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## Performing Tennessee Williams

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Performing Tennessee Williams

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

PERFORMING TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

By Augustin J Correro, MFA Candidate

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2012

Major Director: Dr. Noreen C. Barnes

Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Theatre

This thesis is dedicated to illustrating the unique challenges of staging works by the playwright Tennessee Williams, and to making suggestions on how to avoid common pitfalls in production, performance, and direction of his plays. It uses evidence from the playwright's various biographical works as well as insight and conjecture from the author's experience to illuminate these challenges and help the reader to avoid hackneyed or ineffective staging practices. It touches on the effect of film adaptations on stage performances; the typical portrayal of American Southern characters onstage; the aural ramifications of Williams's poetry to a now-visually-centered audience; stylistic elements similar to Williams's contemporaries, including Rice, Brecht, O'Neill, and others; the delicacy of Williams's signature meter and rhythm in his plays; dramaturgical groundwork in the playwright's intentions; and a systemization of archetypical Williams characters.

This thesis does not prescribe a cut-and-dried set of rules and regulations for performing Williams's works, for the simple reason that the Williams canon is so diverse that no singular set of "tricks" will be effective in every play. Furthermore, the author understands that a producer, director, or actor will not find use in all facets of a rigid "system". The thesis does outline a number of practices whose aims are to make productions more effective from an integral perspective. There are exercises to attempt, questions to pose, and matters to consider in the staging of Williams's plays during any part of production—from in-class reading to designing the scenery, and from deciding why to put a Williams play in a season to the living moments of an actor's performance.

The thesis aims to be helpful, informative, and accessible, rather than doctrinaire: much like the playwright's works, its purpose is to illuminate dark corners of something that viewers think they already fully understand.

## **Introduction:**

### **Why Is Williams Different From Other Twentieth Century Playwrights?**

While the poet-playwright born Thomas Lanier Williams III has become an installation in the canon of American dramatic literature, his work is in many ways unlike the work of his contemporaries, and more similar to the work of a number of nineteenth century playwrights including Strindberg, Ibsen, and most markedly, his idol Anton Chekhov. As a result, the language and arrangement of Williams's words need to be treated with a certain delicacy—if David Lindsay-Abaire and Wendy Wasserstein are battered cod (easily served up, deep-fried, and fairly difficult to ruin), Williams is lobster (one will note, a lobster is not even a fish, but if it is done wrong, it is positively toxic). In the following chapters I will explain the treatment of the language, subject matter, and style I believe are necessary to vitalizing Williams's works in live performance.

However, I do not propose the artists should hope to change the audience's habits when viewing a play by Williams. Instead, the following chapters aim to inform the actor, director, and producer about the unique challenges that come with undertaking his distinctly playable poetry, and to reinforce the importance of communicating it in a full, interesting way. If played well, the audience will hardly know it is surrounded with rich, vivid wordplay. If played poorly, the audience will sit victim to another production of *The Glass Menagerie* during which nothing happens and no one cares.

## Chapter One

### Sweet Tea Tennessee:

#### A Common Treatment of Williams's Work

The plays of Tennessee Williams are met with reticence and contempt by audiences and critics alike. Viewers feel disconnected because productions seem affected, insipid, or antiquated. One reviewer for *Splash* magazine, a Los Angeles publication, in a review for a 2010 production of *Orpheus Descending* at Theatre/Theatre, went so far as to say that “I pretty much hated this play because it has nothing to say to me as an audience member in a major city in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”(Clay) Other reviews include scathing comments on Moises Kaufman’s stage adaptation of Williams’s short story “One Arm” and, as the Google pages scroll on, one applauds the acting in a 2011 production of *Eccentricities of a Nightingale* while claiming the playwright is “up to his old tricks”, longing for something less Southern and precious (Moore). The blog-ridden journalistic climate makes a Google search a very relevant tool of the audience and the contemporary critic. Should a potential audience member choose to look up past reviews of Tennessee Williams’s plays, he or she will be inundated with the same stereotypes that are too commonly regurgitated upon the planks. This travesty does neither the playwright nor potential producers any good.

I have coined a term that I think captures the essence of many misfired productions of Tennessee Williams’s plays: “Sweet Tea Tennessee”. The Sweet Tea treatment is one in which the playwright’s work at crafting a high-stakes, emotionally charged circumstance is undermined by a collection of stereotypes and misplaced expectations. These clichés and expectations come from all sides: the audience, the actors, and the directors. Stereotyping Southerners as slow-

talking and incapable of urgency because of a lackadaisical demeanor is a common pitfall in productions of Williams's plays. Directors often opt to play an atmosphere when staging plays taking place in the American South. The audience expects a quiet evening on the porch sipping sweet iced tea in a rocking chair while crickets chirp, and theatre companies are all too eager to present such stagings. What the director and actors must never lose sight of, however, is that the play is still drama: heightened situations, charged circumstances, and emotional upset.

Williams's plays are rife with all of these, but the veneer of affected propriety must be stripped away for the performances to become electrifying.

From an American Southerner's perspective, I will posit that the south is hardly a sleepy place with no drama. Rather, it is much the opposite: the lives of characters in the American South, both real and imagined by playwrights and novelists, are fraught with just as much trauma and majesty as those in England, New York, or any other popular setting for dramas. To approach these characters with lethargy of the soul would be a dramaturgical and performative misstep of "Jefferson-Davisian" proportions.

Returning to what the reviews have to say, Thomas Keith wrote in his review for the Pearl Theatre Company's production of *Vieux Carré* in the *Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, "Any director who approaches a Tennessee Williams play is wise to pay close attention to the stage directions. From his poetic character descriptions to the details of the action and the set, Williams's directions are deliberate, specific, and essential to the theatricality of his plays."

(Keith) A director or actor is wise, indeed, to play toward these deliberately theatrical elements, rather than against them. Rather than attempting to recreate what Vivien Leigh and Elizabeth Taylor captured onscreen in those popular films, resting on the laurels (no pun intended) of affected Southern gentility and soft-spoken breathiness, the actor should be challenged to honor

the punctuation—when there is an exclamation point, *get off the porch and shout, bitch!* A cautionary excerpt from a review will well reinforce this belief. For *The New Yorker*, John Lahr protests, when describing a production of *The Glass Menagerie* in 2010 by the Long Wharf Theatre, which was seemingly mishandled by director Gordon Edelstein:

To members of the audience who don't know the masterpiece, it may come as a surprise to learn that none of what they're seeing was written by Williams. To those who are familiar with the play, it's an outrageous piece of intellectual impertinence from a director who is trying to claim co-authorship of a play that he imperfectly understands. At a stroke, Williams's purpose and his meaning are skewed and screwed. (Lahr)

Edelstein had apparently misappropriated the conventions of *The Glass Menagerie* and elected to intersperse several inappropriate biographical elements of Tennessee Williams. The pseudo-adaptation and his “imperfect” understanding led to the audience confusing the roles with the real people on whom they are based, rather than understanding that there was a clear parallel—it seemed to make the play into a docu-drama, rather than a retrospective allegory.

In 2012 and 2011, respectively I had the pleasure and displeasure of seeing productions of *Camino Real* at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* at the Firehouse Theatre Project in Richmond, Virginia. While the production of *Camino* was daring and innovative—truly a triumph of adapting and co-authoring the play with Williams (unlike the production of *Menagerie* critiqued above)—the production of *Cat* was safe, unassuming, and a successful(ish) rendition of what audiences probably think *Cat* is supposed to look like. The responses by audiences and critics were, naturally, different: *Camino*, for all its innovation, received a smattering of praise awash in a wake of derision (mostly for the shock-style delivery

of director Calizto Bieito), while *Cat* received precious praise for its Sweet Tea safety. The culture into which artists introduce their Williams work is one that is adverse to challenging productions, mostly: the audience expects a certain aesthetic, and when it is not delivered, there can be hell to pay in the press and on the blogs. The climate in Chicago is definitely different than that of Richmond, but it is in cities the size of Richmond and smaller that Tennessee Williams gets a lot of stage time: colleges, community theatres, semi-professional and LORT houses from sea to shining sea love to put an American classic in their seasons, but are leery of stepping outside of the box and into the less-tested expressionist and surrealist waters.

From where do these apprehensions spring, though? It is my belief that while the film versions of some of Williams's most famous plays did much good to broaden awareness of his works, it is to imitations of these same films that interesting and new productions like Bieito's *Camino* and the *Comédie Française's* kabuki-inspired *Streetcar* have taken what may be a permanent back seat.

**Let's *NOT* Go to the Movies**  
**or**  
**Viv Leigh the Destroyer**  
**or**  
**The Jar-Jar Binxing of Mr. Williams**

Perhaps the most harm done in placing Sweet Tea expectations on productions has been done by the films based on Williams's plays. Those same films that arguably rocketed Williams to the height of stardom would continue to inform (dare I say dictate) the style of his stage plays for decades to come. Very often in venues far from theatrical epicenters, a *Menagerie* or *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is staged with painstaking effort to resemble the films. Audiences enter theatres expecting replications of movies, much like they see when attending big-budget Broadway musicals. In productions of *Suddenly*, *Last Summer*, the question is begged, "Where's the

elevator?” and in plays like *A Streetcar Named Desire*, audiences are regularly revolted at the grittiness and the melancholy ending, both missing in the film.

There is something to be said about the films directed by Elia Kazan, who was, for much of Williams’s career a go-to director, and who mounted a number of his most successful productions. Even Kazan, however, had to bend to the will of the studios, and remove elements considered too unseemly for consumers of films—elements which needed not be removed when he directed the stage versions of these films. In a clear sign of trust for Kazan, Williams often gave way to the director’s vision, as when he allowed Kazan to convince him to write Big Daddy into the third act of *Cat* for the Broadway production. All this is to say that if films absolutely *had* to permeate and overtake the worldwide preconception of the Williams “brand”, dramaturgs and directors can be grateful that some of them were directed by Elia Kazan.

What those staunch champions of Williams’s poetic power over the surreal and expressionistic are faced with is a world in which there is an encroaching notion of something they do not want in their productions looming at their doorstep as they go into rehearsal. Much like die-hard Star Wars fans cannot ignore the regrettable presence of Jar-Jar Binks in Episodes I, II, and III, naturalism (or at least realism) is an unavoidable expectation thanks to the films. Only those daring avant-garde (or pseudo-avant-garde) productions seem to stare down the naturalistic beast and banish it back into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In his 1944 production notes for *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams denounced staunch naturalism. He stated:

The straight realistic play with its genuine Frigidaire and authentic ice-cubes, its characters who speak exactly as its audience speaks, corresponds to the academic landscape and has the same virtue of a photographic likeness. Everyone should know

nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: that truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance. (*Menagerie* xix)

Therefore, Williams sought in his style of writing, his proposed “Plastic Theatre” (which he would later allow to fall by the wayside as he explored further expression with his plays in other innovative ways), a sort of transformation of the “real” into something resembling reality but which commented more poetically on it. In other words, he hoped to divorce his plays from naturalism, the movement born in the nineteenth century which attempted to place painstakingly realistic behaviors, environments, and properties onstage, and instead he hoped to put on plays that touched on a deeper truth than a pedestrian “slice of life”.

Due to their mass appeal and accessibility, films (and therefore the naturalism found in them) would become the standard for production of a Williams play. If not for the advent of the motion picture, Naturalism may not have found its foothold at the top of the entertainment pyramid. Nevertheless, with movie houses becoming more common, and prices of tickets to live theatre gradually inflating, it came to pass that commercial, naturalistic films with their authentic ice cubes and internalized action remained *en vogue*.

While Williams himself continued to write plays which challenged the dimensions and expectations of the stage, the tried-and-true award winners are played naturalistically in regional and community venues around the country. Easily digestible by audiences, realistic performances are welcome—they are familiar and resemble the well-known films, while artistically challenging productions are relegated to that unsavory category of *avant garde*—recognized as being unpalatable to the common audience. The question must then be posed,

“Why were audiences so receptive to *Menagerie* when it opened in the 1940s, but audiences today are so squeamish to such magical surrealism today?”

### **Re-Learning to Listen**

What is missing is a respect for the aural tradition. The world was different when Williams was writing his plays on manual typewriters. As is the problem with Shakespeare today, viewers are present solely to view. Listening is relegated to concerts. Point-and-click spoon-feeding is appreciated. What is not as often appreciated, however, is poetry—especially in the dramatic medium. Even in 1945, after the success of *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams knew that staging poetry was an uphill battle. In a radio interview with George Freedley recorded in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, the playwright stated:

I think that [the role of poetry in the modern theatre] is going to depend pretty largely on two factors. As everyone knows poetry has a limited audience. It cannot compete on Broadway with comedy hits like *Harvey* or *Dear Ruth*, or even with a play like *Glass Menagerie* which is poetic, but not a verse play. I wonder how many people listening to us tonight know or like or possibly have even heard of Hart Crane, and yet he's conceded generally to be the greatest American poet since Whitman. Therefore, if we're going to have poetry of this stature in the theatre, well have to have theatres that can afford to run without reaching a very large audience. (*Conversations* 20)

One of the few remaining, struggling repertory companies today would hardly choose to produce *Slapstick Tragedy* or *Out Cry* over *Hairspray* or even *Mame*. Even a storefront black box theatre is likely to choose the bottom line over the poetic canon. Audiences simply do not respond to poetry, even suggested or diluted poetry, in the same way that they respond to flashy, moderately-if-at-all challenging “crowd-pleasers”. If Williams’s plays were in public domain,

perhaps they would be more commonly produced, as is the case with the works of Shakespeare, but even still, the audiences would be markedly smaller than those for *Steel Magnolias* or *Noises Off*.

All of this “food for thought” is meant not to be dogma spewed at an audience about how *it* should see or listen to Williams. Performers have rarely made headway through outright instruction to their audiences. It is meant to assist the artists involved in the work to overcome the poetic problems and stylistic challenges of the world of Williams, so that the audience is not acutely aware of being inundated by vital verbiage, but rather enveloped in a luscious landscape accented by the words: something distinctly Tennessee, without the Sweet Tea.

## Chapter Two

### Style:

#### **It's Not Just Something Sebastian Venable Had.**

Allean Hale points out, “Although critics, unable to find an exact label, would at first call him a realist, he was never just that; one mark of his genius was his refusal to fit into any slot; his plays would mingle naturalism, as in *Streetcar*, with the romantic (*Summer and Smoke*) or the allegorical, as in *Suddenly Last Summer*” (Hale, *Making* 23). To answer the question, “What stylistic genre best fits the works of Williams?” is to answer a question that even Williams himself may not have been able (or willing) to answer. In a 1965 interview with John Gruen, Williams said,

At present, the theater is reduced to so many musicals, you know. And the theater of the absurd, which can't appeal to me. I can't really work in the theatre of the absurd. I can work in fantasy—in romantic fantasy—and I can work in very far-out plays. But I could never just make a joke out of human existence. (*Conversations* 118)

But what is the fantasy in which Williams strove to work? The best way to discover it is probably to decide what the fantasy was *not*. Realism—though often applied to Williams by unskilled directors who know nothing more than realistic styles of execution and by actors who emulate film and television performances—was quite definitely not one of Williams's goals. In another interview with Cecil Brown, nearly a decade later, Williams stated:

Sometimes the truth is more accessible when you ignore realism, because when you see things in a somewhat exaggerated form you capture more of the true essence of life. The

exaggeration gets closer to the essence. This essence of life is really very grotesque and gothic. To get to it you've got to do what may strike some people as distortion.

(*Conversations* 264)

In this same 1974 interview, when confronted with the nature of his staged exaggerations, he told the interviewer, rather than exaggerating for emphasis, "I exaggerate because I don't like to write realistically; it doesn't interest me very much." (*Conversations* 263) Ergo, if realism was of little interest to Williams, it can be very easily ruled out as one of the components of an effective Williams production.

Williams's collaborators were on the same page about his departure from the mundane. In "Tennessee Williams—Last of Our Solid Gold Bohemians", a report on an interview with Williams in 1953 by Henry Hewes, some insight is given about the people who made staging Williams's plays possible:

Both Kazan and producer Cheryl Crawford are highly pleased to be doing a work that moves so far away from the strict naturalistic drama that prevails on Broadway. 'No one,' says Mr. Kazan, 'appreciates how much *A Streetcar Named Desire* did to open the avenue to a less literal approach toward the theatre. Because of *Streetcar* we had *Death of a Salesman*. Now we all hope people are ready for this.'" (*Conversations* 33)

When discussing the workshopping of *Camino Real*, whose production followed *Streetcar*, Hewes also recorded that "Mr. Kazan thinks that the reason for any confusion comes from the fact that *Camino Real* instead of having the usual unity of story that limits expression has a unity of theme expressed far more completely than it could have been in a tight story" (*Conversations* 31). This stakes yet another claim in the territory of the expressionist for performing Williams.

While it is true that not every director is an Elia Kazan and not every producer can hope to be a Cheryl Crawford, if the great artists of the mid-twentieth century were willing to take risks in staging Williams's work, so then, should the artists of today be.

These concepts translate as playable to an actor or a director in that the artist must know that there is some elasticity in the fabric of a Williams production. The performer and director should feel not only allowed, but encouraged to go "over-the-top" in their expressions. Too much can be boiled down and simplified, but it is a far greater challenge to grow something from nothing. A timid director or actor will fear going "too far" with a character, a metaphor, or an exchange. Instead of falling victim to a less-than-fulfilled, timid execution, the artists should instead strive for the same things the playwright himself did: understanding and truth. If the result is a carnival-mirror reflection of "reality", it is not necessarily a bad thing. It is up to the directors and actors to rein in absurdity (when applicable), but to push the limits of the real. Either way, a photographic replica of true life will often prove disastrous when applied to a Williams play.

### **Naturalism Is a House Not Meant to Stand**

As referenced before, rather than the cut-and-dried Ibsenesque Realism, the "Williams Style" would likely have been something more Impressionistic or Expressionistic. There are arguments made for both, and because the playwright was willing to appropriate from different styles and sources for various plays, there is no reason to believe that he settled on one or the other for too long a period. Gilbert Debuscher asserts in his essay *European and American Influences on Williams*:

“[Plastic theatre] follows closely the program spelled out by [Chekhov’s character] Konstantin who refuses a theatre of ‘tradition and conventionality’ and calls for ‘new forms of expression.’ Even in details of production Tom, as a substitute for Williams, seems to embrace Konstantin’s rejection of a form that shows how ‘people eat, drink, love...’ when he requests in stage direction that ‘[e]ating [is] indicated by gestures without food or utensils’. (Debusscher 180)

Debusscher continues, “Chekhov may have been Williams’s forerunner in dramatic impressionism in that he uses sound, lighting, and stage effects not as redundant illustrations but as elements of psychological or thematic expressivity” (Debusscher. 181).

As years passed and Williams moved away from this idea of Plastic Theatre (described at some length in the production notes for *Menagerie*), his work undertook a more expressionistic quality. Speaking of his later works, he said, “Finally, I think the ‘German expressionist’ treatment was right for my material. I hadn’t realized how far I had departed from realism in my writing. I had long since exhausted the so-called ‘poetic realism.’ This, after all, isn’t twenty years ago.” (Keith, “Funhouse” xxvi).

Even in materials from twenty years before, though, touches of expressionism can be found in Williams’s plays. In *Summer and Smoke*, Alma’s first entrance is made to an explosion of white flashing fireworks. In *Suddenly Last Summer* the garden seems to come alive with primal calls at moments of tension. Music is woven into the action of scenes in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Orpheus Descending*, *Vieux Carré*, and a handful of other plays from the 1940s-1960s. It is important to note that the use of sound and music is explicitly designed by the playwright in these cases. While the director can choose to utilize these opportunities or not, the

fact is that these sometimes minute but always specific ingredients endured many rewrites but remained in place for one reason or another. These ingredients remain in the recipe, but can be understandably removed to taste—within reason.

Regardless of these strong signifiers of other styles, Jacqueline O'Connor's words continue to ring true: "...Since he first gained international attention with the production of *The Glass Menagerie* in 1945, his plays, even those now considered American classics, have been by turn ignored, scorned, morally condemned, or seriously misunderstood" (O'Connor 255).

Perhaps it is because of injudicious exclusion and rearrangement of stylistic ingredients that the final product is sour.

The following section is a stylistic comparison of Williams and Bertholt Brecht, since examining his similarity to another often misunderstood playwright of the twentieth century may shed some light on the handling and mishandling of Williams's plays.

## Chapter Three

### From East Berlin to Rue Bourbon:

#### Brechtian Elements in the Early Plays of Tennessee Williams

“Nothing needs less justification than pleasure”: This could easily have been a quotation by Tennessee Williams. However, it comes from Bertholt Brecht’s *A Short Organum for the Theatre*. While there is no record of Williams and Brecht encountering one another in their lifetimes, several key concepts and conventions in their works intersected. The *Short Organum* is an easy-to-navigate treatise by Brecht on what his theatre art sought to accomplish and how he hoped to go about it. If using the *Short Organum* as a sort of “Seventy-Seven Commandments” for theatre art, Tennessee Williams’s plays can provide excellent examples of theory in practice. Three prominent examples of such plays are *Not About Nightingales*, written in 1938, *Stairs to the Roof*, produced in 1947 (which Williams first mentioned in his journal in 1940, placing it squarely in his apprentice period), and *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams’s 1944 New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award-winning “memory play”. Each of these plays, showcasing various stages of Williams’s growth as a young poet-playwright, exhibit Brechtian elements in different states of being polished, long before the *Short Organum* would be found on shelves anywhere.

Williams completed his play *Not About Nightingales* in 1938 at age twenty-seven in response to a harrowing news story about four inmates in a Pennsylvania prison scalded to death in an incident of torture-punishment turned into accidental execution. *Not About Nightingales* is possibly the first of Williams’s explicitly politically motivated plays. *Spring Storm* and *Fugitive Kind*, both completed in 1937, are both socially progressive but lack the vehement challenge of the corrupt system of a governmental institution that *Nightingales* boasts. *Nightingales* is also

the first of Williams's plays to use the elements that would later become staples of Brechtian practice: supertitles; music which neither underscores for the sake of underscoring nor calls distinctive attention to itself (thus detracting from the action); and the naming of characters by their types rather than names (and only in the case of more peripheral characters—for now).

However, in examining Williams's life during this time, it becomes evident that his proclivity toward Brechtian elements was coincidental at best, since prior to 1938, Tom Williams would have yet to hear about Brecht (for a few years, at least). In "A Call for Justice", her introduction to *Not About Nightingales*, Allean Hale states:

His description "expressionistic" is an important indication of William's[sic] intent. Although he would for years be branded as a realist, he was never truly that. He would always mix fantasy, even surrealism, with realism...the psychological use of lighting, the contrast of dark and light suggesting prison bars, the groups marching or chanting in unison—are innovative examples. He did away with curtains, used lighting to mark scene changes and spots to enable simultaneous action on various parts of the stage. He introduced theme music, from jazz to Tchaikowsky, to express the characters' moods or comment satirically on the action. This is the most 'living newspaper' of all Williams plays, using throughout the technique of an Announcer and caption titles for each scene... Script directions of "theme up" and "fade-in," "fade-out" suggest that Tom may even have thought of projecting these titles on a scrim—as he would later suggest for *The Glass Menagerie*. While this Brechtian device implies techniques learned at [the University of] Iowa, Tom had used captions in his two other proletarian plays before he heard of Brecht. ("Call" xvii)

A number of statements in this paragraph by Hale are worth exploring. The “living newspaper” comment is likely indicative of Tom’s work under Edward Mabie, his professor at University of Iowa, who was a member of the Federal Theatre Project (an organization which, probably in addition to other practitioners, would have used supertitles before or at the same time as Brecht, but whose use of them would make Williams’s no less inventive as a novice playwright). In his time at the University, Tom had written to several family members about the abundance of “Living Newspaper” plays in which he was involved. It is likely that his tutelage under the “good professor” as Tom sarcastically called Mabie, and his own outrage at the Philadelphia County event were both fundamental to the documentary-style presentation of *Nightingales*. Additionally, as the autobiographic Tom of *The Glass Menagerie* would later inform the world, young Tennessee Williams had a great love for the movies, which likely informed his stage conventions. Hale wrote:

At times the play seems better suited to the screen than to the stage in its quick dissolves, its opening flash forward and such effects as the pleasure boat passing by. It disregards logic, as convicts—supposedly locked in cells—are brought stage front and spotlighted for key speeches....Perhaps Tom’s innovative stage techniques were inspired by nothing more esoteric than the movies. “Going to the movies” had been his adolescent escape from home.” (“Call” xviii)

Furthermore, the fast-forward at the beginning of the play to the final moment in order to show the final outcome is a way of alienating the audience, showing the ravages of the horrible neglect, and asking the audience to watch how and why Jim’s last act needed to be done. This convention, along with the supertitles, works against the ability of the audience to invest fully:

the audience is always waiting for the other shoe to drop. The shoes are literal. Brecht says of the “A-effect”:

A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfair...The new alienations are only designed to free socially-conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today...For it seems impossible to alter what has long not been altered. (Brecht 192)

What Brecht may have been implicating is that by “making strange” a seemingly commonplace element or situation, the audience is forced to withdraw from complacent observation and thus become engrossed in the contrast of the piece. In addition to the use of the A-effect, *Not About Nightingales* includes musical devices that are similar to those used by Brecht. Some of the music comes in the form of themes playing at the beginning of scenes, and some comes in the form of the faintly heard band on a passing boat. Some of the most unnerving and effective music, however, comes from the characters singing. The popular 1918 song “I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles” is repeatedly sung by Butch, the kingpin of the cell block, and not prettily, as prescribed by the playwright. Because of its eeriness and alien nature in the prison, the happy tune, as Brecht would assert:

...strongly resist[s] the smooth incorporation it is generally expected [to have] and turns into unthinking slavery...Similarly in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* the singer, by using a chilly and unemotional way of singing to describe the servant-girl’s rescue of the child as it is mimed on the stage, makes evident the terror of a period in which motherly instincts can become a suicidal weakness. (Brecht 203)

In the case of “I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles”, the inmate’s chilling rendition does not lull the audience into a dreamy state of admiration, but instead accentuates that the part of the refrain will likely be Butch’s own fate: “They fly so high/Nearly reach the sky/Then like my dreams/They fade and die”. While Butch escapes death in the Klondike, a steam-powered torture cell (only to be cornered by authorities) his dream of changing the unfair conditions for his fellows and himself bursts like a fragile bubble.

Although he is a foil to Butch, Jim’s dream is also shattered. He and Butch see eye to eye more than either character would care to admit. In their twin monologues in Episodes Six and Five, respectively, they broadcast the point at which Williams is driving. Butch in Scene Five rallies his cohorts to carry out the hunger strike, no matter what the price. Proclaiming that enough inmates will survive the torture, he brazenly continues:

“Maybe when we git through house-cleaning this place’ll be like the Industrial Reformatory they got at Chillicothe! A place where guys are learnt how to make a livin’ after they git outta stir! Where they teach ‘em trades an’ improve their ejication! Not just lock ‘em up in dirty holes and hope to God they’ll die so as to save the State some money! Tonight we go to Klondike!” (*Nightingales* 123)

Likewise, Jim says in Episode Six: “The book’s no good anymore. We need a new one with a brand new set of definitions”. These several lines inform the reader of Tom Williams’s greater intentions in this outcry of a play: “A play may be violent, full of motion: yet it has that special kind of response which allows contemplation and produces the climate in which tragic importance is a possible thing, provided that certain modern conditions are met.”(Redgrave xii). Allean Hale claims that if Williams had come about two decades later, he would have fit in nicely with Britain’s “angry young men” with this, his proletarian prison play. In her

introduction to *Nightingales*, she recounts the company Williams kept in his time crafting the play, including his best friend, Clark Mills, an editor of *The Anvil, the Magazine of Proletarian Fiction*, a pseudo-Marxist publication. Tom also became entangled with “The Mummies”, the socially progressive theatre group that would premier a few of his long and short plays. Also in this experimental period, he explored socialized medicine in a documentary form (“Call” xiv-xvi). Although he flirted with communism, at Tom’s core, a greater consciousness was bubbling. Hale concludes, “Williams himself was moving towards a different sort of play, psychological rather than sociological, although his writing would always attack injustice and defend society’s misfits. (xxii)”

“Society’s misfits” is a fitting description of those whom Tom would term “the Fugitive Kind”: the characters who would perhaps be secondary in the well-made plays, melodramas, and naturalistic masterworks that Williams would have been exposed to, but whom Williams would move to the forestage and create into stars. Described by Lyle Leverich, these characters are “every conceivable form of human, poor and rich, maverick and ne’er-do-well, the dispossessed and misbegotten...each with his own arcane system for survival” (Leverich 278). Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Val in *Orpheus Descending*, and August, the protagonist in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* are all misfits living on the fringes of society, from which we observe some of the most profound musings of Williams’s world view. Brecht states:

...it is especially the rogues and minor figures who reveal their knowledge of humanity and differ one from the other, but the central figures have to be kept general, so that it is easier for the onlooker to identify himself with them, and at all costs each trait of character must be drawn from the narrow field within which everyone can say at once: that is how it is. (Brecht 188)

These rogues and minor figures with so much to share are juxtaposed with Williams's characters derived from normalcy, such as Mitch in *Streetcar*, Jim in *The Glass Menagerie*, and George and Mrs. Holly in *Suddenly, Last Summer*. Williams allows the regular, functional members of society to be relegated to the viewers' periphery so that the creatures that hide in the dark may have their limelight (or shaded lamplight). *Not About Nightingales* exists almost entirely in that realm. It is interesting and somewhat humorous that in the late 1930's, when hoping to mount the play aptly titled *Fugitive Kind* (a title which Williams used several times, applied to various drafts, plays, poems, and even as the title of a film adaptation of *Orpheus Descending*), Williams worked in uncharacteristic wariness of reprisal for his underhanded attacks on capitalism and the class system in the piece. He may have been uneasy about the actions of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, which had recently questioned members of the Federal Theatre Project and, appropriately enough, a decade later, Brecht (*Letters* 142). Later in his life, once the Red Scare had somewhat subsided and he was more forthcoming with his opinions, Williams named himself a revolutionary of a limited sort: "...We're the death merchants of the world, this once great and beautiful democracy. People think I'm a communist [for saying this], but I hate all bureaucracy, all isms. I'm a revolutionary only in the sense that I want to see us escape from this sort of trap." (Paller 80)

While he would gradually move from socio-political topics to more nuanced assaults on injustice, it remains true when Hale writes "When Jim tears up Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale,' Tom is saying the poet must turn activist" ("Call" xx). Following *Nightingales*, Tom, who would soon become billed as Tennessee, began slowly transitioning from a champion of the Proletarian to *the* champion of the Fugitive Kind.

When compared to Williams's other early works, *Stairs to the Roof* shows itself as daring, if not bizarre. It tells the story of a young clerk whose ambitions vault past his meager position and lead him eventually to incite a revolt against his employers. Along the way, Benjamin Murphy, who identifies himself first as a poet and second as a clerk, entangles a young woman known only as The Girl (one of several similarities between *Stairs to the Roof* and Elmer Rice's 1923 play *The Adding Machine*) in his high-reaching philosophies. At the play's end, both Murphy and The Girl are carried off past the roof and sky into the cosmos by a God-like character called Mister E, presumably to some final reward, leaving their former oppressors and colleagues on earth.

*Stairs to the Roof's* stage directions prescribe generous use of stage conventions that would come to be categorized as Brechtian, including a few instances of estranged music meant to heighten the unusual moods of scenes. Similar to Brecht's use of the songs for A-effect and the use of "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles" in *Not About Nightingales*, Williams orders the use of another popular tune to "make strange" the situation in Scene Four of *Stairs*. Irving Berlin's "Blue Heaven" is played alongside the sounds of chirping birds as we first see Alma, Ben Murphy's wife. The description of Alma as "corresponding to the spider of a certain species that devours her mate when he has served his procreative function" (*Stairs* 26), with her face slathered in cold cream and her hair in curlers when she is introduced, accompanied by this music is certainly alien. Later in the text, Williams describes a carousel in the distance playing its gay and ghostly music, which lilts in and out of audibility at moments of heightened emotion, specifically highlighting longing and regret. As Williams will later write in *The Glass Menagerie*, through the introductory musings of Tom, "In memory everything seems to happen to music" (*Menagerie* 5). While *Stairs* is not billed by the author as a "Memory Play", Tom

Wingfield and Ben Murphy share such autobiographical roots in Tom Williams that a number of their lines and actions are plucked directly from his career at the shoe factory. Not long after the music of the carousel fades, Ben and the Girl find themselves at a lake in the park, where the Girl becomes enrapt in the vision of a swan, and through her rapture the audience hears an *arpeggio* of harp music while she stretches into a swan-like posture in her attempt to reach the bird, which retreats.

Visual devices like the momentary morphing of the Girl to a Swan occur throughout *Stairs*. As she leans out over the great reflective pool, tempting the fates to plunge her in, the Girl is seemingly transformed, but is drawn back to cruel reality as the music fades and Ben informs her that the swan (not the Girl, for she is afraid to take the dive) “isn’t domestic—it’s wild” (*Stairs* 68). Another device is that, as in *Not About Nightingales*, Williams uses projections for supertitles describing the scenes in *Stairs*. Showing once again a social consciousness like that in *Nightingales*, *Stairs* offers possibly one of Williams’s most daring and heavy-handed scenes to close the play, in which Mr. E reveals himself as a celestial deity and (as deities often do) volunteers to play *deus ex machina* for Murphy and the Girl. After the assisted exodus of those untamed youths, Mr. E pontificates half-removed from the action before the men in charge of Continental Shirtmakers barge in on his reverie and begin their bureaucratic cleanup of Murphy’s revolt. Mr. E’s God/Author musings are the culmination of a number of other such textual commentaries that appeal to a Brechtian sensibility. Whether it is Mr. E’s naming of Murphy as the “tragic protagonist of a play called ‘Human Courage’” (*Stairs* 97), his spectator-like laughing which diffuses the tension at the end of nearly every scene, or Murphy’s repetition that “The whole universe is a great big gambling casino” (*Stairs* 10), the characters in the play regularly convey the author’s own feelings on social mobility, and what is flawed about it.

In the opening scene, Ben asserts:

It just occurs to me, Mr. Gum, that maybe the wrong thing is this: this regimentation, this gradual grinding out of the lives of the little people under the thumbs of things that are bigger than they are! People get panicky locked up in a dark cellar: they trample over each other fighting for air! Air, air, give them air! Isn't it maybe—just as simple as that?  
(*Stairs* 13)

In her introduction to the play, Allean Hale asserts that Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* is likely a model for *Stairs*, though Williams added his viewpoints, stage conventions, and signature panache to his own work. Both playwrights comment on the impersonality of the workplace by having characters named either by number or letter (In the case of Rice, they are One, Two, Three, etc., while in Williams's play, they are P, D, Q, and T). To compound the voicing of the prejudices of society, Rice calls his male lead 'Mr. Zero' and Williams calls his female lead 'Girl'. Put eloquently by Hale, in her foreword "A Play for Tomorrow": "Like all writers, Williams got ideas from his predecessors; the new ways he built on them made them unique" ("Tomorrow" xiii). It is interesting also to note that, unlike "Mr. Zero" or "Girl", Mister E's name is homophonic with *mystery*, a possible allusion to the mysteries of God. Hale attributes that the uniqueness of *Stairs* and Williams's innovations with Rice's model (since this play would, like *Nightingales*, have probably been completed before Williams had learned extensively of Brecht, though he may not have been outside of Brecht's wider influence) make for a combination of expressionism and realism, since the playwright likened Murphy to the universal "little man". Conversely, she calls attention to the realistic connotation carried in Williams's preference for Burgess Meredith, a popular realistic actor of the day, for the symbolic "Everyman" role. If played naturalistically, these elements which I label to be expressionistic

would be garish and incongruent—when they are accepted as foreign from real life, though, they aid in expressing the playwright’s message.

With his *Everyman vs. socioeconomic prejudice*, Williams’s confidence undersold his abilities, as he wrote in his *Note to Potential Producers* (included, as many of these such notes of his were, in the play texts): “I wish that I were sufficiently an economic or political theorist to advance a scheme for correction of these unlucky circumstances which I have tried to show. As it is, I can only show them” (xvii).

Like Brecht and so many other playwrights of repute and social importance, Tennessee Williams set pen (or typewriter) to paper with a mission in mind. Like Brecht but *unlike* a number of other playwrights, however, Williams was at this time in his life beginning to refine his ability to tell the story without heavy-handed rhetoric, which would one day place him among Miller and O’Neill as one of America’s most prominent, important, and socially effective playwrights. Brecht asserted:

Whether or no [*sic*] literature presents them as successes, each step forward, every emancipation from nature that is scored in the field of production leads to a transformation of society, all those explorations in some new direction which mankind has embarked on in order to improve its lot, give us a sense of confidence and triumph and lead us to take pleasure in the possibilities of change in all things. Galileo expresses this when he says: ‘It is my view that the earth is most noble and wonderful, seeing the great number and variety of changes and generations which incessantly take place on it.’ (Brecht 202)

Perhaps later in life Williams began to see the motion into which he set the social spheres early in his career. Perhaps that awareness even prompted his anti-McCarthyist “limited

revolutionary” comments. Either way, as he ever walked softly and carried a big stick, the public would begin to see Williams challenging the corrupt caste systems with witty dialogue and his signature monologues which came to be called arias—those often-quoted, rarely forgotten speeches by his major female characters.

By the time Williams set to work on the play that would win him lasting fame, he had polished some of the elements that can be dubbed Epic, and by now it is almost assured that he would have been exposed to the works and practices of Brecht, having spent time at University. *The Glass Menagerie* is arguably Williams’s most autobiographical play (among other plays including *Vieux Carré*, *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, and to some extent, *Stairs to the Roof*). In it, the poet Tom recounts his home life in a misty past in which he cared and provided for his ailing sister and needling mother. Mother and son trade barbs throughout the play over various subjects, ultimately resulting in the son’s departure from home on the night of a disaster entailing his sister meeting a co-worker of Tom’s for a date.

Borrowing from the *Not About Nightingales* playbook, Williams resumed use of scene-describing images projected during the scene, only rather than only using phrases, such as “*Miss Crane Applies for a Job*”, he was so daring as to prescribe the image of a gentleman caller with flowers, blue roses, or ships full of sailors to add depth and detail to the innermost desires of his characters. Inaugurating his “Plastic Theatre” as he was in *The Glass Menagerie*, he brought a new poetic and lyrical force to American theatre (Bray ix). No longer emotionally involved with political events as he was with *Nightingales*, and no longer so over-reaching as to expose the evils of the fast-evolving American lifestyle as in *Stairs to the Roof*, Williams had begun a sort of onstage whisper campaign against the corrupt southern class caste system. Briefly touched on in *Spring Storm*, a play which his teacher Edward Mabie would tell him with harshness was the

equivalent of an artist's nudes in its multitudinous inadequacies; *Menagerie* was the first play which communicated with both pleasing nuance and formidable substance that there was something rotten *and* beautiful in the states of Mississippi and Missouri.

Much of the effectiveness of *Menagerie* can be attributed to the streamlined and painstakingly detailed notes Williams prescribes before and during the play. If there had been any question by this point in his career that Tennessee Williams might be an ineffective realist or a half-baked expressionist, that notion is dispelled in the a passage in his production notes:

When a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or certainly shouldn't be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually or should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are. The straight realistic play with its genuine Frigidaire and authentic ice-cubes, its characters who speak exactly as its audience speaks, corresponds to the academic landscape that has the same virtue of a photographic likeness. (*Menagerie* xix)

The idea, then, is to alienate the events without divorcing them so far from reality that they become irrelevant. The playwright insists that the use of those unconventional techniques is to emphasize one or more particular points in each episode of *Menagerie*, which are structurally the most important, whether the audience understands why (at the time) or not.

Another alienating effect in *Menagerie* is the music, and particularly the "Glass Menagerie" theme music. Described by Williams in his Production Notes, "This tune is like circus music, not when you are on the grounds or in the immediate vicinity of the parade, but when you are at some distance and very likely thinking of something else" (*Menagerie* xxi). This corresponds, for example, to the ballad-singer in *The Life of Galileo*, who is expected not to

sing as though he is a trained musical performer from an arts school, but rather as an urchin whose singing seems neither to detract nor emphasize focus on the scene or subject. Brecht went so far as to say “that he wanted a ‘ragged quality’ about the singing, and that it made no difference if the ballad was out of [the actor] Brown’s range”, and that the character is singing a song solely because Brecht wanted him to do so (Lyon 190). Music itself seems to decide when to change based on Tom’s recollections, as in Scene Seven, when the action of the play comes crashing down around Laura, and the music being projected from the dance hall down the street changes from an up-beat tune into a tender waltz. Similarly, in Scene Seven of *Menagerie*, Laura’s imagination summons the ghostly voice of Jim singing from *Pirates of Penzance* in the distant past: eerie and nostalgic, but not at all realistic. This kind of delicate give-and-take between real and ridiculous is such a balancing act that Laura’s telling statement “Oh, be careful—if you breath, it breaks!” (*Menagerie* 83) is particularly poignant.

Conversely, Tom’s speeches to the audience in *Menagerie* alienate the action of the play in a different way. He addresses the audience in order to tell us his intentions of disclosing his family life, and expects the audience to accept the foggy of the memories being displayed. An enlarged photograph is lit and grins, fantasy images flash across the screen of the mother, Amanda, in her heyday, the pronouncement of the hoped-for (and soon-to-fail) *deus ex machina* is celebrated by music, and characters’ inner joy sometimes manifests in a spectral glow. All of these conventions had been experimented with in one way or another in Williams’s more expressionistic days, but had become fine-tuned by the time *Menagerie* was completed.

All of these elements fell into place in such a way that a reader or viewer can fall into a trance observing the action and completely miss the social implications of the play. However, as Brecht states in his *Short Organum for the Theatre*, and with which Williams clearly agreed:

The parts of the story have to be carefully set off against one another by giving each its own structure as a play within the play. To this end it is best to agree to use titles...The titles must include the social point, saying at the same time something about the kind of portrayal wanted, i.e. should copy the tone of a chronicle or a ballad or a newspaper or a morality. (Brecht 201)

One of the pertinent challenges being made in *Menagerie* is the challenge against the status quo of society in the American South. Amanda asks in Scene Two, “Is that the future we’ve mapped out for ourselves?” when referring to leading a humble, disenfranchised life. She concludes for herself (which she often does), “I swear it’s the only alternative I can think of. It isn’t a very pleasant alternative, is it? Of course—some girls *do marry*” (*Menagerie* 16). Hoping desperately to prevent her from becoming a “front porch girl” like those described at length in *Spring Storm*, Amanda will do anything to fit Laura into the compartment she has established for her daughter. Amanda has nurtured a placid insipidness in Laura, which, as is exhibited in later scenes, is not the daughter’s true nature. Laura, as Tom describes in scene four, like all human beings, “...is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter, and none of those instincts are given much play at the warehouse!” (*Menagerie* 34) It is unlikely that those instincts are given much play at the business college or at home polishing glass, either. However, Amanda argues against the embracing of instinct, choosing rather to champion the supposedly more humane proclivities of “Christian adults.” So staunch in her suppositions is Amanda that she will make, without compunction, broad and silly statements such as “I’ve never known a Jim that wasn’t nice,” and, without knowing the parameters of the gentleman caller’s employment, that it sounds like a “fairly responsible position” (*Menagerie* 44). The gentleman caller, Jim O’Connor, is so embedded in his own societal caste, though, that he describes his position the

same way. With such commitment to prejudice, it is no wonder, as Amanda says, that “Things have a way of turning out so badly” (*Menagerie* 94). In another set of circumstances, Laura could possibly be as brazen as Alma, the heroine of *Summer and Smoke*, who takes to picking up men at the train station.

In *Gentlemen Callers*, Michael Paller explains

“*The Glass Menagerie* is a play about desperation. Its characters, built for struggle, not only desire intensely but act on their desires. Amanda is often considered a foolish woman lost in a nostalgia that she wields as a weapon...Her actions, however, reveal a woman who is not only acutely aware of the present, but who works tirelessly to safeguard her children against the brutality of its Depression-era truths...Laura, too, possesses a will of determination too often overlooked” (Paller 35-36).

The desperation and the tools the characters use to cope make for an excellent Brechtian parallel. Courage, the heroine of Brecht’s *Mother Courage and her Children*, and Amanda Wingfield appear to be cut from the same cloth. The playwrights imbue the women with a number of redeeming qualities in contrast to their incorrigible ones, making it hard for the audience to entirely adore or detest either. Williams proclaims in his *Memoirs* that, to him, *Mother Courage* competes for the title of the greatest modern play against *The Seagull* (*Memoirs* 41). Considering the great admiration Williams had for Chekhov, this is considerable praise for Brecht.

The commentary, then, begs the question “Why is *The Glass Menagerie* the masterwork, and similar works such as *Spring Storm* and *Not About Nightingales* were considered to be an apprentice writer’s early follies?” One more skill that Tennessee Williams had mastered by the mid-1940s was that of putting his own biting wit into his plays. Commenting on the action with

the screen legend by reiterating Amanda's assertion that girls are "A pretty trap" in Scene Six, and in Scene Seven projecting simply "Ha!" onscreen when the electricity is turned off provides a tongue-in-cheek awareness that until *Menagerie* could be overlooked in most of the apprentice period plays, and which was somewhat overdone in *Stairs to the Roof*. As with Brecht, humor can easily be overlooked and underplayed in Williams's works for no other reason than because of the wit and easy flow of the writing.

A large portion of Williams's caste-assault takes place in what can be called *gest*. Brecht describes his concept of the realm of *gest* as "The realm of attitudes adopted by the characters towards one another." He continues:

Physical attitude, tone of voice, and facial expression are all determined by a social *gest*: the characters are cursing, flattering, instructing one another, and so on. The attitudes which people adopt towards one another include even those attitudes which would appear to be quite private, such as utterances of physical pain in an illness, or of religious faith. These expressions of a *gest* are usually highly complicated and contradictory, so that they cannot be rendered by any single word and the actor must take care that in giving his image the necessary emphasis he does not lose anything, but emphasizes the entire complex. (Brecht 198)

Williams's plays are rife with *gest*. Several times Williams describes gestures which comment on the social *gest* of the scene that has taken place, ending scenes with *tableaux* such as Mr. Gum, the vilified manager of Continental Shirtmakers in *Stairs to the Roof*, with his arms spread wide and helpless, "*it is the gesture of Pilate—'What can I do?'*" (*Stairs* 14). Perhaps the grandest visual display of the social makeup of the play is in Scene Five, a dream sequence of Ben's college days in which gothic shadows, engraved marble plaques, pale and ghostly light, a

long-gone college sweetheart, and an avatar of Ben's youth come together to embody his present regrets. These stark visuals are cast against cacophonies of unusual music and sounds, remembered speeches, and ghostly voices.

In *Nightingales*, Williams describes the Chaplain as rising with dignity in the face of the Warden's refusal to do right by God and the inmates. One can wonder if this staunch Chaplain was a representation of Williams's maternal grandfather, with whom the playwright had spent a happy part of his early life. In Episode Five, after being gently denied by Eva, Jim's frustrated convulsions are given painstaking detail by Williams. Such nuances as these are found throughout Williams's career, and are deeply representative of gest.

Being so detailed and melancholy, it is no surprise that a great deal of gest is present in *The Glass Menagerie*. Drenched in emotional attachment, Williams's self-admitted saddest play uses dialogue and motion to chip away at the Southern American caste of nobility. In Scene Six, Williams expounds on the awkwardness enforced by genteel southern living in the directions surrounding the recitation of grace over dinner: "They bow their heads, Amanda stealing a nervous glance at Jim. In the living room Laura, stretched on the sofa, clenches her hand to her lips, to hold back a shuddering sob." The following spoken line is, "God's Holy Name be praised" (*Menagerie* 66). In several other instances of the play, Amanda's repetitive squawking and the other characters' nervous responses show the wear and tear that the matron's lifestyle enforces upon them.

The telltale nervousness in Williams's plays would regularly show itself bubbling under the surface in nearly any female or gay character. Contrary to the happy, care-free life in Mississippi with his grandparents (excepting a fight against childhood disease from which Williams suffered the aftershocks his entire life), Williams's life in Missouri under his father's

roof instilled a constant uneasiness as well as an inferiority complex. In the telling biography *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*, Lyle Leverich reports “[Tom’s mother] Edwina contended that her husband ‘went to unbelievable lengths to destroy Tom’s morale’” (Leverich 101). Williams himself had recorded in his notebook in October 1938, “Dad started griping about my lack of job, Etc.—Surely I won’t stay on here when I’m regarded as such a parasite—Now is the time to make a break—get away, away—I have pinned pictures of wild birds on my lavatory screen...” (*Notebooks* 127). Like Brecht’s fleet-footed escapes from several countries for fear of Nazi persecution, Tennessee Williams would always suffer from an escapism which was implanted by his time in Saint Louis.

With or without an inferiority complex, however, Tennessee Williams would fearlessly pioneer new frontiers as a dramatist, bringing with him his New World Order outlook and carrying a dim light into the dark corners to gently illuminate the Fugitive Kind. Brecht and Williams had these progressive thoughts which fit nicely together:

“I who am writing this write it on a machine which at the time of my birth was unknown. I travel in the new vehicles with a rapidity that my grandfather could not imagine, in those days nothing moved so fast” (Brecht 184)...

“For nowadays the world is lit by lighting!” (*Menagerie* 97)

## Chapter Four

### Depending On the Kindness of Dramaturgs:

#### Translating Authorial Intent into Playable Action

Directors, critics, and scholars alike agree that Williams's plays are remarkably autobiographical. What often results from this brand of dramatic scrapbooking is a languid and precious onstage interpretation that reads as dry, boring, and self-indulgent. This is symptomatic of Sweet Tea Tennessee, and an effective way to prevent or correct it is to turn authorial intent into playable action. In a dramaturgically sound rendition of a Williams play, the director should consider the autobiographical elements as indicators of importance. In exploring *Memoirs*, the collected letters, or any of the biographies, it becomes evident why Williams was inclined to include such details, and what his own feelings about the real-life situations were. By interpreting what the playwright's intention is, the performers can be directed toward playable and invested deliveries.

The concept of dissecting authorial intent for the purpose of effective delivery could be construed as overly intellectual and tedious—useless to actual performance—but an exploration of an excerpt from *Suddenly Last Summer* can prove that this particular brand of research can be profoundly helpful onstage. John M Clum asserts, when referring to *Suddenly*, "...we see the daring of Williams that makes him our greatest playwright, the willingness to go to extremes beyond even the absurdities of melodrama to share his frightening vision with his reader and his audience." (Clum 135) It is the duty of the director, dramaturg, and actor involved in any Williams production to deliver these frightening visions in full living color. This excerpt is rife with material for exploration:

CATHARINE:

...There wasn't a sound anymore, there was nothing to see but Sebastian, what was left of him, that looked like a big white-paper-wrapped bunch of red roses that had been *torn, thrown, crushed!*—against that blazing white wall...

*[Mrs. Venable springs with amazing power from her wheelchair, stumbles erratically but swiftly toward the girl and tries to strike her with her cane. The Doctor snatches it from her and catches her as she is about to fall. She gasps hoarsely several times as he leads her toward the exit.]*

MRS. VENABLE *[offstage]*:

*Lion's View! State asylum, cut this hideous story out of her brain!*

*[Mrs Holly sobs and crosses to George, who turns away from her, saying:]*

GEORGE:

Mom, I'll quit school, I'll get a job, I'll—

MRS. HOLLY:

Hush, son! Doctor, can't you say something?

*[Pause. The Doctor comes downstage. Catharine wanders into the garden followed by the Sister.]*

DOCTOR *[after a while, reflectively, into space]*:

I think we ought at least to consider the possibility that the girl's story could be true...

*(Suddenly 92-93)*

An examination of this short exchange, which includes the contingency-ridden final words of the play (one of the most disagreed over lines in the Williams canon) can shed some light on how the playwright would have wished for certain events in his life to have unfolded. This vital information can be immediately put to use in discovering the intention of the characters. Catharine Holly's description of an afternoon lunch gone horribly awry begins this selection: she concludes her account of the seaside meal that ended in the bloody Eucharistic sacrifice of Sebastian, whom John M. Clum would describe as the "sacrificial stud" in his essay "The Sacrificial Stud and the Fugitive Female". Catharine uses the image of a wrapped bunch of

roses smashed against a wall and crushed to relive her moment of Williams-tragedy: that time when something glorious is meant to happen, but in which instead the sky comes crashing down. Here Williams has placed the allegory of Sebastian within the greater allegory of the play; the purpose of which will become clearer in the following lines.

Unable to come to grips with the truth of Sebastian's lifestyle, his mother staggers with animalistic abandon toward Catharine to strike her down. Violet Venable would rather destroy the girl than allow her family's name to be sullied. When her plan is foiled by her own frailty and the Doctor's intervention, the clouds begin to part and light peeks in on Catharine Holly. Violet's last-ditch effort to bury the "hideous story" is to implore the doctor to perform his specialty—the lobotomy. Performed on his sister Rose in 1943, the operation would haunt Williams for the rest of his life. The reason for this haunting is detailed by Allean Hale in "Early Williams: The Making of a Playwright":

...(In 1943 the lobotomy, which involved drilling a hole into each side of the skull, was a new operation thought to be the solution for schizophrenia; that it was mutilating, returning the patient to an infantile passivity was not yet understood.) Although Tom was not told of the operation until after it was done, he would always feel guilt at not having prevented it. If he had avoided seeing Rose for years, her presence had never left his subconscious or his writing. "Portrait of a Girl in Glass," "Oriflamme," and *Portrait of a Madonna* were portraits of Rose. ..he worked on *The Gentleman Caller*, a crystallization of all those painful family memories...As *The Glass Menagerie* it would become "the great American play," one of the most performed and most anthologized in modern theatre history, translated into more than thirty languages, universal in its appeal. (Hale, *Making* 26-27)

More than a decade later, this guilt was apparent in the sacrifice of Sebastian Venable. As the sacrificial stud, Sebastian was the unseen “Tom” character in *Suddenly*, whose absence was the source of Catharine’s (the allegorical Rose’s) suffering. However, through a twist of events and the crumbling of the antagonistic Violet’s constitution, the shining and undeniable truth of Sebastian’s horrible death is Catharine’s saving grace. George Holly, probably based on Williams’s brother Dakin, whom he would have wanted to intervene for Rose on his behalf, offers to quit school and sacrifice his own happiness for his sister’s sake. Mrs. Holly begs the doctor to say something helpful, standing up for her daughter in a way Williams only wished his mother had. The icy and beautiful doctor then weaves a web of conditional verbiage, including “ought,” “consider”, “possibility”, and “might”. At the end of this allegory “Dr. Sugar, both alien to this aristocratic hothouse through his Polish origins and rendered ineffectual by his sweet nickname, decides the outcome of the conflict between the two women” (Clum 134) and “At the conclusion of *Suddenly Last Summer*, Catherine’s[sic] story has freed her from the threat of a lobotomy, but the characters move off in different directions, disconnected.” (135)

The sacrifice of Sebastian, the redeeming quality of undiluted truth, and the blessed reversal that saves the Rose archetype are all representations of autobiographical investment in the text, which can inform the actor of how the lines might be delivered in the most effective way. An actor playing George or Mrs. Holly could easily throw the lines away, giving them little weight, or choose to be hopelessly selfish—both of which are hard to sympathize with; but an informed actor can opt to take the high road, and save Rose. To undertake the task of playing a Dakin who was more willing, and Edwina who was more stalwart, or a Doctor who took pity on a desperate and helpless girl are all more interesting and playable choices than to play a horde of greedy, selfish conspirators. The only member of the Williams family missing from this

exchange in the Garden District conservatory is Cornelius Williams, the patriarch of the clan. Because he was often vilified by his son, it is likely that he was embodied in Violet, or like the absent father in *The Glass Menagerie*; simply a deserter. In the periphery of the exchange is the white-clad nun, Sister Felicity, the god watching the carnivorous birds descend upon the helpless Catharine.

No further proof is needed to ensure that Williams's feelings on Rose's situation were carried with him for decades than the following passages from his *Memoirs*, published in 1975, and which are a portrait of the cigarette-swiping Catharine Holly of 1958:

At Stoney Lodge, Rose is limited to three or four cigarettes a day but when she comes into town she is a chain-smoker. I showed her the Surgeon General's warning, on a pack of cigarettes, that they were dangerous to health. Rose pretended to be unable to read it, although, later, she could read a French menu in a restaurant with ease...In any case, you could not ask for a sweeter or more benign monarch than Rose, or in my opinion, one that's more of a lady. After all, high station in life is earned by the gallantry with which appalling experiences are survived with grace." (*Memoirs* 251-252)

These final few words of his *Memoirs* are dedicated to Rose's unfaltering delicacy and goodness, as are so many characters in his plays. The treatment of the Rose archetype by other characters must be handled in such a way that honors the playwright's intention, or else the actor can quickly find his or her role to be unlikable and unforgiveable. Neither of these are preferable in what Violet Venable describes as a world of light and darkness, in which the darkness is sometimes more luminous than the light.

### **Enter the Fugitive Kind:**

## Shadow Characters Take the Limelight

Because of Williams's penchant for the autobiographical, many characters that would live in the dark, seedy periphery of other playwrights' works take center stage in his. The many faces of Rose and Edwina Williams surface in nearly all of his mature works, and a writer-commentator is present in several, as well. Discovering these Williams archetypes is vital to understanding how to make these characters full, likeable, and rich: a group of adjectives that are all too often inapplicable to actors portraying such iconic roles as Blanche DuBois, Maggie Pollitt, and Amanda Wingfield. The actor can begin to humanize these roles most effectively if he or she understands Williams's particular brand of wretchedness, strips away any negative connotation, and truly begins to identify with the Fugitive Kind.

In the 1957 interview with Don Ross entitled "Williams in Art and Morals: An Anxious Foe of Untruth", Williams answers a simple question quite poetically:

I: What kind of people do you write about?

W: Deeply troubled people. I think most of us have deep troubles. I've yet to find people I didn't think were deeply troubled. This is the age of anxiety. I think that if most people look at others they'll see deep trouble under the skin. There is an increasing tension and anxiety in people I know. (*Conversations* 39)

The anxiety Williams refers to is the gripping breathlessness that possesses so many of his heroines and the uneasy shiftiness of his heroes. Heroes in plays by Miller and O'Neill are easier to categorize—they do have troubles, anxieties, and flaws, but they do not have the same type of outright desperation as Williams's. Many dramatists write characters who spend entire plays trying to stave off scandal or catastrophe, but most of Williams's celebrated characters make

their first entrances *after* the fall: Blanche, Reverend Shannon, Catharine Holly and the like. Less like Miller's, Strindberg's, or even Chekhov's are these characters: instead they more closely resemble Ibsen's. Blanche fights ferociously to uphold her status, much like Hedda Gabler. Amanda Wingfield and Mrs. Alving share a number of characteristics in their relentless struggle against the past which encroaches on the present and future. Laura Wingfield is probably separated only by lacking a pistol from being Hedvig Ekdal by the end of *Menagerie*.

Even so, Williams's heroes seem to be darker and more troubled than those of most major playwrights before him. Surrounded by not-quite heroes and anti-heroes, the shadow heroes of Williams's plays occupy a place onstage that, as Violet Venable would say leaves "Everyone else, eclipsed". Similar to the faeries of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, these elemental personalities wear an aura of tenderness and are accompanied by an almost palpable crackle of intensity, all while shoving the "normal" folks into the background. By casting aside the "well-made character", the reader, actor, or director can begin to dissect the archetypal bestiary of the Fugitive Kind.

### **Portraits in *Glass***

In the allegorical works of Williams, a number of archetypes can be traced through the decades. I have devised several archetypes which can be distinguished in Williams's plays. The most remarkable and common of these are located in *The Glass Menagerie*: the Poet, the Rose, the Mother, and the Gentleman Caller. Referring back to the autobiographical roots of the plays, each archetype can be broken down into aspects which are present for each role, but unique within the circumstances of the plays.

The Poet is based on Williams himself. He makes an appearance in several plays: August in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, the Writer in *Vieux Carré*, the absent Sebastian in *Suddenly, Last Summer*, and many more. He is a constant commentator, habitually grasping for greater understanding, and insatiable as a result. He is an unstable factor when added to any situation, no longer relegated to the sidelines like in so many works as the author-as-spectator, and instead used as a catalyst and a reflecting pool for surrounding characters.

The Rose is an institution in Williams's entire canon, being modeled after arguably the most important figure in his life: his sister Rose. Delicate victims trying to make sense of their circumstances abound in Williams's body of work in various ages and states, such as Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Rosa in *The Rose Tattoo*, and Alma in *Summer and Smoke*, and later in *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale* to name only a few. The world wears on the Rose, like frosts and heat gradually wither a literal flower, and the signs of duress appear in the Rose seemingly based on age. Rosa in *Tattoo* is not yet ruined by the world, and so she has innocence, zest, and passion. In her mid-to-late twenties, Roses such as Alma are consumed from both within and without. By age thirty, Blanche has succumbed to the slings and arrows of a world that, Williams seems to assert, is too unforgiving a place for a flower so delicate. The Rose is left usually with one of two paths: to become the Mother, or to become a Front Porch Girl.

The Mother is based on Williams's memory of his own mother, Edwina, and besides Amanda Wingfield, she appears in *Summer and Smoke*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Vieux Carré* (the Writer goes so far as to proclaim, "Mrs. Wire, I didn't escape from one mother to look for another"! ). Often given an unforgiving treatment, Williams's models of the mother became more and more sympathetic as his works matured, and when played sympathetically, greater effect is achieved. All of the matrons share an overbearing demeanor and a strong will, with the

utmost goal to do right by their children—but sadly they all fail to see eye to eye with their spawn, and remain stuck in another time. Sometimes it is so extreme as the addled and demented Mrs. Winemiller, other times as furious and protective as Violet Venable.

The Gentleman Caller, or sometimes simply the Good Man, is apparent in the periphery of many of Williams's plays: he becomes one of those characters described as being eclipsed by the luminescence of the shadows cast by other characters. Such Good Men include Roger Doremus in *Summer and Smoke*, the hapless Mitch in *Streetcar*, and, in all his glory, Jim in *Menagerie*. The Gentleman Caller exists in a realm separate but parallel to the heroes and heroines of Williams's works, and would be himself the hero in a Miller or O'Neill Play, but, alas, he always comes up short in that Ibsenesque moment when "something glorious" is meant to happen, as in *A Doll's House*.

Around these four common archetypes can sometimes be seen less common but sometimes more memorable character types. Appearing most often, these include the Drifter, the Barbarian, the One That Gets Away, and the Firebrand.

The Drifter is a mutation of the Poet, an artist or scholar of some sort who comments on his world but is awash in troubles which follow him like a shadow. Notable Drifters include Val in *Orpheus Descending* (a guitarist), John in *Smoke* (a medical student), Christopher Flanders in *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (a craftsman), and (less artistic, but still adept) the boxer Kilroy in *Camino Real*. Best expressed through Kilroy, the Drifter always hopes for little and receives even less. His ne'er-do-well history and sexual prowess regularly enraptures the Rose.

Often the foil to the soft-hearted Drifter is the Barbarian. A violent, passionate, and tempestuous outside force, the Barbarian is the abuser of whomever is the victim in any particular Williams play. The most notorious is the sultry and crass Stanley in *Streetcar*. Other Barbarians include the deadly Jabe Torrance in *Orpheus Descending*, Rudy in *Milk Train*, Tye McCool in *Vieux Carré*, and Bugsy in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*. Terrorizing the Rose(Stanley) or pursuing the Drifter (Boss Finley in *Sweet Bird of Youth*) is the Barbarian's *modus operandi*, and because of Williams's own history of being victimized, the Barbarian tends to win any battle in which he is involved. The Barbarian is, however, often a sex object for the Poet. In *Vieux Carré*, the writer cannot help but stare at Tye McCool's naked body. In *Something Cloudy*, the homophobic Merchant Seaman becomes a plaything for August. Sebastian Venable becomes the victim of the barbaric children he himself molests in *Suddenly*. With a tender side like the underbelly of an armored and dangerous alligator, the Barbarian deserves a very special treatment.

The shining beacon of gentleness and hope that is much the opposite appears in the form of the One That Gets Away. *Something Cloudy*'s Kip is both biographically pertinent and archetypically necessary when looking at this archetype. This character is a mutation of the Gentleman Caller: one who seems like the perfect match for the Rose or the Poet, but whose own mortality or agenda intervenes. In *Something Cloudy*, like the very sand of the beach in Provincetown itself, Kip slips between August's fingers. In *Vieux Carré*, the playwright leaves the audience assured that while Sky may have delivered the Writer from 922 Toulouse Street, somewhere along the way, he vanished. John Buchanan walks a fine line between the One That Gets Away and the Drifter. Perhaps it is because he does not ascribe to the amorphous and intangible arts, but rather to medicine that John escapes the play relatively unscathed(Kip is a

dancer and Sky is a musician). At any rate, Kip Kiernan left a distinct mark on Tennessee Williams which informed his sense of loss and beauty for decades to come.

Finally, the Firebrand completes the trinity of Williams's women: The Rose, the Mother, and the Crazy Bitch. Probably an amalgamation of all of the traits in Tennessee Williams's favorite "fag hags" throughout the years, these women tend to be brassy, outspoken, and historically played by the diva du jour. Firebrands of note include Mrs. Goforth in *Milk Train* (portrayed, though briefly, by Tallulah Bankhead), Maxine Faulk in *Night of the Iguana* (originally played by Bette Davis), and Firebrand-in-training Maggie Pollitt (originally played by Barbara Bel Geddes, but most recognizably portrayed by Elizabeth Taylor). The Firebrand is a sort of Front Porch Girl who got off the porch and shouted her way into the consciousness of the people around her. Many Mothers are a few screams shy of being Firebrands: Violet Venable, Serafina Delle Rose, and Big Mama Pollitt to list a few. Tallulah Bankhead even makes a biographical appearance in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* as the Actress, berating August for his treatment of her—few details are spared.

As an archetype, the Father nearly makes this list, but each Father figure in Williams's work seems to be a retooling of the father before, as though Williams was always attempting to craft a patriarch that made sense to him, that was sympathetic, and that he could be at peace with considering his feelings toward his own father Cornelius. Some fathers were vicious like *Sweet Bird's* Boss Finley, many were absent like Tom Wingfield's in *Menagerie*, and some were very soft like Reverend Winemiller in *Smoke*. Most successful, perhaps, was the invention of Big Daddy in *Cat*: fiery, tender, wise, and likeable (and of course, reared into manhood by two gay men). Obviously the closest to Cornelius himself can be found in Williams's final play, *A House Not Meant to Stand*. Of Cornelius McCorkle, Thomas Keith offers in his Introduction to *House*:

...There has never been another character like Cornelius in the Williams canon who so clearly stands for Williams' own father, also named Cornelius. Aspects of Williams' brother Dakin are also present in Cornelius—pointedly, his failed aspirations for political office. The Three McCorkle children, a gay son, a straight son, and a mentally disturbed daughter, can be easily equated with Tom, Dakin, and Rose Williams. (Keith, xiv-xv)

He continues,

By 1982 Williams had come to better terms with his own father (who died in 1957) and would have been inclined to portray a man he understood himself to be more like than he had ever realized in his youth...In an unfinished early draft [of *House*] from 1981, when Williams first began writing the full-length version of the play, he writes of Bella and Cornelius as: "The woman—whom I want you to love—and her husband—whom I want you to understand as much as you are able... (xvii)

This grappling with "understanding" his characters, especially the Fathers and Barbarians held special interest for Williams. In an interview in 1962 with Lewis Funke and John E. Booth, the playwright answered a question about liking his characters by saying he hoped first to "Understand them. If I understand them I like them. The one thing I cannot—I can understand maybe—but, no I don't even understand it, is that kind of self-infatuated, self-blindness and cruelty, you know, such as he...Finley...personified." (*Conversations* 103) In an interview three years later with John Gruen, he would still confess: "I'm afraid I don't identify very easily with these Stanley Kowalskis and so forth. Maybe I should. They are sort of a mystery to me". (*Conversations* 117) Because of this vagueness, the Father archetype cannot truly exist in the

pantheon of Williams characters—it exists rather in a transient state between so many travelling salesmen and treasure-hoarding barbarians.

Several other peripheral archetypes can be detected with equally specific autobiographical ties: black maids similar to Williams's childhood caretaker Ozzie appear in *Milk Train*, *Cat*, and *Vieux Carré*; loud-mouthed gossips abound in *Summer and Smoke*, *Orpheus Descending*, and *The Rose Tattoo*. Oracles of horrible events appear in *Streetcar*, *Orpheus Descending*, and *Camino Real*. None of these, however, take the forestage with such prevalence as the Poet, the Mother, the Rose, the Gentleman Caller, or their sidekicks, lovers, and destroyers the Barbarians, the Firebrands, the Drifters, and the Ones That Get Away.

But how are these archetypes playable? Calling attention back to the importance of authorial intent and biographical relevancy, each of these archetypes sits in a sphere all its own, and how these spheres collide onstage during the action can inform the director and actors as to the pure chemical reactions that occur. If the Drifter and the Barbarian have a completely superficial exchange, it leaves the audience back on the porch sipping that damned cool beverage. If the Rose does not yearn with every cell of her being for the unaware Gentleman Caller or the melancholy, sexually ambivalent Drifter, then there are no crashing chandeliers when the man must leave, or worse, there are no fireworks when the Rose awakens in the Drifter a passion he had thought was long dried up—engulfing her in his flames and leaving her singed to her core. It is vital that the actor know these dramaturgical and archetypal details so that she may know if her Rose is just-bloomed or on her way to wilting. Not to know is a disservice to the audience and the playwright.

Like with any exploration that I recommend, I hope that the reader takes away a willingness to go too far, rather than stopping short. Playing a rehearsal in which these character archetypes are fully embodied in all of their beauty and ugliness, the actor and director will discover truths about the characters, as well as stage business that becomes fresh, vivid and superbly effective. I hope that the actor allows his shadow character to be both unforgivable and human in the same moment. I hope that the director is not afraid of tapping deeply allegorical elements from Williams's life to create scenes that make reality pale in comparison to their vividness. I once worked on a production of *Suddenly Last Summer* with a director who elected to do exactly these things. Though critically chastised by small-townners with small minds, he was approached following a performance by a man claiming to have lived with Williams in Key West. He told my director that it was exactly what Tennessee Williams would have wanted done. I like to think that it was the level of risk, and not the set dressing.

## Chapter Five

### Helpful Observations for Tackling Tennessee

#### Part One: Transforming *Cloudy* into Clear

I recently directed a staged reading of *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*. The blocking was about half of what I would have assigned for a fully realized production. I was able to coach the three leads for a few hours total, and we were able to rehearse three times before the audience appeared. The play itself includes a number of vignettes from the life of Tennessee Williams interwoven with the greater plot of the play. This gave a lot of opportunities to explore the way the archetypes fire off of one another. To drive the dialogue and the action of the play, I insisted that the actors continually engage or disengage one another in an attempt to keep the play active. The challenges I faced and how I handled them or would attempt to handle them for a more fully actualized production are detailed in the following section.

#### The Challenge of Poetic Text

I will begin with some thoughts by the playwright as recorded in the Funke and Booth interview “Williams on Williams” from 1962:

...Poetry doesn't have to be words, you see. In the theatre, it can be situations, it can be silences. Colloquial, completely unheightened language can be more poetic, I think. My great *bête noire* as a writer has been a tendency to what people call...to poeticize, you know, and that's why I suppose I've written so many Southern heroines. They have the tendency to gild the lily, and they speak in a rather florid style, which seems to suit me because I write out of emotion, and I get carried away by the emotion. Sometimes what

Kazan refers to as the arias, sometimes they come off very well, and other times they stop the play. (*Conversations* 99)

The actors handled their dialogue fairly well, but the long speeches, specifically the descriptive ones, were challenges. Clare, Kip, and August each have lengthy moments of description that punctuate their personal “negotiations of terms”. These arias did run the risk of halting the action of the play. The actor often has the inclination to naturalize the speeches, dispensing with the feeling for fear of going overboard. This challenge can be overcome by licensing the actor to treat the speeches with a Brechtian “defamiliarization”—a removal from the staunchly natural. An example of when this is prescribed is the rising sound of the minor-key *varsouviana* in Blanche’s famed speech in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. If played entirely naturally, the speech will be ridiculous when placed against this music. Blanche, rather, needs to become so enrapt in her own recollection that she is transported to the time and place of the incident, making the gunfire both real for herself and true to the audience. Likewise, Kip’s hunger must overcome him as he speaks, August must show the audience the freshness of his burgeoning fame, and Clare needs to convey the urgency of Kip’s dilemma in her speech.

I do not prescribe the “sense memory” that Meisner advocates. This technique, though profoundly effective for some actors, may not match the production in some cases, and therefore it is necessary to distance these suggestions as hard, fast prescriptions. Instead, as with Shakespeare, I would suggest that relishing (but not self-indulgently) in the poetry of the speeches is key. Williams shed some light on his ideas of the importance of poetry to the actor, while being sure to banish any dogma about poetry-snobbery for actors in a description of one of his favorite actresses in an interview with George Freedley in 1945:

Whenever you speak of acting, my mind immediately goes to Laurette Taylor...I don't think Laurette reads poetry. I don't think she ever curls up in bed with Hart Crane or even William Shakespeare, but I've never known a person who could put more poetry, more of the quality of poetry into a reading. What the poetic theatre needs is more fine, intuitive actors of her caliber. We've gotten in the habit, actors in the Broadway theatre, of talking like parrots. And poetry dies through that form of delivery. (*Conversations* 23)

It is a fine-tuning of this intuition that I believe the actor must strive for if the pacing and urgency of the speech come into question. Without being lazy, the actor must allow the words to do some of the work, and give over to some of the nuance.

One particular nuance that presented a challenge in the reading of *Something Cloudy* was the common repetition of phrases, often within only a few breaths of one another. I have heard on several occasions that actors are averse to Williams because of the affected language and the apparently meaningless repetition. What I hope can be dispelled is the idea that Williams's language is artificial and that the repetition serves no purpose. With actors, I describe the poetry as swords, shields, and paintbrushes. Williams's characters use their words to slash and cut, to defend and hide, and to create and beautify. The Roses in his stories paint elaborate worlds of glass around them—they paint ornate castles to hide in and defend themselves with their delusions. The Barbarians cut through the fancy language with their brazen and gauche utterances and accusations. The Poets make excuses for themselves and for their loved ones, casting up shields and painting distractions. The words, like in Shakespeare, sit where they do for reasons. Considering the number of revisions most of Williams's plays weathered, exchanges were exactly where he wanted them to be, as he wanted them to be presented.

The repetition, therefore, can be approached not entirely as a way for the character to reinforce the concept that he or she speaks, but rather can derive from a need to understand. Much of Williams's work sought to wade through the quagmire of human interaction (to separate the "cloudy" from the "clear"), and to reach a greater understanding. So, then, his autobiographical characters would surely grapple with the concepts central to their circumstances. In *Something Cloudy*, the "exigencies of desperation" and "negotiation of terms" are repeated by each of the central characters. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Big Daddy battles to understand "lies and mendacity" in a world that he built, but which is no longer his. Catharine Holly's memories of her mad, painful, hot dash through the streets of Cabeza de Lobo physically exhaust her in *Suddenly Last Summer* as she continually chokes out "ran", "white", "gobbling", and "hot". When a concept is too large to speak about civilly, it is essential that it be repeated, or else the character will be entirely helpless—even if the attempt to understand does ultimately prove futile. Even if the actor understands that the story being recited ends a certain way, and that the character has already lived the actions—Blanche's description of Allen's suicide, Catharine's scathing account, Maggie's regaling Brick about her encounter with the "no-neck monsters"—the telling of these stories must be so real and so visceral that the character re-lives them. It should go without saying that the actor should not play the end of the speech at the beginning, but these arias seem to regularly fall into a gray place (no pun intended), in between action happening and action that has happened. The most interesting choice, frankly, is to play the action as though it is happening. The stakes will be higher and the scene more interesting as a result.

To communicate this to an actor is a difficult act, however, understanding that the actor enters the rehearsal process expecting—more often than not—to deliver a naturalistic (or at the

very least a realistic) performance, or to recreate the character portrayed by a Leigh, a Brando, a Burton, or a Taylor (or depending on which Williams film, a Taylor-Burton). Among other reasons, this is why I was glad to work on *Something Cloudy*, since a majority of actors had never heard of the piece, much less had established ideas of how it should be played. Within the first fifteen minutes of the read-through, the actors were made quite aware that the play could not and would not be a “genuine Frigidaire” type of play. With characters based on real people, but people who largely have not been recorded or made into an icon (the two actresses and Williams himself excluded), it was easier for the actors to make choices without feeling the need to pay homage. This divorce from the expected should not be a frightening act, and I challenge actors and directors performing Williams to take cues from such recent revivals as the *Comédie-Française* adaptation of *Streetcar*, which looks nothing like the film *and* received rave reviews as an inventive and respectful mounting of a canonical play.

### **Express Yourself**

In March 2012 I held a workshop called “Staging Tennessee Williams”, which was focused on the performance, directing, and production of Williams’s plays. The following paragraphs share some pedagogical tools and methods used to assist the artists to discovering a balance of the visceral and the intellectual in the plays.

One of the main foci of the workshop was finding a way to effectively express the poetry while communicating with other actors and the audience. A small but mighty group, six actors aged 18 to middle-50’s appeared to workshop Williams with me. We used scenes and monologues for our explorations. The monologues we used included Shannon in *Night of the Iguana*, Byron in *Camino Real*, Tom from *The Glass Menagerie*, Alma from *Summer and*

*Smoke*, and Nightingale from *Vieux Carré*. Three scenes were studied: Jim and Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*, Nightingale and the Writer in *Vieux Carre*, and Tom and Jim from *Menagerie*. What occurred in a tiny room in a venue made mostly of aluminum siding, and which featured a mechanical whining for most of the workshop, was actually quite magical.

During the three-and-a-half-hour session, I coached the speeches on the importance of investing in and relishing the words in the monologues, the value of reliving the events being described (as Williams's monologues can sometimes be very "tell-y" rather than "show-y", as actors sometimes describe), and the necessity to communicate with the other people present. For the latter, Williams's speeches can present a special challenge. Actors are often inclined to focus intently on one spot or one person when speaking these lengthy speeches, which is a holdover from so many acting classes in which "clarity of the other" is paramount. With these speeches, though, I insisted that the actors focus not so much on a real person, but more on the driving desire to tell their stories. What resulted was an air and an atmosphere that crackled with memory and specificity. The exercise I used to achieve this was to instruct the actors to slow down, take their time, and speak to each person in the room individually and singly. I instructed the "audience" (the other actors) to nod their heads, individually, when the story that the speaker told had moved them. As the speakers began, they had no choice but to attempt different tactics to win their listeners over. One by one, heads nodded, and the workshopers were astounded by the difference in their experiences as actors *and* as spectators. Phrases such as "you really got me" or "it was so much more touching" were quite common during this exercise.

I must pause for a moment to note that the participants in this workshop were actors of all proficiencies: some who have barely seen a stage experience, and some who have, in varying degrees. I took special pride in winning over those newcomers, as sometimes it is the actor's

habit to claim he or she comprehends a topic, even if visceral or intellectual comprehension has not been achieved (to keep up with the “pack”). By the end of the exercises, it was the consensus that the actors understood intellectually, kinesthetically, and emotionally the tasks at hand.

When the actors had completed their “nodding” exercise, they were asked to repeat their monologues, using what they had taken away from the exercise. The magic was still there, as was the communication, the respect for the poetry, and the investment. I believe that this exercise is very useful, especially for the long arias of Williams’s works. Also, as an exercise in expressionistic storytelling, it allows the actors create for themselves a landscape of fantasy, permitting them to live in these secret gardens which the characters construct, establishing not only descriptions, but sensations (and well-communicated ones, at that) of the points they wish to convey.

In addition to “Nodding”, I worked with the ever-present tug-of-war of engaging and disengaging, asking the actors to stand in profile to the audience and step either forward or backward at the ends of lines, or to stand willfully in place if they felt so inspired. Watching the characters inch across stage toward one another or back cautiously away, as I described to the participants, is an excellent way of graphing the characters’ engagement with one another throughout a scene. The scene which proved the most fascinating of these was the one in which Nightingale and the Writer in *Vieux Carré* go back and forth with one another, Nightingale attempting to secure an invitation into the Writer’s bed, and the Writer reluctantly rejecting Nightingale. Nightingale shuffles forward as he jokes with the younger man, and then taunts him by suggesting he hoped to rape Tye McCool. The actor reading the Writer then sprung forward several steps to defend himself, and spent the rest of the scene backpedalling as

Nightingale stepped ever-nearer. Finally, some verbal barbs from the Writer sent the poor old Nightingale back to his bed, ashamed and disappointed. When asked to do the scene again, no longer in profile and not confined to the “Rules of Engagement”, the scene became electric and heartbreaking.

A recommendation I made for some of the more physically inhibited actors was to record themselves speaking the speeches and to create a vocabulary of gestures or a dance to the lyrical lilt of the phrases. I told them that even if pounding the ground or contracting into a ball did not make it all the way into a performance, that the sensibility of either thing could inform when Alma wants to shake John in *Summer and Smoke* or when Tom runs, pursued by spectral Laura, to so many European ports at the conclusion of *Menagerie*. We explored this idea by reading other actor’s speeches while they constructed their movements onstage, then allowed them to both speak and move. While some of the results yielded was still over-the-top, much of it was the perfect size for the grandiose scale of Williams. I think that this exercise is of specific pertinence in constructing an Expressionistic or Impressionistic rendition of the playwright’s stories—it certainly looks nothing like the movies.

Archetypes came into play during this workshop, as well. The most common trouble the actors had with achieving fullness of character was with Jim O’Connor. This was unexpected, as I had expected that Jim would be the most easily digestible role, but his good-natured normalcy was difficult for the actors to grapple with. Two actors read for Jim, and while the young lady playing Alma did so with gusto and the gentleman portraying Shannon played off of an invisible Bette Davis with abandon, by contrast, our Jims remained sticks-in-the-mud. This was overcome by asking the performers to create a caricature of a larger-than-life, too-good-to-be-true company man. When they began to render this cartoon character version of Jim, the moments became

more alive before our eyes. The first actor said “I kind of felt like an asshole” because I had instructed him to smile from start to finish. The second actor said that he felt “false”. Both times, though, the viewers received a great deal more from the scene, as did their partners. Coaxing this archetype into being gave Tom something to work toward—“How can you convince this big smiling guy who just wants to sit at home that you want nothing more than to go see the world?” I asked. The actor reading Tom worked doubly hard to make Jim understand the fire in his belly. As most acting teachers and directors have discovered, an actor’s 100% tends to look like 80% or less to the audience. Dragging the archetypes out of the trunk and forcing the actor to undertake an effort of 200% produced very interesting results.

The last exercise that I found helpful in this workshop was the “Imaginary Spotlight”: an exercise I invented in which the speaker of a monologue steps downstage, away from the other actors, into an imaginary limelight and performs his or her speech as though it were a poem rather than a piece of mono-or-dia-logue. Without the constraints of trying to be “believable” in speaking to the other person, these hard-to-manuever speeches became suddenly enlivened. As stated before, there is only so much of the technical exercise that can effectively be rendered in performance, but the sensation obtained during it can be quite informative on a visceral level.

Altogether, this workshop proved quite useful as I tested my pedagogical mettle on the exploration of Williams. I was glad to see that when it came to the test, the methods were all quite successful. I broke the actors out of a Sweet Tea state of mind, and together we rendered something both unique and unlike the films. I conclude with a short excerpt from one of Tom’s speeches in *The Glass Menagerie*, which was repeated several times during the course of the workshop by a few actors:

Look at them—All of those glamorous people—having adventures—hogging it all, gobbling the whole thing up! You know what happens? People go to the *movies* instead of *moving*! Hollywood characters are supposed to have all the adventures for everybody in America, while everybody in America sits in a dark room and watches them have them! ...I'm tired of the *movies* and I am *about to move*! (*Menagerie* 61)

In the year that this paper was completed, Williams would have turned one-hundred and one. Perhaps the challenges associated with his works are hard to grasp for some because the works are still relatively fresh. In time, I expect that readers and practitioners of theatre will begin seeing the vast differences in the styles of Williams, O'Neill, Albee, Miller, and all those in between and thereafter. My hope is that we can shorten that time, and begin taking the risks sooner rather than later—I think that the audience deserves it. They pay for tickets, fill the houses, and depend on strangers to make them feel, understand, and appreciate. Let us do them that favor.

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