

# Naturalism in 'miss julie'



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Writers involved in the naturalist movement believed that actors' lines should be spoken naturally, and that mechanical movements, vocal effects, and irrational gestures should be banished. A return to reality was proposed, with the old theatrical attitudes replaced with effects produced solely by the voice. There was a call to individualise characters, instead of generalising them, to produce characters whose minds and bodies would function as they would in real life. Strindberg's 'Miss Julie' has been said to be an excellent example of this movement, as it involves stress on multiple motivation of action; a departure from the stereotypical depictions of character; and random, illogical dialogue. Strindberg's naturalistic conception of theatre also extends to non-literary aspects of staging such as stage décor, lighting, and make-up. Strindberg avoids the regularity of mechanical question and answer dialogue, instead allowing his dialogue to meander, encouraging themes to be repeated and developed over the course of the play. In the preface to the play, Strindberg explains that he has broken with tradition by avoiding "symmetrical, mathematically constructed dialogue." The sexual tension and hidden aggression in the first scene of 'Miss Julie' could be said to be an example of this, especially while the cook Christine is present with Julie and Jean to inhibit the expression of what they really mean. However, it is noticeable that Strindberg's sub-textual dialogue at the start of the play radically changes once the seduction is completed and there is no more to hide. It is then that the dialogue becomes explicit and ceases to meander. An excessively theatrical scene occurs at the point where Julie grows conscious of her humiliation, falls to her knees, clasps her hands, and cringes before Jean, who rises to stand triumphantly, and symbolically, over her. There is also the bluntly overt exchange of lines such as, 'Beast!' 'Menial! Lackey!'

'Menial's whore, lackey's harlot!' It has been proposed that this retreat to the characteristics of old theatricality is perhaps only redeemed in the last minutes, when the stage action becomes solemnly symbolic. The end of the relationship is represented by the decapitation of Julie's songbird; the sudden ring of the Count's bell introduces a character that has been silent throughout, present only in spirit. Jean places a razor in Julie's hand, and she walks out to her death in silence, as if in a hypnotic trance. Her death is not as melodramatic or theatrical as her previous behaviour, so this goes some way to compensate for earlier lapses. Strindberg expressed an aversion to dividing his play into acts, as he believed that, "the declining capacity for illusion is possibly affected by intervals, which give spectators the time to reflect and thereby withdraw from the suggestive influence of the author hypnotist." His theory centres on the assumption that by eliminating intervals, which act as breaks from the action, continuity would improve, thereby increasing the intense nature of the play's action and creating a claustrophobic environment. In order not to break the illusion, he also wanted to be rid of any musicians that the audience could see, and would not tolerate supper-parties, or other such distracting elements common in the Victorian theatre, and demanded total blackout in the auditorium to make sure. Strindberg wanted his plays to be viewed with thought and intellect, therefore he strove to eliminate all possibility of detached enjoyment, as he did not believe that the theatre should be used as a form of light entertainment, "popular enough for the middle classes...to be able to grasp without too much effort, what the minority is arguing about." All of Strindberg's requirements for the intense concentration of the audience during the performance clearly indicate his ideas of dramatic illusion. His

audience was to be completely convinced of the reality of the world on the stage, and transported wholly into it. As for the stage setting for 'Miss Julie', Strindberg decided to show only part of the kitchen in which the action was to take place, and requested that what was seen should be arranged diagonally, in order that the audience should complete what was not seen by visualising it in their imagination. He echoed a common cry when he asked for the kitchen shelves and utensils to be real props, not just painted on a canvas backdrop. He wanted all barriers between the audience and the stage removed, such as the orchestra and side boxes. The seats were to be raised to bring the audience at an equal level to the actors, and he suggested that auditoriums should be smaller, and more intimate, to have the desired effect of involving the audience, rather than distancing them from the action. Strindberg was not a playwright associated solely with naturalism, since plays such as 'The Ghost Sonata' were known as examples of subjective drama, the very opposite of naturalism. The critic Styan has also stated, "By the fall of the curtain, the dialogue has entirely ceased to meander realistically, and it is hard to recognise the play itself as a cornerstone of the naturalistic movement." However, Strindberg's preface to 'Miss Julie' has been heralded as the best manifesto of naturalism written, and the techniques that he advocated such as the removal of intervals and orchestras, the use of real props, and a reduction in theatre size, have come to have strong repercussions in modern theatre. Bibliography: "Three Plays: Strindberg" "Modern Theories of Drama: 1840-1990" G. Brandt "Modern Drama in Theory and Practice 1" U. L. Styan