

Entertainment : Theatre

## Tennessee Williams & The Mystique of the Chorus Girl

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Tuesday Sep 17, 2013

A promotional photo for "The Chorus Girls Plays"

Before he changed his name to Tennessee, young Tom Williams drew upon impressions of the women close to him (his mother, sister and grandmother), as well as female actresses he saw in 1930s movies for the female characters in his plays.

These early creative explorations, and later dramatic manifestations, form the core of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival's eighth season titled "50% Illusion: Tennessee Williams and Women."



Over the course of four days, beginning on Sept. 26, international and local theater troupes will gather on Cape Cod to explore this dichotomy of illusion versus reality. The reference in the title is attributed to Williams' character Blanche Dubois from "A Streetcar Named Desire," who said, "After all, a woman's charm is fifty percent illusion..."

"Researching Williams' work," said David Kaplan, Festival curator and impresario, "I noticed a recurring theme in his short plays: the character of the chorus girl."



The young Tennessee Williams

### Template of a lady

By focusing on Williams' early influences - and obsessions - the Festival showcases how this theme influenced his later work. A world premiere, "The Chorus Girl Plays," features three short plays -- a work from 1935, "Cairo! Shanghai! Bombay!," and two others, "At

Liberty," and "Curtains for the Gentleman," written during this period.

"The girls in the chorus, whose figures and wits were a means to survive, became, it would

seem, Williams' template of a lady," Kaplan said, noting that this theme emerged after his close reading of fifteen one-acts by Williams, collected posthumously by editor Thomas Keith and published in "Magic Tower and Other One Act Plays" (New Directions 2011).

This female archetype can be seen in the latter Williams' characters - exemplified by Maggie the Cat in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" and Sissy Goforth in "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Any More" - (both featured at the Festival this year). Yet elements of the chorus girls' personas appear throughout the Williams canon: strong-minded women secure in their sexuality that command the stage with feisty and passionate, worldly-wise spirits.

The thread that binds "The Chorus Girl Plays" is a recreation of a bordello, not dissimilar to (according to Kaplan) the bars and bordellos Williams frequented in the East St. Louis neighborhood known for its seedy jazz joints and red light district. "I asked William Jay Smith [former U.S. poet laureate and longtime Williams friend], when he visited the Festival in 2010, if he knew if Williams had ever frequented these places. Smith told me, yes, Tom had gone there, and often," Kaplan said.

A promotional photo for "The Chorus Girls Plays"

### **Not strippers**

These one-acts are directed by Robert Chevara, a Berlin- and London-based director who has worked on several of Williams' plays on stages in the States and overseas, in collaboration with choreographer Paula Frasz, artistic director of Danszloop Chicago. It opens on Thursday, Sept. 26 at Paramount at the Crown and Anchor, with additional performances peppered throughout the Festival's four days.



In a phone interview Frasz said her troupe "is composed of women of varied sizes, ages and experience. I love the diversity of their bodies. The show is labeled burlesque, and the actresses portray prostitutes, but it is not the burlesque audiences today might expect. They are not strippers. Only one dancer is dressed with pasties and tassels. The rest are dressed in period costumes - they show their garters, their slips, and stockings underneath -- and they do peek-a-boo routines, including a fan dance, true to the era. But it is more teasing than stripping."



A promotional drawing for "The Chorus Girls Plays"

### Period shoes

There was, though, an unexpected factor Frasz realized once rehearsals began in Chicago earlier this year.

"I hadn't initially expected the dancers to also be actresses," Frasz said. "That posed an initial challenge. Not all dancers are actresses. Sometimes when dancers open their mouths to deliver lines, they are less than successful. But they rose to the occasion. They are talented to do both dancing and acting."

Both director Chevara and David Kaplan, who attended the rehearsals, insisted that the women wear period shoes, to authenticate their dance steps.

"In the 1930s, women wore these clunky heeled dance shoes, not the light and airy shoes dancers wear today. These shoes accentuated their earthy sexuality. They were very much

like 1930s screen icon Mae West, communicating to audiences that they owned their sexuality," Frasz said. "They stood up before the catcalls and hoots and the brassiness of the men who flocked to their shows as if to say, 'This is my body, I own it. You can enjoy it. But it's mine. It belongs to me.'"

Robert Chevara

### Red-hot mamas?

Director Robert Chevara, in a telephone interview from Germany, emphasized that Williams created chorus girls based on women he admired in films.

"The women are not red hot mamas, they are not Sophie Tucker-types," he said. "Rather, they are women who are supportive of one another but who are obsessed by the men in their lives. Williams loved the characters in the gangster movies of his day, the molls who would follow their men over the cliff, if needed. We see this developed later in 'Streetcar.' Stella won't go over the cliff for her sister Blanche.



Instead, she chooses Stanley over her sister."

As for casting dancers as actresses, Chevara said he is pleased with how these performers play the dual roles with confidence and professionalism.

"Dancers are like soldiers," Chevara said. "They do what they're told. They don't debate back and forth the way actors are wont to do."

While he is on tap to direct Williams' 1969 play, "In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel" in the West End in London next year, he sees great promise in the playwright's early works.

"There is a great deal of poetry early on," Chevara said. "There is humor and color and within these early plays and one sees the microcosm of themes emerge, themes he revisited in plays he wrote throughout his creative life."

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***The Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival begins Sept. 26, 2013 at various venues throughout Provincetown. For a complete schedule and ticket information visit their website [www.twptown.org](http://www.twptown.org)***

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