

One Magazine – September 30, 2015

del Rosso: Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival 2015

The Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival in Provincetown, Massachusetts, is now in its 10th year (Year TENN Ptown Sept 24-27). Co-founder and curator David Kaplan has said, “What we are about ultimately is to change the way that Williams is spoken about and thought about in the world.”

I had never been to the Tennessee Williams Festival, and was introduced to plays I had never seen or heard of before. When I ran into David Kaplan and told him my mind had been both blown and expanded, my appreciation for Williams deepened, he said, “I love it when people come to the festival for the first time, because they have no idea what they are getting into.” He is right. This year’s productions of Williams’ plays come from South Africa, London, Boston, Mexico City, New York City, and Mississippi, as well as right here in Provincetown. One could call the TENN Festival (mostly) a reassessment of Williams’ later work. Why? Kaplan says, “The proposition that Williams stopped writing what was called lyric realism because he was alcohol-impaired was overturned by Festival performances of Williams’ dialogue in which broken sentences and aching pauses demonstrated virtuosic control and mature musicality. Late autobiographical plays such as *The Traveling Companion* and *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* were not marginal after all, but essential.”

The TENN Festival is essential viewing. But you don’t have to believe Kaplan. Or me. Let the plays speak for themselves.

1. *The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore*: by Abrahamse & Meyers Productions from Cape Town, South Africa at The Provincetown Theater. Directed by Fred Abrahamse. Cast: Jennifer Steyn (Sissy Goforth), Marcel Meyer (Christopher Flanders), Nicholas Dallas (Stage Assistant One/Witch of Capri/Rudy/Giulio), Daniel Richards (Stage Assistant Two/Blackie). At intermission, an older, bearded man stopped me en route to the bar and said, “You’re reviewing this, aren’t you? Who do you write for?” And I explained. Then he said, “And I don’t suppose you can tell me whether you liked it or not, can you? Well, I suppose I shouldn’t ask, it’s not...”

“It’s phenomenal,” I said. Okay, maybe a reviewer isn’t supposed to tell, but too bad.

“It is, isn’t it?” said the man, delighted. “*Tallulah Bankhead* did this play on Broadway and it ran for five days then closed.”

‘Really?’ I said.

“Yes,” he said, “but isn’t Jennifer Steyn stunning?”

Yes, yes, and more yes.

Steyn is Sissy Goforth, an aging, terminally ill showgirl living on the Italian Riviera and “writing her memoirs.” Enter the beautiful Christopher Flanders, a penniless poet and “angel of death” played by Marcel Meyer.

There are references to Kabuki in the text, and this particular production has Kabuki gently

incorporated in landscape, movement, costume. It is stylized, beautiful to look at, the music is gorgeous and everything just works. The relationships work: servant to servant, servant to master, master to would-be lover. Everyone wants something in this play and no one quite gets it. The aging showgirl wants to be well and not die. She does not want to be lonely, but she wants to give nothing in return for companionship. The opportunist Flanders wants food and drink; instead, he starves. And he waits. The servant wants peace and will have none. But because it is stylized does not mean it isn't devastating: Sissy eventually has to face the end of her life, but she does not go gentle. She isn't good at accepting help. And though she makes a big deal of the jewels she wears and of being "robbed blind" by her servants these are distractions. She can't take those jewels with her, and she knows it.

2. *The Day on Which a Man Dies*, by Abrahamse & Meyers Productions from Cape Town, South Africa. Designed and directed by David Kaplan. Cast: Jennifer Steyn (Woman), Marcel Meyer (Man), Daniel Richards (The Oriental), Nicholas Dallas (Second Stage Assistant). A meditation on the life and death of Jackson Pollack, and what happens when the artistic spirit and motivation dies, this is another first-rate, beautifully acted, visually stunning production of a play that was unknown to me before stepping into the theater. Jennifer Steyn is unrecognizable from "Milk Train.." and Meyer captures the artist's agony. Williams depicts the conflict between devotion to personal life and devotion to one's art; and then what happens when there are no more ideas. When there is nothing more to give, or to say.

3. *Suddenly Last Summer*, by Tennessee Williams Tribute, Columbus, Mississippi. Directed by Augustin J. Corrrero. Cast: Brenda Currin (Mrs. Venable), Drew Stark (Dr. Cukrowicz), Beth Bartley, (Catharine Holly), Laura Beth Berry (Mrs. Foxhill), Vicki Hill (Mrs. Holly), Shane Tubbs (George Holly), Cherri Golden (Sister Felicity).

A Williams classic. Yes, it is a camp film. But that camp film boasts indelible performances by Elizabeth Taylor, Montgomery Clift and above all, Katharine Hepburn. It is not so much about what is remembered about Mrs. Venable's son Sebastian, it is rather the image his mother wants to retain of him even if it means lobotomizing the truth out of the only other woman who knows the truth: his cousin Catharine. Mrs. Venable can't very well set up a Sebastian fund and proclaim he was chaste all his life if someone out there is saying otherwise, now can she? This production was a bit of a disappointment, and as I said, that film does loom in the mind. But Brenda Currin did not seem entirely comfortable in the part (in contrast to when I saw her at TENN @ Town Hall, where she was fabulous), and neither did the Stark's doctor escape from "acting" the part, nor did Hill's Mrs Holly and Tubbs's George escape greedy Southern stereotypes. The lack of a cohesive whole seemed a directorial problem. The breakout performance was Beth Bartley's, whose magnificent, wrenching Catharine riveted me throughout.

4. *The Parade*, by Peregrine Theater Ensemble, Provincetown, MA. Directed by Jef Hall-Flavin. Cast: Ben Berry (Don), Nash Hightower (Dick), Ruby Wolf (Miriam), Bronwyn Whittle (Wanda), Ian Leahy (Postman).

The Parade or *Approaching the End of a Summer* is the play that put this festival on the map. First done ten years ago as a world premier, it was published after Tennessee Williams' death. This time round, when I saw it, a small grey platform was set up on the beach at low tide between the breakwater and the Provincetown Inn. So the set was Mother Nature at her best: a spectacular afternoon, blue skies, bright sun, a blue sea, and this previously unknown play. Don, a stand-in for a young Tennessee, is in Provincetown, writing plays, on the brink of success

and in love with an Adonis named Dick (or, as Don's friend Miriam calls him, a "gorgeous, graceful moron") who cares nothing for him and claims to be "asexual." No one believes this. Don and Dick are on a mail-drop platform in the dunes (because that was how it was done before email had its way) and while Dick practices his dance moves, Don suffers, fumes, they bicker, and then Don storms off. Enter Miriam. Then Dick storms off and Don returns. He and Miriam confide in each other; they would, they are close friends. Perhaps too close.

Don's work does not bring him the happiness, the love and passion he craves. Miriam believes he should concentrate on his writing instead of Dick. But she also may have ulterior motives.

The characters in "The Parade" love the wrong people, people who can't or won't love them back, causing immense heartache. But it is also about the conflict with the artistic spirit and how much fulfillment that spirit can and cannot bring.

This production, compared to the others, was spare. Minimal. And for me the most affecting. The cast, as I said to the director (that's the lovely thing about the Festival being in Provincetown; one can run into people one admires everywhere), was stunning, and they broke my heart, in particular Ben Berry's Don, a dead-ringer for young Tennessee, and Ruby Wolf's Miriam. Their scenes together were affecting. Astonishing. Heartbreaking.

5. The Remarkable Rooming House of MME. *Lemonde and Aimez-Vous Ionesco?* by Beau Jest Moving Theater, Boston, Ma. Directed by Davis Robinson.

Cast for The Remarkable Rooming House... Mint (Jordan Harrison), Son (Nick Ronan), Hall (Larry Coen), Madame Le Monde (Lisa Tucker).

Cast for Aimez-Vous... Francine (Lisa Tucker), Marlene (Robin Javonne Smith), Delphine (Larry Coen), Mr. Coppitt (Nick Ronan & Jordan Harrison).

Hilarious. Sad. Absurd. A put-upon cripple. A bit of buggery. A visit from an old friend. A spot of tea. A fertile landlady. Director's notes: "Tennessee planned for the play to be part of an evening of 'Williams' Guignol' that was never produced." That description is apt. To say more would give away too much, I think. But The Remarkable Rooming House of MME. *Lemonde* boasts a first-rate ensemble cast, filthy humor and pathos. That's a lot for a short play that segues beautifully into *Aimez-vous Ionesco?* Two female friends meet for tea, and a ballet dancer, one Mr. Coppitt, stops by. They are preoccupied with him, he is preoccupied with himself, pisses, preens and leaves. Is there anything left to talk about? Is there anything left? Is there...anything?

6. *TENN @ Town Hall* consists of excerpts from eleven world-premier productions of Tennessee Williams. The show was compiled and directed by Jef Hall-Flavin.

The plays of Williams were: *The Parade*, *The Pronoun 'I'*, *Sunburst*, *Green Eyes*, *The Remarkable Rooming House of MME. Lemonde*, *The Dog Enchanted by the Divine View*, *The Enemy: Time*, *American Gothic*, *Once in a Lifetime*, *Curtains for the Gentleman*, *Aimez-Vous Ionesco?*

There were also excerpts of plays inspired by Williams, from Greg Barrios (*Rancho Pancho*), Charlene A. Donaghy (*Gift of an Orange*), and Wendy Kesselman (*The Shell Collection*).

While there were roughly 30 performers, it could have been a cast of thousands, such was the staggering amount of talent on one stage. This was a high-energy, happy event that left me wanting to run out and buy every, single Williams' play I did not know. I am working on it. Truly.

I did not get to see every play at the festival, but I wish I had. I wish I had a clone, because then we could have gone out each night, late, and discussed what we missed.

It takes a special kind of talent to recognize genius; this is what David Kaplan has accomplished with his astonishing tribute to Tennessee Williams, year after year for a decade. But this far-reaching Festival is also a tribute to Kaplan himself: his knowledge, breadth, and devotion to changing the Williams landscape. The next generation has geniuses, to be sure; but that is not enough. There has to be someone to rediscover, to redefine, to keep that flame burning. What happens every year at the Provincetown Theater Festival is historic. And ephemeral. So many people from around the world contribute to this memorable experience. David Kaplan, again, “When what’s admirable is gone, it’s worth recalling, like a splendid summer day recalled in September, or Williams’ visions recalled by performances in Provincetown for the last ten Septembers. Loss sometimes prompts an imperative to recall.” As I said, this year, 2015, is the first year I attended The Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival. It won’t be the last.



David Kaplan, Co-founder and Curator of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival

Published on 30 September, 2015 6:02 PM.

Filed under: [author - Lisa Del Rosso](#) Tags: [del Rosso: Provinc](#)