

Tennessee Williams and fall: two reasons to head to Provincetown

By John Winters | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 08, 2012



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At the 2010 Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, there was a porch play performed. This year's theme is "Williams and music."

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PROVINCETOWN — There's something about Provincetown in fall. Longtime lovers of the outermost tip of the Cape often prefer this time of year.

"September in Provincetown is when the colors are very intense at sunrise and sunset, and you understand why it's been an artists' colony for so long," said David Kaplan, who spends half the year in town.

September in this seaside enclave is also associated with Tennessee Williams. For the seventh year, it is home to an annual festival honoring the American playwright. From Sept. 20-23, Williams-related events will be held on stages and porches, in gardens, at Town Hall, and in bars and

restaurants across town.

With music the theme of this year's festival, Kaplan, its curator and cofounder, said: "We want the audience to dance down the street from show to show."

Williams (1911-83) first came to town in 1940 and soon he purchased a Victrola. Music was integral to his vision. In "The Glass Menagerie," his narrator, Tom, says, "In memory, everything seems to happen to music."

"Williams often uses music in a humorous or erotic way," Kaplan said. "It's a psychological element that reveals what's going on beneath the surface."

Williams spent four summers in Provincetown. According to Kaplan's book "Tennessee Williams in Provincetown," Williams loved and lost here, worked on some of his greatest plays, and even played the conga drums. The festival that bears his name was founded in 2006, with a mission to both celebrate his work and commemorate his connection to the town.

Previous festivals have included world premieres of recently discovered plays of his, as well as presentations of his works, major and minor. These have been accompanied by complementary events, including dance performances, art exhibits, a "jazz funeral," readings, and more.

Those who stage this annual labor of love say they work hard to connect the dots, allowing fans to experience Williams in a different context year after year. With music as this year's theme, the festival promises a mix of scholarly insights and toe-tapping fun.

"Tennessee Williams did not write music, but it serves as the underpinning of a lot of what he wrote," said Jef Hall-Flavin, the festival director. "From my standpoint, my job is simple this year. Everyone understands music, so it's been a joy to work with this theme."

The festival will feature international music, blues, mariachi, Dixieland, American pop, art songs, and African drumming with performers and musicians hailing from Italy, South Africa, Alabama, Boston, and New York.

The theatrical offerings will include "The Glass Menagerie," "Auto-Da-Fé," "Ten Blocks on the Camino Real" (performed in part with marionettes), "I Never Get Dressed Till After Dark on Sundays," "Kingdom of Earth," and a musical production featuring scenes from four of Williams's short plays.

Additionally, this year's festival will feature a new play, "Gift of an Orange" by Charlene Donaghy, a documentary screening, and several opportunities to hear live music.

Williams often used contemporary pop songs in his work. Hence the inclusion in the lineup of "The Tennessee Williams Songbook." Natick native and twice-Tony-nominated Broadway actor and singer Alison Fraser, along with pianist Allison Leyton Brown, will perform a selection of pop songs from Williams's plays, swinging from country-western ballads to Mississippi blues to Latin love

songs, with stops in between.

“The music is so fantastic,” Fraser said. “I mean who’s not going to want to hear ‘Sophisticated Lady,’ ‘St. Louis Blues,’ ‘If I Didn’t Care,’ ‘It’s Only a Paper Moon’? It’s a spectacular rainbow of music. This is the soundtrack of Tennessee Williams’s life.”

So, come for the scenery, stay for the music, the festival, the theater. Or vice versa.

“To me, fall in P-Town is the most achingly beautiful time of the year,” Hall-Flavin said. “By the end of summer there’s a glistening haze in the air, and you have this bittersweet relationship to the town. The days are still warm and you remember that it’s a beautiful summer place, yet the evenings are cool and crisp. Everything is still open, but the press of people is not so great. And I’m always happy to be in a town where everyone’s smiling.

“Plus there’s parking again.”

Tickets and additional information are at www.twptown.org or by calling 866-789-8366.

Tickets can be purchased individually or in special packages; details online.

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