



Williams fest explores women, illusion

Tennessee Williams festival explores women's roles

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Few could argue that Tennessee Williams wrote some of the best roles for women in American theater. Think Blanche Dubois. Amanda Wingfield. Maggie the Cat. Serefine Della Rose.

The writer's relationship with women — and how that changed as women's roles changed in American society — is the focus of the eighth annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival. From Thursday through Sept. 29, the event will explore the theme of "a woman's charm is 50 percent illusion" — a quote from Blanche Dubois in "A Streetcar Named Desire."

Theater artists from around the world will celebrate Williams' legacy with four days of plays, dance and film that address that topic in various ways. Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater's production of the classic "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" — which features the character of Maggie, as well as acclaimed actors Keir Dullea and Mia Dillon as Big Daddy and Big Mama — will move to Provincetown, sharing the bill with more avant-garde interpretations of that theme.

"In creating women's roles, Williams understood that women leading real lives, as Blanche points out in 'Streetcar,' have had to create illusions for themselves and for others in order to survive," notes festival curator David Kaplan in a press release. "Fragile grace got replaced with powerful grace, often combined with powerful laughter."

Some of the event's non-Williams offerings are plays "by women who were creating women characters in their own way," according to a festival press release. Others are less familiar plays by Williams. And executive director Jef Hall-Flavin says that with his experimental work, the playwright was really "often ahead of his time."

Besides the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," the program for the festival includes:

- "Slapstick Tragedy: The Mutilated": According to festival information, "Slapstick Tragedy" was the name Williams gave to a double bill on Broadway in 1966. "The Mutilated" was the first play on that bill. Cosmin Chivu, director of the Provincetown show, considers it "one of the funniest, strangest, most neglected, and most moving of Tennessee Williams' later plays." The Beth Bartley Productions version stars Mink Stole (a cult favorite of John Waters' films) and New York avant-garde performance artist Penny Arcade in a play about a Texas oil heiress who hides a secret while "her drunk and derelict frenemy" plots to reveal it to the world.
- "Kingdom of Earth": This production from Cape Town, South Africa is returning after performances last year to play at Provincetown Theater both during and in advance of the festival, so those interested can enjoy a sneak preview. The returning stars in this Abrahamse & Meyer Productions show are Anthea Thompson, Marcel Meyer and Nicholas Dallas in a story about a TV personality, her sickly new husband and the half-brother who aims to inherit the family farm.
- "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore": The same company brings what the festival describes as "an unconventional and provocative production of Williams' 'sophisticated fairy tale.'" It stars South African stage and film actress Jennifer Steyn as Sissy Goforth, "an eccentric millionaire consumed with writing her memoirs confronted by an enigmatic young poet, companion to wealthy women as they near death." Meyer, Dallas and Roelof Storm also star.
- "The Chorus Girl Plays": This production features three short plays written in the 1930s about "good-time girls" before Tom Williams became Tennessee. DanszLoop Chicago, an ensemble led by Paula Frasz that specializes in dance interpretations of plays, performs under the direction of Robert Chevara, a European opera and theater director. He has set the plays in a vaudeville dance hall at the start of a burlesque show with 1930s music to evoke

the era in which they were written. "These are very funny plays which also have a disturbing undercurrent that calls to mind the effects of the Depression on that era," Chevara says in a press release. The plays are the world premiere of "Curtains for a Gentleman," "At Liberty" and "Cairo! Shanghai! Bombay!" with a dance-hall finale by slapstick burlesque performer Lefty Lucy of New York.

- A Neo-Benshi interpretation of the film "A Streetcar Named Desire," performed by poet Roxi Power in the style of performance art started by San Francisco poets in 2003. Festival information says the style builds on the Japanese tradition of the "benshi," a traditional Japanese storyteller who would act out the roles alongside the first silent movies. "Poet Roxi Power lip-synchs a humorous alternative narrative that sabotages the scenes even as it expands our pleasure in the original film," according to a press release.

In addition, "Miss Lulu Bett," a silent film based on the 1920 Pulitzer Prize-winning play by Zona Gale, will be shown, accompanied by live music.

Plays by women will include:

- Jane Bowles' "In the Summer House": Tennessee Williams called this play about a woman trying to break free of a possessive mother (which will be directed by Kaplan) "not only the most original play I have ever read, I think it also the oddest and funniest and one of the most touching," according to festival information. This workshop production takes place around a swimming pool and features stars from former festival productions, including Irene Glezos, Beth Bartley, Brenda Currin and Jack Kesy.
- "Pink Melon Joy" by Gertrude Stein: Williams was a fan of Stein's and this play by the modernist writer about a baby shower that continues longer than expected shows off her rhythmic language. This new production from New York is directed by Katherine Brook.

The festival also offers talks, parties, social events, a Jack Daniels tasting dinner and a "Mississippi Juke Joint" music venue, as well as a "Tennessee Williams 101" primer and "Tennessee Williams Institute," a graduate-level symposium led by Williams' scholars. Provincetown artist Bill Evaul has created a series of works for the festival.

IF YOU GO

"Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival"

When and where: Thursday through Sept. 29, with varying times for performances at venues around Provincetown.

Reservations and information: www.twptown.org or 866-789-8366.

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