



Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* as staged by the Teatro de la Reforma, Mexico City. Under direction of Seki Sano. (This photo is used with permission of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin).

An Interview with Wolf Ruvinskis: The First Mexican Stanley Kowalski

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Wolf Ruvinskis (born October 30, 1921) is perhaps Mexico's most resilient but least appreciated actor. Abandoning his first career as a prize fighter in the late 1940s, Ruvinskis turned to acting and has appeared in over 150 films, 40 theatrical productions, and daytime television dramas. He has worked with such highly respected actors as Jorge Negrete, Pedro Infante, María Félix, and has made several films with Mexico's leading comedian Mario Moreno (Cantinflas), including *El patrullero 777*. Ruvinskis also worked with noted director Salvador Novo in his production of *Medea*. In 1952, Ruvinskis won a Theatre Critics award for best actor for his performance in Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* (*Panorama desde el puente*), and appeared in the Argentine film *La alterna*, which garnered awards for the best movie and the best director. Ironically enough, however, Ruvinskis's most important work in terms of Latin American theatre history may have been starring as the first Mexican Stanley Kowalski in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (*Un tranvía llamado deseo*).

The production of *Streetcar* in Mexico City in 1948 was a landmark event in both American and Mexican theatre history. It was the first time Williams's play had been done in Mexico, proving the play's universal appeal. In "Current Attractions" for the June 1949 issue of *Mexican Life*, Vane C. Dalton attested to the significance of having *Streetcar* come to Mexico:

The conspicuous success of *A Streetcar Named Desire* must be accepted as a highly important event in our dramatic annals, for it has served to acquaint a great many Mexican spectators with certain aspects of the contemporary stage in the United States but mainly because it has introduced and firmly established on our boards a new and capable dramatic company which seems to be on the right track.
(p. 29)

The company that staged *Streetcar* was the semiprofessional group known as the Teatro de la Reforma. This experimental group was founded in 1948 by Seki Sano, Luz Alba, and Alberto Galán. Sano was its life force, however. Emigrating to Mexico in 1939 from Japan, Sano brought with him a zealous devotion to the theories of Stanislavski and Meyerhold. Injecting these theories into Mexican culture, Sano's school included many illustrious actors including Ruvinskis, María Douglas, Lillian Oppenheim, and Ricardo Montalbán. Beyond doubt Sano was responsible for much innovation on the Mexican stage in the 1940s. By the time *Streetcar* opened, Sano was already famous for directing such non-Hispanic works as Anton Chekov's *La petición de mano* (1944) and John Steinbeck's *La fuerza bruta* (1946). In 1949 he directed a highly successful *La fierecilla domada* (*Taming of the Shrew*) in which Ruvinskis also appeared.

Premiering at the prestigious Palacio de Bellas Artes, Sano's *Streetcar* opened on December 4, 1948 and ran for ten performances until Sunday December 12th. The script was translated into Spanish by Lillian Oppenheim, Reynaldo Rivera, and Sano, while noted playwright Rodolfo Usigli supervised their efforts. The play was exuberantly reprised the following spring at the Teatro Esperanza Iris on May 4, 1949 and ran for 14 weeks through August 1st. Ruvinskis starred as Stanley; María Douglas as Blanche; Lillian Oppenheim as Stella; Reynaldo Rivera as Mitch; Agatha Rosenow as Eunice; and Jorge Casanova as the doctor. The sets were designed by Sano and Rafael Villegas.

Ruvinskis's acting debut could not have been more auspicious. The audience adored the 26 year old Ruvinskis, especially the women who swooned over his strong physique. Most rewarding, though, the often harsh Mexican critics lavished praise on him. A typical response came from Ceferino R. Avcilla at the *Excelsior*: "Wolf Ruvinskis was the protagonist who until now was simply a fighter. Well, this fighter talks, moves, and acts with ease, with simplicity and grace—grace in the sense of the Greek concept of it, which is incorporated into the life of the stage" (8 Dec. 1948, p. 2). Antonio Magaña Esquivel at *El Nacional* was even more effusive.

Ruvinskis was not chosen by chance to play the part, and it would be hard to duplicate his efforts. There are frequent reminders of the athlete, the professional fighter, in this particular interpretation by Ruvinskis, but to his credit an actor emerges as well, with admirable control of voice and gesture. Ruvinskis still retains the vicious habits of a man who has devoted himself wholly to exercising his muscles; but thanks to Sano the director there is awakened in Ruvinskis the discipline for a text and the subjection necessary to play this character.

In this role Ruvinskis has discovered all the resources of the actor's spirit. ("El Teatro," 12 Dec. 1948, p. 14)

Judging from Magaña Esquivel's assessment, Sano was entirely successful in inculcating the spirit of Stanislavski in his newest student, Wolf Ruvinskis. Sano succeeded in channeling Ruvinskis's aggression into art.

The following interview with Ruvinskis, now in his seventies and still active in making films, was conducted on June 4, 1992 from his home in Mexico City. We are most grateful to Señor Ruvinskis for his courtesy and keen insights. We dedicate this interview to him. We also thank Tony Canales of Monterey for introducing us to Sr. Ruvinskis.

What made you go into the theatre, to change from being a prize fighter to an actor?

I always liked acting, but I did not have any formal training. I started at the bottom, but the idea of wanting to work in the theatre sprang, I guess, from my fighting before the public. I knew how to win over the public in the ring, and I had a strong personality. I wanted to be an actor but did not know how until one day when I was in the hospital I met a young man who said: "I'm working with Seki Sano who is a director." After talking with this young man, I went to see Sano.

Two actors wanted the role of Stanley—Rodolfo Acosta and Ramón Guy. Sano was debating which of these two would have the role. But they were not Stanley's type. Rodolfo Acosta was an excellent actor, but he had a face like a Filipino, different, a Filipino-Mexican. On the other hand, Ramón Guy was too thin, too sensitive, too much the gentleman. Fortunately, I was Stanley's type. I read a scene, but Sano saw that I had a strong Argentinean accent and he called me out. "Take off that accent and prepare this other scene." I worked feverishly—twelve, fourteen, fifteen hours a day. Everyone in the production of that first Mexican *Streetcar* gave his or her all, and we all profited from the special vision of Seki Sano.

In performing the role of Stanley, what did you think his strengths were?

I carefully analyzed Stanley's character and felt—and this is very important—that in the beginning, when Blanche arrives at the Kowalski house and tells Stanley that she is his wife's sister, she gives him her hand, and when I, as Stanley, take it, she takes it back quickly because she feels that there was a strong sexual current going through her while we had our hands together. It was this contact that made Stanley feel perplexed. The audience may have known it or not, but in this exchange of our hands, Blanche signals a great deal about her emotional history, especially in the way she withdraws her hand swiftly. She

understands that strong hidden sexual force in her and Stanley. Three hours later, at the end of *Streetcar*, I violated Blanche, and she faints in my arms, and I tell her: "We had this date from the beginning."

Why do you think Stanley gets so angry with Blanche?

The work I did in analyzing Stanley rightfully focused on his family. Blanche came to put a rift within Stanley's family. When Stanley returns from buying a few things in Scene 5, he hears her viciously talking about him as if he were insignificant. Blanche's contempt towards Stanley makes him furious, and this becomes the basis of his revenge because he is very wild, this family man.

Do you think that this was the source of his energy, his force?

Yes, everything in his life was related to this force, this wild, uninhibited nature. He existed, he ate, he had sex, he had everything, he was a man, he was an animal, but an animal who was handsome and very interesting. He was not an ambitious man; he loved his wife, slept with her at night, and if another woman came along, that was okay with Stanley, too. He undressed that other woman fast.

How difficult was it for you to identify with Stanley's character?

I would get very angry when newspapers would say that I was an authentic brute, a fighter, and because of this it was not hard for me to play this role. In reality, I had to rehearse hour after hour during the day to be able to bring out Stanley's character. I worked as a desperate man. Initially, they could not take me seriously as an actor. Ironically, my first role in the movies, after doing this production of *Streetcar*, was in *Las ligas de las muchachas* [1949] as a speechless statue because they could only appreciate my physical strengths and not see my talents as an actor. I was hurt so badly that I actually cried; I could not believe it. Given my *Streetcar* work, which received rave reviews, I thought I would get the main role in this movie.

Between Blanche and Stanley, whom did you consider to be more the villain?

I don't think that Blanche was a villain; neither was Stanley. The true villain was a set of circumstances, a way of living. I never turned Stanley into a villain. As Stanley, I wanted only to live well in my house with my wife and to be left alone, not to be provoked by the outsider, her sister. Stanley was wild but very honest.

Did you notice in the Spanish translation of Streetcar if there were any major changes, deletions or additions to make it more acceptable or understandable to the Mexican public?

No, not at all. Sano respected the play in every sense; he had a high regard for *Streetcar*. But he also had a very Stanislavskian sense of theatre in interpreting Williams's characters. At one time, to allow the audience to see Stanley's vulgarity, Sano made him clean his feet with one of his socks. Not even Brando's predatory Stanley did that!

Some of the reviews focused on the striking way Sano has Blanche leave at the end of Streetcar. Would you comment on the way Sano may have changed Blanche's final exit from the Broadway production?

Unlike other productions, in ours Blanche leaves by walking through the audience and is accompanied by the doctor and nurse. She was led away in a white housecoat, or robe, by the doctor because when he arrived, Blanche was in the bathroom. She leaves the stage, therefore, right down the middle and through the audience, not behind the stage or on the side as in the New York production. As the doctor leads her out, the nurse carries Blanche's small suitcase. The effect on the audience was moving, awe-inspiring.

Did Tennessee Williams ever see your production in 1948- 1949?

No. But I became a very good friend of Williams because I played Stanley in another production in Spain, at the Reina Victoria in Madrid in 1961 or 1962. But I later withdrew when the production was to go on the road. I also wanted to leave Spain because I did not like the director. Then I returned to Mexico.

Did you get to know Tennessee Williams in Spain or had you met him before?

I met Williams in Spain. We were both staying at the same hotel. One day he needed to leave for Tangier—he was a bit drunk. If it were not for me, he would have missed the airplane, but I called the airport and arranged for them to wait for him. He used to call me "the magician." We played cards at the hotel a lot. At one time, when we were playing cards in his room with Orson Welles, I started to make some of my own magic with cards, too. Williams and I talked on various occasions; I respected him greatly.

How was it working with Sano? What was he like as a director?

Sano was fastidious. Everything had to be analyzed and reanalyzed, but he was a realist. We reached a point, and there we would leave it. About two weeks before the premiere we were rehearsing the last scene of *Streetcar*. We

were playing poker, and Blanche was in the bathroom. All of us were laughing as if we did not care what was happening. Seki Sano said: "Something here is not right." It took us about six days, analyzing, looking, until we finally saw, with Sano's help, the true meaning of this final poker game. Stanley was laughing only to hide the problem of the possible disclosure of his true deeds, and his friends were really indignant. Their anger was the reason behind the fight in this scene. Even for something as relatively small as Stanley's laughter, we spent days, four to six hours a day in fact, rehearsing one word, one gesture. Sano did not believe in theatre just for theatre's sake; you had to move and act in a certain way. He would repeatedly say, "No, do it another way; I'm interested in seeing another perspective."

What was your opinion about the Mexican theatre critics of 1948-1949 and the way they reviewed you and the production?

The critics in general were very good, but it cost them a lot to accept Seki Sano, a Japanese who came to Mexico with revolutionary techniques. Rehearsals in the Mexican theatre before Sano used to last one to two weeks with actors reading their lines from promptcards. With this production of *Streetcar*, on the other hand, we started rehearsals in October of 1948, two months before we opened, and we dispensed with cards altogether. The lines were all memorized, and we gave it our everything. I was considered by the critics to be an authentic Pole, stereotyped as brutish. Though I was born in Lithuania, I lived in Buenos Aires. But I regard myself as Mexican; I have lived most of my life in Mexico.

In general, then, all of you in the cast received good reviews, right?

Not just good, but very good reviews. Seki Sano's work was something out of the ordinary; something like this was never done there before. We were all compared to famous stars; I was compared to Marlon Brando. It was very difficult at that time to say that a person like me, as a beginner, could do a play the quality of *Streetcar*. It was gratifying to have our work compared with American productions. I regard this as high praise coming as it did from critics who, because they spoke English and Spanish, knew something of American theatre. I received a lot of letters, and it is a pity I don't have them anymore, especially the one that I received from Señor Ruiz Buñuel, a famous director of that time.

How would you sum up the Mexican audience's reaction toward your production of Streetcar?

The premiere of *Streetcar* was at the Palacio de Bellas Artes. When the curtain fell, you could not hear anything. We were frozen. When the curtain came up again, there was still nothing; nobody in the audience said a thing, nor

did they applaud. But when I went upstairs and got ready to come down again, a bomb had exploded from applause. I remember we were all crying. It was unforgettable. It was madness. The audience was practically glued to their seats, unable to believe what was happening to them. People now sixty to seventy years old who had seen *Streetcar* that first night still recall the experience.

What was it like working with other directors after that memorable experience in Streetcar with Seki Sano?

After *Streetcar*, I had problems working with other directors because they wanted you to feel the emotions immediately. With Seki it was different. He did not believe that as an actor you could feel any emotions unless you first got to know the character. If you said, "I love you, I love you" when you started rehearsals, it would kill Seki. For him you had to analyze your role and the play before showing any real emotion. The emotion had to come out because the situation created it. It was not just acting; it was feeling. Seki used to say that the scenography did not have much value. What had real value for him was what we as actors could give to the play. Seki was totally professional. He could not accept anyone giving anything less of himself than his all.

How did the Mexican theatre community feel about the changes Seki made?

He had a lot of obstacles to face. He used to say: "To do theatre in Mexico is like walking on mud." He was almost deported from the country once because of his criticism of Mexican theatre, though this was never mentioned in the newspapers. What Sano said about the Mexican theatrical community was true at the time. Some in the theatre community were against him and his revolutionary changes. But Seki came and changed everything, our theatre, our acting, our way of looking at what we were doing.