

STAGES

'Ten Blocks' offers look at Tennessee Williams's 'plastic theater'

From Beau Jest, an earlier version of Tennessee Williams's 'Camino Real'

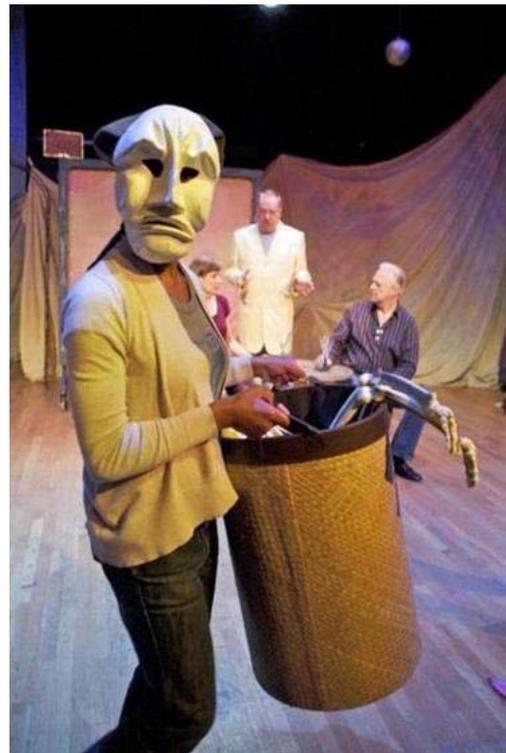
By Joel Brown | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 04, 2012

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For the third time, Larry Coen gets to act in a Tennessee Williams play that's seldom, if ever, been performed here. That's not something many actors can say, especially since the playwright died in 1983.

"I am amazed at how much new Tennessee Williams we've had a chance to do here," Coen says. "The fact that there are still premieres coming out is extraordinary."

Coen plays Gutman in the Beau Jest Moving Theatre production of Williams's "Ten Blocks on the Camino Real," opening Thursday at Charlestown Working Theater. It's a lyrical fantasy about characters in a Latin American town, including the American boxer Kilroy, the hotel owner Gutman (named for Sidney Greenstreet's character in "The Maltese Falcon"), and the sexy Esmerelda. If that sounds familiar, it's probably because "Ten Blocks" is an earlier, shorter version of "Camino Real," the Williams play that flopped on Broadway in 1953.



KYLE GEISTE

Robin Smith, Lisa Tucker, Larry Coen, and Robert Deveau in rehearsal for Beau Jest's production of "Ten Blocks on the Camino Real."

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"I'm on a bit of a mission to try to let people know this is actually a really interesting play," says Beau Jest artistic director Davis Robinson, who directs the production.

In recent years, a number of short Williams plays, unproduced in his lifetime, have been brought

into the light. At the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, Coen has acted in the world premieres of Williams's "The Dog Enchanted by the Divine View" and "The Remarkable Rooming House of Madame LeMonde," the latter also a Beau Jest production directed by Robinson.

"Divine View" was really a sketch for Williams's "The Rose Tattoo." The dark, bizarre "Madame LeMonde" was one of many short works written late in his life, when his career was considered to be in decline.

"Ten Blocks on the Camino Real" is something different. It was written in 1946, between "The Glass Menagerie" and "A Streetcar Named Desire." Williams hoped it might stand on its own. Written in 10 vignettes, the play departs from the realism of those two masterpieces for what he called "plastic theater," adding music, dance, and poetry to the mix.

"He thought it would sort of send theater in a new direction, keep it more expressionistic and experimental," Robinson says. It didn't turn out that way.

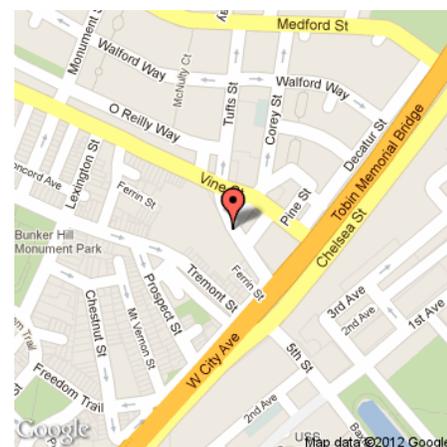
The play reached Broadway on March 17, 1953, as "Camino Real," directed by Elia Kazan. By then it had been expanded significantly — to 16 blocks, for starters — and, in Robinson's view, lost something in the process.

"As they prepped it for Broadway, Kazan and Tennessee got caught up in trying to explain it more, with added characters, plot, images, and dialogue," he elaborates in an e-mail. "It was like rewriting a haiku in the thought you could improve it and turn it into an epic."

Neither critics nor audiences liked what they saw. Still, "Camino Real" has been revived numerous times. The original "Ten Blocks" was produced for public television in 1966, starring Martin Sheen as Kilroy and Lotte Lenya as the Gypsy. But Robinson says it was not seen after that until it was published for the first time in 2008, resulting in a New York production the next year.

Provincetown festival curator David Kaplan helped Beau Jest secure the rights from the playwright's estate. The cast also includes Nick Ronan as Kilroy and Kathleen Lewis as Esmerelda.

"I have an absolutely amazing monologue that I am thrilled to be able to perform," says Coen,



Larger map / directions→

TEN BLOCKS ON THE CAMINO REAL

42 Bunker Hill St., Charlestown MA
866-811-4111.

Presenting organizations: Beau Jest Moving Theatre and Charlestown Working Theater

Venue: Charlestown Working Theater

Date of first performance: May 10-20

Ticket price: \$25

Company website:
<http://www.charlestownworkingtheater.org>

“which is basically about Saturday night in any town, anyplace in the world. It’s about people’s desire to break out of their constraints, to maybe get a little drunk, maybe do a little flirting or more. It’s about the lights and the noise that everybody craves on a Saturday night. It’s about the action, where is the action, from the biggest city to the smallest town.”

Coen believes that Williams “is the greatest of American playwrights.”

“His writing is always so filled with empathy and humor and equality. He has this amazing genius to be able to write all of his characters sympathetically. There are no villains; he never stacks the deck,” the actor says. “I think it’s the Provincetown festival and their closeness to Boston that is bringing all of these Williams riches to our area, and I am wildly grateful for it.”

A tale of Mormon women

Also opening next Thursday is the Gan-e-meed Theatre Project production of Julie Jensen’s “Two-Headed” at the Boston Center for the Arts. The play follows the friendship of two Mormons after the 1857 Mountain Meadows Massacre in Utah, in which Mormon militias and their Native American allies killed more than 100 westbound settlers. Young Lavinia and Hettie grow to adulthood amid the lingering guilt of that event and the polygamous tangles of their family lives.

Becky Webber directs SerahRose Roth, Gan-e-meed’s executive artistic director, as Hettie and Kara Manson as Lavinia. The show plays May 10-19 in Rehearsal Hall A in the Calderwood Pavilion. Tickets, \$25, at www.bostontheatrescene.com or 617-933-8600.

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