

Provincetown falls "Under the Influence" of Tennessee Williams at this year's fest

By Sue Harrison

Provincetown Banner

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PROVINCETOWN — The fifth annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival has chosen a juicy theme this year — “Under the Influence.” It’s a nuanced reflection on Williams’ work and creates the opportunity to look at everything a little differently.

“In 2007 we did the first plays that were not by Williams,” festival director Jef Hall-Flavin says by way of explanation about this year’s theme. That phrase was used to describe others who were under Williams’ influence but this year, it comes full circle to include Williams’ own inspirations.

Content for this year’s program evolved from connections made at past festivals, Hall-Flavin says. He mentions DanzLoop, who took part in 2008 and now returns with a new dance for this year.

“It’s synergy between us and the other [performing] groups,” he says. “We have a new dance piece and a new musical this year. We are excited to bring new works to the stage. We are not a museum, not a mausoleum for old plays.”

Included in the Sept. 23-26 festival lineup are plays written by Williams, plays or other work that influenced Williams, and work influenced by the playwright himself. As a special treat, an old friend of Williams, former poet laureate William Jay Smith, will talk about his early friendship with Williams when Tennessee was still just plain “Tom” and the two were in college together.

Following up on last year’s successful use of non-theatrical venues the festival is again taking to the streets and even front porches of locations around town. This re-setting of the fourth wall is just one more technique the festival uses so well.

Williams’ recurring themes of erotic danger, descents into hell and perhaps the possibility of redemption are mined deeply this year.

World premiere

Plays by Williams this year include “27 Wagons Full of Cotton,” staged by Big Finish Productions and directed by Jeff Glickman, paired with the world premiere of “American Gothic,” directed by Davis Robinson and the Beau Jest troupe. Beau Jest brought us the dynamic rendition of “The Remarkable Rooming House of Madame Le Monde” at last year’s festival.

These two short plays are presented on the porch of an impressive Provincetown sea captain’s house. That venue is a nod to Williams’ upbringing in the South and the importance that front porches held in the social fabric of communities as people fled the heat of the day to sit on porches and tell stories as the light faded away.

The classic “27 Wagons” was the inspiration for the controversial film “Baby Doll” and takes on innocence and corruption while reveling in sexual liberation. “American Gothic” is Williams’ look at Grant Wood’s famous painting of the same name. In it, a stern couple stand stiffly in front of a spare farmhouse. What if they look so disapproving because their son has turned out to be a gangster? What if he comes back home?

Two plays, “Orpheus Descending” and “Escape,” focus on the idea of finding freedom, from a variety of situations, and ask: is it possible without dying in the process?

“Orpheus,” written by Williams in 1940 when he was first visiting Provincetown, is the myth of the poet’s journey to the underworld and what happens when he comes back to share what he has seen and learned. In true William’s style, the poet Val is a handsome musician who inspires a bit too much worldly interest among certain pious women and for that he will pay. New York City’s Infinite Theatre presents, Nick Potenzieri directs. Hall-Flavin calls it the centerpiece of the festival with its mythic tale filled with familiar Williams themes.

In the two-part “Escape,” a boy takes the only way out he can find — death — to get away from his overbearing mother. In the second part, a convict makes a desperate bid for freedom but can he elude the hounds from hell? Choreographer Paula Frasz uses the plays as inspiration for a dance work by the DanzLoop Chicago Ensemble that is performed with the plays.

The final Williams play is “Suddenly Last Summer” directed in a staged reading by Jodie Markell. This is the story of Sebastian, a poet who put out one book comprised of one poem each year until the year he died. The telling of his death becomes the central struggle between his mother, Mrs. Venable, played by stage and screen star Dana Ivey, and his cousin Catherine (Rebecca Brooksher) who was traumatized by his mysterious and macabre death. Soap opera heartthrob Robert Bogue stars as Dr. Sugar, who is caught in the middle when Mrs. Venable wants Catherine lobotomized to prevent her telling the sordid truth, and if he will only comply she will fund his research.

Under Williams’ influence

In the under-the-influence-of-Williams category the festival presents “Bent to the Flame,” a one-man show by Doug Tompos on Williams’ lifelong obsession with poet Hart Crane, a creative gay man who chose suicide as his escape. Also, two plays and a chance to see the private collection of John DeLeo’s Williams’ related films and hear him talk about what movies the playwright liked, didn’t like and how Hollywood sometimes paid homage to Williams and sometimes spoofed him.

The two plays are “Diff’rent” by Eugene O’Neill and “The Jazz Funeral of Stella Brooks,” a new musical by Terry Abrahamson and Michael Carlson from Chicago.

Williams is known to have seen the O’Neill play in Provincetown. This version, presented by The Provincetown Theater and directed by festival director Hall-Flavin brings the real life father-son duo of Tony and Beau Jackett together to play the same man, 30 years apart in an exploration of sexual repression and small town life 100 years ago in New England.

“Jazz Funeral” is about Stella Brooks, a singer referred to as the white Billie Holiday. When Williams was finishing “A Streetcar Named Desire” he was in Provincetown, and Brooks was performing at the Atlantic House. He went often, transfixed by the singer, and the festival program asks, can the nightly calls of “Stella” at the end of her shows be the inspiration for Stanley’s wounded cry in “Streetcar”?

The fictionalized Stella talks about her life and the play then uses her funeral as another allegory of death and return as the dirge-like march to the cemetery is replaced by the umbrella-wielding line of dancing mourners weaving down Commercial Street, happy to have escaped from death’s clutches.

A new element this year is “Orpheus in the Galleries,” which traces a path between Berta Walker Gallery, DNA Gallery and ArtStrand as each holds a special festival exhibition on the themes of death, obsession and renewal. Sky Power, Varujan Boghosian, Salvatore Del Deo, Gilbert Franklin, Nicoletta Poli, John Choly, Jay Critchley, Jim Peters and Kathleen Carr are featured artists in the shows.

Hall-Flavin is proud the festival has done eight world premieres to date including never-before-seen Williams plays and plays inspired by him. Next year will be even more ambitious, he says, in celebration of Williams’ 100th birthday on Nov. 11, 2011. The festival is kicking off a program to raise \$300,000 to expand last year’s Hotel Williams idea of short plays performed for small audiences in hotel rooms to include more plays and take it on tour; after Provincetown it will hit seven other cities.

“Tennessee Williams can be alive and not a history lesson,” Hall-Flavin. “We don’t want to talk about his work in panel discussions. We want to see him alive and breathing.”

For a full schedule go to the festival website at www.tuoftown.org.

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