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August STRINDBERG
anatomia caracterelor esențiale



Universul dramaturgiei • Dicționarul,
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THE BOOK AS A JOURNEY: *AUGUST STRINDBERG.* *THE ANATOMY OF ESSENTIAL* *CHARACTERS*¹

August Strindberg. Anatomia caracterelor esențiale

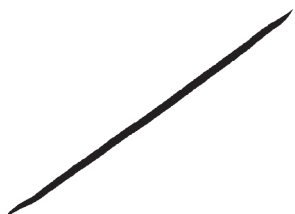
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¹ Review translated by Cornel Huțanu.

Abstract: This research aims to delve into the soul of Strindberg's essential characters by analyzing their lines from the plays in which they appear, in order to understand their psychology. The 27 texts subjected to analysis highlight the depths of these characters and the way in which they live their own drama, rendering a geography of their intellect, their way of judging and reacting in the situations they experience. The book also pays homage to the eminent professor Ileana Berlogea, author of the study *August Strindberg - A Solitary Precursor of Contemporary Theatre*, published posthumously in 2011 by the Romanian Academy Publishing House.

Keywords: August Strindberg, Corneliu Dumitriu, character psychology, Realism, Naturalism.

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With an esteemed pedagogical and editorial activity, Professor Corneliu Dumitriu, PhD supervisor at UNATC, adds to the thirty-three books published so far a new study of remarkable depth, entitled *August Strindberg. The Anatomy of Essential Characters* (*August Strindberg. Anatomia caracterelor esențiale*), published this year by Artes Publishing House in Iași. Governed by a passionate and captivating search of the particularities and grounds for intellectual satisfaction provoked by this dramaturgy, revealed through the very words of the characters, as he first did in *The Ibsen after Ibsen Notebooks* (*Caietele Ibsen după Ibsen*, UNATC Press, 2016), followed by the volume *Shakespeare's Theatre* (*Teatrul lui Shakespeare*, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 2021), this book dedicated to the psychological universe of Strindberg's protagonists also represents, according to the author, a tribute to the eminent late Professor Ileana Berlogea, the creator of the study *August Strindberg - A Solitary Precursor of Contemporary Theatre*, published posthumously in 2011 by the Romanian Academy Publishing House (not in 1995, as it appears in the Preface), through the efforts of Ana Boariu, the author's daughter, at the threshold of a century since the death of the great Swedish playwright.

From the start, the book offers significant milestones from the troubled biography of the playwright, motherless at the age of 13, self-declared son of a wealthy bourgeois and of a maid, who, after flirting with the thought of becoming a doctor, an actor or embracing the skills of journalist and proofreader, painter, clerk at the Royal Library, brilliantly affirmed his vocation as writer through an impressive number of novels, short stories, plays, stories and essays. These are joined by thousands of edifying letters of a life full of stressful trials, three marriages ended by as many divorces, sufferings and experiences from which there was no shortage of séances, sanatoriums for mental recovery, or the dissatisfaction of having lost

the Nobel Prize in favor of writer Selma Lagerlöf, cynically counterpointed by a “People’s Award”, the equivalent of donations from numerous admirers, probably from among the 60,000 participants to the funeral procession that led him to eternity before he turned 63. The religious upbringing, from which he parted not long after, followed by the intellectual training influenced by the writings of Nietzsche (whom he knew personally), Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer or Eduard von Hartmann with his “philosophy of pain”, found no less valuable counterparts on the literary level through the encounter with the works of important writers such as Ibsen, Schiller, and Shakespeare, the playwright confessing that when he wrote *Master Olof*, in which the protagonist’s revolt and desire for reform will finally give way to the need to save his life at the cost of acknowledging that he is nothing more than an instrument of the monarch, he was influenced by Shakespeare’s masterpiece *Julius Caesar*.

Strongly concerned with the complex and often contradictory psychological universe of his characters and the conflictual nature of their relationships, as best illustrated by the dispute between spouses or between children and parents, attracted for a while by alchemy or occultism, disappointed by the weak echo of the 1848 Revolution in Sweden or by the “Swedish” perception of Lutheran Reformation, he forged his own religion, not devoid of doubts and uncertainties. In his writing, he approached psychological Realism, Naturalism, Surrealism, and Expressionism, without abandoning the obsession of the protagonists’ conflict with those around them and with themselves, but also the need to reconcile with his life just like the hero of *Lucky Per*, like the Stranger in *The Road to Damascus* in search of the Divine, a play considered “the starting point of twentieth-century Expressionism”. He founded the “Scandinavian Experimental Theatre” in 1888, in Denmark, where he will stage for the first time *Miss Julie*, starring Siri, the writer’s first wife, in the preface of which he explains his ardent interest in addressing “characterless characters” and the psychological warfare between the sexes. He also founded an “Intimate Theatre” in 1907, at a time when he was writing chamber plays, such as *The Pelican* or *The Ghost Sonata*, not forgetting the denunciation of that psychological war carried out at the level of the minds, as evidenced by the one act plays *Pariah, or the Outcast* and *The Stronger*.

After going through the analytical discourse dedicated to the plays and their protagonists, I can say that I experienced the feeling of a captivating journey through worlds, spaces, and times more or less known, through the dramatic, Christian or savage core of true life stories, brought together under the sign of the struggle between the sexes or between minds, between the weak and the strong, between their good essence and their evil essence, shaping the

mystery and origin of behaviour of these light or dark characters. In other words, I let myself be conquered by an initiatory journey or by a story of stories, as in *One Thousand and One Nights*, in which you can easily recognize over and over again the same contradictory and surprising nature of peers and human relationships, determined by an alchemy present either in the house of ordinary mortals, or in the intimacy of symbolic characters or under royal robes, in historical plays. Often, we are urged to discern the cracks in the composition of “good characters” or the glimpses of humanity in the personality of the bad ones. Each “story” respects the same architecture, in which we recognize one by one the “Characters”, the “Introduction”, the “Psychological Universe of Each Essential Character”, the “Relationships Between Characters” (in the form of geometric schemes), the “In-depth Considerations”, “Questions with (and without) Uncertain Answers”. From the “Introduction” we also find the subject and motivation of the action or the mechanism that determines the attitude of the characters, while “In-depth Considerations” and “Questions”, with or without answers, give meaning and colour to meditations occasioned by conflict, the reactions of the protagonists, and the sometimes open ending of the play. Sometimes, the conflict is incendiary and irreconcilable, and the resolution becomes synonymous with the death of one of the characters, as in the “dramas of incompatibility”, in plays such as *The Father*, *Miss Julie*, *The Dance of Death* and *Facing Death*. In the first play, the dispute between the parents to gain authority over the child will give birth to a monstrous plot, at the end of which the woman will triumph by passing over the corpse of her husband. In the second, Julie will be urged to commit suicide by the cynical Jean, her father’s valet, paying for the error of having surrendered to him on a night of victory of the carnal over reason. The fourth, called by the author of the book “the drama of sacrifice”, brings to the fore the unfortunate father, a widower who has reached the threshold of poverty with the help of his even more unfortunate wife, striving to ensure the material future of his three daughters deprived of concern for their father, through an insurance policy honoured after burning the house down. The third play, *The Dance of Death*, considered to be emblematic for Strindberg’s theatre by writer Alexandru Sever, gives apocalyptic dimensions to the conflict between the spouses generated by the authority in the family, the end giving the father, a character accustomed to feeding on the sufferings of others, a lethal attack of apoplexy. The words of the characters in the play are significant in defining the essence of the relationships between them, but also crown the viability of the method used by the author of the book to unveil the “anatomy of essential characters”. First Alice, the wife, addressing the family friend:

What am I to talk about? That I have spent a lifetime in this tower, locked up, guarded by a man whom I have always hated, and whom I now hate so beyond all bounds that the day he died I should be laughing until the air shook. [...] You may well ask! While still engaged we parted twice; since then we have been trying to part every single day—but we are chained together and cannot break away. Once we were separated—within the same house—for five whole years. Now nothing but death can part us. This we know, and for that reason we are waiting for him as for a liberator.

Edgar, the husband:

It is death—or something still worse! [...] Have probably been set to torment each other—so it seems at least! [...] If life be serious, or merely a joke, is more than I can decide. Often it is most painful when a joke, and its seriousness is after all more agreeable and peaceful.

A reply to this insurmountable conflict, but also to the one in *A Doll's House* by Ibsen, can be found in *Mr. Bengt's Wife*, in which, after the marital breakup, the heroine will relinquish her selfishness and pride, returning to her husband's arms. Bengt: "Then let's support each other, Margit, and let no one be the master of the other." Margit: "Let's teach our child that the sky is up, and that here, below, is the earth"... The third part of the book gives us an encounter with five "newly translated" one act plays: *The Outlaw*, *Simoom*, *The Stronger*, *Pariah, or the Outcast* and *The First Warning*, of which the third play saw the light of day at the Odeon Theatre and at the Comedy Theatre, a performance that occasioned the characters embodied by actresses Mihaela Teleoacă and Antoaneta Cojocar. These plays complete the image of the "characterless characters" and of the battle between minds, of the psychological universe of the characters, defining their individuality through the power of concentration of the conflict, the nervous rhythm of the dialogue, the often radical tone and harshness of the attitudes.

The readers' "journey" through the universe of Strindberg's characters benefits from an extensive bibliography, with virtual milestones in the exploration of this universe, but also from a rich photographic material, which increases the cultural and emotional merit of the book. The portraits of the playwright (from his youth to the period of his last travels under the burden of illness and loneliness), of his three wives and children, as well as the covers of volumes and posters of plays, the fragments of handwritten manuscripts and

his letters, make convincing references to the intimacy of the playwright's life and creation. In other photographs we find King Gustav Vasa, the founder of the modern Swedish state, and his wife Margaret, King Magnus Eriksson (Eric XIV), Queen Maria Christina Alexandra, daughter of Gustav II Adolf Vasa (presented in a painting with Descartes), who inspired his historical dramas where, beyond the ambience of the time, the emphasis is also placed on the bright or gray human universe of the characters. For readers who are theatre professionals, including those in artistic higher education, but also for lovers of performing arts, the book goes beyond the researcher's own area of interest, offering the satisfaction of an intellectual journey not only at text level, but also in terms of photography, with numerous images of theatres and performances from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Germany and the United States, but also from our country which honoured this dramaturgy. We are challenged by the affective memory and the emotion of reuniting with some magical theatrical moments from performances such as *The Pelican* at the Levant Theatre, directed by Cătălina Buzoianu, with Valeria Seciu in the role of that memorable Mother as a cynical effigy of old age dominated by a devastating selfishness; *The Father* at the Bulandra Theatre, also directed by Cătălina Buzoianu, with Virgil Ogășanu and Valeria Ogășanu in the foreground; *The Dance of Death* at the National Theatre of Cluj, with the late Anton Tauf and Melania Ursu as the "essential characters"; or *The Stronger*, a play mentioned in the book not only through its staging at a theatre in Santa Monica (USA), but also through the one at the Comedy Theatre; *Miss Julie* staged at unteatru; *The Road to Damascus*, urging us to think for a moment of a disturbing radio theatre performance from 2009 directed by Ilinca Stîhi. The most intense intellectual challenge for me, however, was the photo of *Miss Julie* staged by the Schaubühne from Berlin during the National Theatre Festival in Bucharest, through the modernity of the directing and the virtuosity of the performers, and through the fact that the performance would add a new element to the question marks raised in this study. It is a "secondary" character, "The Cook", whom we do not find among the "essential characters", but which emotionally dominates the exceptional artistic discourse in the performance through the astonishing mobility and expressiveness of the mimicry, heavy with meanings, depicted on a screen with a diabolical perseverance and at the same time edifying for the complexity of the conflict and for the drama of the play. It reminds us that the evolution of theatre is much faster than the traditional perception of dramaturgy.



Corneliu Dumitriu is a Professor PhD and Doctoral supervisor at the I.L. Caragiale National University of Theatre and Film in Bucharest (UNATC) since 2014, former consulting professor at the Burghausen Theatre Academy (Germany), at the National School of Drama in New Delhi (NSD), at the Shanghai Theatre Academy (3 years) and at the Beijing Central Academy of Drama (11 years), author of 34 books published in the country and abroad, including the *Shakespeare Dictionary of Plays and Characters*, edited in a bilingual (English-Chinese) edition, present in the libraries of theatre

schools in China – a work prefaced by Professor David Chambers (Yale School of Drama, USA).

Among his most important books: *Masks of the Traditional Theatre of Asia – India, Japan, and China*, *Ancient Greek Tragedy and Comedy*, *The Ibsen after Ibsen Notebooks*, *Shakespeare's Theater. Tragedies. Comedies. Historical pieces*.

His most recent work, considered by the Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing House in Bucharest the "Editorial Event of 2025", is *A History of Beauty and Theatre Aesthetics*, a research dedicated to a number of 51 philosophers, playwrights and directors, from the 8th century BCE Hesiod to present day Eugenio Barba.