

CITY

Spooky Action Theater Prepares to Premiere a Never-Before-Seen Tennessee Williams Play

See it this weekend in D.C. before it opens at the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival.

BY IAN THAL — SEP 19, 2019 11 AM



Natsu Onoda Power with the kamishibai theater she built for the show
COURTESY OF SPOOKY ACTION THEATER

In a church basement on 16th Street NW, an experimental theater company is rehearsing a world premiere. That an experimental troupe like Spooky Action Theater might be working on a never-before-seen play may seem par for the course, but the playwright in this case is a legend of American theater: **Tennessee Williams**. The play, *The Lady from the Village of Falling Flowers*, is just one of the vast number of works left unpublished when the prolific writer died in 1983.

Nearly every season since its founding in 2006, the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, based in the Cape Cod town where Williams wrote some of his early hits, has premiered a previously unknown Williams play. Festival curator and co-founder **David Kaplan** had been planning to use this year's festival, which runs September 26 to 29, to explore Williams' friendship with the Japanese playwright, novelist, and leader of a failed 1970 coup d'état **Yukio Mishima**, and the multicultural aspects of both writers' works.

Typically these posthumous premieres have been experimental works written late in Williams' career, when the commercial success that marked his earlier fame had come to elude him. However, *The Lady from the Village of Falling Flowers*, subtitled, "a Japanese Fantasy in One-Act", was written around 1930, while Williams was studying journalism at the University of Missouri. The play draws inspiration from a character from *The Tale of Genji*, a novel—some argue the world's first novel—written in the early 11th century by **Murasaki Shikibu**, a poet and lady-in-waiting of the Imperial court. It is uncertain whether Williams read *Genji* on his own or for course work but it would have been available to him through **Arthur Waley's** 1927 English translation.

After examining the manuscript at the Williams archive at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, and seeing that Williams had typed up a title page and cast list, Kaplan determined that Williams had considered it a finished work. Yet there was no evidence that it had either been performed or handed in as a class assignment.

In the play, the unmarried **Emperor Nijo** (an anachronism on Williams' part: The historical Nijo ruled over a century after Murasaki's death) is frustrated that his prime minister, **Mako**, is unable to write a poem in tribute to the orange trees while the blossoms are in full bloom. Mako in turn expresses the court's frustration with the emperor's bachelor status. A deal is struck: The Emperor, an aesthete, will marry a woman who can compose a poem that captures the beauty of the orange blossoms before the sun rises "so that they will smell as delicious a thousand years from now as they now smell on this evening's wind!"

Once permissions were acquired from the Tennessee Williams Center at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, which holds the copyright, and Williams' publisher, New Directions, Kaplan had to find an artist to breathe life into a long-forgotten text.

When Kaplan first read the play, he immediately saw why Williams found inspiration in the courtly world of *The Tale of Genji*. There were themes that would persist from his famous plays like *A Streetcar Named Desire* to later experimental works like *The Pronoun "I."* Williams' concern with "the difference between one's public face and private feelings," as Kaplan describes it, as well as the manner in which "storytelling, including lying, creates a reality of its own" were already in evidence.

Meanwhile, in preparation for this year's overall theme of the links between Williams and Mishima, Kaplan had been researching Japanese popular arts in the 20th century and discovered the theater form of kamishibai, finding it a perfect fit for *The Lady from the Village of Falling Flowers*. Festival publicist **Hunter Styles**, who had previously worked at several D.C. theaters, then told Kaplan he knew the person for the job.

That person was D.C.-based director and playwright **Natsu Onoda Power**, who teaches at Georgetown University and is well remembered for her play *Astroboy and the God of Comics*, which chronicles the Japanese superhero and his creator, the manga and anime pioneer **Osamu Tezuka**.

“The name kamishibai,” Onoda Power explains, “comes from ‘kami’ for ‘paper’ and ‘shibai’ for ‘play’ or ‘theater’. It’s a visual storytelling form from the pre-cinematic era.” The theater is a frame that holds a stack of placards, each of which has an image on the front, and text on the back for the storyteller to read. Kamishibai theaters were often mounted on the back of bicycles so the storyteller could take the show from neighborhood to neighborhood. Onoda Power notes that while it was “spontaneous, primarily for children,” that “during World War II, the kamishibai cards were mass produced for official news and propaganda.”

When Onoda Power was growing up in Japan, stacks of kamishibai cards were available for sale at children’s bookstores. The stories were not just traditional Japanese tales either: As a child, her favorite cards were from an adaptation of **Hans Christian Andersen’s** “The Snow Queen.”

“I don’t define what I do as kamishibai,” says Onoda Power, “It mimics the form but purists might be scandalized.” So while she designed a kamishibai theater for the first part of the play, the placards are joined by equally flat puppets. In each succeeding scene, increasingly sophisticated puppets are introduced that evoke without pretense of authenticity other Japanese theater forms, ranging from what she calls “casual bunraku,” for the classical theater in which puppeteers manipulate dolls in full view of the audience, to large puppet heads sculpted to resemble Noh masks.

Onoda Power had previously worked with Spooky Action Theater on her stage adaptation of **Ursula K. Le Guin’s** *The Lathe of Heaven*. They were eager to collaborate again, so she proposed the project, but she also needed to find her cast. “Some actors have puppetry DNA,” she quips. The trio of **Melissa Carter, Dylan Arredondo, and Jared Graham**, who had previously worked with her on a multimedia adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* that she developed for the National Players, the longest running classical touring company in the U.S., currently based at Olney Theatre Center, had the skills she was looking for.

Onoda Power began rehearsals with simple mockups of the puppets, observing how the actors worked with them before eventually replacing them with more elaborate stage-ready designs. While the show makes its world-premiere at the festival in Provincetown, Massachusetts, Spooky Action will host two invited dress rehearsals and a benefit preview on September 21 at their space at 1810 16th Street NW. The show has been sufficiently designed, so Onoda Power has confidence that Carter, Arredondo, and Graham can revive the show without her direct involvement if the opportunity arises.

In this cultural moment, artists and audiences alike are re-evaluating practices of cultural appropriation and representation. For Kaplan, speaking of Williams and Mishima, both of whom read and borrowed from well beyond their home cultures, “these artists were inspired by material that spoke to them. They did not want to limit themselves or their audiences. They wanted to share their vision widely. This was expected of writers of their stature: to write about the world and this meant knowing the world.” Ultimately for Kaplan, “the way we form our thoughts is multicultural.”

In Onoda Power’s view, *Falling Flowers* “is a product of cultural appropriation by modern convention, [but Williams] does it with respect and reverence.”

She also observes that in light of numerous adaptations in a range of media, “*The Tale of Genji* is not an underrepresented thing,” underlining that for a Japanese student, “You can’t escape reading some part of it. I suffered through it.”

Most fundamentally Onoda Power believes the staging “gives the audience permission to have fun with the combination of Tennessee Williams and *The Tale of Genji*.”

Williams’ cultural borrowing allows Onoda Power some playfulness with representation, “Do they have to be Japanese? If everyone in the story is Japanese then nobody is Japanese.” In her version, one character is represented by four different puppets. “We can look different depending on who sees us,” she says. “All these versions are true.”

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