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Strindberg's *Lycko-Pers resa* – Staging the Fantastic

In his *Open Letters to the Intimate Theater*, Strindberg wrote the frequently-quoted statement that when, after a hiatus of twenty-five years, he once again began to write history plays, he returned to the dramaturgy of his first history play, *Mäster Olof*.¹ Strindberg had spent five years writing *Mäster Olof*, creating three versions and adding an epilogue, between 1872 and 1877. The play was first performed on December 30 1881, after almost ten years of being rejected and rewritten. Once performed, the play, with what Gunnar Ollén calls its “epoch-making scenography,” enjoyed a history of successful productions.²

After emerging from his so-called “Inferno crisis” in 1898, Strindberg, who for six years had not written a single drama, returned to writing for the stage, creating *Till Damaskus I*, the first of what later came to be known as a series of expressionistic “station dramas,” or “vandringsdramer.” One seeks in vain, however, for any acknowledgement on Strindberg’s part that when he again began to write “vandringsdramer,” he sought a model in his first play in that genre, *Lycko-Pers resa*. He had begun to write *Till Damaskus I* at around the same time that *Lycko-Pers resa* was enjoying a success-

¹ SS 50, p. 240.

² Ollén, p. 44. All translations in this article are mine, BL.

ful run at the Vasa Theater in Stockholm during the 1897-1898 theater season.³ Shortly after completing his new play, however, he did relate it somewhat to *Lycko-Pers resa* in a letter to Karin, Greta, and Hans, the children from his first marriage, informing them that he had just finished writing a play, “det bästa jag har skrifvit,” written in “en ny genre, fantastiskt och lysande som Lycko-Per men spelande i nutid och med full verklighet bakom.” (the best I have written ... a new genre, fantastic and brilliant as Lycko-Per, but with a contemporary setting and based completely on reality).⁴ Perhaps he referred to *Lycko-Pers resa* in this letter because his children were familiar with the play. They also were benefiting from its current success, which enabled Strindberg to send them substantial amounts of money.⁵ In most other instances, however, Strindberg's expressed opinion of the play did not echo what he had written to his children. In 1903, for example, he wrote to his German translator Emil Schering: “Lycko-Per är billig och tarflig litteratur. Damaskus, Drömspelet, Dödsdansen det är litteratur!” (Lycko-Per is cheap and shabby literature. Damascus, A Dream Play, The Dance of Death – that is literature!).⁶

One might suspect that, even after fifteen years, the sensitive Strindberg might still have felt the sting of, and also agreed with, the criticism he had received from Edvard Brandes after Brandes had read the manuscript of *Lycko-Pers resa* back in 1882. Brandes thought that the play was not at all commensurate with Strindberg's talents as a dramatist, and he wrote frankly that, in his opinion, Strindberg seemed to have lowered his literary standards. Brandes thought that, among its other faults, the play was too “H.C. Ander-

³ Ollén, p. 67.

⁴ *Brev XII*, p. 311.

⁵ *Brev XII*, p. 37.

⁶ *Brev XIV*, p. 246.

sensk” for the 1880’s.⁷

Strindberg apparently took this criticism to heart. Deferring to Brandes, he replied that, except in the matter of the redeeming power of love, about which Brandes was skeptical, he did indeed share his opinion.⁸ One might suggest, however, that Brandes, with his eye on what was *au courant* in literature, had judged *Lycko-Pers resa* as epigonal and criticized the genre, rather than judging the play as the excellent *féerie* that it is. Also, the fact that Brandes had merely read the play, and not seen it, calls to mind a comment that Strindberg had once made with regard to the difference between reading his plays and seeing them performed:

Olyckan med tryckningen af mina pjäser, är den, att de äro spel-dramer, och därför falla vid läsningen. Fordringsegare, spelades nyss i Upsala och lär ha gjort ett våldsamt intryck ... Nerhäck-lades när den kom ut i tryck första gången!

(The trouble with the publishing of my plays is that they are written to be performed, and, consequently, they fail when they are merely read. *Creditors*, which played recently in Uppsala, is said to have made a powerful impression ... Panned when it first appeared in print).⁹

Incidentally, in the same letter, Strindberg refers to his second *vandringsdrama*, *Himmelrikets Nycklar*, as being “icke [...] någon skizz till ett läsedrama, utan ett fullt sagospel, lika stort som Lycko-Per” (not a sketch for an armchair drama, but a complete fairytale play, as great as Lycko-Per).¹⁰

Lycko-Pers resa premiered on 22 December 1883, under the di-

⁷ *Georg og Edv. Brandes Brevveksling med nordiske Forfattere og Videnskabsmand*, VI, pp. 30-31.

⁸ *Brev* III, p. 53.

⁹ Letter to Fredrik Vult von Steijern, *Brev* IX, p. 30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

rection of Ludvig Josephson, who had successfully staged *Mäster Olof* in December 1881, at the Nya teater (New Theater) in Stockholm, which, though it did not yet have electric lights, still was more technically advanced than was the Royal Dramatic Theatre at the time. The scenic designer was Carl Grabow, who later designed the sets for the epoch-making premiere of *Till Damaskus I* in 1900, as well as being involved in setting up the premiere production of *Ett drömspel* (A Dreamplay) at the Royal Dramatic Theater in 1907.¹¹

Fortunately for Strindberg, Stockholm audiences did not approach the play with the same criteria as did Edvard Brandes. They did indeed expect to see a fairytale play, with all its magic and fantastic scenery. And they were so pleased with the entire production - its staging, its music, and its fantastic lighting effects - that they called not only for the actors, but also for the director, Ludvig Josephson, the composer, Richard Henneberg, and the scenic designer, Carl Grabow, to come on stage for applause. The master machinist, Svensson, was praised in the newspaper reviews as well. The play enjoyed an exceptionally long run, opening the fall season of the Nya teater in 1884, and playing for a total of seventy-six performances.¹²

Strindberg was well aware that staging his fairy tale play would be a complicated endeavor, but he did not want the play to be merely a "läsdrama," or "fåtojl pjäs." He definitely wanted to have it performed. For the sake of practicality, and to avoid too many risks and interruptions in the action, he designed six of his scenes in pairs. The first and last scenes take place in a church, the second pair includes nature scenes, in the forest and on the seashore, and the third pair is made up of the scenes that take place in the caliph's palace and the rich man's room - scenes that could share a number

¹¹ *SV* 11, p. 432.

¹² Ollén, p. 66.

of props, décor, and lighting effects. Gunnar Ollén points out a connection between Strindberg's plans for staging *Ljucko-Pers resa* with his stage directions for *Till Damaskus*, citing a letter that Strindberg had written, in which he stressed the practical point that each of the sets he had planned for *Till Damaskus* could be used twice.¹³ In the middle of *Ljucko-Pers resa* is the fourth scene, set in a town square. This scene stands alone, in that, in contrast to the others, it has a realistic setting, with the only fantastical elements being a pillory and a statue who bow to each other and converse.

The extensive correspondence between Strindberg and the director, Ludvig Josephson, reveals Strindberg's involvement with the staging of *Ljucko-Per*; he made a number of suggestions for stage effects and actions, such as having a ballet of snowflakes in the second act, which are then transformed into flowers, as well as having mermaids dancing on the waves in the scene in which Per is at the seashore. These were among the suggestions that Josephson rejected with a firm "Nej!"¹⁴

I stress this point mainly for the following reason: it may be true that many theatergoers in Sweden, and perhaps in the other Scandinavian countries, might be acquainted with *Ett drömspel*, *Till Damaskus*, and other of Strindberg's later dramas and might even have seen some elaborate, even extravagant, productions of these plays. In other countries – the United States, for example – it is likely that, if people even have heard of Strindberg, their knowledge often is limited to what they study in drama or literature classes, in which they usually read *The Father*, or, more often, *Miss Julie*, along with its preface, which often is included in textbooks on theatre and staging, especially among documents on "naturalism and the theatre." In this preface, Strindberg writes that the most desirable

¹³ Cf. Ollén's comments in *SV* 39, p. 429, and Brandell, "*Strindberg och scenetechniken*" p. 35.

¹⁴ Letter to Josephson, 17 January 1882, *Brev* II, pp. 346-350.

scenic design is a simple one, with just one setting, and he stresses that a scenic designer who can create waterfalls and fire-spouting mountains ought to be able to create a room that looks like a real room.¹⁵ Some might even have read Strindberg's comments on *Fordringsägare* (*Creditors*), a play that Strindberg proudly described to his publisher Karl Otto Bonnier as being better yet than *Miss Julie*, with a set so simple that it had only "three persons, one table, two chairs, and no sunrise."¹⁶ Such a set, of course, helped Strindberg achieve the unity of time, place, and action that was so desirable for the theatre of Naturalism.

What many outside of Sweden or Strindberg studies might not know is that Strindberg was very well schooled in theatrical design of the Baroque period and the Italian Renaissance.¹⁷ As a young man, he had worked as an extra in the opera in Stockholm, and he even had been involved in Ludvig Josephson's highly successful production of Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* in 1867, with its magnificent representation of a shipwreck, with the ship sinking with all passengers and crew on board – all very realistic, with limelight for an intensive effect, and with scene changes taking place "inför öppen ridå" (in full view of the public) – or, to use the technical term, "changement à vue."¹⁸

Strindberg, then, was aware of the technical devices used in the theatre – the wind and thunder machines, the moving waves, trapdoors, cloud cars, and the lighting machinery, as well as with stages that were standard in opera – very deep stages, with several sets of wings – some showing a kind of DaVinci perspective that directs the eyes of the spectators to a high point in the center, where there might be a castle, such as Strindberg has in *Ett drömspel*, a mountain

¹⁵ Preface to *Fröken Julie*, SV 27, ed. Gunnar Ollén.

¹⁶ Letter dated 21 August 1888, *Brev VII*, p. 105.

¹⁷ Hanes Harvey, Anne-Charlotte, p. 63; Reinhardt, Nancy S., pp. 3, 47, 48, 110.

¹⁸ Nilsson, Torbjörn, Commentary to *Lycko-Pers resa*, SV 11, 2001, p. 416.

pass, such as he has in *Till Damaskus*, or fascinating cloud formations, out of which now and then a character might appear. When it came to stage design, then, Strindberg, though ever among the theatrical avant-garde, occasionally found his décor in what had been in place for centuries, occasionally not merely to please his audiences aesthetically, but also to overwhelm them.

During the 1971-72 theatre season in Stockholm, the Royal Dramatic Theater staged *Lycko-Pers resa*, directed by Ingvar Kjellson, with scenery by Agneta Pauli, and *Ett drömspel*, directed by Ingmar Bergman, with scenery by Lennart Mörk. Those who saw both productions – or even one production – if not themselves overwhelmed by the stage business, hardly could have escaped noticing the expressions of excitement on the part of the audiences when the scene changes were taking place, when certain *tableaux* were formed on, or projected onto, the stage.¹⁹ There were also some striking similarities between the *changement à vue* in the second act of *Lycko-Pers resa*, when the landscape changes from winter to summer,²⁰ and the action in *Ett drömspel*, when the scene switches from Skamsund to Fagervik.²¹ Incidentally, in 1939, at the age of twenty-one, Bergman staged *Lycko-Pers resa* at *Mäster Olofgårdens* Theater in Stockholm, with a stage decor based on sketches that he himself had made. Rehearsals for the production took four months, and Bergman himself played the bit part of “Vännen II” (the second friend).²²

To understand what audiences were enjoying as they watched *Lycko-Pers resa*, one needs to take a closer look at the text of the play, with Strindberg’s stage directions, and see, or imagine, what

¹⁹ Lide, Barbara, eyewitness account.

²⁰ *SV* 11, p. 174.

²¹ *SV* 46, p. 65.

²² Bergman website, 12 December 2005.

was, indeed, happening on stage.²³ The play, set in the Middle Ages, begins in a room in a church tower on Christmas Eve. Windows open onto a glistening starry sky. There is an inherent magical quality evoked by the very idea of Christmas Eve and bright stars. In the tower room is a statue of the Virgin Mary, with a light in front of it. Thick beams support the ceiling, of which two, in the middle, are large enough to contain a person – and they do. Characters slip in and out of them. Per's father, an old man who keeps Per secluded in the church, away from the wicked world, comes with *gröt* (porridge) for the Jultomte (the Swedish equivalent of Santa Claus), as well as traps for the rats, who are erroneously suspected of eating the gröt. These rats, typical of animals in fairytales, have names, Nisse and Nilla; they are large enough to be portrayed by actors, and they speak. Voices are heard, the Maria statue shakes its head, and Maria's forehead emits a bright ray of light. When the old man, referring to Per, cries out, "Min son! Min son!" the Maria statue contradicts him by saying, "*Min* son!" (p.153) – indicating that Per is perhaps more than an ordinary mortal. At least he has divine protection.

In the second scene, Nisse and Nilla eat the porridge put out for the Jultomte, who then enters the scene, whereupon the fairy godmother comes out of one of the beams, dressed as an old witch. We learn that she is Per's fairy godmother and that the Tomte is Per's godfather. They agree to let Per out to see the world. The Tomte will give Per his magical wishing ring, and the fairy godmother will give him good company on his way. This "good company" is a young girl named Lisa, who is not always together with Per, but who is sent to help him when he is in need and to guide him. Magically, the tomte disappears into the second pillar. The fairy godmother, now dressed in white like an angel, appears, and Per's adventures begin, many of which demand exciting scene

²³ All references to stage directions in *Lycko-Pers resa* will be to SV 11.

changes. Before he sets out, in a series of *tableaux* reminiscent of Dickensian Christmas scenes, his fairy godmother takes him to peek into a large house at the town square – a rich man’s house. This is followed by a quick look through a gable window to observe how the poor live, and then, finally, a glimpse into the interior of the king’s palace. A clock strikes three, the last *tableau* disappears, and the room in the church tower resumes its previous appearance. The fairy godmother gives Per a wishing ring, and then she disappears into one of the beams in the tower. As Per, looking at his ring, wonders what he should wish for himself, his father enters “genom väggen” (through the wall). Strindberg employs this magical technique again in *Ett drömspel*, when the Officer’s father “går ut mitt igenom väggen nickande till avsked” (goes out through the wall, nodding a farewell).²⁴

Before the end of the scene, Per’s father explains that he is not only his unhappy father, but also a man who is subject to the magic of the “makter” – the powers – whereupon he is changed into a large black cat. Per cries out for help and is answered by strong rays of light emanating from the statue of the Virgin Mary. The cat disappears, and Per jumps out of an open window to end the first act.

Per’s travels first take him to the woods, where he throws snowballs and slides on some ice, which breaks, causing him to fall down and lie in the snow. Lisa enters, rubs the wishing ring, and the landscape changes, magically, from winter to summer. In this exciting *changement*, the ice melts, water flows between the stones, and the sun illuminates the entire scene.

At the end of this scene, when Per and Lisa kiss, and Per, throwing off his coat and suggesting a swim, Lisa, in her innocence, holds her hands before her eyes and hides behind a tree. A little bird, who has been singing, sings louder, as if to warn the young people, as well as to add an audio dimension to the décor and light-

²⁴ *SV* 46, ed. Gunnar Ollén, 1988, p. 14.

ing that produce the fairy-tale atmosphere. As Lisa runs from Per, he cues the scene change for scene four, with the words, “Kom hit palats, och fat och vin, och hästar och vagnar, och tjänare och guld, guld!” (Come here, palace, and kegs and wine, and horses and wagons, and servants and gold, gold!) Suddenly, the stage becomes a magnificent large room in the house of Per, who, very much in the manner of Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*, has become a rich man who then is betrayed by those around him. At the end of the act, Per, left alone, goes to the window and leans over to look out. When he stands upright again, he wears the ears of an ass. This is, of course, a simple trick, but it is both illustrative and effective.

Per then becomes a “reformer” in a highly satirical third act, in which the scenery itself is not magical, as it is in the scenes with quick-changing *tableaux*. The act is simply set in a town square – with a pillory and chains and a statue of the mayor of the town. The magic in this scene consists in the pillory bowing to the statue and the two of them conversing. Per’s attempts to reform the town fail, and he is put into irons and displayed in the town square. Again, he is saved by Lisa, who appears in the guise of an old woman. She sends him on his next adventure, in the fourth act, which takes place in a palace in oriental style, and in which Per appears as a caliph with the name “Omar the 27th”. The name “Harun el Raschid” is mentioned, in reference to *1001 Nights*, which was immensely popular in 19th century Europe. Harun el Raschid also appears in Strindberg’s later fairy-tale play *Abu Cassems tofflor* (Abu Cassem’s Slippers).²⁵

While verbal satire is at the core of this scene, with Strindberg casting the ignorant Per in the role of literary critic, there still is a lot of action on stage. Per is led to a divan and entertained by dancers, singers, and the famous court poet, “Timer-Lenk.” There is more music and dancing, as Per is to be married – to his surprise

²⁵ *SV* 62, ed. Gunnar Ollén, pp. 8-99.

and disappointment, not to Lisa, but to a girl as unwilling to be a bride as Per is to be a groom. This scene ends on a highly dramatic note, with Per cursing the palace and all connected with it. His curses provide a loud cue for the picture of “Omar’s” (Per’s) family tree to come crashing noisily down from the wall and roll itself up on the floor. The bride disappears through the wall, the crown and spire, symbols of Per’s power, fall down, the throne breaks apart, thunder and lightning are heard and seen, the court disappears, and Per remains standing with his face in his hands, while, in a *change-ment à vue*, the scene is magically transformed into a seashore, with remains of castaway cargo, the wreck of a ship, and gulls swooping over the waves. At stage right, there are cliffs with a pine forest. Below them is a hut.

There is some exciting machinery at work in the next scene, with its special lighting effects and other stage business. The waves become threateningly high, forcing Per far downstage. He tries to flee into the wings at stage left, but he is driven back by moose; he tries to flee to the right, but he encounters bulls. In this delightful fairy-tale scene, Strindberg even has dragons rise up out of the sea to threaten Per, who finally cries out, “Kom död och befria mig!” (Come, Death, and liberate me!). With a strong touch of literal irony, Death does indeed appear, in stereotypical dress, complete with a scythe. Per’s idea of being freed changes quickly. Death advises Per to knock three times, in good fairytale style, on the door of a nearby hut, and then he disappears. An old man, called “Den Vise” (the wise man), comes out of a hut to meet Per. He shows Per a little box, which contains a human heart. The audience suspects – or eventually figures out – that it is the heart of Per’s father, broken by a woman, who had tramped upon it for twenty-six years. Some believe that this wise man is Per’s father, still under the spell of the “makter” (powers).²⁶ Per’s father can only be released from

²⁶ Ward, p. 40.

that spell if his son finds true love and returns home. After more words from the Wise Man, Per realizes that he must return home to his father and that he does indeed love Lisa and must marry her. Having fulfilled his function – of bringing Per to know what he must do – the wise man, with a bit of stage magic, sinks through the floor, and his hut disappears.

The scene continues with Per, alone on the shore, shouting, “Jag älskar Lisa! Jag älskar henne, jag älskar henne!” (p. 257) (I love Lisa! I love her, I love her!). His declaration of love serves as a cue to Lisa, who magically appears in a boat, sitting at the helm. She waves to Per and sails on, leaving him to discover that he has lost his magic ring and cannot wish for her to come back. He must pursue her, and, because there conveniently happens to be a boat on the shore, he is able to do so. Thus ends the fourth act, with its oceanic scenery that Gunnar Ollén suggests is a precursor to the grotto scene in *Ett drömspel*.²⁷

To complete the circular structure of the play, the last act brings Per back to his starting place; instead of being in the tower, however, the characters – the Fairy Godmother and the Tomte – are now in the main part of the church, and so extra scenery is, indeed, required. In the background is an altar and a crucifix, to the left is a pulpit. Similar to what he does in the third act, in which the pillory and the statue converse, Strindberg has a Bier and a Broom move around and carry on a conversation. The Tomte is seen in one window, and the Fairy Godmother in another. Lisa appears, expecting to see Per, and she hides behind the confession stool. Strindberg then has Per enter. He is split into two characters – himself and his shadow, who steps up to the pulpit, turns the hourglass upside-down, and begins to deliver a sermon, addressing the Bier and the Broom, who add a bit of comic relief to this scene, as they compare their martyrdom and argue about which one of them

²⁷ Ollén, *SV* 46, p. 147.

had suffered most. The main target of the shadow's words, however, is Per, whom the shadow admonishes to "arbete ... och var hederlig, men bliv icke helgon, ty då blir du högfärdig, och det är icke våra dygder, utan våra fel som göra oss till människor!" (work... and be honorable, but don't become a saint, for then you will become arrogant, and it is not our virtues, but our weaknesses that make us human!, pp. 261-2). The shadow also comforts Per, however, by telling him that, although life is a stormy sea, it has its safe havens and verdant islands (p. 262). This is an early reference to the "grönskande öar" (literally: greening islands) that appear as a leitmotif in both Strindberg's literary work and his paintings. The play ends with Per being reunited with Lisa and reconciled with his father, who also undergoes a major change for the better – and yet, in typical Strindbergian fashion, there is no promise that the characters will live "happily ever after" on the stormy sea of life.

While one can simply interpret the shadow to represent Per's conscience, a number of scholars have commented that Per's shadow is the first of Strindberg's *Doppelgänger*, who appear in the expressionistic station dramas, in which the protagonists, as they journey through life, meet figures who resemble themselves.²⁸ It is noteworthy that what some consider a modern technique, called "the projection of the ego," probably, as Boel Westin and Sten Magnus Petri point out, has its roots in folklore, in which Strindberg was well versed. Both Westin and Petri cite the folklorist Gunnar Olof Hylten-Cavallius, writing that, according to folklore, it is possible for people to become such sinners that they lose their shadows, which represent their souls.²⁹ Such an interpretation could indeed be applied to Per, who at least encounters his shadow once again and appears to take his advice.

Lycko-Pers resa is generally considered to be a forerunner of

²⁸ Ollén, *SV* 46, p. 147.

²⁹ Westin, p. 190; Petri, p. 160.

Strindberg's later station dramas and *sagospel*, or fairy-tale plays. Ollén writes that it is “i mångt och mycket Strindbergs första drömspel” (in many respects Strindberg's first dreamplay).³⁰ Gunnar Brandell calls it “den närmaste förebilden” (the closest model) for *Till Damaskus*.³¹ Ruprecht Volz acknowledges it as the prototype of the later station dramas.³² It sets the pattern not only for the themes of seeking one's identity, finding out what human life is all about, and then reviewing one's life as it comes to an end, but also for the circular structure that Strindberg used in the later station dramas. Richard Bark, in his study of Strindberg's “dreamplay” technique, reminds us of the relationship of *Lycko-Pers resa* to the baroque theatre, with its machinery for quick scene changes, its “changemang à vue, mytologiska persongalleri, allegoriska bildvärld, dess av denna värld stiliserade fantasidekor och dess av denna dekor styrda handlingsmönster,” (changement à vue, mythological character gallery, allegorical imagery), – much of which is prevalent in the later station dramas.³³

Lycko-Pers resa is perhaps most closely related to *Ett drömspel*, a play that also has a young, naïve protagonist who is sent out into the world to experience life. The plays have in common not only the magic of their staging, which creates a fairy-tale, dream-like atmosphere, but they share bits of dialogue as well. In *Lycko-Per*, for example, Per, the naïve and simple protagonist, knows nothing of the world. He has never even experienced eating an orange. After stepping on a pinecone in Act 2, Scene 2, Per curses the pinecones, whereupon the spectator sees a sudden *changement* – the pinecones disappear, and the tree that bore them suddenly bears oranges instead. When Per enthusiastically tastes an orange, Lisa asks him,

³⁰ Ollén, *Strindbergs dramatik*, p. 242.

³¹ Brandell, ‘Strindberg och scentekniken’, p. 35.

³² Volz, p. 36.

³³ Bark, p. 48.

“Nå, vad tycker du?” (Well, what do you think?), Per responds by saying, “Det är nog gott, men inte så som jag hade tänkt mig.” (Well, it was pretty good, but not exactly the way I thought it would be.) Lisa replies with her words of wisdom, “Så är det alltid, hela livet igenom.” (That’s the way it always is, throughout all of life.)³⁴ This brief exchange is echoed by the Billposter and the Officer in *Ett drömspel*. When the Officer asks the Billposter about his fishnet – the fishnet that he had dreamed of and had wanted for a very long time – the Billposter replies, “håven var nog så bra, men inte så som jag hade tänkt mig!” (The net was very good, but not exactly the way I thought it would be.) The Officer responds with, “Inte så som jag hade tänkt mig! ... Det är utmärkt sagt! Ingenting är som jag hade tänkt mig!” (Not the way I thought it would be! ... That is excellently put! Nothing is as I thought it would be!)³⁵

Although *Ljeko-Pers resa* is a delightful theatre piece, it is not one of his most popular among either theatre people or Strindberg scholars. Boel Westin presents two reasons for the play’s being relegated to “forsknings utmarker,” the outer margins of scholarly interest. The first is that the *sagospel* as a genre does not fit the picture of Strindberg as an experimental, modern, innovative dramatist. It is a genre weighed down by tradition that looks backward, and not forward, in time. Also, according to Westin, in Sweden, after Strindberg, the fairy-tale play as a dramatic form, if it has not died out completely, it has, at least, been put on ice.³⁶

If, however, one looks at recent repertoires of theaters in Stockholm alone, one might not agree with the suggestion that the fairy-tale play “has been put on ice.” For example, in late November of 2005, the play *Petter och Lotta och stora landsvägen*, by Lucas Svensson, based on books by Sweden’s beloved writer of children’s stories

³⁴ *SV* 11, p. 177.

³⁵ *SV* 46, p. 28.

³⁶ Westin, p. 177.

Elsa Beskow, premiered at the Royal Dramatic Theatre. Hailed as “Ett sagospel för 2000-talet,” (a fairy-tale play for the twenty-first century), the production was so successful that the theatre prolonged its run with five additional performances.³⁷ This is but one example. Still, one might suspect that, while Swedish theaters might stage fairy-tale plays based on stories by Elsa Beskow, they might be reluctant to mount *Lycko-Pers resa* for their “Strindberg offering,” when those deciding the repertoire might prefer one of Strindberg’s more modern or better-known plays.

Over the years, *Lycko-Pers resa* came to be a piece performed mainly for children. In 1981, ten years after the Royal Dramatic Theater’s production, a Riksteater production received less favorable reviews.³⁸ To my knowledge, no major stages in Stockholm, Göteborg, or Malmö, have set up the play since then. Some might believe that the satire is outdated. One would think, however, that anyone who has observed questionable, if not illegal, behavior on the part of people who hold public office ought to be able to appreciate the political satire. This certainly appears to be true in the case of the recent production of the play, in July of 2005, by the August Strindberg Society of Los Angeles, directed by David Patch. Patch described the satire as “timely,”³⁹ and one of his actors, Bruce Thomas Eason, wrote that the play is “a satire of the hypocrisy in the society of Strindberg’s day, which still rings all too true in today’s political and social climate as well.”⁴⁰

In small theaters with limited funds, major problems could arise from the demands of the technical aspects of the play, but, like David Patch, a number of daring directors have risen to the challenge. In Sweden, there have been performances in regional thea-

³⁷ Website, dramaten.se

³⁸ Ollén, *Strindbergs dramatik*, p. 68.

³⁹ Letter from David Patch, 17 February 2005.

⁴⁰ Eason home page, 22 June 2005.

tres and by touring groups that perform mostly for children – for example, the Mittiprickteatern, based in Stockholm, went on tour in 1998 with a production that included such changes in the text as having Per, at one point, utter a loud “Wow!” The production received favorable reviews, including one by Lars Ring in *Svenska dagbladet*.⁴¹ Among the more theatrically innovative productions was one staged in the 1997-98 season, directed by Itamar Kubovy at the Fria teater in Högdalen, outside of Stockholm. On the advertisement for that production, people were invited to go along on *Ljeko-Pers resa*, “en tripp för alla mellan 11-111 år.” (a trip for everyone between 11 and 111 years old).⁴² While the production in this small theater was not as elaborate as the spectacular ones at the Nya teater or Dramaten in Stockholm, it still fascinated the reviewer Birgitta Haglund, who appreciated its “enkla, vackra scenografi” (simple, beautiful scenery) – which included a large glass cube with pictures projected on it. There were interesting small *tableau vivants*. Per himself was updated, with a backward cap (not to be confused with a baseball cap), and a rather shabby suit. Lisa was described as “a lively little black crow who follows him.” Haglund describes some of the changes made by the director, Kubovy, who, at the same time he tested the limits of tastelessness, strove to keep the fairy-tale atmosphere over the entire production. While Strindberg’s text was, to a great extent, unchanged, the scenery was radically changed and updated. For example, the rich man’s house became, in this production, the house of a rock star, and the gold he had was in the form of gold records that decorated the walls of the house, in which the guests all wore black sunglasses.

One might fear that updating the play by adding such features as a rock star with a collection of gold records – which reflect current popular culture and might appeal to a post-adolescent and adult

⁴¹ Ring, *Svenska dagbladet*, 6 December 1998.

⁴² Fria teatern, advertisement for *Ljeko-Pers resa*.

audience – could possibly detract from the play's magical staging and lose its appeal for younger audiences. Yet the mere presence of an enormous glass cube on stage, with scenes projected on it, has, in itself, a fascinating, magical quality that appeals to younger audiences. And the adventures of Per as he travels on the road to achieving a certain degree of maturity and finding love certainly is in accord with many a fairy tale and story for young people. In her final comment on the Fria teater production, Haglund echoes the words of the theater's advertisement – words with which I agree – that *Lycko-Pers resa* is indeed a play that can and does appeal to audiences of all ages.⁴³

⁴³ Haglund, Birgitta, Review of *Lycko-Pers resa*.

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