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## Williams On The Edge

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Regina Bartkoff and Brandon Lim in Tennessee Williams' *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*. Courtesy of 292 Theatre.

*by Steve Desroches*

Writing, good writing, requires vulnerability. Throughout Tennessee Williams' career, he repeatedly bared his soul via his characters and narratives, some more obvious than others. And each of his works presented a different aspect of the man, his life, and his emotions, depending on his circumstances. It's his 1969 one-act play *In A Bar Of A Tokyo Hotel* that many critics and Williams scholars feel represents his pain.

In this play, which premiered off-Broadway at the Eastside Playhouse on Manhattan's Upper East Side in May 1969, a successful American painter named Mark is in Tokyo, closed off in his hotel room, frenetically creating unintelligible work. His wife Miriam, concerned for his artistic reputation and their financial well-being, calls his New York agent Leonard asking him to come right away to intervene. In boredom and despair Miriam finds comfort in flirting with the hotel's bartender, creating a catalyst to learn about an artist self-destructing and his wife's need for something more. While never made clear, it could very well be an autobiographical piece with Mark and Miriam disparate parts of Williams himself. The little known and infrequently produced play comes to the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival via a 2012 cult hit production at the 292 Theatre in Alphabet City in Manhattan, with its original cast, but with new direction by Ridiculous Theatrical Company (RTC) legend Everett Quinton.

"It's easy to direct," says Quinton. "There is an elegance and simplicity to the play. It's not easy to act."

Staged at the lush Velvet Lounge, *In A Bar Of A Tokyo Hotel* comes out of time when Williams was experimenting with writing embracing the anti-establishment movements of the late 1960s as well as the cultural avant garde of the times. At the same time, critics were harsh with his new work, and he struggled to regain the renown of his earlier plays, while he also descended deeper into drug and alcohol addiction. In this period he wrote some of his edgiest and most confrontational works, as well as increasingly rebellious plays that both took on the establishment and became increasingly bold with gay themes and identity. Plays like the savage *The Remarkable Rooming-House of Madame LeMonde* and *The Mutilated*, both featured in past festivals, shocked then as they do now, both because of the themes and because they are so wildly different and lacking in any Southern gentility compared with classics like *A Streetcar Named Desire* or *The Glass Menagerie*. But with *In A Bar Of A Tokyo Hotel* we catch a glimpse of self-awareness that Williams may have had that addiction was the biggest stumbling block to his creative soul.



(l to r) Regina Bartkoff, Charles Schick, Brandon Lim (background), and Wayne Henry in *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*.

“The poor guy, he was very sick when he wrote this play with his drugs and booze,” says Quinton. “I had a friend who said that when you’re on drugs and booze you’re only operating at ten percent. If this is him operating at one-tenth, just imagine.”

Quinton first came to the festival and Provincetown in 2011 when he directed another play written by Williams in 1969 at his counter-cultural zenith, *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws*, starring Mink Stole. Quinton moved to New York in 1976 and joined the RTC, which was founded by Charles Ludlum, who would become Quinton’s life partner until his death in 1987. Over his time with the RTC, Quinton appeared in such Ludlum classics as *Medea*, *The Secret Lives of Sexists*, *Salamambo*, *Galas*, *The Artificial Jungle* and the original production of *The Mystery of Irma Vep*. That experience with Theatre of the Ridiculous (a genre that explored queer themes, surrealism, avant-garde aesthetics, and cultural critiques), carried through in Quinton’s work directing this, and others of Williams’ most experimental works that were well ahead of his times, written when many cast him as a has-been.

The theatrical legacy created by both Williams and the RTC has had a lasting and deep impact on Provincetown, to say the least. And the Festival is acutely aware and revels in that decidedly cutting-edge

vibrancy, each year diving head first into work, by Williams and others, that challenges and at times shocks audiences. In addition to reviving the beloved classics in new and fresh ways, bringing productions from all over the world to witness Williams global reach, the Festival not only brings compelling theater to Provincetown, it also exports the town's reputation as an important cultural locale even these 100 years since Eugene O'Neill and the Provincetown Players created a uniquely American theatrical voice. This festival claims that artistic birthright as well as maintains the importance of Williams, creating an institution to help both legacies flourish well into the future.

"I'm in awe of people who can produce something like this festival," says Quinton. "This has the potential to be one of the greatest theater festivals in the country."

*The Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival presents In The Bar Of A Tokyo Hotel at the Velvet Lounge, 258 Commercial St. for five performances Thursday, September 22 through Sunday, September 25. For tickets (\$35/\$25 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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