



MISS JULIE

By August Strindberg. A new version by David Eldridge,
from a literal translation by Charlotte Barslund

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID ELDRIDGE

Rory Mullarkey, the Royal Exchange Theatre's current Pearson Playwright in-residence, who is also translating and adapting THE CHERRY ORCHARD by Chekhov for the Royal Exchange, discusses with David Eldridge the process of creating a new version of MISS JULIE.

RORY: How did this adaptation come about?

DAVID: Basically it began with an Ibsen play I did a new version of for the Exchange in 2010 (THE LADY FROM THE SEA). Sarah Frankcom directed that too and we had a really good experience on it. She told me the Theatre wanted to do MISS JULIE and that Maxine Peake was going to play her and asked if I'd be interested in doing the version.

RORY: That's quite a while ago now. How did the practicalities work after that?

DAVID: I've done three Ibsen plays before and the translator, Charlotte Barslund, has done the literal translations of all them. I find her literals very clear to work from. So the only practical thing, from my point of view, was to get Charlotte to work on it.

RORY: What is a literal translation? Does it still make sense?

DAVID: Yes, it makes sense. Its main function is to give me a very accurate picture in English, of the Swedish play. Sometimes if there are references that are oblique or obscure then Charlotte provides a clear footnote for me. But the main thing, I suppose, is that the very act of translation renders the energy of the text quite descriptive; it feels like it's written with a descriptive energy rather than with a sense of dramatic action.

There are other things I do with the text but the main thing I feel I have to do is write anactable version. It's got to be the actor's version of the dancer's sprung dance floor; it's got to go at the speed of an actor's thought and exist on the moment. The literal translations are excellent and clear but it's not Charlotte's job to do that – her job is to describe what the original is in English and inevitably that descriptive energy feeds into that.

RORY: Do you feel that you stay quite close to the literal translation? Do you think your job is to try and keep a sense of the literal, or do you find yourself moving away from it sometimes in order to make it clearer for an English audience, or because the character is taking you there?

DAVID: I'm very loyal to the play but not always loyal to the literal. If I can split the difference there. It depends upon the play. For example, when I did THE WILD DUCK and JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN for the Donmar Warehouse the energy of those plays felt very much like the characters spoke often in clear thoughts and full sentences, whereas in THE LADY FROM THE SEA the characters kind of search for things in the language all the time and sometimes cut each other off. Certainly on MISS JULIE with Jean it was important for me to find a slight vernacular because of the class differences in the play, but not to go for something that was really geographically specific.

Some writers work on classic plays and provide a more modern adaptation. I guess with an adaptation you really are starting to be much freer with it. But what I'm interested in with this work on these great plays is to write a new version that communicates in a very detailed way what Ibsen and Strindberg wrote.

RORY: In terms of culturally and where it's set do you try and use a language that has a specific English time period?

DAVID: I've never done that. I know writers that have done that. I remember hearing Nicholas Wright speak about a version of JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN he'd done for the National Theatre and he said that he read a lot of Henry James to help him find a way in. I'm very particular how I do it, actually. I like to respond in as pure a way as possible to Charlotte's literal translation in the first instance. I think you need to watch out for anachronisms, but for me, the language they speak is Strindberg. When I first did this sort of work I did quite a lot of research around the play and looked at other people's versions before I really got into mine. It did my head in. It made me feel really inhibited and worried all the time I was getting it right or wrong. So what I did on THE WILD DUCK was I got rid of all that and just sat with the literal translation in front of me. What I try and do is respond in the moment to the literal for the first draft and only really go away and look things up if I'm really stuck. Once I've got that first draft that's the point at which I'll look at other versions and think about it in a more general point of view of the Dramatist.

RORY: With the first draft do you go all the way through, almost as if you're writing the play?

DAVID: Yes, a bit. I'm sort of writing/rewriting on the moment. I think it's that thing where the characters need to exist on the moment to be inhabitable properly by the actors and that's really important for me. As with an original play as well, I don't get to the end and say 'oh that's the first draft done'. I go back over it and go back over it so by the time a theatre looks at it I'll have been through it a dozen times.

RORY: Given that you knew it was for this theatre space and Sarah and Maxine do you feel that this influenced how you wrote?

DAVID: I think the main influence was knowing Maxine was going to play Miss Julie because when I've seen MISS JULIE before the character tends to be portrayed by quite gamine, upper-middle-class actresses and Maxine has a different and exciting energy and comes from a different place as an actor. I had to get rid of that received image of Miss Julie and start to think about her in a different way. I thought about Maxine's sensuality as an actress. Max has got really good shoulders and a really good neck. I think there's a line in MISS JULIE where Jean says she's a handsome looking woman and that was a great way in to thinking about the character. I really like to write for particular actors.

I didn't really think about the RET space because it didn't feel particularly relevant to me to doing this version. When I did THE WILD DUCK at the Donmar it was very important to think in the context of that space because we physically couldn't do a reveal of the attic in the same way and we needed to make the cast smaller. With this here, it's three people in a room and that was where my focus was.

RORY: Do you continue to work on the play in rehearsals or is it set as a text now?

DAVID: It's not a kind of wholesale rewriting that goes on this sort of job, I think. It's much more about whether that line doesn't work, or that word is right, so it's much more on a micro level. Sometimes you'll get things that don't sound anachronistic on the page suddenly feel a bit too modern when actors play it. I had a good instance of that on THE WILD DUCK where I'd used the word 'sofa'. When we heard it we suddenly felt like we were at Ikea. We researched the word 'sofa' and it's actually much older than we'd given it credit for. It was around at the time of the play being written but we still decided to change it because it somehow took you to another place. Then there's the usual things you get on any play, albeit a new version or adaptation, where for the most part it will all sound great in the mouths of the actors but

inevitably you do get lines here and there that maybe don't sound quite right or sound a bit awkward.

RORY: So it's different to being in the rehearsal room with one of your own plays?

DAVID: Yes. I feel like I'm Strindberg's representative so you have a different relationship to the actors and the material. I find that when I'm in rehearsal for an original play of mine what the writer says has a huge amount of power in the room. As a writer in the room on a new version or adaptation it's not my play, it's Strindberg's, so it's not the same. I feel much more part of the team that are putting on the play rather than the person who's sort of at the centre of it all. I also feel like I'm Strindberg's defender. The person who's got his corner.

RORY: You've done Ibsen and Strindberg and they were famously antagonistic towards each other. How do you feel your relationship is towards them having adapted them both?

DAVID: It's interesting. MISS JULIE is called a naturalistic tragedy and it's a proper attempt at psychological naturalism because the characters psychologically and sometimes emotionally, do what living, breathing human beings do and what characters often don't do in plays, which is that they jump around; thought processes get started and then don't get picked up. In Ibsen there's much more of a linear psychological narrative that's pulsing through the play. In Strindberg that's just not there, it's much more real. In that sense I think Strindberg's got more in common with Beckett than Ibsen, actually. If you think of a play like HAPPY DAYS thoughts are zinging all over the place. Obviously, MISS JULIE's not quite like that but you do get the jumps. You think, 'Wow, hang on a minute – we were there... now we're there!' But that's actually what people are much more like. That's what this conversation's like. However much you're guiding it it's going off here, there and everywhere.

RORY: Have you found that doing adaptations has fed into your own writing?

DAVID: It's too soon to say about Strindberg

because I've not written anything new since doing MISS JULIE, but certainly the Ibsens, yes. I think I've got a lot more interested in plot, for example, and I've discovered an interest in form and using it in an expressive way. I like the idea that Ibsen's world deals with big, political ideas via metaphor as well.

RORY: Does working on something like this give you ideas about what you might want to do?

DAVID: I'm not sure about whether it gives me ideas but what it does do is replenish the well. You're constantly going to the well as a writer and you don't want your source of ideas, inspiration and energy to dry up. What working on these great plays does for me is that in the end they give back much more than I put in to them.

RORY: Which other plays you would like to adapt?

DAVID: I'd love to have a go at all of Chekhov's major plays, and I know that you're doing one Rory. It's a tricky play to do but I've always had half an eye on LITTLE EYOLF and I love THE MASTER BUILDER, of course both by Ibsen.

MISS JULIE runs at the Royal Exchange Theatre from 11 April - 12 May 2012.

Box Office: 0161 833 9833

royalexchange.co.uk/missjulie

Introducing MISS JULIE

Tuesday 24 April, 10am – 12pm

Pre-Show Workshop for schools, community groups and individuals who have booked to see the show.

£8 / £6 (all concessions & group leaders);

Book via Box Office on 0161 833 9833

Between The Lines Adult Playreading and Discussion Group

Wednesday 9 May, 11am—1pm and 2.15 – 4.15pm

To accompany MISS JULIE we will be reading from AFTER MISS JULIE by Patrick Marber
£6; Book via Box Office on 0161 833 9833