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# Tennessee Williams festival marks a decade

By **Loren King** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 21, 2015

The Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival celebrates its 10th season this week in venues indoors and out throughout the town where Williams spent a pivotal period of his life during the 1940s.

While looking back might seem fitting and deserved, the festival's raison d'être is to put Williams solidly in the present. "YEAR TENN: A Decade of Tennessee Williams in Provincetown" revives past shows but with different casts or settings, while imported productions provide fresh interpretations of the playwright's works.

"It's not in our nature to do the same thing twice," says Jef Hall-Flavin, the festival's executive director. "We're not reliving the past, yet we have a lot to pull from because Williams was constantly innovating right up until his death [in 1983, at 71]. We're not going to run out of material any time soon."

Hall-Flavin directs "The Parade," Williams's autobiographical one-act play — one of his few explicitly gay love stories — about a struggling writer who finds love and heartbreak in Provincetown. It premiered at the first Tennessee Williams festival, but this time "The Parade" will be staged on the beach in front of the Provincetown Inn. Williams wrote the play in summer 1940, when he was 29 and having a fleeting romance with a 22-year-old Canadian man.

Two other noteworthy productions, "The Day on Which a Man Dies" and "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore," come courtesy of Abraham-se & Meyer Productions of Cape Town, a foremost interpreter of Williams's work. Using Williams's original Kabuki stagehands, the South African company's production of "Milk Train" features a tour de force



JOSH ANDRUS

**Jennifer Steyn and Marcel Meyer take center stage in "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore."**

for Jennifer Steyn as Flora Goforth.

“‘Milk Train’ for a long time was seen as a problem play. [Abrahamse-Meyer] embraced Williams’s original stage directions, which were Kabuki,” says Hall-Flavin. “Who knew that would be the key to making the play work?”

“‘Milk Train’ will be performed in repertory with ‘The Day on Which a Man Dies,’ directed by festival co-founder and curator David Kaplan and starring Steyn and Marcel Meyer. Kaplan in an e-mail interview (he was heading home from rehearsals in South Africa) explained why a South African troupe has come to claim one of the great American playwrights.

“They treat Williams like Shakespeare, paying the same attention to rhythm, word choice, the musicality of dialogue, the universality of themes and the depth of characterization,” he says. For “The Day on Which a Man Dies,” described as a “fantasia on the death of Jackson Pollock,” Kaplan says he was “able to develop certain wordless sections with the South Africans — a dance sequence, the final exits — very clearly described by Williams that I always wished I could have more time to work on.”



EILEEN COUNIHAN

**Ben Berry stars in “The Parade.”**

Two other productions are music-based, paying tribute to a key component of Williams’s life and work. Kaplan compiled and directs “Canciones de Tennessee Williams,” a collection of Mexican songs that Williams wanted sung in his plays, along with the English dialogue the songs amplify. It will be performed cabaret-style at the Crown and Anchor by Mexican singer-actor Armando Arrocha.

Also at the Crown and Anchor, staged as a Weimar-era cabaret, is the London import “The Liberation of Colette Simple,” a live music fantasy about a shopgirl in Primanproper, Mass. Directed by Matt Peover and composed by music director Vincent Guibert, the show is adapted from Williams’s play “The Case of the Crushed Petunias.”

The creative team wanted to commemorate hitting the 10-year mark — no small achievement for a theater festival of this scope in a small Cape Cod town in the off-season — but do so in a way consistent with its mission to keep Williams relevant and fresh. “TENN @ Town Hall,” directed by Hall-Flavin, will feature past and present festival actors, including Keir Dullea,

Mia Dillon, Lou Liberatore, and Irene Glezos, reading excerpts from the 11 Tennessee Williams premieres the festival has staged over the last decade: “Aimez-Vous Ionesco?”; “Green Eyes”; “Madame LeMonde”; “The Parade”; “Dog Enchanted by the Divine View”; “The Enemy: Time”; “Once in a Lifetime”; “Sunburst”; “Pronoun ‘I’”; “Curtains for the Gentleman”; and “American Gothic.”

“Williams was interested in human beings. He had a way of piercing through culture and time to get at the heart of what it means to be human,” Hall-Flavin says.

From its inception, Tennessee Williams Theater Festival organizers wanted to provide an immersive experience for audiences by offering a wide range of plays over a short period in a community-wide environment. “Seeing [the plays] together, of course, changes the meaning of each one,” says Kaplan. “We see them this year, not as part of [a] theme, but as plays bouncing up against each other, like mirrors reflecting mirrors and meanings.”

## PROVINCETOWN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS THEATER FESTIVAL

At various venues, Sept. 24-27. Tickets: 866-811-4111, [www.twptown.org](http://www.twptown.org).

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