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[Shakespeare and Tennessee Williams Check Into the Gifford House](#)

September 20, 2017 5:00 am [0 comments](#) Views: 46



Madison Weinoffer and Teddy Little

Photo: Hannah Anderson

by Steve Desroches

If walls could talk... Atop Mill Hill on Carver Street sits the Gifford House, home to the popular Porchside Bar and Club Purgatory as well as the hotel itself. At over 150 years old the Gifford House has seen a lot in Provincetown, so much so that its history is full of myths and legends as well as the uncertainty of just exactly when it was built. That all builds mystery and bit of fable, which Provincetown adores. The Gifford House is a leading character in the ongoing narrative of the Cape tip's story.

Full of personality and history, the Gifford House caught the eye of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival. One of the hallmarks of the annual late September event is producing performances in nontraditional spaces. In 2013 the Gifford House hosted a landmark production of the rarely performed Williams play *The Mutilated* (starring Mink Stole and Penny Arcade), in which the audience moved throughout the building in a most effective and dramatic way. But what put both the Gifford House and the festival itself on the theatrical map was in 2009 when it hosted *The Hotel Plays*, in which the audience moved from room to room to see a variety of short plays set in hotels rooms. It was a smashing success then as well as in 2011 when it was done again with new plays. The environmental theater presentation returns again this year as *The Hotel Plays* includes four works: two by Williams and two by William Shakespeare, building on what has become a popular element of modern day theater, creating stages in unexpected places and ways.

“It’s hard to program a 12-minute play or a 20- minute play,” says Jef Hall-Flavin, executive director of the Festival. “Using spaces in unconventional ways helped us with that problem. It made the festival part of the zeitgeist.”

Environmental theater, and its artistic cousins, immersive and interactive, have become timely forms of production, says Clay Martin who, along with Erin Cawley, co-directs *The Hotel Plays*. While it does make for an unforgettable and unique experience, the driving force between environmental theater is often the increasingly high production costs of producing a show in a traditional theater. Moving to old factories, outdoor spaces, and in this case, a hotel, make it much, much cheaper to produce. In addition, with the rise of technology, which seems to be pushing people farther apart rather than bringing us together, creating a performance where the audience has a communal experience helps break viewers from any digital shackles. It's live, it's intimate, and it's immediate.



Spectrum Theatre Ensemble

Both native Texans and master's degree candidates at Texas Tech University, Martin and Cawley are presenting *Mr. Paradise* and *Talk to Me Like the Rain and Let Me Listen...* by Williams and scenes from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* and *The Comedy of Errors* performed by the Spectrum Theatre Ensemble in association with Trinity Rep in Providence, Rhode Island. Both alumni of the Tennessee Williams Institute, a graduate-level immersion course that takes place during the festival, Martin and Cawley have presented work at the festival before and both describe the annual theater festival as transformative.

When it comes to the challenges of directing four different plays to be performed for different times with a guided, yet roaming audience in a hotel, the thrill of live theater is all the more immediate. "It absolutely takes a lot of layering and a bit of trial and error," says Cawley. "We love the plays and the anonymity and intimacy that is created when it's done in such close proximity to the audience. That's central to the pieces."

The immersive experience begins immediately as the Gifford House is transformed into a flophouse in 1970s New Orleans. In between the four plays done in different rooms there are mini-performances in the hallways to further drive the feeling of being invisible voyeurs floating around a divey hotel in a gritty part of the Big Easy. But what may surprise audiences most are the parallels between the work of Williams and those of Shakespeare, despite having been written nearly 350 years apart. The lyricism, the universality, the rhythm of the words as well as the continual references to water in all four plays provide an opportunity to delve deep into these stories that so quickly glide from comedy to tragedy and back.



Concept sketch by Travis Clark

The Hotel Plays are performed by actors in the Providence-based Spectrum Theatre Ensemble, a group of artists that are both neurotypical and on the autism spectrum founded by Martin along with PJ Miller earlier this year. Their production of *The Hotel Plays* premiered at Barnaby Castle in Providence just a week before bringing it here to Provincetown. The company has worked hard not just exploring the words of these two preeminent playwrights but also in their performance that leaves no room for error, as the audience will literally be able to feel the heat from their bodies and their breath as they exhale in this one-of-a-kind theatrical experience.

“You’re a voyeur not just in the room with these characters but also into their minds,” says Martin. “You’re that close.”

The Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival presents The Hotel Plays at the Gifford House, 9 Carver St. for five performances Thursday, September 21 through Sunday, September 24. For specific showtimes and tickets (\$35/students \$26.25) go to the box office at Sage Inn, 336 Commercial St., call 866.789.TENN, Ext. 1 or visit twptown.org.

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