

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07668-6 - Tennessee Williams and the Theatre of Excess: The Strange, the Crazy, the Queer

Annette J. Saddik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS AND THE THEATRE OF EXCESS

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 crazy, the queer."

ANNETTE J. SADDIK is Professor of English and Theatre at the City University of New York (CUNY), where she teaches at the CUNY Graduate Center and New York City College of Technology. She is the author of *Contemporary American Drama* (2007) and *The Politics of Reputation: The Critical Reception of Tennessee Williams' Later Plays* (1999), the first exploration of Williams' post-1961 reputation. She is also the editor of *Tennessee Williams: The Traveling Companion and Other Plays* (2008) and has published essays on various playwrights in journals such as *Modern Drama*, *The Drama Review (TDR)*, and *South Atlantic Review*, as well as in numerous critical anthologies and encyclopedias. She serves on the editorial boards of *Theatre Topics*, the *Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, and the *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, and received the 2015 McAndless Distinguished Professor award to serve as scholar in residence at Eastern Michigan University.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07668-6 - Tennessee Williams and the Theatre of Excess: The Strange,
the Crazy, the Queer

Annette J. Saddik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07668-6 - Tennessee Williams and the Theatre of Excess: The Strange,
the Crazy, the Queer

Annette J. Saddik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS
AND THE THEATRE OF
EXCESS

The Strange, the Crazy, the Queer

ANNETTE J. SADDIK



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07668-6 - Tennessee Williams and the Theatre of Excess: The Strange,
the Crazy, the Queer

Annette J. Saddik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of
education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107076686

© Annette J. Saddik 2015

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2015

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Saddik, Annette J.

Tennessee Williams and the theatre of excess : the strange, the
crazy, the queer / Annette J. Saddik.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-07668-6 (hardback)

1. Williams, Tennessee, 1911-1983—Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.

PS3545.L5365Z8335 2015

812'.54—dc23

2014043068

ISBN 978-1-107-07668-6 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of
URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication,
and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain,
accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07668-6 - Tennessee Williams and the Theatre of Excess: The Strange,
the Crazy, the Queer

Annette J. Saddik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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*¹

¹ Tennessee Williams, *The Collected Poems of Tennessee Williams*, ed. David Rossel and Nicholas Moschovakis (New York: New Directions, 2005), 150.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07668-6 - Tennessee Williams and the Theatre of Excess: The Strange, the Crazy, the Queer

Annette J. Saddik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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,” 1948²

BEAU: You are too much.

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

— Tennessee Williams, *The Traveling Companion*, 1981³

² Tennessee Williams, “Something Wild,” in *New Selected Essays: Where I Live*, ed. John S. Bak (New York: New Directions, 2009), 47. As Bak notes, this essay first appeared in the *New York Star* on November 7, 1948, under the title “On the Art of Being a True Non-conformist” and later as the introduction to Williams’ *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* in 1953 (274). In Tennessee Williams, *Where I Live: Selected Essays by Tennessee Williams*, edited by Christine Day and Bob Woods (New York: New Directions, 1978), there is apparently an error in the dating: the editors state that the essay first appeared in the *New York Star* in 1945 and served as the introduction for the second edition of *27 Wagons Full of Cotton*, in 1949 (7).

³ Tennessee Williams, *The Traveling Companion and Other Plays*, ed. Annette J. Saddik (New York: New Directions, 2008), 290.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07668-6 - Tennessee Williams and the Theatre of Excess: The Strange,
the Crazy, the Queer

Annette J. Saddik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Introduction: “sicker than necessary”: Tennessee Williams’ theatre of excess	I
1 “Drowned in Rabelaisian laughter”: Germans as grotesque comic figures in Williams’ plays of the 1960s and 1970s	22
2 “Benevolent anarchy”: Williams’ late plays and the theatre of cruelty	42
3 “Writing calls for discipline!”: chaos, creativity, and madness in <i>Clothes for a Summer Hotel</i>	64
4 “Act naturally”: embracing the monstrous woman in <i>The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore</i> , <i>The Mutilated</i> , and <i>The Pronoun “I”</i>	86
5 “There’s something not natural here”: grotesque ambiguities in <i>Kingdom of Earth</i> , <i>A Cavalier for Milady</i> , and <i>A House Not Meant to Stand</i>	117
6 “All drama is about being extreme”: “in-yer-face” sex, war, and violence	138
Conclusion: “the only thing to do is laugh”	161
<i>Select bibliography</i>	164
<i>Index</i>	173

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07668-6 - Tennessee Williams and the Theatre of Excess: The Strange,
the Crazy, the Queer

Annette J. Saddik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Figures*

- 1 Jordan Harrison and Larry Coen in *The Remarkable Rooming-House of Mme. Le Monde*, directed by Davis Robinson. Boston, Massachusetts (2009). Photo by Justin Knight. page 9
- 2 Erin Markey, Regina Bartkoff, Mink Stole, and Everett Quinton in *Now the Cats with Jewelled Claws*, directed by Jonathan Warman. La MaMa E. T. C., New York City (2011). Photo by Jonathan Collins. 60
- 3 Roelof Storm, Jennifer Steyn, and Nicholas Dallas in *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, directed by Fred Abrahamse, costume design by Marcel Meyer. Cape Town, South Africa (2013). Photo by Pat Bromilow-Downing. 101
- 4 Mink Stole and Penny Arcade in *The Mutilated*, directed by Cosmin Chivu. New York City (2013). Photo by Scott Wynn. 111
- 5 Nicholas Dallas, Marcel Meyer, and Anthea Thompson in *Kingdom of Earth*, directed by Fred Abrahamse, costume design by Marcel Meyer. Cape Town, South Africa (2012). Photo by Pat Bromilow-Downing. 123

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07668-6 - Tennessee Williams and the Theatre of Excess: The Strange,
the Crazy, the Queer

Annette J. Saddik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

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.

Special thanks are due to my "traveling companions" – Thomas Keith, David Savran, John Bak, David Kaplan, and Jeremy Lawrence – who have accompanied me on both the literal and figurative Tennessee Williams journeys that have led to this book. Their perceptive insights, generous assistance, and friendship have been invaluable to me, and I look forward to many more adventures together.

I would also like to thank other Williams scholars, artists, and aficionados who have kept the conversation alive and offered helpful observations, particularly Robert Bray, Philip C. Kolin, Allean Hale, Michael Hooper, Barton Palmer, Kenneth Holditch, Dirk Gindt, Brenda Murphy, Brian Parker, Jacqueline O'Connor, Sue Tyrrell, Andrew Pinder, Cyndy Marion, Vanessa Bombardieri, Regina Bartkoff, John Uecker, and Ian McGrady.

Several artists have generously shared their work, production photographs, and creative insights with me, and I very much appreciate their talent and friendship. Many thanks to Fred Abrahamse, Marcel Meyer, Nicholas Dallas, Cosmin Chivu, Davis Robinson, and Jonathan Warman.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07668-6 - Tennessee Williams and the Theatre of Excess: The Strange,
the Crazy, the Queer

Annette J. Saddik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

Acknowledgments

Special thanks also to John Guare, Lee Breuer, Maude Mitchell, and John P. Shanley for their inspiration and support, and to Lanford Wilson, who sadly passed away on March 24, 2011, just two days before Williams' centennial.

Thanks are also due to students in my CUNY Graduate Center Spring 2013 "The Grotesque in Theatre" course and Fall 2011 "Tennessee Williams in Context" course, and in my New York City College of Technology Spring 2014 "Introduction to Drama," for lively discussions and valued commentary on production photos. I continue to owe a debt of gratitude to my own teachers who have influenced my thinking about drama – particularly Thomas Van Laan, Elin Diamond, and the late George Kearns, who unwittingly set me on this path years ago with a casual suggestion: "You have some new and interesting ideas about Williams' post-1960 plays – why don't you write about *them*?" I can only hope to be as much of an inspiration to my students as these teachers were to me.

Many friends, colleagues, and family members have also provided their insights, support, and helpful commentary during the preparation of this book: Martin Halliwell, Beth Bartley, Diana Frame, Clare McKeen, Ted Kersten, Michael W. Page, Ari Maller, Monique Ferrell, Kathleen H. Formosa, Michael Formosa, Renee Murad, Eileen Murad-Frank, David Frank, Morry Murad, and the late Charles Hirsch. Special thanks to my sister, Orly Saddik, for her ongoing support, and, as always, my deepest gratitude goes to my parents, Dr. Meir Saddik and Gila G. Saddik, whose spirits are with me in everything I do.

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.

My work on this book was supported by PSC-CUNY research grants and PDAC travel funding, and I wish to thank CUNY, particularly New York City College of Technology President Russel Hotzler, Provost Bonne

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07668-6 - Tennessee Williams and the Theatre of Excess: The Strange,
the Crazy, the Queer

Annette J. Saddik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Acknowledgments*

xi

August, Associate Provost Pamela Brown, and Dean Karl Botchway, for their support. Many thanks also to Raquel Martinez, Lily Lam, and Laura Kodet for their assistance.

Some portions of this book, revised here, first appeared in academic journals and scholarly volumes: “‘The Inexpressible Regret of All Her Regrets’: Tennessee Williams’s Later Plays as Artaudian Theater of Cruelty,” in *The Undiscovered Country*, ed. Philip C. Kolin (New York: Peter Lang, 2002); “Introduction: Transmuting Madness into Meaning,” in *The Traveling Companion and Other Plays*, ed. Annette J. Saddik (New York: New Directions, 2008); “Recovering ‘Moral and Sexual Chaos’ in Tennessee Williams’ *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*,” *North Carolina Literary Review* 18 (2009): 53–65; “‘Something about the Deep South of America and London’s East End’: Tennessee Williams’s Late Plays and In-Yer-Face Theatre,” *Valley Voices* 10:1 (2010): 58–71; “‘Too Grotesque and Too Funny for Laughter’: Publishing the Late Tennessee Williams,” in *Tenn at One Hundred: The Reputation of Tennessee Williams*, ed. David Kaplan (East Brunswick, NJ: Hansen Publishing Group, 2011); “‘Drowned in Rabelaisian Laughter’: Germans as Grotesque Comic Figures in the Plays of Tennessee Williams,” *Modern Drama* 55:3 (2012): 356–372; “‘There’s Something Not Natural Here’: Grotesque Ambiguities in Tennessee Williams’s *Kingdom of Earth*, *A Cavalier for Milady*, and *A House Not Meant to Stand*,” in *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*, Brenda Murphy (London: Methuen, 2014).