

MATTHEW C. ROUDANÉ

Introduction

If such playwrights as Eugene O'Neill, Susan Glaspell, Thornton Wilder, and Clifford Odets dominate American theatre in the first half of the twentieth century, and Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Lorraine Hansberry, Sam Shepard, and, among many others, David Mamet the second half, Tennessee Williams animates the middle years of the century. In a very real sense, then, Tennessee Williams inhabits a central place within the American theatre. The centrality of Williams's theatre, however, has less connection with chronology and more with the original nature of his theatrical imagination. While O'Neill was the tragic dramatist and Miller remains the theatrician of the ethical, Williams emerged as the poet of the heart. He took quite seriously Yeats's epigraph: "Be secret and exult."

Ultimately Williams would become less secret about his life and art, and his exultations less clear of purpose, but he worked assiduously in creating poetic stage moments, moments in which social fact, psychological collapse, and eroticized encounter form a still point in which the imagination, itself, becomes the last refuge for his fated characters. In Williams's cosmology, of course, the imagination is the source of both great strength and weakness. Strength because the imagination creates, for Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*, Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, or Hannah Jelkes in *The Night of the Iguana*, a heroic resistance against a contingent and bewildering universe. Weakness because, for Val Xavier in *Orpheus Descending*, Sebastian Venable in *Suddenly Last Summer*, or Chance Wayne in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, the human imagination finds itself consumed (by blowtorch, cannibalism, and castration) by those whose sensibilities annihilate the heroic, the romantic, the creative. Within such a paradoxical world Williams succeeded in expanding the boundaries of theatricality itself, combining a lyricism and experimentalism that revolutionized American drama after World War II.

Williams was hardly the first to reconfigure through dramatic experimentation the American stage. Before Williams became a teenager O'Neill

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entranced the nation with such Strindbergian expressionist works as *The Hairy Ape* and *The Emperor Jones*. As a young man Williams would have been aware of the contributions of Susan Glaspell and Elmer Rice, who stand as but two representative examples of other notable American dramatists who, like Williams, were engaged with psychologizing as well as mythicizing the Real. Williams was a child of both World War I and the Great Depression and, like Clifford Odets and Thornton Wilder, was aware of the social dimensions of his theatre, an awareness that allowed Laurette Taylor as Amanda, Eddie Dowling as Tom, and Julie Haydon as Laura to move – physically and symbolically – beyond the scripted text of *The Glass Menagerie* and into a broader collective social context. Thus, for all his acclaim as a dramatic innovator, Williams is plainly indebted to some literary forebears. From Hart Crane and D. H. Lawrence he took the imagery of the repressed desires, of an inscribed sexuality that is at once visible and thinly veiled. From O’Neill he inherited the imagery of the tragic, of a sense of personal betrayal born out of characters who seem increasingly unable to communicate with self or the other. From Strindberg he inherited the imagery of the expressionist, which helped him to restructure the modern stage. From Karl Huysman, and Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, Williams drew upon the technical and imagistic possibilities implicit in the Symbolist movement. He often commented that he was influenced by Brecht, Sartre, Rimbaud, and van Gogh. From Chekhov, especially, he learned the importance of setting and emblem, replicating the particular milieu of Belle Reve, New Orleans, or St. Louis while simultaneously transforming those localized settings to the level of symbol.

Yet even as Williams borrowed from his literary and theatrical past, he also, when he was at his best, reinvented the American stage. This certainly was the case on December 26, 1944 when *The Glass Menagerie* premiered at the Civic Theater in Chicago and when *A Streetcar Named Desire* opened on December 3, 1947 at the Barrymore Theater in New York City. A connoisseur of the visual and a celebrant of the magical textures of the human body live on a stage, Williams nonetheless was foremost attracted to the word itself. Indeed, of all the creative forms which Williams indulged in – poetry, short fiction, memoirs, letters, his production notes, and stage directions – it is his use of language that most animates his stage.

Williams celebrates language. His is a poetic language that makes the word flesh, creates an alluring stage ambience, that becomes the visible means to performance grace. His attention to language liberated the American stage from the constraints of Ibsenesque realism as it suggested other metaphoric possibilities to Williams and his contemporaries. Arthur Miller, for one, reports that after seeing *A Streetcar Named Desire*, he was

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inspired to work even more precisely with his language in a play he was struggling with at the time. It was then called *The Inside of His Head*, the working title, of course, of what would become *Death of a Salesman*. Seeing *Streetcar* “strengthened” Miller. It was a play, Miller reveals in his autobiography *Timebends: A Life*, that opened “one specific door,” one that didn’t deal so much with “the story or characters or direction, but [with] words and their liberation, [with] the joy of the writer in writing them, the radiant eloquence of its composition, [that] moved me more than all its pathos. It formed a bridge . . . to the whole tradition of unashamed word-joy that . . . we had . . . turned our backs on.”

Indeed, Williams “formed a bridge,” whose foundation is the word, and he, Miller, and other dramatists suddenly were able to cross a creative bridge more freely and enter into a new theatrical world. What Miller suggests has everything to do with the animating principle of Williams’s theatre. He sought to find the verbal equivalents for his characters’ tortured inner selves, a search that led him away from the realism of Ibsen, O’Casey (the later) O’Neill, Clifford Odets, and Lillian Hellman and toward a new dramatic form. Williams reinforced his language, moreover, by refining what he termed his “plastic theatre”: the use of lights, music, sets, and any other forms of nonverbal expression that would complement the textual version of the play. This willingness to open up his theatre to more than the traditional forms of realism, then the dominant mode of theatrical expression in America, allowed Williams to create a lyric drama, a poetic theatre. Stage symbol, scenic image, body language were to assume important roles, roles accentuating the conflicts that the characters themselves were articulating to audiences through their language.

Alean Hale begins the *Companion* by interweaving Williams’s life and career prior to *The Glass Menagerie*. She chronicles the conflicting influences that father, mother, and sister exerted on Williams, and other such key events as the devastating family move to St. Louis, Williams’s formative creative years at three universities, and the impact of laboring in a factory during the Great Depression. Hale also writes about other early experiences, the outcomes of which inspired the playwright to write short stories, poems, and his first plays. His early career, we learn, is of astonishing if amateurish productivity: before *The Glass Menagerie* opened, Hale writes, “he had written more than thirty-five plays, twenty-five stories, the forty pages of verse published in *New Directions’ Five Young American Poets*,” and other items Williams could not remember.

Perhaps Williams’s apprenticeship, which lasted at least a decade, partially explains, to borrow John Barth’s words, the “passionate virtuosity,” of his “first” breakthrough work and the subject of C. W. E. Bigsby’s

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essay, *The Glass Menagerie*. Bigsby suggests that Williams, like Chekhov, explores “a world of private need beneath the routines of social performance,” a private need poignantly revealed through Tom Wingfield’s poetic reconstructions of past familial experiences. Working carefully with the pretexts of Williams’s published text – “The Catastrophe of Success” essay, character and production notes, the richly textured opening stage directions – Bigsby pinpoints the multivalency of *The Glass Menagerie* and the ways in which these pretexts influence audience reception. Bigsby also discusses the multiple origins of the play, the ideographic backdrop of the Great Depression in the United States, and how these and other factors make the Wingfields victims of fate, of time, and of “a prosaic and destructive reality.” Reflecting on the play’s ending, Bigsby writes, “Art can never really be a protection against the real. Chamberlain’s betrayals, Franco’s victories, Hitler’s barbarity were not defeated by wishing they might be so, and, as Auden lamented, poetry did not save a single Jew. Williams was acutely aware of this.” Then acknowledging the political and personal dimension of Williams’s play, Bigsby concludes, “At the same time [Williams] was wedded to art, whose power does indeed lie in its ability to outlive even the traumas of history. He was wedded to theatre whose form and whose substance exposed the nature of the paradox, as it offers truth through lies and reveals a tensile strength in the most fragile of creations.”

As Felicia Hardison Londré argues, *A Streetcar Named Desire* fulfilled the promise and aesthetic brilliance of *The Glass Menagerie*, catapulting its author “to the front rank of American dramatists.” Londré analyzes the play in its historical context, situating its theatrical and cultural impact during the time of original performance, demonstrating, as does R. Barton Palmer in his contribution on Williams and Hollywood, just how startling *A Streetcar Named Desire* was for 1947 audiences. She also provides a fresh reading of the ending of the play, bringing to bear current critical debates regarding Williams’s portrait of Blanche. Through a careful discussion of each of the play’s eleven scenes, Londré analyzes what many regard as Williams’s greatest achievement.

Jan Balakian addresses one of Williams’s most innovative, and misunderstood, plays, *Camino Real*. Tracing the elements of melodrama, farce, pagan ritual, romance, satire, tragedy, and comedy, Balakian suggests that “never before had the American theatre seen a play that exploded realism” in quite the way the surreal *Camino Real* did. In this mythicized poetic allegory, Balakian argues, Williams reveals just how indebted he was to the Romantic sensibility, a sensibility energized by the enabling imagination of the self. More than merely a fanciful indulgence celebrating the wondrous if baffling powers of the imagination, though, *Camino Real*, like Miller’s

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The Crucible, problematizes the ideological realities of a Cold War conservatism within the United States. Balakian also covers the notorious critical reception of the original production and surveys key landmark productions over the years. Despite the carnivalized world in which Kilroy finds himself, Balakian concludes, “*Camino* is ultimately an affirmative play because the violets break the rocks, and imagination and love triumph over cruelty and tyranny. Indeed, Williams’s most crucial metaphor is Kilroy’s retrieval of his heart from the state because this is a play about reclaiming one’s heart.” Perhaps as we enter the twenty-first century, audiences will be better prepared to appreciate the wonderful theatricality of this 1953 work.

After the alleged failure of *Camino Real*, Williams’s next major play two years later, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, emerged as “a great critical and financial success,” as Albert J. Devlin writes. In addition to his reading of plot, character, and theme, Devlin provides background information regarding the original composition of the play, the various third-act versions, and why such revisions were made. Devlin also demonstrates the ways in which Williams culturally inscribed the drama by exploiting “the plantation setting and ideology” of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Relying on the theories of Georg Lukács and Julia Kristeva, as well as a number of unpublished Tennessee Williams letters, Devlin contextualizes our understanding of Big Daddy, Big Mama, Maggie, and Brick in this fresh reconsideration of a drama whose figures try, with uneven results, to come to terms with the “mendacity” and the “clicks” infiltrating their very existences.

Thomas P. Adler takes as his subject two important plays within the Williams oeuvre, *Summer and Smoke* and what Adler calls “the dramatist’s last Broadway success,” *The Night of the Iguana*. Analyzing the intertextuality of Williams’s scripts, particularly the interfolding of his own and others’ poetry into the plays, Adler explores central patterns long associated with the playwright’s verse and drama: “Dissolution and decline – purity giving way to corruption, a sanctuary or safe harbor invaded by harsh judgment and condemnation – these are, indeed, recurring motifs in the verses from his own pen that Williams includes in his plays.” Adler charts the competing narratives of Alma and John, the rich symbolism of *Summer and Smoke*, and discusses the relationship between two who should or could have been close, but whose fates are, like those of Laura and Blanche, defined by separation and loss. Still, Adler locates, especially in *The Night of the Iguana*, the classic Williamsesque theme concerning the importance of “tenacity and endurance,” a sense of acceptance that tempers, however ambiguously, Hannah’s life. If all the figures in the play are at the end of their ropes, to allude to a key metaphor of the play,

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Williams also outlines a redemptive force. Shannon, Maxine, and Hannah, Adler concludes, are able to carry on. Hannah, especially, “in a kind of Beckettian endurance beyond endurance, serves Williams well as a potent image of humankind’s condition after the Fall.” This is why both *Summer and Smoke* and *The Night of the Iguana* invite theatregoers to “consider our torturous growth from innocence to experience and the need for finding a way to live in the ruined Eden of the present.”

No American playwright before Williams eroticized the stage the way Williams did. Ever since the audience gazed at Marlon Brando – and his body – in 1947, Williams presented what John M. Clum calls a “sex/gender system” that only recently has been more fully appreciated by both homosexual and heterosexual audiences. Clum focuses on three plays of the late 1950s, when homophobia was rising to its high point during the McCarthy era: *Orpheus Descending*, *Suddenly Last Summer*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth*. Sebastian Venable, Val Xavier, and Chance Wayne, Clum suggests, are “sacrificed for violating their proscribed roles in the patriarchal sex/gender system. The possibility of a new sex/gender system is seen through the two central female characters in each play, one mutilated, the other healed.” With reference to such scholars as David Savran, Gayle Rubin, and, among others, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Clum begins with a theoretical discussion of the many ways in which the relationship of homosexuality and heterosexuality influences both American culture and our ways of rethinking Williams’s stage. Clum concentrates “on the beautiful male as sexual martyr in these three plays, on the dynamics and erotics of the martyrdoms, and on the ways in which his relationship to the fugitive woman suggests a liberating possibility.”

As Bigsby, Adler, and Balakian locate an essentially Romantic sensibility in Williams, so Nancy M. Tischler explores even more explicitly what she calls the Romantic textures in selected short stories and plays. Like Hale, Tischler gives careful consideration to biographical issues, showing that the playwright had a profound “inclination to observe the world and its people through the eyes of the romantic,” a vision that “came as naturally to Williams as writing did.” Citing personal letters (many of which will be published for the first time by Tischler and Devlin), early rough drafts, selected pieces of short fiction, and, of course, numerous plays, Tischler concludes, and rightly so, that the “life on stage was for Tennessee Williams an image of the human condition, not simply a chronicle of individual experience.” For Williams, the personal insight and private doubts, as Christopher Bigsby reminds us, outline the political concerns and moral anxieties of a nation whose faith in the future, though ever present, seems as indeterminate as the troubled heroes of Williams’s theatre.

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In his carefully documented essay, Gilbert Debuscher spotlights the extent to which Williams borrowed from the past, refurbished the present through his own original plays, and left his unmistakable imprint on a future generation of playgoers and playwrights. Although the European and American models and influences, from Oscar Wilde, Hart Crane, and Bertolt Brecht through Federico García Lorca and Jean Cocteau, remain vital forces inscribed in a Williams text and performance, Debuscher insists on the playwright's originality. "Williams is not a derivative artist," concludes Debuscher, "and his plays are nothing if not recognizably his own: he was in life as in the best of his art a devourer, a predator who seized upon his own experience and that of his literary predecessors to feed his imagination and trigger his creativity."

Moving from page to stage was, for Williams, tricky business. Like any self-respecting Romantic, Williams poured out his soul in solitude, typing out scripts for that ideal Beckettian audience, an audience of one, himself. Whether in text or performance, though, Williams's words have since become part of the collective vocabulary of a nation. Amanda Wingfield's reminiscence about entertaining "seventeen! – gentlemen callers!"¹ or Blanche DuBois's "I don't want realism. I want magic!"² or, in some of the most famous lines in American theatre, her last utterance in *Streetcar* – "Whoever you are – I have always depended on the kindness of strangers"³ – remain familiar to audiences a half a century after they were first voiced. But Williams knew that the transference to live performance, the most public of arts, required help.

More so than any other literary form, playwriting quickly becomes a collaborative effort, involving a whole range of players who never take the stage on opening night: set and costume designers, lighting and sound technicians, stage managers and stage hands, producers, and, of course, directors. Indeed, in the case of Williams, the role of the director has been enormously influential – and at times controversial. In her careful examination concerning the relationship of Williams and directors, Brenda Murphy raises such issues as the nature of artistic integrity, authorial control, commercial viability, and, above all, the way in which the playwright and the director's relationship became, for Williams, a contentious one. As Murphy puts it, "from his first protector in the theatre, Margo Jones, to his last, José Quintero," Williams ". . . had worked with some of the best directors of the twentieth-century theatre . . ." Like so many of his antiheroes, however, Williams himself was filled with ambivalence and contradiction. "He desired both protection and control," Murphy concludes. "He sought collaboration and resented it. He needed an emotional connection, and he sabotaged it. He could be the most amiable of

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collaborators and the most difficult. He was fortunate in finding so many talented collaborators who saw the genius in the plays and were willing to take on the playwright in order to participate in their full realization on the stage.”

The collaborative issues Murphy articulates seem equally evident in Williams’s major contributions to Hollywood film, the subject of R. Barton Palmer’s essay. Palmer pursues the various issues that relate to the adaptation of Williams’s plays for the screen. These issues relate largely to the different requirements of the commercial cinema, which was itself in a process of transition during the 1950s and 1960s for institutional and economic reasons. In particular, Palmer addresses the notion that the more radical, disruptive thrust of the Williams play is generally blunted by Hollywood treatment (though not entirely, because it is Williams’s somewhat scandalous reputation that provides the motive in part for the screen adaptation of his work). Palmer opens his essay with a survey of the Williams film adaptations, seen within the context of American filmmaking as an institution in the process of self-transformation in the 1950s and 1960s. Williams’s dramatic materials, Palmer demonstrates, provided Hollywood with important sources for a new kind of film – adult, naughty, pessimistic, filled with intense and complex characters – that proved popular because of changing conditions of production and, especially, reception. Palmer then shifts to a close examination of the most important adaptations: *Cat on Hot Tin Roof*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Rose Tattoo*, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, *Suddenly Last Summer*, and *Baby Doll*. Here Palmer’s analysis centers on the ways in which Williams’s materials were adapted to key elements of “the classical Hollywood text,” particularly the Production Code, and the genre system, especially the melodrama or woman’s picture. Palmer rightly concludes, “If the American cinema of the late fifties, sixties, and early seventies is densely populated by attractive yet emotionally sensitive men who lack decisiveness and are prone to failure, then Tennessee Williams must be credited for inaugurating what is, in part, a revolution in taste, but also, and more important, a transformation of the national character. And this would never have happened without the wholesale transference of his artistic vision from the stage to the commercial screen.”

The author of some seventy plays (if one counts the combinations of earlier plays expanded into new and newly retitled works as well as the unpublished works) Williams established his reputation, of course, with *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but also extended his artistic excellence, most agree, with at least *Summer and Smoke*, *The Rose Tattoo*, *Camino Real*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Orpheus Descending*, *Sweet*

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Bird of Youth, and *The Night of the Iguana*. If the plays of the last twenty years of Williams's life are "failures," Ruby Cohn may cause scholars, or at least actors, to reconsider the merits of such lesser-known works as *The Chalky White Substance*, *Small Craft Warnings*, *Vieux Carré*, *A House Not Meant to Stand*, and, among others, *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*.

The specifics of Williams's originality remain varied and complex, but his use of set and setting, of lights, music, screen projections and so on all coalesce in the plays in ways that remain as fresh as they are original. The music and lighting in *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* seem almost too notorious to require much comment here, but within many of his last twenty plays before his death in 1983, Williams, as Cohn writes, "expanded both his visual and sonic repertory: soap bubbles, iron gates, spotlights, dancing, and manipulation of props; the noise of knocks, rattles, sea, wind, and giant wings." Cohn, too, spotlights the playwright's verbal accomplishments. In her reading of selected plays after *The Night of the Iguana*, Cohn suggests that "almost always, these devices [Williams's stage effects and expressive dialogue] function dramatically, even when the plays are slim. Without exception, these late plays, like the earlier ones, provide opportunities for passionate acting."

Jacqueline O'Connor surveys the major critical statements in her bibliographic essay. She evaluates the biographical studies, from Edwina Dakin Williams's *Remember Me to Tom* (1963), the first biography of the dramatist, written by his mother, through Lyle Leverich's *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams* (1995). O'Connor also reviews the extant bibliographies, such as George Crandell's *Tennessee Williams: A Descriptive Bibliography* (1995), and she notes the *Tennessee Williams Literary Journal*, edited by W. Kenneth Holditch; this journal remains an invaluable source for information about The Tennessee Williams Literary Festival, an annual gathering of critics and performers each spring in New Orleans. She also reports on the many book-length studies on Williams, including, for instance, Nancy M. Tischler's *Tennessee Williams: Rebellious Puritan* and Signi L. Falk's *Tennessee Williams* (both 1961) through several studies published in the 1990s – Thomas P. Adler's "A Streetcar Named Desire": *The Moth and the Lantern* (1990), Brenda Murphy's *Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan: A Collaboration in the Theatre* (1992) and, among others, Alice Griffin's *Understanding Tennessee Williams* (1995).

O'Connor also highlights the various collections of critical essays, including Jac Tharpe's *Tennessee Williams: A Tribute* (1977) and Philip C. Kolin's *Confronting Tennessee Williams's "A Streetcar Named Desire": Essays in Critical Pluralism* (1993). O'Connor mentions several key books

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whose chapters include provocative and enlightening considerations of Williams. C. W. E. Bigsby has written particularly engaging commentaries in his well-known *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, volume 2* (1984) and in *Modern American Drama, 1945–1990* (1992). So, too, have David Savran in *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (1992) and Thomas P. Adler in *American Drama, 1940–1960* (1994). Finally, O'Connor's second contribution brings the *Companion* to a close by surveying selected key premieres through the years and the sometimes laudatory but often hostile receptions the plays received from theatre reviewers and critics.

If Williams began to lose control of his mimetic powers in the later years, he nonetheless produced an *œuvre* that forever altered, and enhanced, the American stage. The following essays, which address not only the plays, but also the poetry and short stories in roughly chronological order, chart the enormity of such alterations and enhancements.

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NOTES

- 1 Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, in *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*, vol. 1 (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 148.
- 2 Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, in *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*, vol. 1 (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 385.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 418.