



## ***Does Fear Have an Aesthetic?***

Season Q&A with Festival Curator David Kaplan

### **Where did the idea start for a season pairing Williams and Mishima?**

For our 2014 season, we presented a collection of plays written by Tennessee Williams along with plays written by four friends he considered to be his peers: William Inge, Jane Bowles, Carson McCullers, and Yukio Mishima. In that 2014 lineup, Mishima's work was, surprisingly, the crowd-pleaser. In our production from South Africa of Mishima's eerie play *The Lady Aoi*, a seaside vacation that seemed scary when you read about it turned sexy in performance. People in Provincetown could relate to that. I began to think our audience would follow us if we wanted to present more Mishima.

### **And there were more plays to do?**

There were a lot more. Mishima wrote sixty-two plays. In Japan, Mishima was a celebrity as much as Williams was in America. In 1955, Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* opened on Broadway (and Williams' *Glass Menagerie*, *Rose Tattoo*, and

*Streetcar* were playing all over the world). In the same year, nine plays by Mishima premiered in Japan. While researching, I came across an anthology, *Mishima Onstage*, a collection of nine plays, edited and with notes by Laurence Kominz. The foreword by Donald Keene was a revelation. For me, the most interesting sentence in it:

*“Mishima once said of his plays that they were his ‘mistress,’ as opposed to his novels, ‘his wife.’*

### **What do you think that means, theater was Mishima’s mistress?**

Mishima was successful writing fiction, dedicated enough to write thirty-four novels and twenty-five books of short stories. Writing fiction was a happy marriage, let’s say. Fruitful. What made him stray? I think writing a play allowed him new identities, the way someone is different, for better or worse, in different intimacies. Plural. I don’t mean that while writing plays Mishima impersonated other people’s voices. Of course he did, as he had done while writing fiction. I mean that when Mishima wrote plays, his persona as author changed as he conceded to the demands (and enjoyed the pleasures) of the different dramatic forms that attracted him. Fiction offered him stability, drama promiscuity.

### **How different?**

He wrote traditional Kabuki, which meant writing in verse; he wrote modern realistic plays, which meant writing believable dialogue. He wrote propaganda plays, which meant passing on a message. He wrote a campy three-act play that resembles 1950s/early ’60s film noir, which meant balancing horror and humor with suspense. He took austere traditional Noh plays and modernized them enough to take place on a park bench or in a hospital room. He wrote parodies and satires. His Western-inspired plays featured Western demons: his titles include *My Friend Hitler* and *Madame De Sade* (the wife of the Marquis). Our 2019 season will present plays by Mishima in different styles and pair them with plays by Tennessee Williams in different styles.

## **And the connection to Williams?**

The audience at the Festival in 2014 made its own connection. Anyone who watched Mishima's *The Lady Aoi* and also saw that year's production of Williams' *Vieux Carré* couldn't help but notice that apparitions rose up in both plays. Confessing to desire resurrected memories – painful memories – and ghosts appeared. Think of *Streetcar Named Desire* and the phantasmagoria that arrives when Blanche remembers her husband. Confessions, pain, and ghosts are some of the strongest connections between Williams and Mishima.

And there are other connections. They were friends. They visited each other and saw each other's plays. They hung out and ogled men together. They shared collaborators. In 1957-58, just as he met Mishima, while working on *Suddenly Last Summer*, Williams entered what might be called a Japanese phase. This period of Japanese influence ran for a dozen years, up to 1970, when Mishima died. Japanese theater forms turn up overtly in *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (written in 1963) where Williams' stage directions ask that Kabuki stagehands narrate the play and play roles in the action. The well-known plays by Williams from this period, including *Suddenly Last Summer* and *The Night of the Iguana* (written in 1961), echo the Japanese Noh theater's invocation of demons who appear to onstage protagonists in fever dreams.

There are other, covert, uses of Japanese imagery in the plays Williams wrote at the same time: a man transforms his French Quarter courtyard into a Japanese garden for *And Tell Sad Stories of the Death of Queens* (written in 1962). In *Will Mr. Merriwether Return from Memphis?* (written in 1969), a woman holding a fan calls up apparitions like a priestess out of Noh. For *The Day on Which a Man Dies* (written in 1959), set in adjoining Tokyo hotel rooms, Williams created a Mishima-sounding narrator to explain the difference between Western and Eastern suicides. This was a decade before Mishima's actual suicide.

## **Why present such a season – Williams and Mishima - in America in 2019?**

Can we agree we are spooked in 2019? Haunted? Our hottest disagreements and worst fears resurrect arguments that go back to the Civil War, and before. Does fear have an aesthetic? Mishima and Williams make plays out of fear. Does evil

have some attraction, some beauty, especially the beauty that has the potential to annihilate us, as Stanley does with Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*? Yep. That's the basis of Romantic ideas from Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* to Mishima's entire oeuvre, including a play Mishima wrote with the title *Flowers of Evil*. Mishima's famous suicide got him on the cover of *Newsweek*. It was gruesome; it was glamorous. It's still disturbing to think that Mishima, who was a bodybuilder, willfully destroyed his own body.

### **Does Mishima's suicide discredit the value of his art?**

Even while he was alive, fascination with Mishima's life diverted attention from his art. Mishima's suicide in 1970 seems to summarize his life for those who want to avoid being unsettled by what he wrote. Tennessee Williams' plays have also suffered from dismissive clinical diagnoses of their author, rather than considered responses to what he wrote. The mission of the festival is to put attention back on the performance of Williams' plays. Let's do the same for Mishima.

If you're looking for moral instruction in such theater, you'll be disappointed. Much like Tennessee Williams, Mishima's writing, especially in the 1960s, became inherently ambivalent, a response to a world that had lost its moral assurance twenty-five years after World War II: Williams from the side that claimed victory, Mishima from the side that acknowledged defeat.

Their work is provocative. Their plays require an audience's reaction to complete any possible meaning. An audience reacting, during and after performances, might build its own moral assurance. That's a good reason to stage these plays and a better reason to watch them. I'm still thinking about it. We've had years to prepare for this and months still to go.

## **FURTHER READING**

### **Mishima Onstage: The Black Lizard & Other Plays**

Edited and with an introduction by Laurence Kominz

University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies (January 6, 2007)

<https://www.amazon.com/Mishima-Stage-Michigan-Monograph-Japanese/dp/1929280432>

### **Five Modern Noh Plays**

Written by Yukio Mishima, translated by Donald Keene.

First published in 1957

[https://www.amazon.com/Modern-Tuttle-Classics-Japanese-Literature/dp/4805310324/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1546608109&sr=8-1&keywords=five+modern+noh+plays](https://www.amazon.com/Modern-Tuttle-Classics-Japanese-Literature/dp/4805310324/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1546608109&sr=8-1&keywords=five+modern+noh+plays)

### **Tennessee Williams' Circle of Friends**

written by David Kaplan

The Gay & Lesbian Review, October, 2014

<https://glreview.org/tennessee-williams-and-his-circle-of-friends/>