Strindberg, Johan August

From The Columbia Encyclopedia

(strĭnd'bŏrg, Swed. yŏ́hän ou'gӘ strĭ̬nd'bēr'´yӘ), 1849–1912, Swedish dramatist and novelist. He was a master of the Swedish language and an innovator in dramatic and literary styles.

Strindberg was the unwanted fourth child of a once well-to-do father and a mother who had come to his father's house as a servant. He studied intermittently at the Univ. of Uppsala, but poverty forced him to leave without a degree, taking work as a tutor, journalist, and librarian.

Strindberg's first mature drama, Master Olaf (written c.1873), showed the influence of Ibsen and Shakespeare; it represented the personality of the author in three characters. The play was refused production until 1881 because of its realistic portrayal of national figures and its unprecedented use of prose for dramatic tragedy. With the novel The Red Room (1879), in which he satirized hypocrisy and injustice in Swedish life, Strindberg achieved renown. The Red Room, which helped initiate Swedish realism, revealed Strindberg's remarkable style, brilliantly visual and precisely suited to his ideas. He developed it more fully in the next decade, pouring forth an impressive assortment of novels, plays, stories, histories, and poems.

Strindberg's life was complicated by an unsuccessful suit brought against him for blasphemy as a result of his stories in Married (2 vol., 1884–85), which derogated women and denounced conventional religious practices. Although this conflict stirred a persecution complex in Strindberg, he remained for a time prolific and creative. His bitter and revealing autobiography Tjänstekvinnans son (tr. Son of a Servant, 1913) appeared in 1886.

In the late 1880s he began to experiment with free verse and created the great dramas The Father (1887), Miss Julie (1888), and Creditors (1888). These plays follow naturalism in their emphasis on the pathological and in their realism, but they depart from its objective, documentary techniques to achieve a subjective and emotional tone. The Father vividly expresses Strindberg's view of the war between the sexes, in which he saw man as victimized by woman. Miss Julie is a psychological study of the seduction of an upper-class woman by an insensitive chauffeur. These works show the influence of the ideas of Zola and Nietzsche.

In 1891 the first of Strindberg's three wretched marriages ended in divorce, and his second marriage and separation soon followed. He was precipitated into his "inferno crisis" (1894–96), in which he explored the occult and entertained the delusion that he was persecuted by creatures from another world, an experience later described in Inferno (1897). His inner turmoil subsided somewhat as he adopted Swedenborgian mysticism (see Swedenborg, Emanuel) and he entered a new period of creativity. In 1901 he married the actress Harriet Bosse; they parted in 1904, and, as with his previous marriages, he lost custody of their offspring.

In the dramas of this period Strindberg began to experiment with visual effects and other aspects of dramatic form, initiating changes that still remain living influences in the modern theater. Expressionist dream sequences and symbolism were combined with realism and with religious mysticism. Major works in this vein are The Dream Play (1902), To Damascus (3 parts, 1898–1904), and The Ghost Sonata (1907); in all there prevails some compassion for humanity's discordant existence, accompanied by
varying degrees of pessimism. Strindberg also wrote many historical dramas, including the outstanding
Gustav Vasa (1899). His last play, The Great Highway (1909), was a symbolic study of his own life.
Many of his works have been translated into English.

Bibliography

See his Open Letters to the Intimate Theatre (1966) and his letters (1939, repr. 1959);
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