



Williams fest celebrated rebirth and renewal

By Susan Rand Brown / Banner Correspondent

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Stormy Shakespearean weather — “Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!” — descended on Provincetown as the 12th annual Tennessee Williams Theater Festival welcomed a global community of theater artists last weekend. The point-counterpoint pairing of Shakespeare and Williams presented two masters of low comedy and ethereal verse, violence and forgiveness, separation and connection, heartbreak and the will to continue.

A bearded Ophelia (Matthew Baldwin), arm raised and torso submerged in water, was the striking image on the festival brochure. Required in Shakespeare’s day, men in women’s roles held sway throughout the festival. Everett Quinton played a sinewy, love-spurned Cleopatra, his trademark red goatee enhancing an antic performance. There was Hamlet’s mother, Queen Gertrude (Callum Tilbury), whose portrayal was charmingly flirtatious with a steely edge.

Intentional overlapping of lines contributed to an eerie, ear-pleasing sense of overhearing, with plays by both authors speaking to one another in venues from the comfortable Provincetown Theater to the rugged Wharf House, which was fitted this year with high-tech lighting (program notes give a special shout-out to Provincetown electrician Carlos Silva).

Throughout there was much ado about water and fish. The two-person clown act “Dumb Show and Noise,” presented at St. Peter the Apostle, was staged to be water-laden. Ponchos placed on seats alerted audiences to running gags modeled on the Marx Brothers and Sid Caesar. Watching Jay Stewart and Mike Smith toss wet fish back and forth had its moments: at each soaking the gag grew sillier.

“The Gnädiges Fräulein,” a seldom seen dark comedy, was populated with Williams’ inebriated, antic fishmongers. A bawdy reference to women perfumed with eau de fish surfaced in “Pericles.” And the spare, black set for “Hamlet” was rimmed by a river of flowing water which turned silver under the lights.

Shakespeare's "Hamlet" and Williams' "Sweet Bird of Youth," both performed at the Wharf House by renowned Abrahamse & Meyer Productions from South Africa, was an inspired pairing. If "Sweet Bird" was overly long, the staging and costumes were remarkable, and the gender-fluid casting worked wonders: kudos to Callum Tilbury's Aunt Nonnie, and Matthew Baldwin's Heavenly. When the actors reappeared in "Hamlet," the magic was amplified.

The festival's most valuable player award goes to Marcel Meyer, who moved seamlessly from a Southern drawl as Chance Wayne in "Sweet Bird" to what we think of as Shakespearean English as Hamlet, initially sly and bawdy, only to throw himself over the drowned Ophelia's casket. On Sunday morning, in "Antony and Cleopatra," Meyer commanded the stage as Octavius Caesar — imperious, impetuous warrior and lover.

"Pericles," produced by Die-Cast, the company that brought O'Neill's "Hairy Ape" in 2016 and is known for its choreographed moves, was set inside the hull of the Rose Dorothea, permanently dry-docked in the children's room of the Provincetown Public Library. Though Shakespeare is believed to have worked on this play, its language is often clumsy; nevertheless, the vivid performances held the attention of large audiences. Hannah Van Sciver was outstanding as the long lost and much put-upon Marina, oasis of purity in a fallen world.

"The Hotel Plays" introduced the ambitious Spectrum Theater Ensemble to town. Engaging scenes from Williams' "Mr. Paradise" and "Talk to Me Like the Rain and Let Me Listen" were coupled with scenes from Shakespeare's "Cymbeline" and "Comedy of Errors." In "Talk to Me," with Teddy Lytle as Man and Madison Weinoffer as Woman, Williams' theme of longing for a spiritual home always beyond reach was portrayed with lasting resonance.

"The Gnädiges Fräulein," performed by Texas Tech University and directed by Jef Hall-Flavin, the festival's executive director, showed a side of Williams' late work that recalls Ionesco's Theater of the Absurd. The Fräulein herself was a perfectly cast Francine Segal, rooming house denizen with bandaged eyes, holding on to newspaper clippings of former glory. She's another in Williams' long line of survivors, abstractly and skillfully sketched.

“Antony and Cleopatra,” directed by festival curator David Kaplan and staged in Town Hall, was a labor of love, fulfilling Kaplan’s vision of setting it within Provincetown’s seat of government, using an international cast. Festival themes of appearance and reality, love and lust, comedy and tragedy were played out in an exhilarating, exhausting hour and half (Part II is promised for 2018). Players from the National Theater of Ghana were visible throughout, performing and seated on stage. Abena Takyi, vibrant in “Ten Blocks on the Camino Real,” staged at the Bas Relief, was especially glamorous as one of three Cleopatras.

The Ghanaian troupe traveled the farthest and its members showed the festival’s biggest heart, notably the doomed boxer Kilroy (Isaac Fiagbor), whose “heart the size of a baby’s head” proved his undoing. After the staging of his funeral, he too got up and danced. In the words of Williams, “Make voyages! — Attempt them! — There is nothing else...”



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