



PHOTO BY PAT BROMLOW DOWNING

## Tennessee Williams, from Cape Town to Cape Cod and Back

By David Kaplan

**F**ROM CAPE TOWN, South Africa, to the tip of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and back—and back again—the award-winning staging of Tennessee Williams’s often-overlooked late play *Kingdom of Earth* from Abrahamse-Meyer Productions is a not-to-be-overlooked example of what the Tennessee Williams Festival in Provincetown means and does to act on its mission, to roll out Tennessee Williams’s work into the world.

In late September 2012, the meeting hall of the musty P-town VFW on Highway 6 opened to the beat of Sam Chatmon's haunting Mississippi Delta blues song "I Have to Paint my Face":

Say God made us all  
He made some at night  
That's why he didn't take time  
To make us all white

The sight of hypermasculine Marcel Meyer stripped to the waist, pouring water on himself, readies the audience to pay close attention to the entrance of Anthea Thompson in hot-pink, gingham Capri pants stretched over ample assets. She's playing Myrtle, an ex-stripper prattling in a spot-on country-fried accent, mysteriously acquired 8,700 miles from the Mississippi Delta, where the play is set. Myrtle got married the day before to neurasthenic Lot, played with albino blonde perfection by Nicholas Dallas. Lot aims to have Myrtle set up home on his family farm, though he didn't bother to tell his new wife about his half-brother named Chicken, who lives on the place. That's Meyer as Chicken, glistening wet, listening to their arrival, feral.

A Boston-based critic described what it was like to be in the audience:

As directed by Fred Abrahamse, the play grabbed hold of your throat and slowly, purposefully, squeezed your breath away. . . . The effect was riveting. (Robert Israel, *Edge Magazine*)

The South African cast flew into Boston two days before their festival premiere, thanks to last-minute intercession to get the proper visas from America's Vice Consul in Cape Town, Collier F. Graham, who coincidentally hails from Clarksdale, Mississippi, where Tennessee Williams spent his boyhood. In a fortuitous Washington meeting between Robert Gips, US Ambassador to South Africa, and Ebrahim Rasool, South African Ambassador to the United States, the two diplomats discussed the hope that South African theater artists would bring a new point of view to a version of a play better and badly known as *The Seven Descents of Myrtle*.

Under that ungainly title, the play opened on Broadway the day after Williams's birthday in 1968 and closed after twenty-nine performances. The critics were baffled:

There is no rational explanation of *The Seven Descents of Myrtle* except that Tennessee Williams is burlesquing himself, if that is rational. Williams' exercises in southern degradation have sometimes illuminated the human condition, but this one is narrow, obsessively petty, and essentially ludicrous. (Edwin Newman, NBC News)

Forty-four years later, the South African production did bring a different perspective, in particular a sensitivity to the issues of race that underscore the play, something unnoticed in 1968, so distracted were Americans by the playwright's recently disclosed and unapologetic



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(ABOVE FROM TOP) SCENES FROM *KINGDOM OF EARTH*: CHERRI GOLDEN AS MYRTLE AND ALEX ORSAK AS LOT IN THE COLUMBUS, MISSISSIPPI, PRODUCTION, 2013; DAVID TROTTER AS CHICKEN AND CHERRI GOLDEN AS MYRTLE IN THE COLUMBUS, MISSISSIPPI, PRODUCTION, 2013; MARCEL MEYER AS CHICKEN, ANTHEA THOMPSON AS MYRTLE, NICHOLAS DALLAS AS LOT IN THE PROVINCETOWN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS THEATER PRODUCTION, 2012

(OPPOSITE PAGE) MARCEL MEYER AS CHICKEN IN THE CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA, PRODUCTION, 2012

homosexuality. What was called burlesque—Williams's reconfiguration of his earlier themes under the light of his later experience—is now recognized as a widening of his vision as a creative artist. Knowing the Festival's enthusiasm for presenting adventurous work written by Williams, Tom Erhardt, the London-based theater agent who represents the Tennessee Williams estate, suggested that the Abrahamse-Meyer production premiere in Provincetown.

Critical theory aside, visceral enjoyment of the performances in Provincetown was undeniable. The run sold out. Home in Cape Town, South Africa, where it played next, the production was acclaimed. "The cast are, without exception, absolutely outstanding," said the *Cape Times*, commending the "terrible beauty" of the acting and pointing out that "the play is ultimately one of hope. It is a resounding affirmation of the power of love." The production was nominated for three Fleur du Cap Awards (the Cape Town

equivalent of the Tony). Anthea Thompson was nominated for best actress, Charl-Johan Lingenfelder for original score, and Fred Abrahamse won for the best set design.

The further resonance of the production is most impressive. Brenda Caradine, the executive director of the Columbus, Mississippi, Tennessee Williams Tribute, has been coming to Provincetown for each of the last eight years of the Tennessee Williams Festival. She was so moved by *Kingdom of Earth* that she had her own production of it staged this spring in Columbus—the small town where Williams was born. Echoing the Provincetown VFW, an old drugstore on the historic downtown Main Street was converted into an intimate theater. M. J. Etua directed, with Alex Orsak as Lot, Cheri Golden as Myrtle. A reviewer in Columbus extolled David Trotter in the role of Chicken:

[He] both dazzled and disturbed the audience. The honesty that defined the complexity of a man

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who is tormented by his own existence was felt throughout his entire performance. The subtleties of anger, hate, madness and shame permeated his performance. No emotions were left unaddressed. (Joseph St. John, in *This Is Real Media*)

Mississippi social mores are not Provincetown's. The play was controversial in Columbus, its impoliteness "disappointing," and e-mails circulated protesting Williams's "objectionable language." And this, too, the reviewer in Columbus took on:

Tennessee Williams was a man before his time . . . a true philosopher of the human condition. He did not mince his words as he dealt with the complex issues of race, sex, passion, heterosexuality, homosexuality and the Eros of humanity. . . . Some people may not like what Tennessee Williams had to say and that is their loss. Williams accomplished what all writers want to be: an artist who says, writes and does whatever he wants. In the end, he was the master of his own art.

Joe Paprzycki, the artistic director of the South Camden Theatre Company in New Jersey, also comes to the Tennessee Williams Festival in Provincetown every year. His productions of Williams's plays *Suddenly Last Summer* and *The Night of the Iguana* have brought his company great reviews. A production of *Kingdom of Earth*, directed by Connie Norwood, opens the 2013 season in Camden, starting October 11. Paprzycki explained: "I knew

about the play before, and had probably read it, maybe even more than once, but seeing it was something else. Seeing it at the festival inspired me to produce it."

The genesis of these inspired connections began seven years ago, in December 2006, when a small group of people gathered in Boston to draw up a mission statement for the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival. Present in the room: Alix Ritchie, Jerry Scally, Patrick Falco, and this writer, along with P. J. Layng, Maureen Shea, and Gail Phaneuf. The agreed-on goals: to celebrate Williams's work and connection to Provincetown, but also to send the spirit—"searching spirit," Alix Ritchie suggested—rolling forward out of the Cape and back. That is what has happened with numerous plays shown at the Festival, *Kingdom of Earth* among them.



The 2013 theme for the Festival is *Tennessee Williams and Women*, seven plays by Williams ranging from the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to a self-described "slapstick tragedy," *The Mutilated*, starring avant-garde goddesses Mink Stole and Penny Arcade. Also on the bill: Williams's plays from the 1930s in which burlesque chorus girls have prominent roles, written when the playwright was still Tom, not yet Tennessee. As challenging in their own way as Williams's later plays, the chorus-girl plays tap into the roots of love and cynicism displayed by the former chorines who play leading roles in Williams's *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* and *Kingdom of Earth*.

For those who missed it last year, the original South African cast returns to Provincetown to play *Kingdom of Earth* for two weeks at the Provincetown Theater, a production sponsored by Berta Walker Gallery, starting September 12 and then on into the Festival week. This is part of a lineup of seven Williams plays (along with some Gertrude Stein and Susan Glaspell) running September 26-29 in venues throughout town. ❏

DAVID KAPLAN is the curator and a cofounder of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival and author of the book *Tennessee Williams in Provincetown*. More information about festival activities is available at [tuptown.org](http://tuptown.org).



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