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Theater Review: Tennessee Williams' "Talisman Roses" — Early Healing

SEPTEMBER 30, 2018 — [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

This is an opportunity to take in the early stirrings of Tennessee Williams' talent as a playwright.

Talisman Roses by Tennessee Williams. Directed by Marsha Mason. Staged by The Collective NY, presented by the Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, Provincetown, MA, closed.





By Robert Israel

In 1937, a 26-year-old Tom Williams (not yet self-invented as Tennessee) authored a script that fictionalized an event he had painfully witnessed: the admittance of his sister Rose to a mental institution for schizophrenia. He produced five drafts and titled the one-act *Talisman Roses*

Talisman Roses refers to the act of using a flower as a magical charm, in the hopes that its curative properties — with their intoxicating scent and resplendent color — will leaven deep sorrow and restore health. The script remained unpublished and was archived in a Texas library following Williams's death in 1983. Williams scholars knew of the manuscript, but it took the efforts of director/impresario David Kaplan, curator of the Tennessee Williams Theater Festival in Provincetown, to put the script on stage. *Talisman Roses* is the 12th world premiere of a Williams work at the Festival.

Publication of posthumous works by celebrated authors has become a trend in recent years. Take, for example, Ernest Hemingway's short story "A Room on the Garden Side," found among his papers in the Kennedy Library in Boston; it finally appeared in print this past summer, 62 years after



There are questions to be asked about the worthiness of publishing material authors set aside for a host of reasons (known and unknown). Are their exercises in exploitation or curiosity? Or does the work measure up to the best of the work in the author's canon?

In the case of *Talisman Roses*, the answer is yes. This is an opportunity to take in the early stirrings of Williams' talent as a playwright. Many of the elements of his skill as a dramatic storyteller, particularly his uncanny ability to delve deeply into the human psyche, are present. In this satisfying production, insightfully directed by Marsha Mason, three actresses are given opportunities to be captivating and engaging. Yes, one yearns to see more, to learn more, to witness further character development. The script is stripped down to a fault: yet, in a dreamy way, it is packed with enough raw emotion to make it a worthwhile addition to the Williams canon.



Amanda Plummer. Photo: courtesy of Tennessee Williams Theater Festival.

1937 was a year of miracles for the young playwright, but it was also a year of horror. His sister's hospitalization and subsequent diagnosis devastated him. In *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh*, biographer John Lahr describes Williams's decision to pursue writing during this pivotal time as an escape "in which he was able to turn himself and the torture of his family into an event of a different kind. In playwriting, he found a strategy both to hide himself away and to vent his murderous feelings." Williams, defined playwriting as an act of "outer oblivion and inner violence" — these are themes he would revisit throughout his career.

In *Talisman Roses*, however, that violence is understated, muted. As Ethel, actress Amanda Plummer deftly balances the character's outrage at how mentally ill people are treated with an acceptance of things as they are. Celebrated as a performer who skillfully taps into nervous energy, Plummer suggests the angst beneath the surface exasperation: we see her character wrestling with layers of difficult emotions. She is paired wonderfully with Maureen Burns as Aunt Lily, is a portrait of mid-Western civility and kindness, accented by each dipping arc of her sewing needle. The character of Ida, the mentally ill patient at the asylum, is played with spectral levelness by Jessie-Ann Khelman



We see the figure as a ghost slinking across the stage, which adds a mystical, haunting quality to the work.

It is challenging to imagine how Williams might have developed this one-act, had he chosen to work on it further. At the very least, the provocative script sheds light on his other plays, most notably *Suddenly Last Summer*, which deals with violence, mental illness, an asylum, psychiatric intervention, and horror. Williams' "murderous feelings" came to Gothic fruition in that play. *Talisman Roses* embraces tenderness by choosing restraint, an interesting choice by a young dramatist. It would make for an illuminating double-bill with *Suddenly Last Summer*.

Robert Israel writes about theater, travel, and the arts, and is a member of Independent Reviewers of New England (IRNE). He can be reached at risrael_97@yahoo.com.

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