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[Print Page](#)

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With old favorites and new works Provincetown Tennessee Williams fest turns 10

The Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival is celebrating its past, present and future with its 10th anniversary season, Sept. 24-27, by bringing back some crowd-pleasers from the past decade and finding new ways to illuminate the writing of one of the pioneer playwrights of the 20th century.

The festival “began as an idea in 2004 by [former Banner owner] Alix Richie, [local actor and director] Patrick Falco and [local theater supporter] Jerry Scully,” says Jef Hall-Flavin, the festival’s executive director. “They wanted to gain national and international support for Provincetown for serious theater.”

The trio approached Williams scholar David Kaplan to consult and eventually take on the role of festival curator.

Since then, the festival has “grown from an audience of a few hundred the first year in 2005 to last year when we sold over 5,000 tickets,” Hall-Flavin says.

This year, Flavin-Hall says, noting some festival highlights, “‘Tenn at Town Hall’ is a retrospective of all our 11 world premieres. We are doing excerpts and readings with some of our favorite festival actors. We are also highlighting some of the writers who were inspired by Tennessee Williams,” including plays by Wendy Kesselman, Charlene A. Donaghy, Greg Barrios and Irene Glezos.

John Guare, author of “Six Degrees of Separation” and “The House of Blue Leaves,” premieres his new play, “More Stars Than There Are in Heaven,” an adaptation of the Williams short story “The Mattress by the Tomato Patch.”

Through the years the festival has developed its own unique Provincetown style of presenting Williams’ work. Plays can happen anywhere. Not only in traditional theaters but in hotel rooms, bars, on the beaches, in a fish house on a wharf, at a summer home or a lavish beachside pool deck. Each year they find new ways to expand the audience’s perception of what makes a theater.

In “Parade,” originally produced by the festival in 2006, for example, rather than recreating a sand dune in a theater, the 2015 production’s stage is the actual beach (behind The Provincetown Inn).

As many plays in the theater do, “Parade” celebrates Williams’ time spent working and living and otherwise learning about life in Provincetown. In the summer of 1940, Williams had a Rockefeller Grant of \$100 a month and came to Provincetown to write. He shared rooms at Captain Jacks Wharf and fell in love with a dancer. “Parade” vibrates with the agony and the poetry of this unrequited love. In this year’s production, Ben Barry reprises his role as the young Williams, which he played a decade ago.

The theater company from South Africa, Abrahamse and Meyer Productions, returns with its production of “The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore,” which sold out the festival in 2013. Award-winning actress Jennifer Steyn once again plays Flora Goforth. This year, the group is performing “Milk Train” in repertory with “The Day on Which a Man Dies,” a fantasia on the death of Jackson Pollock directed by Kaplan.

The Beau Jest Moving Theater in Boston is back again with the original cast of their 2009 production of “The Remarkable Rooming House of Madame Le Monde.” This company is also bringing a new production of “Aimez-Vous Ionesco.”

Augustin J. Correro, co-artistic director of the Tennessee Williams Theater Company of New Orleans, directs “Suddenly Last Summer.” Originally presented as a reading in 2010 by the Columbus Mississippi Tennessee Williams Festival, this year perennial festival favorite actors Brenda Currin and Beth Bartley play the roles of Violet Venerable and Catharine Holly.

A highlight of the 2009 festival was “Petunias,” an adaptation of Williams’ short story “The Case of The Crushed Petunias.” Directed by Falco, it played in a storefront on Commercial Street. This year, Falco brings it back to the same location.

This year there’s also a new adaptation of another Williams short story. “The Liberation of Colette Simple,” directed by Matt Peover is a new music theater cabaret fantasy from Spatfeather Productions in London.

“The Road to Paradise,” a dance piece, is the very first play we did in our very first season,” says Hall-Flavin. Choreographed by Carson Efrid with students from Bennington College, it is based on Williams’ poetry and his diaries about falling in love for the first time in Provincetown.

In 2012 David Kaplan created and directed Allison Fraser in “The Tennessee Williams Songbook.” This highly successful Town Hall concert consists of songs inspired by and featured in Williams’ plays and back it comes for 2015.

This year Kaplan also directs Armando Arrocha in “Canciones De Tennessee,” in a mix of Spanish and English songs from Williams’ plays.

“If Alison’s show is, in essence, a woman waiting for a man who never comes, then Canciones is, in essence, a man who leaves, feels bad about it, but even so, doesn’t return,” says Kaplan.



Beth Barkley in “Suddenly Last Summer.”
 Photo courtesy Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival

When the Banner asks Kaplan if he had any idea when he began 10 years ago that he'd still be here today, he replies, simply, "Yes. From the beginning, I knew the wind was at our backs. That is to say, we would have Williams' words and appreciation of his writing to inevitably move us forward."

Just the facts

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

<http://provincetown.wickedlocal.com/article/20150917/ENTERTAINMENTLIFE/150916851>

Print Page