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Entertainment

## Women direct at the Williams fest

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In the 1940s, Tennessee Williams, as Eugene O'Neill did a generation earlier, came to Provincetown and fine-tuned the distinctive, poetic voice of his writing to the hum of the foghorn and the pounding of the tides. Now, in 2018, late September's balance of light and dark, camaraderie and solitude, will provide the perfect setting for the 13th annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, during which the town is transformed into a four-day immersive stage with "Wishful Thinking" as its touchstone.

Here are three directors to watch at the festival, all of them women: Katherine Mendeloff, a professor of drama at the University of Michigan, takes on "Uncle Vanya" by Anton Chekhov, Williams' favorite playwright; four-time Best Actress Oscar nominee Marsha Mason helms the world premiere of a seminal Williams play, "Talisman Roses"; and Dana Greenfield, a member of the Lincoln Center Theater Directors Lab, brings to life Williams' "The Rose Tattoo," described by Ben Brantley of The New York Times as "an intoxicating fairy-tale for grownups."

Katherine Mendeloff will be familiar to festival regulars, having directed "Summer at the Lake" in 2010, "The Pink Bedroom" in 2009, and "The Notebook of Trigorin" in 2007. Trigorin is the central character in Chekhov's "The Seagull"; in writing his play about the character, Williams was "altering his traits to make him bisexual," Mendeloff says by phone from Ann Arbor. Her festival production of "Uncle Vanya" will be performed in the Porch Room of the Provincetown Inn, a multipurpose space suggestive of old Cape Cod. "The idea is that nothing calls attention to the theatricality of the performance," Mendeloff says. "You should feel like you know these people, not that they're actors."

Mendeloff met David Kaplan, the festival's founder and curator, at the Yale School of Drama in the late 1970s. What connects them is a shared passion for contemporary adaptations of classical theater. " 'Uncle Vanya' is an existential play about lost opportunities," Mendeloff says. "Chekhov did not call it a comedy or a tragedy; he just called it 'scenes of country life.' " The production comes to the festival from Arb Arts, the Ann Arbor performance ensemble Mendeloff founded and directs.

Marsha Mason, best known for the title role of the movie "The Goodbye Girl," which was written for her by playwright and then-husband Neil Simon, played the ingénue in Williams' "Vieux Carré" in a 1984 production at the Williamstown Theatre Festival. "Talisman Roses," which Mason is directing, was written in 1937, when Williams was a student at the University of Iowa. Kaplan discovered the script in a manila folder at the University of Texas. "It's very much its own play, not an early draft of something else," Kaplan says. The action centers on Ida, diagnosed with "precocious madness" (schizophrenia), and modeled after Williams' younger sister, Rose. Mason describes Ida, in mourning for a lost love, as a precursor to Laura in "The Glass Menagerie" and Blanche DuBois in "A Streetcar Named Desire." Ida will be played by Amanda Plummer, recipient of the festival's TENN Award this year. "In all Williams plays, there's a victimized, lost and otherworldly woman," Mason says. " 'Talisman Roses' is the beginning of that investigation. Ida waits for a lost love to return. And then there's a moment — I don't want to give it away — when she comes out of her long isolation."

At the center of "The Rose Tattoo," directed by Dana Greenfield, is the Sicilian widow Serafina delle Rose, who lives in a small Mississippi village and becomes withdrawn after her husband's death. The bawdy melodrama — Williams called it his "love-play to the world" — was a hit on Broadway in 1951, where it won Tony awards for Best Play, for Maureen Stapelton (as Serafina) and costar Eli Wallach. Williams then adapted it for the movies, and Anna Magnani, who played Serafina in the film version, won an Oscar. In Greenfield's revival, Serafina is played by Irene Glezos, whose emotive performance in the festival's "Orpheus Descending" drew raves in 2010.

“This play is a rom-com about grief, despair and rebirth — after her husband dies, Serafina waits for him, and then the perfect man shows up on her front lawn,” Greenfield says by phone from New York. “In Serafina’s world, objects have a great importance. I framed her village as a massive shrine-like altar, filled with rosary beads, pictures, clothing, kitchen things and the actions of her husband.” Live music and puppetry surround the audience.

It’s been a busy summer for Greenfield. She’s been assisting festival favorite Lee Breuer, founder of the experimental theater company Mabou Mines, on a revival of “The Gospel at Colonus.” Greenfield also worked on the New York production of Williams’ “The Mutilated,” a slapstick comedy featuring avant-garde standouts Penny Arcade and Mink Stole that was also presented by the festival. “No matter how many times I encounter a Tennessee Williams play, there are new layers to be discovered. There is so much poetry and depth,” Greenfield says. “When you experience plays from different periods of Williams’ life, you see his style and form change and grow.”