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East Meets West at Provincetown's 14th Tennessee Williams Festival

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By EDWARD RUBIN, *Special to Theatrecriticism.com*

For the past 14 years, David Kaplan, the curator and co-founder of the annual Tennessee Williams Theater Festival in Provincetown, has had the daunting and, as he might say, blessed task of mounting a high-wattage festival that shines an incandescent light onto Williams' fantastical multi-storied life and works.



Tennessee Williams and his friend and fellow writer Yukio Mishima. (Design by Melinda Ancillo)

Guided by Kaplan's fecund and fertile mind, a large staff, and a healthy parade of donors, organizations, volunteers, businesses, and theater companies from around the world – it does take a small army – the Festival has grown every year since its inception in quality, content, and audience attendance.

Nowhere, other than the cities of New Orleans and St Louis –both of which have their own annual Williams Festivals – can audiences get to grandly feast on a never-ending cornucopia of all things Tennessee.

Lifting the Provincetown Festival closer to heaven and adding yet another notch on his belt, Kaplan surprised us all this past September



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by pairing the work of Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) with that of Japan's so-called bad boy author, poet and film director Yukio Mishima (1925-1970).

In previous years Williams shared the Festival's stages with just about everybody and everything that touched upon his life. But Mishima! Who knew?

Maybe a handful of people, other than Kaplan, were cognizant of the Williams-Mishima connection and aware of their friendship, which began in New York City in 1957. Aware of how much they had in common. And aware of their influence on each other.

No doubt, the majority of the Festival's audiences (myself included), were in the dark and had a lot to learn. Thanks to the Festival's exceedingly thoughtful and considerate planning, learn we did.

To make sure we were brought up to snuff, even before we took to our seats, attendees were offered, on the first two days of the Festival, a 90-minute Williams 101 presentation. Led by Hofstra University professor Patricia Navarra, her talk, complete with visual documentation, touched on Williams' life, his loves, his writing, the summers he spent in Provincetown during which he wrote his first major plays, as well as his relationship with Mishima (given name Kimitake Hiraoka).

Even more enlightening was Kaplan's eye-opening, five-page essay in the Festival's program. Titled "8 Questions You Might Ask," Kaplan discussed the relationship between Tennessee Williams and Mishima, listed facts about Mishima's understanding of Williams' plays and why Williams chose so many of his characters to wear Kabuki robes and kimonos. He also touched on Mishima's abhorrent ritualistic death from Seppuku, his politics, and then related it all to what it has to do with us sitting in America now.



2019 Festival program
(Cover design by Melinda Ancillo)



From "The Night of the Iguana" are Bo Peterson, left, and Marcel Meyer.
(Photo by Nate Gowdy)

For those diehards who craved even more Williams, Kaplan's 134-page book "Tennessee Williams in Provincetown" was prominently featured for sale in the lobby of Town Hall as well as in the window of the Provincetown Bookstore. Fascinating, to say the least, I devoured it in one wonderful sitting. Armed to the hilt, I was now ready to face what turned out to be the most thrilling end-of-summer treat.

Last year's four-day Festival (September 26-29) featured 70 events spread across the town in some 17 venues. Though the plays of Williams and Mishima were the main draw – there were four by each – there was a superabundance of other events from which to choose.

Wanting to do everything, I found myself attending afternoon workshops on Noh, Kyogen, and Kabuki, the Japanese performance techniques employed by Williams and Mishima in their plays, an amazing Master Class conducted by actress Kathleen Turner and, of course, the Festival's opening and closing parties at which Festival attendees get to mix with actors, directors, and all those involved in bringing the Tennessee Williams Festival to life.

The plays on everybody's must-see list, the only two full-length plays during the Festival were William's *The Night of the Iguana*, which played once each of the four days at the Provincetown Theater, and Mishima's camp classic *Black Lizard*, which had a highly publicized "one time only" staged reading at Town Hall on the Festival's closing day. All the others were either one-acts or a performance piece.

The Night of the Iguana kicked off the Festival with a special Wednesday, September 25 preview for sponsors and townies. Word quickly spread that this classic, brought from South Africa by Abrahamse and Meyer Productions, and directed in traditional Noh style by Fred Abrahamse, was a must-see. For those who never saw the 1964 John Huston-directed movie starring Richard Burton, Ava Gardner, and Deborah Kerr, based on Williams' 1961 play of the same name, it was catch-up time.

Here, Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon (Marcel Meyer), a down and out defrocked Episcopal clergyman with a rumped whiff of sex clinging to his clothes leads a busload of middle-aged Baptist women from Texas on a tour of Mexican religious historical sites.

Even before boarding an old-fashioned school bus, Shannon goes neck to neck with Judith Fellowes (Sarah MacDonnell) the pit-bull leader of the group. It seems Shannon's gonads are being tweaked by Charlotte (Nell Hamilton), a young and nubile, under-aged girl. And the feeling is mutual.

Of course, the extremely strident, and hyper-protective Fellowes swings into action with numerous threats including getting him fired from his tourist guiding job.

Adding fuel to the fire, both the bus and the alcohol-loving Shannon break down outside Puerta Vallarta. Refusing to continue the tour, he ends up, with all of the women waiting on the bus, at his over-the-top friend Maxine Faulk's (Gail Phaneuf) run-down motel. Soon after, an aging poet (Everett Quinton) and his guardian Hannah Jelkes (Bo Petersen) looking for a room arrive at this same motel. Thus, begins hot and heavy exchanges between all of the players, as the failures haunting their lives begin to surface.

While the acting served the play well, all except for the two young native "beach boys" whose non-acting skills were annoyingly distracting, it was Bo Peterson's gentle and realistic channeling of Jelkes, both mesmerizing and beautiful to watch, that brought the play closest to our hearts.

Adding a bit of comic relief, as Hannah Jelkes' 97-year-old grandfather, referred to in the play as "the world's oldest living practicing poet" was the perennial tic-laden, role-milking performance of Everett Quinton, a longtime member of New York City's Ridiculous Theatrical Company.

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Another big “word of mouth” draw was Mishima’s *Black Lizard* at Town Hall. Here the Diva Queen Yuhua Hamasaki, riding the crest of last year’s “RuPaul’s Drag Race” competition, along with her handsome romantic lead James Yaegashi, better known for his recurring role as Robert Minoru in Hulu’s *Runaways* based on the Marvel Comics series, ruled the stage. Though billed as a staged reading, if memory serves me, most of the actors were off-book. In fact, I barely remember anybody even carrying a script. That is how riveting this play was.



Yuhua Hamasaki, left, and James Yaegashi in “Black Lizard.” (Photo by Nate Gowdy)

The plot, if you were going to sum it up for a friend in a sentence or two, is a cat and mouse story between the beautiful and cunning jewel thief Black Lizard (Yuhua Hamasaki), who tries to kidnap Sanae (Virginia Fuentes), a wealthy jeweler’s daughter, as part of a plot to steal the “Star of Egypt” diamond, and Akechi (James Yaegashi), a quickly-hired famous detective dubbed “the Sherlock Holmes of Japan.” This sets off a take-no-prisoners duel, with the help of a super-fine supporting cast, between Black Lizard and Akechi in which each try to outwit the other. Of course, in the process these quick on-the-trigger inventive strategists fall in love.

The fun is found in a rolling cascade of breathtaking twists and turns that takes you to the edge of your seat as you wait to see what happens next.

For those interested, the 1968 Japanese film “Black Lizard” (with English subtitles), based on the play, can be seen on YouTube. It is fabulous camp at its most subtle. Towards the end of the film, for a split second if you don’t blink, a near-naked Mishima, well known for his posing abilities, makes an appearance. His character: a beautiful man.

My favorite play in the Festival, and one that still remains very much alive in my mind, was *The Lighthouse*, Mishima’s near-genius five-character, 75-minute one-act play. Adapted by Mishima from Jean Racine’s five-act, 17th century tragedy *Phèdre*, it is a retelling of the story of Phaedra from Greek mythology. Here the playwright explores the anxieties and repressed desires of the Kurokawa family.

Produced by New York City-based writer and actress Marissa Carpio, *Lighthouse* was brilliantly directed by Benny Sato Ambush from a new English translation by Laurence Kominz. Written in 1949 as a shingeki, a Japanese theater form based on modern realism, Mishima updates the action of his play to shortly after World War II in American-occupied Japan. Using an all-Asian and Asian-American cast, the *Lighthouse* story unfolds beautifully.



Stars of the outdoor presentation of “The Lighthouse: starring Lya Yanne, left, and Sam Hamashima. (Photo by Nate Gowdy)

Adding much frisson to this production, since the play does take place at a seaside resort, was the venue, which had us sitting on an outdoor terrace overlooking the Provincetown Harbor.

Lighthouse centers on the young 25-year-old Noboru (Sam Hamashima), a recently discharged navy guy, and Isako (Lya Yanne), an attractive 30-year-old woman who married Noboru’s 60-something-year-old widowed father Yukichi (Yoshiro Kono). Though silent, until it isn’t, it is obvious that a simmering sexual attraction which had some of us hedonists in the audience shifting in our seats – existed between them.

Also in the mix, representing the innocence of youth, is Noboru’s teenage sister Masako (Haley Sakamoto), who is in the process of coming of age. All are vacationing on Oshima Island, south of Tokyo, when their repressed feelings begin to explode. So believably alive were the electrifying performances of the cast that the ghost of Mishima himself, both directing and playing every character on stage, seemed to be in the house.

And Tell Sad Stories of the Death of Queens, William’s first known play set in the gay world, was written in 1957 during the period when he was seeing a famously quack psychiatrist who told him that all of his troubles stemmed from living a gay life. Indeed, Williams was publicly closeted for most of his life, despite having a very public relationship with Frank Merlo for 15 years. This play, first produced in 2004, was also kept in the closet, hidden until it resurfaced after Williams’ death in 1983.



Rob Tucker, left, and Rick Ware in Tennessee Williams’ “And Tell Sad Stories of the Deaths of Queens.” (Photo by Nate Gowdy)

Brought to the Festival by Philadelphia-based EgoPo Classic Theater and directed by Lane Savadove, EgoPo’s artistic director, this four-character, 50-minute one-act tragicomedy tells the story of Candy Delaney (a fabulous in-your-face Rob Tucker), a lonely and flamboyant New Orleans transvestite who picks up Karl (an appropriately menacing Nick Ware), a merchant marine in a gay bar.

Bringing him home to her well-appointed home, complete with a beautiful Japanese fantasy garden, a well-stocked bar, and pink rose petals scattered about the floor (set design by Dane Eissler), Candy goes about wooing Karl, who is downing drink after drink, with stories of her successful interior design business, and her ownership of three properties in the Quarter.

Unexpectedly, Karl asks Candy, who is obviously gay to everybody in the audience, if she is queer. Her faster than a speeding bullet zinger, reminiscent of a Tallulah Bankhead comeback, “You can’t expect me to believe that a man shipping in and out of New Orleans for five years is still not able to recognize a queen in a gay bar,” filled the theatre with its biggest laugh.

With offers of financial security being hinted at, Candy, still hot for the allegedly straight Karl, tells him that all she really wants is companionship, not sex. This said, with easy money on his mind, and many drinks under his belt, he eventually beds Candy. Sadly, the next day, despite early warnings about this relationship from Jerry Johnson (Charlie Barney) and Alvin Krenning (Kerry Jules), two of Candy’s drag queen tenants, violence rears its ugly head.

Again, the venue's Japanese flavored setting which had the audience, with the living room in the middle, facing each other, brought us dramatically into the play, not only as voyeurs but as invited guests of Candy's. To heighten this effect Candy playing hostess galore handed a number of us, with refills to boot, glasses of sparkling champagne. To be a friendly and supportive participant, I generously accepted a second helping.

Another imaginative, eye-opening presentation, was the placement on the same bill of two different versions, helmed by two different directors, of Mishima's short one-act play *Busu*, (translated as *delicious poison*). This unique pairing, holding court at Fishermen Hall, highlighted the difference between Kyōgen, the traditional Japanese comedic theater style, with a wilder and more freewheeling, contemporary version. Total running time for this intermissionless dual presentation was slightly over an hour.



In "*Busu*" we see Mark Hayes, left, Laura Dooley, center, and Laurence Kominz. (Photo by Nate Gowdy)

Though the set, the actors' rhythms, and their costumes differed in design for each version, the story for both is essentially the same. The traditional Kyōgen presentation, the more staid of the two, was directed and translated by Laurence Kominz who heads the Kyōgen Company at Portland State University.

This version of the play opens innocently enough with two servants (Laura Dooley, Mark Hayes), lightly bantering among themselves. A strange, and seemingly out-of-place black box is seen resting in the middle of the stage. About to leave the house, their master (Laurence Kominz) instructs his servants to guard the box, and under no circumstances open it, otherwise a poisonous death residing in the box will do them in.

As expected, after their master leaves an insatiably curiosity takes over. The fun is in watching them planning their invasion of the box. At the end of it all, surprisingly so, for both the servant and the audience, the black box, fortified by the power of belief alone, turned out to be empty.

The freewheeling contemporary *Busu*, wilder by half than the traditional interpretation, incorporated the use of eurythmics (the art of interpreting music by rhythmical free-style bodily movement), vaudeville-like slapstick, and a musical score. The action of the play moved from a rich man's house to an antique shop.

Translated by Donald Keene and directed by Daniel Irizarry, the artistic director of One-Eighth Theater in New York City, featured Charlie Munn and Michael Leonard as shop assistants and Irizarry doing double duty as Rasputinov, the shop's owner. In this version, the mysterious box was filled with green Jell-O, which the hungry assistants quickly lapped up.



"*The Lady Aoi*" starring Justine Chevalier and Marcel Myer. (Photo by Lisa O'Brien)

The Lady Aoi, an otherworldly tale by Mishima, also housed at Provincetown Theater, was a modern version of a 15th century classical Noh drama. The original story has its roots in one of Japan's most legendary novel, "The Tale of Genji," written by Murasaki Shikibu, a poet and lady in waiting of the Imperial court of Japan, in the early years of the 11th century.

Translated by Donald Keene and directed by Fred Abrahamse, *Lady Aoi* was the second play brought to last year's Festival by Fred Abrahamse's and Marcel Meyer's South African production company.

Of all the plays on view, thanks to the production's use of a puppet as the central eye-catching figure, characters wearing masks, an eerie set featuring a hospital bed surrounded by a flowing diaphanous curtain, and a revenge-seeking ghost (Marcel Meyer) given to haunting a comatose Lady Aoi (the puppet in the play), was the most shiver-producing play in the Festival. The very versatile Meyer also played the hospital's weird nurse.

Also putting in an unexpected visit to the hospital is Hikaru Wakabayashi (Justin Chevalier). Lady Aoi's husband, who may or may not have had a relationship with the nightly visiting ghost lady. This not knowing whether or not what we are watching and hearing is real, imagined, a heated dream, or all three, keeps us on our toes. I am guessing that this feverish and pulsating ambiguity, which keeps the audience on tenterhooks, is the point of the play.

Another letter-perfect 80-minute pairing was that of Williams' 1943 short story, "The Angel in the Alcove," narrated by Marios Mettis with "Airing Old Clothes," a Runn Shayo dance performance based on five haikus written when Mishima was sixteen. These haikus, which may have been inspired by stories told to him by his aristocratic grandmother, talk about finding a stain of perfume on an old ballgown, distant horses gathering for a ball, and fireflies released during this celebration.

Brought to the Festival by the Cyprus-based Poreia Theatre Group and directed by Anthoullis Demosthenous (he also did the lights and costumes), the story of "The Angel in the Alcove" is a beautiful blending of the spiritual with faith in an afterlife.



"The Angel in the Alcove" with Marios Mettis, left, and Runn Shayo. (Photo by Nate Gowdy)

The story takes us to the darkened hallways of a rooming house in French Quarter of New Orleans, not unlike one that Williams most likely stayed at himself. Here we meet a young artist surrounded by a harridan landlady given to paranoia, a next-door neighbor thirsting for love-making and a shimmering angelic figure who only appears in an alcove when the light is just right.

Though the narrator does not go into detail, Williams' erotically-tinged language tells us that sexual union with his neighbor was indeed consummated. "I want to, I want to," the neighbor whispered. "So, I lay back and let him do what he wanted to until he was finished. I felt that the angel in the alcove permitted the act to occur and had neither blamed nor approved, and so I went off to sleep."

Much of the strength of the "Angel" adaptation stemmed from the ingenious set design by Antonis Neophytou which elevated dancer-choreographer Runn Shayo's half-naked Christ-like performance to as close to heaven as one can get without dying.

Accompanied by Rachmaninoff's "Vespers," smells of incense, candles, strategically placed crosses and paper bags – each marked with one of the seven deadly sins – turned Shayo's nimble, dance-like movements into a ritualistic church pageant. Its ending, lost on nobody, had Shayo standing with outstretched arms and a tilted head in front of a large cross.

Another visually wonder-filled one-act play whose story-telling power was greatly enhanced by its innovative mixture of Japanese kamishibai style (storytelling with drawings), two- and three-dimensional puppets, and hand-held Noh-inspired masks, was Tennessee Williams' *The Lady from the Village of Falling Flowers*.

Written around 1930 while Williams was studying journalism at the University of Missouri and left unpublished when he died in 1983, *Falling Flowers* was first brought to Provincetown by Washington DC's Spooky Action Theater in 2019, where it was the Festival's 13th premiere of a Williams play.



Dylan Arredondo, left, Melissa Carter, center, and Joseph Graham in "The Lady from the Village of Falling Flowers." (Photo by Nate Gowdy)

The beauty of *Falling Flowers*, in addition to being performed amongst the outdoor greenery at Wa Garden, was in the play's use of three different visual ways of telling its story. The first scene, looking like a traditional kamishibai play, introduces cut-out two-dimensional puppets. The second scene moves its telling to miniature three-dimensional puppets, while the third uses hand-held Noh-inspired masks.

Inspired from a character from "The Tale of Genji," *Falling Flowers*, adapted, directed, and designed by the extremely inventive Natsu Onoda Power – she even built the set – tells the story of the unmarried Emperor Nijo (Dylan Arredondo) and his annoyance at his prime minister Kamo (Jared H. Graham) who is unable to write a poem in tribute to the orange trees while the blossoms are in bloom. Not missing a beat, in a tit for tat, Kamo lets it be known that Nijo's court is not happy with the emperor's bachelor status.

A deal is quickly arrived at with the Emperor promising to marry any woman who can compose a poem that captures the beauty of the orange blossoms before the sunrise "so that they will smell as delicious a thousand years from now as they smell on this evening's wind." As to be expected (who wouldn't want to marry an emperor?), a number of awful poems were put forth.

In a jubilant fairy tale ending, which brings to mind Cinderella's being saved by a perfect-perfect glass slipper just in the nick of time, *Falling Flowers* ends happily, for all involved, with a winning poem being submitted by the very beautiful Princess Musaki (Melissa Carter).

The 2020 (15th Annual) Tennessee Williams Theater Festival in Provincetown titled "Censorship" will be held from Thursday, September 24 through Sunday, September 27, 2020. The full line-up of shows in the 15th Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival will be announced at the annual Performance Gala in Provincetown on Saturday, May 30, 2020. For more information about the Festival, and how to purchase Festival passes, log onto their website <http://twptown.org>



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