

Robert Israel: Writer

Selected stories & pieces

Spellbinding Sweet Bird of Youth at 12th Annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival



Tennessee Williams

By Robert Israel

Tropical storm Jose pelted Provincetown with a cold, driving rain. The seas that surround this Outer Cape hamlet were churning. A raging wind pelted the Salt Box homes — as well as hearty theatergoers who braved the elements to go out — with wet, stinging sand.

Inside the Wharf House on the night of September 21st, a different storm was raging.

Staged by Abrahamse & Meyer Productions, Tennessee Williams's *Sweet Bird of Youth* was given a riveting, spellbinding production. Once the lights came up on a stark set surrounded by a gurgling moat, it was clear that tropical storm Jose had strong competition.

At the risk of repeating myself: this Cape Town, South African troupe needs to be experienced by larger Boston-area audiences at a larger venue. They are one of the finest troupes I have seen perform in over four decades of reviewing live stage performances.

They return each year, by invitation, to the annual Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, and each year Abrahamse & Meyer Productions astonish with their passionate and compassionate treatment of Williams's works (and the works of Eugene O'Neill and Shakespeare). The performances by the seven-member cast for this production – who in some instances take on additional roles – were — collectively and individually — nothing short of brilliant.

The elements that go into making a production work include writing, acting, stagecraft, lighting, costumes, set design, sound, directing. When all these elements conspire to work together – when a production seamlessly unfolds and tells its story – audiences are treated to a transformative experience.

That's what occurred during the performance of *Sweet Bird of Youth*.

Abrahamse & Meyer Productions – named for its two principals Fred Abrahamse and Marcel Meyer who founded the company in 2006 – know how to create potent theatrical alchemy. They know how to use their multifarious talents to dig into scripts and to get under our skins. Their productions unnerve us. Their work is haunting. Eerie. We leave the theater moved and inspired — changed.

The story: Set in St. Cloud, a Mississippi Gulf Coast city, hometown hustler Chance Wayne (Marcel Meyer) has returned and as the play begins he is lounging in black silk pajamas, a semi-lifeless form of another body lying in bed beside him. He's hungover. So is she. Soon, this semi-lifeless body stirs and we meet Princess Kosmonopolis (Fiona Ramsay), a woman considerably older than her handsome roué. They are both on a mission to recapture their spent youth, to regain social (and, although tarnished, artistic) footings. Abusing a combination of “pink pill” opioids, hashish, 100 proof vodka (and, for the Princess, some heady blasts from a tank of pure oxygen), the hapless couple moves about the hotel room as drifting, spectral beings, lost in a miasma of drug and alcohol abuse, lustfulness and melancholy. They cling to one another and speak to one another in a languishing prose/poetry that takes us into a hallucinatory world.

We wander into Williams's miasma through his canny use of repeated words and phrases, nuance, and suggestion. Sexual congress is not described in all its prurient detail, for example – it is suggested. Venereal disease is not graphically described, it is hinted at how devastating it has ravaged character Heavenly's body. These topics were taboo during Williams's time, so he had to be clever; he had to entice audiences to understand these age-old issues without resorting to graphic details. Audiences understood, by inference, discerning the meaning by listening to the rolling waves of his characters' speeches. Perhaps we were more of a literate society when this play was written, because now our language seems dominated by twittering Tweets.

Sweet Bird of Youth is about a story about love, about the price one pays to love in a world that is often loveless.

Take, for example, when Chance tells the Princess of how he views love:

“The biggest of all differences in this world is between the ones that had or have pleasure in love and those that haven’t and hadn’t any pleasure in love, but just watched it with envy, sick envy. I don’t mean just ordinary pleasure or the kind that you can buy, I mean great pleasure...”

The love the Princess and Chance share is carnal, not the sort Chance described in his aforementioned speech. Yet he is willing to engage in this sort of sexual dalliance with her, to use her and to be used by her, in hopes he can later cash in his chips: to flaunt what he’s pilfered from her and hold it up before the disapproving eyes of his hometown folk who resent — and vocally threaten — his return. He has escaped this Town Without Pity and now he’s back to reclaim his great love, Heavenly. But her father will have none of it. And so, along with his dreams of stardom, his reveries will be dashed by final curtain.

Kudos to the cast for creating this hallucinatory world and for enticing us to enter and temporarily reside amidst its tormented citizenry. This production easily could have succumbed to a Hitchcockian horror show: it’s that creepy. But, instead, it stays focused on using literary devices within the script that bring us back to the central motifs: the ephemeral nature of youth, the fleeting nature of love.

When I left the Wharf House and walked toward the twinkling lights of Provincetown, I felt appreciative that this Festival has had the vision to showcase the talents of this gifted cast and crew once again.

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Robert Israel, a member of the Independent Reviewers of New England (IRNE), writes for *The Arts Fuse*, *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, and other publications.

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