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Fuse Stage Feature: TW Festival's David Kaplan on Beyond Success — Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams

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Once Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams achieved success, they wanted to take on themes in their plays that challenged audiences.



A Russian production of Eugene O'Neill's "The Hairy Ape" coming to the 11th Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival. Photo: Dave Sarrafian.

By Robert Israel

David Kaplan is a stage director whose itchy feet routinely take him globetrotting to Asia,

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Africa, Europe, and Russia to work with such troupes as the National Theatre of Ghana and the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre on productions of plays by Tennessee Williams and Jean Genet, among others.

For the past eleven years Kaplan has also been the curator and impresario of the **Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival**. Each year he invites many of the theater companies he has worked with overseas to travel stateside to showcase their work.

This year, from September 22-25, troupes from South Africa and Russia will be in residence in Provincetown to present their interpretations of Williams' plays, sharing makeshift stages — on wharves and in other venues peppered throughout the seaside village — with visiting homegrown companies from Vermont, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and New York. This year features an expansion of the Festival's vision: along with Williams, there will be productions of works by America's only Nobel laureate in theater, Eugene O'Neill.

"We're calling the Festival 'Beyond Success' because it showcases works by both Williams and O'Neill that they wrote after they had already become successful playwrights, had won accolades, and had captured the attention and trust of audiences," Kaplan explains.

The ghost of Eugene O'Neill looms large in Provincetown, where he lived and wrote in various rooming houses, barrooms, and in an Outer Cape Cod dune shack at Peaked Hill Bar, beginning in 1916 (he died in Boston in 1953). In Provincetown, he cranked out one acts — many of them revolving around the sea — later performed by a ragtag troupe known as the Provincetown Players. His work is not a stranger to the Festival. Six years ago, under Jef Hall-Flavin's direction, the Festival staged a memorable al fresco production of O'Neill's one-act play *Diff'rent* at the Boatslip Resort Hotel with Provincetown Harbor as the backdrop.

O'Neill's influence over other American playwrights, including Williams (who summured in Provincetown twenty years after O'Neill lived there) has long been documented. But what hasn't been explored is why both playwrights, whose stars were in the ascendant, chose during this phase of their careers to craft more experimental plays — with controversial themes — that catered less to the popular tastes of their contemporary audiences.

"O'Neill continued to experiment with less popular theatrical themes after he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1920 for *Beyond the Horizon*, with *The Emperor Jones* following a year later," Kaplan observes, "and the same thing happened to Williams, who won wide acclaim (and the Pulitzer) in 1946 for *A Streetcar Named Desire*. They both looked at success skeptically. And they both looked with that same skeptical eye at the soullessness that was prevalent in American life. Now that they had achieved success, they wanted to embark on themes that challenged audiences."

According to Kaplan, their mutual connection to Provincetown is also an aspect of their careers that will be reflected in the productions chosen for this year's Festival.

"Both O'Neill and Williams hung out with artists in Provincetown who influenced their work by helping them to see how color could be added to their theatrical landscapes," Kaplan notes. "These artists also rejected social trends and had grown to distrust America's penchant toward success, money, and glibness that we find mirrored in both playwrights' works."

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