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The first Mexican production of a Tennessee Williams's play took place on December 4, 1948, in Mexico City. *Un Tranvía Llamado Deseo* (A Streetcar Named Desire) was performed nine times, from Saturday, December 4th, through Sunday, December 12th, at the Palacio de Bellas Artes, almost one year after the Broadway premiere of the play on December 3, 1947. A semiprofessional, experimental theatre company, the Teatro de la Reforma (named for a major street

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in Mexico City), under the direction of Japanese-born Seki Sano, made Mexican theatre history with this premiere. Reflecting on the significance of Seki's work, Roni Unger states that the "turning point for [Mexican] theater was 1948, the year in which the eminent director Seki Sano began his Teatro de la Reforma group" (Poesía en voz alta, 4). Vane C. Dalton explained why and how Seki and his Reforma troupe changed Mexican theatre, and Mexican culture as well.

The conspicuous success of A Streetcar Named Desire must be accepted as a highly important event in our dramatic annals, for it has served to acquaint a great many Mexican spectators with certain aspects of the contemporary stage in the United States but mainly because it has introduced and firmly established on our boards a new and capable dramatic company which seems to be on the right track. ("Current Attractions: Drama," 39)

That company propelled itself to fame by performing Tennessee Williams's world famous play. Even Suárez del Solar, one of the most unsympathetic reviewers of Seki's production, admitted it was "a very commendable effort in the first place to allow Mexicans to know a play considered among the best in the last 25 years" ("Trotamundos de espectáculos"). Seki chose well for his company's auspicious debut. No one in Mexico would have anticipated the results. Writing a column entitled "What Is Happening in Our Theatres" for El Universal (24 June 1949), the critic Palmeta pointed out that the Teatro de la Reforma's success presented "an unusual case, since there has never been seen in Mexico City such power as this group of amateurs affords us."

Perhaps the most significant appreciation of the Streetcar achievement in Mexico came from one of the country's greatest cultural heroes, Diego Rivera, revered painter, stage designer, Marxist thinker, and spokesperson for the arts. Rivera thought Sano's Streetcar was so extraordinary that he was one of its padrinos and wrote the following endorsement that was included in the program:

A Streetcar Named Desire has given us a piece of excellent theater with great clarity, giving us profound meaning and intensity. We are indebted here in Mexico to the author of this magnificent play and to the persistence and heroic effort of Seki Sano and his collaborators. He is a great director and working with admirable actors, full of enthusiasm and talent yet free of pretensions. He has achieved through his production the creation of something of great esthetic value and profound social application. ("Opiniones personales")

The Mexican press rightfully devoted space to prestigious members of Sano's audience, all of whom lavished praise on the
director, cast, and crew. A constellation of Mexican luminaries attended a gala celebration on the last night of *Streetcar*’s run in December. Among the most distinguished was famous actress Delores del Rio, then in her late twenties, who acclaimed Sano’s work and regretted that she was not able to work with him because of a previous engagement in Buenos Aires (Rocha, 10 December 1948). Also in attendance at one of the early productions of *Streetcar* was Margo Jones, the “famous North American director and worthy to be included with the best directors on Broadway” (Rocha, 8 December 1948). A longtime friend of Williams, Jones directed the world premiere of *Summer and Smoke* at her Dallas Theatre in July of 1947.

Sano’s group of “apprentice actors,” as Vázquez Herrerías rather smugly referred to them, achieved even greater heights thanks to Williams’s *Streetcar*. Six months after their short-lived premiere of *Streetcar*, the Teatro de la Reforma staged a second, seemingly unlimited run of the play—from May 4, 1949, until August 1, 1949—moving to the Teatro Esperanza Iris where Seki and his group of disciples offered *Streetcar* more than one hundred times. The fledgling company even read the play on Mexican radio “in the apartment of novelist Julia Guzmán, the mother of Rita Macedo” (Huerta, 11 December 1948).

With *Streetcar* Seki Sano changed the direction of theatre in Mexico; he also creatively interpreted Williams’s masterpiece to accommodate his Hispanic audiences. The story of Seki’s success with *Streetcar* has not been chronicled, even though it is significant in Mexican cultural history and in the production history and cultural influence of Williams’s most important work.

The Teatro de la Reforma received help from many friends, Mexican and American alike, in performing *Streetcar*. Dorsey Gassaway Fisher, the first secretary and chief of public relations at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, secured permission, with J. R. Woodul acting as intermediary, from Tennessee Williams for the group to present the play, but not more than ten times (Dalton, “Current Attractions: A *Streetcar Named Desire*”). Earlier attempts to stage *Streetcar* in Mexico were unproductive given the enormous success the play had on Broadway (Rocha, 8 December 1948). Moreover, the “author himself had before prohibited Sano, the Japanese director, from doing *Streetcar* for fear that in Spanish the play would raise clouds of indignation because of its bold, provocative themes and its undeniably realistic style.” But Williams relented, and no other company could have made the debut (Mori, “Escenario y platea”).

Ads in *El Nacional* (6, 31 May, 30 June, and 31 July 1949)
proclaimed the importance of *Streetcar* in America and profusely thanked Williams for his generosity. In fact, the ad in the Sunday, December 12th edition of the paper informed readers that “the gallantry of the author Tennessee Williams is responsible for the exclusive commission to Teatro de la Reforma to present the play to Mexico.” Sano was also enormously assisted by the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, a prestigious institution supporting the arts and led by Mexico’s most illustrious composer Carlos Chávez.

In May of 1949, Sano’s company was able to move to the larger Teatro Esperanza Iris for their second run of *Streetcar* because of the goodwill and help of Mexico’s most famous comedian Cantinflas (Mario Moreno), who gave up his rights to the lease on the theatre so that Seki could use it (Solana, 25 June 1949). Rodolfo Usigli, one of Mexico’s most esteemed dramatists, assisted Seki’s troupe by “overseeing the translation” of the play into Spanish. In point of fact, however, Usigli did not really get involved in the translation but lent the authority of his name to the project so that “the play could be registered in the Mexican Union of Authors” (Magaña Esquivel, "Un estreno").

The spirit of cross-cultural cooperation extended to the translation of Williams’s play into Spanish. It was done by Lillian Oppenheim, who played Stella; Reynaldo Rivera, who took the part of Mitch; and Seki himself. This first translation of a Williams’s play into Mexican Spanish met with contradictory assessments. The venerable theatre critic Armando de María y Campos exulted over it: “The translation by Lillian Oppenheim, Reynaldo Rivera, and Seki is perfect, an ideal of what is contained in English—it employs slang from New Orleans usefully to give strength to the characteristic linguistic expressions of the environment it invokes—the admirable theatrical creativity of Tennessee Williams” (11 December 1948). Similarly, Avecilla praised the effort of these three translators, whom he singled out for their honesty and effectiveness.

However, other Mexican critics severely faulted Oppenheim, Reynaldo, and Seki’s attempts. In a blistering attack on the *Streetcar* dialogue, Suárez de Solar, in *Novedades* (14 December 1948), protested that it all “sounds false in Spanish.” He faulted the translators for leaving out a lot of things—exclamations, for example; their work, he believed, was stilted and lost the spontaneity the play possessed. Suárez del Solar also pointed to the exaggerated acting as a direct result of the translation and concluded that it was not possible to put the play on in Mexico City because of the flawed translation. Showing his nationalism, Suárez concluded: “Because some of the actors were foreigners, they were made to speak unnaturally slowly in order to prevent difficulties in the language,
but the result is ridiculous since they have attempted to put on a play in Spanish but have chosen actors who cannot master the language.” Monterde echoed Suárez del Solar’s sentiments, maintaining that the “translators have decided to substitute slang phrases for local Mexican words. Such a procedure, even though it may appear viable, leads to foolishness since the environment and the origin of the characters do not seem to go together; all of the scenes occur in a French suburb of New Orleans” (“Obras e interpretaciones”). Evidently, Sano’s desire to retain some of Williams’s slang expressions for local color met with strenuous nationalistic opposition.

There was no denying that the driving force behind the first Mexican Streetcar was its director Seki Sano. As a number of critics observed, “Sano brought Tennessee Williams to life among us”; ads for his production jubilantly emphasized that Streetcar was “presented by Seki Sano.” Palmeta stressed that it was Sano himself who was responsible for “sustaining the representation of Williams’s play in Mexico” (26 July 1949). Sano can also be credited with a number of other firsts in the Mexican theatre. He was responsible for “introducing Stanislavski’s and Meyerhold’s techniques to Mexico” (Unger, Poesía en voz alta, 4) and for revolutionizing the way actors rehearsed and delivered their lines on the Mexican stage. Before Sano, actors read their lines from prompt cards and had just a few days to rehearse (Kolin and Arana, “An Interview,” 164). Among Sano’s admirers perhaps none surpassed Ceferino Avecilla who burst with pride at the director’s accomplishments:

None of the big achievers of the theater from today’s world surpass the magnificent Seki Sano, and very few can match him. In this class of directors I must cite Max Reinhardt, the Austrian, who was the first revolutionary to realize the scenic dimension of the stage, and Gaston Baty, who signifies the maturity in France of what was initiated by Max Reinhardt in Germany. (“Un Tranvia Llamado Deseo,” Parte 2)

Miguel Guardia adopted the Japanese Sano as “the strongest director from Mexico, capable enough to shake not only the circle of Mexican intellectuals but also the great and notorious of the theatre with an extraordinary audacity, ability, and intelligence” (quoted in Carbonell and Mier, “Una crónica,” 45).

The second run of Streetcar, beginning in May 1949, was only possible because of Sano’s great skill as a director. Sano was not hesitant to make this point to theatregoers at the Teatro Esperanza Iris, and he included in the playbill the following excerpt from a letter, dated January 10, 1949, he received from Audrey Wood, Williams’s agent:
Norman Rothschild [a personal friend of Williams's] came to see me bringing all the photographs from your production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in Mexico. His enthusiasm was so great that when he finished talking, it seemed that your production was even better than the original. Personally, I am disposed to allow the repetition of staging this play in Mexico, provided that the cast continues to be as good as it was at the premiere, and that you continue to be the director.

No doubt Wood was also echoing the sentiments of Tennessee Williams who was quoted as saying “My play was represented better in Mexico than here in New York” (quoted in de Cervantes, “Foros y artistas”).

In 1948, Sano had already devoted ten years of his life to theatre in Mexico. He had emigrated to Mexico from Japan in 1939 and quickly became involved in productions sponsored by the Mexican Union of Electricians (Dalton, “Current Attractions: *A Streetcar Named Desire*”). He made his debut in Mexico directing the theatrical part of the ballet “La Coronela” by the world renowned Mexican composer Silvestre Revueltas (María y Campos, 11 December 1948), in which his wife played a role. Under the patronage of the electricians’ union, Sano organized a school of actors in 1941 and mounted *The Hanging Rebellion*, a dramatization of the novel by B. Traven. In 1946, Sano directed a memorable production—for some it was seminal—of John Steinbeck’s *La Fuerza Bruta (The Brutal Force)* at the Hotel del Prado, which firmly established him as a forceful and talented director.

Eight months before *Streetcar* premiered in December of 1948, Sano founded the Teatro de la Reforma with Alberto Galán and Luz Alba. In fact, Sano had once been a member of Konstantin Stanislavski’s staff in Moscow, and, according to Luis de Cervantes, A. Epstein in *Pravda* had correctly hailed Sano as “the fourth director of theatre in the world” (“Foros y artistas”). As a follower of Stanislavski, Sano was devoted to incorporating the Russian’s acting methodology into the representation of classic dramatic art as well as to those written by contemporary Mexican authors. For Sano the emphasis of any production had to be centered in the actor. He wrote:

> A brilliant job of directing that does not succeed in making the actors prominent will not become a rhythmical proposition or lead to a carefully presented play. What is negative for the actor is negative for the entire theatre. Consequently, the actor’s extensive understanding of the creative process constitutes the foundation of the author’s work and the critic’s job in assessing it. (Quoted in Carbonell and Mier, “Una crónica,” 46)

It was in the production of *Streetcar* that Sano’s disciples from
the School of the Reforma made their first public appearance and through their work illustrated his own ideas on acting. Figure 1 shows Sano with the cast of the first Mexican *Streetcar*. Sano used the psychological techniques of Stanislavski to get his actors in *Streetcar* intimately involved in their roles. His intense devotion to the actor's craft produced a rich harvest. His students, or disciples, from the School of the Reforma included Ricardo Montalbán, Josie Pérez, Miroslava, Ana Mérida, Victor Junco, Lillian Oppenheim, Reynaldo Rivera, Wolf Ruvinskis, and of course María Douglas. The last four were the stars of Sano's *Streetcar*.

It is one of the ironies of theatre history that a Japanese director premiered an American play and transformed the state of the Mexican theatre in doing so. For his efforts Sano was hailed as a genius, an innovator of immense proportion. Luis de Cervantes insisted that Sano's "success in theatre techniques allows him to have a prominent place among the directors of the world theatre, thus adding to Mexico's pride in having such a theatre and such a director" ("Foros y artistas"). "Seki Sano deserves praise; to do theatre and at the same time to adapt a modern technique is both stimulating and beautiful" (Moriscout, "Confetti"). An ad in *El Universal* for the *Streetcar* production confidently claimed: "The best play. The best acting. The best director" (31 July 1949). Helia D'Acosta affirmed that Sano's troupe outdid any other theatre group in Mexico ("Que, Quien, Cuando").

Sano won the Mexican Theatre Critics' Director of the Year Award for his work on *Streetcar* and launched an illustrious career in Mexican theatre for himself and for his disciples. While his aim was to praise Sano, C. Vázquez Herrerías nonetheless used Sano to whip native Mexican directors into shame. Quoting those who boast "We do not have any other director but Seki Sano," Vázquez added: "And with this sentiment remains indelibly engraved Sano's knowledge of what theatre is; and so now you know—Ernesto Vilches, Andrés Soley and many others—study with this subject of the Rising Sun so that posterity can qualify you as directors as well" (4 December 1948, 3). Rafael Estrada believed it was difficult for Mexicans to do *Streetcar* anyway, but still conceded that "though I must forsake our artistic environment I must call Seki Sano an ingeniously good director" (16 December 1948, 11.)

But Sano also ran afoul of some in the Mexican theatre establishment for his innovations and, as an undercurrent of their bitterness, for his ethnic background. A few times Sano was disparagingly called "the Japanese director" in the reviews. Sano himself made no secret of the low esteem in which he held the Mexican theatre and its practitioners. He announced that "producing a play in Mexico is like
Figure 1. Director, Seki Sano, and the cast and staff of the first Mexican production of "A Streetcar Named Desire." Photo courtesy of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
swimming in a sea of mud” (“Mexican Streetcar...”). There is no doubt that Sano earned many enemies for his outspoken criticism of Mexico’s commercial theatre—its frivolity, its lack of artistic goals (Magaña Esquivel, “Un estreno”)—and at one point he was even threatened with deportation for his views (Kolin and Arana, “An Interview,” 165).

Sano’s premiere of A Streetcar Named Desire at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in December of 1948 not only brought Tennessee Williams and his work before the Mexican audience; it also changed them and Mexican theatre. Before Seki Sano’s daring experiment, the Mexican theatre was, by many accounts, impoverished. Mexican audiences saw little good theatre, and until Sano “there were sparse showings of...foreign plays” (Unger, Poesia en voz alta, 4). On the occasion of the second run of Streetcar in May of 1949, Vane C. Dalton, with lacerating precision, identified the condition Mexican audiences found themselves in during the month of June.

Our dramatic impresarios, with their eyes solely fixed on the box office, seek financial success by catering to the semi-educated mass audience, myopically failing to take into account the more cultured minority which in this city of over two million is nevertheless sufficiently large to support opera, ballet and symphony concerts, as well as the best stocked book stores in all Latin America. The kind of theatre these commercial impresarios conduct is quite appropriate for a public whose literary and artistic needs are satisfied by the comic strip magazines. (“Current Attractions: Drama,” 38)

With these “impresarios” pandering to an audience’s basest tastes, the “cultured minority” were indeed neglected. The cry of that “cultured minority” was heard again and again, through the critics paying tribute to Sano’s gift to Mexican theatregoers. Solana pleaded: “With so very few works that are available for us to see in our theatre now, it would be a shame to let this opportunity get by us” (14 May 1949, 78). More boldly, Huerta announced that “this is the theatre that people have been asking for. Do they really want a Mexican theatre? Well, then, a theatre deserving New York audiences has been given to the Mexican public” (8 December 1948). No higher comparison could be given to the “cultured minority” to encourage them to patronize Sano’s Reforma group. Living up to that high expectation, Sano, according to Palmeta (26 July 1949), did not sacrifice Tennessee Williams’s art to appeal to Mexican audiences: “Sano did not abandon artistic qualities...to convince the public of the magnitude of his group’s labor or the intrinsic values of its art.”

Though the critics raved about Sano’s gift to Mexican audiences, these same critics frequently chastised “the cultured minority” for not supporting Sano and his theatre more. Though a number of
reviewers pointed out that the December premiere drew “overflow audiences” (Dalton, “Current Attractions: Drama,” 38), evidently some of the most powerful members of the “cultured minority” stayed away. In an impassioned tone, Huerta asked:

Why don’t they go, then? Why do certain people refuse to go to see what they have been asking for, when what’s being offered is what they asked for? Seki Sano and his group have not enjoyed, admittedly, great publicity. But very few people, even the ones who usually go to the theater, have frequented the theatre during the three consecutive days, that is from Saturday the 4th to Monday the 6th of December 1948, that Seki Sano has staged A Streetcar Named Desire by the young North American dramatist Tennessee Williams. But people have not wanted to attend the theatre, not even in respectable numbers. Yes, the seats have good admission prices. In fact, it is known that tickets have been graciously given away. (8 December 1948)

Estrada similarly demanded that more powerful attention needed to be paid to Sano and his company. “This group of youth deserves greater and broader official support to strengthen their immediate purpose, since Sano’s effort, without continuity, will lose momentum; our theatre needs to be more consistent.” Estrada added that it “befalls responsible people to demonstrate their support effectively and thus to create a renovated public interest in behalf of the Mexican theatre” (16 December 1948, 4, 11).

Things had changed for the better with the second run of Streetcar in May 1949. The move to the larger Teatro Esperanza Iris and the favorable publicity that Sano had received from the December Streetcar plus his concurrent production of La Doma de la Fiera (Shakespeare’s Taming of the Shrew) no doubt brought the support of influential patrons to the Reforma group. There were no more charges that people were staying away. In fact, Sano had succeeded in educating Mexican theatregoers. According to Ceferino Avecilla, “The audiences, which by fortune now come in large numbers, receive this play and its actors with favorable applause, which is very seldom seen in a play like this” (“Reposición”). Sano did succeed in bringing the “middle class into the theatre” (Unger, Poesía en voz alta, 4).

Two different yet complementary responses from the critics demonstrate the powerful effect Sano’s Streetcar had on Mexican audiences. Speaking of the December premiere, Vane Dalton observed seven months later when he was reviewing the “second run” in June 1949

that each of the nine performances was attended by an overflow audience revived in me the conviction that dramatic art is not dead in Mexico, that it has been merely neglected, or allowed to fall into decay, for the simple
reason that most of those who are still striving to keep it alive are woefully unprepared for the task, lacking experience, intelligence and ability. ("Current Attractions: Drama," 38-39)

He then concluded that “I felt that [the play] not only deserved but actually required a much longer run, for in this way it would exert a salubrious influence on our sadly destitute dramatic stage.” Reviewing Sano’s work (25 June 1949), Solana ironically found it necessary to express impatience to have *Streetcar* depart from the Teatro Esperanza Iris so that other good plays, following the Sano precedent, could replace it: “There are so few places to go; it is intolerable to have to wait two months for another work to premiere…today the Sano company is assured that people would come back as soon as he announced that the company will do another play, whether that work is a contemporary one or a classic; and there is no doubt that its performance would be consistent with the artistic level reached through *Streetcar*.”

Overall, the Mexican critics were zealously enthusiastic about Williams’s *Streetcar*. Frequently, reviewers compared Williams to Eugene O’Neill (María y Campos, 4 December 1948, 3). They were clearly aware of *Streetcar*’s immense popularity in the United States and invariably referred to Williams’s winning the Pulitzer Prize and Drama Critics Award for *Streetcar*, a fact also reinforced by the many ads for the play in the Mexican press that mentioned these honors as well.

The most extensive discussions and appreciation of Williams’s *Streetcar* came from Armando de María y Campos who devoted four very full columns in *Novedades* to the play. María y Campos enthusiastically judged *Streetcar* to be a “masterpiece,” one of “the biggest successes in the theatre” (9 December 1948). Already familiar with Williams’s work, María y Campos contrasted *Streetcar* with Williams’s earlier play *The Glass Menagerie*. *Streetcar* “sets up with major profundity what Williams already sketched out in *Glass Menagerie*,” though “what was bittersweet in *Menagerie* is frankly bitter in *Streetcar*” (7 December 1948). In a later review (9 December 1948), he additionally commented that “the serene equilibrium of *Glass Menagerie* is not found in *Streetcar*, but *Streetcar* has achieved a dramatic intensity and psychological depth …it is one of the most beautiful achievements of North American theatre since O’Neill.”

Praise for *Streetcar* was contagious. Among the other Mexican critics, Efrain Huerta pronounced that *Streetcar* “was the most important theatrical play ever staged in Mexico” (8 December 1948). Suárez del Solar was equally effusive, claiming that *Streetcar* was “best regarded as among the best plays of the last 25 years” (“Trotamundos de espectáculos”). Moriscout said *Streetcar* was a “play of eighteen
carats" ("Confetti"). For some reviewers such as Antonio Magaña Esquivel Streetcar was "a drama of customs and popular characters, very much in tone with most modern literature" ("Un estreno"). Avecilla labeled Streetcar "the best of the present dramas coming from New York" and praised "the swiftness of action and dialogue" ("Un Tranvía Llamado Deseo," Parte 1). Manuel Altolaguirre, however, dismissed Streetcar as "melodrama" ("Un Tranvía Llamado Deseo").

Following the New York critics, those in Mexico lauded Streetcar as a highly realistic piece of theatre. The anonymous reviewer in Ultimas Noticias extolled Williams's "super realism which gave the impression of being more real than reality itself" and asserted that such dramatic realism "was superior to the older theatrical presentations that preceded it" ("El teatro moderno"). María y Campos also focused positively on Williams's "brutal tenderness and poetic realism" which "flows from the dialogue and emanates from the action itself" (9 December 1948).

Some Mexican reviewers, however, branded Williams's realism as "rude," "brutal," even "offensive." Altolaguirre, for example, objected to Williams's "offensive realism," complaining that the ways the actors dressed and behaved "were largely unpleasant to me." He did not want to see the "brutal gestures of a man hitting his wife after a game of poker, filthy with rum and obscene phrases on his lips" ("Un Tranvía Llamado Deseo"). Yet articles in Hoy playfully reported on the scandal associated with Stanley Kowalski wearing boxer shorts and Blanche and Stella parading on stage in intimate apparel. Yet many other critics pointed to Streetcar's poetry and acclaimed the two sides of the Streetcar experience—the lyrical and the cruel. Palmeta gladly recommended "the structural realism of the play in which Tennessee Williams painted the low life of the people of a suburb in New Orleans with eloquent crudeness" (24 June 1949). Unqualified praise for Williams's lyricism amid the harsher realities of the play also came from Huerta who labeled Streetcar "one of the most beautiful plays accomplished through contemporary dramatic art" (8 December 1948).

As critics did at the other national premieres of Streetcar in the late 1940s, a few Mexican reviewers negatively associated Williams's realism in Streetcar with North American vices. Monterde found that the "vigorous realism was natural to North America, the Costumbrista [folkloric and/or regional] theatre." Then after linking Williams with Ibsen and O'Neill, Monterde observed, "Given its sexual problems, Streetcar contains indubitable reminiscences of Desire under the Elms and Anna Christie. This realism is at times brutal, though the audience only listens to the screams without actually seeing how some men beat their wives. This is doubtless a conces-
sion to classic taste made for the U.S. public....Sometimes, too, Williams employs expressions which in another language and gathering place are too strong” (“Obras e interpretaciones”). Magaña Esquivel also associated Williams’s style with North American art: “Streetcar is a play which corresponds to the realistic style preferred in North America” (“Un estreno”).

Yet a perceptive minority of Mexican critics took the larger, international view of Williams’s play instead of disparagingly linking Streetcar to North American crude tastes and customs. Chief among them was Arturo Mori who readily admitted that while Streetcar “does not take in through its form the Latin spirit,” it does nonetheless dispel the idea that North American literature deals with more than “gangsters and cattle rustlers.” Mori found much to commend in Streetcar which “surprises us for its truthfulness and humanity”; its “ending takes us back to Greek tragedy in fact and redeems in part the unholiness of the previous scenes” (“Escenario y platea”). Avecilla similarly proclaimed that Williams captured the “sincerity and gifted expressions of life” and that he “understood in Streetcar the same naked reality and made it accessible to audiences.” Furthermore, for Avecilla Streetcar “brings out the miracle of a new emotion which is not from the theatre but from life itself. The play is really dis-theatrical, which makes it unique” (“Reposición”). Armando de María y Campos wisely identified what was becoming a seminal theme in Williams’s canon: Streetcar “represents the eternal conflict of fantasy against surrounding reality” (11 December 1948).

But perhaps the most enlightened, global view of Streetcar came from Rafael Estrada: “A Streetcar Named Desire made its premiere in Mexico showing us the grief of longing and frustration, stripping away the faults of a decadent and sterile society that can be transplanted anytime to any place in the world, choosing its victims among the anonymous and nebulous masses of the poor, the repressed; the owners of exclusive privilege get drunk and play poker in order to hide their mediocrity in the warm solitude of naked bodies” (16 December 1948, 4).

Few Mexican critics offered assessments about the structure of Williams’s masterpiece, but one of them, Magaña Esquivel, was especially farsighted in discussing Williams’s “cinematographic techniques,” one of Williams’s most distinctive hallmarks for many contemporary critics (Boxill, Tennessee Williams, 31, 66-69; Adler, A Streetcar Named Desire, 9). Magaña Esquivel’s following words are rich in consequences for an understanding of Williams’s plot:

Streetcar offers much in the way of retrospective stories and allusions to the drama that serves as its antecedent. In reality, the play responds to a line of former dramatic events which constitute the authentic conflict of
Blanche DuBois (María Douglas); her failed marriage with her female-like husband is left behind and we witness only the psychological effects on her. The audience comes to know her drama because she tells it during a hysterical fit, and because her sister, Stella Kowalski (Lillian Oppenheim), also repeats it in order to justify her older sister’s subsequent imprudence. But, what a drama has been lost with that theme! What’s left in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is the repercussion of the psychic conflict of Blanche, from which Tennessee Williams constructs a valuable dramatic piece but not one that is so elaborate as the great drama of the decadent woman, defrauded in her marriage. ("Un estreno")

With characteristic zeal, María y Campos dissected the source of Williams’s poetic fictions and praised "the magnificent object lesson" of his poetry. But he came down hard on the way in which Williams resolved the conflict. He argued that sending Blanche to the madhouse was a "forced solution, one that is too easy to resolve the conflict." He concluded that Williams’s "characters are so twisted that the author finds himself trapped in his own nets....Blanche, who arrived on the *Streetcar* of desire, ought to leave on it as well" (9 December 1948).

In the final analysis, what influence did the Mexican *Streetcar* have in the late 1940s and early 1950s? Retrospectively, Dolores Carbonell and Luis Mier offer the following informed judgment about the relationship of the play to Mexican theatre and culture.

Some factions of society who were watching the 1940s die were scandalized. Topics such as alcoholism, drug addiction, homosexuality, sexual frenzy, and madness, which the North American author of *Streetcar* opened so plainly in his drama, announced to the theatrical community that they were to the point of beginning the 1950s through the accomplishments of personalities like Salvador Novo and, then, by the protagonists of the Poesía en Voz Alta and the Teatro de la Universidad. ("Una crónica," 50)

The story of *Streetcar* is the story of Blanche DuBois. That part in the Mexican premiere was taken by María Douglas, a young actress at the beginning of her career. For Luis de Cervantes, María Douglas was "incomparable; she cannot be surpassed" ("Foros y artistas"). Arturo Mori hailed her as "an exceptional dramatic actress, a talent of the highest magnitude" and chastised those critics who wrongly searched outside their country "for what they already have at home in María Douglas and have not yet been able to discover" ("Foro y melodía"). For her work in Sano’s production she can be described as Mexico’s Jessica Tandy. As Sano’s protégé, María Douglas "was the best shaped fruit—product—of Seki Sano’s art" (Magaña Esquivel, "Un estreno"). Felix Héroe in *Ultima Hora* acknowledged Sano’s great contribution to Douglas’s success:

Thanks to Seki Sano, this phenomenal show is truly amazing, and his miracle
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as the director is that he succeeded in transforming María Douglas, an actress with stellar elocution. She is now able to go into glory because of her role as Blanche DuBois. Her performance here will nullify the work of actresses for many years to come in the Mexican theatre. Her work...is simply astonishing. (quoted in the Teatro Esperanza Iris program)

As Carbonell and Mier put it years later, “Coming out of Sano’s school was an actress whose tragic and premature death made her into a legend—María Douglas, the first Blanche DuBois of the Mexican theatre” (“Una crónica,” 52). In fact, twenty years after Sano’s premiere of Streetcar at the Bellas Artes, Beatriz Sheridan, “considered one of Mexico’s finest actresses” (Unger, Poesía en voz alta, 145), played the second Mexican Blanche DuBois, and seemed to fulfill Héroë’s prophecy stated above. When Sheridan was asked “What were you most afraid of when they offered you the role?” she replied: “I was afraid of the fans that María Douglas had” (quoted in Carbonell and Mier, “Una crónica,” 49–50). Ironically, Douglas received no award for her presentation of Blanche in 1948–49.

Blanche DuBois was not María Douglas’s first role. She had acted in Los emperos de una casa (The Engagement of a House) by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and directed by José Aceves and also in La ciudad muerta (Dead City) by D’Annunzio during the third and fourth seasons of the Proa Group. Douglas also played a happy, secure, young lady in Villarrutia’s El pobre Barba Azul (Poor Blue Beard) and appeared in El gesticulador by Rodolfo Usigli, who, as we saw, was one of the patrons of Sano’s production of Streetcar. But it was the role of Blanche that catapulted María Douglas into stardom. In fact, after seeing her as Blanche DuBois, C. Vázquez Herrera asserted that she was the “star of the modern theatre” (4 December 1948), and by the time she appeared in Sano’s third production of Streetcar—April 30, 1953—she was clearly an “established name” (Unger, Poesía en voz alta, 4). In an interview for Novedades (30 June 1949), Douglas was bitter about her experience leading up to Streetcar. Despite her work on stage and film (she made her film debut in Five Were Chosen), she felt neglected and declared, “Money is not important to me. What is important is all the years I had to wait to get to Streetcar” (Valdés, “María Douglas”).

Douglas was exactly right for her part in Streetcar. Avevilla found her acting “absolutely insurmountable” (“Reposición”); and Huerta proclaimed that Douglas’s work was “exceptional, especially since so many other stars are consecrated every 24 hours in the theatre” (8 December 1948). For Magaña Esquivel, Douglas was a “woman with a well-cut figure, a voice with a graceful tone, a pure dramatic temperament, and with ample experience in the theatre of realism” (“Un estreno”). Judging from the photos of María Douglas in figures 2 and 3, Magaña Esquivel’s praise was eminently justified. A number
of Mexican critics seized the fact that Douglas had blonde hair, highly suitable for a Blanche whose quest is to capture a man and whose dreaded antithesis is the upside down Mae West statue Mitch holds in scene 6. As Estrada pointed out, Blanche DuBois, "played by the blonde María Douglas, showed the audience the great dramatic flair this actress possesses and which she is still in the process of developing" (16 December 1948).
Even provisionally negative comments about Douglas or the play were transformed into positives by the critics when they assessed her performance. For example, Suárez del Solar maintained that Douglas was a “great actress in spite of everything else,” most notably a poor translation, forced dialogue, and “false Spanish” (“Trota-mundos de espectáculos”). Also turning to the language of the play, Monterde directed his readers toward another possible disparity between Blanche and María Douglas, but resolved it in favor of the Mexican actress: “María Douglas, who has earned a lot of respect with regard to her diction and has proven herself in many scenes
as a great actress, exceeds herself in the interpretation of Blanche by being younger than the role of the protagonist requires” (“Obras e interpretaciones”).

Maria Douglas may have been younger than Tandy, Uta Hagen, or Jessica Lange when they played the part of the aging Camille-like schoolteacher Blanche, but Douglas demonstrated why she was Sano’s star pupil through her interpretation of the role. The spine of the role for Sano was to present Blanche as an arrogant and flirtatious woman who because of her vulnerable obsessions also becomes a victim. Certainly Douglas captures the flirtatious side of Blanche in figure 2 and in figure 4 below. Underlying Sano’s interpretation of the character lay his Stanislavskian convictions imparted to Douglas that she become one with Blanche while still maintaining the credibility that the diversity of the role also demands.

Once more, Magaña Esquivel pinpointed and acclaimed Sano’s genius and Douglas’s talent in the following central perception of her acting: “Douglas’s transformation involves losing herself in the interpretation but not the absence of passion; her dominance and absolute manipulation of the role are her virtues as an actress and give her the power to convince us” (“Un estreno”). As Monterde put it, “The refined teacher of literature on a supposed vacation ends up by being transformed into a victim of obsessive psychosis” (“Obras e interpretaciones”). Under Sano’s direction, Douglas masterfully entered the play with pride and snobbery. As Estrada carefully noted, “Blanche DuBois, the proud character of Streetcar, tries to create ‘an immediate proximity to God,’ invoking the principles of the spirit and the intelligence with such fervor that at the end of the play she is driven to the chaos of madness, the madness of one’s own negation” (16 December 1948). Avecilla also commented on María Douglas’s “snobbism” in the part, though he attributed it to the translation Sano used (“Un Tranvía Llamado Deseo,” Parte 2). María y Campos beautifully summed up Blanche’s plight: “She was wounded fatally in puberty and attached herself to an old, decaying order. She is destroyed in her dreams and illusions, a victim of insanity” (7 December 1948).

And for Magaña Esquivel, Blanche is an alien in a “New Orleans where the inhabitants are primitives. Blanche, with her dreams on her back, comes to put this world in an imbalanced state, yet she does not achieve her goal but becomes her only victim. When Blanche fails and falls, Stanley’s New Orleans world returns to normalcy. It is a triumph of the natural order of existence represented by the brutal Stanley Kowalski” (“Un estreno”). (The way in which the two DuBois sisters react to their New Orleans environ-
ment is powerfully captured in figure 3.) Magaña Esquivel's interpretation foreshadows a Foucaultian reading of the play that sees Blanche as the disrupter, the one who brings turmoil and must be evicted for things to return to normal (Kleb, "Marginalia"). In short,
“As represented by María Douglas, Blanche, of mythical memory for us, is portrayed as the incarnation on stage of that defeated character who looks for refuge in prostitution, alcoholism, and fantasies and so succumbs as the victim of madness” (Carbonell and Mier, “Una crónica,” 49).

Perhaps Sano’s most innovative interpretation of Blanche, with Douglas acting the part to perfection, came in the last scene of the play—Blanche’s exit to the madhouse. Thanks to the fact that there was no great physical barrier separating actors from audience at either the Bellas Artes or Esperanza Iris theatres, Sano’s Blanche was able to walk right through the audience on her final journey to the madhouse. The most insightful assessment of Sano’s direction and Douglas’s acting came from Ceferino R. Avecilla writing for Excelsior Praising Sano, Avecilla pointed out:

The moment in which Sano reaches his absolute form is in the final scene where the martyred protagonist crosses between the spectators and follows, across the hall, the same road that they will take moments later, when the curtain falls, guillotined to time. In that final moment, what might appear to be a dramatic excess turns out to be not only justified but poignant.... Having the audience at her mercy, Douglas’s Blanche makes them tremble with such a lively emotion to have seen her pass so close to them; Douglas plays a Blanche at the point of collapse followed by the doctor and the nurse who are taking her to the sanatorium. (“Un Tranvia Llamado Deseo,” Parte 2)

Because of such staging and Douglas’s powerful performance as Blanche, Sano was able to detheatricalize Blanche’s tragic experience and show how the audience, too, could be both the onstage witnesses to her tragedy and an extension of it. There could be no doubt that “Blanche was the central character in the Mexican Streetcar” (Magaña Esquivel, “Un estreno”).

Douglas’s exit would seem far more provocative and intimate for audiences than would Vivien Leigh’s walking out of Stanley’s house in the 1951 film version of Streetcar or Ann-Margret’s being driven away toward the cathedral bells in John Erman’s 1983 teleplay. Very few of the Mexican critics had anything negative to say about Sano’s departure from the Broadway ending of Streetcar, except for the anonymous reviewer for El Informador (15 May 1949), who observed:

Whoever has seen the representation of A Streetcar Named Desire in New York, and afterwards in Buenos Aires, agrees that Seki Sano should not have changed the ending of Tennessee Williams’s play, because it reduces the dramatic quality so admirably established by the script. Nevertheless, altered or not, the ending of Streetcar constitutes one of the most strongly written theatrical pieces of our time. (“Un Tranvia Llamado Deseo”)

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If María Douglas was the soul of Sano's *Streetcar*, then Wolf Ruvinskis—as Stanley Kowalski—was its brawn. Another one of Sano's students, Ruvinskis made his acting debut as Kowalski in December 1948; he was one of Sano's apprentices. Like the American film star Robert Mitchum, Ruvinskis was a boxer-turned-actor. *Streetcar* launched Ruvinskis's career, and he went on to appear in more than 150 films and numerous stage plays in Mexico, Argentina, and Spain. In fact, he appeared as Stanley Kowalski again in Sano's 1953 revival as well as starring in a Spanish production of the play in 1961 (Kolin and Arana, "An Interview," 163). Armando de María y Campos mistakenly claimed that Ruvinskis "was of Polish origin" (11 December 1948); he was in fact born in Lithuania, emigrated to Argentina when he was just a couple of years old, and did not come to Mexico until he was in his late teens (Kolin and Arana, "An Interview," 161). Before he came under Sano's influence, Ruvinskis had numerous professional fights in Mexico, California, and Oregon in the late 1940s. Fortuitously, Wolf Ruvinskis literally bumped into Sano on the street outside the Teatro Bellas Artes in early 1948. Recognizing the prizefighter, Sano invited him inside the theatre where he met the distinguished Salvador Novo and then asked Wolf to stay and watch a rehearsal. From then on Wolf Ruvinskis was hooked on acting (Carbonell and Mier, "Una crónica," 55-56).

In appearance and temperament, Ruvinskis was a physical man, the prizefighter, as can easily be seen in figure 4. Sano captured the essence of Ruvinskis's feral strength and channeled it into art. From his Stanislavskian perspective, Sano got Ruvinskis's anger to work for the actor in interpreting Stanley Kowalski. By tapping into Ruvinskis's fiery temper the director got the aggressiveness he knew the role demanded. In an interview conducted almost forty years after his debut as Stanley Kowalski, Wolf Ruvinskis was asked by a reporter "How did Seki Sano succeed in transforming you into Stanley Kowalski?" Ruvinskis's reply is haunting:

> Within his impatience Sano had the gift of persistence to bring out a character. But Sano was also aggressive and had a tendency to attack. During those first rehearsals, I took all of his screaming; I bore it all. I accepted Sano's rage because I did like the role very much, and because I knew I was not doing it well. However, it made me furious to be screamed at in front of everybody, and on one occasion he told me: "Damn! Are you an actor?...You're filth!" I was so furious that I took up a chair with every intention of throwing it at Sano's head....It was too much. (quoted in Carbonell and Mier, "Una crónica," 44)  

Sano clearly got impressive results from his confrontational method of teaching acting. Estrada used the right metaphor when
he claimed of Ruvinskis: "Wolf jumped from the prizefighting ring to the stage floor as an actor with dignity" (16 December 1948). And Ceferino R. Avecilla at the Excelsior also praised Wolf Ruvinskis for successfully combining fighter and actor: "Wolf Ruvinskis was the protagonist who until now was simply a fighter. Well, this fighter talks, moves, and acts with ease, with simplicity and grace...incorporated into the life of the stage" ("Un Tranvia Llamado Deseo," Parte 2). But the highest praise for director Sano and actor-fighter Ruvinskis came from Magaña Esquivel at El Nacional:

The talents of Seki Sano are most ably, most notably expressed through his interpretation of the role of Stanley by Wolf Ruvinskis. Ruvinskis was not chosen by chance to play the part, and it would be hard to duplicate his efforts. There are frequent reminders of the athlete, the professional fighter in this particular interpretation by Ruvinskis, but to his credit there suddenly comes before us an actor with admirable control of voice and gesture. There still are in Ruvinskis the vicious habits of a man who has devoted himself wholly to exercising his muscles; but thanks to the efforts of Sano the director there is awakened in Ruvinskis the discipline for a text and the discipline necessary for him to play this character, and Ruvinskis discovers in his nature the resources of an actor. Wolf Ruvinskis is an exceptional case. ("Un estreno")

While Ruvinskis under Sano's direction received a great deal of well-deserved praise, some critics found the actor still too much the blunt, obvious pugilist. Monterde, for example, protested that "Wolf Ruvinskis sometimes stresses the features—the blatant traits—of the villain reminiscent of the melodrama in movies through his character governed by instincts" ("Obras e interpretaciones"). But by Streetcar's second run in May 1949 Ruvinskis's problems as an actor were under greater control. According to Luis de Cervantes,

Ruvinskis is now a much better actor. His voice is more toned, fitting very closely the role he plays without excess, an acting talent not easily accomplished. In each word, in each gesture, in each movement we can see Sano's accomplishments, too. Another actor better than Wolf Ruvinskis could not be found to play this role. ("Foros y artistas")

It is certain that, as Magaña Esquivel pointed out, Ruvinskis was not selected by chance. In him Sano saw the raw realism he wanted in the character of Stanley Kowalski and in the play in general. Violence, brutality, and explosiveness were the traits Sano wanted Stanley to exude, and it was these traits energizing Ruvinskis that Sano strove to bring out of the fighter-actor. Ruvinskis did not disappoint Sano, or the audience for that matter. Ruvinskis's Kowalski hit his wife, exploded into violence with his friends, and brimmed full of oaths. Appropriately for a Mexican Stanley Kowalski, Ruvinskis
drank rum, not bourbon or Jax beer. Wolf also portrayed a lecherous Stanley who, as can be seen in figures 2 and 4, took delight in sexual pleasure. But his Kowalski was also unrelentingly brutal in mocking Blanche. Above everything else, Ruvinskis's Stanley enjoyed torturing Blanche as the victim. In scene 2, for example, Ruvinskis outdid Brando in mocking his visiting sister-in-law by wearing Blanche’s tiara himself as he balanced her pearl ropes in one hand and an open jewelry box in the other. In commenting on Stanley’s “sordid environment” and “savage robustness,” María y Campos found that in Blanche’s brother-in-law “there is engendered the pain of death” for Blanche (9 December 1948).

Ruvinskis’s physique and macho image enabled him to play Kowalski to perfection. Note the bare-chested stance Ruvinskis takes in figure 4. Thanks to Ruvinskis’s animal magnetism, Sano’s Streetcar gave “the Mexico City bull-ring stiff competition” (“Mexican Streetcar...”). The Mexican audiences were infatuated with Ruvinskis and the women in those audiences swooned over his body. In a number of scenes Ruvinskis appears only in his underwear, shoes, and socks, especially when he holds Stella, who is a few steps above him, all to the rage or the pleasure of Mexican audiences. In his columns for Hoy, Rafael Solana recorded these observations from Mexico City town life: “The gentlemen, more tolerant and of greater spirit, have not ever thought to organize themselves against Ruvinskisism, nor do they pinch their wives when they applaud Wolf at the curtain call.” Solana went on to draw contrasts between what happened when an army of “salvation ladies” attacked Tongoleleism (Tongolele = the sexy femme fatale Yolanda Montes) which produced pictures of women dressed in scanty clothes. No such campaign of protest was mounted against Ruvinskis. In fact, concluded Solana, “The success of Tongolele was the intelligent mixture of pornography and music. Ruvinskis’s achievement was that he mixed pornography and literature. Both Tongolele and Ruvinskis made a fortune” (4 June 1949).

Comparisons between Wolf Ruvinskis and Marlon Brando, the first and for many the seminal Stanley Kowalski, are easy (and instructive) to make. Interestingly, both actors got their start with Streetcar; both were strongly influenced by director-mentors (Brando under Elia Kazan; Ruvinskis under Seki Sano) who were indebted to Stanislavskian techniques; and both Brando and Ruvinskis were close in age when they played Stanley. Brando was twenty-three; Ruvinskis was twenty-six. While their careers may have taken different paths, Brando’s and Ruvinskis’s started with extremely popular rides on Streetcar.

Beyond doubt Mexico was a favorite retreat for Tennessee
Williams. In the summer of 1940 he "escaped to Mexico for no more definite reason than it was as far from New York as I could get on the small funds at my disposal" ("Summer of Discovery," 1). While in Mexico City and then later in Acapulco, Williams had an epiphanic experience realizing that suicide was pointless because there was "meaning to life." While Williams, the "unregenerate romanticist," was in Acapulco, he discovered the seeds for his Night of the Iguana. Shortly after the Glass Menagerie catapulted Williams to success in 1946, he again went to Mexico and "had a marvelously happy time" (Devlin, Conversations with Tennessee Williams, 330). In fact, one of the Mexican critics of Sano's Streetcar even chronicled the events of this Tennessee Williams's Mexican holiday (María y Campos, 11 December 1948). For the rest of his life, Williams's trips to Mexico nourished his body and soul.

Mexico—as location and as metaphor—figures prominently in and through Williams's plays. There is, of course, the Mexican woman who sells flowers in Streetcar; the Gonzales family reside in Summer and Smoke; a Mexican-like ethos infuses Camino Real; and the hotel Casa Verde in Iguana is modeled directly after the hotel Williams stayed at in Acapulco in the summer of 1940. But perhaps one of the most significant connections between Tennessee Williams and Mexico occurred in December of 1948.

This Mexican production of A Streetcar Named Desire takes its proud place alongside the cavalcade of national premieres of Williams's masterpiece in the late 1940s. In 1948 the play opened in Brussels in October; Amsterdam in November; and Rome in December; and in March 1949 Streetcar was directed by Ingmar Bergman in Gothenburg, Sweden; and by Sir Laurence Olivier in London in October. Seki Sano's production of Streetcar was not the equal of these in terms of worldwide publicity; after all, London, Rome, and Brussels could offer audiences an enviable and long-standing tradition of theatrical achievements and technical resources. But perhaps no other national premiere of A Streetcar Named Desire so radically changed a country's theatre as Seki Sano's did.
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