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@ the 2009 Tennessee Williams Festival

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In just four years the **Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theatre Festival**, (which wrapped up on September 27) has fulfilled - indeed, surpassed - the dreams of its creators.

The event's producers designed a theatre festival where performers from around the country and the world would gather in Provincetown to showcase Williams' works. This year troupes and performers from throughout the States, as well as from Norway and New Zealand, came to the seaside town that was integral to Williams early days as a writer.



Tennessee Williams

One of the missions of the Festival was to involve the quirky and creative residents of Provincetown in the event, and they generously responded, volunteering in different

ways and opening their venues to the many events. Impromptu theaters pop up in guest houses, art galleries, museums, bars, restaurants, as well as the Art House, the converted movie theater that has become one of the town's major theater spaces during the busy summer months.

This year proved to be the most ambitious Festival to date. Most of the presentations - sixteen Williams plays consisting of full-length and unfinished works, one-act plays, as well as other productions of works by contemporary playwrights and a guest appearance by playwright Lanford Wilson - were sold out. There were numerous parties and other special gatherings. And what was most gratifying was to witness the level of enthusiasm the audiences had to Williams' work.

Due to the compacted nature of the festival, it was impossible to attend all the productions; but here are some reflections on what I did see.

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Before Sweet Bird of Youth

In 1952 Williams wrote a script **The Enemy: Time**, which was presented by the Gremlin Theatre of Minnesota and directed by Jef Hall-Flavin at Art House. In it, he explored themes that would find their way into a fully realized play, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, six years later.

The play, given its premiere production by the Gremlin Theatre, is set in a small town where the handsome Phil Beam (Peter Christian Hansen) arrives making people believe he's a movie star. He has also returned to reclaim the broken heart



Caroline Cooney and Peter Christian Hansen in *The Enemy: Time*

(and damaged spirit) of his hometown girlfriend, Rose (Caroline Cooney). We learn she has contracted a venereal disease from him and is now unable to conceive children as a result.

At 30 minutes, the play is a gem. All of Williams' intimate knowledge of people - their vanity, mendacity, and dashed hopes - is revealed in this short running time. Actors Cooney and Hansen were particularly effective as one-time lovers who must now put the pieces of their broken lives together in solitary quests in an effort to move past the detritus of their troubled pasts.

The play was followed by a screening of *Sweet Bird of Youth*, starring Paul Newman as Chance Wayne, in what Lanford Wilson (more on him later) called a "fun but bowdlerized film."

While there were numerous changes from the one-act to its expanded version to its film, the themes of lost love and tarnished dreams remain the same. Surprisingly, much of Williams' language was retained. Take, for

example, this memorable and bittersweet monologue spoken by Paul Newman:

"Princess, the great difference between people in this world is not between the rich and the poor or the good and the evil, the biggest of all differences in this world is between the ones that had or have pleasure in love and those that haven't and hadn't any pleasure in love, but just watched it with envy, sick envy."



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Around the Gifford House

A series of one-act plays, many of them collected in Williams' book *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* and other Plays, were presented by the Infinite Theater of New York, under the direction of Nick Potenzieri and Jonathan Warman. The Festival producers divided the plays into two groups, **Pink Hotel** and **Rain Hotel**, and chose Gifford House as the venue.

Before the plays began, the audience waited in the barroom, replete with unabashed homoerotic art and a blazing fireplace. Several of the Gifford House rooms - on the ground and third floors - served as the setting for these plays, originally written from the 1930s through the 1980s.

Crammed into a room with twenty others, bathed in an eerie light, waiting for the actors to enter,

brought to mind these lines from Edgar Lee Masters' poem about another infamous rooming house, *The Hotel Chelsea* in Manhattan:

"What loves were lived there, what despairs endured; what children born here, and what

mourners went out of its doors; what peace and what lament these rooms knew, long obscured."

The Infinite Theater is to be praised for its effective blocking of each of the plays, given the restrictions imposed by such small, tight rooms, and for its multiracial cast. I found the treatment of **Talk to Me Like the Rain and Let Me Listen**, written in 1953, particularly stirring. It featured Luke Forbes as Man and Erin Cherry as Woman, both African-American actors, who portray characters struggling to regain dignity in a callous world. Williams' language sings: "It's been too long a time since - we leveled with each other," the Man says to the Woman. "Now tell me things. What have you been thinking in the silence? - While I've been passed around like a dirty postcard in this city...Tell me, talk to me! Talk to me like the rain and I will lie here and listen."



Jeff Christian and Jennie Moreau in *The Day on Which a Man Dies*

Jeff Christian played the Man, naked except for a loincloth, revealing himself to be a towering, abusive, and tortured soul whose painted chest resembled a Day of the Dead etching by Posada. The Woman (called a number of expletives including "whore") was played by the talented and feisty Jennie Moreau.

Both actors rose to the demands of their parts. The problem was that I (and many others) could not see or hear clearly, due to the constraints of the room. Many in the audience stood to watch, strained to listen, and flinched at the graphic profanity. It was a risk-taking production in need of a more accommodating venue. And yet, flawed, it left a powerful aftershock.

Long-lost discovery

Festival curator David Kaplan told the sold out audience at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum that the play, **The Day on Which a Man Dies**, which he also directed, was discovered in Los Angeles among Williams' papers "by a 91-year old woman who got permission to give me a photocopy. The play was further daunting because the pages that were found were unnumbered."

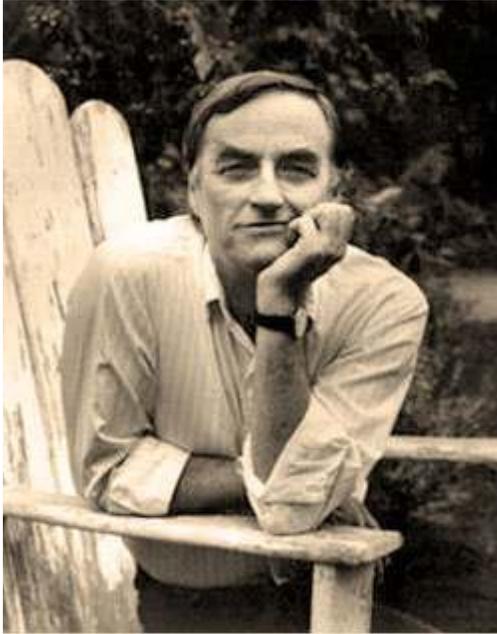
A difficult and demanding work Kaplan helped to bring to cohesion, it was presented by the National Pastime Theater, a Chicago-based troupe. It tells the (fragmented) story of a painter, believed to be Jackson Pollock and a woman, believed to be his lover Lee Krasner, who lash out at one another in a Tokyo hotel room.

Coffee with Lanford Wilson

Coffee with Lanford Wilson took place at the Crown and Anchor Hotel. Thomas Keith, a Williams scholar, served as interviewer and moderator. An appreciative and attentive crowd assembled to hear and to meet Wilson, author of *Tally's Folly*, *Burn This*, amongst other plays.

Wilson shared memories of Tennessee Williams who, during their first meeting, he said, "was laughing hysterically and was so out of it, he was taking every pill known to mankind -- it was the worst meeting I had ever had."

And yet, Wilson said, he remained devoted to a man who would become his mentor, and ended up working closely with him in Key West,



Lanford Wilson

learning, firsthand, of his "genius."

Wilson also shared insights into his own writing, his discovery of being gay, and his collaborations with Sam Shepard, Irene Fornes, John Guare and others during the heady 1960s at Caffe Cino in Greenwich Village. Now in his 70s, Wilson is warm, plain speaking, and generous. He provided a seamless connection between an era that has passed and an era that is embracing the wisdom of the masters, namely Tennessee Williams and himself.



Jarod Rawiri and Jude Gibson in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, a production that hails from the Fortune Theatre, Dunedin, New Zealand that played the recently completed Fourth Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theatre Festival.

Postscript...

By way of closure, I quote a Festival volunteer who told me: "I am a devoted theatergoer, and I love the plays, but there's just no way I can see or absorb all that this Festival is presenting."

This being the case, amongst the events I wasn't able to attend were the world premiere of the black comedy **Madame LeMonde** by the Boston-based Beau Jeste Moving Theatre; a New Zealand produced **A Streetcar Named Desire** with a Maori actor as Stanley; a production of Strindberg's **Miss Julie** from Norway spoken in Norwegian; and an appearance by Broadway legend Betty Buckley in a reading of **Ghosts**

of a Summer Hotel, who also performed her cabaret act in a local club.

Next year's festival, set for September 23-26, 2010, is titled **Under the Influence**. In a published program note, the producers say it will include works by "Williams, Shakespeare, Garcia Lorca, Eugene O'Neill, Hart Crane, Stella Brooks and more." Wow: the Festival's cup runneth over. Could a bit of trimming help? It is my hunch that it will. Hopefully the ongoing success achieved these last four years will be just as impressive.

Robert Israel writes about theater, arts, culture and travel.

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