

By Lynda Sturner

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Ninth annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival to take over town

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Running from Sept. 25-28, this year's theme is "Circle of Friends" — plays about friendships and plays written by friends of Williams'. Carson McCullers, Yukio Mishima, William Inge and Jane Bowles were all writing in the 1950s and early '60s. "These acclaimed men and women kept their private lives private," says festival curator David Kaplan. "But they shared with each other their secrets and lovers, good parties, a love of words and alcohol and a belief of hard work as salvation."

Provincetown and Williams have a long history together. In the early 1940s, Williams lived here in a dune shack, where he began writing "A Streetcar Named Desire" and "The Glass Menagerie." The festival celebrates and honors this connection.



PHOTO/ PHOTO JOSH ANDRUS

One of the things that make this festival so unique is that these plays and events happen all over Provincetown. "By putting these plays in these venues, we expand the meaning of these plays," says Kaplan. This also enhances and illuminates William's connection to Provincetown. It's almost as if he's back here partying with us at the A-House.

Juliet Brett and Jack Dilday in "The Summer House," by Jane Bowles.

Another special thing about the festival is that it has built up relationships with theater companies all over the country and world. The Abrahamse-Meyer Company from South Africa is back again for its third year. Other participating companies are the Gremlin Theater from Minneapolis, Minn.; the Know Theater from Binghamton, N.Y.; A Hidden Splendor Company from Kansas City, Mo.; the New Urban Theater Lab from Boston; and Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater.

It's best to start the festival with "Williams 101: Everything You Wanted to Know" — a 60-minute talk with Williams Institute scholars and guest artists covering Williams' life, work and impact on the world.

This year plays by Williams and friends are:

"A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur" by Williams, a Gremlin Theater production directed by festival director Jef Hall-Flavin, is a site-specific piece playing in a private home on Bradford Street. Hall-Flavin says he wants the audience to smell the chicken fat frying in a hyper-real environment. "Creve Coeur" (broken heart) was the name of a streetcar in St. Louis. Four Williams' women, battling loneliness and dashed dreams, prepare to go on a picnic at Creve Coeur Lake. This play inspired the hit TV comedy series "Golden Girls."

"An Otherwise Hopeless Evening," a string of four plays by Inge, directed by Travis Chamberlin of A Hidden Splendor Theater, features art installations by Joseph Keehn and the drag performer De De Deville. These dramas about unrequited love between men are the only gay-themed plays written by the closeted Inge, a friend, lover and sometimes rival of Williams.

"In the Summer House" by Williams' longtime friend and admirer Jane Bowles, directed by Kaplan, is another site-specific play. Last fall the festival presented only the second act to much popular acclaim. This year the festival is producing the whole play once again in and around the Boatslip Resort's pool, staircases and waters of Provincetown Harbor. Actors Irene Glesos, Brenda Currin and Beth Bartly return along with Provincetown favorites Melissa Nussbaum Freeman and Laura Shabott. "What an empowering opportunity it is to be able to stretch my craft and my artistry in the company of such accomplished theater veterans. It is a gift to live in a vibrant town that the world comes to," says Shabott.

"Vieux Carré" is one of Williams' many autobiographical plays. In this one, a young writer moves into a run-down New Orleans boarding house with paper-thin walls. Directed by Brant Reiter, it comes to us from the Know Theater and is staged in the round in the middle of Town Hall. Kaplan says, "I wanted

a space that would pull the play out of realism and would give it a more phantasmagorical viewing.”

“I Wish You’d Keep Still,” a dance piece choreographed by Carson Efirid, Katherine Ferrier and Courtney Greer, is inspired by two Williams one-acts — “Why Do You Smoke So Much, Lilly” and “Something Unspoken.” Efirid’s dance piece, “The Road to Paradise,” based on Williams’ Provincetown diaries, letters and poems, was the first performance of the very first festival. For her MFA at UCLA, she developed a movement process that extracts and abstracts action from theatrical texts into non-verbal narrative.

“The Lady From Aoi,” by Mishima, considered by critics one of the most important Japanese writers of the 20th century, brings back the award-winning Abrahamse-Meyer Company from South Africa. Performed by puppets, “Lady Aoi” is a modern version of an ancient Japanese Noh play. The story goes that Williams and Mishima first hooked up one night on New York’s Upper West Side and were subsequently formally introduced at an awards ceremony the following week.

“Period of Adjustment,” presented by Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater and directed by Michael Unger, was the only light comedy Williams attempted to write. He was trying to write a commercial play in the style of Inge but his more serious concerns of the human heart could not be suppressed.

“The Member of the Wedding” by McCullers comes to the festival from the New Urban Theater Laboratory. It’s performed as a radio play by an all black cast. Frankie, a 12-year-old tomboy in a small Southern town, wants to go with her brother on his honeymoon. Bernice, the family housekeeper, helps her work through her longings and desires. McCullers adapted this play from her novel of the same name. Williams and McCullers were such close friend that they wrote much of “Summer & Smoke” and “Member of the Wedding” at the same table in Nantucket in 1946.

In one of the highlights of this year’s festival, theater critic, biographer and playwright John Lahr gives a talk about his new book “Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh” with editor Thomas Keith.

Among the evening activities are the opening and closing parties, cocktails with the actors and a “Wash-Ashore Mixer.” New this year is the Beatnik Jam, run by actor Jeremy Lawrence, that features music and prose and poetry and readings.

One can explore Provincetown and the Williams’ life here by downloading a map on the festival’s website (twptown.org) and then walk through town discovering the places and haunts dear to Williams and his friends.

Morning, afternoon, evening and after hours, this four-day marathon brings to town people with great imaginations who are not afraid to shake it up, rock and roll, take risks and try new ways of doing old plays. As much as you may think you know about Williams’ life and work, you will rediscover Williams with these fresh inventive productions.

Just the facts

What: Ninth annual Tennessee Williams Festival Where: Various venues around Provincetown When: Thurs.-Sun., Sept. 25-28 Tickets: twptown.org

<http://provincetown.wickedlocal.com/article/20140916/NEWS/140917077>

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