THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HUMAN DIMENSION IN INTERPRETATIONS OF *FORDRINGSEGARE*

ELVYRA MARKEVIČIŪTĖ

STRINDBERG ONCE SAID that a poet's vision gets distorted by the written word, and a written drama, in one way or another, gets distorted by its materialization in a performance on stage. Still, his works have a dimension which nothing can diminish—it is that very spiritual charge through which the work was born. Of course, an inadequate interpretation can diverge from the author's original inspiration, but it would never be the sole interpretation, and it would not escape comparison with other productions. Therefore, a comparative analysis becomes that litmus test which allows us to probe the vitality of various versions, their relevance to our times, and the trace left by Strindberg in our present-day memory.

The extreme world of Strindberg's plays is most poignantly reflected by his *Fordringsegare* (*Creditors*), which he himself considered to be his most personal play. It is an encyclopedia of spiritual cannibalism with the idea of the destructive force of love, and it reveals ever new nuances of resistance to the spiritual yoke that is passion. The relationship of the lovers here is a gladiatorial arena where everyone tries to steal another's soul and replace it with his/her own by imbuing it. As they strive to achieve this goal they disregard all limits.

It is quite paradoxical that food for the soul is also being cooked in this hell's kitchen—the perennial struggle of the sexes is going on not just between them, but also for the individuals' personal freedom and

dignity. These humanist tendencies were envisioned and exemplified by two productions that were staged in the same period in Lithuania and France—*Fordringsegare* directed by Gytis Padegimas in the Kaunas Drama Theatre (1981) and Jacques Baillon's near-contemporaneous production in the Petit-Odéon (1980), which at the time belonged to the Comédie-Française. The comparison of these two productions reveals that both directors were able to recognize in Strindberg's drama a humanist, who is in despair over his own and mankind's imperfections, yet is not disappointed by human beings and still has faith in them.

Of course, comparing these productions is a rather complicated task, firstly, because Padegimas' interpretation involves actors from two generations—a junior and a senior cast—who create two different performances sharing the same plot and the same place of action, yet being totally distinct in their experience and inner feelings. They are like children and parents, where the first version is an *a priori* one—prior to experience—when the participants are only beginning to live and are just learning, trying, tasting the art of psychological duel, while the second—*a posteriori*—version is acted out with already acquired experience, when the characters are rather bruised by life, cynical and having mastered the lessons for mutual attack. Such a directorial approach widens the sense of perspective, which seems to expand time and space, complementing the characters' biographies with new, yet unwritten pages: actually, the characters' lives in the first and the second versions are separated by, let us say, some 20 years. This newly manifested period, having elapsed beyond the confines of the stage, is still important for the conception of the whole production. The viewers' imagination has to engage in additional activity—it must envision, conjure up some third, interim life for the characters which allows the imagination to easily connect both versions into a continuous narrative, thus bringing it closer to the structure of a novel.

Jacques Baillon's production is limited to a single cast, so in this case we need to look for the points of similarity or differences which have been dictated by Strindberg himself. Even in this instance it is possible to find distinctive correlations, because Baillon is likewise



Baillon's *Fordringsegare* (*Creditors*) 1980: Catherine Hiegel (Tekla) and Jacques Toja (Adolph). © collection Comédie-Française/collection Ina.

interested in the issue of generations, which he presents through the characters' age difference—by choosing for Tekla's role a young actress (Catherine Hiegel) and inserting her character into the company of older men (Gustav: François Chaumette, Adolph: Jacques Toja). This serves quite well to illustrate the importance of signs and colours used for creating a performance, when the actor's type alone can enhance or distort the initial interpretation. In this case everything is logical, since the very casting of the actress underscores the director's idea that a young person can be easier manipulated and recreated to fit a certain mould. By the same token, he also indicates Tekla's disadvantaged and defensive position, because she has to fight the adversaries who are older and more experienced than she is. This partly explains even Hiegel's reserved style of acting, when emotions are being hidden due to the lack of confidence in her strength. Jean-Jacques Gautier refers to this in his review titled 'Il Faut le voir' (It has to be seen): "One hardly has the impression that she moves or that her fea-



Padegimas' *Fordringsegare* (*Creditors*, junior) 1981: Jūratė Onaitytė (Tekla), Robertas Vaidotas (Adolph), Valentinas Masalskis (Gustav). *Photo: Vladas Žirgulis/Kaunas State Drama Theatre.*

tures stir. Everything she conveys comes from within and her mystery remains profound."[1]

In Padegimas' versions both casts are commensurate in terms of their readiness to fight and their life experience. In them, both Teklas, as if denying the Lithuanian reserve, are flirtatious and playful, only the younger version (Jūratė Onaitytė) tempts, entices and terrorizes her partner while not yet fully aware of her own capabilities and as if trying on an adult woman's garment, whereas the older one (Doloresa Kazragytė) already has at her disposal the full arsenal of an experienced woman. The theme of the junior cast is more that of a miscommunication between people fighting for their dignity, principles and an imagined model of love—their actions are emotional, not always rational. In the version with the senior cast, a variation of merciless debtors, of cruel, unforgiving and egotistic creditors comes to light. Here Tekla reveals herself in all the colours of a mature woman.

1 Gautier 1980. Unless stated otherwise, all translations are the author's own.



Padegimas' *Fordringsegare* (*Creditors*, senior) 1981: Algimantas Masiulis (Gustav), Doloresa Kazragytė (Tekla). *Photo: Vladas Žirgulis/Kaunas State Drama Theatre.*

After receiving an award for the best female role of the year, actress Doloresa Kazragytė shared her thoughts:

> There were more reviews than ever, and they were more contradictory than ever. To one critic she was a predator, a feline, to another—a fragrant rose, to yet another—a tragic, egotistic character who embodies femininity, exemplifies power and resilience. To some she is more reprehensible, in others she evokes sympathy. Perhaps they are all right. She has all these things in her. At least we rehearsed her this way with the director G. Padegimas and other colleagues. I don't know if this was close to Strindberg, or far from him (we believed it was close), but who can tell what a woman is? [. . .] Has Strindberg found an answer? [. . .] However, above all this, as a leitmotif, as fate, there's a terrible struggle for the liberty of you—the only, unique, inimitable creation of nature. The struggle is cruel, egotistic, but

> the opponents are no less cruel and egotistic too. This theme is the most interesting one for me. Why does one person strive to enslave another, to impose his wishes, his own thinking, his way of living, his own taste? Neither the first, nor the second husband accepted Tekla as she was, and only tutored, tutored, and tutored her! Yes, Tekla took it in, she dissembled, adjusted, submitted to tutoring, but . . . Her nature just couldn't bear it, began resisting, until she reached the final tread, beyond which—death. And she steps over it. Because Adolph's death is hers too. They had really grown into one tree trunk—into their love. Which is also bondage. So isn't death a liberation?[2]

The sculpture of Tekla created by Adolph is interpreted differently by the two directors. In Padegimas' production, in the proscenium we see an unfinished sculpture of a woman, which is in active use: it is now caressed, now spurned, a covering is either thrown over it, or pulled away. The characters treat it as a living person, to the men it is evidently a stand-in for Tekla, whenever she herself is not around. It is noteworthy that even then they attempt to "recreate" her.

In Baillon's production we see a sculptural bas-relief of a stylized woman's figure, framed in ornaments. At the start, Adolph uncovers it in order to show it to Gustav, and later on, having received no encouragement from him and beginning to doubt Tekla, he covers it up again. Tekla, by repeating this sequence, unconsciously confirms the doubt in his talent, as she instantly dissociates herself from Gustav's sardonic allusion to her image. In Baillon's production, she is embarrassed and perplexed while doing this, whereas in Padegimas' interpretation she acts joyfully and with playful coquetry. Thus the directors convey the thought that Strindberg's characters, who often justify their actions with their desire to create or with their lack of such, pursue it only by brutally destroying or denigrating this gift in one another.

Further comparison reveals other differences in interpretation,

2 Kazragytė 1982.

along with certain common aspects. The action of *Fordringsegare* takes place exclusively in a hotel room, in an intimate setting, enclosed within a love triangle, the author's favourite. In this respect the scenography of the two productions overtly reflects the inner life of the characters. Yet in both of Padegimas' versions they are given more space (particularly in the performance of the junior cast, filmed in 1994 for TV in an old manor building) as the characters are placed on an open terrace with a view of the sea framed by white columns on both sides. The columns bear some slight cracks, and the lighting helps to create an illusion in the second, senior, cast's performance that those cracks have deepened. The sumptuous environment underscores the contrast between the beauty around the characters (vases, flowers, tulle drapes) and their inner discomfort.

In Padegimas' production the sense of the flow of time is especially important. In the course of the performance we notice the bright morning light grows gradually dimmer as day turns into evening. Two dimensions of time are emphasized by mise-en-scènes: when in proscenium, the characters act in the present, and as they approach the white balustrade, open to the sea view, they return to the past. They now run ahead for a short moment (typical of the first version), now linger on for a while, as if gathering strength for their fight in the present (the second version). Entering the room Tekla misarranges flowers: she places an arrangement of red blossoms in the vase which already has a bouquet of white flowers in it. This is a sign foreshadowing a shift in feelings, warning of their fickleness. The moon above the sea also changes its colour, turning from pale to red, as if reflecting the ominous mood of the characters. Russian theatre critic Alyona Kravtsova, who reviewed the production during its tour in St Petersburg (then Leningrad), noted that "the precise and subtle work done by the director makes it possible to watch and comprehend the performance even without simultaneous translation".[3]

In contrast, *Fordringsegare* directed by Baillon (and seen by me in its 1981 TV version) is emphatically ascetic: the set designer has con-

3 [Kravcova] 1981a.

fined the characters within a tiny artist's studio, as if echoing the tradition that the Swedish dramatist's characters must fight it out in a cramped space with no adornment. The actors are restricted by minimal mise-en-scènes and dotted-line moves, and they mostly either sit or stand, channelling everything into the explosive inner charge of the here-and-now. The director has shared a very interesting story about his work on the production where he mentioned the method of "rewriting" (adapting) the text he had used. Although the production remained rather close to traditional French verbal theatre, which can be truly enjoyed only if one knows the language well, the director succeeded in "rewriting" the acting manner typical of Molière's theatre. Jacques Toja was the best at working simultaneously in all three directions—those of form, of logical thinking and of emotion—by blending them into a unity; however, in the other players' acting style Molière occasionally still "comes through", when more emphasis is put not so much on the dynamics of the author's thought but rather on the creation of a character. Jean-Jacques Gautier confirms this in his above-mentioned review: "Mr. François Chaumette imparts to Gustave's personage a disquieting, menacing, dangerous nature."[4]

When we compare the characters in Baillon's production with those in both of Padegimas' versions, where the text remains the same, it becomes evident that the characters in Padegimas' production derive greater enjoyment from the game of tempting and fooling their opponents. If we see Chaumette's Gustav as, according to Gilles Sandier, "a paranoid virtuoso wielding the word like a hidden knife",[5] then Masiulis' character is more inclined toward the art of changing his masks: "[...] in less than two hours we see unfold before our eyes the manifold picture of a refined gentleman, a humble Tekla's adorer, a pedantic and observant scholar of classical languages, an Iago-like schemer, a hotly jealous lover, a morbid sex addict, a thinker, a psychologist and a lonely man. And this is still an incomplete list of his colours [...]"[6] Padegimas' subtle staging work presents a flexible

4 Gautier 1980.
5 Sandier 1980.
6 Girdzijauskaitė 1981, p. 20.

score of motions which reveal the inner mise-en-scènes that he constructs. It is so naturally fine-tuned that it becomes unnoticeable, although it reflects all the psychological nuances as they become underscored by erotic moves. Let us say, Gustav (Algimantas Masiulis) licks Tekla's ear as he attaches her earring. In both directors' productions the roles of the above-mentioned actors are notable for their distinct form, and are theatrical in the good sense of the word. Meanwhile, the young Gustav (actor Valentinas Masalskis) uses more subtle colours. He does not torment his victim as methodically as the latter ones do—in the beginning he even feels for her. Anyway, we might say that he, having found Adolph so sensitive and susceptible to suggestion, just cannot resist the temptation to experiment, and gradually becomes merciless to him.

When the director chose Jacques Toja, known for his classical roles, to play Adolph, he risked being excessively influenced by the charm of the actor who had become very popular in the 70s for his appearances in Bernard Borderie's "cloak and rapier" films *The Three Musketeers* (Aramis) and the *Angelique* saga (Louis XIV). However, in Baillon's production Toja's external attractiveness is as if hidden, reduced to its minimum, inconspicuous—although even dressed in a figure-concealing loose garment similar to a workman's robe, he, to paraphrase a saying from George Bernard Shaw's play *Heartbreak House*, cannot rid himself of his fatal gift of beauty just as he can-not cut off his nose. Yet Toja did succeed in distancing himself from his previous "bright and light" acting style. Gone were his usual gracefulness, distinguished stance, aristocratic presence. Even though the director in his interpretation refused to use the crutches that were mentioned by the author, Adolph in Toja's embodiment appeared neither charming, nor alluring, nor gallant—his discordant moves, slight stoop, arms always either folded at the waist or hanging loose, his frequently erupting nervousness revealed the character's insecurity and persistent anxiety. This was stressed by François Chalais in his review titled 'Mise en scène particulièrement réussie' (A particularly successful production/staging): "Jacques Toja, better perhaps than he ever was—seduction

on the back burner, talent in full view."[7] Quite deservedly the role of Adolph was noted as the actor's great achievement and a breakthrough in the context of his usual classical parts which had allowed him to remain within the framework of his psychophysicality.

In the junior version staged by Padegimas, the actor Robertas Vaidotas, who played Adolph, was in many ways similar to the character created by Toja, regardless of their age difference: the same good looks, sensitivity, impulsiveness, inner flexibility, only he, unlike Toja, did not have to struggle with the limitations imposed by being a classical actor. Both Lithuanian and French reviewers used rather analogous terms for their analysis of their two roles. Jean-Jacques Gautier wrote: "Jacques Toja, the second husband, is forced to be less virtuosic, since he plays a paler, more disarmed being: he creates a skilful composition, a half-tone blur, and appears to have studied Edvard Munch's self-portraits and the works this painter had dedicated to jealousy: the same white anguish on the face, same loss of strength."[8] Audronė Girdzijauskaitė in her characterization of Vaidotas' Adolph likewise mentions his pallid complexion:

> The theme of love and despair rings out in Adolph's image. R. Vaidotas' Adolph is fragile and savant. Being madly in love with Tekla and tormenting her, he deepens the chasm of mutual misunderstanding and himself wanes. Having retained the naïveté of his soul, he is the first to become depleted, goes blind and perishes. From his lean figure, from his pale face of a condemned man, from his originally designed moves (fits of partial paralysis, running after Tekla on his crutches, dragging his feet, etc.) we can see the director's desire to arouse in the viewers not just amazement or shock but rather deep compassion for the characters, the necessity to turn back to oneself.[9]

In the performance of the senior cast, Viktoras Šinkariukas' Adolph

7 Chalais 1980.
8 Gautier 1980.
9 Girdzijauskaitė 1981, p. 18.

is quite different—outwardly very reserved, gloomy, evoking no sentiments. These differences are best underscored by two dissimilar finales. In the performance of the junior cast, Tekla and Gustav, kneeling before dead Adolph's body, seem to constitute a mutually integrated group. In the version of the senior cast, dead Adolph hangs on his crutches, while Tekla and Gustav keep shoving him at one another, as if trying to shift their responsibility and guilt. Eventually, they press against each other and freeze. In the final scene of Baillon's production Tekla likewise falls on her knees beside prostrate Adolph, but Gustav remains standing aside, leaning against the wall.

Strindberg provokes the actor to expose human nature and so the actor reveals himself in dreary, naked, tragic forms of individualism, where everybody is both a tormentor and a victim. Submerged in their desires, led by their unconscious, the characters neither see nor hear each other, and if they do, say only the most hurtful things which allow them to justify their egotism. The relations between the lovers become a fighting arena, where the quest for harmony always turns into discord. Their humaneness and sensitivity are overwhelmed by the need to rule the one close to them; the range of their feelings expands from total acceptance to monstrous hatred.

The actors in both of Padegimas' versions asserted that they had consciously avoided watching their colleagues' rehearsals for fear of being influenced by them, and, as a result, two completely different performances were born, with no mise-en-scènes in common. The comparison with the French version convinces one that the play can be interpreted endless ways. The Lithuanian and French productions were staged almost at the same time, and it is not hard to notice that both directors resorted to the means of expression which appealed to them—they accentuated the dynamics of emotional and spiritual change, the spontaneity of the actors' performance and their Munch-like moves. Although most likely they were united by what had inspired their productions with the leitmotif of humaneness ringing loud and clear. "But, eventually, the director imparts to us the thought that a human being attempts in vain to assert himself/herself through egotism. A simple thought comes through about one's inability to defend oneself in this

world and about the imperative closeness of people. An almost physical need for kindness and attentiveness arises",[10] resumes Alyona Kravtsova while analysing Padegimas' diptych. The correctness of her insights was confirmed by the director himself: "While staging *Creditors* I wanted to negate the opinion that Strindberg extols anger and hatred. This writer is a humanist. And humanism is what we tried to emphasize in our production. We wanted the viewers to start thinking—are people simply wasting their emotions, do they know how to cherish love?"[11] The French reviewer Paul Chambrillon notes the same when he mentions Adolph played by Toja: "A climate of tenderness and trust would give him happiness and life. He is mercilessly denied that."[12]

"Before giving free rein to one's own nature, one has to know the natures of others quite well. Or they might clash", says Gustav to Tekla. By this statement Strindberg both warns and shows a way out, as he turns in the direction of the human dimension. At the same time he fully realizes that the problem is everlasting, therefore, paradoxically, theatre, by striving to devote its art to the allegedly old-fashioned search for humaneness, for justice and kindness, will always be contemporary. In his reminiscence about creating the production of *Fordringsegare* Baillon wrote: "I was convinced that the human dimension appeared in its eternal form when Jacques, through his example, showed me that humanity could only express itself by being a modern humanity. It is true that the character of the sculptor that he played in *Creditors* allowed him to make more understandable the need for a sensitivity open to creation in order to justify the modernity of all humanity."[13] I believe that both directors, who not only elucidated clearly the tragedy of egotism but also sought to show some ways of overcoming it, have succeeded in turning our attention to the human factor both in Strindberg's works and in the realities of life.

---

10 [Kravcova] 1981b, p. 7.
11 [Padegimas] 1981.
12 Chambrillon 1980.
13 Baillon 2014.

REFERENCES

Baillon, Jacques 2024. 'Jacques Toja, le moderne', in Elvyra Markevičiūtė, *Jacques Toja—ambassadeur de la belle illusion/Jacques Toja—gražiosios iliuzijos ambasadorius*, Kaunas: Kopa, p. 148.

Chalais, Francois 1980. 'Mise en scène particulièrement réussie', *France-Soir*, 31 January.

Chambrillon, Paul 1980. 'Sensibilité pasionée', *Valeurs Actuelles*, 11 February.

Gautier, Jean-Jacques 1980. 'Il Faut le voir', *Le Figaro*, 12 February.

Girdzijauskaitė, Audronė 1981. 'Kas tie "Kreditoriai"?', *Kultūros barai* 10, p. 20.

Kazragytė, Doloresa 1982. 'Dvi viršūnės 1981-ųjų teatrinėje panoramoje: Kūrėjo tribūna', *Kauno tiesa*, 30 January.

[Kravcova, Aliona] 1981a. 'Kaunas-Leningradas-?', *Kauno tiesa* 41, 25 October.

[Kravcova, Aliona] 1981b. 'Leningrado teatrologai apie kauniečius', *Literatūra ir menas*, 31 October, p. 7.

[Padegimas, Gytis] 1981. 'Versmės', *Kalba Vilnius*, 10 April.

Sandier, Gilles 1980. 'Merveille', *Le Matin*, 7 February.