

A Fecund Harbor for Tennessee Williams

There are revelations aplenty at a Provincetown festival

BY RANDY GENER



COURTESY OF JOE HAZAN

Tennessee Williams in Provincetown in the 1940s.

MAN: I've—I'm—Perfectly willing—To leave you all my new work, I mean to make out a will leaving all my new work to you! Call a lawyer, get a lawyer up here, we'll make out a legal document, now, today! —Leaving you all my work, everything that's unsold.

WOMAN: Thank you. —Suppose it's worthless?

MAN: Do you think it's worthless?

WOMAN: How do *you* feel about it?

MAN: I think I'm—breaking new ground, I'm— breaking new ground, I'm—

WOMAN: [*coolly*]: You're rationalizing.

—From *The Day on Which a Man Dies* (*An Occidental Nob Play*), by Tennessee Williams

Flying in a little plane from Boston to attend a festival of obscure Tennessee Williams plays in Provincetown, Mass., seems to me to be one definition of insanity. For a while there is just the open blue, mixed with the crisp sensation in the gut that you might encounter something seminal, like pearls in the sea, in the lesser-known Williams works that are seeing the first light of actual production. And then there it is: the crook of land at cape's end, a curl of sand dunes and bright greens, of

gleaming wharves and jumbled houses curving into the blue ocean, and then the town, snuggled up in that spiral arm, the image of refuge and welcome and frolicsome pursuits. High bohemia, it's been called.

Summers in P-town are an escape worthy unto itself: the rainbow banners outside quaint New England homes and shops, the stream of people cruising one another along the main drag of Commercial Street, the bicycles chained shoulder to shoulder along the fence that marks the entrance to the crescent beach of Herring Cove. Suddenly the idea of flying to this carnivalesque summer resort town only to be trapped inside black-box theatres for a roster of performances has never seemed more absurd.

Moreover, as far as theatre in concerned, Provincetown is viewed as a trashily endearing hub for drag queens, comedians and solo performers: Want a cocktail with that naked boy singing? Its claim to fame as the progenitor of experimental noncommercial theatre in America—it was here that the Provincetown Players nurtured self-consciously modernist figures such as Susan Glaspell, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Eugene O'Neill—is lost in the mist of memory and history, buried in a republic of broken dreams. But over the past two sum-



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mers, the Tennessee Williams Provincetown Festival, which its curator David Kaplan co-founded with festival board president Jerome T. Scally, executive director PJ Layng, Alix Ritchie and Patrick Falco, has been creating some history of its own. Of the four annual U.S. festivals devoted to celebrating the Southern dramatist's life and work, P-town is the only Yankee affair, the only event that strictly centers on performances. (The New Orleans festival in March, which attracts hundreds of people to the French Quarter, is mainly a literary soiree whose scope goes beyond Williams; the two Mississippi tributes, one in Williams's birthplace of Columbus and the other in Clarksdale, are a smorgasbord of lectures, student pieces, parties, tours of landmark houses and scholars' conferences.) "Ours is primarily a theatre festival, and the performances come from different places, not just local people doing Williams plays," states Kaplan, the author of a smart, cheeky monograph, *Tennessee Williams in Provincetown*, which serves as the festival's manifesto.

Making its appearance in the off-season days of late September, when the light noticeably changes, the salty-aired season shifts



ERIN E. HEASLEY



COURTESY OF JOE HAZAN

At left, a dreamy-eyed Williams; at right, the playwright in Provincetown with friends, from left, Joe Hazan, Ethel Elkovsky and Walter Hollander.

gears, and the Felliniesque swirl of activity down Commercial Street eases up, the P-town festival steals a piece of the fall action, spurred by special weekends that cater to groups ranging from the local animal shelter and Alcoholics Anonymous to leather fetishists and husky bears. Like the other Williams celebrations, Provincetown lays claim to the reflected glamour of historical significance. Last year, a once-lost early work, *The Parade*,

or *Approaching the End of a Summer*, in which Williams, at the age of 29, wrote freely about his homosexual desires, premiered at this quirky vacation place where for four summer seasons—those of 1940, 1941, 1944 and 1947—he wrote early drafts and short-story versions of the plays that made him famous—*The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Summer and Smoke* and *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale*. In P-town, Williams fell in love unguardedly for perhaps the only time in his life, with a 22-year-old Canadian draft dodger and dancer, Kip Kiernan, whom the playwright thought resembled the Russian dancer Vaslav Nijinsky. Provincetown was where Pancho Rodriguez, the hot-blooded hunk whom Williams thought might replace Kiernan as his lover, tried to run him down with a Pontiac. It was where he first met and had a sexual assignation in the dunes with his Sicilian-American companion of 14 years, Frank Merlo. As Williams recalls in his *Memoirs*, "The little god was given such devout service that he must still be smiling."

Affectionately staged by Shakespeare on the Cape, *The Parade* made headlines last year, because its existence exposed the lie of conventional wisdom, especially among Williams's politically correct detractors and gay-liberation activists, which argued that he was an innately tragic and self-loathing gay dramatist—that his homosexual characters are cloaked in heterosexual disguise, their humanity distorted. "There is a lot of nonsense that says Williams was conflicted about his homosexuality in this period of his life," says Kaplan. "That's not true. The tone of this play is beautifully unequivocal. It is not whining. It is not apologetic. He demands his audience to take seriously gay people on stage." Hastily composed in July and August

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Mia Phoebeus (formerly Ethel Elkovsky) at Poor Man's Landing, where Williams resided in P-town.

of 1940, *The Parade* is an autobiographical document from what he called that “pivotal summer when I took sort of a crash course in growing up,” a chronicle of how he had finally come “thoroughly out of the closet.”

Parade's debut seems to be transforming P-town into a haven for first productions of Williams's unknown one-acts. This past summer's second edition debuted two: *Sunburst*, a 1980 short play about an elderly woman held hostage in a hotel room, and *The Pronoun 'I'* (1971), an odd composition subtitled “a short work for the lyric theatre” and featuring a mad English queen and a “petulantly pretty youth” with “only his genitalia clothed” (according to the stage directions). Negotiations are currently underway for a 2008 premiere of another short work, *Green Eyes*, about the quarrels of a honeymooning couple in the French Quarter, and, according to Kaplan, the 2009 festival might see the airings of short or early versions of several major dramas (notably *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* and the brutally honest *Vieux Carré*).

THESE AREN'T THE ONLY WILLIAMS

one-acts coming out of the woodwork. Links Hall of Chicago is touting Kaplan's “world premiere” in February of the 1959 version of *The Day on Which a Man Dies*, about the vicious quarrel of a married couple believed to be patterned after the painters Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, which Williams subsequently revised, dedicated to Yukio Mishima (who committed *hara-kiri*) in 1970 and subtitled “An Occidental Noh Play.” In April '08, all the above-mentioned one-acts will be collected in a new anthology, *Traveling Companion and Other Plays*, edited by the scholar Annette J. Saddik and published by

New Directions, which has put out all of Williams's works since 1944. “All the plays in the book are previously uncollected, and all are previously unpublished in a trade edition,” says New Directions's Thomas Keith. “A few of them have been published in literary journals, one in a magazine, and one in a limited edition version.”

This year New Directions also reissued

new editions of Williams's collected poetry (accompanied by a CD of the drawing poet reading his own works), his prismatic and gossipy 1975 *Memoirs* (with a predictably reverent essay by the filmmaker John Waters), and the second volume of Williams's voluminous correspondence (circa 1946–57). The major publishing event of 2007, however, came from elsewhere: Yale University Press recently released the magisterial *Notebooks*, a postmodernist masterpiece of proxy confessions, random jottings and fragmentary musings that gathers the entire known corpus of more than 100 drugstore notebooks that Williams kept from his 25th birthday in 1936 to two years before his death at the age of 71 in 1983. Scrupulously researched by the New Jersey-based scholar Margaret Bradham Thornton, whose breathtaking annotations take up half of this massive tome, these journals make public Williams's self-pitying, unvarnished private voice. Although not as great as the writer's diaries of Virginia Woolf or Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notebooks's* entries offer a worm's-eye-view of how this lust junkie—who was intent on pursuing epic fornications and satisfying his yawning appetites

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for drink, drugs and writing—transmuted it all into art. In leaving *Notebooks* to posterity, Williams hoped that “they may have some usefulness as a history of an individual’s fight for survival.... I wrote them purely the way that Catholics talk through a black cloth to the priest in the next cubicle. Except that I was both Father Confessor and Son Confessor.”

Lately some skeptical observers, among them Williams sympathizers, are asking: Is there such a thing as too much? In an October '04 *New York Times* article, timed to the Manhattan Theatre Club premiere of *Five by Tenn* (which began at the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, D.C.), journalist Jesse Green all but replied in the affirmative. Tetchily, he queried: “Do the benefits of seeing his [Williams’s] lesser works outweigh the risk to his reputation?”

On the evidence of *Five by Tenn*, Green suggested that the dramatist’s as-of-then-unpublished one-acts were “not good enough to stand on their own.” “They might almost be drafts,” he added. “Or they might not. There’s no way to know how Williams viewed them or how he would want them handled.” With the deaths of Maria St. Just, the co-executor



RANDY GENEV

David King as the cocaloony in *The Gnädiges Fräulein*, at Fisherman’s Wharf.

to his estate, in 1994 and of the playwright’s sister Rose in 1996, Green took to task the University of the South in Seawee, Tenn. (to whom the estate passed in accordance with Williams’s will); the *Times* article described it as “a university with financial interest (and little theatrical experience).” “The hard part,” the article went on, “involves the university’s potentially contradictory role as protectors

of Williams’s reputation (a role that may require keeping the cork on even the good stuff) and as rights-holders in his works (a role that encourages a willingness to expose almost anything).”

This conundrum casts a shadow upon Provincetown’s renewal of interest in Williams’s past works. “There are obviously some plays that don’t work, things that are not being published because they were left unfinished,” Kaplan says. “I don’t feel I’m robbing his notebook. I would only show incomplete work if I thought it had some integrity by itself and could be related to works we already know.”

Like the daily critics who once attacked Williams like uncomprehending furies, what the anti-intellectual *Times* piece did not adequately address—but which this summer’s expertly curated four-day Provincetown festival directly confronted—is that for quite some time now Williams’s later plays (for convenience’s sake, the ones that came after 1961’s *The Night of the Iguana*) have been undergoing a healthy posthumous reevaluation, for which the only genuine rejoinder is to allow further publications and more productions. Among academics, scholars and enthusiasts, lively debates have been brewing, engaging speculations about the presentational values and anti-mimetic qualities that are characteristic of Williams’s works in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s. As Saddik theorized at a New Orleans scholars’ conference, “Rather than focusing on what language could say with his long poetic speeches, he focused more on pauses, silences, gaps, truncated sentences, incomplete sentences—on the inexpressible. I think that aided him in achieving his goal of articulating a truth

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CARLOS ROSALES

Zachary Clause, left, and Jeremy Lawrence in *The Chalky White Substance*.

which is beyond the surface and beyond linguistic signification.”

Although he was very much a Broadway animal throughout his life, as early as 1945 Williams had gestured toward “a conception of new, plastic theatre which must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions.” In addition to this description of the expressionistic qualities of *The Glass Menagerie* from his production notes, Williams refers to a “sculptural drama” in his *Notebooks*. Around the time Williams was writing *Milk Train*, his writing entered what he himself began to speak of as a decadent phase. It was not a complete and total break from poetic realism, but his later plays grew stranger, more fragmentary, at times campier and less naturalistic. He broke formal rules of structure, juxtaposed past and present, intermingled places and events, blurred the lines between memory, invention and facts. Consciously, he took up the abstract techniques of Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee, not merely to articulate his ambiguous relationship to slice-of-life realism but to investigate alternative forms of expression: romantic fantasy, grotesque comedy, far-out allegory, surrealism and caricature. Williams’s lyric poetry moves in parallel to this restless dramatic experimentation.

THE MENAGERIE OF WILLIAMS PIECES

presented at Provincetown, however significant or slight, was not short of revelations. Sarah V. Michelson’s Brooklyn on Foot production of the 1953 dream play *Camino Real*, in which Williams intermingles some of literature’s most memorable characters (Don Quixote, Camille, Marguerite Gautier, Baron



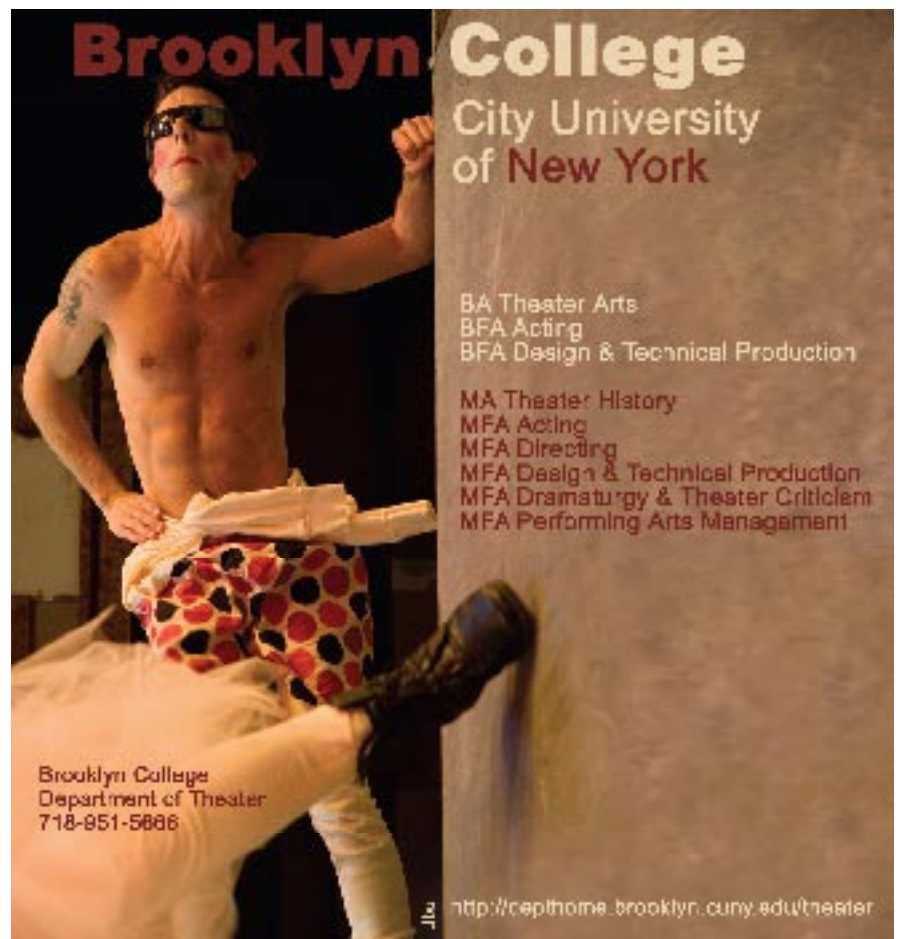
KELLY DAVINSON

Ryan Landry performs *The Plexiglas Menagerie* at the festival.

de Charlus) in a boldly symbolic netherworld of beggars, rogues and outcasts, serves as a stark reminder that any line of demarcation between Williams’s so-called early and later plays are, at best, arbitrary. A poet and bohemian, Williams would never escape his natural inclinations to take chances, no matter how hard he tried. “Make voyages, attempt

them,” says Byron in *Camino Real*, and Williams persistently did so in art and life.

By 1965, when *Esquire* first published *The Gnädiges Fräulein*, Williams had ventured into Antonin Artaud’s theatre of cruelty. Staged site-specifically by En Avant Project and Main Street Players with a gray marina substituting for the lunatic tropical fantasia of Cocaloony Key, Fla., and its young actors framed by posters advertising trolleys, beers and schooner rides, this devastating portrait of Key West attained the broadly ironic qualities of a Pop Art cartoon. Dark-haired Melissa Graves was a white-faced cutup as the gossip columnist, Sarah Schmitz a wide-eyed wack as the boarding-house proprietress, and Libby Ewing a freakish former chanteuse as the sad-pathetic Fräulein, who had already lost an eye battling the local cocaloonyes (large pelicans) to catch raw fish. The suitably blonde Daniel Abeles was a ferocious caricature of Hollywood B-movie iconography as the cigar-store Cherokee, Indian Joe, whom the women preyed on. Clad in a black hat and a cheap suit, the words “strangers,” “sexuality,” “illusion,” “failure” and “passion” emblazoned on the back (the terrific costumes



were by Kathryn Goodman), David King's allegorical cocaloony emitted angry bursts of "Awk! Awk!" and gouged the Fräulein's other eye out.

Sunburst, *The Pronoun 'T* and *The Parade* yield different insights into the eclectic variety of Williams's late plays. The first revelation is that—although Williams revisited themes and reconstructed scenes, at times mocking or parodying them—a number of the short plays do indeed hold up as distinct creations. Once considered a one-act seed of the 1981 *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, his 1962 revision of *The Parade* is like a piece of chamber music that came before a symphony. Where *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* conflates both Williams's younger and older selves to create an abstract tapestry of memory and images on life and death, the action in *Parade* takes place in one realistic setting—a wind-swept beach—and directly represents intense

intimacies that were quickly dissolving at the end of that fateful Provincetown summer. Still, it isn't a great work, and so the later appearance of the real Ethel Elkovsky, now called Mia Phoebus, who was in love with Williams in P-town and was the basis for the character of Miriam in the play, stole the evening.

A second revelation: It might be necessary to read the action of the late plays against the vicissitudes of Williams's life. Staged by Patrick Falco with Provincetown locals, *Sunburst* featured Beverly Bentley as an elderly actress, Miss Sails, trapped in her hotel room, and Brian Patacca and Zachary Clause as the Italian gigolos trying to steal her prized diamond ring from her stubby finger. This slender play takes the form of a mildly suspenseful thriller: To keep murder at bay, Miss Sails stays up all night, reciting Shakespeare's lines. Late in life, Williams was, like Miss Sails, frequently stoned out of his

mind. After Merlo's death, he had to depend on a string of men as traveling companions, some of whom took advantage of his depressed and overmedicated condition. Sometimes, he picked up strangers who beat him up. Written two years before his death, *Sunburst* makes light of the theme of defiance, Williams's unsentimental awareness that to stalwartly cling to poetic words—to the theatre—in the face of danger could amount to a salvation.

Williams also wrote plays to amuse himself: A flamboyant little riff featuring male nudity, female masquerade and a political revolution, *The Pronoun 'T* has the potential to strut like a piece of highfalutin outrageousness, Theatre of the Ridiculous-style. But as blandly interpreted by the performance artist Julie Atlas Muz and the redheaded stripper James Tigger! Ferguson, this ornate piece of fluff ended up looking like a shoddy Genet knock-off. It did not help that *Pronoun* was sandwiched between Muz's extravagantly lithe burlesque vignettes, one of which found her ethereally nude squeezing into a giant balloon, and another that involved her bending over to allow Ferguson, slathered in black paint, to plant an American flag in her anus.

The strongest evening at the festival was Kaplan's double-bill of *The Traveling Companion* and *The Chalky White Substance*,

Books Discussed

THE COLLECTED POEMS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

By Tennessee Williams, edited with an introduction by Nicholas Moschovakis and David Roessel, New Directions Publishing, New York City. 112 pp, \$18.95 paper with CD.

MEMOIRS

By Tennessee Williams, with a foreword by John Waters, New Directions Publishing, New York City. 368 pp, \$16.95 paper.

NOTEBOOKS

By Tennessee Williams, edited by Margaret Bradham Thornton, Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn. 856 pp, \$40 cloth.

THE SELECTED LETTERS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, VOLUME II: 1946-1957

Edited by Albert J. Devlin, co-edited by Nancy M. Tischler, New Directions Publishing, New York City. 672 pp, \$22.95 paper.

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS IN PROVINCETOWN

By David Kaplan, Hansen Publishing Group, East Brunswick, N.J.. 148 pp, \$14.95 paper.





COURTESY OF DR. KENNETH HOLDITCH

Williams has an Elvis Presley encounter.

a co-production with P-town's sister events in New Orleans and Columbus, Miss. These two-handers, both written around 1980 and both concerning the power struggles between men, resonate with themes that dog Williams's body of work: brutality, old age, homosexuality, vulnerability, appearance versus reality. Set in a New York City hotel, *Traveling* depicts a standoff between an aging writer, much like Williams (portrayed with sensitivity and panache by Jeremy Lawrence) and the young man (the pouty Zachary Clause) whom the writer picked up at a San Francisco gay bar and hired as a traveling companion. Unfortunately, this snappish youth insists that he is straight, and he refuses to sleep in the same hotel bed as his benefactor. Filled with stammers and incomplete sentences, this tense play bears potent whiffs of Pinteresque violence: Will this piece of trade turn dirt?

By casting the same two actors to play the monk-like figures in *Chalky White Substance*, Kaplan reverses that predatory male dynamics so that it is now the innocent young beloved who does not realize that he should fear his older protector (who betrays and kills him). Set in a dystopian future ("a century or two after our time") in which there is a competitive struggle for survival in a chalky white universe hostile to human habitation, the play's nightmarish bleakness is made even more harrowing by the brilliant use of projections that suggest a blinding blizzard of post-nuclear fallout.

To state that lesser Williams is better than the best of anybody's work is to slither into glibness. We ought to be cautious and judicious when it comes to putting every Williams play out in the world. Since many of them are in disrepair, standards do need to be exercised. But as a poetic analyst of the

warp, woof and murk of human relationships, Williams is a giant—prescient, pitiless and well-nigh impregnable. His early works (such as *Not About Nightingales* and *Candles to the Sun*) were once labeled as apprentice plays, and yet successful recent productions have revealed that they are no such thing. By giving us Williams unplugged, the brave folks at the Provincetown festival are doing the necessary, good work, outside the confines of commercial bottom-feeding. Though frequently judged as the embarrassing scribbblings of a great dramatist in decline, Williams's late experiments in ordered anarchy and avant-garde European aesthetics were, as the vicissitudes of his life and art confirm, very much earned, very much his distinctive own. Williams's dramaturgy is still ahead of our time.

In a letter to Elia Kazan dated June 16, 1950, Williams wrote: "The peak of my virtuosity was in the one-act plays, some of which

are like fire-crackers in a rope." Whether or not Williams would have demurred from having these lesser-known works be seen today, he knew all too well when he was alive that productions, by their very nature, are always a gamble. True to his most primal instincts, he faced the blank page every day, despite hostility and indifference and in spite of his own demons. The outside world had pronounced that he was in competition with his own best work—the past that had been written into the history books. In fact, Williams was always confronting the future; a shaman with a typewriter, he dug into the darkest depths of the American psyche in search of dramatic truths. No wonder Williams has inspired many artists and writers (like Ryan Landry and Wendy Kesselman at the Provincetown festival) to forge intriguing new creations that take up his recurring battle cry from the letters and journals: "*En Avant!*"

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