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Gift of an Orange. Photo by Rosemary Marchetta.

Bringing the Bayou to a Provincetown Garden

by Rebecca M. Alvin

“He thought of a bottle that he had once pulled out of the Sunflower River. He had dived from a log and his hands, touching the sandy bottom, came on this five gallon jug... Inside was a large catfish. They all wondered how it had gotten in there for now it was much too large to get through the mouth of the bottle. It must have swum in when it was a minnow and somehow grown up inside. Too big to get out. He thought about that as he looked at the big foreign woman... The woman backed into the trailer. He heard heavy movements inside like the catfish floundering in the bottle after the water had been poured out. A mean thing to do. They had crouched on the bank and watched it until it quit flopping.” — From Tennessee Williams’ “Gift of an Apple”

When Charlene Donaghy read Tennessee Williams’ short story “Gift of an Apple,” she was struck by the connection, however fleeting, between his two characters. The result of that inspiration is the play *Gift of an Orange*, which had its world premiere in Boston earlier this month, presented by New Urban Theater Lab. The production is headed to Provincetown this weekend for the 7th Annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, where the steamy bayou atmosphere of the piece will have to adapt to the slight chill of September in the outdoor Wa Garden, where it is scheduled to be performed.

Donaghy understands the complexities of logistics, though. She has been the Director of Productions at the Festival since its second year. Working with the unique spaces available here in town is a challenge, but ultimately an inspiring one.

The production is performed in a traditional proscenium arch theater in Boston, but when it comes to Provincetown, it will be in the round. The New Urban Theater Lab will bring much of its set here, but some of it will have to be adapted for the particulars of this unique production. And while the weather may prove an obstacle to generating that southern bayou experience, Donaghy doesn’t appear worried. She is happy to embrace the “magical beauty” of the Wa Garden. “It’s very much like the courtyard I do all my writing in, so it’s really come full circle,” she says. “And it really adds to that intimacy with the audience.”

In Williams’ original story, a young drifter happens upon a large Italian woman in a trailer by the side of a road. Hungry, he stops to talk with her and in the process, the pair share a brief moment of lust, interrupted by her realization that he is far too young. Williams takes that tiny little moment, what in reality would last only a minute or two, and gives it meaning beyond what the two characters can realize.

“For me, it was that you have these two people who have no connection with one another and I think they’re longing for a connection,” says Donaghy. “The whole story of the fish in the bottle and the woman in the trailer spoke to me. And just thinking about how people connect.”

But she didn’t adapt the story for the stage. While “Gift of an Apple” is the inspiration for *Gift of an Orange*, Donaghy says this play is all her own. Like Williams, Donaghy has a connection to New Orleans, which she says is “her muse” and her second home for the past 16 years. “My ‘stuff’ always has some connection to Louisiana, but it always also has people searching for home... In my mind, it immediately goes to Louisiana... It’s a natural thing to go to that setting,” she explains.

As she describes it, Donaghy’s play has a female character named Oshun as the lead. She is a voodoo practitioner who, using a spell, summons a young hitchhiker named Taurean who is half her age. The setting is in the wilderness of the Louisiana bayou, with subtle references to a great flood that has occurred there. There are

lots of differences between Donaghy's play and Williams' story (not the least of which is just in the fact that she can delve deeper into the connection between these two people in the space of a play), but she says they share that sense of longing for something, or someone, that feels like home.

Interestingly, while Donaghy had been very much taken with the largeness of the woman in Williams' story and in thinking about what that physical attribute might bring to that relationship, when she handed it over to director Jackie Davis, the casting went against her expectations. Not only is the actress playing Oshun not the voluptuous woman described in Donaghy's writing, she is actually quite slender.

"As a playwright, you have to hand [your work] over, and as odd as it sounds, when I give a director a play, I'm saying, 'surprise me!'," Donaghy explains.

While Donaghy admits she was a little shocked at first, she now realizes it was a gift.

"I think it's more that she doesn't have what's considered traditional beauty. I had wanted the largeness of her to be the shift in her beauty, but this actress is just amazing. And that's what Jackie gave me as a surprise," Donaghy enthuses.

Gift of an Orange will be performed as part of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival on Thursday, September 20 (2:30 p.m.); Friday, September 21 (2 p.m.); Saturday, September 22 (12:30 & 3 p.m.); and Sunday, September 23 (3:30 p.m.), in the Wa Garden, Tickets (\$25) can be purchased online: www.twptown.org; by phone: 866.789.TENN; or at the Box Office at the Waters Edge Cinema, 237 Commercial St., 2nd Fl. NOTE: This play contains full male nudity.

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