

¶ Egil Törnqvist. *Strindberg's The Ghost Sonata*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000. 269 pp. ISBN 90 5356 435 7 (Paperback). 90 5356 454 3 (Hardcover).

As Egil Törnqvist indicates in this shrewd and perceptive book, few if any of Strindberg's plays impacted so powerfully on twentieth-century theatre as *Spöksönanen*. Practitioners so supposedly distinct as Artaud and Piscator and dramatists from Lagerkvist and Abell to Beckett and Dür-

renmatt all responded to the challenge of its dramaturgy while in tone as well as form this most provocative and musical of Strindberg's Chamber Plays became an important intertext for the modernist theatre in general. There is therefore good reason to devote a monograph to this one play.

In fact, as anyone at all familiar with Strindberg scholarship will know, Törnqvist has already done so, in *Bergman och Strindberg: Spöksönsösten – drama och iscensättning, Dramaten, 1973* (Stockholm, 1973), in which he analyses the play and traces its metamorphosis from page to stage at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm, under the direction of Ingmar Bergman. And it is this earlier, but still relevant study of Strindberg's play in production that provides the kernel of this present book, refashioned here in English and complemented this time both by a discussion of several other productions of *Spöksönsösten* on the radio and television as well as in the theatre and by a study of its transposition into another language, English, both British and American. Some of this material has also appeared before in one or other of Törnqvist's many studies of Strindberg or translation or the play text in performance (English versions of *Spöksönsösten* were the subject of a chapter in his *Strindbergian Drama: Themes and Structure* (1982), for example), but their reappearance here together with much new or updated material is evidence not of the author's desire to repeat himself but of how the ways he has used to analyse plays in performance and the problems inherent in translation for the stage have been so consistently productive. Moreover, while the detail in which Törnqvist examines Bergman's 1973 production, which extends to the inclusion in three of the book's four appendices of a transcription of Bergman's performance text, a rehearsal diary from the same production, and a configuration chart of the play as directed by Bergman in 1973, threatens to dwarf the discussion of other versions by, among others, Max Reinhardt, Olof Molander and once again Bergman (2000, also at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm), this is a price worth paying for the general availability of a sensitive reading of a great director at work by a critic who possesses not only an intimate knowledge of Strindberg's *oeuvre* as a whole but also an effective method for analysing the way in which a play script may be

transposed onto the stage. If, on the one hand, Törnqvist is frequently able to shed light on details in Strindberg's text by linking it to e.g. *En blå bok* (thus, the Milkmaid's 'summer clothes' indicate that she comes from the first station of the dead in Toten-Insel, 'a home without dust', unlike the one in which the Student encounters the Young Lady in *Spöksönan*), he is also finely attuned to the visual and aural implications embedded in this most complex of Strindberg's Chamber Plays, to which directors like Reinhardt or Bergman have so variously responded, and for which they have sought and found an appropriate stage language and *mise en scène*.

It is this pursuit of a language in which to realize Strindberg's source text, whether on stage or in another tongue, that particularly interests Törnqvist and helps unify the different strands of this book. Having placed *Spöksönan* in terms of Strindberg's career and the contemporary theatre and provided a detailed exegesis of the Swedish text, he then compares fifteen different English translations (an advance on the nine English versions available to him in 1982 and further testimony of the importance of this play), with the premise that fidelity to the source text must be a primary demand, not least because in translating from a minor language like Swedish which, unlike English, French or German, few readers or spectators will be in a position to verify, a translator has a particular responsibility to convey the original as faithfully as possible. At the same time, however, the translated text must be easy to grasp, since the theatre affords little time for reflection. Hence Törnqvist's general conclusion on the way in which these fifteen translators have resolved issues of culture specific detail, lexis, punctuation, metaphor, puns and the play's often cryptic detail is that 'the most literal translations, unidiomatic as they may be, are thematically the most adequate.' But as he is aware, there is, of course, a problem here for Swedish spectators of *Spöksönan* too, not to mention many of its contemporary Swedish readers. For except in the most turgid of productions, they will be similarly bereft of time for reflection and many of them will have little immediate sense of what Strindberg might have been intending even where culture specific references such as the sheets hung out as a sign of mourning at the start of the play are concerned. Moreover, nei-

ther a Swedish nor a non-Swedish audience is likely to respond as Strindberg desired to Böcklin's painting *Töten-Insel* which forms the final tableau of the play. One fin-de-siècle's icon is another's kitsch and, like the translator, a theatre director has consequently always to find an adequate contemporary language in which to transmit Strindberg's vision.

Some of the many attempts at staging *Spöksöneten* both in Sweden and elsewhere are noted in the very useful, if sometimes tantalisingly brief, annotated list of selected productions that concludes this book. Others are reviewed in more detail in the discussion of adaptations of the play for radio and television. In each case Törnqvist concentrates on two versions though at least where television is concerned, it would have been good to have seen the inclusion of one or more additional versions such as the BBC production with Robert Helpmann and Beatrix Lehmann, screened in 1962; but space was no doubt a premium. Where radio is concerned, the endeavour to broadcast a stage play in which many of the most striking theatrical effects entail the absence of sound (for example, the direction '*The BEGGARS bare their heads, but without cheering*') or are predicated on an audience's ability to see (the harp that sounds without its being touched, for example, or the Milkmaid who is initially invisible to Hummel in Act One) is a quixotic one. Consequently, Per Verner-Carlsson's radio version, which Törnqvist calls 'masterly', entailed a far-reaching reshaping of the original text to meet the listener's need both to understand what is happening and to be emotionally influenced by it.

This book, which is finely and appropriately illustrated, is an important addition to the available literature on *Spöksöneten*, and on Strindberg as a dramatist in general. With its focus on English translations and (mainly) Swedish productions it complements Karin Tidström's recent study of the same play in France, *Cette fameuse Sonate des spectres...* (Stockholm, 1999) and has much to offer an English readership which, in spite of those fifteen translations, is rarely given the opportunity of seeing this play on stage. Errors are rare, although on page 239 the Japanese form of puppet theatre 'Bunraku' emerges as 'buraku' and on page 12 Strindberg is credited with a new daughter, Märta. Paternity is

always a touchy subject where Strindberg is concerned but while he may, as *Ockulta dagboken* (14 February 1901) and other sources suggest, have entertained incestuous feelings for his sister Anna, all the evidence seems to confirm that her daughter (Märta Philp) was conceived with her husband, Hugo. It was also *Waiting for Godot*, not *Endgame*, that Beckett initially sought out Roger Blin to direct after the latter had staged *Sonate des spectres* at the Gaité-Montparnasse (which is not to say that he did not also want to persuade Blin to direct *Endgame* as well, as Törnqvist maintains). But like the book's remarkably few unidiomatic English formulations, these lapses in no way detract from what is a highly readable, cogent, fact-filled and astute book: once again, we are indebted to Egil Törnqvist.

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