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## The ptownie Review: Sweet Bird of Youth

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The wind shaking the Wharf Theater was impressive at one of the opening shows of the Tennessee Williams Festival, but not nearly as impressive as what was going on inside: Abrahamse and Meyer Productions' take on Sweet Bird of Youth.

One expects, by now, to be enthralled by anything the South African company brings to Provincetown—I've been to every play they've done at the festival and have been consistently impressed—but this was one of their best. The spare set design, the actors' exquisite timing, and the deft balance of humor and pathos made for three hours of exceptional theatre.

Marcel Meyer is, of course, brilliant as Chance Wayne (let's face it, I'd pay good money to listen to Meyer recite a list of vegetables); he manages to stay just this side of sleazy, and the audience is consequently empathetic rather than dismissive of the aspiring actor and southern gigolo. Chance eloquently echoes Williams' own fears about aging and being forgotten. "In a life like mine," he says, "you just can't stop, you know, can't take time out between steps, you've got to keep going right on up from one thing to the other. Once you drop out, it leaves you and goes on without you and you're washed up." Meyer's Chance has us almost believing that he does in fact have a chance, still, to grab that ring before it's too late, even while it becomes increasingly apparent that he never really had what it takes.

Princess Kosmonopolis, as played by Fiona Ramsay, is quite simply a delight. She brings an unexpected elegance and wry humor to the role that lifts her lines into something more profound; she makes the audience look for another, deeper meaning behind her words. It would be easy to play the princess as merely an aging alcoholic; Ramsay turns her into someone who, despite her fears, amnesia, and self-centered need for attention, is still someone you'd want to have a drink with. And her costumes are perfect.

This summer Junot Diaz spoke eloquently about the difficulties inherent in writing in an "age of alternative facts." Williams found himself in a similar situation when he wrote *Sweet Bird of Youth*: in 1955, just four years before the play's opening, black teenager Emmett Till was murdered in Mississippi for allegedly flirting with a white woman. Setting this play in the deep South and having a character obsessed with "racial and sexual purity," Williams was addressing audiences that might not find the figure of Boss Finley offensive. For audiences in 2017, the parallels between Williams' racist politician and America's racist president are clear: any of the boss' lines could conceivably have come straight off Trump's Twitter feed.

His theatricality is dazzling. The sadness of two people grasping at what they think will make them happy—being young, being acclaimed, being loved—is layered skillfully through Williams' monologues, especially those that address the audience. The town operates as a chattering judgmental Greek chorus backing the lead characters. Religious themes of guilt and expiation are everywhere, making the ending somehow inescapable.

And yet, despite the seriousness of the context and Williams' own angst about aging, this play is *funny*. Part of that is due to Williams' lines and the stage directions sewn into them, but a lot of it is down to Fred Abrahamse's brilliant direction and how the actors have responded to it.

Watching a production of this caliber is a true treat for festival audiences. See it.

Performances:

Friday Sept 22, 2:30 pm – 5:30 pm

Saturday Sept 23, 8:00 pm – 11:00 pm

Sunday Sept 24, 1:00 pm – 4:00 pm

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