The Royal Dramatic Theatre of Sweden brings August Strindberg’s The Ghost Sonata to BAM under the distinguished direction of film and theater dynamo Ingmar Bergman. By Stan Schwartz

August Strindberg may be best known in America for such angst-ridden dramas of searing psychological realism as Miss Julie and The Father, but essential to the great Swedish playwright’s output are his later dream plays. These are evocative, symbolist fantasies shot through with Buddhist touches. At the same time, these dream plays reflect Strindberg’s growing interest in the 18th-century Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg and his notions of spiritual correspondence. Strindberg’s works in this category include the epic three-part To Damascus as well as the aptly titled and equally epic A Dream Play. On a far more compact scale, there is The Ghost Sonata, one of Strindberg’s so-called late “chamber plays” written in 1907 for his own Intimate Theatre. With striking economy of language and its startling mix of lyricism and grotesquerie, The Ghost Sonata reveals Strindberg as a true master of the dream play idiom.

Dream plays are very tricky things — to write, of course, but perhaps even more so to direct. How do you stage events in a credible way
when logical cause-and-effect and psychological realism are jettisoned, or at least, substantially blurred? How do you maintain dramatic tension if much of the proceedings seems dreamily inexplicable? Enter Ingmar Bergman, arguably as much a legend, at this point, as Strindberg himself. Of course, Bergman is known to all as one of the great film directors. But for more than five decades, he’s also shown himself to be a master conjurer of theater magic, principally at Stockholm’s Royal Dramatic Theatre (known as Dramaten) where his most recent production, Schiller’s *Mary Stuart*, has been playing to packed houses since its premiere last December.

There’s no disputing that these two towering figures in Swedish cultural history are closely linked. The influence of Strindberg on Bergman’s film work is formidable, and conversely, one cannot overstate Bergman’s particular affinity for Strindberg’s plays, not just the realistic plays with their fierce psychological warfare, but also for the otherworldliness of the dream plays. After all, what is a dream if not the idiosyncratic presentation of pure, concentrated feelings expressed through a peculiar constellation of pure, concentrated imagery? And what better way to sum up the entire Bergman oeuvre?

Over the years, Bergman has staged many Strindberg plays at Dramaten, and it’s significant that the current production of *The Ghost Sonata* marks the director’s fourth inquiry into its mysteries. Bergman has a habit of continually returning to the same play, but it would be wrong to characterize this as an instance of someone “trying to get it right.” Rather, it’s the mark of a master interpreter who feels compelled to continually explore further. Bergman first staged *The Ghost Sonata* in 1941 as an amateur production, with understandably problematic results (the director was 23), but version number three, at Dramaten in 1973, was groundbreaking in its treatment of the play’s difficult final scene. The current production further crystallizes Bergman’s interpretation of Strindberg’s enigmatic text into one seamless, haunting vision.
On paper. *The Ghost Sonata* sounds fairly simple, if strange. In the first of its three scenes – “movements,” if you like – the young Student meets up with the sinister, wheelchair-bound old man Hummel outside a house in Stockholm’s fashionable Östermalm district. The Student is now revealed to be a Sunday Child (according to Swedish folklore, a child born on a Sunday has visionary powers, and this Student is no exception), which intrigues Hummel. The old man contrives a plan by which they will both end up invited to dinner later that night in the house which Hummel explains is presided over by the Colonel. Scene two comprises the famous “ghost supper” in which Hummel mercilessly exposes the past crimes and false identity of the Colonel. This leads to Hummel’s own fatal comeuppance at the hands of the Colonel’s Mummy-wife, who emerges from her closet, clucking like a parrot.

Meanwhile, the Student is falling in love with the beautiful young Girl who may or may not be the Colonel’s daughter. In the play’s last and most troubling and mystical scene, set in the so-called Hyacinth Room, the Student, now irreversibly poisoned by the household’s menacing air, confronts the Girl and reveals her as the horribly scarred and diseased creature she really is. The truth proves too much for her to bear.

That’s the story. The challenge is to transform it into a coherent dream-vision – in the heightened, quasi-mystical sense of the term. The process seems to come remarkably easy for Bergman, himself a Sunday Child (a detail of fundamental importance to such films as *Fanny and Alexander* and *Sunday’s Children*). The director understands that achieving a convincing dream-state onstage has nothing to do with hokey effects and everything to do with mining the play’s relentless inner logic and filling it out with an emotionally-charged hyperrealism. To further the effect, Bergman employs a deliberate and elegant choreography to underscore the play’s musicality.

All the while, the director punctuates the proceedings with small, salient details not spelled out by Strindberg but logically extrapolated from his world: a maid emptying out a pail of steamy excrement, Hummel’s hand bleeding from advanced psoriasis (Strindberg suffered from the same), that same hand laving a trace of blood as it caresses a white marble statue of a beautiful woman. Each of these small moments has the shocking impact of a sudden, unexpected film close-up. Taken together, Bergman’s strategies conspire to create a most particular and peculiar tonality best described as lyricism infused with grotesquerie, and a certain amount of macabre humor. The tone is perfectly suited to Strindberg’s twilight-zone vision of Swedish upper-middle-class respectability at the turn of the century: a sad bunch of morally and spiritually bankrupt ghosts doomed to fester in their exposed lies, and die.

“Although it ends very tragically, I think it’s a good thing, in a way,” says Jonas Malmsjö. Malmsjö
plays the Student (and in a striking casting coup, the role of Hummel is played by Swedish stage veteran Jan Malmsjö, the young actor’s real-life father). “If you had deep dark secrets that are just eating away at you,” the actor continues, “there can be some kind of salvation in meeting someone who unlocks whatever it is and forces you to confront your fears.”

But what about all those scarred, deformed ghosts? I recall a conversation I had a year ago with Erland Josephson, chatting quietly in the Dramaten green room (Josephson originally played in this production but, regrettably, could not join the New York tour due to recent back surgery). The famed Bergman actor had told me quite emphatically that Dramaten was haunted – he’d had a personal Encounter some years back with the ghost of Strindberg. Upon hearing this anecdote, Malmsjö laughs. “Well, you never know with Erland! But hey, I don’t know! I like the idea of ghosts, that we don’t just disappear when it’s all over.”

In Bergman’s hands, Strindberg’s ghosts couldn’t be more alive and palpable.

The Ghost Sonata will be presented at BAM Harvey Theater, June 20-24.

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Photo by Bengt Wanselius