

August Strindberg was born in 1849 in Stockholm. His mother, Ulrica, was of the servant class who, at age 16, was taken into Carl Oscar Strindberg's house as housekeeper and mistress in 1843. She bore three children by him before they were married in 1847. She carried twelve children before her death of consumption at age 40. Carl Oscar, August's father, was a steamship agent who held ambitions to own a steamship business that would earn him stature among the well-to-do merchant class of the city. His career faltered several times and eventually he and his family moved into indigent quarters with only two rooms in a derelict section of Stockholm. He started over as a grocer. Poverty was continuous, but Ulrica had her sights set on August's education. According to his siblings, he was the favored child. He had a sensitive nature—many said unbalanced and overwrought—and a quick intelligence. He was sent to a private school where he soon learned to read Greek and Latin and demonstrated an aptitude for sciences.

In spite of his facility with languages, August was not an adroit writer through his grammar school years and into his studies at the University of Uppsala. As well as the Scandinavian languages, he acquired fluency in Italian, German, English and especially French. He attended university classes irregularly but was taken under wing by a Dr. Lamm who mentored young August in classical literature and natural sciences. Drama was of particular interest to August and he began to take rôles in local theater productions. The critics were not impressed. However, his acting fiasco worked as an impetus to writing his personal vexations with society and feelings of inferiority. In a matter of weeks after his failure as an actor he wrote no less than three plays, all before the end of 1869. He soon tore up the first. The second play, *The Freethinker*, expressed August's unorthodox view of Christianity through the protagonist who is ostracized by his fiancé, family and society. The play failed to reach the stage and was soundly trashed by the reviewer for the Stockholm newspaper, but it was published in 1870. The third play, *Hellas in Decline*, was rejected by the Swedish Royal Theatre; after which he expanded it to five acts in blank verse. Though another failure with the literary arbiters of the day, Strindberg discovered that blank verse came easily to him, expressing his inner voice.

Strindberg's father showed little interest, even disdain, for his son's efforts as a writer and student. But, as his father's business endeavors improved and he was able to preside over Sunday salons in a decent middle-class house, he demonstrated admiration for a nephew who was a regular at dinner and was a bright conversationalist and a savant of drama and the theater. August was sidelined while his detested cousin showed forth. August's alienation from his father was long-standing, due in part to Ulrica's favor of her fair-haired son. Carl always acted toward her as an underling of low birth. This festered in August's perturbed mind. While he harbored grand illusions about himself, at the same time he both coveted and mocked the aristocratic class. Coupled with his loathing for his aloof father, August's mental state declined into neurosis.

By the time he was twenty two years of age, August was gripped in what was known in those days as hysteria. Psychiatrists of our day reviewing the evidence of his writing and that of those who associated with him have concluded that he was suffering from paranoid schizophrenia with obsessive tendencies. He had lived in the home of Dr. Lamm and his daughter who observed that Strindberg was undergoing a spiritual crisis, contending with the traditional God that his mother avidly venerated. He left the mentoring of Dr. Lamm and pursued readings on his own, including Nietzsche, Swedish history, Swedenborg, Zola and modern French literature, and alchemy.

In 1871 he was ‘approved’ for his oral examination to stand as a ‘candidate in philosophy.’ His subsequent essay on a Danish poet was adjudged “more suitable for a ladies’ magazine than for an academic dissertation.” (Mortensen and Downs, 15.) But he persisted with his writing in an association with ten fellows from the university in a literary club, *Runa* (old Ger. character that Strindberg translated as “song”). Typical of August, he grew contemptuous of his fellows and eventually parted company with them. But he had produced a play, *The Outlaw*, in 1871 that was performed at the Royal Theatre the same year. He was prolific, but rarely produced. Most plays, like *The Freethinker*, were iconoclastic or satiric. He also undertook sweeping histories of Swedish rulers and reformers like *Master Olaf*. His audacity if not the elegance of his writing began to gain him some notoriety. The revered Danish literary critic, Georg Brandes, characterized Strindberg’s face as “that of two men—one with the brow of Jupiter [...], the other with the vulgar nose and chin of a Stockholm guttersnipe.” (M&D, 20)

By some uncanny self transformation, by age twenty-three Strindberg had grown into a handsome, well appointed young man who could converse wittily and intelligently and could be a charming companion. This did not indicate that he was a “fully integrated personality,” however. In today’s parlance we would say that he had “reinvented himself.” He met the Finnish noblewoman and actress, Siri von Essen. They were married in 1877. From the start it was not a marriage made in heaven though she bore four children by him. He was emotionally inconstant and restless. They moved around Europe and were often penniless. The marriage dissolved in 1891 and he dropped into deep depression over the loss of his children. This precipitated a protracted mental breakdown—told in his two-part autobiography, *Inferno* and *Legends* (1886 - 1888). Many of his plays thereafter, including *Miss Julie*, were sourced in this period of his life. The character, Miss Julie, is a harsh depiction of Siri von Essen. He had two later marriages, first to an Austrian journalist, Frida Uhl, and then to the Norwegian actress, Harriet Bosse. Each bore two more of his children, but these marriages were also miserable.

But even this, like all his life’s miseries, provided raw material for his plays and essays. In Paris he hobnobbed with the avant-gardists and literati who were fascinated with what they perceived as the raw, exotic energies and genius of remote outsiders, especially Russians, Scandinavians and “those wild Americans” like Loïe Fuller and Isadora Duncan. Strindberg’s volatility, melancholy, and audacity captured the imagination of the jaded Paris nightclub society while at the same time he profited from his association with André Antoine’s experimental Théâtre Libre on which Strindberg designed the Intima Theatre in Copenhagen. He shared with artist Edvard Munch the thesis that art—all art, like life—is an expression of one’s inner being. Strindberg’s counter to rationalism was, “I dream, therefore I exist.” His mature plays clearly stem from this aesthetic view of life; but it is a tragic, losing position to stand in.

John M. Wilson, Feb. 2016

(Johan) August Strindberg; playwright, essayist, painter
b. 1849, Stockholm; d. 1912

Wrote over 60 plays including five-act histories and sagas, chamber works (*quarte d'heure*), naturalistic and realistic dramas, "dream" plays, children's plays -

Best known:

Master Olaf, 1872: an epic in five acts

The Father, 1887: naturalistic response to Ibsenian character types

Miss Julie, 1888: naturalistic conflict of hereditary traits in one act

To Damascus, 1898: allegory in three parts

The Dance of Death, 1900: an expressionistic struggle of souls

Easter, 1901: a revelatory allegory

A Dream Play, 1902: poetic expression of life's eternal hopes and sorrows

Ghost Sonata, 1908: a play of memory and reality, aging and dreams

Swanwhite, 1909: a children's fairy drama in one act

There is an axiom popularly held in theater and drama history that states: all Western drama leads to or from Ibsen. If a little over-simplified, this observation rings true in many respects, but particularly with regard to the rise of naturalism in drama and the following evolution (or revolution) into expressionism and surrealism. The Norwegian, Henrik Ibsen (1828 - 1906), created the epitome of dramatic naturalism (parallel to the French naturalistic novelists, Flaubert and Zola) with *A Doll's House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881), *An Enemy of the People* (1882), *The Wild Duck* (1884), *Hedda Gabler* (1890) and other plays. These are often referred to as "problem" plays and "well-made" plays. They expose problems deep within society and human nature, and bring them dramatically under ethical and moral scrutiny, usually with shocking or tragic results. These plays are tightly constructed so as to leave few loose ends; every action and reaction is accounted for. The plot, characters, and their moral constitution are so closely knitted that a dreadful crisis is inevitable, accompanied by profound insight. (See notes from Aristotle below: elements of tragedy.)

As we know well, Charles Darwin (1809 - 1882) had shocked Western culture with his theses on the *Origin of Species* and the *Descent of Man*. The intelligentsia and literati of the day were ready to translate those theses - especially "natural selection" and "survival of the fittest" - into literary forms that challenged worn-out conventional beliefs. Naturalism used this handily in such disquieting works as *Miss Julie*. Her genes and Jean's genes are attracted to each other in the most fundamental way and yet cannot live together in the same world (culture, society, house, bed...). One or the other must die as a person and die off as a species.

Naturalism ~

Émile Zola (1840 - 1902): from his manifesto, *Naturalism in the Theatre*; three principles 1) the play should be realistic, the result of careful study of human behavior and psychology; the personalities of the characters should arise from their heredity and environment; no extraneous theatrical devices; 2) the conflicts should be meaningful and have life-altering significance; 3) the play should be simple and direct in its action, without sub-plots or extended expositions. (Again, see notes from Aristotle below: The Unities.)

Realism ~

Very related to theatrical naturalism. Both diverged from the old style of acting in which language was declamatory in elocutionary style and gestures were formalized and stereotypical. The object of realism was to depict the lives of ordinary people, their daily struggles, hopes, defeats, small triumphs. Most playwrights, unto today, use realism for their style of expression: from Gorky and Chekov to Eugene O'Neill, William Inge, and Arthur Miller.

Strindberg, envious of Ibsen's huge success internationally, offered his naturalistic works, like *The Father* and *Miss Julie*, but with a difference. He felt, based on his personal experience and turgid personality, that Ibsen's characters were not truly realistic but somewhat stereotypical - the good mother, the bad councilman, the naive professor, etc. This can be argued about, but Strindberg's characters are generally more fiercely drawn and individualized than Ibsen's. As you will hear them, Jean and Miss Julie speak so much from their own, inner voices that their interchanges can hardly be called dialogue. They operate in two different universes of logic and don't quite realize it. They only realize that each is a mortal threat to the other. This is naturalism on the verge of breaking into expressionism. Strindberg's later plays move this direction, departing from classical notions of plot, character, thought, and language almost completely. What is left is a world of dreams, memories, partial mosaics of life experiences.

This is revolutionary. It gave substance and text to the emerging new art form, cinema, and to surrealism in literature, art, and, one can claim (at least I do), music of the twentieth century and beyond.

So this is why August Strindberg is a towering figure in the history of Western drama. Back-to-back, he and Ibsen brought Western drama to a fine point then Strindberg thrust it into a new consciousness. It was a kind of literary quantum leap, except that we can see both how and why it happened the way it did.

Notes from Aristotle:

I have to give credit to Aristotle for helping to sort this thesis out. In *On Poetics* he describes the importance of maintaining The Unities in drama: one location; single, continuous passage of time; single focus on precipitating event (i.e. no sub-plots); only essential characters. Note how closely both Ibsen and Strindberg in their naturalistic plays stay with the unities, but then how far from them Strindberg extends - from *Miss Julie* to *A Dream Play*.

Upon seeing and studying the best of the classical Greek plays preceding him, Aristotle noted that there are six elements by which tragic poetry (drama) is fashioned: plot, character, thought (logic), diction (language, like iambic trimeter and trochaic pentameter), melody (music), and spectacle (all that is visual like masks, robes, and the dance). In the mind of the classical Greeks, plot was the most important element. It represented fate; an absolute against which one's character (moral bent) is pitted. Through thought and diction, the character comes to realize or fails to realize his or her moral being. That is what life is about. Shakespeare shifted the most important element to character, as did great playwrights after him including Goethe, Schiller, and Kleist. One of Strindberg's most radical creations was to mix this order up to where even spectacle could be more important than plot in creating the reality of the play. "I dream, therefore I exist." Truly extraordinary!

Thanks for listening! Now enjoy The Rogue Theatre production of *Miss Julie*.

JMW, '16