

Provincetown Celebrates Williams

BY JOHN WINTERS CORRESPONDENT

Attleboro Sun Chronicle, GO Magazine, September 24, 2010



A scene from "Orpheus Descending," featuring Thomas Beaudoin as Val and Irene Glezos as Lady. (Photo by George Causil)

PROVINCETOWN - Why does Tennessee Williams still matter? David Kaplan, the curator of an annual festival in honor of the playwright and his work, has been asked that question so many times he's honed his answer to a simple phrase: "It's the words."

Lots of those words will be heard on the streets and stages of the outer Cape Sept. 23-26 when the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival is held.

Truth be told, Kaplan can't restrain himself to just a three-word answer.

"The words are beautiful, and profound," he said. "This is a poet playwright, with a sense of compassion and a sense of humor and a sharp eye. But mostly, it comes down to the words."

Williams spent four summers in Provincetown. According to Kaplan's book, "Tennessee Williams in Provincetown," the playwright loved and lost while there, worked on some of his greatest plays, and even played the conga drums.

The Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival was founded in 2006, with a mission to both celebrate Williams' work and commemorate his connection to the town. This year marks an important 60-year anniversary, said Jef Hall-Flavin, director of the festival.

"I think it's very exciting because 1940 was a pivotal year for Williams on the Cape," he said. "He first fell in love that summer, and he was still a nobody. Just after he finished his summer here that year, he became somebody."

Each year, a theme is selected to guide the festival's programming. This year's is "under the influence," and the festival includes poetry, art, music, film and drama that either inspired Williams or that he in turn inspired. Kaplan recalled how in the festival's second year a few works looked at the reciprocal influence between Williams and other playwrights like Samuel Beckett and August Strindberg. This year, that notion informs the entire festival.

"For me," Hall-Flavin said, "it's all about inspiration: what inspires an artist and what inspires an audience." Looking over the 2010 festival schedule, Kaplan points to "Orpheus Descending" as a prime example of a Williams play that reveals much about his artistic and literary antecedents. One of the planned highlights of this festival, "Orpheus" reveals the influences of classical literature in Williams' work, as well as his identification with the outsider, a familiar trope in American art forms of all types.

"What it does is bring together several streams of influence on Williams' work," he said.

Meanwhile, "American Gothic," which makes its world premiere at this year's festival, wears its influence in its title. In fact, the famous painting by Grant Wood not only gives the 1938 work its name,

but also contributes two of its lead characters, as Williams re-imagines the iconic farming couple as the parents of a ne'er-do-well, bank-robbing son.

"It's an interesting take on what if that painting came to life," said Davis Robinson, who will direct his Beau Jest Moving Theater Company in "American Gothic." "Wood did many paintings that reference the same landscapes that are referenced in the play, and the characters' lives are as dried out as the fields they work in."

In this play, which Williams wrote in college, Robinson said the imagery, language and ideas that would become hallmarks of the playwright's subsequent and most famous works are evident.

Paired with "27 Wagons Full of Cotton," another short Williams work, "Gothic" will be presented on the porch of a Provincetown mansion. As usual, galleries, a church, clubs, traditional theaters, a local high school, and even the streets will host parts of this year's festival.

"The whole town is our stage," Kaplan said.

The four days of the festival are jammed with an eclectic slate of offerings, from a talk by poet William Jay Smith, a friend of the young Williams, to more than a half-dozen plays (including Eugene O'Neill's "Diff'rent"), to lectures, dance performances, art installations and music, all related somehow to the work of Tennessee Williams. The four days include receptions, a wine tasting and various parties. Another not-to-be-missed part of this year's festival is a staged reading of "Suddenly Last Summer," featuring Obie Award-winning actress, Dana Ivey, and television veteran Robert Bogue.

A handful of the events are open only to donors or those who purchase an event pass. However, most of the performances and activities are ticketed separately, so attendees can pick and choose.

The festival has grown each year. In 2009, 3,000 tickets were sold to 650 patrons from 25 states. This year, Hall-Flavin says the goal is 1,000 attendees. Fall is a beautiful time to visit Provincetown, and Williams' legacy of work is always a draw.

"When you talk about enduring dramatic literature, and you look at the commonality between Aeschylus, Moliere and Shakespeare, they're poets," Hall-Flavin said. "They're poets of the theater, and I think that kind of language is what's missing from a lot of American theater today. Too many plays these days want to be like television shows. Williams is a poet."

Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival

The Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival will be held Sept. 23-26. Billed as four days full of "plays, music, dance, film, art and fun," this year's festival features the world premiere of "American Gothic," a Williams play circa 1938. There will also be full productions of "Orpheus Descending," and Eugene O'Neill's "Diff'rent." Also featured is a staged reading of "Suddenly Last Summer," featuring Obie Award-winning actress, Dana Ivey, and television veteran Robert Bogue.

The theme for the 2010 festival is "under the influence," and patrons will learn about those who influenced Williams and those he influenced. Full passes for the festival are available; however, individual tickets can be purchased for most events. Information and a full schedule are at <http://www.twptown.org/>.

<http://www.thesunchronicle.com/articles/2010/09/24/go/7947128.txt>