

STAGES

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Getting an early look at Tennessee Williams

By Joel Brown, Globe Correspondent | September 24, 2010

What could the dour Midwestern farm couple in Grant Wood's iconic painting "American Gothic" possibly have in common with Blanche DuBois? They're both at the heart of Tennessee Williams plays.

This weekend, Boston's Beau Jest Moving Theatre unveils the world premiere of Tennessee Williams's early short play "American Gothic" at the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival. It presents the uptight duo in Wood's iconic painting as the parents of the male half of a Bonnie and Clyde-style crime duo. And the play is definitely a Williams work, says Beau Jest artistic director Davis Robinson.

"You can still see the elements. There's still a kind of virile young guy who shows up who's dangerous, and the sexy, kind of young, dangerous woman, and then the friction between them and the repressive parents, the mother in particular," says Robinson, who directs the production and is one of the actors.

"He looked at the lines in the painting and the expressions of the people to develop a sense of what their language might be, should they open their mouths and speak, and went further with it in terms of what might be their central conflict that they're looking so severe about, which is when their son and his new wife show up," Robinson says.

Kathleen Lewis and Nick Ronan play the youngsters, Mabel and Amadee, while Lisa Tucker and Robinson play the parents, Nonnie and Alfred.

This is the second year Beau Jest has presented a Williams premiere at Provincetown, as festival curator David Kaplan has been digging in Williams's archives for unpublished material. Last year Beau Jest performed the sensational, perverse late work "The Remarkable Rooming House of Madame Le Monde."

"American Gothic" shows Williams at the beginning of his career, influenced by Warner Brothers gangster flicks and film noir. He wrote it in the 1930s at the University of Iowa. Wood was teaching there at the time, and while there's no evidence that they met then, Williams would have been aware of the famous painting, Kaplan says. The two artists did meet later in Key West.

It's one of several early short plays that Williams wrote reflecting on particular paintings. It fits into the festival's theme this year, "Under the Influence," which also examines how Williams's work was shaped by and shaped others' work in return.

There's one other unexpected influence on Williams's play, said Kaplan: "It has to be after the death of Bonnie and Clyde."

Today and Sunday on the front porch at 160 Commercial St., on a double bill with Williams's "27 Wagons Full of Cotton," presented by Big Finish Productions. Tickets for double bill: \$30. Full-festival passes start at \$125. 866-789-8366, www.twptown.org