



Ben Berry and Ruby Wolf in "The Parade."



Jennifer Steyn in "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore."

Strong performances highlight 10th anniversary Williams theater fest

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The "Year Tenn" anniversary of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, which ended Sunday, offered a record number of festival-goers a marathon four-day immersion in works either written or inspired by the great American playwright.

Through song, dance and drama, the festival also afforded attendees the exhilarating experience of watching talented performers from around the globe bring the writer's words brilliantly to life — often in plays that have been ignored, dismissed and even maligned. This is particularly true of Williams' later plays, dating from the 1960s on, when the author entered his self-described "Stoned Age."

Just as many of Shakespeare's problematic plays like "Pericles" can be brought to life with an imaginative production and fine acting, Williams' neglected plays, in the right artistic hands, defy the critics, as we saw this past week on so many Provincetown stages. And it wasn't just the many memorable performances in major roles that highlighted the festival. Equally joyful moments came from performers in supporting roles.

I'm thinking of Ruby Wolf's winning performance as Miriam in "Parade," the play that put Provincetown's Williams fest on the map and was revived for this 10th anniversary in a beautiful outdoor setting by the tidal flats behind the Provincetown Inn. Wolf understatedly and deftly portrayed her character's honesty, practicality and sense of



Armando Arrocha (singing) and Mario A. Cabuto in "Canciones de Tennessee Williams." PHOTOS JOSH ANDRUS

humor while serving as a foil to the lyrical flights of fancy, and often self-pity, of the Williams stand-in character, Don.

Equally impressive were the supporting male roles in "Suddenly Last Summer." With his booming voice, Drew Stark, playing Dr. Cukrowicz, easily overcame the problematic acoustics of the Provincetown High School auditorium. Shane Tubbs delivered an appropriately unctuous performance as George Holly, the materialistic brother of the heroine. And in a wholly different style of performance, pianist Mario A. Cabuto's artistry didn't so much accompany the gorgeous voice of Armando Arrocha as sing with him in "Canciones," a festival highlight that also featured the handsome lighting of local designer Tristan Divincenzo.

Matching Arrocha's performance was the gorgeous soprano of Nathalie Carrington in the chamber musical production of "The Liberation of Collette Simple." This production was based on Williams' "The Case of the Crushed Petunias," which had its world premiere in Provincetown's 2009 festival, directed by Patrick Falco of Truro. Carrington effortlessly sailed full-throttle over the performing space of the Crown and Anchor. And the image of her being inundated with a seemingly endless torrent of crushed petunias proved one of the comic highlights of the evening.

Many festival attendees were anticipating the performances of the iconic Williams heroines and they were not disappointed. As the tormented Catharine Holly in "Suddenly Last Summer,"

Beth Bartley gave a performance of intensity and commitment, proving that Elizabeth Taylor's histrionic Catharine in the movie version can be given a different and equally valid interpretation, particularly in her infamous 20-minute monologue that ends the play.

I wondered at first where the actress was taking us with her portrayal, but Bartley slowly dealt out her emotions to wonderful effect. When she comes to the shocking speech revealing that her cousin Sebastian was "famished for blondes," the fleeting looks on her face betray horror, revulsion and even disbelieving humor. It's a wonderful moment that clues the audience in to the trauma and shock and, in modern psychiatric terms, post-traumatic stress that her character has

experienced, paving the way for revelations that leave her in a sobbing, cathartic heap by the end of the play.

And then there is Jennifer Steyn. To say that her performance in "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore" was iconic doesn't do this incandescent performer justice. Her Flora Goforth — a role that has defied actresses of the stature of Hermione Baddeley, Tallulah Bankhead and more recently Olympia Dukakis — was of such transcendent magnificence that it demands a complete re-evaluation of a play that was formerly scorned, marking Williams' final descent into drugs and derision. Theatergoers fortunate enough to have seen this performance may never see another such interpretation — yet another reason why Provincetown's festival does the American bard proud.