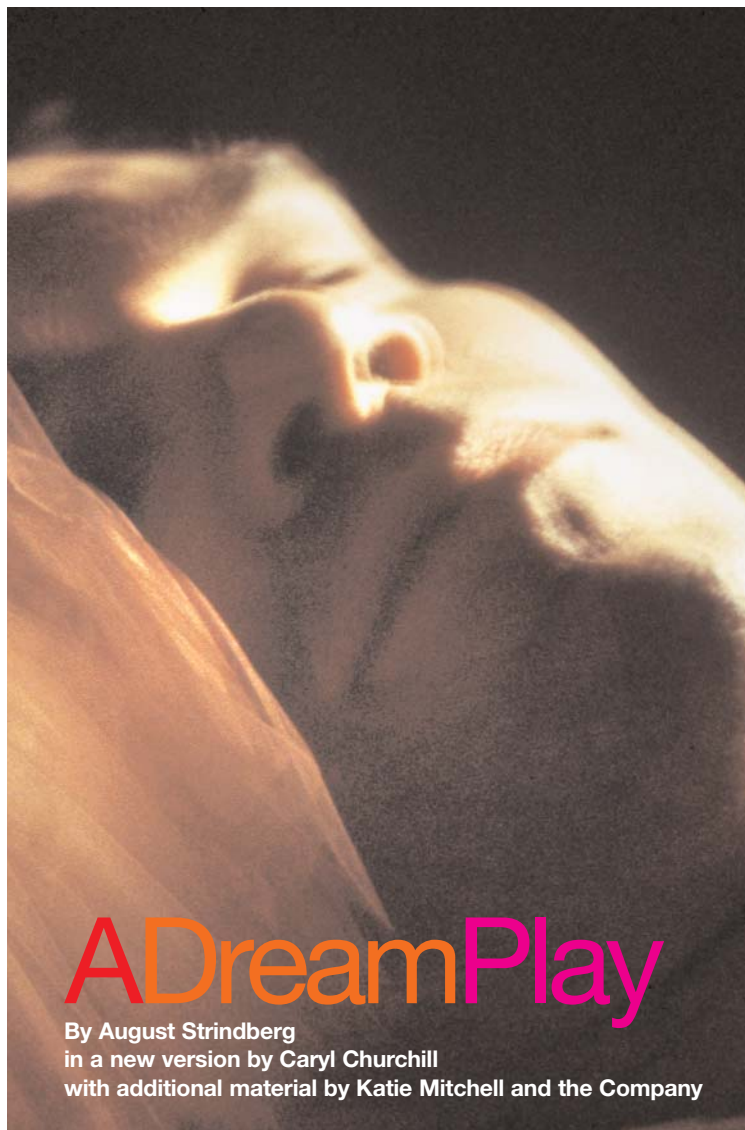


A Dream Play Background Pack

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A Dream Play

By August Strindberg
in a new version by Caryl Churchill
with additional material by Katie Mitchell and the Company

Angus Wright
Photo: Stephen Cummiskey

A Dream Play

By August Strindberg, in a new version by Caryl Churchill
With additional material by Katie Mitchell and the Company.

Director
Katie Mitchell

Further production details
www.nationaltheatre.org.uk

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Background pack
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A Dream Play

CAST (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)

MARK ARENDS

Young George, the broker's brother
Geoffrey, Victoria's lover

ANASTASIA HILLE

Christine, the broker's mother

KRISTIN HUTCHINSON

Rachel, the broker's first wife

SEAN JACKSON

Security Supervisor
Port Health Officer

CHARLOTTE ROACH

Lina the maid
Ugly Edith, the broker's co-respondent

DOMINIC ROWAN

Herbert, the broker's father
Adult George, the broker's brother

JUSTIN SALINGER

The Broker's Solicitor
"Uncle" Jack, the mother's lover
The Glazier

SUSIE TRAYLING

Victoria, the broker's second wife

LUCY WHYBROW

Agnes, the broker's secretary and angel

ANGUS WRIGHT

Alfred, the broker

Other characters played by members of
the company

| | |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| KATIE MITCHELL | Director |
| VICKI MORTIMER | Designer |
| CHRIS DAVEY | Lighting Designer |
| KATE FLATT | Choreographer |
| SIMON ALLEN | Music Director and Arranger |
| CHRISTOPHER SHUTT | Sound Designer |
| KATE GODFREY | Company Voice Work |

Music played live by:

| | |
|----------------|-----------------------------|
| Paul Higgs | Associate MD/piano/keyboard |
| Joe Townsend | violin |
| Katja Mervola | viola |
| Penny Bradshaw | cello |

Schubert's 'Nacht und Träume' specially
recorded by:

| | |
|--------------|-------|
| Mark Padmore | tenor |
| Andrew West | piano |

This production opened at the National's
Cottesloe Theatre on 15 February 2005.

Introduction

Born in Stockholm, August Strindberg (1849-1912) was the fourth child of a shipping agent and a servant girl. His father went bankrupt when he was four, his mother – who eventually had twelve children – died when he was thirteen. For much of his childhood he suffered from poverty and hunger. After leaving university without a degree, he toyed with the idea of becoming a teacher or a doctor. He then turned to acting, but was so bad that after playing his first leading role he attempted suicide. He subsequently worked as a journalist, editor and librarian before taking up writing full time. His three marriages all ended in divorce, and his other relationships also failed to last. He suffered several periods of mental breakdown, from what would now be

August Strindberg
photo: Strindbergsmuseet,
Stockholm



called manic depression and persecution mania. During these periods he dabbled in alchemy, hypnosis and the occult, and later embraced the ideas of the mystic Swedenborg. A prolific writer, he produced novels, short stories, poems, pamphlets and an autobiography, as well as more than fifty plays.

His early plays were conventional historical dramas and farcical tales of rural life. He then wrote *The Father*, *Miss Julie* and *Creditors*, plays full of psychological realism in which he analysed marriage and the war of the sexes in more depth than any playwright had done before. A personal crisis led him to abandon writing for five years. Subsequently, with *To Damascus* and *A Dream Play*, he became the first dramatist to explore the role of the subconscious. Later he wrote heavily symbolic plays such as *Easter* and *Dance of Death*, and in his final years a series of one-act 'chamber'

plays – including *The Ghost Sonata* – for the Intimate Theatre in Stockholm, which he co-founded in 1907.

Strindberg was a great influence on twentieth-century theatre. Although hailed as a naturalist in his lifetime, it is his symbolic plays and his formal experimentation that have been most influential, notably on writers and directors such as Edward Albee, Antonin Artaud, Samuel Beckett, Sean O'Casey, Eugene O'Neill, Harold Pinter, Max Reinhardt and Tennessee Williams.

The Original Play

Strindberg's aim was to write a play that imitated the form of a dream. The result, he suggested, is 'a blend of memories, experiences, pure inventions, absurdities, and improvisations', in which the 'characters split, double, redouble, evaporate, condense, fragment, cohere'. Within the story, time and space do not exist, events are disconnected and illogical, anything can happen, everything is possible and plausible.

The narrative consists of a series of short scenes set in many different locations: a tower, a family home, outside a theatre stage door, a solicitor's office, a palace, a cave, the sea shore. These are held together by the central character, Agnes, a young woman who has been sent to earth to observe the human condition. The glimpses she gets of the lives of the many characters invoke her pity for the pain, suffering, guilt and frustration that they

experience. In this society no harmony is possible between men and women. The leaders of science, religion, the law and psychoanalysis are corrupt and self-serving. People are abused and falsely imprisoned, success and pleasure are but pipe dreams: one person's happiness is another's sadness. At the end of the play the characters assemble to witness Agnes opening a door, behind which lies the meaning of life. When she does so, there is nothing there. Agnes returns to the gods to report on what she has discovered about life on earth.

The National's version, written by Caryl Churchill, differs in important ways from the original. In the interview that follows, Katie Mitchell describes the reason for these changes, and for the new material added in rehearsal.

The Director: Katie Mitchell

Why did you decide to direct *A Dream Play*?

The National's director, Nicholas Hytner, wanted to do a production to link up with the exhibition of Strindberg's paintings, drawings and photographs at Tate Modern, and invited me to direct the play of my choice in the Cottesloe. I'd done a couple of productions of *Easter*, one in England and one in Sweden. I prefer later Strindberg, I find the earlier plays too misogynistic. I think *A Dream Play* is impossibly difficult, but it's the big one, and I felt I might never have another chance to have a go at it.

Mainly I do fourth-wall realism, which is about behaviour. But that isn't representing what it's like to be inside someone's consciousness. So the challenge of representing someone's dreams, of one dream that one person has, and constructing it in such a way that the audience will really feel they are watching a dream, was just so tantalising and gorgeous.



Katie Mitchell
Photo: Stephen Cummiskey

How did Caryl Churchill come to write your version?

I'd been doing some research into neuroscience, the relationship between the biology of the brain and acting. I mentioned this to Caryl, and she'd started to attend some of the workshops. So when I began work on the play she was the one I asked. At first she said no, and I started to waver over my choice of text. But a month later she rang and said, I really like the play and I'd like to do it. And then during a period of two months we discussed it as she drafted it, although of course she did most of the work.

Her version is very different from earlier ones: not just modern, but shorter, and with no supernatural framework involving the gods. Why is that?

That first scene of Agnes coming down to earth was added much later by Strindberg, I think for narrative clarity. It was a very big decision to remove the Eastern religion, but it was actually very inaccurate, so it could have been quite insulting for a modern audience. For example, Indra doesn't have a daughter. So what at the time would have been radical and exciting, when no one would have been very informed about it, could now be disrespectful – and also, we thought, a bit 1970s. A lot of the religion is now 'backgrounded'. Agnes is someone from another world – we make her very specifically an angel, who has wings, though not all the time.

But there is a gap between Caryl's text and what we're now doing. We've made even more radical decisions: we've cut some material, inserted improvisation material, added our own framework of the waking world, and chosen one of the characters to be the dreamer. So the Banker has become a Broker. We see him in his unhappy life, we see him fall asleep, have this very long dream, and then wake up. I think this makes the story more accessible.

The Director: Katie Mitchell

Otherwise it could confuse and frustrate the audience; people will think it's a play and try to put it together, and it won't fit. Once you say there is a waking world, and now he's fallen asleep, it will help people not to be alienated from the material.

Your version doesn't always tell you where you are in the kind of detail that Strindberg indicated in his stage directions.

Caryl worked from a literal translation, and her version is very close to Strindberg. I think perhaps other translations are not that faithful, they're quite interpretative and add more words than the Swedish, or change it.

How much influence did you have on the text while she was putting it together?

She showed me drafts, and we sat making notes together. Then when I was in Sweden directing Beckett, I was at the Royal Dramatic Theatre, which of course is where Strindberg was based. So I was able to talk to lots of academics and dramaturgs there, to learn what was obscure because we don't know about Swedish history, and what was obscure because it was just obscure. All of that was fed back to Caryl.

Do they feel in Sweden that there are obscurities that are artistic flaws rather than just inaccuracies?

They're quite reverent about it in a way. There are things that a nineteenth-century audience would understand, but which for us seem

weird. There are things that Swedish people today would understand but in Britain we would find weird, for example, the pasting of the cracks in the window. In Sweden nowadays they have double windows, like they have in a lot of Europe. We don't have that: double glazing came in the 60s and 70s. They used to get strips of wallpaper and stick them around the windows to stop the cold air coming in. That's very much of that time and that country, but it's very opaque for us.

What do you think the play says about humanity, and why does it resonate today?

The changes we've made are attempts to make it relevant. I think in its own right, before we interfered with it, it was relevant formally more than in terms of its ideas structure, which is quite thin and clunky. Relationships don't work, there's a bit about war, there's some token left-wing politics, the big idea in it is Loneliness, but it's not got a particularly strong ideas structure. But as a formal experiment done in 1901 without any knowledge of Freud's book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, it's unbelievably radical and extraordinary. It was the first attempt to do a surrealist play, to do a dream on stage, and even now, over a hundred years later, there are things we as theatre makers can learn from it formally. When you represent human experience on stage, you don't have to do it with plodding linear narrative or realism, there are many other choices. Nowadays there's a lot of caution about form, so I think the play is absolutely relevant from that point of view.

I think the subject-matter of dreams also makes it relevant. People are looking to have how they experience things represented differently. We've all had anxiety dreams, about our teeth falling out, or about ageing, or where we can't reach a loved one, or we're back in school and being asked to do our times table. Strindberg has really put his finger on those private anxieties we all have: they're tiny details, but they're huge in a dream landscape, and that really speaks to people. We've added a lot more dreams. We've read Freud's book and some Jung, and used some of their dreams and also our own.

Angus Wright
Photo: Stephen Cummiskey



The Director: Katie Mitchell

Because we couldn't work out how to move from one scene to another without using very clichéd conventions or awful scene changes, we had to insert dream material to get us from one scene to the next, and that then took on a life of its own. There are also fragments of improvisation, mainly in the transitional places, but sometimes in the scenes themselves.

Aside from the dreams, what kind of research did you do, or ask the actors to do?

Quite a few of the actors read Strindberg's biography. I looked back at what was happening in his own life at the time he wrote the play. All those meetings in Stockholm were about very specific details – what does it mean when he says chrysanthemum or hollyhock – is there any significance? We went through it with a fine toothcomb, to check the meaning. We did some research into the Eastern religion he was drawing on, and found he hadn't researched it well.

How did you make the decision about the dreamer?

We spent the first two weeks of rehearsal analysing dreams and reading the text. We

started staging dreams, looking at the kind of dreams that work. We couldn't fly the actors, because we didn't have the budget for harnesses. We looked at the components of dreams, what makes that a dream and that not a dream, and what conventions we needed to convince the audience that they're watching a dream. Then it became really clear that we had to make a decision that one person was dreaming.

We thought there were three candidates: the Banker (who we had made a Broker and in Strindberg's version was an Officer), Agnes and the Writer. We thought the Writer was a bit thin, there's not much about him, he comes in later and he's slightly functional, if not gnostic. Agnes has no back history at all. The only person who had one, and one that chimed with the events of Strindberg's life, was the Broker. A lot of autobiographical information was coming through, for example about the early death of his mother, or descriptions of certain visits involving foxgloves and bees, which had either happened in Strindberg's life, or gave the impression they had.

Once we had decided to set it in 1950 and in London, we built a very detailed biography of Alfred Greene the Broker, taking evidence from the play, putting the events – including two world wars – in as markers. For example, the mother says in the play, 'I was a maid once, or have you forgotten?' So we thought, she has to be a maid, so when does she become a maid, and how did the maid marry someone who clearly wasn't of that class? And where did that lead us? We looked at Strindberg's biography because his mother was a maid, and we studied the history of maids in Britain, and pieced it all together. Also, every character who occurs in the dream exists in the waking world, or is a faceless person, as you often get in dreams. For example, we decided the Broker would put his first wife as the stage-door keeper. Having studied the logic of dreams, we realised that sometimes you beam down the weirdest people into different roles or jobs in your dreams.

So it was a skeleton from the text, which we fleshed out with our own invention.

Caryl Churchill
Photo: Stephen Cummiskey



The Director: Katie Mitchell

We improvised lots of the Broker's back history, and decided that Agnes was his secretary, and that he knew nothing about her – which is often the case, you often know nothing about the history of the people you work most closely with. So he dreams of his secretary Agnes Bruce as an angel coming to rescue him.

This leaves some of the text behind, and draws other ideas forward. In rehearsal it's been a huge evolution – so much so that we had to write a very careful note in the programme, which made it clear that what people were seeing wasn't totally Strindberg's original text or totally Caryl's version, but that there were more steps in between.

Has Caryl been sitting in on rehearsals, and feeding her thoughts to you?

Yes, and it's been fantastic to have her involved. The deal was that she would do the version but have no obligation beyond that. But she has come in quite a lot, and she has given us really precise and useful notes. Of course it's hard for her to see some of the text that she wrote for us being cut, or else manipulated in a different way. But they're a

Anastasia Hille
Photo: Stephen Cummiskey



terribly inventive group of actors, and what they're adding to the material is very stimulating. So she's very seduced by that, while also wanting to honour Strindberg. I think it's a difficult position at times, but she's such a wise woman, she can see why we're doing this, and that there would be no point in trying to yank it back in the other direction.

Has she had to add any material?

A lot of the dream text she loves, and doesn't want to alter. But when we try to improvise things she always helps us out. She'll say, 'That line's at the end of the scene, so I think you should change it,' or, 'I don't think that quite works,' or, 'If you're going to do that, then I think you should do this.' She has laser-like precision in helping us with the detail. I love writers.

Finally, how have you worked with Vicki Mortimer, the designer?

We were in Stockholm together doing the Beckett play, so she was part of the process of historical research and research into Strindberg's life, which was good. We realised that most dreams happen in real places, in a kitchen or a location that you know, but things happen in it that don't normally happen there. So we decided we would have to have an environment that would be very real, but that could also change from one place to another, using lights and a moving wall – there are 40 scenes, and 30 quick changes. So we have a composite room, which is actually inspired by photos of a lovely decayed old industrial building, Ellis Island, the old customs house for New York City, before they did it up in the late 80s. Because there's a quarantine scene in the play we rather liked that synchronicity. The setting is one we could change from a small domestic space to a large public one by moving a wall down and up. But it's also a very real one.

The Actor: Angus Wright

What was your first response on reading Caryl Churchill's version of the play?

When Katie sent it to me she gave me instructions not to read any other version. I think she was worried, rightly so, that the actors would look at earlier versions and wonder what was going on. But Caryl has made it poetic and modern, and I think it speaks much more directly to us. Going from her version to our final one was a process that most other leading playwrights would have felt battered by. She wasn't, and that was amazing. I suppose it's partly the kind of tradition she's worked in, for example with *Joint Stock*. She understands the process the whole team needs to go through to get the result, rather than just saying, 'This is what I've written, so you either do it as it is, or not at all.'

What made you decide to accept the part?

I wanted to do it because I know Katie's work: I had been part of her company for *Three Sisters*. That was really the driving force for me. I put myself into the position of the

director, and I thought, 'I wouldn't know where to take the first step with this play.' But I was confident that Katie wouldn't be doing it if she didn't have some concept of where it might go. Also we had done a workshop on brain science, where we had discussed how emotions are physical. For example, if a bear walks around the corner, you don't think, 'Oh, I'm frightened.' Your body reacts, the emotion hits you and it's a physical reaction, and only afterwards do you monitor what happened and put a name to the emotion: fear.

To perform this production you need to be in tune with primary emotions like fear and disgust, anger, happiness and sadness. You mustn't censor, as we often do as actors. When you watch someone genuinely react to something with a primary emotion it can be startling and quite ugly, and it makes you think, 'Do I really do that?' So we were tapping into that area, and I knew that Katie was going to fold that work in, and the idea of dreams, and how the brain functions in dreams. I also knew that Caryl's material would be fertile territory for finding out how to make it work. It's a play that has a history of directors pitting their wits against it, and that's an interesting challenge for a company.

Presumably you had no idea before rehearsals began that you would become the central figure who has the dream?

No. Katie talked to me about playing the Banker, who is the Officer in Strindberg's play. In the early weeks of rehearsal, when we were trying to find out how to present it, he became the Broker. It's a great part to play, but it is entirely dependent on the other actors who create the dream world around the Broker.

All of us are operating in very strange territory, because you reach a point where you go, 'Yes I suppose I can do that, I can wear that, I can sing that, why not? It's a dream.' We also came up with this phrase 'faceless person', a figure who is threatening for us as human beings: the blank expression of people under umbrellas, or of those who come into a space and just look at you. All in all it's a very strange world to be working in.

Angus Wright in rehearsal
Photo: Stephen Cummiskey



The Actor: Angus Wright

Did you contribute particular dreams yourself?

There are a few of mine in there, but I'm one of those people who rarely remembers their dreams. The 'compound eyes of the bee' was mine. There are some of Freud's, some of Jung's, but most of them are ours, and Katie's – and Nick Hytner has one in there too. Interestingly, since we've been on stage I've started to dream more vividly – though I don't know whether that's something I do anyway when a play is up and running.

So in rehearsal you were analysing dreams and then improvising from them?

That was fascinating. One of the things that Katie does is to use the Stanislavskian technique of working on the back history of characters. It was part of the process to flesh out people like Alfred. He doesn't exist as Alfred Greene in the original play, or in Caryl's version, so through improvisations we built up his history, the childhood home that he grew up in, his brother George, what the relationship with his parents was – everyone who was part of his family, we charted their lives. It was like a jigsaw puzzle or a detective story, trying to work out what had happened.

What do you find most helpful in the way Katie works as a director?

She's brilliant at getting inside your head, so that she knows, sometimes even before you do, what it is that is distracting you from achieving clarity. She can tell if there's interference, and even if she can't nail what that interference is, she knows it's there. She'll say, 'Your intention is to get your father to ask for forgiveness and you seem to be off that intention.' And even if the actor says, 'It's because my foot was trapped under the leg of the table.' she'll say, 'Right, we need to solve that.' It's rare that a director can have that sort of precision and care, and get right in there behind the actors' eyes. People who work with her appreciate that. It is demanding of everyone around her, to come up to that standard. But then why bother to do the work if you don't want to set the bar higher?

You had longer to rehearse than usual. Why was that?

If you do improvisational background work and the text isn't finalised, you need those extra weeks. If the play is done and dusted, and the text is fixed, then you don't need as long. We'd never worked together as a group, and that chemistry, especially in a show like this, takes a little time to get right.

As well as the acting, the demands of the production – which is physical and balletic and choreographed – require incredible collaboration. For example, you have to make sure that as you move that bed you're not running over someone's foot, or crashing into the stage crew backstage. Your awareness of everyone on stage needs to be acute. And the confined space, and the nature of the work, means that backstage is just madness – it's rather like *Noises Off*. It's incredibly intense for everyone – dressers, stage management, crew, actors.

An enormous amount of your part involves just reacting to what is going on around you. Is that difficult?

It's true, my time on stage is peppered with my reactions to things, and there were moments in rehearsal when I thought, 'Surely I can't be surprised again, can I?' But we dealt with it by always discussing the different moments: what is the nature of this threat, or of someone's appearance, or why is the TV frightening, is it maybe a recurring dream? We decided some of this stuff on the hoof. Basically it was finding levels of unease or outright terror, and grading your reactions to the various things that happened.

How have you coped with the huge physical demands of the production?

We did ballet work and ballroom dancing right through rehearsals. Kate Flatt, who is a trained ballet dancer, choreographed a routine for us, a set of exercises which we now do before the show. We've all got fit through doing this production, because it is non-stop – it's a bit like middle-distance running. Seeing us all in tutus is alone worth the price of admission!

The Actor: Angus Wright

Getting it all to happen technically was the big battle. The more technical work you do, the further you are from the improvisational work you did in rehearsals, and the delicate world you built up then. It's very hard to concentrate on getting the technical stuff right and then in previews having to re-invest in the life of the character that you've built up.

Angus Wright
Photo: Stephen Cummiskey



How have audiences reacted to the first dozen or so performances?

I'm sure there are some people who are looking for narrative structure, and are frustrated that they're not being given that. But it is called *A Dream Play*, so there's a hint in there that it's not going to be a whodunnit. We're getting some laughter, but that's not always a good barometer, and it can also make you start to become too aware of the audience. One of Katie's expressions is 'turning the volume down on the audience'. It's hard to blot out that world and concentrate on the one you're inhabiting on stage.

It's rare when you start rehearsals that you don't have some image of what a production will be like, that you can't picture how it will be in front of an audience. With this one I don't think any of us had any idea where we were heading, and that was very exciting. I love doing it. It has so many different settings and moods – you're caught up in a storm, then you're at your own strangely peaceful funeral and then you're a child playing musical chairs. There's a great range that we can all play in, and it has all the colours in the palette.

The Designer: Vicki Mortimer

How did you start work on designing the play?

The production had quite a complicated birth. At the stage when Katie and I started talking about it Caryl's version didn't exist, because she and Katie were still working on it. That collaboration was quite a gradual process and the nature of their version only gradually became clear. So at first I had to hold back.

In preparing for the production I drew much more on my previous experience of working with Katie, on plays such as *Three Sisters* and *Ivanov*, than on the material I would normally expect to use as background material: information about the writer, contemporary sources, or the social context. I deliberately had not to look at all that, because it was always going to be Katie's very personal picture of *A Dream Play*.

In the meantime I looked at my own dreams, and at their nature. I spoke regularly to a Jungian about them, just to get know a bit more about the fabric and vocabulary of dreams, and how one person looks at dreams

and applies them to real life. In fact, that was a process that Katie built on with the actors.

How did the idea for the set come about?

At the beginning we didn't know what we needed. An empty-space production was one option. But after some investigation, we established that dreams are real in their context, but that surprising things happen within that reality. Once we'd landed on that, we began to think about what architecture we wanted, what the space should feel like, how it could be flexible and do the things that architecture does in dreams. The most obvious element is the expansion and contraction of space, so we had to find a three-dimensional way of doing that, to catch that disorientation. Also Katie felt the dream should be black and white, so that also contributed to the developing environment. Changing the colours of walls was clearly difficult to achieve, but we hoped the use of light and certain coloured elements would help to give us diversity.

We also felt there should be a slightly layered, institutional feel about the set, as though the fabric of the building itself was an accumulation of the marks of time. One of the major reference points became Ellis Island, the former processing station for immigration in New York. Before it was renovated it had an incredibly haunted, dream-like quality. A lot of artists have taken photographs of it, and done installations using the site itself; it's an incredibly potent place, particularly for Americans. It's such an emotive, intense place, haunted by all of the people who came through it, but it's also a place that feels it could undergo transformation.

Gradually in rehearsal it became more and more clear that Katie wanted the literal content of scenes to be expressed as much as possible, so you genuinely felt as if you were changing location. I was nervous and rather sceptical about that. I thought it was, after all, only a room with a moving wall. We started to talk about light, about the fittings we would have in the room, and all the time I was wondering privately if this was going to work. Were we ever really going to believe that the

Vicki Mortimer
Photo: Catherine Ashmore



The Designer: Vicki Mortimer

dreamer moves from one space to another? But somehow once the dream gets going, and with the way it's been lit, you start to believe in it; you feel the space open up, that there might be water out there, and it really does work.

There's also a pragmatism about the design, to do with the amount of wing space in the Cottesloe. Backstage is a whole story on its own, so re-using objects became a necessity. But, in fact, once elements of the dreamer's waking life come into the dream, then every time that you use that object you're re-defining it as a symbol. Often they're used in a re-iterative way, reminding you where the dreamer fell asleep the first time.

We decided that the double doors had to be on bomber hinges so they would close themselves. There was no way that the actors were going to shut them behind them: the momentum of the show is such that they have to close by themselves. That also pushed us more towards an institutional architecture. So it was very symbiotic: one decision in one area would lead to others in another.

At what stage did you decide to set the version in the 1950s?

It happened within a couple of weeks of starting rehearsals. It was to do with some of the dream elements, with what puts pressure on a person – things like divorce, or the death of a baby. It felt like it needed to be at a

distance from us, not completely contemporary. It was also partly a result of thinking how people who had been through something like the Blitz, how their dream landscape might have been changed by that sense of life being somehow very fragile and under threat.

In a workshop a couple of weeks before we started rehearsal we were looking at how sounds in the real world enter your dreams, as for example when you hear a knocking in your dream, and it's actually someone at the door. We looked at how if you had the memory of bombs falling outside, then even if the sound was just a pile of books falling on the floor, you might dream it as the sound of bombs. Social coding of the time meant that the exposure and embarrassment had a real impact on the dreamer.

The show has a remarkable number of costume changes, doesn't it?

It's a show where everybody has to concentrate; you can't sit back for a moment. The dressers – we started with five, now there are eight – don't even have time to read their notes, because the next change is already happening. Most of the actors have around 28 costume changes. Some of them are incredibly fast, and that to a certain extent dictated the costumes. Nobody has a huge number of them, they just go in and out of them an awful lot. It was a Cottesloe budget, and we had to make as many of the costumes as we could, so that we could quick-change them. You can't rent clothes and put them under that kind of stress; they would never survive the run.

Did you have to drop many ideas because of these restrictions?

A few. It was really touch-and-go to get the technical work done, and there were definitely a few narrative points that it would have been nice to address, that we simply couldn't fit in. At some point in the technical rehearsals you have to hand the show over to the actors, and let them play it in. You just have to oil the machinery as well as you can so it's doing its job, and then the actors can get the show back.

Behind the scenes in the National's Paintframe
Photo: Stephen Cummiskey



The Designer: Vicki Mortimer

Why did you decide on that particular configuration of the Cottesloe?

The Cottesloe will normally support two different configurations in the rep. Ironically, this was the one occasion when I've been in there when they'd only got one, so we had complete flexibility to decide which to use. Oddly enough, we chose the completely conventional one. We talked about other options, but the main reason we decided on an end-on configuration was because we felt that framing it was the best way to give the audience a controlled picture of the dream. We looked at the set-up we used for *Ivanov*, where we had a short traverse, with one half of the audience able to see the other half beyond the actors. But we decided that this completely changed how the audience received the dream.

What would you say is distinctive about working on Katie's productions?

I suppose it's partly to do with how she works with the actors. As a designer you carry a huge responsibility towards the actors when you work with her. You think you will do that with every production and every company, but often it will very much focus in the costume area, and only tangentially have an impact on props and set. With Katie, because the work with the actors is really her priority – it's her momentum into the show – you are constantly having to re-evaluate what you're doing in the light of what the actors are doing.

She and I have known each other for twenty years, and have been working together for most of them. So we have quite a shared palette of experiences, including travelling

research trips. We went to Norway when we were doing Ibsen, Russia for Chekhov, and Sweden for Strindberg. She's become much more authorial, so for me it's become much more of a process of supporting her authorial voice.

Over the shows we've done together we've worked out certain principles before she goes into a room with the actors. We do a lot of research. For example, on a more conventional play than the Strindberg, perhaps one with a nineteenth-century format, we'll always work out the geography of the building and of the place where the characters live – all those things that go beyond the time and location limits. So I know it's part of my responsibility as designer to help work that out.

With *Three Sisters* we looked into what was happening around the time Chekhov was writing the play, what the typical local architecture was, how a garrison town worked, how far the characters were from major cities in Russia, and much more. So when Katie goes into rehearsal she has a map of all this material, and can guide the production in the direction she wants.

Other directors and designers also do this, but for me that's one of the intriguing things about working with her: the layers on which her production is built visually provide really firm footholds. You are building something in a generous and supportive way for the whole production. You never feel that you're just handing a design over, or that the production just happens inside it.

Activities and Discussion

DISCUSSION

1. What is the central message of Strindberg's original play?
2. Why do you think he made Agnes the daughter of a god?
3. Strindberg is often labelled a misogynist. What evidence can you find in the play for this judgement?
4. Compare the National's production with another that you have seen, or another version or translation you have read.
5. What do you think would be the gains and losses of a radio production of the play?

PRACTICAL EXERCISES

1. Working in pairs, tell each other your most vivid or most frequent dream, and what you think it means. Tell one of the dreams to the whole group, and then stage it.
2. The professions are represented in the play by the deans of law, medicine, philosophy and theology. Divide your group into four, and devise and stage a nightmare for each of them.
3. The play culminates in a door being opened to reveal the meaning of life. Working in pairs, devise an alternative revelation, stage a selection of them, and discuss what effect this has on the various characters in the scene.

WRITTEN WORK AND RESEARCH

1. What were Strindberg's personal circumstances at the time he wrote the play? How do you think they affected his choice of story and characters?
2. What influence did Freud's ground-breaking book '*The Interpretation of Dreams*' have on the play?
3. Read either *The Father* or *Miss Julie*, and decide what themes that play has in common with *A Dream Play*.
4. Take one short scene from the play, and re-write it in the style of Harold Pinter, Sean O'Casey or Tennessee Williams.

Related Materials

FILMS

The Dance of Death (1968), directed by David Giles, starring Laurence Olivier, Geraldine McEwan, Robert Lang, Carolyn Jones.

The Father (Fadern) (1969), directed by Alf Sjöberg, starring Gunnel Lindblom, Lena Nyman, Jan-Olof Strandberg.

Miss Julie (1950), directed by Alf Sjöberg, starring Anita Björk, Ulf Palme, Anders Henrison.

Miss Julie (1999), directed by Mike Figgis, starring Saffron Burrows, Peter Mullan.

PLAYTEXTS

Strindberg, Five Plays: The Father, Miss Julie, The Dance of Death, A Dream Play, The Ghost Sonata, translated with an introduction by Harry G. Carlson, University of California Press, 1981.

Strindberg, Three Plays: The Father, Miss Julie, Easter, translated with an introduction by Peter Watts, Penguin, 1958.

Strindberg, Selected Plays and Prose, edited with an introduction by Robert Brustein, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964.

Strindberg, Twelve Plays, translated with introductions by Elizabeth Sprigge, Constable, 1963.

BOOKS

Harry G. Carlson, *Out of Inferno: Strindberg's Reawakening as an Artist*, 1996.

Michael Robinson, *Strindberg and Autobiography: Writing and Reading a Life*, 1986.

Evert Sprinchorn, *Strindberg as Dramatist*, 1982.

Birgitta Steene (ed), *Strindberg and History*, 1992.

Goran Stockenström (ed), *Strindberg's Dramaturgy*, 1988.

Egil Tornqvist, *Strindbergian Drama: Themes and Structure*, 1982

On sale at the National's Bookshop: the text of Caryl Churchill's version of *A Dream Play*, published by Nick Hern Books, plus other work by and about Strindberg, including *Strindberg: Painter and Photographer*, and by Caryl Churchill; the production programme, priced £2, and the poster.

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A Dream Play is a collaboration between the National Theatre and Tate Modern.

An exhibition of paintings, drawings and photographs by August Strindberg is at Tate Modern from 17 February until 15 May 2005.