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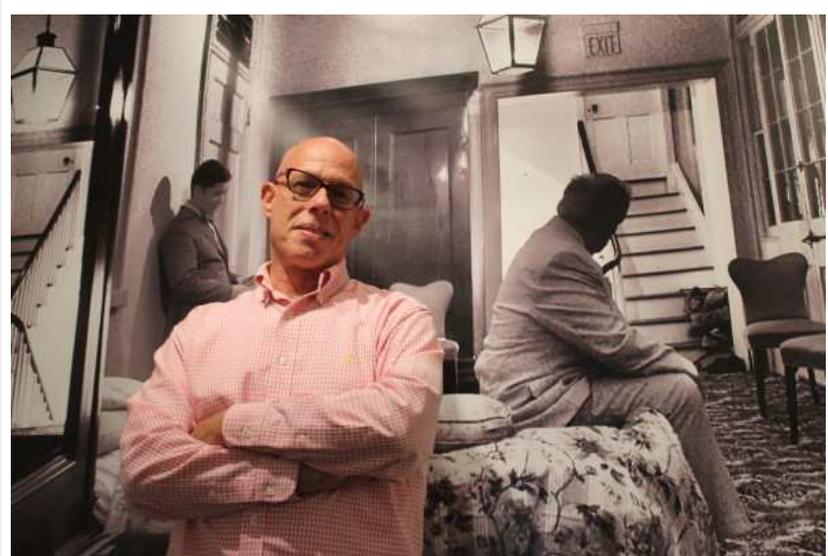
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Tennessee Williams – Provincetown, Memory & Eternity

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PROVINCETOWN – Once upon a time, Tennessee Williams was young and beautiful and in love in Provincetown. He stayed at Captain Jack’s Wharf in the West End, where he listened to the rhythm of the tide as he wrote *“The Glass Menagerie”* on a borrowed typewriter.



David Kaplan, curator & co-founder of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival. Behind him is a photograph from his art installation, “The Hotel Plays,” featuring photos of actors backstage at a Tennessee Williams Festival in

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New Orleans.

This week, for the tenth year, Provincetown is remembering that time and all of the work of Williams, a writer that David Kaplan, curator and co-founder of the [Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival](#), compared to the eternal greats, including William Shakespeare

“The words are incantations,” said Kaplan. “They are recipes for magic.”

“Really, this is what it’s about,” said Kaplan. “Love and beauty and youth pass very quickly so there is an imperative to remember them, and because they pass so quickly they are that much more important. That’s what Tennessee Williams was about.”



Twice in Provincetown

Tennessee Williams is back in Provincetown.

In many ways, said Kaplan, the spirit of Tennessee Williams has always been alive in Provincetown. “You’re at the edge of the Earth, where the Earth meets the sea. Where solid becomes liquid.” It represents, he said, “the changeability of moving between worlds and consciousnesses.”

Kaplan, a fifth generation Manhattanite, is a part-time resident of Provincetown. He is an international theater director, the author of two series of college textbooks for actors, and he is the author of [“Tennessee Williams in Provincetown”](#) (2006; Hansen Publishing Group).

Kaplan also creates art installations, including *“The Hotel Plays,”* currently at the Berta Walker Gallery in Provincetown. *“The Hotel Plays”* features moody photographs of actors backstage at a Tennessee Williams Festival in New Orleans.

Williams wrote, said Kaplan, “memory plays... All of us know the power and warmth of memory, and that’s what Williams celebrates,” he said.

“A memory play hits you at several different levels,” said Lou Liberatore, a New York actor who performed in 2011 in Provincetown as Tennessee Williams in *“Something Cloudy, Something Clear.”*

“He wrote this play, and put it in a drawer, and then he came back to it and started examining the memory,” said Liberatore. “Because he was so complex, the more you look at him the more layers you keep unfolding.”

The four-day festival, September 24-27, celebrates the four summers that Williams stayed in Provincetown, as well as the arc of his career and life. The festival features 10 plays by Williams performed by various professional actors, including groups from Mexico, South Africa and England, said Kaplan.

“The body of work he wrote is universal,” said Kaplan. “Just think of the diversity of people performing Williams’ plays.”

And while the plays are universal, there are certain places that Williams is part of – places like Columbus, Mississippi; New Orleans, and Provincetown. These places, as well as others hold



Captain Jack's Wharf. Tennessee Williams could hear the tide as he wrote.

festivals for Williams.

"Each place that sponsors a festival has a particular claim to him," said Brenda Currin, an actress who splits her time between New York and New Orleans. "Provincetown is very special. Williams went there in the 40s. It's the place where he first fell in love. That love was one of the major events of his life," she said.

"He was young. He met a younger man who was a dancer," said Currin. "They met out on the dunes or at Race Point," she said. "They fell in love while they were young in a beautiful place for the summer."

It is this ethereal world of fleeting youth that that is the essence of Williams, said Kaplan. "What he uses always is an image, like a lit cigarette or a bubble before it bursts. It's not sad at all. It's life affirming," he said.

But Liberatore described Williams as a tortured artist. "This man had heartbreak and sadness and loss in his life," said Liberatore.

And so there are memories. Memories of when Williams was in Provincetown. Memories within his plays. And the memories of those alive now, directing those plays and acting in them. Wrapped around all of that, as Williams knew, are the memories of all of us: the audience.

He spent four summers in Provincetown – 1940, 1941, 1944, and 1947.

Moments in time. Captain Jack's Wharf is at the water's edge and as the tide comes in, one hears it lapping underneath. "There's a rhythm that people listen to when they are writing," said Kaplan. "We know that there are certain pieces of music that Mozart wrote on a stage coach. We know that Dickens wrote on a train. Well, Williams was writing with the constant rhythm of the sea."



“One of the greatest writers in the history of the world”

From the mid 1940s through the early 1960s, Williams had a string of unprecedented successes, starting with *“The Glass Menagerie,”* and including *“A Streetcar Named Desire,”* *“Cat On A Hot Tin Roof”* and several others.

These are not mere successes of the era, said Kaplan. They are of the ages.

“One of the things that drives me wild is when I see him referred to as one of the most important American playwrights of the 1940s,” said Kaplan. “That’s like saying William Shakespeare was one of the most important playwrights from Stratford, England in the late 1500s.”

“He’s at the level of Chekhov,” said Kaplan. “He’s not at the level of Lillian Hellman. He’s at the level of Ibsen.”

“He’s one of the greatest writers in the history of the world,” he said. “He’s one of those American things, like Emily Dickinson, like Walt Whitman, that is part of our contribution to world culture.”

“We allow our generals and politicians to define American identity, but it’s our writers and thinkers that really define American identity. It’s not just about entertainment or distracting people,” said Kaplan. “What Williams did is something more important.”

Liberatore said, “He’s our greatest American playwright. He’s kind of a conduit of the playwrights that came before him. It changed American theater.”

“He’s one of the great authentic artists in the history of the world,” said Currin. “There’s obviously the language, the poetry, the humanity... He is a great dramatist,” she said of Williams.

“Sure you have all that beautiful language, but he understands the human condition in a way that is theatrical and encompasses life and death, and conflict, and the complexities of love and hate,” said Currin. “And he understands the role of money in drama.”

Of course, much of popular media written about Williams focuses on his personal life. Kaplan said, “When an American writer is great, not popular, critics have a difficult time dealing with that greatness and find it a lot easier to focus on the eccentricities of their life.”



The Reckless Experimenter

“When you look at his career, you see that his sojourn into respectability was only about 12 years,” said Kaplan.

“On the other side of that 12 years, he was a reckless experimenter,” said Kaplan. “He was always an avant garde writer. He was avant garde like Picasso, reinventing the language of his art.”

His later work, after that commercial peak, was not as critically acclaimed. “His art changed because his worldview had changed,” said Kaplan. “He no longer believed it was easy to explain things. He no longer believed that sweet lyric language accurately depicted reality.”

“His later work is more staccato and cacophonous and has a



David Kaplan on Tennessee Williams: "The words are incantations. They are recipes for magic."

beauty of its own," said Kaplan.

"He's breaking formula," said Kaplan. "By 1965, he's using burlesque discordant rhythms, and, of course, that's a reflection of the times. Also, he's from Mississippi. And even though he's not living there anymore, he's aware that the world that existed when he was a child has shattered."

In the aftermath of his monumental success, Kaplan said, Williams created other great works that have not been recognized as such. Some, at the time they were performed, were panned critically. Some were rarely read, and some had never been produced as plays.



The Freedom Of The Town

"Twelve years ago, Provincetown was Eugene O'Neill obsessed," said Kaplan. About that time, Kaplan was directing a Tennessee Williams play in Hong Kong, and I needed to clear up a matter of research, the origin of the play. When it was written,"



As he started researching Williams, he said, he was "astounded by how much material there was from Provincetown."

He followed that research. "You fall in love with the research," said Kaplan. "The research takes you to another place." It took him to Provincetown, where he embarked upon researching the book that became *Tennessee Williams In Provincetown*.

"What I learned immediately was that there was a spirit of freedom in this town," said Kaplan. "It was a sexual freedom, but also an artistic

*Tennessee Williams in
1944 in Provincetown.*
PHOTO BY HAROLD
NORSE.

freedom," he said.

"The more I learned about who his friends were, I learned that he had really found community here. It wasn't the theater community," said Kaplan. "He was part of the artistic

community."

He was not hanging out with the local theater group, said Kaplan. "He wasn't working on a third-hand project like, 'Let's do our version of *Our Town*.'"

Williams, said Kaplan, "saw himself in the continuum with Chekhov. That's how he thinks of what he's writing. He sees himself as part of the larger world."

While Williams wrote every morning, Liberatore, who has stayed at Captain Jack's Wharf, said, "Provincetown represents his angels and his demons." There was the beauty of the place, the sand and surf and the chance for solitude but "there was also the debauchery of it all. The furtive meetings under the docks," he said.



Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival

While Kaplan was researching the book and immersing himself in Williams time in Provincetown, he met with a group of people who created the "first building dedicated to theater in Provincetown in 37 years." They were looking for a use for the building.

Kaplan had a couple of suggestions that were dismissed and then "I very offhandedly said, 'You could do a Tennessee Williams Festival.'"

This is year 10 of the festival, or as it is called in promotional material, "Year Tenn."

Before the first one, Kaplan attended other festivals around the country to get a sense of what is possible, and how to be different. The New Orleans festival, for instance, is a literary festival. "Ours is a performance festival," he said.

As such, one of Kaplan's goals for the festival was to give life to some plays that had never been performed, and to breath life back into plays that had been panned when they originally were released.

"You could read some reviews from the New York Times in the early 60s and be appalled," said Kaplan.

Kaplan went into it with an open mind, and a bit of reverence for Williams. He read the unknown plays. "The first thing I realized was that these are, without equivocation, beautiful plays," he said. "Beautiful plays, beautiful description, beautiful dialogue."

The festival meant, "I could do something about getting them performed," said Kaplan.

Eleven of Williams plays have premiered in Provincetown since the festival started, said Kaplan.

And others are getting a fresh look.



Lou Liberatore, of acting in a Tennessee Williams play in Provincetown: "You know where he is coming from."

"He was imprisoned by his own success," said Currin. His big hits "seemed like mainstream great plays, but he actually was a rebel in terms of the mainstream."

"The public really tortured him and persecuted him for it as his life went on because he wanted to experiment and the audiences wouldn't have it," she said. "That's what these festivals are doing, getting a look at this work that was summarily dismissed."

Times, of course, have changed. As has control of the Tennessee Williams estate, said Kaplan.

"Because times have changed and also because the gatekeepers have died – the person who controlled his estate died – I think his reputation right now is that he is a very produceable playwright, as we see, around the world."

"When you get a brilliant director who loves Williams to stage one of his plays... when you get dedicated directors and actors who are lovers of Williams, it's their mind and talent that comes into relationship with Williams all over again," said Currin. "That's what theater is. It's not just on the page. It's to be interpreted, a continual living event."

Williams himself referred to the concept, in his production notes for *"The Glass Menagerie"* with a term he coined, "the plastic theatre."

The work of Tennessee Williams is alive. It's alive in Provincetown. Liberatore said of acting in a Williams play in Provincetown, "It is informing your choices. You know where he is coming from."

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