

The Road to *Andreas*

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Jonathan Châtel is French-Norwegian. He trained as an actor and studied philosophy and theatre at the same time. He co-founded the company ELK in 2011 and directed Ibsen's *Little Eyolf* (2012), which he newly translated and adapted. This first production received the audience's award at the festival of emerging theatre *Impatience* in 2013. His second creation, *Andreas* (2015), based on August Strindberg's *The Road to Damascus*, was premiered at the Avignon Festival and presented at the 2015 Paris Autumn Festival. His production of his play *De l'ombre aux étoiles* was presented in November 2019 at the Théâtre de la Cité-CDN in Toulouse.

Jonathan Châtel is also a director, playwright and scriptwriter: *Les Réfugiés de la nuit polaire* (documentary), *Ostinato*, *Louis-René des Forêts* (experimental film), *Kirkenes* (comics)... He is also professor at the Centre d'Études Théâtrales of the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium. In 2015 he published the essay *Henrik Ibsen, le constructeur* (Editions Circé).

English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Abstract

This paper explores the stages that structured *Andreas*, Jonathan Châtel's rewriting of *The Road to Damascus* by August Strindberg. Based on the questioning of the uncertain identity of the character of the Stranger, the task of rewriting revolves around key themes: the dream of changing lives, the desire to disappear, the dizziness of madness. *Andreas*, a labyrinthine dream play in dialogue with the Strindberg path, has also been a meditation on the act of writing and the role of the maternal figure in creation.

Keywords: Strindberg, creative process, writing, dramaturgy, existence

Jonathan CHÂTEL

The Road to *Andreas*

Today I will talk to you about my road to writing and adapting *Andreas* based on the first part of Strindberg's *The Road to Damascus*, seen at the 2015 Avignon Festival, the Paris Autumn Festival and then on tour.

I will not describe this winding, multi-faceted road in detail but I will try to get as close as possible to the intimacy of the creative process, the dialogue, I shared with Strindberg.

I have a friendship with plays. They choose me as much as I choose them. A face-to-face relationship is established with the writer, consisting of joyful moments and others that are more tense and difficult.

When I was young I grew up with the theatre of Henrik Ibsen. At the age of fourteen, I read his plays for the first time and immediately felt challenged, shocked: I sensed a great injustice. I remember reading *The Wild Duck* and having a very powerful feeling of revolt. There was that child, Hedvig, a victim of the cruelty of the adult world. For Ibsen this is a real obsession: children shattered by the disarray of the adult world as well as our insensitivity to suffering, the inability to love when we are bitten by evil and blinded by unfeasible ideals. He is a playwright who has been with me for a long time and, like it or not, I am in constant dialogue with his work. This is what led me to direct *Little Eyolf* in 2012.

I'm talking to you about Ibsen because you know about the Norwegian playwright's relationship with Strindberg. Henrik had a portrait of August in his office and said he needed the madman's face to work. These two men admired each other, although they never met. Strindberg was sometimes highly critical of Ibsen, but so he was with everyone, starting with himself. These two men communicated through interposed plays. And their psychic energies were connected. So it was logical for me, after *Little Eyolf*, to continue with Strindberg. It was like a call, a relief, and especially considering that Ibsen wrote his last play, *When We Dead Awaken*, as a result of his reading of *The Road to Damascus*, which impressed and intrigued him so much. As if reading this play by Strindberg, which is such a clear and brutal break with the canons of playwriting, had not influenced him but rather accompanied

him in writing this strange play. He said it would be his last and would close the series of dramas he had begun with *A Doll's House* and about which he claimed that if he still wrote, he would do so with a completely different idea, perhaps also in a different way.

“With a completely different idea, perhaps also in a different way.” Reading, the long relationship with *The Road to Damascus*, changes the nature of writing. For me, the creation of Andreas was a structuring stage. Strindberg connected me even more deeply with a personal, intimate gesture of writing. Since then I have written several plays, one of which is entitled *De l'ombre aux étoiles*, in rehearsal as I speak, and which I will present at the Théâtre de la Cité in Toulouse in early November.

But returning to *The Road to Damascus*, it is a piece I've had in my head for about fifteen years and to which Jean-Pierre Sarrazac introduced me, of course. Its rage, its anger, had marked me. Re-reading it, over the years, it has taken on different facets. I also saw in it an evanescence, a roar rather than just the cry that could be immediately attributed to the Stranger.

I understood it by connecting to the body, to a state of the body. The body allows me to think.

Imagine a Sunday. The day of the sun. A day when, at the end of this summer during which I am writing this paper, the sun is a white circle that can be guessed at behind the clouds of gray, blurred, vaporous layers. *The Road to Damascus* begins on a Sunday, a day that is not any day, but the day after a festive Saturday night and the eve of a ruthless Monday. A day when the spirit wanders outside the body, as the Stranger, Strindberg's character, says; a day when the feverishness of the body engenders a fear of passing out, the crisis of anguish, when the body ceases to be a fragile garment that tells us it is about to tear at any moment.

On Sunday, we wander, the morning seems hostile, the action of movement is a saviour because it makes the blood circulate, because it undoes ideas, impressions, as if the fact of passing through the streets, avenues, parks of a city, let us overcome the death out there, awaiting us if we stop. On Sunday the body is also free, voracious, greedy, hungry; it cries out in a muffled and deep way that it wants to devour other bodies, swallow food; it is thirsty, it wants to eat. This desire, the oppressive absence that disturbs, has been decisive for me to feel *The Road to Damascus*, to approach the story of this lost man, of this Strindberg double who must so often have experienced the Sunday hangovers in Paris, Berlin or Stockholm.

Hence the absence, the desire, the fragility of the body, the fluctuation of consciousness. All of this led me to understand what I would call the Stranger's “bittersweetness”. The Stranger is indeed sweet, fed by loneliness, on the lookout, his voice like a roar. He tries to abstract himself from the world, but also from what he is. Here we find vulnerability and innocence, but they are the principles of his disobedience. Making him a manipulator or Machiavelian, even if he is dangerous and has power, would have been a mistake. The end of the first scene of the play, which I used in my adaptation, ends with a strange pact. The Stranger says: “To fight trolls, free princesses, kill werewolves, that is to live” and the Lady responds: “Then come, my liberator.” This

phantasmagorical pact is very important, it is crucial. They go off on an adventure based on this statement, on this struggle. This struggle is that of writing in the first place, this struggle with oneself, one's demons: the "trolls" who are, for both Strindberg and Ibsen, those of the "heart and soul." Then of course, the Stranger uses the Lady, seduces her because he needs her to tell a story. But the opposite is true. We do not have the victims on one side and the executioner on the other. It is a madness for two, a game, without irony or cynicism.

This game, this adventure at the limits of the intimate, is the very movement of the act of writing.

It is for this reason that I based my adaptation on the first part of *The Road to Damascus*. It is the clearest part of the trilogy, and its structure interests me. It speaks of inner chaos but its mirrored arrangement, from the corner to the Refuge of the Madman and later from the Refuge of the Madman to the corner, provides a geometric framework for this intimate explosion of the character. Violence and rage also lie in this almost mathematical composition. As I immersed myself in Strindberg's language, in the sweet orality I felt, in its great precision, rewriting took hold of me. On the other hand, Strindberg considered his play to be a material. He told the stage director that he should feel free to cut, to change. This invites you to project yourself into the play.

The first part interested me because it has to do with the purity of the movement of writing. When he wrote it, Strindberg had given up theatre. He had not written a play in about five years. He had lost his deepest desire. He had gone into exile in Paris, drank too much, practised alchemy; his hands were black, burned by sulphur. In this search for the philosopher's stone, he sought to dissolve but also to reinvent himself. That is what happened: all of a sudden, without warning, he wrote the first part of *The Road to Damascus* in one go, as if this long period of theatrical silence had prepared this clean and powerful gesture. This play is about the experience of a breaking point that is also a movement of resumption. He sent it to his editor, who told him it was formidable. It was not until later that he wrote the second part and a few years after that the third. As he wrote the first part, he had no outer gaze; his mirror was his page and nothing more. What fascinates me is that this gesture of resumption released an immense creative energy. Over the next five years, Strindberg wrote many plays.

Finally, working on this adaptation, I sought and intuited a dense and intimate version based on Strindberg's long fresco. Speaking about his writing, the playwright said that he ate only the meatiest part of a lamb's rib; or that he sometimes condensed his five-act dramas into a digest. That is what I did with *Andreas*. I wanted to give an intimate version of this great three-part fresco, in the sense that Strindberg himself gave this word dreaming of a theatre that would follow the ideal of chamber music.

The starting point of my adaptation also arose out of the mysterious identity of the Stranger. This character has no name, or an uncertain name. He is sometimes known as "Caesar". At the end of the third part of the play, it is mentioned that he could be called "Johannes". That was my way in. My questioning of the uncertain identity of the Stranger led to a rift that opened up my adaptation, which is also, as for Strindberg, my self-portrait.

In my rewriting, I actually wanted to give the Stranger a name: “Andreas”; and make the play itself the story of this forgotten identity. Because the fact that the Stranger is called Andreas is ambiguous in my adaptation. In a way this name changes, it spreads through all the characters. He is the character of this playwright in exile and at the same time the Beggar, the Stranger’s double, the madman who lives in the doctor’s house, a childhood friend and the man who made the Lady’s mother suffer. The principle of my adaptation was to put this designation into play.

“Andreas” is a name that is close to me, that I have found in my life and in my readings; it comes back to me like an obsession. It appears, for example, in a very beautiful short novel by Joseph Roth, *The Legend of the Holy Drinker*. It tells the story of a beggar, Andreas, who is given money out of charity and never manages to return it because his passion for alcohol always makes him spend it too fast. At the end of the novel, Andreas drops down in front of a girl he takes for a saint. He gives her the money and dies.

Andreas also appears in Bergman’s film *The Passion of Anna*. It is about a misanthrope who has taken refuge on an island to escape the eyes of the world. Suddenly, in this refuge, his ghosts look him up and down. This is a self-portrait, as *The Road to Damascus* is for Strindberg. At the end of the film, Bergman says in a voice-over: “This time they called him Andreas Winkelman.” So this man is a stranger who wears several masks but always tells the same story: that of an alienation of oneself by oneself. Andreas is the figure of a tramp, a persecuted rebellious being. A figure we can play with and project ourselves onto.

Finally, Andreas is my uncle’s name, a bright and sensitive man who entered the land of madness about thirty years ago. Do we have to be crazy to give up the world? Do we have to be crazy to manifest our break with the role the human community wants to assign us? Does madness underlie any gesture of sincere rupture? Madness is a spectre to me. It is evident in my productions, the plays I work on, and my texts. In *Little Eyolf*, a father and mother who have lost their son travel to the limits of madness; in *De l’ombre aux étoiles*, an astrophysicist lives isolated on top of a mountain where he shouts his rage against the world to Heaven; in another of my plays, *Welcome Knut*, a man tries to disappear, a victim of amnesia takes disturbing night walks in a phantasmagorical city in search of an answer to his misfortune.

What Strindberg was asking me to do was to unpack my personal baggage, I who dared to approach this monument of dramatic literature. Moreover, when I wrote this adaptation of *The Road to Damascus*, I had formed a community of writers who accompanied me, stimulated me in the writing, as when you need a friend, a travel companion to go to the top of a mountain and not just take the easy path, avoiding the heights.

Gå (Walking), a contemporary Norwegian novel, an “autofiction” by Tomas Espedal, marked me. One day, the narrator leaves his house, turns right and, instead of going shopping, begins a tour of Europe. He dreams of disappearing, of breaking with his identity and being reborn in another purer life, in accordance with his deep ambitions and freed from his demons. Strindberg had already wondered about this going back to a foundational

myth of our civilisation: conversion, the belief in radical change, of ourselves but also of society. This famous "road to Damascus" on which Saul, the persecutor of Christians, falling from his horse, has suddenly become St. Paul, the founder of the Church. By changing his name, he has changed his life. Through this biblical narrative, Strindberg wonders about this utopia deeply ingrained in our genes. By destroying everything, by falling, we can reinvent ourselves. Only a radical revolution can open the doors to the possible, to the new. Strindberg's road, which is both an inner journey and a man's clash with his ghosts, makes this alternative more complex. In order to change, what should we do with these ghosts that encumber us? Exorcise or welcome them, let them take us over? Should we let madness take possession of us to achieve a new life?

In my adaptation, I have also taken up an idea that runs through the three parts of the play, which, in my opinion, forms the core of Strindberg's work and holds up a mirror to my own obsessions: the role of the mother, charged with mending the Stranger's broken childhood, or at least trying to.

My adaptation revolves around the Stranger's inability to say "mum" to his mother and the belief that they changed him when he was born, that he is the son of a troll. *Andreas* is a study of the mother. It is, as I said, an underground movement yet very defined, which takes place in the third part in the original play, in which the Lady finally metamorphoses into Mother to bring a kind of peace, wipe the forehead, wet with anguish, of the Stranger, her son. This connects with the movement of writing. Writing means trying to rediscover the mother tongue, lost forever more, and then fall silent. The third part of *The Road to Damascus* anticipates this dream of an end to language, of a world without words, in which only telepathic communication remains. Writing returns to silence. My adaptation has taken up this dream of disappearing, especially thanks to the character of the Beggar, who is like a tempter. Because, recommending the monastery to the Stranger – I will read an excerpt from it in a moment – he expresses the central alternative of the play: either being with the other, in language, life, or being alone; that is, in silent contemplation, in connection with a community of ghosts. How far can you go to keep your anger intact? Can everything be destroyed? Is it possible to live in the nuance, in other words, without any system, in a land that always trembles?

Motherhood and madness, two reasons that intersect with the question of writing, the gesture of writing. I asked this question with *Little Eyolf*, through the questionings of a philosopher, Alfred Allmers, who believes that thought, in order to access purity, must ignore writing, its disappointing materiality. *De l'ombre aux étoiles* also speaks of art, and the astrophysicist defends a spiritual art, a true art, freed from narcissism, an art that would be equivalent to self-denial, disappearance, and not a selfish and megalomaniacal extension of the personality.

Without slipping into pathos, there is a certain danger in creation. There is a risk of never returning from it, or never returning to it. Following the road to Damascus was for me a test in the broadest sense of the term. Many press articles were dithyrambic, others more critical, many people in the audience were genuinely moved, others untouched, they treated me like a

mystic, a lunatic or an academic and bore. I had to travel, work abroad, in India, where the practice of theatre is a vital necessity and an act of resistance to the terrible power of Narendra Modi, the Indian nationalist president, so that the desire, which had never completely left me, would flourish again, be reborn, and help me rekindle my creative path.

Finally, I would like to read you a passage from *Andreas*, my adaptation of *The Road to Damascus*, in which I wrote a confession from the Beggar to the Stranger. The Beggar is described as a man broken by the split between his desire for the absolute in art, his desire to write a book that ends literature, and his everyday and trivial life, on a human level. The Beggar, this double tempter, addresses the Stranger:

“THE BEGGAR: Now you’re depressed, but this... You’ve partied too much, you’ve pursued too many love stories, and that has weakened you. Recover. What you’re doing is quite out of fashion. Are you telling me you’re looking for a woman? What does that mean? That you need to be consoled? Or even worse: that you need to be forgiven? Don’t get caught up in your guilt or you’ll end up a complete fool. Do you know what you need? A monastery, to keep your rage intact! A completely white building, built on an island, like a lighthouse, with men like you and me who wouldn’t talk and telepathically increase the magnetic field of their rage! Don’t join the herd of losers who have capitulated, who have given up the fight for life because they have suffered some defeats. With a flap of your wings, rise above this slag! Put yourself to the test, move! Speaking of slag, now I recall: I was a writer. I was also married, and had a girl. My wife and I tried to own a house, cook good food, have time to see friends, and save up to go on holiday. A daily struggle. But a glass always had to be broken and food burnt in the pans. When we organised a trip to the city, the babysitter couldn’t make it at the last minute, and we had to cancel... When the school holidays came, a final demand or a bill arrived at the last minute... It all made us sad. And a little resentful. Especially her. She said that I wasn’t involved and that my lack of practical sense, my inability, or rather my laziness, to grasp reality and life as they are plunged us every day a little more into the mediocrity of an existence without direction, without discipline and without joy, always a little more arduous, a little more precarious and gloomier. The bastard was right. Writing had taken over everything. I was overwhelmed. I needed to write, and that’s all! Then I no longer tidied, I no longer slept. I spent my time daydreaming in front of the page, looking at what others had written and working out confusing and complicated theories about naivety in art, scandal, the use of language, as I couldn’t find this original, great idea, which would have made me an author to contend with. I spent whole nights writing, paradoxically without producing anything. Merely black traces scribbled on the page, like bad drawings. At that time, I would get up at two in the afternoon and pick up my daughter at school at four-thirty. During those two and a half hours that I should have been devoting to a normal life, I escaped to the movies. And I shivered when I saw a beautiful movie,

but not when I saw my daughter running towards me after school, crazy with joy every day as if it were her first time. When she cried, I didn't cry with her, on the contrary, I shouted at her, and when she cried out louder, I lifted her by the shoulders and shook her small body, thus cursing her for being an obstacle in my life. Obviously, I hated myself for this helpless violence, my disgusting irresponsibility. But the truth is I could hardly breathe when I imagined that one day I would write a masterpiece, not when my little girl was overwhelmed with terror and soaked in tears at her mad father with rage. I saw myself finishing a book that finally talked about what I really felt, what I was experiencing, me, and not someone else, not another writer, or an inescapable critical reference, or my wife whose opinion I always asked. Not that I didn't love my wife and daughter because I did! It just wasn't enough. My life was no more meaningful because of them! It wasn't my dream, I wasn't... What kind of glow-worm was gnawing at my brain at night and keeping me from engaging in this simple world that I truly liked? Why was this kind of existence inaccessible to me, who was writing? The years passed. I started drinking more and more. Frustration turned to cold, love subsided into deep disgust. I couldn't see the one I loved naked anymore; her sex disgusted me, her skin... In fact, the idea of making love to a woman made my hair stand on end. I hated their smell, their superiority, their intelligence and that kind of filthy maturity. I hated their hypocrisy, the abject way they hide their calf's head under layers of makeup, their wrinkles and their hair concealed under creams, under sheets, beneath the carpets, in the gutters. I also ended up hating my daughter, who had grown up, who had become a teenager, with her small breasts, more idiotic than ever and increasingly sadder for having to call such an icy man 'dad'. Real hate infected the house, came out of the pipes, clogged the toilets. Then one day, unintentionally, I gave up everything and became a hermit. Evidently, loneliness makes me thirsty, and I quickly found myself bankrupt, in a miserable hotel and without having written a single satisfactory line. One morning, breathless, just before dawn and just after a good bout of drunkenness, I crawled up to the top of a slope, the Golgotha of the small town where I lived, and announced, with my face looking at the sunrise, that I would create a universal nothingness based on my nothingness. An ambitious programme, which I simplified in my room with a well-aimed shot at the glow-worm, there inside, and everything this entailed... I fell... On my tomb it reads: 'Here lies our dear Andreas / Well resigned, soaked / Who broke with everything to write / His friendships and his newborn / But not the pages of his notebooks / Which he kept immaculate.' Nota bene: 'In his kindness he left / Two cigarette butts in an ashtray.' But what am I saying... Amnesia, then?"

End of scene.

Thank you for listening.

