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William(s) Shakespeare: The 12th Annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, Part 2

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NB: This is the second of a three part series on the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival. To read Part 1, containing reviews of Ten Blocks on the Camino Real and The Gnädiges Fräulein, [click here](#).



RIDE HAMILTON

(l to r) Marcel Meyer as Chance and Fiona Ramsay as Princess Kosmonopolis in Abrahamse & Meyer Productions's *Sweet Bird of Youth* by Tennessee Williams.

Sweet Birth of Youth

Sweet Bird of Youth is a very strange Tennessee Williams play. I usually describe it as a mix of *Orpheus Descending* and *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*. Whereas *Orpheus* gives us Chance, the drifting soul who can't find a place in

the world, but has musical talent, *Sweet Bird* has Chance, who is a true grifter without any connection to reality. *Milk Train* takes us through Mrs. Goforth's final moments as she puts her affairs in order, while *Sweet Bird* introduces us to Princess Kosmonopolis, who is actually the movie star Alexandra Del Lago hiding from what she thinks is a failed comeback attempt. While Alexandra Del Lago rises like a phoenix at the end of the play, Chance ends up castrated in a punishment straight out of Hammurabi's code. My problem with this play is that it is one of very few Williams works in which there are practically no likable characters.

Meyer & Abrahamse Productions, on the other hand, is a very likable company. Their *Desire Under the Elms* was one of the highlights of last year's festival, with bold choices and solid acting that brought a vitality to O'Neill's words that does not always read in contemporary productions. *Sweet Bird* began with a sort of tableaux vivant of the play's backstory: Chance, Heavenly, Boss Finley, Aunt Nonnie, and Miss Lucy dance to music box songs in fine clothes and low light. The women in this scene were all played by male actors, but the scene was not camp. Heavenly and Chance see each other and try to meet, but Boss Finley stops them. This stylized prelude to the performance felt tonally right: there are larger than life themes here, and not many fully fleshed-out people to carry them.

Once the play as written began, director Fred Abrahamse did an excellent job at ensuring that the stylized elements continually came back. Matthew Baldwin's Heavenly and Callum Tilbury's Aunt Nonnie were played straight, not for laughs, with more than one reference to Heavenly's Ophelia-like role in the story. Part of this, as I will discuss in the next installment, has to do with the fact that Baldwin in fact plays Ophelia on the same stage in the company's other production for the festival, *Hamlet*. The use of masks, of cross-gender casting, and of stylized lights and movement at times was an excellent choice to remind us that this play is not naturalistic.

The disconnect in this production therefore comes from a rather unusual issue: Meyer's Chance was a bit too human and too likable for this world. Meyer is charming and it was impossible for me to read him as a con man, or a manipulator, and yet Chance is both of those things. Even Alexandra, well-played here by Fiona Ramsay, is not entirely a real person, although I would argue that she is the most realistic character. I enjoyed a great many aspects of this production, as it contained a series of great performances, such as Dean Balie's Miss Lucy, played straight and yet also for laughs. Real life father and son Michael and Jeremy Richard also brought the dark political father and son team of the Finley's to life with excellent sliminess. And yet the two styles of excellent acting did not fully cohere in a way that made *Sweet Bird* sing a unified song that would have taken this production from good to great.



RIDE HAMILTON

(starting at bottom left and moving counterclockwise) Colleen Corcoran, Kayla Anthony, Carlo Campbell, Ife Foy, Chris Anthony, Hannah Van Sciver, Shamus McCarty, Andrew Carroll, and Keith Conallen in Die-Cast's production of *Pericles*, by William Shakespeare.

Pericles

William Shakespeare's *Pericles* is categorized as a "problem play" for its structural strangeness, but the term is fitting to describe the plot as well. The play is jam-packed with incest, pirates, false deaths, riddles, rape, and impressive amounts of boat travel making the action choppy and incredibly violent towards women. I am the first to admit that I have no desire to see a faithful production of this play, and yet I was immensely excited to see what director Brenna Geffers would bring to this work, especially after her masterful production of *The Hairy Ape* at the festival last year. Back with a newly formed company, Die-Cast, created with Thom Weaver, Geffers brought her recognizable knack for tackling troubling, and misogynistic, plays to bear.

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Performed on the half-scale ship model the Rose Dorothea in the middle of the Provincetown Library, the cast of *Pericles* immediately established the ensemble nature of this storytelling. Hannah Van Sciver and Chris Anthony (Yank in last year's *Hairy Ape*) perched on the side of the ship, playing a guitar and singing softly, to usher the audience into the sea space. The other cast members soon joined them, moving together and working as one. This was one of the strongest aspects of *Hairy Ape* as well, and yet here the communal storytelling served a structural purpose that I appreciated. For example, when Marina (Van Sciver), Pericles's daughter, is being forced to sell her virginity, the character of Gower (Anthony) stood in the scene, physically and emotionally supporting Marina through this ordeal.

Geffers did not change the plot of *Pericles*, but she did cut it down to its essence, and moved through the highlights in a way that did not gloss over the tricky parts, but instead framed them for the audience. The character of Gower ended up serving as a narrator, moving the cast through the immense plot, as Keith Conallen's Pericles went through his difficult journey. In addition to taking on a variety of other roles, the ensemble (Carlo Campbell, Colleen Corcoran, Shamus McCarty, Ife Foy, Andrew Carroll, Kayla Anthony, and Anthony Crosby) also used movement sequences and rhythmic breathing to emphasize the driving pace and emotional trials of the play's narrative. This stylized the hardest portions of the plot, making them watchable in a way that a more realistic interpretation would have made unbearable.

The ensemble work did not only work visually, but also brought the cast's ensemble mentality to the foreground. These actors were able to move together and support each other as they moved through this play, and that trust and community was very enjoyable to watch. Of course, this was not a silent play, and I would be remiss if I did not mention each and every actor's facility with the text. The contrast between actors who know what they are saying in Shakespeare and those who do not is a wide chasm that many a theatergoer has struggled to bridge. It is a pleasure to see and hear a group of actors who can clearly communicate Shakespeare's words without seeming to strain with the effort. I look forward to seeing what Geffers and her Philadelphia based company of actors will do next.



RIDE HAMILTON

(l to r) Madison Weinoffer as Woman and Teddy Lytle as Man in Spectrum Theatre Ensemble's *The Hotel Plays*.

The Hotel Plays

Every two years, the Festival presents a collection of short plays and scenes in an environmental setting. In other words, if a scene is set in a hotel room, it is staged in a hotel room, if it is set in a bar, it is staged in a bar, and so on. This year's offering was presented by Spectrum Theatre Ensemble, a Rhode Island-based company that includes actors on the autism spectrum and neurotypical actors. The collection of plays and scenes varied widely, and I was not one of the lucky few who actually got to see the scene from *Lady of the Larkspur Lotion*, so I unfortunately cannot say anything about that one.

My journey through the Gifford House began with Williams's often-performed one-act *Talk to Me Like the Rain and Let me Listen*. This play's dialogue flows like the rain in its title, and I too often find it soothing in the way a bedtime story would be. Yet staging it in the brightly lit hotel room gave it an energy I had not formerly seen in it, and I found Madison Weinoffer and Teddy Lytle's performance refreshing and nuanced. Next was a scene from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, which included a powerhouse performance from Leslie Fray, who played Imogen with the power and passion that part deserves. Fray delivered the famous "false to his bed" monologue from Act III, Scene 4, to Orlando Hernández's Pisanio, whose tender feelings towards poor Imogen were obvious. This was my favorite scene of *The Hotel Play's* offerings.

Next, my small group traveled down a staircase to a room littered with discarded typed pages. We had entered the realm of *Mr. Paradise*, where a reclusive writer is confronted by an effusive young fan who wants to share his writing with the world again. Jim O'Brien's Mr. Paradise looked the part, and had a shyness about him that fit the part quite well. Tracy Allard's Girl was not quite as successful at the exaggerated, and rather dated, wholesome optimism this part requires. The room alone conveyed a slightly more serious attitude than I read in the play, but it was interesting direction, and a good opportunity to see this work performed.

Next we moved outside to join Tom (Adam Almeida) and Willie (Ava Rigelhaupt) from *This Property is Condemned*. This scene was very short, but worked perfectly on the stoop of the Gifford House, with the sky as white as Willie keeps claiming it is. Finally we moved into the bar area to see an inn scene from *A Comedy of Errors*, where Luciana (Cat Yudain), Antipholus (Jason Shipman), and Dromio (Adam D. Bram) discussed the various parts of a lady they say is as round as the world. This scene reminded me of our local New York Shakespeare Exchange's ShakesBeer events, in

which they set a series of Shakespeare scenes in real bars. It is always a pleasure to see, and the text feels at home next to a pint. I commend directors Erin Cawley and Clay B. Martin for the range of scenes explored and tackled in *The Hotel Plays*, and was very happy to explore the hotel in which I was staying in a new and different way.

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