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Festival relying on a little help from Williams's friends

By Loren King | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 25, 2014



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PROVINCETOWN — Tennessee Williams may be regarded as one of America's greatest playwrights, but Jef Hall-Flavin, director of the annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, didn't hold him in such high esteem when he was in college. Then, learning

about Williams carried with it the distinct odor of mothballs.

“He was a museum piece,” says Hall-Flavin, describing his initial feelings about Williams. “I didn’t realize his scope. He’s a contemporary playwright. He’s America’s Shakespeare.”

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Casting Williams in an ever-changing, contemporary light is the purpose of the annual festival, which Hall-Flavin directs and David Kaplan curates. Now in its ninth year, the festival runs through Sunday with a packed schedule of performances each day. It celebrates the author of “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” and “A Streetcar Named Desire” with thoroughly modern, even experimental productions from around the world starring first-rate actors.

Although most often associated with New Orleans and Key West, Williams spent his summers in the 1940s in Provincetown, where he reportedly worked on “The Glass Menagerie” and “A Streetcar Named Desire.”

The theme of this year’s festival is “Tennessee Williams’ Circle of Friends.” It features two Williams plays that deal with friendship (“Period of Adjustment” and “A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur”) as well as works by four artists — Carson McCullers, Yukio Mishima, Jane Bowles, and William Inge — who were colleagues and friends of Williams and who, like Williams, were gay or bisexual. “For them, sexuality wasn’t just a matter of sex but about being secret: hiding it, sharing it,” Kaplan says. “Keeping a secret, having a second self became an aspect of identity. That is an aesthetic.

Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival

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“Friendship, even within honest friendships, carry on Williams’s themes of illusion and shared fantasy,” he says.

“Period of Adjustment,” staged by the Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater, is a rare Williams comedy (albeit a dark one) that depicts a Christmas Eve shared by two couples at different stages of life. “A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur,” a production from Minnesota’s Gremlin

Theatre directed by Hall-Flavin, is about a group of older women living together in a St. Louis apartment. Like many of the festival's productions, "A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur" will be staged in an unorthodox setting: a house at 175 Bradford St. in the center of town, with chairs set up in the living room to view the action that takes place there and in a hallway, bathroom, and on a staircase.

Other works by Williams in this year's festival include "Vieux Carré," his autobiographical play about a young writer who moves into a French Quarter boarding house run by a lonely landlady and filled with eccentric characters. KNOW Theatre of Binghamton, N.Y., which first produced the play last year, will stage it at Town Hall.

As for the friends, Kaplan directs "In the Summer House" by novelist and playwright Bowles, who, he says, befriended Williams in Morocco. In another use of an environmental setting, Kaplan stages "In the Summer House" outdoors by the pool of the Boatslip and along the edge of the bay.

Mishima's "The Lady Aoi" will be performed at the Art House with puppets by the Abrahamse-Meyer Company from South Africa. Mishima's work is modeled on the classic Noh Theater of Japan.

McCullers's classic "The Member of the Wedding" will be staged at Town Hall by an all-black cast led by Brenda Thomas, who was last seen in the Hartford TheaterWorks production of "The Sty of the Blind Pig," for which she won a Connecticut Critics Circle Award. The casting, says Kaplan, underscores McCullers's major themes of identity, friendship, and the human condition. "To see a black man playing an 8-year-old white sissy boy is to see the soul of someone else come from another's body. That's what it means to be possessed. . . . We honor the text but we free it for a period, respectfully and wildly. We make it alive again for that audience in those chairs now."

The Kansas-born Inge (who committed suicide in 1973 at age 60) was a closeted homosexual who led a tortured private life. Williams, also from the Midwest (St. Louis) and gay, befriended Inge and became a mentor, even introducing Inge to his agent, Audrey Wood.

Four one-act plays by Inge, collected at the festival as "An Otherwise Hopeless Evening," deal with unrequited love between men amid the conservative Midwest culture. The show will be staged at Sage Inn and Lounge by an all-male ensemble under the direction of Travis Chamberlain, who helmed the New York City premiere of Williams's little-known play "Green Eyes" in 2011. "An Otherwise Hopeless Evening" consists of two short plays — "The Boy in the Basement" and "The Tiny Closet" — and two previously unpublished works, "The Killing" and "The Love Death."

This year's festival coincides with the long-awaited publication of New Yorker theater critic John Lahr's extensive biography, "Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh." As a bonus for festival-goers this year, Lahr will be featured on Sunday at 10 a.m. in conversation with Williams authority and editor Thomas Keith at the Fine Arts Work Center.

Hall-Flavin stresses that the Provincetown festival is one of the "few places on earth" where audiences can see one-acts and full productions of Williams's lesser-known plays. "We've changed the reputation of Tennessee Williams over the past 10 years," he says "With eight to 10 shows in a weekend, audiences can hear his voice in its full breadth. We show the B-sides, not just the greatest hits."

Loren King can be reached at loren.king@comcast.net.

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