

ABSTRACT

Anxious Nation and White Fashion Suddenly Last Summer in the Swedish folkhem.

This article investigates how Tennessee Williams' play *Suddenly Last Summer*, as staged in Sweden in 1959, communicated sexual and racial anxieties. It aims to tease out the importance of fashion for the articulation of the closet and the expression of the simultaneous absence and presence of the queer subject in the play. Looking at the omnipresent use of whiteness of certain key costumes, the essay further proposes the concept of white Gothic fashion and argues that this assumed a whole new meaning when staged in a social and historical context that was not only characterized by institutionalized homophobia, but also promoted white hegemony and the control of women's bodies. Placing particular emphasis on the socio-historical context of Sweden in the 1950s, the article demonstrates how performance studies and fashion theory can engage in a critical cultural analysis and help us understand national emotions, concerns and anxieties.

KEYWORDS:

Tennessee Williams, whiteness, closet, fashion, national anxiety, folkhem, welfare state.

BIOGRAPHY

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Anxious Nation and White Fashion: *Suddenly Last Summer* in the Swedish folkhem

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What a huge creature, what an immense beast He must have been to have left such enormous white bones when He died... Endlessly long ago, the bones of Him now turned to powder that blows and blows about His broken – creation...

Tennessee Williams, *The Chalky White Substance*

In 1959, Swedish audiences were treated to Tennessee Williams', by then, most scandalous creation – the one-act play *Suddenly Last Summer*. Under the direction of Frank Sundström, the shocking tale about lobotomy, cannibalism, homosexuality and prostitution was performed together with the short opener *Something Outspoken* under the collective title *Garden District* at Malmö Intiman on 12 February 1959.¹ Set in New Orleans' more exclusive Garden District neighbourhood in the mid-1930s, *Suddenly Last Summer* starts with the old and rich Mrs. Venable trying to bribe the Polish neurosurgeon Doctor Cukrowicz (who calls himself Doctor Sugar) into performing a lobotomy on her niece Catharine in order to prevent her from telling the truth about how Mrs. Venable's son, the poet Sebastian, died the previous summer in Mediterranean Europe. Afraid that Catharine's story might harm her son's posthumous reputation, Mrs. Venable also blackmails Catharine's mother and brother George by threatening to contest Sebastian's will and prevent them from getting their substantial part of the inheritance. After having been injected a truth serum, Catharine discloses, in a climactic monologue,

that Sebastian first used his mother and then herself as bait to attract young men whom he paid to have sex with. It is also revealed that he was literally torn apart and devoured by these same prostitutes. The play is loaded with imagery of whiteness as well as with metaphors of a cruel universe where only the strongest and fittest can survive, while the weak end up as prey. The different stories we hear about Sebastian not only foreshadow his own violent demise, but also confirm the victim's own morbid fascination with death and devouring. The pride of his jungle garden, where part of the action of the play is set, was a Venus flytrap, and during a trip to the Encantadas, he witnessed how newly hatched turtle babies were eaten alive by birds of prey before they could reach the safe ocean.

Throughout her long monologue, in which Catharine reveals the truth about Sebastian's death, the contrast between black and white is particularly palpable. For instance, her description of the environment and the weather stresses that the atmosphere was "a blazing white hot, hot blazing white", making it seem "[a]s if a huge white bone had caught on fire in the sky and blazed so bright it was white and turned the sky and everything under the sky white with it".² The anxious Sebastian, who was wearing "a spotless white silk Shantung suit and a white silk tie and a white panama and white shoes, white – white lizard skin – pumps [...] kept touching his face and his throat here and there with a white silk handkerchief and popping little white pills in his mouth" (414). A little further on,

Catharine describes how the dark skinned children chased Sebastian like a “flock of black plucked little birds” and “up the steep white street in the sun that was like a great white bone of a giant beast that had caught fire in the sky” (421).

This article investigates how *Suddenly Last Summer*, as staged in Sweden in 1959, communicated sexual and racial anxieties. It aims to tease out the importance of fashion for the articulation of the closet and the expression of the simultaneous absence and presence of the queer subject in the play. Looking at the omnipresent use of whiteness of certain key costumes, the essay further proposes the concept of white Gothic fashion and argues that this assumed a whole new meaning when staged in a social and historical context that was not only characterized by institutionalized homophobia, but also promoted white hegemony and the control of women's bodies. Placing particular emphasis on the socio-historical context of Sweden in the 1950s, the article demonstrates how performance studies and fashion theory can engage in a critical cultural analysis and help us understand national emotions, concerns and anxieties.

FASHION IN THE DRAMA TEXT

Suddenly Last Summer was announced and reviewed in the press as a shocking horror tale. *Aftonbladet* for instance called the story “extraordinarily sickening”.³ *Svenska Dagbladet* named it “a macabre play, [...] one of the most horrid in modern drama”,⁴ while *Arbetet* noted its “violent effects”.⁵ Williams scholar Robert Gross states that “the play is easily identified as an example of Gothic melodrama”.⁶ The setting of Sebastian's exotic jungle garden with the Venus flytrap as its main attraction, the breathtaking story of the poet's death as well as the damsel in distress who is threatened by her evil relative are familiar motifs from the Gothic genre. The larger part of the story revolves around a woman being violated: Catharine is forced to speak with a truth serum, yet the outcome of this speech might be punishment and a lobotomy. As a result she becomes the “imperiled woman” and “the archetypal persecuted maiden of Gothic fiction”.⁷ Literary scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies a number of Freudian motifs in gothic tales: a fascination for sexuality, a

fear of incest and an atmosphere that is characterized by the threat of inter-generational violence. Gothic stories, Sedgwick argues, became popular at the same time when modern definitions of sexual identities were created and when homophobia became a central mechanism for the gender order. The Gothic, therefore, works as “an exploration of ‘the perverse’”.⁸ So how did this Gothic atmosphere of the play translate into the costumes? Like in many of his dramas from that period, Williams is very specific and detailed in his stage directions. Doctor Cukrowicz, for example, is described as “a young blond Doctor, all in white, glacially brilliant, very, very good looking” (350), the nurse wears a “sweeping white habit” (370), the table and the chairs on the patio are repeatedly described to be made out of “white wicker” (370ff.), and during the climactic confessions, “the surrounding area has dimmed out and a hot white spot is focused on Catharine” (414). If the story is rooted in the dark style and atmosphere of the Gothic tradition, why then did Williams in his stage directions and in the dialogues insist on the colour white? The answer is to be found in the play's politics of sexuality, ethnicity and race. Indeed, some of the major themes are introduced and enhanced through Williams' strategic use of fashion and costumes.

Long before the final revelation of Sebastian's sexual appetites and eventual death, the attentive reader/spectator is offered a number of allusions to his deviant masculinity and sexuality. Among them is his strong interest in horticulture, his passion for poetry, his almost incestuous relationship with his mother, his predilection for fancy environments and restaurants as well as his heightened knowledge of fashion. At one point in the play, Catharine mentions that the dress she is wearing is an original creation by the Paris based designer Elsa Schiaparelli that Sebastian bought for her on their trip to Europe: “[I]n Paris, he took me to Patou and Schiaparelli's – this is from Schiaparelli's! [*Like a child, she indicates her suit.*] – bought me so many new clothes that I gave away my old ones to make room for my new ones in my new luggage to – travel.... I turned into a peacock! Of course, so was *he* one, to....” (406). Williams was a master at expressing *the love that dare not speak its name* between the lines, and this

seemingly minor detail can be understood as an allusion to Sebastian's homosexuality. Traditionally, men who were too knowledgeable about trends and styles were suspected of being queers. In order to remain in the closet, many chose to avoid fashionable clothes, especially before the late 1960s.⁹

The action of *Suddenly Last Summer* is set in the mid-1930s, and it was during that period that Elsa Schiaparelli was at the height of her career as a designer with her boutique in Place Vendôme in Paris attracting many customers. Schiaparelli was known for allying herself with artists such as Dalí, Picasso and Cocteau and for introducing surrealism into fashion, not least through using garments out of context and putting them on a different part of the body; the most famous example being the hat in the shape of a shoe. Schiaparelli was also influenced by theatre; one of her collections was inspired by Commedia dell'Arte and her runway shows were among the first to be turned into stage spectacles.¹⁰ Did Williams feel any particular sympathy for a designer who introduced surrealism into fashion? Many of his best-known dramas unfold in a creative field between realism and modernist aesthetics, while most of his later works abandon the tradition of realism altogether.¹¹ Ever since the foreword to his breakthrough *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams demanded that realism be given up: "Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: that truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance."¹² The reference to Schiaparelli could thus be seen as an accentuation of Williams' dismissal of realism as well as a way to out himself, between the lines, as a queer man by demonstrating his knowledge about fashion.

Another reason for making Catharine wear a Schiaparelli dress is suggested by how the designer had a predilection for the word "shocking": her first fragrance was called "Shocking", its bottle modelled after Mae West's torso. Her biography was aptly titled *Shocking Life* (1954), and her signature colour for which she became famous was "shocking pink". Williams often had to defend himself against the ac-

cusation of using shocking effects. Interestingly the programme for the Malmö production reprinted parts of an interview that Williams had given to the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1957: "I want to shock people but not to have a *succes de scandale*, not to shock per se, but because I want to give people a jolt, get them fully alive. I like strong effects and boldness, and perhaps sometimes I go overboard, but I never do it for commercial reasons."¹³ The notion of shock, that is, the attempt to cause a sudden and immediate reaction in the audience, was then a part of Williams' politics. It was only through boldness and shock that he could express the aggression and cruelty of his own times which, in an interview with himself, he identified as "the developing tension and anger and violence of the world and time that I live in".¹⁴

To offer yet another explanation, Schiaparelli also questioned conventional notions of gender. Fashion scholar Caroline Evans argues that Schiaparelli's designs deconstructed stable and essential femininity as a masquerade. Through playing with issues of surface and depth, her creations revealed the cultural construction of gender. Evans makes clear that Schiaparelli's designs must be seen in relation to anxieties related to gender, female fashion and the New Woman of the 1930s: "The 'New Woman,' in the form of the sexually independent woman in particular, was a source of much anxiety in the inter-war years as she destabilized the conventional association between appearance and identity."¹⁵ She posed a threat to the conventional gender order by controlling her body and sexuality and by unmasking the cultural construction of femininity, often through a creative use of fashion. This designation applies partly to Catharine. In *Suddenly Last Summer* the young woman threatens patriarchal authority: first, through her sexual appetite (she admits that she "came out in the French Quarter years before [she] came out in the Garden District" (413) and during the play, she hits on the doctor), and second, because she reacts angrily when she feels used and abused after a one-night love affair with an unidentified upper-class man, confronting him in public and causing a minor scandal. Did Sebastian encourage her feminine independence, symbolically supporting it by buying her a dress by Schiaparelli to

turn her into a “New Woman”? Both the gay man and the emancipated woman (dare I say fag hag?) pose a challenge to heteronormative patriarchy, and their resistance to it is expressed through the use of fashion.

Although never present on stage, the dead Sebastian, who was “fed up with the dark [boys] and was famished for blonds” (375), is mirrored in the costumes of the other characters. Because Catharine is wearing the dress her cousin bought her, he is physically present through that costume clinging to her. The doctor, whose nickname Sugar symbolically expresses whiteness, wears stark white clothes. Moreover, Catharine’s brother George is wearing one of their dead cousin’s suits. Finally, Catharine seems to have taken over some of Sebastian’s sexual desires (not least for blond men, as her hitting on Doctor Sugar makes clear). These devices lead Gross to state that “the one body physically absent from *Suddenly Last Summer* permeates the entire play”.¹⁶ Williams’ clever and complex use of fashion has been underrated, and the interplay between absence and presence necessitates an analysis of the performative and signifying nature of bodies and fashion on stage.

In arguing for the important differences between wearing clothes and exhibiting them in a museum after a person is gone, fashion scholar Elizabeth Wilson writes:

We experience a sense of the uncanny when we gaze at garments that had an intimate relationship with human beings long since gone to their graves. For clothes are so much part of our living, moving selves that, frozen on display in the mausoleums of culture, they hint at something only half understood, sinister, threatening; the atrophy of the body, and the evanescence of life.¹⁷

Sebastian is never on stage, yet his memory haunts the action and the other characters, visualized and materialized through the white costumes. Williams gave the question of how to represent Sebastian as an embodied spectre a lot of thought. In his meticulous study of the different drafts of *Suddenly Last Summer*, Brian Parker has shown that the playwright first wanted to have Sebastian symbolically

present on stage through a portrait or a sculpture of him in the nude.¹⁸ It is significant, however, that in the end, fashion became the privileged mode to express and represent the dead homosexual man. In *Suddenly Last Summer*, the clothes of a deceased man are transferred to and re-embodied by the next generation (Catharine and George) or making new, unexpected appearances (Doctor Sugar).¹⁹ The queer subject who is already dead by the time the curtain goes up is a common trope in the Williams canon from that period. However, unlike Allan in *A Streetcar Named Desire* or Skipper in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Sebastian Venable is not only remembered, but materialized and partially embodied through dress and costume.

INSTITUTIONALIZED HOMOPHOBIA AND RACIAL BIOLOGY IN THE WELFARE STATE

The 1950s in Sweden was a decade marked by institutionalized homophobia through a combined attack from the government, media and medico-judicial establishments. The translation of the first Kinsey report in 1949²⁰ hardly led to more tolerance, but rather enhanced the homophobic atmosphere in Sweden. Not only was homosexuality categorized as a mental disorder, a classification that would not be removed from the medical diagnosis list until 1979, it was also regarded as a moral threat to young people as well as a risk to national security. Scandalous news bills conveyed ideas of “homosexual freemasonry”, through which men in high social positions promoted one another’s interests. Stories circulated about secret networks of men who would not hesitate to break the law to ensure mutual protection. In the printed media, the connection with criminal activities was so strong that homosexuality appeared inseparable from prostitution, paedophilia and freemasonry. The Swedish *folkhem*, literally the people’s home, was a political project that was characterized by a number of reforms (including regulated economy, general healthcare, modern housing and free education) with the goal to increase the quality of life of the citizens. However, it was also coupled with a compulsory national heterosexuality. In the struggle for social improvement, homosexuality risked being wiped out.²¹

In *Suddenly Last Summer*, Sebastian is described

as a deeply unsympathetic, if not a cruel and cynical, character who uses his female relatives to attract young men whom he pays to have sex with. Because of his disdain for his fellow human beings the question of whether he is a queer villain or a queer martyr has occupied Williams scholars. Michael Paller points out that "Sebastian is a predatory paedophile who is literally devoured by a rampaging pack of his victims".²² However, he also argues against critics who find *Suddenly Last Summer* to be filled with homophobic discourse and states that the play "is a full-throated defense of living one's life according to one's own lights, regardless of the consequences or of the opinions of others".²³ With the exception of Catharine, all the characters, living or dead, exploit their fellow human beings using and devouring them both metaphorically and literally. Even Catharine's own family members are prepared to sacrifice her for financial gains. The play is thus a critique of society's ruthlessness, and it is therefore crucial to stress that "Sebastian is a monster not because he is homosexual, but because he is a selfish exploiter".²⁴ Situating the conception of the play in the age of McCarthyism, Steven Bruhm claims that Sebastian and Catharine are victims of a homophobic environment and capitalist system, where the patriarchal exchange of women is an important economic transaction.²⁵ Joe Falocco argues that the play merely shows the destructive consequences for queers in the 1950s: they are either condemned to live in silence and repression or to come out and be destroyed.²⁶

It is intriguing that after the Off-Broadway première in 1958 only two American critics mentioned the word "homosexuality" in their reviews.²⁷ The Swedish reviewers were far less coy and much more frank in revealing the exact details of Sebastian's death in a Spanish village. Moreover, they stood united in their condemnation of the poet for whom they could not spare one line of sympathy. *Aftonbladet* called him "a strange hyper-esthetic perverted type with paedophile inclinations".²⁸ *Svenska Dagbladet* stated that the play was about "repressed perversions".²⁹ *Arbetet* compared Sebastian's predilection for extravagant clothes and his habit of being surrounded by young men to Oscar Wilde,³⁰ while *Expressen* called Sebastian an "arch-esthetic mama's

boy with homophile tendencies".³¹ For the theatre journal *Scen och salong* Sebastian was "a degenerated upper-class snob for whom we feel the liveliest disgust".³² Only *Stockholmstidningen* was less harsh: "But for the desperately lonely Sebastian Williams did not create any sympathy. Or was it his intention that the woman should receive our sympathy?"³³ Not a single article thus reflected on what it meant to be homosexual at that particular cultural moment. During a period when the authorities were putting severe pressure on homosexuals, the critics failed to allow for any interpretation of the character of Sebastian other than deviant and queer.

However, *Suddenly Last Summer* is not only about repressed homosexuality, it also deals with questions of ethnicity and race. Williams scholar John Bak understands the play as a Gothic attack on the Puritan sense of nationhood. Inspired by Toni Morrison's seminal essay "Playing in the Dark", he argues that the presence of blackness articulates unconscious fears and desires of the USA as a nation whose identity is built on repressing the Other. According to him, Williams "cannot but help reproduce the national fear of the predatory black race [...], since the 'American historical past' and its landscape have relied upon the myth of black savagery to define its national self".³⁴ Bak further states that "we find obvious images of blinding whiteness in contrast to the blackness of the skin that, when combined with homoerotic, religious and cannibalistic tropes, reconfirm a consuming Africanist presence in the play".³⁵ A result is that the play "evoke[s] a blatant dichotomizing of race into its black and white components of which Williams is perhaps only liminally aware".³⁶

While I agree that the play dramatizes racial anxieties, not least considering that it was conceived and produced at a time when the Civil Rights movement caused much resistance, I wish to express some reservations concerning some of Bak's conclusions. It is true that the play toys with the juxtaposition of white and black in its imagery and symbolism, but it must nevertheless be stressed that the action takes place in Mediterranean Europe, in the fictional town of Cabeza de Lobo in Spain to be more precise. As a result, I find it problematic to equate African-Americans with Spaniards. Besides,

if *Suddenly Last Summer* were only about the relationship between whites and blacks in the United States, what would motivate a Swedish director to produce it? Could it have any relevance for an audience outside the US? Moreover, Bak claims that the play “displays the author’s racial fears, conscious or otherwise”.³⁷ However, once a drama is staged by directors with actors and actresses in front of an audience, it becomes a common cultural property whose sole sources of meaning are no longer the playwright, his/her biography and psyche. I therefore propose to contextualize the Swedish production and reception of *Suddenly Last Summer* in a social climate that was not only characterized by institutionalized homophobia, but also by racial biology and forced sterilization.

The State Institute for Racial Biology (*Statens institut för rasbiologi*) in Uppsala was founded in 1922 and was the first government institution in the world to study eugenics. It remained active into the second half of the century. The decision to initiate such an establishment was taken by the Swedish parliament, with strong political support by all parties. Its aim was to study the Swedish population and analyze the effect of genetics and environment on mental and social health. Deeply racist, it linked mental illness, criminal behaviour and alcoholism to categories of race and ethnicity. Although Sweden was by no means the only western country to engage in eugenics, it was certainly among the nations that took it furthest, and the Institute earned considerable international attention and admiration, not least from Germany. While one might expect that 1945 marked a turning point, this was not the case. In a pioneering study, scholars Gunnar Broberg and Mattias Tydén argue that Swedish scientists quickly dismissed the Nazis’ experiments as extreme perversions, defending their own stance as scientific and correct. Any parallels between the Nazis’ and the Swedish research on racial biology and hygiene were ignored.³⁸ After 1956, racial biology was exchanged for medical genetics.

Some very important explanations as to why such a programme was deemed necessary are to be found in the social changes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Broberg and Tydén offer a number of reasons, among them the mass emigra-

tion to North America, the end of Sweden’s union with Norway, the social movements (the labour, the women’s, the sobriety and the free church movements), as well as the insecurity and lack of food caused by World War I (which Sweden did not participate in).³⁹ Added to these social anxieties came the economic recession in the 1930s with decreasing birth rates. This problem of not only increasing the quantity, but also the quality of the population, was most notably discussed by Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, two key Social Democratic figures during the formative years of the welfare state, in their book *Crisis in the Population Question* (*Kris i befolkningsfrågan*) from 1934. While the book debated Swedish family politics, the authors also positively commented on the alleged social utility of forced sterilization, especially of people deemed psychologically ill and unwed or “unfit” mothers.⁴⁰

The uncanny marriage between eugenics and politics had its most palpable outcome in forced sterilization between 1935 and 1975. The programme was introduced in 1935 and a change in the law in 1941 gave the medical establishment greater authority to decide and enforce sterilization by effectively overruling the consent of the individual patient. Those deemed psychologically ill, mentally handicapped, “asocial”, alcoholics or unfit to take care of children were excluded from the collective project of the *folkhem*. During the 1940s and the 1950s, 35.000 people were sterilized. Between 1935 and 1975, 63.000 people were made infertile. What is particularly striking is that the vast majority were women, an average of 93% in the same period.⁴¹ While Broberg and Tydén do not provide a satisfactory answer to this gender imbalance, historian Maija Runcis offers a more pronounced critique and identifies the particular interest in and emphasis on women’s sexuality. The programme affected women who were deemed incapable of taking care of their children, whose sexuality seemed to be unrestrained or whose lifestyle was considered immoral. Forced sterilization was thus a means to control women’s bodies and sexuality. Runcis concludes that this normative project “reveals the *folkhem* as an exceedingly patriarchal place. Swedish population policy of the 1930s assumed that the state had the right to decide who could become a parent or

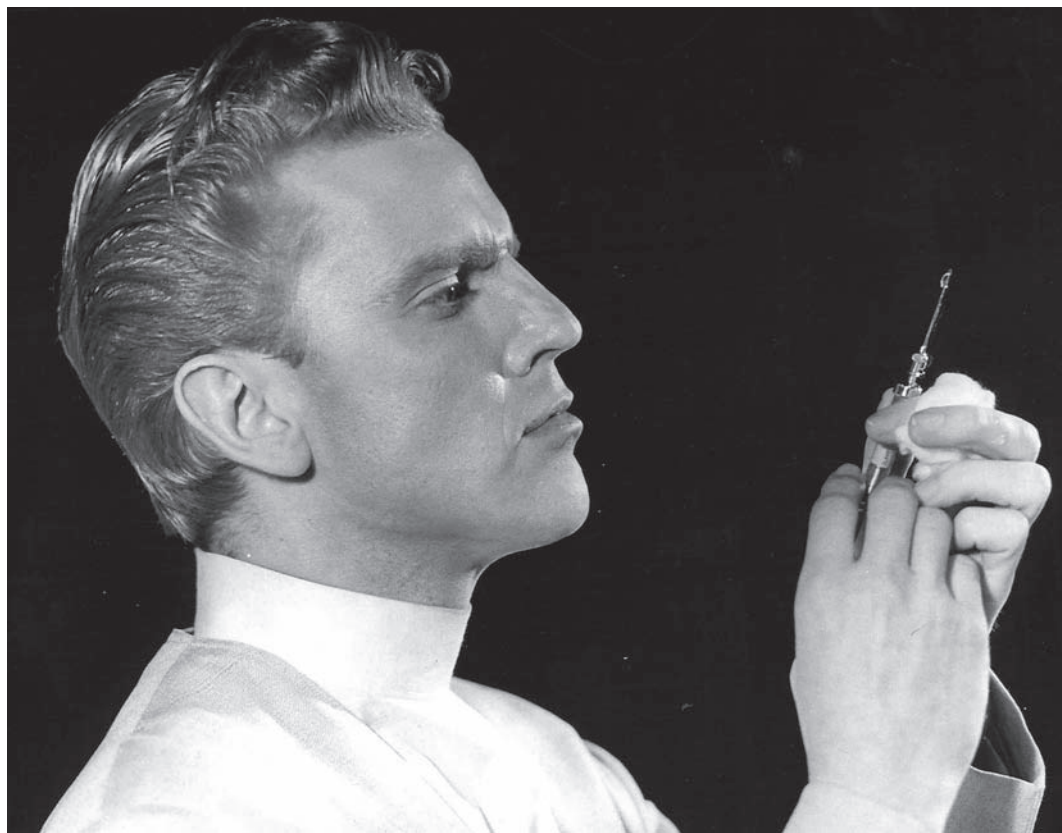


Figure 1: Doctor Sugar (Folke Sundquist)

remain one. The formation of families, childbirth and sexuality became issues for which the state assumed responsibility".⁴² It was not until the 1960s that these issues became publicly debated and politically charged, not least for the emerging feminist movement. At the time *Suddenly Last Summer* was produced silence surrounded these topics.

EMBODIED WHITENESS IN THE MALMÖ STAGE PRODUCTION

In a recent reference guide to Williams' body of work, the figure of the neurosurgeon is described as a very positive character who, "dressed in angelic white, becomes a sweet savior to [Catharine]".⁴³ Such an interpretation seems too optimistic though. The doctor can just as easily be read as a sinister character. In fact, Williams' own directions encourage a more cautious reading. Right from the start, the doctor is identified as "very, very good looking", but

also as "glacially brilliant" and with an "icy charm" (350). Gross points out that the doctor is one of Williams' most ambiguous and unclearly defined characters,⁴⁴ and scholar Jochen Baier underlines that "the possibility to buy off the medical profession for personal gain and power is also a theme that Williams explores in the drama *Suddenly Last Summer*, with an attempt to render the character of Dr. Cukrowicz amenable with a larger donation".⁴⁵ After Catharine has revealed the gruesome details about Sebastian's death, Mrs. Venable leaves the stage once more demanding to "cut this hideous story out of her brain" (423). The doctor ends the play with the highly ambivalent statement: "I think we ought at least to consider the possibility that the girl's story could be true..." (423). Catharine's fate thus depends on whether the neurosurgeon believes her story and, provided he does, whether he is willing to resist Mrs. Venable's attempt at bribery.



Figure 2: Doctor Sugar (Folke Sundquist) and Catharine Holly (Gerd Hein)

Based on the written text only, it is impossible to decide whether the doctor will save or sacrifice Catharine. Crucial for any interpretation of *Suddenly Last Summer* is how the character is approached and embodied on stage in a particular production.

In Malmö, the then 35-year-old Folke Sundquist (1925–2009) was cast in the role of Doctor Sugar. Sundquist had his breakthrough in 1951 in Arne Mattsson's *One Summer of Happiness* (*Hon dansade en sommar*), a movie whose perceived sexual radicalism contributed to a sensationalized discourse on sinful eroticism in Sweden. During a long career, not least at Malmö City Theatre, he starred in different theatrical genres and in a number of movies directed by Ingmar Bergman. The critic for *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* expressed his surprise to how physically changed Sundquist appeared to be in *Suddenly Last Summer*: "If you hadn't checked the cast list in the programme, it would have been difficult to recognize Folke Sundquist in the part of the

doctor, considering how transformed he looked as a blond alphan with a Greek profile, as a young medical lion from an elite clinic."⁴⁶ Sundquist had black hair, but for the production of *Suddenly Last Summer*, he coloured it in order to correspond to Williams' vision of the young blond Doctor. The make-up artist had certainly done a good job. Figure 1 shows how Sundquist's usually curly hair was combed back to pronounce the severity and sharp features of his profile. In the production, the doctor embodied the archetype of the blond Nordic man as well as a representation of Aryan whiteness. We see him preparing the syringe with the truth serum that will make Catharine talk and tell the story of Sebastian's death. His professional handling of the syringe enhances the sterility of the moment and connotes the medical establishment of the 1950s. The white collar is reminiscent of a priest, giving him not only a medical, but also a spiritual authority. He is the one who will drag the truth out of

Catharine about what happened the previous summer. The image shows how director Sundström and his designers, under the guidance of Greta Johanson and Manne Lindholm at Malmö Intiman, used costumes to add another dimension to the character. Through the combination of a medical and a religious authority, Sugar can control both Catharine's body and mind.

In many of the other photographs the doctor is placed behind the other characters, allowing for a privileged position. He is the one who sees, observes and interprets, and at the same time he remains hidden from the analytical gaze of the other characters. Figure 2 shows him sneaking behind Catharine (Gerd Hein), with his gaze fixed on her. Does he pity her? Is he being condescending? Or is he thinking that, after having performed the brain surgery on her, his career will take off? While the doctor is often silent, he has the right to interpret the actions of the other characters. He is one of the psychiatric experts with the power to decide over truth and lie that Michel Foucault describes in *The History of Sexuality* as "a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the

confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile".⁴⁷ This power is further expressed in Figure 3, where Sugar holds back Catharine. Like the tentacles of an octopus, his hands, Mrs. Venable (Naima Wifstrand) and the Venus flytrap's arms all reach out for her, threatening to strangle Catharine. In this scene, the doctor is allied with money, represented by Mrs. Venable and the cruelty of Social Darwinism, represented by the flesh-eating plant. The photograph also illustrates how integrated the stage design, the costumes and the actors' movements and gestures were in Sundström's production. The permeating whiteness conveys a ghost-like atmosphere. The sleeveless dress that Gerd Hein wears is an example of the more classic and practical fashion for women that Schiaparelli created. It is important that the dress is just as light and bright as that of the many other characters. The colour of Catharine's dress is never stated in the drama and was thus a significant choice made by director Sundström. As a result, Catharine is further aligned with her cousin. While both the costumes and the scenography are remarkably simple, the most styl-



Figure 3: Doctor Sugar (Folke Sundquist), Catharine Holly (Gerd Hein) and Mrs. Venable (Naima Wifstrand)

ized element in the production is the insectivorous plant in its white pot made of stone. It is devoid of any leaves and the dryness only seems to reconfirm its life-denying qualities.⁴⁸ Because no unnecessary decorations can distract, there is a greater emphasis on the text and attention is drawn to the symbolic prop of the plant.

Recall that the story is categorized as a Gothic play. While Gothic clothing is often associated with a subcultural style that favours black outfits and skull imagery, flirts with occultism and vampirism and is characterized by a sense of depression and/or mourning as well as a certain gender ambiguity, fashion scholar Valerie Steele argues that this is only partially correct and often distorted by the media.⁴⁹ Above I have outlined how fashion in *Suddenly Last Summer* expresses closeted queerness and social anxieties about early feminism. However, the stark white costumes also serve as a reminder of the frighteningly destructive, devouring and masochist nature of white hegemony, especially when staged in a country that practiced racial biology and forced sterilization. As film and cultural scholar Richard Dyer asserts, discrimination based on gender and sexuality is often intersectionally linked to and reinforced by issues of ethnicity and race:

All concepts of race are always concepts of the body and also of heterosexuality. Race is a means of categorising different types of human body which reproduce themselves. It seeks to systematise differences and to relate them to differences of character and worth. Heterosexuality is the means of ensuring, but also the site of endangering, the reproduction of these differences.⁵⁰

This interplay between racism and heteronormativity explains why, in a racist framework, it is necessary to both control the female body and eliminate the homosexual body, two of the central themes in *Suddenly Last Summer*. I therefore propose the concept of white Gothic fashion to describe the symbolic meaning of the costumes worn by the characters, both in Williams' written text and in the Malmö stage production. White Gothic fashion refers to a distillation and isolation of the dark and destructive sides of whiteness: the brutality against

non-whites and the heteronormative control over sexuality. The play shows how fashion can articulate the unspeakable, that is, the white heteronormativity of the Swedish People's Home and its pathologization of those deemed unfit or worthy to be part of this collective project.

The *folkhem's* obsession with social hygiene was an endemically white project. Runcis makes clear that the issue of "[h]ygienism focused not only on personal hygiene, but also on healthy housing, nutritious food, sexuality, personal relations and generally 'sound' conduct" (359). Cleanliness and whiteness in the *folkhem* were achieved through the control of human sexuality and women's bodies. Dyer notes: "What is absent from white is anything; in other words, material reality. Cleanliness is the absence of dirt, spirituality is the absence of flesh, virtue the absence of sin, chastity the absence of sex and so on."⁵¹ Dirt, flesh, sin and sex – these are the "absences" that Williams repeatedly showed to be at the centre of human life. His dramas are a celebration of contradiction, chaos, confusion, desire and life. A play like *Suddenly Last Summer*, in all its ghastly subjects that the critics point to, stands in opposition to some of the fundamentally life-denying aspects of the building of the Swedish welfare state in the 1950s. According to Williams expert Annette Saddick, *Suddenly Last Summer* is one of the works through which "Williams illustrates the futility of trying to define and contain human desire, of trying to construct and control the human subject through sexuality, and displays the destructive consequences of these attempts".⁵² I suggest that the play is diametrically opposed to the project of building the *folkhem* with its normative and normalizing claims. However, even if the play has a counter-hegemonic potential and even if the production enhanced some of this potential through a strategic use of decorations, costumes and fashions, this does not necessarily mean that its political content fell on fertile ground or resonated well with the critics. I have already shown how the reviewers were unanimous in their condemnation of the character of Sebastian. But how was the figure of Doctor Sugar represented on stage and how was the theme of whiteness received?

Sydsvenska Dagbladet noted the ambiguity in

the doctor's long silences and pointed out that, at no time, did Sundquist give away anything of the character's intentions: "Folke Sunquist's measured acting did not open any crack as to what he was thinking, and that was correct. The only flaw was however that the handsome mask did not allow the uncanny in the doctor's reticence to come forth."⁵³ *Scen och salong* assumed that the doctor believed Catharine's story, even though the reviewer criticized Gerd Hein for playing the final monologue a bit too hysterically: "Now, one was almost surprised, when the doctor believed her, so highly strung and agitated she seemed." The same journal also noted that the play offered "a frightening picture of the dependency of the American medical establishment on private charity and the possibilities to murder a human being in cold blood and without any risk",⁵⁴ but failed to draw any parallels to the contemporary reality in Sweden. Many other critics had a positive view of the doctor and were prepared to embrace the character. *Stockholmsstidningen* praised: "Folke Sundquist plays the doctor with an admirably pertinent tone of voice, a quiet centre on a stage filled with neurosis",⁵⁵ *Aftonbladet* complimented "Folke Sundquist, who in an original mask, played the doctor so reassuringly natural that one felt grateful for him being on stage",⁵⁶ and *Svenska Dagbladet* noted that Sundquist gave the doctor "unexpected and sympathetic weight".⁵⁷ Most reviewers seemed to find the doctor a reassuring character. Not a single mention was made of medical abuse or forced sterilization in the Swedish *folkhem*. While the pictures that document the production offer a different interpretation and show how Sundquist performed Doctor Sugar as a more sinister and creepy character, most critics took to him wholeheartedly. It seems that their appreciation of the actor and his performance blinded them from seeing him play the unsympathetic and dangerous character represented in the photos. As a result, many of the conflicts and tensions in the play were contained and the critics cast a vote of confidence for whiteness, rationality and the medical establishment as represented by the doctor.

CONCLUSIONS

Undoubtedly Tennessee Williams was unaware of eugenics and sterilization programmes in Sweden

when he wrote *Suddenly Last Summer*. What matters here is that, when staged in a Swedish context, the play paralleled domestic mechanisms of social control that remained largely unacknowledged by contemporary critics. The world as Williams represents it in *Suddenly Last Summer* is uncannily reminiscent of the realities of the *folkhem* in the 1950s. Catharine is one of a number of Williams' outspoken and sexually active female characters. Like the practice of forced sterilization, the threat of lobotomy that will control her desires and her forthrightness is another mechanism of control over women's bodies. Additionally, Sebastian's destiny demonstrates the destructive consequences of homophobia in the 1950s. Although Frank Sundström's Malmö production in 1959 never realized the drama's counter-hegemonic potential, its creative use of whiteness in the costumes and the scenography still had the power to articulate, or at least hint at, the unexamined homophobia and the control of women's sexuality in the *folkhem*, while also demonstrating how these issues went hand in hand with white hegemony.

During the period between 1946 and 1960, no less than thirty different productions of Williams' works were presented on Swedish stages, often by well-known directors with acclaimed actors. Some reasons for his popularity, I suggest, are to be found in the specific social and political background of the 1950s. The national, racial and sexual apprehensions of the *folkhem* proved to be fertile ground for the frequent production of Williams' dramas. Despite being an American playwright who managed to express the concerns of his own times and particular environment, Williams nevertheless translated well onto Nordic stages. Apart from dramatizing universal human concerns, emotions and longings, his plays struck a nerve and offered a specific cultural resonance to the Swedish theatre system and audiences.

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All illustrations: Skåne-Reportage (Press & Illustrationsbyrå); Malmö Operas Arkiv (photographer unknown).

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 The next day, *Suddenly Last Summer* was presented at Gothenburg City Theatre, directed by Staffan Aspelin. The play would be produced a third time by Lennart Olsson at Upsala-Gävle City Theatre (première 5 February 1960).
- 2 Tennessee Williams, *Suddenly Last Summer*, in *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams* vol. 3. New York: New Directions, 1971 [1958], p. 419f. References to all further stage directions and quotes from the play are given in brackets.
- 3 Hartvig Kusoffsky, "Skräck och varnagel i Malmö", *Aftonbladet* (13 February 1959). Original quote: "utomordentligt äckligt".
- 4 Per Erik Wahlund, "Sprängladdade Förnäma kvarter", *Svenska Dagbladet* (13 February 1959). Original quote: "en makaber pjäs, [...] en av de otäckaste i modern dramatik".
- 5 Allan Bergstrand, "Outsagt och utsagt", *Arbetet* (13 February 1959). Original quote: "våldsamma effekter".
- 6 Robert F. Gross, "Consuming Hart: Sublimity and Gay Poetics in Suddenly Last Summer", *Theatre Journal* 47 (1995), p. 229.
- 7 Gross, p. 233.
- 8 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, p. 90.
- 9 Shaun Cole, *'Don We Now Our Gay Apparel': Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century*. Oxford & New York: Berg, 2000, pp. 59-65.
- 10 Charlotte Seeling, *Mode: Das Jahrhundert der Designer*. Köln: Könemann, 1999, pp. 142-55; Caroline Evans, "Masks, Mirrors and Mannequins: Elsa Schiaparelli and the Decentered Subject", *Fashion Theory*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1999), pp. 3-32.
- 11 David Savran, *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992; Anne Fleche, *Mimetic Disillusion: Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and U.S. Dramatic Realism*. Tuscaloosa & London: University of Alabama Press, 1997; Mary Ann Corrigan, "Realism and Theatricalism in *A Streetcar Named Desire*", in *Critical Essays on Tennessee Williams*, ed. Robert A. Martin. New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1997, pp. 83-93; Esther M. Jackson, "Tennessee Williams: The Idea of a Plastic Form", in *Critical Essays on Tennessee Williams*, ed. Robert A. Martin. New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1997, pp. 191-208.
- 12 Tennessee Williams, "Production Notes", *The Glass Menagerie*, in *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams* vol. 1. New York: New Directions, 1971 [1945], p. 131.
- 13 Don Ross, "Williams in Art and Morals: An Anxious Foe of Untruth", *New York Herald Tribune* (3 March 1957), reprinted in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, ed. Albert J. Devlin. Jackson & London: University Press of Mississippi, 1986, p. 41.
- 14 Tennessee Williams, "The World I Live In: Tennessee Williams interviews himself", *Tennessee Williams: New Selected Essays: Where I Live*, ed. John S. Bak. New York: New Directions, 2009 [1957], p. 83.
- 15 Evans, "Masks, Mirrors and Mannequins", p. 19. In the same article, Schiaparelli herself is identified by Evans as a "New Woman".
- 16 Gross, "Consuming Hart", p. 240.
- 17 Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003, revised & updated ed., p. 1.
- 18 Brian Parker, "A tentative stemma for drafts and revisions of Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer*", *Modern Drama*, vol. 41, no. 2 (Summer 1998), pp. 303-26.
- 19 John Clum claims that the doctor is a sexually ambiguous character. Even though he says that he is engaged to a girl, there are enough hints that put his heterosexuality into question. Clum notes that Williams' repeated comments on his good looks are a code for homosexuality in 1950's drama. Moreover, Doctor Sugar rejects both Mrs. Venable's charm and Catharine's sexual advances. Clum therefore concludes that "[t]his hint of a remaining homosexual potential after Sebastian's death means that there is no realistic closure to homosexuality in the play". John Clum, "The sacrificial stud and the fugitive female in *Suddenly Last Summer*, *Orpheus Descending* and *Sweet Bird of Youth*", in *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*, ed. Matthew C. Roudané. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

- 1997, p. 135.
- 20 For an analysis of the effects of the Kinsey reports in Sweden, see: Lena Lennerhed, *Frihet att njuta: Sexualdebatten i Sverige på 1960-talet*. Stockholm: Nordstedt, 1994, diss., pp. 39-69.
 - 21 Martin Andreasson, "Samhällsfara eller samhällsgrupp? Riksdagens syn på homo- och bisexuella", in *Homo i Folkhemmet: Homo- och bisexuella i Sverige 1950-2000*, ed. Martin Andreasson. Göteborg: Anamma, 2000, pp. 36-58; Fredrik Silverstolpe, *En homosexuell arbetares memoarer: Järnbruksarbetaren Eric Thorsell berättar*. Stockholm: Förlaget Barrikaden, 1980; Arne Nilsson, "Modernisering och manlig homosexualitet: Svenska storstadsmän kring mitten av 1900-talet", in *Rädd att falla: Studier i manlighet*, eds. Claes Ekenstam et al. Stockholm: Gidlund, 1998, pp. 182-234; Fredrik Silverstolpe, Greger Eman, Dodo Parikas, Jens Rydström, Göran Söderström (eds.), *Sympatiens hemlighetsfulla makt: Stockholms homosexuella 1860-1960*. Stockholm: Stockholmia Förlag, 1999, pp. 485-501; Jens Rydström, "Från fula gubbar till goda föräldrar – synen på sexualitet och genus i lagstiftning och debatt 1944-2004", in *I den akademiska garderoben*], eds. Anna-Clara Olsson & Caroline Olsson. Stockholm: Atlas, 2004, pp. 37-65.
 - 22 Michael Paller, *Gentlemen Callers: Tennessee Williams, Homosexuality, and Mid-Twentieth-Century Drama*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005, p. 146.
 - 23 Ibid., p. 148.
 - 24 Ibid., p. 149.
 - 25 Steven Bruhm, "Blackmailed by Sex: Tennessee Williams and the Economics of Desire", *Modern Drama* 34 (1991), pp. 528-37.
 - 26 Joe Falocco, "Gardens of Desire: Toward a Unified Vision of Garden District", *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, no. 7 (2005), n.p.
 - 27 Paller, *Gentlemen Callers*, p. 154f.
 - 28 Kusoffsky, *Aftonbladet*. Original quote: "en sällsam hyperestetisk perverterad typ med pederastiska böjelser".
 - 29 Wahlund, *Svenska Dagbladet*. Original quote: "förträngda perversioner".
 - 30 Bergstrand, *Arbetet*.
 - 31 Ivar Harrie, "Tennessee Williams nya pjäs var dålig", *Expressen* (13 February 1959). Original quote: "modersbunden ärkeestet med homofila tendenser".
 - 32 Nils Beyer, "Skräckpjäs av Tennessee Williams", *Scen och salong* (no. 3/1959), p. 7. Original quote: "en degenererad överklass-snob, för vilken vi känner den livligaste avsmak".
 - 33 Hans-Ingvar Hanson, "Williams förnämna kvarter", *Stockholms Tidningen* (13 February 1959). Original quote: "Men för den förtvivlat ensamme Sebastian skapade Williams ingen medkänsla. Eller är det hans mening att kvinnan skall ha vår medkänsla?".
 - 34 John S. Bak, "Suddenly Last Supper: Religious Acts and Race Relations in Tennessee Williams's 'Desire'", *The Journal of Religion and Theatre*, vol. 4, no. 2 (Fall 1995), pp. 122-45.
 - 35 Ibid., p. 138.
 - 36 Ibid., p. 140.
 - 37 Ibid., p. 125.
 - 38 Gunnar Broberg & Mattias Tydén, *Oönskade i folkhemmet: Rashygién och sterilisering i Sverige*. Stockholm: Gidlund, 1991, pp. 161-65; Mattias Tydén, "Rasbiologi och andra rasismer", *Folkets historia*, vol. 24, no. 3-4 (1996), pp. 51-63.
 - 39 Broberg & Tydén, *Oönskade i folkhemmet*, p. 16. The authors also point out that Swedish natural sciences ever since Carl von Linné had long been occupied with mapping the biological world, and before the establishment of racial biology, physical anthropology was tabulating the physiognomic measurements of different ethnic groups, the Sami population in particular.
 - 40 For a discussion of the Myrdals and their involvement in the Swedish Government Officials Report on sexuality and sexual morals in 1936, see: Yvonne Hirdman, *Att lägga livet tillrätta: Studier i svensk folkhemspolitik*. Stockholm: Carlsson, 2000, pp. 128-58.
 - 41 Broberg & Tydén, *Oönskade i folkhemmet*, p. 99.
 - 42 Maja Runcis, *Steriliseringar i folkhemmet*. Stockholm: Ordfront, 1998, diss., p. 360.
 - 43 Alycia Smith-Howard & Greta Heintzelman, *Critical Companion to Tennessee Williams: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*. New York: Checkmark Books, 2005, p. 283.
 - 44 Gross, "Consuming Hart", p. 237.
 - 45 Jochen Baier, *The Long-Delayed but Always Expected Something: Der American Dream in den Dramen*

- von Tennessee Williams. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2001, p. 160. Original quote: "Die Käuflichkeit der Medizin zur Machterweiterung beschäftigt Williams auch im Drama *Suddenly Last Summer*, in dem die Person des Dr. Cukrowicz mit einer größeren Spende gefügig gemacht werden soll."
- 46 Hans Ruin, "Den oföränderliga människan", *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* (13 February 1959). Original quote: "Hade man inte råkat granska personförteckningen i programbladet hade man haft svårt att igenkänna Folke Sundquist i läkarens roll så förvandlad var han som blond A-människa med grekisk profil, som ungt läkarlejon från en elit-klinik".
- 47 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, volume 1: The Will to Knowledge*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990 [1976], translation by Robert Hurley, p. 61f.
- 48 In a review in *Arbetet*, scenographer Gunnar Lindblad is praised for how his creation of Sebastian's garden "contributed to creating the right atmosphere of decay and mouldering" Bergstrand, *Arbetet*. Original quote: "bidrog att skapa den rätta stämningen av förfall och förmultning".
- 49 Valerie Steele & Jennifer Park, *Gothic: Dark Glamour*. New Haven: Yale University Press & FIT, 2008.
- 50 Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture*. London: Routledge, 1997, p. 20.
- 51 Dyer, *White*, p. 75.
- 52 Annette J. Saddik, "The (Un)represented Fragmentation of the Body in Tennessee Williams' 'Desire and the Black Masseur' and *Suddenly Last Summer*", *Modern Drama*, vol. 41, no. 3 (Fall 1998), pp. 347-48.
- 53 Ruin, *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*. Original quote: "Folke Sunquists avmätta spel öppnade ingen springa till vad han tänkte, och det var riktigt. Enda felet var dock att den sköna masken inte lät det kusliga i läkarens förtegenhet tränga fram"
- 54 Beyer, *Scen och salong*. Original quotes: "Nu blev man närmast förvånad, när doktorn trodde på henne, så överspänd och exalterad som hon verkade"; "en skrämmande bild av det amerikanska sjukhusväsendets beroende av privat välgörenhet och de möjligheter att kallblodigt och riskfritt mörda en människa".
- 55 Hanson, *Stockholmsstidningen*. Original quote: "Folke Sundquist gör läkaren med beundransvärt sakliga tonfall, ett lugnt centrum i ett neurosens scenrum".
- 56 Kusoffsky, *Aftonbladet*. Original quote: "Folke Sundquist, som i en originell mask gjorde läkaren så tryggt naturligt att man kände sig tacksam för att han fanns med på scenen".
- 57 Wahlund, *Svenska Dagbladet*. Original quote: "oväntad och sympatisk pondus".