

Staging of early Tennessee Williams work could spark festival in St. Louis, his hometown



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Carrie Houk could have settled on “The Glass Menagerie”; it is, beyond question, the greatest play ever set in St. Louis.

She might have gone for “A Streetcar Named Desire,” “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” or “The Night of the Iguana.”

But “Stairs to the Roof,” the play that opens Nov. 7 at the Boo Cat Club, seems, to her, the perfect choice: perfect for the reopening of a dormant theater space, and perfect for what she hopes will blossom into an annual Williams festival in the city where the playwright grew up.

One of the world’s most esteemed Williams directors, Fred Abrahamse of Capetown, South Africa, will direct the rarely staged play with a cast of St. Louis actors. Paul Cereghino stars as Ben, a dreamy, frustrated clerk in a clothing factory, with Fringe Fest founder Em Piro as the soul mate he stumbles upon.

The cast also includes Drew Battles, Bob Harvey, John Krewson, Peter Mayer, Caitlyn Mickey, Reginald Pierre, Jen Theby Quinn, Cooper Shaw, Alyssa Ward, Benjamin Watts and Peter Winfrey, plus performers from Circus Flora, Jazz St. Louis and MADCO. Abrahamse said the St. Louis actors were so good, he felt no need to look elsewhere.

Of course, Houk — artistic director of “Stairs” — had a good idea of what he would need. A top casting director and acting coach, Houk knows the St. Louis theater scene inside-out. Still, she enlisted some expert help: David Kaplan and Jef Hall-Flavin, both of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival on Cape Cod.

On a visit to the Tennessee Williams New Orleans Literary Festival, Houk said, she was “completely wowed” by a production of four of Williams’ one-act plays, performed in a historic house in the French Quarter. Kaplan, co-founder and curator of TWPTown, and Hall-Flavin, its executive director, had each directed two of them.

She tracked down Kaplan, who gave her his best advice: “Don’t do the usual stuff.”

With that suggestion, a relationship was born between the Provincetown festival and the potential one here. Think of TWPTown as a godparent to TWStl — and in fact, there will be a kind of christening next month.

Hall-Flavin is coming here to help Houk get things going. (“Stairs to the Roof” has a budget of about \$81,000 from grants and donations.) He will be the guest of honor at a party to introduce the idea of the festival, and will get a tour of the area to look at potential festival venues, including the Boo Cat Club (formerly the St. Louis Artists’ Guild building on Union Boulevard).

Grand Center chairman Ken Kranzberg, who will show him around, thinks there’s lots to consider. “St. Louis is the culturally richest city in America, per capita,” he said, “and it makes a lot of sense to have a St. Louis Williams festival — even though he doesn’t seem to have liked it here. Maybe Shakespeare didn’t like Stratford-on-Avon! But this is an intriguing idea.”

Both the New Orleans and Provincetown festivals stage a variety of work. Plays by Williams are, of course, the centerpiece. But other options include plays by writers who were his friends or whom he influenced, plus visual art, music and dance productions that have a Williams connection. Both festivals employ a variety of settings, not only theaters but waterfronts, old houses and other unconventional venues.

“Every Williams festival has its own character,” Hall-Flavin said, explaining that St. Louis will need to figure out what it wants. At this very early stage, he said, “St. Louis seems squarely based on performance, which is also what we do here.”

In a city with many theater festivals — including Shakespeare Festival St. Louis, Ignite! at the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, Fringe Fest, the LaBute New Theater Festival at the St. Louis Actors’ Studio and the Greenhouse Festival at HotCity Theatre — a new effort might get lost in the crowd. Kaplan has a suggestion: Keep things fresh.

“Tennessee Williams was an experimenter,” he said. “We need to remember that at the time he grew up, St. Louis was the fourth-largest city in the United States. It had its own character and culture.” In that context, he believes, it’s especially valuable to perform work that may seem as avant-garde today as it did when it was written.

Although the city where “Stairs to the Roof” takes place is not named, University of Illinois professor emerita Allean Hale said in 2000 that she felt sure it was St. Louis (where she also grew up). Like the play’s hero, Ben, Williams worked unhappily as a factory clerk after his father pulled him out of the University of Missouri when he failed ROTC. Although it veers into fantasy, “Stairs” offers a foretaste of themes that would recur throughout his work, particularly in “The Glass Menagerie.”

Williams was 30 when he wrote “Stairs.” By the time it made its debut about three years later, in

a 1945 lab production in Los Angeles, “Glass” had already opened — and secured Williams’ stature among American playwrights. Two years later, he didn’t even attend the first full production of “Stairs” at the Pasadena Playhouse, probably because “Streetcar” was about to open on Broadway. When the University of Illinois mounted a student production in 2000, almost no one had even heard of it.

But with its science-fiction plot twists and its sympathy for downtrodden workers, “Stairs” showcases less-familiar aspects of Williams’ oeuvre, presaging the surrealistic late work that’s a specialty in Provincetown.

It also calls for a huge cast — an echo, Kaplan thinks, of Williams’ early experience in St. Louis community theater. Today, playwrights are encouraged to write for casts of three or four actors, he pointed out — but Williams’ first work emerged in a “parts for everyone” atmosphere that encouraged him to stretch his imagination and his play-making skills. He compares Williams to other great American writers — Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman — “whose reputations changed after they were dead. They all wrote for readers who were not yet born.”

Abrahamse thinks so, too. “‘Stairs’ is not a nostalgia trip,” he said. “Williams’ plays are so on-the-nose, he makes us uncomfortable. But that’s also why they still resonate, and why they speak volumes to young audiences. That’s why he gets under our skin.”