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Cultural Translations, Sexual Anxieties and Racial Fantasies

Dirk Gindt

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DIRK GINDT

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For John, who hangs my moon and all the stars.

CONTENTS

List of Figures viii
Acknowledgements xi

Introduction: Cultural Translations and Patterns of Migration 1

1 Setting the Stage: *The Glass Menagerie* 25
2 Encounters with the Other: *A Streetcar Named Desire* 39
3 Sinful Sexualities and Commercial Triumphs: *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* 89
4 Fantasies of the Deep South: *Orpheus Descending* 137
5 Critical Watershed: *Suddenly Last Summer* 163

Epilogue 196

Appendix 204
Notes 210
Works Cited 226
Index 251

LIST OF FIGURES

1 Mimi Pollak in *Glasmenageriet*, Royal Dramatic Theatre (1946), and Jane Marken in *La Ménagerie de verre*, Théâtre du Vieux Colombier (1947). Photo: Sven Järlsås, © Kungliga Dramatiska Teatern; © Studio Lipnitzki/Roger-Viollet/The Image Works 27

2 Olof Bergström and Nancy Dalunde in *Glasmenageriet*, Royal Dramatic Theatre (1946). Photo: Sven Järlsås, © Kungliga Dramatiska Teatern 28

3 Carl-Johan Ström's set for *Spårvagn till Lustgården*, Gothenburg City Theatre (1949). Photo: Georg Cassirer, © Göteborgs Stadsteater 42

4 Annika Tretow, Karin Kavli and Anders Ek in *Spårvagn till Lustgården*, Gothenburg City Theatre (1949). Photo: Georg Cassirer, © Göteborgs Stadsteater 45

5 The final scene in *Spårvagn till Lustgården*, Gothenburg City Theatre (1949). Photo: Georg Cassirer, © Göteborgs Stadsteater 46

6 Karin Kavli in *Spårvagn till Lustgården*, Gothenburg City Theatre (1949). Photo: Georg Cassirer, © Göteborgs Stadsteater 48

7 Herman Ahlsell and Anders Ek in *Spårvagn till Lustgården*, Gothenburg City Theatre (1949). Photo: Georg Cassirer, © Göteborgs Stadsteater 54

8 Hubert Lärn's illustration of *Spårvagn till Lustgården*, Gothenburg City Theatre, in *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning* (2 March 1949). © Anita Lärn and Viveca Lärn 56

9 Jean Sennep's illustration of *Un Tramway nommé Désir*, Théâtre Édouard VII (1949), in *Le Figaro* (20 October 1949). © Sennep/Bildupphovsrätt 2017 62

10 Lila de Nobili's set for *Un Tramway nommé Désir*, Théâtre Édouard VII (1949). © Studio Lipnitzki/Roger-Viollet/The Image Works 70

11 Lila de Nobili's set design for *Un Tramway nommé Désir*, Théâtre Édouard VII (1949), in *Vogue* (November 1949). © Condé Nast France 71

12 Yves Vincent and Arletty in *Un Tramway nommé Désir*, Théâtre Édouard VII (1949). © Studio Lipnitzki/Roger-Viollet/ Parisienne de Photographie 85

13 Arletty in *Un Tramway nommé Désir*, Théâtre Édouard VII (1949). Photo: Georges Dudognon, © Photographie Georges Dudognon 87

14 Carl-Johan Ström's set design for *Katt på hett plåttak*, Gothenburg City Theatre (1955). © Göteborgs Stadsteater 92

15 Gunnel Broström and Herman Ahlsell in *Katt på hett plåttak*, Gothenburg City Theatre (1955). Photo: Georg Cassirer, © Göteborgs Stadsteater 93

16 Herman Ahlsell and Kolbjörn Knudsen in *Katt på hett plåttak*, Gothenburg City Theatre (1955). Photo: Georg Cassirer, © Göteborgs Stadsteater 94

17 Gunnel Broström in *Katt på hett plåttak*, Gothenburg City Theatre (1955). Photo: Georg Cassirer, © Göteborgs Stadsteater 98

18 Herman Ahlsell and Gunnel Broström in *Katt på hett plåttak*, Gothenburg City Theatre (1955), in *Se* (42/1955). Photo: Lennart Nilsson, © Lennart Nilsson/TT 101

19 Peter Brook's set for *La Chatte sur un toit brûlant*, Théâtre Antoine (1956). Photo: Roger Viollet/Studio Lipnitzki, © The Image Works 115

20 Jeanne Moreau in *La Chatte sur un toit brûlant*, Théâtre Antoine (1956). Photo: Roger Viollet/Studio Lipnitzki, © The Image Works 121

21 Paul Guers and Jeanne Moreau in *La Chatte sur un toit brûlant*, Théâtre Antoine (1956). Photo: Roger Viollet/Studio Lipnitzki, © The Image Works 122

22 Paul Guers and Jeanne Moreau in *La Chatte sur un toit brûlant*, Théâtre Antoine (1956). Photo: Jack Garofalo, © Paris Match via Getty Images 127

23 Lars Schmidt, Raymond Rouleau and Jean Babilée during rehearsals for *La Descente d'Orphée*, Théâtre de l'Athénée (1959). Photo: Jack Garofalo, © Paris Match via Getty Images 141

24 Douta Seck in *La Descente d'Orphée*, Théâtre de l'Athénée (1959). Photo: unknown, © AML (Archives et Musée de la Littérature), Brussels 151

25 Arletty and Jean Babilée in *La Descente d'Orphée*, Théâtre de l'Athénée (1959). © Photo Roger Pic/Bildupphovsrätt 2018/ Bibliothèque Nationale de France 156

26 Georges Lycan and Jean Babilée in *La Descente d'Orphée*, Théâtre de l'Athénée (1959). Photo: Jack Garofalo, © Paris Match via Getty Images 159

27 Folke Sundquist and Gerd Hein in *Plötsligt i somras*, Malmö City Theatre (1959). Photo: Alice Strid, © Malmö Opera Arkiv 168

28 Folke Sundquist, Gerd Hein and Naima Wifstrand in *Plötsligt i somras*, Malmö City Theatre (1959). Photo: Alice Strid, © Malmö Opera Arkiv 168

29 Silvia Monfort and Moni-Reh in *Soudain… l'été dernier*, Les Trétaux de France (1965). © Photo Danielle Netter 193

30 Silvia Monfort and Jean Danet in *Soudain… l'été dernier*, Les Trétaux de France (1965). © Photo Danielle Netter 194

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***

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Introduction: Cultural Translations and Patterns of Migration

Travelling wears me out.

(Williams 1971b: 267)

It is with this apologetic statement that Blanche DuBois, the protagonist in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, attempts to explain her run-down appearance and barely concealed craving for a stiff drink, when she arrives at her sister's apartment in New Orleans. Contrary to what the play suggests, Blanche will travel much further than the French Quarter or even the mental institution, which seems to be her final destination after her nervous breakdown. Let us imagine for a moment that the doctor or, more appropriately, the stranger on whose kindness she famously relies at the end of the play does not escort her to a hospital. Let us assume instead that he accompanies her to the nearest stop where she hops on the next streetcar, which takes her on a journey around the world. Along this journey, Blanche will make appearances on international stages, touching audiences in many countries and becoming one of the most recognizable characters in modern theatre. Sweden and France are among the many countries that Blanche visits, and these two cultures constitute the focus of this book.

By providing a critical study of the processes of production and reception of Williams' works on Swedish and French stages at the height of his commercial success between 1945 and 1965, the book aims to answer the following series of questions: How do plays that have been conceived in an American context and successfully produced on Broadway become intelligible for theatre artists, audiences and critics on the other side of the Atlantic? How does their interpretation adapt and change in new cultural circumstances? What are the specific aspects of a stage work that members of the new culture focus on or even enhance in order to make the play accessible, compelling, socially relevant and financially lucrative? Who are the cultural agents initiating and propelling the migration of plays from one context into another? And finally, what can a detailed study of the production and reception of these plays reveal about the respective social and historical contexts, including the politics of gender, sexuality and race?[1] Sweden and France, as I will demonstrate, constitute two particularly relevant case studies to address these questions and, as a result, the book charts and critically analyses the patterns of migration and cultural translation of Williams' plays in two specific European contexts to produce a much richer, deeper and more nuanced understanding of the transnational impact of one of the twentieth century's key playwrights than has been provided thus far.

The two decades immediately following the Second World War mark a pivotal moment in the globalization of American theatre when Williams' plays became some of Broadway's most critically acclaimed and commercially profitable exports. The international success of his plays, as I will show, was dependent on the effectiveness of their cultural translation, a key theoretical concept suggested by postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha (2004) and literature scholar Peter Burke, among others. For Burke cultural translation is 'a double process of decontextualization and recontextualization, first reaching out to appropriate something alien and then domesticating it' (2007: 10). It refers to the processes of interpretation that happen when readers in one social, aesthetic and historical environment negotiate the meaning of a particular text, defined broadly here, that originates in another different context. At times, this process results in a radical re-adaptation or re-interpretation of the original in order to make it appealing and intelligible to audiences in the 'host culture' (ibid.: 20).

Building and expanding upon Burke's definition, the book proposes its own, multifaceted analytical approach to tease out four specific layers at stake when Williams' plays made their journey from Broadway to Stockholm, Paris and beyond. Cultural translations in the theatre are unique because they go beyond the linguistic act of translation of a dramatic text from one language into another.[2] Often, this first layer already involves an adapter who, following their own artistic vision and temperament, modifies the dialogue and thus imposes their own interpretation to facilitate meaning for new audiences. A second layer refers to the material conditions, including the role played by agents, producers as well as artistic directors and managing directors, all of whom need to be taken into consideration to understand the concrete financial interests and investments at stake when plays migrate from one culture to another. The third layer reveals how plays are dependent on corporeal, material and visual presentation in order to come alive in performance. This particular aspect of cultural translation is propelled and personified by directors, actors and designers who have their own artistic and, sometimes, political agenda. A fourth and final layer is provided by reviewers who play a formidable part in these processes of cultural translation as professional evaluators and interpreters who explain and debate the content and merits of a play for their readers, often motivated by their own subjective tastes and ideals. Respecting these four layers of cultural translation (text, material conditions, performance and critical discourse), the book focuses in on five of Williams' most iconic plays by way of their stage production and critical reception in Sweden and France: *The Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desire, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Orpheus Descending* and *Suddenly Last Summer*.

Three core objectives undergird the ambitious trajectory of this study. The first of these is to trace the patterns of migration of Williams' plays into two previously neglected historical and cultural contexts of theatre by studying original stage productions and their reception. While American theatre and popular culture in general have had a global impact since the mid-twentieth century, my argument is that in order to truly understand the implications of this phenomenon, we need to analyse the respective national contexts to unpack the complexities and nuances of this impact. Williams' plays, while supported by substantial financial investments and promotional efforts, could only have become

successful (and notorious) precisely because they managed to strike a cultural nerve, not just in the United States but also in Sweden, France and beyond. Because of the emphasis placed on cultural specificity and historical and national contextualization, the book must not be misconstrued as advancing a pan-European claim (even if there certainly are overlaps with other European countries). Rather than succumbing to essentializing notions of an overarching European pattern of production and reception of Williams' work, I argue for the need for culturally sensitive studies based on primary sources as a means to establish overlaps as much as evoke crucial differences, tensions and evolutions in the cultural translation of his plays. By presenting original, often heretofore unavailable Swedish and French archival material, the analysis offers important new insights into the international impact and legacy of Williams' dramatic oeuvre. The subject matter is approached from a truly interdisciplinary perspective that studies textual documentation (translations of the plays, reviews, newspaper articles, interviews, theatre journals, memoirs, biographies and, where available, promptbooks and directors' annotated rehearsal scripts), in addition to preserved audio transmissions (audio recordings, radio broadcasts and cultural debate programmes) and the visual culture generated by the productions (publicity and rehearsal photographs, design sketches, illustrations, caricatures and photo essays in fashion and lifestyle publications). The careful examination of such diverse material provides a nuanced and complex view of the cultural translation of Williams' plays both on and off the stage. Significantly, this critical methodology allows me to move beyond Williams the playwright and chart an expansive network of cultural agents who left distinctive marks on post-war European culture in the overlapping fields of directing, acting, set and costume design, fashion, production, management, theatre criticism and photography. What this generates, in turn, is a cultural history of mid-century theatre in Sweden and France well beyond the specificity of one play or playwright.

Informed by gender, sexuality and postcolonial studies, my second objective interrogates the sexual anxieties and racial fantasies that Williams' characters, settings and themes engendered in post-war Sweden and France. The overwhelming evidence, I posit, underscores how his plays constituted cultural products that made possible the exploration and articulation of domestic anxieties and national

insecurities, which, in turn, could be deflected and safely diverted to an exoticized version of the United States or, more specifically, the American (Deep) South. When Williams' plays were staged and reviewed, they were filtered through the lens, presumptions and prejudices of European directors and critics who catered to the often equally skewed expectations of their audiences. With rare exception, directors and actors in Sweden and France blatantly sexualized and racialized Williams' characters and settings, which in turn provided critics with ammunition to incite public scandal and outrage or dismiss the plays as products of an exclusively American imagination. This double process of hyperbole and displacement allowed for the negotiation of Swedish and French fears, fantasies and anxieties under the guise of seemingly particularized American tastes, preoccupations and obsessions.

As a direct consequence of the first two aims and as a way to synthesize them, my third objective is to redirect interest to Williams' plays as works for the international stage by looking at actual productions, their critical reception and the various debates these engendered in a well-defined historical and cultural context. *Tennessee Williams in Sweden and France* offers a timely expansion of the discussion of the global impact of American drama that points to the increasingly transnational and intercultural direction in theatre history and performance studies. The book analyses the processes of migration of a striking aspect of post-war Broadway culture to Sweden and France, weaves together narratives from different national theatre cultures and linguistic contexts and, in the process, charts international networks of creativity. These intercultural meetings, dialogues and negotiations reveal, I claim, new dimensions of American and European theatre history as much as they advance knowledge of the international magnitude of one of the defining playwrights of the twentieth century.

My methodological choice to employ the notion of cultural translation as a guiding principle and framework is propelled by this ambition to generate further insights into and carve out new directions for Williams as well as American and European theatre studies. Building upon Walter Benjamin's (1969) anti-essentializing claim that any act of translation is always a process whose meaning can never be fixed in a stable point of origin, Bhabha exposes the politically subversive potential of the concept of cultural translation: 'Cultural translation desacralizes the transparent assumptions of

cultural supremacy, and in that very act, demands a contextual specificity, a historical differentiation *within* minority positions' (2004: 327; emphasis in original). For Bhabha, cultural translation offers a way to open up for spaces and states of hybridity that expand beyond binary thinking and cut across narrowly defined identity politics. When Williams' plays moved or migrated to Sweden and France, they entered into a 'third space' (Bhabha and Rutherford 1990) that became a site of not only potential conflicts and anxieties but also creativity and artistic collaboration. The third space is conceptualized here as having both a material dimension (embodiment onstage) and a discursive one (theatre criticism). In this dynamic space, a number of steadfast binaries (American/European, queer/straight, black/white, us/them) were challenged, which in turn resulted in numerous sexual anxieties and racial fantasies. These anxieties and fantasies, I posit, troubled myths of national or cultural homogeneity, revealed cracks and fissures in normative discourse and therefore enabled the emergence of subject positions and communities that were, and often continue to be, denied access to universalizing narratives and historiographies.[3]

Välkommen till Sverige – Bienvenue en France

My choice of Sweden and France as areas of focus is far from arbitrary and allows for two unique, rich and complimentary case studies to tease out similarities, overlaps, variations and contrasts of the points of entry, dissemination, cultural translation and reception of Williams' stage works, as well as the manifold anxieties and fantasies engendered by them over the span of two decades. Unlike in numerous other European countries, theatre in Sweden and France was not subjected to any direct form of politically or religiously motivated censorship.[4] Theatres in the UK and Ireland, for example, had to observe various mechanisms of censorship, which resulted in significant delays in Williams' plays being performed. It might be worth highlighting that when they were finally staged, the sexually provocative content was often significantly expurgated (de Jongh 2001; Dean 2001). Largely due to Cold War politics and the military division of Europe, productions of American drama behind the Iron Curtain were delayed by several decades. In the

USSR, most notably, the first Williams play to be translated was *Orpheus Descending* in 1960, while *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* did not open until December 1981 (Shaland 1987). Under the dictatorship of General Franco, regional Spanish theatres were often prohibited from staging Williams (Romero 2014; Torres-Zúñiga 2014), while cultural representations in Italy were censored long after the Fascist regime had ended (Clericuzio 2016). In West Germany, the stationed Allied forces deployed cultural products, including Williams' plays, as pedagogical tools of propaganda for American-styled democracy and values. As a result, the cultural translation of Williams was already provided for before German theatre artists and audiences were involved and the rushed translations often included glaring errors (Frenz and Weisstein 1960; Lange 1980; Wolter 1993). In sharp contrast to the aforementioned countries, theatre artists in Sweden and France were free to perform Williams' stage works as they wanted, without fear of external interference and censorship.[5]

A key difference between the two countries lies in their respective theatre cultures and the ways managing and artistic directors and reviewers negotiated the increasing impact and commercial appeal of American drama after the Second World War. Sweden, which had been spared the trauma of occupation and whose infrastructure and economy remained relatively intact, provided the gateway into Europe not only for Williams but also, notably, for post-war Broadway culture in general. Due to a number of intersecting factors, Sweden hosted the European openings of *The Glass Menagerie, The Rose Tattoo, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Sweet Bird of Youth, Period of Adjustment* and *The Night of the Iguana*. The establishment of regional and municipal city theatres, supported by public funding, marked a crucial shift in cultural politics that contributed to the process of decentralization and democratization of cultural life in the 1940s and 1950s.[6] These playhouses, inspired by the German *Stadttheater* and in line with the Social Democratic government's agenda of bringing culture to large segments of the population, offered both up-and-coming and established actors and directors a platform to gain valuable experience and explore different genres. Managing and artistic directors were eager to stage contemporary international plays, an effort that was applauded and supported by reviewers who could easily travel by train to see and evaluate new productions, often highlighting them as superior to the offerings of the national stage, the Royal Dramatic Theatre (aka Dramaten) in

Stockholm (Heed 2007).[7] In addition to the city theatres, Williams' plays were also performed by the private Vasa Theatre in Stockholm, the national touring company Riksteatern (founded in 1933) or independent itinerant ensembles that reached out to audiences outside of urban centres. However, unlike the city theatres that offered long-term contracts and took pride in their ensemble acting, private theatres and companies were more dependent on the star quality of a leading performer for each production.

Also of importance here is the Swedish reception of Eugene O'Neill. In the interwar period, his plays were staged at the Dramaten to such a regular extent that critics spoke of an 'O'Neill tradition' (see Olsson 1977) and in 1946, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. These are two vital explanations to understand why Swedish critics in the immediate post-war era were generally receptive towards Williams and Broadway theatre, which they did not perceive as a threat to national culture. Furthermore, the naturalistic aesthetics following from the nineteenth-century Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg tradition, coupled with the fact that the Swedish translations of Konstantin Stanislavsky's writings on psychologically realistic acting were published in 1944 and 1951, made for an inviting and fertile climate for the dissemination of post-war American drama and facilitated the approach to the plays by a younger generation of actors who were reared or educated themselves according to the principles of Stanislavsky's system.[8] Refusing to limit themselves to one theatrical genre, directors did not discriminate and seamlessly moved from producing American realism to Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, Federico García Lorca's lyrical drama or, in the 1950s, theatre of the absurd. Finally, both actors and directors travelled and explored vibrant and emerging currents in European theatre, not least contemporary French directors' attempts to move away from antiquated declamatory styles and the revolutionary reforms of the Berliner Ensemble (Helander 2003). In a creative environment that stimulated artistic diversity and healthy competition, Williams soon emerged as the era's most popular and commercially lucrative international playwright.

Initially France offered a less hospitable environment for Williams and American theatre. Within a few years after the war, Paris re-emerged as an important European theatre hub, not least because of the breakthrough of theatre of the absurd and the impact of existentialism on 1950s culture, which inaugurated a

new golden era for French theatre. Visits from Asian companies exposed audiences to Beijing Opera as well as Nō and Kabuki, while guest performances by the Berliner Ensemble sensitized them to epic theatre (Bradby and Delgado 2002). The cultural monopoly of Paris was not unquestioned, however, and demands for cultural decentralization gained increasing momentum in the post-war period, when politicians and artists sought to make arts and theatre available to all French people (Abirached 1993; Bradby 1991: 87–165). As the book shows, decentralization eventually had a remarkable impact on the cultural translation of Williams in France.

The period following the Liberation from German Occupation also gave birth to some of the most vibrant periodicals that helped shape theatrical discourse. *Paris-Théâtre* (founded in 1947) and *L'Avant-Scène* (founded in 1949 and titled *L'Avant-Scène/Femina-Théâtre* as of 1957) initially only published new plays. By the early 1950s these plays were richly illustrated with photographs from their opening production in addition to theatre criticism and artists' biographies. *Arts: beaux-arts, littérature, spectacles*, initially a modest four-page magazine founded in 1945, dropped its subtitle in 1952 and quickly established itself as one of the most influential cultural journals of the post-war period. Until it ceased publication in 1966, *Arts* published in-depth reports on the arts, lively intellectual debates between artists and, not least, vigilant accounts about the politics of the French Ministry of Culture (Blondet 2009).

Throughout the post-war period, the legacy of both Jacques Copeau and the so-called Cartel des Quatre retained a stronghold on French theatre. As director at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, which he founded in 1913, Copeau argued for respecting the intellectual value of a dramatic text and sought to implement a new simplicity in stage design that established the actor as the uncompromised centre of a production. He also trained performers to act in less artificial ways and abandon the boulevard theatres' ham acting or the neo-classicist declamation taught at the Conservatoire, the national drama academy in Paris (founded in 1795). The Cartel was a loose association founded by four actors and directors: Gaston Baty, Georges Pitoëff, Charles Dullin and Louis Jouvet joined forces in 1927 to renew French drama and French theatre. Like Copeau, they advocated for a more sincere and less pretentious acting style,[9] highlighted the need to nurture contemporary playwrights and, above all, opposed the

commercialization of the thespian arts by some boulevard theatres that appealed to bourgeois audiences and offered revues or light comedies rooted in nineteenth-century aesthetics. The Cartel further argued for a reappraisal and continuation of an artistic theatre in the spirit of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century innovators such as Copeau, Stanislavsky and André Antoine, though without advocating a return to naturalism (Bradby 1991: 34–86; Falb 1972; Guérin 2007: 351–403; Guicharnaud and Guicharnaud 1967; Viala 2009: 405–50).[10] While the Cartel dissolved in 1939, its modernist aesthetics left a profound mark on French theatre and criticism after the Second World War, which provides an important explanation as to why American theatre was met with scepticism, deemed too naturalistic and therefore obsolete and at odds with the aspirations and ethos of contemporary modernist drama.

In Paris, Williams' plays were exclusively performed by private-enterprise ventures, the so-called boulevard theatres, whose managing and artistic directors were keen to combine commercial success with literary value to enhance the reputation and appeal of their theatres; a new Williams offering often had the potential to fulfil all of their criteria.[11] Because his plays were not produced by any of the national stages whose mandate was to preserve and promote the country's dramatic heritage,[12] but rather by the more commercially mindful boulevard theatres, Paris witnessed the formation of new *international* (as opposed to exclusively French) artistic constellations. Managing directors and artistic directors often initiated myriad networks of creativity, and many cultural agents who were involved in the productions of Williams' plays had a tangible impact on post-war European culture and theatre history. The book therefore marks a critical intervention into conventional historiography by demonstrating the real, substantive and central role that American theatre and Williams played in France.

Agent Schmidt

A significant link between Swedish and French post-war theatre is embodied by the Swedish agent-cum-producer Lars Schmidt (1917–2009), who is a recurring personality throughout the book. As a teenager, Schmidt, whose family expected him to pursue a career in shipping, became enamoured with Gothenburg City

Theatre's 1934 inaugural production of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and decided to pursue a life in the theatre. Following some failed attempts at playwriting, he eventually found his vocation and, in 1941, co-founded a publishing house, Lars Schmidt & Co. (later called Nordiska Teaterbolaget). Feeling the gruesome effects of the ongoing war on local cultural production, he soon set sail for North America and the thriving theatre life of Broadway. Amid the turmoil of the Second World War, his ship was bombed and Schmidt ended up stranded for several weeks on the Färö Islands before making an extended detour to Cuba where he was provided with a new passport and visa.[13] Upon arrival in New York, his adventurous story (which Schmidt repeated many times) made him a popular guest at cocktail parties and opened doors for him to meet playwrights like O'Neill, Robert Sherwood, Maxwell Anderson, Clifford Odets and Lillian Hellman, in addition to composers Irving Berlin and Richard Rodgers along with lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II (Schmidt 1995: 15–25). Ambitious and aided by a fluency in English, Schmidt wasted no time in acquiring the licences for many of these artists' works and, upon his homecoming, began to supply Swedish, Danish, Norwegian and Finnish theatres with contemporary American plays, making him the de facto Nordic agent of many American playwrights and composers of the period. In 1942, he celebrated his first success when Gothenburg City Theatre produced Joseph Kesselring's farce *Arsenic and Old Lace*.[14]

At the end of the war, the industrious publisher made a second extended trip to New York and, upon returning to Sweden in December 1945, he had secured the licences for over a hundred new plays. Among the rising new stars in the post-war Broadway firmament, one particular name had grabbed his attention: Williams who, after years of struggling, had finally celebrated his breakthrough with *The Glass Menagerie*. Schmidt made sure to generate a media buzz around his discovery and soon enough, the Swedish publicity mill boldly proclaimed that in the United States, Williams was 'considered the heir of O'Neill' (McDé 1945). In his memoirs, Schmidt later explained his fascination with Williams' ability to introduce new dimensions to American drama: 'He described the colours of the Southern states and sensuality and created female destinies and female portraits like no one before' (1995: 91).[15] Thanks to Schmidt's efforts, the European premiere of *The Glass Menagerie* took place on 8 February 1946 at the Royal

Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm, two months after his return from New York.

Once Schmidt had effectively established Williams on the Swedish and Nordic markets, the playwright himself approached him with a request to secure similar success in France. As a result, Schmidt relocated to the City of Light, where he soon reinvented himself as the continent's primary individual theatre producer who not only promoted American drama but also introduced American business models. At the centre of his initiatives, of course, were Williams' plays. The book establishes Schmidt as a major cultural ambassador whose importance for the internationalization of American post-war theatre and its migration to the other side of the Atlantic cannot be underestimated.

Sexual apprehensions and postcolonial upheavals

The productions under review here took place in the two decades following the Second World War and prior to the student riots and social upheavals in May 1968 in Paris (and soon after in Stockholm), which in both countries led to a new wave of politically topical theatre and a more pronounced emphasis on collective creation that challenged traditional hierarchies, institutional theatres and the authority of the (male) director (Bradby 1991: 191–226; Sauter 1996). In addition to the theatre historical background, the social and political context is relevant to further motivate the choice of countries and time frame. On the surface, Sweden was building a model welfare state characterized by rationality, modernity and equality, a seemingly progressive endeavour, which, at closer look, left little room for difference. France was more conservative, yet it was also significantly more culturally diverse due to its colonial history and geographical location. Benedict Anderson has elaborated how nations are 'imagined communities' (1983), while Bhabha (2004) has cautioned us not to approach cultures as homogenous entities.[16] The intention, therefore, is not to essentialize either national experiences or expressions. My aim is to show how the production and reception of Williams' plays in Sweden and France revealed particular internal tensions and brought to the surface sexual and racial phobias that questioned and threatened to uncover myths of

national or cultural homogeneity. A few supporting points here will help to further establish the two respective historical and cultural contexts, particularly in relation to gender, race and sexuality.

The book is situated in a period before the effects of the sexual revolution and the lesbian and gay liberation would make their full impact felt, and thus covers two decades that were characterized by a conservative politics of gender and sexuality. In 1944 Sweden decriminalized homosexuality only to pathologize it as a mental and emotional disorder, a classification that would not be abolished until 1979. The higher age of consent for homosexual acts (18 as opposed to 15 for heterosexuals) was deemed necessary to prevent youth from being 'seduced' into homosexuality.[17] Fears of secret networks and 'homosexual freemasonry' led to a number of highly publicized political scandals and mediatized witch hunts. Moreover, homosexuals or so-called 'homophiles' were vilified as an alleged threat to national security: they were perceived either as potential blackmail victims of communist spies or as clients who encouraged conscripts to boost their salaries through occasional sex work. These fears led to increased police surveillance and monitoring of public parks and urinals. The organization RFSL (today called the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights) was founded in 1950. Its members, who had to be rather discreet, attempted to oppose social discrimination and defamation by influencing public opinion, but also enjoyed the benefits of finally having a community platform to socialize (Andreasson 2000; Lennerhed 1994; Lindholm and Nilsson 2002; Parikas 1999; Rydström 2007; Söderström 2000).

In Sweden, the immediate post-war decades also marked the successful implementation of the Social Democratic welfare state that was characterized by a number of social reforms and services (including a regulated economy, universal healthcare, modern housing, free education, elder care and nursing) with the goal of increasing the quality of life of the population and, crucially, national health (*folkhälsan*). Advocating economic growth while working in close conjunction with the labour movement's institutions and unions, Social Democracy entered its golden age and constituted the governing party without interruption until 1976, which allowed Tage Erlander (prime minister between 1946 and 1969) to realize the party's vision of the *folkhemmet* – or 'the People's Home' (Gould 2001; Hirdman, Björkman and Lundberg