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What we mean when we perform Tennessee Williams

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JOSH ANDRUS PHOTO
IRENE GLEZOS in Tennessee Williams' *Orpheus Descending*

Two actors share insights as festival nears

This year's internationally known Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival's theme is "50% Illusion, Tennessee Williams and Women."

Irene Glezos, whose performance as Lady in *Orpheus Descending* rocked Provincetown for two TWfest seasons, is returning in *In the Summer House* by Williams friend Jane Bowles, directed by festival curator

David Kaplan.

When she was young, Glezos wanted to be a boy, because boys seemed to have “agency; they had power.” Discovering Williams, she changed: “You want to be the women in his plays, don't you? Because he shows that there's something far more interesting than that male power or force. He gives the melody to the underdog! He makes the underdog, the artist, the outcast -- the one you'd want to be. The one you hope for.

“Williams wrote that the organizing principle of his work is a need for understanding, tenderness and fortitude for individuals trapped by circumstance. How does a highly sensitive person, which Williams's women often are, deal with living in the world? With fortitude. Blanche, is she deluded? No, she is staying alive. With Williams, you are allowed to see the character's panic and loneliness and the ways that they cope with it. “

Glezos said her *Summer House* character, Gertrude, is a “single mom when the play starts...The play is in part about women, such as Bowles who was pressured to marry by her own mother, who did not in that time, have agency. My character is having an identity crisis. Her organizing principle was her father. They shared the same values, and if he is not who she thought he was, then who is she? There is no real self created.”

The actress “played the viola and was a cross country runner. But my own father died suddenly when I was 15.” When she acted in a high school play about the Holocaust, it seemed to mirror her own “inner circumstances.” Acting became a “perfect match” for her sensibilities.

“In my work it is: can we locate the thing that provokes a certain behavior in us? Plasticity in the best sense of the word; there is no type per se but all these qualities we need to find in one character.” Especially in Williams, who, Glezos said, is “the antidote” to all the bad plays and career difficulties actors have to go through. “With other playwrights you have to crack the nut. With Williams, if you're right for a part and you understand it, you just get on and he takes you there.”

The festival, running from Sept. 26 to 29, is privileged to have Keir Dullea, film and stage star (ever since he got his Actors Equity card in 1957) playing Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

His favorite of TW's women? “Why have to choose?” he asked. Dullea sees them all the characters as fascinating, male or female.

He says his wife, Mia Dillon (playing Big Mama opposite him), is so much in character that he didn't recognize her at first in costume. “Considering how badly she's treated by Big Daddy, Big Mama stands up for herself; she has guts but her ability to love is also very strong.”

Dullea played Brick opposite Elizabeth Ashley's Maggie in the 1974 Broadway production of *Cat*, directed by Michael Kahn. Recently viewing the archival footage he was “blown away. Ashley was a gift. She was sexy, cat-like, hungry, flirtatious and Southern.” The Maggie in this production, he said, has similar qualities.

Playing Big Daddy, the actor said, is the role he is proudest of in his long career because it is so complex; for instance, “How do you explain that such an extreme redneck is as sensitive in that era to his son's homosexuality, as he is?”

“I've never experienced such total inhabitation of a character,” he said. For Dullea acting is not just from “inside out” for him but also outside in; when he grew his hair long, grew a beard, deepened his voice, it helped give him the character. With film, “you can do many different takes which the audience never sees. With theater you do a different take every night, which allows you to grow with the piece.” The audience, he said, is the other character in the room. Their silence or laughter helps create the experience.

Dullea and Glezos, both New York-based actors, studied with Sanford Meisner, whom they credit for preparing them to play emotionally loaded roles such as Williams's. In the end, they said in separate interviews with me, “It's your own method” that works the best.

Festival curator Kaplan explains that the “50% illusion” is a quote from *Streetcar Named Desire*: the magic the playwright creates, and what his women (and many of us) live by. Festival artists all help create that magic to perfection.

Festival productions come from New York, Chicago and California. *Kingdom of Earth* returns from South Africa, along with a new production of *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here* starring Jennifer Stein. *The Chorus Girl Plays* presents a burlesque version of one of TW's early works. There are parties, meet ups and music. Details at www.twptown.org