

## ***Miss Julie* walked on Santa Monica Boulevard**

By Panos

November appeared to be the Scandinavian month in Los Angeles: the LA Philharmonic presented Sibelius, Grieg and Nielsen; *Mamma Mia*, playing at the luxurious Ahmanson Theater, used music by the Swedish pop group ABBA and the theater group Volta produced and performed *Miss Julie*, by Strindberg. But if *Mamma Mia* is wildly advertised and Sibelius with his *violin concerto* and *valse triste* is quite well established in the world repertoires, Strindberg (1849-1912) and his masterpiece *Miss Julie* passed unnoticed. And what a pity. I have to say that the quality of the performance was remarkable.

Beyond the end of a long row of shiny cafés and stores on the endless Santa Monica Boulevard emerge the new acting talents of Hollywood, but different then the glamour this art is associated with. Here we see shabby small rooms, stairs, which give you the feeling of being in a scene of *Streetcar Named Desire*. In fact, if there were a streetcar on Santa Monica Boulevard, which, by the way, is not such a bad idea, it should be called Desire because only love can survive so much ascetism. The Complex of sketchy theaters offered me an unexpected sensational quality of acting, setting, and dress in the presentation of a complex and even today shocking with its naturalistic honesty play such as *Miss Julie*. During an uninterrupted hour and a half we were transported to the late 1800s on the most sunny, pagan and joyful day of the Nordic year, Midsummer. We were not more than 10 souls in the audience, the actors - three and the scene had 4 chairs and a table, but in a blink in front of our eyes we had Strindberg's Sweden before the fall of the 'pyramids' and in the dawn of egalitarian movement. The young American actors retold the dynamics of a whole era of dramatic, but hidden, change of social paradigm with maturity and believability which expresses both their individual and collective talents and the sensitive and very serious loving care of the Slavic

director, Pavel Cerny. Although the Swedish language gives much more melodic and 'slow' impression the American version and the combination of types of actors translates not only linguistic but cultural issues. It is not unimaginable even today to see an American Miss Julie and let's say a Mexican servant. Miss Julie, the unfortunate, perplexed and confused human being she is, so powerfully, passionately and sensitively expressed by Jenifer Nall is in Strindberg's eyes and in history the crack in the new social landscape of a growing feministic world: a young woman who had no chance to enjoy her femininity but inherited a feminist sense of non-belonging without understanding it, without being able to control it. The ruin of the monarchic pyramids was indeed conducted in a cold-warm *pas-de-deux*: the ambitious young servants and the confused young aristocrats, the power seeking men and women. The director has chosen a very ascetic presentation which fits perfectly the loaded with images and deep character-studies text by Strindberg.

Most impressive for me is the love and the serious respect for their art the actors and the director demonstrate. I saw the last performance of a 6 week show, and it was sad. First we were all transported from our chairs to the drama of one midsummer night when the Swedish souls were glowing and then the actors suddenly left, were not even called twice to the scene, and that was it. The director came and removed the count's riding boots, the only presence he so cleverly offered to the missing and falling male aristocracy, the lights coming out of a kind of cardboard hole went off, it became suddenly grey and late and it was raining and everybody had left. At the door I met the young Supatra Hanna, who played Christina, the female loyal, hard-working, religious servant, who unlike *Miss Julie*, knew both her place on earth and what men are like. When I went out I saw the powerful embodiment of the Swedish new generation of daring and complex men, Jon, played by Robert Straley who was at that point smoking in the rain with a friend. It is truly unbelievable that such young people can give such depth of

character and add even more power to it. He was silent, tired. His character was so complex, a man who wants to fly from a cage and can not, a man who is born in solidarity with his cast but whose mind is like a bird, a man who is in the position to define a new concept of a man. Robert Straley got it all, and added even more to the character, more energy, more rigor, more articulation, even more humor and male tenderness. No huge shiny changing rooms, no flowers, no standing applause and cheerful interviews, as it was after the passionate performance of the equally young and talented violinist Midori and her equally expressive interpretation of Sibelius' violin concerto.

The play and all the work related to it felt like a sand painting blown by the wind. The ephemeris of the art is the actual practice of devotion to a higher order of human state of soul, mind and body. This performance of *Miss Julie* was an amazing example of love and dedication to a great art, which I dare to believe will be revived, there at the Complex theater station of the streetcar named Desire on Santa Monica Boulevard, 2002. Let us hope that group Volta ([www.thevolta.com](http://www.thevolta.com)) is not going to be discouraged and will continue their beautiful work. Early next year Pavel Cherny will be directing *Nathan the Wise* by Gottfried Lessing. What an excellent choice in times where we do need to be reminded of the concept 'universal brotherhood':

#### NATHAN

We did not choose a nation for ourselves.

Are we our nations? What's a nation then?

Were Jews and Christians such, e'er they were men?

And have I found in thee one more, to whom

It is enough to be a man?

(from *Nathan the Wise*)