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## Tennessee Williams and Luchino Visconti: Various Stages of Outrage – and Censorship

### Visconti as Cultural Ambassador

When Luchino Visconti decided to direct Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* in Rome in 1946, Italian theaters were slowly recovering – culturally and economically – from the ravages of World War II. Intellectuals were disappointed by the poorness of what Italian playwrights produced and disturbed by what audiences loved most (variety shows), while theatergoers were often offended by the lack of Italian plays in favor of foreign ones, and sometimes outraged by the themes these dramatic works offered to the public.

In this atmosphere, Visconti was the cultural ambassador who introduced Tennessee Williams' theater to Italians. He directed *Lo zoo di vetro* in December 1946 at the Eliseo Theatre in Rome, where he also put up *Un tram che si chiama desiderio* in January 1949. In 1951, with some changes in the cast, his *Streetcar* opened in Milan at the Teatro Nuovo. Newspaper critics thronged to see and judge Italy's most provocative director staging a new American playwright.

Count Luchino's fame was already quite controversial when he decided to try his hand at this unknown author who had fared well on Broadway, but whose name had no appeal whatsoever for the average Italian theatergoer. Visconti had returned to theater after Cinecittà Film Studios in Rome were turned into refugee shelters during the last months of World War II. Well-trained in the best filmmaking of the previous decade, in Jean Renoir's entourage, Visconti had only shot one feature film, *Ossessione*, in 1943. The

stage had indeed been his first artistic passion, steeped as his family was in the love of theater. In 1898 his grandfather, Grand Duke Guido Visconti, personally helped La Scala opera house in Milan to overcome its bankruptcy and thus acquired a private stage box, a privilege very few families could afford.

Luchino Visconti was an aesthete who strongly believed in the artistic and communicative power of memory, both on a personal and on a professional level. He was a collector of fine fabrics, of antique furniture, and of china animal figures, which, together with unique Art Nouveau glass pieces, crowded the Roman villa in which he went to live in 1941. Many of these objects were used as props by Visconti on his sets. He was indeed turning physical pieces of personal and family memory into publicly evocative art, a process that was running parallel to Tennessee Williams' own processing of personal, family, and national past into drama. This is one of the reasons why the Italian director was drawn towards *The Glass Menagerie* and was able to give it an appealing personal interpretation.

I tried to trace how Visconti met with Williams' work in the first place, considering this connection an interesting site for the investigation of the transcultural processes started at the end of World War II between Italy and the United States. According to Visconti, it was Williams himself who had the script of *The Glass Menagerie* delivered to him in 1946 (D'Amico de Carvalho 106). But there is no evidence of Williams knowing the Italian director before 1948, when the latter was planning to stage the Italian version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in Rome, which premiered the following year.

Visconti's closest collaborator was Gerardo Guerrieri, who worked as assistant director, translator, and in many other capacities. In an unpublished letter, dated 1945, held at the Visconti archives in Rome, Guerrieri wrote to the director that he was "making arrangements with Silvio d'Amico and a Murray lady to have plays from America and from England." When Williams died, in 1983, Guerrieri read a eulogy on the radio and started his memories of the American playwright from the times in which *The Glass Menagerie* was produced in Rome. "*Zoo di vetro*," he remembered, "was one of the first things that reached us from the United

States after the war, together with Camel cigarettes and canned pea soup. The script was brought to us to the Eliseo Theatre by a young man still wearing his uniform, a soldier who was a theater agent" ("I demoni" 15). Visconti apparently could not speak or read any English (Williams, *Notebooks* 570), and when he first read the Italian translation of *Menagerie* done by Alfredo Segre, he found its style rather obsolete and asked Guerrieri to revise it. "In the original text," said Guerrieri, "I was touched by a voice that had new grace and new strength, that I tried to capture. It was an unexpected text, the opposite of what we imagined should arrive from there. We never thought America the Winner would bring forth such a suffocated cry of unhappiness, of loneliness, of huge but unfulfilled desire" ("I demoni" 15).

The play strongly appealed to Visconti, once he realized that its apparent old style was in fact an attempt to bring memory center stage. "The most interesting aspect of this play is that it manages to stage memories," declared the Italian director to a theater journal. "Tom's role is similar," he added, "to that of the stage manager in Wilder's *Our Town*" (Patroni Griffi 55). This means that Visconti did notice the innovative aspects in the dramatic structure of Tennessee Williams' theater.

### Tatiana and Rina, Two Primadonnas for Williams

For the cast, Visconti chose Tatiana Pavlova as Amanda, Rina Morelli as Laura, Giorgio di Lullo as Jim, and Paolo Stoppa as Tom. Rina Morelli has somehow survived as the quintessential Williams heroine on Italian stages, having played Laura and then Blanche, but Russian born Tatiana Pavlova (1894-1975) was the big star of the times. Albeit somehow overshadowed by Morelli, Pavlova was actually no amateur performer: she had been acting since the age of fifteen in touring Russian companies and in Moscow theaters. In 1920 she moved to Italy, where she studied acting and made her debut in 1923. For the following two decades she was a very controversial figure, being given the first teaching assignment in stage direction at the newly inaugurated Drama Academy, Silvio D'Amico's Accademia d'Arte Drammatica. Her innovative directing techniques, her

marriage with a Fascist *gerarca*, and not least her Russian accent, were some of the disturbing elements attributed to her persona.

When Luchino Visconti was arranging an early reading of the script of *Lo zoo di vetro*, he immediately decided to assign the part to this Russian artist, whom he had seen in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* over a decade earlier. His decision turned out to be a huge comeback for a woman who had fallen into oblivion, especially due to her political affiliation at the time of Fascism. During rehearsals Visconti was very strict and exacted a perfect pronunciation of standard Italian, a linguistic nuance that was extremely difficult for Pavlova, who had learned Italian with some of the most outstanding actors of the 1920s.

After twenty years, her guttural Italian still had some traces of slavic cadences, and Visconti reproached her during the rehearsals of *The Glass Menagerie* for her imperfect speech. With a xenophobic remark, he shouted "Stop acting! We will resume when Signora Pavlova stops speaking Turkish" (qtd. in Villien 50). Cultural xenophobia towards linguistic otherness prompted Visconti to reproach his actress's slip from proper Italian. As much as he would later shoot with non-professional, dialect-speaking actors in *La terra trema* (*The Earth Will Tremble*), a choice that highly impressed Williams during his visits to the set (*Notebooks* 472), on stage Visconti exacted a perfect pronunciation of standard Italian.

Interestingly enough, Guerrieri maintained that her Russian-sounding Italian was an exotic transcultural equivalent to Amanda Wingfield's Southern drawl ("I demoni" 15), and many reviewers writing in the 1940s thought the same, extolling her ability to play with voice and accent. In 1924 she'd had a triumphant American tour, and, wrote a critic,

the audience loved this Duse who spoke an Italo-Russian esperanto. For sure, with no disrespect to her other qualities, I'd say her stage persona is still playing a lot on the charm of that esperanto. So much so that in most of her lines she speaks a perfect Italian, but in others, where she needs a special effect, she indulges in a foreign affectation made of slurred, warbled and sighed words. (Vigorelli 4)

Another critic completely ignored Tatiana Pavlova's performance and published a long review under the title of "Rina Morelli and the Miracle

of *The Glass Menagerie*.” In a rhetorically verbose style, he extolled her “evocative power” that brought her, like few other actresses, “close to the sanctity of art.” “Her Laura delivered a richer and more intense message than the playwright’s words could ever do” (Marinucci 40).

This panegyric sounds very much like a critic’s response to another critic’s lavish praises of Tatiana Pavlova: two different ways of acting for the two leading ladies resulted in two different views of dramatic art. Whereas Rina Morelli’s technique had the realistic imprint of the classic Italian tradition (she had been among the founders of the Compagnia Italiana di Prosa directed by Visconti a few years earlier), Tatiana Pavlova had all the frills and the heavy effects of a turn of the century show-stealer, coming as she was from the old Russian school of acting. On top of all this, her *primadonna* status actually made her steal the scene even more than the original Amanda was meant to do. Visconti reportedly had to tone down Pavlova’s exuberance on stage, for she was at times way too showy and, like the director said, sometimes she acted the part as if the play was a “pochade or an operetta” (Guerrieri “I demoni” 15).

It was Vigorelli, writing for the weekly magazine *L’Europeo*, who extolled Tatiana, and like his colleague had done three months earlier, used the name of the female star for the title of his review: “Tatiana is back!” “The only reason for the success of *The Glass Menagerie*,” he wrote, “is Pavlova’s comeback. I’m not sure how faithful to the original her Amanda was, for she made her a hysterical, erratic, abstract and sentimental creature. Everybody agrees, like twenty years ago, on her woman’s charm ... and when she acts she acquires all the rights to be Tatiana the woman and Tatiana the performer” (4). Visconti was surely aware of this potential for dramatic friction when casting two such different women as Pavlova and Morelli, and he was just as satisfied afterwards, for twenty years later he affirmed that among the many plays he directed on the stage, *The Glass Menagerie* was among the few he would do again in exactly the same way as he’d done it (66).

Visconti *versus* Williams

Luchino Visconti's shows met with the provincialism of Italian dramatic culture in the early months after WWII. Before Williams, he had staged plays by Hemingway (*The Fifth Column*), *Tobacco Road* adapted by James Kirkland from the Erskine Caldwell novel, and works by French writers Jean Paul Sartre, Jean Cocteau, Jean Anouilh, and Beaumarchais, as well as a French adaptation of Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment*. Few reviewers, at the time, recognized the innovative transcultural effort Visconti was making in his aesthetic activity. Most of them simply extolled his genius or blamed him for the same reason.

Writing for the monthly journal *Mercurio*, critic Ermanno Contini appreciated Williams' drama and found fault with everybody and everything else. Even by the play itself he was not thrilled: he admitted that its tenuous atmosphere was its strength, but underrated the novelty of the style, especially for European stages. "We can praise," he wrote, "Williams' effort to free the American theater of its too crude and shallow theatricality with the insight of personal conflicts.... Used to the strength of visual effects and to the violence of strong feelings, Americans have never cared to lift the veil that hides the daily tragedy of faceless common men. They have never cared for creatures without history, people who waste away in their grey monotonous routine, who are stifled in the misery of an un-lived life, torn between wearing sacrifices and useless fantasies." ("Tennessee e Visconti" 105).

Meanwhile, in January 1948, Williams was visiting Italy and Rome, where he met Visconti and his scene designer and assistant director Franco Zeffirelli, aged 25 at the time and apparently the lover of American expatriate Donald Downes, who had worked during WWII for British and then American intelligence (Williams, *Notebooks* 472). Williams was invited to go to Sicily and see the shooting of Visconti's film *La terra trema*. At first he was fascinated by Visconti's choice of filming with non-professional actors, but he soon got bored with the long times of Italian filmmaking and with the poor conditions of the Sicilian village in which they were staying, and left. He went back and forth between the States and Italy, enjoying the Roman life with Frank Merlo and with Anna Magnani.

He gave Visconti an inscribed copy of the published version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which is now held at the Visconti archives in Rome.

Visconti was immediately attracted to the character of Blanche and decided to put up her tragic story: Williams returned to Rome, to be present at the rehearsals, but the director was not really keen on sharing his views, for he believed that authors had nothing to say about their work. He had the romantic idea of the writer as a fool gifted with a message that he could deliver but not explain. Williams himself apparently confirmed Visconti's opinion, for he replied to all queries of cast members or of the director with nothing but a laughter.

*Un tram che si chiama desiderio* opened at the Teatro Eliseo on January 21, 1949. Visconti was known for his signature treatment of family drama, and his great success as a theater director was coming from his staging of Jean Cocteau's *Les Parents Terribles* exactly four years before. In the French play, the family members witnessed the gradual ending of the traditional marriage, as, somehow, happened in Williams' plays too. In both shows the audience experienced the demise of the main characters which had been foreshadowed since their first appearance on stage: "I always like to recount failures and describe victims, I prefer those lives that are crushed by the weight of reality," Visconti stated in an interview (qtd. in Mazzocchi 241). This is why Blanche's character had a strong appeal for him. Also, he very much believed in the eroticism of class warfare: his first feature film, *Ossessione*, was a rewriting of James Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, in which the social and economic differences between the lady and the tramp are bigger than in the American original. Blanche's status as a fading aristocrat made her desire towards her working-class brother-in-law – and their mutual love-hate relationship – one more feature that met the Viscontian aesthetics: the director came to be known as the "communist nobleman." Rejecting Elia Kazan's psychological interpretation, according to a critic, the Italian director was guided by "a pervasive desire to present burning issues and existential content where political meaning was expressed through exaggerated realism" (qtd. in Kolin 49).

Class difference as a Leitmotiv was also noticed by Achille Fiocco, who reported that Blanche,

born of noble lineage, cannot stand the tragedy of losing her parents and the family inheritance, and seeks shelter at her sister's. The latter is less a slave to conventions and has married a young Polish working-man with whom she leads an animal life. ... Tennessee Williams couldn't do without class conflict, the aristocratic and the plebeian [sisters], resounding a Strindberghian echo, which is here made more complicated by a sort of inferiority complex of the male. (8)

### “A History of Beds”

The style of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, its interpretation by Visconti, as well as the sexual mores it portrayed were the main issues raised by Italian critics in 1949: the play was almost unswervingly criticized as flawed and its novelty mistaken for imperfection. Reviewers who were too clever to expose their narrow-minded patriotism, chose a political innuendo, as had happened with *Lo Zoo* only three years before: a journalist from left-wing newspaper *Il Paese* ironically wrote that the Marshall Plan must have had a theater section and ocean cruisers coming from the States were not only delivering wheat and other goods, but also a great quantity of play scripts “lacking in originality and taste” (M. C. 3).

A critic from *La Repubblica* defined *Streetcar* and the other plays by Williams known at the time as “realistic reports, told in a journalistic style with the only recurring vague theme of the end of illusions. .... The episodes of the play are at times depicted with acute psychological understanding, but they have no lyricism, following one another without a human frame or a dramatic structure. Apart from Blanche, the other characters are fake puppets who became believable on stage only thanks to Luchino Visconti, who created an environment that was a character in itself.”

Playwright Rosso di San Secondo wrote that the success of the show was mostly due to the accurate direction, since the play – “like most American theater” – consisted “of a number of scenes that reminded one of film technique rather than of the concentrated and explosive spiritual catharsis of classic drama” (5). None of the many reviewers who wrote about Visconti's *Tram* was really exempt from a comparative evaluation of the two



artists. Those who sided for Visconti usually considered him the savior of the show, because “what little the play had to offer was made visible thanks to Visconti” since the play “was not brilliant at all” (Trabucco 3). Deeming Williams’ play “devoid of any noteworthy meaning or value,” a reviewer extolled Visconti’s rendition, particularly stressing the scenic import of beds in his shows, something also another journalist had noticed (Spadavecchia 20). From “[Anhouil’s] *Eurydice* to *Les Parents Terribles* to this bed in *Streetcar*, the history of Visconti’s directions will somehow be a history of beds. . . . They are essential to the so-called neo-realist aesthetics . . . perfectly marking Visconti’s artistry and at the same time attracting theatergoers” (Radice 11).

Slightly disturbed by Visconti’s extreme attention to details, Fiocco nonetheless appreciated the direction and explicitly disdained the play, that he termed “morbid” and considered “second rate,” not without an appraisal of “the few good moments in it . . . the razzmatazz of the second act, ending with the surrender of the crying male” (8). For Giovanni Mosca, an amateur playwright himself, Visconti served as the “refined” director of a “voyeuristic” play that “cannot and does not even aim at lifting the veil from the ugly world it depicts. . . . Williams is not an artist,” he sentenced, and if the audience was enthusiastically applauding the show, it must have been, he inferred, only because it was fashionable to do so (22). The reviewer from socialist magazine *Mondo operaio* not only maintained that “Visconti and not the author should take the credit of the show,” but also that the play was evidence of a rotten society, “prostitution” and “animal sexuality” being its main themes (Meocci 8). “Blanche has French origins and Stanley is Polish,” noticed a journalist, who insinuated that “Williams would show America as a country peopled with the dregs of European society” (Radice 11).

Subject matter surely did cause some bewilderment or outrage: “Blanche tries in vain to stifle her own depravation but . . . [Stanley] wants to have her like many others have done before him. . . . The material of the play is muddy and turbulent, stemming from the basest naturalism typical of Zola, made murkier by ambiguous psychoanalytic influences and by Sartre’s and [Arthur] Miller’s bad examples” (Contini “Un tram” 3).

According to one reviewer, *A Streetcar Named Desire* was “rotten, vulgar, unbearable literature” indulging in the motive of the lost woman but

without the “atmosphere of *Anna Christie* or of Russian novels.” In his reading, furthermore, Stanley was “contaminated by the presence of the crazy sister-in-law” (Talarico 3). Subjective interpretations of the plot were not so rare: according to another reviewer, Blanche “has no more restraints: her brother-in-law’s friends arouse her, the young man coming to collect a payment causes her to scream with desire, the sharp smell of her brother-in-law makes her lose her mind,” he wrote. At the same time, still appreciating Visconti more than Williams, he also conceded that it was unfair to accuse the playwright of having written a play that had nothing new to say: “he did not write – and he surely did not mean to – something new and different for the sake of novelty. He aimed at creating a disquieting female character, ... that he managed to. The character of Blanche stands out in the play with such neat features that she justifies the three whole acts. Her painful path to madness ... is recounted with cruelly precise art” (Masserano 3).

A reviewer wrote that thirty-six rounds of applause had marked the end of the show at the Eliseo, and that the “malicious rumors according to which thirty were for Visconti and six for Williams” (Giagni 11) were not true because the play had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize and was still on Broadway after two years. The aristocratic director was, according to a critic,

the liveliest and most modern voice that’s speaking in the theater now ... and I cannot accept the criticism of those who consider the play of low quality. Quite the opposite, I have rarely seen such an intense sympathy between a text and its interpretation. A victim of his own legend, Visconti has been denied the merit of having found, among the thousands of *best plays* of modern theater one of the most meaningful works and one that best applies to his vision of long crisis of the modern soul. (Prosperi 7)

A very poetic reading of the plot can be ascribed to poet laureate Salvatore Quasimodo, who reported that “Blanche and Stella had a happy childhood in a rich mansion with a French education .... Stella followed Stanley for love and Blanche, who loved love, had a gloomy destiny” (35). His evaluation of the show was positive, even though characters seemed to

him quite “heavy,” whereas another journalist sided for Stanley, defining him “a mixture of primitive, rough and bestial bonhomie” (Trabucco 3). While many critics detected a cinematic language in the short episodes of the play – many were still comparing the two media (Contini, “Teatro e cinema” 49) – very few were the ones who acknowledged and appreciated Tennessee Williams’ art, among them Silvio D’Amico.

### Silvio D’Amico’s Role

Reviewers’ and critics’ oscillating attention towards the play, the director or the performers was not due to personal whims: it was a sign of the times, in which dramatic culture in Italy was undergoing profound changes. Whereas the new role of the director had reached the stages of other European countries at the turn of the twentieth century, Italian companies started feeling the need for such a figure a couple of decades later. In the 1930s and early 40s the stage director had not yet gained the prominence that he was going to have henceforth: debates were taking place as to what “real theater” consisted of: the old figure of the leading actor, the *mattatore* (who, in some cases, was little more than a stock star), the play – and in that case it had to be a classic, or, more recently, the mediating and harmonizing job performed by the stage director.

After some tentative innovations suggested by Virgilio Talli, Gabriele d’Annunzio, and, somehow by Luigi Pirandello, it was thanks to critic and theorist Silvio D’Amico that some real changes took place. Although initially opposed to stage direction and in favor of the playwright, D’Amico had “more than anyone else” a pivotal role in the “development of Italian theater towards what it is like today” (Bosisio 60-61). He was the founder of what can possibly be considered Italy’s first modern Acting Academy, the “Accademia Nazionale d’Arte Drammatica” in 1935, where, despite many oppositions, he gave Tatiana Pavlova the first teaching assignment in stage direction (Ruocco 131-32). In March 1945 he started a radio program in which he reviewed virtually every major play staged in Rome. At the same time, he wrote for Roman newspaper *Il Tempo* and dedicated both his radio and his press reviews to Visconti’s *Streetcar*.

The two reviews are basically the same, with the exception of a detailed description of the Roman ladies decked in furs and of the celebrities attending the premiere, which is only in the aired version. Reporting the plot, D'Amico informed readers and listeners that, after losing her reputation, "Blanche falls apart, she gets drunk and she even gives herself over to her brother-in-law" (18), a reading of the plot which was only possible from a chauvinistic perspective. It is noteworthy that, though advocating the necessity for a director, D'Amico still maintained the centrality of the text over all other aspects of the show (Bosisio 61) and accordingly considered Luchino Visconti's rendition of *Streetcar* "extreme," somehow "too impeccable" and "literally violent" in its aesthetic abundance. The "hyper-realist and at the same time existentialist" direction, he added, should have been "less exterior and more essential" because the play itself needed "an intimate approach" (17-18), thus showing more respect and appreciation of Williams' art and standing out, somehow, as the one and only critic who preferred Williams' text over Visconti's directing technique.

In 1951, encouraged by the Roman success, Visconti managed to bring the show to the Teatro Nuovo in Milan, with some changes in the scenes and in the cast. Blanche was still played by Rina Morelli, for many had thought her perfect for the role. Critics and theatergoers, as well as Visconti himself, considered Morelli, the previous Laura Wingfield, the most gifted actress that Italy could boast, whose performances always bordered on absolute perfection. It is no wonder that all reviews extolled her interpretation of the Southern belle. A journalist went so far as to write, "if it had not been for Rina Morelli's acting, we wouldn't have given a damn to see Mrs. Blanche's story. It's impossible to understand why the great Visconti has wasted his expertise, his genius and his money to give us the most banal comedy of middle-class realism" (Gigliozzi 3). Morelli's performance, wrote critic and amateur director Vito Pandolfi, bore "a wound in the swollen, painful bitterness of the soul" (56).

So it happened that Rina Morelli's bravura almost overshadowed the other performers, namely Vittorio Gassman and Marcello Mastroianni as Stanley and Mitch. Gassman's sinewy strength was often recognized as a plus for the show. His performances of Stanley's rage, as well as his despair, were so powerful as to scare the audience. In the scene in which Stanley

is brought under the shower by his friends to be calmed down, Gassman seemed the victim of an epileptic seizure. His seductiveness was often noted too: “Gassman’s underwear should be restricted to adult viewers,” went one of the reviews of the 1949 show (Gigliozzi 3). But his personal and artistic relationship with the director came to a halt right after *Streetcar*. Gassman left the company and never worked again for Visconti. That is why, when Visconti put up the play in Milan, Stanley’s role was taken up by Mastroianni. At his first appearance on the stage of the Eliseo two years before, at the age of twenty-five, he was spotted by a critic, who wrote, “in the cast, the young Mastroianni should be mentioned, because he will surely go far” (“*farà strada*”) (Trabucco 3).

### Various Stages of Censorship

Scenes were designed by Franco Zeffirelli in both productions, with the difference that the first was “more ‘material’ and realistic” while the second was,

more stylized. Tulle was used for the side walls of the building and to mark the streets, allowing transparencies ... and quick shifts from the inside to the outside. Replacing the big veil façade of the first edition there are big blinds that are rolled up and down to reveal the room and the kitchen of the ground floor. In both scene designs the round motive of the banisters and of the trelliswork – made of waves, curls and spirals is everywhere, it is obsessive. This constantly repeated spiralling mark signifies the meanderings of Blanche’s mind. (Mazzocchi 245)

The visual rendition of the set was highly appreciated both in the Roman and in the Milan productions: “the setting was itself a text, becoming expressive and developing into drama” (Calendoli 4), wrote a journalist about the 1949 version, and “the interesting features of the show were its spectacular aspects, the streetcar passing by the top floor of the building ... is really remarkable, the dances, the songs, the overall rhythm gave the feeling of a choreographic style. ... Visconti’s show is already in the setting

itself,” wrote a reviewer in 1951 (qtd. in D’Amico de Carvalho 186). And the director’s use of music was deemed instrumental to the success of the show (Simoni 2), especially in the Milan production, where Visconti had the New Orleans Style Band play live, directed by William Bodkin.

But the two year hiatus between the productions did not allow a more profound appreciation or a unanimous one: save for sporadically positive reviews, most critics kept on dismissing the play and the author as minor and pointing out the weak elements of the performance. “The text has nothing interesting,” wrote a reviewer, who considered the show as evidence of the effort of contemporary theater to mimic the language of film (Rebora 25). Someone even thought that the Williams-Visconti collaboration was the highpoint of “thirty years of bad taste” (D’Alessandro 3). An unbiased acknowledgment of Williams’ art was going to be possible, paradoxically, when his theater would be staged by other directors and judged on their own – and on their playwright’s – merits instead of against those of the towering icon of Luchino Visconti, whose activities had unfortunately also alerted the Bureau of Censorship.

Stage censorship in Italy was a government affair. After the unification, a law was passed in 1889 that ruled stage performances with two kinds of censorship: before being allowed production, plays had to be submitted to the Prefect for formal approval, and, once they were in production, they could be stopped if they posed a threat to public order. From 1931, Fascism centralized the control and passed the task of censoring to the Ministry of Home Affairs first, then in 1938 to the infamous Minculpop. At the end of the war slight changes to the law were made with new statutes, but the two modes of intervention remained basically the same, though managed directly by the governmental offices of the Prime Minister of the newborn Republic.

Right after WWII, finally free from the censorious grip of Fascism, intellectuals couldn’t wait to have real access to new artistic expressions, be they Italian or foreign. In 1945, critic Ermanno Contini lamented that a democratic country could no more suffer the limitations of preventive censorship for stage plays, the more so, he argued, because books and periodicals were exempt from it. He termed it “an absurd institution that stemmed from the old and obsolete, even sour fight of the Church against

theater, an approach that was welcomed by totalitarian police regimes” (“Censura teatrale” 32).

Wishing to stage the Tennessee Williams play, the Visconti company complied like everybody else and, on January 7 1949, sent the script of *Un tram che si chiama desiderio* to the “Ufficio di revisione” of the Cabinet of the Prime Minister, “revision” being an apt euphemism for censorship. A handwritten note by the head of the 7<sup>th</sup> division, Lodovici, dated January 9 of the same year, declares that the “work has no artistic value... it is banal and ordinary. But its features as a dramatic text are particularly fit to tickle Visconti’s temperament.” He then listed the swear words that needed to be eliminated and concluded: “All these expressions have been cut. The show *is* there and censorship, under the existing law, cannot intervene. The adventurous, hysterical protagonist can arouse pity. And the text can be successful exactly for this reason. The dirty expressions having been cut, censorship has nothing to say” (ACS 3594).

A copy of the script was then returned to the company, with a stamp of approval dated January 11, 1949. The excised expressions – no more than a dozen – belonged to Steve, calling his wife Eunice a “troia” – [rutting hunk] (Williams, *Streetcar* 327) and Stanley repeating the word “culo” [ass] twice. Blanche’s dialogue was changed too, but this time more for the meaning conveyed than for an inappropriate word: when she says “They think a girl over thirty ought to – the vulgar term is – ‘put out’” (335), the Italian went: “Passati i trenta una ragazza, secondo loro, dovrebbe... volgarmente si dice ‘darla via’.” “Darla via” was changed into “darsi via.”

All in all, no big deal. Allen’s homosexuality, which, as we shall see, caused more outrage in reviewers, went unnoticed. The company now had to work with the only allowed version of the script, but things did not exactly go this way on the night of the premiere, January 21, 1949. Visconti refused to comply with all the changes and left Gassman with the two lines with “culo” unaltered. Through his assistant Guerrieri, he talked Lodovici into accepting this decision for “the sake of art.” The lines were going to be pronounced “through the teeth” so that the audience would not understand them and so that the mood – on which the director and the actors had been working for over twenty rehearsals – could be kept intact.

The authorities must have really not trusted the companies, for after revising the scripts, they would require the presence of the officer who had approved the play – this time Lodovici – in the theater. As if this was not enough, they also sent a policeman to check that everything was carried out in the expected way. So it happened that the day after the premiere, the police superintendent immediately sent a wire to the offices of the “Revisione Teatrale” at the Cabinet of the Prime Minister *and* to the Minister of Home Affairs. “It is true,” it went, “that Lodovici had allowed the lines to be played in spite of the ban,” but the reaction of the audience was one of disapproval, so “from tonight on the company will have to scrupulously comply with what has been decided by the Office of Revision.” The note reached Lodovici shortly after and, quite abashed, he assured authorities that “all the original cuts to the scripts have been restored,” especially because the show was soon going to be seen by the Sunday afternoon audience consisting mainly of families (“la domenicale”) (ACS 3594).

#### “Things that Shook the Audience”

So it happened that in the early Christian Democratic Republic, censors were more concerned with vulgar expressions per se and with the sanctity of a woman’s role than with the explicit references to Blanche’s husband’s homosexuality. Critics and reviewers, though, didn’t miss the chance to address a subject that, exactly in those years, had become a burning issue for directors, theatergoers and reviewers. Two factions had indeed developed, following the stagings of two plays with homosexual characters in Rome, in the 1945 season: *Adam* by Marcel Achard (directed by Luchino Visconti), and *Les Fleur de Pois* by Edouard Bourdet (directed by Ettore Giannini). Newspapers, critics, and apparently also audiences sided for the shows or against them, so much so that some tried to tag gay drama as “the Luchino Visconti genre” (“Moralità” 52).

When *Un tram* was produced in Rome four years later, virtually no journalist avoided to mention that, among the characters, though not on stage, there was a homosexual man. The way in which this was reported



says a lot on the prudery of Italians in the late 1940s: some were outraged, defining homosexuality Allen's "bestly vice" (Spadavecchia 20) in the pages of Italy's most widespread women's magazine, catering to young wives or wives-to-be. While "vice" and "depraved" (*vizio* and *vizioso*) were the terms used by other critics (D'Amico 17; Calendoli 4), "sick with homosexuality" was Di San Secondo's expression (5); religion was invoked by Prosperi, who so told the story of Blanche, "outdone by the end of a relationship that denied the name of God and, if you like, of Nature and piety, and that leads her to one of the most tragic exits in contemporary theater" (7). For Trabucco, Blanche ends up "marrying a boy who, to her utter disgrace, she will find out is a queer" (*invertito*) (3). "The picture is not complete without a touch of sodomy," went Prezzolini (3). These condemning judgments contrast with the lyrical report given by Quasimodo:

enchanted by the ephebic beauty of a boy – she would have kissed the ground where he lay his light foot – at the age of sixteen she marries the god who writes madrigals. But the marriage revealed a physical mismatch between the two. Both the female angel and the angel of the opposite sex were disappointed. And one day Blanche finds the young Apollo in the company of a man. ... Blanche starts a life of excess in order to forget that irreplaceable love. (35)

Others were just more matter-of-fact: his gayness "was a brutal reality for Blanche" (Contini, "Un tram" 3). Or they saw in the marriage the beginning of her downfall, as did Masserano, according to whom, she "confesses her past, the story of her marriage with a man who betrayed her with another man, the story of all her failures. It is a scene of great beauty" (3). One critic, apparently very knowledgeable about the state of sexology studies, reviewing the 1951 Milan production of *Streetcar*, had a more balanced reaction to the theme. He wrote that Blanche's first husband preferred "Socratic" relationships to marital ones. "Things that happen more often than we think, if we can trust the Kinsey report. The only thing is that the young man has made three mistakes: first that of getting married, second that of being caught in the act, third that of shooting himself. A disproportionate reaction" (Terron 22).<sup>1</sup>

Visconti was never discouraged by the narrow-mindedly outraged

reactions of critics, either to *Streetcar* or to the other plays he had directed, that had homosexual characters, namely the above mentioned *Adam*, in which Vittorio Gassman played Ugo Saxel, vying with a woman for the love of Maxim, the bisexual character who never appeared on stage, and Jean Paul Sartre's *No Exit* (also known as *Behind Closed Doors*, in Italian *A porte chiuse*), in which Rina Morelli played the lesbian character Ines. Quite the opposite, when recalling those years in a later interview, he lamented that nothing interesting or stimulating happened on Italian stages anymore. "Today's audiences are sluggish," he said in a 1962 radio interview, "maybe because what's missing are the explosive ingredients that bring theater to life. ... I've seen people hit one another and scream at premieres of plays like *A porte chiuse*, stuff that was very modern for the times, things that shook the audience" (qtd in D'Amico de Carvalho 51).

For this reason, in the mid-50s he had in mind to also work at *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and at *The Rose Tattoo* but both plays were destined to remain unproduced, marking one last chapter in the long history of the Tennessee Williams-Luchino Visconti relationship in Italy, in which the threat of censorship was always lurking. The script of *Cat*, translated by Guerrieri as *Una gatta sui carboni ardenti*, was submitted to the censorship office in September 1955, but, apparently, was neither approved nor forbidden, because the company itself stopped rehearsals after four days for fear of treating too hot a text. If this is true, the cultural "terrorism" of the Christian Democratic government had succeeded in the subtlest way. *The Rose Tattoo*, in fact, had just been denied permission less than a year before.

In a letter dated May 12, 1953, Visconti had written to theater agent Natalia Danesi Murray, cherishing the success of his Anna Magnani film *Bellissima* in NYC and asking for the rights to put up Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and an unidentified Williams play, in all likelihood *The Rose Tattoo*. On August 23 of the following year, Ivo Chiesa, manager of the Company, submitted the Italian script of *La rosa tatuata* to the Bureau of Theater Revision of the Consiglio dei Ministri. A note from the office, with an unintelligible signature, states that "the company is asking for permission to stage the Tennessee Williams play, which they had submitted some time ago in a different version, and which the company themselves decided not

to produce anymore. The present translation is significantly different from the original text and much ‘cleaner’” (ACS 11435).

A commission composed of many members – the minutes of one of the meetings has a threatening list of Ph.D.s and lawyers, each followed by the indication of the office they belonged to – met more than once. On November 29, 1954, they issued a note saying that, “conceding that the play submitted by the Company of via Manzoni proves meaningfully ‘lighter’ than the previous translations, the Commission advises for permission to be granted, provided some more modifications are made. The Commission nonetheless is somehow perplexed about the staging of the play, mainly because some of the stage directions concerning the more risqué scenes appear to have been mitigated, maybe in order not to impress the censors too much.” In what appears to be a constant skirmishing that was going to involve Williams and Italian censorship for another decade, a probably successive handwritten note – with no date – read: “While going on reading the play, many doubts have arisen regarding our approval, for the mixture of sacred and profane is more and more evident.” After listing some cuts, the censor concluded that, “for a more radical elimination of the problem, I would suggest the statue of the Madonna be removed from the room of the baroness.”

Probably due to the changes he’d made to the revised script of *Streetcar*, Visconti was considered unreliable even after cuts, and, as is evidenced by the three-year ban on the distribution in Italy of the Elia Kazan’s version of *Streetcar*, Tennessee Williams was literally under surveillance. These elements made the two artists’ connection a threatening one for censorship: after three months and a half of shilly-shally (which sound as a discouraging technique when compared to the four days it took the same offices to allow *Un tram*), the manuscript of *La rosa tatuata* was finally refused permission with a negative stamp on December 7, 1954, thus leading Visconti to terminate his artistic connection with Tennessee Williams’ theater.

In the meanwhile, he had involved the American playwright in the writing of the script of his film *Senso*, released in the same year. A first collaboration had been suggested by Visconti shortly after the moving of *Il tram* from Rome to Milan, when the director had asked Williams to write a script based on Dumas’ *The Lady of the Camellias* (*La dame aux*

*camélias*) (Williams, *Notebooks* 386) for Anna Magnani to star in. But Williams refused, later accepting, though not really enthusiastically, to work on *Senso*, based on a novella by Camillo Boito. Williams' contribution to the script, that critics of the times either neglected or harshly criticized – and that Viscontian scholarship has only recently really fathomed (Giori 117-166) – has mainly to do with some scenes between the two leading characters, Countess Livia and her lover Franz.

Visconti went to see Ten and Frank in their Roman home in via Firenze in June 1953 and asked the playwright to work on the dialogues for *Senso*, but the latter refused, for reasons of bad health, immediately passing the task to Paul Bowles (Williams, *Notebooks* 483). When Visconti read what Bowles had written, he declared himself unsatisfied and asked Williams to revise what his friend had produced. Vacationing in Positano in August, Ten accepted, writing to Cheryl Crawford that he was working at a “wop version of *Gone With the Wind*” (2006 496). If detailed evidence of Williams' and Bowles' authorship has been presented by recent criticism (which is of interest more for Viscontian scholars), what seems of greater import for the evaluation of the transcultural dynamics in which the American playwright was involved is his overall influence on such an artist as Luchino Visconti. According to Giori, “Williams' [dramatic] works should indeed be considered among the primary sources for the melodramatic aesthetics of *Senso*” (124), for instance in the choice of making Livia's lover Franz younger than her (Remigio, her lover in the novella, is her age), and in the ambiguity that the Italian director added to the literary character of the Austrian lieutenant (164), played in the film by Farley Granger, a role originally meant to be given to Marlon Brando, whom the world at the time knew as Stanley Kowalski. The forsaken “older” lady and the young, handsome but cold and cheating lover, not only in their dialogues – written by three different hands, i.e. Tennessee Williams, Paul Bowles and Maria St. Just (134) – but also in their melodramatic identity, were pure Williams material even before the American playwright was called to write their lines.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that the author of this review, drama critic and RAI television manager Carlo Terron was the victim of some sort of outing a few years later. In the pages of right-wing weekly *Specchio* of January 1959, a campaign was published against what was considered the dissolute and sinful behaviour of powerful television managers. Under a picture of Terron a caption read "Used to be a Fascist, after the War Terron turned into a man of the left . . . . The absence of female encounters in his life is notorious, though he is a good catch. On the contrary, he has launched some young male actors." In another picture was "his protégé, young Paolo Carlini" (Spalti 20)

# QUESTURA DI ROMA

UFFICIO SPETTACOLI

N.0587-A.4.B. di Prot.

Roma, il 22 gennaio 1949

Oggetto: Fonogramma in copia.

→ ON. PRESIDENZA DEL CONSIGLIO DEI MINISTRI  
Servizio Revisione Teatrale  
ON. MINISTERO DELL'INTERNO  
Direzione Generale della P.S.

|                             |             |
|-----------------------------|-------------|
| PRESIDENZA CONSIG. MINISTRI |             |
| Ufficio Censura Teatrale    |             |
| N. Prot.                    | 1858/3594   |
| N. Fog.                     | 25 GEN 1949 |
| Roma                        |             |

ROMA

Ieri sera, al Teatro Eliseo è stata rappresentata la commedia dal titolo "UN TRAM CHE SI CHIAMA DESIDERIO" della Compagnia Luchino Visconti.

All'atto del controllo del copione, debitamente vistato col n°3594 dell'II/I/1949, per l'osservanza dei tagli e modifiche apportate da codesto Ufficio di Revisione, il Funzionario di P.S., comandato di servizio, ha notato che la Compagnia non si era attenuta ai tagli di cui alle pagine 2 C e 3 C, riguardanti le seguenti frasi "togli il culo dal tavolo" e "ti brucia la sedia sotto il culo", adducendo di essere stata autorizzata, direttamente sul posto, dal Dr. LUDOVISI addetto all'Ufficio di Revisione Teatrale presso la Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri.

Infatti, il Funzionario di P.S. ne aveva conferma dal Dr. Ludovisi stesso, presente in sala.

Poichè, però, il pubblico ha manifestato una certa disapprovazione, specie per la seconda battuta, da questa sera la Compagnia si atterrà scrupolosamente a quanto disposto dal competente Ufficio di Revisione.

IL QUESTORE  
(Saverio *Elito*)

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