



CAPE COD TIMES

Entertainment & Life

Mason, Plummer help Provincetown festival debut 'new' Williams play

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Posted Sep 23, 2018 at 3:00 AM

Marsha Mason, Amanda Plummer helping to bring 'Talisman Roses' to audience for first time.

David Kaplan only had a title: "Talisman Roses."

Having seen a few references to those words in scholars' work and book footnotes, the curator of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival and author of a book on Williams' Cape Cod connection asked about "Talisman Roses" when he traveled last winter to take his latest look at the Texas archives for many of the playwright's early papers.

What Kaplan found was a one-act play that had never been performed.

Williams had written it in 1937, when he was in his mid-20s at the University of Iowa, and was visiting his older sister in an asylum. In the script, a young woman is released from an asylum to live with her sister and their aunt, and is restored to sanity, according to Kaplan.

Kaplan felt the play perfectly fit, serendipitously, with this year's already-planned "wishful thinking" theme – so "Talisman Roses" will have its world premiere Thursday as the 2018 festival opens, and have repeat performances through the weekend.

"Other people had looked at (the script), but I don't think anyone had looked at the five drafts with that much attention, and I don't think anyone had researched it," Kaplan says in a phone interview. "So I can't say that I discovered ("Talisman Roses"), but I can say that I looked at it closely enough to realize it was not only more than stageworthy but that it should be staged."

Directing the play as part of The Collective NY's debut at the festival is four-time Oscar nominee Marsha Mason ("The Goodbye Girl," "Cinderella Liberty"). She was attracted by this opportunity with an unknown Williams work as well as its roots in her hometown of St. Louis. Kaplan brought the play to her at a friend's recommendation because, he says, as Williams revised the play, "he made it more and more Midwestern, and there were some subtle changes in the spelling, subtle changes in the word order, subtle changes in the vocabulary that made it really specific to the Midwest. ... I wanted someone who would really know the music of that."

Mason, who lived in St. Louis through college graduation, found success and acclaim as an actress in the 1970s and early '80s, particularly with roles written by then-husband Neil Simon. She later moved to New Mexico for decades, largely out of the theater/film business, until returning to New York City in 2014. Now 76, Mason has taken on a variety of TV and stage roles in the past few years, but also enjoys the directing end of the business.

"I was thrilled to get the opportunity to direct Tennessee Williams," she said last week during a post-rehearsal interview at the Veterans Memorial Community Center in Provincetown. "Especially an early piece, all the way from the '30s, was really exciting to me – to investigate and work on a piece of material like that."

Two actresses from The Collective star in the show – Maureen Shannon as the aunt and Jessie-Ann Kohlman as the young woman released from the asylum – and the third cast member is Tony- and Emmy-award-winning actress Amanda Plummer ("Agnes of God" on Broadway, "Pulp Fiction" on screen), a frequent Williams interpreter on stage who in June was awarded the festival's annual TENN award for her career work.

Mason and Plummer, also at the Provincetown rehearsal, said they are both drawn to Williams' work in part because of how he writes women's roles. They are intrigued by the glimpses they see in "Talisman Roses" that foreshadow later classic Williams characters.

"The complexity of the women he writes (is) very unusual, and he writes with such compassion, and such understanding of the feminine, I think," Mason says. "Especially when you look at Laura and the mother (in "The Glass Menagerie") and Blanche and the sister (in "A Streetcar Named Desire") – they're very

complex relationships as well as all kind of parts of (Williams himself). In this piece (“Talisman Roses”), it’s the early, early stages of both Laura and Blanche and ‘Suddenly Last Summer’ – there’s a little bit of the beginnings, I think, of those fulfilled plays that he wrote later.”

Plummer – who played Laura, also inspired by Williams’ sister, in “The Glass Menagerie” on Broadway – cautions, though, that the connections to later work are subtle, and she doesn’t want festival audience members to watch “Talisman Roses” expecting to see Williams’ better-known women. She praises Williams’ curiosity and use of language, calling his writing “vibrant and very much alive on the page,” and she’s interested in how his work shows how he was constantly still developing as a writer.

“Even in this piece, it’s strangely familiar Williams, in an odd way,” Mason noted. “The rhythms, the thoughts, the characterizations ... he wrote so autobiographically, it’s just really interesting to me. ... His rhythm and his depiction of women to me gets fully realized in the other plays, but it’s very apparent here, also.”

Kaplan saw the parallels between “Talisman Roses” and Williams’ later work, too. From reviewing the drafts from Texas, Kaplan recognized that Williams eventually changed the ending to something more ambiguous – similar to how he ended “Streetcar” and other plays.

The new script “was a really good example of needing to perform the play because the meaning of it would be decided by the audience,” he says. “This was a pattern throughout Williams’ (work), and it was pretty clear to me that that’s what this ending was. That we were seeing what could be a happy ending or perhaps was an illusion of a happy ending, and that was left for the audience to decide. And I think that was pretty sophisticated.”

“Talisman Roses” is the 12th world premiere of a Williams script by the Provincetown festival in its 13-year history, and Kaplan says there’s always a question of why an undiscovered play should be brought to life long (in this case, 35 years) after Williams’ death.

“The reason for this one was pretty clear cut – it needed an audience in order to complete its meaning,” he says.

Because “Talisman Roses” is a one-act, it’s being presented as part of a full program with “The Waiting Plays,” a collection of five short plays specifically about “waiting in the theater.” One of those is “How It Will End” by Eric Marlin, a student at the University of Iowa, the same school where Williams was enrolled when he wrote “Talisman Roses.”

Kaplan says he’d hoped to work with the university for a while, and the connection this year with the “Talisman Roses” program is a full-circle moment he likes to see.

Both Mason and Plummer had not heard of the Provincetown festival until this year, but now say they are excited to stay to watch as much of the other work presented this week as possible.