

Entertainment

Williams' wistful women and mutable men

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The 13th annual Tennessee Williams Theater Festival filled the town with sunshine, moonshine, hilarity, dark humor and roses. Williams' sister, Rose, was his lifelong talisman, and her fragile health was a subject that he famously revisited. Over five decades of travel, often accompanied by a lover, and almost always accompanied by a typewriter, Williams created scene after scene with fragile, wistful women confronting dwindling possibilities. The plays by him in this year's festival — full-lengths, one acts and mash-ups, each a collage of images, movement and language — represented his oeuvre over a half century. Themes of waiting, wishful thinking and the passage of time, sprinkled with roses, as a symbol of and antidote to autumn's shorter days, were threaded through work by Williams and Chekhov, García Lorca and Beckett.

The world premiere of "**Talisman Roses**," a very early Williams one act discovered by David Kaplan, festival founder and curator, in a drawer at the University of Texas, was the weekend's most anticipated production. The hype did not disappoint. Audiences were mesmerized by this precursor to "The Glass Menagerie," with Amanda Plummer, as the older sister Ethel, assuming the censorious voice of Williams' mother, and Jessie-Ann Kholman, as the doomed Ida, released (at least temporarily) from an asylum and modeled after Williams' sister, Rose. The play ends with Ida framed by a hopeful bouquet of yellow tea roses. Kudos to director Marsha Mason, and Maureen Burns as the mediating Aunt Lily.

The Sicilian immigrant Serafina delle Rose in "**The Rose Tattoo**," portrayed here by Irene Glezos, is a spinning dervish and full-throttle force of nature. Fishermen Hall was well suited to such an operatic production of Williams' romantic comedy, with its abrupt mood shifts for close to two hours, and director Dana Greenfield kept Glezos whining, pleading, needling, flirting and scolding, whether lamenting her truck driver husband (he of the rose tattoo, now deceased), warning her daughter, chasing nosy neighbors or playing cat and mouse with Jack (Joel De Candio, channeling Burt Lancaster), a rose tattoo on his chest. "The rose is the heart of the body," Jack says, in what can be interpreted as poetry or parody.

Williams' "**Some Problems for the Moose Lodge**" played like a 1970s screwball comedy that suddenly turns dark. The action begins with Corny and Bella returning from an out-of-town trip to bury their son, a victim of AIDS. Bella, demented, is constantly off balance, her illness treated as a pratfall. Almost as an afterthought, she reads a letter to a friend (whose hemorrhoids had the audience laughing) from her institutionalized daughter, pleading to come home. Wishful thinking?

"**Will Mr. Merriwether Return from Memphis**," a Williams mash-up with dance and music, dates from the late 1960s, though it wasn't produced until 1980. In a boarding house, philosophical characters in drag float on- and offstage, and a French teacher elicits (to general hilarity) confessions from widows he tutors, until he suddenly offers his own. He's been caught with a younger man and hurriedly leaves town. The scoundrel Mr. Merriwether finally shows up; a cake-baking neighbor finds her poet; blooming red roses (a lovely, connecting touch) peek through a window at the Provincetown Inn, where the play was staged; and the audience was left with echoes of Williams' unshakable poetry, "as far away as a memory of a dream."

A modern translation of the stately "**Uncle Vanya**" (Williams considered Chekhov a major influence) was an outlier in a weekend of mostly non-naturalistic theater. Wordy drawing room scenes, enlivened by music and dance, are populated in the play by self-important men leading lives of desperation, alternately quiet and furious, while women appear helpless or abused. Under Kate Medeloff's pitch-perfect direction, "Vanya" was adapted to the theme of roses: following prolonged foreplay, Doctor Astrov and the beautiful Yelena are startled mid-embrace by Uncle Vanya, whose bouquet of red roses, intended for Yelena, is tossed aside.

Federico García Lorca's "**Doña Rosita the Spinster (or The Language of Flowers)**" was directed by David Kaplan as a labor of love. This was García Lorca's last play before he was executed in 1936 for being ardently anti-Fascist and a closeted homosexual. Doña Rosita is engaged to a country youth, who leaves her at the altar. She awaits his return, her cloistered

life awash with rose gardens. Middle school students, cast in “adult” roles, performed alongside professional actors. Though audibility was a problem, the student actors could be seen as a homage to García Lorca, who would cast his young cousins in plays he wrote while growing up.

The ultimate Williams mash-up was “**Menagerie of Angels**,” directed by Brenna Geffers, an immersive, site-specific performance in the Wharf House at Provincetown Marina, where five “Toms” (after Williams’ given name) represented five decades in the playwright’s life. There was a Tom enacting his first lover, Kip, the dancer; an older hustler Tom in a seersucker suit; and an artist Tom in black briefs and a kimono. The swirling, exhilarating “Menagerie” employed repeated phrases about time’s passage and lyrics to the Righteous Brothers’ “Unchained Melody”: “Time goes by so slowly/ And time can do so much/ Are you still mine?” In unexpected ways, it was pure Williams, carrying its audience full circle from “Talisman Roses,” when he was beginning to sound his depths.