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STRINDBERG'S CAREER IN THE POLISH THEATRE

An investigation of Strindberg's impact on Polish literature and the Polish theatre presents many problems. The very name of the Swedish dramatist has always stirred up an emotional response. He was adored or violently opposed, proclaimed a severe moralist or denounced as depraved. And instead of encouraging critics to make scholarly studies, these emotional reactions were an obstacle to them. This is one of the reasons for the lack of serious and responsible studies of Strindberg when his works first appeared on the Polish literary scene. Another reason is connected with the general situation in the field of theatrical criticism and research in the days of the so-called Young Poland, at the close of the 19th century. There were no theatrical libraries, archives, or museums, and there was scarcely anyone aware enough to collect theatrical documents of any kind. That is why an historian of the theatrical life has hardly any evidence available.

The difficulties I have mentioned are certainly not a feature particular to the Polish situation: they were probably common to all countries at that time. Nevertheless, it would be useful to remind you of the handicaps that confront an historian of the theatre when he tries to establish the facts.

If, despite all this, we can still be so bold as to promise you a survey of Strindberg's theatrical career in Poland, it is only possible because of Strindberg's theatrical career in Poland, it is only possible because tholic University in Lublin, in the years 1966/68.

The idea of undertaking such a survey can be entirely justified. In studying the Great Theatrical Revolution we realized how much Strindberg had contributed to change the very idea of the theatre, and how deeply the Intima Teatern as a concept of the new theatre had influenced European culture. So the problem of Strindberg and the Polish theatre, as manifold and complex as it appeared to us, seemed to require some solution. We decided then to concentrate on this problem, without losing

sight of the twofold framework which had to be taken into account: namely, that Strindberg's theatre ought to be considered not only within the framework of its period, but against the background of later theatrical developments and trends as well. Without this double approach we would not be able to establish Strindberg's due place in our contemporary culture.

The gathering of materials proved extremely difficult: Marian Lewko toured all the libraries in the country and interviewed many actors and producers. His inquiry has elicited many unknown facts, and it would be worthwhile, perhaps, to present them in some detail, particularly those referring to the period of Strindberg's first appearance in the Polish theatre, a period which closed in 1918, the year in which the first World War ended. In subsequent years, interest in Strindberg dramas decreased, and not until recently was it to revive in Poland.

The problem which will concern us first can be called the choice of the model. Strindberg's dramas were successively accepted and interpreted in Poland as possible models of the naturalistic and independent theatre (*théâtre libre*), as so-called „somnambulistic” drama; as modern mystery play; as expressionistic theatre, and eventually as existentialist drama. The latter refers to quite recent Polish interpretations and productions.

From the very beginning, Strindberg's growing fame in Poland stood in paradoxical opposition to the scarcity of texts available to Polish readers: until Strindberg's death (1912) of the 60 dramas he wrote, no more than 3 had been published (*The Father, Miss Julie, Comrades*). Let us add that the situation has not changed much up to now, although a recently published volume (1962) contains some new translations. We still do not know (except from the stage) the texts of *Dance of Death, Advent, To Damascus, Easter, Swanevit* and many other dramas.

Since most of these dramas have been performed in Polish theatres, they must have been translated, and some of these translations are available in manuscripts or typescripts, scattered about in theatrical libraries and archives.

Polish readers had their first opportunity to become acquainted with Strindberg's short stories in 1885. The next years brought some of his novels and other stories. According to Polish critics of that time, Strindberg was considered the most prominent realistic writer: his deep psychology, „true to life”, has been often emphasized. Strindberg's popularity centered in Warsaw — the recognized centre of positivist and realistic trends. The mystery plays, although well known to Polish critics

(in German translations, probably), were considered a transient oddity of the writer at that time.

The only dramas which were edited at the end of the century were *The Father* and *Miss Julie*. Both aroused interest — not without a flavour of scandal — and were widely discussed in Polish literary magazines. The discussion focused on social and psychological problems; nevertheless, the novelty of the theatrical concept, Strindberg's conscious and sharp drawing of characters, did not pass unnoticed. The critics paid great attention to the writer's theoretical formulas as expressed in his prefaces and articles, and some of them, especially the preface to *Miss Julie*, were reprinted two or three times.

Compared with these early discussions and translations, the staging of Strindberg's first play in Poland seems very belated. Up to now, 1908 has been accepted by Polish critics as the year of Strindberg's first staging in our country. But the recent inquiries by Mr Lewko have made it possible to move that date back to 1905. The shift concerns not only the date, but also the play produced first. It was *Simoom*, not *The Father*, that began Strindberg's career in the Polish theatre.

Simoom's première took place in the Eliseum (Warsaw). This play was put on by an amateur theatrical society (Towarzystwo Miłośników Sceny) along with two of Axel Steenbuch's plays (*Father* and *Mazourka*). The whole evening repertoire was dedicated to Scandinavian authors. Scandinavism (or septentrionalism) had been extremely popular in Poland since the 80's, and since 1891 the term *scandinavism* was in frequent use in Polish criticism.

But is the date 1905 really so belated? It is, if we consider the first performance of Strindberg in the Swedish and German theatres as a point of reference. The theatres of some other Slavonic countries, the Russian and Czech theatres — had preceded us too, although by only a few years. On the other hand, the Polish theatre had preceded the United States, England, and Japan.

Coming back to *Simoom*: in the same year 1905 two other theatres (that of Wrocław, then Breslau, and Komissarżewskaya's in Moscow) produced it too. To which of those three cities does the honour of having introduced *Simoom* on the foreign stage first belong? This cannot be decided without further investigation. The question still remains open.

In Warsaw *Simoom* seems to have been performed as a naturalistic drama, all its expressionistic potentialities being neglected. The Warsaw theatres still followed the naturalistic model of the *théâtre libre*, although they were already acquainted with Przybyszewski's and other new dramas.

Thus the first phase of Strindberg's reception in Poland was characterized by adoption of his early naturalistic theatre, interpreted both as a reaction against the mild, meek realism of the previous period, and as a protest against the so-called idealistic theatre.

The plays of Strindberg's naturalistic period were represented on our stages by 5 dramas: *Simoom*, *The Father*, *Miss Julie*, *Creditors*, and *Comrades*. (We are giving these according to the chronological sequence of their appearance in our theatres). All of them were presented as specimens of a new, bold, revolutionary theatre, although not very many producers were conscious of Strindberg's artistic novelties. Both the producers and the audiences seemed interested in these plays for their social problems rather than for their theatrical concepts. Hence only psychological, moral, and social aspects of the play were subject to discussion and the plays themselves were usually considered to be extremely drastic, immoral, provocative. Had those plays not been regarded as offending, they probably would have been staged in Poland some years earlier. Some allusions by Polish critics of that time suggest that censorship — both Russian and Austrian — played a decisive part in the story.

Most often during that period *The Father* as well as *Miss Julie* was produced with illusionistic scenery: Strindberg's own stage directions were either neglected or misinterpreted. There were, however, some exceptions. One of the most interesting examples of the ambitious attempts at a new, anti-illusionistic setting took place in Warsaw) The Independent Stage of the so-called Little Theatre) in 1910. Bolesław Gorczyński, director of that experimental little theatre, tried to make use of the new theatrical ideas practised by Reinhardt and Fuchs at the Kuenstlertheater in Munich. *Miss Julie* was staged against a background of curtains and draperies. This performance — the first in Warsaw — was much discussed and gave rise to violent attacks against the dramatist as well as the producer. Nevertheless, the most aware critics declared it an artistic achievement.

Another representative of Strindberg's naturalistic dramas, *The Father*, was introduced to the Polish stage in 1908 and was repeatedly performed until about 1934. It is noteworthy that an outstanding Polish playwright, Gabriela Zapolska, at that time in the cast of Antoine's theatre in Paris, fostered the idea of staging *The Father* in Warsaw as early as 1895. This drama returned to the Polish stage in 1955, after a 20-year absence. But, the break was not complete: just after the Second World War, in 1946 and 1947, three theatres presented *The Father*. After that, performance was not permitted until 1955, when Strindberg's dramas again returned to the Polish stage.

Today, *The Father* no longer is the only or the most popular Strindbergian drama: it appears alternately with other plays.

The second decade of our century may be called *The Father's* triumphant march through the Polish country. This tremendous success is a sort of paradox and puzzle. How was this success made possible while critics were firmly pointing out all the weaknesses of the play and were steadily denouncing it as an out-of-fashion, traditionalist, naturalistic scheme? This cold or angry criticism was opposed by the most enthusiastic reaction of audiences who had repeatedly clamored for revivals.

A paradox of a similar kind happens so often that it is well known to historians of the theatre. The puzzle is easy to solve: the leading part in the play during that period had an extraordinary interpreter: *The Father* was acted by Adwentowicz, and this became his most well-known role. For almost 40 years (from 1908 to 1946) Adwentowicz toured the entire country preceded by his legend, and the people rushed not so much to see the play, as to admire the famous artist's skill. Let me remind you, incidentally, that Scandinavian roles were his particular speciality: Adwentowicz achieved utmost success in Ibsen's and Strindberg's plays. Manders' rôle in *The Ghosts* was his last performance. A fatal stroke took him off stage: the performance had to be interrupted.

Adwentowicz's acting had a strong impact on the Strindbergian tradition in Poland, and for a long time our actors were reluctant to take up his parts, afraid of unfavorable comparison.

Along with Adwentowicz, a famous tragic actress, Stanisława Wysocka, contributed considerably to Strindberg's popularity in Poland. The older generation still remembers her as Laura in *The Father* and Eliza in *Pelican*. For some years we have been observing a definite revival of the latter play: at the beginning of 1970 *Pelican* was produced at three Polish theatres (at the Dramatic School of Warsaw, in Łódź and in Wrocław).

From among the plays representing the naturalistic phase of Strindberg's dramas, *Comrades* and *Creditors* (1910) had some success before the first World War, but none of them was ever popular in our country, and both have fallen into oblivion.

The most interesting set of Strindberg's plays are certainly those written after *Inferno*, hence those belonging to his post-naturalistic period. Although at every stage of his creative work Strindberg's dramas acted as inspiration and challenge to the theatre, the post-naturalistic dramas are still regarded as anticipating many later theatrical inventions and new currents.

Not all of them were put on the Polish stage — but almost every so-called mystic play (*Advent, Easter, To Damascus*) aroused interest before or just after the First World War. *Crime and Crimes* was among the first stagings in Poland (1905) — under the changed title *Folly*. It preceded by three years *The Father* and *Miss Julie*. In 1913 *The Thunderstorm* was performed in Lwów and this was among the very first foreign productions of the play. *To Damascus* was discussed in 1908 and later was put on the list of future repertory projects — a list which was to contain many of Strindberg's dramas, most of them never produced.

These non-realized plans deserve attention. Sometimes the play was in rehearsal and almost ready; in other cases the censor's intervention put an end to the preparations; in most cases, however, the very reason of the failure is to be elucidated.

The Spook Sonata was among the most promising of those expected but never achieved productions. One of our distinguished directors, Tadeusz Pawlikowski, was to present it in Cracow in 1913. Most likely, he met Strindberg himself abroad, and for many years he thought of introducing his plays on the stage that he directed. In 1913, just after again becoming director of the theatre in Cracow, he planned to open the season with *The Spook Sonata*, which would have been its first foreign production. Unfortunately, the young producer, to whom — on Przybyszewski's insistence — the task had been entrusted, was not able to meet the task. The production might have been an artistic failure, so Pawlikowski chose to call the performance off.

The Spook Sonata was to wait more than 50 years before being presented to a large audience by Jerzy Kreczmar at the Teatr Polski in 1965, where it achieved a well deserved success. We learned recently that it was staged in the Summer of 1926 at the Formist Theatre in Zakopane. The producer was the famous Polish playwright, the founder of our avant-garde theatre, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. Since the audience was very limited, the production passed almost unnoticed.

Once more we have to mention Pawlikowski's bold initiative, even earlier than that mentioned above. The producer, excellent connoisseur of the modern theatre, who had introduced in Cracow many of the new dramas at the close of the 19th century, decided to stage *Swanevit* in 1908, at the same time, it not earlier, as Strindberg, who put *Swanevit* on his stage at the Intima Teatern, in the autumn of 1908. This time the performance had to be cancelled because of the protest of local authorities. The drama seemed too risky from the financial point of view. The Austrian censor's stamp on the manuscript remains as lasting evidence of that attempt. The same script was used by Teatr Lwowski in

1918; although the play was rehearsed, there is no evidence for its being produced.

In the theatrical library of Katowice there is another translation of *Swanevit* which seems to have been done later. But when was it done? And on which theatre order? Another puzzle to be solved.

In the same year 1908 another famous man of the theatre, Kazimierz Kamiński, planned to put *Eric XIV* on the Warsaw stage. The translation had been made by the well-known critic, Adolf Nowaczyński; the project aroused a vivid interest and was much discussed in the Polish press. This time the Russian censorship's opposition proved to be an insuperable barrier. The censor's verdict ran as follows: „The king is presented with irreverence and behaves without any dignity. Eventually the rebellion is victorious“. What a precious historical document proving how weak and uncertain the government felt, to be so suspicious and look for political allusions everywhere!

It is impossible to present in detail all the cases of repertory plans that failed. They are quite numerous. Nevertheless the already mentioned cases can give an idea of the difficulties the theatres had to overcome in order to stage Strindberg's plays. The directors had to cope with official censorship as well as with an inner, social censorship, and with financial issues as well. And last but not least, some productions were hindered by a lack of actors suitable for Strindbergian roles. Soon it became obvious that Strindberg's dramas required interpreters of utmost skill and training. The success of these dramas always has depended upon the actors.

Among the Polish productions two more should be mentioned: the only performance of *Advent* in Poland (1918) and the Polish première of *Dance of Death*. The former took place in Cracow (1918), the latter in Warsaw (1917). Upon further investigation the first production of *Dance of Death* may be traced back to another date; some facts indicate that it possibly took place before 1910.

When compared with the year of its creation (1898), the first production of *Advent* in Cracow (1918) seems extremely belated. In order to gain the proper perspective for this fact, we should add that the Cracowian première had preceded that of the Swedish theatre's (1926), and that it followed the world première at the Kuenstlertheater in Munich by only 3 years.

The Polish literary world expressed its approval in many articles: the Polish critics emphasized the religious aspect of the mystery play and pointed out the revival of the religious theatre at that time. Enthusiasm was not quite unanimous, however; one of the critics (Szyjkowski)

led a violent attack against the producer (Trzciński) on that occasion, calling the play „the pathological fruit of an unsound mind”. There were some other objections too: namely, against the naturalistic acting which did not match the symbolistic setting of the play. The naturalistic tradition of the Polish actors, still supported by Stanisławski's authority, was so strong in those years that it proved hard to overcome. The stage-designers were much more advanced than the actors.

It is really regrettable that such an interesting play as *Advent* has never returned to a Polish stage.

On the other hand, *Dance of Death*, ever since its première (1917), has always ranked among the most popular of Strindbergian plays. As in the case of *Advent*, Reinhardt's production of 1912 encouraged the Polish director to introduce it onto our stages. The play achieved a considerable success once more, and since then the part of Edgar has become associated with Adwentowicz's name.

The audience was shocked by this demonic rôle, interpreted with utmost precision and cold economy. The play seemed superior to the others in every respect. And this performance gave birth to the popularity *Dance of Death* has enjoyed since that time. It seems now the most attractive and the most theatrical of Strindberg's plays. After Strindberg was reintroduced into the Polish theatre in 1955, *Dance of Death* has been his most often performed drama. In 1967 alone, three theatres (Gdańsk, Kraków, Warszawa) produced this play. One of these productions was presented at the festival of Toruń, in 1967.

When compared with the pre-war period, and especially that preceding the First World War, our theatres' recent achievements do not seem very imposing: the number of plays presented in our theatres is very small. Many of the plays that used to be produced or prepared for the stage, have never been staged since: for example, *Simoom*, *Crime and Crimes*, *Creditors*, *Comrades*, *The Thunderstorm*, *Advent*. The case of *Swanevit* has been already mentioned.

On the other hand, our generation has had the opportunity of seeing two excellent plays not staged previously (although they were in preparation): *The Spook Sonata* and *Eric XIV*. Owing to a young university dramatic society of Cracow, „Theatre 38”, *The Spook Sonata* was introduced to the Polish theatre in 1964. A year later the Theatre Polish in Warsaw followed suit. The drama was already known to the audiences, since our magazine *Dialog* had published it before.

The Polish première of *Eric* (1961) became an event vividly discussed by Polish critics. The political problem of the play was associated with the Shakespearian historical tragedies, extremely popular in recent years,

which have been presented by many theatres and interpreted in terms of present reality by Jan Kott in his well known book: *Shakespeare — Our Contemporary*. The phrasing was applied to Strindberg as well: Strindberg — our contemporary.

Despite the scarcity of published texts and the small number of Strindberg's plays performed in our theatres today, there is much evidence for a growing interest in the Strindbergian theatre in our country. This interest is shared by the critics, by those of the theatres as well as of television and radio. Strindberg is considered no longer as a dangerous or unsound writer: no one is concerned any more about the influence he may exert on the young people.

It would be interesting, perhaps, to stress the contribution of the Polish television in this respect. So far, 8 plays have been presented, three of them never previously produced in any theatre (*Actresses*, *Parias*, *Leka med elden*). At present, a television production of *Creditors* is being planned.

The context of contemporary theatrical events makes us regard him as an „angry young man” of his epoch; as a bold innovator and revolutionist of the theatre. Strindberg's inspiration has visibly influenced the expressionistic phenomena in theatrical art as well as many other events. The apologists of all contemporary tendencies in the theatre appeal to Strindberg as their predecessor and patron. His authority is invoked to patronize naturalistic and symbolic drama; short, one-act forms as well as vast mass shows; the revival of religious drama and the theatre of cruelty. Strindberg's name has become associated with Shakespeare's historical tragedies, with Ionesco and Beckett, with Artaud. The Polish critics have taken up the problem of all these affinities and have discussed it extensively these last few years.

Since the lack of Strindbergian texts has been considered an obstacle to securing a better knowledge of the writer, some new initiatives and works are already in progress. In addition to some planned theatrical productions, a new publication is being considered, namely, an anthology of Strindberg's theatrical ideas. The book is to be included in the series entitled „*Theories of the Contemporary Theatre*”. Strindberg will join Craig, Tairov, Meyerhold, Wachtangow, Artaud and Claudel. Let us hope, too, that at last all those translations, which at present are unavailable, save to the scholars, in the archives, will appear in print soon.

Strindberg's impact on the Polish theatre certainly deserves a large monograph. It would be a colourful survey of many prominent names and events which have shaped the history of our theatre for the last seventy years.