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## Tennessee Williams' Summer Fling — And More — Takes to the Stage

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Nash Hightower and Ben Berry star in *The Parade* or *Approaching the End of a Summer*.

**by Jeannette de Beauvoir**

As its second theatrical production of the season, the Peregrine Theatre Ensemble is presenting two short plays—albeit with lengthy names—under the title *Blue Dusk: Tennessee Williams One-Acts*.

*And Tell Sad Stories of the Deaths of Queens* and *The Parade or Approaching the End of a Summer* have something in common besides their long titles: both are plays that received little or no attention from the public for decades, and they're also Tennessee Williams' only overtly gay-themed plays.

Jef Hall-Flavin, Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival executive director, wanted Ptown to give the plays the attention they deserve. “The festival approached Peregrine Theatre Ensemble to produce a new version of *The Parade*, with Ben Berry reviving the role he created, as part of its tenth anniversary season this year,” he says. “Peregrine Theatre asked me what short plays might pair well with *The Parade* for a fuller evening. *And Tell Sad Stories* was a natural choice. I think audiences will respond to the universal longing for love in both main characters, as well as the lack of acceptance for those who fall outside sexual or gender norms.”

Written in 1957 but never produced in Williams's lifetime, *And Tell Sad Stories of the Deaths of Queens* (the title is taken—with a slight modification—from a heartbreaking speech in Shakespeare's *Richard II*) is set in the French Quarter of New Orleans. As she approaches her 35th birthday, Candy Delaney, a transvestite and

successful interior decorator, is on the rebound from the breakup of a long relationship. She picks up a sailor at a gay bar and brings him home, lavishing attention and plans for their future on him—a future that will, of course, not happen.

“Williams was always ahead of his time,” says Hall-Flavin, who is also directing the two plays. “It doesn’t surprise me that *Queens* wasn’t produced prior to his death in 1983. Contentious subject matter needs the distance of time to be put into context. I was fortunate to be part of the team working on the world premiere in 2003, and I have great respect for the play, which gave voice to gay and transgender people more than a decade before Stonewall.”

*The Parade Or Approaching the End of a Summer* feels a lot closer to home: the playwright’s only autobiographical work reflects one of his own experiences here in Provincetown. In the summer of 1940, Williams and 22-year-old dancer Kip Kiernan shared a two-story shack on Captain Jack’s Wharf until Kiernan ended the affair and left Williams for a woman. Williams immediately poured his grief into writing, filling notebooks with a draft that was to remain unfinished for years.

Williams’ alter ego in the play is Don, head-over-heels in love with a young dancer named Nick—who in turn is actually in love with his girlfriend, Wanda., and leaves Don just as Kiernan left Williams. Don says, poignantly, that love is like a circus parade that never arrives. “My neck’s getting stiff from straining forward,” he says. “I’m beginning to think the parade isn’t going to stop by. It must have been halted somewhere. The elephants turned hugely, impassively aside at the wrong intersection.”

*Parade* touches all hearts, but perhaps especially anyone who’s had a bright summer dalliance that didn’t end well. Passion, heartbreak, and nostalgia for what might have been are universal feelings, and Williams captures and expresses them brilliantly.

And yet, while he’s clearly reflecting the grief of rejection, it’s noteworthy that Williams isn’t whining: critics are finally moving away from early judgments of the playwright as self-hating. “While there’s a lot of shame in some of the characters, it’s largely caused by the society in which they live,” says Hall-Flavin. “Williams wrote in his letters and diaries that he was ‘past shame,’ which I believe to be true, insofar as the world around him would allow. In order to write these characters—even as early as 1940—he was self-aware enough to understand his characters’ sad predicaments in a world still hostile to its ‘crooked children,’ as he put it.”

While Williams put gay characters on the stage at a time when in America it was almost unthinkable to do so, modern theatergoers have become accustomed to stories that embrace a spectrum of sexuality and gender identification. Is there something that audiences in 2015 can take from these plays? “For better or worse, human nature doesn’t change very quickly, so they’re still very relevant today,” responds Hall-Flavin. “In *The Parade*, Williams really understands the plight of a gay man in love with someone who is uncomfortable

being labeled as gay, while simultaneously understanding the frustration of a sympathetic straight person who just can't truly understand why their friend has to be gay. As for *Queens*, even today, effeminate men are not often portrayed sympathetically, and the play will remain relevant until violence against transsexual people is no longer a problem.”

Hall-Flavin is excited about Peregrine's new production. “It's a joy to come back to *The Parade* after 10 years,” he says. “I was privileged to co-direct the world premiere, and it's like taking a vacation with an old friend, only better. *Queens* is a joy because it is so unlike anything else I've directed by Williams. It's a joy to direct Ben Berry, who is one of the most intelligent, emotionally available and utterly watchable actors I've had the privilege to work with. Other joys include working with Ruby Wolf and Nash Hightower, as well as the talented crop of actors that Peregrine has been able to gather here this summer.”

Both plays feature what Hall-Flavin calls a “multi-layered set of characters that challenge notions of conventionality, queerness, violence against transgender people, and the construct of masculinity” to the stage with both flair and compassion. “In memory,” Williams once wrote, “everything seems to happen to music.” The music of *Blue Dusk* is the music of Williams' own life, and it cannot fail to enchant.

*Peregrine Theatre Ensemble performs Blue Dusk: Tennessee Williams One-Acts Thursdays and Fridays, 7 p.m., at Provincetown Schools, 12 Winslow St., through September 18 (no show August 20). For tickets (\$28) and information visit peregrinetheatre.com. They will also perform The Parade or Approaching the End of a Summer as part of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival, September 24 – 27. Visit twptown.org for information and tickets.*



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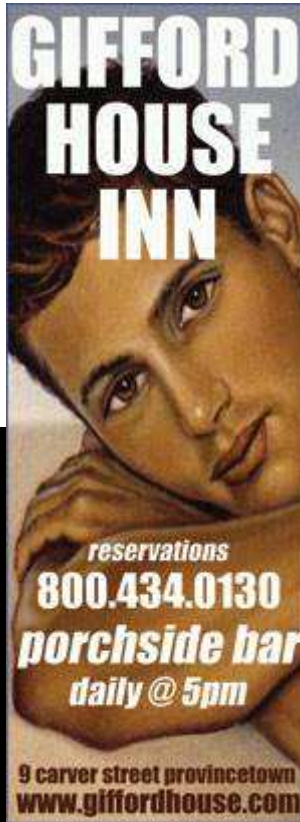


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