

A circle of theater-loving festivalgoers

Ninth annual Williams fest 'bold, outstanding & original'

By Lynda Sturner

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For the ninth year, organizers of the annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival have created a unique environment where a select ensemble of theater companies and artists from all over the world is asked to find new ways of exploring old plays in nontraditional theatrical venues that illuminate and bring fresh insights to the world of Williams.

The productions this year came from theater companies as nearby as Wellfleet and as far away as Cape Town, South Africa. And while the actors brought a wide range of experiences, from members of community theaters to the actors equity union, all brought equal enthusiasm to create nothing less than bold, outstanding and original productions.

This year's theme, "Tennessee Williams: Circle of Friends," brought plays by Williams as well as his contemporary writers and compatriots Jane Bowles, William Inge, Carson McCullers and Yukio Mishima.

One festival highlight, "An Otherwise Hopeless Evening: An Anthology of Short Homophile Plays by William Inge," created by Joseph Keehn II and directed by Travis Chamberlain from Kansas City, Mo., presented a line-up of the only known gay-themed plays that Inge wrote. Chamberlain broke the first play, "The Love Death," into five parts and wrapped the other three plays around them, creating a dark, vivid portrait of the pain, repression and desperation that define closeted lives. Its actors — Ray Ettinger, Justin Speer, David Wayne Reed and Brad Shaw — along with organist Andre Du Broc played their parts to perfection.

"The Lady Aoi," by Yukio Mishima, translated by Donald Keene and directed by Fred Abrahamse, was another extraordinary creation from Abrahamse & Meyer Productions in South Africa. This elegiac, edgy modern Noh play, with awardwinning actors Marcel Meyer and Nicholas Dallas, tells a tale of love and vengeance from beyond the grave.

The festival's executive director, Jef Hall-Flavin, staged Williams' "A Lovely Sunday For Creve Coeur" in a private home and brought a new realism to this rarely seen play. This production featured actors from the Gremlin Theater in St. Paul, Minn. Sara Richardson, Sally Ann Wright, Jane Froiland and Ellen Apel inhabited that home like it was their own.

"Vieux Carr," by Williams, from the KNOW theater in Binghamton, N.Y., follows a young writer's first years in New Orleans at a run-down rooming house in the French Quarter. Familiar Williams characters such as prostitutes, destitute socialites, dying boarders and an angry landlady populate the play, circling the most familiar character from the Southern Bard's oeuvre—Williams himself, called here only "the writer," played soulfully by the young Tommy Heleringer. After two acts on stage, Heleringer forever alters the way the audience feels about the playwright, adding fresh insights with each tender, nuanced reaction to the cast of characters swirling around him onstage.

In "I Wish You'd Keep Still," choreographer Carson Efird and her team of dancers created a dance piece inspired

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Desiree Ledet (left) and Tommy Heleringer in "Vieux Carre."

PHOTOS JOSH ANDRUS



Sara Richardson (left) and Sally Ann Wright in "A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur."

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by two Williams short plays, "Why Do You Smoke So Much, Lily?" and "Something Unspoken." Efir uses movement to explore and illuminate the complex relationships between a mother and daughter and employer and her employee.

Directing Jane Bowles' "The Summer House," festival curator David Kaplan reversed the order of the acts, adding tension and giving the audience a new perspective into the piece.

Another festival high point, the lead New Yorker magazine theater critic, playwright, novelist and biographer John Lahr kicked off his book tour for the recently released "Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh" at the festival. The response was so strong that festival organizers had to move it to a larger space to accommodate the crowd.

Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater presented "Period of Adjustment," directed by Michael Unger. Although it is the only light comedy Williams wrote, dark undercurrents of despair and desperation course through this play of wounded warriors.

The New Urban Theater Laboratory of Boston brought a riveting "The Member of the Wedding," by Carson McCullers to Town Hall. Produced as a radio play with an all-black cast, this original concept made an old classic sound contemporary.

In the true spirit of live theater, anything can happen. A live chicken refusing to perform in "Summer House," for example, was swiftly replaced by a frozen one from Stop and Shop, and the show goes on.

When rain threatened to call off the opening afternoon performance of that same play, director Kaplan restaged, in hours, the whole show, moving it from the outdoor deck of the Boatslip Resort to indoors. Scattering around blue paper flowers,

he transformed the interior tea dance disco space into a beach.

As Kaplan told his cast, "This is live theater. We are artists. We take risks."

Theatrical risks and surprises were aplenty this year and the artists once again went out on a limb, trusting the magic of Williams' words. And once again, their fine work proved a thrilling weekend for loyal fans and first-timers alike.



Ray Ettinger (left) and DeDe Deville in "An Otherwise Hopeless Evening."



Nicholas Dallas (left) and Marcel Meyer in "The Lady Aoi."

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