

BOSTON GLOBE

9.11.2016

FALL ARTS PREVIEW

**Provincetown festival explores connections
between Williams, O'Neill**



Julia Cumes for the Boston Globe

David Kaplan, curator and cofounder of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival.

By [Don Aucoin](#) Globe Staff September 09, 2016

PROVINCETOWN — If there were a Mount Rushmore for American playwrights, Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams would obviously both be on it.

Apart from greatness, though, what connects the two men? Well, for one thing, both of them lived, worked, and found inspiration in Provincetown during crucial early periods in their careers.

But there are other connections as well, and those will be reflected in this year's Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, which is slated to unfold Sept. 22-25 under the title "Beyond Success: Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill." Now in its 11th year, the festival will present works by both writers that range from well-known to obscure, at venues that will include a bar, a wharf, and even a T-shirt store.

Both O'Neill (1888-1953) and Williams (1911-1983) were influenced by Provincetown's tradition-flouting art scene, and after they became famous both playwrights began to ask a similar probing question in their work, which festival curator and cofounder David Kaplan frames as: "What defines success?"

"They really investigated what their success was based on," Kaplan says while sitting on his back porch overlooking Provincetown Harbor, his dog in his lap. "They both grew to distrust the smooth surface and what was easily understood, and they sought to engage the audience with their fractured, inconclusive ideas." Both playwrights, according to Kaplan, were less interested in strictly binary questions of good vs. evil than they were in "competing ideas of good."

[Fall theater picks](#)

Moreover, says festival executive director Jef Hall-Flavin in a telephone interview, "After the height of their success, both playwrights turned to alternate forms and experiments in social commentary to make a new direction, when what they could have done was write what they had always written and keep raking in the dough. They didn't do that. Instead they tried to stick it to the man."



Pat Bromilow-Downing

Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival presents "Desire Under the Elms." Pictured are Marcel Meyer as Eben and Mbali Bloom as Abbie.

That rebellious and experimental spirit will be reflected at the festival in productions of such O'Neill plays as "The Hairy Ape," which dramatizes the dehumanizing effects of mechanization; the seldom-performed "Marco Millions," a "burlesque retelling" of the life of Marco Polo, reimagined as a rich tycoon in the Roaring 20s; "Tango Christie," an adaptation of O'Neill's "Anna Christie" that features song, dance, and Russian dolls; and a production of "Desire Under the Elms" that is set not in New England but in South Africa, with a British colonial settler marrying a black South African woman and bringing her home to his farm in the Eastern Cape province in the 1890s.

In addition, on Sept. 25, two-time Tony Award winner and renowned O'Neill interpreter Brian Dennehy will conduct a master acting class. One of Dennehy's Tonys was for his performance in a revival of O'Neill's "Long Day's Journey Into Night."

Among the Williams plays to be staged in Provincetown is "Small Craft Warnings," which revolves around a group of misfits and lost souls gathered in a fog-shrouded bar near the ocean. In terms of setting, technique, and subject matter, that play carries echoes of O'Neill's "The Iceman Cometh," in which a collection of down-and-outers drink and wanly dream in a Greenwich Village saloon.



Dave Sarrafian

The cast of “The Hairy Ape.”

“He was taking a motif from O’Neill and making it his own,” says Kaplan, noting that Williams wrote a letter to O’Neill after seeing “Iceman,” expressing admiration for it and telling the older writer that he understood why the play needed to be so long.

Williams’s “Kirche, Kuche, Kinder (An Outrage for the Stage)” will be presented at the festival — the first professional production of that play since 1979, according to Kaplan — along with “In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel,” directed by Everett Quinton, and “A Perfect Analysis Given by a Parrot.”

It was in the summer of 1940 that Williams came to Provincetown, returning for the summers of 1941, 1944, and 1947. Here is where he completed the first draft of “The Glass Menagerie,” according to Kaplan, and also finished a draft of “A Streetcar Named Desire,” among other works.

The young playwright was aware that O’Neill had preceded him to Provincetown by several decades. O’Neill arrived in the summer of 1916 and largely lived here until 1922, then kept returning each summer until 1925. He was productive in P-town, churning out numerous plays, including “Beyond the Horizon,” “Anna Christie,” “The Emperor Jones,” and “The Hairy Ape,” according to Robert M. Dowling, author of “Eugene O’Neill: A Life in Four Acts” (Yale University Press).

“O’Neill really found a home there,” Dowling says in a telephone interview.

And a launching pad as well: A 1916 Provincetown Players production of “Bound East for Cardiff” — seen today as a break with the melodramas that had dominated the American stage and a step toward the development of serious drama — established O’Neill as a significant playwright.

“It wasn’t Broadway that started him as a playwright,” Dowling says. “It was this little theater in Provincetown that did it.”