The plays of Tennessee Williams’ post-1961 period have often been misunderstood and dismissed. In light of Williams’ centennial in 2011, which was marked internationally by productions and world premieres of his late plays, Annette J. Saddik’s new reading of these works illuminates them in the context of what she terms a “theatre of excess,” which seeks liberation through exaggeration, chaos, ambiguity, and laughter. Saddik explains why these plays are now gaining increasing acclaim, and analyzes recent productions that successfully captured elements central to Williams’ late aesthetic, particularly a delicate balance of laughter and horror with a self-consciously ironic acting style. Grounding the plays through the work of Bakhtin, Artaud, and Kristeva, as well as through the carnivalesque, the grotesque, and psychoanalytic, feminist, and queer theory, Saddik demonstrates how Williams engaged the freedom of exaggeration and excess in celebration of what he called “the strange, the crazed, the queer.”

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TENNESSEE WILLIAMS
AND THE THEATRE OF EXCESS

The Strange, the Crazed, the Queer

ANNETTE J. SADDIK
I think the strange, the crazed, the queer
will have their holiday this year,
I think for just a little while
there will be pity for the wild…

— Tennessee Williams, Collected Poems

The biologist will tell you that progress is the result of mutations. Mutations are another word for freaks. For God’s sake let’s have a little more freakish behavior – not less.

— Tennessee Williams, “Something Wild,” 1948

BEAU: You are too much.

VIEUX: Better too much than insufficient, I’d say.

— Tennessee Williams, The Traveling Companion, 1981


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The collaboration among scholars, artists, producers, festival directors, and publishers who are passionate about Tennessee Williams’ work is a rare alliance that has created the climate for new, informed productions and publications to emerge, and I am grateful to these members of the Williams community who have influenced this book, both formally and informally, with their energy, commitment, and talent. They have made the often isolated occupation of scholarship an exciting social endeavor. My thanks to everyone at the Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival, especially Paul J. Willis and Patricia Brady, and everyone at the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, especially David Kaplan, Jef Hall-Flavin, Charlene Donaghy, and Patrick Falco, for the conversations and performances that allow Williams’ theatre to thrive. Much gratitude also goes to the editorial and production staff of Cambridge University Press, particularly Vicki Cooper, Fleur Jones, and Emma Collison.

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During the 1980s, Tennessee Williams had fallen out of public favor, valued for a few early plays but considered passé and tragically in decline, both professionally and personally. Despite his persistent attempts to present new work and be understood during his last twenty years, when he died in 1983 he thought it unlikely that he would be remembered as more than a failed playwright who had some success during the 1940s and 1950s. He had no reason to think that his centennial in 2011 would have been celebrated throughout the world with a renewed appreciation of his work, both early and late. I think the current resurrection of his reputation would have made him very happy, and he might even have had a good laugh at it. I am just grateful to have had the opportunity to be a part of his story. This book is for him.

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