

From Robert Israel Blog:

Review: “Suddenly Last Summer” at Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival

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Suddenly Last Summer, by Tennessee Williams. Directed by Augustin J. Correro. Presented by the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, High School Auditorium, Provincetown, MA, September 24-27, 2015.

By Robert Israel

“A play may be violent, full of motion: yet it has that special kind of repose which allows contemplation and produces the climate in which tragic importance is a possible thing,” wrote Tennessee Williams in 1951. These words became the motivating force, seven years later, for the playwright’s one-act play, *Suddenly Last Summer*.

A stirring production of *Suddenly Last Summer*, directed by Augustin J. Correro, was brought to Provincetown by way of Mississippi. It introduced us to characters struggling to find the importance Williams referred to, discovered out of the tragedies of their lives, despite living in a malevolent world where all species – human and animal – prey on one another.

This decidedly cannibalistic view was formed after Williams, according to biographical sources, quit psychotherapy with psychiatrist Dr. Lawrence Kubie who had urged him to stop writing, abandon his homosexually promiscuous ways, and become heterosexual. He dismissed the doctor’s recommendations. He went on to write many more plays and pursued, until his death in 1983, an openly gay lifestyle.

In the play we meet Mrs. Venable (Brenda Currin), a matriarch of a Southern family, who wields a silver cane, thrashing anyone who gets too close, or dares to interrupt her ritualistic 5 o’clock imbibing of a frozen daiquiri. She is holding forth in a home with a primordial garden with unwieldy plants that underscore the cannibalistic theme. With complete candor, she tells psychiatrist/surgeon Dr. Cukrowicz (Drew Stark) that she has called upon him to perform a lobotomy on her niece Catherine Holly (Beth Bartley). He sees through her motives, since there is no medical reason to perform this radical surgery. Yet Mrs. Venable is shameless: she simply cannot abide by what her niece has witnessed, namely the ghastly murder of her only son, the late poet Sebastian, by a cannibalistic horde of crazed youngsters on a beach while Catherine and Sebastian were vacationing in Mexico. She wants her niece’s memory wiped clean. She has the cash and will gladly pay it out in order to make it happen.

In several versions I have seen of this play, including the 1959 film starring Elizabeth Taylor and Katherine Hepburn, actresses playing the role of Catherine Holly emphasized her fragility,

revealing her as a woman more prone to be violated and, consequently, more easily sacrificed. But in this production, actress Beth Bartley showed us another aspect of Catherine's character, her bruises, certainly, but also her steel resolve to tell the truth. It was a hauntingly powerful performance, matched in its intensity by Brenda Currin's Mrs. Venable.

There were many other inspired flourishes to the production, and kudos go out to Mary Wildsmith for her marvelous lighting design that enhanced the poetry of Williams's script. This was particularly noticeable in one scene when Catherine describes how her restless and voracious cousin Sebastian implored her to see the Northern Lights in his quest to find lighter skinned prey, after gorging himself on "the dark ones" in the southern climes they had visited. Wildsmith let the wall behind Catherine glow with the green and red lights of the Aurora Borealis, and, just for a moment, we were all transported to another place.

Endnote: This year marked the tenth anniversary of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival. I was a witness to their derring-do from the onset, invited to review the shows from their first season a decade ago. I have returned every season thereafter, reviewing plays and writing feature pieces about the writers and performers they bring in each year. I have seen these performers present works in courtyards, barrooms, art galleries, on the wharves and in gay dance clubs. While I may have had initial doubts about the Festival's longevity, the staff and the hordes of volunteers that return each year never shared my doubts. **Success, it seems, is the only word in their vocabulary.**

A lengthy exegesis could be written about their history and accomplishments over this past decade, but that's not my intention here. **They have etched out a place of permanence. We are the beneficiaries. We have a festival that flourishes in a town that once nurtured the talents of Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams.** We should applaud and support their efforts going forward.



Brenda Currin as Violet Venable in "Suddenly Last Summer."