

Drama and poetry, where do they merge?

Contributed by Lee Roscoe
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As Provincetown's Tennessee Williams Festival co-founder and artistic director David Kaplan explained it during an interview, "Cocteau said it best. There is poetry in the theater, pretty words, and poetry OF the theater, which can be a door slam, a good entrance, and a change of costume. It's a rare group of people who can do both, Shakespeare of course, and Tennessee Williams." He adds Lorca, and Marlowe.

"Who can do it in other languages we may not hear as well in English?...Pushkin, Goethe, Racine, Moliere, Euripides." Poets T.S. Eliot and Yeats do not achieve poetry of theater, Kaplan thinks. "You can track TW's aesthetic through the poets he read and enjoyed," he said.

It was Sara Teasdale, a St. Louis poet, whose work, style and life influenced Williams most. Kaplan explained, "It's all about giving all, the romantic theme, the agony of love." Kaplan noted that vagabond Vachel Lindsay was Teasdale's lover and that they both committed suicide, then quoted a piece of Teasdale's poem "Barter": "Life has loveliness to sell....Spend all you have for loveliness....And for a breath of ecstasy/ Give all you have been, or could be." Kaplan added that "this beyond all set the dramatic path for both Williams's plays and his poetry." Kaplan says that later other admired poets gave Williams "another way of organizing his thinking, changing his artistic paradigm, rather than influencing the way he wrote. In D.H. Lawrence was the idea of sexuality as healthy. In Hart Crane, it is (and here Kaplan cites Heraclitus) the delight in how seeming incongruities add up to another truth." This opposition is contained in Jane Bowles's "In the Summer House," which Kaplan is directing for this September's festival: "Combining disparate things to add up to something, a kind of poetry."

Reminding me that Williams was influenced by the rhythms of jazz, Kaplan said, "Williams is ultimately about how words cast a spell, by reading or hearing them out loud we go to another place. That's why he was so precise about his word choice, so aware of rhythm and cadence."

Williams rarely used poems per se in his plays. He did in "Night of the Iguana" with the old poet Nonno. Yet lines immortal such as Blanche's in "Streetcar Named Desire": "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers," are poetry. The most poetic of Williams's plays? The director answers, "Camino Real."

I think of almost anywhere in the play: Gypsy: "A tom-cat in the plaza." Esmerelda: "God bless all cats without pads in the plaza tonight. Kilroy: Amen!" (He falls to his knees in the empty plaza).

Esmerelda: "God bless all con men and hustlers and pitch-men who hawk their hearts on the street, all two-time losers who're likely to lose once more, the courtesan who made the mistake of love"

Williams wrote poetry as well as plays, and his poetry itself is often theatrical, setting a scene, creating a character as in "Photograph and Pearls": "And I am led to wonder, under the breath of my polite attention, /whether or not anybody, half or wholly unclothed, golden or brown, /had ever disturbed in the least/his elegant mother's dominion of pearls." There's drama in his Crane-like cry of history in "The Inheritors": "The western acres have turned our flesh into bread/our bone into wood to build houses/our blood is caught up/in the churning motion of wheels."

Jef Hall-Flavin, executive director of the Williams festival, summed up a piece of his take on plays, which are poetry in a separate conversation. "Plays which are too realistic, depict too much, don't last. Shakespeare understood that we can speak a sunrise into existence because we have imagination. In our time it is Tennessee Williams who has the heart and skill of a poet, beyond any of our playwrights, which is why his work will last."

For information on the 9th annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater festival, Sept. 25-28: www.twptown.org.

