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***BLACK OTHELLO* PRESENTED AT  
COLUMBIA'S DEUTSCHES HAUS  
TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2008**



**"BLACK OTHELLO" (IRA ALDRIDGE) AND CECILIA SIDENBLADH**

Ira Aldridge, America's first great African-American actor of Shakespeare, is the lead character in a new play to be presented November 11 by the Columbia University Swedish Program. The author of the play, Cecilia Sidenbladh, will be present at the play reading, to be held at Deutsches Haus, 420 W. 116<sup>th</sup> Street, N.Y.C. (between Amsterdam Ave. and Morningside Dr.).

The program begins at 7 p.m., the public is invited, and admission is free.

The text has been translated into English by Verne Moberg, lecturer in Scandinavian languages at Columbia, and the cast of professional actors will be directed by Robert Greer.

The action is set in 1866, when Ira Aldridge played Othello to his Swedish

wife's Desdemona at Stockholm's Royal Dramatic Theater. Though he was born in New York and educated in the United States, Aldridge left the country at an early age to find better acting opportunities in Europe, where he toured successfully for some years. Earlier, black performers were seen as inferior entertainers, clowns, or freaks. But Aldridge chose dignified roles, performed in respected venues, and won praise for his acting of Othello and other roles. The story of his visit to Stockholm is a fascinating blend of romance, mystery, and comedy as two actors--Aldridge and his Swedish wife--play different roles, onstage and in reality, dealing with each other's lies, secrets, and longings to be loved for what they are *not*.

*Black Othello* is sponsored by the Swedish Program with the assistance of Columbia's European Institute and the Department of Theatre, Barnard College. For information: Tel.: 212-854-4015; E-mail: <vam1@columbia.edu>. Advance reservations are not required.

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A native of Stockholm, Cecilia Sidenbladh earned her doctor's degree at the University of Uppsala in 1987 with a dissertation on the 19<sup>th</sup> century Swedish Romantic author Carl Jonas Love Almqvist. From 1983 to 1985 she studied playwriting at Stockholm's Dramatic Institute and film dramaturgy at that institute and with Swedish TV. In her career, she has produced ten plays, four novels, and six children's books.

Her writing began with two novels from the 1790s and the turn of the century to the 1800s, and her first produced play dealt with the witch trials in South Stockholm in the 1670s.

Sidenbladh's one-act play *Isjungfrun* (The Ice Maiden), based on the diaries of the 19th century author Victoria Benedictsson, was originally done in 1995 at Stockholm's Klara Teatern. In April 2000 it was featured at Lund University, with Sweden's Royal Dramatic Theater actress Irene Lindh in the title role, and on November 3 of that year, the same play was given a reading at Columbia University's Deutsches Haus in an English translation by Verne Moberg. Sybil Lines played the lead, directed by Robert Greer, and the piece was repeated in several venues, including the Strindberg Museum in Stockholm (on August 13-25, 2002). The performances of both Irene Lindh and Sybil Lines were recorded and included in the CD series "Scandinavia Off

Broadway,” along with an interview with the author by the translator. All were produced by the Columbia Swedish Program.

Sidenbladh enjoys writing about people of the past and often focuses on women’s issues. Several of her plays deal with C.J. L. Almqvist, whose relationship to Sweden’s first female journalist (Wendela Hebbe) is the topic of her play *Wendelas mörka lockar* (The Dark Locks of Wendela Hebbe), performed at Stockholm’s City Museum in April 2001. Another Sidenbladh play about Wendela Hebbe was done in the summer of 2008: *Midsommarafton vid Snäckviken* (Midsummer’s Eve at Snail Bay, about Wendela and her daughters, whose summer house served as the setting.

Recently the dramatist was commissioned by the Royal Dramatic Theater to write a play about Almqvist’s trial (for treason and attempted murder by poisoning): entitled *Skyldig – icke skyldig* (Guilty – Not Guilty), this one-act documentary crime drama for a half dozen actors is now scheduled to be presented as a staged reading in Stockholm. The evidence presented in the trial determines whether Almqvist was a psychopath or a victim himself.

Almqvist also puts in an appearance in her new play *Black Othello*, in which the Swedish wife of Ira Aldridge plays a key role in the trial, testifying against the writer, enabling an outcome that led to his exile in America.

Cecilia Sidenbladh has also published historical novels and children’s books. In September to October 2003, in honor of the 700th birthday of St. Birgitta, there was a production of her play *Djävulens advokat* (The Devil’s Advocate), also about a trial (between Birgitta and the Devil), and Birgitta’s revelations, and earlier that year came *Birgitta, Birgitta!*, a book for young adults, told from the point of view of a female companion to the saint.

In addition, the same publisher brought out another anniversary edition: *Min pappa blomsterkungen* (My Papa, the Flower King), Sidenbladh’s children’s book to commemorate the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Swedish botanist Linnaeus. The book is written from the point of view of his seven-year-old daughter Sofia, who was allowed to accompany her famous father on some of his adventures and even enjoyed the privilege of standing in front of him as he lectured.

Sidenbladh has also produced children's book versions of classics in collaboration with the Swedish illustrator Tord Nygren, one a story version of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2001) and another of Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* (2003).

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