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Entertainment

## The spirit of Williams thrives in Amanda Plummer

By Lynda Sturner / Banner Correspondent

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Amanda Plummer met Tennessee Williams when she was doing “Agnes of God” on Broadway in 1982. She played a novice in a convent who denies giving birth and killing her baby and won a Tony for the part. One night, while she was in a dressing room with Elizabeth Ashley and Geraldine Page, the other two stars of the show, Williams came backstage.

“It was like walking into the sun and the moon at the same time,” Plummer says. “His face, his eyes were so bright and curious. The curiosity is like a force in his eyes, and the smile — this Cheshire cat grin of a smile.”

And smile he did. “Elizabeth, who was an old buddy of Tennessee’s, is a brilliant stream-of-consciousness talker,” Plummer says. “He just wanted to listen and laugh. Gerry and I just hung out, basking in his immense presence. I’ve met a lot of people who had presence, but they don’t take a cake from him.”

This Saturday, Plummer will be the guest of honor and receive this year’s TENN Award at the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival’s Annual Dinner at Provincetown Town Hall. The award is given for advancing the spirit of Tennessee Williams through excellence in the performance, study or promotion of the American theater.

Theater is definitely the first love of Plummer, the only daughter of actors Christopher Plummer and Tammy Grimes, but she’s also had quite a career in movies (in “The Hunger Games: Catching Fire,” “Pulp Fiction” and “The Fisher King”) and TV (“Miss Rose White,” winning an Emmy, and two Emmy-winning guest gigs on “The Outer Limits” and “Law & Order: SVU”).

“I love working in film,” Plummer says. “However, I would be onstage all the time if they asked me.”

She has a special affinity for Williams' work. She played Laura Wingfield in a Broadway revival of "The Glass Menagerie" in 1983, "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore" off-Broadway in 1987, "Summer and Smoke" at the Hartford Stage in 2006, "The Two-Character Play" off-Broadway in 2013 with Brad Dourif, and, most recently, "The Night of the Iguana," in a 2017 American Repertory Theater production in Cambridge along with Dana Delany, last year's TENN Award winner.

"What connects me to Tennessee Williams is that [his characters] all have social problems," Plummer says. "They're not trying to be anyone else, they're just living in their own skin and sharing their air with other people and strangers that pop into their lives and just adapt or don't. I love that his women are so strong in their indefinability and their refusal to be defined by external forces."

Both Plummer and Williams have that special ability to inhabit darkness and light at the same time. He writes characters on the edge, on the brink of extinction, and no matter how outrageous and mangled his characters may be, the fearless Plummer both grounds them in reality and launches them into outer space.

"Tennessee Williams' writing is filled with unknowns, and to try and know the unknowns is too destructive," she says. "Feel it, sense it, experience it and you'll keep on arriving somewhere inside yourself as an actor."

How does an actor take what's absurd in Williams' plays and make it real?

"Massive secret that!" Plummer says, laughing. "What I tell anybody who wants to be an actor, is read the play, all of it, over and over and over until you're sick, and then you read it more. And learn everything — learn every word so that you can say it as fast as 'da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da' without any inflections or intonations. Then your senses are freed up to do it. Accept the unexpected, the unconscious waking dreams that occur, and you're open to what's going on around you and from the other actors."

For Plummer, it's all about the relentless process of rediscovery. "You're always arriving," she says. "As soon as you try to understand it, you're boxing yourself into something from the past, from yesterday in your universe. Forget about it now. Lose it. It's a journey that never ends for the actor because he or she is

going to be discovering more and more and having to throw it away. So that every night that you go on stage, it's going to be a new adventure. I love being in long running shows. When the curtain comes down, as I walk down the street by myself, I think, well, it's gotta be better tomorrow."