

## Choreography in *the Dance of Death*

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**Abstract:** *The Dance of Death* by August Strindberg is structured on the pattern of Waltz dancing. The play is modeled on the movements of the dance to portray the dynamics of man-woman relationship in marriage. This paper traces the movements of Waltz and its therapeutic effects in the structure of the play. The dance-like pattern of the play reflects the paradoxical marital life of Edgar and Alice, who have been bound together in a love-hate relationship for twenty five years. The setting of the play and the dialogical progression impart a rhythmic rise and fall to the thematic structure.

**Keywords:** (Dance, Waltz, Dynamics, Marriage, Therapeutic, Rhythmic).

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Dance has been one of the earliest modes of expression in human history. Apart from the ritualistic aspect, the rhythmic movements of the body with music allow the performer to give vent to all the unexpressed emotions within the mind, thus rendering it a cathartic and therapeutic effect.

Waltz first originated as peasant dance in the middle of eighteenth century in France. Later on, it took the form of a popular social dance throughout Europe. The word "Waltz" is taken from the Italian 'volvere' which means 'to turn' or 'to revolve' (Waltz n. pag). In its present day form, the performance takes place in a ballroom where the couples are in a close-hold physical position and on an equal level of mental response towards each other. They glide together on the dancing floor moving in repetitive circular turns and counter-turns. The course of the dance is more of a circular nature than a linear one. Its tempo is usually slow at best, but the expressive some moments to join again after the circular turn. At the end of each course, the dancers are pent up but there is a cathartic effect of the dance which renews their energies once again (Waltz n. pag.).



### 2. WALTZING

The waltz is a graceful couple dance that originated in central Europe and became popular in the mid-19th century. Here, couples waltz in a New York City ballroom in the 1890s. (Encarta n. pag.). In the above picture, the Waltz dancers can be seen in a ballroom, in close-hold physical position facing each other.

### 3. ANALYSIS

The structure of the play, *The Dance of Death* is choreographed on the pattern of Waltz. When the play begins, the setting is inside of a round fortress which resembles a closed ballroom. A sentry,

regularly marching past with sabre drawn the words of Amy Bloom, "Marriage is not a ritual or an end. It is a long intricate, intimate dance together, where nothing matters more than the sense of physical intimacy and mental co-ordination in spite of all the differences"(qtd. in Schupmann n pag.).

In case of Edgar and Alice, their marriage and their children are the factors which bind them physically. Moreover, like the Waltz performers, they are on the same mental level in certain things. Both of them share the good memories of their visit to Copenhagen. They have a common hatred for the rest of the islanders. When Kurt asks them, "Are you at loggerheads with all of them?" Edgar answers, "All!" and Alice comes out with a similar statement, "Yes it's true. One really can't associate with such people" (1.1.56).

Besides this mental co-ordination, another common factor is a love-hate relationship between the two. From the very first scene, their verbal bickering, their repeated references from the past twenty five years and the mutual boredom of their mundane lives are the things which set the couple in a slow circular Waltz of their lives. Alice seems to wish Edgar's death, and he seems several times to be right at the verge of obliging her. Similarly, at times, he is bored of her and yet he seems entirely to have interwoven his psyche with her that he could not survive without her. Edgar expresses his boredom in these words,

Haven't you noticed that every day we say the same things? When just now you said your inevitable "In the house anyway", I should have replied as usual "It's not just my house". But since I have given that answer five hundred times already, I merely yawned. (1.1.51)

Throughout the first scene of the play, there is an exchange of repeated statements between them.

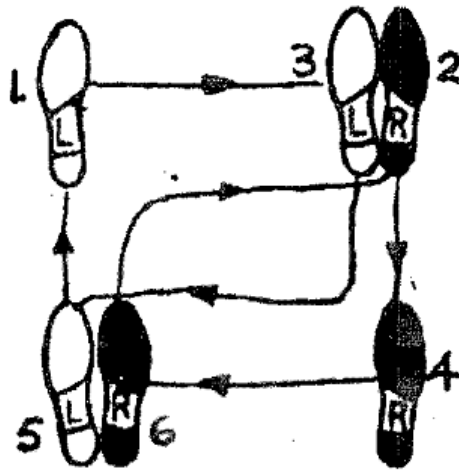
These repetitions in their dialogues portray the circular turns and counter-turns – in the dance. The prevailing tone of their dialogues varies between empty indifference and cynical acceptance - of an over whelming tedium. Such questions as, "Should the door be closed?", "What's for dinner?", and "Has the post come?" (1.1), define the emptiness and purposelessness of the passing hours in a twenty five year old "image. Everything is said, done and received with an air of long repetition - the absence of expectation of anything new and interesting to break the routine. The action of the play is caught in circles. Both the characters are relieved of their internal stress and the monotony of their lives by expressing themselves repeatedly. Margery Morgan, in her book entitled *August Strindberg*, describes this dance-like cyclic movement of the play's action in these words,

There are echoes of earlier situations in this presentation of a couple locked into a marriage of mutual torment, a see-sawing struggle for dominance, and a repetitive, cyclic action involving a triangle of two men and one woman. (III)

There is a circular exchange of domestic truths in their conversation. They have no food stuff in their house and the servants are always on the run. But in the entire first Act, both Alice and Edgar exchange certain statements which are either fictitious or meaningless. Edgar is in the habit of asking Alice, "Did you say anything?" to which she replies, "Nothing". It is this "nothing" which starts their conversation and it ends on "nothing". The play's action revolves like the spinning of a couple in Waltzes.

The cycle of these old grievances breaks only with the arrival of an old associate, Alice's cousin Kurt at the end of the first scene. He enters the round fortress, first as a spectator of the couple's repeated moves of mutual torment but later on, he is inevitably drawn in to take turns with Alice and Edgar in their cyclic dance. Before the arrival of Kurt, both the husband and wife go on exchanging verbal bickering with slow and measured steps, but after he comes, there is a tremendous increase in the tempo of the play and it remains there till the end of Act One.

Kurt's involvement in the action not only increases the tempo of the movement but it also gives it a new dimension. The structure of the play which was earlier moving in circular form now takes the shape of "Box step" in Waltz. In this step, the slow circular moves are changed into forward and backward steps. Both the performers in couple form take a step to the right side, a backward step and then move forward to the same place. This change in the step does not alter the course of the dance. It gives the dance a sort of weaving pattern. The diagram of "Box Step" below can help understand it in a clearer way (Waltz n. pag.).



*Box Step in Waltz*

In Scene I Act II of the play, Alice and Edgar break their pair time and again to have their separate turns with Kurtz. In the absence of one, the other tries to lure Kurt. When the captain has a seizure Alice finds a chance for her to lure Kurt to her side. She engages him in a dialogical pattern which is retrospective (backward movement) and promising (forward movement) at the same time. From here onwards starts the "Box Step" between Alice and Kurt. The retrospective is obvious when she confides in him about her past miserable life with Edgar to gain favour from Kurt in these words, "That I have sat in this tower for a life time, a prisoner, kept from life by a man I have always hated" (1.1.62): At the same time she tries to seduce him by talking about their past relationship and begs him to join her, "Don't abandon me now. Don't leave me, or he'll beat me. He has beaten me for twenty five years" (1.1.94). She offers a promising future to Kurt by luring him in these words, "Do you remember when we were children and said we'd marry each other" (1.2.96). Moreover Alice also uncovers the secret hand of Edgar in Kurt's marital breakup. She tells him, "When you confided in him and sent him to mediate with your wife, he started a flirtation with her and taught her how to get custody of the children" (2.1.86).

At this stage, after weaving a pattern of backward and forward movement with Kurt, Alice succeeds to some extent in turning Kurt against Edgar. She plans to damage Edgar by sending a secret telegram revealing proofs of his involvement in money embezzlement. She tells Kurt, "I am free! And in ten minutes he will be sitting down there, under arrest, down there" (2.1.96). Kurt also joins Alice in her plans by saying, "I can't try to be his friend any longer... I was willing to forget how he humiliated me... because I could see he was sick and tired. But now that he wants to take away my son, he must die - he or I (2.1.94-95).

In the beginning of the second Act, these rhythmic to and fro movements of Alice and Kurt start to take a linear direction against Edgar. Their plans to throw him out of their way are under process but before they could form any shape, Edgar intervenes. They have hardly taken a few paces together when the play resumes its repetitive course once again. The floor of the fortress is occupied all the time by two performers. The play moves in the style of American Waltz; hi this style, the pair part from each other to take a solo spin before they meet again. It is either Alice and Kurt or Kurt and Edgar engaged in their performance. Both the husband and the wife have their own way of telling the truth to Kurt. In the absence of Alice, Edgar forms a pair with Kurt and weeps his heart out against Alice. He tells Kurtz, "The day I had no money - she would leave me" (1.1.60).

Kurt is dragged by Edgar into a round spin and he is confused about the reality of things. In his changing turns with Alice and Edgar, Kurt is like a swinging partner in this dance. He is so tired and confused by the fast tempo of both the partners that he feels dizzy at the end and says, "I can't say. I just don't understand people at all" (2.2.104). Both Alice and Edgar pull Kurt towards them one after the other, but he is exhausted and leaves the dancing floor by saying, "Go to hell, whence you came! Good bye" (2.2.106).

The couple once again falls into each other's arms to resume the cyclic pattern. In Scene II Act II, When Kurt leaves, both Edgar and Alice who had separated from each other to perform their solo spins are ready to reconcile. Edgar at once comes to terms with Alice and says to her, "Forgive me Alice, and come here, come quickly!" (2.2.106) and Alice takes no time to reject Kurt. She says about

Kurt, "That man is the most contemptible and hypocritical wretch I have ever met in my life. At least you are a man" (2.2.106). There is no other option for both of them except to join the same course where everything is repeated.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

After tormenting each other so much they are once again ready to go on another course of dance as life goes on. The Waltz of their married life has helped them to give vent to their grudges against each other. The repetitive turns and counter- turns in their expressions purged them of the unexpressed thoughts in their minds and what they find in the end is a renewed energy to go along each other. There are reconciliatory moves between Alice and Edgar, "Yes, I knew, you wanted to have me put in prison. But I blot that out." (2.2.109). The captain says in the end, "Well then. Our silver Jubilee. Blot out the past and go on living. Well let's go on" (2.2.111). The ending can be well described in these words,

The end of the play is a cyclic return to normality, but with a difference from the beginning. The grotesque events they have acted out and the repetition of their mundane lives seem to have invigorated Alice and Edgar. Certainly they are more cheerful and more reconciled to their situation - the human situation - and to each other. (Morgan 115)

The movements of Waltz dancing that are traced out in the structure of the play impart a therapeutic effect to it.

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