

The Blue Room: A Primer

By David Hare, freely adapted from Arthur Schnitzler's *Reigen*



“You, like how you seemed at our first meeting,
But are people ever truly what they seem?
For soon I felt that subtle, slight retreating
That marks the ending of the ending of a dream...”
the Playwright in *The Blue Room*

“I write of love and death. What other subjects are there?”
Arthur Schnitzler

Produced and Performed by the Department of Dramatic Arts,
Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts, Brock University
Sean O’Sullivan Theatre, February 14-16, 2013.



Brock University
Faculty of Humanities

The Show

Plot Summary

Act One

Scene One - The Girl and the Cab Driver - *by the side of a street*

Scene Two - The Cab Driver and the Au Pair - *a storeroom next to a dancehall*

Scene Three - The Au Pair and the Student - *the kitchen of a modern house*

Scene Four - The Student and the Married Woman - *the Student's bedroom*

Scene Five - The Married Woman and the Politician - *a wealthy bedroom*

Intermission

Act Two

Scene Six - The Politician and the Model - *a room in the Metropole hotel*

Scene Seven - The Model and the Playwright - *a bohemian studio*

Scene Eight - The Playwright and the Actress - *a room in a country hotel*

Scene Nine - The Actress and the Aristocrat - *a theatre dressing room*

Scene Ten - The Aristocrat and the Girl - *a sex shop hotel*

The Team

Director: Virginia Reh

Scenographer: David Vivian

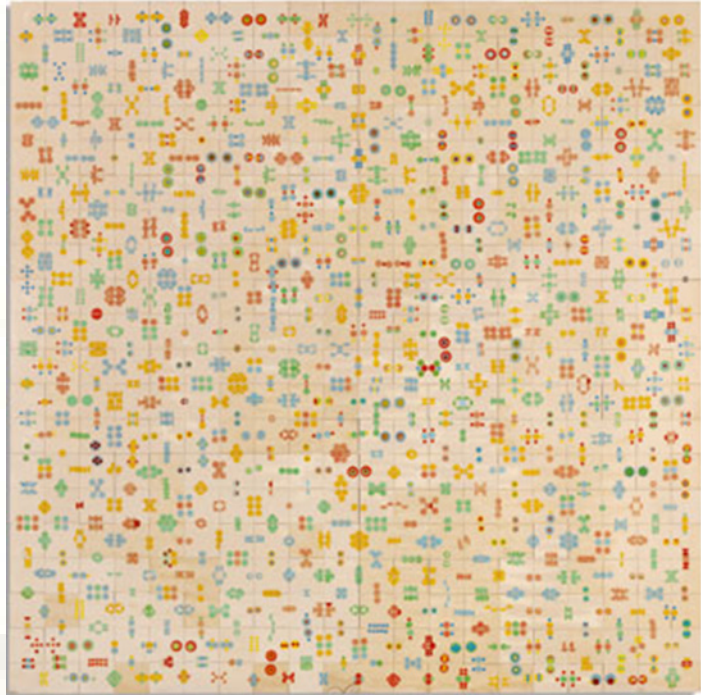
Lighting Design: Ken Garrett

Production Manager: Brian Cumberland

Assistant Director and Primer:
Jessi Robinson*

Composer “Blue Room” song:
Carly Manley, student, Music

Stage Management: Kate Hardy*,
Stephanie Baxter*, Derek Ewert*



Alighiero Boetti, Senza titolo (Untitled), 1969.

http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/boetti/#imgs-large/Boetti_Senza-titolo_1969.png

Cast:

The Girl (Irene)

The Cab Driver (Fred)

The Au Pair (Marie)

The Student (Anton)

The Married Woman (Emma)

The Politician (Charles)

The Model (Kelly)

The Playwright (Robert)

The Actress

The Aristocrat (Malcolm)

Azzurra

Erica Charles*

Kevin Chew*

Emma Strong*

Michael Caccamo*

Rachelle Lauzon*

Nick Leno*

Shauna James*

Chris Chapman*

Kendra Neaves*

Matt Da Costa*

Stephanie Neale*

*Students of the Department of Dramatic Arts are indicated by an asterisk**

Now to Start at the Beginning...

Arthur Schnitzler and *Reigen*

Arthur Schnitzler was born in Vienna in 1862 and died in Vienna in 1931. While he did occasionally make visits across Europe, and vacationed in northern Italy, he lived almost solely in Vienna. The Vienna in which Schnitzler grew up in was one that centered itself heavily in appearances and the bourgeois society. This society was one Schnitzler himself was born into, one that his father had to climb to achieve. Dr. Johann Schnitzler was not always a respected throat specialist. He began his journey as a Jewish man of modest means from Hungary, one who came to Vienna to study medicine (Thompson,2). Through his marriage to the daughter of a well-established Doctor in 1861, his success as a laryngologist and being one of the founders of the Poliklinik, a medical Clinic in Vienna at which he later became the director. Schnitzler's father was able to successfully assimilate his way into the higher ranks of Viennese bourgeois society (2). This was quite typical of the period and the city; this lifestyle was not merely limited to the born aristocracy anymore. Many in lower levels of society were able to bridge the gaps among social strata. Vienna was a cosmopolitan society, a melting pot of races, cultural backgrounds and eventually political ideologies, and this is where Arthur Schnitzler was educated. He was reared in a culture that was supremely superficial and enjoyed the status of middle-class or nouveaux riches. This class of society enjoyed its newfound wealth and became very materialistic. However, at the same time it was one of the most sophisticated middle-classes both culturally and intellectually. The bourgeoisie came to rival the aristocracy in their patronage of the arts. Schnitzler himself was privileged enough to frequent the Burgtheater and was even able to meet the some of the most successful actors of his time, as they were patients of his father (6). Pleasure seeking readily summed up the Viennese culture that Arthur Schnitzler grew up in and became an active part of. This is reflected clearly in most of his written work.



Arthur Schnitzler, Vienna, 1915.
http://www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions_events/events/schnitzler/index.html

Those Pleasure-Seeking Viennese

Schnitzler was one of three offspring of Dr. Johann Schnitzler and Louise Markbreiter. He had a brother Julius and a sister Gisela, and was raised in a comfortable lifestyle, one in which he was able to take music lessons and attend the Gymnasium, of which only a select minority of Vienna's families could afford (Gay, 1). Schnitzler was an avid writer and kept daily journals, including that of his sexual activities of which he wrote in detail about the number of orgasms achieved and how long each encounter lasted. Unfortunately, because of this habit, he received a "terrible reprimand" from his father, after he found Schnitzler's journal and read about his erotic encounters. This lecture from his father included "a treatise on syphilis and skin diseases complete with explicit and repellent illustrations"(xxvii). This was a turning point for Schnitzler though, as he realized a bond had been broken between himself and his father that could never be fully repaired as his father had violated privacy by reading his diaries. Schnitzler's almost compulsive habit of keeping journals never really stopped and although he eventually followed in his father's footsteps, studying at the University of Vienna in 1895, he spent more time writing than he did on his studies (Liukkonen) . After his father's death in 1893, he all but abandoned his career as a doctor, although he had developed a keen interest in psychiatry and came to focus completely on his career as a playwright and novelist (Liukkonen).



Spencer Tunick, Entanglement. <http://spencertunick.com/>

A Sexual Appetite & the Numbers to Prove It

One of Schnitzler's main themes as a writer came to be that of love, more specifically erotic love and the relationships that form around particular sexual partnerships. Schnitzler's own sexual appetite was well documented in his own journals which he kept almost daily, tallying his own orgasms, his partners, how and when they had sex, as well as

notes of the nature of the relationships both in the beginning and the end; as they always came to an end. From his more youthful days referring to women in his diary as Greek goddesses, to becoming “more prudent in his sexual exploits”(Gay xxvii) as he matured; and this meant exploring more of the social strata of Vienna to satiate his limitless appetite, which never seemed to succeed for very long (64). He crossed social boundaries seeking new conquests or lovers; from affairs with married women to prostitutes. In 1887, Schnitzler picked up a young woman named Anna Heeger, who made a meager living embroidering and came from a far lower social class. This made her all the more desirable in his eyes. Within a few days they had become lovers and, to Schnitzler’s surprise, he became attached to her, which only occurred four or five times from the numerous affairs he engaged in. Although he seemed to feel something greater than normal for her (throughout their 2 year relationship they had participated in sex 583 times - 326 of which happened in the first eleven months), he continued to have affairs outside of their relationship (64-65). This defined Schnitzler, as he was continually searching for other outlets for his many appetites. He would repeatedly terminate relationships with a cool and detached attitude, as these women had merely become victims of his prodigious record of orgasms. To say that Schnitzler had a complicated relationship with love, sex and women would be putting it lightly as he was obsessed with his lovers’ sexual pasts. He found unexplored virgins the most desirable, however would keep them as mistresses long after virginities were taken. He was also adamant that the women he was involved with not have jobs, as he perceived this as an affront to his character.

This sexual appetite and vast body of experience was reflected in Schnitzler’s writing, especially that of *Anatol* in 1893; a story of a young man and the sexual conquests of his past leading up to his wedding, told in a series of seven scenes. *Reigen* or “Hands Round” in 1900 offers 10 scenes of couples that interconnect through the passing of partners from one scene to the next, beginning with a soldier and a whore and completing the circle of the play with the whore and the Count. The play became more widely known as *La Ronde*, following the 1950’s film by Max Ophüls. *Reigen* was originally written by Schnitzler as a play to be read among friends, and only 200 copies were published, at his own expense. It was a clear dissection of the relationships he had experienced himself, as well as those he witnessed in Vienna at the time, scenes from life. It also illustrated clearly the promiscuity of the era coupled with the growing issue of venereal disease, a serious penance for lifestyle choices. The play soon became an underground sensation as copies of the play leaked out past his

circle of friends. Illegal copies of the play began to be printed and circulated despite the censor's bans. However the play was not performed publicly until 1920, and was met with unmitigated scandal. At the performance in Vienna in 1921, a riot broke out which was attributable to both the sexual nature of the play and rising anti-Semitism. In the same year, the opening in Berlin resulted in the actors being arrested and held for a 6 day obscenity trial resulting in an acquittal. Schnitzler was labeled as a writer of Jewish filth and the author himself banned any further performances of the play until his death. Reigen had caused one of the largest scandals in German theatre history and withdrew the play from public production.

Freud's Double

Although *Reigen* was met with much hostility in the 1920's, Schnitzler was in some very interesting company, company that may have had a significant impact on the nature of his writings. Sigmund Freud was one of Schnitzler's contemporaries and although they did not meet until June 1922, when Freud was 66 and Schnitzler was 60 (Beharriell ,722), they had written each other prior to the meeting and even came to admire each other's work. It was



Blue Room.
<http://griet-pearl.deviantart.com/art/Blue-Room-115695477>

not until the 1950's when the letters between these two were published, that it became clear just how significant a relationship it was. In one letter from Freud to Schnitzler on May 14, 1922, Freud explains why he was so hesitant to meet, stating that: "I have formed the impression that you know through intuition or rather through keen self-analysis everything that I have discovered through laborious work on other people. Indeed, I believe that fundamentally you are an explorer of psychological depths, as honestly impartial and unafraid as anyone has ever been..."(723). This was high praise

from such a pioneer of the field of psychology and philosophy. Perhaps it was warranted, as Schnitzler was a playwright with the background of a doctor, interested in the analysis and writing of erotic relationships, with a benefit of seeing them enacted on stage.

From Vienna to Britain in 76 Years...

David Hare & *The Blue Room*

From the banning of public performances of *Reigen* by Schnitzler in 1921 to the 1950's film version *La Ronde* by Max Ophuls to the present date of 2013, the world has seen many re-imaginings of Schnitzler's original *Reigen* or "Hands Round". We have selected for our 2013 mainstage production David Hare's *The Blue Room* written and first performed in 1998. This adaptation was suggested to the playwright David Hare by the then up and coming director Sam Mendes, who was working out of the Donmar Warehouse in England. Hare approached this project "licensed by the knowledge that the author himself never put the material into a form where he foresaw it being performed" (Hare, preface, *The Blue Room*). Therefore he adapted the play freely and without strict adherence to the original. Although, after comparing the two texts closely, it is uncertain as to how "free" he actually was-with the script, as there remains much overlap between the two plays. The daisy chain of sexual partnering still exists while the setting has been changed to "one of the great cities in the world, present day" (1), so Hare leaves it much more open to artistic interpretation. In *The Blue Room*, some of the most noticeable changes are in the characters' descriptions: the soldier is now a cab driver; the whore is now the girl; the maid is the au pair; the young gentleman is now the student; the young wife is the married woman; the husband has become the politician; the young miss is now the model; the poet is now the playwright; and the count is now the aristocrat. One role that does not change in title is the actress, and oddly enough she is the only character in *The Blue Room* to be left unnamed, as if to reflect a commentary of both authors on the nature of being an actress. The tone of Hare's version is somewhat different from the original *Reigen*. "Schnitzler's text is about cynicism, control, abuse and manipulation. However, in my version at least, it is also about yearning and romance... I did eleven drafts. It took me a very long time to find a difficult tone: world-weary, yes, clear-eyed, yes, but also full of the vulnerability of the search for love." (Hare, *Acting Up: A diary*). That was Hare speaking about his own vision of his work in comparison to

that of Schnitzler, and of course the interpretation of both texts is to be subjective. Some of the changes Hare made do take on a very different tones. The modification made to the role of “the girl” from “the whore” immediately removes some of the harshness. As well, Hare changes the ending of her first encounter to one of mixed regret, rather than an outburst of rage and profanity that one sees in *Reigen*. The hundred years separating the original from Hare’s adaptation witnessed an incredible amount of social upheaval and transformation and with that in mind, one would think that the attitudes towards sex would have been drastically altered. Hare articulates “the fascination of the work is that its treatment seems hardly dated at all” (preface) and this is why most of the content and nuances of the relationships in *Reigen* are very much visible in *The Blue Room*. Hare continues to explain that one reason why this play is still able to resonate with audiences, even a hundred years in the future, is because Schnitzler’s “essential subject is the gulf between what we imagine, what we remember, and what we actually experience” (Hare, *The Blue Room*).

Quite the English Gentleman

David Hare is an English writer born and bred. He was born on June 5, 1947 in East Essex. He attended Lancing College, then moved to Jesus College, Cambridge where he earned his MA in English. His first playwriting gig was actually an accident, as he was working for Portable Theatre Company, which he co-founded when a playwright dropped out at the last minute and left the company without a script. After that, he was commissioned to write a full length play called *Slag* which was first produced in 1970.



David Hare, 2010. <https://www.bafta.org/access-all-areas/screenwriting/profiles/sir-davihare,1426,BA.html>

He co-founded the Joint Stock Theatre Group, worked as a director, playwright and even acted in his own one-man shows. *The Blue Room* was not his first adaptation; he also adapted Chekhov’s *Platonov* and *Ivanov*, and Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children* for the theatre(The British Council). Hare was able to write *The Blue Room* throughout the

development of this production in conjunction with Sam Mendes, and was able to continuously tweak the script even after rehearsals with Nicole Kidman and Iain Glen had begun. In his book *Acting Up: A Diary*, Hare reveals his process of working on the play all the way through to its reception in both the UK and America.

The reception of this play was unique, in that Nicole Kidman was still a budding actress and mostly known for being Tom Cruise's significant other, while Iain Glen was an accomplished actor. Sam Mendes was a major up and coming director. The press, while giving some mixed reviews, mainly focused on the brief interval in the play when Kidman was naked on stage. Charles Spencer, a journalist from the Telegraph, got carried away with his review and said that the show "was pure theatrical Viagra", a review that became synonymous with the play. This play still carries with it the taboo or stigma that is sex itself and the way sex is societally considered and controlled. Whether *Reigen* or *The Blue Room*, the focus seems to divert to sex and scandal rather than to the play and its messages in their entirety. Perhaps this is the personal human condition. *The Blue Room* was a major success financially though and effectively assisted in launching Kidman's career as she was signed onto both *Moulin Rouge* and *The Hours* during her tour of the show.

Size Really Does Matter

The Addition of Azzurra

Why? The first question that needed to be answered for this production was why do all of these characters have sex or at least try to have sex? It seemed to us it was about the search for a connection in a world that leaves one feeling alone and sometimes even



The Highline in New York, view from inside the seating area.

used. It was the image of particles moving through space crashing into one another, bouncing off, only to be thrown in another direction, just as these characters crash into one another. These were the starting places for the development of this production and eventually the creation of a new character Azzurra. The Ophüls film offered a precedent for a framing character, in his case a ringmaster to keep the story moving. Our Azzurra had a lot to do with where these 10 scenes were going to be situated. In the original version by David Hare, all 10 characters were played by 2 actors and the entire play was set in a non-descript room that was able to be transformed by the actors. In this production, all 10 characters were played by individual actors. A place where all these encounters could take place was necessary. It became very evident that a major theme of the production was watching or being watched during these scenes, as voyeurism, almost a Big Brother or reality show type setting. A place that was controlled by someone, a person that watched all these relationships unfold and organize a suitable place for the next encounter to unravel. Game shows, reality TV and voyeurism were all explored in an attempt to understand why the audience is able to see these scenes.



New York *The Highline*, view from the outside.
<http://www.cleanbiz.asia/image/high-line-park-new-york>

The Blue Room, in this incarnation, is a business steeped in people's fantasies, controlled and operated by Azzurra, a business woman who also enjoys the power of exposing and watching people's intimate moments unfold. This woman is in control of the matching process and sets up specific pairings in

order to fulfill more than just her clients' desires. In this place, a character's fantasies are created and arranged, allowed to be played out, and examined by those allowed to watch. Clearly fantasy sometimes becomes flawed once brought into the real world. The character of Azzurra creates a world where characters can outline their fantasies and allow her to create

the details. It is about more than just the physical for her, just as it is about more than sex for the rest of the characters. Only Azzurra understands the unusual pattern of behavior from pairings she creates. It is not the outcome that is exciting, rather the process of moving from wanting so badly to find a connection to needing to leave the situation that is interesting for her. While she may appear sadistic in a business fueled by others' fantasies, she ensures her own are not lost.

Sex, Risk and How Far We've Come... Or not?

In the culture Schnitzler grew up in, risk was very much a factor in each of these kinds of sexual encounters, from the chance of contracting venereal diseases, to being caught with the wrong women and subsequently challenged to a duel, to the other side of the gender coin where women would lose everything if caught as unfaithful or impure. The standard approach to *La Ronde* has been that the characters are passing on diseases to their successive partners. Hare created his adaptation after the height of the AIDS crisis, but makes a few passing references to the health risks. Pleasure was a major component of Schnitzler's era though,

and with the rise of the nouveaux riches, there was also a break in traditions or at least loopholes. Affairs were known to occur and continue, as long as they did not interfere too publicly with those involved. Risk maintains a major role in sex today. Even in our daily lives, risk seems to have evolved into a form of sport; from jumping off



HBO's Voyeur Campaign, New York, 2008.
<http://indiadrant.blogspot.ca/2008/06/voyeur-bbdo-nys-work-for-hbo.html>

higher and higher buildings, cliffs, even from the edge of outer space, as Felix Baumgartner did in 2012 being the first man to break the sound barrier unassisted.

Today, with the advent of internet sites like youtube, phones so small they can be taken anywhere unseen, and the continual addition of CCTVs (closed circuit televisions) or security cameras, risk and thrill of being caught in the act of anything are very high. The risk within this play has much to do with the potential of being caught, recorded by a stray phone, or seen by someone who is not supposed to see you. The risk associated with being caught doing something immoral or socially unacceptable is also part of the excitement sexually for these characters. The characters are standing on the edge of a very high cliff, or in these cases having sex in a hotel room while taking a lot of pills, or copulating on the floor of a closet in a nightclub. These are high-risk areas societally, where anyone could walk in or overhear your intimate moments. Public sex is becoming a more widely documented trend, with sites listing the top ten places to have sex other than a bed, or facts about the unusual places where people have engaged in sexual activity. Tattooing, scarring and piercings openly express other avenues to assist in getting your blood pumping, other ways to experience the rush of doing something that is taboo. Just as there is public sex, there are numerous fetishes or different sexual experiences that take participants far beyond that of the regular, missionary sexual position if they feel so inclined. In *The Blue Room*, drugs also fuel a pairing's sexual encounter, stimulating them in another extremely high risk or thrilling way, as the pills could be laced or made out of something too powerful for users.

Drugs can also move participants into an altered state of being, similar to alcohol, in that they give people taking them the ability to put the onus on the substance rather than themselves. MDMA, ecstasy, pills of all colors and shapes, cocaine and a myriad of other drugs are available to those wishing to experiment, and while the method of consumption may come with instructions, the actual drug induced "trip" does not. So the risks of losing control and inhibitions increase as well as experiencing finding oneself in a most vulnerable state. Sexual diseases remain very much problematic, even today. With the production of affordable or free condoms and other sexual protection and contraception, there is still a threat of being infected by something that could be very dangerous indeed. Gonorrhea is, for example, a serious sexual disease thought to be almost eradicated by medicine. However, in 2012, *The New Yorker* offered an article about a sex worker in Japan who was infected by a strain of Gonorrhea resistant to the traditional means of treatment. AIDS was a major medical crisis in the United States in the 1980's, yet the threat of contracting HIV or AIDS still carries on today. Risk is present when choosing a sexual partner because the ability to make informed

decisions is sometime blurred, especially if the partner is lying or simply has not been checked by a doctor.

Sexuality and the perception of what sex is have always been subjective. Some treat sex as a means simply to procreate, and nothing more, while others wish to speak more freely about sex just as The University of Toronto Sexual Education Centre wished to do this January. University of Toronto's SEC, or Sexual Education Center, in conjunction with the Oasis Aqua Lounge (a "downtown club that bills itself as a water-themed adult playground, where swingers are welcome and sex is allowed everywhere but the hot tub")(online) held a night for students.

SEC's mission is to foster "a sex-positive attitude in the greater U of T area, by offering information, programming, safer-sex supplies, and peer counseling in a welcoming environment"(same). This is just one example of how sex is becoming more openly acceptable - without taboo. Even if only limited to a club or darkened corner, the fact is that sex is now at least a more openly discussed part of our culture. *The Blue Room* illustrates the sometimes overlooked reality of relationships; the power of the mind in many states, and analyzes the harshness and complexity of human interaction both before and after sex; from the risks these characters will take in pursuit of excitement, fantasies or thrills, only to discover afterwards that perhaps the risk was far too great or perhaps not satisfying enough.



By: Artistic unit JocJonJosch, "Existere" Project, 2011.
<http://now-here-this.timeout.com/2011/06/06/naked-participants-needed-for-jocjonjoschs-existere-project/>

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