

Dreaming a Dream Play

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January 15, 2001

August Strindberg wrote *A Dream Play* in 1902 after experiencing a serious nervous breakdown in Paris that led him to the brink of madness. Called the "*Inferno* crisis" after the intensely subjective memoir he later wrote about the experience, this was a period in which Strindberg's incipient paranoia had blossomed into full-blown persecution mania. Among his many curious delusions was the conviction that he was being tortured by feminist witches. He was convinced they were pumping gases into his body by means of an infernal electrical machine through the walls of his hotel room.

His recovery from this dark night of the soul, under the tender care of his mother-in-law, led to a radical transformation in his personality, his religious beliefs, and his approach to theater. Whereas Strindberg formerly believed, for example, that what passed for love between men and women was strife, a crude Darwinian struggle for supremacy resolved only through the victory of one sex over the other, by the time he writes *A Dream Play* he has abandoned his Naturalistic strategies and misogynistic dogmas and embraced a kind of rueful asceticism modeled on Eastern religions.

Strindberg's change in mood was further influenced by the dissolution of his third marriage, to the actress Harriet Bosse. Previously inclined, and on the slightest pretext, to accuse his female partners of infidelity, lesbianism, careerism, uncleanness, sloppy bookkeeping, and trying to emasculate him (his model was Hercules, robbed of his club by Omphale and forced to do female tasks), Strindberg was beginning to concede that he might share some of the blame for the way his relationships had been unraveling. Trapped in a repetition compulsion, he recognized that he was producing the same neurotic patterns over and over again.

As a result, *A Dream Play* has a cyclical form rather than a linear one. Also as a result, Strindberg's central character in this play is no longer a raging, victimized male, as in his *pre-Infemo* writings, but rather a composite of bewildered men (called the Lawyer, the Officer, the Poet) on a quest for salvation. As for his traditional antagonist, the scheming or castrating female, she has been replaced by the tender and compassionate daughter of Indra, the Vedic ruler of the heavens and the god of storms. Indra sends the girl down to Earth through a suffocating atmosphere (Strindberg predicted the pollution over our major cities) to find out why people are so full of complaint. In order to learn this, she must first take on human form (her terrestrial name is Agnes or Lamb of God) and become a kind of female Christ.

After witnessing countless instances of human suffering, and enduring a lot of suffering herself as the battered wife of the Lawyer in a household where the maid pastes out all the air, she returns to heaven, spent and exhausted, leaving her mortal remains in the purifying fire. Indra's daughter

has concluded that life is a tragic contradiction, a struggle between irreconcilable opposites such as spirit and matter, love and hate, the male and female principles. These are the conflicts that split the human heart in two, forming the basis for her repeated perception that "Humankind is to be pitied."

But this moist, often self-pitying choral moral is not what is remarkable about the play. Nor is the work especially unique in its perception that we dream away our lives and wake only into death. Calderon framed this concept hundreds of years earlier in *Life is a Dream* ("What man is there alive who'd seek to reign/Since he must wake into the dream that's death?") and so did Shakespeare in *The Tempest* ("We are such stuff/As dreams are made on and our little life/Is rounded with a sleep"). No, the innovation of *A Dream Play* (and of *To Damascus*, the trilogy that preceded it) is its non-realistic form, later to be called Expressionism.

It is a form in which, in the playwright's words, "Anything can happen; everything is possible and probable; time and space do not exist ... imagination spins and waves new patterns made up of memories, experiences, unfettered fantasies, absurdities, and improvizations." Strindberg had not read Freud, though he was familiar with the writings of Charcot, whose experiments with hypnotism influenced Freud's early theories. Nevertheless, his method uses a kind of Freudian stream of consciousness, and his play is full of Freudian insights, including the notion that the unconscious observes "no secrets, no incongruities, no scruples, and no law." Since the work follows the episodic, fluid, and fragmented form of a dream, in which characters, in Strindberg's words, "are split, double and multiply ... evaporate, scatter, and converge," it has always been fearfully difficult to produce on stage. Aside from the fact that the work is all theme and virtually no action, an existential cry of pain, Strindberg calls for at least nine major changes of scene, and his final image is that of a burning castle topped by a flower bud that bursts into a giant chrysanthemum. Try that one on your scene shop and see what happens!

Since the ideal dream medium is the cinema, you would think that some avant-garde filmmaker might have turned *A Dream Play* into a surrealistic movie, on the order of Cocteau's *Blood of a Poet* or Bunuel's *Andalusian Dog*. Indeed, it would have been a perfect project for such an inventive cinema artist as Ingmar Bergman, many of whose film are Strindberg *hommages*. (Indeed, *Wild Straw-berries* borrows its academic procession scene from the one in *A Dream Play*.) But Bergman elected to produce this Strindberg work on stage rather than on screen, and in that intractable medium even Bergman was unable to make it work.