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After Miss Julie Lecture Series

On October 17th, 2009, as part of Roundabout Theatre Company's ongoing Lecture Series, Ted Sod, Dramaturg for the Education Department interviewed Patricia Denison from Barnard College about Strindberg, Marber, and their respective takes on *After Miss Julie*. A question & answer session with the audience followed.

Ted Sod: What was going on with August Strindberg when he wrote *Miss Julie* in 1888. He wrote a rather lengthy preface to his play--correct?

Pat Denison: Strindberg's early reputation as a dramatist was based both on his plays and his "Preface" to *Miss Julie*, often described as a manifesto for naturalism in the theatre. This is a naturalism based on large forces such as environment and heredity. Strindberg was partly addressing late-19th century Darwinian thought. Strindberg argued that if a play also examines large cultural forces, such as the rise of science and the decline of religion, then a play should display dense circumstance and multiple motives. These issues, along with experimental ways of staging, are raised in his preface. Strindberg claimed that "The joy of life is in its cruel and powerful struggles," and these kinds of struggles were evident in Strindberg and Miss Julie. In the preface he lists multiple motives for Miss Julie: her mother's primary instincts, her father's raising her incorrectly, her own nature, the influence of her fiancé on her weak and degenerate brain, her father's absence, her monthly indisposition, her preoccupation with animals, the provocative effect of dancing, the magical midsummer twilight, the aphrodisiac effect of flowers that drives them together, and the boldness of arousal. Strindberg advocates a new kind of character who is difficult to understand and classify. In other words, you will not find a dominant internal motive that drives Miss Julie, and you will often find evidence of several large, external forces at work.

Ted Sod: At the time, most writers were not writing psychologically, were they? Both Strindberg and Ibsen were ahead of the curve in terms of endowing their characters with psychological complexity. I believe Ibsen wrote *Hedda Gabler* in 1890, and, of course Freud learned Norwegian to read the play because he was so curious about her psychology. In this play we get very distinct psychology and this is a big deal for 1888 – would you say?

Pat Denison: Yes. And if you want to go even further back, you can look to *A Doll's House* in 1879. Strindberg wished to distance himself from the structure of the conventional well-made play, and in his preface to *Miss Julie* writes that "because new forms have not been found for the new contents . . . the new wine has burst the old bottles." A challenge for many late-nineteenth-century playwrights was how to structure

drama so that it might accommodate and adapt to changing social structure and changing understanding of character.

Ted Sod: Because this was new, Strindberg was vilified by the critics. And he took it to heart. Why do you think the critics had such a hard time with this play?

Pat Denison: In the 1880s you rarely had those kinds of startling incidents happen on the stage. You can find earlier examples of women committing suicide, but there is unusual sexual explicitness in *Miss Julie*. The play was banned and not professionally performed in Sweden until 18 years later, although there had been university productions and an 1893 production at *Theatre Libre* .

Ted Sod: Let's segue into Marber's version. Marber uses the same characters: Jean is now John. Kristin is Christine and Miss Julie is still Miss Julie. What are the fundamental differences in the two versions?

Pat Denison: I would go to Christine first. In Strindberg's play, Kristin is more abstract, a minor character who rarely questions authority. In Marber's play, Christine is fleshed out much more. For example, at the start of this production, she is the first one you see onstage, smoking and standing by the door. Marber invites us to think about her relationship with John right in the beginning, when John says, "Sorry." Above all, Christine possesses a knowledge that she does not have in the original. In Strindberg's play, she does not wake late in the night; she does not know that Jean and Julie have gone off to his room. Nor does she pocket the money at the end. And, of course, with no cars in the 1880s, she does not take the car keys, but she does exit "going to tell the groom not to let any horses out, in case anyone wants to leave before the Count gets back." So there is some strength in Kristin in the original but nothing compared to the strength we see in this production. Christine's knowledge, her understanding, her ordering Julie and John is Marber's invention.

Ted Sod: What about John? In the original he is more of a manservant/valet but in this he is a chauffeur.

Pat Denison: In this production when Christine notes that he's "a chauffeur," John replies, after a lengthy pause, "Well, that's different. I'm . . . . Just different -- suggesting that unlike the stable lads, he's 'moving up.' Marber's version edits Strindberg's formulaic pattern of Miss Julie descending as John ascends. The rise-and-fall dream sequences are cut in the Marber. For Strindberg, John clearly represents a species on the rise, manservants threatening to replace a dying aristocratic breed.

Ted Sod: Miss Julie feels like she has evolved in Marber's version to someone who is possibly more aware of her sexuality. How would you describe it?

Pat Denison: She is quite sexual, yes. Not to say that in the original she wasn't, but here you have heightened erotic tension: physical attraction, verbal aggression, and struggle for power. In Marber's version, she is still vulnerable but also more sexually aggressive.

Ted Sod: Many of you may or may not know this, but Marber originally wrote *After Miss Julie* as a teleplay in 1995 for a program that was called *BBC Performance*, which is lamented because it's no longer being presented. Then in 2003, Michael Grandage, who took over from Sam Mendes at the Donmar Warehouse in London, asked Marber if he would adapt it to the stage. It was quite a success for both the Donmar and Marber. Marber deliberately sets his version of the play on the eve of the Labour Party's victory. Can you fill us in on why this was a seminal event in Britain?

Pat Denison: It was the summer of 1945, after the end of WWII in Europe. As Americans, we may recall Churchill's leadership as crucial to Britain's "finest hour" in the Battle of Britain and subsequent victory over Hitler. Yet Churchill, leader of the wartime government, was voted out after the war. Remember the toast John makes, saying that the wine, like Churchill, is "robust, full-bodied . . . . and finished." Well, he was finished, at that time, and that was shocking to the many who recalled his inspiring wartime radio broadcasts to the British people. Another moment in British history, though, had not been forgotten by the voters, that of an earlier war, the Great War (WWI). Many in the working class felt then that a generation had been sacrificed on the battlefields, yet after the war it was more of the same at home, with the upper classes ruling the country and massive unemployment. In 1945, however, the hope was that Labour would bring needed change to Britain such as nationalizing health care and major industries -- coal, electricity, and railroads. The voters believed that Labour would take care, if you like, of workers such as John and Christine. There was great celebration the night of the 1945 Labour victory. Marber captures well the jubilation and the promise of that election evening.

Ted Sod: Strindberg's father had a trace of aristocratic blood, which he was very proud of. His mother was truly a proletariat, and he wrote a biography of himself called *Son of a Servant.* So he was also somewhat tortured about class differences. He married a wealthy woman—correct?

Pat Denison: Yes, he married a baroness.

Ted Sod: The original takes place in a count's estate and Strindberg's dealing with this class struggle as well. What Marber has done is really amped up the stakes of the class struggle. Would you agree?

Pat Denison: Marber thinks that we will find his version of class conflict in the 1945s more accessible than a moment in the 1880s. However, many also know well that in the late 19th century issues of class and gender, 'the new woman' question, were prominent.

Ted Sod: By a 'new woman,' we mean a woman who wants to be educated, a woman who wanted the same freedoms as her husband, or as men in general, or who wanted the right to vote.

Pat Denison: Who wanted the right to vote, smoke cigarettes, ride bicycles, and, above all, be treated equally as a human being.

Ted Sod: But in 1945 in Britain, the Labour Party was elected in and there was this turmoil after the war. Politically there was also this sense still that people were holding on to money. It's not too much unlike what's going on in our country, is it?

Pat Denison: I agree that you can see parallels to the recent election of President Obama – with hope and belief in change. The 2008 election night serves as a useful analogy, and although many Americans remain optimistic, we don't, of course, know where the nation and the economy are going from here any more than the British did in 1945.

Ted Sod: Would you say it affects the way Miss Julie approaches the evening, or is it immaterial to her? Is she on a different collision course? Because it feels like all those things that Strindberg mentions that make up her character are still part of her character in Marber's version. Election or no election, this night could still have happened.

Pat Denison: Yes, that's persuasive. She stays home instead of going to Central Hall with her father to celebrate the election. You may remember the BBC series *Upstairs, Downstairs*. Here Julie comes downstairs to celebrate and cross boundaries. Her fiancé, the officer, has ended their engagement, and for Julie this festive evening is an occasion to be with John, the chauffeur. Her father is away; she takes advantage of the opportunity.

Ted Sod: The cruelty that the characters display with one another – that was something that was in the Strindberg but not quite as focused as it is in the Marber piece. What do you make of that? Strindberg has been accused of being a misogynist. It has also been said that if Ibsen was the feminist playwright then Strindberg was the anti-feminist. What do you make of this sadomasochism that Marber has kind of teased out?

Pat Denison: Marber is much more sympathetic to these characters, aware of the many dangers in the games they are playing. Strindberg, in his preface, describes Miss Julie as a 'man hater' with a degenerate mind. If Strindberg has any sympathy for any of his characters, it would be with Jean rather than Julie or Kristin. He believes in the possibility of Jean, a 'masculine' player in this 'struggle of the fittest,' a 'strong'man determined to move upward in a hierarchical world.

Ted Sod: Marber also gives each one of these characters an opportunity to take power, which doesn't happen in the original – it sort of feels a little lopsided with Kristen not having as much knowledge. But in this version, everyone has an opportunity to trump, and certainly between John and Miss Julie it goes back and forth.

Pat Denison: It goes back and forth, back and forth, and the physicality – literally who is on top and who is not -- is much more explicit in the Marber version.

Ted Sod: Let us talk a little about the symbolism in that play. Let us consider the canary. Some people think is represents Miss Julie. Do you feel that way?

Pat Denison: It's quite appropriate to take the image of the caged bird and connect it to a woman in domestic settings, a manor house in late-19th century or mid-20th century.

You can link the blood of the decapitated bird, menstrual blood, and aristocratic blue blood. At the risk over simplifying, it is a central and evocative image in the play.

Ted Sod: So cutting off the bird's head is representative of going past this relationship and moving on or am I reading too much into it? Is that too reductive? I think it's a big moment for the audience –I heard a gasp today.

Pat Denison: I think it's that crunching sound.

Ted Sod: It's the animal lovers who gasp -- is that what you are saying?

Pat Denison: Remember when John says to Christine, "The aristocracy just *adore* the animals -- that's why they hunt them. We kill what we love."

Ted Sod: The other thing that is really curious about this play is this whole cat and mouse game. I feel that again Marber in this version is really putting into taut focus who is the cat and who is the mouse. And I don't know what we would call Christine – another cat, maybe?

Pat Denison: This play stands on its own even if you have never read *Miss Julie*. As Marber said, it is *After Miss Julie*, meaning it is in the 'manner' of Miss Julie. He saw obviously parallels in the games people play in relationships, 19th or 20th century games. To my mind, what is diminished, although not missing entirely, in Marber's version is a strong sense of those external forces that influence the rise of John and the fall of Julie.

Ted Sod: You mean mystical things or more deliberate things? Because at the end of the Strindberg there is this sort of mystical hypnotism that happens that moves her towards her own death, her suicide. In this one, it feels like maybe she is more in control. How did you view it?

Pat Denison: Again, let's go back to Strindberg. He was fascinated by hypnotism, science, and what he called "open suggestion." Marber plays with that. Remember the line after the bell rings: "It's not just a bell. There's someone behind it. And a hand that sets it in motion . . . and a vast spinning universe that sets the hand in motion." The line takes you into realms that are much larger than the kitchen. Audiences might struggle to make sense of the ending and the mystical elements. Strindberg described himself as an auteur/hypnotist who 'suggests' things for us in the audience to learn, while mesmerized.

Ted Sod: Before we take questions, I wanted to talk to you a little about Marber himself, because he has been quite a successful contemporary dramatist, screenwriter, actor, director – he's done quite a bit. This play, he said, probably inspired his best known play, *Closer*, which came after, because of its themes of desire and cruelty and the search for intimacy and how people misuse each other. Do see that connection?

Pat Denison: Yes, and Marber has said that following the television broadcast of *After Miss Julie*, he started to think about "this sort of territory" and began writing *Closer* the following summer.

Ted Sod: Who would like to ask a question?

Audience Member #1: When you were commenting on the symbolism of the canary I thought of how canaries were used in coal mines to determine the toxicity. So I thought of the toxic relationship of the three of them. The question I had was, with all the adaptations of plays and screenplays now, is it incumbent on the directors and the actors to read the original, to read say, Strindberg's *Miss Julie*?

Ted Sod: First of all, Mark Brokaw, in the interview that is on our website (www.roundabouttheatre.org), did say that he had read every extant version of *Miss Julie* before he started working on Marber's because he truly wanted to understand the variations between the two. For the actors, that is an individual choice. Actors have performances available to them that they can watch. In fact, Sienna mentions in her online interview that given the choice to watch someone else's performance or not, she wouldn't because it is too influential. I think she references that she saw the Donmar version. But to study someone else's performance can be very counterproductive; it is a very subjective and individual thing, as I understand it. Would you say, Pat?

Pat Denison: I would like to refer back to the comment about going down into the coal mines which takes us again to the class issue in Britain, who goes down into the mines, and how many dreadful catastrophes occurred.

Ted Sod: That was certainly a big part of the theme in *Billy Elliot* and then you have the Tories in Parliament…

Audience Member #2: My question is aimed at both of you. Why did Roundabout think it necessary to put this very dated British play on in New York?

Ted Sod: Well, that's an interesting observation. I don't see it as dated. First of all, I think what is truly remarkable about this play, and I am speaking from my own point of view, is that, for me, it pulls you in to these relationships. For me, there was a real sense of danger when I watched it, and I watched it about three weeks ago at the first or second preview and I watched most of it today. Both times I watched it I got pulled in to the dynamics of the relationship, so I don't see that as being something dated. I certainly think that this relationship between Julie and John is something I see played out. I deal with the public quite a bit, and this may not seem apropos to your question, but I see a lot of cruelty and incivility and mistreatment of people all the time. I'm not sure if that is because of an unstable political economic atmosphere like is in the play, but I think there is bad behavior going on. I know there has always been bad behavior, but I think I have become acutely aware of bad behavior and mistreatment and using people for your own desire, your own lust, your own needs and then sort of symbolically spitting at them. I see

this a lot. I see this in the play and it has resonance for me. I don't see the play as dated, but you are certainly entitled to that opinion.

As far as doing the play, our artistic director, Todd Haimes, programs nine to ten plays a year. He tries to give a very varied diet to the audiences, including dramas, musicals, comedies. I know that he is an artistic director who reaches out to directors, to writers, to people who have projects in mind. I know that Mark Brokaw, the director, has wanted to do this play for a long time. He is one of our resident directors so he is able to bring projects to our artistic director, and it was important to him to do this play. He wanted to do it for the longest time and couldn't find the right cast; then he found this cast and felt they were the spot on cast to do it.

Pat Denison: I would like to say, without direct reference to Roundabout, that many of us regularly return to the theatre to revisit plays and think about them afresh. We may be startled by new connections we make; we may discover more fully what we partially knew earlier. If we don't maintain that curiosity, theatres might as well not produce *Hamlet* any more because that British play has been done many times before.

Ted Sod: I think Marber's version, or whatever version of this story, has stayed in the public consciousness because there is something true about the class struggle, about that sex struggle, that lust struggle that we saw today.

Audience Member #3: Recognizing lack of resolution, I was wondering, are the last scenes of Marber's play consistent with the 1945 era?

Ted Sod: That is an interesting question because we are not quite sure what she is doing because we don't know if she goes to her own death or not. Is that true?

Pat Denison: Let me answer this carefully. Part of what is happening with Marber's ending is that it returns us to those larger forces that Strindberg was dealing with in the 1880s: hereditary and environment. We need to ask were there comparable large forces in Britain in 1945? A new government had been swept into power with the promise of radical social change and economic reform. To be persuaded by the final scenes in the play, you need to recognize that Julie is overwhelmed and believes she has sacrificed her family honor and lost control. As she says, "It's a horrible ugly mess . . . an endless circle." And the money is gone, the car keys are gone…

Ted Sod: Miss Julie has brought on her own destruction and both playwrights seem to see Miss Julie as self-destructive. John is still polishing shoes, he still seems to be entirely in his position of servitude. I don't know that she's taught him anything, even though she tries to say, "It's just the bell." She tries to get him to move past his mindset of being a servant, but it doesn't quite work. He does convince her to leave with the razor. And, of course, Christine says she won't work in this house anymore, and I tend to believe her, and that's not true in the original. I don't think this was a very neat ending. I think it forces us as the audience to make some decisions. What is going to happen next? What happens when Christine comes back from church? What happens when the lord

finds out that his daughter is dead? This whole thing has to unravel. Because John's already lied, he said nothing bad happened, there was not too much drinking – and that's a lie. I think Marber is asking us as the audience to make the leap to what the resolution might be.

Audience Member # 4: There's a book called *Men Make Women Crazy* and somehow I have the idea that Julie is a little bipolar.

Ted Sod: It's so interesting. Every time we do a play from a period other than our own, so many people, and I think we have a lot of psychotherapists in our subscriber base, come with a modern understanding of mental health issues and apply them to Hedda Gabler or Miss Julie or whatever. I cannot wait to hear what people say about Conrad Birdie. I'm sure they're going to tell me he has ADHD. It happens with each character we present because we've become so hyper-aware of these medical conditions. I believe, and it is one of the things that I appreciate about Ms. Miller's performance, that that character is not all there. I really sense that she is operating in a very vulnerable and truly dangerous place. And I don't think it's just liquor, do you, Pat?

Pat Denison: It's not just the liquor. Go to the end of the play, when she talks about being unable to escape from the voices of her parents. Her mother, a proponent of "women's emancipation," had dressed Julie in boy's clothes as a child and, on her deathbed, made Julie promise that she'd "never be a slave to any man." Yet there is also Julie as "Daddy's special girl." When she talks about ice skating in Central Park with her father, she suddenly stops, remembering something unspecified, and there's this long pause. If you focus on her parents, she clearly has a complicated inheritance.

Ted Sod: I think it is a little bit too easy for us to apply modern sensibility to these people, but I do think this character is suffering. I think Christine is aware of that and talks about Julie's suffering, and even John is aware of her suffering.

Pat Denison: Yes. Think of the caged "house bird." At first Julie wants to set the bird free. Persuaded that she wouldn't survive outside, Julie quietly pleads, "Please don't let her suffer," and hands John the bread knife.

Ted Sod: She's playing a dangerous game, she's acting out, she's getting negative attention, she's self-destructive. All those psychological terms that we are aware of can probably be applied. I think, though, that this is a very special character, given her birthright and her loneliness.

Pat Denison: And her location in the kitchen. What is she doing there?

Ted Sod: She shouldn't even be there. It's very rare to make an entrance into the kitchen.

Pat Denison: In Marber's version, John describes her mother's "fraternizing with the troops" in the past and Julie's "gallivanting with the gardeners" in the present.

Ted Sod: So if Julie is bipolar, we've done two plays this season about people who are bipolar, for those of you who haven't seen Carrie Fisher yet.

Audience Member #5: I felt there was an incivility towards John because of how Christine bosses him around. For example, in the scene where she tells him to get his shoes off, and get on his shirt and he hops to do that. Then Julie bosses him around about their relationship and wanting to have sex with him and he hops to do that. So it seems like there is a psychological thing with John as well. Could you talk about his relationship with both Julie and Christine?

Pat Denison: Let's return to the issue of class. Remember the moment in the performance when John speaks eloquently and Julie wryly responds, "My, what language! Are you a patron of the theatre?" Chastened, John replies that he has accompanied "his Lordship" to the theatre "sometimes," and that as a child of a laborer, he strives to educate himself. At some points, you may believe that John is capable of moving out of domestic servitude and achieving his larger ambitions. Yet you also see that emblem of servitude – in the 19th century, the count's boots, and in the 20th century, the peer's dress shoes. John obsessively cleans those shoes, and whenever anything becomes complicated, especially with Miss Julie, he returns to polishing. Similarly, when Julie enters, he stands rigidly, like the soldier he was, at attention. Christine, who 'knows her place' in the kitchen, also stands at attention. Above all it's that bell. John would love to escape. But when Julie questions John about her father, his employer -- "Do you wish he were *your* father?" -- Jean visibly struggles with the question.

Ted Sod: I think he is a psychologically fascinating character. He admits that he's in love with Miss Julie and was in love with her as a child. So that to me gives away right from the start a lot about who this man is. The fact that he more or less knew he could never have her because he knew he wasn't worthy. So he's acutely aware, as Strindberg was, of his class and what is allowed and what he isn't allowed. That doesn't really change his desire and his wanting to get ahead. The fact that he is going to marry someone of his own station doesn't stop him from wanting to marry an aristocrat. The fact that Christine bosses him around; well, she knows that he just had really crazy sex with the mistress of the house, she saw it. So she's bossing him around and slapping him around for a very specific reason. I think that the relationship is not exactly equal between Christine and John. I think there's a very interesting give and take there. I think when you are in a position of servitude there is power in numbers. The fact that they are together means that there is a block of strength there. They are there for each other, but this Miss Julie thing is something he has always wanted. So for it to present itself to him, drunk or not drunk, he's intoxicated and mesmerized by it. A wonderful part of Marber's version is when she brings out that dress, because that does not happen in the original, and it's old and you can see that it's deteriorating. That's really a very interesting moment because it represents a time that is long gone.

Audience Member # 6: While we are talking about psychology, we forgot one thing, John wearing Julie's father's shoes…

Ted Sod: And then he doesn't remember he has them on.

Audience Member #6: I thought to myself, "My god, Oedipus wanted to sleep with his mother and Julie wants to sleep with her father.

Pat Denison: That was not in the original.