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THEATER | CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

## Tennessee Williams's time is now

By **Don Aucoin** | GLOBE STAFF | SEPTEMBER 21, 2013

To borrow and bend a phrase from Tennessee Williams, playwrights have always depended on the kindness of posterity.

And to judge by the surge of interest in his plays, both famous and obscure, posterity is smiling on Williams 30 years after his death.

Thanks in substantial part to the annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, which kicks off this week, a spate of unseen or seldom-seen plays have pushed their way into view, giving us a fuller sense of his entire body of work and suggesting the need for a reappraisal of a writer we thought we knew.

“Now we’re rediscovering his other side, his experimental side,” says Peter Smith, artistic director of the Tennessee Williams Center in Sewanee, Tenn. “He was always trying to push the envelope of what playwriting could be.”

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Meanwhile, his best-known dramas are, if anything, more popular than ever. For Williams — who spent the last two decades of his life in such critical and commercial disfavor that in 1977 he despondently wrote “no one is more acutely aware than I that I am widely regarded as the ghost of a writer” — it’s a striking display of posthumous vindication that confirms the strength of his hold on American theater.

How strong? Consider just this Thursday alone. On Broadway, it will be opening night for the American Repertory Theater’s production of “The Glass Menagerie,” directed by John Tiffany and starring Cherry Jones, Zachary Quinto, and Celia Keenan-Bolger. In New Haven, the Yale Repertory Theatre will open “A Streetcar Named Desire” — the first time Yale Rep has produced “Streetcar” in the theater’s 47-year history.



SAM FALK/THE NEW YORK TIMES/FILE 1965

**Tennessee Williams, seen in his New York apartment in 1965, began to fall out of favor in the '60s.**

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■ **Critics' picks: Theater**

On the Cape, the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival will get under way with performances of “Slapstick Tragedy: The Mutilated,” “The Chorus Girl Plays,” and “Kingdom of Earth,” the latter in a production from Cape Town, South Africa. Slated for later in the festival is the Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater’s production of “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,” starring Keir Dullea as Big Daddy and Mia Dillon as Big Mama.

The burst of simultaneous openings in New York, New Haven, and Provincetown will put an exclamation point on a year when Williams’s authorial presence has been pronounced. It began in January, with the Broadway revival of “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,” starring Scarlett Johansson as Maggie the Cat. In March, Renée Fleming sang the role of the doomed Blanche DuBois at Carnegie Hall in André Previn’s operatic adaptation of “A Streetcar Named Desire.” The month of May brought the first New York performance of “The Notebook of Trigorin,” his adaptation of Chekhov’s “The Seagull,” followed in June by an off-Broadway production of Williams’s “The Two-Character Play,” starring Amanda Plummer and Brad Dourif.

“We are watching a reputation rise,” declares David Kaplan, the curator and cofounder of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, who estimates there are at least 300 professional productions worldwide each year of Williams plays, which translates to thousands of performances annually. (On top of that there are, of course, countless performances of Williams plays in colleges and high schools.)

So why is Williams more with us than ever? Partly it’s because his work responds to our hunger for expert storytelling and craftsmanship, two qualities that never go out of style. Kaplan says “the greatness of the plays shines through” because “they’re lit by something inside them: their understanding of human beings, and very importantly by his mastery of language.”

His unabashedly poetic sensibility and emotional directness — Williams’s heart was always visible, right there on his sleeve — also may appeal to contemporary audiences weary of the ironic distance and detachment that characterizes our eye-rolling, finger-quoting age.

Moreover, when it comes to Williams, there’s a vitality in performance that can’t be denied. He had a rare gift for constructing epic familial showdowns to go along with his nearly unrivaled knack for creating vivid, larger-than-life characters. The stormy likes of Stanley Kowalski, Amanda Wingfield, and Maggie the Cat are irresistible actor bait; each new generation of performers wants to tackle the big Williams roles, including movie stars like Johansson, and producers are often happy to oblige them. Directors, too, are intrigued by the interpretive possibilities.

But the other side of the unceasing Williams wave has to do with the torrent of productions of his least-known plays. The critical response to these dramas has been mixed, but audiences and theater artists alike seem determined to get the fullest possible picture of the oeuvre compiled by this exceptionally prolific



MICHAEL J. LUTCH

**Celia Keenan-Bolger and Brian J. Smith in the ART’s “Glass Menagerie.”**

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Some of the plays in question were written before “The Glass Menagerie” made him famous in the mid-1940s. In one celebrated instance, the actress Vanessa Redgrave helped to unearth “Not About Nightingales,” a 1938 drama by Williams, leading to productions in England in 1998 and in New York a year later.

And some of them were written in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, a period when his new work was routinely lambasted by critics and he was battling drug and alcohol problems. For example, “In Masks Outrageous and Austere,” his last full-length play, unfinished when Williams died in 1983, was staged last year in New York in a production starring Shirley Knight.

In his later years, free of the heavy hand of censorship so prevalent during the 1940s and 1950s — and perhaps free, too, of any wan hopes of regaining his popularity — Williams wrote dramas that are characterized by an uncompromising bleakness of tone and a rawness of subject matter that makes them perfectly suited for the “Breaking Bad” era. Changing cultural attitudes may also make today’s audiences more receptive to Williams’s edgier work; even during his heyday, media coverage of Williams, who was gay, was often laced with thinly veiled or not-at-all-veiled homophobia.

Smith, of the Tennessee Williams Center, credits Kaplan and the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival for helping bring much of the playwright’s work into the light. Since 2006 the festival has held world premieres of nine previously unproduced plays by Williams, along with one US premiere. The plays have included “The Remarkable Rooming House of Madame Le Monde,” “American Gothic,” “The Parade,” “Green Eyes,” and “The Dog Enchanted by the Divine View.” On Thursday night the festival will add another world premiere to its list with “Curtains for the Gentleman,” one of three short plays to be presented under the title “The Chorus Girl Plays.”



MICHAEL & SUZ KARCHMER

**Steven DeMarco and Madeleine Lambert in “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” in Wellfleet.**

Kaplan says that in championing such plays, the festival’s goal has been to put them “in the context of his earlier work, and not thinking of them as orphans artistically but as a continuation of his work.”

“He had a sojourn into respectability that lasted less than 20 years,” says Kaplan. “In the work he did before that and in the work he did after that, he was pretty consistent in his desire to experiment, and his desire to work in nontraditional forms.”

“The Remarkable Rooming House of Madame Le Monde” fits that description. Written near the end of Williams’s life, it’s a macabre, unsettling excursion into Grand Guignol in which a man named Mint, first seen clinging to hooks from the ceiling, is subjected to physical and verbal brutality before the arrival of the lethal title character, who ups the ante still further.

Kaplan, who has directed numerous Williams productions, likens his later plays to the later works of Beethoven and Picasso in that they “expose the workings” of the artist while concentrating his themes. The

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that it is understood by the person doing it.”

The dangerous power of sex is at the heart of “Green Eyes.” Written in 1970, the one-act play unfolds as a kind of danse macabre between a soldier about to return to war (clearly the Vietnam War) and his sultry wife, who relentlessly taunts him, in scenes of erotic and psychological combat, with her apparent infidelity. Last year, in a co-production between Company One and the experimental theater troupe the Kindness, “Green Eyes” was performed in a hotel room in downtown Boston for an audience capped at 25 spectators. That setting was about as far removed as could be from the 1,200-seat Broadway houses where Williams’s most popular plays were, and are, performed.

There was another notable thing about “Green Eyes”: Fragmentary and uneven though it was, the play was much more compelling than this year’s starry, lavish, big-budget Broadway revival of “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” — a reminder that the work of Tennessee Williams continues to upend expectations.

*Don Aucoin can be reached at [aucoin@globe.com](mailto:aucoin@globe.com).*

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