

A Williams WORLD

by Steve Desroches



Sure, on a map Tennessee is in the South, but in the theater, Tennessee is in France, Japan, Russia, and even in Mongolia!

Tennessee Williams, arguably one of the most celebrated, talented, and accomplished American playwrights, is already revered as one of our nation's most important writers of dramatic literature. But his works are also worshipped by theaters, drama schools, and theatrical companies the world over not only for communicating a uniquely American, especially Southern, voice, but also for the universality of the themes explored in his plays. His work transcends culture as the genius of his writing comes with an instant translation for those wanting to explore the world of Tennessee Williams.

At any given time, Williams' work is being performed somewhere in the world, likely many locations, be it in a huge theater in Tokyo, a small repertory theater in New Zealand, or a suburban American high school drama club. The relevance of his work, regardless of the culture, continues to resonate as well as grow in literary importance. Just last week, the 300-plus-year-old Comédie-Française, an acting troupe in Paris, announced an upcoming production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, (or as they bill it, *Un Tramway Nommé Désir*), marking the first time the well-respected French acting company is performing an American play. King Louis XIV founded the acting troupe by decree in 1680 and today it is considered one of the guardians and standard-bearer of French theater and performance.

"For the Comédie-Française to choose *Streetcar* as their first American play, and on the big stage, means that they are placing Tennessee Williams on par with Molière and Ibsen," says David Kaplan, author of *Tennessee Williams in Provincetown* and curator of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, which comes to town this weekend.

According to news reports, Stanley Kowalski will get a French makeover, which means no white tank top made famous by Marlon Brando in the 1951 film adaptation. But it's not just the aesthetics and directorial decisions that make foreign productions of Williams' work so interesting,



Productions of Tennessee Williams plays in Hong Kong (*Eccentricities of a Nightingale*) and New Zealand (*A Streetcar Named Desire*) are just a few of the international versions we've seen in the Festival.

It's what a different cultural point of view can find most relevant in the work that is fascinating, says Kaplan. In France, they respond to how powerfully Williams wrote about class relations and the friction between

rich and poor. In Russia, where Williams is the second most performed playwright after Chekhov, they relate to his exploration of the family and how it defines the individual's place in society. And in India, audiences enjoy the eccentric characters and the special role they play in society, both in his fictional American South and in their own real country.

"In India, if you want to appear as a cultured person you go see and talk about Tennessee Williams plays," says Kaplan. "The very fact that Williams is so universal is not limited to just his writing, but that each culture has a different aspect of the same vision."

As the Festival continues to grow in both size and popularity, it is increasingly recognized as a significant institution for the preservation and celebration of the playwright's work, garnering worldwide attention. And as such, productions from around the world have come to participate in past festivals, including a Hong Kong based cast for *Eccentricities of a Nightingale* and a New Zealand repertory theater's production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, in which most of the male cast were Maori, setting off a bit of a controversy at home.

"Some in the Maori community felt that a Maori Stanley was not a good role model," says Kaplan. "But that sentiment changed over the run of the show."

The festival receives e-mails from around the world about upcoming productions of Williams plays. Argentina, Portugal, and most recently word of a Williams play in Zimbabwe came into Kaplan's inbox.



"Can you imagine seeing a cast from Zimbabwe perform Tennessee Williams?" says Kaplan. "That would be amazing. That one would be easy to find funding to bring to the festival. Zimbabwe! Fabulous!"

In the early days of Williams' fame, several productions were shut down and theaters raided as local authorities deemed the work "offensive" or "obscene." That doesn't happen often now, says Kaplan, as most recognize the importance and brilliance of the work, as well as each theater company adapting the play for local customs and culture, as was done with performances of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Sweet Bird of Youth* in Egypt.

"Only in the United States," says Kaplan of where authorities try to shut down Williams' productions. "I'm dead serious. It's particularly

problematic when high schools put on productions. There was a well-known case where a production of *Streetcar* was shut down at a Newark high school in the 1960's."

No matter the language, "the magic is still going on," says Kaplan of productions around the globe. It never ceases to amaze him how ubiquitous the reverence for Williams is around the world, and how much his work finds a niche in such a diversity of cultures, as well as how his work can still inspire a thousand conversations and debates. Recently, an Australian production of *Streetcar* by the Sydney

Theater Company made international news just because Cate Blanchett was cast as Blanche. The theater world was abuzz with anticipation as to what she would bring to the role that has become the Lady Macbeth-plumb role for the modern day theater.

"One of the ways that we can see Williams' stature in the world is the sheer number of performances of his work by companies around the world," says Kaplan. "I was in Mongolia working with a theater and we were talking about plays they've done and they said, 'Well, of course we've done *Streetcar* and of course we've done *The Glass Menagerie*.' It was the use of the phrase 'of course' that struck me. And then I said to myself 'Okay, okay. I get it. His work really is known all over the world.'"

The 5th Annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival comes to town September 23 - 26 at various venues in town. For schedules, information, and tickets/passes, call 866.789.TENN,

visit www.twptown.org, or visit the box office at the Crown & Anchor, 247 Commercial St., Provincetown.



Tennessee Williams in Mexico.

Tennessee Williams in Provincetown

This year's Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival features the following four Williams plays, along with several other works that either inspired Williams or were inspired by him. For full schedule, tickets, and information, visit www.twptown.org.



American Gothic and 27 Wagons Full of Cotton

The Cabral House, 160 Commercial St.
Thu., Sept. 23, 4 p.m.; Fri., Sept. 24, 2 p.m.;
Sun., Sept. 26, 3:30 p.m.
RAIN DATE: Saturday 5 p.m.

Two plays, both set on a sun-drenched front porch: The never-before-seen *American Gothic* imagines the famous Grant Wood couple as the stern Midwestern parents of Bonnie and Clyde-style gangsters... and from the heat of the Mississippi Delta, the sultry *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* will also be staged on the historic porch of 160 Commercial Street. Written around 1938 and never published, never performed, suggested by the famous Grant Wood painting of the same name, *American Gothic* takes place on the porch of a farm-house on the Great Plains during a drought. Williams imagines the iconic farm couple as disillusioned parents who must force their long-lost son to leave the house with his girlfriend when they find out they've been robbing banks. *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* – This Southern Gothic comedy recombines some themes from *Orpheus Descending* – sexual liberation, innocence and corruption – with whip-cracking humor.

Escape

Provincetown Theater, 238 Bradford St.
Fri., Sept. 24, 8 p.m.; Sat., Sept. 25, 1 & 4 p.m.

Two plays, two different escapes: the sounds of a jailbreak interrupt a chain-gang's nightly card game, and a teenage boy swims to his death rather than return to the life his domineering mother has planned for him. The plays will be shown with related original dance inspired by the two plays. Two short plays by Williams were, for a time, both given the title *Escape*. Written in the 1930s, they reveal Williams's early mastery of listening as spine-tingling dramatic action.



Orpheus Descending

St. Mary of the Harbor - 518 Commercial St.
Thu., Sept. 23, 7:30 p.m. (\$10 Townie Night);
Fri., Sept. 24, 7:30 p.m.; Sat., Sept. 25, 3 p.m.

Orpheus Descending – a play Williams was writing in its first incarnation as *Battle of Angels* when he first came to Provincetown in 1940 – is our thematic centerpiece. This Williams classic follows the handsome, guitar-playing Val as he descends into a hell of a small-town variety store. The timeless myth of a poet who travels to the underworld- and returns to our world to share his visions of love and pain-inspired Williams for decades.

Suddenly Last Summer

Provincetown High School, 12 Winslow St.
Sun., Sept. 26, 6 p.m.

This Williams one-act play is in the form of a crime story told by a traumatized young girl. A handsome doctor, tempted by a rich woman who might fund his research, must decide who to side with: the witness or her hostile listeners. A reading of the text will be staged by Jodie Markell, the director of the recently released film written by Williams: *The Loss of a Teardrop Diamond*. Audiences can look forward to a stellar cast, including the Obie Award-winning actress, Dana Ivey as Mrs. Venable, plus Broadway and television veteran Robert Bogue as Dr. Cukrowicz... roles made famous in the film by Katharine Hepburn and Montgomery Clift.