August Strindberg’s Haunted Life

August Strindberg (1849-1912) may not be well known outside of the world of theatrical production, but his innovations are known even to non-theater goers. He was a man of many interests and talents and an author with an uncommon range of styles, influenced by a variety of other authors and philosophers and influencing many more over the next centuries.

Aside from being known as a landmark figure in both Swedish literature and the modern theater, he is also recognized as a pioneer of Expressionism on stage, in photography, and in painting. Other interests he pursued include modern languages, telegraphy, chemistry, and alchemy (the mystical practice of attempting to turn base metals into gold).

Strindberg wrote over sixty plays between 1869 and 1909 (that’s almost double the number of plays that Shakespeare wrote and in nearly half the time). In the beginning of 1907 Strindberg wrote four “chamber plays.” In the previous November, German director Max Reinhardt had opened a small theater to provide intimate performances for the audiences who sat in close proximity to the stage. At the end of 1907, Strindberg founded his own small theater to showcase his chamber plays and called it the “Intimate Theater.” Through this theater and the plays he wrote, he innovated multiple theater techniques and devices still used today. In his theater, he eliminated overdone makeup on his actors and the footlights at the bottom of the stage -- both of which gave an unnatural appearance to the characters in his plays. In contrast, he also experimented with visual effects and began the use of expressionist dream sequences.

Strindberg led a difficult and at times dark life. He suffered three failed marriages from which he lost custody of his children, he spent some time in an asylum (during which time he wrote his book *Inferno*), and he died from a bad case of pneumonia and what is now surmised to be stomach cancer. His emotionally turbulent life facilitated the perfect environment for both
Naturalistic and stylized, Expressionistic pieces that dealt with not only matters of spirituality and society, but with the nature of humanity and the soul in this life and the next.

Image from Ingmar Bergman’s 1973 production of *The Ghost Sonata*, from www.ingmarbergman.se

There is no way to prepare an audience for *The Ghost Sonata*, and no way to tell them what to think or how to feel while experiencing everything that the play exposes them to. This play is over a century old, but it can still haunt and provoke audiences to come. To say it is an unusual play is an understatement. It is bizarre in structure, in appearance, and in nature. That is precisely what makes this play so timeless and so powerful. It is not of this world, so it is equally accessible to everyone who sees it. What is particularly extraordinary about this particular production of *The Ghost Sonata* is that, with its intimate staging, it is being staged and performed in a way similar to how it would have been performed a century ago. In a way, this production is a kind of séance. Over the next few hours, this audience will experience a haunting re-enactment of supernatural events from another dimension, and no one can say what will happen.