

1 Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan: the aesthetic matrix

The dynamics of collaboration

A director who works with a playwright on the first production of a play is a full collaborator in the work that is eventually described in the published script. This is now a critical commonplace. When Tennessee Williams began working with Elia Kazan on *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1947, it was more like an accusation. The Broadway theatre of the forties was still functioning on a model for the production process that had originated at the turn of the century, just as the director had begun to assume a separate identity from the producer and actor-manager. In the days of the great regisseurs – men like Augustin Daly, David Belasco, and Steele MacKaye – director, playwright, and sometimes theatre owner and star actor, were often one person, the company manager. In the early part of the twentieth century, the playwright gained greater and greater respect as a literary artist while the functions of producer and director gradually were separated into those of the business manager who tended to the money side of the production and the artistic director who actually staged the play.

By the early thirties, the model for interaction among producer, playwright, and director had solidified into convention. In the conventional model that had arisen in the twenties, the playwright delivers a finished script to a producer, working out with him or her the changes that are deemed necessary for commercial success. The producer hires a director and casts the play, usually in cooperation with the director, although the producer's decision about casting overrides the director's, and the playwright must give at least tacit consent to all decisions. The director takes the finished script and interprets it for the stage, providing a unified physical realization of what he sees as the playwright's intended meaning in the play. This includes helping the actors to develop their characters, providing movement and gestures in the form of blocking and business, cutting and sometimes revising the script to meet the needs of the production, working with the designers to create scenery and cos-

2 Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan

tumes that will support the overall concept of the play's meaning, and in general serving as the coordinator of the performance.

According to this model, the playwright works in isolation, alone in the proverbial study, to produce the script, having complete ownership of the play up to the point of production. At the point of production the director takes over and becomes the author of the performance. When the play is published, whether it be in the "reading version" meant to take its place in the library of dramatic literature or the "acting version" meant to serve as a blueprint for subsequent performances, convention again ascribes all of its elements to the playwright. Since the playwright, as writer, owns the published script, she also owns the non-verbal elements described in the stage directions, despite the fact that the playwright may have had little or nothing to do with creating them.

Playwright Robert Ardrey wrote of his relationship with the typical Broadway producer in 1939:

Before the production starts, the two of you will have put in many hours, hundreds of hours, perhaps, going over the script, cutting, rewriting, arguing, clarifying. By the time rehearsals start, you've settled everything with him. The job is in his hands. You have only to sit back, watch, make suggestions, have an occasional emotional discussion with him in the back of the empty theatre.¹

Ardrey said that the Group Theatre changed this conventional relationship during the thirties because it included the playwright in the production process, extending his collaboration to the director and actors, and opening the script up to revision by the author well into the rehearsal period. It also changed the position of the producer, however, transferring the artistic relationship of the playwright in effect from the producer to the director. When he had gained enough power through a string of successful productions, Elia Kazan was to force Broadway producers to accept the situation that had prevailed when he was a member of the Group, with the exception that as director he was definitely in control, with the actors firmly under his authority.

As is particularly true of Tennessee Williams's plays, the differences between the pre-production version and the published version(s) of a script are often great and, as Elia Kazan has written, the play described in the published script is seldom the work of the playwright alone:

A published play is often the record of a collaboration: The director's stage directions are incorporated, as are some of the contributions of others working on the show – actors' "business," designer's solutions, and so on. The theatre is not an exclusively literary form. Although the playscript is the essentially important element, after that is finished, actors, designers, directors, technicians "write" the play together.²

To refine on this, we should remember that plays have never been merely written but “wrought.” The playwright may write every word of the published script, but the language of a play is not simply words. The language of the theatre is also form and color and movement and sound, a language that cannot be created by a playwright writing, or by one artist without the creative collaboration of others. The script merely records the stage language that results from this creative collaboration.

To criticize a playwright for engaging in collaboration with the theatre artists with whom he works to create the piece on stage seems now to evince a very narrow view of the creation of a play. In the forties, however, critics were working from the already out-dated model that treated the playwright as a “writer,” working alone and outside the presumably corrupting influence of the theatre, and the director as a subordinate talent concerned only with realizing the writer’s imagination as well as he could within the constricting limits of the stage production. The playwright’s job was to write the play, from start to finish, presumably consulting only his creative imagination. The director’s job was to know his place and keep it. The creative process by which Williams’s plays were realized in performance under Kazan’s direction clearly differed from the conventional model, so much so that Eric Bentley raised the issue of what he called Kazan’s “co-authorship” of Williams’s plays as early as his 1947 review of *Streetcar*. Quickly picked up by other critics and discussed with increasing intensity throughout the fifties, the issue was constructed as a question: whether Williams was a “weak” playwright who allowed his director to “tamper” with his plays, or whether Kazan was an overbearing director who violated the writer’s artistic integrity, or both.

The process by which *Streetcar* was produced was actually much closer to the conventional model than what was to become the collaborative process of Williams and Kazan during the fifties. Williams had presented a finished script to producer Irene Selznick, who had, at Williams’s request, hired Kazan to direct the play. The three had worked together in casting the major roles, leaving the minor ones up to Kazan alone. Williams had watched the rehearsal process, primarily as a passive observer, making minor revisions in the script at Kazan’s request. The set had been designed and realized by Jo Mielziner under Kazan’s direction. Both published versions of the script included descriptions of the set designed by Mielziner and the gesture, movement, and business devised by Kazan in conjunction with the actors, although the “reading version” that Williams prepared for publication by New Directions contained less of this specific information than the “acting version” prepared directly from the stage manager’s script for Dramatists Play Service.

4 Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan

Kazan had a much more direct influence on the construction of the plays after *Streetcar*. Beginning with *The Rose Tattoo* in 1950, Williams's practice was to send Kazan an early draft of the script, to which Kazan would respond with a long letter suggesting ways of shaping the plot, developing the characters, and emphasizing the potential meaning he saw in the play. Williams responded in various ways to these letters, becoming increasingly resistant to Kazan's suggestions as the years went by, but he always made substantial changes in his plays as a result of Kazan's advice and criticism. Williams and Kazan together chose the producers for the plays after *Streetcar*, producers who were increasingly cut off from the rehearsal process. Kazan directed the whole production process for the later plays, with Williams's active participation. The scripts for these plays remained flexible for a good part of the rehearsal period. Williams added or deleted whole scenes as well as changing or adding lines to develop the play that was taking shape on stage. With the exception of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the scripts that Williams published – both “acting” and “reading” versions – described the play as it had developed in collaboration with Kazan and the other artists involved in the production without commenting on the extent of this collaboration.

After Williams published a note with the *Cat* script explaining that he had felt pressure from Kazan to make changes in the play he hadn't been sure of, most critics in the fifties tended to describe Kazan's involvement in the script's development as an intrusion of commercial values into the artist's domain and Williams's acceptance of it as caving in to the desire for success. In one of the most influential attacks, Henry Hewes wrote in *The Saturday Review* in 1956 that, “because he is a sensitive romantic, Williams has an insecurity which sometimes leads him into giving in to inferior suggestions from stronger people rather than to do nerve-shattering battle for his own judgement. His relationship with director Elia Kazan is a case in point.”³ Hewes went on to build a whole scenario of interference based on Kazan's alleged commercialism in opposition to Williams's supposedly higher artistic motives.

Academic critics, on the other hand, have tended to be concerned that Williams was somehow not doing the whole job of artistic creation if his final scripts reflected the contributions of the theatre artists he worked with. In the first serious critical book on Williams in 1961, Nancy Tischler implied that Williams's collaborative aesthetic made him less of a playwright than those who wrote independently of theatre artists: “Since Tennessee Williams has owed much of his success to the designers, directors, and actors who have caught the fire of his conception and conveyed it vividly and artistically to the audience,” she wrote, “the belittling rumors are partially justified.”⁴

For most of its duration between 1947 and 1960, the artistic collaboration between Williams and Kazan was carried on within a climate of critical disapproval and distrust which naturally made for tension between playwright and director. Partly because of this, with *Camino Real* in 1953, Williams began to resist some of Kazan's suggestions. The tension heightened with *Cat*, finally surfacing in Williams's public statement in 1955 that he felt Kazan had usurped his authority as writer with that play, and Kazan's understandable resentment. This did not deter Williams from rather desperately wanting Kazan to direct *Orpheus Descending* (1957), *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), and *Period of Adjustment* (1960). The personal and artistic relationship between Williams and Kazan intensified rather than diminished during the late fifties.

At work here was a fundamental dynamic in the relationship between these two men, a struggle for artistic control that is masked by the rhetoric of cooperation typically used to describe the collaborative relationship among theatre artists. In the old conventional model, the director is the willing servant of the playwright, subordinating his or her personal vision to the expression of the play's meaning as the director understands the playwright to intend it. In new models arising from the work of alternative theatres in the sixties and seventies, the playwright becomes the servant of director and actors, as all work to stage the group's performance under the director's guidance. Within the dynamics of Williams and Kazan's relationship, however, there was clearly a struggle between playwright and director to maintain artistic control, to own the play. Kazan has made no secret of his drive for hegemony over the productions he directed. He understood, as he remarked to Robert Anderson, that "a director takes the play away from the playwright, and then the actors take it away from both of them."⁵ He tried to realize the writer's vision, but it was his version of that vision:

I think there should be collaboration, but under my thumb! I think people should collaborate with *me*. I think any art is, finally, the expression of one maniac. That's me. I get people who help me, but I'm the center of it . . . Art is the overwhelmingly strong impression that one obsessed visionary puts on his work. It's important that the people who collaborate with you are able to see things as you do, but also that they're willing to ask you what you want and try to give it to you. When I have people I like, it's enormously pleasurable. And I like being contradicted because it helps the work, so long as I can, at a point, say: "That's it."⁶

For his part, Williams usually acceded to Kazan's ideas and synthesized them with his own in reworking his plays because he had a great faith in what he called the "Kazan magic" – the director's ability to take even a shaky script and realize it powerfully on the stage. But there was a point at

6 Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan

which Williams would dig in his heels and refuse to go Kazan's way – which happened in small ways with *Camino Real*, and a point at which his creative powers simply refused to function – which happened in small ways with *Cat* and in major ways with *Sweet Bird*. The struggle for ownership is clear in gestures such as Williams's publishing an early version of *Cat*'s Act 3 along with what he called the "Broadway Version," in order to distinguish his vision of the play from Kazan's. It was there almost from the beginning of this collaboration, and it could be debilitating, but it was also part of the creative dynamic.

The close artistic collaboration between these two men was also based on a deep personal affinity that both recognized but neither could explain. Williams wrote that "Kazan understood me quite amazingly for a man whose nature was so opposite to mine."⁷ Kazan has written:

Tennessee and I took to each other like a shot and without any of the usual gab about mutual friends, tastes, experiences, and so on to bridge the gap. It was a mysterious harmony; by all visible signs we were as different as two humans could be. Our union, immediate on first encounter, was close but unarticulated; it endured for the rest of his life. How did it happen? Possibly because we were both freaks. Behavior is the mystery that explains character. (L 334–35)

The relationship between Williams and Kazan was based on a mutual affection, trust, and admiration that supported their freedom to experiment artistically. It also contained destructive elements that strained the relationship as time went on, and resulted in its eventual dissolution. Williams conceived of Kazan as an Apollonian consciousness who could bring order to the Dionysian chaos of his artistic genius. He relied on his director to advise him about the structure of his plays, and he trusted Kazan to uphold his artistic values throughout the pragmatic negotiations with producers, theatre owners, agents, and lawyers. Over the years, Williams also developed an emotional dependence on Kazan that made him increasingly reliant on his director for approval and support, while at the same time he resented his own dependence and what he came increasingly to view as Kazan's interference with his artistic vision.

For his part, Kazan was at first enthusiastic about his role as interpreter of and catalyst for Williams's creative vision. As time went on, however, he felt an increasing need to express his own ideas and imagination, fighting for greater and greater control over the process of artistic collaboration in all of his directing work, both plays and films. Combined with Williams's emotional dependence on him, this need to assert his own creativity led to the imposition of what he has acknowledged were his aesthetic values rather than Williams's on the productions of *Cat* and *Sweet Bird*. By 1960 the fragile dynamic of their collaborative relationship had become destructive rather than productive of the free play of

creativity that had made it so successful in the beginning. Their collaboration perhaps ran a natural course that helps to explain the explosive dynamics that characterize many creative collaborations in the theatre, and that are masked by the rhetoric of cooperation we now employ to describe the production process.

Despite its eventually destructive dynamic, the Williams–Kazan relationship was central to some of the best work that either man did. Kazan understood that Williams’s work was his life. He wrote:

Work is what held Tennessee Williams together; he did it every morning, and nothing was allowed to interfere. He would get up, silent and remote from whoever happened to be with him, dress in a bathrobe, mix himself a double dry martini, put a cigarette into his long white holder, sit before his typewriter, grind in a blank sheet of paper, and so become Tennessee Williams. Up until then he’d been nothing but an aging faggot (his phrase, to me), alone in a world he had always believed and still believed hostile. (L 261)

Williams, writing about the centrality of work to his existence, said, “I don’t think anyone has ever known, with the exception of Elia Kazan, how desperately much it meant to me and accordingly treated it – or should I say its writer – with the necessary sympathy of feeling.”⁸

The collaborative aesthetic

Within the dynamics of their collaboration, Williams and Kazan brought together a nexus of aesthetic values from their varied training and experience that they combined with the visual aesthetics of Jo Mielziner to create the unique theatrical idiom that came to be known throughout the world in the fifties as “the American Style.” In 1944, Tennessee Williams was a young playwright with several moderately successful regional productions and a rather spectacular Theatre Guild flop to his credit. With a brashness born of having little to lose, he wrote what is now recognized as a theatrical manifesto that defined the most significant development in the twentieth-century American theatre. In his production notes to *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams took a defiant stand against the theatrical realism that was the dominant mode in American drama before World War II. Calling his new work a “memory play,” he suggested that it could be presented “with unusual freedom of convention.”⁹ Directly confronting the assumed dichotomy between representational and presentational drama that had divided the American theatre of the twenties and thirties into two sharply defined camps, Williams declared that

expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to truth. When a play employs unconven-

8 Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan

tional 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. (7)

After suggesting that greater depth of thought was possible with the techniques associated with expressionism, he dismissed what he called "the straight realistic play with its genuine frigidaire and authentic ice-cubes, its characters that speak exactly as its audience speaks," noting that "everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art" (7). Instead, he wrote, "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" (7). Lest any reader miss the point, the young playwright declared that "these remarks are not meant as a preface only to this particular play. They have to do with a conception of a new, plastic theatre which must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions if the theatre is to resume vitality as a part of our culture" (7).

Williams was suggesting here a marriage of the two theatrical idioms most at odds during the thirties and early forties, the realism associated with the commercial, middle-class and middle-brow theatre of Broadway and the expressionism associated with the experimental and leftist theatre imported from Europe during the twenties and appropriated by such socially conscious groups as the Federal Theatre Project and the various workers' theatres of the thirties. During the thirties, Williams had been writing mildly leftist plays about miners and flop-houses for regional theatres that thought of themselves as *avant-garde*. Now he was trying to assimilate what he had learned aesthetically with a subject matter and social point of view that were appropriate to the Broadway theatre, and were also much more indicative of Williams's own interests and concerns than his early efforts. His "manifesto" was a way of domesticating the *avant-garde* in order to make it suitable to a Broadway audience. At the same time, it was meant to free the domestic drama of middle-class life from what Williams considered the severe limitations of realism as a theatrical mode.

The notion of a "plastic theatre" derives from precursors of Tennessee Williams as remote as Edward Gordon Craig and Richard Wagner. One critic has suggested that it derives directly from Wagner's concept of synthesis: "Wagner sought a fusion of music, poetry, and all areas of design. Similarly, Williams strives for a synthesis of poetry, music, dance, mime, and all theatrical elements of design, including such modern devices as the film screen."¹⁰ Most critics, however, have followed Esther Jackson's lead in locating the elements of Williams's theatrical language

in his American contemporaries and their immediate precursors. As she noted, something uniquely American had developed from the work of playwrights as disparate as Eugene O'Neill, Thornton Wilder, Clifford Odets, Elmer Rice, and William Saroyan: "a system of communication with its own themes, types of character, modes of speech, styles of acting, and patterns of staging."¹¹ Most importantly for Williams, "this poetic language had a parallel in an emerging art of the *mise-en-scène*."¹² Jackson maintains the importance of Williams's academic training in "the rudiments of this theatrical syntax,"¹³ and a number of biographical and critical studies have emphasized particularly the influence of Hamilton Wright Mabie at Iowa and John Gassner and Erwin Piscator at The New School for Social Research in acquainting Williams with recent developments in both the American and European theatres.¹⁴

For Williams's particular theatrical idiom, the most important development in the American theatre of the twenties and thirties occurred in scene design, a development spearheaded by the great American designers Robert Edmond Jones, Lee Simonson, and Norman Bel Geddes, and continued by the generation of Donald Oenslager, Boris Aronson, and Jo Mielziner. In 1941, Jones published his seminal little book on scene design, *The Dramatic Imagination*, which might be seen as a summation of his generation's work and an outline for that of the next. With uncanny prescience he wrote:

Some new playwright will presently set a motion-picture screen on the stage above and behind his actors and will reveal simultaneously the two worlds of the Conscious and the Unconscious which together make up the world we live in – the outer world and the inner world, the objective world of actuality and the subjective world of motive. On stage we shall see the actual characters of the drama; on the screen we shall see their hidden secret selves. The drama will express the behavior of the characters set against a moving background, the expression of their subconscious mind – a continuous action and interaction.¹⁵

Williams used slides and "screen legends" instead of motion pictures in *The Glass Menagerie*, but he did sketch out a series of silent movies to develop Alma Winemiller's character in early versions of *Summer and Smoke*. In any case, he will be recognized as the kind of playwright Jones was describing. The episteme beneath Williams's new theatrical idiom was the "continuous action and interaction" of the objective and the subjective, social reality and memory, past and present. Williams's drama exploded conventional notions of truth by exposing the inadequacy of the language used to convey them, and did so precisely as Jones had imagined, by exposing the "hidden secret selves" of its characters at the same time as it maintained the illusion of objective reality regarding the events happening in the present of the stage action.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, the dramatic assumption on which the

10 Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan

conventions that allow the audience to understand the play are built is the basic assumption of realism, the illusion of the fourth wall. The audience “believes” Tom when he makes his opening speech because the convention is that he is a “real person,” not a character in a play. When it witnesses the action behind the transparent wall, the audience accepts not only the convention that the characters are Tom’s family and friend, but that the action is really what happened to Tom in the past, as Tom remembers it. In other words the fundamental suspension of disbelief operating in realistic drama is operating here. The audience accepts the premise that the stage action is based on something that happened in a particular time and place, that it represents objective reality. The play’s departure from realism comes of course in the assumption that Tom’s memory has intervened in the audience’s perception of that objective reality, and that the spectator is perceiving the past through the layers of memory represented by the consciously public discourse of Tom’s speeches as narrator and the scrimms through which the audience first views the action. The play’s fundamental aesthetic is realism, but it is subverted by some elements of its theatrical language in order to suggest that the fundamental epistemological assumption behind realism – that the aesthetic object represents objective reality – must be tempered by an element of subjectivity. This play represents not “what is,” but the way Tom understands and remembers “what was.”

Some elements of the play’s theatrical language are completely in keeping with the aesthetic of realism, in that they do not shatter the fourth-wall illusion by calling attention to their theatricality. The fact that the glass menagerie is a symbol or an objective correlative for Laura’s state of mind, for example, does not interfere with its iconic function as a realistic prop; it is the collection of glass she keeps in the living room. Only elements of the production that call attention to themselves as theatrical, such as the scrimms, the music, and some of the lighting, shatter the illusion of representational realism. These effects thrust the play into another mode, but because the fundamental assumption of the play is that of realism the spectator is unable to categorize it as expressionism or as fantasy. The particular mode of drama in *The Glass Menagerie*, a fundamentally realistic aesthetic subverted by suggestions of a mediating consciousness, is more accurately described as “subjective realism.” This term is useful, I believe, for describing not only *Menagerie*, but the whole group of important mid-century plays that became recognizable to the theatrical world as being in “the American Style” during the fifties. Subjective realism was the aesthetic base for Williams’s collaboration with Elia Kazan and designer Jo Mielziner.

When Williams began collaborating with Elia Kazan on *A Streetcar*