

A Dream Play

Interview with Director Daniel Kramer

Last April, the new Theater, Dance, & Media concentration debuted its highly anticipated production, *The Man Who*, in Farkas Hall. In addition to opening auditions to all students, the concentration show boasts renowned theater professionals at its helm. This fall, TDM returns to Farkas with an adaptation of August Strindberg's *A Dream Play*. Originally written in 1901 after Strindberg experienced a near-psychotic episode, *A Dream Play* was first performed at The Swedish theater in April of 1907. The play strays from Strindberg's usual strict realist style in favor of more surrealist and expressionist methods as it follows Agnes, daughter of the god Indra, as she takes an Inferno-like journey into the human realm. Sent to report on the extent of human suffering to her father, Agnes encounters over forty characters – to be played by eleven actors – and discovers a resounding empathy for the creatures.

The production will be directed by Daniel Kramer, a graduate of Northwestern University and winner of the South Bank Show Award for Outstanding Achievement in Opera. Dr. Martin Puchner, Chair of TDM, anticipates that this show will attract a variety of students. "Part of the appeal of bringing Daniel Kramer, apart from the fact that he's such a fascinating director, is his broad experience, ranging from choreography to theater and opera, which dovetails with the equally broad mission of TDM," says Puchner. "It is a challenging classic that will demand imaginative solutions and will allow broad participation from students." Recently appointed the Artistic Director of English National Opera in London, Daniel Kramer directed Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* this past June. Even with his busy schedule, Mr. Kramer was able to give some insight into what *A Dream Play* at Harvard may entail.

Derek Speedy: What is the story of *A Dream Play*? What is the story you wish to tell?

Daniel Kramer: One being's quest to understand why the human race suffers so much. I don't enjoy telling stories – any paid craftsman can do that. I enjoy groping to express the inexpressible; I like innards over exteriors; I prefer poetry to fiction.

DS: Why this show? What pulled you to this work? Why do it with college students?

DK: I'm drawn to Strindberg's realization in *Dream Play* that "the green fishing net of our dreams is always better than the green fishing net of reality." It reflects on the illusion of the American Dream, this idea that our media-government dangles before our eyes in an attempt to hide the grotesque reality of the American class system. I believe art must challenge the political, religious and cultural institutions of our time since those institutions aren't very active at questioning themselves beyond a bi-partisan point of view.

I also appreciate *Dream Play's* non-linear form. I am bored by most linear storytelling. My mind clicks around and multi-tasks like my Mac desktop – I have five applications running at once. This whole notion of A, B, C, D storytelling feels dated to me; it feels like a gross simplification of the minds and hearts I know. *Dream Play* is multi-layered: multiple threads are weaving a tapestry at all times. The richness of the play, like our world, is in the counterpoints and juxtapositions that we can realize on the stage, as they exist on earth at this very moment. It takes a certain



photograph by Linda Nyland

amount of dare to explore such content; few theaters have the courage to stage such important work in these days of capitalist theater where “happy” audiences and standing ovations are often more important than quality, never mind content.

Challenging an audience can be dangerous these days. I have wanted to do this play for 20 years, but I needed the right environment to begin unpacking it without fear. University students have ferocious attack and hunger for their art. I will be able to explode the play best at Harvard, and then no doubt develop my findings for the professional world. Unless we take the Harvard production elsewhere. Step by step.

DS: How are we to interpret the title: *A Dream Play*? Is it a play about dreams or is it the play that is a dream? What does this notion of dreams lend to the theatrical world?

DK: How you interpret *Dream Play* depends on every second of your life until the moment the curtain goes up. If your father died when you were nine, like mine did, you will see it one way. If your father dies an hour before the curtain goes up, you will see it another way. My job is not to decide what you interpret, my job is to offer you our ensemble’s discoveries and, more importantly, the questions that our process unveils.

Is it a play about dreams or dreams itself? It is a play about the comi-tragedy of human suffering. I’ve never seen a play or opera that wasn’t about human suffering. Let us not confuse content and form. The form is that of a dream, one might say. But one might also say that the form is a rich multi-layered reflection of reality that few plays dare to explore: at this very moment on earth, a woman is having acid thrown in her face while you sip your Starbucks. That is not a dream: it’s the horrifying reality we share. Strindberg dares to connect us, much like the Internet does. He dares to show our single drop of water in relation to the ocean. Is that a dream?

I don’t believe in realism onstage anymore. Very little is real in the theater save the mobile phones going off, people coughing, and people unwrapping candy. Everything else is (most often) highly planned illusion. The people onstage are performing some version of themselves. They are wearing costumes assigned to them, working a set that has been considered for months, speaking words and doing movements that they have memorized and rehearsed. Let’s leave realism to the close up of photography and documentary films. Though frankly I don’t even like realism in films anymore. Acting is not realism; it’s imitation of some sort. I want to see people create poetic representations of life, express the distilled essence of life – guts and bowels. Samuel Beckett, please. Stanley Kubrick, please. Bill Forsythe, please. When I come to the theater or opera or dance, I come to see human symbols collide in space in time. I come to see artifice and poetry and metaphor and ideas and images. I do not come to see pure imitations of reality. The camera has happily claimed that art form of mirror gazing. Give me soul gazing, please. The performing arts must create their own concrete, physical language of signs being signaled through the flames as Rome burns and Nero sings – yes, Artaud. Give me the meaning of words found empty or too pregnant to bare; give me movements, gestures, dances and images that brand themselves into our subconscious shadow; give me a language of dreams and subatomic communication.

Strindberg aims for the cellular. And so I hope our shared time on *Dream Play* does the same for all of us – ensemble and audience – I hope it gets under our skin, vibrates something subconscious in us all: healing, transformative, challenging, metaphysical. **TDM**

This Fall Mr. Kramer is teaching *TDM 191: Devising Physical and Image Performance* on Thursdays 2-5pm. *A Dream Play* will hold residence October 31–November 20. Tickets can be purchased at the Harvard Box office.

Interview by Derek Speedy