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*Theatre History II with Dr. Felicia Londre*  
*Survey of French Theatre with Dr. Gayle Levy*

### **Now and Then:**

## **French Cultural Influence in Swedish Theatre and the Path of Theatre in Sweden Until Modern Times**

Once upon a time in eighteenth-century Sweden, French-language theatre was the main type of theatre that you could find. To the unsuspecting drama enthusiast, the idea of French theatre in Sweden is strange. However, the presence of French theatre makes sense because French culture was enormously influential at this time in Scandinavia. In fact, the French theatre troupes overtaking Swedish theatres in the eighteenth century were invited by Louisa-Ulrika, Queen of Sweden and wife of King Adolph-Frederick, in 1753. This invitation sparked an upheaval in Swedish theatre that was finally settled in 1771 by King Gustav III and Sweden soon began producing its own theatre again after an eighteen-year pause (Senelick 65). Sweden would encounter more pauses in theatre development after the departure of French troupes. In examining the process of winning Swedish theatre back for the Swedish language, it will prove useful to understand more about the political and cultural atmosphere in Sweden in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, it is also important to note that Sweden has since recovered from the French influence to become a country responsible for producing brilliant theatrical artists.

The French culture (specifically French theatre) was extremely popular in Sweden in the eighteenth century and this influence sparked the beginning of the downfall of Swedish-language theatre. As stated in *National Theatre in Northern and Eastern Europe*, “The taste for French theatre became so general and seductive that people forgot there had ever been a Swedish theatre, and thought it foolish to believe there ever could be. . .” (Senelick 65). It is fair to say

that the influence of French culture during this time period could be likened to a fad, or fashionable trend. In *The History of World Theater: From the English Restoration to the Present*, Felicia Londré states, “By the eighteenth century, the courts of both Denmark and Sweden were eagerly receiving French troupes that would lend them prestige” (Londré 119). The popular Neoclassical theatre style in France was especially influential not only in Sweden, but in all of Scandinavia. Swedish plays and theatre were very much in their infancy, and remained so due to the invitation of Queen Louisa to a “. . .mediocre French troupe in 1753. . .” (Senelick 5). The troupe performed in what would later become the National Theatre. Their presence ousted a Swedish language troupe, called the Stenborg troupe, and made French language theatre the main entertainment.

Queen Louisa-Ulrika was, apparently, quite a Francophile. In *Le Soleil et l'Etoile du Nord*, it is stated that “. . .she adapted her taste to the latest French fashions...she had collections of furniture, porcelains, and French paintings...” (Taylor-Leduc 256). In addition to the Queen’s love of all things French, the Swedish elite “. . . had libraries that held French editions of Rousseau, Bayle, and the Encyclopédie, which, not coincidentally, highlighted the wide dissemination of the French language” (Taylor-Leduc 257). It appears that, at this time in the history of Sweden, French culture was almost a trend, not unlike its place in American culture today. Interestingly enough, although French theatre influenced Swedish culture in the early 1700s, its influence continued after the reign of Queen Louisa-Ulrika into the era of Gustav III. It is also interesting to note that France was not the only country sending troupes into Scandinavia; Italy, Germany, and other countries also participated in this one-sided cross-cultural exchange. As stated in *The History of World Theater: From the English Restoration to the Present*, “As early as 1737, Swedish players had performed publicly under royal patronage at Stockholm’s Bollhuset, but Louisa Ulrika found them not up to her standards and replaced them with French actors and Italian singers. Gustav III also turned to French artists to set standards for the native work he hoped to encourage” (Londré 123). Gustav III used the influence of the French theatre troupes to enhance Swedish theatre. However, the

cultural preference of one ruler, Louisa-Ulrika, impacted the state of Swedish theatre for many years because she was not using the French companies to improve Swedish theatre; she was simply allowing the French to overcome the Swedish companies.

Swedish theatre during the era of Queen Louisa was not nonexistent, it was simply "...a refugee in its own country..." (Senelick 65). The immense popularity of the French theatre was unbeatable, and the Swedish language theatre companies struggled to remain afloat in their native land. Because French culture was so fashionable, it was considered "low brow" to attend Swedish language theatre. Thus, for almost twenty years, Swedish theatre came to somewhat of a standstill. It did not die off completely, but it was not nurtured nor developed much during this time.

Though Swedish theatre was not popular during the reign of Queen Louisa-Ulrika and King Adolph-Frederick, theatre itself was still popular. Though evidently without Swedish-language drama in mind, Queen Louisa-Ulrika and King Adolph-Frederick did build an amazing theatre near Stockholm that still stands today. It was constructed in 1764-1766 by the Court Architect, F. F. Adelcrantz, and is called the Drottningholm Court Theatre. As stated in *An Eighteenth Century Royal Theatre in Sweden*, "Here the tragedies of Corneille, Racine, and Voltaire, as well as the lesser known tragedies, comedies, and operas. . .were performed, evidently with much care for scenic effect" (Havens 23). The touring troupes from different countries would perform their works on this stage for the royals staying in the Drottningholm Chateau. Though it fell into disuse, it was rediscovered in 1921. This theatre is incredible because it is one of our only existing untouched examples of eighteenth-century scenic devices, such as the chariot and pole method of shifting scenery. Theatre historian Felicia Londré states,

Behind the unadorned, neoclassical façade of the free-standing theater is a beautifully proportioned auditorium of painted wood, and a stage house fully equipped with . . . wave-rollers, wind and thunder devices . . . and machinery for achieving a complete shift of backdrop, borders, and wings in ten seconds. Drottningholm Court

Theatre's remarkable state of preservation is owed to the fact that it fell into disuse not long after the assassination of the actor-playwright King Gustav III. (Londré 121-122, 123)

Obviously, Drottningholm was and remains an incredible theatre; however, the fact that Swedish theatre was not important to the royalty is evidenced in the Drottningholm Theatre being boarded up and neglected after Gustav's assassination.

The neglected state of Swedish language theatre ended with the second coup d'état of Gustav III, a lover of theatre. King Gustav dismissed the French troupe in 1771. With this dismissal came a request from the Stenborg Troupe: "... Since the troupe of French players who were formerly here will no longer be performing... and since the Royal Bollhuset is vacant at present, I make so bold as to pray most humbly for Your Majesty's most gracious permission henceforth to perform the Swedish plays there" (Senelick 66-67). Gustav approved of the Swedish troupe taking over this national theatre, and the Swedish theatre was reborn. In the Stenborg request to King Gustav, it was also mentioned that, "Circumstances [over the past twenty-five years] have admittedly not been favourable . . . our countrymen would have the pleasure of understanding what they heard spoken" (Senelick 67). It was, in a sense, just a beginning for Swedish theatre. But the country was ripe to produce its own work by this time. In *Theatre in Sweden*, it is stated that, "Gustaf III was instrumental in founding the Swedish Academy (1786), as well as two national theatres: Kungliga Teatern (Royal Theatre), a musical theatre commonly known as Operan (1773), and Kungliga Dramtiska Teatern (Royal Dramatic Theatre), known as Dramaten (1788) (Claes and Janzon 9). Thus, Swedish theatre owes much to Gustav III who is responsible for its professional beginnings.

However, Gustav III proved himself to not only be a champion of Swedish theatre, but also to be intelligent enough to realize that Swedish theatre needed guidance. Gustav dismissed the French troupe but then proceeded to hire another French troupe to instruct the new Stenborg troupe. According to *Theatre in Swedish Society*, "Gustaf introduced into his court the French troupe headed

by Jacques-Marie Boutet, who was to instruct and encourage Swedish actors. . .Gustaf's idea was that theatre should be a temple of sorts, a temple all the people could enter..." (Flakes 86). Even after French theatre was ousted entirely from Sweden, it still left its mark. For example, the first play to be performed by the Swedish company was *Menaechmi* or *The Two Identical Brothers* in 1772, translated from the French (Senelick 67). It seems that France's influence helped encourage Swedish theatre with Gustav's manipulation. Therefore, though French theatre initially deterred Swedish theatre, Gustav used it to his advantage.

Theatre in Sweden today has recovered from the upheaval led by various foreign troupes. It did, however, encounter many hiccups along the way. French culture was not the only obstacle to Swedish theatre's success. Performers and dramatists encountered typical governmental restrictions and regulations, such as censorship beginning in 1785. In fact, after King Gustav III was assassinated, theatre in Sweden was, once again, left to fend for itself until a more open-minded ruler took the throne. However, this ruler did not take power until the mid-nineteenth century (Senelick 5). What happened in between the reign of Gustav, who championed the theatre and was responsible for the establishment of the first Swedish theatre, and that of Oscar I (1829-1907)?

After the assassination of Gustav III, the Stenborg troupe encountered a lack of interest from the royals. In fact, there was a royal monopoly placed on theatres from 1790-1842 imposed by Gustav IV Adolf (the son of Gustav III). This monopoly banned entertainments for individuals in Stockholm, meaning that it was limited to theatres supported by the King directly. During this over forty-year monopoly, the King attempted to have the Royal Opera House destroyed (Senelick 81). This was supposedly due to the fact that his father was murdered there, but the actions of Gustav IV Adolf suggest that he just simply was not a theatre fan. In fact, it almost seems that Gustav IV Adolf sought to undo all of the foundational work for the theatre that his father accomplished. Luckily, thanks to delays, the Opera House was not demolished. However, Gustav IV

Adolf was not yet finished. He ultimately dissolved the Royal Opera in the early nineteenth century for financial reasons.

Despite the obvious royal dislike of Swedish theatre, independent theatre lovers trudged onwards. Swedish theatre troupes existed openly at this time unlike the era of French troupes in the eighteenth century. In 1834, Anders Lindeberg (who wished to found a theatre) requested that the royal monopoly be dissolved: “It is consequently the above-mentioned monopoly which is the cause of my grief, and this is the reason why I am appealing against it to the Ombudsman for Justice” (quoted in Senelick 92). With this came more censorship, as well as actors’ rebellions. Finally, the royal monopoly was ended with the opening of a theatre called Nya Teatern in 1842. This date marks the first real beginning of Swedish theatre, and it exploded. As mentioned in *Theatre in Sweden*, “The fact that Sweden has not been at war since 1814 has favoured a political and cultural development more secure and sheltered than that of almost any other western nation” (Claes and Janzon 8). With this in mind, it follows naturally that Sweden would produce brilliant performers, directors, and dramatists such as August Strindberg, Ingmar Bergman, and Henrik Ibsen.

The nineteenth century in Sweden called for a change in cultural control. This control was taken by the middle classes and led to a huge amount of literature being produced. One of the leading figures of this time was August Strindberg (1849-1912) (Claes and Janzon 9). Strindberg, a dramatist in the Realist movement, influenced Swedish theatre leading up to 1945. His plays were more psychological than those of the past, and they are still influential today (Claes and Janzon 11). Other important Swedish theatre figures include Ingmar Bergman, director of *Persona* (1966), and Henrik Ibsen, author of *A Doll’s House* (1879), among other outstanding theatre artists.

Today, though not at the same level as America in terms of mass film and theatre production, Swedish theatre is barely recognizable as the struggling creature it once was in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is now better remembered as a country responsible for creating stunning, groundbreaking work as

well as influential artists. Sweden has King Gustav III to thank for championing theatre early on, as well as King Oscar I. Theatre in Sweden has debatably risen to almost the same level of influence in the entire world as France did in Sweden during the eighteenth century. Considering Sweden's influence on the theatrical world today, its eighteenth-century struggles appear to have been minor setbacks to its rise to prominence.

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