

In Search of the Author's Voice: The Strindberg Project, a Performance by The Cullberg Ballet (2012)

The year 2012 marked the centennial of August Strindberg's death. His persona and artistry held center stage in the many productions commemorating the poetics of one of the founding fathers of European modernism. For the Swedish Cullberg Ballet this was an opportunity to pay tribute to one of Sweden's major national culture figures and to re-examine the legacy and the memory of Strindberg.

The Strindberg Project, a dance performance by the Cullberg Ballet, premiered in March 2012 in Stockholm (the Strindberg project is co-produced with Festspielhaus st poelten, Austria). This performance does not present August Strindberg's biography, nor is it an adaptation of any of his dramatic or literary works. Instead, it seeks to investigate the cultural and artistic memory of Strindberg as an iconic figure.

A Swedish icon in its own merit, the Cullberg Ballet, a part of Riksteatern, Sweden's National Touring Theatre, unsurprisingly rose up to the challenge and readdressed the works of Sweden's literary icon. This is not the first time the Cullberg Ballet stages a choreographic interpretation of Strindberg's works. In 1950, the centennial of August Strindberg's birth, Brigit Cullberg, founder of the dance company, adapted his play *Miss Julie* (1888) as a ballet and created a performance that won her company world acclaim as it became one of the most staged and popular ballets of modern times.

More than half a century later, the Cullberg ballet produces *The Strindberg Project*—a performance that deals with the relations between the author's artistry and his interpreters; it questions the presence of iconic cultural figures in our lives and seeks to understand their part in staging our identity. This performance thus encapsulates a multi-layered cultural dialogue between the dance company and an emblematic figure in Swedish culture, presenting contemporary perceptions of Strindberg's poetics and examining the relevance of his presence as a cultural symbol. Accordingly, in this review I wish to examine development of understanding and thought about Strindberg's authorial voice.

This project consists of two parts: the first, titled *August did not have what is commonly considered good taste as far as furniture is considered*, was created by dancer and choreographer Tillman O'Donnell; the second part of the performance, created by theatre director Melanie Mederlind, is titled *Translations*. The two parts differ in their themes, scenography and choreographic language. Whereas the first part of the show presents a white cubic stage on which Strindberg's mental illness is presented in regard to his poetics, the second part of the production shows a dark space focusing on Strindberg's occupation with the Chinese language during his later years. However, despite these differences both parts of the project attempt to shed light upon the gap between the poetics and persona of Strindberg and its contemporary understanding by redrawing the boundaries on stage between the vocal and the visual, between what is heard and what is seen.

The performance showcases a performative approach that perceives the stage not only as a visual and physical place, but also as an acoustic one. The danced sequences in this performance are combined with scenic miniatures that include acted episodes as well as group sequences in which the dancers recite texts and perform vocal acts: they speak, sing, shout, scream, and bark. The dominant presence of vocal acts in a highly visual performance offers a discursive investigation of the tension between the dancers' bodies

and the natures of their vocal acts.

Vocal acts in contemporary dance performances are often regarded as secondary texts in the construction of the *mise en scène*. In contrast to this approach, this review considers the voice a primary element in the staging of the dancers' bodies and in the communication of the performative experience. I am referring here to the notion of voice as a generative principle that operates in two registers: in the first, the voice is understood as a metaphor signifying Strindberg's authorial identity. In this register imprints and echoes that characterize rhetorical features of Strindberg's poetic style are traced and revealed.

In this performance Strindberg's authorial voice is depicted in representations of characteristics from his dramatic techniques. These include the spatial perception and the cinematographic effects interlacing the different scenes in the performance. The second register refers to the materiality of the vocal utterance as manifested in this performance. The after-effects of Strindberg's dramatic techniques and public persona regain their presence through the vocal configurations performed by the dancers. These include fragments from his writings and abstract vocal acts that stage aural images and metaphors from his plays.

During the first part of the performance, three small photographed portraits of Strindberg are present on the stage. The performance space thus prompts a stage in the spirit of Strindberg who haunts it as a visual image and as an authorial presence. Moreover, this space materializes an abstract interpretation to some key elements from Strindberg's fictional worlds. Freddie Rokem has noted that the stenographic metaphor of a claustrophobic space was frequently used by Strindberg to express a universal determinist human condition (2004:34). The same spatial logic is applied to the stage: in the first part the stage is designed as a wide closed room with few articles of furniture, where six dancers are imprisoned. In the second part of the performance, the black cubic stage is marked by white masking-tape outlining the borders of the imaginative habitual space of the dancers.

As in many of Strindberg's fictional worlds, the actual stage action is dynamic and multifocal. The first part of the performance unfolds in a fragmented flow of scenes, scenarios and dance sequences montaged together by associative logic. This effect is reached mostly through the stage-lighting design. Three fluorescent lights hang above, illuminating and darkening the space in interplays, thus producing the impression of edited moving-pictures, creating a cinematic effect that echoes Strindberg's preoccupation with the art of photography. Sometimes the scenes cross-fade into each other; at other moments they shift abruptly from light to darkness. The stage lights thus manipulate the audience's perception as the viewers' angle of vision jumps from one spot to another. Strindberg's interest and experiments with the aesthetical and rhetorical features of photography is furthermore cited in the second part of the performance, by combining video close-ups from the staged action.

In both parts of the performance the dancers present exaggerated notions of Strindberg's public identity, ridiculing the clichés that comprised contemporary understandings of Strindberg: misogynous, mad, and inspired. At these moments one cannot avoid noticing a sense of self-reflexive irony regarding the applauding of a symbol, seasoned with irony at the habit of butting the icon.

August Strindberg's artistic voice is thus the substance of this performance, carried out and heard through a fabricated dialogue with the sensual materiality of the dancers' physical and vocal actions. Features from Strindberg's poetics are mediated by the performers, undertaking the action of utterance, and simulating the author's artistic voice. The dancers' bodies are transformed into an artistic sign by the

syntax of their choreography: throughout the first part of the performance the dancers present repetitive movement motifs of fractured, stand-still and fast-forwarded dance sequences. These physical configurations resemble the moves of animated figures, or marionettes movements, and create the image of dancers that have lost control of their body.



The Cullberg Ballet's *The Strindberg Project*. Photo: Courtesy of Dansens Hus.

Hence, the choreographed syntax presents the dancer as a vehicle to channel the voice of the author—be it the choreographer or August Strindberg. Positioning the dancers' corporeality as an apparatus to stage Strindberg's voice indicates a fundamental distance between the narrating agent—the performers—and the narrated object—August Strindberg. Melanie Mederlind acknowledges the discrepancy between the theme of the performance and its enactment, as she explains in the performance website: "I want to take in the different linguistic backgrounds of the dancers and create an ensemble piece out of language, associations and images."

The gap between the author's voice and the body of the dancer producing it is presented by staging the non-linear relations between the heard voices and the performers' bodies. Three central vocal practices formulate these relations: the first is the barking dancer; the second is the female voice-over and the third is the conflict presented between the source text and its translator. These strategies stage a voice that is detached from its source and attached to a separate, perhaps disembodied existence.

The first vocal practice refers to the materiality of the voice. The vocal act of barking is repeated in various phases of the first part of the show, accompanied by the imitation of doglike behavior. Although Strindberg was well known for his fear of dogs, uttered barking presents a common motif in his drama: Strindberg's fictional characters are often driven by their untamed urge to a fatal condition that reveals their animal-like nature. An obvious example of this can be found in the scene from *Miss Julie* where Julie's purebred dog who had been consorting with the gatekeeper's mutt, is presented as an analogy to Julie's condition in the kitchen: the pet dog is in estrus and Kristin tells Jean that it is Julie's "time of the month" that is making her behave strangely. In a similar fashion, the dancers in O'Donnell's performance are captured in recurring movements and vocal patterns that echo the repetitive behavioral pattern and the expected and uncontrollable archetypical schemes often presented by Strindberg characters. From this point of view, the barking serves as a vocal act that animates a universal primal mental condition of characters enslaved to their behavioral configurations and inescapable drives.

At one point during this scene, the delicate balance between the different movement patterns of the dancers on stage is violated and a storming and aggressive attack of the dog troupe begins. The moment of attack presents an abstraction of a familiar moment in Strindberg's drama, in which the characters rip off their domesticated and educated masks and expose a beast-like aggression in their carnal lust for prey. "To eat or be eaten- that is the question"—Strindberg dictated these words to the Captain in his play *The Father* (1887). This statement is further exemplified in the performance by presenting the vocal lateralization of the metaphor. In the second part of the performance, the carnal metaphor is translated in the sublimation of the actual act of eating, as the dancers peel and bite oranges.

The moment of the savage attack also presents the formation of a community comprised of resonating bodies sharing the Darwinian survival struggle. Noises from the aggressive assault continue to flood the acoustic space long after the stage is darkened. During these moments the viewers' field of vision revoked, and their stimulated imagination and fantasies replace the necessary visual anchor. In these moments the performers' voices serve as voice-overs and create an alternative mental image of the assault. The audience experiences the actual process of acknowledging bestial human nature as it hosts the voices of the brutal attack in its mind.

The second mode in which the notion of voice operates in this performance is the disembodied female voice-over. During the first part of the performance the entire cast wears fake beards and moustaches, imitating Strindberg's. These visual attributes signify that the performers' corporeality is inscribed and authored by Strindberg's own male persona, both textual and corporal. However, despite the male dominance of the visual score, the configuration of the disembodied narrator's voice as female suggests the supremacy of the feminine in the acoustic space. In this perspective, the female voice-over repositions the familiar Strindberg theme of the gender-based battle as a conflict between the visual stage and the acoustic space.

Who then wins this battle? Throughout different moments of the first part of the performance, a female voice-over recites a text describing Strindberg's mental and social peculiarity. This text is delivered in perfect diction with a distinct American accent, creating an acoustic image of an act of patronage. The female voice-over thus disrupts the male dominance of the stage and alters the perceptual hierarchy of sound and image. By using the reference to Strindberg's iconic look, the battle between the sexes shifts to one of dominance between the author's voice and its enactment. Understood from this perspective, the female voice-over emphasizes the split between the authorial voice and the actual place of its production.

The third, and final, mode of the voice focuses upon the tonality of Strindberg's language through the concept of translation. The aural and acoustic aspects of Strindberg's drama are hardly a present aspect of his staging, since most of the performances of Strindberg's works are nearly always translated. The second part of the performance illustrates this idea, as Egil Törnqvist has pointed out, Strindberg's plays are dependent on their translation due to the simple fact that few non-Scandinavians have any knowledge of Swedish (2000:53). The voice in this performance is present through the different sounds and accents of the language games performed by the dancers.

The associative image flow of Strindberg is performed by a multilingual translation combining video projection, Cha-cha-cha dances, and echoes of fragmented writings by Strindberg. In this part of the performance the act of translation is played out through the reconstruction of Strindberg's poetics in a new form. His authorial voice collides with a shifting flow of imagination and conception of China, merging with the dancers' various national and personal identities.

To conclude: the vocal practices I have presented outline the acoustic dimension of the performance as one that emphasizes the liberation of the voice from its source. However, while the voice detaches Strindberg, it symbolically reattaches itself to the corpus of August Strindberg—it animates his voice and translates it into a contemporary artistic language. August Strindberg died a century ago. His artistic pulse, however, continues to beat as it reverberates in the bodies of his adaptors, translators, and interpreters.

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