

Synopsis

"In the imagination, anything may happen. Everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist. On an insignificant background of reality, imagination designs and embroiders novel patterns. A medley of memories, experiences, free fancies, absurdities and improvisations. The characters split, double, multiply, vanish, solidify, blur, clarify but one consciousness reigns above them all - that of the dreamer. And before it there are no secrets, no incongruities, no scruples, no laws..."

In a street, The Old Man sits next to a drinking fountain in his wheelchair. The ghost of The Milkmaid appears and walks past him but he cannot see her. The Student also appears - he has been helping to rescue people from a collapsed house and is both dirty and thirsty. The Student drinks from the fountain and asks The Milkmaid to wipe his eyes for him. The Old Man can see no one apart from The Student.

The Old Man recognises The Student as the son of an old business acquaintance. The Student, in turn, recognises The Old Man as the person responsible for bankrupting his father. Convincing The Student that he was not at fault, The Old Man takes advantage of The Student's admitted financial embarrassment and offers him a job. The Student agrees and, immediately, The Old Man starts scheming - he will use him to gain entrance to The Colonel's house (which they are standing in front of) by bringing him to The Colonel's notice at the next performance of *The Valkyrie*.

The Old Man discovers that The Student is a 'Sunday Child' and he can see things that other people cannot see. The Student tells him of The Milkmaid and The Old Man becomes visibly agitated.

That evening, inside The Colonel's house, his Daughter sits in The Hyacinth Room, leading off from the main Salon. She sits at her harp. Two servants - Bengtsson and Johansson - enter the room and set it up for the usual tea-party, or "Spook Supper". Bengtsson tells him that the Colonel's wife is mad - she lives in a cupboard. He opens the cupboard to reveal The Mummy, as they call her, sitting on a chair, surrounded by cobwebs and making parrot noises. She has been like this for forty years. Bengtsson also points out a black Japanese screen in the corner of the salon. It is a "death screen" - it is used when someone is due to die.

The Old Man appears behind them, personally uninvited but there nonetheless. He demands to see The Colonel. The Mummy appears from the cupboard and he is appalled at what she has now become, as she was once beautiful. She asks him why he has come here. He has come for their daughter - The Colonel's Daughter. She goes back into the cupboard as The Colonel approaches.

The Colonel says he is aware that all his 'notes of hand' have been bought up by The Old Man and he wants to know his business with him. The Old Man systematically destroys the Colonel by disproving his rank, his status and his family name, leaving him with nothing. Invited to dinner, The Student arrives and he is asked to introduce himself to The Colonel's Daughter while The Colonel and The Old Man conclude their business.

The other guests arrive and sit down to tea. They are all spiritually corrupt in their own way and are known to The Old Man, who harangues them. Composing himself, he tells them that The Colonel's Daughter is, in fact, his own daughter and she has lost the desire to live, a fact which he blames firmly on them ("this air-foul with crime, false with treachery has withered her"). He has brought The Student there so that she may absorb some of his "light and warmth".

The Mummy wakes from her torpor and accuses The Old Man of hypocrisy - he is worse than any of them. Bengtsson tells them all about The Old Man: his nastiness, his cheapness, his involvement in the drowning of a woman - a milkmaid - who had been a witness to one of his transactions. The Old Man is mentally and spiritually beaten - he hands over everything he has taken from The Colonel. The Old Man crawls across the floor while making parrot noises and is shut in the cupboard. The death screen is placed in front of the cupboard door and they all sit down to tea again.

In the Hyacinth Room, The Student sings as The Colonel's Daughter plays the harp. He tells her that he has fallen in love with her, but she tells him that she cannot return that love. She is being suffocated by the atmosphere of decay in the house. The Student wants to take her away from all of this but she explains to him that it is her destiny to stay there - she is tired of life. He is angry for her - the house is full of lies and deceit and it is suffocating her. Just by being there he feels poisoned himself.

The Colonel's Daughter tells him that she is dying - she cannot bear to live any longer in the house. They move the death screen in front of her. The Student tells her that she has suffered for the guilt of others and wishes her sweet dreams and a better life in the "next world".



The Mummy terrorises The Old Man (© BBC)



Jeremy Brett as The Student (© BBC)

Background Notes, Investigation and Scrutiny

Strindberg is no ordinary playwright. By turns pauper, manic depressive, failed suicide, occultist, misanthrope, political vacillator and paranoiac he was a prolific writer (novels, plays, poetry and over 7,000 letters) and is credited with being one of the "fathers of modern drama". He is Sweden's national poet.

The Ghost Sonata, written in 1907, is a chamber play (a theatrical piece written specifically for 'intimate' staging) in three sections (paralleling the three movements of a sonata). Described as a "pioneering ... non-realistic play", it showcases both Strindberg's talent as an observer of mannerisms and of dialogue - he excels in the use of language and its delivery - and *The Ghost Sonata* is acknowledged by many to be his finest play.

Referred to in early (1959) documentation as **The Spook Sonata**, outside rehearsals for the play took place on 2nd-5th, 8th-12th and 16th-18th January 1962 between 10:30am and 5:30pm at the Drill Hall, 190 Hammersmith Road, London, W6. Time-out was taken from rehearsals on the 15th January to film the introductory back-projected scene at the administration block of Queen Charlotte's Hospital, London. Special permission had to be given by the hospital authorities to use and customise the building as members of the cast needed to be placed in the windows, curtains and blinds put up and a flagpole erected. The resultant 234' of silent 35mm film was played into the studio as back projection in the opening scene and was telerecorded as part of the live action.

On Friday 19th January, audio recordings were made by Osian Ellis, Ursula Connor (a soprano) and Jeremy Brett in Studio R at Lime Grove between 11:00am and 1:00pm. They sung specially commissioned pieces by Ellis, totalling 9'13", which were ultimately played into the studio during telerecording on the evening of the 21st.

With camera rehearsals taking place between 2:00pm and 10:00pm on the 19th and 20th and 1:00pm to 6:00pm on Sunday 21st, telerecording then took place between 7:45pm and 10:30pm on the Sunday night. This was ultimately edited into 6604' of 35mm film and was given the reference 35T/13697. Records indicate that a parallel 16mm telerecording was also made and given the reference 16TU/13697. This may have been a safety copy or for overseas sales purposes. This 16mm print no longer exists.

John Cura was contracted to supply photographic services for the duration of the recording.

All three principal actors are simply tremendous in this production - they are given great characters to play by adapter Michael Meyer and do not disappoint. The opening act - mostly a continuous dialogue between Jeremy Brett and Robert Helpmann - establishes both characters firmly: one is a Sunday Child with the soul of a poet (A "Sunday Child" is - with reference to Swedish myth and superstition - a person who has supernatural abilities) while the other is a manipulative user of people who can be charming enough if it is to his advantage. Both turn in wonderful performances-Brett capitalising on his ability to play fey characters and Helpmann almost (but not quite) over-acting with his eye-rolling and Shylockian mannerisms. It is misleading to suppose that an actor cannot go over-the-top in a surreal play - even these types of character must have their own internal logic and all characters must behave true to themselves. Anything else invites ridicule and this compelling and intriguing play certainly does not do that.

The other outstanding performance has to be Beatrix Lehmann as the effective 'third lead' character, The Mummy. In a play within which all characters (with the exception of The Student) are ultimately emotionally corrupt, she is the most corrupt thing in it, both in aspect and outlook (after all, she destroys The Old Man who - until that moment - was the most malign creature in the story). She becomes, in essence, Miss Haversham's nastier, older sister and she uses her aged, wrinkled face to great effect, especially in extreme close-up during the 'two-hander' scenes with Robert Helpmann. Indeed, facial close-ups are

used as a stylistic device throughout this play, whether focussing on a single actor or as an element in a framed shot - the characters (and audience) are spared no emotion - it is written large on the screen.

The street set is excellent - a house front with steps and bay windows, a street leading to a bridge and a water fountain. The backdrop beyond the bridge is painted - and obviously so. In a play this surreal, however, the false backdrop is perfectly in tune with the (largely) false characters that we encounter throughout the play.

There is one set for the second and third acts (the salon and the Hyacinth Room). The salon is centre stage and radiating from it (left to right) are the Hyacinth Room, an area with a statue of The Mummy as a beautiful young woman, the main entrance to the room and the door to the cupboard. The entire set can almost be seen in one wide-angle shot and is truly a product of the skill of gifted designer Clifford Hatts. Having previously designed such productions as *Rudolph Cartier's Quatermass and The Pit* (1958/9), *Rashomon* (3rd March 1961) and *Adventure Story* (12th June 1961), he worked his way up to the post of "Head of Design Group, BBC Television" by the mid-1970s. He was obviously skilled at providing maximum design impact in small studios and it shows throughout this production.

Rosemary Wilkins' costumes complement the design and period (gothic baroque at the beginning of the 20th century), but the only design which stands out, perhaps, is Brett's student costume (looking for all the world like Bob Cratchit but with a much nicer hat).

The music is used sparingly and to great effect - excluding the pre-recorded Brett/Connor music, only 5'47" in the whole production, played live by Osian Ellis whilst telerecording took place. Never intrusive, the music always serves to underline and enhance a particular scene - most notably where The Old Man becomes agitated when he learns The Student has seen the ghost of the Milkmaid. The only other music used in the production was 2'40" of Bach from the commercial disc *Classic Club Best Loved Organ Works*, which was audio-mixed into the opening sequence to accompany the Poet's monologue.

The 'ghostly' effect (used several times in this production) is achieved by overlaying two scenes from the production gallery using vision mixing. For example, The Milkmaid - filmed as the only light object on a dark background - is faded in over the top of the main picture. As the ghost effectively interacts with the main picture (in one instance she moves background to foreground, past The Old Man and right to the off-screen drinking fountain), it was necessary for actress Linda Gardner to hit her marks exactly as she had to go through a set of well-choreographed steps in another area of the studio as the main scene was being shot. A similar scene is staged with the Milkmaid's ghost overlaid on Bengtsson until she is faded from the picture.

An interesting combination of technique is used in the final scene, which sees a shot of Brett in foreground on a set which houses a back-projection screen. On that screen is projected an image of Boecklin's painting of *The Isle of the Dead* and, overlaid on that is a vision-mixed image of Ann Bell, shrunk so as to place her 'on' the Isle in scale. This multi-layered effect stands as a good example of experimenting within the limits of the period's technology.

Similarly, the opening sequence (by way of a 'teaser') shows the play's main characters being viewed from a window as a voice-over paraphrases Strindberg's *Prefatory Note to A Dream Play* (the text of which heads the plot synopsis). The set is a simple one, comprising a backdrop wall with an inset window. A back projection screen is set up behind the window, through which the pre-recorded film of the principal characters at Queen Charlotte's Hospital is played while the scene is shot. It features the principals outside the Colonel's house, either in the 'street' or featured in the doorways and windows of the house. The camera pans up and across the front of the building taking in all the main characters. As viewed on back projection via a fixed viewpoint (the window frame), the effect is surreal and slightly disorientating.



The Student comforts The Colonel's Daughter (© BBC)

leaving the viewer under no illusions that what they are about to watch is not a 'normal' play.

Another stylistic device is adopted almost throughout the play - principal characters, while in shot but not holding the viewer's focus ('centre-stage', as it were) remain immobile. For example, when The Student and Johansson walk along the street and past the front of the house, they walk past two windows - The Colonel stands in one and his Daughter stands in the other. They are both still throughout the shot. It is an effective device and adds to the stylised direction of the play.

There are certain styles and methods of direction that have become accepted as standard since the mid to late 1960s, primarily because of the ability to structure scenes electronically in post-production. In 1962, most productions still consisted of long scenes shot 'as live' in single takes and any complex camerawork or effects had to be done in real time on the studio floor whilst recording was taking place. Understanding this, a number of incredibly well structured scenes become apparent, each benefiting from a complex execution which serves as an impressive precursor to later methods of programme making.

There is an excellent panning shot across the set to cover the transition from act two to act three (with the Old Man being locked in the cupboard, the focus then moves to the Hyacinth Room). While Jeremy Brett and Ann Bell mime to the previously recorded music, the camera crabs across the set - starting from the cupboard door and moving across the length of the salon, taking in both the tea-drinkers and the statue. It continues on into the Hyacinth Room where it settles on Brett and Bell for a few moments and then pulls back to frame them both in a full length shot as the song ends. Wonderful stuff.

Within this play, however, (whose direction is expertly managed throughout by producer Stuart Burge) there is one sequence that remains outstanding. This is where The Student talks to The Milkmaid's ghost at the fountain. It is wonderfully staged, establishing beyond doubt that The Student can see things that the other characters cannot. The scene begins with a wide shot showing The Milkmaid as she walks past The Old Man to the fountain (vision mix overlay). The Student then enters and moves to the fountain.

ANGLE 1: Mid close-up on both The Milkmaid and The Student from the front. Both actors are in shot.

ANGLE 2: Close-up of The Old Man's face as he wonders who The Student is talking to.

ANGLE 3: Long shot from behind The Old Man showing his point of view. Linda Gardner has stepped back out of shot and it looks as if The Student is talking to himself.

ANGLE 4: Close-up of The Student as he talks to the (off-screen) Milkmaid. Offscreen, Linda Gardner steps back into position for Angle 5.

ANGLE 5: Close-up of both The Student and The Milkmaid as he continues to talk to her

This is a remarkable number of shot changes in a sequence which lasts for a few moments only. It is, effectively, a choreographed scene, with Linda Gardner moving in and out of vision with each change of camera-angle and it comes off very well indeed. It is enhanced by the way Brett and Gardner interact as she bathes his eyes: she lifts the wet handkerchief to his eyes, ensuring that no part of her hand touches his face - only the handkerchief touches Brett. Brett lifts his hand, moving it gently over her hand - very close, but never touching - and takes the handkerchief back. This behaviour is not mentioned in the camera script and must have been something that evolved during rehearsals. A little thing, easily missed, but it is a defining moment for Brett's character.

The surreal quality of the scene is further enhanced by The Old Man, looking at the student, framed in close-up (Angle 2, as mentioned above):

OLD MAN: *Who's he talking to? I can't see anyone - is he mad?*

Is he talking to himself or to the audience? Certainly the script specifies that the Old Man is being rhetorical, but the play's surrealism introduces an element of doubt and it's entirely likely that Robert Helpmann is 'breaking the fourth wall' and talking directly to the audience. This movement is not overt - as in a Brechtian piece - but enough doubt is given to the viewer so as to make one pause for thought.

Transmitted in March 1962 and never repeated, this shows a Producer (in the days before the rôle evolved into that of both Producer and Director) at the top of his form and actors relishing their respective characters and giving top-notch performances.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of Louis Marks' production of **The Ghost Sonata** for the 1980 **Festival** series (programme number LDPB113D). Directed by Philip

Saville, it starred Donald Pleasance as The Old Man and Clive Arrindel as The Student and was transmitted on Sunday, 23rd March 1980.

Stretched out over 95', it once again used Michael Meyer's translation as it's base text, but had some passages extended and extra scenes written (by Script Editor Stuart Griffiths), presumably to enhance the production and make it less impenetrable to the casual viewer. This 'enhancement' gives us an opening scene (filmed) of The Student rescuing a child from the collapsing house (an obvious special effect) before leading into the opening credits superimposed over The Milkmaid's (Debbie Linden's) bare breasts bouncing around as she is being drowned, shown in first person perspective. All of this to the strains of Radiophonic music...

It sort of goes downhill from then on, what with Peter Howell's discordant and anachronistic incidental music playing out alongside the wooden acting of most of the cast (although a gaunt-looking Vladak Sheybal as Bengtsson, is as impressive as always) and the pace of the whole play never really getting past a slow crawl. It's probably this which is really the most annoying, as there is an absence of menace and unease in this adaptation which should permeate every fibre of the play. One can excuse Ken Moray's costumes (although it's hard to ignore The Student's apparently bri-nylon safari suit) and the terrible, terrible choice of turning what Brett sang as a solo into some kind of folk duet between The Student and The Colonel's Daughter, but to watch this play and feel no sense of pace or direction is unforgivable. It's a boring play, which is quite possibly the worst thing that anyone can say about a production.

On a plus point, Barrie Dobbins' set designs were wonderful. It's just a pity the production as a whole did not do it justice. This is definitely a case where less would have been more.

Radio Four also adapted **The Ghost Sonata**, which was transmitted in stereo on 3rd May 1994. Running for 85'30", this version starred Frank Finlay as The Old Man, Dorothy Tutin as The Mummy and Alan Cox as The Student. Music was provided by Andy Price and the Producer was Andy Jordan.

Transmission Details

Transmitted on Friday, 16th March 1962 between 10:00:37pm and 11:12:04pm (bookended by **Indoor Athletics** at Wembley and the **Late Night News** as read by Richard Baker), **The Ghost Sonata** was one of a strand of 'Friday plays' (never branded as such under an umbrella title). Ranging between 60 and 125 minutes in length, these plays ran almost the whole of 1962, with a short revival in March and April 1963. Whilst their range was diverse (including many original plays) a number of 'literary classics' were produced during the run, including Ibsen's **Ghosts**, Chekhov's **The Cherry Orchard**, Shakespeare's **A Winter's Tale** and Emily Bronte's **Wuthering Heights** (directed by Rudolph Cartier).

Radio Times lists the programme thus:

"An old man in a wheel-chair offers his patronage to a young student, on one condition-that he goes to a performance of The Valkyrie and asks no questions"

Although accurate in its brevity, it's a fairly unenthralling "teaser" and one wonders how many people were actually tempted to watch the play from this description alone. Viewers probably had either an interest in Strindberg's work to begin with or had become accustomed to watching a play on Friday night; **The Ghost Sonata** was tenth in the 'series', so it's likely that some sort of viewer base had built up by.. then.

A half-page article accompanied that day's listings in Radio Times. Half of it was taken up with a facial close-up picture of The Old Man menacing The Mummy while the other half explained the play. "Tonight's production is one of the most unusual ever seen in television" it begins, before going on to explain the eccentricities of both the plot and Strindberg. The last few paragraphs list the cast and their recent credits. Brett, not yet a headlining actor (but, conversely, the first name on the list when the credits roll) is listed as "...Jeremy Brett, seen in television last year in **A Kind of Strength** and **Beauty and the Beast**, is cast as The Student..."

The Ghost Sonata has never enjoyed a repeat showing and has never been made available commercially.

Archive Details

Records show that **The Ghost Sonata** is stored in the BBC Film and Television Library in several formats. As well as a timecoded VHS viewing tape, this play is held as a separate magnetic mute film and soundtrack and both the monochrome composite optical negative and positive.

The viewing tape holds a very rough print of the story taken from three separate reels of 35mm film (viewing copies are not necessarily the best indicator as to the condition of the best master available). It is very unfortunate that the viewing copy is incomplete, with just over five minutes



The Student encounters The Old Man (© BBC)



The Colonel is made to suffer by The Old Man (© BBC)

absent from the end of Reel 1, mainly showing the Student's first meeting with Johansson. The viewing print details the following information overlaid onto the recording:

Reel 1: PL78841 (duration 15:16 - print ends prematurely)
 Reel 2: PL78842 (duration 19:18)
 Reel 3: PL78843 (duration 25:45)

Given that there are multiple copies held at Windmill Road, it is highly unlikely that the play is only held there in an incomplete format, although this would, of course, require verification. Missing segment notwithstanding, the viewing copy shows that the film recording itself has several momentary scratches and speckling in evidence through its length, both of which can be remedied by digital processing. The soundtrack would also benefit from some digital cleaning and restoration.

Prior to transmission, one continuous 35mm film would have been made and transmitted from the Telecine area at the BBC Television Centre at White City. This 'transmission' copy no longer exists.

Cast

Old Man	Robert Helpmann
Student	Jeremy Brett
The Mummy	Beatrix Lehmann
The Colonel	William Mervyn
Johansson	Thomas Heathcote
Bengtsson	John Kidd
The Milk Maid	Linda Gardner
The Colonel's Daughter	Ann Bell
The Caretaker's Wife	Miki Iveria
The Dark Lady	Yvonne Coulette
The Fiancée	Jane Eccles
The Nobleman	Arthur Lawrence
The Dead Man	George McGrath
The Cook	Anna Wing
The Maid	Mary McMillen
The Poet	John Rae
Beggars	Gladys Dawson
.....	Nelson Evans
.....	Laurence Archer
Coffin Bearer	John Scott Martin
.....	Leslie Bates
.....	Brian Bada
.....	Norman Coburn
.....	Michael Byrne

Crew

Written by	August Strindberg
Translated from the Swedish by	Michael Meyer
Music for the harp composed and played by	Osian Ellis
Settings by	Clifford Hatts
Produced by	Stuart Burge
T.O.M.	Otis Eddy
Lighting	Jimmy Purdie
Sound	Gordon Mackie
Vision	Nellie Southcote
Crew	8
Production Assistant	George Spenton
Assistant Floor Manager	Sue Armstrong
Assistant to Producer	Maisie Woodall
Costumes	Rosemary Wilkins
Make-up	Rosemary Ross

Production Information

Project Number	[not listed in script or PasB]
Telerecording Numbers	35/T/13697, 16/T/13697
Camera Rehearsals	19th and 20th January 1961
Camera Recording	20th January 1961
Duration	"71'41"
Studio	Lime Grove
Recording Format	monochrome 35mm with
.....	mute monochrome 35mm inserts
Archive Format	monochrome composite optical
.....	positive and negative, separate
.....	magnetic soundtrack, timecoded VHS

Film Sequences Used

- o Specially Shot: 234' silent monochrome 35mm film

Music Listed as Used

- o 09'13" of specially commissioned music by Osian Ellis, sung by Ursula Connor (a soprano) and Jeremy Brett.
- o 05'47" of live harp music played on-set by Osian Ellis
- o 02'40" of Bach from *Classical Club Best Loved Organ Works*

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