



Williams festival uses Provincetown as a stage

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The town itself has always been important to the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival. It was where the famed playwright spent a few summers in the 1940s and wrote some of his most successful plays. And in its ninth year, the festival is continuing to use unusual spaces in town to interpret the plays presented in new ways.

“One of the great things about our festival is the way that Provincetown is showcased,” says executive director Jef Hall-Flavin. “Provincetown is such a special place. I think everyone who comes here falls in love with it in a different way,” whether because of the light, the sea, the dunes or its history. In a phone interview, Hall-Flavin quotes festival curator David Kaplan, who has said, “We like to play the town as a piano, using all the octaves.”

With the festival's focus on Williams' language, organizers have also tried to match his words with settings, Hall-Flavin says, that are “surprising or enlightening or even challenging.” Some unusual locations have been required because the small town doesn't have enough traditional performance spaces for multiple plays and events over the four-day festival. But location choices also have been a way for directors to “open (their) minds to what (they) really want to say about the piece and get creative.”

Festival-goers have consistently told Hall-Flavin that the plays in unusual spaces have been the most memorable part of their experiences at the festival. In the past, plays have been staged on a wharf, a storefront, a front porch, a church, a tent on the beach, a bar, a hotel room, a parade down the street and actually in the harbor.

This year's event, which begins Thursday and runs through Sept. 28, will continue that tradition.

One such play is “In the Summer House,” by Jane Bowles – one of Williams' friends represented in this year's schedule themed around “Circle of Friends.” The drama with mystery and humor, a script that organizers say Williams championed, is taking place outdoors at the Boatslip Resort – including on the stairs, around and in the pool and in the bay next to the resort.

Kaplan, as director, chose the location. “In this play, Jane Bowles has the idea that to understand clearly, emotionally, you need to back up and look at a distance,” he says in a press release. “The length of the Boatslip pool, the drama of its three-story staircase, the sweeping views of the bay from the deck, make for excellent scenery and proven audience eye candy.

Williams' “A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur,” with a plot described as women friends helping each other “navigate the rocky road between romance and reality,” will be performed in a 1920s Sears house at 175 Bradford St. The audience will be seated in the great room, and the actors will perform there, and in the bedroom, bathroom, hallway and stairs.

The action is supposed to be set in an efficiency apartment, says Hall-Flavin, who is directing, “and rather than try to create that on a stage, it's far more satisfying and a lot of fun, to actually see it in a house.” He did that for a Minnesota production in March, and it worked so well that he wants to re-create that experience down to the fried

chicken being cooked and actual toilets flushing.

“The minute you take a play off a traditional stage, it changes the relationship between the audience and the actors,” he says. “You’re able to hear the play in a different way. It becomes something else, the event rather than ‘This is my job as the audience’ and ‘This is my job as the actor.’ ... We subvert those roles when we bring it into a house.”

Even one of the plays presented in Town Hall, which has a proscenium stage, will get a different treatment: IT will be performed in the round on the floor of the hall. That decision for Tim Gleason, artistic director of KNOW Theatre from Binghamton, New York, came from a desire to make a closer connection between audience and actors.

For “Vieux Carre,” which reflects on the importance of even fleeting friendships, he says in a press release, being surrounded by the audience “means there’s no place for us to hide. We’re fully exposed. As actors we feed off the energy an audience gives us. We’re ready for anything.”

To further steep the audience in a town important to Williams, the festival has provided a free downloadable guide to sites connected to him at www.twptown.org. The Provincetown festival is billed as the nation’s largest performing arts festival dedicated to “celebrating and expanding the understanding of America’s great playwright” and his enduring influence in the 21st century.

WHAT'S ON THE SCHEDULE

The Circle of Friends theme for the ninth annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival features shows focused on the humor, love, disappointment and healing that spring from friendships. The schedule includes plays written by Williams and by friends who influenced his work and dance inspired by it.

The festival also offers a daily “Williams 101” background course, parties, and talkbacks set in bars. For a full schedule: www.twptown.org.

Some highlights:

- Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater's current show “Period of Adjustment,” a 1960 “serious comedy” about two Korean War buddies and their wives facing issues of the times.
- “A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur,” a play set in the 1930s about a circle of women friends who strive to protect each other from disappointments in love, but not always successfully.
- “Vieux Carré,” about a young writer who moves into a New Orleans boardinghouse in the French Quarter and meets his lonesome landlady and eccentric characters; by KNOW Theater from Binghamton, New York.
- “I Wish You'd Keep Still,” two dances choreographed by Carson Efirid that were inspired by Williams' one-act plays “Why Do You Smoke So Much, Lily” (1935) and “Something Unspoken” (1951).
- “The Member of the Wedding,” by Williams' friend Carson McCullers, produced by Boston's New Urban Theatre Laboratory as a radio play, with an all-black cast playing even traditionally white characters.
- “In the Summer House,” by friend Jane Bowles, about a possessive mother who threatens to send her brooding daughter to business school.

- “The Lady Aoi,” by friend Yukio Mishima, about a ghostly apparition that appears in a hospital room and unleashes a jealous fury; produced by the South African performers of Abrahamse-Meyer Productions as a puppet play.
- “An Otherwise Hopeless Evening,” four plays by William Inge about extraordinary men struggling to be themselves; performed by an all-male cast with veteran drag queen De De Deville from Kansas City.

If you go:

What: The Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival.

When: Thursday through Sept. 28.

Where: various locations in Provincetown.

Tickets and information: www.twptown.org.

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