



[Miss Julie](#) by August Strindberg
[Royal Exchange](#), Manchester

Reviewed by [Bill Hughes](#) May 2012

Sarah Frankcom, in directing Strindberg's *Miss Julie* at the Royal Exchange, resists the impulse so often indulged by the company to take classic drama out of its context and make crass points on twenty-first-century issues. And, given Strindberg's confrontation with class and feminism, this would have been easy to do.

Strindberg's play was written in 1888, on the cusp of massive social change - class barriers

were dissolving, religious certainties collapsing, the Woman Question was in the air (especially as voiced by Strindberg's *bête noir*, the progressive Ibsen). The new form of naturalist drama and the formal experiments of Strindberg create a new drama appropriate for the age. This involved such techniques as doing away with act and scene divisions, for instance, having actors perform mundane tasks to ensure a continuous flow of dramatic action while significant events take place off stage.

The production deviates from this with a flawed interlude where time is suspended and realism eschewed for a masque-like love triangle enacted between peasants, singing to a violin that seemed to symbolise eternal conflicts and resolutions between the sexes. The actual text maintains the continuous narrative, with peasants invading the kitchen from the Midsummer festivities that have provided the backdrop, dancing, drinking, and singing a bawdy folk song that is aimed at Jean and Julie's transgression, and urges them further into tragedy through its scandal-mongering.

Strindberg engages with another contemporary strand in naturalism—the determination of character by the weight of culture or even heredity. The bleak fatalism whereby the characters cannot escape their class and sexual identities seems to suggest that determinism, yet the performance brought out brilliantly the bad faith and evasion of responsibility that is in the text and which undermines that current.

