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Dirk Gindt, *Tennessee Williams in Sweden and France, 1945-1965. Cultural Translations, Sexual Anxieties and Racial Fantasies*, London and New York: Methuen, 2019, pp. 257

Abstract

Building on Peter Burke's and Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural translation as a process in which readers in one social, aesthetic and historical environment negotiate the meaning of a particular text that originates in a different context, Dirk Gindt has investigated the migration process of five plays by America's foremost playwright, Tennessee Williams, towards France and Sweden between 1945 and 1965. *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Orpheus Descending* and *Suddenly Last Summer* were directed and acted, with rare exception, with blatantly sexualized and racialized characters and settings. This, in turn, provided critics with ammunition to incite public scandal and outrage or dismiss the plays as products of a nation with an immature theatrical culture. The book delves into myriads of reviews and other elements connected with the transcultural passage of these works to offer an interdisciplinary study of the negotiations involved in the process, with a keen eye for such meaningful issues as sexuality, race, gender and nation.

KEYWORDS: race; gender; sexuality; homophobia; Tennessee Williams; France; Sweden

Tennessee Williams is undoubtedly the American playwright whose work has been most widely disseminated outside of his native country. Some of the reasons why this has happened are the unfailing transpositions of his plays into Hollywood films, the fact that he started writing at a time when the American cultural hegemony in the world reached a peak, and the titillating sexual elements in his plays, that anticipated deep changes taking place in Western civilization in the following decades. Choosing to focus on five plays, two countries and a specific time span, Dirk Gindt's book adds relevant insight to contemporary Tennessee Williams scholarship, to drama studies and to the transcultural approach in the humanities.

From the late 1940s to the early 1960s most European theatre-goers were exposed to the controversial effects caused by Williams's plays of the time, whether directly (when witnessing actual performances) or indirectly (reading the reviews), and his theatre formed part of cultural debates especially tackling such issues as gender, sexuality, race, and nation. It is in these points of convergence, as

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stated by the subtitle to Gindt's book, that lies his motivation for choosing to investigate two nations apparently quite different from each other. The American playwright's theatre, in fact, raised questions that were meaningful for both countries and provoked responses that were sometimes similar, sometimes differed according to the social conditions of Sweden and France, and the book never fails to acknowledge coincidences or to compare and explain differences.

On top of this, Williams's plays were connected, in the two nations, by the strategic operations of a Swedish agent/producer, Lars Schmidt (1917-2009), who passed from owning a small publishing company to being the most significant cultural ambassador for post-WW II American theatre in Europe. Such information is available because Gindt's method of research goes beyond textual analysis to encompass all the elements that are involved in the cultural translation of a piece of theatre, including actors, directors, costume and scene designers, translators, adaptors, advertisers, agents and, most important, the journalists who provided the theatre reviews through which new plays were supposedly explained, evaluated and judged. Building on Peter Burke's and Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural translation, Gindt has thus provided a fascinatingly detailed assessment of the "various layers of the production and reception of Williams' plays in Sweden and France as processes of interpretation, negotiation and creative tension between various national, cultural and linguistic contexts" (198). The plays that have been taken into consideration are among the most prominent in the Williams canon, *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), his masterpiece *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Orpheus Descending* (1957) and *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958). All of them were variously produced in Sweden and France, except for the rewriting of the Orpheus theme, which was not staged in the Scandinavian country. But despite (or thanks to) this choice, it is noteworthy that Gindt's transcultural approach not only offers new insight in the foreign reception of America's most iconic and influential playwright, it also generates a cultural history of mid-century theatre in Sweden and France well beyond the specific single artist.

What the Swedish scholar does, indeed, is to identify and draw a web of interwoven forces generated by the transcultural migration of five among the most representative plays of post-World War II American theatre towards two European nations that soon recognized Tennessee Williams as an extremely rich site for debating controversial issues such as male homoeroticism, female sexual desire, race and national identity, among others. What results is "the first book on Williams to devote equal attention to both sexual and racial politics and the intersection of these outside of an American context" (20).

Each new premiere performance of a Williams play, starting from his first international success, *The Glass Menagerie*, lent itself to various reactions in audiences and critics, which often involved negotiations of fears, fantasies and anxieties bringing "to the surface sexual and racial phobias that questioned and threatened to uncover myths of national or cultural homogeneity" (12-3). Whereas *The Glass Menagerie* was considered, we could say, the 'meekest' of these plays in terms of provocative power, his following work, the world-reknowned dramatic portrait of Blanche DuBois, the embodiment of an old aristocracy overwhelmed

by history and by the brutal assault of an alpha-man, did not fail to unleash opinionated reactions in both countries. At the beginning, Laura Wingfield's demure tragedy of gradual withdrawal from reality into her world of glass animals simply puzzled European critics for its mixture of realism and symbolism. Perceived as a weird specimen of American modernity in terms of dramatic structure, it nonetheless garnered commercial success and praises in Sweden that were slower to come from the French intelligentsia, which was still treasuring neo-classical rules in the theatre and 'defending' them from foreign contamination.

1949 was the year in which *A Streetcar Named Desire* started its as of today unstoppable route outside the United States, being directed in January in Rome by Luchino Visconti, in March in Gothenburg by Ingmar Bergman, and in October in Paris by Raymond Rouleau, who put up a French version adapted by Jean Cocteau. By no means devoid of sexual and racial innuendo, the play was received in each of these countries causing reactions that mirrored the specific cultural *milieu* it encountered. In Sweden, a social Darwinist reading of the play as the depiction of a "rotten branch" of American society being liquidated by newer forces bespeaks a dark side in the supposedly progressive Scandinavian spirit. Despite its aura of sexually liberated culture, Swedish society was all but immune to fears of degeneration. The stately sponsored Institute for Racial Biology, founded in 1922 and still active at the time of these performances, "took eugenics to an unprecedented level by studying the alleged relationship between race and mental illness, alcoholism and criminality, all in the name of social hygiene and national health" (51). Furthermore, a large-scale sterilization programme started in the previous decade allowed doctors to overrule the wishes of the patient if the latter was deemed unfit to form part of the *folkemmet*, the "People's Home", as envisioned by the ruling Social Democratic party. It is in this atmosphere that the play was staged and received, and it is no surprise that most reviews mirrored these anxieties, also because the directors themselves, both in Sweden and in France, chose to overly sexualize and racialize Williams's text. Neither culture, in fact, was yet ready to assimilate and directly face the play's explicit and groundbreaking representation and embodiment of sexual desire. As would happen to most of Williams's successive heroines, Blanche was dubbed a nymphomaniac simply because she dared express her sexual desires and Stanley's rape of his sister-in-law was often underrated as a natural male reaction. Racial elements also came to the fore, as the Paris production "relied on deeply rooted tropes of colonial representation to project the white characters' immense desires onto sexualized Black bodies. Racialization was thus key to visualize, stage, review and debate the erotic appetite and appeal of the main characters. In both countries, it marked a defence mechanism to keep white sexuality under control" (200).

The fact that Williams's characters and plots were at odds with the heteronormativity and male chauvinist hegemony of the burgeoning Cold War period was nowhere more evident than with the stagings of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Women's bodies as personifications of their desires through actual conspicuousness on stage were also quite daring for the times, and Maggie the Cat's feline femininity, iconized on film by Elizabeth Taylor, was one of the main topics tackled by reviewers of the play. In Sweden, the play was staged at a key historical moment,

when the myth of Swedish tolerance in sexual matters was turning against itself and becoming negative, tagging the national character as sinful. The French production, on the other hand, directed by British dramaturg Peter Brook, played on the myth of Parisian sensuality and, by casting Jeanne Moreau as the heroine – decked in flimsy Coco Chanel designed clothes – deflected the focus of the play from her husband’s tormented homoeroticism to a heterosexualized display of female beauty. In Italy, directed by Belgian born Raymond Rouleau (who had directed *Streetcar* in Paris), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (with Lea Padovani in the title role) significantly did not need any directorial intervention in order to be ‘normalized’: the overarching heteronormative culture made it impossible for reviewers to believe that Brick Pollitt could have had a physical or sentimental attraction to his sporting buddy Skipper, so much so that the ambiguity of the plot was often solved by reviewers blaming Maggie for Skipper’s death and for her husband’s emotional paralysis. Homophobia – in this case meaning blindness to the rules of attraction – was easily coupled with misogynist dismissals of woman’s essential ‘wickedness’.

This shows how Williams’s texts lent themselves to delicate processes of cultural translation, in which some elements were lost, others were misinterpreted, but all of them, by touching many a raw nerve, are now proving extremely relevant for investigating theatrical culture in the countries in which they were staged, and for understanding how such cultures mirrored social tensions of the time. As was happening in other European countries (in Italy, Germany, and to a lesser extent, because of Franco’s regime, in Spain), Tennessee Williams’s plays elicited biased reviews in which the United States and Broadway were conceptualized as Europe’s theatrical Other, “and the representation of sexuality became a key tool for consistently contrasting and judging Swedish and French values, norms, aesthetic ideals and cultural identity against their imagined American counterparts” (90). Homosexuality, for example, was deemed to be one of America’s obsessions, as Robert Anderson’s 1953 *Tea and Sympathy* was playing in Paris at the same time as *Cat*. The play likewise dramatized ‘accusations’ of same-sex attraction leveled at a school boy (as had happened with another sensational Broadway play that dealt with same-sex love in an all-female school, Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour*, 1934), once again chalking up the subject to matters of gossip, misunderstandings or unresolved ambiguities. The way Brick and Skipper’s relationship and their mutual connection to Maggie were understood in the two nations investigated by Gindt thus says a lot about the development of sexual mores of those cultures in a specific historical period, in which theatre was still the site through which people could negotiate contemporary anxieties about sexuality, gender and nation.

One of the harshest comments on Jeanne Moreau playing Maggie the Cat in sexy lingerie was aired on the French radio in 1957 by a journalist who maintained there was no lack of establishments in Paris where one could be treated to similar entertainment without having to listen to dramatic dialogue and with the possibility of buying much cheaper entrance tickets. As Gindt has wisely noted, equating Moreau’s “performance to a striptease in the red-light district was a convenient way to take off the edge of the character who refuses to give in to the

overbearing patriarchal mentality and mendacity that holds its grip on the Pollitt family” (132).

Apparently more daring and provoking than the other plays (in Italy it was not produced until 1991), *Suddenly Last Summer*, with its gloomy jungle-garden background and Darwinian violence exposed, marked the beginning of France’s actual appreciation of Williams’s theatre. It should be noted that it was staged in 1965, when the aftershock of decolonization had already deeply changed consciences and its anti-racist undercurrent was more easily graspable. The play was so much perceived as a meaningful and timely cultural product, that it was appropriated by the innovative company Les Trétaux de France, a travelling ensemble that, focusing on *la banlieu* and *les provinces*, was indeed one of the pivotal agents of theatre decentralization in France. *Orpheus Descending* had been produced in France six years before (directed by Rouleau), but its Southern setting and racial theme were either too exoticed or misinterpreted, its women still judged by the harsh standards of nineteenth century psychiatry. Carol Cutriere, for example, the young rebel who voices her sexual desires, was defined by a French reviewer as “the nymphomaniac on duty in Mr. Tennessee Williams’ theatre” (147). Only a few years later, French critics – who had willingly travelled to the *banlieu* to watch *Suddenly Last Summer* – interpreted the newest production as “a successful attempt at capturing essential truths about humanity: the destiny of the weak, sensitive or artistically minded who, as dictated by the logics of Social Darwinism, were doomed to be crushed and devoured by the stronger ones” (185). Homophobic remarks were disappearing from reviews, as were accusations of antiquated naturalism (levelled at *Orpheus Descending*), excessive melodrama or Freudian obsessions. French theatre intelligentsia was growing up, and it was doing so also thanks to the constant challenges posed by Tennessee Williams’s plays. On Scandinavian stages, instead, *Suddenly Last Summer* marked the beginning of the author’s fall from grace with Swedish critics and audiences, an abrupt change that was about to mark Williams’s career in all the countries where he had been most lionized, and that would last until his death in 1983, when he was quickly turned into a modern classic.

