

**CULTURAL CO-ORDINATES AND RUMINATIONS: A STUDY OF
CARYL CHURCHILL'S ADAPTATION OF STRINDBERG'S *THE DREAM*
PLAY**

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ABSTRACT

Strindberg the very famous Swedish playwright, novelist, poet, essayist and painter was an extremely prolific writer whose literary career spans more than half a century in which he experimented with a range of literary styles, indicating his preference for naturalism, tragedy, melodrama, expressionism and surrealism as well as a keen insight into the genre of the unconscious. The preoccupation with memory, the funny yet threatening responses of individuals and groups, also form and control the thematic world of one of the most noteworthy postmodern female British playwright, Caryl Churchill. Known as an iconoclastic writer, Churchill's adaptation of Strindberg's *The Dream Play* is bold, strikingly modern and very concise. In fact it is more challenging in scope and dramatic form. The focus of this paper is an in-depth analysis of both playwrights' technicalities and stylistic devices in *The Dream Play* which will help explain the play's contemporaneity and significance even today.

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Theatre as a medium for literary and artistic expression through performance is the oldest and the most challenging form of social and cultural documentation of an era or a nation. The theatre of Athens produced Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes. Elizabethan England produced Marlowe, Shakespeare, Johnson and many more literary geniuses. The Scandinavian dramatic movement out of which Ibsen emerged gave birth to other literary talents worthy of being associated with him and equally renowned in their literary contribution and legacy.

August Strindberg's achievement as a dramatist, painter, historian, autobiographer, novelist, essayist and speculator in the natural sciences, alchemy and linguistics is so various that

an exploration into his qualities seems redundant. However his international reputation rests primarily on his genius as a dramatist. Strindberg experimented with many theatrical forms, the fairytale comedy as in *Lucky Peter's Travels* and the Folk play in *The Virgin Bride. Master Olof* in 1872, his first major work is a history play, in a cycle of 12 history plays that reveal Strindberg's genius as a writer of chronicle plays next only to Shakespeare. He was also against the tradition of the well-made plays and found an alternative to them while writing a series of naturalistic plays between 1892 and 1897; according to him a play should reflect "the harsh, cynical and heartless drama that life presents".ⁱ The core of such drama dealt with the elemental conflict between man and woman, the tragic pathos of human life resulting in unfulfillment and misery which is so very evident in plays like *The Father*, *Miss Julie* and to an extent sarcastically in *Creditors*. Conflict in such plays is not physical violence but a battle of brains where one character tries to impose his will on the other. Strindberg's ideas about dramatic art are outlined in his volume of essays titled "Vivesections", where a neat analysis of the writers mind and his motives in drama are very succinctly laid down. The preface to *Miss Julie* is also perhaps Strindberg's greatest manifesto of dramatic art, where he lays down the germ of his characters' motives as arising out from environmental and social constraints, hence characters are "split and vacillating... agglomerations of past and present cultures, scraps from books and newspapers, fragments of humanity, torn shreds of once-fine clothing that has become rags, in just the way that a human soul is patched together."ⁱⁱ This idea about a play's characters may not have been fully realized in *Miss Julie*; but the very fact that after an interval of six years Strindberg embarked on writing plays that represented a radical break with prevailing dramatic conventions fully justifies his innovations in theatrical modernism. Strindberg unravels the influence of societal norms on suppressed dreams, passions and uncharted desires. The theory of the occult profoundly attracted Strindberg and while being drawn to it immensely he was careful enough to express its intricacies through the employment of non-conventional dramatic techniques, such as doing away with neat demarcations of time, space and authenticity in character portrayal.

Strindberg's remarkable transition from naturalism and realism to modernism was largely due to a period of acute mental suffering and psychological breakdown in his late 40s, resulting in an unproductive phase in the life of such an imaginative writer. Between 1892 and 1898 he started devoting much time to scientific studies especially alchemy and magic, influenced by the fin de siècle in Paris. However behind these apparently aimless pursuits was the driving need to renew and assert himself by the discovery of the visible and invisible world of matter and things. Comprehending the essence and nature of the cosmic universe and its relation and impact on human life seems to have been one of his major quests during this time. The cultural climate of Europe fostered such a perception as is found in the psychoanalytic and self analytic theories of Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). In a similar manner Strindberg also sought to decipher the unconscious secret life of the mind, employing techniques which he outlined in his essay "The New Arts" or "The Role of Chance in Artistic Creation", which anticipates Surrealism and which he fruitfully applied to his paintings. A friend of Paul Gauguinⁱⁱⁱ and Edward Munch^{iv}, Strindberg's handling of the non-representational in art is albeit praiseworthy. The emphasis on the states of subjective unconscious parallels a similar shift away from plot and character in drama.

The focus of this paper is trying to analyze Strindberg's relevance in the contemporary dramatic scenario in Britain in order to show how significant his dramatic and artistic oeuvre can be. This paper tries to study Strindberg's *The Dream Play* by unraveling not only the philosophic

nuances in the play's structure, but by examining the play as a work of sustained merit and highly mature craftsmanship having multifarious dimensions that can provoke endless interpretive possibilities. *The Dream play* has been adopted by one of the most prolific and widely acclaimed modern British writer Caryl Churchill who has also toyed with the idea of the dream narrative, Meta fictional elements, psychological depths of memory and unconscious at work in tandem and finally the exploitation of surreal states of existence.

The similarity of Strindberg's concerns with those of his contemporary Sigmund Freud have often been observed and seem to baffle critics and scholars alike; though the writer's presentation of life as a dream and the world as a stage has been the subject of earlier drama, for example in Shakespeare, Calderon and Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. Nevertheless *The Dream Play* was instrumental in initiating a body of work that could be called meta-theatrical, in its concentration on theme centered plays conveying subjective poetic images rather than reliance on standard plot and character. The projection of concrete theatrical images with the help of available stage resource created a fluid structure of plays that were easier to comprehend in terms of music. It was an affinity that Strindberg himself underlined by using a term 'Chamber Plays' to denote his last important collection of plays, namely *Ovader (The Storm)*, *Branda tomten (The Burned house)*, *Spoksonaten (The Ghost Sonata)* and *Pelikanen (The pelican)* all written around 1907 and more popularly designated as his last Sonatas.

In *Till Damaskus (To Damascus Part I and II, 1898; Part III, 1904)* a sequence of three plays in which Strindberg projected his tumultuous life through the figure of the protagonist, the picture frame stage of the naturalists and the abundance of realist detail gives way to the interior region of the mind where the past, present, and future coalesce into one immutable category and characters are either aspects of the playwright's own personality or projections of dream states or perhaps even products of riotous imaginations.

In *Ett dromspel (A Dream play, 1902)* regarded undisputedly as Strindberg's major dramatic forte, he tried "to imitate the inconsequent yet transparently logical shape of a dream."^v Here time and place do not exist and everything is probable and possible. In framework the plot of *The Dream Play* is kaleidoscopic, it opens with a prologue in which we hear the Voice of Indra (his presence is unseen) speaking with his daughter as she descends from the ethereal layers of the sky to the more grosser, and polluted atmosphere of the earth in order to see the states of men and study their lives firsthand. Musings uttered by the voice is significant in its suggestions of a hindu religious paradigm, "The Voice: Yes, beautiful as all that Brahma made--/But still more beautiful it was of yore./ In primal morn of ages. Then occurred/ Some strange mishap; the orbit was disturbed; Rebellion led to crime that called for check—" ^{vi} After the prologue, the play begins with a conversation between a Glazier and Indra's daughter; they both look at a castle that is growing higher and higher because it is regularly manured and the time is ripe for it to bloom, as midsummer is also approaching. (The Glazier: [To himself] I have never seen this castle before—have never heard of a castle that grew, but—[To The daughter, with firm conviction] yes, it has grown two yards, but that is because they have manured it—and if you notice, it has put out a wing on the sunny side.)^{vii} The very prospect of a castle blooming is strange and albeit surreal. Very soon an officer and his sick mother are introduced and before long the stage is peopled with a medley collection of variegated characters—a singer, a Portress, a Bill-poster and in the midst of these the prompter enters, followed by a lawyer and a corpse de ballet. The point of dispute concerns a door, behind which is a mystery, nobody has yet fathomed. It is this door which needs to be opened rather forced open but social constraints and

the intervention of law has all along been a barrier. In order to accommodate varied number of characters who come and go off the stage the décor changes but not drastically. The lawyer is shown to be corrupt, sinister yet once again a victim of his own insecurity as much as he is a victim of society. The daughter says: “It is certainly a crazy world! Look at the four faculties here. The government, to which has fallen the task of preserving society, supports all four of them. The theology, the science of God, is constantly attacked and ridiculed by philosophy, which declares itself to be the sum of all wisdom. And medicine is always challenging philosophy, while refusing entirely to count theology a science and even insisting on calling it a mere superstition. And they belong to a common Academic council, which has been set to teach the young respect—for the university. It is a bedlam. And woe unto him who first recovers his reason!”^{viii} Poets and miners, personifications of theology, philosophy and medicine, these are jumbled together with all the incongruity of a nightmare, yet beyond and above them all lies the central image of the dreamer, seeing evil come out of pure intelligence, and perceiving that as long as we are bound in the fleshly form, corruption can never be got rid of. In Strindberg’s *The Ghost Sonata* (1907) a similar situation prevails; an apparition of a milkmaid, the ghost of a consul, a Mummy (the Colonel’s wife) all interact in a world of specters, which is also like the human world, full of suffering, illusion, guilt and death with only a very feeble hope of faith to illumine figments of ideas that have somehow lost their validity. Youth and age alike are bounded in a circle of evil, and although the action ends with a strange vision in which the whole room disappears and in its place an Island of the dead appears, soft music very subdued and pleasantly sad, is heard to depict the grim monotony of nothingness. Some critics have discerned a sort of stoicism or even a Buddhist resignation in Strindberg’s plays that tells us to do away with the pleasures of the material world.

In Caryl Churchill’s adoption of Strindberg’s *The Dream Play*, written primarily for Katie Mitchell’s production at the National Theatre in London, she used for her reference a translation of Charlotte Barslund and was clear in her mind about some cuts in scenes that would make the play more concise and yet retain the central idea from the viewpoint of the dreamer. Mitchell herself was keen on a few cuts and their joint consensus in this regard gave shape to Strindberg’s play. The initial starting point of the play, the prologue where Indra’s daughter comes down to earth has been done away with completely, Caryl Churchill regrets this as she makes clear in the introduction to her *Plays: 4* (London: Nick Hern Books Ltd., 2009,2010, 2011) , for the simple reason that it would balance the character’s final going away at the end. But even Strindberg wrote the prologue as an afterthought and moreover as Churchill states the story revolves around the dreamer’s perceptions and does not take for its plot the character of the daughter (here in Churchill’s adoption the daughter is called Agnes). Some other cuts took place during rehearsals but what Churchill felt about the whole thing was that writers of such degree as Strindberg are lucky that their plays are still performed which shows the abiding interest and significance of such plays till date.

In the Introduction that immediately precedes the play, Churchill writes : “Is it a larder? Is it a fridge? Is it more fun, more vivid, or even more true to what Strindberg meant, to update the larder door which is just like the ones the Officer saw when he was a child? A larder’s where the food is, so does a fridge give us more directly, without archaism, the promise of satisfaction of appetite? And make it easier to see why the characters hope that if they finally get the door open they’ll find the meaning of life inside? Or is it a silly idea and a modernism too far?”^{ix} These lines by themselves point out the andromorphous and multiple dimensions of the play’s conflict.

Inversely Churchill's statement might also mean that the meaning, the real purpose of life can never be arrived at. Mitchell who welcomed the idea of using anachronisms had no problem with Churchill substituting sentences like 'People are so fucked up' (considering the contemporary use of language in Britain and the U.S. to show some kind of dissatisfaction with life) instead of retaining the original which says: "Life is wretched." The statement changes but the idea behind it with reference to the happy married couple who decide to kill themselves because bliss would not last, is quite effective both in Strindberg's original as much as it is in Churchill's exploration of the dominant mood of contemporary lifestyles. Strindberg's play length-wise is so exhaustive that it often seems too taxing for the reader or viewer to remember and reflect upon the lengthy philosophic passages spoken by abstract personified figures. In such passages the argumentative spirit and logical concerns of the playwright is evident as in the following passage which will illustrate this point:

Philosophy: Truth is never dangerous.

Medicine: What is truth?

Jurisprudence: What can be proved by two witnesses.

Theology: Anything can be proved by two false witnesses—thinks the pettifogger.

Philosophy: Truth is wisdom, and wisdom, knowledge, is philosophy itself—

Philosophy is the science of sciences, the knowledge of knowing, and all other sciences are its servants.

This entire section on the argument between the sciences and other epistemological fields of enquiry (which occurs in Strindberg for about 5 pages) is omitted by Churchill who justifies it as necessary perhaps when she says: "There's a strand of the play that is about academia, and that's where I've done the most updating. The university and its bossy deans of theology, philosophy, medicine and law don't have the power over us that they seemed to have over Strindberg. Here a bishop, psychoanalyst, scientist and barrister are on the committee of the enquiry looking into the opening of the door, and the solicitor is refused not a doctorate but a knighthood. Not a big change, and on the whole this version stays close to the original."^x

Strindberg's idea of religion as he voices in *The Dream Play* is also very relevant historically. According to Churchill Strindberg was much more conscious and morally stubborn about religious values and dictates than any of us are today, primarily because we are no longer bound up with thoughts of Christian piety, concepts of sin, redemption and suffering that Strindberg's society assiduously alluded to, if only in theory. Though Churchill also says simultaneously "with a Christian prime minister and an American president voted in by right-wing Christians both calling us to fight evil, perhaps we should feel as dominated by religion as Strindberg did. Still, we don't, so I'm not restoring those cuts".^{xi} Further the references to the Flying Dutchman and Caliph Haroun have been cut off along with a few other references which have seemed too superfluous. The passage which deliberates on the meaning of life has also been cut off for Churchill felt this was not what Strindberg had originally intended to do--- reflect on the meaning of life for example. She has put it in a different way by having the Daughter (Agnes) tell the poet in whispers what life meant, so that we the audience don't hear it. And anyway even if the meaning of life would have been elaborated upon, it would sound too much of an anti-climax, Churchill felt, for modern audiences. In a very logical way Churchill explains the image of the tower which would in our times be equivalent to high-rise commercial buildings that house businessmen and all kinds of bankers, and though a banker in place of an officer

would be more appropriate to modern day audiences, Churchill retains the persona of the Officer nonetheless. And as for the door which looked like the handle of the fridge in the original, Churchill jokingly comments: “I’ve kept the fridge though—if you’re not happy with anachronism feel free to go back to the larder.”^{xii}

Having read the play several times over the years Churchill felt surprised at the entirely new emotions it evoked in her each time she went deeper into the text and she was everytime struck by a unique tenderness that the play exuded. She also felt that interpreting Strindberg in relation to the facts of his life would mean trying to analyze the compulsive effects of his disastrous marriages on a highly sensitive and alienated sensibility, all of which comes through figuratively in *The Dream play*. Strindberg was also political in the sense that the writer incorporated a coal-miners scene and it is worth mentioning that at the time of Strindberg’s writing the play there was a miner’s strike in Stockholm, and on being asked once what he wanted most, Strindberg pointed out that it was ‘disarmament’. The play as an adapted text is crisp in language and more relevant to our context today since it has been ridden of all archaisms in ideas as well as in arguments. Churchill states lastly, “.but perhaps when a play is over a hundred years old you should just be glad it’s still being done. And it survives unharmed in Swedish. I’d like to think he’d be glad about this version. I’d like to make him smile. But maybe he’d say, ‘Oh woe. Life is wretched.’”^{xiii}
(Words: 3,029)

NOTES AND REFERENCES

ⁱ Encyclopedia of world Literature in the 20th Century. Vol 3: L-S. Farmington Hills, MI: St James Press, 1999. P 970.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, P 970.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eugène Henri Paul Gauguin was a leading French [Post-Impressionist](#) artist who was not well appreciated until after his death. Gauguin was later recognized for his experimental use of colors and synthetist style that were distinguishably different from Impressionism. His work was influential to the French [avant-garde](#) and many modern artists, such as [Pablo Picasso](#), and [Henri Matisse](#). He was an important figure in the [Symbolist](#) movement as a painter, sculptor, print-maker, ceramist, and writer. His bold experimentation with coloring led directly to the [Synthetist](#) style of [modern art](#), while his expression of the inherent meaning of the subjects in his paintings, under the influence of the [cloisonist style](#), paved the way to [Primitivism](#) and the return to the [pastoral](#).

^{iv} Edvard Munch (12 December 1863 – 23 January 1944) was a [Norwegian painter](#) and [printmaker](#) whose intensely evocative treatment of psychological themes built upon some of the main tenets of late 19th-century [Symbolism](#) and greatly influenced [German Expressionism](#) in the early 20th century. One of his most well-known works is [The Scream](#) of 1893.

^v Encyclopedia of world Literature in the 20th Century. P 971.

^{vi} Plays by August Strindberg. Translated by Edwin Bjorkman. New York, U.S.A.: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1912. P 26.

^{vii} Plays by August Strindberg. Translated by Edwin Bjorkman. New York, U.S.A.: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1912. P 29.

^{viii} Plays by August Strindberg. Translated by Edwin Bjorkman. P 49.

^{ix} Caryl Churchill Plays: 4. London: Nick Hern Books Ltd., 2009, 2010, 2011. P 209.

^x Caryl Churchill Plays: 4. P 209.

^{xi} Caryl Churchill Plays: 4. P 209.

^{xii} Caryl Churchill Plays: 4. P 210.

^{xiii} Caryl Churchill Plays: 4. P 210.

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