

# Canciones

September 23, 2015 11:18 am [0 comments](#) Views: 50



Armando Arrocha

## **Language and Love and the Music of Mexico in the Work of Tennessee Williams**

*by Rebecca M. Alvin*

Tennessee Williams is of course renowned for his rich, lyrical language. In fact, music was an essential element of his work that is reflected in the language. Of course, having written seminal works in New Orleans, perhaps the greatest music city there is, Williams was inspired by the sounds of American music, but he was also deeply moved by the music of Mexico, with its Latin rhythms and the romantic intonations of its singers, even as he was not fluent enough in Spanish to understand their words. The Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival highlighted the music connection with their 2012 theme, Tennessee Williams and Music, and this year, they bring us an original production, *Canciones de Tennessee Williams*, that specifically speaks to Williams' love for Mexican music.

“There’s nothing like schmaltzy Latin music when you’re heartbroken,” says David Kaplan, who is both the curator of the Festival and the director of *Canciones*. He says after Williams left Provincetown, heartbroken from his breakup with dancer Kip Kiernan in 1940, he went to Mexico to lick his wounds. When he arrived, he found a new spiritual and creative home.

“He wrote that he had another self there,” Kaplan explains.

The roots of *Canciones* go back to 2012, when Tony nominee Alison Fraser starred in a music-oriented production in the Festival entitled *The Tennessee Williams Songbook*. While Kaplan was pulling together music for that show, he came across a lot of Spanish-language music referenced in the works of Tennessee Williams over the years. “Always, the Spanish music is the unexpressed world, what the English world is not doing, the unexpressed words that appeal to the emotions,” Kaplan explains.

In a 1943 letter to James Laughlin, Williams himself confirms this: “Latin American poetry is so much softer and yet stronger than ours, they are not afraid of tender feelings and lavish color nor of the cruelty that goes with it, like the bullfights in Mexico where the fighters have an almost feminine or tender grace but destroy the bulls so remorselessly, with such wonderful music and brilliant colors. I think the cold British influence has done us in a little.”

Kaplan and Fraser kicked around the idea of doing something with just these predominantly Mexican songs, ultimately deciding to have Fraser do another one woman show singing them. But just about seven weeks ago Fraser had to pull out because she got a part in a new play at the Public Theater in New York (where she’ll be playing Nancy Reagan!), and the tech rehearsals are during the festival.

“I said, ‘well, it can also work for a man,’” Kaplan recalls, though he admits it was a big change with some logistical juggling. The idea was to combine the words of Williams (in English) with Mexican music to create a narrative musical performance. “If Allison’s show was about a woman waiting for a guy who didn’t come, this is about the guy who went away. He feels bad, but he’s not coming back. And anyone who’s had an Irish boyfriend knows what that kind of blarney is like, where they sing a beautiful song and they feel really bad, but they ain’t coming back. And the song is that much more beautiful because they feel regret but they’re not coming back,” Kaplan laughs.

The resulting piece includes dialogue from Williams plays, including *Camino Real*, *The Purification*, *Talk to Me Like The Rain and Let Me Listen*, and *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, a rarely produced play Williams wrote about a mariachi band leader, the original production of which starred Anthony Quinn for its brief Boston run.

The star of this show is a Mexican actor/singer Armando Arrocha, whose background includes performing in numerous Mexican productions of Broadway hits such as *The Addams Family* and *Mama Mia!* Kaplan says Arrocha is not just a singer, but a true actor, trained in the Strasberg Method, in fact.

In Mexico, Williams has been well known almost as long as he has here. Kaplan says the first production there was *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1948. “Naturally, they were scandalized by the sexuality of it when it opened,” Kaplan explains. “But, of course, the [beauty of the] language won them over.”

*Traversing the space between a universal language (love and heartbreak) and the specific foreignness of a language ultimately fits perfectly with a festival of Williams’ work. To that end, the festival has presented works in other languages—without subtitles or translations of any kind—regularly over the past 10 years, quite purposefully.*

“I like when an English-speaking audience is challenged. It creates a sensitivity to behavior and to the nuances of the story,” Kaplan says. “You know, we forget, some of the most important events in theater history were people watching theater in another language.” He cites key performances of Brecht as an example, and says he thinks Williams was quite aware when he included Spanish in his plays that his audience did not speak that language.

Beyond that, Williams always saw himself as an outsider and so his connection to the music of a foreign land is not much different from how he connected with his own culture’s music. For him, this music was full of life, full of joy, and full of promise, even when the singers sang of heartbreak, because it is in the ability to express oneself through the music—whether performing or listening— that we find respite from the coldness of the real world.

“With Williams, always, the music is the paradise across the street, never in the room. It’s the girl who limps who hears the dance hall with people dancing across the street... It’s the promise in an ironic counterpoint to what we’re seeing. That’s an essential part of him.”

*The Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival takes place September 24 – 27 at various venues in town. Canciones de Tennessee Williams will be performed at the Paramount at the Crown & Anchor, 247 Commercial St. on Friday, Sept. 25, 9 p.m.; Saturday, Sept. 26, 3:30 p.m. and 9:30 p.m.; and Sunday, Sept. 27, 5:30 p.m. For tickets (\$34.50), festival passes, and additional information, go to the box office at the Crown & Anchor, call 866.789.TENN, ext. 1, or visit [twptown.org](http://twptown.org).*