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Fourth Fest makes Tennessee Williams relevant

by Robert Israel
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Thursday Sep 10, 2009

David Kaplan sat facing Provincetown harbor on a sunny August afternoon. He was reflecting on all that has gone into the 4th annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival -- set to run from September 24-27 -- and all that remained unfinished. Kaplan is a teacher, writer and theater director who plies these trades here and overseas. He also serves as curator of the Festival, a job he has held since its inception.

"Planning for this year's festival took place 18 months ago," Kaplan said, "when this country was in the throes of the presidential election. The Festival board members and I were kicking around ideas. We were grappling with how this year's festival would be relevant to the times we are living in and how it would tie in with Williams' era."

The theme emerged when Kaplan and the Festival board realized how similar today's climate of crisis and change was in sync with the times Williams lived through in the 1940s.



David Kaplan in a photo taken at Norman Mailer's house in Provincetown where the fourth annual Tennessee Williams Festival takes place from September 24 - 27. Kaplan is the Festival's curator.

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Festival's focus

"That's when it hit us," Kaplan said. "The focus of the festival would be about a fight for life. It's not only about everyday survival, but also about the struggle to work, creatively, as artists, in the face of adversity, war, and aggression, and to advance as soldiers do, with discipline, passion and power."

Kaplan -- author of "Tennessee Williams in Provincetown" which chronicles the playwright's life and works while he was living in Ptown --



Betty Buckley. The Tony-award winning actress stars in a concert reading of Williams' last play on Broadway, *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*.

said that Williams articulated a similar survivor's artistic passion when the talk (and hysteria) of war was everywhere, even in bucolic Provincetown. It was an era that turned out to be his most prolific. As the fever of World War II was fomenting, Williams found he could tap into a wellspring of energy and imagination. Despite a grim atmosphere of economic, social and political upheaval, Williams went on to produce some of his most celebrated works.



Jordan Harrison in *The Remarkable Rooming House of Madame LeMonde / Beau Jest Moving Theater* / Photo by Bill OConnell

Fundraising remains daunting

As it enters its fourth season, the Tennessee Williams Festival continues to draw these parallels from Williams' remarkable canon, presenting them as artistic achievements in their own right and for what they ultimately teach us about our own era -- and his.

"We have a very dedicated board of directors," Kaplan said, "and, at the core, there are three of us -- Jef Hall-Flavin, Patrick Falco and myself -- who are working partners, stewarding the festival forward each year. We are three gay men working together, much in the same manner as the three gay men who run the Glasgow Citizens Theatre in Scotland. We share a vision. We share responsibilities. There is no competition between us, and we know what we need to do and what needs to get done."

Jef Hall-Flavin, a former student of Kaplan's, handles Festival contracts, staff, and scheduling; Patrick Falco serves as president of the Festival board of directors. Both men are accomplished actors and directors; each is directing productions while multi-tasking with other Festival responsibilities, including

fundraising.

Fundraising -- particularly in a time of fiscal stringency -- is a daunting task. But Kaplan remains upbeat.

"Yes, it's harder to get foundations to give you a grant for theatre, that's true," Kaplan said. "Some foundations have said to us that they are funding hospitals and homeless shelters and food banks, and they ask us, 'Why should we fund a theatre festival during times of economic crisis?' And I tell them simply that we need festivals like the Tennessee Williams Festival in order to better understand ourselves, our times, our struggles, our conflicts."

Kaplan and his comrades also raise funds from appearances at social gatherings and artistic gatherings.

"We are about something," Kaplan said, "and donors know this and offer to help." He also notes that several donors have approached him, knowing that their financial help is needed during tough times.

The Festival has matured into a well-oiled operation, hosting performances nationally, which Kaplan calls "gateway performances" -- in such far-flung locales as East Hampton, New York; Chicago, Illinois; Columbus, Mississippi; and Sewanee, Tennessee. These events raise awareness and help with the coffers, too.

"We had a sellout crowd for an event we held at the Norman Mailer House in Ptown that featured Sylvia Miles," Kaplan said, "and another sellout crowd for a performance we held in East Hampton."



(Source:Jarod Rawiri and Jude Gibson in A Streetcar Named Desire, a production that hails from the Fortune Theatre, Dunedin, New Zealand.)

An international event

Word continues to spread about the Festival, here and abroad, Kaplan added.

"We have folks who came last year from England who are returning this year," Kaplan said. "Some people are traveling from as far away as Hawaii and from Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Each year we feature an international troupe, and word has spread about that, too. This year, a troupe from New Zealand is performing 'A Streetcar Named Desire.' We're in discussions with theatre groups in Italy and Portugal who also want to participate in the Festival."

This leads to a question about what's in store for the fifth season. Each year, the Festival generates a buzz. There are always surprises. Marquee names like Sylvia Miles, Olympia Dukakis, and Dixie Carter (as it turns out, Carter is no longer able to attend. In her place is singer/actress Betty Buckley) -- and notable playwrights like John Guare and this year's visiting playwright Lanford Wilson -- add limelight and luster. So, who is he lining up for next year?

A twinkle appeared Kaplan's blue eyes, but he holds himself back from dishing the dirt.

"Suffice it say I've made overtures to a well-known actress who is interested in doing something wonderful with us next year," Kaplan said, grinning.

Whoever this mystery actress is, her appearance at the Festival next year is guaranteed to be tantalizing.

David Kaplan, director and impresario, is a passionate and indefatigable spirit. He keeps his weather eye on the horizon for what lays ahead, while staying focused on today's challenges which he greets with chutzpah. And he is a juggler. He deftly balances these multiple tasks while actors and directors and volunteers -- and soon, audiences -- all gather in Provincetown as the fourth season of the Tennessee Williams Festival awaits its debut.

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

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