



Bess Rowen

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Ph.D. in Theatre and Performance, Visiting Assistant Professor at Villanova University, theatre-maker.

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## Wishful Thinking: The Provincetown Tennessee Williams 13th Annual Theater Festival, Part 1

For the past three years I have had the privilege of traveling to Cape Cod to see the theatrical offerings of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival. Unlike the two previous years, which both paired Williams's work with that of another playwright, the thirteenth annual festival instead thematically grouped plays around the theme of "Wishful Thinking." Joining the works of Williams were plays from Federico García Lorca, Samuel Beckett, and Anton Chekhov, along with a devised piece by festival-favorite Brenna Geffers and *The Snagglepuss Chronicles*, a comic-book character who has been recently rewritten with Tennessee Williams as the inspiration. There were some wonderful works presented this year, although I will say that the festival overall seemed slightly more uneven than it has to me in previous years. This is perhaps a result of my own wishful thinking, which is undoubtedly a result of the excellent work I have seen over the past two years. At least I seem to be on theme. Come with me as I take you through my festival days as I experienced them.



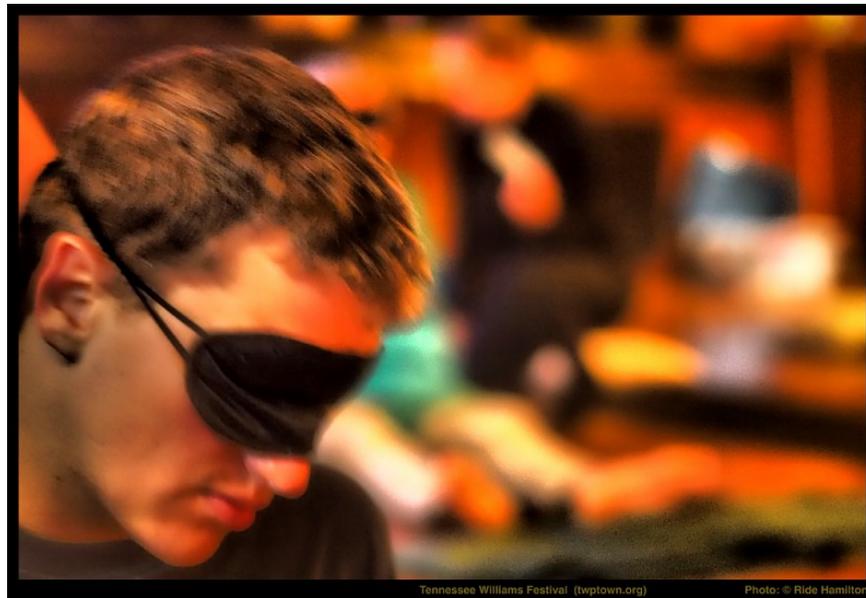
(from left to right) Fernando Ramirez, Malana Wilson, and Anna Ruth Aaron-DeSpain in Federico García Lorca's *Doña Rosita the Spinster*, directed by David Kaplan. Photo credit: Ride Hamilton.

### *Doña Rosita the Spinster*

The first time I read a Federico García Lorca play I was drawn to it for many of the same reasons I love reading works from Williams: beautiful and poetic writing, a love of symbols, and bravery in showing emotionally epic situations. I was surprised that this was the Lorca work chosen, as the “Wishful Thinking” involved in it is cast in a decidedly negative light. Doña Rosita’s fiancé has left but writes to her that he will return. He never does, and she eventually learns that he has married another while she has waited for him. Her story mirrors that of a specific type of rose her father grows in his garden called “rosa declinata” which has three stages of life in a single day. It is hard as coral and blood-red in the morning, whitening and fainting in the afternoon, and finally it fades at nightfall. The play itself is a complex and surreal fable commenting on the situations Spanish society asked women to endure in order to have any societal standing.

This complex play was a bold undertaking by festival director David Kaplan, but when I saw that it was in collaboration with Texas Tech University I was excited to see what would happen. Texas Tech has been behind some of my favorite work of previous years, and yet the majority of the cast was comprised of Atkins Middle School students with no acting experience. As a theatre-educator I am a huge proponent of using the arts as an educational tool. Had this been a

workshop production set aside from the major offerings of the festival I would be very excited about the benefits of such undertakings. However, as someone who respects this festival as a place where great theatre is shown, I found the quality of this production to be sorely lacking. I can get behind productions where the actors are trying but lack skill or direction, but I felt that the majority of the people on stage did not seem to want to be there at all. When there are so many actors who want to act, and who are interesting to watch, I cannot understand why more of Texas Tech's talented actors were not included in this cast. Anna Ruth Aaron-DeSpain was valiantly trying to keep things moving as *The Housekeeper*, but even she could not salvage a play that was honestly difficult to watch. I applaud the bold choice of taking a chance on a new idea, and yet quality, or at least desire to perform, ought to still matter. I know what director David Kaplan is capable of, as I've very much enjoyed his work in the past; and so, like Doña Rosita, I felt myself strung along only to be disappointed.



An audience member experiencing Samuel Beckett's *Company*, presented by EgoPo Classic Theater, directed by Lane Savadore. Photo credit: Ride Hamilton.

### *Company*

As *Doña Rosita the Spinster* was my first play of the festival, I walked over to Town Hall with somewhat lowered expectations. Upon arrival, I was handed a program explaining the rules of the space I was about to enter: I would be blindfolded, asked to remove my shoes and any hanging jewelry, and then I would be led into the space by my "angel."

Once in the space I would occasionally be touched and asked to move, which I could opt out of with specific hand movements. The group of around a dozen or so patrons and I were already filled with anticipation as we were brought into the waiting area. By the time we were blindfolded and led into our individual spaces I had completely forgotten about the experience of a few hours past and was fully ready for whatever EgoPo was planning for me. EgoPo Classic Theater hails from Philadelphia, and their production of *The Hairy Ape* at the 2016 festival is still one of my favorite productions of all time. After being led to a yoga mat and silently instructed to lie down on my back, the aural experience truly began. Beckett's words were so often meant for radio or darkness, and so this felt like the perfect way to experience them. *Company* is actually a novella, but the blurring of Samuel Beckett's genres means that there is very little difference between the writing in this work and his short plays, for example.

The narrative of the piece seems to be about the liminal moments around falling asleep. There are dreams, half-memories, and synesthetic experiences described in the text, the experience of which was heightened as the words echoed in the space. The lines were often spoken aloud by the voices of Maria Konstantinidis (Memory), Davey Strattan White (Intellect), Zach Valdez (Spirit), and Aiden McDonald (Body) before being repeated in a whisper by each of our individual angels. As my personal angel whispered to me she also moved my hands, arms, and occasionally indicated that I should move my entire body to more closely mirror the script. I found myself both incredibly relaxed and keenly alert, resting but also wondering what I would be asked to do next. (I will also say that the actor in me was slightly too eager to please; for example, I tried to stand up when asked to sit up, and actually crawled some steps instead of crawling in place.) My angel was very patient with me, so shout out to Adriana Santilli for being patient with me. The angels were all members of the Rowan University Theater and Dance department which is a testament to the excellent training happening there. When the experience was over we removed our blindfolds and shared milk and cookies with our angel. This was a wonderful experience as well, and the excitement in the room was obvious even before we were all led back to our belongings, still buzzing about what had just occurred. This piece was one of the absolute highlights of my festival experience and I have never actually experienced anything quite like it before. Director Lane Savadove did an impressive job transforming one of the most acoustically difficult

spaces in Provincetown into an exciting soundscape. This is the kind of risk taking that benefits the overall theatrical experience of the festival as a whole.



(from left to right) Hilary Cohen, Joshua Kay, Christopher Martin, and Emily Slomovits in Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, directed by Kate Mendeloff. Photo credit: Ride Hamilton.

There are certainly many characters in Chekhov's plays that have wishes. From Irina's fervent desire to go to Moscow in *Three Sisters* to Uncle Vanya's hopeless love for his former brother-in-law's new wife, Chekhov's characters do what they can to distract themselves from the boredom of their daily routines. Ann Arbor-based company Arb Arts brought a production of *Uncle Vanya* to this year's festival, and although this marked the company's first visit to Provincetown, director Kate Mendeloff was present in 2009 with her production of *The Hotel Plays*. Mendeloff also procured an exciting new translation of the text by John Freedman, the former theatre critic for *The Moscow Times*. Mendeloff had an added challenge in staging this play in a somewhat intimate room at the Provincetown Inn. The large, looming estate houses I associate with Chekhov were replaced by a staging in the round that provided a different experience of the play and its characters.

There was a great deal of earnestness in this cast. Perhaps I noticed that specifically because of my initial play of the day, but I was engaged the entire play because each and every actor was truly committed. I particularly enjoyed Emily Slomovits's energy and genuine feeling as Sófya Alexándrona (Sónya), Vanya's niece. Her scenes were

consistently my favorites, especially when she appeared in conjunction with Carol Gray, who played Yelena Andréevna, Vanya's unrequited love, and Christopher Grimm's Mikhaíl Lvóvich Astrov, the country doctor who has a flirtation with Yelena. Unfortunately, the overall pacing of the piece suffered from sloth. People tend to associate Chekhov with pauses and waiting, and yet that is not playable for the entirety of a full-length play. This was compounded by the fact that the weakest cast member was Uncle Vanya himself. Joshua Kay's Vanya was so slow to anger that he never actually got angry, making entire stretches of scenes where characters refer to how angry he is completely nonsensical. This production was a few steps away from greatness, but I am very appreciative of the work that they did.