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# William(s) Shakespeare: The 12th Annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, Part 1

09/27/2017 11:53 pm ET

Tennessee Williams and William Shakespeare are playwrights whose voices echo across stages around the world, relying on the kindness of strangers and holding up a mirror to society. Granted, Williams is a far more recent voice, but, as the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival has proven for the past twelve years, his plays have the range and reach to bring together international theatre companies to explore his work. Instead of the fast ferry I took last year, Hurricane Jose insisted instead ended up on a bus winding along Cape Cod's narrow streets in the wind and rain in order to get to see eight plays from these two playwrights. This year's pairing was an exciting mix of styles, genres, cultures, and time periods. This is the first of a three part series detailing the entire festival.



RIDE HAMILTON

(l to r) Esther Ado-Scott as Gypsy, Mawuli Semevo as Mr. Gutman, and Isaac Fiagbor as Kilroy in Abibigromma's production of *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real*, by Tennessee Williams.

*Ten Blocks on the Camino Real*

My arrival in Provincetown last week coincided with Hurricane Jose's journey north along the Atlantic Coast. As such, a great deal of fog, wind, and rain characterized the first few days of the festival. I mention this because the National Theatre of Ghana's production of *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real* was meant to be staged outdoors in Bas Relief Park, at the base of the famous Pilgrim Monument. Also known as Abibigromma, this troupe as performed Tennessee Williams's one-act version of *Camino Real* internationally as a part of the first ever touring production to come from the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival. Even though the production was transferred to Town Hall, whose acoustics are notoriously awful, the company's infectious energy and obvious commitment to the spirit of this play came through.

*Ten Blocks on the Camino Real* combines mythical characters, dreamlike logic, and grand storytelling, making it one of my favorite Williams plays. Our hero is Kilroy, named for the cartoon figure that U.S. soldiers used to draw during World War II above the sentence "Kilroy was here." He wears boxing gloves around his neck, and a championship belt around his waist. He has arrived on a street of a place he does not know, and he tries to get his bearings as he interacts with figures from literature such as Esmeralda and Casanova, as well as sinister and mysterious figures called "Street Cleaners" who come to claim dead bodies and seem to be circling the living, waiting for their next job.

The back of the stage space was adorned with a series of brightly colored posters, featuring pictures of each of the actors in character with their character name and the tag line "The deal is rugged," a line Kilroy speaks in the play. Performer Godwin Awador sat off to the side, dressed in a brightly colored patterned garment, playing a drum beat that continued at various volumes and speeds throughout the action, setting the driving pace and rhythm of life on the Camino Real. Isaac Fiabgor's Kilroy entered the space with charm and swagger, as befits a character who has a heart "the size of a baby's head."

Despite the substitution of several Ghanaian specificities in place of the Spanish language and figures present in the original play, David Kaplan's direction and the cast's excellent performances were true to the play. Joycelyn Delali's Esmeralda was coy and clever, Abena Takyi's Marguerite was glamorous and distant, Emmanuel Ghartey's Casanova was suave and confident, and the Mawuli Semevo's Mr. Gutman was bemused and streetwise. One of my favorite parts of this production was the performance of the Street Cleaners (Yaa Ocloo, Eldad Wontumi, and Benjamin Adzika) who wore half masks of skulls while they hissed, clicked, and lurked as they menacingly swept the streets.

The hardest part about both *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real*, and its full-length version, *Camino Real*, is that the naturalistic style present in Williams's more famous works is not very present here. He has traded emotional family dynamics for the grand theatricality of overt symbolism and stylized drama more often found in epic theatre. Critics at the time were confused, and the play has the possibility of baffling contemporary audiences as well. This production proved that committing to the unrealistic aspects of the play by embracing the symbols and allegories, rather than fighting them, allows the humor and pathos of Williams's writing to shine.

Abibigromma and director David Kaplan committed to this play, and the result was a phantasmagorical jaunt through Williams's, and Abibigromma's, imagination. Williams wrote Don Quixote into this play, but he was transformed in this production into Okomfo Anokye, the founder of the Ashanti line of kings. Even if the audience members did not read the program note explaining this change, the context of Anokye's entrance into the play made things clear, because the scale and tone of this production made each choice clear. I truly wish I had been able to see *Ten Blocks* outside, as that is how the show has been presented in locations from Accra, Ghana to St. Louis, Missouri, but I was truly grateful that I was able to experience it.

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RIDE HAMILTON

(l to r) Rachel Hirshorn as Molly, Anthea Thompson as Polly, and Randall Rapstine as the Cocaloony in Texas Tech University's production of *The Gnädiges Fräulein*, by Tennessee Williams.

### *The Gnädiges Fräulein*

A gossip columnist and the landlord of a boarding house walk into Cocaloony Key. That premise is as funny as it sounds, and the beginning of Williams's *The Gnädiges Fräulein* is quite hilarious. And yet the play was one half of a 1966 Broadway Williams double-feature entitled *Slapstick Tragedy*, where it was paired with a play called *The Mutilated*. In actuality, performing slapstick tragedy is as tricky as it sounds. Jef Hall-Flavin's excellent production of this difficult, but rewarding, play achieved a balancing act all too rare when it comes to structurally hybrid works such as this.

Rachel Hirshorn, who last year delighted us in *Kirche, Küche, Kinder*, once again showed her impressive characterization skills through another madcap character. Molly owns a boarding house that has several eccentric guests, one of whom is a German woman they call the Gnädiges Fräulein (Francine Segal) who earns her keep by going out to catch fish. When a gossip columnist, Polly, well-played by Anthea Thompson, who matched Hirshorn's zaniness, comes to visit Molly, she finds the story of the Fräulein interesting and wants to know more. The Fräulein has already lost an eye to one of the gigantic cocaloony birds that swoops down over this fictional Florida key every once in a while, but when the horn sounds, she nevertheless gets ready and takes off to try to fight the birds for a fish.

Before the play began, Shannon Robert's scenic and lighting design had already begun setting the stage for the world. A miniature version of the boarding house sat suspended in a beam of light. When the play began, this small house rose up as the curtain parted, depositing us into a full-sized, but distorted version of the world. This design choice already showed an understanding of the forces of truth and exaggeration at work in this play, and the entry of our two

main characters quickly revealed that the actors also perfectly fit into this funhouse mirrored world. And at the start, the reflections we see are comedic, as Molly and Polly smoke marijuana, synchronize rocking chairs, and pine over another eccentric lodger, the blonde Indian Joe (Ryan McCrary). Randall Rapstine, another favorite from last year's *Kirche, Küche, Kinder*, played one of the feared Cocaloonies as a mix between a person-sized pigeon and a bad-tempered rooster, brandishing a vulture-like handheld bird head while strutting around the stage.

Hirshorn and Thompson's comic timing and chemistry made these scenes laugh out loud funny, only for things to get emotionally trickier when the Fräulein actually entered the space. It was easier to laugh at the idea of her than to see her standing there, clothes torn and dirtied, one eye covered in a bloody bandage, asking Molly and Polly which song she should sing from her tired repertoire. Segal's Fräulein eventually loses her other eye, and some of her clothing, but she eventually catches a fish - only to have it stolen from her. Segal's performance was mostly cheerful, with the ever-present tragedy of the Fräulein's current state only occasionally clouding over her bandaged eyes and face. I particularly appreciated that Segal's body seemed to convey strength even the character's weakest moments; we could see her muscles flexing, her body resisting the Sisyphean task of her impending fishing trips.

The symbolism in this play overtly references Williams's own repeated attempts to please the critics, continually running after the fish no matter how many times he is beaten and bruised in the press because of it. The audience's responses around that moment in the performance began to shift as well, with the audible laughter giving way to expressions of pity, and then, eventually, to enrapt silence.

Most productions that deal with a play that has mountains and valleys of emotions like this try to even out those extremes, for the comfort of the audiences. And yet this is not what Hall-Flavin's production did, and I found that to be the most important part of the experience. Williams wrote a slapstick tragedy, and the actual feeling of watching a piece of that genre is as contradictory as the name suggests. I feel for the Fräulein, but can also laugh at the absurdity of the unrealistic plight involved, which makes *The Gnädiges Fräulein* uncomfortable to watch at moments, but worth the emotional roller-coaster every time.

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