

Full of pith and vinegar

Written by Lee Roscoe

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BRUCE GLIKAS PHOTO

GLAMOUR AND GUTS – The distinctive actress Elizabeth Ashley will share her thoughts on “Wine, Women and Williams” June 1 at a fundraiser for the Tennessee Williams Festival.

Elizabeth Ashley on Tennessee Williams and the theater today

Tony award-winning actress Elizabeth Ashley will help to preview the 2013 season of the Tennessee Williams Festival at a fund-raising gala, "Wine, Women and Williams," June 1 at 6:30 p.m. at Provincetown Town Hall.

The festival will feature in part, plays by O'Neill contemporary Susan Glaspell, a reading of *In the Summer House* by TW friend Jane Bowles, a repeat of *Kingdom of Heaven* in from South Africa, and WHAT's production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Ashley starred and was Tony-nominated in the 1974 revival of *Cat* as one of Williams's most compelling women, Maggie, directed by (my first acting teacher) Michael Kahn. I talked to her via e-mail.

How relevant do you think *Cat* is today?

Always relevant because of its classical themes of need and greed. Big Daddy is Tennessee's *Lear*.

What does the woman playing “Maggie the Cat” have to have to make it work?

A sense of humor/irony, and a ferocious hunger. (Ashley has said she starved her own kitties for a while to see how they would behave.) Plus extreme animal physicality and courage, courage, courage.

Her funniest experience in theater was:

During a performance of *Cat* on Broadway, in Act One, Maggie is like an animal in heat way downstage -- when an animal in the audience starts to growl and bark. Finally it got

so bad I couldn't continue. The audience was in an uproar. I stopped the play and said, 'Will whoever has something alive please leave so we can continue.' (One never stops a performance for anything short of fire). To my horror a man rose from the second row with a seeing-eye dog and cane and made his way up the aisle. I had just thrown a blind man and his dog out of a Broadway theater!

But he wrote me a letter saying his dog only ever reacted that way to cats – when he smelled them!

(The interviewer here pauses to laugh herself silly.)

You and TW were friends. Talk about it. Boozing?

Much and massive.

Favorite haunts?

Venice, Harry's Bar (was Hemingway's preference, too), Café Carlyle, NYC when (one of her best friends) Gore Vidal was around.

Most favorite, "Le Select" on St. Barth's before it was "discovered" by the "civilized world." (Remoteness is what draws her to Maine, where she spends much of her time writing an autobiography titled, appropriately, Heretic,)

What of your common "southernity?"

This was a huge common bond. He adored my mother, and was constantly whispering in my ear, "She's Amanda Wingfield, ya know." He loved that I could understand and speak the language, not imitate it. (Ashley has said that actors doing southern accents are too slow; that, especially with Maggie, the lines are fast.)

TW wanted you to play all his female characters?

Glass Menagerie, Sweet Bird, Milk Train and Red Devil Battery Sign, before I got too old or died. Alexandra de Lago in Bird is my fav; she never lies. But Ashley finds playing any TW a joy "due to the emotional and psychological truths embodied in his characters" unless a production threatens to "fall into the sex-south-sin clichés"

Talk about how your process: how you prepared

She is Method trained via such as Sandy Meisner at the Neighborhood Playhouse, Lee Strasburg at the Actor's Studio, "but mainly 55 years on stage."

I find plays over four characters and more than 90 minutes will not get a production and that the corporatization of theater has trivialized and ruined most of it. What do you think about how theater, the plays and the audiences have changed for better or worse in the past decades?

Economics is turning Broadway into Las Vegas, i.e., Disneyland theme park theater for tourists. Rarely are new serious plays produced unless they have London's prior stamp

of approval. Ashley says the best work is done in regionals, such as Kahn's company in DC, Hartford Stage, etc.

What brought you to theater?

Escaping from Baton Rouge, Louisiana – having read waaay too much Hemingway, my only ambition was to become an adventuress – but first I had to find out exactly what that was.

Do you prefer theater to film and TV or not and if so why?

She says film and stage acting are apples and oranges, mentioning a number of actors such as Alec Baldwin who do both well. But for Ashley who is not “crazy about the show-biz” atmosphere on movie sets, “The stage feels home to me, the most private place on earth.”

To hear Ashley talk about a life which has had many acts (and which in many ways mirrors a Williams play), while enjoying cocktails, dinner and more, call 866-780-TENN, or go to TWPTOWN.org. Limited tickets are available at \$125.

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