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THE IMPACT OF JOHN AUGUST
STRINDBERG'S PERSONAL LIFE
ON HIS PRINCIPAL DRAMATIC WORKS
(1849 - 1912)
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TO MY BELOVED FAMILY



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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

"Strindberg is not simply enacting somebody else's scenes; he is creating his own. In this process he allows his present mood to play a major part. Consequently, since Strindberg was a man of many moods, he usually had more than one iron in the fire, so that he could switch from one to the other to accomodate his moods. This is part of the secret of his amazing productivity"¹

The life work of Strindberg resembles a huge continent crossed by three mountain ranges. The first range, containing peaks like The Father and Miss Julie, occupies the mid 1880's. The second range divides the continent in two and includes plays like To Damascus, A Dream Play, The Dance of Death, Gustav Vasa and Erik XIV, all written between 1898 and 1902. The third range, smaller than the other two, includes the chamber plays, written for the most part in 1907. Of these three ranges the second is the most majestic.

Indeed, Strindberg is one of the most bewildering figures in modern literature, fascinating in expressing feelings,

1. Evert Sprinchorn, "A life on Stage," Strindberg as dramatist. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1982, p.20.

but to some readers, he is difficult to read. The misinterpretation of his writing may exist because of the language of writing. He wrote in a minor language; and his forceful prose, free flowing, seemingly spontaneous, eminently readable, a prose that revitalized the Swedish language, is difficult to translate into other languages. Another reason is that he wrote so much in his sixty three years.

The present study is undertaken to show, to what extent, the influence of his private life is mirrored in his dramatic work. This study is based on a deep understanding of the basic information of his personal life, as well as, a precise analysis of his published plays.

The first chapter of the thesis gives a clear autobiography of his life, the persons with whom he came into contact; his family, his friends and his three wives; and to what extent his marriages to three emancipated women increased his misogyny. John Milton (the British dramatist) says of Strindberg's misogyny that it was largely an artistic device that was chosen according to the artist's temperament. It was an expression of the artist's eternal dissatisfaction. He expected and wanted more than he got, especially in support of his work. As he searched for the ideal woman he reached too

far for the ideal form: the ideal form being an interior creation as much as an ideal woman in a private dream. His natural environment had always driven him to the brink of madness, so he expressed himself in a private kind of symbolism that he thought to be particular to himself.¹

His confessional literature dealing with his marital experiences is unique in the frankness of its self-revelation. "It was one of his tragedies that he ever sought the 'Madonna' in any relationship, while the type that attracted him physically was completely different, a fact that is confirmed by his three marriages."²

In the second chapter, the researcher has traced the style and the technique that the artist used in his plays. The third chapter gives a deep analysis of his great plays, the Naturalistic and the Fantastic ones. As well as the previous three chapters, there is a conclusion.

Traditionally, critics speak of the Pre-Inferno (1869-92) and the Post-Inferno plays (1892-1902). This distinction which applies also to the form of the plays, is certainly meaningful. There are indeed important differences between the two groups of plays. In the Pre-

1. John Milton, "Strindberg in the Inferno: A Restless Pilgrim, Modern Drama, 5 (1962-1963) pp.307-312.

2. Amal Moussa. "Strindberg Misogyny", An M. A. thesis, American University in Cairo, 1977, p.3.

Inferno plays, Strindberg still dramatizes primarily internal human conflict; he is still a fairly plot-oriented playwright; and relies to a great extent on illusion. In the Post-Inferno plays, the conflict is largely super-human, dramatizing a struggle between the protagonist and what Strindberg called the powers; the dramas are primarily theme-centered, and illusionism has given way to a half-reality.

Strindberg is very much equating life with his own play structure; or to put it more precisely; he is endeavouring to shape the plays in such a way that they reflect his own conception of life. In his chamber play, The Burned House, he emphasizes his idea:

"When one's young, one sees the web set up: parents, relatives, friends, acquaintances, servants are the warp; later on in life one sees the weft; and the shuttle of fate carries the weft; and the shuttle of fate carries the thread back and forth; and sometimes the yarn is forced into twists and turns, and the web is done. In old age when one's eyes can really see, one discovers that all twists and turns form a pattern a cipher, an ornament, a hieroglyphic, which one can now interpret for the first time: that is life! the world weaver has woven it"¹

1. Vance Thompson, "The Burned House" Strindberg and his plays, New York, Mc Devitt-Wilson's, Inc, 1921, p.31.

Characteristic of the Strindbergian drama, especially in the Post-Inferno period, is the gradual progression from matter to spirit, from outward to inward reality, from the singular to the universal. Presumably for the first time in the history of drama we are confronted with a play in which an inner reality is consistently better dramatized. The Road to Damascus-I has often been hailed as a mile stone in the history of drama usually for two reasons. On one hand Strindberg employed a loose plotless structure: on the other hand he reduced all the characters surrounding the protagonist. Throughout A Dream Play, we are confronted with human beings, hoping and waiting for a heaven rising from the earth, which is ultimately for what all wait. With this hope A Dream Play ends.

The series of autobiographical novels that constitute the approach to The Father and Miss Julie reveals how the artist and scientist collaborate in Strindberg, and the fifth novel, in particular, A Madman's Defence, shows how the scientist turns actor in order to carry out an experiment in psychology. In his introduction to the novel, he said that he had determined to examine his life "carefully, discreetly, scientifically. With the aid of all the resources of modern psychology... I would find out everything, everything."

1. August Strindberg, A Madman Defence, Introd. Evert Sprinchorn, London, Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1961, p.40.

CHAPTER [I]

Section I: August Strindberg (1849-1912)

Section II: Persons in Strindberg's life

Section I: August Strindberg (1849-1912)

Much of the history of modern drama is a history of revolt. The first great move was made by Ibsen and Strindberg in the middle of the nineteenth century against the polished vacuities that then dominated the stage. One of the different moods in the modern drama has been formal and asked for physics and chemistry to be staged. Other moods concerned the attempt to get further inside the characters and the events. Some have introduced revolt by dramatizing social revolutions:

The American playwright Eugene O'Neill Says:

"Strindberg was the precursor of all modernity in our present Theatre.... Strindberg still remains among the most modern of moderns, the greatest interpreter in the theatre of the characteristic spiritual conflicts which constitute the drama, the blood of our lives today"¹

Since, even more than most authors, Strindberg writes his personal experiences and mental processes into all his work often in context where they seem barely relevant, a short outline of his life might

1. Eugene O'Neill, "Strindberg and our Theatre", quoted in Modern Continental Drama by Helen Hatcher, New York and Lurline, Harcourt Brace and World, Inc., 1941, p.61.

help the reader to get into and appreciate his works.

He was born prematurely and unwanted, in Stockholm in 1849. At the time of his birth, his father had just gone bankrupt, and for much of his childhood August Strindberg suffered from poverty and hunger. His mother worked as a servant before his father married her. The important and unfortunate feature for Strindberg is that he became torn from the very start by a class-war within him; half bourgeois half-proletarian by birth. Unfortunately, he had a very difficult time understanding himself. He felt as if he had two natures, which were at war with each other.¹ At the age of nine and at the age of fifteen he passed through failures of love. In 1855, he entered school, feeling dissatisfied with everything around him. The harsh, personal schooling of the mid-nineteenth century, with its forced teaching of Latin and its respect for beating was not a milieu in which the young Strindberg could flourish. In Klara school, his sense of the general injustice of things rapidly developed. As we will see further, he was tormented by the idea of injustice throughout his life. He did not make any progress at Klara school

1. Elizabeth Sprigge, The Strange Life of August Strindberg, New York, Russel and Russel, 1972-1949, pp. 1-3.

and his father transferred him to another, where he mixed with children of people in humble circumstances. In 1861, he joined Jacob school, but he became dissatisfied with the method of learning.¹

As a child, he had an inner religious potential, when he says:

"Born with nostalgic longing for heaven, I used to weep over the filth of life, even as a child, I felt strange and homeless among my relatives, and in company of other people... Even since I was a child, I searched for God, and what I found was the Devil."²

His ideas about God were vague. In 1864, he thought that the Holy Spirit could not descend until he was confirmed. He learned how to pray, and contact pastors, then he found himself trapped after all in the intricacies of dogma, and began to search for way out.³ Between 1867 and 1872, he spent periods at the university of Uppsala. He made vain attempts to achieve success,

1. L. Lind-af-Hageby, "Struggle with environment", AUGUST Strindberg, The Spirit of Revolt: Studies and impressions New York, D.Appleton and Company, 1913, pp.24-35.

2. August Strindberg, Inferno and From an Occult Diary, Selected by Torsten Ekhud, Trans. Mary Sandbach, London, Penguin Books, 1979, p.100.

3. Elizabeth Sprigge, Op.Cit, p.14.