

August Strindberg (1847 – 1912) wrote plays that span the literary periods known as realism, naturalism, and modernism. He also wrote histories, autobiographical works, poetry, novels, and literary critical essays. Though he began writing in the styles and models of his contemporaries in the 1870s (dramas in acts, historical themes, tragedies or comedies clearly marked as such), by the mid-1880s he had begun to advocate for a new theater. His important “Preface” to his 1888 play *Miss Julie* calls for “departure from a play divided into acts to the achievement of a one-act play presenting a segment of life without intermissions (hence his use of monolog or soliloquy, mime and ballet in *Lady Julie*); a meaningful, universal and timeless theme; a plot illustrating that theme without the use of artificial intrigue; dialog like that of conversational speech; utterly realistic staging, setting, lighting and scenery; and complex, dynamic characters (i.e. characterless characters, individuals, not types).”¹ His influences on his new thinking about drama include Mill, Darwin, Huxley, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Zola. His so-called Inferno crisis of the mid-1890s followed several years of bohemian living in Berlin and led to a revised personal spirituality that incorporates Christian thinking, psychological introspection, occultism, theosophy, Swedenborgian visions (don’t ask), and various other kinds of spiritual kookiness in vogue in the post-Nietzschean rubble of fin-de-siècle Europe. As he comes out of his spiritual traumas Strindberg writes more than a dozen late plays that involve fantastic elements, myth, and dreams. His preface to *A Dream Play* (1901) puts it like this:

How to understand *A Dream Play*? Indra’s daughter has descended to Earth to find out how human beings have it. And there she learns how difficult life is. And the worst is: having to injure or do harm to others if one wants to live. The form is motivated in a preface: the conglomeration out of a dream in which, however, there is definite logic. Everything *irrational* becomes believable. Human beings appear at several points and are sketched, the sketches flow together; the same person splits into several persons only to form into one again. Time and place do not exist, and minute is equal to many years, etc.²

If Strindberg’s *Miss Julie* can represent the height of naturalist theater (in Zola’s formula “*faire grand, faire vrai, faire simple*”—make literature great, true, and simple as it reflects the lives of the people for the people), by *A Dream Play* from 1901 he had moved completely away from mimetic representations of lives on stage and to working with concepts, motifs, and ideas. His late plays of 1905 on, of which the four “Chamber Plays” are best known, move fully into the realm of expressionist theater, that is, drama that foregrounds the individual psyche, disregards the constraints of reality, embraces experimental forms and staging, and places the subjective perception of reality at the center of attention. *The Ghost Sonata* is the best-known of the four expressionist chamber plays of 1907, dark, full of death, small in form, radically experimental. “I have suffered as though in Kama Loka (Schoel) while writing it, and my hands have bled (literally),” Strindberg wrote to a friend in 1907. *Kama Loka* is the Sanskrit term for the first locus of the soul after death and the Hebrew *Schoel* is the place of the dead. Strindberg’s self-conscious use of the musical term sonata implies a formal structure—three parts: statement, development or variation, recapitulation, and two main themes; and by calling this group of plays “Chamber Plays,” he also invokes a musical idiom of intimacy, small scale, and sparse, transparent virtuosity on stage.

As you watch the Davidson production of the play see if you can tease out the opposing themes of perfectionism (or idealism) and vampirism (yep, vampirism). And note the structural progression from the vision of the home and people in it, the unmasking of those people, and their confrontation with their actual unmasked status that they need to accept to make life at all bearable. If there is a single message in Strindberg’s late works: human beings are to be pitied.³ It’s been called “Strindberg’s most pessimistic statement of his idea of human nature.”⁴ Given that, we have to wonder why it’s been more-or-less continuously in production for a century, why Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman produced and directed it four different times over forty years, why Max Reinhart (the Andrew Lloyd Weber of his day in Berlin, and later, Salzburg, in the first decades of the century) chose it as the main event for Berlin in 1916, why it’s become, over and over again, a vehicle of choice for stage designers to make a big statement and directors to assert themselves boldly, why and how “the apparent statement of a given text is continually transformed”⁵ as it comes to life (or death) on the stage. That is, *The Ghost Sonata* is a big canvas and every decade has projected its own visions upon it. Here’s a synopsis:

The work concerns the vampirish old man Hummel, seeking to destroy the Colonel, who years ago seduced the woman Hummel loved. Hummel introduces a Student to his peculiar coterie, which includes both the Colonel’s wife (known as the Mummy) and her frail daughter, who draws life from hyacinths. At an elaborate “ghost supper” in the Colonel’s apartment, Hummel humiliates the Colonel and tells the guests that the hyacinth girl is his child, but when the Mummy reveals Hummel’s sordid past he hangs himself. Later, as the girl slowly dies, the Student declaims how appearances can mask evil; he turns to the audience and warns them that they, too, cannot escape their sins.⁶

Ready for a fun time?

NB: We hear that Friday and Saturday will sell out for sure, perhaps the other shows as well, so get tickets early, today if possible. We will expect you to be able to discuss this play on the final exam.

¹ Walter Johnson, *August Strindberg* (Boston: Twayne, 1976), 139.

² In Strindberg, *A Dream Play and Four Chamber Plays*, ed. & transl. Walter Johnson (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1973), 3.

³ See Johnson’s notes in *op. cit.* 183-85.

⁴ *Op.cit.*, 190.

⁵ Frederick Marker and Lise-Lone Marker, *Strindberg and Modernist Theater: Post-Inferno Drama on the Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 163.

⁶ From *Merriam-Webster’s Encyclopedia of Literature*, accessed 18 Feb 2009, <http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu:3376/login.aspx?direct=true&db=1fh&AN=17285306&site=lrc-live>