

# A STRINDBERG CLASSIC WRAPPED IN PINK

BY RUTH E. GOLDBERG

**Director/  
Designer  
Matthias Langhoff  
brings  
Miss Julie  
to Paris**

**D**irectors are often known to make discoveries in unlikely spots—Lana Turner behind the counter of Schwab's drugstore is a classic example. So Swiss theatre director and set designer Matthias Langhoff's recent discovery coming in a department store is not in itself unusual. What is unusual is that the discovery was bright pink wrapping paper and that it would become the basis for the January 1989 production of the Comedy of Geneva's *Miss Julie* at Paris's Theatre de l'Athenee.

The silver-haired Langhoff, 48, explains that for him a new production often begins with a material that has in some way intrigued him. "Materials that I don't know interest me. They stay in my head and come back. Material can come first and then be fitted into a play. In *Miss Julie* it was clear that I'd use the paper, later I found how. I'd found this pink paper and it made me think immediately of *Miss Julie*."

The decor that eventually developed is an oversized 1950s kitchen with its floorboards and furnishing sharply cut and angled diagonally into fuchsia crepe-paper walls. Its use in *Miss Julie* underscored Langhoff's growing renown in Europe for imaginative new design and direction in familiar work.

Equally important in establishing this reputation were his recent projects including a 1988 production of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* at the Burgtheatre of Vienna, works of O'Neill and Beckett for the French Maison de la Culture at Bobigny (1987); and Shakespeare's *King Lear* at the National Theatre of Strasbourg (1986). Langhoff has also mounted plays in his native Zurich and in Hamburg, Germany. Prior to these endeavors,

Langhoff worked with director Manfred Karge in a collaboration that spanned two decades and many countries since its start at the Berliner Ensemble in 1962.

Talking in a backstage dressing room—his makeshift headquarters while in Paris with *Miss Julie*—Langhoff discusses his theatre work. A trim man with a boyish face that belies his years, Langhoff speaks in a French thickened with a German accent.

He begins with the concrete, explaining the design rationale behind his set for *Miss Julie*. "The decor works on two opposing diagonal axis. The two directions angled are the floor and the walls. The walls are big lines which cut the furniture literally, as if cut with knives." This is an instance where the set reinforces the action, as the use of knives is a pronounced part of the characters' behavior throughout the play. The refrigerator, radio and other objects date the kitchen to the 1950s. The period choice enables the play to seem relevant, though not contemporary, says the designer. "It's both modern and historic, which is how I find the play. It's perhaps because of my age that I think of the 50s as long ago but still today."

One touch that seems incongruent with the modern set, the small bundles of dried branches that dot the floor, is in fact in keeping with the original, traditional decor. "The branches are in Strindberg's original description of the play," says Langhoff. "It's a Swedish summertime tradition to have that. So even if it's not familiar to others, at least the Swedish know why the branches are there. I wanted to keep to the original."

Discussing his personal design philosophy,