

The Presence of American Drama in the Spanish Non-Professional Theatre of the 1950s

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Abstract:

American dramatists arrived in the Spanish theaters rather late, in the 1950s. In the beginning they were generally represented by non-professional theater groups (exemplified here by Dido Pequeño Teatro) that aimed to challenge the obsolete plays produced on the mainstream stages during Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975). Thanks to these companies that were an alternative to the commercial theaters, Spanish audiences gradually discovered many contemporary playwrights whose plays were being staged in the rest of Europe at the time. This article focuses on three American authors who were the first significant ones to be staged in Spain: Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and the American-born T.S. Eliot, and were chosen by Dido Pequeño Teatro. This paper briefly presents the three authors and their theater, together with their success in the United States, in order to then concentrate on their first appearance in Spain. We highlight four plays that were produced by one of the most significant Spanish non-professional groups of that era, Dido Pequeño Teatro. The article then takes a closer look at how the plays were received by the critics and the general audience and analyze their success.

Keywords: Spanish Non-Professional Theater; Eugene O'Neill; Tennessee Williams; T.S. Eliot; Dido Pequeño Teatro

1. Introduction

Spanish theater in the 1950s was highly conditioned by the dictatorship that lasted from 1939 to 1975. The regime changed the cultural life in the country by limiting the literary works that were allowed to be published or represented on the stage and the films that could be seen in the cinemas. Theaters were especially affected by the censorship, as the groups had to request permission to represent any kind of play and make changes in the text and the staging if the authorities demanded so. Consequently, the mainstream theaters decided to produce plays that were not controversial and were thus safe to perform, that is classical plays and light entertainment like comedies, musicals and revues. Therefore, the plays that the general public was able to see were rather obsolete, without any experimentation, and most importantly, the playwrights were always the same and rarely foreign.

The non-professional and amateur groups thus became indispensable for the progress of theater in Spain, as they fought the situation by introducing new dramatists and experimenting with genres to offer the theatergoers something new and exciting. Even though this meant they could do only one performance for each play –often with considerable changes in the playscript due to the censors’ demands– for a limited audience in a small space, they opted for these plays to diversify the theater repertoires of the big cities. The popularity of non-professional theater brought about a wide range of groups and terms, such as, *teatros de cámara y ensayo* (chamber theaters), experimental companies and university groups. There were slight differences between all these concepts, but they were not very significant as they all shared the same ideas regarding the repertoire and the desire to renew the theater in Spain. They generally did not have permanent members, but rather chose actors and directors for each production. Working in precarious conditions, they fought against the censorship and brought to Spain a number of contemporary foreign playwrights whose works were being staged in the rest of Europe at the time.

This article focuses on the American¹ playwrights that these non-professional groups brought to Madrid –and occasionally Barcelona– in the 1950s. As we will see, American playwrights were almost completely unknown before these groups discovered them and brought their plays to life on Spanish stages. In order to limit this investigation, the present paper focus on one of the most successful

1 The term American is used as synonymous with North American. Although we realize its appropriateness is debatable, we chose it for reasons of brevity and the fact that this term was used in the time period discussed in this article.

and prolific Spanish non-professional groups of the 1950s, Dido Pequeño Teatro. This company was extremely important for the theater in Spain during the dictatorship because it revolutionized the repertoire offered in the capital and introduced the Spanish theatergoers to numerous foreign dramatists. Among those were three great American authors, who gained more acknowledgement in Spain as a result of Dido's stagings: Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and T.S. Eliot. Although Dido staged some other American plays, this article will concentrate on these three authors due to the fact that they got the most attention of the press at the time and that they continued being staged by other non-professional and professional groups after Dido's productions.

Their theater and their success in the United States will be briefly presented in order to understand the background of the Spanish stagings. Then, the article will explain how they came to Spain and what was the censorship's first reaction to these works, before taking a look at the actual staging and the critical reception of the three.

2. Dido Pequeño Teatro

One of the most prolific and persistent non-professional groups in the middle of the 20th century was definitely Dido Pequeño Teatro, who fought against the censorship and improved the repertoires that were offered in the theaters in those decades. The company, directed by Josefina Sánchez Pedreño, started its journey on the Madrilenian stages in 1953 and remained active during more than a decade, which at the time was fairly uncommon for a non-professional group.

Dido was established to fight the general oppression in Spain, specifically visible in the theater and other cultural activities. Its director was, on the one hand, eager to create a space where young artists could express themselves and learn from the more experienced ones and, on the other hand to challenge the requirements of the censorship, which were drastically changing the types of plays that could be produced in Spain and their quality. Dido's goal was to offer the Madrilenian audiences a wider variety of foreign theater, together with some young unknown Spanish playwrights, including Lauro Olmo and Ricardo Rodríguez Buded. The famous stage director, Alberto González Vergel, explained in an interview that "Dido was the group who introduced the Spaniards, the Madrilenians in this case, to the modern theater" (audiovisual material 2004, 00:12:13)², due to the fact that they were the first to produce works by playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco or Albert Camus. They were particularly

2 "Dido fue el grupo que inició a los españoles, a los madrileños en este caso, en el teatro moderno". All the translations from Spanish are mine.

interested in the Theater of the Absurd, but not exclusively, since they opted for a wide variety of dramatists, including some American ones.

Despite promoting foreign playwrights, Dido did not forget about the national authors, especially the young promising talents who were struggling with premiering their work. Not only did they have problems because they were new and unknown, but also due to the Francoist regime that censured many of them and limited their performances. In this way, Dido performed around 18 plays by Spanish playwrights –most of them young contemporary ones– in addition to about 36 foreign ones. Among the playwrights from abroad, four were American and the rest of them were European, mostly British and French.

As in the majority of non-professional companies, Dido did not have a fixed cast, but rather counted on the collaboration of a variety of artists. The actors and actresses usually used these groups as a springboard for a professional career, as in the case of Jaime Blanch, who was to become an acclaimed theater and TV actor. The stage directors were also chosen for every individual play, so the interpreters had a chance to work with outstanding theater figures, such as Alberto González Vergel, Miguel Narros, Luis Balaguer, José María de Quinto y Trino Martínez Trives, among others.

As we can see from this brief summary of their trajectory, Dido was extremely important for the presence of foreign theater in Madrid, as well as the development of young Spanish authors. They were constantly fighting against the censorship and other requirements of the dictatorship to be able to continue presenting essential contemporary theater to the audiences of the capital. Among these works were also those of the three American playwrights whose presence in Spain we will focus on in the present article.

3. American Drama in Spanish Theatres (1910s-1950s)

It is difficult to say with certainty when American drama started to be produced on the Spanish stage, but Espejo Romero claims that it was not before the 1910s: “Before this decade, shows derived from some American novel or short story could be seen occasionally, but were so much tempered with that little of the original (if anything) lived on in the stage work inspired by it” (Espejo Romero 2016, 300). The first production that was actually based on an American play, rather than a novel, was *Jimmy Samson*, the Spanish version of *Alias Jimmy Valentine*, by Paul Armstrong, which was premiered in Madrid in 1912 (Espejo Romero 2016, 300). From then on, American theater gained more presence on the stages of the capital, but curiously not with the greatest successes that were being staged on Broadway at that moment, such as those by Eugene O’Neill, Susan Glaspell or Sophie Treadwell. Instead, theaters picked plays written by

Paul Armstrong, Bayard Veiller, Guy Bolton, or John Willard (Espejo Romero 2016, 312, footnote 3). The professional groups in the 1920s and 1930s chose especially those American plays that successfully combined detective stories, mystery and some melodramatic scenes, due to their popularity among the theatergoers. It is important to point out that these were very commercial plays that were staged in big theaters for a general audience and not by the non-professional companies, which generally opted for more serious works.

Gradually, more well-known and successful American plays started to arrive in Spain. In the season 1929-30 the theater producer Francisco Gómez Hidalgo and his *Compañía de Teatro Americano* staged *The Trial of Mary Dugan* (*El juicio de Mary Dugan*), by Bayard Veiller, *La casa endemoniada* (*The Possessed House*), by Abel Birth and John Willard's *The Cat and the Canary* (*El gato y el canario*) (Espejo Romero 2016, 308). Slowly other groups started to follow the new trend to keep up with the competition. But at the same time some more serious and less commercial performances became available, generally on the smaller stages. As we will see later on, the first play by O'Neill was produced in 1924 in Barcelona and later, in 1931, in Madrid.

Even though the first serious plays started arriving from the 1930s onwards, in the next decade there were still not many to be seen on the billboards of big theaters. The few exceptions worth mentioning are *Our Town* (*Nuestra ciudad*), by Thornton Wilder, *There shall be no night* (*No habrá ninguna noche*), by Robert Sherwood and *The Glass Menagerie* (*El zoo de cristal*), by Tennessee Williams (Estévez Fuertes 1991, 202). Some time later, in the early 1950s, the American theater finally came to Spain with a strong force, especially due to the great work of non-professional groups, who were looking to break away from the classical, obsolete theater that was being produced in the commercial theaters, like the classics of the Spanish Golden Age, the Quintero brothers or Jardiel Poncela. In this way, the real –or at least the most successful– American drama began its new era in Spain with great playwrights like Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill and T.S. Eliot (Estévez Fuertes 1991, 203). Despite the fact that the Spaniards came into contact with these artists rather late, they became very popular among the audiences and the critics. Although the four dramatists were the most frequently produced by non-professional companies in Spain, due to the limited scope of this article, I will solely discuss Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and T.S. Eliot.

4. Eugene O'Neill

One of the most widely represented American playwrights in 20th-century Spain was definitely Eugene O'Neill. His rise to fame started in 1918 with *Beyond the*

Horizon (Más allá del horizonte), which won him his first Pulitzer Prize (1920). Two years later, in 1920, he wrote *Anna Christie*, for which he was awarded the second Pulitzer Prize a year later. After these two very successful publications, he added many more plays to his oeuvre over the years and was awarded four Pulitzer Prizes and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936.

According to Watermeier, “O’Neill’s career, which began on the cusp of this theatrical Renaissance, was impacted by theatre’s expansionist tendencies and the prevailing tensions between the forces of tradition and those of change” (1998, 33). Nonetheless, O’Neill’s plays gradually became very well-known as his performances moved from the small stages to the big commercial ones. The author succeeded in gaining the approval of the audiences and most of the theater critics who by that time had grown to accept the experimentation with fatalism and psychoanalytic influences in the works of the new young talent. O’Neill was not popular with everyone, however, and even his biggest followers felt that some of his plays were lacking certain qualities, which is why “O’Neill himself was often irritated with the critical response to his plays and their productions” (Watermeier 1998, 47), but that did not discourage him from writing.

Even though O’Neill became fairly popular in the United States, in the 1920s and 1930s he was almost invisible in the Spanish theaters: “Only two [of his plays] found their way to the stage during these years: *Anna Christie* [...] and *Before Breakfast*” (Dougherty & Vilches de Frutos 1993, 159). The first one was performed by the Lola Membrives Company in 1931, and the latter was premiered by Teatro Escuela de Arte, directed by Cipriano Rivas Cherif, in 1934. Before that, the only contact that the Spanish theater-lovers had with the American playwright was through the translation of *The Emperor Jones (El emperador Jones)*, by Ricardo Baeza, in *Revista de Occidente* (1929).

It was generally thanks to Baeza that O’Neill’s works were brought to light in the Spanish capital. Apart from *The Emperor Jones*, he also translated *Before Breakfast (Antes del desayuno)* –later staged in Madrid–, and published “an extensive essay on O’Neill that set the critical issues by which the playwright would be judged up to the outbreak of the Civil War in 1936” (Dougherty & Vilches de Frutos 1993, 158). Due to Franco’s dictatorship, there is no documentation of the staging of O’Neill’s plays until 1948 when the company of Diana Torrieri and Sergio Tofano performed *Anna Christie* in 1948 at the Teatro Calderón in Barcelona. One year later *Mourning Becomes Electra* premiered in Teatro Beatriz in Madrid, and gradually the author became more known and loved among the audiences of the two biggest Spanish cities. At the time not many American playwrights were being staged in the non-professional theaters, and even fewer could be seen on the billboards of the commercial ones, so O’Neill was more or less an exception. Perhaps that is the reason why the newspaper *ABC* described

him as “the only North American playwright who has triumphed on European stages and the creator of modern drama in the U.S.” (qtd. in Dougherty & Vilches de Frutos 1993, 157-158). Despite the variety of his plays produced in the midst of the 20th century in Spain, for the purposes of this contribution, the article will focus on the two staged by Dido Pequeño Teatro: *Beyond the Horizon* and *Anna Christie*.

4.1. *Beyond the Horizon*

The first major play by O’Neill, *Beyond the Horizon*, premiered in 1920 at the Morosco Theatre in New York and it was his first opening in a mainstream theater. Even though the city was in the middle of an influenza epidemic at the time, theatregoers went to see the show “and accepted the play as a serious and absorbing work, and reviewers admired it” (Black 1998, 4). After a series of amateur performances of his short plays, he not only finally reached a big commercial stage –which made him the first American playwright to bring dramatic literature to Broadway–, but also got a positive feedback from the audiences. Watermeier attributes this success to “the fact that there was a dearth of dramatic talent in the years immediately preceding the premiere of *Beyond the Horizon*” (1998, 41). Whatever the case may be, the play ran for 111 performances and was selected by Burns Mantle as the best play of the season 1919-20, which, together with the Pulitzer Prize, confirmed the irrefutable success of the play.

According to the catalogue of Centro de Documentación Teatral (CDT), *Beyond the Horizon* was premiered in Spain in 1954 by the group Colegio Mayor Julio Ruiz de Alda. Given that this was a performance of a college group, it did not receive a lot of public attention. However, the next staging, by Dido Pequeño Teatro in 1956, was much more significant and acknowledged by the theatregoers in Madrid. As in some other occasions, the company opted for a play that had achieved worldwide recognition and was, therefore, more likely to be successful also in the Spanish territory. The company presented the script to the censorship committee in January 1956 and got the approval only a few days later. The sole censor, E. Morales de Acevedo, described the play as a “literary work, perfectly written, with an interesting depiction of the feminine character and an emotional study of nobility and love between two brothers. Without problems”³ (AGA, file 0021/56). As this was the only censor who read the play and found the text was not problematic, *Beyond the Horizon* could be staged without any changes and could even be broadcast, even though it was only approved for adults.

3 “obra literaria, perfectamente escrita, con pintura de tipo femenino interesante y con emotivo estudio de nobleza y amor de dos hermanos. Sin problemas.”

After going through the censorship process, the play was produced by León Mirlas and Horacio Peterson was responsible for “the very successful stage direction”⁴ (*Más allá del horizonte* 1956, 16). Maritza Caballero, Carme Lequerica, María Cañete, Arturo Fernández, Esteban Herrera, José Franco, Javier Loyola, Juan Romera y Emilio Alisedo achieved a “terrific interpretation”⁵ (*Más allá del horizonte* 1956, 16). As it can be observed, the response of the critics was certainly positive, and they were, in fact, wondering why this forty-year-old play had not been performed in Spain before. “The very numerous audience applauded with enthusiasm”⁶ (*Más allá del horizonte* 1956, 16), which shows the early acceptance of his work among the Spanish general public. Nonetheless, that did not encourage other companies, neither amateur nor professional, to continue staging *Beyond the Horizon* in the future. As documented by CDT, the play was produced only on one more occasion, in 1962, by the group Dramática Marquina in Barcelona.

4.2. *Anna Christie*

When O’Neill first started to write *Anna Christie*, it was titled *Chris Christophersen* and for two years it caused him great struggles. After the death of his father, however, he started making adjustments to the play, adding new characters like Chris’s daughter and his lover and changing the setting and the plot of certain acts. The drama with the new title *Anna Christie* was written in less than six weeks (Black 1998, 5).

The original version was focused almost completely on Chris the coal bargeman and not on his daughter Anna. At first, she was a rather unbelievable character, who after being brought up by her mother’s English family came to Chris as a typist eager to get a college degree. In the final version of the play Anna is a girl from Minnesota who after being sexually abused by her family ends up working as a prostitute. She falls in love with Mat, an Irish sailor who comes to show her the true meaning of love. However, Loftus Ranalad points out that “what really changes Anna is her discovery that the sea is in her spirit and in her veins, while the fog which leaves her in suspension from reality purifies her” (1998, 56). O’Neill wrote various endings for the play because at first he was not interested in a happy Hollywood-like conclusion of the events, but rather in making believe that the story continues its course and the characters keep living even after the performance (Ortiz-Vargas 1944, 79). Even though “it remains doubtful which conclusion was used at the first performance of *Anna Christie*”

4 “la acertadísima dirección”

5 “estupenda interpretación”

6 “El público, muy numeroso, aplaudió con entusiasmo.”

(Loftus Ranald 1998, 56), we can assume that the ending was happy, given that after its premiere in the United States reviewers characterized it as a comic play, even though the author insisted on its being tragic.

Despite some investigators saying that *Anna Christie* lacks interest (Ortiz-Vergas 1944, 78), it was selected as the best play of the season 1921-22, and for the critics it was a drama that perfectly portrayed the American middle class. Due to the play's "romantic sentiment and its far-from-tragic ending, it seemed closer to the public taste. This play was made for the American middle class, which generally doesn't like tragedy and distrusts art for art's sake" (qtd. in Urra 1983, 89), suggested the critics at the time.

As previously mentioned, this was the first play by O'Neill to be produced in Spain and it was relatively successful. Though it did not offer "the technical innovations for which O'Neill is known, as in works like *The Emperor Jones* or *Strange Interlude*", (Dougherty & Vilches de Frutos 1993, 159), Spanish audiences were pleased with this new author. One critic from *El Socialista* especially greeted the fact that it ended on a positive note and treated the topic of prostitution frankly, putting love above morality. This was quite a controversial play for Spain in 1931, but said anonymous critic welcomed it with open arms, for it broadened the Spanish horizons (Dougherty & Vilches de Frutos 1993, 160).

According to Dougherty and Vilches de Frutos, *Anna Christie* was first performed in Barcelona in 1924 (1993, 162, footnote 7) and in Madrid in 1931. The first production documented by Centro de Documentación Teatral, however, is from 1948 when an Italian company, directed by Diana Torrieri and Sergio Tofano, staged the Italian version in Teatro Calderón in Barcelona. Just as in previous decades the play was very well received (Cala 1948, n.p.).

The next occasion on which the Spanish audiences were able to enjoy an O'Neill play was in 1959, when the group Dido performed it on the stage of Infanta Isabel Theater in Madrid. As always, the group had to present the script of the play to the censorship committee. However, in this occasion Dido's name is not stated on the petition, because in this case the company introduced to the Spanish audiences the new group directed by Nuria Espert, which is why their information appears in the censorship files (AGA, file 0241/59). The play was read by the censor Adolfo Carril in whose opinion the profession of the protagonist is not problematic, given that she regrets her actions and wants to change her life. Nonetheless, the censorship committee demanded that the words *zorras* (whores) and *acostarse* (to go to bed) be changed (AGA, file 0241/59).

León Miras was responsible for the translation of the play, directed by Armando Moreno. The cast included some of the regular members of Dido such as Ramón Corroto and Ramón Durán, together with Nuria Espert, Milagros Leal, Laureano Franco, José María Cuadrado, Roberto Jusmet and Enrique Julvez.

As expected, the performance of the Madrilenian company was very successful and “the audience followed the development of the play with great interest and applauded various scenes and the endings of the acts”⁷ (Gómez Picazo 1959, n.p.). On the other hand, the very meticulous critic Adolfo Prego was not enthusiastic about the play, even though it had been triumphant on several occasions in Spain and O’Neill was one of the few foreign playwrights whose works were well received at that time. The reviewer generally did not approve of the experimental playwrights that Dido usually chose, but in this case, he missed some more experimentation and revolutionary techniques (Prego 1959, 9), just like some of the critics at the Madrilenian premiere of the play in 1931.

As mentioned before, the general feedback was positive, as the audience was satisfied with the performance. But despite its success, we can find only one more registered production of *Anna Christie* in Spain, performed in 1983 in Catalonia by El Globus. However, it is possible there existed more such performances –especially given its popularity–, but they were left undocumented by the newspapers, and consequently the Centro de Documentación Teatral.

Even though each of O’Neill’s plays was performed on only a few occasions, his presence in Spain was fairly constant, as a result of many theater groups opting for one of his works. Together with *Anna Christie* and *Beyond the Horizon* other famous plays of his found their way to the Spanish stages. We can find documents about productions of *Desire Under the Elms*, *Long Day’s Journey into Night* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. The latter was premiered in 1949 by the well-known non-professional group La Carátula and the stage director José Franco. After this non-professional staging, its professional debut came along rather soon, in 1965, thanks to the Compañía del Teatro María Guerrero. Hence, the New York playwright was very recognized in the Spanish theaters, particularly among the non-professional groups. The presence of his plays “was significant [...] for their being received as, or associated with, experimental trends in Spain’s modern theater” (Dougherty & Vilches de Frutos 1993, 161) and were sufficiently triumphant as to keep appearing on the stages in the second half of the 20th and in the 21st century.

5. Tennessee Williams

Just like Eugene O’Neill, Thornton Wilder and Susan Glaspell dominated the first decades of the past century, and Arthur Miller and Edward Albee the second half of the century, Tennessee Williams was the primary American playwright of the 1950s.

7 “El público siguió con gran interés el desarrollo de la pieza y aplaudió varias escenas y los finales de acto.”

Born in 1911, Williams is one of the most well-known American playwrights. Even though he is most famous for his dramatic texts, he also wrote poetry, numerous short stories and two novels. He won two Pulitzer Awards for *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1948 and for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1955. He was also nominated for four Tony Awards and won one for *The Rose Tattoo* in 1951.

Despite the fact that Williams triumphed with his most recognized play in the late 1940s and reached the peak of his fame in 1957, in Spain he was still almost completely unknown in those decades. His theater arrived in the country much later than in other European cities, and even the audiences in the capital would be completely unaware of the playwright if it were not for the non-professional companies.

As in the case of all the productions of that time, Williams' plays were also affected by the dictatorship and the restrictions that it entailed. The author's "liberal attitudes towards treating sexual and psychological matters in his work clashed with the authorities' moral and sexual prudery in Spain, which, in accordance with their Catholic views, was strictly enforced" (Espejo Romero 2014, 216). Additionally, Williams' work was regarded as too complex and demanding for the Spanish contemporary audiences due to its style and structure.

Therefore, his plays did not interest the mainstream theaters and their destiny was left in the hands of the non-professional groups. When José María de Quinto and José Gordón –two fundamental figures of non-professional theater– decided to stage *The Glass Menagerie* in 1957 they openly confessed to altering the text, eliminating any offensive or inappropriate elements that would make the censors prohibit the play (Espejo Romero 2014, 229). It might seem immoral to change someone else's work to this extent, but we must keep in mind that this kind of alterations were the only way to make the productions of these texts possible. As Williams was familiar with the political situation in Spain, he agreed with these practices. Espejo Romero quotes the playwright's opinion on non-professional theaters: "Maybe 90% of them lead nowhere... but without them we will spread conformism, and nobody in America will ever really be young, and we would be standing in the deadlock of nothingness" (2016, 230-231, footnote 37). His opinion about American non-professional groups can easily be related to the amateur scene in Spain, since most of these companies disappeared after a few years, but their activity was essential for the fight against conformism and cultural oppression.

By 1957 several plays by Williams had been seen on Spanish stages, but all of them were produced by non-professional companies. In Barcelona, *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* were premiered in 1947⁸ and 1949

8 *The Glass Menagerie* was reprised in Barcelona in 1950 and Williams unexpectedly attended the performance (Espejo Romero 2014, 217).

respectively. The famous group La Carátula was in charge of the Madrilenian premiere of *The Glass Menagerie* in 1950, and Teatro de Cámara de Madrid brought *A Streetcar Named Desire* to the capital in 1951. Williams' most significant play was also produced by *teatros de cámara* and university groups in smaller cities, such as Murcia, Salamanca, Zaragoza and Santiago de Compostela. Its first mainstream production, however, was organized in 1957 at the Eslava Theater in Madrid, which was also the first of Williams' plays to be staged in a commercial theater (Espejo Romero 2016, 227).

5.1. *The Rose Tattoo*

Williams' artistic excellence can be seen not only in his most notorious play, but also in *The Rose Tattoo*, written between 1949 and 1950. It debuted in Chicago in the same year, and one year later in New York, winning a Tony Award. At first, it was one of the plays by Williams that did not make any money (Devlin 2006, 98), but later on became successful and was even adapted for the screen in 1955. The story, "inspired by his relationship with Frank Merlo, [is] a carnivalesque comedy celebrating the Dionysian" (Balakian 2006, 1). Its cinematographic adaptation received several Academy Awards and Golden Globes even before the play was first produced in Europe.

The premiere of *The Rose Tattoo* in Spain, by Dido Pequeño Teatro, was held in 1958. As usual, the group opted for one of the less-known plays by the reputed playwright, at least in Spain, to offer the audience something fresh. Since by then the American playwright was quite recognized in the capital and his work had not been problematic for the censors, Dido also did not have any major difficulties when requesting the permission for representation. They requested the staging permit in February 1958 to be performed in March (AGA, file 0015/57). The files include only the names of the actors, the translator and the stage director, but not the comments of the censors, which would help us see their first impression of *The Rose Tattoo* in Spain. No obligatory changes are stated in the files, but it is clear from the reviews that the play was abridged due to its excessive length for the Spanish spectators (Mostaza 1958, n.p.). Moreover, the censors even approved various continuous stagings—as opposed to the usual one-time performance—, which was very uncommon when it came to non-professional productions.

This debut was highly anticipated by the Madrilenian theatergoers due to its great success in New York, where it ran for three consecutive seasons, and in some European capitals, for which the Spanish audiences also wanted to experience it. Moreover, the 1955 film adaptation of *The Rose Tattoo* won several Oscars and Golden Globes, which generated even more expectations.

Dido's 1958 production in Teatro Beatriz was directed by Miguel Narros and interpreted by Adela Carboné, Alicia Agut, Blume, Carmen López Lagar, Julieta Serrano, Juan Antonio Lebrero, Lola Gálvez, M^a Amparo Tadeo, Margarita Lozano, María Cañete, Maruja Recio, Miguel Palenzuela, Pilar Prados Ramón Corroto and María Arias⁹. According to the stage director, the latter made a great performance as one of the most difficult protagonists of the 20th century (Laborda 1958, 8). Her presence in the play was additionally highlighted by the reviewers and her popularity attracted more spectators, which helped with the success of the production.

In general, the reviews were positive, although some commented that Williams was copying the same "formula" he used in his previous, more famous dramas (Prego 1958, 21). On the other hand, Torrente Ballester praised the fact that the author "was able to understand and incorporate in his comedy that which is healthy and positive in that Latin, Mediterranean materialism that emigrants carry with them"¹⁰ (1958, 21). All the critics also stressed the importance of the stage director's work, thanks to whom the play was well-received by the audiences, which applauded enthusiastically after the three acts (Torrente Ballester 1958, 21; Prego 1958, 9; Mostaza 1958, n.p.).

Despite the successful premiere of *The Rose Tattoo*, the play was produced only on a few further occasions, among which the most significant ones were those of Teatro Nacional de Cataluña in 2013 and the Centro Dramático Nacional in 2016. Nonetheless, in the next decades Williams went from being completely unknown to becoming one of the most-performed foreign playwrights in Spain. Even though critics like José Antonio Bayona thought that his "realism [...] lacks the poetry and lasting qualities that could give it a more timeless appeal" (Espejo Romero 2014, 221), William's most significant plays have been continuously produced up to the present.

6. T.S. Eliot

Even though T.S. Eliot is primarily known as a poet, his career as a playwright should not be ignored. His presence in the Spanish theaters was not as frequent as O'Neill's and Williams', perhaps due to the fact that Eliot wrote far fewer plays than the other two. However, he was still one of the first American¹¹ authors

9 She was a well-known actress at the time. In the 1930s, she was a part of the company Xirgu-Borrás, the official company of Teatro Español for three years.

10 "Williams supo comprender e incorporar a su comedia lo que hay de sano y positivo en ese materialismo mediterráneo que los emigrantes llevan consigo".

11 Although he was born in the United States, Eliot moved to London in 1914 and settled there for the rest of his life. Therefore, all the first productions of his plays were carried out in England and not in his country of origin.

whose works were performed on the Spanish stages, which is why it is important to include him in the present paper.

At first, Eliot's works were very difficult to stage. On one hand, this was due to the verse which in the beginning was very strict, reflecting Eliot's fascination with Elizabethan playwrights such as William Shakespeare and Thomas Kyd. As Llorens-Cubedo points out, in Eliot's plays "dramatic action is obscured by poetic language", which is why his "verse drama is demanding for an audience" (2021, 558). On the other hand, his settings were also causing difficulties because, as Grove explains, "such emphasis on setting as a literary effect [...], meant a steady contrasting of page and stage, a distinguishing between dramatic poetry and real plays, as available in the theater" (1994, 160).

After his first production on a theater stage, Eliot did not only want to continue writing, he also did not want to see his productions in churches, but rather in real theaters. Furthermore, he wanted to move away from the historical play and try using more contemporary language in order to be better understood and accepted by the theatergoers of the time.

In Spain, as in the case of O'Neill and Williams, the first production of one of Eliot's plays was rather late. According to the TEATREL-SP project, his first piece to be introduced in the country was *Murder in the Cathedral* (*Assassinat a la Catedral*) in 1949 in Barcelona. In this occasion the play was not staged, but rather read at two private gatherings at the British Council and the Unió Excursionista de Catalunya. The readings were done in Catalan, translated by Lluís Maria Aragó and Joaquim Balcells (TEATREL-SP, online). Over the next decades this was by far his most produced play, followed by *The Cocktail Party*, first staged by the company of Teatro María Guerrero in Madrid in 1952.

6.1. *The Family Reunion*

After *Murder in the Cathedral* was first staged in New York, Eliot already had the first draft of *The Family Reunion* (*La reunión de familia*), which was completely different from his previous plays. This was the first play for which he employed a form of verse that resembles everyday speech –or as Carbajosa Palmero calls it, conversational line– which helped create a special drawing-room ambience (Carbajosa Palmero 2021, 37). The text was still rather difficult to take in at first, but the change in verse was significant. According to Browne, "the firm yet infinitely flexible rhythms of the verse [...] allowed contemporary characters to speak with apparent naturalness yet to rise without a jolt into the higher reaches of poetry" (1966, 144). In a few words, the drama in blank verse talks about a family in England and the troubles that torment them. Harry, the protagonist who is hunted by the guilt of being responsible for the death of his wife, returns home after eight

years only to leave again in a few hours, which leads to his mother's death. It is true that the play is subtle in action, but it does explore the topics of sin and remorse.

The Family Reunion was first staged at the Westminster Theatre in 1939, thanks to the theater director of the London Mask Theatre and Eliot's friend Asley Dukes (Browne 1966, 146). The author was not very involved in the production due to not being accustomed to working with actors, but he did add an extra scene during the rehearsals, after the cast pointed out that a part of the story seemed to be missing. At its debut the play was not well received, as the audience failed to understand its meaning. However, when it was revived "at the Mercury in 1946, its purpose was instantly appreciated, and even though its faults were not glossed over it was recognized as a major play" (Browne 1966, 146-147). Despite its success, Eliot did not write any more plays alike. In fact, he only wrote three more and all of them were comedies: *The Cocktail Party* (1949), *The Confidential Clerk* (1953) and *The Elder Statesman* (1958).

According to the Centro de Documentación Teatral, in Spain *The Family Reunion* was only produced once, though TEATREL-SP mentions another staging in 1949 (TEATREL-SP, online). The production by Dido Pequeño Teatro took place in 1956 in Madrid. It was rapidly approved by the sole censor who inspected the play, Adolfo Carril. According to him the play was "eminently poetic"¹² and its transplantation lived up to the original in terms of quality and rhythm (AGA, file 0101/56).

The Family Reunion was translated by Carmen Conde and directed by Trino Martínez Trives, an important director at the time, who participated with Dido and other non-professional theaters on a regular basis. The play was interpreted by Josefina de la Torre, Julia Delgado Caro, María Antonieta Escrivá, Carmen Lequerica, María Abelenda, Rosa María Wallace, Ramón Corroto, Victórico Fuentes, Sergio Mendizábal, Bonifacio de la Fuente, Javier Loyola and Gonzalo Mariscal.

As in the case of Williams' *The Rose Tattoo*, this play was also authorized for more than one performance, which shows that from the point of view of the censors it was not problematic at all. Moreover, it demonstrates that the play raised interest among the theatergoers. The group had many members and was also obligated to invite the press, so in order to have enough space, they had to ask for three additional sessions, which were approved by the censors (AGA, file 0101/56).

Before the premiere, the translator, Carmen Conde, announced that *The Family Reunion* "is the dramatization of a topic that runs through all of Eliot's works: the relation between time and eternity"¹³ (Conde 1956, n.p.), and

12 "eminentemente poética"

13 "es la dramatización de un tema que corre a través de toda la obra de T.S. Eliot: la relación entre el tiempo y la eternidad"

highlighted that the play was written in unrhymed verse. Perhaps this attracted a wider audience, whose response to the play was surprisingly positive. One of the reviewers declared that its rhythm was rather slow (Jenabe 1956, 15), but that did not seem to discourage the rest of the people. Despite it being a difficult text, and that the “Spanish audiences were declared to be unreceptive to drama in which conceptually rich dialogue prevailed” (Llorens-Cubedo 2021, 567), the audience kept in silence throughout the performance (Prego 1956, n.p.), as the actors kept them on their toes with their excellent performance. One critic also highlighted the extraordinary work of the director Martínez Trives, who arranged a magnificent performance with a lot of sensibility and good time measures, for which he received great applauses at the end (Agurrie 1956, 13).

This being said, we can observe that *The Family Reunion* was well liked among the Madrilenians, and was approved not only by the censorship committee, but also by the reviewers and the general public, despite the fact that the reviewers criticized the play’s moral and theological aspect and were not convinced that the Spanish theatergoers would relate to them (Llorens-Cubedo 2021, 561). However, it seems that the Spanish theater companies lost interest in Eliot in the following decades, as not many more stagings of his works took place after Dido’s performance. As said before, *The Family Reunion* was not produced ever again, and only a handful of his other plays have been performed in the 21st century.

7. Conclusions

As we were able to observe, American drama arrived in Spain rather late. Although it was in some way present in the country since the beginning of the 20th century, the most significant representatives of the American theater were not to be seen until the late 1940s/early 1950s. It is clear that this change in repertoire occurred thanks to the non-professional groups that were constantly trying to expand the horizons of Spanish theatergoers and achieved it—at least to some extent—by introducing foreign playwrights despite Franco’s regime.

Once the American theater reached the Spanish stages, it did so with its strongest and most recognizable authors. O’Neill, Williams and Eliot, three indispensable figures of American drama, were extremely successful in their home country—with the exception of *The Family Reunion*—and several European countries before they became accessible in Spain. This is why some of these plays, like *The Rose Tattoo*, were received with a lot of expectation and instantly became popular among the Spanish audiences.

In general, the American drama did not cause many problems to the non-professional groups, as they were easily approved by the censors and could be represented without major changes in the texts. Many of them could even be performed on more than one occasion, which was rare for the non-professional

productions. These performances were also very well-reviewed, which was not always true for non-professional productions, as they occasionally chose works that were too experimental for the Spanish tastes. American dramatists, however, were universal enough to appeal to Spaniards as well, which made their plays become among the most successful ones within the non-professional circles, together with other important playwrights like Beckett or Ionesco.

It is important to highlight that most credits for introducing American drama to Spanish theaters go to the non-professional companies, even though some initiative also came from the director of Teatro María Guerrero at the time, Luis Escobar¹⁴. Without them the plays that have been analyzed in this paper would probably not be seen in Spain until much later and could have been much less successful than they were. Dido Pequeño Teatro played an especially significant role in the case of the three dramatists that have been discussed. Even though some of the analyzed plays had been staged before, Dido's productions really showed the value of these authors to the Spanish audiences and increased their popularity. In this manner, Dido and other similar non-professional companies did a magnificent job that not only changed the theater scene of the mid-twentieth-century Spain, but also made possible that these plays have kept being staged until today.

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