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Driscoll: Unusual tributes planned for festival

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Reimagining playwrights Eugene O'Neill's and Tennessee Williams' work with music, dance, settings in South Africa and a Provincetown bar, Russian dolls, puppets and saloon songfests are among the unusual tribute plans for September's 11th annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival.

The festival program, announced last weekend at an annual gala, offers new approaches to both writers' work, linking them through their Provincetown roots as 2016 marks the 100th anniversary of O'Neill's time in the town. O'Neill wrote ground-breaking plays in Provincetown that launched modern American drama, and the way he and Williams both broke through conventions of their time inspired the festival's choices of unusual productions of their work, officials say.

Board president Patrick Falco says he hopes these choices help audiences "discover the O'Neill and Williams they don't know. We'll present some of their most experimental, countercultural plays performed by contemporary theater artists who are themselves breaking conventions."

Both writers, while winning Pulitzer Prizes and scoring Broadway hits, "went beyond success to experiment with burlesque and cartooning, sentimental songs, Asian ideas of theater, and attacks on money-grubbing aspects of American culture," festival curator David Kaplan notes in a press release. "Their unconventional work seems to be speaking to us today, especially in this election year."

The season, running Sept. 22-25, was announced as part of a fundraiser dinner at Provincetown Town Hall at which actor Brian Dennehy, a premiere interpreter of O'Neill, was special guest. He was interviewed after dinner by O'Neill scholar/biographer Robert M. Dowling and Dennehy

also read a key scene as the James Tyrone character from “Long Day’s Journey Into Night” that won him a Tony Award.

The plays were announced with short films. Highlights of the upcoming lineup:

O’Neill plays: a production of “Desire Under the Elms” by Abrahamse and Meyer Productions that moves the story of a stepson’s passion for his stepmother from New England to Cape Town, with a Boer farmer and a black bride; an athletic production of “The Hairy Ape,” about a coal worker on an ocean liner from Philadelphia, which will be performed at a wharf theater; a burlesque retelling of “Marco Millions,” which casts the 14th-century adventurer Marco Polo as a 1920s “multimillionaire running for office and trying to take over China,” according to Kaplan, with 80 characters played by five actors/musicians from a Vermont company; and a Russian production of “Tango Christie,” based on “Anna Christie,” which tells the story of a woman as daughter, lover and prostitute through dance, song, Russian dolls and dialogue. There will also be an outdoor beach showing of “Anna Christie,” a 1923 silent film that was the first movie adaptation of an O’Neill play.

Williams plays: “Small Craft Warnings,” about misfits huddling in a bar at the edge of the world, which will be performed at the Boatslip beach bar; and “Kirche Kuche Kinder (An Outrage for the Stage),” a Texas company’s production of a dark, song-filled comedy about an Irish hustler married a Lutheran preacher’s daughter and plans for their children’s future, performed for the first time since its 1979 debut,

There’s also a double bill about “good-time girls”: Williams’ “A Perfect Analysis Given by a Parrot” and a scene from O’Neill’s “Welded,” all performed with puppets.

There will be two productions that move between Provincetown bars: “Saloon Songs,” for which festival artists will sing songs referenced by O’Neill and Williams in stage credits with live accompaniment; and “Stage Moms,” actresses portraying the playwrights’ mothers finally meeting. On the educational end, the Tennessee Williams Institute will again offer seminars and workshops for graduate and undergraduate college students, and there will be a new half-day immersion experience for high-schoolers to interact with productions and artists.

More information on the festival: www.twoptown.org.