

**Roundabout Theatre Company**

**THE  
FATHER**

**Family Series  
Study Guide**

# THE FATHER

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## ABOUT STRINDBERG

Johan August Strindberg was born on January 22, 1849, the fourth child in a family that grew to contain eight children. It was just before August's birth that his father went bankrupt, plunging the family into a financial and emotional depression. These circumstances proved to have a great effect on the outlook and disposition of the young Johan August.

August was an unusually sensitive child who took even the smallest misadventure to heart. He felt neglected, unloved, ignored, abused, misjudged and treated with dishonesty by the adults who controlled his life. At the same time that he resented and hated his parents he also loved them and was obsessed by the hope of gaining their approval.

According to his many writings about his life, August Strindberg was never able to gain his parent's approval. Nor was he ever able to overcome the painful memories of his relationship with them. His mother died when he was just entering adolescence. Despite his troubled relationship with her he never recovered from this loss.

One of Strindberg's lifelong terrors was that the anger he felt toward the injustice of his life might eventually cause him to go insane. Strindberg read books about madness, he studied psychology, consulted physicians and kept detailed notes on his experiences in order to keep track of the difference between reality and delusion.

Strindberg was plagued at different times throughout his life by the paranoid idea that the world was against him, that he alone understood the universe and for this he was hated, and that he could destroy people with

his thoughts. Perhaps most painful was the constant nagging fear that the women he loved most deeply were trying to drive him insane, were unfaithful to him, passed other men's children off as his, and in general did everything possible to mock and destroy him.

Strindberg was married three times. All three marriages ended in divorce. All three wives were strong willed, independent women who expected to continue to work even after they were married. In each marriage Strindberg believed he had found the woman "who would make him whole." But in each marriage Strindberg came to fear and finally hate the woman to whom he had given all his love and trust. It was as if he made each of his wives his mother, hoping that each new mother would heal his wounds. Of course, these women were not his mother and while they loved him, they could not erase his memories and his fears.

Strindberg was married to Siri Von Essen from 1877 to 1892. With Siri, Strindberg had three children. From 1893 to 1894 Strindberg was married to the journalist Frida Uhl. Frida was so much younger than Strindberg that it was necessary for her to get her father's permission for them to marry legally. Frida bore one child during her marriage to Strindberg. Then in 1901, at the age of fifty-two, Strindberg married the ambitious young Norwegian actress, Harriet Bosse. This marriage ended in 1906 and brought to Strindberg one more child. All of Strindberg's children were raised by their mothers and while Strindberg felt it was correct for a child to remain with the mother, he resented losing them enormously.

Before he became a writer, Strindberg worked as a teacher and found he disliked the strict discipline, he studied to enter medical school and was rejected, he trained as an actor and was never cast in a play and then, in 1869 he

began writing plays. While he loved the thrill of dramatic creation, these early plays earned Strindberg only a small amount of attention and absolutely no money. Consequently, he had to turn his pen to the work of journalism. Then in 1874 Strindberg became assistant librarian in the Royal Library of Stockholm. Gaining this position was a tremendous breakthrough for the twenty-five year old Strindberg because he had not completed any university degrees despite the great number of fields to which he had turned his hand.

While work at the Royal Library did provide Strindberg with some amount of financial security, his emotional state continued to swing up and down. It was during this period that Strindberg turned once again to the work of playwriting.

Throughout the emotional turmoil that continued throughout his life, Strindberg maintained a steady and voluminous outpouring of creative works. He wrote plays, novels, essays and autobiographies. He expounded on political, psychological and scientific subjects relevant to his day. At first a strong advocate of woman's equality, Strindberg came to believe that women were too dangerous to be given more power in society.

While some of his writings brought him fame, renown and respect others caused pain and public humiliation. He wrote a book in two parts called *MARRIAGE* that was so negative regarding the relationship between the sexes, in addition to being blasphemous, that he was brought to trial for expounding ideas that mocked the Lord and the Church.

Having spent a short period of his youth studying to become a physician Strindberg was fond of seeing himself as a scientist. He believed that the future of literature was doomed if it did not itself become a science. The writer would become useless if his work

did not serve to increase humanity's knowledge and understanding of itself.

In addition to seeing himself as a "scientific" writer, Strindberg saw himself as a real scientist, a chemist. Just as his marriage to Frida Uhl was ending, Strindberg descended into a period of his life he came to refer to as "the inferno". It was during this time that he stopped writing and devoted himself entirely to scientific experiments. Shut up in his apartments, he spent months trying to prove that sulfur is not an element, but a compound of carbon, oxygen and hydrogen. He also devoted himself to confirming that base metal could be transformed into gold.

Conducting these experiments Strindberg destroyed the skin on his hands and arms. He lost contact with his friends and colleagues. During this period he seemed to lose almost all contact with reality. When he finally emerged from his laboratory he believed that he had proven that sulfur was a compound and that he was almost at the point where he could turn lead into gold. The heartbreaking irony is that Strindberg's delusions were most probably deepened and aggravated by the fumes he was breathing as he conducted his experiments.

Interestingly, Sir Isaac Newton, one of the most brilliant scientists of all time, also experimented with turning base metal into gold. During his experiments he suffered prolonged periods of delusions and paranoia. Strindberg probably experienced the same effects as Newton, but over and above his normal sense of paranoia and persecution it was probably worse.

Strindberg spent much of his life traveling and living all over Europe. While he loved his native Sweden he felt alien and disliked in his own country. He corresponded and visited with the greatest minds of his time and the

stormy nature of his artistic creativity mirrored the transition of his society from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. While he may not have been able to turn mercury or lead into gold, Strindberg was able to transform the theatre of the nineteenth century into a theatre that will travel easily into the twenty-first.

### WHERE DOES ART COME FROM?

In considering the story of Strindberg's life, described here in the barest of outlines, one may say that many children suffer unhappy childhoods, and so what makes Strindberg so special? Many men feel betrayed by their wives. Many people marry and divorce, one, two and three times. Many parents lose their children when separated from their spouse and many people have nervous breakdowns. So what is unique about Strindberg?

Strindberg is unique because of the way in which he expressed his pain and described his suffering. Instead of keeping all his thoughts inside where they would have probably driven him completely mad, he poured them out onto paper. He read what others were thinking and found the common thread joining his thoughts to current trends and new ideas.

Through the intensity of his experiences and the clarity with which he was able to describe them, Strindberg created stories that have touched people all over the world. When you see *THE FATHER* at the Roundabout you may not recognize your own family exactly, but you may recognize certain feelings and fears you, or someone you know, has experienced.

Many people suffer in silence the feelings Strindberg wrote about; others become violent, and still others may turn to drugs or

alcohol. All these responses enlarge the original suffering. Many Strindberg experts believe that, in addition to giving the world a large body of beautiful literature, Strindberg kept himself alive and sane by working his problems out in writing.

It is fascinating to consider that the experiences you have everyday, coming and going from school, from work, or from visits with your friends, could be the foundation of an interesting story. Great art is not easy to create, but the source of material is around us every day and everywhere.

### ABOUT THE TIMES

Artists are influenced by many different people and ideas. For example, the music created by the group BOYZ II MEN is influenced by the Motown sound of the 1960's. The singer Lenny Kravitz builds his sound from the rock/funk of Jimi Hendrix.

August Strindberg was also influenced by the world in which he lived. And just as audiences today can see the influences of contemporary artistic and social movements in their favorite performers, so can we see how Strindberg was affected by the thinkers, artists and movements of his day.

As a young man Strindberg spent over a year trying to gain entrance to university to become a doctor. During that time he became acquainted with the scientific method used in all experimental techniques. It was from these experiences in the laboratory that Strindberg probably developed his concept of the writer as scientist.

Strindberg lived during exciting and tumultuous intellectual times in Sweden and throughout Europe. Sweden was changing its

national constitution from a complete monarchy to a more democratic state, naturalism was becoming a vital artistic movement, the systematic study of human psychology was being created as a new science, women were agitating for greater social freedom, philosophers were beginning to question more deeply the nature of human existence and religion was no longer viewed as the only source for answers to all human and social problems. Following are brief descriptions of some of the individuals and movements known to have exerted some influence on Strindberg.

**Existentialism** is a philosophical system of thought centered on the belief that it is the responsibility of individuals to examine and understand the meaning of their own existence. Existentialism places a great burden on the individual to justify him or herself, while earlier philosophies or beliefs provide that the meaning of life can be defined by established authority figures and/or religions.

Strindberg felt strongly that the individual must justify his own life. These opinions were borne out of his own thinking and on his reading of works by Kierkegaard, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche and even Sigmund Freud. Freud's theories on the human unconscious provided Strindberg with verification of his own belief that men and women are driven by forces buried deep in their emotional history; just as he himself was driven by the demons he felt were created by his unhappy childhood.

**Naturalism, expressionism and symbolism** are artistic movements which took inspiration from the developing trends in nineteenth century science and philosophy. Naturalism attempted to reflect a scientifically accurate portrait of reality. In literature naturalism was championed by the French writer Emil Zola

and the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen. Both writers were respected for their brave and clear descriptions of real life, no matter how painful or distasteful. And both Zola and Ibsen had great respect for Strindberg's contribution to naturalist drama, especially with his play *THE FATHER*.

Expressionism and symbolism were artistic movements that developed as a response to naturalism. As Freud developed his new science of human psychology, representing what the unconscious feels or sees became more possible for visual artists and writers of the late nineteenth century. Paul Gauguin and Edvard Munch were two painters with whom Strindberg spent much time and whose visions corresponded to Strindberg's own voyage away from dramatic naturalism. While Strindberg is known only as a writer, he did at times paint in an effort to express his vision of the world.

## ABOUT THE PLAY: *THE FATHER*

Completed in 1887, *THE FATHER* is often interpreted to be Strindberg's portrait of his first marriage to Siri Von Essen. Indeed, there were many parallels in the outline of the story, and Strindberg himself admitted that he used his writing to work out the problems of his life.

During their stormy marriage Strindberg was convinced that Siri was unfaithful to him, that their children might not be his and that she was trying to drive him insane. This is very clearly the relationship Strindberg was describing when he created the characters of Laura and the Captain, the couple at the center of *THE FATHER*. Siri, and all of Strindberg's wives, suffered the pain of seeing their marriages publicly displayed in the most unflattering ways in Strindberg's plays and novels.

*THE FATHER* was published immediately after Strindberg completed the script and it was translated into Danish, German and French. It had its first production in Copenhagen in December of 1887. The play was received as the work of a genius and a second production was mounted in Strindberg's home city of Stockholm. Unfortunately the Swedish audiences were not so taken with Strindberg's genius as they were with the emotional violence depicted in the play. After nine performances *THE FATHER* was closed. Receiving widely divergent responses in the capitals of Europe, *THE FATHER* was warmly received at Andre Antoine's Theatre Libre in Paris and banned in Berlin.

Two years later, *THE FATHER* had even more critical success in Paris when it was produced at the Theatre Nouveau. On opening night the theatre was filled with the greatest artists in Europe, Paul Gauguin, the

sculptor August Rodin, the playwrights Emil Zola and Sardou. Strindberg felt as if he had finally achieved the recognition he deserved.

Unfortunately this feeling of acceptance and acclaim did not last for Strindberg. While his play was wildly successful and touring Europe, he made only three hundred francs from the entire production. He resented the profits that the producers and publishers received from his work. It was not until 1893 that *THE FATHER* was translated into English for a possible production at the newly established Independent Theatre in London. Strindberg and his wife, Frida Uhl, decided to reside in London during the rehearsal and production period for the show. Without explanation, *THE FATHER* was postponed by the producer J.T. Grein, and Strindberg was left stranded in London.

By 1908 Strindberg himself came to view *THE FATHER* as one of his worst plays. Despite the acclaim it brought to him, despite the fact that it was produced over and over again, in his later years Strindberg moved away from the naturalist movement that had so fascinated him during the middle of his career. Throughout his life, Strindberg felt that it was possible for the individual to know and convey to others the truth about his or her own life.

But he felt equally strongly that naturalism, the dramatic form he employed as a younger man, was not as effective as symbolism and expressionism, the forms he used towards the end of his career.

Emil Zola wrote the preface to an early French translation of *THE FATHER* and he gave the play his highest praise. Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher who regarded himself as the greatest mind in Europe, wrote to Strindberg that the play was truly great and represented his own

(Nietzsche's) views on love and marriage perfectly. Henrik Ibsen, the great Norwegian naturalist playwright, (against whom Strindberg felt great antagonism, coupled with envy and a sense of competition,) openly recognized the genius in *THE FATHER*; although he did not agree with the philosophy of the work.

Since its first production in 1887 *THE FATHER* has rarely been absent from a stage somewhere in the world. It is considered one of the true classics of the modern stage. You may disagree with the message Strindberg is sending, as did Ibsen, but it will be difficult to leave the theatre unaffected by the strength of his voice and vision. That is why it is a classic.

## CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

**Captain:** is the father, the head of the household, the only means of financial support for his wife, daughter, mother-in-law and household staff. According to the values of his day, the Captain is the master of all who live in his home. The Captain does not feel that he truly has that much power. His wife, Laura, feels that he does.

While the Captain earns his living in the military, he hopes some day to devote himself entirely to his scientific experiments. Unfortunately, Laura, does not understand his ambitions and finds many of his ideas and behaviors extreme and unreasonable. Laura and the Captain disagree violently over how their daughter Bertha should be raised. The Captain has decided that Bertha should be sent away to school and Laura is willing to do almost anything to keep her child with her at home.

**Svard:** functions as the Captain's personal servant.

**Nodj:** is a brutish young soldier who lives in the village. Nodj had a love affair with the Captain's housemaid, Emma, and now it has been discovered that Emma is pregnant. Nodj refuses to take responsibility for the woman or the child, claiming that it is possible that someone else is the father. Everyone knows that Nodj is the father, but none of the responsible men of the village who listen to his logic have the conviction to argue with him. While his words are obnoxious to them they have to agree that it is possible that Emma slept with someone else. The Captain is particularly disturbed by the thought that only women, who constantly deceive men, know by whom their children have been fathered.

**Pastor:** while he is Laura's brother, he is also the one in whom the Captain often confides his problems in, and fears about, his marriage. It is not until late in the play that the Pastor reveals to whom he is really loyal.

**Mother-in-law:** is Laura's mother, and though she is never seen by the audience her opinions are clearly felt by the Captain and by Laura. A Spiritualist, Laura's mother talks endlessly to her grand-daughter Bertha about ghosts and spirits, and antagonizes the Captain by blocking his desires concerning the education of his daughter.

Oddly, Strindberg has the Captain and the Pastor refer to this off-stage character as the "step-mother". While it may seem like an inconsistency on the part of the playwright, Strindberg makes sure to have the Captain repeat the appellation several times, leaving scholars puzzled as to what he may have meant by calling her the mother-in-law and the step-mother.



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**Doctor Ostermark:** arrives as the new doctor in town just as the play is beginning. He is still a young man and very eager to show his skill in the new science of psychology. Though sympathetic to the Captain, the easily manipulated Doctor becomes a tool for Laura in her plan to institutionalize her husband.

**Bertha:** is the seventeen year old daughter of Laura and the Captain. She is an uncomplicated person, of average intelligence and talent, who finds her future to be the subject of heated battle between the adults who control her life. She loves her father but if given a choice, she would remain with her mother.

**Laura:** has been married to the Captain for twenty years. Trapped in an unhappy marriage that has become an unending power struggle, Laura feels driven to do anything she can to keep her child from being sent away to school. Laura regards the Captain as unstable and dangerous. She intercepts his mail and discusses her fears about his nature with his friends and colleagues. The result is that many begin to believe that the Captain is near insanity. After hearing the story of Nodj, the soldier who abandons his responsibility to the pregnant housemaid Emma, Laura is disgusted with the male values that let him off the hook of responsibility. In her anger over their response she points out to her husband that no man, not even a married man, can be totally sure that his children are his own. After this, the Captain's security is totally shattered.

**Margaret:** was the Captain's childhood nanny. She raised him from a baby, raised Bertha also, and now she resides in his house as one of the family. She is the only person the Captain actually trusts.