

# With Mason and Plummer aboard, Tennessee Williams Festival to stage another premiere

By Loren King

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Neither Marsha Mason nor Amanda Plummer had ever heard of “Talisman Roses.” But when the two stage and screen veterans learned that this early, never-produced short play by Tennessee Williams would have its world premiere at the 13th annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival, both jumped at the chance to be part of it.

Mason, now a stage director but best-known as a four-time Oscar-nominated actress and frequent collaborator with her former husband, the late Neil Simon, will direct “Talisman Roses.” Williams wrote the play, about a young woman released from an institution into the care of her aunts, in 1937, around the time that his beloved older sister Rose was in an asylum.

Mason, interviewed by telephone just days after Simon died on Aug. 26 at age 91, says there are parallels in how both playwrights mined memories about family. “Some of Neil’s best material came from the distillation of looking back at his family. That’s what Tennessee Williams started to do with this play, very early. He started to investigate these three very different female characters and [explore] the family tension. It’s a beautiful little play, like the crystal unicorn that Laura loves [in “The Glass Menagerie”].



HANNES MAGERSTAEDT/GETTY IMAGES

**Marsha Mason will direct “Talisman Roses.”**

Tony Award-winner Plummer has frequently performed in Williams's plays, including as Laura in "The Glass Menagerie" in a 1983 Broadway revival and starring as Hannah Jelkes last year in the American Repertory Theater's "The Night of the Iguana." (Mason had played Maxine Faulk in the 1996 Broadway revival of "Iguana.") Plummer was the guest of honor at the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival's gala fund-raiser in June which, she says, inspired her to return.

"I would have come back even if I didn't get an invitation to work on something," says Plummer, who also spoke by telephone. In "Talisman Roses," she plays Ethel, who with her older sister become caretakers for their niece after she's released from the state asylum. "There are allusions to everything in Williams's life [in his plays]. The genesis for ["Talisman Roses"] was his ever-changing relatability and perspective on this relationship with his sister and the psychiatric mishandling. But there's also his immense imagination, and it's the combination that makes [his plays] universal," she says.

Plummer, who played a version of Rose in Williams's rarely staged "The Two-Character Play" off-Broadway in 2013, says directors and journalists tend to focus on the autobiographical aspects of Williams's work. "It's not that interesting to play. People are aware of that connection because of what people write, but it's not something you can act," she says.

Plummer was to meet Mason for the first time during rehearsals in Provincetown. "I like going in with a clean slate. I'm excited to look into her face. I've been a fan of hers for a long time," Plummer says.

It was festival curator David Kaplan who asked Mason to direct.

"As I read through the drafts, I saw that [Williams] had revised the play in spelling, word choice, word order, and punctuation so it was more and more in dialect. I thought about having someone direct it who would know the sound from the period or who had heard it from their older relatives when they were a child." That's when he thought of Mason. "She's from St. Louis and of an age where she would have heard the sound Williams is writing for," he says.

The Williams family moved from Clarksdale, Miss., to St. Louis in 1918 when Williams and his sister Rose were children.

“I never thought of [St. Louis] as a Southern city until I left and got perspective,” says Mason who lived there until 1964. “There is a strong racist feeling there, still. At least when I was growing up, there was so much ‘white flight.’ It’s like the city lost its identity when the steamships went out of transportation. Chicago moved on to be a bustling center and St. Louis lost its identity for many years. There is a sense of being lost there, of being trapped.”

“Talisman Roses,” which will be staged at the Provincetown Theater, is the festival’s 12th world premiere of a Tennessee Williams play. Other highlights this season include “The Rose Tattoo” at Fishermen Hall, starring festival favorite Irene Glezos. She plays the Sicilian widow Serafina, a seamstress who’s shut herself in her cottage on the Gulf Coast as she mourns her late husband.

Also at Fishermen Hall is a staged reading of “The Snagglepuss Chronicles,” based on Mark Russell’s DC Comics series, “Exit Stage Left: The Snagglepuss Chronicles.” The comic book reimagines Snagglepuss, Hanna-Barbera’s animated pink mountain lion from the early 1960s, as a droll 1950s Southern playwright in the Williams mold. The production will be directed by Brenna Geffers and performed by the Die-Cast ensemble from Philadelphia, a company long associated with the festival.

## PROVINCETOWN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS THEATER FESTIVAL

Provincetown, Sept. 27-30. Various venues. Tickets and full schedule: 866-789-8366,

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