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STIG DAGERMAN IN THE NETHERLANDS

Skuggan av Mart (The Shadow of Mart) was the first work by the now renowned Swedish writer Stig Dagerman (1923-54) to reach a Dutch audience. This occurred when a scene from this play was transmitted by the TV corporation VARA on 29 May 1958. Members of the Amsterdam Theatre Academy were responsible for the production. Femke Boersma did the part of Thérèse, Louis Bongers that of Gabriel. The scene was directed by Willy van Hemert. According to the list of productions given in *Den dödsdömda* (The Condemned; AB Federativ, Stockholm 1977, p. 11) the play was two years later performed in Amsterdam, but despite investigations I have been unable to get this laconic piece of information confirmed. On 30 August, 1962 *De schaduw van Mart* was again transmitted by the VARA, this time complete. Translation, adaptation and direction were in the hands of Theun Lammertse. Scene designer was Jan van der Does. The four parts were done by Selma Vaz Dias (Mrs Angelica), Henk van Ulsen (Gabriel), Yoka Berretty (Thérèse) and Cor van Rijn (Victor).

In that same year J. Bernlef, now one of the leading Dutch writers, had his translation of Dagerman's novel *Bränt barn* (A Burnt Child) published by De Bezige Bij under the title *Het verbrande kind*, a title that, like the English one, is rather misleading and certainly does not carry any of the proverbial connotations of the Swedish one. Literally translated the proverb reads 'A burnt child shuns the fire', a concretization of the trial-and-error idea. A Swedish reader would immediately recognize the beginning of the well-known proverb in Dagerman's title. But the author is being ironically misleading, for the proverb is actually contradicted in the novel. *Het verbrande kind* became a great success and the novel was reprinted in 1966, 1967 and 1987. When it first appeared in Dutch, the writer and critic Sybren Polet in *Het Vrije Volk* (8 December 1962) spoke of Dagerman's effective use of suspense and of his lucid style. He called the novel a masterpiece and praised the translation. A year later Bernlef's rendering of the posthumous "Tusen år hos Gud" (A Thousand Years

with God) appeared in *Randstad 6* (De Bezige Bij) under the title "Duizend jaar bij God".

In 1965 a selection of the short stories in *Nattens lekar* (The Games of Night) and the posthumous *Vårt behov av tröst* (Our Need of Consolation), including the title essay of the latter volume, was brought out by De Bezige Bij under the title *Natte sneeuw* (Wet Snow), so called after one of the short stories in *Nattens lekar*. Again Bernlef was responsible for the translation, as well as for a short introduction.

Freddy de Vree's essay "Stig Dagerman" in *Rita Renoir, enz.* (Paris-Manteau, Amsterdam & Brussels, 1973) did not lead to any immediate new translations - despite de Vree's enthusiastically provocative remark that Dagerman's style is "unique in European literature". Not until 1985, in the wake of the renewed interest in Dagerman in France, where a Dagerman Association has been formed, did the Swedish writer return to the Dutch reading public when the renowned publishing house Meulenhoff in Amsterdam decided to present his work fairly extensively. Up to now this laudable decision has resulted in five attractive paperbacks, most of them with Edvard Munch's melancholy woodcuts of tormented human beings on the cover. *Natte sneeuw* was the first to appear in a revised edition, or rather, in two editions, one with a Munch woodcut, the other with Dagerman's face on the cover. The latter edition functioned as a kind of companion volume to the writer Jeroen Brouwers' 39-page impressionistic essay *De levende stilte van Stig Dagerman* (Dagerman's Living Silence; Meulenhoff, 1985). Brouwers had become interested in the Swedish writer when he worked on his study *De laatste deur* (The Last Door), dealing with suicide and Dutch literature. For Brouwers, Dagerman is "the writer of a completely black oeuvre"; his work breathes "quenching anguish and loneliness, melancholy, schizophrenia, a sense of insecurity and powerlessness, obsession with death". Who, one may ask, will be tempted to read Dagerman after this rather one-sided description of his work? Moreover, as Viktor Claes remarks in his review (*De Standaard*, 20 September 1986), Brouwers does not attempt to tackle the metaphysical aspect of Dagerman's sense of desolation. More inspiring for potential readers is Bernlef's comment on Dagerman's style: "There are few writers who create the illusion that every word is irreplaceable and placed exactly where it should be." Dagerman, he finds, is one of these rare writers.

At the appearance of the fourth revised edition of *Het verbrande kind* in 1987, Willem Kuipers in *De Volkskrant* (13 March 1987), one of the major Amsterdam newspapers, remarked that the book was by no means dated and that this "Catcher in the Rye in Swedish" - a rather misleading label - could be strongly recommended to present-day readers. A recent attempt to turn the novel into a Dutch film was thwarted by the fact that the rights had already been given to a French director.

With the publication of *Het eiland der verdoemden*, a translation of *De dömdas ö* (Island of the Doomed) in 1986, a new Dagerman translator entered the stage: Karst Woudstra. Originally a student of Swedish at the University of Amsterdam Woudstra, now a well-known playwright and director, was already an experienced translator of Ibsen, Strindberg and Lars Norén when he tackled Dagerman. At its appearance, *Het eiland der verdoemden* was called an "excellently translated ... interesting novel", by Atte Jongstra in the widely read weekly *Vrij Nederland* (12 July 1986). Like most critics Jongstra, admitting that the book made difficult reading, compared it to a jungle, and seemed to reveal a qualified interest in it by calling it "a fascinating document of a period". Nevertheless Dagerman had stolen his heart, he confessed, with the short story "Waar is mijn Noorse trui?" (Where is my Norwegian Sweater; the original actually speaks of an Icelandic sweater) in *Natte sneeuw*.

In 1988 Meulenhoff brought out Dagerman's debut novel *Ormen* (The Snake) under the title *De slang* in Karst Woudstra's translation. Atte Jongstra in *Vrij Nederland* (2 July 1988) found it "a moving novel with an elaborate, controlled symbolism"; the composition, he declared, is "miraculously balanced", the narration "marvellous". Whether you want it or not, he concluded, "as a reader you are drawn into the abyss of Dagerman's vision of the world".

The most recent Dagerman publication in the Netherlands is the discerning report from postwar Germany entitled *Tysk höst* (German Autumn), literally rendered as *Duitse herfst*, this too translated by Woudstra. (A chapter called "Ruïnes" (Ruins) received a prepublication in a Swedish issue of the journal *De Tweede Ronde*, spring 1989, edited

Scene from: Bränt Barn by Teneeter (1994). From left to right: Maureen Tauwenaar, Rinus Knobel, Joost Koning and Agnes Bergmeijer.
(Fotograph by Bas Mariën)

by the author of this article.) In *De Volkskrant* (5 January 1990) Michaël Zeeman concluded his review by stating that *Duitse herfst* ought to be obligatory reading for everyone with a historical consciousness.

The interest in Dagerman is still quite marked. A sign of this was the 1994 stage production of *Bränt barn* by the theatre group Teneeter from Nijmegen. Recognizing the untranslatability of the title, the group, rather surprisingly, decided to keep the Swedish title. Dagerman dramatized, published and staged *Bränt barn* himself in 1949 under the title *Ingen går fri* (Noone Is Acquitted). His dramatization was rather coolly received by the critics. Arguing that Dagerman's eighteen-year-old protagonist, Bengt, today would correspond to a male in puberty, Teneeter has made their own version aimed at a young audience from fourteen up. Presumably based on Bernlef's translation of the novel (the name of the translator is missing in the program) and directed by Jos van Kan, the Teneeter production was on the whole well received. Ad van Oorschot in *De Gelderlander* (8 January 1994) found Joost Koning in the lead "very convincing", but to Monique Gadiot in *Gelders Dagblad* (10 January 1994) his "mannerisms", although they suited the part, seemed somewhat

irritating. Bengt's father Knut was done by Rinus Knobel, an experienced actor, his sad girl friend Berit by Agnes Bergmeijer and Knut's mistress Gun by Maureen Tawnaar. Knut's two sisters, played by Andrea Fiege and Maaïke van der Meer, helped to provide a touch of humour to the play. With its production of *Bränt barn*, Marian Buijs in *De Volkskrant* (22 January 1994) claimed, Teneeter had created a performance which, "despite the somber subject, has many comical moments." And Monique Gadiot concluded that the group had "succeeded in providing consolation from a work by an inconsolable writer. That alone makes *Bränt barn* a remarkable production."

Although Dagerman's influence on Dutch and Flemish writers has not yet been demonstrated, his importance for Bernlef, de Witte and Woudstra seems evident. Sybren Polet and Maarten 't Hart, both writers with a knowledge of Swedish, may also owe something to him.

It remains to be seen whether the renewed interest in Dagerman in the Netherlands will result in still more translations and stage productions. In a recent 40-minute Dutch radio program, completely devoted to Dagerman (*NOS*, 15 February 1990), he was referred to as the most important Swedish writer after Strindberg - a subjective statement which nevertheless indicates the growing recognition of Dagerman as one of the major European writers of this century.