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| August Strindberg (1849-1912) |
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| August Strindberg is Sweden’s most important writer and one of the most influential dramatists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Along with Henrik Ibsen, the Scandinavian dramatist to whom he is most often compared, Strindberg transformed modern Western theatre, inspiring playwrights such as Georg Kaiser, Eugene O’Neill, Edward Albee, Sarah Kane, and Caryl Churchill as well as the film and theatre director Ingmar Bergman. Strindberg’s plays span the naturalism of early European Modernism as well as symbolism and expressionism. His work in non-dramatic genres and media includes novels, autobiography, journalism, poetry, essays, painting, and photography. Outside of Sweden Strindberg is known as a personality and a playwright who mined his own and others’ experiences for his art. The miseries of marriage are central to many of Strindberg’s plays, which underwent radical stylistic changes after a personal crisis in the mid-1890s. Strindberg’s experiments with alchemy and occultism during this period influenced his later works, which frequently represent dreams, states between life and death, and the transformability of matter. In the 21st century, Strindberg’s plays are mainstays of world drama. |
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Strindberg’s experiments with alchemy and occultism during this period influenced his later works, which frequently represent dreams, states between life and death, and the transformability of matter. In the 21st century, Strindberg’s plays are mainstays of world drama.  File: AugustStrindberg.jpg  Figure August Strindberg  Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:AugustStrindberg.jpg  Johan August Strindberg was born in 1849 in Stockholm, Sweden to a middle-class father and a working-class mother. The historical drama *Master Olof* (1872-1877), which he rewrote several times in prose and verse, is the most noteworthy of his early plays. But it was Strindberg’s novel of social satire *Röda rummet* (*The Red Room*,1879) that launched his career and Sweden’s contribution to the Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough. In the play *Fröken Julie* (*Miss Julie*, 1888), Strindberg fully developed and theorised the naturalistic style for which he became famous, though initially his publisher rejected the play, which was not published uncensored in Sweden until 1984. *Miss Julie*’s kitchen setting emphasizes domestic labour and class divisions among its three characters: Miss Julie, the daughter of a Count; Jean, the Count’s favourite servant; and Christine, the cook. The plot builds to Julie and Jean’s sexual intercourse, which reverses the power dynamic between them: whereas in the first half of the play Julie’s social class places her above Jean, in the second half Jean has an edge over Julie, who is now a fallen woman. Thus the play is about sex and gender as much as class. The preface to the published version of *Miss Julie* outlines fundamental principles of Strindberg’s naturalist dramaturgy, in which the characters’ lives are determined by social class, heredity, and environment. This naturalism is influenced by Émile Zola (1840-1902); however, Strindberg departs from Zola in his contradictory emphasis on the constraints of genre as well as social and biological forces: he subtitles the play, “A Naturalistic Tragedy.” Strindberg’s preface to *Miss Julie* also recommends changes in theatre and staging practices such as eliminating act divisions (which break the theatrical illusion), doing away with footlights (which hurt the actors’ eyes and distort the appearance of their faces), and adopting cropped settings that encourage the audience to imagine the set extends beyond the stage frame. If *Miss Julie* is Strindberg’s most performed play, the preface is his most read essay on the development of modernist theatre.  File: StrindbergTheTown1903.jpg  Figure *The Town*, Oil on Canvas, 1903  Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Town,_1903.jpg>  Strindberg often used his own and others’ lives as source material for his writing. Strindberg’s first marriage to Siri von Essen, a noblewoman who left her first husband to marry Strindberg and become an actress, was dissolved in 1891. Following his second marriage to the Austrian journalist Frida Uhl in 1893, Strindberg entered a period of personal torment known as his Inferno crisis. During this period Strindberg did not write plays; instead, he wrote about photography, alchemy, and spirituality for French occultist publications. Strindberg documents his experiences during this period, including paranoia and hallucinations, in the novel *Inferno* (1897), which was published in the same year his marriage to Frida was annulled. The Inferno crisis was a turning point for Strindberg’s dramatic style, which subsequently emphasized dream states and spirituality without abandoning the material and social concerns of his earlier work. The most influential of Strindberg’s post-Inferno plays, *Et drömspel* (*A Dream Play*,1901), follows Indra’s Daughter, the daughter of a god, who comes to Earth to experience human life and struggle. The play’s form is based on disjointed dream logic and represents similarly incoherent characters. Indra’s Daughter, full of pity for the human condition, occupies many roles as she navigates and ultimately abandons the human world of drudgery and suffering. *A Dream Play* questions the possibility of meaningful human action and, in so doing, influenced twentieth-century movements such as surrealism and the Theatre of the Absurd. From 1901 to 1903 Strindberg was married to Harriet Bosse, a twenty-two-year-old actress who inspired and acted in several of Strindberg’s plays. Bosse also inspired Strindberg’s *Ockulta dagboken* (*Occult Diary* 1896-1908), in which Strindberg imagines their relationship as a series of psychic, erotic assaults.  File: StrindbergByMunch.jpg  Figure 3 Lithograph of Strindberg by Edvard Munch, 1906  Source: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/media/14565/Strindberg-lithograph-by-Edvard-Munch-1896?topicId=343748>  In 1907 Strindberg partnered with August Falck (1882-1938) to found the Intimate Theatre in Stockholm. The theatre was a small space specifically devoted to staging Strindberg’s plays. Strindberg wrote five chamber plays, so named for their intimate scale and association with chamber music, for the theatre: *Oväder* (*Thunder in the Air*, 1907), *Brända tomten* (*The Burned House*, 1907), *Spöksonaten* (*The Ghost Sonata*, 1907), *Pelikanen* (*The Pelican*, 1907), and *Svarta handsken* (*The Black Glove*, 1909). The chamber plays, particularly *The Ghost Sonata*, greatly influenced modernist and postmodern theatre; however, during the Intimate Theatre’s three-year lifespan Strindberg’s earlier naturalist work proved more popular with audiences. Despite and because of the continuing controversies associated with Strindberg’s writing and personality, he was awarded an anti-Nobel prize of 50,000 kr raised by public subscription —Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949), who Strindberg admired, was awarded the Nobel—before his death in 1912.  File: StrindbergSelfPortrait.jpg  Figure 4 Self Portrait, Gersau, Switzerland, 1886  Source: <http://sweden.se/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/August-Strindberg-low-resolution2.pdf>  Chronology of works  \* *Mäster Olof* 1872-1877 (*Master Olof* 1915)  \* *Röda rummet* 1879 (*The Red Room* 1913)  \* *Herr Bengts hustru* 1882 (*Sir Bengt’s Wife* 2013)  \* *Tjänstekvinnans son* 1886-1887 (*The Son of a Servant* 1913)  \* *Vivisektioner* I, II 1887, 1894 (*Vivisections* I, II; selections available in *Selected Essays* 1996)  \* *Fadren* 1887 (*The Father* 1899)  \* *Fröken Julie* 1888 (*Miss Julie*, published as *Miss Julia* in *Plays by August Strindberg* 1912)  \* *Fordringsägare* 1888 (*Creditors* in *Plays by August Strindberg* 1912)  \* *Den starkare* 1888-1889 (*The Stronger* in *Plays by August Strindberg* 1912)  \* ”L’exposition Edvard Munch,” *La Revue blanche* 1896 (”Edvard Munch’s Exhibition” in *Selected Essays* 1996)  \* *Ockulta dagboken* 1896-1908, published 1977 (*The Occult Diary*, selections available in *Inferno/From An Occult Diary* 1963)  \* *Inferno* 1897 (*Inferno* 1912)  \* *Klosteret* 1898, published 1966 (*The Cloister* 1969)  \* *Till Damaskus I, II, III* 1898-1901 (*To Damascus* I, II, III in *Eight Expressionist Plays* 1930)  \* *Dödsdansen I, II* 1900 (*The Dance of Death* in *Plays by August Strindberg* 1912)  \* *Et drömspel* 1901 (*A Dream Play*, published as *The Dream Play* in *Plays by August Strindberg* 1912)  \* *Svarta fanor* 1904-1907 (*Black Banners* 2010)  \* *Spöksonaten* 1907 (*The Ghost Sonata*, published as *The Spook Sonata* in *Plays by August Strindberg* 1916)  \* *Pelikanen* 1907 (*The Pelican* in *The Chamber Plays* 1962)  \* *Öppna brev till Intima teatern* 1907-1908 (*Open Letters to the Intimate Theatre* 1966)  \* *En blå bok* four vols., 1907-1912 (*A Blue Book*; selections published as *Zones of the Spirit* 1913) |
| Further reading:  (Meyer)  (Carlson)  (Marker and Marker)  (Szalczer)  (Prideaux) |