TENNESSEE WILLIAMS IN SPAIN: THE EARLY YEARS (1945-1957)

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The incorporation of Tennessee Williams into mainstream theatrical praxis in Spain certainly took longer than it did in many other European countries. Williams gained a reputation for himself with The Glass Menagerie as early as 1944-1945; and notwithstanding lesser works, between 1945 and 1957 he would give to the stage A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), Summer and Smoke (1948), The Rose Tattoo (1951), Camino Real (1953), Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955) and Orpheus Descending (1957). By 1957, Williams’ career had reached its summit in terms of his popularity and artistic achievement, and he was famous worldwide. But in Spain, in 1957, Tennessee Williams was still virtually unknown.

The purpose of this essay is to examine the reasons why and the means by which he was steadily brought to the attention of Spanish audiences, critics and theatre practitioners, as well as to determine what difficulties he encountered along the path to his becoming a regular fixture in Spanish theatrical life. Although that process involved the mounting of various productions by theatre companies and dogged directors intent upon modernizing the Spanish stage, the role of the print media in promoting Williams’ work should not be underestimated. While the impact of these small theatre groups on the development of mid-twentieth century Spanish theatre has generally been acknowledged in the secondary literature, that of printed commentary in newspapers and journals has seldom received attention.

Spanish theatre of the mid- to late-1940s was far from capable of welcoming such a strong theatrical personality as Williams’. Almost
exclusively made up of national plays of questionable quality, Spanish theatre was geared to the tastes of the upper middle classes, who were after all the only ones who could afford tickets.\(^1\) The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) had ravaged the country, and the rise of Franco to power coinciding with the outbreak of World War II had certainly not improved the situation. Politics and theatre cannot be tackled separately in Spain.

After the insurgent forces of Generalísimo Franco had finally defeated the republican government in 1939 and established a dictatorship, complete isolationism was quickly and inevitably enforced. The country was stricken with poverty, hunger and devastation and thus could not be of much use to the axis powers; consequently, the democratic nations, which had turned their backs on Spain, ignored what was happening in order to concentrate on the menacing German or Italian regimes. As it was, Franco tried to capitalize on this isolationism and pretended that it best served maintaining the purity and superiority of Spain. Unlike other countries, Catholicism was still very powerful in Spain, with the Spanish people living under what was, to all intents and purposes, a theocratic rule. The once vast Spanish empire had vanished (the two remaining colonies, Cuba and Puerto Rico, were handed over to the United States after the Spanish-American War of 1898), and the Spanish population, however destitute, now tried to cling desperately as a nation to the shadow of what it once was, with its religious faith supplying the link to its “glorious” past. Inevitably this led many Spaniards to view everything foreign with distrust, often with outright hostility.

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\(^1\) Throughout the opening paragraphs of this article, I am offering conclusions resulting from my own research into this period of the history of American drama in Spain. The article is thus part of a much more ambitious project. Some of its results (specifically in reference to Arthur Miller and Edward Albee) can be consulted in my book *España y el teatro de Arthur Miller* (Alcalá de Henares: Instituto Franklin, 2010). A much shorter version in English exists as “Some Notes About Arthur Miller’s Drama in Francoist Spain: Towards a European History of Miller”, *Journal of American Studies*, XXXIX/3 (December 2005), 485-509. See also my articles “Historia del zoo, de Edward Albee, y el teatro independiente español”, *Atlantis*, XIX/2 (December 1997), 65-76; “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?: Edward Albee, en España, y su posterior influencia en el teatro de Alfonso Paso”, *REDEN: Revista española de estudios norteamericanos*, XV-XVI (December 1998), 111-22; and “Trayectoria española del teatro de Edward Albee”, *Anales de la literatura española contemporánea*, XXIV/3 (1999), 453-71.