AUGUST STRINDBERG'S LAST TWO PLAYS IN THE CONTEXT OF HIS DEATH

A departure into "the brightened night" or into "the dark woods"?

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WHEN HE WAS 26 years old and still a young and up-and-coming dramatist, August Strindberg stated in a letter to his future wife and budding actress Siri von Essen, apparently trying to give her lessons in creative writing: "An author is no more than a commentary on what he has lived."[1] Much later, having become a mature and widely-known writer, he confessed:

> This is what I think about my life: is it possible that all the dreadful things I have been through have been choreographed for me so I might become a dramatist, portraying all states of soul and all situations? Had I become a dramatist at the age of twenty, my life would have proceeded calmly and quietly, I would have had nothing to portray.[2]

Needless to say, authors of all times have based their work on their personal backgrounds and experiences, yet throughout his life Strindberg, as a seasoned playwright and director, kept ingeniously creating for himself dramatic, often extreme situations in which he performed the role of the protagonist, thus accumulating and occasionally re-

1 Meidal & Wanselius 2013, p. 76.
2 Meidal & Wanselius 2013, p. 399.

plenishing the dwindling source of his creative expression. Of course, by always balancing on a dangerous edge and often tempting fate with his provocative actions, he brought upon himself numerous affronts and hurtful surprises, habitually called the irony of fate.

In this long line of "natural coincidences" or sequence of "fateful omens" I would like to highlight his life-changing encounter with Siri von Essen and her husband Baron Carl Gustaf Wrangel af Sauss. When the young playwright gratefully accepted the invitation of the aristocratic couple, not that different from him in age, to visit them at their residence, it turned out this was the very same house where he, growing up with his family, had experienced all the storms of juvenile pubescence, the death of his mother and the arrival of his stepmother, and other similarly stressful events. These memories, without a doubt, had a significant influence on the complicated relations between the threesome, which started out as ostensibly innocent games with fire—when they played "mother", "father" and "child", as well as "brother" and "sister"—with clearly pronounced sexual overtones. Eventually, it became the cause of the players' divorces, new marriages, long-term neuroses and frustration. Different variations of these sadomasochistic experiences, as we well know, have successfully seeped into a number of the author's dramas and works of prose.

After 15 years of turbulent marriage Strindberg divorced Siri von Essen and was preparing to marry Frida Uhl (whom he had met in Berlin) on Heligoland Island off the German coast, when another strange coincidence took place on the eve of their wedding. They walked to the railway station for no particular reason and "ominously met a ghost from his past—his former wife Siri von Essen's first husband Carl Gustaf Wrangel".[3] This, and many suchlike occurrences enriched the often morbidly sensitive Strindberg as an author, yet kept irreversibly draining him as a man. In a letter, written to his brother Axel after the completion of his 1887 drama *Fadern* (*The Father*), Strindberg confided:

3 According to Frida Uhl's account (Meidal & Wanselius 2013, p. 288).

> It feels as though I am sleepwalking; as though fiction and life are mixed up together. I do not know if *The Father* is a work of fiction, or if my life has been one; but it seems to me that at a given and imminent moment it will become clear to me, and then I will fall to the ground, either in madness caused by qualms of conscience, or in suicide. All this literary writing has made my life a shadow life; I feel I am no longer walking on the Earth but hovering in an atmosphere, not of air but of darkness. When darkness penetrates that darkness, I will come crashing down and be dashed to pieces![4]

In one of his last residences—one of the many he had inhabited throughout his life—called The Red House, Strindberg set up a "Temple of Memory", and, if we applied to the author the pronouncement from his last drama *Stora landsvägen* (*The Great Highway*) about "memory as unfulfilled hope", eventually we could conclude that this temple was a kind of repository for his abundant unfulfilled hopes. In 1908, after moving to his final residence, The Blue Tower, where he spent the last four years of his life, Strindberg attempted to assume the role of a penitent who, imprisoned in this tower, cuts his worldly bonds and serves the punishment for all of his transgressions. To his and Frida Uhl's adolescent daughter Kerstin, whom he had not seen since her childhood and who now wished to get in touch with him, he heartlessly wrote: "I am 60 years old and living in a boarding house … But I am a writer, of course, and life is purely my material for plays, mostly for tragedies! Farewell! and consider me just a memory."[5] A little later his other daughter Karin wrote to her mother Siri von Essen in Helsinki: "… we saw (Father), who looks about 80, white-haired and like an old man."[6] The perpetual rebel, exhausted from the never-ending life struggles with conservative societal norms, censorship, his closest people, his inner demons and even metaphysical forces, appeared aged beyond his years, yet remained unbroken. Sven Hedin, a renowned ex-

4 Meidal & Wanselius 2013, p. 196.
5 Meidal & Wanselius 2013, p. 466.
6 Meidal & Wanselius 2013, p. 483.

plorer of those times and vehemently opposed to Strindberg, wrote in the heat of their polemic fight: "One goes past his home here in Stockholm with a sense of passing a house of mourning, where the bier stands prepared. [...] The darkness has already begun rising about him. Soon the black bats will appear and his heart will grow cold."[7] (Regardless of how indiscreet and cruel these words might sound, the verbal duels between Strindberg and his adversaries often entailed much more malicious stabs which went both ways.) So, I would wish to look at the writer's final few years, including some bright spots, and at his death through the prism of his last plays. This idea came to me when our planned conference in Kaunas to commemorate the 110th anniversary of his death was unfortunately cancelled.

In the shadow of demise

Strindberg's last works of drama, *Svarta handsken* (*The Black Glove*) and *Stora landsvägen*, were penned in 1909—during the 60th year of his life. Although Strindberg's plays were being performed at a number of theatres in Stockholm and other cities to note this important occasion, he was hurt and humiliated by certain background events that had upstaged what was perhaps the most significant festivity of his life. Not he, but Selma Lagerlöf was awarded that year's Nobel Prize in Literature; not he, but his former close friend and ally (and by then his avowed adversary) Verner von Heidenstam received an honorary doctorate from Stockholm University to mark his 50th birthday and was celebrated as a national poet and the foremost writer of Sweden. Another insult came just five days before January 22nd—Strindberg's jubilee birthday—when Swedish society, headed by the king, came out to meet with great pomp Sven Hedin as he returned from the expedition which had earned international glory for Sweden.

Though these unrelated events can in no way be attributed to any human conspiracy or act of vengeance, and can only be called yet another variation of "the irony of fate" or, according to Strindberg, an "attack by higher forces", of course, for Strindberg it was an un-

7 Meidal & Wanselius 2013, p. 480.

deserved and painful blow which further deepened his resignation and his social marginalization. He received a substantial blow in the sphere of personal relations as well, when his fourth attempt to find marital happiness failed when he unsuccessfully tried to woo a very young actress, Fanny Faulkner, from his Intima teater. The author's last play, *Stora landsvägen*, influenced by these setbacks and by all the upsets and bitterness accumulated throughout his life, became his seven-station journey of human unfulfillment into the dark woods of non-being.

As it is aptly noted in "the Bible of Strindbergiana"—Björn Meidal and Bengt Wanselius's book *The Worlds of August Strindberg*—from which I have sourced material for this article, during the final period of his life the author of virtuoso dialogues quite often turns his voice into a monologue, even when writing a drama with numerous characters, such as *Stora landsvägen*. Meidal and Wanselius note:

> the many private connotations in what has to be his last play, The Great Highway, made it very hard to classify. They refer concrete terms to the stations of August Strindberg's own journey through life: from his birth on Riddarholmen via Drottninggatan and the Blue Tower to the New (North) Cemetery.[8]

It is interesting that this particular cemetery, in which a few years later Strindberg was to find his eternal resting place after a lifetime of storms, is not even mentioned in the play. What is mentioned, however, is the crematorium which is one of the protagonist The Hunter's stations on the way and is located within an unnamed cemetery. This detail lets us draw the conclusion that the author's subsequent death becomes associated in the minds of the researchers with the protagonist's death in his final play, and enables us to look for correlations between these two departures. One more unexpected detail, which makes it possible to talk about the deaths of the protagonists in Strindberg's last plays in terms of the author's "memories of the fu-

8 Meidal & Wanselius 2013, p. 468.

ture", is The Japanese whom The Hunter meets by chance next to the crematorium and who requests that his body be cremated, and who, when asked for his name, says it is Hiroshima since he hails from that city … Of course, we all know what fate befell Hiroshima 33 years after Strindberg's death and how much ashes were there then.

Deliverance through departure

For Strindberg, for this master of extreme situations, who had lost his mother early in his life, who had experienced the death of his newborn daughter, and, later on, the tragic demise of his former lover Dagny Juel, the following lines by Lithuanian poet Tomas Venclova could be pertinent: "I've lived, yet also learned how not to be,/And death was like a member of my family,/Who hogged most room in our flat from me."[9] Death is the usual dénouement in many of Strindberg's plays, and it releases their characters from the hell of living. In his penultimate play, *Svarta handsken*, which could be characterized as a Christmas tale for adults, one of the characters, The Old Man, is called by others "Doctor" or "Professor", when in fact he is a professional taxidermist who has devoted his whole life to a Faustian quest for knowledge and is trying to unravel the fundamental mystery of existence.

However, having irretrievably lost and forgotten within the profusion of yellowing pages of his manuscripts the answer which he had gained through much suffering (or just had an inkling of), he is described in the very beginning of the play by another character, The Doorman, as "a philosopher who desires to die as soon as possible". The very craft of taxidermy implies the professional habit of preserving a dead body by deceptively presenting it as alive. The representatives of higher forces, The Christmas Angel and the Scandinavian Christmas Gnome (Jultomten), agree to give him death as a Christmas gift. But ahead of that, Jultomten shows The Old Man the futility and senselessness of all his scholastic pursuits and rationalizations. Disheartened by his pointless life-long travail, the lively Gnome cheers him up: "You have burned down your dying old forest—this

9 Venclova 1977, p. 15.

was your bravest and wisest move. Now go ahead and seed the burnt-out field."

And it is a very simple thing to do—all it takes is diverting your gaze from yourself at someone close to you. By presenting the black glove he had found with a ring lodged inside to the servant girl Ellen, who had been accused of stealing the ring, The Old Man removed the danger facing her and restored her joy of life. Like Faust after his salvation, he can depart from this world after uttering his final line: "Now I can die in happiness, now that God's grace has helped me make at least one person happy." This line and the protagonist's pre-death enlightenment, as well as the subsequent somewhat basic happy ending, come off as rather mawkish, yet in the context of Strindberg's other plays, which are often replete with deadly struggles between characters, they are original and unexpected. The Great Sceptic (and quite often Cynic), after a lifetime of creating relentless "hymns of pessimism" to man and world, in this play sings praise to human solidarity and compassion with an uncharacteristically cheerful tone. As "the son of a servant" looks with Christian empathy upon the representatives of lower social strata residing on the ground floor and in the cellar of the building he describes, his sensitivity makes him socially responsible and brings him closer to "the downtrodden and the hurt".

Svarta handsken, even with all its schematism and sentimentality typical of a Christmas tale asserting the victory of traditional human values over the destructive forces of fate, turned out to be prophetic for its author. Here it becomes apparent that the protagonist's final confession in *Stora landsvägen* ("I am tormented by the shame that cruelty has made me merciless") as well as the closing lines of the same play ("[...] I had to suffer more than others perhaps because I felt the pain of failing to be such as I wanted to be") are autobiographical and very significant for the author ...

Nevertheless, the coda of the complex and controversial symphony of Strindberg's life was truly unexpected and almost fantastically bright. One might even think that God or the "Higher Forces" had heard his ironic remark, "Bless also the created humankind that suffers from your gift called life", and decided to bless, if not human-

kind, then at least the author of many a poignant remark addressed to Him/them—who was about to leave this vale of tears—with all kinds of grace, seemingly compensating him for the plethora of iniquities, losses and humiliations which had been meted out to him as his earthly lot.

The grand finale

The first of these graces, as if embodying the maxim from *Svarta handsken*, "An old tree does not turn old until it stands all by itself in the woods, surrounded by young saplings, time having so thoroughly pared away adjacent trees", was that in his final years Strindberg was surrounded by young people. In the very same year, 1909, during which his last plays were written, the tensions of his divorce from his third wife Harriet Bosse had faded, and Strindberg could spend unhampered time with his most beloved daughter Anne-Marie after she was brought back into his life as if by Jultomten. This mirrored the appearance of the vanished daughter in the final scene of *Svarta handsken*.

Soon after, he was visited by two of his other children—his only son Hans and his eldest daughter Karin—whom he had not seen for 18 years, and who came from Helsinki, where they had been raised in their mother Siri von Essen's family. His daughter Greta, the only one of Strindberg's five surviving children to choose acting as a profession, had been residing in Stockholm for quite some time, and in 1909–1910, to her father's great delight, was performing in his plays all over Sweden with the *Strindbergs-tournen* company.

In its own turn, the young generation, inspired by the social democratic trend which was gaining momentum within Swedish society, found in the controversial author a figure who shared their ideals and from whose work and activities they could draw inspiration in their struggle to renew the ossified social order—so much so, that they even proclaimed him "the people's writer" and the "poet of liberty". The 15,000-strong torchlit parade organized by these young people on Strindberg's last birthday to express support and unconditional acceptance for the dying writer must have given him much joy and satis-

faction as he greeted the march from the balcony of his home with his little daughter Anne-Marie by his side.

However, even though he tossed down into the crowd a bouquet of red roses as a token of mutual respect, this amazing, powerful declaration of love, seldom (if ever) so publicly demonstrated to the writer during his life, did not cancel Strindberg's ecclesiastical realization (by then essential to him) that "all is only vanity of vanities and torment of the soul", a concept which permeates his valedictory play *Stora landsvägen*, written shortly before this event. And although Strindberg, in his address to the young social democrats thanking them for this celebration, did profess the very human solidarity he had proclaimed in *Svarta handsken* by the following words: "Thank you my good friends! Now that I have finally once again found myself and my standing, which can never be static because of my work as a writer, you know where you are with me, and all mistrust can be discarded",[10] it evidently failed to offset his opposing attitude—"with every bond I broke I came looser from this prison"[11]—which had been ingrained in him for quite some time by then.

The financial success which Strindberg enjoyed towards the end of his life after a lifetime of privations and major financial problems likewise appears as if taken from a trite plot of a Christmas tale, even though it brought him a far-from-trite sum of money—the size of two Nobel prizes. It consisted not just of the money he had received from the Bonniers publishing house upon signing a lucrative contract for their edition of his works, but also included a much more significant and fairytale-like "People's Nobel Prize" which had been contributed to in small amounts by a huge number of Swedes. The writer, who quite often had to extricate himself from financial predicaments through embarrassing fundraisers conducted by his friends and colleagues, could now allot considerable sums to his children and symbolically repay his "old debt" to Siri von Essen, and also, in his own words, "as a Christian and socialist" lend at least some humble assistance to the needy.

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10 Meidal & Wanselius 2013, p. 489.
11 Meidal & Wanselius 2013, p. 458.

It is true, however, that his daughter Kerstin apparently received no financial support from him, even though she, in response to the above-mentioned letter from Strindberg with his refusal to re-establish their communication, had written: "For me you are not a 'memory'! Will never become one! [. . .] You are my father."[12] The motif of a "never-found" or a "never-known" daughter is prominent in both of his last plays. It has special poignancy in the seventh station called "At the Last Gate" of *Stora landsvägen*, where the protagonist, unrecognized by his daughter and about to sink into eternal darkness, sees for a moment an illuminated tableau of the earthly happiness and peace he had craved so much yet never reached—"as a memory of his unfulfilled hope . . ."

It seems that after such great successes it would be possible to leave this world—especially the one always viewed as a place of suffering—with a bright smile like that of The Old Man in *Svarta handsken*, but not for Strindberg. He slammed the door upon departure so hard that the noise remained audible long after his death, and its echo has reverberated for over a hundred years, to this very day. Even in our times of non-stop discourse and of relentless informational din, the sheer scale, intensity and acerbity of the discussions provoked by Strindberg in Swedish society during his final years are quite astounding.

In his articles, full of unexpected youthful drive and senile rage, the seasoned polemist, who had spent a lifetime honing his tools in various clashes, now attacked a vast range of topics, from the monarchy to the usual habits of everyday life. This phenomenon—which perhaps has no analogues and has even received a special name, the Strindberg Feud, which has split Swedish society and is reminiscent of the third station in *Stora landsvägen* called the "Village of Donkeys"—from the perspective of time appears to have been excessive and needlessly intense, yet it stirred up the stagnant waters and, like the totality of Strindberg's activity and work, contributed considerably to the progress in various spheres of life in Sweden and to some achievements which are quite evident today.

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12 Meidal & Wanselius 2013, p. 486.

In his last years, both love and hate, which had always followed Strindberg during his lifetime not just in Sweden but across the whole of Europe, acquired even greater proportions. The course of the illness of "the ruler of human hearts" and his death were widely discussed, debated and commented upon both in private and in public, and were thus very unlike the quiet and lonely departures of his last protagonists. Even the writer's funeral, contrary to his last wish, was turned into an enormous show of state significance and a political spectacle.

However, regardless that even his last words, later to become legendary, appeared in three versions, and in spite of the truly Renaissance-like scope of his life and work, Strindberg died alone like everybody else. None of the famous last lines ascribed to Strindberg contain any pathos. They are all laconic and simple.

Let us try to imagine them in the mouths of three different characters in the writer's last two plays. "Do not worry about me, I no longer exist"[13] could be uttered by The Japanese to The Hunter, the assistant to and witness of the death of The Japanese in *Stora landsvägen*. The Hunter, in his own turn, could softly proclaim while vanishing imperceptibly into "the dark woods": "I have closed my account with this life. There is nothing personal left."[14] The Old Man of *Svarta handsken*, after experiencing before his death what it means to make somebody else happy, could gently whisper while departing into "the brightened night": "Now I have said my final words. I shall speak no more."[15] The author himself, if he became a character in a biographical drama or film, could deliver a longer monologue in the final scene. I believe a short dialogue from *Stora landsvägen* between The Hunter and The Japanese could fit in rather well here if transformed into a monologue:

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13 Meidal & Wanselius 2013, p. 491.
14 Meidal & Wanselius 2013, p. 491.
15 Meidal & Wanselius 2013, p. 491.

> THE HUNTER: I've been preaching to people and teaching them, extolling virtues, the most beautiful aspirations, which we call ideals—these are like flags on a high pole, like pennants inviting to a festival. Now—and it hurts—I must become disillusioned in everything I've dreamed and spoken of! —There is no real beauty in life—we'll never instill it—and in reality there are no ideals. THE JAPANESE: I know—they are only our hopes which make us raise our sails— Let these flags wave, they may be up high, but they can be seen from afar . . . they are showing the way to the heights, to the sun!

These lines, coming from the characters created by Strindberg, presage an existentialist variation of Albert Camus' yet to be written "The Myth of Sisyphus"—well ahead of its time.

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