

Margareta Wirmark

## Strindberg versus Bergman: The End of *Spöksöneten*

Ingmar Bergman claims to be a director anxious to live up to the dramatist's intentions. In several interviews during the last thirty years he underlines this and stresses his indebtedness to the author. The text is the very essence of the performance, he states, and the director must always remain loyal to the dramatist's text.

This is Bergman's credo. Does he live up to it when he produces Strindberg's plays? Does he stick to the author's dialogue? And, more importantly, is he true to the Strindbergian message?

Out of Strindberg's more than fifty plays Bergman has staged around ten. Four of them seem to be his favourites – *Spöksöneten/The Ghost Sonata*, *Ett drömspel/A Dream Play*, *Pelikanen/The Pelican* and *Fröken Julie/Miss Julie* - as he has staged them more than once. I have chosen to concentrate on one of these plays: *The Ghost Sonata*. Rather than discuss the whole drama, I shall focus on the end of the play.

### Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata*

Death is the theme of Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata*. Death is presented from a dialectical point of view: it is not only an end but also a beginning. After life's suffering a new and better existence begins. Strindberg considers the moment of individual death the meeting-place between two different forms of existence and attempts to visualise this meeting.

To be able to show the borderline between two different worlds Strindberg turns to metaphor. The metaphor chosen is not invented by him, however, it is inherited from others. The deceased has to embark on a journey, Strindberg tells us; he has to use a boat to reach his new existence. The goal of the journey is also presented; it is an unknown island surrounded by water.

In the play it is a young lady who dies. Her dying is very brief; it lasts only a couple of minutes. Neither her beloved, nor the audience is allowed to witness it for the Young Lady is concealed behind a screen. Her death is a solitary one; it is neither exposed to the eye of the spectator nor to her beloved Student.

It is Bengtsson, the servant, not the Student who fulfils her last wish, providing her with the Japanese death screen. Bengtsson opens the screen and places it in front of her. "Quick! The screen!", the Young Lady exclaims. This cry is not an expression of horror; it is a welcoming of death.

Why does Strindberg place the Young Lady behind a screen at the moment of death? Obviously he does not want to focus on this part of the drama. What carnal death is like is left without comments. Strindberg is more eager to present what happens after death when man makes his entrance into a new and better world.

How does the Student react when he understands that his beloved is about to die? He does not react at all. He takes little part in the Young Lady's dying and leaves it to Bengtsson to fulfil her last wish. Nor does the Student try to console her; instead he devotes himself to eloquence. Judged by normal standards the Student's behaviour is most inadequate.

The Student first indulges in a long monologue where he complains about the poor conditions of mankind. After that he starts reciting a poem and then utters three short speeches. He first bids welcome to death, then approaches Buddha, and finally says farewell to the Young Lady. The Student has much in common with the Poet in *A Dreamplay*; he obviously believes that the essence of life can be summed up in words.

"My poor, poor child", the Student begins, "child of this world of illusion, of guilt, suffering and of death." This is the beginning of his

farewell speech. What the Student presents to us is the beginning of an official speech intended for a large audience. The Student expresses no sorrow or sense of bereavement. At the end of the drama the young man does not behave like a lover any more as he did earlier in the drama. His task is no longer to express personal grief but to visualise the condition of mankind. He does not call the Young Lady his beloved but a “child of this world of illusion”. This is the beginning of his final speech, which concludes: “May the Lord of Heaven be merciful to you on your journey.” The soliloquy he has just delivered resembles most of all a speech by a priest officiating at a funeral.

“May the Lord of Heaven be merciful to you on your journey.” The Student’s benediction over the dying Young Lady forms the very last line of the play. The next moment the two lovers are gone and the Hyacinth room has faded away as well. Instead of this poisonous place where death reigns, a lovely green island slowly appears, a heavenly island seen from a distance.

*Rummet försvinner. Böcklins Toten-Insel blir fond; svag musik, stilla, angenämt sorgsen höres utifrån ön.<sup>1</sup>*

*(The room vanishes to give place to Boecklin’s painting Island of the Dead. The faint strains of music from the distant island - sweet, low and plaintive are barely audible.)<sup>2</sup>*

Man’s existence does not end with death, Strindberg underlines. On the contrary, man’s real existence begins in the moment of death. The unknown island presented to the audience at the end of the play is a metaphor of hope.

“Kanske när döden kommer, börjar livet”<sup>3</sup> (“Perhaps when death comes life will begin”), the Captain tells us in *Dödsdansen/The Dance of Death*. In this drama the life hereafter exists only in the Captain’s

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<sup>1</sup> Strindberg 1991, p. 225.

<sup>2</sup> Strindberg 1960, p. 136.

<sup>3</sup> Strindberg 1988, p. 134.

dreams. In *The Ghost Sonata*, however, the world beyond is visualised on the screen. Böcklin's painting is projected at the very centre of the stage and it is visible to everyone in the audience. This is an important difference.

The world to come, the world of hope is presented to the audience and only to them. The Student knows nothing about it, nor does the Young Lady. When the green island is projected on the front wall, these two have already left the stage. Strindberg reveals the enigma of Death as a gift to everyone in the audience.

When Böcklin's *Toten-Insel* is introduced to the audience the love story of the Student and the Young Lady has already come to an end. Human love has lost in importance; it has faded away and died. Now it is time for Strindberg to reveal the enigma of the play. Another life remains, more worth longing for.

The ending of *The Ghost Sonata* tells us what will happen after death. Apparently this play cannot be considered a realistic one; nor do the people on stage behave like ordinary human beings. In the final scene the Student and the Young Lady are no individuals any longer; they have more in common with the characters in a morality play. Especially the Student adopts different roles in the course of the play. First he behaves like an ordinary human being longing for a place to live and a woman to love. At that time the Young Lady in the Hyacinth room represents the fulfilment of all his human wishes. At the end of the play, however, none of his desires have been fulfilled. The Student has been transformed into a representative of mankind. In the final scene he devotes himself to eloquence and talks like a poet or a priest. The poet and the priest have both a representative function: their task is to serve as a the link between God and mankind. In the last scene of the drama Strindberg abstains from using words. Human words cannot explain the enigma of life, Strindberg underlines. Gradually he turns to more theatrical means of expression. When the Lady's death struggle begins, music and light are introduced. The golden harp begins to play without anybody touching the strings and at the same time the room is filled with flooding white light.

Strindberg tells the audience that a new and better life will begin after death. To show this he ends with a collage, long before this word was invented. He borrows from literature as well as from art when quoting *The Song of the Sun*, an Old-Icelandic poem from the thirteenth century. In this poem we are confronted with a deceased father who returns from death to tell his son what eternal life is like. This is what he tells his son:

Solen såg jag  
Så mig tycktes,  
Som jag skådat Den Fördolde<sup>4</sup>

(I looked into the sun and saw  
the hidden soul of all the world)<sup>5</sup>

When death is imminent, the father reports, man is confronted with a shining light, the symbol of God. Strindberg quotes *The Song of the Sun*, the poem about light; at the same time he introduces a strong shining light on the stage.

When Strindberg wants to visualise life-after-death he turns to light and music, poetry and visual art. He ends with the painting he was personally very fond of, Arnold Böcklin's *Toten-Insel*. In *En blå bok III/A Blue Book III*, Strindberg describes the inhabitants of this distant island. Here, Strindberg tells us, "those who had more or less managed to resist the earthly trials" (som så tämligen hade bestått prövningarna) gather after death.

Befriade från den mänskliga djurkroppen och från ont och osant,  
voro de alla sköna och rena. De voro halvt genomskinliga, så att

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<sup>4</sup> Strindberg 1991, p. 225.

<sup>5</sup> Strindberg 1960, p. 136.

de icke kunde dölja eller ljuga. [...] Detta var vilostationen, eller sommarlovet efter första döden.<sup>6</sup>

(Set free from the human animal body, free from evil and falsehood, they were all beautiful and clean. They were half transparent, so that they could not conceal anything or tell lies. [...] This was the resting place, or the summer vacation after the first death.)

### Bergman's *Ghost Sonata*

Ingmar Bergman has produced *The Ghost Sonata* three times. The first production took place in 1941 at Medborgarhuset in Stockholm, the third at Dramaten in 1973.<sup>7</sup> I shall here be concerned with Bergman's second production of the play at Malmö stadsteater in 1954. This production had a magnificent cast. Naima Wifstrand played the Mummy, Benkt Åke Bengtson Hummel. The Student was played by Folke Sundquist and the Young Lady by Gaby Stenberg. Bergman's copy of the drama is available in the theatre's archive together with dozens of photos. Clips from numerous Swedish and Danish newspapers report from the event.

What changes did Bergman make in Strindberg's text? First of all he transformed the drama into a dream play. An enormous gauze curtain was raised in front of the stage. This curtain, on which emerging clouds were projected before and after each act, remained in place to the very end of the play. In Bergman's production the Student was transformed into a dreamer. Apparently he was given quite another role than in Strindberg's play. Bergman presented the love story as part of a dream and nothing more. When the curtain was finally drawn and the Student

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<sup>6</sup> Strindberg 1918, p. 1035 f.

<sup>7</sup> For an examination of the latter, see Egil Törnqvist (1973).

woke up from his sleep he realised that his own love story had been nothing but a dream.

When *The Ghost Sonata* is presented as a dream play the metaphysical perspective loses in importance. In fact, Bergman cut out the largest part of this aspect. The Student was allowed to recite *The Song of the Sun* but Böcklin's painting was never projected on the front wall. Nor was the Student seen as a representative of mankind; to the very end he keeps his individual traits. The Student was an ordinary teenager from the fifties who did not know very much about life. He remained just as talkative as in the original text; the monologue, *The Song of the Sun*, and the three short speeches were all delivered without a single cut.

Bergman did not abstain from showing the Student's cruelty towards the Young Lady but he made one important change. He allowed the Student to develop. At the end of the play the Student was furnished with a more likeable personality: he was shown to be capable of compassion. Focusing on the Japanese screen, he went up to it and removed it, so that the body of the dead Young Lady was exposed.

Looking at her, he bowed down, lifted up her head and placed it in his lap. He was now seen sitting on a tiny white chair close to the golden harp, while the Young Lady remained sitting on the floor. She wore a blue dress with a white collar, white cuffs and a white shawl. Her eyes were wide open; she looked upwards and did not face the Student. Her body was stiff and still like that of a doll, her arms hanging limp on both sides. The Student was seen in profile. He wore a dark costume, a tie and a white shirt. He looked down at her in silence. His left hand was raised in a gesture of ten-

Photo: The Student (Folke Sundquist) and The Lady (Gaby Stenberg) in  
the final scene of *The Ghost Sonata*. (© Malmö musikteater)



derness; perhaps he had just caressed her cheek. They remained in this position for quite a long time. Slowly the sight faded away and the clouds on the gauze curtain started moving. This was the end of the Bergman *Sonata*.

As we have seen, Bergman ended his production with a pantomime. In this pantomime the Student reacted as a human being and not as a symbol of mankind. He was allowed to show tenderness to the Young Lady, a tenderness which is missing in Strindberg's drama. Bergman's ending did not fail to move the Malmö audience; in Henrik Sjögren's words: "vad som ger hela föreställningen dess gripande storhet är den medkänsla som till slut tar hem spelet" (the performance was presented with moving greatness thanks to the feeling of compassion that finally ends the play).<sup>8</sup>

Strindberg ends his play with a painting, a painting that places the emphasis on the eternal perspective. Bergman discarded this ending and replaced it with a touching image from this world, an image of separation and sorrow. Both endings remind the audience of death, death that lies ahead of us all. But there is an important difference. Bergman focused on this world and omitted eternity.

Like Strindberg, Bergman ended the play with a kind of collage, taking advantage of the *pietà* motif. During the Middle Ages a *pietà* sculpture was common in Christian churches. Virgin Mary could be seen contemplating over her dead son. Usually exposed sitting on a chair, holding her son in her lap, she is old, whereas her son is young. The *pietà* tells us what human life is like, and the focus is on Virgin Mary. This is what it is like to go on living on earth, bereft of a beloved person. The *pietà* focuses not on man's dying but on the effects of it.

The *pietà* group ending Bergman's *Ghost Sonata* made use of these connotations. But this time the audience was presented with two young people. Their love story had abruptly come to an end. The man was holding the woman's body in his arms. Taking Virgin Mary's position, the Student's sorrow over his personal loss was clearly expressed.

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<sup>8</sup> Sjögren, 1954 03 06.

But Bergman's *pietà* also expressed the condition of mankind. In his production, too, the audience was reminded that death and separation are indispensable parts of human life. His Student was transformed into a 'Madonna', a 'Madonna' able to express compassion for all mankind.

By excluding *Toten-Insel*, Bergman could stress the human aspect of the play. Yet by means of the *pietà*, the metaphysical perspective was reintroduced. The theme of reconciliation was in this way strongly underlined in the production. Man must learn how to reconcile himself with life. Reconciliation is the only solution to human suffering. But Bergman makes one important addition: reconciliation can only take place on earth.

As we have seen, Bergman was in his Malmö production both faithful and unfaithful to Strindberg's text. While he remained loyal to the author's lines, he did not hesitate to change the message of the drama. This was done by adding a pantomime.

Bergman's loyalty to the text was far from absolute. As compared to Strindberg's text, some roles gained in sympathy and other roles grew more dislikeable in his version.

This study has examined the end of only one Bergman production of a Strindberg play. I am not sure that the same conclusions could be drawn if all Bergman–Strindberg productions were investigated. I leave it to somebody else to carry out such a comprehensive investigation. In the meantime, the present essay may serve as a hypothetical interim statement.

## References

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