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0521400953 - Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan: A Collaboration in the Theatre - Brenda Murphy

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This is the first book-length study of the collaboration between Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan. Their intense creative relationship, fueled by a deep personal affinity that endured until Williams's death, lasted from 1947 to 1960. The production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* established Williams as America's greatest playwright and Kazan as its most important director. Working with producers Irene Selznick and Cheryl Crawford, designers Jo Mielziner and Lemuel Ayers, and actors such as Marlon Brando, Jessica Tandy, Paul Newman, and Burl Ives, Williams and Kazan created some of the most important theatrical events of the post-war era.

In this book Brenda Murphy analyzes this artistic partnership and the plays and theatrical techniques the artists developed collaboratively in their productions of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Camino Real*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth*. In addition, Murphy suggests new ways to examine the working relationship between playwright and director which can be applied to other practitioners in twentieth-century drama.

The book will be of interest to students and scholars of theatre history and American literature as well as to practitioners. It contains numerous illustrations from important productions.

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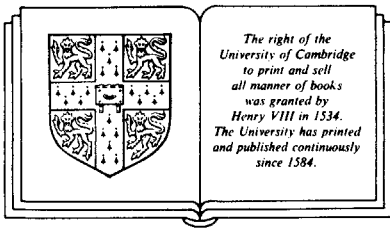
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[More information](#)

To George

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiv
1 Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan: the aesthetic matrix	1
2 Subject and object: <i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i>	16
3 Realism and fantasy: <i>Camino Real</i>	64
4 Presentation and representation: <i>Cat on a Hot Tin Roof</i>	97
5 Realism and metatheatre: <i>Sweet Bird of Youth</i>	131
<i>Notes</i>	165
<i>Select bibliography</i>	178
<i>Index</i>	195

Illustrations

between pages 96 and 97

- 1 Irene Selznick, Elia Kazan, and Tennessee Williams at the opening rehearsal for *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Eileen Darby photo)
- 2 The set for *Streetcar*, final scene (Eileen Darby photo)
- 3 Stanley, Stella, and Blanche in scene 2 of *Streetcar* (Eileen Darby photo)
- 4 Stanley, Blanche, and Stella in the “birthday scene” of *Streetcar* (Eileen Darby photo)
- 5 Stanley and Blanche in the rape scene from *Streetcar* (Eileen Darby photo)
- 6 Mitch and Blanche in *Streetcar* (Eileen Darby photo)
- 7 The festival scene from *Camino Real* (Friedman–Abeles photo)
- 8 La Madrecita and Kilroy in *Camino Real* (Friedman–Abeles photo)
- 9 The “We’re Caught” scene from *Camino Real* (Friedman–Abeles photo)
- 10 Maggie and Big Daddy, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Zinn Arthur photo)
- 11 The set from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Zinn Arthur photo)
- 12 Brick and Big Daddy, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Zinn Arthur photo)
- 13 Brick and Big Daddy, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Zinn Arthur photo)
- 14 The birthday-party scene, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Zinn Arthur photo)
- 15 Maggie and Big Daddy, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Zinn Arthur photo)
- 16 The final scene of *Sweet Bird of Youth* (Friedman–Abeles photo)
- 17 The bar scene, *Sweet Bird of Youth* (Friedman–Abeles photo)
- 18 Chance and the Princess, *Sweet Bird of Youth* (Friedman–Abeles photo)
- 19 Chance and the Princess, *Sweet Bird of Youth* (Fred Fehl photo)
- 20 Chance and the Princess, *Sweet Bird of Youth* (Fred Fehl photo)
- 21 Boss Finley and Heavenly, *Sweet Bird of Youth* (Friedman–Abeles photo)

Preface

This book began as an attempt to translate one of the current truisms of critical theory – that a play is not simply a dramatic text but a text realized in performance – into practical criticism. While it has become a cliché to recognize this fact at the beginning of a critical piece, it has also become a cliché to note that we have yet to find a satisfactory method for analyzing performance and text simultaneously. Hence most studies of plays remain either studies of dramatic texts as literature or studies of performances as such. In this book, I wanted to look specifically at the process by which the initial performance of a play was inscribed in the text that was subsequently published, either as an “acting version” to be used as a blueprint for subsequent performances or as a “reading version” to be read and studied as a literary text.

I chose Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan for this study because they had a long, well-known, and productive collaborative relationship. Kazan had directed the initial Broadway productions of four of Williams’s best-known plays – *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Camino Real* (1953), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), and *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959) – and the two had, in collaboration with designer Jo Mielziner, created “the American Style” in the 1950s, a recognizable and influential theatrical idiom that has been mentioned by many critics and scholars but given no really exhaustive analysis.

My original intention was to discover what specific elements in the published texts of the plays that convention ascribes to the playwright Tennessee Williams – elements such as set, props, movement, costumes, music, and vocal intonation as well as dialogue – actually originated with director Kazan or designer Mielziner. As I studied the evidence in memoirs, letters, notes, drawings, lighting charts, property lists, etc., related to the performances, and the changes that were made in the versions of the scripts as the writing proceeded before, during, and sometimes after the rehearsal process, however, I found that there was a more intriguing subject in the process of the collaboration itself.

My study of the development of the plays, particularly those after

Streetcar, showed that the models we currently employ for the collaboration of playwright and director are inadequate to describe the process that actually occurred with Williams and Kazan. These models fall generally into two categories which Richard Hornby has called the “symphony model” – director as conductor, merely interpreting the playwright’s fixed text – and the “cinema model” – director as *auteur*, bringing to life the playwright’s mere scenario. These models describe a clear hegemony within the creative process. Either the playwright’s text or the director’s concept is sacrosanct. In the theatre of the fifties, before directors like Richard Schechner took control of the creative process, critics have assumed that the “symphony model” was at work. The playwright handed a finished play to a director, who did his best to realize the playwright’s vision on the stage. During the fifties, Kazan himself used this language to describe his work with playwrights.

The creative interaction between Williams and Kazan, however, was a far more complex process. As soon as he had a recognizable script, Williams would send it off to Kazan for his reaction. Kazan responded with detailed suggestions about how the play might be changed and reshaped. He suggested adding or deleting scenes, emphasizing various themes, developing or changing aspects of characterization, and in general helped to shape the play that finally emerged in the script that went into rehearsal. In rehearsal, Kazan and Williams worked together, with Williams cutting lines or writing new dialogue to go with the kinesic and pictorial stage language that Kazan developed. The published text(s) of the play recorded the script as it had evolved at one or another stage in this process and described the set designed by Jo Mielziner or another designer in collaboration with Kazan for this specific production. Although Tennessee Williams wrote every word that appeared in a published script, the play the script described was clearly a collaborative venture. On the other hand, as the one who made the final decision on every word of dialogue, Williams was hardly writing “scenarios” for Kazan to develop.

The study of this collaboration demonstrates clearly that we can not employ the critical convention of ascribing everything that appears in a play’s text to the playwright and everything that occurs in rehearsal to the director. It also shows that the process of Broadway “playwrighting” in the fifties, before the advocates of performance rose up in the sixties and took control of the script’s development, was not the clear-cut division of labor it has been assumed to be. In the case of Williams and Kazan, at least, the director was involved in the play’s writing from very early on and the playwright was involved in the production process throughout its development. Within this process occurred a dynamic of struggle – for

ownership, for control, for hegemony over the creative process – that is masked by the rhetoric of cooperation with which the process of theatrical collaboration is usually described. From the earliest versions of the script to the Broadway opening, Kazan sought to shape the play within his vision of its meaning. While he keenly desired his director's collaboration to a point, Williams resisted it – sometimes explosively – when he felt that Kazan's suggestions were violating some inner vision of his own. In the end, exacerbated by critics such as Eric Bentley, the struggle for control, and the complex emotions that it generated, fatally undermined the creative dynamic that had sustained this collaborative relationship for thirteen years. Did this relationship run a natural course that might help to explain the explosive dynamics that characterize many creative collaborations in the theatre?

In the end, a study like this inevitably raises more questions than it solves. My investigation suggests broader questions that need to be answered before we can arrive at a more accurate model for the process of playwrighting in the fifties. There is evidence to suggest that Kazan worked in a similar way with playwrights such as Arthur Miller, Robert Anderson, and Archibald Macleish. Was there a similar struggle for control in the creative dynamic with them? Kazan was one of the most influential figures in the American theatre of the fifties, and Williams was its greatest playwright. Did their working relationship establish a model for others? If so, what is its relationship to the rise of the director in the sixties?

Even more broadly, we need to think more about what it means to call Tennessee Williams, or any playwright, the “author” of a play and how the conventional language of scholarship and criticism can be altered to reflect the collaborative art that went into creating “his” plays. Most importantly, we need to study the collaborative dynamic among theatre artists in order to discover more about the forces that lie beneath the rhetoric of cooperation that we have used to mask them. Is the struggle for creative hegemony inevitable? How are the forces with the collaborative dynamic related to creativity? How does collaborative art differ essentially from art created by an individual? Pursuing answers to these questions will bring us closer to understanding the complex aesthetic process by which drama is created in the twentieth century.

Acknowledgments

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The manuscript was altered for the better on the advice of Phillip Larson, my former colleague at St. Lawrence University, and Sarah Stanton, my editor at Cambridge.

Although his substantial archive at Wesleyan University remains sealed to scholars as I write this, Elia Kazan and his assistant Eileen Shanahan were generous in helping me to pursue my research in other collections.

All of the photographs are included here by consent of the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations. The two photographs by Fred Fehl are reproduced with his permission. My efforts to contact Seymour Milbert have been unsuccessful, but I have used the materials he donated to the New York Public Library with gratitude.

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[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

xv

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