

Alan Swanson

Plays and Politics in Eighteenth Century Sweden

The story goes that in 1771, while attending the theatre in Paris, the Swedish crown prince, Gustaf, was told of his father's death.¹ It is also reported that Gustaf's first royal act was to sack the French theatre troupe then resident at the court in Stockholm.² This was not because they were terrible actors, for he kept some of them on, nor was it because he could not understand French, for that was both the court language and the language in which he usually wrote, nor was it an attack of Lutheran pietism, for Gustaf had, if anything, mild Catholic leanings. No, the reason was both simpler and more complex.

Gustaf III had two passions in his life, theatre and government, and these passions coalesced in the very fact of the Swedish language and in a vision of Sweden as a gathering and nurturing home for all that is Swedish [called today in Swedish *folkehemmet*]. In sending home the troupe of French actors, Gustaf III sent a political as well as a cultural message: his reign was to be overtly nationalistic in its pretensions. This could not have been unexpected and, in-

¹ Beth Hennings, ed., *Ögonvittnen om Gustav III* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1960), pp. 55-56. See also Erik Lönnroth, *Den stora rollen. Kung Gustaf III spelad av honom själv* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1986), p. 35.

² Beth Hennings, *Gustav III. En biografi* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1957), p. 180.

deed, could hardly have been otherwise. What rapidly became clear, however, is that this course would have a populist edge to it, and this constituted a threat to the group of nobles which had become used to running the country. Underneath this obvious patriotic signal lay another, as well, a notice to the court that the new king—whose childhood had been the object of considerable political manipulation, whose political inheritance had been tainted by a failed court *coup*, and whose country depended upon foreign subsidies—had his own mind; in short, that a new and different political moment had arrived.

To explain how an apparently trivial gesture could be so freighted with meaning, we need first to step about a hundred years farther back, to the period of the great Baltic confrontations between the Swedes, the Russians, and the Danes.

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In 1672, the year of Peter the Great's birth, the sixteen-year old Swedish monarch, Charles XI, ended the regency which had governed Sweden since the death of his father twelve years earlier. However central this fact would become in Baltic history, what is important for our purposes here is that the king who declared himself regnant had been educated in a highly unusual fashion, to say the least.

For Charles, not a robust child, was also dyslexic (as we should say today) and, as a consequence, a slow or even backward pupil. Or so the Parliament thought when it criticised his teachers for putting too much emphasis on his physical development at the expense of his intellectual education.³ A solution to the problem came about when someone thought of using plays as a teaching

³ Franklin D. Scott, *Sweden. The Nation's History* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), p. 215. See also Gunilla Dahlberg, *Komediant-teatern i 1600-talets Stockholm*, *Stockholmsmonografier* 106 (Stockholm: Stockholms stad, 1992), pp. 144-46 *passim*.

device for the young king: by showing the boy how a king should act, it was hoped that he would, in fact, so act. The didactic use of theatre has a long history and is even recommended, if with severe reservations, by Plato in his *Republic*.⁴ As is often the case with dyslexics, Charles was by no means unintelligent and he was indubitably courageous, and his later career suggests that such non-traditional pedagogy had the desired effect.

The cultural importance of this fact lies, however, in the atmosphere it created for the presence of theatre in public life, as well as in the theatre that it brought to seventeenth-century Sweden. Unlike the dire effect of religion on theatre in, say, England during the Commonwealth or in France of the 1660/70's, the Church in Sweden recognised the drama's ethical and didactic potential and, except for brief periods, generally supported, or at least did not oppose, its activities. In this, it revived a tradition from the Middle Ages of using plays to portray religious characters and their stories for a non-literate public and to demonstrate thereby positive ethical and religious ideals.

It is of immediate relevance to our purposes here, however, that, with one modest exception, the theatrical troupes which played before the court and the plays which they performed were all foreign. These travelling companies came chiefly from two places, Germany and the Dutch Republic, and their repertory was apparently played in High German, Dutch, and, probably, in French, as well.⁵ (What the young king made of all these languages is anybody's guess.)

The fact is that in seventeenth-century Sweden, there was little

⁴ See especially the discussion, among other places, in Book X (around 604e and following), where Plato allows those kinds of plays and poetry which portray proper civic sentiments. See, too, the discussion of this aspect of the *Republic* by M.F. Burnyeat, 'Art and Mimesis in Plato's *Republic*,' *London Review of Books*, 20 (21 May 1998):3-9.

⁵ Dahlberg, *Komediantteatern*, pp. 333-414.

Swedish material to choose from: a few historical plays from the beginning of the century by Johannes Messenius, some religious and historical plays by Anders Prytz from the 1620's, and a couple of student plays by Urban Hiärne from the time Charles' childhood, at least one of which [*Rosimunda*] was played by students before the young king in Uppsala in 1665. The richness of Italian, French, and to some extent, English and German, theatre of the century puts the poverty of contemporary Swedish drama into sharp relief. War, vast administrative demands upon the economy, and a small population are some of the reasons why there was neither a great Swedish investment in theatre nor a significant pool of playwrights. Yet, in addition to its teaching use,⁶ it was recognized that the presence of a theatre company was a sign of refinement. There seems little doubt that, after the two years of required mourning for Charles X, there was a general yearning in the court for theatre, music, and the other good things to be found in a cultured society. Travelling theatre troupes were, therefore, welcomed back to Sweden after 1662. The return to Sweden in 1666 of Jean-Baptiste van Fornenbergh, from The Hague, provided the occasion for the construction of Sweden's first permanent stage, in a converted lion-house, and van Fornenbergh's presence for many years, playing both for the court and for the public, stabilised the position of theatre in the Swedish capital.⁷

I iterate this information briefly here to demonstrate that at least a hundred years before Gustaf III's dismissal of the French troupe, theatre in Sweden was essentially a foreign and, largely, a court af-

⁶ In Sweden, as on the Continent, there was also theatre in schools, usually in Latin as a teaching device in the use of the language and in rhetorical practice. Strindberg recalls this in the opening scene of *Mäster Olof*.

⁷ Owing to the importance of the lion-house as a permanent theatrical venue, Gunilla Dahlberg discusses its admittedly problematical physical aspects at some length in *Komediantteatern*, pp. 292-332. The lion came to Stockholm as part of the war-booty from the siege of Prague in 1648 and lived until 1663.

fair.

Peter the Great's formidable enemy, the "hero-king," Charles XII, more reknowned to history for his battles won and lost than for his humanistic leanings was, in fact, quite interested in theatre. There are records of his attendance at plays when on leave from some war or other, and at least one group of actors played before him in his winter camp in Germany.⁸ By now, however, the visiting German and Dutch troupes of his father's reign had given way to the more or less permanent presence, from 1699 to 1706, of a French company under the leadership of Claude de Rosidor. Importantly, though Rosidor's troupe was essentially a court theatre, it is clear that it played at least occasionally for the public, as well.⁹

What is significant for the development of a Swedish theatre is that, with perhaps two exceptions (Corneille and Rotrou), Rosidor's company played, in French, relatively current material, from Racine and Molière to Dancourt.¹⁰ As Lennart Breitholz suggested, this brought those in Sweden interested in theatre at once into contact with the best recent French comedies and tragedies. To say it was important, however, does not mean that it left in its wake a great impulse for Swedish plays on similar themes worked out in a similar manner. Rather, it brought to the fore a theatrical world that had not yet been seen in Sweden.

After the dissolution of Rosidor's company in 1706, there seems to have been no permanent presence of actors in the country. There were, however, German companies that passed through

⁸ Dahlberg, *Komediantteatern*, p. 258.

⁹ On Rosidor's troupe and its repertory, see Lennart Breitholz, "Två teaterhistoriska bidrag. I, Rosidoriska teatersällskapets repertoar," *Samlaren* NF27(1946):79-84, and Carl-Allan Moberg, "Essais d'operas en Suède, sous Charles XII," *Publications de la société française de musicologie (=Mélanges de musicologie)*, Series 2, Tômes 3-4(1932/33):123-32.

¹⁰ Breitholz, "Rosidoriska teatersällskapets repertoar," pp. 80-83.

Sweden on tours throughout the Baltic region.¹¹ To judge from the surprisingly sparse documentation available, these *Hochteutschen Comoedianten* appear to have played mostly the rather old-fashioned *Haupt- und Staatsaktionen* and dramatisations of Biblical stories.¹² Though French, German, and, occasionally, Italian visiting companies continued to appear in Sweden throughout the middle of the eighteenth century, there was also a concerted effort at the same time to create a Swedish acting company and its thereby accompanying Swedish repertory.

Stimulated by the return from abroad of Anders von Höpken, a young, theatrically-interested, nobleman, a number of young Swedes with time on their hands formed an amateur company, *Den svenska Komedien*, and, from 1737, regularly gave plays in Swedish at various venues in Stockholm—probably as many as fifty-five performances in 1738, for instance.¹³ These plays were credited to their original authors when they were translations, but there were also Swedish “originals.” These latter, though “original” in the sense that they were made new in Swedish, were nonetheless heavily dependent upon foreign models and sources. The fact that they were in Swedish, however, gave them a popular place, and the work of three or four writers shows a clear attempt to make new plays out of older material.

The advent in 1744 of Lovisa Ulrika, the sister of Frederick the Great of Prussia, as consort to the crown prince, Adolf Fredrik, did not, in the end, improve the lot of Swedish theatre. Deeply devoted

¹¹ See the table in Laurence Kitching, “Wandernde Spieler im Baltikum im 17. Jahrhundert und ihre Suppliken im Revaler Stadtarchiv,” in Kitching, *Das deutschsprachige Theater im baltischen Raum, 1630-1918, Thalia Germanica 1* (Frankfurt a/M: Peter Lang, 1997), pp. 68-70.

¹² See the fliers in Rudolf Björkman, “Die Hochteutschen Comoedianten,” *Samlaren* 29(1908):83-90.

¹³ Trygve Byström, *Svenska komedien 1737-1754. En studie i Stockholmsteaterns historia*, (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1981), pp. 113-14.

to the theatre as she was, Lovisa Ulrika's intellectual life was entirely French and, as her letters make abundantly clear, her tastes were exclusively Parisian.¹⁴

The Swedish company struggled in vain against the competition and finally dissolved in 1754. By the end of its formal existence, the company had become essentially professional and needed, therefore, more plays to keep it going. Hence, the use of many translations and adaptations.¹⁵ In 1754, too, Francesco Uttini arrived from Italy *via* Copenhagen and became master of the royal music and court composer. This brought Italian opera into Sweden. Shortly thereafter, a new French theatre troupe took up residence at court and the French repertory returned to Stockholm.

The struggling Swedish company dissolved and, out of it, one group, under Carl Gottfried Seuerling, began a new, and successful, career of touring the countryside, even as far as Finland,¹⁶ while another, under Petter Stenborg, toured for fourteen years and then applied for permission to play in the capital, a request granted in 1768.¹⁷

Stenborg's company posed no threat at all to the resident French troupe, whose audience was limited to the court and its environs and, above all, to those who knew French and those who

¹⁴ See, for instance, her letters to her brothers and sisters in *Lovisa Ulrika, die schwedische Schwester Friedrichs der Grossen*, ed. by Fritz Arnhem, 2 vols. (Gotha: Perthes, 1909-10), where, with a few early exceptions, operas by Hasse and Graun, with Italian texts (I:79), she reports only on French plays.

¹⁵ See the repertory chronology in Byström, *Svenska komedien*, pp. 111-27.

¹⁶ See Ester-Margaret von Frenckell, *Comoedie directeuren Carl Gottfried Seuerling och dess hustru theater directeurskan Margaretha Seuerling* (Helsingfors: Frenckellska Tryckeri, 1953), and Gunilla Dahlberg, "Till E.K. Maj:ts aflägsnare undersåtares noje," in Claes Rosenqvist, ed., *Att resa var nödvändigt* (Gideå: Vildros, 1990), pp. 18-48, esp. 30-33.

¹⁷ The most important study of this company is still Johan Flodmark, *Stenborgska skådebanorna. Bidrag till Stockholms teaterhistoria* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1893).

needed to be thought to know French. Furthermore, Stenborg had no real theatre for several years, and his company played first in various attics and spare rooms in the town.¹⁸ Eventually he was granted the use of a pavilion in a public park, Humlegården. Because this structure was unheated, it meant he could only perform in the warm months. This did not engender any competition, for the French company moved with the court to the country palace of Drottningholm in the summer. Furthermore, Stenborg's repertory was old-fashioned, consisting mostly, as far as we can tell, of his part of the material from *Den svenska Komedien*. This contained those Swedish "originals," some Molière, a good deal of the comedies of Ludvig Holberg and, remarkably enough, George Lillo's bourgeois drama, *The London Merchant* (1731), which stayed in the theatre's repertory until the end of the century. They also played an apparently endless number of harlequinades, most probably adapted from the *commedia dell'arte* scenarios used earlier in France. There were, as well, many kinds of plays with music.¹⁹ Importantly, however, it was all in Swedish and the company was successful, or at least successful enough to keep together as a company. Even more importantly, Stenborg had a routined troupe and at least one first-rate actor/singer, his younger son, Carl.

We have, then, in Stockholm from 1768, two parallel theatre companies, appealing by language and by repertory to two different audiences. This was not a unique situation in the eighteenth century—in the first third of the century, London had several English-language theatre companies and two rival Italian opera companies,

¹⁸ See the drastic description of its state in Gustaf Johan Ehrensvärd, *Dagboksanteckningar förda vid Gustaf III:s Hof*, ed. by E.V. Montan, 2 vols (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2nd ed. 1878), I:211-12, and the less-colourful discussion in Flodmark, *Stenborgska skådebanorna*, pp. 1-17.

¹⁹ Indeed, until almost the end of the last century, most plays were performed with some kind of music around them, if only overtures and *entr'acte* music. The repertory is discussed at length in Flodmark, *Stenborgska skådebanorna*.

one of which relied heavily for most of its material on the speedy work of a German named George Fredric Handel. At the same time, Paris had both a French and an Italian theatre and Vienna had opera in German and Italian.

We can see, therefore, that the decision to have a Swedish theatre was not an idea born solely in the imagination of Gustaf III, but was already a fact. But if Gustaf did not invent the Swedish theatre, he was certainly the prime mover in raising the stakes by setting it in motion at a high professional level, for he was the one with the money and influence. Stenborg's company gave a tryout for the court on March 11, 1772, at which they played a Swedish translation of (probably) Regnard's version of Plautus' *The Twin Menechmi* and a translation by Christopher Knöppel of Marc Antoine Legrand's *L'Ami de tout le monde* (1724). The performance was a reasonable success and encouraged the king to greater efforts, though not with Stenborg's company.²⁰

As a political instrument, as opposed to being a means for teaching or entertaining, Stenborg's company was apparently just not technically good enough to make the impression that the King felt was necessary. He did, however, take notice of young Carl Stenborg, who quickly obtained a sinecure in the royal machinery and a job as the king's leading tenor.

For the king had decided that opera was the best means to accustom people to hearing Swedish onstage. This attitude toward the native language may strike us today as odd, even absurd. Moreover, since the "people" had been keeping Stenborg's theatre in business all along, the issue should not have been in doubt. How-

²⁰ For Stenborg's application to the king and a description of the event, see Flodmark, *Stenborgska skådebanorna*, pp. 41-46, and the more scathing description of the performance by Ehrensvärd, *Dagboksanteckningar*, I:213-14. Ehrensvärd, however, asserts that the afterpiece was Jakob Ichsell's translation of Poullain de Saint-Foix' *L'Oracle* (1740), but the advertisement billed Legrand's play.

ever, I suspect that the “people” whom the king had in mind were not the same ones who paid to see Stenborg’s comedies.

At such an historical moment, then, given that there would be opera, one would normally expect that a company would be assembled, an opera chosen, its text translated, the whole theatrical apparatus set in motion, and all would be well. But Gustaf had bigger ideas, for he wanted the whole enterprise to be Swedish. To aid in this, he drafted, in French, a five-act scenario based on the libretto to an otherwise completely forgotten French opera on the theme of the wedding of Thetis and Peleus. He had a court poet, Johan Wellander, versify it in Swedish, had his court composer, the same Francesco Uttini, set it to music, he auditioned and hired singers, and probably also did what we would call the stage-direction himself. He was tireless (and, to some, tiring) in getting his Swedish theatre off the ground, and it succeeded. Indeed, so much energy had gone into ensuring the success of the first production that no one had given much thought to what would come next. Someone suggested that an enlargement and musical pastiche be made of John Gay’s and George Fredric Handel’s *Acis and Galatea* (1718/36), from which a great deal of Handel’s music was dropped for being old-fashioned. This piece, or parts of it, had, in fact, received a concert performance in Stockholm many years earlier and was, in that special sense, “known.” This gave time to find the next production, which turned out to be Raniero Calzabigi’s and Christoph Willibald Gluck’s *Orfeo*, in a tenor version even before the more famous production in Paris. Gluck’s work was a great success and his operas remained so to the end of the century, exercising a profound influence on other younger composers.²¹

All this shows something of the close links between foreign

²¹ For a brief survey of these beginnings, see Alan Swanson, “Kellgren’s Libretto for *Aeneas i Carthago*,” *Scandinavian Studies*, 72(2000):381-84, and Alan Swanson and Bertil van Boer, “A Swedish Reinterpretation of Handel’s *Acis and Galatea*,” *Scandinavian Studies*, 65(1993):29-49.

theatre and the establishment of a Swedish theatre in the eighteenth century. As was obvious to Stenborg, Gustaf wanted to establish and support the Swedish language as a fully complete æsthetic instrument. For this reason the Society for the Improvement of the Swedish Language [*Förbättringssällskapet för svenska språket*] came into being. For this reason, too, the Swedish Academy was founded and began awarding literary prizes. And when Carl Stenborg, having taken over the running of the family company, finally moved into a purpose-built theatre in Stockholm, the King bought a loge in it.

When the Royal Dramatic Theatre came into being in 1788, payment for plays was based on a scale that included not only length, but also a play's Swedish originality. While this indubitably encouraged the development of Swedish drama, it also brought forth a vast number of translations and adaptations that passed themselves off as Swedish, because the author frankly got more money if they were thought "original." (And if a two-act play could be turned into three acts or more, so much the better.)

As one can see, there was suddenly a powerful stimulus from the highest political authority in the land for the making of Swedish plays. It is also true, however, that despite the fever of playwriting in the 1770's, the results must be seen as disappointing, in the sense of not leaving much of a permanent deposit in Swedish cultural memory, for it seems to be the case that one cannot simply order first-rate plays by the meter. There were some good plays written—indeed, the king himself wrote at least one of them—and there are some that might merit revival—mostly comedies—but the great and truly Swedish theatrical achievements lay yet another hundred years in the future.

It is fair to ask, then, just what the impression was that Gustaf III needed to create, to ask how plays and politics were wound one another, and to understand this, it is necessary to know that this king had been saturated with the theatre as a child, even more so than his predecessor a hundred years earlier. More specifically, he

had been bathed in the recent French theatre. As children, he and his brother Carl had organised and acted in plays, together with the pages and other courtiers. On his travels to Paris, much of his free time was taken up with visits to the theatre. Even as king, he supervised most of the details and rehearsals of plays at court, and often acted in them as well, until the French ambassador advised him in 1776 that it was unseemly for a monarch to be seen on stage by his subjects.²²

All this manic theatricality had a four-fold social and political effect. First, the King truly loved theatre. He wrote and produced plays and other theatrical events for the court and encouraged some of this material to be seen by the public. Second, he understood that the glamour of the theatre, and a vernacular one, at that, was good publicity. But, third, this intensely dramatic king well-understood that much of the political business of getting things done, and *all* of its public presentation, depended heavily upon theatricality. Such an insight is as valid today as it ever was, probably even more so now that radio, television, and newspapers have taken over the production of news. Specifically, as an absolute monarch, Gustaf III needed to guarantee that attention was always directed toward himself. Much of his hold on power over the higher nobility was centered in the fact that he was a genuinely popular monarch, one for whom agents did not need to whip up an enthusiastic crowd for his public appearances. It is also true that he seems never to have been “off-stage” for a moment in his entire life. Not for nothing was his great model Louis XIV. Fourth, I think the prominence given a Swedish theatre was intended to help wean a foreign-oriented administrative and commercial elite away from its intellectual and cultural dependence upon the external,

²² Beth Hennings, *Ögonvittnen*, pp. 114-15. However, Charles Serfass, “Le Théâtre français en Suède au XVIII siècle et au début du XIX,” p. 43, asserts without source that it was the Council which caused him to quit the stage.

even while the king depended upon French subsidies to keep his country afloat. It may in addition have been a way of reassuring everybody that this king was, in fact, Swedish in a way that his mother, for example, had never been or had even tried to be.

I have suggested here that the permanent establishment of a Swedish theatre was the result of political as well as æsthetic interests. It is clear that these interests are not necessarily in conflict with one another and that æsthetic means can be of service to political ends. That the king understood that the theatre was also potentially dangerous unless closely governed is clear from his infliction of censorship upon it from 1785 onwards: political ends do not always respect æsthetic means. This close interest of government in the effects of theatre persisted into the beginning of the nineteenth century but, by then, the theatre was an established institution with considerable staying-power. After Gustaf's death, in 1792, performances of plays continued and even increased in number.²³ When Gustaf III's son, Gustaf IV Adolf, ordered the Royal Theatre to be detached from the royal household's budget (1806) and that the building be torn down (1807, an act which did not, in the end, take place), the theatre companies, without ceasing production, simply moved to other quarters. There was as well a clear increase in the number of orchestra concerts. Then, too, the central welcoming manifestation in 1810 for the arrival in Stockholm of the newly-elected crown prince, Jean Baptiste Bernadotte, was a grand production of Gustaf III's and Johan Henric Kellgren's *Gustaf Wasa* (1786, music by Johann Gottlieb Naumann).²⁴ That, however, brings us into a different story.

²³ See the calendar in Magnus Blomkvist, "Nöjeslivet i Stockholm 1773-1806," Trebetygsuppsats, Institutionen för teater- och filmvetenskap, Stockholms universitet, 1972.

²⁴ See B. Guston, "Eggert och Küster. Konsertverksamhet och kompositioner," *Svensk tidskrift för musikkforskning* 7(1925):51, 53. See also Nils Personne, *Svenska teatern*, 8 vols. (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1913-27):III, 13-16.