

'Suddenly Last Summer' heats up Williams Festival

By **Stuard M. Derrick**
Banner Correspondent

After years of making room for daddy and father knowing best, the late 1950s and early 1960s ushered in a new vision of Mom — and it wasn't pretty. There was Eleanor Shaw Iselin with her pack of playing cards, and Norma Bates and her penchant for fruit cellars and butcher knives.

But the precursor to all this maternal mayhem was Violet Venable, desperately clutching her blank book of poetry in "Suddenly Last Summer." Using her vast wealth and influence from her home in the Garden District of New Orleans, Violet intimidated a psychiatrist into plunging a knife into the brain of her niece, Catharine, so as to stop Catharine's "babbling" about what had happened to Violet's son, Sebastian.

A masterpiece of Southern Gothic lyrical decadence, Tennessee Williams' play is one of the much-anticipated offerings of the 10th annual Tennessee Williams Theater Festival commencing tonight, Thursday, Sept. 24.

This production comes direct from the Tennessee Williams Tribute in Columbus, Miss., Williams's birthplace, and is directed by Augustin J. Corroero — who will also conduct for the second year the "Williams 101" seminars — and features festival favorites Brenda Currin and Beth Bartley.

A continually vexing issue confronting any stage interpretation of "Suddenly Last Summer" is the overwrought 1959 film version's very clear homoerotic subtext that equated homosexuality with a predatory pedophilia that must be destroyed. "It's something that Tennessee and I aren't talking about," wryly remarks Corroero, the co-artistic director of the Tennessee Williams Theatre Company of New Orleans. "It's horribly reductive to the gay community. I just don't know how to make peace with that except by working it out through performance. And that is essentially to say that we have to learn more about Sebastian. Sebastian has to be a full character, he can't just be a stock queer pedophile; he has to suffer from something that isn't just being gay but is instead a sort of spiritual sickness. There is a sort of white guilt that Williams writes into his plays and short stories occasionally that is echoed in Sebastian: he is plundering poor dark-skinned children and adolescents and ultimately he throws himself into oblivion at their mercy, and it destroys him. He sacrifices himself to these children."

Regarding the play's impact on the stage, Corroero explains, "Theater is more immersive, both auditory and visual. Onstage what you have are two great performers and you use the other actors as a lens. Through these other



From left, Beth Bartley, Drew Stark and Brenda Currin in "Suddenly Last Summer." PHOTO COURTESY TENNESSEE WILLIAMS THEATER FESTIVAL



Brenda Currin in "Suddenly Last Summer." PHOTO GREG MCGOON

characters the audience learns by watching and hearing these revelations, and it's real work for these other actors to stay engaged, to commit to the focus of what is being said, because a 20-minute monologue is hard to watch otherwise. The play is only an hour and a half long, and you can have just two people talking and the audience will stay with you."

As for the show's leading ladies — "two great performers," says Corroero — Currin plays Violet and Bartley, Catharine. "My interpretation of Catharine is that she is the sanest person in the play," says Bartley. "She's telling the truth and no one wants to hear the truth that she's sharing — they'd rather cut this hideous story out of her brain. I think she's very hungry emotionally and physically. I think she has incredible intelligence and charm to get what she wants. She has the alertness of an animal. She is always operating. I think she has a purity, but I don't think she is just an innocent. I think she is extraordinarily brilliant and charming and full of potential beauty, which is why it's so disturbing that she may be lobotomized this afternoon."

"I love her," says Currin about

Just the facts

What: Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival
When: Thurs.-Sun., Sept. 24-27
Where: various venues around town
Tickets & Schedule: twptown.org

her character. "And what I love about the play on this particular afternoon in this garden, Sebastian's garden, is that Violet has staged it to get what she wants. In the past year she has gone through an overwhelming grief that could have killed her, yet she finds this awesome life force in order to do what she needs to do in her own mind to insure her son's reputation as a poet. I believe her; she sees herself as the one who has saved Sebastian, has saved him from destruction. Onstage as Violet, I am fascinated by what god Sebastian was looking for — his idea of God was a cruel one, but it was still God to him, and Catharine's story is everything she doesn't want to hear. I do believe that Violet doesn't live long past this experience, but who knows?"



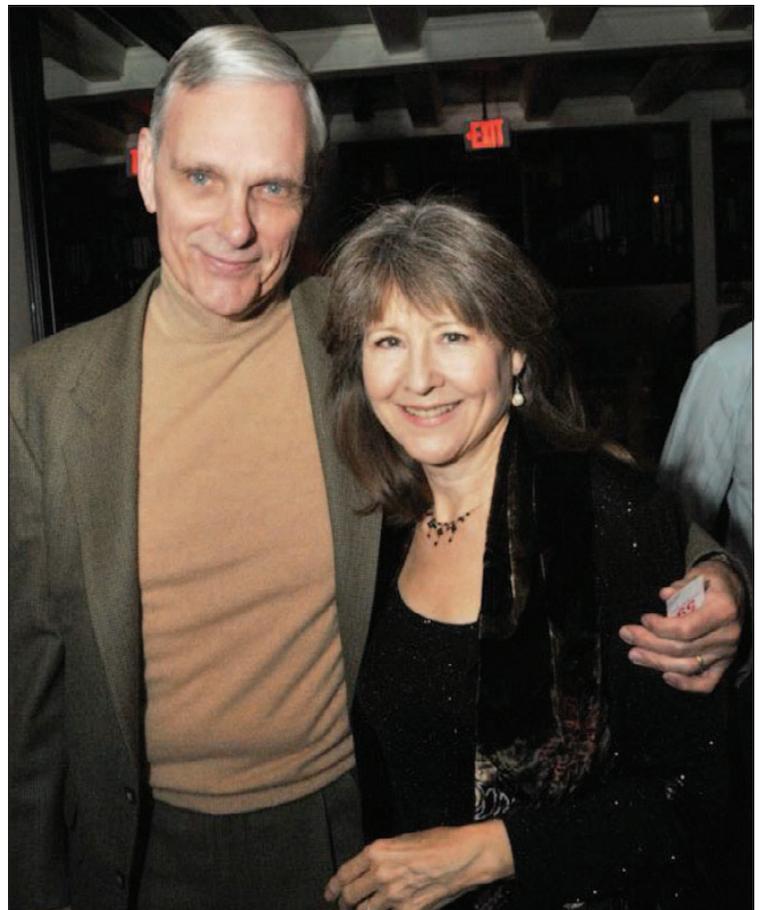
Mink Stole in "The Mutilated." PHOTO JOSH ANDRUS

Stars return for 10th anniversary reading of festival-premiered plays

In "Year Tenn: A Decade of Tennessee Williams in Provincetown," many popular festival actors return to participate in a reading of excerpts from 11 of the Williams plays premiered at the festival since its inception. Among them are film and stage actors Kier Dullea and Mia Dillon, who starred as Big Daddy and Big Mama in the 2013 production of "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," and Mink Stole of John Waters film

fame, who starred in "The Mutilated" and "Now the Cats with Jewelled Claws" that same year.

The reading takes place at 5:30 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 26, and at 3 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 27, at Provincetown Town Hall, 260 Commercial St. Tickets, \$34.50-\$44.50, are available at twptown.org, where you can also find festival details and a full schedule of performances, talks, parties and other events.



Kier Dullea and Mia Dillon. PHOTO SUZANNE SHERIDAN