

Mocking humor turned against Strindberg

by John Feffer

When Ingmar Bergman first produced August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* in Munich in 1981, he put his own *Scenes From a Marriage* and Ibsen's *A Doll's House* on the same bill. Strindberg's explicit misogyny was therefore effectively tempered by Ibsen's prescient feminism and Bergman's more sophisticated view of gender.

Why, then, is the Wilma Theater offering *Julie*, Bergman's latest version of the Strindberg play, all by itself? After all, Bergman's re-staging contains no trendy additions: no punk music, no intrusive dream sequences, no casually modern dialogue (thank God!).

Instead, this collaboration of two Swedes is remarkably old-fashioned and, at times, painfully dated. The dialogue is faithfully reproduced; the plot remains unchanged. Even the bulk of the misogyny is still there, raw and disturbing without Ibsen as palliative.

Julie seems at first glance to be an unadorned and undiluted *Miss Julie*, with only the Miss missing. But Bergman, despite textual faithfulness, has managed to tease new meanings out of old Strindberg.

Both plays concern the relationship between smoldering passion and that other favorite Strindberg (and Bergman) topic: humanity's limitless capacity for suffering. *Miss Julie*, an aristocratic young lady of dubious lineage and morality, seduces a valet, Jean, who clearly possesses neither lineage nor morality. The two find themselves in a hopeless tangle, unable to transcend thoroughly engrained class and gender categories. A third character, Christine the cook, tries to keep Jean in his place as her rightful suitor.

But perhaps the most active player in the drama is Strindberg and his overwhelming contempt for women. The playwright's disposition emerges often in the dialogue and undergirds many of the characters' motivations. *Miss Julie* behaves immorally because, among other reasons, she possesses a characteristically degenerate nature, she is having her period and her mother was a staunch feminist.

With *Miss Julie*, Strindberg has constructed his nightmare woman, one both too strong and too weak, caught between traditional gender categories: a woman who dances between androgyny and coquetry. As the sum total of Strindberg's irrational fears of "unnatural" women, she provides virtually all of the power of the play. She fascinates and repels Strindberg and—if the play achieves its intended effect—the audience as well.

In 1888 when it premiered, *Miss Julie* certainly shocked audiences. Today, however, the power has evaporated to a large degree: the misogyny, after all, has become silly (or perhaps dangerous, given today's backlash against feminism), while the class conflict of a lapsed gentry and aspiring peasantry has become largely irrelevant.

Such anachronisms make modern productions of *Miss Julie* very difficult. Bergman takes an interesting route. Relying on modified stage directions rather than modified dialogue, he sacrifices much of the play's power by moderating the man-hating and downplaying the class conflicts. With a noticeable vacuum at the core, the Wilma's *Julie* offers an entirely new main character—a sympathetic one. How Strindberg would have groaned at this "emasculated" of his drama.

Louise Roberts, in the title role, finds herself in a difficult position. Bergman has tempered the extremes of her character, making *Miss Julie* less of the cardboard stereotype. Roberts is best at her moments of quiet desperation; otherwise she seems unsure of how to meet the demands of Strindberg and Bergman simultaneously.

In order to preserve dramatic interest and bring the sympathetic qualities of *Miss Julie* into relief, the other two characters must become more sinister. With Strindberg, the cook is a relatively colorless part, but Cecile Mann brings a vitality and humor to her role that is absolutely essential. Robert Lee Martini, as Jean, gives some impressive scenes of viciousness but unfortunately doesn't sustain the implicit sinister and craven qualities.

Despite any individual failings, however, the trio succeeds together in



Louise Roberts and Robert Lee Martini in Julie: Is it possible to blunt Strindberg's thrust?

bringing out Strindberg's least appreciated quality: humor. Although Strindberg has certainly not left a legacy of wit, his dialogue is punctuated by wry comments, and his scenes frequently allow for comic interplay.

But Bergman and the Wilma go further. Scenes that are filled with pathos and exhaustion in Strindberg's version become lively and appropriately ludicrous in *Julie*. When *Miss Julie* indulges in one final fantasy at the end, the monologue becomes satiric, almost self-mocking.

Through humor, Bergman turns the words of Strindberg against himself, leavening the Scandinavian misan-

thropy, undercutting the reproachable message of the play and making *Miss Julie*, in the end, a tragic figure.

It is admirable that the Wilma has decided to stage such a careful production of Strindberg. The subtleties of the interpretation, however, might just be lost against the sheer strength of the playwright's vision, like whispering in the face of a hurricane.

Julie: Wilma Theater, 2030 Samsom Street, through April 19. \$12-\$17. 963-0345.

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