The American theatre on the London stage: Tennessee Williams at the Royal Court Theatre[1]

O teatro estadunidense nos palcos de Londres: Tennessee Williams no Royal Court Theatre

Jonathan Renan da Silva Souza[2]

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Abstract
This article aims at disseminating knowledge to experts and researchers interested in American theatre of the presence of plays from the United States at the internationally recognised Royal Court Theatre in London, one of the birthplaces of modern British drama, especially for revealing new authors. It focuses on plays by Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), one of the playwrights among the distinct group of American playwrights whose work was taken to the stage of the legendary theatre. The historiographic character of this text will be intertwined with brief analyses of the relation between content and form of Tennessee's plays which possibly attracted the attention of the artistic directors of the Royal Court and made possible a relevant exchange between the American and the modern British theatre in the post-war period.
Keywords: English theatre; North American theatre; Subsidised theatre; George Devine; Modern British drama.

Resumo
Este artigo busca dar notícia aos estudiosos e interessados em teatro estadunidense sobre a presença de peças de autores dos Estados Unidos no palco do Royal Court Theatre de Londres, um dos nascedouros do teatro moderno britânico e de importância reconhecida internacionalmente, sobretudo em revelar novos autores. Em foco estará a montagem de peças de Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), um dos dramaturgos encenados dentre o seleto grupo de estadunidenses cuja obra foi levada à cena no lendário teatro. O caráter historiográfico deste texto será entremeado com breves análises da relação entre conteúdo e forma das peças de Tennessee que possivelmente suscitaram interesse dos diretores artísticos do Royal Court e possibilitaram um relevante intercâmbio entre o teatro estadunidense e o teatro moderno britânico no período pós-guerra.
Palavras-chave: Teatro inglês; Teatro estadunidense; Teatro subsidiado; George Devine; Teatro moderno britânico.

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[2] PhD Candidate at the Postgraduate Program of Linguistic and Literary Studies in English (Department of Modern Languages – DLM/FFLCH – University of São Paulo (USP)) and Visiting PhD Student at Royal Holloway University of London (2023/2024). My main research focuses on the post-War period and dramatists such as Arnold Wesker, Caryl Churchill, Edward Bond, Harold Pinter, Joan Littlewood, Joe Orton, John Arden, John McGrath, John Osborne, Sarah Kane, Shelagh Delaney and Tom Stoppard. Email: jonathan.renan.souza@usp.br.

Introduction

Considered the birthplace of the modern theatre in Britain, the Royal Court Theatre has established itself as one of the most renowned British theatrical institutions in the post-World War II period. The ideas of George Devine (1910-1966), important director who had previously tried to develop an artistic repertoire theatre at the Old Vic, inspired by European models, became attainable with the foundation of the English Stage Company. Its home would be the Royal Court Theatre in Sloane Square, London, where, according to the hegemonic historiography, the modern British theatre was inaugurated in 1956 with John Osborne's play *Look back in anger*.

The theatre in which George Bernard Shaw had worked was to be leased exactly in the mid-1950s, enabling Devine's plans of producing plays of high artistic quality, in the European tradition fashion, particularly Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble in East Germany (cf. Rebellato, 1999, p. 153-154). One of the aims was to distance from the production mode of the commercial theatre, especially the West End,[3] which prioritised the financial revenues of producers, dramatists and stars. In Devine's words, "The twin mottoes of the London Theatre are: long run or sudden death" (Roberts, 1999, p. 14).

Devine, who was the English Stage Company's (ESC) first artistic director and considered by some the father of modern British drama, envisaged establishing a theatre with a more defined artistic line – eventually considered too much politically engaged – which would give voice to new dramatists, primarily the British ones: "The policy of the Royal Court will be to encourage the living drama by providing a theatre where contemporary playwrights may express themselves more freely and frequently than is possible under commercial conditions" (Roberts, 1999, p. 8). One of the highlights of this ideal was the partnership with one of the Royal Court's first big names, the then unknown John Osborne, which guaranteed an inaugural and crucial success, the legendary production of *Look back in anger* in 1956.

Several difficulties, however, would promptly get in the way of such a proposal, mainly financial ones, as the production of new names did not necessarily result in box office success, something that the Court's Council saw with concern given the ambitious

[3] Considered the "British Broadway", the West End is an area in central London (Theatreland) with several big theatres, predominantly occupied by Broadway musicals. In the British theatrical historiography, the term refers not only to its geographical location but mostly to the types of plays produced, in general musicals or commercial plays with a star cast.

impetus of Devine and his associates, who intended to give London's stage a new breath of air from the 1950s onwards. And yet, the project did not comprise just unknown authors; on the contrary, for Devine, Tony Richardson, Oscar Lewenstein, William ("Bill") Gaskill – his closest associates – it would include important foreign names which were still less known in London (for instance, the long-awaited tour of the Berliner Ensemble to London happened exactly in 1956, presenting Brecht to the London stage at the Palace Theatre, following a highly successful tour in Paris).

Among these dramatists, Brecht was one of Devine's most appreciated, as well as Beckett (whose premiere in London took place in 1955 directed by Peter Hall). Indeed, for Devine, both dramatists indicated the future of modern theatre. Throughout the seasons, other plays of what came to be known as the Theatre of Absurd were produced at the Royal Court, such as Ionesco, but also Sartre. Praising what was being done in the European continent did not prevent the ESC, however, from producing plays of other nationalities, some of them paradigmatic names from the American theatre, which, in that moment, exported a vigorous playwrighting beyond the Broadway musicals and Hollywood films which were widely popular in Britain.

American dramatists

One of the first dramatists to be considered for production by the ESC was Arthur Miller, among other important names as Brecht, Osborne and Séan O'Casey. In the mid-1950s, Miller's major plays were by that time known and celebrated. For George Devine and others in the Council, as well as Oscar Lewenstein, *The crucible* (1953) had a great potential for appearing in the first season of the theatre, as indeed happened in 1956, having in the cast Alan Bates (who was in the original production of *Look back in anger*) and Joan Plowright, great dame of the theatre and also future wife of Laurence Olivier. Despite a certain disagreement with Miller over Devine's decision of cutting a character, the production was well received and favoured a certain relation between Miller and the British theatre of that moment. For Council members, however, the play – and various others at the time – represented a financial risk that they were less likely to take:

> Esdaile, who had imaged a theatre offering lengthy runs and lucrative transfers of star vehicle shows, was hostile to Devine's expensive production of Miller's great political allegory, and joined Duncan in opposition to his

> programming and politics: 'The whole thing is costing too much and we are getting a ten shilling article for which we are paying a fiver… I told you that these fellows can ruin anybody if they are not held tightly on the bit' (Little; McLaughlin, 2012, p. 23).

In spite of that, *A view from the bridge* premiered at the West End in 1956, directed by Peter Brook, what seems to indicate how strongly Miller's work was received at the British stage. His presence in London to attend the premiere of his plays, nonetheless, caused unpleasant situations in his thus far troubled relation with the authorities, especially the HUAC, the House Un-American Activities Committee. Conversely, it enabled a fruitful exchange exactly in a moment in which the experiences of the Royal Court initiated the modern British theatre. Philip Roberts (1999) recalls when Miller attended a performance of Osborne's *Look back in anger* with Marilyn Monroe and Laurence Olivier, and mentioned the play's value, despite his initial negative opinion.

In the analysis of Dominic Shellard (2000) on the beginnings of the modern British drama, much more can be credited to the relation between the British theatre, which indeed started to focus more on its own voices, and what was being done outside Britain. In his view, the contact with what was happening in the United States, such as Elia Kazan's and Lee Strasberg's works with the Stanislavski method, as well as the musicals, added up to other exchanges which in his perspective were crucial to the "evolution" of British theatre:

> The opening up after the war of the London stage to creative contact with New York and Paris, for example, was an event every bit of important [sic] for the evolution of twentieth-century English drama as the advent of Osborne, Wesker and the other 'new wave' dramatists. […] Exposure to new types of plays by Sartre, Genet, Anouilh and Ionesco on the one hand, and Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams on the other, provided a creative impulse that could not have been envisaged during the war and contact with new dramatic theories such as French existentialist drama, and, later, Brecht's Epic Theatre, led a number of playwrights to applied [sic] these varied approaches to their own work (Shellard, 2000, p. 34).

Another unique experience of contact occurred in the 1969 season. The 1968 May movements in France and United States, the counterculture and the fight against the Vietnam War found various artistic expressions which made space for the revolt and protest, especially by the youth, in several contexts engaged in macro causes as the fall of the system and specific agendas, such as the Vietnam War, all of which also resonated in London at the time (cf. Donnelly, 2005, p. 145-150). In theatre, some important groups stood

out with an engaged practice involving plays, pageants or interventions in demonstrations and events, aiming at aligning dramatic art to the political disputes of that period.

One of these American groups was the Bread and Puppet Theater, conceived by the German émigré Peter Schumann. From his artistic and political practice on the streets of New York, Schumann founded the company, which in 1974 established itself in the state of Vermont, where it is still located.[4] The Bread and Puppet shows would be famous for their gigantic puppets and outdoors shows which would take the audience via an allegoric route to reflect on urgent themes, such as the functioning of capitalism and the use of wars to maintain it, in that moment with an emphasis on the Vietnam War (cf. Ilari, 2010).

In 1969, the Bread and Puppet was in Britain, collaborating with Ed Berman and his company, the Inter-Action, which later would produce John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy's plays when few producers would agree to do that, considering their radical political positions. David Weinberg (2015) briefly relates the Bread and Puppet's tour, which brought to the Royal Court one of their most important shows, *The cry of the people for meat*. A ccording to the Victoria and Albert Museum, the three shows of the 1969 season were presented to the British audience, including *Theatre of war* and *Blue raven beauty*. The museum summarises part of the repercussion among the critics regarding the shows that featured the impressive puppets on the Royal Court's stage:

> *The Times*, 25 June 1969 published Irving Wardle's review of *The Cry of the People for Meat* in which he noted: 'The puppets are the glory of this company. Even when they are motionless, these grotesque figures, some 20 feet high, are insistent presences, malevolently or seraphically questioning the value of the scurrying human life around them.' […] the critic Harold Hobson wrote in *The Sunday Times*, 26th June, that: 'Peter Schumann's production has the vitality, the noise, and the primeval appeal of the fairground: his players merge and grow into the enormous puppets they bring on to the stage', describing the evening as: 'an experience as impressive as it is unique' (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2010).

For the Royal Court, to receive one of the most acknowledged American companies in the experimental and political circuit (in Britain sometimes called "fringe") certainly reaffirmed its commitment to what was being done in the theatrical avant-garde, demonstrating a very acute political engagement. Such a position is revealed as controversial in the backstage, since, from the start, Council members were disturbed by the "left-wing" plays, such as John Arden's, who did not have the reputation of a Brecht which could justify financial and image risks, i.e., of "marking" the Royal Court as a political

[4] Their website: https://breadandpuppet.org.

theatre. At the end of the 1960s, under the artistic director William Gaskill, who had precisely produced Arden and Brecht, but also Edward Bond and later on David Hare, it comes as no surprise that the Bread and Puppet was to be received at the Royal Court, where dramatists as John McGrath had worked – McGrath was the founder of the 7:84 alternative theatre company, which had some similarities with Bread and Puppet and other 1960/1970s groups.

John Elsom (1976) highlights with some reservations that the contact of the British theatre with Bread and Puppet and other American groups (*America hurrah*, by Jean-Claude van Itallie was also produced at the Royal Court in that moment, in 1967) made it possible to evaluate what was being done locally in relation to the interventionist theatre and agitprop:

> The visits of the La Mama company in 1967, of Chaikin's Open Theatre in 1967 and the Bread and Puppet Company in 1969 showed London audiences a forceful theatre launching general attacks against a range of American phenomena (its ad-mass outlooks, its neocolonialism), beside which British fringe companies seemed somewhat parochial (Elsom, 1976, p. 152).

Focusing on internal problems (the "parochial" character) is something that to a certain extent these British groups certainly did, something that did not prevent them from pointing out bigger issues. They surely were encouraged not only by what was being done in the United States and performed in Britain in this moment of social and artistic movement but also by their own history of internal activism of artists such as Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl, as well as the political dramatists connected to the Royal Court (especially Arden, Wesker and Bond in this first moment) and other plays of social criticism (including Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams).

Other American dramatists would also have their plays produced by the ESC. Among the most prominent, Sam Shepard stands out: *La turista*, in 1969; *The unseen hand*, in 1973; *Geography of a horse dreamer*, *Tooth of crime* and *Action*, all in 1974; *Curse of the starving class*, in 1977; *Seduced*, in 1980; *The war in heaven* (written in collaboration with Joseph Chaikin) and *A lie of the mind*, both in 1987 and *Simpatico*, in 1995.[5] Other plays eventually appeared: the adaptation of William Faulkner's novel *Requiem for a nun*, in 1957; *The American dream* and *The death of Bessie Smith*, by Edward Albee, both in 1961; *Edmond*, in 1985, *Prairie du chien* and *The shawl*, in 1986, *Oleanna*, in 1993, and *The old neighborhood*, in 1998, all by David Mamet.

[5]Sam Shepard was probably Royal Court's most staged American dramatist. The relation between his work and the theatre's seems to be further investigated, something which extrapolates the scope of this article.

Besides the initial interest of Devine in bringing Arthur Miller to the British audience and the future partnership with Sam Shepard, as can be seen by the number of productions, it is remarkable that some of the big names of the American theatre of the twentieth century who wrote mostly during the 1930s were absent, including Clifford Odets (albeit *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) was one of the initial plays of Ewan MacColl and Joan Littlewood's work), Thornton Wilder, Lillian Hellman and Eugene O'Neill, whose work dates from the beginning of the century. Considering one of the main objectives of Devine, incentivising new dramatists, something which endures up to today at the Royal Court, such an absence seems to be justified, since some of the most celebrated plays by these dramatists were not considered contemporary anymore by the end of the 1950s.

On the other hand, in comparison with the number of European dramatists produced – from Pirandello to Chekhov, including Sartre, Ionesco, Beckett and some Germans such as Frank Wedekind, Georg Büchner and Brecht – the absence of more American names emphasised how much Devine's and the other associate directors' eyes were focused on the internal context and to what was being performed more frequently in Europe. The plays of non-British dramatists were not necessarily the most recent ones, but were not rarely aligned to the modern and more experimental theatre which was sought, especially at the ESC's beginnings. In that moment, the Sunday nights performances (called *Sunday nights without décor*) and later the Theatre Upstairs (today the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs), had exactly this intent: experimenting with less commercially appealing plays, something, at first, distant from the tremendous success of playwrights such as Arthur Miller, Edward Albee or Tennessee Williams.

Tennessee Williams

Among the British, Tennessee Williams was not an unknown author and since the 1940s his plays attracted the audience and critics' attention. The production of *A streetcar named Desire* directed by Laurence Olivier in 1949 with Vivien Leigh as Blanche had raised notable controversy. David Weinberg highlights that these plays – others by Tennessee, but also those of Arthur Miller – were considered too provocative, and *A streetcar...* received criticism emphasising its "indecency". For the British moral standards of the time, besides the more traditional and conservative theatre reviewing, such provocation could still face a certain persecution from the censorship.

In the post-War period, the plays to be produced in Britain were still submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's office, which, since the 18th century, censored the scripts, authorising or not their production, demanding cuts or even preventing their performance in conventional theatres, that is, eventually some of them would be performed in private clubs, which could circumvent the censorship but limited the audience's access. Weinberg briefly comments this issue regarding Tennessee's work:

> Williams resisted the imposition of any cuts and fought to preserve the integrity of his play. He warned that he would refuse to yield to any censorship imposed by the Lord Chamberlain. […] There was even an effort to have the play withdrawn because of elements considered obscene. While the first London production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* had a good run and acquainted the British public with Tennessee Williams's most famous work it did not do much at the time to enhance his reputation with British theatre critics who generally failed to recognise Williams as a playwright of the first order (Weinberg, 2015, p. 44).

Cat on a hot tin roof also suffered impositions from the office. Steve Nicholson (2000, p. 45) mentions that "Over 40 specific cuts were made to Tennessee Williams's play, but more than 20 remained even after the ban on homosexual references was lifted". Even the version submitted in 1967 received 26 cuts. For the examiners, as reported by Nicholson (2000, p. 45-46):

> The play undoubtedly qualifies as 'serious and sincere'. Twisted as is much of Mr Williams's psychology and disagreeable and disgusting as are his oversized characters… […] In my opinion, time has not made all that difference. The obscenities noted in the original remain obscenities… I still believe him to be pathologically biased and to possess an inflated sense of his own importance.

The examiner's comments, albeit granting a certain recognition to the play's artistic quality, reinforce the conservative and moralist view of the Establishment which maintained the theatre censorship in Britain via the Lord Chamberlain's office up to 1968 when the Theatres Act was finally approved in Parliament and obtained the monarch's consent. This only happened after great pressure from the theatre community, especially through the dramatists connected to the Royal Court such as Edward Bond and John Osborne (with the controversial plays *Saved* and *A patriot for me*, respectively).

At the Royal Court, four Tennessee Williams plays were considered in the initial period of George Devine's artistic directorship. Neville Blond, one of the Council members, had contacted the Music Corporation of America to obtain the rights of *Cat on a hot tin roof*, a

recent play, which in Tennessee's opinion needed a bigger theatre than the Royal Court. The play ultimately premiered in 1958 at the Comedy Theatre, today The Harold Pinter Theatre, thus already in the West End, directed by Peter Hall – who at that time had already directed in London Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning becomes Electra* and Tennessee Williams' *Camino Real*.

Another frustrated attempt to bring Tennessee Williams to the Royal Court took place when Devine started to rehearse *The milk train doesn't stop here any more* in 1965 (premiered in the US in 1962).[6] Devine's fragile health eventually prevented the rehearsals to continue, the project was cancelled, and he took a leave of three months. In the following year, the 55-year-old director would die. The play is still rarely performed and, when it is, not unfrequently is fulminated by the critics. It inaugurates Tennessee's third phase of more formal experimentation (with expressions of the Japanese and absurdist theatres, for instance), also castigated by the critics, who not occasionally detracted his work.

These two examples, besides expressing failures in trying to produce Tennessee's plays at the Royal Court, exemplify the material and production issues behind the scenes related to the decision-making on the artistic and financial prospects of the English Stage Company. The search of a play as successful and of undeniable importance and quality as *Cat on a hot tin roof* demonstrates the Council's drive in relation to the theatre as a financial enterprise, i.e., the selection of plays should also be subjected to box-office circumstances, ensuring the financial return to the involved parts, despite George Devine himself receiving a small salary, as reported by Philip Roberts.

Conversely, Devine wanted plays which matched his agenda for the Royal Court: contemporary plays, of undisputable artistic value and, whenever possible, written by British dramatists. Not rarely plays of social criticism were also produced. Thus, it comes as no surprise that a Tennessee play diverting from the ideal of the dramatist celebrated by the media and cinema was chosen. Hence, this other Tennessee demanded a more acute formal diligence, providing contact with a piece of work less dictated by box-office-hit seeking, yielded by the star casting or by selecting plays already celebrated on Broadway or adapted for the cinema.

In this context, the power dispute tended to favour Devine and his associates' work approach which, among the four plays, managed to get two of them produced. Considering that the Royal Court in the 1950s had less than 500 seats, the production of plays in a theatre that would be considered off-Broadway corroborates Devine's ideal of promoting non-

[6]The play was recently (2022) produced at the Charing Cross Theatre, West End, directed by Robert Chevara.

conventional and experimental plays. In a theatre considered small, the Council's disposition to support such financially controversial decisions seems justified, even though they were not accepted without turmoil in the backstage and attempts to put more traditional, classics or more commercially appealing plays on the bill.

The first of Tennessee's plays to be taken to the Royal Court was *Orpheus descending*, directed in 1959 by Tony Richardson, who at the time was interested in American culture. In this season, other important foreign dramatists were produced as Georg Büchner, Pirandello, O'Casey and Ibsen, besides new British ones such as N. F. Simpson, Arnold Wesker and John Arden. In addition to being a filmmaker, Tony Richardson was one of the closest collaborators of George Devine, having directed many productions at the Royal Court, including the premiere of *Look back in anger* and *The entertainer* by John Osborne, the latter starring Laurence Olivier. Moreover, Richardson had directed *The crucible* at the Royal Court and a short season Broadway production of *The milk train doesn't stop here any more* which, as referred, never happened at the Sloane Square theatre.

Orpheus descending is the result of Tennessee's rewriting of *Battle of angels* (1939), his fifth long play and the first to be produced professionally, according to the author's foreword. The new version, almost completely rewritten, premiered in New York in 1957 at the Martin Beck Theatre, directed by Harold Clurman. In the play, Carol is a rebel, horrifying a small community of conservative and religious people. The arrival of Val, a handsome and attractive young man, causes a certain unrest and fascination, especially in Lady, who owns a confectionery and whose husband is fairly ill. Val is recruited to work for Lady and ends up persecuted by the community for a supposed affair with the sheriff's wife. In the end, his relationship with Lady is revealed and she is murdered by her husband while pregnant.

Presenting a social panorama of a small community in the South of the United States (19 characters), it is possible to see in a microcosm the functioning of much broader archaic and moralistic social structures which are displayed through the authorities and power figures. Religion and conservatism come to life through the gossipers and their constant social monitoring; state and private violence figure in the command exerted by the sheriff and the gun possessed by Jabe, Lady's husband. Formally, the play is structured in three acts, in which the use of techniques from the tragic genre can be verified (such as the Prologue which reveals to the audience the tragedy of Lady, whose father was murdered with the involvement of her husband). The tragedy is also indicated in the title, which

references the myth of Orpheus, with which Val is associated, who in various moments sing songs accompanied by his guitar.

In his essay for *The Cambridge companion to Tennessee Williams*, John M. Clum (1999) emphasizes the discussion on sexuality regarding this play (something expected considering his expertise), particularly in relation to Tennessee's universe of plays. If, on the one hand, the questionings arising from such a perspective amplify the debate on sexuality, gender and its representations, on the other, they do not seem to have a dialogue with which, in my view, was mostly sought for in the Royal Court production, i.e., its social criticism. For instance, Clum interrogates:

> Why the move from the homoerotics of the stories to the heterosexuality of *O rpheus Descending*? One could make a case that this is Williams presenting what he thinks his audience will tolerate, but there were references to homosexuality all through the highly successful *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. […] The world of *Orpheus Descending*, like that of *Suddenly Last Summer*, is one of powerful women and sexually ambivalent men (Clum, 1999, p. 139-140).

The theoretical presentation to British readers proposes important reflections in relation to the representation of sexual freedom, gender roles (as with the character of Carol) and how homosexuality is portrayed in this and other plays by Tennessee Williams. As for the interest of the ESC, Richardson and Devine, it is possible to suppose that the background issues, revealing social and economic structures, may have played a decisive role in selecting this play. Despite its tragic features, thus more "universalising," this play strongly sets its foot on internal American issues, some of them not even mentioned here, such as the racial one, or those more explicitly economic, considering that Val/Orpheus is a tramp with no prospects who encounters Lady, a future proprietor, as for when the death of her husband would occur.

The role played by Carol and Val, who divert from the social norms, seems to be one of the elements that may have been crucial for the selecting of this Tennessee play for the Royal Court. Val, as an allegory of art or of a libertarian impulse, exerts fascination on the community members who see themselves terrified by his rebelliousness and beauty, as well as defied by his attraction to break from the morality's limits dictated by the social and religious traditional structures. One of the aspects of his tragic end seems to stem precisely from this kind of contact with Vee, the sheriff's wife. The device of an intruder who steps inside the moral and physical space of a community – which is notable in the theatrical historiography in Gerhart Hauptmann (*Before the sun rises* (1889), *The weavers* (1892) cf.

Szondi, 1987, p. 37-40) – amalgamates with the tragedy form, emphasizing the tension between forces of maintenance of the established social and ideological system and forces of subversion and erosion of this same structure. It can be argued that such a tension may also be seen in the British society of that time, i.e., between the monarchic form of government and the modern post-War world and in the microsphere of the theatre between the authors from the war period in the West End and the emerging voices in the Royal Court.

The other Tennessee Williams play produced by the ESC was *Period of adjustment*, directed by Roger Graef in 1962. Written in 1957, it had premiered on Broadway in 1960 and adapted to the cinema in 1962 (same year of the Royal Court production) by the same American director, George Roy Hill. As reported by Philip Roberts, from the diverse season – which included Shakespeare, Edward Bond, Osborne, Brecht and Beckett – only *Period of adjustment* and *Chips with everything* by the British Arnold Wesker obtained financial success (*Period...* obtained 66% of box office from a total of 29 performances), thus transferred to the West End (*Period...* was transferred to the huge Wyndham's Theatre).

Also structured in three acts, the play features two friends who fought in the war in Korea, one recently married, George, and the other recently divorced, Ralph. The consequences of the war are present in the tremors of George, possibly a post-traumatic stress, and in spite of that he wants to have his friend as a partner in a cattle ranch business. George's wife, Isabel, is a young woman from the countryside who is disillusioned with her husband, having abandoned her profession as a nurse to marry. Without having consummated the marriage, she travels with him to meet Ralph, whose own marriage is in crisis. In the third act, Ralph's mother- and father-in-law, the ones who motivated his engagement to Dorothea, who had "psychological problems" in the past, show up to collect their daughter's belongings. And yet, the couple ends up reconciliating.

Apparently more traditional than *Orpheus...* in terms of structure, *Period of adjustment* seems to devise a certain type of well-made American playwrighting: a well-structured play, with a more accommodating ending, portraying life in a typical town in the countryside of the United States. Even so, it does not dispense with moments of criticism, skilfully inserted into the vigorous dialogue cemented on themes and tropes familiar to the American audience. The search of the two friends for the "American Dream" as "deserving" heroes for their fighting in the wars and yet suffering its outcomes is under the spotlight here, as well as the ideal of a patriarchal society in which the man builds his own successful individual "empire". The "deviations" in the path towards it, as George's shakings and

Ralph's "effeminate" son, seem to attest, however, the discrepancy between what was promised to the war heroes and the limits imposed by the circumstances to the accomplishment of the self-made man. Among these limits, the impossibility of George receiving a compensation for his condition after the war is highlighted, as reported by Isabel:

> […] he had gone in Barnes instead of the Veterans Hospital because in the Veterans Hospital they couldn't discover any physical cause of this tremor and he thought they just said there wasn't any physical cause in order to avoid having to pay him a physical disability – compensation! […] Of course at Barnes he got the same diagnosis, or lack of diagnosis, that he'd gotten at the Vets Hospital in Korea and Texas and elsewhere, no physical bases for the tremor, perfect physical health, suggested – psychiatry to him! (Williams, 1961, p. 14).

Also noteworthy is the timid reference, though fundamental, not only to the previous wars, but especially to the one in Korea. This war, despite the conflicts involving South and North, escalated to deadlier dimensions involving world powers which had interests in the region, such as China, the Soviet Union and the US, and sent troops to the Korean territory in one of the moments of military power struggle during the Cold War. In the play, the two men are war heroes with sequelae from the "seventy-two air missions in Korea" (Williams, 1976, p. 76). Notwithstanding, in the broader picture, the outcome of these wars was far bloodier and anything but heroic, as pointed by the British historian Eric Hobsbawm (1995, p. 434):

> The Korean War of 1950-53, whose dead have been estimated at between three and four million (in a country of thirty million) (Halliday & Cumings, 1988, pp. 200-1) and the thirty years of Vietnam wars (1945-1975) were much the largest, and the only ones in which American forces themselves were directly engaged on a large scale. In each about fifty thousand American were killed.

As for theatrical reputation, perhaps it can attract one's curiosity or inspire surprise the fact that "another" Tennessee Williams was produced by the ESC. And not the one of Broadway's roaring success or Hollywood's films with stellar casts. These plays, *Orpheus descending* and *Period of adjustment*, despite containing elements and themes very much present in other Tennessee Williams's plays, display other facets of the dramatist, who, for a certain portion of the critics, was from this moment onwards in decadence. The size of the Royal Court and the specificity of their dramaturgical project could also sustain the view that this was not the "great Tennessee" anymore. The social criticism and a certain

experiment with the form – notably in *Orpheus* – seem to justify the appeal that these works had for the Royal Court and which enabled the encounter, via non-obvious plays, between one of the greatest American playwrights and an inescapable reference in the modern British drama.

For the British theatrical historiography, particularly on the Royal Court, approaching what I have herein emphasised seems to point out to the difficulties faced by a theatre with a more established dramaturgical project, aimed at revealing new authors and fostering the modern British theatre, and yet had considered investing in the production of successful foreign plays to survive. In the case of Tennessee, such an attempt, almost strategic, enabled making the audience acquainted with less commercial works which aligned with social criticism stances (including towards the very British moralism and bellicism) and formal challenges, which came to differentiate the Royal Court from the other post-war theatres, such as the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company. Thus, it could be argued that in a sense the Royal Court Theatre was in fact revealing a new author: the Tennessee Williams quite often rejected by the critics and the one whose plays were lesser known among the American and the British audiences.

Final considerations

Despite sharing a language and a previous relationship as metropolis and colony, Britain and the US had profoundly distinct developments in their dramaturgical and theatrical production history. There was, nonetheless, various similarities: the production mode functioning of the West End, in several aspects, is similar to Broadway's. Before the establishment of a public subsidy system in mid-20th century (via Arts Council and still in operation), most of the theatre in Britain was determined by the box-office revenues (which retroactively implied the writing of more commercial plays), *modus operandi* still predominant in the American context.

The interest amongst the Royal Court's Council members – as well the big producers of the West End – for successful plays from the US was justified on these same premises: the possibility of a reasonable financial return and, at the actors and directors' level, the opportunity of playing memorable roles (frequently given to the already known theatre stars) and of directing works of acknowledged potential and international appraisal, respectively. For the ESC's directors, however, the interest in works that could have a

dialogue with the ongoing dramaturgical project led at times to selecting plays of less financial potential, and yet which resonated formal challenges and themes important for the type of renovation in force in the British theatre at that moment, in which the Royal Court played an unquestionable central role.

With this article, it could be verified that there is a lack of academic studies which deal with the relations between Tennessee Williams and the British theatre – despite for example Michael Paller's essay on the relation between Tennessee and Harold Pinter, published in *Tennessee Williams and Europe* (2014). The same can be said for dramatists of Tennessee's calibre and other American groups, such as the Bread and Puppet. Despite its limitations, this paper attempted to fill this gap in relation to one of the most important American dramatists and the interest in Britain for his work, being Tennessee one of the very few American playwrights produced in decades by the Royal Court Theatre, a unique stage in modern British theatre. It is expected that this work may perhaps encourage other historiographic and analytical-interpretative studies on the relationships of these dramaturgies and theatres, contemplating important figures such as Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, herein briefly covered, the Bread and Puppet company and Sam Shepard.

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