

# EDGE Boston

## @ the 9th Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival

by Robert Israel  
Contributor  
Tuesday Sep 30, 2014



If the crowds that stood in line for the productions and special events at this year's Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival are any indication, the playwright, who died in 1983, continues to wield considerable magnetism.

The lack of traditional venues in town remains a vexing feature of this quirky yet undeniably spirited festival. But because of the imaginative ways productions are shoehorned into spaces not designed for theatrical productions, audiences clamored to see international and national productions that demonstrated boldness and imagination.

Williams' influence on other playwrights (and their influence over him) was the theme of this year's festival (the ninth) that took place this past weekend.

Works by William Inge, Carson McCullers, Yukio Mishima, and Jane Bowles were presented alongside Williams' plays, allowing audiences to explore thematic and linguistic threads. Taken in sum, the plays proved that language and ideas once bandied about freely by and among Williams and his "circle of friends" are resoundingly and theatrically compelling today.

Due to the compact nature of the Festival, it was impossible for me to attend every production. What follows is a quick look at some of what I did get to see.



Boarding house tenants marched to the Paddy wagon in Vieux Carré Photo courtesy of KNOW Theatre

## **Vieux Carré**

Williams often returned to plays and stories he had previously written, and such is the case of "Vieux Carré," which he wrote over a period of 40 years for a production that was finally staged in New York in 1977. Set between the winter of 1938 and 1939, in a rooming house in the French Quarter of New Orleans, the play featured outstanding performances by the Know Theatre troupe of Binghamton, NY, under Brandt Reiter's strong direction.

We learn of the life of a Writer (Tommy Heleringer) whose room in Mrs. Wire's (Desiree Ledget) house on Toulouse Street, to use the playwright's words, is a place where the "breeness...should be a poetic evocation of all the cheap rooming houses in the world."

While this poetry revealed the depths of human despair, the choice of venue - Provincetown Town Hall - proved to be its undoing. Constructed in the round, the actors were often inaudible, a matter that could have easily been remedied by the use of microphones. Yet microphones alone would not have solved the dilemma that prevented many in the audience from witnessing the players interact at many moments throughout the production. Unflinchingly graphic in its portrayal of gay sexuality, Williams' portrayal of "an older painter, a terribly wasted man, dying of tuberculosis," (his words), played by veteran actor Tim Gleason, was riveting, especially during the moments when he enters the young writer's room and induces him into a web of gay sexuality without the benefit of seduction. Yet despite these issues with the production, Williams' words resonated.



Sara Richardson as Dotty in *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* Photo courtesy of Gremlin Theatre

### **A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur**

Williams' one-act play, "*Creve Coeur*," (it translates from the French as "broken heart"), was written in 1976 and performed in New York in 1979. Directed by Jef Hall-Flavin (who also serves as executive director of the Festival), it featured an all-female cast from the Gremlin Theatre of St. Paul, Minnesota.

The venue for this production -- which took place at the private Reed Boland residence on Bradford Street - proved to be an inspired choice. The Boland home overlooks Provincetown harbor and is flooded with light. Under Sarah Bauer's stage design, the room's original furnishings were disassembled and replaced by homey furniture depicting the '30s, including a functioning kitchen alcove where Bodey (Sally Ann Wright) fries up chicken whose aromas permeated the performance space.

Set in St. Louis (where Williams spent many formative years), the play evokes the influence of William Inge's work, whose characters similarly reveal the warmth and hospitality found throughout the American Midwest.

We meet Bodey and her roommate Dorothea (played by the talented Sara Richardson) as Bodey makes plans for them to travel to Creve Coeur, the site of an amusement park in St. Louis, where the women will join her twin brother Buddy (an off-stage character) for a Sunday picnic. Dorothea protests this planned rendezvous (she reveals she has an infatuation with another off-stage male character), but Bodey will have none of it, and scurries about, packing the basket with all the accoutrements. Enter two other female characters, the hoity-toity Helena Brookmire (Jane Froiland) and the deeply depressed Sophie Gluck (Ellen Apel), and you have the makings of a four-handed farce of the highest order.

The ensemble work was spot-on, each character feeding off each other's nuances and foibles. This is a production that should be taken on the road, and with this cast: it was simply that good.



Juliet Brett as Molly and Jack Dilday as Lionel in In The Summer House Photo by Josh Andrus

### **In the Summer House**

The late playwright Jane Bowles once declared, "I'm Jewish, homosexual, alcoholic, a communist -- and I'm a cripple!" Her 1954 play, "In the Summer House" may be one of the strangest plays ever written. Like Williams' "Vieux Carre," it is a play written in poetic spurts. Characters sputter speeches to one another. It's as if it was sketched from the imagination and lives in a surreal landscape.

The venue for this production, under David Kaplan's brilliant direction (Kaplan is also curator of the Festival), was the Boatslip, a resort on Commercial Street that hugs the harbor, and includes several playing areas (including a swimming pool). While not listed in the credits, Kaplan owes some credit to Federico Fellini, especially in his casting choice of local Provincetown actors and actresses who form the chorus of "Lionel's Followers." This ragtag group of thespians sport multi-colored hairdos, customers, a kazoo, inflatable children's pool toys, carrying on stage a live chicken, hot dogs dipped in mustard, trays of bubbly beverages, and more. At some points in the production, I swore I was viewing Fellini's "Juliet of the Spirits," the 1965 film that included several hallucinatory/dreamlike sequences.

The play centers around two characters Gretrude Eastman Cuevos (Irene Glezos), and her daughter Molly (Juliet Brett), and the aforementioned vigorous cast. Kaplan insists that the audience move around a bit, he changed the order to the acts to express the story in a new slant, and, almost as if on cue, the sound of the surf lapping the pilings under the Boatslip's deck added the necessary dreamy effects. The result was a roller coaster of a ride, and just as thrilling.



John Lahr

### **John Lahr at Provincetown High School**

Author John Lahr, who served formerly as chief drama critic for The New York, held forth in a forum with moderator Thomas Keith, where he discussed his just published biography, "Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh" (Norton, New York). Lahr is a gifted raconteur whose other works include a biography of his late father, film actor Bert Lahr, and the late gay playwright Joe Orton.

Lahr discussed Williams' gay promiscuity, which he said contributed to the playwright's ability to tap into his creative powers; his struggles with depression; his horrid upbringing at the hands of a repressive mother; his years of alcohol and drug abuse. It was in Provincetown, Lahr said, that Williams met one tempestuous male lover (Pancho Rodriguez) and formed a lasting love relationship with Frank Merlo. Provincetown held a magical place in his mind and in his creative output throughout his life, Lahr said.

Lahr also said that the Williams estate recently reported an income of over one million dollars, attesting to the rise in Williams' popularity, many years after his death.

This last mention of a rise in popularity did not surprise those who packed Provincetown High School auditorium (the original site for the forum had to be nixed to accommodate the overflowing crowd). They keep coming back to the Festival each year to discover, in Williams' works, new ways to better know themselves.

*For more on the **Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival**, [visit the Festival's website](http://www.twptown.org). [www.twptown.org](http://www.twptown.org)*