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Maid in England: Anglicizing *Miss Julie*

This brief presentation of the BBC *After Miss Julie* project is offered as an addendum to Inga-Stina Ewbank's reflections on the reception of Strindberg in England. My own discussion of this topic and Strindberg's failure to find either an adequate translator early on in the century (many of the first Strindberg translations were made from Emil Schering's German edition rather than from the original Swedish) or an intermediary who could introduce him in England as Bernard Shaw did Ibsen are to be found in the introduction to my recent volume of *Studies in Strindberg* (Norwich: Norvik Press, 1998) and (in Swedish) in Björn Meidal, ed., *August Strindberg och hans översättare* (Stockholm, 1995). No acting tradition has emerged for the performance of Strindberg in England as it has for Ibsen and Chekhov, and the sheer range and variety of his dramatic production has opened the way to accusations of a lack of artistic control in his writing, in contrast to what is seen as the admirably consistent approach to playwriting of his Norwegian and Russian contemporaries. The one practitioner who might have introduced Strindberg to England, in an informed way at least on paper, was of course Edward Gordon Craig, but Strindberg had insulted him when Craig sought him out in Stockholm in 1906, and thus, like so many other opportunities in the anglicizing of Strindberg, this, too, was stillborn. Few of the prose works are known there and his other work (e.g. as a painter) remains to be discovered; indeed, even today, Strindberg has got little further in England beyond the somewhat unwelcoming port of Gravesend, where

he first set foot on English soil in 1893.

After Miss Julie was presented as one of six otherwise classical plays in the BBC 2 Performance series, what was in 1995 still the BBC's major annual serious drama slot. It enjoyed the luxury of four cameras for filming over an entire week with a set built in the BBC's Shepherd's Bush Studios. Three years later such a series of major plays with comparable facilities is inconceivable.

The director is the playwright Patrick Marber who has pursued a not uncommon path into the British theatrical mainstream. Following studies at Oxford he spent some time in stand-up comedy, both in the theatre and on television. His first award-winning stage play was *Dealer's Choice*, produced at the Royal National Theatre in 1995 with a text derived from his own experience as a poker player and an affinity with the work of David Mamet, whom he greatly admires. His next play, *Closer*, which has been compared variously to Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, Pinter's *Betrayal* and David Hare's *Skylight*, was also staged at the National and went on to win the Olivier Best New Play award for 1997, the *Time Out* award, also for best play, and (rather more curiously, since it is sometimes anything but comic) the prize as best comedy in the *Evening Standard* Drama Awards for the same year. It is still (September 1998) the hottest ticket in town. Although he had directed his own first play for the theatre and has subsequently been responsible for other productions, including Dennis Potter's *Blue Remembered Hills of Home* at the National Theatre, *After Miss Julie* was his first experience of directing for television as well as his first television play.

It also brought together three actors, each well-known in their respective spheres, yet at first sight unlikely fellow performers. In 1995 Geraldine Somerville, the Miss Julie, was best known for her role as the female detective in the widely-screened award-winning criminal series *Cracker* in which she played the female detective alongside Robbie Coltrane, a criminal psychiatrist. Paul Daniels, who had appeared in Marber's first play *Dealer's Choice*, and who has a reputation for playing comic or low-class roles in both Shakespeare and the contemporary theatre played Jean. His casting seems to me to avoid an obvious trap in

the anglicisation of *Miss Julie*, which would be to represent Jean as a Laurentian gamekeeper attending his Lady Chatterley, in the manner of a saturnine Alan Bates in *Far from the Madding Crowd* or *The Go Between*. Meanwhile Kathy Burke, who played Christine, enjoys a substantial reputation both as an actress in television comedy and for the portrayal of lower-class characters, also on screen. (She appeared as one of the inmates in Mai Zetterling's *Scrubber*, for example.) Since *After Miss Julie* she went on to win the prize for best actress at the 1997 Cannes Film Festival for her performance as the battered wife in Gary Oldfield's *Nil By Mouth*.

My own role in the project was modest, although it went beyond the usual contribution expected of a primary translator. Initially I produced a literal translation of the kind one is sometimes asked to do for a theatre who then hands it over for further work by a recognized playwright - I had in fact done this once before with *Miss Julie* for John Guare and the Roundabout Theatre in New York. As agreed, however, my translation this time was accompanied by a detailed commentary which entailed anything from glossing individual words and lines for subtextual or alternative meanings in the original or commenting on the play's contemporary Swedish context to more elaborate reflections on the possibilities inherent in Strindberg's text for its transposition to the English 1940s. Thus, given the initial decision to remove the events of the play from 1888 in Sweden to England on the night of the General Election in 1945, I appended a series of interpretative comments on how relocating the action in this way could permit a reading of the text as a failed revolutionary moment where Miss Julie might be depicted as - if only half-unconsciously - seeking to break with convention and aspiring to live differently in a new female role for which she lacks the language to articulate this desire, or indeed any sense of the new world in which these aspirations might be realized. I argued too that this abortive revolt was also affected by way of Jean who (again to some extent unconsciously, perhaps) manipulates her in the interests of his own revolt against precisely the class she represents. Thus, although we are not told how he voted earlier in the day, he emerges in Marber's published script as something of a closet Tory. He does not aspire to

overthrow Julie's class but to join it, and he is thus as emasculated a revolutionary as she is because he has introjected the values of that class. This was linked in my mind especially with a very real concern that in setting the play so precisely at the end of the Second World War and Labour's astounding landslide election victory, there should be no sentimentalizing of the historical moment, no nostalgic backward gaze or romanticizing of that false dawn. And in the notes I sent with the original translation I stressed how all this was linked to the way in which the play revolves round the sexual encounter in Jean's room. Sex is the act by which both characters believe they can, at least temporally, legitimate their visions and accomplish, if only momentarily, their personal and class transformations.

Patrick and I then met to discuss the translation line by line, teasing out further possibilities and exploring ways of transposing Strindberg's text into the place and period he had already chosen - the country estate of a Labour Lord in the English home counties on the night of Labour's post-war election victory in 1945 which was selected (by Patrick) to stand in for that culturally untranslatable annual event, a svensk midsommarafton. (That a Swedish play written in 1888 about a transgressive affair between an aristocratic daughter and her father's manservant could be so effectively transformed is, of course, in itself an eloquent comment on the class-ridden society of modern Britain in the 1950s of Clement Attlee or indeed the 1990s of Tony Blair.) Patrick was also insistent that I identify key phrases or exchanges in Strindberg's text, most of which were retained in the final version even if they were subsequently given a more 1940s inflection.

A number of features in Strindberg's original found a ready and natural place in the transposition to 1945. Thus it made sense for Julie's fiancé to be an army officer and for Jean to have gained a smattering of French while serving abroad during the War. Likewise, though this was rather more strained since the link was made through Julie, who in Strindberg's play is characterised by her lack of worldly experience in comparison with Jean, the idea of America and a Jazz club replaced Strindberg's hotel in Switzerland as a forlorn way out for the doomed lovers. These and other possibilities were energetically considered as I

was also invited to attend early cast briefings and rehearsals, thus enabling me to discuss the text and context of the Strindbergian original in some detail with others besides Patrick. I was subsequently also present for the filming at BBC Studios in Shepherd's Bush - although by that time both script and performance were, of course, fixed.

The fact that the play was scheduled for a prime time showing also determined the shape of the final shape of *After Miss Julie*. The allotted slot allowed for a script of no more than about 75 minutes. Hence certain cuts were made to the original text (for example, the exchange of dreams between Julie and Jean and the long retrospective account by Julie of her mother in the second half of the play were both included in the first two drafts but had subsequently to be lost). These complemented other changes to the script that were introduced during rehearsal since Patrick, who believes that 'when you stop changing things, it's dead', always continues to write, cut and re-draft all the way through rehearsal: such passages include the moment when Jean is first invited to step into Julie's father's shoes and subsequently has to give them up again (pp. 85 and 109 of Marber's published text, London 1997).

As an academic moonlighting in the theatrical bear pit, I found the whole process both stimulating and appropriate for, I think, two principal reasons. Firstly, ever since the pioneering translations of William Archer and Constance Garnett the domestication of Ibsen and Chekhov in the British theatre has been a commonplace of both translation and reception theory. Often at the expense of their Norwegian and Russian origins, their plays have been absorbed into the British theatrical mainstream. Strindberg, on the other hand, has generally remained impervious to this kind of domestication, and it seemed to me both interesting and legitimate to see the extent to which *Fröken Julie* might be remade in England. The result, I believe, both illuminates the original play and the condition of post-war British society. Secondly, there is a sense in which any performance of a dramatic text, whether in its source language or any other, is a translation. Moreover, at the remove of over a century since *Fröken Julie* was written, even sticking faithfully to the letter of Strindberg's original

does not necessarily ensure that one does literal justice to the text as written. As Harry Perridon has pointed out, in a recent discussion of how one translates the class and gender defining forms of address in the play, since ‘the meaning of a large number of words has changed since the days of Strindberg, the text printed in the [new scholarly edition of Strindberg’s *Samlade Verk*] is arguably *not* the same text as the one created by Strindberg’ (*Strindberg, Ibsen & Bergman*, Maastricht, 1998, pp. 173-4). Nor, of course, is Patrick Marber’s play, although the latter, like any performance of Strindberg’s text, is ‘After Miss Julie’.