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A Transnational Streetcar Named Desire: An Omnibus Premiere, Mexico City, 1948

Tennessee Williams was born Thomas Lanier Williams III on March 26, 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi. He died in New York City on February 25, 1983, age 71. His most famous work, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, rolled into Mexico via a circuitous route that went from Tokyo to Moscow to Paris to New York and, finally, arrived in Mexico City on the stage of the Palacio de Bellas Artes on December 4, 1948. This was the itinerary of Seki Sano (Japan 1905-Mexico 1966) the man who co-translated and directed Williams' best-known play in Mexican Spanish. The play that had opened on Broadway at the end of 1947 would have its first international production in Havana at the Auditorium of the Patronato del Teatro, in Cuban Spanish, on Friday July 9, 1948. Five months later, a re-translated *Un tranvía llamado deseo* would have its Mexican premier, the result of the efforts of its Japanese-Mexican director and the extraordinary conjunction of a number of highly talented actors, some of whom went on to become international stars as a result of their role in the Mexican avatar of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire.*

The *agent provocateur* for this extraordinarily international event was the director Seki Sano, himself very much a cosmopolitan phenomenon. Mexico's "dean" of cultural journalism Carlos Landeros had this to say about Seki Sano last April, 2011, in the magazine *Siempre!*:

> La importancia de Seki Sano en el Teatro en México es realmente trascendental, y como ya dije no creo que a la fecha se le haya dado el lugar que le corresponde a su labor teatral en México. Primero que todo, hay que decir que fue uno de los dos discípulos de Stanislavsky, el otro sobreviviente de esa época fue nada menos que Lee Strasberg, director del Actors Studio de Nueva York, de

> donde salieron actores de la talla de Marlon Brando, Marilyn Monroe, Dustin Hoffman, Robert de Niro, James Dean, entre otros. (Landeros)
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> [Seki Sano's importance to Mexican theater is truly momentous, and, as I have said, he has yet to be accorded his proper place in his theatrical work in Mexico. First of all, it should be said that he was one of the disciples of Stanislavski, the other survivor of that era being none other than Lee Strasberg, Artistic Director of the Actors Studio of New York, from which emerged actors of the stature of Marlon Brando, Marilyn Monroe, Dustin Hoffman, Robert de Niro, and James Dean, among others.]

Constantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski (1863-1938) and his realist or naturalist system of acting appears to have been the link that connected Tennessee Williams and Seki Sano, a connection whose potential would be productively realized in Mexico. Stanislavski's naturalistic movement evolved into social realism in the Soviet Union, and it metamorphosed into psychological realism, with a number of its naturalist characteristics in tact, when it crossed the Atlantic into the Americas. Seki Sano, along with Lee Strasberg, the Artistic Director of the Actors Studio of New York, as Carlos Landors tells us, were an integral part of that westward migration of the Stanislavski system. And though Seki Sano was a native of Japan (according to some, he might have been born in China), Seki came from Moscow to New York and then immigrated to Mexico. The Actors Studio of New York mentioned by Landeros in his commemorative appreciation of Seki Sano was a cauldron of ideas on theater and acting from which emerged a generation of stage and screen stars, directors, as well as playwrights that shaped the history of American theater and film in the twentieth century. The Actors Studio emerged in 1947 from the Group Theater that Strasberg was instrumental in founding in 1931. The fame of the Group Theater and the uniqueness of its successor Actors Studio rested in large measure on "method acting," and the origins of that method went back to Stanislavski and the transmission of his ideas on acting brought to New York by his students, Strasberg among them. Stanislavski's book *An Actor Prepares* (1936) became a handbook for "the method," at whose heart is "the psychology of interpretation." Tennessee Williams himself described the method when he noted, "Studio actors had a more intense and honest

style of acting. They act from the inside out. They communicate emotions they really feel. They give you a sense of life" (Gussow 20).

A Streetcar Named Desire could be said to have had its genesis in many ways in the Group Theater and in the Actors Studio of New York that was so important to Seki Sano in his brief sojourn in New York between Moscow and Mexico City, where he arrived in 1939. Tennessee Williams was a founding member of the Group Theater and an important member of its playwrights' wing. The year of the debut of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1947, was also the year of the founding of the Actors Studio. Elia Kazan, who would be the first director of *A Streetcar*, and Marlon Brando, who would be the first and paradigmatic Stanley Kowalski, the male lead of Williams' play, were an integral part of the Actors Studio under Strasberg's artistic direction. In a 2004 Introduction by Arthur Miller, the other emblematic American dramatist, the author of *The Crucible* recalls the first time he heard *A Streetcar*, and in his recollection, the indelible mark of Stanislavski was unmistakable. Miller notes:

> A writer's soul, a single voice was almost miraculously enveloping the stage. But remarkably, each character's speech seemed free to declare their contradictory selves rather than being harnessed to the play's story-telling needs. But at the same time that story marched inexorably forward, shaped as it was by Kazan's hand and a cast that was nothing short of superb. In fact, the production was the fullest bloom of the vanished Group Theater's intense, decade-long investigation into the Stanislavski Method; it was a form of realism so deeply felt as to emerge as a stylization. (Miller xi-xii)

The affinity between Tennessee Williams and Seki Sano was political, ethical, stylistic, and technical. Their political commitment was to a socially engaged theater, their ethical allegiance was to a theater that reflected accurately the profound complexity and ambiguities of the human predicament, their stylistic penchant was for an unadorned reality that emanated from the conditions of that predicament, and their technical affinity was founded in the "method acting" pioneered by Stanislavski and pithily described by Williams as "act[ing] from the inside out." Because of these shared characteristics, Williams and Seki Sano also shared a common fate as non-conformists and, often, as social outcastes. In the already cited

Introduction to the play, Arthur Miller insightfully noted, "*Streetcar* at the hour of its birth echoed the fate of the outsider in American society and raised the question of justice" (xiii).

Miller's comments could have been describing the situation of Seki Sano just as well. A political radical in the imperial and bellicose-minded city of Tokyo of the 1930s, Seki Sano is said to have stopped a riot-police bullet in his knee, hence his limp and the need to walk with a cane for the rest of his life. Having escaped to Moscow from the rightwing, belligerent monarchy of Japan, he found it necessary to flee as well from the Stalinist regime in Moscow in 1938. At the verge of World War II, New York was no less in the grip of an emergent patriotic zeal that targeted foreign immigrants and refugees, especially the Japanese, who would be imprisoned in interment camps shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

The year of Seki Sano's crossing into Mexico, 1939, was also the culmination of a decade-long systematic expulsion of Mexicans from the United States of America. Known as the Mexican Repatriation program that the State of Arizona would very much like to re-deploy now, the U.S. government forced some half a million people of Mexican descent out of the U.S. Mexico, for its part, opened its doors to refugees from European Fascist regimes, most notably Spanish Republicans fleeing the Spanish Civil War which had just ended with the victory of the Fascist uprising and the establishment of the Franco regime. Like many political refugees, Seki Sano found a hospitable destination in the Mexico of 1939. This was the time of the liberal government of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). Nonetheless, Sano was not immune to racial prejudice and xenophobia, especially after Mexico broke diplomatic relations with Japan on December 8, 1941, and entered World War II on the side of the Allies shortly after.

A Streetcar Named Desire was not the only U.S.-American work Seki Sano and his semi-professional theater group, El Teatro de la Reforma, produced in Mexico City. Two years earlier, in 1946, he directed *La fuerza bruta*, the Mexican adaptation of John Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men* (1937). And ten years later, 1956, he produced Arthur Miller's McCarthy-era play *Prueba de fuego* (*The Crucible*, 1952). John Steinbeck and Arthur Miller fascinated Seki Sano no less than Tennessee Williams, and what he found most compelling in these three different American writers was

their realism, sense of history, and the fragile materiality of the human condition in distress that all three Americans portrayed so powerfully. By disposition, political conviction, and aesthetic sensibility, Seki Sano felt a profound affinity with these authors and this is the dimension that he represented to great effect on the Mexican stage. The two-month-long rehearsal of *Un tranvía llamado deseo* set a record for rehearsals in Mexico, and the effect of the production earned Seki Sano the critics' award for best director for the 1948-1949 theater season. The Mexican playwright and translator of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, Luisa Josefina Hernández, noted in a 1979 interview: "The theater in Mexico had been sentimental and ridden with clichés. Then *A Streetcar Named Desire* broke away from all that and gave us honest portraits of people who are quite frank or openly cruel or unsympathetic. It had tremendous effect in that it opened up new possibilities for our dramatists: to see realism for real. … I began writing plays about a month after seeing Seki Sano's production" (qtd. in Hardison Londré and Watermeier 445).

Ten years later, Seki Sano would produce Hernández' own potently realistic play *Los frutos caídos.*

One of the most powerful symbiosis in the Mexican avatar of *A Streetcar Named Desire* originated in the convergence of Seki Sano's formidable passion as director and the commanding power of Wolf Ruvinskis who played the male lead role of Stanley Kowalski. The director Elia Kazan had already established a forceful precedent in December 1947 when he cast Marlon Brando in that lead role in the play's premier. While Brando was a powerful actor, however, Seki Sano saw clearly that Ruvinskis was a powerful man and potentially just as powerful as an actor. He made sure of that in transforming the professional prizefighter Ruvinskis into an even more commanding Stanley Kowalski than Brando's had been the year before on Broadway. Ruvinskis, like Seki Sano a nationalized Mexican who emigrated from Argentina was called the Pole, "El Polaco," even though he was born in Lithuania on October 30, 1921, and lived most of his life in Mexico. The twenty-six-year-old Ruvinskis under Seki Sano's direction went from blazing prizefighter to star actor, appearing in over forty theatrical productions and more than 150 films. He also had a part in the translation of Tennessee Williams' play into *Un tranvía llamado deseo*,

along with the director and other members of the cast, including Maria Douglas who played Blanche DuBois. Thus, in a 1992 interview with Philip Kolin and Auxiliadora Arana, Ruvinskis' responses to a number of probing questions are most revealing on the success of *A Streetcar* in its Mexican avatar. He was asked:

> – Did you notice in the Spanish translation of *Streetcar* if there were any major changes, deletions or additions to make it more acceptable or understandable to the Mexican public?
> – No, not at all. Sano respected the play in every sense; he had a high regard for *Streetcar.* But he also had a very Stanislavskian sense of theatre in interpreting Williams's characters. At one time, to allow the audience to see Stanley's vulgarity, Sano made him clean his feet with one of his socks. Not even Brando's predatory Stanley did that!

And on one of the key modifications Seki Sano made in *Un tranvía* to Williams' *A Streetcar*, an emendation that, very much in the Stanislavski tradition, powerfully broke down the imaginary fourth wall of the theatrical stage, Ruvinskis' answer is very revealing:

> – Some of the reviews focused on the striking way Sano has Blanche leave at the end of Streetcar. Would you comment on the way Sano may have changed Blanche's final exit from the Broadway production?
> – Unlike other productions, in ours Blanche leaves by walking through the audience and is accompanied by the doctor and nurse. She was led away in a white housecoat, or robe, by the doctor because when he arrived, Blanche was in the bathroom. She leaves the stage, therefore, right down the middle and through the audience, not behind the stage or on the side as in the New York production. As the doctor leads her out, the nurse carries Blanche's small suitcase. The effect on the audience was moving, awe-inspiring. …
> – How would you sum up the Mexican audience's reaction toward your production of *Streetcar*?
> – The premiere of *Streetcar* was at the Palacio de Bellas Artes. When the curtain fell, you could not hear anything. We were frozen. When the curtain came up again, there was still nothing; nobody in the audience said a thing, nor did they applaud. But when I went upstairs and got ready to come down

> again, a bomb had exploded from applause. I remember we were all crying. It was unforgettable. It was madness. The audience was practically glued to their seats, unable to believe what was happening to them. People now sixty to seventy years old who had seen *Streetcar* that first night still recall the experience. (Kolin and Auxiliadora 163-65)

Seki Sano brought to the Mexican stage such masters as William Shakespeare, Anton Chekov, and Leo Tolstoy, in addition to the already-mentioned American playwrights. But more than any other work, the 1948 production of Tennessee Williams' *Un tranvía llamado deseo* proved a watershed for the transformation of the history of Mexican theater and for the internationalization of Tennessee Williams and his work. And Seki Sano's amendment to the closing scene of *Streetcar*, as described here by the prizefighter and lead actor Wolf Ruvinskis, transformed the Williams' work into an even more powerful theatrical punch very much in keeping with the social effect the American playwright sought to achieve. By being made to overflow its proscenium and invade the life world of the audience, Seki Sano exacerbated the drama's realism and, in doing so, turned a stage play into a worldly performance we are now given to calling world literature. It's a venerable form of worlding world literature, perhaps even older than Greek Old Comedy and Aristophanes' *The Wasps* that had its premiere at the Athens Lenaia Festival of 422 B.C. That radically performative sting is called *parabasis* and its enduring legacy extends to the meta-fictions of our postmodern narratives. Blanche DuBois' exit from the stage, per Seki Sano's rendition, translates her into the world of the audience. Rather than exiting the stage, she enters, through the invisible fourth wall, the manicomium that is the world whose dramatic history Tennessee Williams portrayed so poignantly. As much as a national history of the United States of America at a critical period, *A Streetcar* is also the record of a painful family history that Williams was never able to overcome, no matter how often and how powerfully he dramatized it. But that's another story for another occasion…

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