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Beyond Success: O'Neill and Williams at the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival, Part 2

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Ride Hamilton

Lee Minora and Chris Anthony in *The Hairy Ape*.

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NB: This is the second part of my day by day account of the [Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival](#). To see my preview piece, an interview with three female directors of Eugene O'Neill pieces, click [here](#); to see my account of the first day of the festival, click [here](#).

My second full day of festival attendance involved three shows, two from Tennessee Williams, and one from Eugene O'Neill. I was particularly excited for these three shows, and especially with the opportunity to see Williams's *Small Craft Warnings* and *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* right next to each other. These two plays both take place in bars with at least one unhappy couple. These superficial similarities quickly give way to two sides of the same coin, in my opinion, with *Small Craft Warnings* leaning more towards comedy, while *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* is a bit more somber. The third of the day's offerings, *The Hairy Ape*, was also an anticipated event that day, as it's a play so often discussed, but still relatively rarely staged.



Ride Hamilton

Sarah MacDonnell, Gail Phaneuf, and Joe Macdougall in *Small Craft Warnings*.

Small Craft Warnings:

Though this play is set in California, seeing it performed on a beachside bar in Provincetown, The Boatslip Beach Club, was a truly special experience. Director Patrick Falco's production was laugh out loud funny and absolutely entertaining. The Melissa McCarthy-like timing and

presence Gail Phaneuf brought to the role of Leona and the perfectly layered portrayal of desperate yet sensitive Violet by Sarah Macdonell stole the show.

Violet is a hustler in more ways than one, one who drinks and performs sexual favors as she goes through life in a stupor. She is our entry into the world of Monk's bar, which introduces us to Leona's no-good boyfriend Bill, played by Joe Macdougall, who is apparently about to be kicked out of Leona's trailer, and then by Violet's apparent boyfriend Steve, played with great timing by Ian Leahy. There is also a drunken doctor, Doc, played by Bill Salem, whose decision to go out and perform medicine while under the influence (and technically, we later learn, without a license) provides this play with its own dose of melancholy. Though Salem, along with Macdougall, were somewhat uneven in their performances, this did not detract from the overall success of a world that had been so well established by Phaneuf and MacDonnell.

This success comes from handling the fact that the characters are drunk and also, in so many ways, complete messes, while still allowing us to empathize with them. MacDonnell's Violet was the kind of character who you can make you either laugh at her or cry with her, which is something so often called for in these Williams plays and so rarely delivered in productions. This production started to get at this balance in the rest of the play, where the laughter and pleasure at the drunken antics of the patrons doesn't detract from the darker elements lurking just below. Though this layering did not find itself through the thought asides that Williams has provided, had it done so this would have been an even stronger production. Still, this was a fantastic start to the day, and Phaneuf and MacDonnell both gave stand-out performances.



Ride Hamilton

Regina Bartkoff, Brandon Lim, and Charles Schick in *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*.

In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel:

Another play set in a bar, *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* is a notable Williams work, if for no other reason than the fact that its printed text is a stark contrast to the rest of his plays. The play is full of fragmented sentences that end in a period rather than ellipses, indicating the characters to do trail off, but instead are purposeful in their incomplete utterances. Director Everett Quinton's production with 292 Theatre was a fantastic choice for a piece with such unusual rhythms and undercurrents. Quinton is, of course, a beloved New York performer and camp icon, and who brought this sensibility to Williams's odd Tokyo bar.

This left me wondering how the play would look if Regina Bartkoff's stilted performance as Miriam had been replaced by a male performer in drag, perhaps even Quinton himself. The initial scene with Miriam and Brandon Lim's Bartender showed great promise with its formal and stylized aesthetic mixed with the salacious desires of Miriam. Lim was particularly adept at

embracing both the aesthetic and linguistic style, and his performance was the highlight of the piece for me. Unfortunately, Bartkoff lacked the ability to exist on both tragic and comedic levels, unlike the leading women in *Small Craft Warnings*.

In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel, as I said above, seems to lead with tragedy broken up by comedy, as opposed to *Small Craft Warnings*, which does the opposite. In playing the surface camp of the play, it's brooding, dark tones did not strike a chord. Charles Schick's Mark, Miriam's star painter husband, did slightly better at finding the humanity in this man and this relationship, but this resulted in the appearance that all three characters (Miriam, Mark, and the Bartender) are acting in different plays. I wish these elements had been either more purposefully united or driven apart, as I actually believe either might have achieved a deeper understanding of this play. I was thrilled to see this play done, but this production was not as fully realized as I would have liked.



Ride Hamilton

Jonathan Aviles, Lee Minora, Chris Anthony, Karina Balfour, and Walter DeShields in *The Hairy Ape*.

The Hairy Ape:

Eugene O'Neill's 1920 semi-expressionist work *The Hairy Ape* is truly unusual play. Though undoubtedly a work of expressionism, *The Hairy Ape*'s sprawling monologues and complicated politics immediately distinguish it as a very American version of the works being done in Germany around the same time, with a distinct influence from naturalism. Egopo Classic Theater's production, brilliantly directed by Brenna Geffers, was a revelation. This was my other favorite production of the festival, and it set a very high bar for any future productions of this play I will ever see.

O'Neill's play is about belonging. Yank, strongly played by Chris Anthony, who not only looks the part, but can truly pull off Yank's peculiar combination of bravado and insecurity, is content to shovel coal on a ship. Then he meets Mildred, deftly played by Lee Minora, a wealthy lady whose quest to visit the lives of the poor men working in the underbelly of the ship brings her face to face with a beast she is not familiar with: the hairy ape. Geffers's direction leads a fantastically talented ensemble (Walter DeShields, Colleen Corcoran, Andrew Carroll, Karina Balfour, Shamus McCarty, Jonathan Aviles, and Mary Lee Bednarek) through the creation of this expressionist world where bodies and machines merge and collide on stage.

The general choreography of the world of the ship is notable, but it is the elements Geffers adds to the piece that reveal her deep understanding of the text. When Yank and Mildred lock eyes, Geffers has added a series of brief tableaux in which Anthony and Minora act out their characters' various understandings of their relationship. This dance is metaphorically continued as Minora's Mildred haunts Anthony's Yank through the end of the play, where it is her embrace that stands in for the zoo ape's hug that kills Yank at last. To paraphrase Stanley from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, they had this date with each other from the beginning.

Egopo's wholehearted embrace of the expressionist elements of the piece, while still allowing the often naturalistic elements of O'Neill's lengthy text to come through, was inspiring to see. This is another production that should be making its way to New York and beyond so that others can see how exciting this play can be. I will also be keeping an eye on this company, as I would really like to see more from them in the future.