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Ringling the Southern Belle

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Cherry Jones in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*

Cherry Jones on Tennessee Williams

by Steve Desroches

Since the very beginning, the echo of Tennessee Williams' work has reverberated throughout Cherry Jones' career. While a student at Henry County High School in her hometown of Paris, Tennessee, Jones chose a portion of the Williams' short play *This Property Is Condemned* for a speech competition. She loved the piece so much she used it as her audition for the prestigious Carnegie Mellon School of Drama, from which she graduated in 1978. Ever since, whenever Jones takes on a Williams role, it's left a thunderbolt impression in the American theater community.

Considered one of the greatest stage actors of our time, Jones will be the guest of honor at the Tennessee Williams Annual Dinner, a gala fundraiser for the September festival that keeps alive the playwright's legacy in Provincetown. In addition to the announcement of this year's festival lineup, Jones will discuss her career, especially in regards to her performances in such plays as *The Glass Menagerie* and *Night of the Iguana*. Jones has joined a distinguished list of actresses in portraying some of the most dynamic women characters written for the stage.

"I know those women," says Jones. "I revered those women."

While in high school Jones connected with Williams' work, but later she needed to come back to his work

from several different angles to find that same spark of imagination and creativity that was a sacred relationship between the actor and the playwright's work. Sometimes there was a distance between her and the characters, other times it was between her and Williams' writing, says Jones. She admits she still is not great at reading plays. She much prefers to read them aloud with others, in order to grasp all that is within the words. In the case of Williams, it took a better understanding of his mother, Edwina. Born in Ohio, she became a bit of a cultural carpetbagger when she moved to Mississippi, adopting the ways of the upper class South and putting on airs.

"She became a professional Mississippian," laughs Jones. "I guess her accent was thicker than anyone in Mississippi!"

So for Williams, growing up in a home where one worked hard at being Southern, the ways of the South and its people sometimes became a bit exaggerated in his plays—perhaps for effect, or maybe out of sincerity of experience.

"I always said that Tennessee Williams' beautiful writing was like a floral arrangement with too much baby's breath," says Jones. "But then you learn to appreciate the baby's breath."

For an actress of Jones' stature it begs the question as to why she never played Blanche DuBois. Jessica Tandy, Cate Blanchett, Jessica Lange, Rachel Weisz, Natasha Richardson, Rosemary Harris: all greats of the stage and they all played Blanche DuBois to critical acclaim. Jones was offered the role of Blanche in a production, but she turned it down.

"For years I never really got Blanche," says Jones. "I've always said being a lesbian I can play a heterosexual woman, I can play a heterosexual man. I can play a gay woman; I can play a gay man. It was hard for me to imagine playing a heterosexual woman written by a gay man."

She almost turned down the role of Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*, too. But at the insistence of producers who said she was perfect for the role and after a read through, the character struck a chord. And so Jones added her name to the great women of the stage who have also played the role: Tandy and Lange, as well as Maureen Stapleton, Julie Harris, Judith Ivey, Harriet Harris, and Anne Pitoniak.

"To a nearly past middle aged woman, it is sort of our Hamlet," says Jones.

Critics raved about Jones in the role, stating it was a landmark performance. And it earned her a fifth Tony Award nomination (she won two of them, for her roles in *The Heiress* and *Doubt*). The nervous energy of Amanda made creating and portraying her a thrill, says Jones. But as Jones really delved into the caverns of Amanda's mind she found a hard-working, devoted woman, an aspect she thinks many people miss if they

only pay attention to Amanda’s anxiety. Amanda is a survivor. And playing her each night was a burst of adrenaline for Jones.

“If someone said to me we need to do four performances tomorrow I would have said ‘Yup!,” says Jones. “It made me so high. Her energy made me high.”

Jones is excited to visit Provincetown, a place that has been a home to not only Williams, but to many other writers whose works Jones has portrayed: Paula Vogel, Eugene O’Neill, Tony Kushner (and Sebastian Junger, as Jones was in the film *The Perfect Storm*.) She hasn’t been back to Provincetown since the 1970s and is eager to see Williams’ old haunts and how the town may have changed since her last visit.

“It was wild,” says Jones of Provincetown in the 1970s. “I just remember behind every bush there was funny action going on.”

The Tennessee Williams Annual Dinner with special guest Cherry Jones is on Saturday, May 30 at Provincetown Town Hall, 260 Commercial St. Cocktail hour begins at 6:30 p.m., with dinner, auction, and the gala at 7:30 p.m. Tickets for the fundraiser are \$75 for cocktail hour only, \$150 for dinner, \$1,000 for a table of eight, and \$1,250 for the head table. For tickets and information visit twptown.org.

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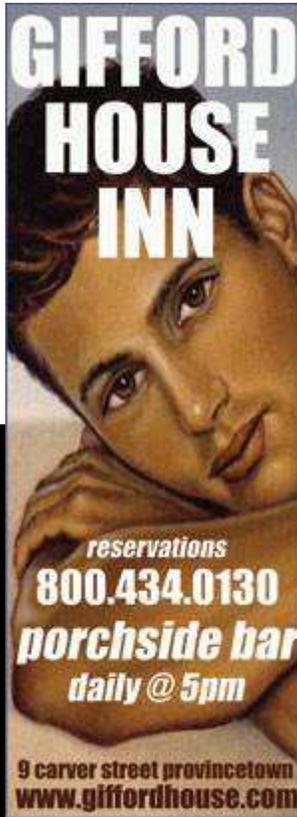


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