

Love and Lust in Provincetown

Another Side to Tennessee Williams

by Steve Desroches

Tennessee Williams spent four summers in Provincetown – 1940, 1941, 1944, and 1947. And we here in Provincetown claim him along with the thousands of artists, writers, actors, and other creative visionaries that have come to town since the founding of the art colony in 1899. Through the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival we've had wonderful opportunities to see his classic works reimagined, to take in some of his most obscure work, as well as to see world premieres of previously hidden theatrical gems. Throughout the past nine years of the festival we've also had a chance to hear lectures and panels to gain more insight into Tennessee Williams, arguably one of the best playwrights of the modern era, American or otherwise.

At this year's Festival attendees will have an opportunity to gain greater insight into the life and times of Williams from celebrated writer, theater critic, and biographer John Lahr author of the just released *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh*. Published earlier this month, the biography is already being hailed by critics as a monumental work and the most comprehensive and compelling biography of Williams to date. Lahr, who is the son of actor Bert Lahr, from *The Wizard of Oz* fame, will participate in a discussion with editor Thomas Keith about Williams and his "circle of friends," in keeping with the theme of this year's festival.

"I don't know what we'll talk about," says Lahr from his home in London. "It's a bit like a jazz improvisation. We'll see where it goes."

Lahr's ability to riff on the life of Williams' is encyclopedic. Digging into archives and libraries around the country with the fervor of an archaeologist on a dig and the precision of a surgeon, Lahr has created a compelling narrative linking together the disparate parts of Williams' legacy, which lie in repositories, mainly at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, at Columbia University, and in the Houghton Library at Harvard University, with some additional helpful holdings at the New Orleans Historical Society. But for many in Provincetown, interest lies in what he did and who he met while he was here. And just how much impact did Provincetown have on Williams and his work? Does Provincetown have an inflated view of its importance in the life of Williams? Did he leave a bigger imprint on the town than vice versa?

When Williams arrived in Provincetown at the age of 29 for the summer of 1940 he was a struggling writer who had recently accepted he was gay. A late bloomer sexually, who had no

intimate experiences with men or women until he was 26, Williams' coming to Provincetown started him on a very important journey of self-discovery.

“At that time Tennessee was in Provincetown those were his rambunctious years,” says Lahr,

Raised in a strict religious household by an overbearing mother with Puritanical views, it's a bit of erotic irony that Williams came to the original landing place of the Pilgrims to shed those restrictive and oppressive roots. He fully embraced the hedonism and wild scene that was well established in Provincetown by 1940. Lahr says, choosing his words carefully to accurately make the point with no judgment, that the sexual freedom he found in Provincetown really helped to open him up as a person and as a writer.

“Williams is a wonderful example of the utility of promiscuity,” says Lahr. “It just in every way broadened his horizons.”

In addition to his sexual adventures in Provincetown Williams also found love here, a prospect which, for a gay man of the time, could be fraught with drama around the impossibility of maintaining a socially unsupported relationship, never mind the fevered pitch of an underground sexual revolution. The importance and gravitas of his first two significant loves being found in Provincetown did indeed make the town an important place to Williams, says Lahr.

“It certainly was,” says Lahr in regards to Provincetown as a special place in Williams' life. “Williams held it in affection. He came back to it. It was associated with his first love and second love.”

The intimacies Williams found in Provincetown play out in the book with stunning liberalism for the times and a steaminess that, even by today's standards, is beautifully fun and erotically charged, while the story of Williams inviting Marlon Brando to Provincetown to discuss starring as Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is told with new details to a well-known story. But above all else, the Provincetown passages in the book place Williams in the context of what he was in the 1940s, a rising star in the theatrical/literary world and a tender, vulnerable, and horny young gay man who, like many before and since, came to Provincetown to scratch that itch, with much success.

Tennessee Williams & His Friends, a discussion with John Lahr led by editor Thomas Keith, will be on Sunday, September 28 at 10 a.m. at the Fine Arts Work Center, 24 Pearl St., Provincetown. Tickets (\$10) are available at the door and online. For more information call 866.789.TENN or visit twptow