

ACTOR IN POSTDRAMATIC THEATRE

August Strindberg's play *Fröken Julie*

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Problem with novelty

AS SOCIETAL DYNAMICS evolve, so too does the theatre, yet the written text endures as an immutable entity, as exemplified by Bulgakov's assertion, "Manuscripts don't burn".¹ This enduring quality is evident not only in August Strindberg's *Fröken Julie* (*Miss Julie*) but in numerous plays authored by him and others. While theatrical trends undergo constant transformations, the essence of the plays appears to remain consistent, encapsulating the original intentions of the playwright from over a century ago, as is notably observed in the case of *Fröken Julie*.

In an article by Oskaras Koršunovas, the renowned Lithuanian director and former artistic director of the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre, he emphasizes the fluidity of staging, asserting that "classics should be staged in a modern way, and contemporary dramaturgy should be staged in a classical way".² This perspective resonates with the prevalent notion of modernity, where the postdramatic often takes centre stage, characterized by its association with non-mimetic elements. Coined by Hans-Thies Lehmann in 1999 through his seminal work *Postdramatic Theatre*, the term delves into the complexities of this theatrical paradigm, as succinctly captured by Lehmann's statement: "Postdramatic theatre tries to withdraw from the reproduction

¹ Bulgakov 1967, p. 148.

² Koršunovas 2022.

of ‘images’ into which all spectacles ultimately solidify.”³ This departure from mimetic representation fosters a shift towards performativity and a nuanced creation of relationships, transcending the confines of traditional dramatic structures.

In this transformative theatrical landscape, Lars Kleberg further accentuates the interwoven nature of diverse artistic elements within the theatre. While acknowledging the incorporation of elements from music, painting, literature and more, Kleberg contends that in the realm of theatre, these elements coalesce into a unified whole, shedding their intrinsic characteristics.⁴ This underscores the dynamic and multifaceted nature of contemporary theatrical expression, where traditional boundaries dissolve, allowing for innovative and interdisciplinary performances that defy categorization.

A playwright, particularly one with expertise in the theatre, crafts a play with an inherent focus on its potential staging. This includes envisioning the play within contemporary theatre trends and prevailing directions. Notably, postdramatic plays exemplify this approach, deliberately constructed upon postdramatic principles. In these instances, authors consciously integrate non-mimetic elements, contributing to the realm of innovative and unconventional theatrical expression.

Creating a theatrical experience

Distinguishing between staging plays in line with the author’s envisioned theatrical production and diverging from the author’s vision to stage according to that of the director poses a dichotomy. Opting for the latter, I acknowledge that my venture was not successful. The focus on portraying the actors’ personalities overshadowed the essence of the play’s characters, relegating the text to a mere tool for unveiling actor personalities rather than those of the characters. This approach may stem from the prevailing influence of traditional training methods, such as those of Stanislavski and Chekhov, still prevalent among Lithuanian actors. Vaidas Jauniškis, a notable theatre critic,

³ Lehmann 2006, p. 184.

⁴ Kleberg 1993, p. 41.

underscores this observation, stating that despite Lehmann's insights on postdramatic theatre, Lithuanian directors largely adhere to the dramatic tradition, meticulously exploring and expanding the playwright's text.⁵

As the actors persisted in reading the text and adhering to classical acting principles, I endeavoured to dismantle these entrenched systems, introducing broader paradigms. The actors found themselves in an airless space, devoid of the familiar starting points essential for character development in performance. Regrettably, my limited knowledge at the time hindered me from tapping into the world of "devised" theatre and its innovative creation methods. Devised theatre, by definition, encompasses a process-oriented approach involving collaboration, multi-vision, and the creation of an artistic product. As explained by Oddey,⁶ devised theatre is at times crafted for, with, or from a specific audience. Furthermore, it emerges as a set of strategies within various theatrical and cultural fields, such as community arts, performance art/live art, or political theatre.⁷

Viewing the text as a mere stepping stone in the construction of our performance, we embarked on the ambitious task of creating a contemporary, naturalistic expression, breaking free from traditional theatrical confines. Steering away from conventional principles, I integrated postdramatic elements, extended expositions, unique scenography and choreography to establish a profound connection with the audience. Despite the potential conflict between these avant-garde staging principles and the play's naturalistic roots, the enduring relevance of its content, spanning over a century since publication, cannot be overlooked. In our rendition, we explored power dynamics, the influence of youth and age in decision-making, and the impact of material wealth, money and changing circumstances on aspirations and goals. Through this, we aimed to analyse, represent and question societal relationships, presenting a here-and-now reality that resonates with contemporary relevance.

⁵ Jauniškis in Lehmann 2010, p. 15.

⁶ Oddey 1994, p. 18.

⁷ Heddon & Milling 2006, p. 11.

Viewpoint

Fröken Julie can be analysed from various angles. It can be approached from the point of view of Marxist ideology, where all attention gathers in capital and money: this can be seen in Hossein Davari's article 'A Marxist reading of *Miss Julie*' (2015). Additionally, a comparative examination of August Strindberg's *Fröken Julie* with Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* is undertaken and the power dynamics of both plays are scrutinized, as presented in Banu Ögünç's 2018 article 'Where do I belong? Power struggle in *Miss Julie* and *The Hairy Ape*'. We can find meaningful insights in Xiaoshu Xu's 2019 article 'The subversion of gender, the immensity of desire: A psychoanalytic interpretation of Strindberg's *Miss Julie*' into characters' psychological portraits. However, the potency of these analyses hinges on aligning them with the play's core ideas. A crucial consideration is the interplay between the author's original inquiries, still relevant today, and the director's vision. The divergence between these paradigms, as experienced in my case, risks diluting the production's thematic focus. While altering the play's form is a valid choice, it prompts reflections on the essence of a director's ideas and their alignment with the play's core content.

Form artistry

Sven Heed, in his analysis of Robert Wilson's 1998 production of August Strindberg's *Ett drömspel* at Stockholms stadsteater, characterizes it as an extraordinary and somewhat controversial event. He notes that the production, with its seemingly irrational playing style, diverged markedly from the naturalistic-psychological tradition typically associated with Scandinavian theatre, causing a minor scandal.⁸ In a broader context, Robert Cardullo discusses the trajectory of modern drama, highlighting the shift from the realism of Ibsen and the naturalism of Strindberg to the socially, politically and psychologically oriented "problem plays" of the 20th century. Cardullo emphasizes occasional influences from avant-garde movements contributing to the evolution of experimental theatre in the 20th century and beyond.⁹

⁸ Heed 2009, p. 91.

⁹ Cardullo 2014, p. 2.

Indeed, numerous directors, including Wilson and others, appear to be engaged in the ambitious task of bridging seemingly disparate paradigms within theatre. The avant-garde movement, characterized by a self-conscious exploration of the nature, limits and possibilities of drama and theatre in contemporary society, strives to connect traditional and experimental elements. However, despite these efforts, Cardullo notes that the vision for the future embodied in avant-garde work remains tentative and unclear. There persists a sense of doubt and distrust regarding the movement's potential to offer a definitive and inspired vision, underscoring the challenges faced by avant-garde practitioners in articulating a coherent trajectory for the future of theatre.¹⁰

Gunnar Brandell finds the terms “realism” and “naturalism” unfortunate: concerning the reductive tightening of form that shapes such plays as *Fadren* or *Fröken Julie* he would prefer “classical”, bearing in mind that this should by no means suggest a contrast with the “modern”.¹¹ This underscores the challenge of definitively categorizing plays within a specific direction. Moreover, the independence of a play from a particular direction, in my perspective, is contingent upon the interpretation and choices made by the theatre director or the entire ensemble. Strindberg's works, including a play like *Fröken Julie*, exhibit elements of modernism, realism, naturalism and symbolism, alongside timeless themes. The director's conscious or unconscious decisions play a pivotal role in determining how the play is approached and from which perspective the performance is crafted. In essence, there are multiple Strindbergs, shaped not only by different plays but also by the interpretive lens applied by directors and ensembles.

In my approach to *Fröken Julie*, I viewed it through the lens of naturalistic drama while endeavouring to present it in a modern, and even postmodern/postdramatic manner. Sibel İzmir, in her analysis of Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*, highlights the profound reciprocal bond between theatre and society, rooted in the representation of human existence: “While theatre mirrors life, it remains distinct as

¹⁰ Cardullo 2014, p. 2.

¹¹ Brandell 1988, p. 93.

it is not life itself; rather, it is the re-creation of life to impart meaning and significance to the audience.”¹²

Izmir underscores that drama, as fiction, serves as a reflective medium, posing essential questions pertinent to the community for which it is intended. This perspective aligns with my aspiration to infuse a classic naturalistic play like *Fröken Julie* with contemporary and post-modern elements, fostering a dynamic and meaningful connection with the audience.

Aleks Sierz popularized the term “in yer face” in his book *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, defining it as any drama that seizes the audience by the scruff of the neck and forcefully delivers a message.¹³ He delves into the strength of plays, emphasizing that the departure from naturalistic forms, especially the traditional three-act structure, can challenge audience acceptance.¹⁴ He draws an analogy with bread knives: these tools, despite variations in colour and materials, have maintained a consistent purpose over centuries. The simplicity and familiarity of their form, akin to a constant and non-movable stone, serve as instruments for manipulating thoughts, ideas and audience reactions. While modern inventions such as electric knives exist, the paradox lies in people feeling a sense of safety and comfort with the simple, traditional sharp knife—passed down through generations—due to its enduring design and the familiarity of its use. This paradox underscores the enduring power of established forms and their influence on human comfort and perception.

Drawing from Sierz’s insights, there is a compelling argument for utilizing well-known and familiar forms in theatre to maximize audience acceptance. Just as society functions through certain established principles and forms, theatre can benefit from the recognition and comfort that traditional forms bring. Integrating innovative visions, ideas and unique microcosms within these familiar structures allows for a balance between tradition and creativity. This approach acknowledges the inherent connection between form and acceptance.

¹² İzmir 2017, p. 72.

¹³ Sierz 2001, p. 10.

¹⁴ Sierz 2001, p. 12.

Back to the roots

Undoubtedly, theatre is in a constant state of evolution, with emerging perspectives suggesting a return to its roots. The revival of verbal theatre stands out as a notable trend in the 21st century. As Angel-Perez notes, this resurgence is evident on English stages, emphasizing that postdramatic theatre is not solely focused on demonstrating logical principles but also engaged in reconstructing the boundaries between fiction and reality.¹⁵ This resurgence aligns with a broader movement in postdramatic theatre, where many performances seek to reconnect with myth and the sacred on stage. The exploration of verbal and narrative elements reflects a desire to revisit foundational aspects of theatre while pushing the boundaries of form and expression in the contemporary landscape.

If we are coming back to the roots, it is worth mentioning that Émile Zola, the French novelist, journalist and playwright, was a leading figure in the literary school of naturalism and a significant contributor to the theatrical naturalism that my work has discussed. Recognized for his raw and unvarnished depiction of life, Zola left a lasting impact on literature and drama. Nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1901 and 1902, his work continues to influence the exploration of human behaviour and society.

Fröken Julie by August Strindberg is written to abide by the theories of naturalism. Zola puts the term naturalism into a formula,¹⁶ in which there are three principles of naturalism:

Faire vrai: the play should be realistic and the result of a careful study of human behaviour and psychology.

Faire grand: the conflicts in the play should be issues of meaningful, life-altering significance—not small or petty.

Faire simple: the play should be simple, not cluttered with complicated sub-plots or lengthy expositions.

¹⁵ Angel-Perez 2013, p. 2.

¹⁶ According to Madsen 1973, p. 26.

In Copenhagen, where *Fröken Julie* was performed with qualified success, Strindberg corresponded with Edvard Brandes on 12 June 1889, expressing his thoughts on his wife's performance.¹⁷ However, it is noted that in deviating from at least two principles of naturalism outlined by Émile Zola, my production faced challenges and ultimately collapsed. This highlights the significance of adhering to the foundational principles of naturalism in the staging of theatrical works.

Crafting the performer

The question of how actors should be trained and the methodologies taught in drama schools presents a significant challenge. Constantin Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares* has long been a foundational text for actor training. The influence of Stanislavski has been pervasive, particularly in post-communist countries. However, the dominance of this approach raises concerns about monopolistic systems in actor preparation. French theorist Florence Dupont's book *Aristote ou le vampire du théâtre occidental* (Aristotle, or the Vampire of the Western Theatre, 2007) explores the foundations of Western theatre with Aristotle's poetics, challenging the monopolistic influence of Stanislavski.

Notably, contemporary voices, such as Lithuanian director Valentin Masalskis, deviate from a singular method. Masalskis employs a "collage" of methods and teaches various principles without adhering to a specific favourite method, as highlighted by Živilė Mičiulytė in 2016. This reflects a growing openness to diverse approaches in actor preparation, moving beyond the traditional confines of a single dominant methodology.

There is a parallel between the evolution of political institutions and the changing landscape in actor preparation methodologies. Algis Krupavičius, in his work on post-communist transitions, highlights the significance of real political forces, such as Sąjūdis in Lithuania or Solidarność in Poland, as crucial instruments of political opposition and drivers of institutional reform.¹⁸ Similarly, in theatres across

¹⁷ Madsen 1973, p. 83.

¹⁸ Krupavičius 1999, p. 8.

the globe, there is a shift towards multidisciplinary actor preparation. Theatre directors increasingly seek actors trained in various methods, reflecting a move towards pluralism in the training process. This trend mirrors the recognition of diverse approaches as essential in political and artistic contexts.

Conclusions

The challenge of adapting to evolving theatre trends and methods is particularly evident in the realm of dramaturgy and actor preparation. While the play text and the writer's vision remain constant, the methodologies for staging plays and preparing actors undergo continuous change. According to Vaidas Jauniškis, many Lithuanian directors are rooted in the dramatic theatre tradition, utilizing metaphorical and poetic language to deepen the playwright's text within its strict framework.¹⁹ On the other hand, Valentinas Masalskis employs a versatile approach, using a "collage" of methods and teaching various school principles for actor preparation.²⁰ This reflects a contemporary shift in theatre directing, where a diverse range of actor capabilities and perspectives is valued, making it more adaptable to the dynamic landscape of theatre practices.

The selection of a play by a theatre director often involves a search for a piece that allows for varied interpretations. Gunnar Brandell critiques the terms "realism" and "naturalism", favouring the term "classical" instead, with no implied contrast with the "modern".²¹ Modern drama is seen as evolving from the realistic Ibsen and naturalistic Strindberg towards socially, politically and psychologically oriented "problem plays" of the 20th century, occasionally influenced by avant-garde movements.²² Some plays possess such immense energy that moving beyond their themes, worlds and forms becomes challenging. As Aleks Sierz notes, departing from naturalism and well-made, three-act dramas can make a play challenging for audiences to

¹⁹ Jauniškis in Lehmann 2010, p. 15.

²⁰ Mičiulytė 2016.

²¹ Brandell 1988, p. 93.

²² Cardullo 2014, p. 2.

accept.²³ There is a correlation between altering the form and deviating from classical rules, and potential difficulty in audience comprehension, suggesting that completely denying all classical drama rules may be impractical.

Oskaras Koršunovas identifies two major paradigms in contemporary Lithuanian theatre: either building a contemporary performance from a naturalistic play or constructing a naturalistic performance from a contemporary play.²⁴ However, other paradigms exist, such as building a naturalistic performance from a naturalistic play or creating a contemporary performance from a contemporary play. Devised theatre, where actors contribute to the creation of the text or use the play text as a framework, is gaining popularity. In this approach, the performance becomes a collective endeavour, blurring the director's role as the sole leader. While the director's influence diminishes in terms of shaping the text, there remains a crucial role in encapsulating and guiding the collective ideas to a final, cohesive product ready for presentation.

The evolution of contemporary theatre paradigms, as described by Oskaras Koršunovas, resonates with the transformation of the Lithuanian political system during the Soviet Union's collapse and the early years of independence. This political analogy aligns with the evolving nature of theatre creation, where there is a growing recognition of the possibilities to present shows in diverse forms, methods and ideologies. Similar to the acceptance of multiple political parties, the audience is becoming accustomed to various theatrical productions, fostering a broader understanding and appreciation of different shows. This trend extends to actors, who benefit from wider indoctrinations, preparations and methods in their academies, making it easier to contribute to and create performances that embrace diverse perspectives.

²³ Sierz 2001, p. 12.

²⁴ Koršunovas 2022.

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