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Williams' Women — sex, desire and survival

Eighth annual Williams fest focuses on feminine vulnerability and power

By Sue Harrison

BANNER CORRESPONDENT

If you think you understand Tennessee Williams' female characters, you may be wrong. If you think they are weak little things "depending on the kindness of strangers," you are definitely wrong, and the eighth annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival (Sept. 26-29) will give you ample proof of just how rich and nuanced Williams' women are.

Williams delivered women who survived life's challenges, often on the sheer power of their will. He gave his women vulnerability and power. He gave them charm and desire, and he gave them the right and the means to express those desires. For this he has been accused of creating women who were nothing more than drag queens in faint disguise standing in for his own desires. That's wrong too.

This year's festival theme is "Tennessee Williams and Women." Festival curator David Kaplan and festival director Jef Hall-Flavin have created a compelling mosaic made up of Williams' own work, ranging from the largely unknown "Chorus Girl Plays" to the classic "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," paired with plays written by Gertrude Stein

and Jane Bowles.

"Women were once not allowed to express their desire publically," Kaplan says. When the movie version of "Streetcar" was being edited, he says, the last cuts took out Stella's reaction shots showing that she wanted Brando. She was the "good girl" and wasn't allowed to show that desire.

"He had close friends, sexually adventurous women, and he was keyed into women's desire that they had even when they knew it could bring them down," Kaplan says.

Women in the '30s movies were open about their appetites, but that changed, Kaplan says.

"When we think of Marilyn Monroe [who came later], she appears to not know the spell she casts on men. But Mae West, she knew what she was doing," Kaplan says. Society decided it was distasteful for women to have desire, much less show it, and the illusion of the innocent and fragile female was born.

This year's festival lineup is "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," "The Chorus Girl Plays," "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore," "Slapstick Tragedy — The Mutilated" and "Kingdom of Earth." Added to those are a Neo Benshi production, "Pink Melon Joy" by Gertrude Stein,

Just the facts

What: Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival

Where: Various venues (www.twptown.org)

When: Thurs.-Sun., Sept. 26-29

Tickets: (866) 789-8366, www.twptown.org and Crown & Anchor box office (during festival), 247 Commercial St.

and "In the Summer House," by Jane Bowles.

"Cat" is a full production currently being staged at the Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater leading up to the festival and then moving into Provincetown Town Hall with Keir Dullea (who played Brick on Broadway years ago) playing Big Daddy and his real-life wife Mia Dillon playing Big Mama. WHAT has created a unique set that puts a bed center stage, because isn't that what it's all about really — who wants whom, or who sleeps or doesn't sleep with whom?

"The impulse for theater is the same as the impulse for gossip. It's an inappropriate interest in other people's lives," Kaplan says.

The fabulous South African troupe Artscape and Fred Abrahamse-Meyer Productions is reprising last year's tour de force production of "Kingdom of Earth," which, like "Cat" also opening early, is now playing at The Provincetown Festival, where it will stay put once the Tennessee Williams Festival officially starts next week. This same group from South Africa will also perform "Milk Train," a tale about the angel of death making a carnal visit during a passionate woman's final days.

Williams, Kaplan says, wanted "Milk Train" to be understood as a fable and not "kitchen sink reality." He wrote Kabuki style stage directions using a storyteller on the side that have been largely ignored but are present in this year's production.

Neo Benshi is a fairly new the-



PHOTO COURTESY WILLIAMS THEATER FESTIVAL

Alex Spieth in Gertrude Stein's "Pink Melon Joy."

atrical art form and Roxi Power is a master. It derives from the Japanese tradition of Benshi that puts a storyteller on stage to tell audiences what was happening in silent films.

Roxi lip syncs to movies, delivers sound effects and sometimes writes a new storyline. She will be doing Neo Benshi performances at the festival to "Rebel Without a Cause," "Miss Lulu Bett" (a 1920 Pulitzer Prize winner by Zona Gale) and "A Streetcar Named Desire."

"The Chorus Girl Plays" is burlesque with chorus girls and dancers, including the real Miss Coney Island 2011, Lefty Lucy. It contains another play, "Curtains for Gentlemen," within the storyline.

In "Slapstick Tragedy," two well-known performers, Mink

Stole and Penny Arcade, team up to deliver the world premiere of a fun play that starts upstairs in the Gifford House then takes the audience downstairs to Club Purgatory for the final act.

"I have wanted to do Gertrude Stein since year one," Kaplan says, explaining the inclusion of Stein's play "Pink Melon Joy." She used words like paints, blending sounds and meanings to create new information, he says. What she shares with Williams is the knowledge that the spoken word is and should be a theatrical incantation.

Kaplan, himself, directs "In the Summer House," a play Williams loved almost to the point of obsession. In the play a young woman dies. Was she

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PHOTO MARGARET REYNOLDS

A burlesque show with dancers and chorus line—it's all in the comic thriller, "Curtains for Gentlemen," written by Tom Williams before he became "Tennessee."

