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Entertainment & Life

Characters engage in 'wishful thinking' for Williams festival

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It feels as if everybody is waiting for something to happen, say officials at the **Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival**, so they decided to reflect that feeling in a "Wishful Thinking" theme for this weekend's event.

In what curator David Kaplan called the festival's "most tightly organized programming" perhaps in the festival's 13-year history, each of the more than a dozen Williams and related plays tie together around that theme. "If (the festival) was a piece of music, everything is in tune," he says.

That theme of waiting and hoping even applies to an unusual reading of a new comic book based on a Saturday-morning cartoon character re-imagined as Williams in the McCarthy era, officials say.

Organizers start planning programming a couple of years early, Kaplan says in a phone interview, so that feeling of needing faith that all will be well isn't a sudden condition.

"After the (2016 presidential) election, and even before ... we were all waiting. I was in Turkey, I was in Ghana, I was in South Africa (to talk to companies about festival work), and all of these places were waiting for something to happen," he says. "All of them were going through significant elections ... (and) in all of these places, we're all still waiting. ... We all have a feeling that something's going to happen and we don't know what it is. ... And that's a condition that people have lived with for a long time."

"While 'Wishful Thinking' speaks to our present condition as Americans living in an unstable world," agrees Patrick Falco, board of directors president, in a welcome note for the festival program, "it also reflects the plays we are presenting this year by Tennessee Williams, Anton Chekhov (who wrote "Uncle

Vanya” in 1898, just as Russia was entering its explosive, revolutionary new century), and Federico García Lorca (whose “Doña Rosita the Spinster” was written in 1935 just before the Spanish Civil War).”

The 2018 festival, he adds, is “also the year where every play ends on a happy note, or hopeful enough to appear happy in a year of ‘Wishful Thinking.’”

The Williams pieces being presented this year reflect the breadth of his career. Among them: “The Rose Tattoo” (from 1951), a romantic comedy about a Sicilian widow and her daughter, starring Irene Glezos and produced by Moon Lake Productions from New York City; and the world premiere of the one-act “Talisman Roses” (from 1937), about a young woman released from an asylum, directed by four-time Oscar-nominated actress Marsha Mason, starring Tony- and Emmy-winning actress Amanda Plummer and produced by the Collective NY (in a program with five other world-premiere short plays on the theme of waiting in the theater).

Later Williams plays are the ghost story “Will Mr. Merriwether Return From Memphis?” by Pensacola Little Theater from Florida, a production that includes dance and music to tell a story about a seance that conjures various ghosts; and “Some Problems for the Moose Lodge,” about parents whose son moves in with them along with his pregnant, holy-roller fiancée (which The Collective NY will pair with “Steps Must Be Gentle,” a fantasia about poet Hart Crane).

“Part of what we’re doing this year is we’re showing a real breadth of Williams,” Kaplan says, “and the continuity of his concerns throughout his career. ... He has a vision and you can see the continuity of that vision throughout his life.”

The importance of faith, a la “wishful thinking,” was strong in Williams’ work, Kaplan says, and he believes that was influenced by Chekhov. So a new translation of the Chekhov’s “Uncle Vanya,” which premiered in 1988, is part of the festival – produced by Arb Arts from Ann Arbor, Michigan, as “environmental theater,” with live music.

Waiting for something to happen “is how Chekhov lived,” Kaplan says. When “Vanya,” about a summer at a country estate, was written, “they knew something was going to happen. They didn’t know what it was going to be, but they knew it couldn’t last the way it was going on.”

Two other playwrights Kaplan says were influenced by that feeling of faith in uncertainty are also represented at the festival. Samuel Beckett's "Company" has been adapted as a sound rather than sight experience by Lane Savadove and will be presented by Egopo Classic Theater from Philadelphia. Audience members will be asked to literally represent the story's body lying in the dark by lying in the dark themselves and listening to live violin music, among other things.

Federico Garcia Lorca's "Dona Rosita the Spinster" is a "poetic drama" about a woman waiting for her fiance to return, produced with an ensemble of children and adults from Lubbock, Texas, and including songs and dances with a harpist and guitarist playing classical Spanish music.

Other unusual theater experiences at the festival will include a mashup of Saturday-morning cartoons and Williams. "The SnagglePuss Chronicles" will be a staged reading by Philadelphia company Die-Cast of Mark Russell's "Exit Stage Left" comic-book miniseries, released by DC Entertainment this year. The idea began with Russell sending tweets as Snagglepuss – a pink mountain lion – in the voice of Williams, and the series reimagines Hanna-Barbera's classic cartoon character as a discreetly gay playwright under attack by the House Un-American Activities Committee. Snagglepuss will be played by festival regular Jeremy Lawrence, and Broadway actor John Treacy Egan will play Huckleberry Hound.

The festival will also premiere a "first draft" of "Menageries of Angels," a site-specific interweaving of ghost stories based on the title and a quote from Williams' "Something Cloudy, Something Clear," created by Brenna Geffers and presented by Die-Cast. The show will invite audience members to follow five tales featuring figures stuck between life and death. Audience members will be able to physically roam to follow characters that interest them in any order, or simply remain in one location and watch who passes through.

Beyond those shows, classes and parties, Kaplan says there's one more feature of the festival that should attract someone to participate: the rest of the audience.

"This is a really savvy audience, and it's a delight," he says. They're "knowledgeable," he says, and returning playgoers can connect experiences and performances from year to year. The quality of the audience "is why I tell people to come. You can imagine the plays, but the conversations that go on before, during and after are also part of the experience."