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Installation shot from the exhibition at Berta Walker Gallery, 2015 ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF BERTA WALKER GALLERY

David Kaplan

SECRET GLIMPSES, LURKING IN THE LIGHT OF SHADOWS

By Christopher Busa

THE TALENTED DAVID KAPLAN, cofounder and curator of the now ten-year-old Tennessee Williams Theater Festival in Provincetown, this year has ventured into Conceptual installation art as an examination of the interstices in the actor's art available during the quiet moments between appearances on the stage, when the actor may contemplate an individual and personal relationship with the assumed mask of her or his character. For three weeks, beginning ten days before the 2015 festival last fall, Kaplan and the photographer Ride Hamilton collaborated in creating an installation at Provincetown's Berta Walker Gallery, with photographs and scenery focused on the backstory of *The Hotel Plays*, directed by Kaplan and produced by the Tennessee Williams Theater Festival in New Orleans. These larger-than-life scenes depict in-between moments from the Hotel Plays of Tennessee Williams, four plays that expose the hush-hush whisperings that peel paint off the walls in the hallways and stairwells of transient boardinghouses.

All of the images in the exhibition shine with a noir sepia tint, the twilight that the French call "the hour of the wolf," a strange transition between daylight color and the black and white of the night. Hamilton has served as the official photographer for the Tennessee Williams Theater Festival in New Orleans, beginning a decade ago, immediately after Hurricane Katrina. "I like secrets," Hamilton said. "Secrets are like a doctor peering into a patient's body." He chooses to use a .95 aperture vintage lens—the same aperture Stanley Kubrick used in his film *Barry Lyndon*, and NASA uses in space—explaining, "It can see more than the human eye. In the dark, it becomes an X-ray."

What is extraordinary about Ride Hamilton's photographs is that they are not about actors performing. They are rather about the in-between moments immediately after the audience has left the room and the actor has disappeared from the stage. Sometimes the actors are waiting outside before performing, listening for cues, or perhaps they are suddenly realizing they have just enough time to put on their

makeup. Or perhaps they are standing next to each other, but not in the same play—two actors from two different plays happen to meet in the hallway, talking with each other outside the play. Kaplan relishes that subliminal state for its visual impact. This is what is unique about the peripheral power of twilight, where the fleeting, passing, transitory instance becomes paramount. It is the place of meditation, a mediating between the physical world and the spiritual world. That is the unique genius of Tennessee Williams.

Kaplan conveyed his passion to Hamilton to create these in-between times, moments of intense reflection when the actor goes into character, when it's difficult to tell where the actor ends and the character begins.

"The interesting thing about the Hotel Plays," Kaplan observed, "is the hotel, its physically transitory nature. Williams, to put it inelegantly, thought of the hotel as the body that the soul moves through: that it came from somewhere, resided, then left. For a while, Williams wanted to call his autobiography *Flee, Flee, This Sad Hotel*. Always, in a hotel play,



Ride Hamilton and David Kaplan, *Offstage retouching makeup, listening for a cue upstairs*, 2015, gold-toned photograph, 18 by 24 inches

death is waiting outside the door. So what you see in a hotel room are souls on a ‘time-out,’ souls in defiance of death, leaving or not leaving, or rushing toward, but we see them in a moment of trance, a moment of suspension within the body. Very often, in a hotel play, there is the sound of a clock, or a knock on the door, a repetitive heartbeat, footsteps—something that relates to the passage of time.

“Another important element of theater for Tennessee Williams—and other playwrights, García Lorca among them—is what’s happening

offstage, what’s happening in the hallway, what’s happening in the hotel room outside the hotel room, what’s happening outside the hotel. Everything that we overhear puts what we are perceiving and hearing in perspective. Sometimes it’s the possibility of happiness. Sometimes it’s the sense of other lives going on. Sometimes it’s the mystery of other lives going on. What’s miraculous in a performance is that you can live the experience. You can have the actors and the performers in a room and have the sound of activity in other rooms.”

The Kaplan-Hamilton installation at the Berta Walker Gallery summoned the experience of the production of the *Hotel Plays* at the Hermann-Grima House in New Orleans, now a distinguished museum. The former mansion, in the heart of the French Quarter, became the intensely intimate setting for small groups to move from room to room with the actors, almost as if the audience were included in the various plays. *Green Eyes*, written in 1970, is Williams’s closest inspection of the sexual undercurrents lurking in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, explicitly stripping jealousy of any distance or decorum. The small bed in the hotel room explodes into an enormous arena of psychosexual revelation, fueled by irrational jealousy, in which spontaneous, involuntary utterances shock even the speakers.

In 2009, when the idea of a hotel setting was first being discussed for Tennessee Williams’s plays in Provincetown’s Gifford House Inn, Jef Hall-Flavin, executive director of the Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, mused about what fun it was to hear “sound leaks” in a hotel: “You are hearing the people next door going at it, whether they were fighting, making love, coupled with radio or television commentary or people talking in the halls—sound leaks, it loops in the other scenes. By the time we performed these plays in the Hermann-Grima House, built as a single-family house in 1831, Williams knew that it had become a boardinghouse in the 1920s for ‘Christian women in distress.’”

In such a place, the spatial history made language resonate in the present. The sounds of footsteps in the hallways, the sounds of footsteps on the staircase, the sounds made in the rooms themselves were, Kaplan said, “like playing Beethoven on the original instruments.”

Other elements emphasize this living representation of the narrative: the light piercing through windows, the illumination from lamps in the rooms, and also the reflections in mirrors. Mirrors are a way of relaying information to the audience, and in the Hermann-Grima House, because the audience is sitting around the bed—where audience is literally in front of audience—you very quickly understand that the audience can watch the play the way a movie editor does. You don’t have to look at the scene head-on, but may see it from multiple angles. You can turn your head and see a reaction or turn your head and see a reflection. By putting together these different perspectives, the audience can create divergent narratives. Mirrors literalize the idea of reflection, including quiet moments when an actor may sit without expressing thoughts. Seeing an actor’s image reflected in a mirror allows one to feel a direct access to his mind.

Dwindling light implies an occasion of darkness, and this is reminiscent of Williams’s oracular play, *Orpheus Descending*, his mythological evocation of the lute player entering the underworld via the enchantment of his music. In one movie version, Orpheus enters the underworld by passing through a mirror, as if the mirror dissolves into a flow of water that one slips into, a reflective substance, like a river sweeping one away. Williams’s work inspires this kind of poetic and introspective metaphor.

Just as in Japanese haiku, in which the poem’s meaning is resolved in the mind of the reader, Kaplan’s aim is to help the audience complete the artwork—the magical dynamic is achieved by the audience’s recognition. He credits Bertolt Brecht for reinforcing the notion that the problem is not resolved in the performance, but left to the audience to conclude. He strives, in his direction, to help the audience assemble their own route to the end.

I asked Kaplan to comment on how he works with actors to bring

out these moments of surrender, when the character seems to break through her or his persona into genuine authenticity.

"I am interested in actors who think," he replied. "I like when you see an actor listening to music. I like when you see an actor waiting. I like when you see an actor pausing for a dynamic reason. And I love when the audience is prompted into their inner thinking by the physical presence of the actors doing that thinking, humming like a tuning fork that has been struck." Silence, therefore, becomes an opportunity to expand, extend, and exhaust the impulse with its own reverberations. "We all know," he explained, "if you walk into a room and your dog is sitting upright and looking out the window keenly, you will also look keenly out the window. That attention is contagious. How much more so with a human being—to come across someone who is in that twilight place!"

If theater concentrates only on the dynamic of emotion, Kaplan believes it is "promiscuous." Brecht's criticism of a certain kind of drama was that it sought to teach people to have an emotion in common, a mass emotion, without thinking. If German thinkers developed the idea of the sublime as the highest aim in art, Brecht developed a great distrust of this aim. Like Brecht, Kaplan favors unease in the audience, forcing resolution, not by the spectacle, but by personal struggle. "That," Kaplan said, "requires not just emotion, but thinking."

Kaplan's metaphor of the tuning fork, humming, is like the sound of silent thought, the vibration or tension that occupies the still moment. The drama is in the suspension, holding the audience, keeping them hanging in the air and expectant on the edge of their seats. The significance of what happens requires an audience to complete it. Ideas come into being on the occasion of experience. Experience itself activates latent ideas.

Kaplan knows that the script or the text that is meant to be performed is like a recipe for baking a cake. You can read the ingredients, but until you combine them, whip the eggs, put the concoction in the oven, and wait a certain amount of time, you don't have a cake, you just have a recipe. The text of a play is simply a recipe. Kaplan, a consummate director, has devoted his life to creating the kind of animated existence that happens in the crucible of the stage.

Using the lens of his focus on Tennessee Williams, Kaplan plans to continue to push boundaries in his productions and challenge audiences to see new things in other playwrights. This year, he plans to concentrate on Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill. Both playwrights loved Provincetown, as Kaplan does, "because the land is crumbling into the sea and the sea is chafing on the land. Looking out toward the horizon, the light evens out perspective, and it is no longer clear what is water and what is sky." ❏

CHRISTOPHER BUSA is founder and editorial director of Provincetown Arts Press.

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