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## Tennessee's Trickster

Bryan A. Hollerbach Aug 31, 2017



Some surprising guest artists help a local theater festival stage a colorful, intriguing play by a gent named Williams.

Kilroy, of the mid-20th-century "Kilroy was here!" visual/verbal meme, soon will visit the metro area courtesy of Tennessee Williams Festival St. Louis – with aid from associates not only half the nation away but also half the world away.

From Sept. 8 to 11 at the Grand Center's .ZACK, the festival will welcome David Kaplan, who co-founded Massachusetts' Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, as he directs Africa's National Drama Company of Ghana in the famed playwright's Ten Blocks on the Camino Real.

Upfront, Kaplan succinctly addresses the degree to which Ten Blocks resembles more familiar works from Williams (a St. Louis native buried in Calvary Cemetery) like *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

"All Williams is about the same thing: love, youth, beauty, the summer," he says. "None of these last long – and as a result, they need to be remembered, to be talked about and written about. That's the imperative for performing the plays. We live knowing we will die, the glass animals will break, the match in the dark will blow out, but while the glass shimmers or the match blazes, we enjoy the light."

Of course, in that Kilroy (nominally the protagonist of the play in question) constitutes an archetypal trickster, this production involves a few peculiarities. First and foremost? Ten Blocks, which Williams wrote in New Orleans' French Quarter, predates by the better part of a decade another drama entitled just *Camino Real*.

"Ten Blocks came first as a one-act play that began as episodic scenes worked by Williams' close collaborator Elia Kazan with actors from the Actors Studio, including Eli Wallach as Kilroy," Kaplan says. "The one-act version was finished in 1946. It was experimental work, very different than the usual realism of the [Actors] Studio and different from Kazan's work directing *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1947.

"The one-act was expanded by Williams into a full-length play with 16 blocks titled simply *Camino Real*. That opened on Broadway in 1953 and puzzled critics expecting something similar to *The Glass Menagerie* or *Streetcar* or *Summer and Smoke*. Kazan and the actors were very excited to be breaking new ground.

"Eli Wallach told me on the phone, in the 1980s, they were shocked after they opened in Washington that not everyone shared their pleasure in it."

Ultimately, negative reviews led Williams to revise *Camino Real* for its 1953 publication by the esteemed independent publishing company New Directions – making Ten Blocks an arcane antecedent of an already lesser-known entry in Williams' oeuvre.

If Ten Blocks recalls the relationship of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Trimalchio* to *The Great Gatsby*, though, it similarly has enjoyed more than a little attention over time. In 1966, for example, a television adaptation starred none other than Martin Sheen – a mere three years into his distinguished film and television career.

Carrie Houk, the local festival's executive artistic director, describes the level of excitement surrounding the production. "Tennessee Williams Festival St. Louis is thrilled to launch the U.S. tour of the National Drama Company of Ghana," she says. "We continue to build our friendship with the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival and hope for continued collaboration."

She also sketches what led the local festival (now observing just its second year of existence) to host Kaplan and the Ghanaians, with a grant from PNC Arts Alive and, from Webster University, housing sponsorship for the visiting 12-member troupe.

"The Tennessee Williams Festival St. Louis believes the work of Tennessee Williams speaks to all cultures and nationalities," Houk says. "We thought that this particular production illustrates this for St. Louis audiences and would make his work attractive and stimulating for all.

"We're offering this world-class production and workshops for schools and community groups free of charge. We want to make sure that the production is accessible and available to audiences that might not have the opportunity to experience live theater. ...

"The company will also be doing a performance at Webster University, conversations with students who have attended the Webster U campus in Accra [the capital of Ghana] and students who might be interested in studying abroad in the future in Accra. They will also spend an afternoon in workshops with the Webster U Conservatory of Theatre Arts."

The production, which is free and open to the public, requires no reservations, Houk adds. The company also will present workshops at COCA and Grand Center Arts Academy.

Kaplan, for his part, provides greater detail on the involvement in the production of the National Drama Company of Ghana. "In 1997, flying back from Uzbekistan after directing King Lear there, I learned about Ghanaian concert party from someone in the Peace Corps who had seen performances in Ghana," he says. "Concert party is a form of outdoor theater that combines African stock characters, clowning, singing and dance – and social satire. I love clowning that delivers insight. I thought for years about a suitable text – and it seemed a perfect fit for performing Ten Blocks on the Camino Real."

An American actor named Greg McGoan had worked with Abibigromma, the resident drama troupe of the National Theatre of Ghana since 1991. McGoan introduced Kaplan to that ensemble. Ten Blocks, Kaplan continues, "fit their mission, too, performing popular theater as a way to build community."

Ten Blocks will undergo slight alterations to fit it to a Ghanaian context. Kaplan first directed a concert party production of Ten Blocks in Uruguay, of all places, in 2013.

In sum, Kaplan suggests why the new production – which he describes as "brightly colored" and "the simple story of an innocent man caught up in a city of nets" – should intrigue local Williams aficionados and other devoted theatergoers. "In Ten Blocks, Kilroy enters knowing he has a heart so enlarged he will die from one strong kiss," he says. "Nevertheless, he kisses the Gypsy's daughter.

"First though, he must convince her he is sincere. He asks, does she believe him? 'For a while,' she answers. He replies, 'Everything's for a while. For a while is the stuff that dreams are made of, baby!'"

In short, Ten Blocks – to pay slantwise homage to Williams' last play, left unfinished at the time of his death in 1983 – promises to be a masque outrageous and austere.

*Tennessee Williams Festival St. Louis, .ZACK, 3224 Locust St., 2J, St. Louis, twstl.org*

## Performance Schedule

Friday, Sept. 8: Strauss Park, 10 a.m. and 12:30 p.m.

Saturday, Sept. 9: Soulard Market Park, 10 a.m. and 12:30 p.m.

Sunday, Sept. 10: Strauss Park, 1 and 3:30 p.m.

Monday, Sept. 11: Webster University, noon

## Bryan Hollerbach

Bryan A. Hollerbach serves as LN's copy editor and one of its staff writers. He loves to read, write, impersonate an amateur artist and research all things bibulous.

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