



Review: Katie Mitchell (dir.), *A Dream Play*, by August Strindberg, National Theatre, London 15 February – 15 May 2005

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A Dream Play
August Strindberg
National Theatre, London
15 February – 15 May 2005
Review by Kim Howey

With a play less known than August Strindberg's naturalistic psychological dramas *Miss Julie* or *The Father*, Caryl Churchill can seemingly get away with her version of Strindberg's *A Dream Play* at London's National Theatre.

In 1901, having been abandoned by his wife, the Swedish Strindberg wrote *A Dream Play* in the midst of a mental breakdown, christening the play 'the child of my greatest pain'. In a venture uncharacteristic of turn-of-the-century Swedish theatre, Strindberg summons a Hindu goddess to visit a series of hapless world-bound characters played by a cast of forty-six. Churchill's version, under the direction of Katie Mitchell, not only transforms the Hindu goddess into a plurality of anglicized angels, but cuts the cast to ten and halves the play's time from three hours to one-and-a-half. Focusing largely on a sole character — Alfred Green, an overworked, guilt-ridden husband threatened with divorce by his second wife — Churchill incorporates a selection of the original thirteen tableaux into a dream of this single character.

Alfred is left to his own humanistic devices, alone, on a stark grey stage. There are empty windows in nearly every scene. The recurrent image of a locked cabinet signifies the unconscious, reflecting advances in psychoanalytic discourse of the time. Although Churchill's interpretation of *A Dream Play* may capture the marital struggle that Strindberg locates at the heart of the drama, her production is arguably darker than the original; while in Strindberg's text misfortune befalls a number of characters, in this new rendition, defeat and terror converge on a single character. The 1901 version seems to unite people in their loneliness, but Churchill's version ostracizes one character precisely because of his loneliness.

This play is, ironically, an expressionist drama carried by the dominance of a single character, played strongly by Angus Wright. Other cast members display an almost expressionless, Brechtian straightforwardness in their acting; the women, in particular, are soft-spoken and difficult to hear, as though they have been banished to the margins of one man's story.

True to Strindberg's preface declaration, 'Time and place do not exist', Churchill tries to maintain the nonlinear quality of the dreamlike subplots, even while she drastically alters the substance of these subplots. Beginning with the husband reading a notice of divorce, the scene floods with memories and scenes of the mind, culminating with, appropriately, the reading of the note once more — or for the first time, again.

As though unbounded by spatial restrictions, the stage is without distinct physical borders: characters walk offstage left, while dual cast members, representing the same character, walk onstage right as though the stage were an endless window to the scene and, it would seem, to the mind. This continuous psychological action expresses a convergence of naturalist and symbolic dramatic strategies — a synthesis which might have been avant-garde in the early twentieth century but is now, when theatre abounds in generic hybridity, a collision of modes which would hardly be called brilliant.

Churchill's modernizing and condensing of Strindberg's text turns out to have both positive and negative consequences. Drawing large crowds, her updated work seems to have remedied the age-old saying that Strindberg will empty a London theatre, but her changes to the original text blur, if not destroy altogether, Strindberg's focus on universal human suffering. While Alfred ultimately discovers the contents of the locked cabinet — exposing his own subconscious fears, memories, and emotions — the plights and voices of the excluded original characters are left undiscovered. Strindberg's *A Dream Play* attempts to make sense of universal psychological suffering; Churchill's rendition, however, loses its ability to universalize.