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## Make 'Em Laugh: Talking Tennessee Williams with Director Rory Pelsue

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Rory Pelsue

Out director Rory Pelsue directs two very different plays by Tennessee Williams at the Tennessee Williams Theater Festival in Provincetown this weekend. EDGE spoke to Pelsue about Williams and his double-bill.

Out director Rory Pelsue hasn't been to Provincetown since he was a kid — a surprising thing to learn about the Massachusetts native. But this week he heads to the Cape Cod resort where he's taking part in the Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, a four-day event now in its tenth year that celebrates the playwright whom Pelsue (and many others) believe is the greatest American playwright of the 20th century.

(To learn more about the festival and to see this year's schedule, [visit the Festival's website.](#))

He also was one of the most prolific, who wrote continuously for fifty years even after he fell out of critical favor in the 1960s. The breadth of his work has given the festival the opportunity over the years to present many of his lesser known works.

This year's festival, called "Wishful Thinking," is no exception — with the first performance of his one-act "Talisman Rose" with Amanda Plummer, directed by Marsha Mason and the double-bill that Pelsue is directing: "Some Problems for the Moose Lodge" and "Steps Must Be Gentle."

The two plays couldn't be less alike. "Moose Lodge" is a farce, one of the few in Williams' canon; while "Steps" is a meditative work about the poet Hart Crane that examines death and the afterlife. Under Pelsue's direction, the plays are being performed by the New York City performance troupe The Collective NY.

Pelsue recently received his MFA in directing from the Yale School of Drama, where he received the Julian Milton Kaufman Memorial Prize for directing. At Yale, Rory directed "Passion," "Tent Revival," "Othello," "Bluebeard's Wife" and "Cloud People," and assisted James Bundy on "Assassins" at Yale Repertory Theater. He also served as the Associate Artistic Director of Yale Cabaret's 50th Anniversary Season, where he directed "The Apple Tree" and "And Tell Sad Stories of the Death of Queens." In addition Pelsue was artistic director of Oxbridge Opera, a UK-based company that specialized in rarely-heard editions of Gilbert and Sullivan opera.

EDGE spoke to Pelsue recently as he prepared to head to Provincetown — a locale that Williams lived in during his early years — for the festival.



Tennessee Williams

## Beautifully drawn

**EDGE:** You are directing a double-bill "Some Problems For The Moose Lodge" and "Steps Must Be Gentle." How did you get involved this production?

**Rory Pelsue:** I just graduated from the Yale School of Drama and David Kaplan (who curates the Williams festival) had come to see a show I directed there and he knew from someone else that I had an interest in Tennessee Williams and asked me to do it.

**EDGE:** Did you know the plays?

**Rory Pelsue:** I had not heard of them at all. The first play is about the American poet Hart Crane and I knew that Williams was a huge Crane lover. And the second play I did not know at all, but I did know the full-length version of "Moose Lodge" called "House Not Meant to Stand."

**EDGE:** What was it about "Moose Lodge" that you responded to?

**Rory Pelsue:** Like in all of Williams' plays, his characters are beautifully drawn and complex. What's unusual about it is that Williams trying a formal departure, which is a farce. This isn't the #1 thing you think of with Tennessee Williams. The other thing that is interesting is that he wrote it right towards the end of his life in the 1980s. He later developed it into his last full-length play. I think it is interesting to look at it as the writing of someone who is older, someone who is dying. There are a lot of older characters who talk about their physical ailments and their bodies falling apart, which I find very interesting.



## A close-knit group

**EDGE:** There is a critical consensus that Williams' later work is lesser than what he wrote before 1960. Do you find that true?

**Rory Pelsue:** I don't. It's a tricky question. Did he write a play as good as "Streetcar" or "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" after those plays? Maybe not, but nor did anyone else because I think he is the 20th century's greatest playwright. I actually think his work is really rich throughout his career and deserves to be looked at and celebrated.

**EDGE:** How did you get interested in directing as a career?

**Rory Pelsue:** I think it just had to do with loving theater and going to the theater. At one point I

## Tennessee Williams in Provincetown

realized I love being in the audience and so much of directing is watching. I think I had an interest in the big picture of a theater event.

**EDGE:** What is it like working with The Collective NY?

**Rory Pelsue:** What is great about it is that, like its name suggests, they are a very close-knit group, so they know each other really well. They feel comfortable with each other, but also will hold each other accountable. It has been really fun joining them and working in a kind-of, many of come out of the Actors Studio, which is the American descendent of Stanislavski and the Method. So the way they work together resembles how actors worked together in the Lee Strasberg studio back when Tennessee Williams was writing. So I see an interesting continuity there.

**EDGE:** Like you say, Tennessee Williams isn't known for comedy. Is "Moose Lodge" funny?

**Rory Pelsue:** Yes, it is funny. It is very funny. Apparently, Williams use to get kicked out of Broadway theaters of shows he wrote because he laughed too loudly when ushers didn't know who he was. That's because everyone thought his plays so serious. But to my understanding, he thought all his plays were funny; and I think they are. He's an example of a witty person who uses language to enchant and seduce an audience. We don't think of Williams as witty like we do Noel Coward, but I think the use of language is really light when the circumstances of them is dark. And this play is funny in that it is one of his explicitly labeled comedies. There is a lot of physical comedy in it, and it is sit-com-like at times. I tell the actors is that it is the given circumstances of "The Cherry Orchard" with the tone of "All in the Family."



Tennessee Williams

## Gay resonances

b>**EDGE:** Why was it paired with the Hart Crane play?

**Rory Pelsue:** I think it is a really interesting pairing. David Kaplan (who curates the Festival) paired it. For both, the resonances and dissonances are interesting in that he wrote them at opposite ends of his career. The Hart Crane was written in 1947 when he was at the height of his powers. It was the same year as "Streetcar." And the other was written right at the end of his life. And there is a gay suicide in the plot of both plays and how in

one play gay sex is very flat and covered up, and in the other it is much more explicitly talked about. And both show Williams writing something stylistically different, "Moose Lodge" is an attempt at farce, while "Steps Must Be Gentle" is his only play that is about actual historical characters. It is also very abstract - it is almost a Talmudic argument in terms of it being about Hart Crane and his mother arguing their lives and loves and the circumstances of his death. It is very formal. It takes place in the afterlife. I think that is why they go well together. You see a lot of breadth in his career, and also the issues that obsessed him from birth to death.

**EDGE:** You mention that gay issues are addressed in both plays. Do you think Williams' commentary on gay issues are relevant? Have they stood the test of time?

**Rory Pelsue:** I am gay and I think they are relevant. I think any great writer, I am sure things might be different for these characters if they were living today. But the repression and expression of sexuality which Williams wrote about with such eloquence is I think an eternal part

of the human condition no matter who you are. It is no more dated than the issue of what will the landed gentry do in the suburbs of Moscow if you were reviving a Chekov play. So I think the play transcends that immediate topicality, but also I think the emotional landscape of sexuality - we see things a little bit differently now - but it is a totally recognizable world and I think it is foolhardy maybe to think we've come so far to think it is totally irrelevant to us.

**EDGE:** If you could speak to Tennessee Williams about these plays what would you say?

**Rory Pelsue:** I would ask him about comedy. I would want to buy him a drink and ask him what he thinks is funny in theater. Why does he think "Moose Lodge" is funny. What is humor to him? What makes you laugh? What makes you cry? How furiously should we take his characters? And what is our relationship with these characters meant to be?

*The double-bill of "Some Problems For The Moose Lodge" and "Steps Must Be Gentle" will be performed at the Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, which runs September 27 - 30 at various venues in Provincetown. For the complete schedule, [visit the Festival's website.](#))*

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