

By Sue Harrison

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Audience-pleasing theater troupe returns to Provincetown Tennessee Williams fest

Abrahamse-Meyer Productions, the acclaimed troupe from South Africa, is returning to the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival for the third year and performing "The Lady Aoi" by Japanese playwright Yukio Mishima, a friend of Williams. The troupe previously performed the Williams' plays "Kingdom of Earth" and "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore."

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The Banner recently spoke with director Fred Abrahamse and actor-designer Marcel Meyer via e-mail. The troupe was just concluding its South African run of Williams' "One Arm" and moving to final rehearsals of "The Lady Aoi."

The first year the troupe came to town they had applied for the wrong visas and nearly didn't make it. Abrahamse recalls that first year: "We got our visas at 11 a.m. and boarded a plane at 2 p.m. We arrived on the Thursday night [exhausted and emotionally drained]. Set up and had a technical rehearsal on the Friday and opened that night. I don't think you get closer than that."

Judging from their performances you would never have known.

As a result of Mishima and Williams' friendship, Williams incorporated classical Japanese Noh and Kabuki theater elements into plays like "Night of the Iguana" and "Milk Train," and Mishima added contemporary Western theater forms into his modern Noh plays.

Meyer says his troupe had studied those elements for last year's "Milk Train" and that this year's transition is a natural. But more important than those commonalities of form are the universal stories Mishima and Williams each tell in their plays.

"The major theme of 'The Lady Aoi' is the theme of unrequited love, and that is something each of us can relate to," Meyer says. "At some stage almost everyone has been deeply in love with a person who isn't in love with them — and felt all the pain and suffering that brings along with it — and Mishima has so beautifully distilled the essence of unrequited love and passion in his sparse and poetic little play."

Meyer continues, "Both Williams and Mishima were gay and grew up in societies that disapproved of homosexuality, both writers were extremely prolific and they often tackled many similar themes in their writing."

The basic story of "The Lady Aoi" is that she is on her deathbed where she is visited by her husband Hikaru and the apparition of his former lover and her former rival, the still jealous and scorned Lady Rukujo.

Meyer, who played a raw and primal character named Chicken in "Kingdom," plays two women in this play. "In the opening scene I play a young nurse attending on the ailing Lady Aoi and for the rest of the play I play Lady Aoi's tormentor, an aging beauty called Mrs. Rokujo," he says. "Behind the scenes Fred and I have designed and constructed the puppet, masks and costumes for the production."

In fact the character of Lady Aoi is entirely played by a puppet. It also allows the troupe to do the play with only two actors, Meyer and Nicholas Dallas, who plays the husband.

"Lady Aoi lies dying throughout the piece so we decided to make her a puppet, not only because we don't then have to bring a third person to just lie there [getting to the U.S. from South Africa is enormously costly] but also because the play deals with unrequited love and possession," Abrahamse says. "So she becomes a being that by virtue of them manipulating her they also control and possess her. At one point in the play both players actually inhabit her physically. The costumes are also sculptural. We come from Africa which is a continent rich in ritual and tradition ... so it will be our take on Noh play hugely influenced by where we come from."



PHOTO/ PHOTO FIONA MACPHERSON
Marcel Meyer and Nicholas Dallas in the South African theater company Abrahamse-Meyer Productions' "The Lady Aoi."

Where they come from plays no small part in their passion for Williams' plays. The South he experienced as he came of age and the not-so-distant past of South Africa share similar painful histories.

"What was happening in the '60s in South Africa had huge resonances with what was happening in your South at the same time," Abrahamse says.

Meyer adds, "I was brought up in a very liberal family — and from an early age I was aware of the horrific injustice and prejudice that for many years scarred our beautiful country. Williams wrote so poignantly about similar injustice and the plight of the outsider in a repressive and oppressive environment, and I think that's why his plays speak on such a deep level to South African actors and audiences."

Ultimately the play is another case of the individual story becoming the universal truth.

"It deals with love, desire and the ultimate pain that can be inflicted on a person. It is agonizing in its simplicity," Abrahamse says. "Mishima and Williams were friends and they were inspired by each other's work. They both write with explicit beauty about the condition of the human soul and its fragility. It's a perfect play for the festival and will compliment the Williams plays well."

Just the facts

What: "The Lady Aoi" When: 4 p.m. Fri., 2:30, 7 pm Sat., 12:30, 3:30 p.m. Sun., Sept. 26-28 Where: Art House, 214 Commercial St., Provincetown Tickets: twptown.org, (866) 789-TENN, ext. 1

<http://provincetown.wickedlocal.com/article/20140925/NEWS/140928747>

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