

Excerpt from *Inferno Sonata* by Scott Sharplin

*Inspired by the diaries of 19<sup>th</sup> century Swedish playwright August Strindberg, Inferno Sonata is a one-man play about alchemy, madness, and desperate love. Inferno Sonata was produced by the August Assembly in Summer 2008, touring to five Fringe Festivals across Canada, plus an independent production in Edmonton, Alberta. In this scene, Strindberg takes the first steps towards perfecting the art of alchemy – extracting gold from baser elements – but then is hoist upon the petard of his own arrogance and his envy of rival playwright, Henrik Ibsen.*

Bear with me, while I shakily retrace my steps.  
My first experiments, in Paris, they were blessed  
With fitter apparati. In a place like this,  
We must make do. But back then, it was also true,  
I had the disadvantage of my hands,  
Laid naked to the flame, the acid flakes of arsenic  
Cut chasms in my palms, embalmed geographies.  
All night, I watched them war within the athanor:  
Damnation, holy radiance, amalgamating  
Till the Wolf surrenders, and disgorges something pure.

*[He extracts a white chemical mass from the crucible.]*

*Solve et coagula*: the strands of beauty split, then reunite.  
This alabaster mass is two steps shy of perfect gold.  
Or so your eyes suggest to you – but I must chide  
If you've forgotten that the theatre is the domain of lies.  
Half-truths, quarter-truths, truths so thin they vanish from the side.  
Still, and for a beat, before you saw the trick,  
You must have felt a hint of that elation I experienced in Paris.

Truth be told, it made me cocky.  
Enfevered by my first success, I ventured forth  
To find someone (I cared not who) to brag at.  
At a melancholic bar, *La Montagne Bleu*,  
Where Scandanavian expatriates would mass and mew  
Like kittens, blind and helpless in the Paris wild,  
I found some men I knew. I let them buy me something strong.  
"I have a cause, indeed, to celebrate."

“What cause? Another play?”

“Another wife?” Derided one.

“More precious, gentlemen, than art or sex.

I must be mum, though. For the walls, you see – “

Of course, they coaxed me, flattered me.

I knew the game.

“A secret, gentlemen. But one that will, in revelation,

Make a second Paradise of Earth.”

Of this they made much play.

“A Paradise? From Strindberg?”

“Does he even know the word?”

“Perhaps he’s mixed it up with something.”

“Purgatory?”

“Pandemonium?”

“I know the variations, friends. For I have come through the inferno

And I know, now, at this very moment, the ordeal of Purgatory.”

Well, this provoked a most insuff’rable debate –

Cosmology from clods.

One ventured, “I have heard

That Hell’s flames dance to Donizetti’s comic operas!”

“Oh, no, not so,” Said someone else,

“It is the wretched waltzes of the English

That torment the damned.”

“I know that it is neither, gentlemen.

For in my own abyss, I hear beneath me every night

The squealing dissonance of Edvard Grieg.”

At this, they had the gall to laugh.

“You must be hearing the rehearsals, then!”

“The what? Rehearsals?”

“Yes. You have not heard? It’s caused an awful stir.

*Peer Gynt*, you see. His early masterpiece.”

“*Peer Gynt*. Impossible!

What theatre in Paris would produce that trash?

No plays from Scandanavia are ever mounted here.

No plays of mine.” And yet, they were persistent.

“Yes, the curtain’s rising in a fortnight,  
And at *L’Opera*, no less.”  
“Will *he* be here? God! Is he here already?”  
“He? Oh, you mean Ib—”  
“SHHH! Do not say his name! The walls!”  
“Well, yes, of course, he’ll be in town.  
What man would miss his own play’s Paris launch?”

And then I said some things I shan’t repeat.  
We men are beasts beneath the skin.  
Our soul, the greatest gift from mighty gods,  
Is not impermeable - quite the opposite.  
It is as fragile and as porous as a cloud.  
Each time some villain strikes us down  
In his immoral haste, his thirst for fame,  
An ill wind wisps a bit of it away.