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Torn between the “Swedish Sin” and “Homosexual Freemasonry”: Tennessee Williams, Sexual Morals, and the Closet in 1950s Sweden

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Tennessee Williams was one of the most popular playwrights in postwar Sweden, with over thirty different productions following his 1945 Broadway breakthrough with *The Glass Menagerie*. His plays were staged by well-known directors with acclaimed actors, and the recently established municipal theaters competed for the production rights to present his dramas. This article analyzes how the politics of the closet formed part of the relationship between Williams and the Swedish press. What I wish to contribute to the ever-growing body of work on male homosexuality in the Williams canon is a specific Nordic perspective and focus on what happened when one of the most successful playwrights of the 1950s was translated into a Swedish context during a period that was marked by institutionalized homophobia. I investigate both how the issue of sexuality and morals permeated Williams’s visit to Sweden, which he made in the fall of 1955 to attend the European premiere of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and the critical reception of the homoerotic content of the play. The media discourse surrounding the visit and the premiere of *Cat*, I argue, pointed to an underlying, unresolved tension that contradicted the perceived sexual liberalism in 1950s Sweden, a decade characterized by the infamous “Swedish Sin.” Moreover, *Cat* and its author revealed the institution of the Swedish closet as a productive and contradictory site of power. The article concludes with some reflections on transcultural negotiations, hinting at the possibilities and promises of future studies of Williams in Sweden.

Act 1: The Eccentricities of a Playwright

In the fall of 1955, Williams spent a couple of days in Stockholm; thereafter he traveled on to attend the opening night of *Cat* at Gothenburg’s City Theater, where, thanks to the efforts of theater manager Karin Kavli and agent Lars Schmidt, the play received its European premiere on September 2, 1955, under the direction of Åke Falck.^[1] During his stay, Williams was accompanied by his friend Lilla van Saher-Riwkin. The newspaper *Stockholms-Tidningen* described her as “a stout woman” who acted in a kind and resolute way, as if she were his press agent (Loke).^[2] According to biographer Donald Spoto, Riwkin was a colorful lady of Hungarian descent who, in the mid-1950s, was a constant feature of Williams’s entourage. Apparently, Riwkin saw it as her personal duty to make sure that Williams was going to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. To reach her goal, she saw to it that the press would pay considerable attention to the famous American visitor. She organized a number of parties to introduce her playwright friend to the *crème de la crème* of Swedish society (Spoto 201f.).

¹³ As we shall see, the Swedish press was hardly impressed, and Williams himself would retell the disastrous events on several occasions at different points in his life. In a letter to his friend Maria St. Just, sent from Hamburg on September 4, 1955, Williams complained that “Stockholm was a mess!” because the Riwkin family “used [his] visit as personal exploitation, that is, of themselves,” taking advantage of him as “live-bait” to meet famous people. To his great annoyance, Lilla “proceeded to conduct herself with such pomp and

ceremony that it made [him] ridiculous to the press-people,” who satirically described him as “an elegant playboy flicking ashes from a long holder” (qtd. in St. Just 127). In 1981, Williams looked back on his visit and reflected on why he was never awarded the prestigious Nobel Prize. He still blamed Riwkin, whom he called “the crepe de Chine Gypsy,” and pointed out that she “used [his] name as an excuse to get all the people around that she’d wanted to meet but had no way of meeting.” He also recounted how “[s]he later turned out to be a dominatrix,” treating the press “like a field marshal” and “[b]arking out orders” at them (qtd. in Rader 357). The resulting scandal, Williams claimed, ruined his chances of being awarded the Nobel Prize.

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As documented by the archival records of the Swedish Academy, Williams was in fact nominated in 1958, the year that Boris Pasternak won the award.³ Regardless of the Nobel Prize, it is worthwhile to have a closer look at how the press actually covered the visit in 1956. The American playwright’s stay was significant enough to attract a lot of public interest. At Bromma airport in central Stockholm, he was met by a choir of journalists to whom he hastily explained that he liked to spend his time in Key West and in Rome. The following afternoon, at a combined press conference and cocktail party, Williams explained to *Dagens Nyheter* that he would probably enjoy living in Sweden, stating, “I am such a gloomy person” (qtd. in Zebra). This press conference was covered by several newspapers. Williams showed great interest in which actors were performing the different parts and seemed happy with the distinguished ensemble that included Karin Kavli as Big Mama, Gunnel Broström as Maggie, Herman Ahlsell as Brick, and Kolbjörn Knudsen as Big Daddy.⁴

¶15

Under the signature “Loke,” the newspaper *Stockholms-Tidningen* outlined how the chain-smoking Williams, during the press conference, engaged in a verbal battle with the reporters, whom he silenced with his abrupt comments. The journalist called him a “playboy from the South,” a reference to his long stay in Mediterranean Europe that summer, and used the word “elegant” no less than four times to describe Williams. The journalist further claimed that the playwright wanted to appear “sophisticated” and even mentioned his lisping. Similar depictions were offered by other papers. *Svenska Dagbladet* compared Williams’s black suit and white shirtfront to a “French maître d’hôtel,” pointed out that he was a little round around the waist, described how he touched his moustache, and concluded that “he looked like a real playboy” (Jep). Strangely, *Expressen* even compared his refined southern behavior to the figure of the Gentleman Caller in *The Glass Menagerie* (Bruntus).

¶16

Fashion scholar Shaun Cole points out that many homosexual men in the 1950s preferred to remain invisible by adapting to normative codes of masculine behavior and clothing. Discreet dress was a strategic choice to secure the closet. In order to pass as heterosexual, many men distanced themselves from anything that might be considered as feminine or extravagant, avoiding overtly fashionable clothes (Cole 59–65). One telltale sign of “a queer,” according to contemporary British magazines, was if a man had “an over-developed sense of fashion.” Men who were well groomed, had a perfect manicure, and wore handsome clothes were immediately under suspicion: “When one, two or three button jackets are in he is the first to wear them. His shirts are detergent bright, his tie has the latest knot.... His cheeks are smooth, his hair sparkles, his nails are manicured” (qtd. in Cole 64). Similar codes were at work in Sweden, as evidenced by how *Stockholms-Tidningen* meticulously described Williams as “a gentleman of approximately 165 cm, elegant blue suit, a bow tie knotted according to the rules of etiquette, well-brushed shoes and a well-trimmed moustache.” The portrayal continued: “A slight lisp gives his speech a touch of piquancy, to say nothing of the glance with which he, without hurting, shoots his inquisitive fellow creatures” (Loke). The journalist’s account of Williams’s gestures

when smoking and of his lisping was reminiscent of stereotypical portrayals of homosexual men. It meant to communicate the idea that Williams did not represent heterosexual masculinity but rather that he was deviantly and defiantly queer.

¹⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is among the scholars who identify the importance of the Oscar Wilde trials in the spread of stereotypical homosexual imagery in European culture. While the figure of the effeminate aristocrat was already a well-established cliché, it is through Wilde that this character could trickle down to the middle classes: “[B]y the turn of the twentieth century, after the trials of Oscar Wilde, the ‘aristocratic’ role had become the dominant one available for homosexual men of both the upper and middle classes” (Sedgwick 94). Cole also notes that, ever since the Oscar Wilde trials, aestheticism had become linked to homosexuality in the public mind. Half a decade later, “[t]he association with theatre and artistic circles was one that permeated many perceptions of homosexuality” (Cole 18) and the queer aesthete was still a predominant figure. This particular mechanism was at work in the coverage of Williams’s arrival in Stockholm. In the eyes of the press, he became the archetypical queer aesthete.

¹⁸ Judging by the article, however, Williams was obviously flaunting the closet. He came across as an aristocratic figure, which was very provocative to some members of the press. The sharp-witted one-liners he used to shut up the journalists and his treatment of the carpet did indeed make him appear like a campy and rather spoiled Hollywood diva. He spoke enthusiastically of his admiration for Greta Garbo, regretting that she could not be convinced to take part in the planned movie version of his novel *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*. When asked about his favorite playwrights, he dutifully named Strindberg⁵ and Chekhov, but also mentioned his contemporaries Robert Anderson and William Inge. It comes as no surprise that Williams claimed to be inspired by Chekhov in particular. What is more interesting in this context is that he acknowledged two contemporary playwrights who both worked with closet aesthetics in their own plays.⁶ In light of the one-liners and the eccentric behavior, the references to Anderson (*Tea and Sympathy*, 1953) and Inge (*Come Back, Little Sheba*, 1949; *Picnic* 1953) were yet another way for Williams not only to flaunt the closet, but to open a number of doors and drag out key manuscripts of the contemporary theater landscape, texts which dealt with insecurities about masculinity, homoerotic desire, and unspoken secrets.⁷ Williams allied himself here with a generation of artists whose sexual politics were much more radical than previous American (or Swedish) playwrights had ventured to stage.

¹⁹ The centerpiece of the article arrived when Williams was asked a question about his thoughts on the subject of morals and sexuality in Sweden:

Through *Time*’s notorious article, our sexual habits have of course become a highly appreciated conversation subject in the sophisticated circuits in the USA. Since Mister Williams definitely gives the impression of being called sophisticated, he should of course have some opinions about this fiction.

And so came then instead the counter-attacking shock with “What are morals?”. The inquisitive interviewer fell like an elephant for a dum dum bullet behind the ear and is now certainly a highly appreciated trophy in Williams’s brain chamber.

The background to this little scene was an article that *Time* Magazine had published on April 25, 1955. Under the headline “Sin & Sweden,” the correspondent expressed shock that abortion was legal in Sweden, birth control was completely acceptable, sexual education in school was liberal, large numbers of mothers were

unwed, and—worst of all—that society condoned young people having sex before marriage (Brown). The report caused an uproar, and the following issues of *Time* (“Letters”) published numerous letters to the editor. A Swedish doctor, whom the correspondent claimed to have interviewed, protested and declared she was misquoted. The press attaché of the Swedish Embassy in Washington, DC, found the report to be “unfair and misleading,” and the ambassador himself reacted with an angry letter in which he pointed out some misconceptions and factual errors. One angry reader wondered whether the pretty girls of Sweden had rejected the correspondent, who now tried to reclaim his ego by bashing Swedish morality standards. Another reader was “[s]hocked almost beyond words” reading about “[t]hose horrid lascivious Swedes!” A more humorous letter predicted an increase in American tourism the following summer. And the manager of a Swedish company in California gratefully stated, “Many thanks for your stimulating article; our business has doubled because of it.” Months later, the debate was still fresh enough to be raised at the Stockholm press conference with Williams. Rather than delivering the anticipated exposition on sexuality and Swedish morals, he dryly returned the question and asked, “What are morals?” His rejection clearly stunned the assembled press people. This contrast between the U.S. and Sweden, I suggest, was a *leitmotiv* that ran through the coverage of Williams’s visit and the ensuing reviews of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

Queer Interlude: The Sociohistorical Context

The *Time* article was only the first of many publications on what would become known as the “Swedish Sin.” According to intellectual historian Lena Lennerhed, one of the main reasons for the outrage, not least in the U.S. and in the U.K., was that, in 1955, Sweden set a precedent by making sexual education compulsory. This decision caused moral indignation abroad and was often cited as an example of the welfare state interfering with the private lives of its citizens. Lennerhed also notes that, while Sweden’s economic politics were internationally perceived and praised in the 1930s as a third way between capitalism and socialism, the wave of anti-communism in the 1950s resulted in a shift of perception. Now the politics of the welfare state were demonized, particularly its sexual politics: “The negative image of Sweden served beyond any doubt right-wing political objectives” (Lennerhed 97).

^{¶11} There were further reasons behind the perceived sexual freedom and liberalism in Sweden. For a mainstream foreign audience, movies like *One Summer of Happiness* [*Hon dansade en sommar*], directed by Arne Mattsson in 1951, and Ingmar Bergman’s *Summer with Monika* [*Sommaren med Monika*] from the same year contributed to a sensationalized discourse on sinful eroticism in Sweden. Reflecting on the impact of these movies, Lennerhed states, “The Swedish Sin was associated ... with the young, fresh, natural girl who, without second thoughts, had sex with her boyfriend, was equipped with birth control and had gone through the stately sexual education” (Lennerhed 92).

^{¶12} Whether or not the article in *Time* was a moralizing piece of journalism that was inaccurate in its exaggerations, further publications would enhance the myth of the “Swedish Sin” and construct an external perception antithetical to domestic realities. Depending on one’s position, Sweden seemed to be either enlightened, liberal, and progressive—or an exoticized and eroticized country. It was hardly surprising that the Swedish press would ask a question on sexuality and morals to an American playwright who had become famous for his radical treatment of sexual desires and who distinguished himself through a gallery of actively desiring female protagonists.

¶13 While the “Swedish Sin” was a deeply heterosexual concept, the nation also had anxieties that related to homosexuality. The Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU), an organization particularly concerned with matters of reproduction, health, and sexual rights, was founded in 1933. Its counterpart, the RFSL (today called the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights), was founded in 1950, inspired by Danish colleagues.⁸ On the one hand, the latter organization served a purely social function and arranged group meetings. But given the political climate, members of the RFSL became de facto activists, working to protect sexual rights, attempting to influence public opinion, and fighting against discrimination and defamation. For all their courage, these early activists had to be very discreet. After all, the 1950s was a decade marked, in Sweden, by institutionalized homophobia in government, media, and medico-juridical establishments. The age limit for sexual acts between people of the same sex was eighteen; the heterosexual age limit was fifteen. The need for a higher age limit was justified by the idea that young men could be seduced into homosexuality. The translation of the first Kinsey report in 1949 and its conclusion that same-sex relationships and erotic experiences were much more common than previously acknowledged hardly led to more tolerance, but rather enhanced the homophobic atmosphere in Sweden (Lennerhed 39–88; Söderström, “Bildandet” 630–77; Rydström 37–65).

¶14 Not only was homosexuality categorized as a mental disorder, a classification that would not be removed from the medical diagnosis list until 1979, it was also widely regarded as a moral threat to the youth and a risk to national security. The fact that many army recruits made themselves available as rough trade to supplement their salaries was a cause for concern and provoked a number of homophobic articles in the press (Parikas 522–629). One measure to counteract this perceived danger was the monitoring of public spaces such as parks and urinals by the police in order to prevent sexual encounters between men (Nilsson 171–81; Lindholm & Nilsson). Political scandals involving gay men and those rumored to be gay included the so-called Kejne and Haijby affairs. Karl-Erik Kejne was a vicar who publicly declared himself to be the victim of a homosexual conspiracy, and Kurt Haijby insisted that he had had sexual relations with King Gustav V and blackmailed him. When the media became involved, scandalous headlines conveyed ideas of a so-labeled homosexual freemasonry, understood and vilified as secret networks of men who would not hesitate to break the law to ensure mutual protection. In the print media, the connection with criminal activities was so strong that homosexuality appeared inseparable from prostitution, pedophilia, and freemasonry (Silverstolpe *et al.* 485–501; Söderström, “Keijne” 92–117). Apart from being perceived as a sexual threat, homosexual women and men in government positions were also believed to be potential blackmail victims of Communist spies. Although Sweden was not a member of NATO and had adopted a neutrality policy during the Cold War, the fear of communism was omnipresent. Not unlike other western countries, Sweden thus imagined homosexuality as a risk to national security as well as a moral threat to the country’s youth.

¶15 This certainly paints a dark picture of same-sex desire in 1950s Sweden. In comparison with the legislation in some neighboring countries, one is tempted to presume that Sweden was more tolerant of homosexuality. Yet in the U.K., for instance, homosexuality would only become legalized in 1967. In West Germany, the infamous §175 was liberalized a number of times after 1969 (Rosenkranz & Lorenz 148), but not abolished until 1994, that is, after the German reunification. In Finland, homosexuality was considered a criminal act until 1971 and eliminated from the illness classification list in 1981, while a special censorship paragraph was removed as late as 1999 (Stålström & Nissinen 87–111).

Act 2: In the Room of a Stockholm Hotel

The report from the Stockholm press conference was a vivid illustration of how the closet worked in 1950's Sweden. Williams might have been an expert at flaunting the closet, but the press could certainly pick up signals and continue the dark game in its own writing. Apparently Williams was not amused by the journalist Loke's description of him. His annoyance at *Stockholms-Tidningen* came to the surface a couple of days later when Ruth Link from *Aftonbladet* (9 September 1955), together with an unnamed Danish reporter, was granted a private interview with the playwright in his hotel suite. The article's title, "Williams Makes a Hotel Scene," set the tone for the piece, part of which was written like a play with dialogue and stage directions that included information about the participants' body language, tone of voice, and reactions. Link became a character in this hotel scene and referred to herself in the third person. In her account, the famous playwright had invited them all because he felt bored. However, the presence of two reporters did not cheer him up, and he was far from being communicative. He seemed to be having a bad day and displayed a slightly condescending attitude when he asked the journalist for her "next stupid question." During the conversation Williams claimed that he never listened to people who proposed changes to his dramas, except if "some really skillful director, like Elia Kazan, suggests some minor change. I think that a play should only express the writer's ideas," he stated, "not somebody else's." It remained unclear whether the journalist was susceptible to the irony in these lines; after all, the changes Kazan had advocated to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and its final act were more than "minor." Speaking of his latest offering and his feelings about it, Williams simply responded, "I am tired of it."

¶17 The article described the playwright as a lonely, miserable, and mean-spirited character who inspired sadness in other people. There were a couple of allusions to his alcohol consumption, and at one point the reporter wondered whether "something unnatural [lay] in the air." Several questions seemed to insult Williams; to others he simply refused to give satisfactory answers. The interview was constantly interrupted by photographers who knocked on the door and wanted to show Williams the pictures they had taken the day before. Suddenly, Lilla van Saher-Riwkin also came into the room, and the following dialogue took place:

Tennessee Williams and Mrs. Riwkin exchange words. "I don't like the journalists in Sweden. They've been very mean to me."

"That is not true, they have been decent."

He sulks. "They called me an elegant *playboy*." She fawns on: "No, they didn't."

"Well, they wrote that I lisp and gesticulate."

"But you do."

"Yes, but they didn't need to say that."

"What's the point of them writing unless they make you human, just like you do with the characters in your plays?"

"And they said that I didn't know what morals are."

"That is good."

"But I do know what morals are: it's doing your best not to hurt other people."

The dilemma is clear. Williams was upset that the journalist from *Stockholms-Tidningen* had alluded to his homosexuality a few days earlier. In this second article, Williams almost became a character in one of his own closet dramas. The constant interruptions are reminiscent of those in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, where the "no-neck monsters" constantly trespass into Maggie and Brick's bedroom, and Gooper and Mae spend their time with

their ears close to the wall in order not to miss any detail of the ongoing fights between Brick and Maggie.⁹ The final punch line about not hurting other people could have been delivered by Blanche DuBois or Miss Alma.

¹⁸ Williams continued complaining about journalists and sighed, “I wish I were with ...” When encouraged to finish the sentence, he merely stated, “Unfinished sentences are often those that reveal the most.”¹⁰ Meanwhile, Riwkin looked through the press photos, picked up one of them, and exclaimed, “You look just like a cat.” The confusion between fiction and reality, character and playwright, was complete. For Williams this was the last straw and he decided to leave the room and go to bed. The article finished with the dry statement: “A playwright has made a scene.”

¹⁹ Was Williams being paranoid? Did he overreact or did he just have a bad day? Once more, I emphasize the importance of contextualization and relate the incident to Williams’s life and the historical era. As Gore Vidal reminds us, homosexual playwrights before Stonewall were often victims of homophobic attacks, and Williams was a particularly popular target: “For thirty years he was regularly denounced as a sick, immoral, vicious fag” (Vidal xxiii). In his discussion of how theater critics could defame gay playwrights, Michael Paller states that “[d]isgust for homosexuals would permeate the critical atmosphere in New York well into the 1970s” (Paller 175). Considering that this was a time when homosexuality was treated as the “open secret,” a thing to be silenced while at the same time speculated about, it comes as no surprise that critics used their columns and reviews to launch a barely disguised attack on what they perceived as a homosexual threat to the theater.¹¹

²⁰ One thing that gay men in the 1950s could do, and something that Williams demonstrated again and again in his plays, was to theatricalize the closet, to make a spectacle out of it. And so did the critics. In what seemed to be a mutual agreement, both sides knew how to play the game. While in Stockholm, Williams was flaunting the closet through his theatrical behavior, his sharp one-liners, his self-conscious appearance, and several allusions to queer aesthetics. He was fooling around with the journalists, but the joke backfired. The press picked up these signals, detected others, and brought them out to spice up their reports. In some ways, they basically copied Williams’s own strategies to convey a homosexual content in his closet dramas. There was one decisive difference, however: the journalists were more interested in making their “character” Williams appear as a mean, alcoholic queer, while the playwright himself displayed far greater affection and sympathy towards his troubled souls.

²¹ Both the report from the press conference and the interview expressed some fundamental conditions and ambiguities of the closet. According to Sedgwick, we live “in a culture where same-sex desire is still structured by its distinctive public/private status, at once marginal and central, as *the* open secret” (Sedgwick 22). The tone and content of the two articles oscillated between open speech and silent allusions, drawing attention to Williams’s “deviant masculinity” without ever mentioning the word “homosexuality.” The articles thereby illustrated how much the figure of the open secret was not only a defining characteristic of Williams’s artistic output, but also of his public persona. They were a testimony to his talents of making a spectacle out of the oppressive structure of the closet, not only in his plays, but also in life. In the end, the closet is not only a question of morals, but an aesthetic and political principle that permeates the work of Tennessee Williams—as well as the history of mid-twentieth-century Sweden.

Act 3: *Cat* and its Reviewers

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is arguably the one play in Williams's early canon that most explicitly articulates closeted male homosexuality. There are two potentially homosexual characters on stage (Brick and Big Daddy), in addition to three dead ones who haunt the action (Jack, Peter, and Skipper). Did the Swedish critics acknowledge the homosexual content of the play? If so, what language did they use to describe the relationship between Brick and Skipper?

^{¶23} Most of the reviews that appeared on September 3, 1955, the day after the premiere, wrote openly about the relationship between Brick and Skipper. *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning* identified the “overwhelming shame of being suspected ... of homosexuality” (Baeckström) as the reason for Skipper's suicide and Brick's alcoholism, while *Göteborgs-Posten* offered, “the suspicion of his surroundings regarding the friendship on the verge of homosexuality” (Pem) as an explanation. *Dagens Nyheter* described Brick's feelings towards Skipper as his “strongest emotional experience” (“Katt på hett plåttak”), but underlined that it was only on the part of Skipper that the relationship had a homosexual dimension. *Aftonbladet* claimed that “at the heart of the friendship there was a trait of homosexuality that was never articulated” (PGP). *Morgon-Tidningen's* critical also chose the expression “trait of homosexuality” to characterize Brick and used ironic quotation marks when he explained that Brick “started to drink when his ‘best friend’ killed himself” (Beyer). *Svenska Dagbladet* wrote of a “dark but disturbingly haunting relationship” (Wahlund) with the dead Skipper, and for *Stockholms-Tidningen*, Brick was an “alcoholic with a half outspoken homosexual disposition at the heart of his anxiety” (Strömberg). *Ny Tid* saw the “homosexual tendencies of the world of sports” (Andrén) as an important theme in the play, and similarly, *Expressen* characterized the arena of sport as “the contemporary equivalence to a knightly and monastic order, with the same suggestion of a never admitted platonic Eros between men” (Harrie). Finally, *Vecko-Journalen* spoke openly about “the favorite son's homosexuality” and “a vaguely alluded to homosexual episode in his past” (Björkman).

^{¶24} Based on these reviews, it would be wrong to assume that the politics of the Swedish (theater/media) closet were governed by silence. After the Gothenburg premiere of *Cat*, nearly all the critics stated openly that there was a salient homosexual dimension to the plot, although they mostly relegated it to the dead Skipper, whose erotic feelings for Brick were conceptualized as homosexual desire. Moreover, no reviewer made a connection between homosexuality and criminal behavior, a common association in the printed media at the time. There was very little social contextualization and not a single reference to the juicy affairs that had dominated newspaper accounts only a few years earlier. On the surface, and compared with the general social climate of the period, theater critics seemed relatively unjudgmental. Perhaps some of the reviews mirrored a new cultural sensitivity, where old patterns gave way to new identities and fresh possibilities of arranging lives. While physical and geographical space was not yet granted to homosexual women and men, at least the arts pages in the newspapers seemed to open up a small door for them.

^{¶25} Complete silence, however, prevailed regarding the dead couple, Jack and Peter, who once shared the bedroom that is the location of much of the play's action. Nor did critics comment on Big Daddy's youthful adventures. Through this silence, these characters' desires became unintelligible. While most critics identified the dead Skipper as homosexual, they did not agree on Brick's part in this friendship. None of them stated explicitly that he was homosexual. Some engaged, however, in psychological speculations that he was either unconscious of his true feelings for Skipper or was repressing and drowning them in liquor. *Göteborgs-Posten*, for instance, named the play Williams's best creation since *The Glass Menagerie*, but also expressed some

reservations regarding Williams's unclear intentions with the play. The review identified a number of recurring themes: "loneliness, fear of living, the rather unclear sexual complex that always is the driving force in his dramas." It further noted that while Brick's "latent homosexual relationship" with Skipper, coupled with his fear of his suspicious surroundings, was being brought to the surface in the second act, the ending of the play remained unconvincing. Did Brick return to Maggie for love or for economic reasons? This "weakness of the drama" was blamed on Williams: "He has hardly carried the analysis of his problem to a conclusion—he flees, just like Brick does in the play, to diffuse phrases" (Pem). *Scen och salong* pointed to the same problem, stating that, in the second act, "the homosex-complex is aired—but it is also there one detects that Tennessee Williams himself hesitates and instead lets Big Daddy's understanding for his son's problem conclude in a very vague speech on tolerance" (Perlström).

¶26 Regarding the ambiguity of Brick's character, these Swedish critics echoed a note famously struck by Walter Kerr after the play's New York premiere. In his assessment of the play, Kerr complained that Williams did not offer a satisfactory answer to whether Brick was or was not a homosexual character, arguing that the playwright had "failed—or refused—to isolate the cause of the corruption in Brick," thereby giving the plot a "disturbingly secretive substance" (Kerr 120). Williams would later respond to that review and assert that, while any theatrical character should always retain some sense of mystery in order to be interesting and engaging, "Brick's overt sexual adjustment was, and must always remain, a heterosexual one" (Williams 78). The review and the ensuing reply have since become canonized, and the question of Brick's homosexuality has been the subject of lively debate among scholars (e.g., Clum, "Something Cloudy" 161–79; Lilly 153–63; Savran; Winchell 701–12; Shackelford 103–18; Bak 224–50; Paller; Arrell 60–72).

¶27 The Swedish-American journalist and author Eugénie Söderberg, who interviewed Williams in June 1955 shortly after he had received the Pulitzer Prize for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, was also curious about Brick's sexuality. In the magazine *Vi* of the Swedish Cooperative Union, she asked the playwright directly why Brick, a "modern young man with a college education, is so scared of homosexuality" (Söderberg). Williams reminded the reporter that the college milieu from which Brick derives his sense of self is very homophobic. Moreover, the former football player had accepted dominant ideals of masculinity:

Brick is a sportsman, an adored little sports hero in his circle, which for him is his whole world. According to American conventional opinion, a sportsman has to be a he-man, strong and virile. In popular opinion, there is always something weak, ridiculous, shameful about the homosexual. Brick has the same prejudices as his surroundings. (qtd. in Söderberg)

Williams expressed an awareness of how the closet works and how homophobia affects those who do not conform to sexual and gendered norms. Heterosexuality is constitutive for normative masculinity, which defines/defends itself against anything that might be perceived as non-masculine, feminine, homosexual, or weak (Connell 78). In many ways, Brick has internalized the normative values of the 1950s, and he certainly has a hard time fighting for his masculinity. Already symbolically castrated, he limps across the stage with his crutch and whiskey bottle, unable and/or unwilling to perform in bed, trying to numb his confusion over his feelings for the dead Skipper.

¶28 My objective is not to continue the debate whether Brick is or is not gay, but rather to investigate the Swedish critics' interpretations of the character and how the media evaluated the performance of actor Herman

Ahlsell, who played Brick on stage. As already stated, a number of reviews speculated that Brick might be repressing his homosexuality. For instance, *Scen och salong* stated that for Brick, “the latent homosex in the relationship to the friend” was a trait that “has never been conscious” and that Maggie’s “intervention in the homosex-crisis has led him to a psychosis which makes conjugal life with his wife impossible” (Perlström). However, no critic commented on the social consequences of being or coming out as a homosexual in the mid-1950s. Brick’s potential homosexuality was explained as a clandestine struggle that only affected his family and, above all, his wife. *Svenska Dagbladet* conceptualized Brick’s guilty secret as a private matter by calling his problems “strictly personal and of a sexual nature” (Wahlund). But the possible social consequences and the cultural significance were ignored, which is one aspect of the contradictory logic of the closet. While the closet is a powerful institution in western society, it has continuously been constructed as a question of individual and private sexuality outside the sphere of power and politics. Sedgwick calls this “the damaging contradictions of this compromised metaphor of *in* and *out* of the closet of privacy” (Sedgwick 72). The binary homosexuality/heterosexuality is so much more than a matter of personal identity or sexuality; it is a decisive structuring principle that privileges some people and discriminates against others. The Swedish critics, however, refused to reflect on what it could mean to have a non-heterosexual subject in a leading part on stage in 1955, taking refuge in vague psychological formulations.

129 That the central conflicts were understood as private struggles ignores the play’s historical, social, and economic contexts. This claim is further illustrated with the assessment in *Göteborgs-Posten*: “For Tennessee Williams, the truth of theater lies rather in drawing characters than formulating problems” (Pem). While some reviews wrote about Brick’s shame, none of them reflected on the fear of discrimination as a reason for his anxiety. If Brick really is homosexual, there are some very good reasons for him not to go public with it. In the play, he admits that he himself has been participating in homophobic actions against a friend. His tirade against homosexuals demonstrates that he has internalized the values of a homophobic society. Brick is a celebrated sports hero and heir to millions. Coming out of the closet would have severe social and economic consequences for him. After all, Big Daddy is dying, and the patrilineal economy requires a heterosexual heir. According to queer scholar David Halperin, the closet is not so much about hidden or disavowed identities as it is about power categories and structures of knowledge:

The closet is nothing, first of all, if not the product of complex relations of power. The only reason to be *in* the closet is to protect oneself from the many and virulent sorts of social disqualification that one would suffer were the discreditable fact of one’s sexual orientation more widely known. (Halperin 29)

Such power relations were clearly expressed in the Swedish reviews of *Cat*. Because the Swedish critics conceptualized homosexuality as a private matter, no one dared examine the relationship between Brick’s sexuality and the socio-economic system that he lives in.

130 It is worth pausing to remember that these reviews date to a period when the social authorities and the media put severe pressure on homosexuals. Furthermore, in Sweden at this time, homosexuality was classified as a mental disorder. Indeed, one particular critic talked about a “friendship corroded by perversion” (Thorén). Nils Beyer of the paper *Morgon-Tidningen* treated homosexuality as a scandalous or provocative disposition, along with psychosexual neuroses, alcoholism, cancer, and actively desiring women. Beyer was hardly

impressed by Williams's latest offering. His comments were a curious mix of open disclosure and pure homophobia. It is worth quoting his condemnation of the play, which he described as a

grotesque family gallery with alcoholism, homosexuality and cancer as flavoring ingredients. One wonders why one should be constrained to witness it—not because the content itself feels repugnant but because it does not have anything to tell us. Even in his most “repugnant” marriage dramas, Strindberg could lift the material up to a universal level, where something was told about every marriage. (Beyer)

Masculinity scholar John Potvin focuses on the productive nature of the closet and notes how it constitutes both a political and aesthetic potential as it functions as a refusal to articulate identity through heteronormative discourse. Therefore, “[t]he closet is not a site of oppression, but an unmarked dangerous territory, a virtual space of anxiety and fear for mainstream society” (Potvin 156). Considering that, in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the stage is the concrete place where the closet is performed and embodied, the play appears to have caused a lot of anxiety for the critics, who did their best to keep Brick's potential homosexuality at a safe distance. In Beyer's assessment, the American Williams was compared to the Swedish national playwright Strindberg. Just like at the Stockholm press conference, U.S. values were unfavorably weighed against and contrasted with Swedish ones. What was at stake, I posit, was not the sexuality of the fictitious character Brick, but rather the possibility of a potentially homosexual character being represented and embodied by a Swedish actor on a Swedish stage.

¶31 Herman Ahlsell (1919–1994) had previously played the part of Jim O'Connor in *The Glass Menagerie* (dir. Helge Wahlgren) and the character of Steve Hubbell in Ingmar Bergman's production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* at the Gothenburg City Theater, where he had a long record of service as both actor and director (1942–1983). For his interpretation of Brick, the thirty-six-year old Ahlsell received considerable acclaim, and a number of critics pointed out that he displayed hitherto unseen sides of his acting talents. One reviewer even called Ahlsell's performance his “virile breakthrough” (Strömberg)—sadly, the exact nature of the virility was never elaborated on. *Ny Tid* commended Ahlsell for bringing out the different shades of Brick's personality: “He brooded on buoyant danger, conveyed his character's tensions with his gazes and almost unconscious gestures just as secure as when he broke into storming affects” (Andrén). The confrontation with Big Daddy in the second act was praised as a “long metamorphosis from angry playboy to a deadly hurt man, desperately defending himself against his incurable trauma” (Baeckström). *Dagens Nyheter* applauded how the actor managed to convey Brick's desperate longing for the alcohol to kick in and calm his nerves as well as expressing “the infantile purity in heart, the disgust for life and the helplessness that characterizes the depths of the character” (S.B-I). For *Morgon-Tidningen*, Ahlsell gave “an absolutely perfect demonstration of a drunkard's tragic end” (Beyer).

¶32 While these reviews complimented director Falck for his work with the actors, the positive evaluations also pointed to the new type of male leads that Williams created. Through their insecurities, neuroses, and emotional baggage, Williams's male characters ushered in a new way of representing masculinity, which proved to be a rewarding challenge for a young generation of actors who were allowed to toy with their sexuality in a previously unseen way, display a boyishness that often resulted in them being perceived as social rebels, and flirt with a strongly homoerotic subtext (Cohan 241–59). The Swedish reviewers, however, refused to acknowledge this homoerotic subtext in their assessment of Herman Ahlsell's performance.¹² Most reviewers noted that the actor had displayed hitherto unseen sides of his talent. Although they never openly related

Ahlsell's performance to the question of Brick's sexuality and the challenge this ambiguity posed to an actor in 1955, they were definitely receptive to Williams's contributions to new representations of masculinity on stage. Still, the very possibility of having a non-heterosexual or ambiguous lead character being performed on stage by a Swedish actor was simply ignored. As demonstrated in the first part of this article, the critics had a specific language to describe the flamboyant, eccentric behavior of the American playwright, but the words dried up when it came to expressing the complexity and nuances in the embodiment of a character who potentially transgresses sexual boundaries on a Swedish stage.

Epilogue: *En avant!*

Press clips are response documents and can be a valuable historical source in Performance Studies, even if they offer a limited amount of (and often subjective) information. At best, they convey more than an individual critic's opinion on a particular performance. Apart from describing the scenery, sound effects, costumes, and acting styles, they can also tell us something about the audience's perceptions and reactions. As such, reviews are professional witnesses' accounts of theatrical events. Moreover, they inform us of contemporary aesthetic norms and concerns. Critics are also agents in a public discourse and can offer some insight on how a certain theme is written about in the press. They participate in the formation of opinions, influence matters of taste, sometimes dictate the perception of a production, and thereby influence its artistic and commercial success or failure. Moreover, they are also agents in a public discourse that includes, among other things, questions of sexuality and morals.

¶34

A close analysis of contemporary Swedish reviews shows that there were multiple, competing discourses after the Swedish and European premiere of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. They were certainly not characterized by silence around the subject of homosexuality nor by open rejection and condemnation. The closet, as it emerged in these reviews, was a very productive institution, fueled by a creative tension. Even though some of the critical reception was contradictory, a certain pattern emerged. On the surface, the critics were open about the homosexual content of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. A closer inspection, however, also revealed that, while they opened one door of the closet, they did so only to install a different lock on it. First, the Swedish papers acknowledged and allowed for male homosexuality, but downplayed it or tried to keep it at a safe distance, mostly by identifying the dead Skipper as the only gay character in the play. Brick's guilty secret and possible homosexuality were conceptualized as a private matter with personal trauma. At worst, the issue was dismissed as a cheap ingredient to spice up the action. Either way, the social consequences and the cultural significance of Brick's sexual ambivalence were ignored. Second, the print media did not tolerate the possibility of having male homosexuality physically embodied by a Swedish actor in a stage performance. Herman Ahlsell, who played the part, received considerable acclaim for having developed as an actor and displayed heretofore unseen sides of his talent. But these observations were never related to Williams's innovative talent of creating male leading parts characterized by sexual ambiguities and insecurities. The journalists who covered Williams's visit and press conference had a language that consisted of thinly veiled allusions to the open secret of his homosexuality, but the critics had not yet found the right vocabulary to assess the performance of a Swedish actor who embodied a sexually ambiguous and potentially homosexual character. Dealing with Williams was safe for Swedish critics, because he was a foreign playwright. The press could easily exoticize him as a southern playboy and vilify him with indirect statements about his own closeted homosexuality. In fact, several

journalists created a contrast between the United States and Sweden, thereby deferring the institution of the closet and downplaying the domestic anxiety around male homosexuality and perceived sexual liberalism. The closet that emerged in the Swedish reviews divided the world into us and them, Sweden and the USA, the living and the dead, Swedish actors and the American playwright, the written drama and the staged performance, the intelligible and the unintelligible.

¶135 Still, Williams's trip to Sweden seems to have had a happy ending. *Cat* received excellent reviews, and after the premiere in Gothenburg, the playwright was greeted with warm applause when he appeared on stage.¹³ He received a bouquet of roses from Ove Stenhammar, chairman of the board of directors of Gothenburg City Theater, to which he replied, "All I know in Swedish is tack ... tack...." In his speech, Stenhammar praised the playwright and said, "You're a tough guy, Mr. Williams" ("Tack, sa Tennessee").

¶136 The events in the fall of 1955 illustrate the power of Williams's plays (not to speak of the man himself) to spark controversy with sexuality and morals in a completely different cultural setting and point to some unresolved tensions on the question of homosexuality in Sweden. Williams did not shy away from treating sexual subjects. This is what made him interesting to a Swedish audience in the postwar period. It is through his plays that the nation could publicly—that is, on stage and in the press—negotiate its anxieties and unresolved tensions surrounding male homosexuality. One of the main reasons that Williams became so popular, I suggest, is that his plays brought to the surface a number of issues circulating around sexual morals, the notion of the "Swedish Sin" and the powerful and contradictory institution of the closet.

¶137 While it is well established that Williams worked with the aesthetics of the closet, scholars still need to address how this technique was deployed and received in different geographical and cultural contexts. There exists a need to recontextualize Williams and study performances and reception processes in Sweden. Such a project will shed further light on the dramatic power and the political potential of Williams's dramatic output, as well as Swedish theater history and gay historiography. It will also tease out the nuances and contradictions of the institution of the closet by demonstrating the role the productions of Tennessee Williams played in an era that was characterized by an intense homophobia and yet distinguished by important changes in attitudes toward sexuality to the point that Sweden became internationally regarded as "sinful." These social and political processes require further attention. As Sedgwick insightfully puts it, "In dealing with an open-secret structure, it's only by being shameless about risking the obvious that we happen into the vicinity of the transformative" (Sedgwick 22).

Notes

¹ Considering the language barrier in Sweden, it would have made more sense to stage the European premiere in England. However, the UK had a rigorous system of censorship until the mid 1960s. Apparently the tin roof was a bit too hot for the infamous Lord Chamberlain (De Jongh 110–9). Karin Kavli, a key figure in mid-century Swedish theater, was both a celebrated actress and the manager of Gothenburg City Theater and made serious efforts to present new international dramas to her audiences. Apart from traveling extensively to see new plays performed in other countries, she and theater agent Lars Schmidt also had direct contact with many contemporary playwrights, among them Tennessee Williams (Ericson & Kavli 247ff.). At the time, Schmidt was working in New York, actively introducing American playwrights such as Williams and Arthur Miller, but also modern musicals such as *Oklahoma*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Kiss Me Kate* and *My Fair Lady* to the Nordic countries. He was also the manager of several theaters in Paris. He was well acquainted with Williams, who would ask him to produce *La Chatte sur un toit brûlant* at the Théâtre Antoine under the direction of Peter Brook in 1956 (Schmidt).

² All the reviews and newspaper articles consulted for this essay come from the archives of the Theater Museum of Sweden, Stockholm, and the theater collections of the Göteborg City Museum, Gothenburg. While the preserved material includes authors and sources, unfortunately no page numbers are available.

³ The lists of nominations for the Nobel Prize and the protocols of the discussions are kept in the vaults of the Swedish Academy and do not become public for fifty years. At the time of writing, this means that access is granted up until 1959. (Source: E-mail to the author from the Nobel Library of the Swedish Academy, signed by Madeleine Broberg, dated 15 January 2010.)

⁴ Kavli had already played Blanche DuBois and Serafina della Rosa, both under the direction of Ingmar Bergman. True to his habit of telling every actress that she was the best interpreter of his characters, Williams praised Kavli as the most talented actress in Northern Europe (Jep). However, according to *Expressen*, Williams expressed some concern when he heard that Kavli was not fat enough to play the role of Big Mama (Bruntus). For director Åke Falck, it was the first stage production at Gothenburg City Theater after a long career in radio theater. Unlike Elia Kazan's original production on Broadway, Falck's interpretation of the play emphasized realism and downplayed the Mississippi atmosphere. Critical response was mixed. *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning* praised the realistic approach in Gothenburg (Boel), while *Ny Tid* preferred the New York production's direct address to the audience and regretted that the Gothenburg interpretation was a "conventional reproduction, not a daring co-creation" (Andrén). *Dagens Nyheter* applauded Falck's decision not to emphasize the Mississippi milieu and stated that the realist approach lifted the drama to a level of universal concerns (S.B-I). *Stockholms-Tidningen*, however, regretted the lack of Southern atmosphere and maintained that Falck was too concerned with the psychology of the main characters (Strömberg). Generally, Falck earned praise for his skills as a personal instructor to the actors.

⁵ When asked about similarities between Miss Julie and Blanche DuBois, Williams pointed out that it is Julie who does the whipping, while Blanche is actually the victim (Heidi).

⁶ At the time, Swedish audiences and reviewers were familiar with both these authors. *Tea and Sympathy* had its national premiere on September 9, 1954, at the Nya Teatern in Stockholm; *Come Back Little Sheba* was first played by the Riksteatern in Gävle on February 15, 1951; and the same company premiered *Picnic* on February 17, 1955, in Borås.

⁷ According to John Clum, both Williams and Inge were masters at writing "closet dramas in their evasions, silences, and invisibilities and in heterosexist language with which they surround their homosexual characters. They are also plays about the closet itself and about the terrors of being uncloseted" (Clum, *Still Acting* 140f.).

⁸ The RFSL was modelled after a Danish organization founded in 1948, "Forbundet af 1948." A Norwegian federation for the protection of homosexuals came into being in 1953 and called itself "Det norske forbundet av 1948," while the Finnish "Psyke" was founded in 1969 with SETA following in 1974. Of all the Nordic countries, Iceland came last in 1978 with "Samtökin '78" (Söderström, "Bildandet" 630-77; *Den nordiska homorörelsen under efterkrigstiden*).

⁹ For an analysis of these interruptions in the play, see: Savran 102-10.

¹⁰ In time, the unfinished sentence and the unspeakable desire it alludes to would become more and more central to his work. See Savran 133-7.

¹¹ One of the most famous and most often quoted examples is the attack that *New York Times* critic Stanley Kauffmann launched on Edward Albee on January 23, 1966. See for instance Paller 179-82.

¹² I agree with Paller, who wonders what "playing gay" would actually mean: "It'd be playing a set of stereotypes. But it helps the actor to construct an inner life that is very specific" (qtd. in Voss 222f.). The point is not that Brick can or should be performed in a "homosexual" way, but to see that Williams presented male actors with new challenges that included sexual ambiguity.

¹³ However, in his letter dated September 4, 1955, to Maria St. Just, Williams stated that, while he was happy that the production was "a huge success," it was "done so badly that [he] could hardly sit through it" (qtd. in St. Just 127).

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