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Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill Side by Side, Under the Sun

By [CHARLES ISHERWOOD](#) SEPT. 28, 2016



Rachel Hirshorn in “Kirche Küche Kinder (An Outrage for the Stage),” performed in the back of a T-shirt shop, at the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival. Credit Jeffrey Moore

PROVINCETOWN, Mass. — Loneliness, the condition into which we are born, and from which we spend much of our lives trying to escape — whether through love and sex, or alcohol or

drugs or even, yes, art — is a theme that resounds throughout the works of Eugene O’Neill and [Tennessee Williams](#), two of America’s greatest playwrights, if not the two greatest.

This year’s [Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival](#), an annual event now in its 11th season, brought together select works from both playwrights, each of whom, as it happened, spent much time here, writing some of their best plays.

In fact it is often said that American theater came to maturity in this once-bohemian, now much-gentrified town at the tip of Cape Cod. It was here a century ago that the [Provincetown Players](#), a small amateur group, presented O’Neill’s first produced play, “Bound East for Cardiff,” in a makeshift theater on a wharf. A career was born, and the American theater awoke from an aesthetic slumber almost overnight.

Photo



Chris Anthony, center, in “The Hairy Ape.” Credit Jeffrey Moore

But, as the festival’s curator, David Kaplan, underscored in titling this year’s edition “Beyond Success,” O’Neill and Williams shared more than an affection for Provincetown and certain themes. They also tasted both great fame and abject failure during their long careers. Williams perhaps most famously spent his late years in the artistic wilderness after his long run of Broadway hits in the 1940s and 1950s, striking out in new directions that left critics and

audiences baffled. It was in part to regenerate interest in this later work that Mr. Kaplan founded the festival, which has presented 10 Williams world premieres.

This year the festival presented none, but once again it focused on Williams's lesser-known work. The companies presenting were unfamiliar to me, as were the actors, except for Brian Dennehy, whose deep experience playing O'Neill made for a terrific master class.

The most revelatory production was Williams's "Small Craft Warnings," which Jef Hall-Flavin, the festival's director, suggested in an introductory talk was an unacknowledged masterpiece. I'm not sure I'd go quite that far, but certainly this production, directed by Patrick Falco, made a powerful argument for its status as one of Williams's best late plays.

Among the charms of this festival is its tradition of staging plays in unusual, intimate settings. For "Small Craft Warnings," the Boatslip Beach Club, set on the water, was a suitable stand-in for the play's setting, a seedy bar somewhere on the Southern California coast. It is here that the characters — drifters and grifters who spend their nights huddled over their drinks, and their days trying to forget their nights — assemble to find some solace for the waste of their lives.

Photo



Sarah MacDonnell in "Small Craft Warnings. Credit Jeffrey Moore

The play, [first staged](#) in 1972, is not exactly a comedy, but its frequent bursts of bitter humor almost convince you it is, particularly in Mr. Falco's excellent production, powered by a supremely funny Gail Phaneuf in the role of Leona, the unofficial matriarch of the squabbling, makeshift family whose spiritual home is the bar. Barreling around the stage, her eyes ablaze with indignation or melting in sympathy, Ms. Phaneuf turned the character into a whirlwind of comic energy tinged with pathos: a bit Blanche DuBois, a dash of the blowzy Maxine from "The Night of the Iguana," but with the braying mouth of [Phyllis Diller](#).

Leona arrives in a rage, her younger lover, the hustler Bill (an aptly sexy-seedy Joe Macdougall) having darted out of the trailer they'd been sharing for a couple of months. She arrives to find him in the company of the teary Violet (the movingly desperate Sarah MacDonell), a woman who assuages the emptiness of her existence through booze and sex. But then all the characters in this dark play — similar in spirit and setting to O'Neill's own "The Iceman Cometh" — are in flight from the ugly truths of their lives.

Virtually all the characters — who include Doc (Bill Salem), a physician who has had his license revoked; Monk (Fred Biddle), the bar's sympathetic owner; Violet's on-again, off-again lover Steve (a nicely bruised Ian Leahy); and a pair of gay men who receive a cool reception from Monk (Stuard M. Derrick as the jaded Quentin and Austin Jennings Boykin as his much younger pickup) — directly address the audience at one point or another. They pick at their wounds, plead for understanding, or just tell their sorry tales. And in the intimacy of the bar, their slurred stories of regret are squirm-inducing, like a drink suddenly dumped into your lap along with all those unwanted confidences.

The other Williams plays on the menu were less rewarding, if certainly in some cases bracingly, even entrancingly bizarre. "Kirche Küche Kinder (An Outrage for the Stage)" staged in the back of a T-shirt shop (!), was that rare and puzzling thing: a superb production of an irredeemably awful play.



Marcel Meyer and Mbali Bloom in “Desire Under the Elms.” Credit Jeffrey Moore

Not seen since 1979 — you soon glean why — the play comes from Williams’s most baroque period, when he was experimenting, shakily, with absurdism and surrealism. Despite the excellence of the acting and the director Robertson Dean’s sharp production, this grim little tale of a former hustler initiating his children into the rites of the trade was stupefyingly bizarre. At times entertaining in its extremes, it’s still fundamentally nonsensical.

And while it has its admirers, the other full-length Williams play presented this year, “In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel,” staged by Everett Quinton in the Velvet Lounge, left me completely cold. The tale of Mark, a painter in crisis, searching for new forms (an overwrought Charles Schick), and his wife, Miriam (an overly arch Regina Bartkoff), grinds along as a portrait of a couple in

separate stages of existential crises, mostly talking past each other when she is not flirting with the bewildered bartender (a rather funny Brandon Lim).

Overall it was O'Neill who got the upper hand this year, in the sense that the festival presented two terrific productions of significant works.

Not among them: the Russian-language version of "Anna Christie," called "Tango Christie" and adapted, with generous doses of dance, by Alla Korovkina. It was staged in a warehouselike space on a wharf, with the back wall occasionally sliding open to offer a vista of the ocean. There were times when I was tempted to sprint for the door and throw myself into "dat ole devil sea," to borrow the play's famous phrase.

Photo



Brian Dennehy gives a master class at the festival. Credit Jeffrey Moore

That same space was used to much better effect for the Philadelphia-based EgoPo Classic Theater's production of "The Hairy Ape." Employing a movement-theater approach, the director [Brenna Geffers](#) stripped the play to its bare essentials: a brutal allegory of the dehumanization of the industrial age as personified by Yank (Chris Anthony), who works in the stokehold of a cruise ship and must confront his alienation from a society of false, meretricious values. Mr. Anthony's ferociously committed performance (paging Hollywood) was among the festival's finest.

Also superb were all three principals in the stripped-down, inventive version of "Desire Under the Elms," directed by Fred Abrahamse. Relocated to a farm in South Africa in the 1890s, Mr.

Abrahamse's adaptation focused less on the faintly melodramatic love-triangle plot to recast the play as a fierce fight for possession of the land.

Robin Smith bristled with menace as the wily Ephraim Cabot, who brings home a new wife, Abbie (Mbali Bloom), who soon becomes pregnant by Ephraim's son, Eben (Marcel Meyer), with tragic consequences. Both Ms. Bloom and Mr. Meyer were entrancing in their dangerous dance of seduction, with Ms. Bloom's race — she's supposed to be from the [Xhosa](#) tribe — adding a grim new layer of meaning.

Coming from a people dispossessed of much of their land through a century of wars with European settlers, Abbie's dependence on her brute of a husband, and her willingness to sacrifice her child in order (she thinks) to keep the love of Eben, resounds with anguished new feeling.

Emerging from the darkness of O'Neill's tragedy into the crisp sun of a fine Cape Cod day was disorienting, but in the best possible way.

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