

# Arts & Entertainment

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## Theater fest brings author of new Williams biography to town

By Rob Phelps

BANNER STAFF

If you were Tennessee Williams and you had to choose someone to write your official biography because you died before you wrote your autobiography, who would you pick?

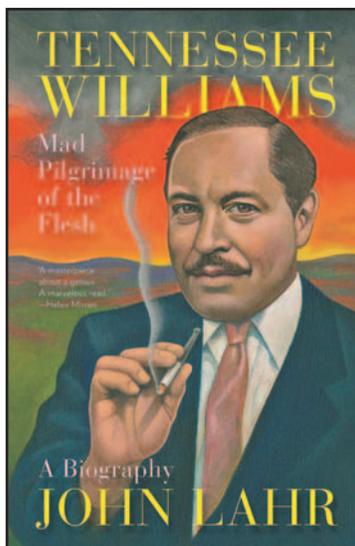
Oh, wait — you did write your autobiography. Besides that beautifully told but all too narrow volume of middle-age memoirs, you gave us your story through your diaries and letters, through your poems and short stories, and especially through every one of your so-called “major” and “minor” plays. (All of them were major, weren’t they, because you poured into each equal part heart and soul, memory and brutal honesty?) You told the truth about your alcoholism and drug abuse, your passions for the flesh and for the stage, your personal desires and disappointments and, above all, your pursuit to discover and po-

etically convey through your work what it means to be a living, breathing human being, just like the rest of us. You may have connected with your fellow man more through your words than through your relationships, but you became one of the great playwrights in doing so.

You told us all this yourself.

As John Lahr, the man who has become your official biographer three decades after you died (after your vast literary estate was freed up from a long, bitter legal fight) and whose publisher released that biography last week, tells us:

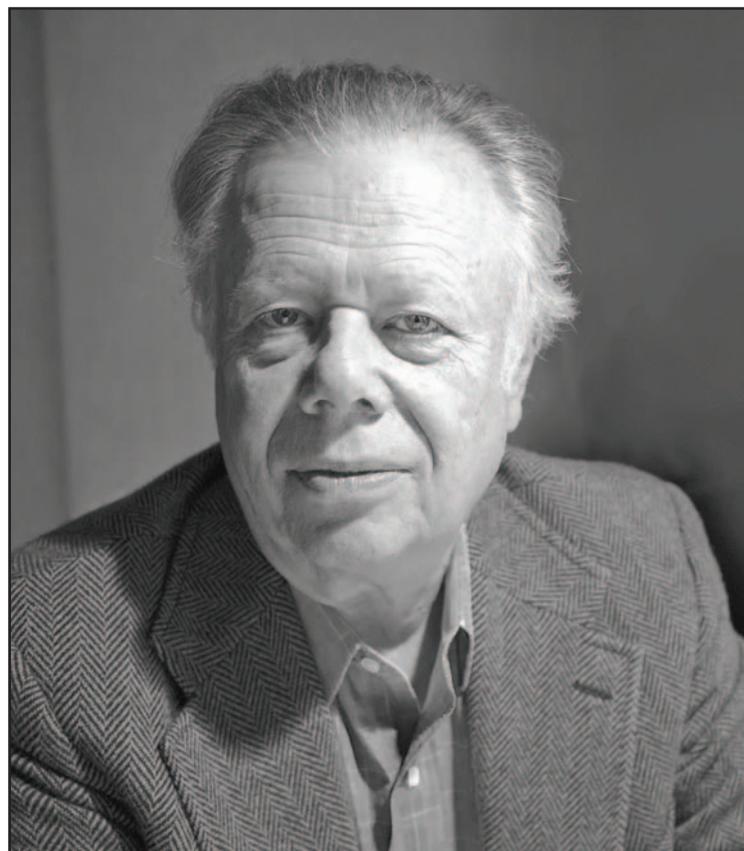
“As early as 1939, having just acquired an agent, a Rockefeller grant, and a career path, Williams vowed to write plays that were ‘a picture of my own heart.’ Over the decades, as that out-crying heart opened, faltered and atrophied, Williams stuck to his game plan: ‘to be simple, direct and terrible. ... I



“Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh,” by John Lahr.

will speak truth as I see it ... without concealment or evasion and with a fearless unashamed frontal assault upon life.’ The plays are his emotional autobiography, snapshots of his heart’s

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John Lahr

PHOTO PAUL DAVIS

## Love & death, betrayal & possession visit ‘Lady Aoi’



PHOTO FIONA MACPHERSON  
 Marcel Meyer and Nicholas Dallas in the South African theater company Abrahamse-Meyer Productions’ “The Lady Aoi.”

By Sue Harrison

BANNER CORRESPONDENT

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.”

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 ele-

### 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

ments 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

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**WILLIAMS** continued from page 25

mutation. So, to tell the story of the plays is to tell the story of the man, and vice-versa.”

If Williams picked someone to write his biography, he couldn't have done much better than Lahr.

The leading theater critic for The New Yorker magazine and a Tony Award-winning playwright himself, Lahr sees Williams' story from both sides of the curtain. Even as he analyzes each of his plays from the perspective of an astute reviewer, he writes about them with the compassion of a compatriot.

His brand new and already highly acclaimed narrative is the story of Williams' life through his plays, sharpened by close study of Williams' vast trove of personal and public documents.

And now Lahr, who lives in England, has chosen the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival as one of his first stops on a six-city U.S. tour to promote the biography, "Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh."

Lahr's talk on Sunday, Sept. 28, at the Fine Arts Work Center is already proving to be one of the hottest tickets at the festival. Thomas Keith, editor of Williams' last full-length play, "A House Divided," joins him in the conversation.

In a recent interview, Lahr told the Banner that for his festival talk he may read from the book, welcomes a question-and-answer session and will most certainly be happy to sign copies. But most of all, he says, he's eager to converse about the theme of this year's festival, "Tennessee Williams: Circle of Friends," which dovetails neatly with his biography.

"In my attempt to bushwhack through [Williams'] vertiginous paper trail," Lahr says, "my goal has been to stick closely, though not exclusively, to the people who meant the most to his theatrical adventure and to whom he spoke his heart. ... To create a sense of the immediacy and the drama in his connections to these people and to create a mosaic of quotation and interpretation, rather like that of a New Yorker profile, I have intentionally let their voices butt up against one another on the page."

And yet, Lahr points out, despite all the interesting characters who passed through Williams' life — from the Tallulah Bankheads and Marlon Brandos of the world to his overbearing mother, closeted Episcopal minister grandfather, famously lobotomized, beloved sister, and lovers who tried so hard to make a life with him — Williams was ultimately a loner, a social outsider, "a very solitary cat," as Gore Vidal called him.

"The real fact is that no one means a great deal to me," Williams said in his first-ever, unguarded interview with The New York Times," Lahr writes. "I'm gregarious and like to be around people, but almost anyone will do. ... I prefer people who can help me in some way or another, and most of my friendships are accidental."

In no small part, Lahr's biography is an attempt to reconcile Williams' sense of isolation with the cast of thousands of fascinating characters so important to his life and career.

Author of multiple books of theater criticism, two novels, his own plays and 10 previous biographies — including the acclaimed "Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton," "Dame Edna Everage and the Rise of

**Just the facts**

**What:** A conversation with John Lahr

**Where:** Fine Arts Work Center, 24 Pearl St., Provincetown

**When:** 10-11:30 a.m. Sunday, Sept. 28

**Tickets:** \$10, twptown.org, (866) 789-TENN, ext. 1

Western Civilization" and "Notes on a Cowardly Lion: The Biography of Bert Lahr," his own father — Lahr brings some serious literary experience to this endeavor.

Still, he says, covering Williams' life was probably his toughest challenge.

"The process was exponentially harder than any of the other books," he says. "[Williams'] career is huge, the output almost unbelievable. I could still be in the library. Williams couldn't stop writing. It was his way of making things mean something to him. [My] challenge was to cover the waterfront, to try and assemble this gigantic jigsaw puzzle [from the documents]. With my father's biography, I had Dad. He was there. With Orton, I had diaries that covered only the eight months he had to live before he was murdered. With Edna, I traveled with Barry Humphries [a.k.a. Edna], so that's also [limited and more easily manageable] source material.

"With Williams, who was dead, I chose to stay close to his emotions, and I could since he wrote so much. I could chart his life with the precision of a GPS [to document] what he was feeling and saying. What I hope the book does," Lahr says, "is to give the reader a sense of the plays and how they came about."

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# Illustrating the illustrious

Festival illustrator references '50s heyday of Tennessee Williams' career

By Laura Shabott

BANNER CORRESPONDENT

The official illustrator for this year's Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival has a daunting task before him. With the 2014 festival theme, "Tennessee Williams: Circle of Friends," the artist, David Chick, had to create images of not only Williams but that circle of friends, including writers Carson McCullers, Jane Bowles, Yukio Mishima and William Inge.

You can see Chick's original festival watercolors at Gary Marotta Fine Art. The show opens with two receptions, both from 7 to 9 p.m., on Friday and Saturday, Sept. 26 and 27. The show runs through Nov. 2.

"I love faces and it was an amazing opportunity to discover people that I didn't know," Chick says. "It had to be legitimate. I studied their lives, their photographs and David Kaplan's extensive essay."

Trained at Parsons School of

Design and a member of the Motion Picture Costume Designers Guild in Los Angeles, Chick was commissioned by festival curator David Kaplan. "With white-line printmaker Bill Evalul's work last year, the festival had a connection with the history of Provincetown," Kaplan says. "With David Chick's drawings, we have a connection through his illustrations to the '50s, the heyday of Williams and his friends."

Illustration is the foundation of David Chick's art. "I've always been looking at things that were drawn, like Bugs Bunny with the pin-up girl on the window shade," he says. "I am also inspired by the colors and light of production numbers in the old Hollywood films."

For the past four years, Chick has worked summers on Commercial Street as a pedicab driver, a waiter and gallery assistant. Each year he has volunteered for the Williams Festival at the end of the season. "It was amazing to follow the actors around the 'Hotel Plays' at the Gifford House," he recalls. "I think I still have my red key."

After seeing Evalul's work for the 2013 festival, Chick approached Kaplan with his own body of work and requested to be

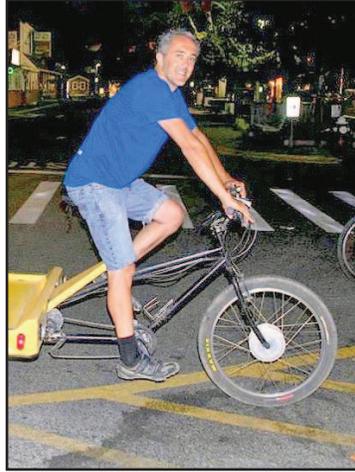


PHOTO COURTESY DAVID CHICK

The artist David Chick in his pedicab.

the 2014 illustrator. Kaplan, apparently, liked what he saw.

Chick's work for the festival harkens back to that '50s sensibility in a truly authentic fashion. He has studied the techniques of this time period as he did the lives of the festival's "faces."

He created one image of Williams, which he calls "A Bicycle Named Desire," for one of the festival's plays, "A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur," with delicate lines in colors from that era — tomato red, sepia and muted blue-grey. The work shows Williams on a happy jaunt, maybe to a picnic, as in the premise of

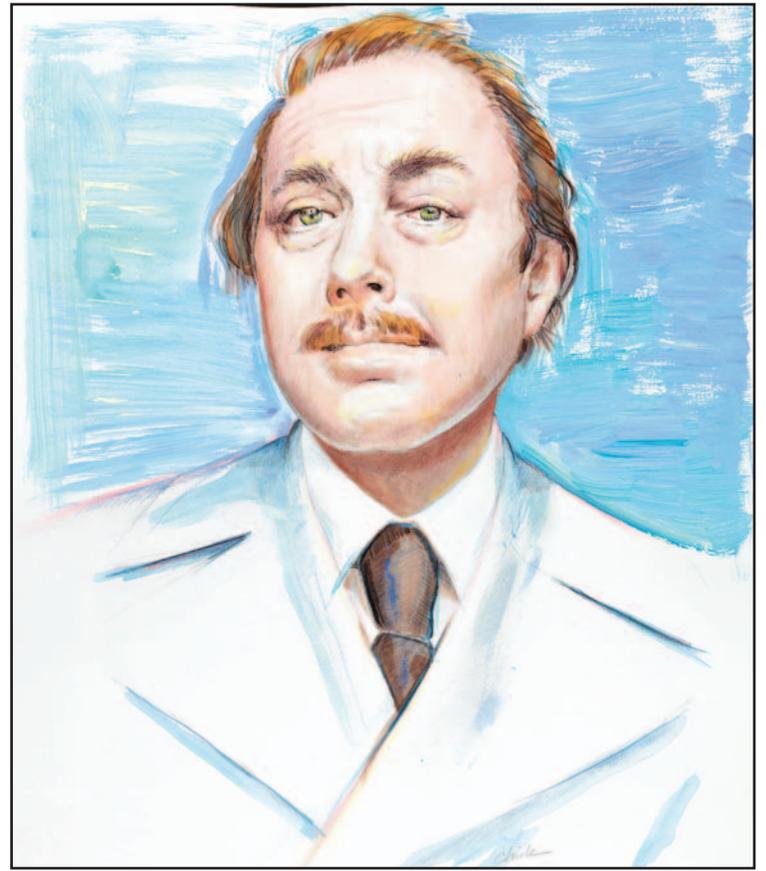


PHOTO COURTESY MAROTTA FINE ART

"Tennessee Williams," watercolor, by David Chick.

the two-act play.

"When I'm on my pedicab," Chick says, "and I drop off at Capt. Jack's Wharf, I think to myself, 'This is where Tennessee lived.' There is a wall with his name on it; he was here."

"This festival is a great thing," says gallery owner Gary Marotta. "I look so forward to hosting a patron's event and the opening re-

ceptions for David Chick's powerful images. We are right across from the Boatslip Resort, the venue for this year's festival production of 'In the Summer House.' A portion of the proceeds from the sale of Chick's original drawings goes to support the festival.

AOI continued from page 25

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



PHOTO COURTESY ABRAHAMSE-MEYER PRODUCTIONS

Fred Abrahamse, director, "The Lady Aoi."

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."

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

## So. Africans take Williams fest to St. Louis

After this year's Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, Abrahamse-Meyer Productions is traveling to St. Louis, where Fred Abrahamse will direct an early Williams work, "Stairs to the Roof." Marcel Meyer is designing and choreographing the play. The Provincetown festival organizers and directors present Williams events throughout the year in New Orleans and Jackson, Miss., as well as other locations like St. Louis.

"This has been a result of our work at the festival," Abrahamse says. "Carrie Houk, our producer [from Saint Louis], is behind the project and having attended the festival in New Orleans and met TWF curator David Kaplan, she is working hand in hand with

them to bring an element of the festival to Saint Louis. It is indeed an extension of the festival and the hopes are to get another branch of the festival going in Tennessee's hometown on an annual basis. It is such an honor that the festival chose me to spearhead this initiative by directing the first play. I came over earlier this year to audition for a local cast. It was so incredible to visit the places where Williams lived, worked and that inspired his plays."

The opening of the play is also relaunching the old actors' guild theater in St. Louis where Williams worked and staged some of his very early works. It is being restored and renovated and is evoking a lot of interest in the region. —SH

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 complement the Williams plays well."