

At the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, all the town's a stage

By Susan Rand Brown / Banner Correspondent

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"I am part of a community of international theater artists," David Kaplan says in his reedy, musical voice, leading the way to a study off the kitchen. He bought a bay-facing condo in the East End a year ago, and right now is headquartered in this compact room lined with books about theater history, with a neon yellow floor-to-ceiling poster for his Ghanaian production of Tennessee Williams' "Ten Blocks on the Camino Real" posted within reach of the computer. Kaplan — "The Professor" is how his husband, Jerry Lee Stacy, who is setting out to walk their dog, Spiké, affectionately refers to him — is curator and co-founder of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, the locally based performing arts festival, now in its 12th annual season, that is dedicated to expanding Williams' enduring legacy beyond the all-too-common naturalistic, sentimental performance of "The Glass Menagerie."

Last year the focus of the festival was on Williams and Eugene O'Neill, coupling the work of two iconic Provincetown playwrights. This year the theme of the festival is "Tennessee Williams and Shakespeare," and Kaplan is pairing three works each by these two stellar poets of the English language in settings that bring their words (and music, dance and frolic) to life. "When you say their words out loud, it's like a spell," Kaplan says.

And since it's Provincetown, who could resist casting drag actor Everett Quinton, of Ridiculous Theatrical Company fame, as Cleopatra — "a man in a wig and a dress calling on the gods," the excited Kaplan says. Quinton is only one of three actors who will share the role in the festival's production of Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra (Part I)" — Part II will be in 2018.

Next Thursday through Sunday, Sept. 21 to Sept. 24, Kaplan and his cohorts (actors, directors and a squad of local volunteers) will throw a fabulous four-day party that stresses nontraditional locations and over-the-top performances in the spirit of the experimental theater company Mabou Mines (whose co-founder, Lee Breuer, will be on hand for a coffee hour). Alongside productions of Williams and Shakespeare, the festival features star-studded mixers, an evening of ballads and beer, a sunset dune tour, and, honoring the Bard's penchant for pirates, a late-night Pirate's Ball.

As a theater director, Kaplan has developed avant-garde productions in Hong Kong, Uruguay and other places with theater traditions that he applauds. And on this particular morning, Kaplan rehearses "Ten Blocks on the Camino Real" with members of the National Theatre of Ghana, one of two festival plays he's directing himself ("Antony and Cleopatra" is the other). "Camino Real" will be staged outdoors at the Bas Relief at the foot of the Pilgrim Monument. Ghanaian drummers, heard throughout, replace the "player of the blue guitar" that Williams' script calls for.

"This figure of masculinity, The Wrestler, shows up in a corrupt city that takes advantage of him, takes him apart, strips him of everything. But despite that, love goes on, life goes on and passion goes on, even in the face of death," Kaplan says of the play. Finding a little light within the bleakness of experience is pure Williams. "It's a form of gracious defiance," Kaplan adds.

Kaplan's attention to language, ensemble work and theater history may sometimes get him pegged as old school, but he isn't. When not coaching performers in a rehearsal space — he will be flying from Provincetown to Ghana shortly, one of many professional trips there — he uses Skype on his phone to direct the cast across time zones, making color-coded notes on a pad while scrolling the text of the play on a computer screen.

A day later he's set to Skype with cast members from the Turkish State Theatres who are in "Antony and Cleopatra." Once in Provincetown, the Turkish actors will join an international ensemble from Ghana and both U.S. coasts, and Kaplan anticipates an emotional experience when, for the first time, they all gather to rehearse in the same room.

The audience for "Antony and Cleopatra" will be seated in the balcony of Provincetown Town Hall, a vantage point that is not unlike classical Greek theater or Shakespeare's Globe. "It ain't the Elizabeth Taylor movie," Kaplan says, sighing. In his vision, the story isn't about tempestuous, doomed lovers — "not Romeo and Juliet," he says, but instead it explores "who is

telling the story. Cleopatra changes from scene to scene — ‘her infinite variety.’ So in dramatizing with three Cleopatras — I don’t want to give away too many of the tricks — you see how ‘who she is’ gets stolen by different people. It’s a collective retelling, and also about consolidating power and compromising democratic institutions.”

It was Kaplan who reintroduced Williams’ work to Provincetown, beginning with his carefully researched, passionately argued book, “Tennessee Williams in Provincetown,” making the case for Williams’ importance in the town’s creative history. Williams’ autobiographical gay romance, “The Parade,” written in Provincetown and set on the dunes, premiered at the inaugural festival in 2006. From the start, the Williams festival has used locations all over town as its stage: living rooms, porches, wharves, churches, vacant stores, bars, hotel rooms and more. One year, a New Orleans-style funeral parade, mourners carrying a coffin and playing brass instruments, snaked its way down Ryder Street.

For 2017 an all-male South African production of Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” will wallow in a shallow tank of water at the Wharf House at Provincetown Marina, where the same South African company will perform Williams’ “Sweet Bird of Youth” — like “Hamlet,” a play of inaction and hesitation. Shakespeare’s pirate adventure “Pericles,” performed by the Die-Cast ensemble from Philadelphia, will be staged aboard the 66-foot model of the Rose Dorothea in the Provincetown Public Library. The absurdist Williams comedy “The Gnädiges Fräulein,” a production of Texas Tech University in Lubbock that is directed by festival executive director Jef-Hall Flavin, will be performed at the Provincetown Theater. The slapstick clown act “Dumb Show and Noise” will be at St. Peter the Apostle Church, and for a new edition of “Hotel Plays,” scenes from Williams and Shakespeare works will be performed by the Spectrum Theatre Ensemble of Providence, R.I., in various rooms of the Gifford House. (For the full four-day schedule of shows and locales, go to twptown.org.)

“From the beginning, we wanted to establish Williams as a reference point for other playwrights and writers,” Kaplan says. “Because we are aware of Williams, we can see things in Shakespeare that we didn’t see before. Because of Williams, we see the compassion for those who are outcasts in society.”

Kaplan is proud of how things have evolved. “The festival has developed a community over the years. They come from all over and follow the actors in different roles. I truly believe that theater is a communal art. It’s the continuity that keeps me excited.”

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