



Bess Rowen

[Follow](#)

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

Oct 7 · 7 min read

Wishful Thinking: The Provincetown Tennessee Williams 13th Annual Theater Festival, Part 3

This is part three of a three part series on The Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival that took place in September of 2018, click [here](#) for part one and [here](#) for part two.



(l to r) Amanda Plummer as Ethel and Maureen Burns as Aunt Lilly in Tennessee Williams's *Talisman Roses*, directed by Marsha Mason. Photo credit: Ride Hamilton.

Talisman Roses & The Waiting Plays

Many familiar themes appear in the play that young Tennessee Williams wrote during his time at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. *Talisman Roses* joins the collection of work revolving around Williams's sister Rose. Aside from the title, Aunt Lily's name joins the flower metaphor that will surround the Rose figure of Ida, a young woman who has been despondent since her love has been sent away by his family to study art in Europe so that he will forget her. We are not

greeted with Ida when the curtain rises, however, but rather with Ethel and Aunt Lily, two of Ida's relatives who are discussing how to handle Ida's health and the family's reputation in town now that she has come to stay in the family home. Towards the end of the play a bouquet of talisman roses arrives, a sure sign that Ida's boyfriend has not forgotten her while he is abroad and that he intends to make the relationship work.

This production was announced as one of the highlights of the festival and it absolutely lived up to that reputation. Amanda Plummer's Ethel was outrageously funny, bringing excellent comic timing to the disgruntled woman who feels like her life has been invaded by the Ophelia-like Ida. Although Ida is at the center of the plot, her role mostly consists of walking through the scene in a daze until she receives her flowers, and Jessie-Ann Kholman did this well. Maureen Burns also did good work as Aunt Lily, whose job is to both handle Ethel and try to keep Ida as happy as possible. Director Marsha Mason also deserves praise for bringing out the pathos and comedy of this delightful one-act.

I enjoyed this play so much that it was easy to forgive the inexplicable short plays that preceded it. *Always a Line* and *Permanent Ink* by Charlene A Donaghy and *Curtain at 8:10* and *A Three Hour Tour* by Joseph M Paprzychi were directed by Maggie Champagne, Ross DeGraw, and Matt Trucano. Although the cast members from *Some Problems at the Moose Lodge* and others did a great job in that show, these skits were poorly written and did not give any of the actors or directors much to do. I would have far preferred that *Talisman Roses* had been presented on its own, or that the festival had chosen another Williams one-act for the evening's bill.



(l to r) Keith Conallen, Chris Anthony, Anthony Crosby, Andrew Carroll, and Steven A. Wright in *Menagerie of Angels*, conceived and directed by Brenna Geffers. Photo credit: Ride Hamilton.

Menagerie of Angels

Director Brenna Geffers first came to the Provincetown TW festival in 2016 with her visionary production of Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*. In those few short years she has become a festival favorite, and I always look forward to seeing her work. Last year her newly formed company Die-Cast presented *Pericles* on the model ship in the Provincetown Library. Geffers co-founded the company with Thom Weaver to specialize in opening up and using spaces that are normally not available to audiences. This year Die-Cast returned with a devised piece loosely based on Tennessee Williams's life. This site-specific work inhabited The Wharf House at Provincetown Marina and reconfigured it as a space where versions of Williams from five decades of his life told their stories and interacted with each other. The audience was encouraged to move around the space to follow the actors or to switch which narrative they listened to.

As usual, Geffers excels in crafting movement vocabularies that are both gorgeous to watch and thematically appropriate to the material. The Philadelphia-based troupe also has an incredibly talented group of performers who could keep the audience's attention despite the fact that five narrative were occurring simultaneously while around 100 audience members milled around. I began with the wonderful storyteller Keith Conallen's track (tracks are common ways of

discussing site-specific and immersive work that is often performed on a loop, as was the case here). Conallen played “Tom 1980s,” which gave insight into a Williams that was never fully seen: one who was struggling with losing loved ones to AIDS.

I then moved to see the graceful Anthony Crosby’s “Tom 1920s” who was clearly inspired by Williams’s first love, the dancer Kip Wallen. These two characters had a scene together in which Conallen’s Tom remembered both his former self and his now-deceased love, touching Crosby’s Tom only to realize this person is not alive. These scenes were beautifully stylized and yet also emotionally real, a breathtaking combination that is a main characteristic of this company’s work. My next Tom was from the 1930s, played by the enchanting Andrew Carroll in that ever-present Williams symbol of a silk kimono. Carroll’s bohemian Williams is visited by his guardian angel, who also happens to be “Tom 1950s” Chris Anthony (who played Yank in the festival’s 2016 *The Hairy Ape*).

My only complaint for this piece is that it was not quite long enough for me to see all the narratives. It is always a good sign when you want to spend more time in a site-specific piece, so this should serve as an indication of how much I enjoyed *Menagerie of Angels*! I missed Chris Anthony’s story and Steven A. Wright’s as well, although I was able to watch them during the moments where all of the Toms united. The somewhat ghostly experience of watching different iterations of Williams inhabit this historical space was phenomenal, and I look forward to seeing a longer version of this piece in the future.



Jeremy Lawrence as Snagglepuss. Photo credit: Lisa O'Brien.

The Snagglepuss Chronicles

The final experience of my festival this year came from a rather unusual play-reading. When you think of Tennessee Williams, D.C. comics is probably not even in the top ten of things that come to mind. But when it came time for Mark Russell to reimagine a comic book character of Snagglepuss for his six-part series *Exit Stage Left: The Snagglepuss Chronicles*, he looked to Tennessee Williams for inspiration. What followed was a reimagined world in which the spirit of Williams lives inside the pink mountain lion with hat and tie first made popular by Hanna-Barbera. In this theatrical adaptation, adapted and directed by Brenna Geffers, the protagonist was played by the closest thing we have to Williams himself: Jeremy Lawrence. Lawrence has played Williams in several one-man shows based on Williams's writing. I first saw Lawrence play Williams in a piece called "The Man in the Overstuffed Chair" at the Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival a few years ago and he was simply astonishing.

Lawrence's performance in this reading was a real crowd-pleaser, and this piece had a lot in common with *Menagerie of Angels* in that it provided a window into an exciting alternate history. What if Williams had been called before the House Un-American Activities Committee? What if he had been present at Stonewall? Russell's comic book tackles these questions, seamlessly weaving Williams's persona in and around these actual events. The result was not only funny, but very moving.

One of the most emotional moments came towards the end of the reading when *Huckleberry Hound*, read by John Treacy Egan, is publicly outed after Stonewall is raided and ends up taking his own life to avoid scandal. The handsome police horse who is also his lover, played by Keith Conallen, is haunted by this action and runs away, only to return to Snagglepuss to help him try to fight injustice. When the police horse walks in to talk to Snagglepuss he meets young *Huckleberry Hound, Jr.*, his deceased lover's son. Although the crowd roared with laughter throughout much of the reading, a great number of us also had tears in our eyes at this ending. The talented actors from *Die-Cast* and some of the other productions from the festival populated the comic book world on stage and it made this reading a true celebration of all of the performances over the past few days.

I am very pleased that the festival took risks this year on unusual forms of performance such as *Company*, *Menagerie of Angels*, and *The Snagglepuss Chronicles*. Pieces such as these are a great reminder of how Williams, and others, are inspired contemporary artists of all kinds to this day. That is the great strength and power of an annual festival. Although there were some weak pieces this year, I still thoroughly enjoyed my time at the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival and look forward to the exciting work that will be presented next year. Until then, as Williams would say, en avant!