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## The Roots of Desire

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Marcel Meyer as Eben and Mbali Bloom as Abbie in *Desire Under the Elms*. Photo: Fiona

Macpherson

**by Steve Desroches**

For five years now Abrahamse & Meyer Productions, a theatrical company based in Cape Town, South Africa, has been participating in the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, where they made their international debut in 2012. And what a debut it was as they blew audiences away with their performance of *Kingdom of Earth*, where they turned the VFW on Jerome Smith Road into a decrepit, leaky Mississippi Delta mansion about to be washed away in a flood while a brotherly drama unfolds. Founded by Fred Abrahamse and Marcel Meyer in 2006, the company's participation in the festival has taken their work throughout the United States, while they continue bringing edgy and dynamic theater to audiences in South Africa, in what has blossomed into a wonderful artistic exchange between the two arts institutions.

With other spell-binding productions of Williams like *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, *The Lady Aoi*, *Stairs to the Roof*, and *The Day on Which A Man Dies*, Abrahamse & Meyer Productions returns to this year's festival with *Desire Under the Elms*, a lesser-known Eugene O'Neill play in keeping with this year's festival theme of exploring the work of the two playwrights who spent a considerable, productive, and influential amount of time in Provincetown. Their South African adaptation, which will be performed here, debuted at the National Arts Festival in 2014 in Grahamstown, one of South Africa's most important cultural events and one of the continent's largest annual arts celebrations, then moved on to the Baxter Theatre Centre in Cape Town receiving rave reviews.

"It dovetails beautifully into African culture," says Abrahamse of *Desire Under the Elms*.

Inspired by the Greek tragedy *Hippolytus* by Euripides, in which Phaedra, the wife of the Athenian king Theseus, falls in love with and attempts to seduce his son Hippolytus, *Desire Under the Elms* premiered at the Provincetown Playhouse in New York in 1924. In this production the action is moved from rural 1850s New England to 1890s South Africa where a British farmer, Ephraim Cabot, brings home his Xhosa bride Abbie Putnam to meet Eben, Ephraim's son. The themes of colonialism and land ownership, two issues that deeply resonate in both South Africa and the United States, create a universality to the story. Historically, both the original story's setting and that of this South African interpretation set 40 years later utilize each country's gold rush as a backdrop. Meyer and Abrahamse both note that the words "my" and "mine" appear with a staccato rapidity throughout this play about desire of all sorts that features a cast of Meyer, Robin Smith, and Mbali Bloom under Abrahamse's direction. They also add that South Africa was a place that fascinated O'Neill and that it is mentioned frequently in a variety of his works based on stories told to friends of his father, actor James O'Neill.



### Meyer and Bloom in *Desire Under the Elms*

Over its 10 years as a theatrical company Abrahamse and Meyer Productions has tackled works from Stephen Sondheim to William Shakespeare to Sir Noel Coward. And, of course, their exploration of the work of Williams has received particular attention since their relationship with the festival and Provincetown began. So they are uniquely poised at the moment, after five years of work with Williams' text to compare and contrast those words with those of O'Neill. In short, O'Neill is a dramatist while Williams is a poet, or more to the point, it's realism versus romanticism in storytelling, they say.

"Williams slowly tears," says Meyer. "With O'Neill, it just rips."

Both Abrahamse and Meyer speak with passion and conviction as they continue to dissect and digest the works of both O'Neill and Williams, doing so on an impossibly beautiful September day on the porch of Roux, the stylish bed and breakfast that is their Provincetown home this year. Spending a couple of weeks in Provincetown is a far cry from their first festival, in which they spent 48 hours here, laughing that they spent more time on the plane to and from South Africa than they did in Provincetown.

The ever-growing prowess of the Festival, buoyed by the support of the community as well as patrons around the country, allows it to bring in stellar productions from around the world. That kind of artistic exchange is vital to both the arts as well as cultural understanding. And it's also an infusion of creative energy into Provincetown, maintaining its status as one of the country's important artistic crucibles. Abrahamse and Meyer both see Provincetown as a place of experimentation and artistic freedom, noting that the roster of this

year's festival features plays not often performed. It's an open-minded, nurturing locale that seeks imagination, not perfection, in the pursuit of new ideas. While the exchange thus far has brought their interpretations of American playwrights, someday Meyer says he'd like to bring the work of South African writer Reza de Wet, as her work is as poetic and universal as Williams. But in the meantime, they're hard at work staging *Desire Under the Elms* at the Provincetown Theater and basking in the opportunities provided by the festival and the town in general.

"There is an innate creative energy here," says Meyer. "True creativity only comes from places where hearts feel free."

*The Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival presents Desire Under the Elms at the Provincetown Theater, 238 Bradford St. for five performances Thursday, September 22 through Sunday, September 25. For tickets (\$45/\$35 for students) and information call 866.789.TENN or visit [twptown.org](http://twptown.org). Tickets are also available at the box office at Sage Inn and Lounge, 336 Commercial St., Provincetown.*

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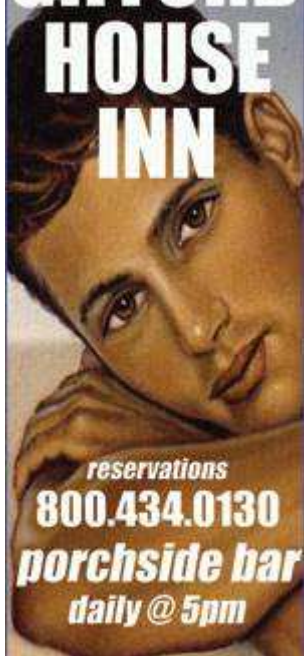
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