

*Egil Törnqvist*

## The “new technique” in Strindberg’s *Kristina*

In his influential book *Theorie des modernen Dramas (1880-1950)*, Peter Szondi argues that the drama from Ibsen onwards has replaced essentially dramatic qualities with epic ones. For each dramatist discussed Szondi focuses on one epic aspect, for Ibsen the tendency to position the most dramatic events in the past rather than in the present, for Strindberg the inclination to subjectify the drama by making the central character subsume the ones surrounding him or her, the tendency to create what the Germans refer to as *Ich-Drama*. Szondi does not discuss the way dramatists in the period concerned have handled stage and acting directions. This is surprising, since it is in this area that we could find some of the most obvious examples of the epification of drama that concerns him. The trend is apparent already with Ibsen, where it culminates in *Hedda Gabler* (1890). It is much more prominent in Strindberg’s historical drama *Kristina* which actually has much in common with Ibsen’s drama.<sup>1</sup>

Strindberg’s *Kristina* has hitherto been discussed primarily from a biographical and genetic point of view. By contrast, my focus is less

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<sup>1</sup> Barbro Ståhle Sjönell, Review of Ola Kindstedt, *Strindbergs Kristina*, in *Samlaren*, 1990, p. 122.

on the writer-producer of the play and more on the potential consumer of it, especially the recreators of it: the actors, and the spectators. But primarily I am concerned with the need for both factual and terminological distinctions within the field of drama analysis, Strindberg's *Kristina* serving as a paragon. First of all, the situation in which the play arose must be outlined.

In a letter to his wife, the actress Harriet Bosse, probably written September 7, 1901 Strindberg mentions his drama about the Swedish 17<sup>th</sup> century queen to her for the first time. The reason he had to communicate with Harriet by means of letters – many of them undated – in this period was that she had left him, after a row, on August 22, not to return until October 6. Left alone, Strindberg was desperate. “For the first time in these last years the thought of suicide comes up,” he writes in *Ockulta Dagboken* on September 6. Realizing that a part that would seem attractive to Harriet, “ett porträtt av den älskade”, would serve as “ett lockbete för att få henne tillbaka”,<sup>2</sup> he soon begins to write *Kristina*. In a letter presumably written September 15 he informs her:

Jag är inne i första akten, men jag vill ha Dig att egna den till.  
Eljes blir den hatfull och ond, kanske ful! Det blir den största  
qvinnoroll som är skrifven, och med en helt ny teknik.<sup>3</sup>

About three days later he writes to her that he has not spoken to director Emil Grandinson about Schiller's *Mary Stuart*

emedan jag skrifver *Drottning Kristina* för Er, och med en full-  
ständig ny teknik som jag helst ville talat fram med Er.<sup>4</sup>

Harriet answers him around September 20: "Jeg vilde jo bli

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<sup>2</sup> Olof Lagercrantz, *August Strindberg*, 1979, p. 370.

<sup>3</sup> *August Strindbergs Brev*, 14, 1974, p. 124.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 128.

strålende for at få läse *Kristina*."<sup>5</sup> On September 21 Strindberg informs his wife:

Nu går fjerde Akten! Huru saknar jag icke nu ett bord der vi fingo sitta och tala fram *Kristina*, slutet i synnerhet, som är viktigast.<sup>6</sup>

In another letter the same day he assures her, with an obvious overstatement, that it will be “den största och grundligaste kvinnorol som är skriven” with “5 herrliga kostymer” for the main part.<sup>7</sup>

The play was published together with four other historical dramas, officially in 1903 but in fact not until 1904.<sup>8</sup> Shortly after it had had its premiere at the Intimate Theatre on March 27, 1908, Strindberg, upset at the negative reviews the performance had received, assured director August Falck that it was

Mitt finaste arbete, med fulländad teknik, karakterer genomförda i detalj, den största kvinnorol på Svenska, de vackraste kärleksförklaringar som finnas; skönt att se, speladt som fulla verkligheten...<sup>9</sup>

What did Strindberg mean by repeatedly referring to the play’s “new technique”? Though clearly meant to be laudatory, he never clarified the expression. The new technique cannot refer to the play structure, whether we regard it as traditionally adhering to the well-made play<sup>10</sup> or unsuccessfully deviating from it.<sup>11</sup> Nor can it refer to

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<sup>5</sup> Torsten Eklund, ‘Strindbergs tredje äktenskap i ny belysning’, *Meddelanden från Strindbergssällskapet*, 19, April 1956, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> *August Strindbergs Brev*, 14, p. 134.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>8</sup> *August Strindbergs Samlade Verk*, 48, 1988, p. 305.

<sup>9</sup> *August Strindbergs Brev*, 1989, p. 234.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Lamm, *Strindbergs dramer*, 2, 1926, p. 299. Walter Johnson, *Strindberg and the Historical Drama*, 1963, p. 206.

the fact that both the play and, notably, its protagonist diverge from historical reality. For although Strindberg defended certain such deviations, he would not take pride in them. It is true, of course, that it was the first time that Strindberg made use of a female protagonist in an historical drama, but since Kristina is just about the only woman to be found among Swedish monarchs, his choice can hardly be called remarkable and certainly not innovating. A better claim to novelty is offered by Kindstedt who, supporting Rinman's view that the new technique has to do with the author's "sätt att teckna huvudpersonen",<sup>12</sup> argues that in none of Strindberg's other historical plays is the main character so dominant and are the private problems of the monarch so foregrounded.<sup>13</sup> This may well be true, but if we consider Strindberg's dramatic output as a whole, such a claim becomes more dubious. Plays like *Fadren* (1887) and *Till Damaskus I* (1898) certainly contain equally dominant protagonists. *Fröken Julie* (1888) provides an even closer parallel. In this play, just as in *Kristina*, Strindberg confronts his protagonist with a fundamental choice between rank/power on the one hand and love on the other, between obligations toward others (nobility; state) on the one hand and toward one's private feelings on the other. Like Julie, Kristina is a highly complex figure. As Code succinctly puts it: "Which is she: queen or king, queen or woman, woman or man, woman or child, Queen Kristina or "lilla [little] Kerstin", Swede, German or Pole?"<sup>14</sup>

Enlarging upon the biographical evidence, Brandell points out that the acting directions in *Kristina*

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<sup>11</sup> Gunnar Brandell, *Strindberg – ett författarliv*, 4, 1989, p. 183f.

<sup>12</sup> Sven Rinman, 'Strindberg', *Ny illustrerad svensk litteraturhistoria*, 4, 1957, p. 115.

<sup>13</sup> Ola Kindstedt, *Strindbergs Kristina*, 1988, p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Code, 'Kristina: Strindberg's Many-Faced Woman', in Birgitta Steene, ed., *Strindberg and History*, 1992, p. 148.

omfattar sådant som han normalt överlät åt regissörer och skådespelare att utforma på egen hand. Förmodligen ville han hjälpa till att ytterligare utveckla hennes [Harriets] förmåga som skådespelerska.<sup>15</sup>

What is here quite rightly suggested is that Strindberg, anxious to get Harriet back, turns himself into her personal ‘director’. What is implied is that the acting directions refer only to the chief character. Although they relate especially to her, a number of them refer in fact also to the characters surrounding her.

In an article especially devoted to Strindberg’s “new technique” in *Kristina*, Amy van Marken already in 1979 questioned the traditional view when arguing that the concept refers, not to the way in which the protagonist is portrayed but to the way in which the stage directions are handled.<sup>16</sup> Like Rinman and Brandell, she is inclined to see the abundance and phrasing of the stage directions in this play as a result of Strindberg’s intense emotional involvement with Harriet Bosse, for whom, as he himself surmised,<sup>17</sup> he had written the Queen’s part.

Comparing the frequency of the stage directions in *Kristina* to those of the historical dramas immediately preceding and succeeding it – *Carl XII*<sup>18</sup> and *Gustav III* – van Marken shows that the number in *Kristina* far exceeds that in the surrounding dramas. As for the kind of stage directions used, she distinguishes between two types: “stödjande” (supporting) and “analyserande” (analytical)

<sup>15</sup> *Strindberg – ett författarliv*, 4, p. 183.

<sup>16</sup> Amy van Marken, ‘Strindbergs *Kristina*. En ny teknik’, *Estratto da Annali – Studi Nordici*, 22, 1979, pp. 1-12.

<sup>17</sup> August Falck, *Fem år med Strindberg*, 1935, p. 135.

<sup>18</sup> All quotations from this play in the following refer to *August Strindbergs Samlade Verk*, 47, 1993. However, unlike this edition but conform with the practice in *August Strindbergs Brev*, I retain Strindberg’s spelling of the King’s name.

directions. In the following, I prefer to call the former type *functional*, the latter *interpretative*. Van Marken uses *stage direction* in the traditional way as an umbrella term for two rather distinct types which in my view should be kept apart; in the following, I therefore restrict this term to those directions which have to do with the stage (scenery, lighting, properties), whereas I call those which refer to the characters *acting directions*. Strindberg's deviation from earlier practice in *Kristina* applies only to the latter type.

Within the acting directions we may differentiate between *durative* directions, as when a character's general appearance is first described, and *momentary* directions, when reference is made to a sudden gesture (kinesics), facial expression (mimicry), or tone of voice (paralinguistics). Within the functional acting directions we may further distinguish a special category, those which make such excessive demands on the actors that we may question their stageability. This goes for certain sudden physiological reactions, as when Kristina "rodnar" or is said to be "*skälvande i hela kroppen*" or when it is stated that she "*krumper ihop*" – all descriptions that tell more about her mental than her physical state.<sup>19</sup> It goes also for ambiguous reactions, as when Kristina is said to be "*rädd att få veta, men ändå nyfiken*"; when she "*bekämpar ett leende med ett vredgat öga*"; or when she regards Steinberg "*med vämjelse blandat med medlidande*". Even a superb actress would find it difficult, if not impossible, to master such contradictory emotions at one and the same time.

Acting directions may be viewed in three, more or less overlapping ways: with regard to their stageability (functional or interpretative); with regard to their recipient (reader or spectator); and with regard to their generic adherence (dramatic or epic). An example will serve to clarify. In Act I, set in the Riddarholm Church, Kristina's entrance is described as follows:

KRISTINA *in från vänster. Sakta, värdigt, med en viss respekt för kyr-*

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<sup>19</sup> All quotations from *Kristina* refer to *August Strindbergs Samlade Verk*, 48, 1988.

*kan.*

The first part of these acting directions is highly functional, informing the actress from where and how she should enter the church, whereas the second part – “*med en viss respekt för kyrkan*” – is interpretative. Applied to the situation of the recipient, we might say that the first part can be grasped by both readers and spectators, whereas the second part will be better understood by the reader, since to the spectator a slow and dignified way of entering may mean something quite different from what Strindberg suggests in the interpretative part of the sentence, for example an eagerness to appear queenlike. If this part of the acting directions had appeared in the form of a speech by one of those present in the church, Allerts for example, it would significantly have changed its meaning. For whereas the *authorial* acting directions must be regarded as objective, the *figural* dialogue is inevitably more or less subjective. To put it differently: whereas what the author-narrator states should agree with the recipient’s impression, what a character states may not necessarily do so. In our construed example, Allerts might well believe that it is out of respect for the church that Kristina behaves the way she does but as recipients *we* may have our doubts that he is right. With regard to generic adherence, finally, the first part of the acting directions may be termed dramatic, the second epic, i.e. inimical to the dramatic genre seen as one intended for and realizable as stage performance.

The interpretative acting directions may be of different kinds. They may indicate the cause of a change of mimicry, as when De la Gardie “*strålar, troende Tott vara i onåd*”; the cause of a gesture, as when Kristina “*far med handen över ögonen för att dölja en tår, som hon skäms för*”; or the cause of an action as when she “*ställer sig och knyter om sandalen på trontrappan, för att dölja sinnesrörelsen*”. In all these cases the spectator is left with the question what the facial change, the gesture or the action actually signifies; in all cases the dramatist makes very strong, perhaps undue demands both on the actors and

on the theatre audience.

These demands become even greater when it comes to the description of disguised emotions:

KRISTINA *blek och stum av harm; men oviss hur hon skall fatta hans [Totts] flertydiga ord vågar hon ej röja sina känslor och tankar genom ett utbrott.*

An ambiguous speech by Tott is here followed by a non-reaction on Kristina's part. It is hard to see how her suppressed feelings can be communicated to the spectator with anything close to the information provided to the reader. Strindberg is straining the theatrical medium.

This is done also when he refers to an offstage situation the spectator cannot be aware of:

WHITELOCK *kommer ut ur draperiet med ett stelnat leende efter något lustigt samtal han nyss haft.*

Or when he claims that a facial expression is the result of a conversation four pages earlier:

KRISTINA *in; hennes ansikte bär ännu friska spår av Steinbergs goda personlighet.*

What is suggested here is that as social creatures we are colored by our confrontation with other people. Good and evil are contagious and we are all receptive to the contagion. Interesting in itself, the idea is hard to communicate theatrically. Most spectators, unable to see the connection with Steinberg, would more simply ascribe the Queen's friendly expression at this point to her discovering of Tott, whom she is in love with.

The interpretative acting directions often harbor comparisons. Kristina “*talar halvbögt och vänligt som till en oskadlig människa*”. She “*springer upp med ett kattsprång*”. Or she “*gör en min med munnen som om hon bet i ett surt äpple*”. The question is here whether these similes,



granted only the reader, deprive the spectator of anything essential. The cat reference may help the reader, notably the actress playing the part, to see something catlike in Kristina's mentality, although it is disturbed by the fact that also the fat Carl Gustav has earlier rather uncalled-for been compared to a scratching cat. And the apple reference may help us realize that, having rejected her royal costumes, Kristina at the end turns into a virtually naked, archetypal Eve.<sup>20</sup> The epic quality is especially obvious when Strindberg resorts to a proverbial expression:

KRISTINA *förödmjukad, skamsen, "tar betslet i munnen och sticker  
huvet i bringan"*.

The proverb contains a simile meaning that one behaves like a horse impossible to steer. The acting direction relates to the riding costume Kristina wears at this point, suggesting that as a rider she is in conflict with her own horse, i.e. herself – an implication reserved for the reader.

The essential element of drama, it is often said, is conflict. Without conflict no drama. This is especially true of Strindbergian drama where conflicts, latent or manifest, between the characters can be sensed on virtually every page. This appears even in the acting directions, where Strindberg's predilection for war imagery, so frequent also in his prose works<sup>21</sup> is apparent. Thus in her conversation with Axel Oxenstierna in Act II Kristina poses a question to him "*skarpt som en kniv*". Soon after this she "*faller ut*" against him. We then learn that she "*borrar blickarne i Oxenstierna*". He in his turn "*sitter i ordning att parera och falla ut*". Even in Kristina's more friendly relationship with her mother, Maria Eleonora, the war imagery enters the acting directions. Questioning her mother about the faith of the royalties closest to herself and to the Swedish

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<sup>20</sup> Kindstedt, p. 182.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Karl-Åke Kärnell, *Strindbergs bildspråk*, 1962, pp. 152-60.

throne, she hopes by means of logical reasoning to force the mother to sanction her plan to convert to Catholicism. Not unlike a cat she puts her head in the mother's lap and begins her questioning "*med en bal, bonungsöt stämmd*". After an averting answer from Maria Eleonora, she "*laddar igen*" as she asks her mother if her, Maria Eleonora's, father was a Calvinist. The culminating and decisive question – "När övergick du då?", i.e. became a Lutheran – is preceded by the acting direction "*lossar av skottel*". The implication is here that if the mother had a right to convert, so has the daughter. Kristina has reached her goal and she "*njuter av segern*".

An interesting category form the acting directions which contain what may be called nonentities, i.e. negations, the lack or absence of something. We have already come across this type when remarking on Kristina's non-reaction to Tott's ambiguous speech. In more obvious ways we find it when Whitelock, the English ambassador, enters the church "*utan krans*", a circumstance the spectator would hardly think of. Or when Bourdelot, the Queen's French physician, and Pimentelli, the Spanish ambassador, both say something "*på franska som icke höres*"; the point in our context is that unlike the reader, the spectator is doubly baffled: since he cannot hear anything, he will not understand what is being said, let alone that it is being said in French. Problematic in another way is the following case of nonentity:

TOTT. Mina känslor! fruktar jag!

KRISTINA *som icke hört*. Jag hörde icke.

The author-narrator here assures the reader that Kristina has indeed not heard what Tott has said. But deprived of this almost unactable acting direction, the spectator may well believe that the Queen at this point, as so often elsewhere, is play-acting, merely pretending. It is characteristic that a few pages later she "*låtsas icke ha hört*" what De la Gardie has just said. Taken at its face value the

acting direction “*som icke hört*” is so uninteresting that it can preferably be seen as an indication of emotional obstruction on the part of Kristina: eager that her tender feelings for Tott should be returned, she simply does not wish to hear about his suppression or denial of these feelings.

The idea that the “new technique” in *Kristina*, defined as the use of interpretative acting directions, was “completely” new, as the author would have it, and that it stems from Strindberg’s relationship with Harriet Bosse at the time of writing, as critics hitherto have claimed, must be modified. For *Kristina* is not the first drama in which Strindberg makes use of this type of acting directions. In the play preceding it, *Carl XII*, the type appears in a number of places. Thus in this play the King twice “*far med handen över ögonen*”, one time “*såsom om han samlade minnen och tankar*”, another time “*som om han ville befria sig från ett nät*”; keeping in mind that Kristina, too, makes use of exactly the same gesture, it is noteworthy that it is interpreted in no less than three different ways in the acting directions. And nothing prevents the spectator, who is unaware of the interpretative directions, from decoding it in yet another way. In *Carl XII*, for example, it could be seen as an indication of the King’s tendency to live in a dream world. It is characteristic that when Carl later, having kept his face “*dolt i händerna*”, looks up and discovers young and beautiful Emerentia Polhem standing before him, “*tyckes han ej veta om det är en dröm eller uppenbarelse*”.

An acting direction may also serve to connect one character with another; this is the case when it is said that Görtz’ face “*ser dött ut i profil*”, a description linking his face with Carl’s which is “*sjukligt askgrått*”. While the interpretative directions here concern mimicry and kinesics, they may also concern nonentities, as when the King “*har försökt ropa, men ej fått fram ett ord*” or “*tyckes söka ord, som han ej finner*”. Very occasionally an acting direction suggests a physiological change almost impossible to bring about on the stage,

as when it is said that Carl, like Kristina, “*rodnar*”. It is obvious that all these signals to the reader are difficult, at times even impossible to communicate to the spectator. The difference between *Carl XII* and *Kristina* with regard to hardly stageable as well as interpretative acting directions – what we have defined as the “new technique” – is obviously a difference in frequency rather than kind.

Harriet read *Carl XII* as soon as Strindberg had finished it. On June 23, 1901 Strindberg writes in *Ockulta Dagboken* that he “slutade *Carl XII* på aftonen”; two days later he notes in the same diary that Harriet “läser *Carl XII* åt mig”. The reason was at least partly, as Harriet informs us,<sup>22</sup> that there were plans to have this play staged in the fall of 1901 and that she was then to act the part of Emerentia Polhem. There were, in other words, good reasons for her to take a considerable interest in *Carl XII*. Actually, the premiere was postponed until February 1902 and not until the fall of that year was she to do the part.

Strindberg is far from unique in his use of more or less unstageable acting directions. As I have initially indicated and elsewhere demonstrated, we can find such directions also with Ibsen.<sup>23</sup> It is reasonable to assume that this has to do with the fact that both dramatists wrote for a double audience, for readers as well as for spectators. However, this does not mean that interpretative acting directions are common either with these or with other dramatists at the time. With Chekhov they seem to be altogether lacking. George Bernard Shaw, another contemporary of Strindberg's, is known for his unusually abundant stage and acting directions; yet an examination of his historical drama *Cæsar and Cleopatra* (1901) reveals very few interpretative acting directions.

More rewarding is a comparison with a post-Strindbergian

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<sup>22</sup> *Strindbergs Brev till Harriet Bosse*, 1932, p. 61.

<sup>23</sup> Egil Törnqvist, ‘Ibsens Double Audience’, *Nordic Theatre Studies*, 10, 1997, pp. 77-82.

dramatist like Eugene O'Neill. Along with Shaw, O'Neill is famous, or infamous, for his ample stage and acting directions.<sup>24</sup> Yet his unstageable acting directions tend to be more Ibsenite than Strindbergian. Compare the following example from Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) with that from O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1956), written in 1940-41. In the former play, Ella Rentheim's face "bærer endnu præg af stor, karakterfuld skønhed i tidligere år", in the latter it is said about Mary Tyrone that "suddenly and startlingly one sees in her face the girl she had once been". In either case there is a reference to the past, a past experienced by the characters surrounding the two women and, indirectly, by the reader, whereas the spectator will remain ignorant of it unless the information in the acting directions is supplemented with the same information in the dialogue, in which case the former serves merely as a redundant verification of the latter. Partly due to the fact that Strindberg did not write analytical dramas to the extent Ibsen quite regularly and O'Neill in some of his later plays do, there was no need for him to resort to this kind of exceedingly epic acting directions.

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As we have seen, Strindberg's use of interpretative acting directions in *Carl XII* and, notably, in *Kristina*, if not unique is at least rare, both in his own dramatic oeuvre and in that of other playwrights. Already in his next historical drama, *Gustav III*, Strindberg abstains from it, probably because there was now no need for personal instruction vis-à-vis Harriet. This in turn undoubtedly made him realize, even before the emergence of his own Intimate Theatre in 1907, that this type of acting directions, more natural to closet drama than to stage drama, creates a gap between reader and

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<sup>24</sup> For an examination of these, see Egil Törnqvist, *Eugene O'Neill*, 2004, pp. 26-35.

spectator. In 1908 he was ready to praise August Falck's simplified staging of *Kristina*, in which many of his own stage directions were ignored.<sup>25</sup> Having found in him his own director, Strindberg presumably was alerted to the fact that there was no need to insert interpretative acting directions. After all, these are a matter for the director rather than the author, and although Strindberg in this period often refers to himself as "regissören", it is obvious that in the modern sense of the word, it was August Falck who fulfilled this function. The "new technique", although interesting as an attempt to strengthen the position of the dramatist or, to speak with Szondi, to rescue a genre in crisis, had actually proved to be counter-productive. It may stimulate the reader but is no real option for the spectator.

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<sup>25</sup> *August Strindbergs Samlade Verk*, 64, 1999, p. 60f.

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