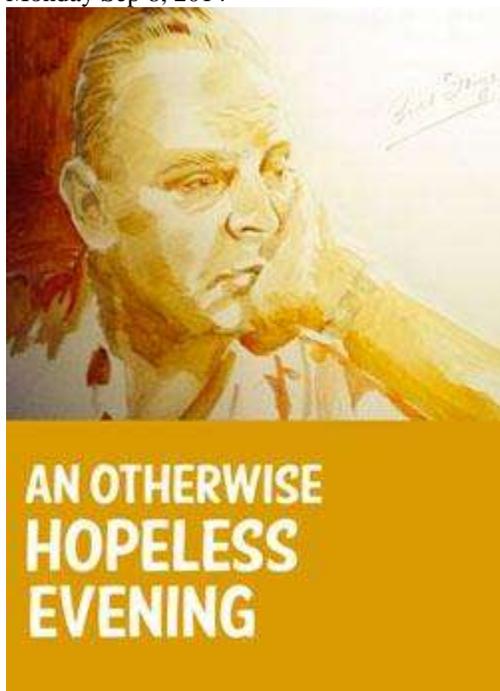


EDGE, Boston

William Inge's Dark Side Explored at Upcoming Ptown Festival

by Robert Israel
Contributor
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Playwrights Tennessee Williams and William Inge started out as friends and became theatrical rivals, competing for accolades and audiences. They spent their formative years in the American Midwest. Inge dramatized the plight of small town folks in America's heartland; Williams focused on society's outcasts in cities like New Orleans, St. Louis, and New York.

Both suffered from clinical depression. Both were gay (Williams was out; Inge was closeted). Both experienced meteoric literary successes that earned them Pulitzer Prizes for drama. Each saw their works made into successful films by famed director Elia Kazan. And each faced harsh criticism and failures.

Their relationship and creative outputs will be showcased at the upcoming Tennessee Williams Theatre Festival in Provincetown from September 25-28, 2014, as part of its 9th season: "Tennessee Williams and Circle of Friends."



Justin Speer as Byron in "The Love Death," part of "An Otherwise Hopeless Evening" (Source:A Hidden Splendor)

Mentoring Relationship

Williams (born 1911), mentored the younger Inge (born 1913) when Inge was a theatre critic for the St. Louis Star-Times. Inge wrote a favorable notice of Williams' "The Glass Menagerie" in 1944. When he later sent Williams a script seeking literary advice, Williams, unbeknownst to him, forwarded that script to his agent, Audrey Wood, who signed Inge on as a client. Thus their friendship was born.

According to Thomas Keith, creative consultant to the Festival who has edited over sixteen volumes of works by Tennessee Williams (he will interview New Yorker magazine theatre critic John Lahr in a scheduled question and answer forum at the Festival (see schedule for ticket information)), what set these two playwrights apart was how each reacted to criticism and how each defined their identities as gay men.

"They were both hard working writers, and they both craved success," Keith said. "But what we see about Williams was that he had a relatively thick skin when it came to criticism of his work. For Inge, the opposite was true: when he was criticized, it crushed him.

"It was also how they handled their sexuality," he continued. "Williams was a happy homosexual, he was open about being gay. But Inge was tortured about being gay, and that exacerbated his depression."



DeDe Deville and Brad Shaw in "A Tiny Closet," part of "An Otherwise Hopeless Evening" (Source:A Hidden Splendor)

An Otherwise Hopeless Evening

These dual themes - Inge's reaction to harsh criticism and his covert sexuality -- will be explored in "An Otherwise Hopeless Evening," a production by A Hidden Splendor, traveling to Provincetown by way of Kansas City, Missouri, where it premiered last year.

Billed as a "site responsive collaboration between theater, art, and LGBTQ history," it opens on September 25 (with additional performances scheduled over three days). It features four of Inge's one-act plays, interpreted by director Travis Chamberlain and visual artist Joseph Keehn II. Boston and New York City theatergoers will recognize Chamberlain's work from a production of Tennessee Williams' one-act "Green Eyes" he directed in both cities in 2012.

"In going through the Inge archives in Kansas," Chamberlain said, "four scripts were discovered that shed light on his sexuality relative to his career. Two of these scripts were published after his mother's death, and two remain unpublished. They explore how he viewed his sexuality from the closet, in the pre-Stonewall era. It provides us with a view of how gay men lived then, and how gay men live now."

An all-male cast performs the four Inge scripts in a production that includes original music and Keehn's art installation. Chamberlain explained that the theme of death runs through all of the plays.

"In the play 'The Love Death'," Chamberlain said, "the lead character, a playwright, is making a series of calls to people he's known before he commits suicide. And it is made clear, since the calls are in reverse order, that the last call he's making is to the person who has hurt him the most, namely a critic who gave him a terrible review and whom he believes has ruined his career."



William Inge

Dark Side of Success

Inge, who penned hit plays "Picnic," "Bus Stop" and "Come Back, Little Sheba" -- all of which triumphed on Broadway and, later, were made into popular films - was haunted by his lack of literary successes in the latter part of his life. Wounded emotionally from a spate of negative reviews, unable to continue writing or to teach playwriting at a California university, he committed suicide at age 60 by carbon monoxide poisoning.

Given these dark themes that haunted Inge - who wrestled with thoughts of suicide before actually carrying it out - what is compelling about presenting this in the theatre?

"It is a legitimate question," Chamberlain responded, "to which we answer that suicide is a sad part of gay history. Gay men and women have struggled with the issue of suicide in the past. They are struggling with this now, and the theater provides a place where this subject can be discussed, where you can come and feel you are not alone and talk about it."

The first performance took place in Kansas City, in the Jewel Box Lounge, a pioneering Midwest venue during Inge's time that boldly promoted female impersonators on their roster of entertainers. When the production arrives at the Sage Inn in Provincetown, it has historic significance, Chamberlain said, noting that the Sage site was once the Pilgrim House Inn, owned by the late drag performer Lynne Carter. Carter purchased the property during the 1960s and transformed it into a drag cabaret; it was later destroyed by arson.

"During our run at the Sage Inn, we will be paying special tribute to Lynne Carter and her pioneering performances in Provincetown," Chamberlain said.

***An Otherwise Hopeless Evening**, by Travis Chamberlain & Joseph Keehn II, featuring four one-act plays by William Inge, will be performed at the Sage Inn, 336 Commercial Street, Provincetown, September 25-28, as part of the 9th annual Tennessee Williams Theatre Festival. For additional performances, ticket information and a complete schedule, visit www.twptown.org.*

Robert Israel writes about theater, arts, culture and travel. Follow him on Twitter at @risrael1a.