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Festival explores Tennessee Williams's connection to Japanese theater, in all its nuances

By **Loren King** Globe Correspondent, September 19, 2019, 4:27 p.m.

Whatever your familiarity with Tennessee Williams's "The Night of the Iguana," whether from previous productions or John Huston's 1964 film starring Richard Burton and Ava Gardner, it might come as a surprise that Williams infused his 1961 play with nods to Japanese theater traditions.

That's the "Iguana" that will be presented at the Provincetown Theater during this year's annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival, running Sept. 26-29 at various venues throughout the town. This year's festival pairs Williams and Yukio Mishima, one of the most prolific and important Japanese writers of the 20th century who had a profound influence on Williams.

"This whole season is about the Japanese influence in Williams's work once he became friends with Mishima [in the late 1950s] and visited Japan, where he saw various productions of Kabuki and Noh plays," says Marcel Meyer, who besides starring as the disgraced Reverend Shannon in "The Night of the Iguana" also designed the set and costumes for the play. "Most productions don't explore the Japanese influence, so we

tend to think of 'Iguana' as a sweaty, tropical play and his last successful Broadway play. But Williams had always experimented with form and style starting with 'The Glass Menagerie.' ”

Meyer and director Fred Abrahamse make up Abrahamse-Meyer Productions of Cape Town, South Africa, a company that's long been associated with the Provincetown festival. Besides "The Night of the Iguana," Abrahamse-Meyer this season will reprise "The Lady Aoi," Mishima's modern take on a 15th-century Noh play, which they first staged to acclaim during the 2014 festival.

"It's a completely Noh play with masks and puppetry," says Meyer. "The Lady Aoi" will share Meyer's Eastern-flavored "Iguana" set for the remote hotel in Mexico where the troubled Shannon takes refuge and where the arrival of Hannah Jelkes and her elderly grandfather, Nonno, leads him to re-evaluate his life.

"The parallels become so much clearer if you see both shows," Meyer says. "Williams and Mishima truly inspired one another."

The Japanese influence in "Iguana" is both stylistic and thematic, he says.

"Shannon is so tormented, and then he meets Hannah who is like a Buddhist monk — he calls her Buddha. She releases the demon he has inside him, and he's given a new lease on life, which is so different from the finality of something like ["A Streetcar Named Desire"], where Blanche is doomed to madness and sent to an asylum," says Meyer. "Shannon gets a second chance; there is healing. The purpose of Asian theater is to create stillness; the Western point is catharsis, which you get in 'Streetcar.' ”

In "The Night of the Iguana," says Meyer, "there's even a mock Japanese tea ceremony where Hannah makes Shannon the poppy tea to calm the spirit. In the stage

directions, Williams says she should be wearing a kimono, but most productions play that down.”

Not so in the Abrahamse-Meyer version, for which Meyer has designed for Hannah “a big kimono, all in white, with colorful sleeves of foliage which represents the jungle.”

Abrahamse and Meyer have explored Williams’s Japanese connections before, most notably in his later works “The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore” and “The Day on Which a Man Dies,” both staged during the festival’s 2015 season. Meyer also acted in the 2016 production of “In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel,” directed by Everett Quinton, who plays Nonno in “Iguana.” Williams’s later plays were vilified by critics and were commercial failures, Meyer notes.

“Critics called ‘In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel’ garbage and said [Williams] was drunk when he wrote it. It’s like Haiku when you speak [the dialogue] properly and play the rhythms. The disjointed syntax is exquisite poetry [comparable with] ‘Summer and Smoke,’ with its languid long lines. It’s deliberately done. People boxed him in; they wanted more Southern belles, not these wacky plays.”

But what keeps Meyer and Abrahamse as well as loyal audiences returning to the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival is its mission to “reinststate his full body of work and not just the familiar Southern plays,” says Meyer.

“There have been so many revivals of ‘The Glass Menagerie’ on Broadway over the last 10 years, with Cherry Jones, with Sally Field, but not one of his later plays. There is so much more to his writing. [In Provincetown] you can see work you don’t see anywhere else in the world. [Festival curator] David Kaplan could play it safe, but he pushes the audiences and pushes boundaries on so many levels.”

For his part, Kaplan notes that although Williams's Japanese allusions are more overt in "The Night of the Iguana," audiences "have been seeing this all along, starting with 'Streetcar' with its paper lanterns. [Williams] was fascinated by Japanese theater form, not just content," he says. "He was always an experimentalist. We think of 'The Glass Menagerie' as a classic, but [at the time] it was completely experimental."

The depth of Williams's work spanning all styles and genres is the lifeblood of the Tennessee Williams Festival. "What enables me to do this kind of programming is that I have such an adventurous audience," Kaplan says.

Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival

Sept. 26-29 at various venues in Provincetown. Ticket information and complete schedule at www.twptown.org

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