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Dana Delany on Tennessee Williams

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'Women are his most interesting characters'

"It was a gift" is how actress Dana Delany describes how much the chance to perform in "The Night of the Iguana" this winter at American Repertory Theater in Cambridge meant to her. And it's a gift that keeps on giving.

Playing Maxine Faulk, a newly widowed hotelier in 1940 Mexico, finally gave Delany the chance to be in a Tennessee Williams play. That role sparked the invitation to be the guest of honor Saturday at the annual benefit dinner for the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival. Her presence at the Provincetown Town Hall gala will include a question-and-answer session about the "Iguana" role, plus, undoubtedly, about her long TV, film and stage career.

But it's other people at the dinner whom Delany wants to hear from. "I just want to talk to people who love Tennessee Williams!" she says in a phone interview.

Delany grew up in Connecticut and visited Cape Cod as a child, particularly remembering seeing Leonard Nimoy star in "Fiddler on the Roof" at the Cape Cod Melody Tent in Hyannis. But she hasn't been to Provincetown since her college days at Wesleyan University and is excited to see the town that she now knows is where Williams worked on landmark plays "The Glass Menagerie," "A Streetcar Named Desire" and "Summer and Smoke." He also began writing "Iguana" during one of his Provincetown summers in the 1940s.

Delany hopes to return for the Sept. 21-24 festival and is excited to hear the schedule of productions that will be announced at Saturday's dinner. She already knows the theme is Williams and Shakespeare and says she made the connection between the two playwrights while performing in Cambridge.

"When the writing is so good, so full, and the characters so well-crafted, you can play the characters in so many way," she says. "That's true of Tennessee Williams and Shakespeare."

The offer for "Iguana" came at a time when Delany, 61, was looking to do more theater. She also "felt the need to shake things up ... to challenge myself" and was looking for a different character from the types of roles she'd recently been offered.

How has she been stereotyped? "A strong, slightly devious, opinionated person." She pauses. "Who dresses really well."

As Maxine, on the other hand, she says, "I got to wear jeans. No high heels. I could put my hair up and let it be natural. I want to play something a little more down to earth."

With TV-viewing tastes that are non-mainstream (Amazon's "I Love Dick," Hulu's "The Handmaid's Tale"), Delany says she's more attracted now to scripts to watch or perform in that tell women's stories with a different slant.

"I've been acting a long time and a lot of the things have been written by men. I'm really trying to head more to (projects that explore) what women are really like, not what men think women are like." Acknowledging she'd love to star in "Sweet Bird of Youth" some day, she notes: "I think Tennessee Williams captures that. Women are his most interesting characters, his most complex characters."

When talking about wanting to now choose the type of roles and projects that she's most interested in, she adds, "I've earned it."

Indeed. Delany's Internet Movie Database profile reveals 96 acting credits over more than 35 years, starting with daytime soap operas in 1980. She's best known for TV shows "China Beach," "Desperate Housewives" and "Body of Proof," but jokes that if a man is approaching her, he's usually going to mention the movie "Tombstone." While in Cambridge, a lot of fans also knew her from her film "Housesitter," which was filmed in Concord.

In "Iguana," she found the different kind of role she's wanted. The A.R.T. experience also included two blizzards and simultaneously working to publicize the second and final season of her Amazon series "Hand of God," which premiered as she did "Iguana." Along with a physically challenging role, that all may have contributed to Delany getting an illness toward the end of the run that was diagnosed as acute bronchitis after the show ended.

But she'd do it all over again in a heartbeat and has her fingers crossed that "Iguana" will someday be restaged in New York.

Meanwhile, her most recent film, "Literally, Right Before Aaron," debuted at the Tribeca Film Festival last month. Delany will be working on a play in July that a friend is writing for her at the New York Stage and Film Company, for which she serves on the board of directors. And in August, she'll be in Joshua Tree, California, filming an independent movie.

Before that, though, she's looking forward to a trip to New York City in June and a chance to visit with "Iguana" co-star Elizabeth Ashley, who knew and worked with Tennessee Williams. Delany wants to make up for what she felt was a lack of time to socialize as much as she wanted to during rehearsals and performances.

"I told (Ashley) ... we're going to just drink and you're going to tell me every Tennessee Williams story," Delany says. "I'm looking forward to that."