DONMAR

# Study Guide

By Sara Clifford
Edited by Rosie Dalling

## Strindberg's
# CREDITORS
In a new version by David Greig

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# Contents

section 1

# Cast list and creative team

## Cast:

### Tom Burke

**Adolph:** A vulnerable and frail artist who has struggled to regain the critical acclaim of his early career, Adolph worships his wife, Tekla.

### Owen Teale

**Gustav:** Tekla's ex-husband who is intent on revenge on the wife who left him and her new husband, Adolph.

### Anna Chancellor

**Tekla:** The ex-wife of Gustav and wife of Aldoph, over whom she has powerful sexual control. A successful novelist who toys with Adolph's emotions by encouraging his jealousy.

# Creative Team:

## Director: Alan Rickman

Theatre work includes *The Winter Guest* (WYP & Almeida) *My Name is Rachel Corrie* – 2005 Theatregoers award for Best New Play & Best Director (Royal Court, Playhouse & New York) *Live Wax* (West End). Film direction work includes *The Winter Guest* – 1997 Best Film Venice Film Festival & Best Film Chicago Film Festival.

## Set designer: Ben Stones

Work includes, for the Donmar, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Other theatre, *Beautiful Thing* (Sound Theatre Leicester Sq), *Humble Boy, Paradise Lost, Someone Who'll Watch Over Me, 101 Dalmations, James and the Giant Peach* (Theatre Royal, Northampton), *The Musical of Musicals!* (Kings Head), *Paradise Lost* – 2003 Linbury Prize winner (UK tour for Headlong), *The Arab Israeli Cookbook* (Tricycle), *The Mighty Boosh* (UK tour), *The Vegimite Tales* (The Venue), *When Five Years Pass* (The Arcola), *The Two Faces of Mitchell and Webb* (UK tour), *The Herbal Bed* (Salisbury Playhouse). Forthcoming designs include: *Taste of Honey* (Royal Exchange Manchester).

## Costume designer: Fotini Dimou

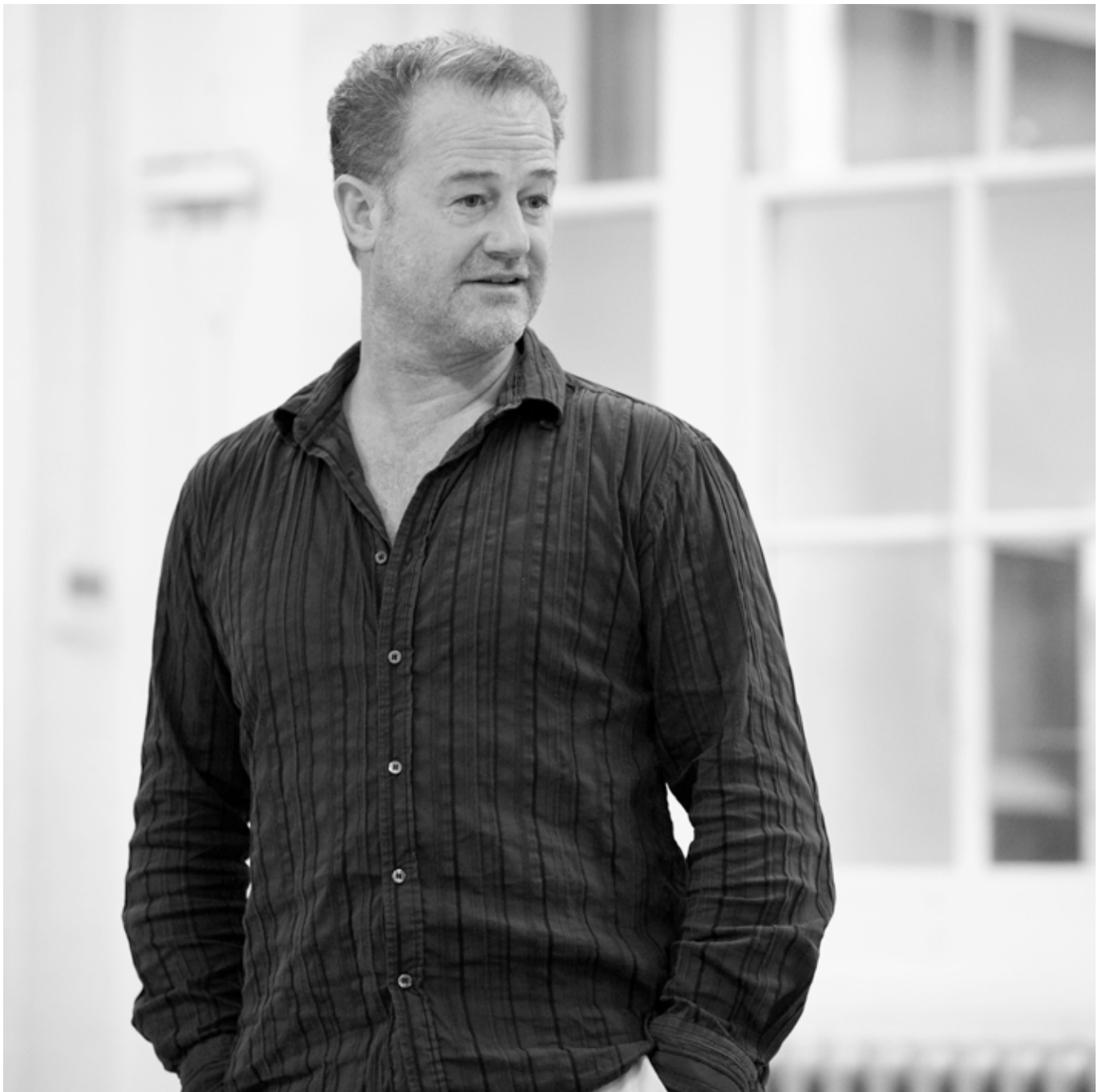
Costume Designs include *Girl with the Pearl Earring* (Cambridge Arts & Theatre Royal, Haymarket), *Romeo and Juliet, Twelfth Night* (Open Air Theatre), *Fram, Thérèse Raquin, The Seagull, Secret Rapture* (NT), *Dido and Aeneas* (Theatro alla Scala, Milan), *The Last Confession* (Chichester Festival & Theatre Royal, Haymarket), *Saturday, Sunday, Monday* (Chichester Festival), *Mme Melville* (Vaudeville). Set and costume designs: *A Jovial Crew, The School of Night, Ion, The Duchess of Malfi, The Archbishop's Ceiling, The Storm, Speculators, Fashion* (RSC), *Some Singing Blood, Sore Throats, The Queen and I, Road* (Royal Court), *Present Laughter* (Royal Exchange), *The Father* (Touring Partnership), *The Provoked Wife* (Theatre Royal, Plymouth), *Eugene Onegin* (ENO).

## Lighting designer: Howard Harrison

Work includes, for the Donmar, *Guys and Dolls, The Vortex, Privates on Patrol, Tales from Hollywood, To the Green Fields Beyond, Divas at the Donmar, The Fix, Fool for Love*. Other theatre work includes Matthew Bournes' *Edward Scissorhands, Nutcracker!* (Sadler's Wells, Uk & US tour) *The Music Man, The Circle* (Chichester Festival), *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* (Almeida), *The Vertical Hour* (Royal Court), *Mary Poppins* – 2007 Tony Award nomination (Prince Edward & Broadway), *Mamma Mia!*, (Prince of Wales, Broadway, Las Vegas, Hamburg, Japan, Stockholm, Australia & US Tour), *Glengarry Glen Ross* (Apollo), *Macbeth* – 2008 Olivier Award & 2008 Tony nomination (Gielgud & Broadway), *Rock and Roll* (Duke of York's), *Love Song* (new Ambassadors), *Donkeys' Years* (Comedy), *Ragtime* (Piccadilly), *Heroes* (Wyndham's).

## Composer and sound designer: Adam Cork

Work includes, for the Donmar, *Ivanov* (Wyndham's), *The Chalk Garden, Othello, John Gabriel Borkman, Don Juan in Soho, Frost/ Nixon* – 2007 Drama Desk Award nomination, *The Cut, The Wild Duck, Henry IV, Caligula*. Other theatre work includes, *No Man's Land* (Duke of York's), *Macbeth* – 2008 Tony Award nomination (Broadway and Gielgud), *Don Carlos* (Gielgud), *The Glass Menagerie* (Apollo), *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (Chichester Festival & Gielgud), *Speaking Like Magpies, The Tempest* (RSC), The Last Days of Judas Iscariot, The Late Henry Moss (The Almeida), On The Third Day (New Ambassadors), Underneath the Lintel (Duchess), *On the Ceiling* (Garrick), *Scaramouche Jones* (Riverside Studios & World Tour), *Faustus* (Headlong/ Hampstead), *Paradise Lost, Rough Crossings* (Headlong), *Nine Parts of Desire* (Wilma, Philadelphia), *Lear, The Cherry Orchard* (Sheffield Crucible), *Romeo and Juliet* (Manchester Royal Exchange), *Suddenly Last September* – 2005 Olivier nomination (Albery).



section 2

# The historical context

*Creditors* was written in 1889, a time of transition and change across Europe. The previous fifty years had seen revolution and revolt in France, Germany and Italy, as well as huge social changes: Karl Marx and Frederich Engels published *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848, and in 1859, Charles Darwin published *On The Origin of Species*. Both these works questioned the fundamental nature of society and how it was organised, and had a huge influence on art and philosophy.

The Doctrine of Marxism had a profound effect on the working classes or 'proletariat,' as it doubted the sustainability and successes of capitalism and therefore questioned the need for a class system at all. This led to a growing awareness amongst the working classes of how they were represented in politics and the arts. Charles Dickens and George Bernard Shaw were amongst the writers who took up these concerns; they showed the reality of the lives of less privileged people at the bottom of society and questioned how they were seen by those of a higher status.

Alongside this, the world was being turned upside down by writers questioning the centuries-old tenets of religion, and when Darwin produced his seminal work, *On The Origin of Species*, proposing that man was descended from apes through a system of 'the survival of the fittest', he initiated a debate that still rages today, on evolution versus creationism. It was Darwin who influenced the idea of Naturalism in the theatre, where characters are seen as the sum of their genes and environment.

Furthermore, in the late 1880s, Sigmund Freud was beginning to develop his psychological theories, looking to the childhood experiences of a person's life in order to understand his or her current state of mind, thus developing psychoanalysis.

Also key, especially for Strindberg, was the changing role of women. By the end of the Nineteenth Century, the feminist ideal of the 'New Woman' had emerged in Europe and North America. Advocates of the New Woman ideal, which encouraged women to liberate themselves, were found among novelists, playwrights, journalists, pamphleteers, political thinkers and suffragettes, whose aim was to encourage women to liberate themselves from male domination, manage their own lives and leave behind anything that might restrict their pursuit of happiness and self-realisation. The New Woman would be educated, financially independent, able to participate in discussions, wear comfortable clothes rather than corsets, and decide for herself who and when to marry and how many children to have. The ideas were heavily opposed by conservatives, and women trying to achieve this independence were seen pejoratively as cigar-smoking lesbians, while Freud considered them to be suffering from 'hysteria'.

Given Strindbergs background and his relationship with his three wives, it would seem that he found the change in women's roles somewhat difficult, and he is often accused of misogyny as a result of the way he portrayed the female characters in his plays.

section 3

# Strindberg's life

August Strindberg (1849-1912) is considered Sweden's greatest author. Although his reputation outside Sweden rests on his plays, in Sweden his stories, novels, poetry, and autobiographical works are equally important. He was also a painter and sculptor.

Strindberg was born on January 22 1849, in Stockholm. He was premature, and an unwelcome addition to the family, arriving four months after his father, a shipping agent from a 'good' family, had married his mother, a servant girl, who had already borne him three children. At the time of his birth, his father had just gone bankrupt, and August's childhood was one of poverty and hunger. His mother had twelve children in all, and he constantly sought her attention, forever trying to master different skills and accomplishments in an attempt to become her favourite. He adored his mother and hated his father, but his mother seemed to prefer his brother, so he resented her as well. She died when he was thirteen and he never forgave the woman who replaced her as his stepmother.

At eighteen he went to Uppsala University where he read Medicine, but failed his exams, then failed as an actor, and finally became a librarian. He began writing plays while he was a student, and his first mature play, *Master Olof* (1872), which he wrote when he was 23 years old, is considered Sweden's first great drama. Heavily influenced by radical thinkers of the time, such as Rousseau, it was rejected by the Royal Dramatic Theatre because of its new approach, a high drama written realistically and in prose.

In 1877, he married the actress, Siri von Essen. This was the longest of his three marriages, all of which ended in divorce, and it was to have a lasting effect on Strindberg and his relationships with women.

In 1879 he published the novel *The Red Room*, Sweden's first naturalistic novel, and a satire on all that Strindberg had observed in the Stockholm of the 1870s. The novel was a scandal and made him famous overnight.

In the early 1880s Strindberg's work reflected the happy years of his marriage to Siri and his growing confidence as a writer. His most successful play of the time, *Lucky Per's Journey* (1882), was written for his wife. However, his insistence on telling the truth as he saw it, including the satire, *The New Kingdom* (1882), meant that he began to make many enemies, and in 1883 he was forced to leave Sweden with his family, leaving behind a collection of angry poems, which encouraged a completely new form and style in Swedish literature.

## The *Inferno*

Strindberg's enemies now brought a charge of blasphemy against him. He stood trial in Sweden and, although he was acquitted, the strain took its toll and the trial marked the acceleration of the persecution complex that plagued him and led, ten years later, to a period of mental breakdown.

In spite of the damage caused by the trial, the strain of trying to support a growing family by his pen, and a total boycott of his work in Sweden, Strindberg produced many of his greatest works in the last half of the 1880s. These include the plays upon which his European reputation was first based – the naturalistic dramas *The Father* (1887), *Miss Julie* (1888), and *Creditors* (1889) – and the autobiographical novels *The Son of a Servant* (1913) and *The Confession of a Fool* (1895) (a one sided account of his marriage to Siri von Essen).

Strindberg's European reputation grew, and his plays created sensations when they were performed in Denmark, Germany, and France. However, the breakup of his first marriage led to further deterioration of his mental health and rejecting many offers from producers, he turned to science and then to alchemy, and finally he began to study the occult and write for occult journals. In studying mysticism, Strindberg felt he had found an answer to why he (and mankind generally) suffered so much. In finding an answer, he recovered his health, and a new period of his writing began.

## Later career

From the *Inferno* crisis – named after the account he wrote of the years of near madness, *Inferno* (1897) – until his death in 1912, Strindberg wrote 29 plays, a volume of poetry, and several volumes of prose. The most important plays of this later period, the expressionist period, are *To Damascus I-III* (1898-1904), *There Are Crimes and Crimes* (1899), *Easter* (1901), *The Dance of Death* (1901), *Crown Bride* (1902), *A Dream Play* (1902), and the "chamber plays" he wrote for his own theatre in 1907. He also wrote a number of historical dramas, including *Gustaf Vasa*, and a final, autobiographical play, *The Great Highway* (1909). He also wrote the personal novels *Alone* (1903) and *The Scapegoat* (1907) and the diary *Blå böcker* (1907-1912).

Strindberg's last years were comparatively calm, broken only by a feud, occasioned by the novel *Svarta fanor* (1907; Black Banners), a final, savage attack on his enemies, real and imagined, all readily identifiable in the book. He died alone on May 14, 1912, in Stockholm.

## Another view:

In his book, 'Strindberg, a biography', Michael Meyer describes Strindberg as 'a pioneer in the depiction of men and women driven by love, hatred, jealousy or a mixture of all three to that nightmare border country where hysteria abuts on madness' and as 'the most deceptive of fanatics' He was 'slim and elegant,' fastidious in his dress and aristocratic in his bearing, with a 'trace of shyness.' He confessed to being "afraid of the dark," as well as of 'dogs, horses, strangers' and yet, as Meyer comes to discover, he did not lack a sense of humor. He loved Dickens. He translated Mark Twain. When the mood was upon him, possibly after a few absinthes, he strummed his guitar while standing on one leg.

In addition to being a prolific author – throwing his pages to the floor as fast as they flowed from his pen Strindberg was a painter of considerable skill. Over the course of his life he would study medicine, explore alchemy in an attempt to produce gold, learn Chinese and Japanese, and, although he remained violently anti-Semitic, he decided in middle age to learn Hebrew.

As a young man, Strindberg wrote his manifesto: "*No spring-cleaning is possible, everything must be burned, blown to bits.*" This is the confession of the artist as a terrorist – maybe not a friend to live next door to, but certainly a fascinating and also very modern man.

(Meyer, M. (1985) *Strindberg: A Biography*, Oxford, University Press)

section 4

# Naturalism and realism in the theatre

## The context

Strindberg tells us that in order to submit a play to the Royal Dramatic Theatre in the nineteenth century, the play had to meet the following conditions:

*'The play had to have five acts, and each act had to run to about twenty four sheets of writing paper… ie 120 pages. Changes of scene within the acts were not liked and were considered a weakness… Each act had to have a beginning, middle and an end… The curtain lines had to give rise to applause... and in the play there had to be 'turns' for the actors which were called "scenes"...'*

**From *Naturalism in context*, an Essay in The Drama Review, (1968), Martin Esslin**

The standard form in theatre at the time was (the '*piece bien faite*') the (well made play) which dominated European theatre during the nineteenth century, with an efficient plot and a successful box office. They were expected to be moral dramas with noble protagonists pitted against darker forces; every drama was expected to result in a morally-appropriate conclusion, meaning that goodness was to bring happiness, and immorality pain.

*If we could raise the stalls to have the spectators' sight-line above the actors' knees; if we could get rid of the boxes with their tittering diners and old ladies taking their supper, so that we could have complete darkness in the room during the performance; and first, and foremost have a small stage and a small auditorium; then perhaps a new drama might emerge, a theatre once again at least a place for the entertainment and enlightenment of educated people. While we wait for such a theatre I suppose we shall have to write for storage and to build up the repertoire which must appear one day.*

**August Strindberg – preface to *Miss Julie***

The Realism movement that rebelled against this was quite shocking; challenging romantic situations and characterization, and aiming to put on stage only what could be observed in real life. Although by definition, this tended towards the concerns of the middle classes; it also aimed to reflect real speech inflections, rather than the grand declamations of classical drama.

Naturalism, which followed hard on the heels of this, was committed to presenting a specifically angled view of real life; that people are, and can only be, the sum total of their heredity and environment, the influence of Darwin and scientific naturalism. It differs from Realism in that it requires the writer to take an objective and 'amoral' view of the characters and their motives, backed by scientific observation.

Emile Zola was the leading light of the Naturalist movement. The Naturalists believed in the importance of naturalistic and realist settings on stage and in every day language. Above all, said Zola, the theatre should not 'lie'. These principles are taken for granted nowadays, and highlight what must have been the stiffness and grandeur of classical drama. The new writers took Shakespeare as their model, claiming a freedom of time and place that would allow everything to collide: tragedy, comedy, the grotesque and the ideal.

After Zola, the greatest proponent of the Realism movement was the Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen, whose work was considered immoral by contemporary Victorian standards, particularly his ideas about women and their status.

He began as a director within the Romantic tradition, but by 1874, he was explaining to students that an artist must possess some experience of the life he is trying to create on stage, and he was supported by the Danish critic, Georg Brandes, who called for writers to turn against romantic idealism and grapple with current social problems.

In *A Dolls House* (1879), Ibsen depicted the emancipation of one woman, Nora, but the play was considered so challenging that other productions changed the ending to show a reconciliation, rather than her independent departure.

*Ghosts* (1881) was even more controversial in its subject matter, showing, as it did, the effects of syphilis on individuals and society, but also introducing the idea of subtext for the first time. Later on, like Strindberg, Ibsen became more allagorical in his writing, with *Wild Duck* (1884), *Rosmersholm* (1886) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890).

Meanwhile in France, Andre Antoine, a modest gas company clerk, was furthering the movement, with his amateur productions of Zola and Ibsen at the Theatre-Libre; producing the plays in tiny theatres and flying in the face of the traditions of classical French theatre at the Conservatoire; where an actor was a type who would recite their part rather than live it, and always use the same gestures without moving and speaking at the same time.

Antoine rehearsed the ensemble and created stage settings as a '*mis-en-scene'* (slice of life), the, and developed the idea of the 'fourth wall' – the window, as it were, through which the audience can observe the action taking place.

## Strindberg's contribution

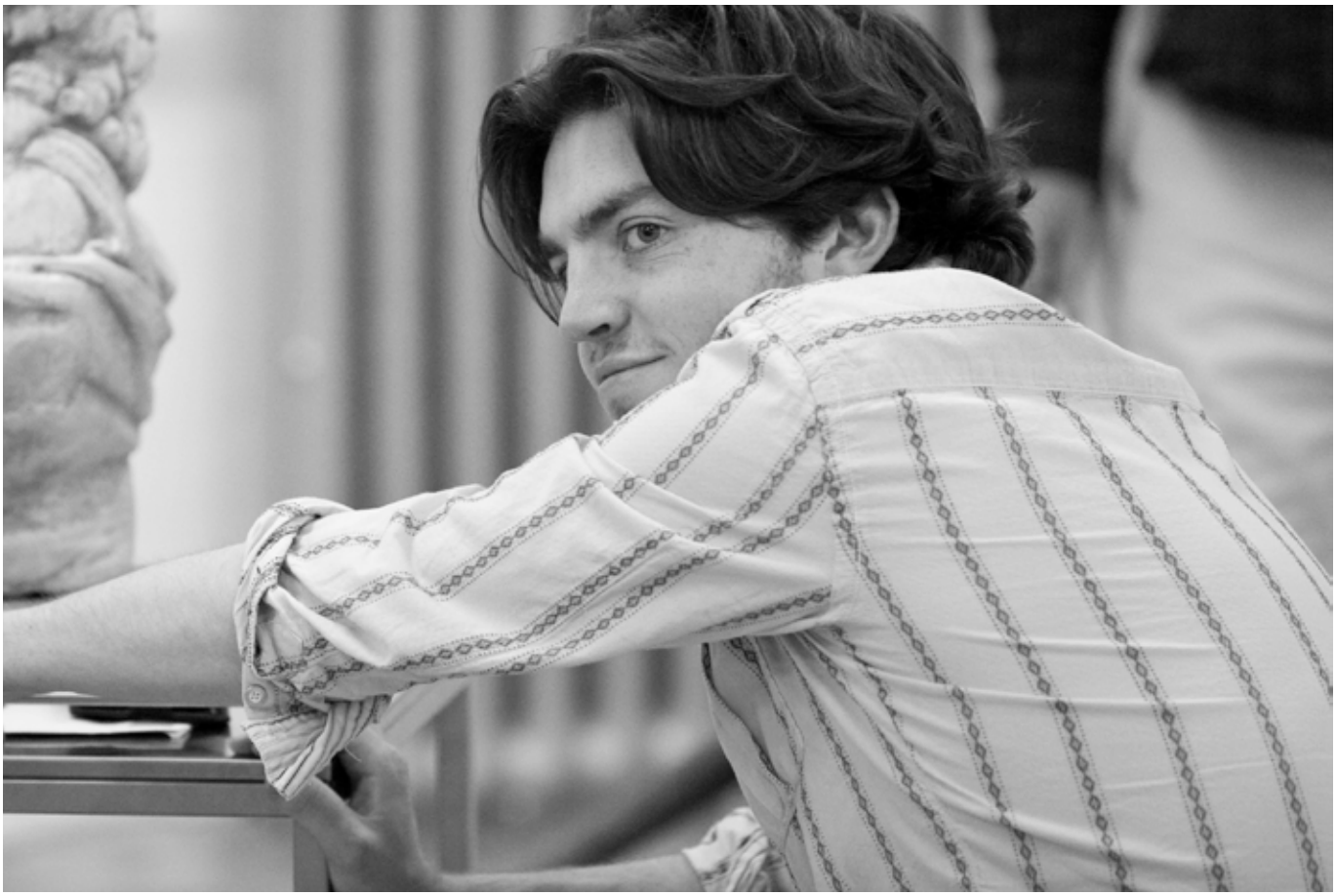
In 1888, Strindberg, who was heavily influenced by Zola and writing within this new movement wrote what almost amounted to a manifesto of Naturalism in the preface to *Miss Julie*, including its preoccupation with 'rising and falling in society'. However, as Martin Lamm points out, 'Strindberg differs from Naturalistic playwrights in most countries, because he is not concerned with peasants or workers, and he does not foreground social problems', and there are, indeed, no social problems in Creditors. This play, along with *Miss Julie* and *The Father,* deal with the struggle between the sexes and relate to Strindberg's own experiences and relationships.

His preface to *Miss Julie* is the classic declaration of early modernism: that human nature is elusive, contradictory, indeterminate, ambivalent, vacillating. It is possible, for example, to experience both feelings of hatred and lust towards the same person, as Strindberg himself did with all of his wives and lovers. This idea of the personality as an arena of conflicting forces and drives is a premise common both to Nietzsche and Freud.

Strindberg tried to create characters that reflect these contradictions in all our psyches:

*"Since they are modern characters, living in an age of transition more urgently hysterical at any rate than the age which preceded it, I have drawn my people as split and vacillating, a mixture of the old and new."*

**Strindberg, from the preface to *Miss Julie***



To some extent, Strindberg's career ran in parallel with Ibsen's, although he disliked him and his work. Ibsen was aware of Strindberg's antagonism towards him, and kept a portrait of Strindberg on his wall: "I cannot write a line," he said, "without that madman standing and staring down at me with his mad eyes."

On the other hand, Strindberg adored the philosopher Nietzsche, and shared his view of life as a perpetual struggle between the strong and the weak. Like Nietzsche, Strindberg cultivated a fear or hatred of women, leading to accusations of misogyny.

*'You'll see there's a good market for "Woman Hate" now… the A Doll's House period is over… What would have happened to A Doll's House if Helmer had received a little justice? Or to Ghosts if Mr. Alving had been allowed to live and tell the audience that his wife was lying about him? No – just blame everything on them, blacken their names, tread them in the mud so that they haven't a square inch left clean – that makes for good theatre!'*

**Strindberg, (1888), in a letter to his publisher**

Strindberg's early plays were romantic historical dramas, but in 1884, his two volumes of short stories, *Getting Married,* about men and women's rights, were written as a riposte to *A Doll's House*. It was for this publication that he was tried on grounds of immorality but then acquitted.

He then wrote two plays of uncompromising Realism, again as a response to Ibsen's feminism, *The Father* and *Miss Julie* (both written in less than two weeks) closely followed by *Creditors*, which he completed in less than a month. In these works he was striving to present as scientific and objective a picture of life as possible. However, he refused to burden his plays with the mass of natural scientific documentation naturalism demanded, and even these realistic plays contained the seeds of the expressionism of his later plays – as well as heavily personal and prejudiced material from his life and relationship with Siri; – as a result they cannot be strictly considered as Naturalistic.

Good Naturalism, he thought, would show natural conflicts of crucial struggles and be true to nature. He wanted to write '*the type of play for modern people*' and was determined to write about fundamental truths, about sexual relationships, about the psychological conflict between wills, and about the bearing of the past on the present: this is all common nature to theatre now, but was groundbreaking at the time.

He also warned against the dangers of triviality – if realism was taken too far, the level of detail would be like '*grains of dust on the camera lens*', again demonstrating that expressionism rather than naturalism might prove to be his forte.

He admired the simplicity of the settings of Theatre Libre and thought that a setting should only ever really consist of a table and two chairs. He also admired one act plays that created the Aristotelian ideal of a unity of time and place, rejected complicated plots and aimed to excavate the psychological struggles of his characters and themes of love, honour and freedom. He also tried to overlap dialogue like a musical composition, a technique later developed by Chekhov; he rejected visible musicians, separate acts, blackouts and illusion, footlights and prompt; and championed the smaller theatre.

Throughout his life, he was very unpopular in Sweden, but by 1899, in the preface to Cesar and Cleopatra, George Bernard Shaw described Strindberg as '*the only living dramatist of Shakespearean calibre*'.

### Discussion point: Free will versus nature

In Creditors, Tekla says towards the end of the play, once she has realised what Gustav is doing:

**TEKLA** Very good, Gustav, well done. You've had your revenge. What an enlightened man you are.

But there's one thing you're forgetting. Don't you and your boring professors – don't you believe that there's no such thing as free will. Don't you believe that we're all only capable of doing what our nature demands in any given circumstance.

**GUSTAV** Yes.

**TEKLA** So when I left you I was behaving the way my nature demanded?

**GUSTAV** That's right.

**TEKLA** I never really had a choice.

**GUSTAV** No.

This is Strindberg expressing the view of Naturalism.

- How much of what we think and do is our own choice? How much is down to other drives over which we may have little or no control, such as sex or jealousy or revenge? Are we just 'marionettes' subject to our subconscious desires? How much can we control these feelings?

## The influence of realism

Realism took the theatrical world by storm, finding its greatest expression in the Russian theatre of Chekhov as expressed by the practitioner Stanislavsky. Stanislavsky developed the theory of the actor experiencing the play 'as if' they were the character, bringing their own emotional memories to the back story in order to understand the character's motivations. The play should have a 'super-objective' or ruling idea, and an inner truth or logic for each character, which means understanding their background up to the point when we meet them in the play; the actor should therefore understand the character's motivations at all points in the play, leading to an understanding of his or her objectives, which are linked together in the through line of the action.

Realism also influenced the work of George Bernard Shaw in England in plays such as, *Mrs Warren's Profession* (1893), which explores the hypocrisy behind prostitution and also the work of Sean O'Casey in Ireland, who wrote *The Playboy of the Western World* and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), which told the stories of ordinary Irish people; Realism became the mainstay of post war American drama, where 'the method' style of acting – experiencing the world as if the actor were the character – influenced a whole generation of dramatists, including Eugene O'Neill, Clifford Odets, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller; and actors (such as Robert De Niro and Dustin Hoffman). In England, realism has influenced a whole generation of writers, from John Osbourne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956), to Arnold Wesker's *Roots* trilogy (1959) to Edward Bond's *Saved* (1965).

## Strindberg's later work

Although Strindberg made a huge contribution to the Naturalistic movement, he is also remembered for his later expressionistic work. He was forced by his own restless, impatient nature – and his great dramatic sense – to seek daring ways to express what he felt was important to express, and he became increasingly interested in psychological exploration, such as 'the battle of wills'. In his naturalistic plays, the personal relationship he had with the characters and themes threatened to overwhelm the structure, leading him to start experimenting with different styles and forms which became the expressionist plays, particularly after the *Inferno* crisis.

The expressionistic plays – such as *The Road to Damascus* (1901), *The Dance of Death* (1900), and *The Ghost Sonata* (1907) – leave behind Strindberg's earlier commitment to plot, a realistic setting or even psychological motivation. Having come to believe, after his madness, that life was really some kind of horrible dream, he tried to dramatise this view, in a nightmarish version of Realism.

The themes are the same in Strindberg's earlier work: life's cruelty, and the battle of wills where the weaker is destroyed as part of nature's impersonal cruelty (as in Creditors), but there is more of a sense of impending punishment; of a judging force.

Strindberg's influence on world drama was equally considerable in this style: European expressionism around World War I owed much to his later plays and the seeds of much recent experimental drama can also be traced back to Strindberg.

Martin Lamm states that 'during the years immediately before and after the First World War, Strindberg was constantly played and read everywhere', and that his later plays (ie the expressionist work, post Inferno) reflected the post war chaos in Europe.

### Practical exercise on realism

- What is the super objective or ruling idea of Creditors?

Select a character:

- What has brought them to this point in the play? What sort of person are they, how were they educated, how old are they, what work do they do?
- What do they love? What do they hate? What is their secret desire?
- What is their motivation in each scene?
- What is their motivation across the play?
- Do they achieve what they want? Does it change?

section 5

# CREDITORS – The Play

## Themes

*Creditors* was more successful abroad than *Miss Julie* and, as it seemed initially more familiar to audiences. Strindberg called it a 'tragi-comedy', a theme common in French drama, the triumph of the original husband over his wife's lover or second husband, and audiences must have been expecting something slightly different to what was presented to them. Strindberg himself liked the play more than he liked *Miss Julie*, feeling that it met the demands of Naturalism more clearly, '*with three characters, a table and two chairs and no sunrise*'.

*Creditors* is, above all, a play about sexual dominance, jealousy and revenge. It is Strindberg looking at what he perceives to be the sexual power that women have over men, a power that he fears can reduce men to crippled children, as embodied in the figure of Adolph, the power that a woman like Tekla can wield over men, even though she is not his intellectual equal; and the jealousy and revenge of a man who has lost the woman he loves. It should be an erotic and near violent exploration of these themes, and, as an audience, we should feel as if we are voyeurs, observing something intimate between these characters as they play out these extreme emotions. These are characters who have crossed a line they can never go back upon.

Abbey Wright, the Assistant Director on the production, says:

> *'It is a play about the distortion of love and sexual power, reflecting Strindberg's own fear of abandoning himself to another person, to the power of a woman; and his desperate desire for certainty, so that when Tekla betrays Adolph; it is almost a relief, that at least he knows this with terrible certainty.*
>
> *In terms of tone, the play is played in the moment with absolute truth. This means that although it is funny, it is not being played for laughs. The ending may look melodramatic on the page, but if it is played with truth throughout, we are not shocked into giggling at Adolph's sudden death, but quietly appalled*
>
> *The cast have worked at layering the characters and the story with such emotional truth, that they take us to the limits of sanity as outlined by Strindberg, and so Adolph's extreme reaction becomes not so shocking after all.'*

He perfected a tense, nervous kind of dialogue, less deliberate and more fragmentary than Ibsen's. And in his early "naturalist" plays – *Creditors, Miss Julie* – he cut the classical three-act construction to a single act focused on a crisis in relations between a man and a woman, or a triangular relationship in which a whole spectrum of suicidal and homicidal emotions appears. Like Ibsen he had an acute sense of the fundamental importance of role-playing, but his exposure cut deeper. His characters often come to see themselves as marionettes who are unable to escape from the absurd and self-destructive situations in which they find themselves.'

Overall, we are being taken to a place that we may all have felt at some point, and in *Creditors* we experience the catharsis of recognising our own chaotic inner life on stage, that other people are mad in relationships as well as ourselves. And, perhaps, a hope being expressed that we might be able to treat each other a bit better but, as Tekla says towards the end of the play:

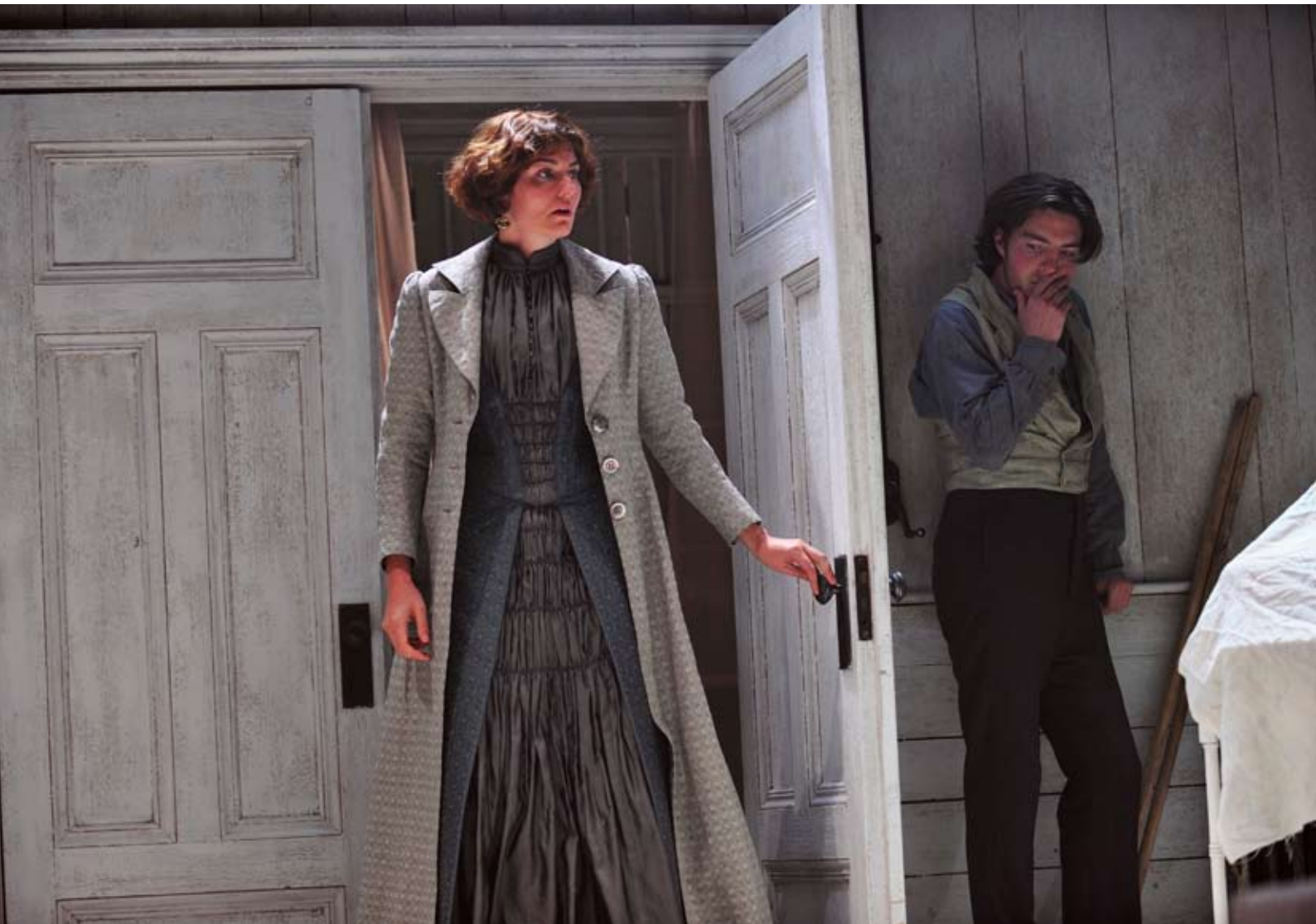
**TEKLA** There is no guilt, Gustav. There's just… people – men and women, fallen human beings – trying to do what they can to live. No one is to blame, Gustav. Not even you.

## Discussion Point

*'The very notion of character implies a stability and coherence which is foreign to Strindberg's view of human nature'*

**Online quote from Bruce Thompson, University of California, Course lecture, Modern European Intellectual History**

- Discuss in the light of Creditors and any other plays by Strindberg you are familiar with.



## The Meaning of the Title, *Creditors*

In this play, Strindberg expresses the notion of corrosive love in terms of a debt, a debt that Gustav has come to collect. We are introduced to the idea when Gustav describes how he imagines they came together as lovers, but were haunted by his presence:

**GUSTAV**: He haunts them. He enters their dreams. He becomes a nightmare disturbing their sleep – a creditor – knocking at the bedroom door… Their guilt pursues them like a bad debt.

As he explains at the end of the play, revealing the hurt and humiliation he has felt watching Tekla run off with Adolph:

**GUSTAV**: Forgive me that you tore my heart to pieces, forgive me my disgrace, forgive me that you made me look a fool in your asinine book, forgive me the endless laughter of my students, forgive me that I saved you from your mother, released you from ignorance and superstition, forgive me that I gave you a house and friends and love, forgive me that I made a woman out of you.

The play shows how Gustav collects this debt: he destroys Adolph, first by destroying his belief in his art and then his belief in his wife, Gustav is therefore able to say at the end of the speech, that his debt has been paid:

**Gustav**: Forgive me as I forgave you.

There.

Our account is reconciled

Now go and settle your debt with – the other one.

He is then able to watch Tekla, as her life collapses around her, holding Adolph in her arms, dead from the shock of her truly fickle nature. His revenge is complete, his debt is settled.

Adolph and Tekla also speak of love in these terms of payment and debt, with Adolph talking of what she owes him:

**ADOLPH** To love like a man is to give. And I have given, haven't I? Given and given and given again.

**TEKLA** What exactly have you given me?

**ADOLPH** Everything.

**TEKLA** What do you want – a receipt?

And later:

**ADOLPH** You found my illness irritating. Now that life was finally smiling on you, you didn't like to be reminded of your debt to me, you didn't like that I'd seen you when you were low. You wanted rid of me, your creditor and witness.

*Both husbands are 'exacting creditors' who have given her the 'spiritual food by which she lives', and Gustav is the embodiment of desperate hurt, come to collect the 'debt'.*

**Lamm, M. (1952) Modern Drama. Oxford, Blackwell**

As Gustav says:

**GUSTAV** Have I ever raised a hand to you in all these years? Have I ever moralized or preached? Have I ever made your life difficult in any way since you left? No – but a few days ago I felt like playing a small joke or two on your other half and the poor boy collapsed like a pack of cards. Is that my fault Tekla? Is it not possible that you are just the tiniest bit guilty too?

**GUSTAV** There's always a crack somewhere, and so the guilt will insist on seeping in – sooner or later the creditors appear. You may be innocent, but you are still accountable. Innocent before your non-existent god, but accountable, accountable to yourself, accountable to your fellow human beings…

I came back to take what had been stolen.

At the end of the play, as Tekla cradles the dead Adolph, crying

**TEKLA** Help us. Help us.

Gustav leaves, saying:

**GUSTAV** She really did love him.

So complete is his revenge, that he is left without anything; burnt out, cold, stepping over the ruins of their lives, this is Strindberg's vision of the result of their battle.

## Practical Exercise

- 'The debt that must be repaid' is a classic story line. Think of other plays and films that explore this plot line eg. *Pulp Fiction, The Merchant of Venice*.
- What emotions are associated with this kind of storyline? Is it their own debt they are collecting or someone else's?
- What kind of characters are involved? How far will they go to 'collect the debt' or exact their revenge?
- Also look at jealousy as a theme (linked to revenge). What similarities are there between Creditors and Othello, for instance? Who is jealous of whom and why? What other stories about jealousy do you know?
- Create a short drama piece built around these themes.

## Structure

*Creditors* is an elegant and deceptively simply structured story of three scenes between the three protagonists, the eternal triangle: Alan Rickman, the Director, describes it as being like a verbal dance, with 'three *pas de deux*' – a pas de deux meaning a dance for two people. .

The company explored the idea that this is 'a play of energies rather than ideas', and that if the observer focuses too much on the words and the ideas being expressed, the audience may be misled. It would be far better to concentrate their feelings around the physical energies being expressed on stage, on the way the characters interact physically, and express their fear of being looked at or touched; perhaps for fear of being too revealing. This is a primal interaction between three people expressing sex, power, jealousy and revenge – enormous themes that can speak to any audience at any time in history.

The first scene depicts Gustav circling Adolph like a cat stalking its prey, initially apparently showing male friendship, but gradually moving towards a decision to destroy Adolph and his new marriage to Tekla. In this scene, he systematically destroys Adolph's belief in himself as a painter, then a sculptor, then his belief in Tekla, and himself as a man, reducing him to a spy from the next room, watching for his wife's infidelity.

The second scene shows Tekla returning to find Adolf full of suspicion, and despite her blandishments, he leaves her alone, saying he is going for a walk, but actually he moves next door to observe Gustav talking to her.

The final scene is when Gustav moves in for the kill, persuading Tekla to kiss him and admit she still loves him, whereupon Gustav reveals what he has done and Adolph is revealed. Having heard everything he falls dead, thus destroying any future chance of happiness that Tekla may have had with him.

Although the actors did not explore this aspect in rehearsal, the play is intensely and emotionally autobiographical: Strindberg's first wife, Siri, was married to Baron Carl Gustaf Wrangel af Sauss (*Gustav*) when August (*Adolph*) Strindberg 'stole' her away. To Strindberg's chagrin, Gustav refused to fight for her, more or less giving her away to him. This was humiliating for Strindberg – it made him question whether Suri was worth fighting for? Was he a lesser man for being the second husband? He has reflected these anxieties in the play, giving Gustav the chance to destroy the character he sees himself as, portraying him as weak, even crippled who manages only a brother and sister type relationship with Tekla (although still sexual). Siri, as Tekla, is punished in retrospect, for being with Adolph, by having him destroyed completely by Gustav. Strindberg actually believed that there was an international conspiracy of women across Europe, who had persuaded Siri to join them against him.

Of course, there is an element of Gustav in Strindberg; he too, is destroyed by the triangle – contrary to his lies, he is homeless, has no wife, and will now, presumably, roam the world with his conscience. Strindberg punishes them all in his conflagration.

## The characters – people or archetypes?

As outlined above, Strindberg was attempting to create characters that were real; that displayed all the contradictions of the human psyche – whilst simultaneously carrying the weight of their place in history and environment:

*"My characters are conglomerations of past and present stages of civilization, bits from books and newspapers, scraps of humanity, rags and tatters of fine clothing patched together as is the human soul."*

**Strindberg preface to *Miss Julie***

While from the rehearsal room, Abbey Wright says:

> *'All the characters are real – you could meet them on the street. Strindberg is often accused of misogyny, but the creative team feel that this is a limited view of his portrayal of men and women, which in fact is far more emotional and honest. Alan [Rickman] doesn't want the audience to have a hiding place, he feels that we all do these things all the time; play these games… and behaving like the animals we essentially are.'*

However, the characters can also be seen as being beyond just individuals, but as taking on the role of man and woman; locked in an eternal battle of wills, fighting for the upper hand.

As Professor Germaine Greer says in her introduction to the programme for the Donmar's production of *CREDITORS*:

> *'The agonies of that long on-again off-again relationship, which ended in their divorce in 1891, are relevant to Creditors, but they are not what the play is about. The three characters are not individuals but archetypes.'*

Although it seems clear that there are autobiographical elements in the play, in the relationship between the three characters and Strindberg's need to 'punish' them all, in moving away from the strictly personal story, is Strindberg not also concerned with depicting this as the eternal triangle, and articulating his belief that men and women can never hope to be happy together; that they must always fight, and that eventually they will destroy their love and, indeed, themselves?

## Practical Exercise

After you have seen or read the play:

- Do you think these characters are real enough to meet on the street?
- Who does your sympathy initially lie with and why? Is this gender related?
- Does your sympathy change with each scene? Or even within a scene? If so, how and why?
- Where does your sympathy lie at the end of the play?
- Create a triangle in the room, with each corner representing one character.
- Be ready to tell the group why you sympathise most with this character.

## Archetypes

- Discuss what archetypes are – do you understand what Germaine Greer meant by her statement?

**A dictionary definition of archetypes:**

1. the original pattern or model from which all things of the same kind are copied or on which they are based; a model or first form; prototype.
2. (in Jungian psychology) a collectively inherited unconscious idea, pattern of thought, image, etc., universally present in individual psyches.

- Discuss the difference between these definitions.

Although the number of archetypes is limitless, there are a few recurring archetypal images in plays, books and films:

The Child
The Hero
The Maiden
The Great Mother
The Wise Old Man
The Trickster or Fox

- Can you think of examples in literature for each one of these?
- Can you think of other examples of archetypes?
- What is the difference, if any, between archetypes and stereotypes?
- What are the archetypes in Creditors?
- Why does Professor Greer call them archetypes?
- Why do you think Strindberg writes like this?
- Draw a mask for each character. Physicalise each character with a gesture that represents them.
- Create a scene between these archetypes (or other archetypes)

## Was Strindberg a misogynist?

*'The Strindberg husband is not an educated middle class Swede of the late 19th century, but any man at any time… He has been called a misogynist because the women in his plays behave so badly. What is less often perceived is that his husbands behave equally badly. His appalled audiences were meant to ask themselves how such a ghastly distortion of humanity came about. How could it be that sensitive intelligent human beings could spend their lives torturing each other to madness. It is not the playwright's job to answer questions, but to dramatise them so that the audience could consider the issues with a fuller understanding.'*

**Germaine Greer in her introduction to the programme for the Donmar's production of CREDITORS**

*'I am fast approaching epilepsy as a result of celibacy. I could, I suppose, get girls, but where sex is concerned I am an aristocrat. I demand that they use soap and a toothbrush. If I fuck once I shall have to pay the slut a hundredfold. And I don't want to sow my seed in bad soil... My Aryan sense of honour forbids me to steal other men's wives… Can you understand my misogyny? Which is only the reverse image of a terrible desire for the other sex…*

*…Without that I should now be mad! Rousseau recommends it in his Confessions, but he ranks it above coition with women. I don't! Buggery is nothing for me – my seed is too string, and seeks eggs – unfortunately!'*

**Strindberg, Letter to Heidenstam (October 13 1888)**

It is widely assumed that Strindberg did, in fact, think of women as 'whores' including his three wives. In a letter to Ola Hansson he says:

> *'Women writers and artists are whores = a woman who has lost the characteristics of her sex = passivity.*
>
> *Emancipated women are the spitting image of whores'*

(Featured in Robinson, M (ed) (1992) Strindberg's Letters, Volume 1, 1862 – 1892. Continum International Publishing Group)

In both *Miss Julie* (where an aristocrat lusts after her servant) and *Creditors* (hell in the shape of a triangle), Strindberg practices his own advice to other authors on the treatment of female characters:

> *'Accuse them, blacken them; abuse them so that they haven't a clean spot – that is dramatic!'*

His second wife, Frida, an Austrian journalist, compared marriage to Strindberg to:

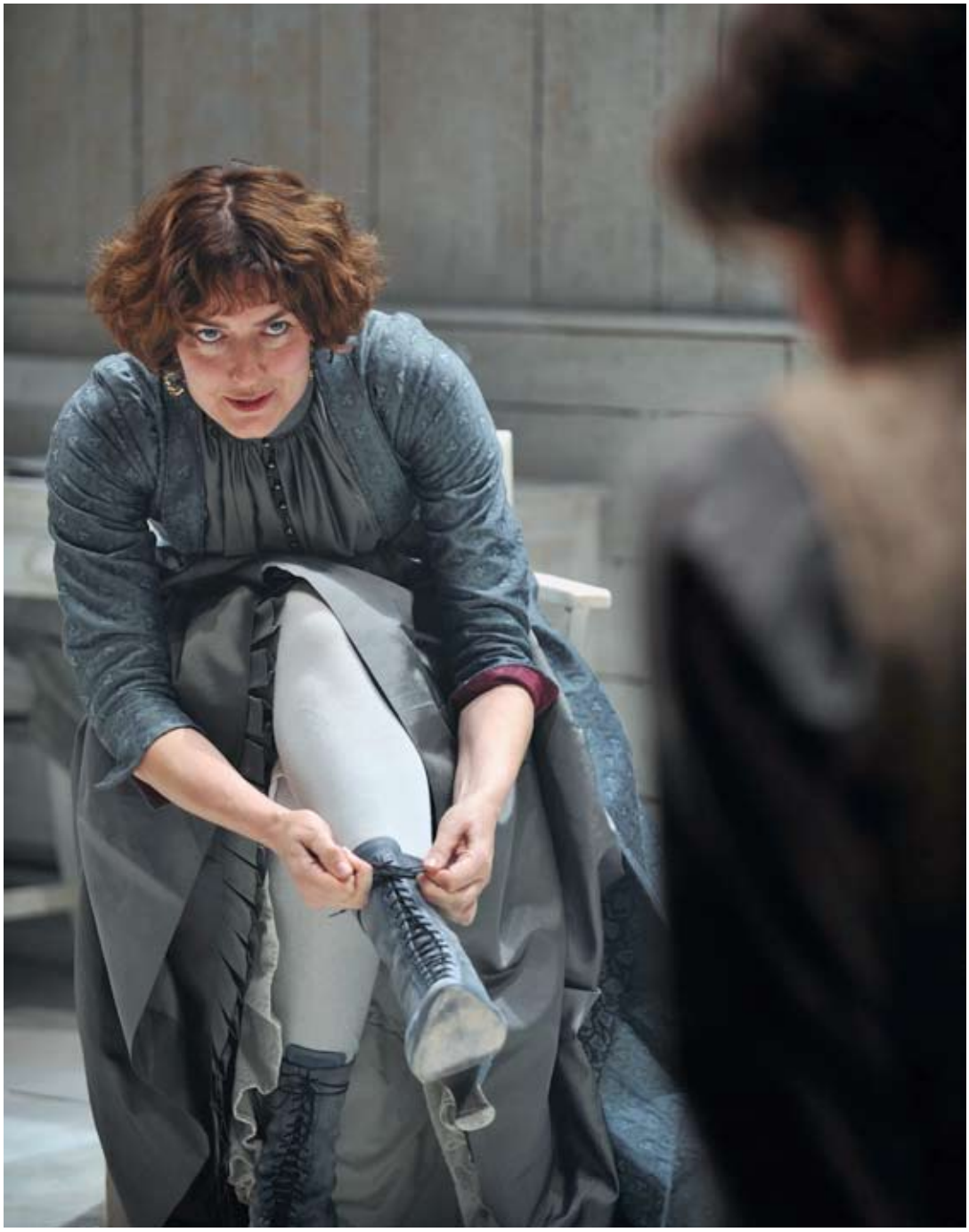
> *'a death ride over crackling ice and bottomless depths'*

And yet a Strindberg play can still electrify an audience in 2008, and writers as wide-ranging as Kafka and Camus, Thomas Mann and Jean-Paul Sartre have read Strindberg with admiration bordering on reverence.

Perhaps it is the unflinching honesty with which he writes that brings Strindberg back to the stage again and again. He shows us ourselves at our most extreme, all our most secret words, thoughts and desires, in front of us, in these characters.

Have you never thought about wanting to kill the person you love from jealousy? Or coldly destroying them and their new lover and life, so that they can never ever be happy again? And, of course, how you might feel, having done that – left to wander the world, homeless, loveless, a shell.

With this honesty, Strindberg is portraying himself in all his terrible extreme states – he is both Gustav and Adolph. As Gustav, he is able to berate himself as Adolph, the man forever in thrall to a woman's sexual power, to destroy his art, to fatally undermine the love that Adolph feels for Tekla, and to turn it, Othello-like, into terrible jealousy, a jealousy that Strindberg knew, only to his cost, consumes and destroys.



The first page of the play outlines this:

**ADOLPH** So there she'd be, talking, laughing – entertaining – and all the time – here's me – sitting in the corner – with no one for company but my own jealousy.

**GUSTAV** A companion you know all too well.

And later, he tells us of his involuntary attraction to women, something he both cultivates and reviles:

**ADOLPH** She was a goddess to me

**GUSTAV** No woman is worthy of that sort of banal admiration. None. You need to start developing a little healthy contempt.

**ADOLPH** But I can't live without having something to believe in.

**GUSTAV** Slave.

**ADOLPH** I need someone to respect, to worship.

**GUSTAV** Oh for God's sake, go and join the Church!

What kind of atheist are you? What is this female need in you to bow down before something? Oh, you're a fine free-thinker aren't you, except when it comes to women.

Gustav even lies about how attractive he finds women's bodies in his plan to bring down Adolph:

**GUSTAV** I mean, have you ever really looked at a woman naked? Really objectively looked at a woman's body? What do you see? A fat boy with over developed breasts, that's what you see. Basically a badly made youth… a chronic anaemic who haemorrhages regularly thirteen times a year.

Adolph is unable to answer to the raging jealous ego that is Gustav, to try and argue rationally with him, to try and prevent the oncoming storm, and bit by bit, his life is pulled out from under him, sucked from him, until he says"

**ADOLPH** I think I'm starting to hate you, but I can't let you go…

…There's a painting by an Italian master – it's a torture scene – a Saint – and they've torn open his stomach and they're pulling his guts out and rolling them up on a spindle – and the saint watches himself getting thinner and thinner as the roll of intestines gets thicker and thicker – that's me.

You're drawing my secrets from me. You're pulling out my guts and when you go you'll leave nothing but an empty shell behind you.

Watching Gustav decide to destroy Adolf and then methodically carry out his plan is quite terrifying. He tells us at the end of Scene One that they have been talking for six hours, and we get the sense of this room (floating on water in the Donmar production, an island, stranded, you can't leave except on the boat) as endless in time; a room in hell.

Meanwhile, Tekla moves between them, a beautiful, quixotic, sexually powerful and demanding, occasionally nonsensical woman with ideas beyond her station. She steals their ideas and calls them her own. She lusts after young men, trading on her looks for as long as she will be able to. Strindberg's final punishment for her, is to destroy her new lover (how satisfying for him to do this on stage and punish Siri!), but also to threaten her with losing her looks and sexual power – what will she do then?

**TEKLA** There are no limits to the men I like, and you know it, young and old, handsome and ugly, big and small. I like them all.

**ADOLPH** You know what that means, don't you?

**TEKLA** No, I don't know what it means. I just know how it feels.

**ADOLPH** It means you're getting desperate. It means you're getting old.

**TEKLA** You be careful what you say, Adolph.

Not for the first time, a knife is invoked, this time a real one – a sign of Adolph's drift into mad jealousy, but also when he says "I've got a knife', it is a metaphorical knife, cutting through what he sees as her lies and deception.

Earlier, Adolph has accused Gustav of using a knife to lance the boils of pus of deception.

**ADOLPH** Oh God, the things you're saying...
It's like having knives cut into me.
I can actually feel a feeling of cutting happening inside me.
Cutting pain.
A good pain, though – like a hot knife lancing a boil-
A boil that was full of pus and bursting and sore but now it's cut open and –
She never loved me.
She has never loved me.

Tekla, however, is not as stupid as Gustav would have us believe. She is emotionally intelligent, and instinctively knows that someone has been in the room; that someone has been talking to Adolph. She wants to keep their love innocent, like a brother and sister, perhaps thinking that if they keep it on this playful level of role-play, then the true nature of what she has done to Gustav will be hidden. She constantly uses sex to divert, entertain, threaten and cajole Adolph, who is almost persuaded once more. But it cannot stay like this, and once the spirit of Gustav has been summoned, interestingly via the mention of the child, he can no longer be kept out of the room. Although Adolph tries to follow Gustav's advice in reclaiming what he sees to be the power within the relationship, and ordering her to join him on the 8 o'clock boat (and thus prove her love for him), she will not be told and refuses – thus sealing the fate of their relationship. Strindberg is showing us what happens when a woman does not obey her husband!

The three of them fight it out in their hotel room on the water – their own private island hell, a fight to the death. But it is Gustav's cold blooded revenge that is the most shocking – we must believe him when he says he hasn't planned this, that he only thought of it on the boat when he heard Tekla talking with the young men – although presumably he wasn't too happy about being referred to as an idiot in her novel.

When Gustav does indeed arrive, he finds Adolph, and proceeds to destroy first his art, then his masculinity and his relationship with Tekla – and finally the man himself. It is the terrible revenge of a jilted lover – and not, the creative team would argue, simple misogyny.

As Germaine Greer writes in her introduction to the programme for the Donmar's production of CREDITORS:

> *'No character… is allowed to rationalize or excuse, let alone explain away, the appalling deeds and words we are forced to witness, as helpless and appalled as children listening to their parents fighting. Because nothing is explained and right is on nobody's side, we find ourselves watching a conflict as bruising and meaningless as a street fight between hooligans. The fact of the conflict is lifted out of its context so that it becomes monumental, mythic… The characters don't argue; they use words like clubs. Nobody wins; everybody loses.'*

## Discussion point

In rehearsals, Abbey Wright said:

> *'The back story was all worked out for each character – for example the children mentioned in the play. The company decided that they were all real, reflecting Strindberg's own three children with Siri, and we worked out when they were born, when they were fostered and when they died. The interesting thing is why the couple would have given away their children'.*

- What do you think the children symbolize in the play? Why do Adolph and Tekla have them fostered?

section 6

# The text in performance

## Style and Design

The creative team have decided to keep the play in its setting of 1888. However, they have stipulated certain touches to ensure a closer link with a modern audience, which includes the absence of wigs.

There is virtually no music or sound, other than the most subtle of faintly heard noises, most effectively the sound of footsteps of Gustav in the first scene and Tekla approaching in the second scene – the sound so weighted with portent, it is almost unbearable to hear.

Gustav controls this miniature world, and so it is he who opens and closes the play – he opens the doors and shutters at the beginning and positions the crutches; and he leaves Tekla and Adolph in the room at the end.

### Discussion Point

- What were your first impressions when you walked into the theatre and saw the set?
- Why is the play set by water? What is the significance of the hotel room?
- How has the designer worked with these ideas? How has he invoked a Swedish aesthetic?
- What is the significance of the two sofas on either side of the room?

### Practical Exercise

Imagine you are directing a production of the play and have decided on a modern staging.

Working in pairs, discuss:

- How would this impact on the play – are the themes modern, would the characters make the same choices?
- How would you work with the designer?
- What choices would you make regarding the costumes, furniture, lighting, sound, music?
- Make some sketches of your ideas.

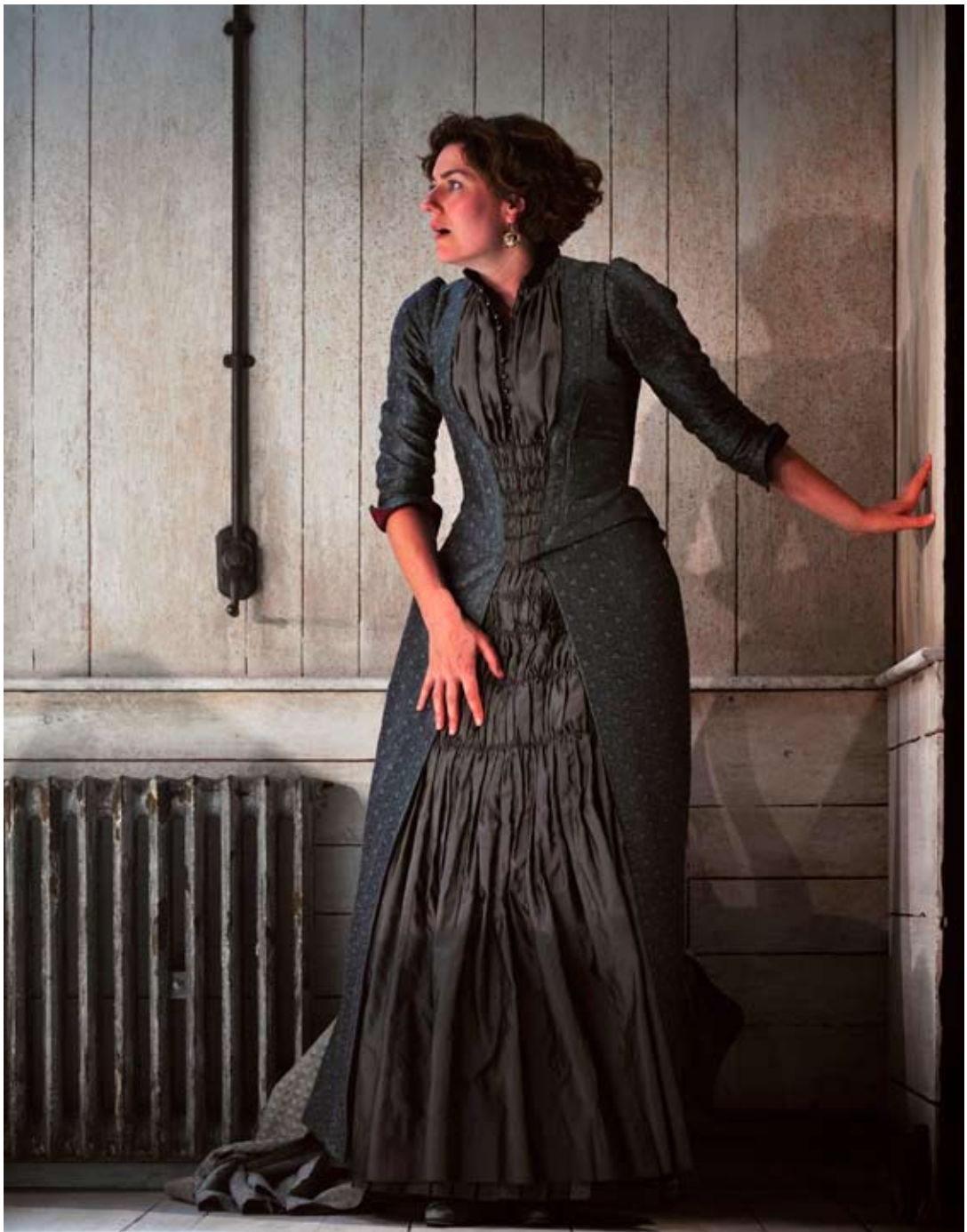
# The Donmar production: Thoughts from Anna Chancellor

## (TEKLA) and Abbey Wright (Assistant Director)

Pre-rehearsal conversation with Anna Chancellor

**What made you decide to choose this part? What attracted you to it? What will you find difficult to play?**

When I'm considering a role, I would first of all think, "can I do it? Can I hear my voice in that or have I got something that I can bring to it? Does it excite me? Does it interest me? Is the writing good?" Then I think of the play and the production as a whole and consider it along those lines.



At the same time, I think choosing a role takes a leap of faith. You never know how it's going to turn out. I have to trust my instincts and I go on a sort of hunch and it's mainly about how much I would enjoy it.

With CREDITORS I knew pretty much immediately – I read it once and then called the director Alan [Rickman], quite soon afterwards. I thought it was like a psychological thriller and I said that to Alan but I don't know if he agreed with me!

**What was your initial response to the key themes and ideas that the play raises (i.e. what is the 'debt' we should expect to be collected from our emotional 'creditors')? In what way does this relate to society today?**

I think CREDITORS is a really interesting premise for a play, with the idea that nothing is freely given. When people start falling out, we go over in our heads what we've done for each other and I think it's a very human quality to keep stock of what you've given. Once you're out for revenge, that stock-taking becomes very rigorous – you feel that Strindberg has really been there and experienced that. In this play, it's interesting the way the characters react to love – it's as though, if they're not feeling, they're not loving; their love is without any responsibility or maturity.

**How will you approach researching and rehearsing the role of Tekla?**

When I'm researching the role of Tekla I will watch the films of Ingmar Bergman, whom I love, and I might weigh that up by reading some rather obvious American psychological books on relationships. I'm going to take the very modern view that Americans are so good at – rather practical human psychology, which I think is slightly 'deadening' and not that artistic. And then I'll look at the Nordic, romantic, off-the-wall version. I'll read a book about Strindberg by Rebecca West and I will listen to some music. I will also read a literal translation of the play – I'm always interested in the different translations that exist.

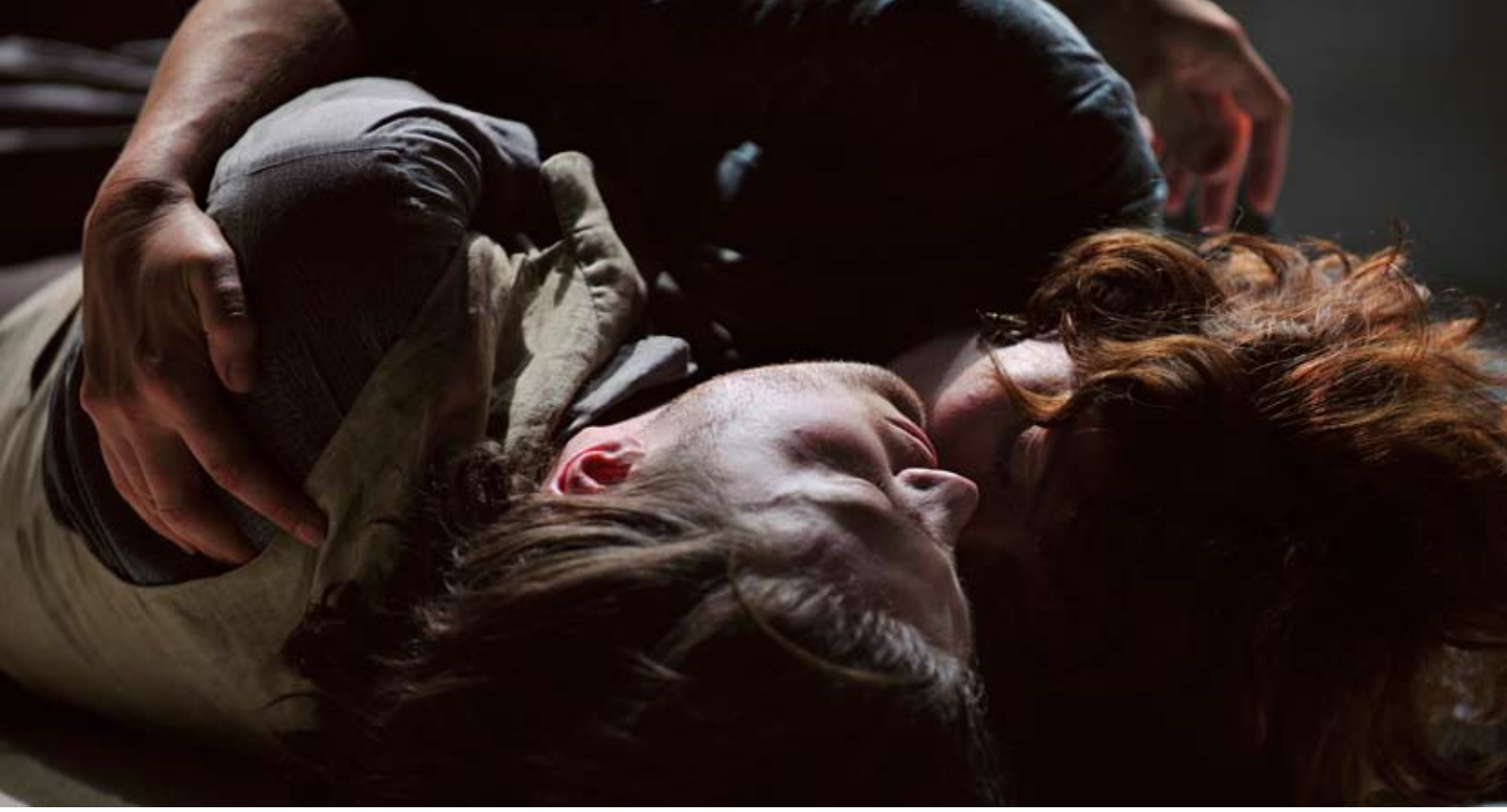
When I rehearse, I think that I tend to just jump off the cliff, see what happens and grab the branches as I'm going down. And sometimes I misfire and slip through. I also like going back to those things I used to do at drama school – copying animals or people walking down the street – building a physical approach to your character and then seeing what the inner approach would be. I like the idea of working from the outside-in before working out the details of it.

**Tell us a little bit about your character, Tekla.**

I think Tekla is very vain. She loves in a very childish, human, unevolved way. So it's all about how people make her feel so when she sees her first husband again, she falls completely into the trap with a little bit of flattery I can relate to her vanity.

**CREDITORS is directed by Alan Rickman, who is also well known as an actor, what are the advantages of being directed by another actor?**

I think an actor can bring a lot to the role of directing because it's always good knowing someone's experience. I heard a programme about medical intensive care rescue helicopters, who have to work in extremely tight teams so no second can be wasted and part of their training is that they have to do everyone else's job in their team of four. They obviously don't fly the helicopter, but they have to sit with the pilot and know exactly what the pilot is going through. I don't think that people work like this enough in England; I believe in job swapping. But at the same time I think some actors do not make good directors because they can get frustrated – they're prone to giving line readings but I know Alan isn't like that.



## Abbey Wright, Assistant Director, talks about rehearsals for CREDITORS:

'The work is quite intense as the play is effectively three two-handers, and a lot of the dialogue is taking you to places bordering on insanity!

The exploration of the text is fascinating. We had David (*Greig*) with us for the first couple of days and worked through, negotiating between his version and the literal in certain sections. David's view of the play was really interesting as he spoke of his own struggle with Strindberg and how he resisted being like him and going to the most frightening areas of his own sexual psyche but how he ultimately saw the play as redemptive, containing the hope that humans could behave better/differently/more kindly to one another in his devastating portrait of the damage we can do to each other. As Gustav says, "men have a thousand means with which to hurt each other".

Anna is wonderful and unpredictable and vital as Tekla, and Owen is incredibly moving as Gustav – the two big discoveries of the day being that Gustav has no home (ie – is literally homeless) and has no plan but invents his moves in the moment. Tom is a very sensuous actor and is working to balance Adolph's innocence and emotional availability with the male force of his sexuality. Alan is fantastic. He is very open and inclusive and challenges anything that is lazy or comfortable or non-specific. He has huge integrity in what he does. Already the piece is coming across as something dangerous, alive and intensely private. Observing it, you feel prurient; as though you're overseeing something you shouldn't be.

It is a very pure play, so intimate that the audience should feel this sense of prurience, of being a voyeur into someone else's life. And yet, this is also cathartic – the levels of insanity that the characters each reflect our true inner selves in relationships; something Strindberg was courageous enough to explore in himself and reflect back to us – a level of obsessive love, of wanting to possess someone, of secret sexual desires, of jealousy and revenge and wanting to punish and destroy your rival – all things that are not spoken about in our 'politically correct' world, where we are all grown up and mature about this. But scratch the surface and these seething, raging desires have us in their grip, and it is this unflinching honesty in Strindberg's writing that makes the play so gripping and timeless.'

section 7

# Practical exploration of the play

## Extracts from the three scenes

In groups, read through the following scenes.

**EXTRACT FROM SCENE ONE:**

**GUSTAV** Apparently her first novel was based on her ex-husband.

**ADOLPH** Apparently.

**GUSTAV** Did you ever meet him? They say he was something of a fool.

**ADOLPH** I never met him. When she and I got to know each other he was off travelling somewhere. But if the book's anything to go by, then he sounds like he was a complete and utter idiot.

And I think we can be sure the book's an accurate portrait.

**GUSTAV** It must be

But then why would a girl like her decide to marry a complete and utter idiot like him?

**ADOLPH** Because she didn't know what he was really like. Of course, you never do know what a person's really like until after you're married to them.

**GUSTAV** No indeed.

That's why one ought to marry anyone one hasn't already been married to – at least once.

That way there's no surprises.

A bit of a tyrant, then, was he – this husband of her's?

**ADOLPH** That's what she says.

**GUSTAV** But then – most husbands are, aren't they?

You must crack the whip a bit yourself?

**ADOLPH** Me?

**GUSTAV** A jealous man like you.

**ADOLPH** Not at all. I let her come and go exactly as she pleases.

**GUSTAV** Well, you have to let her 'come and go', don't you. It's not as if you could physically lock her up. But you're not telling me you like it when she spends a night away from you?

**ADOLPH** No, I don't like that.

**GUSTAV** Exactly – and, to be honest, you would cut a bit of a ridiculous figure if you did like it.

**ADOLPH** Would I? Is it so ridiculous for a man to trust his wife?

**GUSTAV** I'm afraid it is.

The last person a man should trust is his wife. Everybody knows that.

**ADOLPH** But –

Ridiculous?

Do you really mean – ?

Are you telling me you think I cut a ridiculous figure?

Do you think people think – are you saying people say – ?

**GUSTAV** Don't upset yourself. You don't want to bring on another attack.

- How does Strindberg view these men? Is he sympathetic towards them? What are their strengths? What are their weaknesses?

Refer back to the earlier exercise on each character and integrate this information in your assessment.

- Make an image of the relationship between them in terms of status – how does this move and change over this extract.
- Now try staging the scene with one person acting as director, thinking particularly about where the characters stand in relation to one another and when or if they move towards each other or away from each other.

## EXTRACT FROM SCENE TWO

*Tekla enters*

**TEKLA** Here you are.

*Tekla kisses him.*

*Adolph relaxes with her, kisses her back.*

**ADOLPH** Kisses? Anyone would think you'd been up to mischief?

**TEKLA** I don't know about mischief, but I have been spending lots and lots of our money.

**ADOLPH** You've had a good time, then?

**TEKLA** A very good time.

Not at the meeting. That was completely merde – as they say in Paris – but no just… wandering – it was lovely.

Anyway, never mind me, what about Little Brother? What's he been up to while Big Sister has been away gallivanting?

**ADOLPH** I've just been here. Very boring.

**TEKLA** No one to play with?

**ADOLPH** No one at all.

A moment

**TEKLA** Was someone here just now?

**ADOLPH** Someone here? No.

**TEKLA** The chair's warm.

**ADOLPH** Is it?

**TEKLA** Are you sure you haven't had any visitors?

**ADOLPH** Me? No.

**TEKLA** Maybe you've had lady visitors? While I've been away?

**ADOLPH** You don't really think that's likely, do you?

**TEKLA** Look at you blushing! I think Little Brother is tricking me. Come on. Come to your playmate and tell her everything.

*She draws him to her.*

*He puts his head on her lap.*

**ADOLPH** You're a devil, you do know that, don't you?

**TEKLA** Am I? I'm not aware of it if I am.

**ADOLPH** You never analyse your actions?

**TEKLA** On the contrary, I talk about myself all the time. I'm very self centred.

- The so called 'New Woman', economically independent and sexually assertive was a key figure at the turn of the century.
- How does Strindberg depict Tekla? Does he admire her? Despise her? Laugh at her?
- How does Adolph feel about her in this scene, given what has happened in the previous scene?
- Make an image of their relationship – how does this change over the course of this extract?

## EXTRACT FROM SCENE THREE

*A moment of remembering between them.*

**TEKLA** You've changed.

**GUSTAV** Have I?

**TEKLA** You have.

**GUSTAV** Not you.
You're as beautiful as ever, Tekla.
In fact you look younger. If that were possible.
Excuse me.
I didn't mean to intrude on your happiness.
I should never have –
Goodnight.

**TEKLA** Wait.
Stay.
Just for a moment.
You don't think – it's not improper for us to talk, is it?

**GUSTAV** No.
Unless it might upset you – I think perhaps –
But look, it doesn't matter what I think, does it? It's
What you think that's important.
Would you like me to stay?

**TEKLA** Yes.

**GUSTAV** Then I'll stay.

**TEKLA** You can be so delicate, Gustav. You always spoke so delicately. I don't think you could ever upset me.

**GUSTAV** That's a kind thing to say.
But I'm not sure your husband would feel quite so kindly towards me if he were to find me talking with you.

**TEKLA** I don't know. We were just speaking about you – only a moment ago – and he was very – sympathetic.

**GUSTAV** Was he?
It just goes to show.
We cut our names in the tree, eventually bark grows over it.
Even hate can't stay engraved on a man's mind forever.

- When is Gustav lying and when is he telling the truth in this scene?
- How does Tekla feel towards him?
- Get into groups of four.

  Two people create a dance or movement piece between Gustav and Tekla, showing their steps towards each other and their movements away.

  Perform this, while the other two people read the text.
- Thinking about the characters across the play:

  Look back again at the three characters – what evidence can you find of these characters as "split and vacillating, a mixture of the old and new"

  How does Strindberg show the characters in this contradictory state? When and how do they contradict themselves? What feelings does Tekla have towards Adolph and Gustav at certain points in the play.

  And the men, how would you describe their feelings towards Tekla? How and why do they change?

## Language exercise:

> *'In modernist art and literature, the medium is as important as the message, the gaps, puns, evasions, and silences as important as what is actually being said.'*
>
> **Online quote from Bruce Thompson, University of California, Course lecture, Modern European Intellectual History**

Look back again at all the extracts, and note where Strindberg is using language in this way.

> *I have made an attempt; if I have failed then there's plenty of time to try again.*
>
> **Strindberg, from the preface to Miss Julie**

section 8

# Reading, Bibiliogrpahy and Footnotes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## About the Donmar Warehouse

The Donmar Warehouse is an intimate not for profit 250-seat theatre located in the heart of London's West End. The theatre attracts almost 100,000 people to its productions a year. Under the Artistic Direction of Michael Grandage and his predecessor, Sam Mendes, the theatre has presented some of London's most memorable theatrical experiences as well as garnered critical acclaim at home and abroad. With a diverse artistic policy that includes new writing, contemporary reappraising of European classics, British and American drama and music theatre, the Donmar has created a reputation for artistic excellence over the last 12 years and has won 30 Olivier Awards, 14 Critics' Circle Awards, 15 Evening Standard Awards and 13 Tony Awards for Broadway transfers.

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