

# KNOW's 'Vieux' redux revisits Williams' darkest moments

By Chris Kocher | [ckocher@gannett.com](mailto:ckocher@gannett.com) 10:22 a.m. EDT September 3, 2014



(Photo: Photo by Kat D'Andrea)

When KNOW Theatre staged Tennessee Williams' autobiographical play "Vieux Carré" at the end of its 2012-13 season, little did director Brandt Reiter and the cast know that they would return to it a mere 18 months later — and that their production would be seen by the playwright's fans from all over the world.

However, fate sometimes works in mysterious ways and rewards people for good work.

The revival that opens at KNOW on Friday night will travel north to the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival after its three-week Binghamton run. In Massachusetts, "Vieux Carré" will get four performances at the city's historic town hall.

KNOW artistic director Tim Gleason — who stars in "Vieux Carré" as Nightingale, an older gay artist dying of tuberculosis — is a huge Williams fan and calls him "the American Shakespeare." The chance to Provincetown, then, is a dream come true and a boost to KNOW's visibility in the wider theater community.

"Nobody else can look at the sad underbelly of human existence and touch your heart with it at the same time," Gleason said of Williams' work during an interview last week. "Instead of repelling you away, it draws you in. I think it hides in all of humanity, and he exposes it in a way that gives it a sad beauty."

"Vieux Carré" is based on 27-year-old Williams' time in the eponymous New Orleans neighborhood in 1938, when he lived in poverty among desperate, sometimes dangerous personalities.

The play has an unusual pedigree, since Williams started writing it while living in New Orleans but did not finish it until four decades later, with a Broadway premiere in 1977. It therefore serves as the first draft of themes Williams would expand upon in later works such as "The Glass Menagerie," "A Streetcar Named Desire," "Night of the Iguana" and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" but also finds the playwright in his final troubled years looking back on his career.

This new "Vieux" is not an exact copy of KNOW's original production, though. For one thing, it will be presented in the round in Provincetown, under a grand chandelier in the town hall, and this plan is being replicated at KNOW by extending the stage and putting audience members on all sides of the action.

When KNOW moved into its current Carroll Street location in 2006, Gleason envisioned a more flexible seating that could be moved and shaped as needed, so an in-the-round staging is keeping with that original idea.

"It changes the dynamics of the play, because there's no place to hide. Everywhere you turn, there's an audience," he said. "It adds a different energy to your character. You have to be inside of your character at any given moment."

Also, because of actor availabilities, a few roles for "Vieux" were recast. Returning are Gleason, Qiana Watson as Nursie, Carolyn Christy-Boyden and Patricia Donohue as dotty (and hungry) old ladies Mary Maude and Miss Carrie, Brian Naylor as the drifter Sky and Erik Young as the mysterious basement photographer. Tyler Downey, who portrayed the Writer (Williams' avatar) last year, returns as the Stanley Kowalski-like boarder Tye.

New cast members include Tommy Heleringer as the Writer, Desiree Ledet as unstable landlady Mrs. Wire, and KNOW regular Jessica Nogaret as Jane, Tye's much-abused girlfriend with an ailment that could end her life.

"I get to work on this play twice in a very short period, so it's very interesting to me to see how much more there is the more we dig into it," Reiter said.

"We have new actors in this production, and it's bringing new things out because I'm always interested in what the actors bring to shape the play. The fact that we're doing it in the round is forcing me to think in a theatrical way that's a little alien to me, and I'm finding it to be a richly rewarding experience."

Ledet played Mrs. Wire earlier this year as part of the Tennessee Williams New Orleans Literary Festival, in a one-act play called "The Lady of Larkspur Lotion." It was performed in an old Big Easy boarding house, with different Williams works on each floor, and Ledet still sees echoes of the playwright's New Orleans in the city today.

"I've done leads in shows over the years, but I've never done anything like this before," she said. "Nothing compares to the energy I have to put out for this Mrs. Wire. It's pretty much the peak of my career with this role."

Heleringer, a Kentucky native now working in New York City, auditioned for the role through Reiter; the two had worked together previously on a production of "The House of Yes." To be accepted into the Provincetown festival, they and Gleason did a few scenes for festival co-founder David Kaplan at Reiter's NYC apartment.

His experience at KNOW has been an inspiring one so far, he said: "The first day I got here, Tim brought me into the theater and showed me around. There was so much love in Tim's eyes and the way he was talking about the theater, I thought, 'This is really going to work. I'm in the right place.'"

As an actor at KNOW, Nogaret has tackled some pretty heavy roles — but "Vieux Carré" may be the bleakest play she's done.

"Because it's so dark, you have to be brave to have that kind of mindset. You either need to dive in or not do it at all," she said. "I have to take personal situations and reflect on them to do what I need to do onstage. That's the only way I can do it."

Although their characters of Mary Maude and Miss Carrie are faded Southern belles now forced to scrape by, Christy-Boyden and Donohue manage to eke out some of the play's lighter moments.

"I've always preferred comedy, but I get to act with Pat Donahue," Christy-Boyden said. "We ought to be able to make something funny out of it!"

Donahue has nothing but praise for her return to KNOW: "I've met some great people here — I love to work with all of them. Brandt is a fine director — one of the best I've worked with, and I've worked with a lot of them."

For Naylor, the "Vieux Carré" revival and its run in Provincetown — where 250 people are expected at each performance — bring "equal parts trepidation and excitement."

"I'm very eager to improve upon my performance from last year in a differently constructed venue and a different venue altogether," he said. "It's also going to be awesome to give it to a world audience and have a belated summer vacation at the same time."

Young thinks the theater-in-the-round format will help to make the production that much more special.

"When we come onstage, we're going to be in touching distance of the audience," he said. "It's the difference between being able to see their eyes and hear them breathing."

Follow Chris Kocher on Twitter @PSBChrisKocher.

## IF YOU GO

- **What:** "Vieux Carré"
- **Where:** KNOW Theatre, 74 Carroll St., Binghamton
- **When:** Opens Friday through Sept. 20. 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays; 3 p.m. Sundays.
- **Tickets:** \$20 (\$15 for seniors; \$10 for students). Go online to [www.knowtheatre.org](http://www.knowtheatre.org) or call 724-4341.
- **Note:** Next Thursday (Sept. 11) at 8 p.m. is Pay-What-You-Can Night.

## Rest of KNOW season

- Nov. 21-30: 11th Annual Playwrights And Artists Festival
- Dec. 6: Celtic Christmas
- Feb. 13-March 1: "The Pillowman" by Martin McDonagh
- April 10-26: "Time Stands Still" by Donald Margulies
- June 12 - 28: "A Moon for the Misbegotten" by Eugene O'Neill
- July 23-26: Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival

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