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Entertainment

## In Provincetown, and at the Tennessee Williams festival, Abrahamse and Meyer just say Noh

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Theater is not just a spectator sport. It's a collaborative art form that requires the active participation of everyone involved, including audience members. That's just one of the reasons Fred Abrahamse and Marcel Meyer have been returning to the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival with their troupe from Cape Town, South Africa, since they made their debut here in 2012.

"I think the great thing about festivals like the Tennessee Williams festival is that you are performing to a house full of people who are there because they like theater or love Tennessee Williams," Abrahamse says. "When you perform in a traditional theater in a town, at least 50 percent of the audience has been dragged there by a partner or it's a charity night. But when you play at something like the Tennessee Williams Festival, they just drink it in, and it's fantastic."

This year, Abrahamse and Meyer are spending the weeks leading up to the festival in residence at the Provincetown Theater, performing Yukio Mishima's 1954 Noh play, "The Lady Aoi" (pronounced ow-wee), a festival favorite from 2014. Once the festival itself begins, on Thursday, Sept. 26 (through Sunday, Sept. 29), Abrahamse and Meyer Productions will perform "The Lady Aoi" in repertory at the Provincetown Theater with a Noh-inspired production of Williams' "The Night of the Iguana."

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A craving for passionate theater and a love of the classics are what brought Abrahamse and Meyer together — they met 15 years ago when Meyer auditioned for Abrahamse in “Much Ado about Nothing.”

“I love classical theater,” Abrahamse says. “I’ve never been a great avant-garde fan. Give me a big Shakespeare or O’Neill or Williams play. I like working with text, and I suppose what united us was the love of examining classical pieces through text. The text always informs our work.”

Meyer agrees, fervently. “Great writing makes me hungry,” he says. “Because the writing is always the starting point. Being an actor, you are a servant, you are a tool to something that

is bigger and greater than you. Playwrights like Tennessee Williams and Shakespeare and Mishima had this incredible gift to be able to put into words the human experience, and to bring that to life is a great honor.”

Meyer is an interesting person to watch. He is muscular, with dark eyes that observe. He sits with his legs pulled up under him as if reserving his energy until, like an actor making a strong choice, he delivers on an emotion and speaks clearly and definitively. In “The Lady Aoi,” he plays Lady Rokujo, the spurned lover of Prince Genji, and once the festival begins, he will also play Lawrence Shannon, the defrocked minister in “The Night of the Iguana.”

Abrahamse and Meyer know their Williams and Mishima — “aliens with exceptional skills” is how the U.S. State Department described the two South Africans when they were granted visas. And Meyer is delightfully adept at laying out the historical background for how Mishima’s work and friendship influenced Williams, which the reason their work is paired at the 2019 festival.

“Williams and Mishima saw each other several times in Japan and in the States and became very good friends,” Meyer says. “But on Williams’ first trip to Japan, in ’57 or ’58, Mishima took him to see several Noh and Kabuki plays. Williams was working on ‘Iguana’ and ‘The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore.’ He was working on what would eventually become ‘In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel.’ And from having spent time in Japan and having seen all these Japanese plays, he then starts to integrate conventions and structures of Japanese theater in his own plays.”

It wasn’t an easy transition. “The final outcome of western drama is catharsis,” Meyer says. “The essence of Noh theater is the beauty of human suffering. It’s about that whole Buddhist philosophy of releasing the things we cling to in this world. One doesn’t normally think of ‘Iguana’ as a Japanese play, but it’s steeped in Asian aesthetic and philosophy. ‘Iguana’ was Williams’ last big hit on Broadway, but when he thoroughly integrated Japanese culture in ‘Milk Train,’ the critics at the time derided him for having gone crazy. ‘Iguana’ sits on the cusp. It’s going to be interesting to see it this year, surrounded by all this Japanese and Japanese-inspired writing.”

Abrahamse, who is directing “The Night of the Iguana” (Meyer designed the set and costumes), says, “What’s lovely is you don’t need all the trimmings of traditional Western theater.”

David Drake, the artistic director of the Provincetown Theater, describes Abrahamse and Meyer Productions as “world theater,” a term that Meyer uses as well. “Great writing belongs to everyone,” he says without a trace of defensiveness when the conversation turns to identity politics — specifically, why two Caucasian men from South Africa should perform Noh theater — and just who has and who hasn’t the right to tell another’s story.

“What qualifies a Japanese theater company to do Shakespeare?” Meyer asks. “To box Mishima into being a playwright that can only be touched by Asian actors is crazy, because that diminishes how important he is as a writer. ... Williams and Mishima were right about the human condition, that it is universal whether you’re in Australia or Africa or New Zealand or the States. The basic human things are the same, but at the moment people are constantly trying to tell us that we are different. We are in such a dangerous time, because there is a faction of crazy people telling us what we should be doing.”

There is a 20-year age difference between Abrahamse and Meyer. Abrahamse, the older of the two, lived through apartheid and liberation and the corruption that has ensued. “You ask us what it’s like to be here in Provincetown,” he says. “You don’t lock your doors here. We lock our bikes, and people say, ‘You don’t have to lock your bikes — it’s Provincetown.’ Marcel and I live in a province where 47 to 50 people in the city a week are murdered. I think every single South African has a family member, friend or neighbor who’s been subject to violence. So when we tackle something like Williams, who deals with the broken spirit, who deals with the other, who deals with physically as well as emotionally crippled people, we are able to kind of go straight to the marrow.”