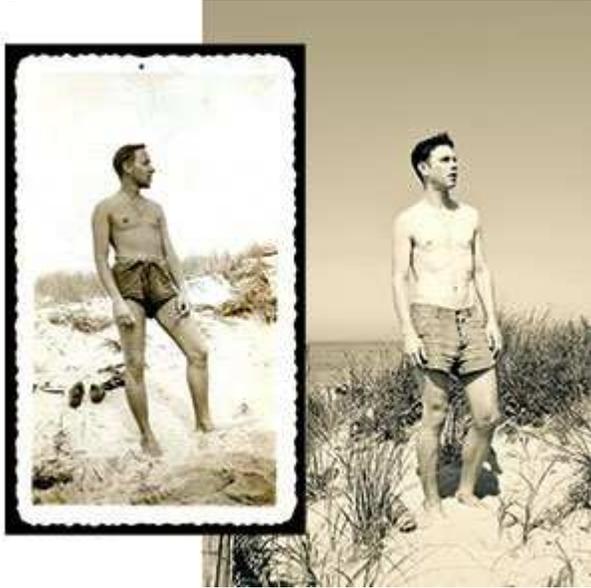


## [The Parade Comes Full Circle](#)

September 23, 2015 11:25 am [0 comments](#) Views: 82



(left)Tennessee Williams in Provincetown, 1944. (Right) Ben Berry in *The Parade*. (Photo by Eileen Counihan)

*by Steve Desroches*

In 2006, at the inaugural Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, the short play *The Parade, or Approaching the End of a Summer* had its world premiere. Written in Provincetown in 1940, the first of his four summers in town, it features a 29-year-old gay writer in love with a straight dancer, accompanied by all the pain and heartbreak of an unrequited love story. The short play is largely autobiographical as the first summer when Williams was living at Captain Jack's Wharf, he fell hard for Kip Kiernan, a modern dancer from Canada in Provincetown dodging the draft back home. Lyrical in its words and revolutionary for its matter-of-fact approach to homosexuality the play literally could not be performed in New York City due to a state law that forbade productions dealing with such topics. Once repealed in 1967, social pressures and prejudices prevented it from ever going to the stage. It wasn't until 2006 that it was publicly performed at all.

“We have done about one-fifth of all Tennessee Williams world premieres, since his death, here in Provincetown,” says festival executive director Jef Hall-Flavin. “More than that, we’ve focused on his late work and his experimental works, which we found that the critics were wrong about. Those plays do work and they are worth doing.”

A production of *The Parade, or Approaching the End of a Summer* is on the bill for this year's festival, a retrospective of the past decade of bringing productions from all over the world to Provincetown to celebrate the American playwright's lasting legacy. And while Williams' work and reputation as a world-class playwright was already well on its way to becoming a globally accepted belief, the Provincetown Tennessee Williams festival, in its 10 years, has become a major force in that large conversation about the man and his work.

While there are other Williams festivals in America – one in Clarksdale and one in Columbus, Mississippi, one in New Orleans, and a new one premiering this year in St. Louis – what distinguishes Provincetown's is its focus on performance. Where other festivals can be academic in nature or focus more on the historical aspects of Williams' life and work, the festival in Provincetown has sought to complement the already existing events around the country by staging as many productions as possible, bringing in theatrical groups from as far away as New Zealand, Norway, and South Africa, as well as creating productions right here in Provincetown and in turn traveling with them to other festivals and theaters throughout the country.

“A novelist is discovered by reading,” says Hall-Flavin sitting on the patio of his home in the West End, which doubles as festival headquarters for the time being. “A playwright's work has to be experienced on the stage. Reading *The Parade* for instance, it doesn't work. But when you see it, it's a whole other experience and you see the beauty of it. The only way to examine his work is to do it, and in the relative safety of a festival atmosphere. It's delighted our audiences. We're not the only ones taking chances with Tennessee Williams' work, but over the past 10 years we've most certainly been on the forefront.”

Since his death at the age of 71 in 1983, Williams is regarded as one of the finest American playwrights, and is increasingly regarded as a theatrical writer who appeals to tastes and cultures around the world. Hall-Flavin notes that Shakespeare didn't really gain a more global reputation for his work until 100 years after his death. Williams is on the same trajectory, especially since the 2011 production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* at the Comédie Française in Paris, making him the first American playwright ever to have a work produced at the theater. The move was largely regarded as Europe's acknowledgement of Williams' work on par with that of his European counterparts. But beyond that, his work has also been incredibly popular in the most prestigious theaters throughout Asia and South America and has even penetrated the deeply homophobic culture of Russia, which hosts frequent productions.

On a more local level, the Tennessee Williams Festival has undoubtedly been a positive force for the cultural life of Provincetown. In the first year of the festival a few hundred tickets were sold. Last year it was 5,000. Coming annually the last week of September, the festival has become an anchor event of the autumn shoulder season. But in addition, it frequently gives Provincetown actors opportunities, like *The Parade*, which featured Ben Berry in the premiere production and will again this year as he comes off a September run of the play done by the Peregrine Theatre Ensemble, a Provincetown-based theatrical group. Through Williams' work Provincetown not only gets to learn of its artistic history, but gets a glimpse into the possibilities for its future as an important and relevant home to theater.

“We’re very influenced by the town,” says Hall-Flavin. “What we do could not happen anywhere else.”

*The Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival runs Thursday, September 24 through Sunday, September 27. For tickets, passes and information go to the box office at the Crown and Anchor, 247 Commercial St., Provincetown, call 866.789.TENN(8366), Ext. 1, or visit [twptown.org](http://twptown.org).*