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Tennessee Williams and His Circle of Friends

by **David Kaplan** on [October 3, 2014](#)

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Editor's Note: Last weekend was the annual Tennessee Williams festival in Provincetown, a tour de force of plays by America's greatest playwright. The theme this year was "TW and Friends," and the festival included works by playwrights that Williams knew and admired, notably William Inge, Jane Bowles, and Yukio Mishima. Following is a piece about the friends of Tennessee Williams by festival curator David Kaplan. — Richard Schneider Jr.

IN JUNE OF 1946, with *The Glass Menagerie* still playing on Broadway (since March of the year before), Tennessee Williams decided he and his lover, Pancho Rodriguez—they had been living together since February—would spend the summer in Nantucket. Williams rented a house at 31 Pine Street and invited Carson McCullers, with whom he had exchanged letters but never met, to stay with them. She accepted.

Williams and McCullers worked that summer sitting across from each other at a big table in the dining room. He was rewriting what became the third full-length play of his professional career, *Summer and Smoke*; she was adapting her third novel, *The Member of the Wedding*, into a play, unsatisfied with a version begun by someone else. There was a wind-up Victrola with a silver horn (that Williams had toted to Provincetown in 1940), which spun out Sousa Marches and the "Santiago Waltz." The recordings, pompous and silly, evoke a small town orchestra playing in a gazebo. Williams inserted such an orchestra into his play.

Southerners in New England, thinking of the South, they drank Johnny Walker during the day, hot rum with tea at night. Day and night they took walks along the beach, enjoying the sunsets and the Aurora Borealis,



A scene from *Vieux Carré* at the Tennessee Williams Festival in Provincetown

which was unusually bright that year. Carson was mooning over a woman who kept pigs. On a visit to Carson's would-be lover, Williams shared enough Johnny Walker with the pigs to get them drunk.

In his plays, Williams depicts writers who know each other socially as squabbling rivals, trading banter: Hemingway and Fitzgerald bicker in Williams' *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* and in *The Notebooks of Trigorin*, Williams' version of Chekhov's *Seagull*, the short-story writers Treplev and Trigorin describe each other with withering dismissals. In Williams' life, catty remarks were tossed at him and thrown back to his friends Donald Windham, Gore Vidal, and Truman Capote, that is to say, other gay writers of his generation whose criticism Williams endured, even as he tolerated their work as playwrights (yet somehow passing on to them that he knew himself to be the superior dramatist—and was). No one could be quite so cutting to Williams as those men who knew enough to cut close and deep. Williams gave as good as he got. Gore Vidal, in a unintentionally self-revealing review of Williams' *Memoirs* titled "Some Memories of

the Glorious Bird and an Earlier Self" cracked that "The Bird seldom read a book," to which Williams replied, "He means I seldom read one of his."

Among living writers Tennessee Williams considered his peers—Carson McCullers, Yukio Mishima, Jane Bowles, and William Inge, and some few others—there was mutual respect and not so much sniping, until Inge grew successful enough in the 1950s to potentially eclipse Williams.

What we know of the lives of these writers Williams befriended and respected (as writers), brings to mind something essential about Williams and that circle of friends. They were in pain. McCullers contracted rheumatoid arthritis when she was 15. By the time she was 31, a series of strokes left her left side paralyzed. The hand with which she held her cane was curved like a hook and shivered involuntarily. Jane Bowles, after a serious fall from a horse when she was 16, lived with chronic discomfort and, like McCullers, walked with a pronounced limp. Bowles suffered a massive stroke when she was 40, leaving her incapacitated until her death at 56. Inge's mental illnesses could be just as debilitating. By the end of his life he recognized that the psychiatric treatments offered him had increased his agonies. Mishima's highly developed abdominal muscles were impossible without willfully self-imposed pain, something Mishima made into an aesthetic. Williams' childhood illnesses, eye surgeries performed without anesthesia, and varied agonizing adult ailments, from hemorrhoids to heart palpitations, were augmented by crippling depression and anguished panic attacks.

Along with pain, these friends shared a work ethic. McCullers, who dictated a memoir as she was dying, called it "the grace of hard work." Williams, from out of the depths of depression managed to write every

morning. Mishima's output is astounding. By the time of his death, at 45, he had completed 34 novels, over 50 plays, 25 books of short stories, and at least 35 books of essays. What Jane Bowles considered her finished output included much, much less: one novel, one full-length play, a ten-minute puppet play, and eleven stories. She worried over her words painfully, yet she was compelled to undergo the ordeal of writing as much as Mishima was compelled to undergo the rigors of bodybuilding.

Along with hard work, they drank hard, and they drank together when they could. They enjoyed themselves shamelessly, with the exception of Inge, whose accommodation with American middle-class respectability included Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, teaching in a high school, and visits to a well-meaning analyst, but for all that, Inge continued to break out of bounds, followed by bouts of hot shame. Williams, much less scrupulous, went to the same shrink, fell off the wagon in two weeks, and boasted about it in interviews.

Drinking fueled their shared aesthetic. Ecstasy is a higher value in their work than sobriety, even if ecstasy lasts a shorter time. An inevitable crash is the price, a cost they knew about intimately and, in living their lives, paid. Suicide was a possibility. Williams and McCullers tried, McCullers' father and her husband succeeded. Mishima's suicide, ritual disemboweling, planned for months, is so in character with his writing it can be considered the last of his dramas. Inge's short play, *The Love Death*, written between 1968 and 1970 and published posthumously, begins with a failed writer tricking his psychiatrist to reveal the number of sleeping pills it takes to kill oneself, which the writer then swallows. In 1973, Inge asphyxiated himself inside his garage seated behind the wheel of his new Mercedes. Thinking of the roses that repeat in their titles or the names of their characters, roses that blossom and shatter, scattering petals, spurred by the Romantic impulse to give all and then fall exhausted, they understood sacrifice and martyrdom. Mishima was photographed as St. Sebastian (in a book titled *Ordeal of Roses*). In *Vieux Carré*, the dying painter Nightingale before he's carried off on a stretcher, holds his easel "over his head like a crucifix to exorcise a demon."

The flipside of their pain is that they were successful, on their own terms and in the greater world. They were fashionable—and ambitious. They wanted their plays on Broadway, they wanted Hollywood films made out of what they wrote with Hollywood stars and important directors. In the 1950s they got what they wanted. They won awards. Mishima won many prizes in Japan and his Kabuki plays were performed by the National Theater of Japan. Inge won a Pulitzer and an Oscar, Williams two Pulitzers. Carson McCullers' *The Member of the Wedding* won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best play in 1950. Williams won the same award five times, Inge won it, too. They were photographed by celebrity photographers and there was interest enough about them for potential scandal.

They led secret lives sexually. In the 1950s Williams and Inge were closeted and promiscuous. According to reliable sources, they had sex with each other. Bowles and McCullers and Mishima were married, but before and during their marriages, they had sex with members of their own sex. They were careful to keep their secrets secret—enough to avoid the law and maintain what was then considered good taste and a decent reputation. After they died, some of their heirs maintained historic façades, but these have collapsed with the weight of time.

We know now some of the specifics of Bowles, McCullers, and Mishima in bed because their lovers have squealed. Williams, typically, spilled his own details in *Memoirs*.

Their sexual activity gave them ready metaphors for their writing: enslavement, abandon, weakness in wanting the thing that would destroy them and, especially and always, having a secret, knowing a secret, keeping a secret, sharing a secret. At an early age their unconventional sexuality estranged them from conventional parents and peers. They identified with freaks, because they knew what it was to be one. Bowles, who was born Jewish, called herself Crippie, the Kike Dyke. Mishima's father mocked him as effeminate, Williams' father called him Miss Nancy. Inge was called a sissy by the other boys in Independence, Kansas, and he was. Bowles and McCullers were "boyish." In each other's company they were open enough about who they slept with. The society they chose to enter held freewheeling soirées in out of the way places: Tangiers, Key West, and the Brooklyn boardinghouse where Carson McCullers and Jane Bowles sometimes roomed (separately) with Gypsy Rose Lee and W. H. Auden. Carson had a crush on Gypsy, though Williams denied it was consummated. He was wrong.

Yet, for all that, they were lonely—profoundly lonely. They fell in love with inaccessible people, which seems fair because they were themselves inaccessible. Their vision made them so, they were not always in the room with other people but off somewhere else in their minds. They recognized this in each other's writing, and in each other's company. In reading each other, in knowing each other, I do not think they were any less lonely, but lonely together.

In *Camino Real* Williams has Don Quixote say: "When so many are lonely as seem to be lonely, it would be inexcusably selfish to be lonely alone." Being alone together is often if not always the basis of friendship in Williams' plays.

Alone together/together alone, in life off-stage Williams offered his friends adventures to share, often road trips. In early 1939 he hitched cross-country from New Orleans to Malibu with the clarinet-player Jim Parrott; he once proposed that Carson McCullers run off with him to set up a ranch in the West with his sister Rose.

Plays by Williams in which friendship is a major theme inevitably suggest a rush out the door: to a picnic in *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur*, to the Pacific Coast in *Vieux Carré*, to a ranch in Texas with photogenic cattle in *Period of Adjustment*. That traveling companions might arrive at contentment is possible, but unlikely. As with the lovers Williams imagined, friends in Williams' plays share fantasies: the starving ladies in *Vieux Carré* pretend to eat at fancy French Quarter restaurants, the suburban husbands in *Period of Adjustment* expect to become successful ranchers. Usually the women who are friends in Williams plays want to make homes together and squabble, as in *Creve Coeur* and *Something Unspoken*. There are exceptions: the chippies in *A Perfect Analysis Given by a Parrot* run off together and squabble.

At home or out the door, true friends are rare in plays by Williams. Lovers are more likely. Attempts to transfigure from friend to lover usually fail (*The Night of the Iguana* is the great exception) and are inevitably

painful and embarrassing. In *Summer and Smoke*, *Eccentricities of a Nightingale*, and *Vieux Carré* the frustrations of the friend who wants to make love, and the difficulties of the beloved who does not, are the occasion of shame, anger, and glorious speech. This, from *Vieux Carré*: “I’ve come to expect and almost to accept as if God—the alleged—had stamped on me a sign at birth—“This man will offer himself and not be accepted, not by anyone ever!” Friendship in a play by Williams is declared as vehemently as love, and if necessary with force, as in this exchange from *Period of Adjustment*:

George: Keep your rotten hand off my shoulder.

Ralph: Break it off me. I’m sorry I ridiculed your affliction.

George: (Pause.) Apology accepted.

Forceful friendship, like much else in Williams, is based on gentle handling, a little willful deafness or cloudy vision, the haze of a drink or two. The full light of examination can blight friendship, as it does for Brick and the unseen Skipper in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. “The special quality of hell is to see everything clearly down to the last detail,” Mishima wrote in his novel *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*. Dim light allows Blanche in *Streetcar* to seem virginal, permits the aging Nightingale to visit the young Writer in *Vieux Carré*, and allows the Writer to pass for Mrs. Wire’s friend, who she confuses with her son, as he sits beside her in the dark. For Williams, onstage and off, friends fantasize their hopes for each other. In their writing, and in their lives, his circle of friends charted *Heaven and Hell* as alternate worlds of delight and terror, just on the other side of the hospital bed in Mishima’s *Lady Aoi* or down the stairs to Inge’s *The Boy in the Basement*. An excruciating one-act by Williams sums up a failed friendship with its title “I Can’t Imagine Tomorrow” and the horror of crawling “in this country of endured but unendurable pain [where]each one is so absorbed, deafened, blinded by his own journey across it, he sees, he looks for, no one else crawling across it with him.”

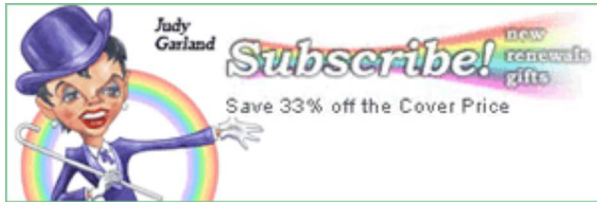
Along with much else, what Tennessee Williams, Carson McCullers, Yukio Mishima, Jane Bowles, and William Inge shared with each other, with readers, and with theater-goers, is a vision that lonely we might be, wounded, hurt, unable to heal each other, yet aware, if not always comforted by the thought, that we might, not crawl, but soar or float, perhaps with liquor, with words, with sex, or with other illusions, into other worlds of delight and through this one of pain, alone together as friends.

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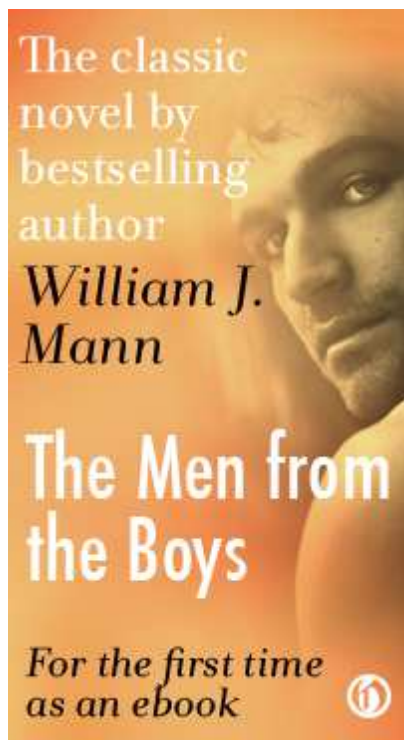
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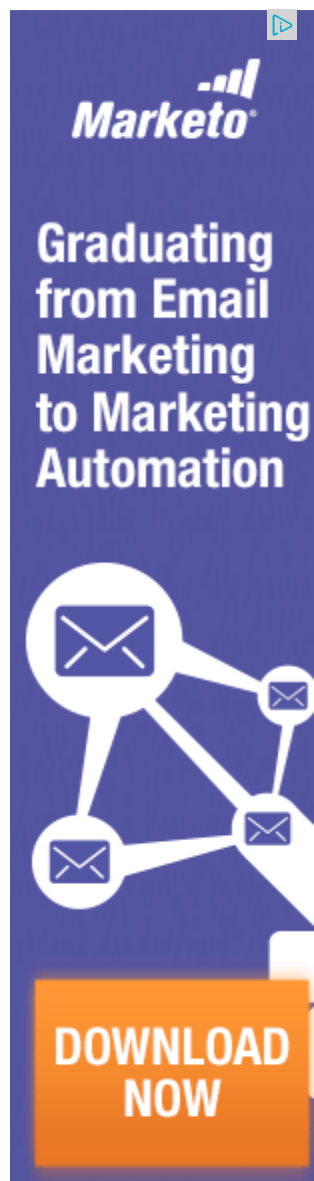
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