

The Tennessee Williams Annual Review

“A Playwright’s Prayer”

Tennessee Williams



Number 6

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Introduction to “A Playwright’s Prayer”

This document was graciously provided to the *TWAR* by Mr. Richard Taylor, who received “A Playwright’s Prayer” from Mr. Charles Gill and Ms. Stell Adams. Stell Adams was a cousin of Tennessee Williams.

Although the work is not signed, its authenticity is undeniable. The script is certainly Williams’s own, and according to Allean Hale, the typewriter appears to be the one Williams used to type *Mes Cahiers Noir*, which was written in 1978 just before Williams went into a New Orleans hospital for an operation. Although the “Prayer” is not dated, Nancy Tischler, who has also examined the piece, believes that the type is similar to letters that Williams typed around 1977. The tone and reflective voice of the piece do seem to indicate the thoughts of a man who is approaching the twilight of his life (Williams died in 1983).

However, Williams includes lines (crossed out in ink) that read, “all that is left of my heart after nineteen years of putting it on paper and on the stage,” which might indicate that the piece was written much earlier in his career.

Whatever the case, the document is remarkable for its candor and for the balance struck between the autonomy of the artist and the collaborative nature of the theatre. We are pleased to publish it for the first time in this issue of the *TWAR*.

Robert Bray
Editor

Help me to know and love faith in "the
truth of the play" and defend it to the
last ditch.

A PLAYWRIGHT'S PRAYER

Dear FATHER IN HEAVEN,

HELP ME TO RECEIVE WITH INTEREST AND COURTESY ALL ADVICE, WHETHER SOLICITED OR BY MYSELF OR OFFERED TO ME GRATUITOUSLY, TO READ AND CONSIDER ALL NOTES NO MATTER WHO MAKES THEM, BUT AT THE SAME TIME TO REMEMBER THAT I HAVE HAD A LONGER AND DEEPER ACQUAINTANCE WITH THE PLAY THAN ANYONE ELSE AND SO, FINALLY, TO PLACE NO COUNSEL CONCERNING THE SCRIPT ABOVE MY OWN COUNSEL.

WHEN EVERYONE ELSE APPEARS TO BE WORKING BUT ME, WHEN I AM JUST SITTING AND LISTENING AND WATCHING, HELP ME NOT TO FORGET THE TWO OR THREE YEARS WHEN I WAS THE SOLITARY WORKER, ALL OF THOSE MORNINGS OF WORK, ESPECIALLY THE BAD ONE WHEN I WONDERED IF THE GOOD ONES WOULD COME AGAIN, AND SO REMEMBERING THAT LONG SWEET AND BITTER TIME WHEN THE PLAY WAS ^{my} YOUR LIFE AND ^{my} YOUR LIFE WAS THE PLAY, LET ME NOT BE ASHAMED OF MY RELATIVE PASSIVITY DURING REHEARSALS, LET ME NOT FEEL AN OUTSIDER...

~~HELP ME TO KNOW AND HAVE FAITH IN THE TRUTH OF THE PLAY, AND DEFEND IT, IF NECESSARY, TO THE LAST DITCH, HOWEVER SANGUINARY THAT LAST-DITCH DEFENSE MAY BE.~~

HELP ME TO BE NEITHER TOO ARROGANT OR TOO HUMBLE, TOO OBSTINATE OR TOO PLIANT, BUT IF I AM EVER COMPELLED TO CHOOSE BETWEEN TOO MUCH OF ONE OR THE OTHER, LET ME GET ON MY HIGH HORSE, ^{it} AND AT LEAST APPEAR TO BELIEVE ^{was that the way} IT CAME FROM KENTUCKY, ^{pass}

BUT ALWAYS REMIND ME, IF I EVER SEEM TO FORGET IT, THAT I AM WORKING WITH OTHER CREATIVE ARTISTS WHOSE DEDICATION TO THIS PLAY AND PRODUCTION, AND WHOSE CONTRIBUTION TO IT MAY EQUAL OR EXCEED MY OWN, AND LET ME "IDENTIFY WITH THEM" AND RECOGNIZE MYSELF IN THEM AND THEIR SELVES IN ME SO THAT I WILL BE AS CONSIDERATE OF THEIR PRIDE AS I AM OF MY OWN, AND BE SUITABLY GRATEFUL TO THEM.

LET ME NOT FORGET THAT HOWEVER ASSURED THEY MAY SEEM, THEY ARE NO MORE SURE THAN I AM, AND THAT THEY NEED, AS MUCH AS I NEED, WHATEVER REASSURANCE ONE MAN CAN GIVE TO THE NEXT MAN IN THE FOX-HOLE, PREPARING FOR AN ATTACK.

BUT LET ME NOT THINK IN TERMS OF OPPONENTS AND WAR-FARE, FOR THAT IS A SYMPTOM OF PARANOIA AND PRIBEC.

HELP ME TO REMEMBER THAT IN ALL MY PLAYS I AM A HIGHLY PERSONAL PLAYWRIGHT, PRESENTING AREAS OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE AND KINDS OF FEELING WHICH MAY SEEM VERY SPECIAL AND FOREIGN AND EVEN OFFENSIVE TO SOME IN THE AUDIENCE, INCLUDING SOME OF THE CRITICS, AND SO ~~DO NOT~~ ^{not} BE SHOCKED AND ENRAGED IF THE ADJECTIVE "MORBID" IS USED AGAINST ~~YOU~~ ^{me} OR EVEN IF ~~YOU ARE~~ ^{I am} COMPARED, ONCE MORE, TO A "FETID SWAMP".

HELP ME TO REMEMBER THAT I AM OBLIGATED TO TRANSLATE MY PERSONAL WORLD INTO TERMS OF THE WORLD AT LARGE, SO THAT THE APPARENT DIFFERENCES CAN BE SEEN AS WHAT THEY ARE, AS MERELY DIFFERENT SHADOWS OF THE SAME OBJECTS. AND HELP ME TO

EXPECT NO SPECIAL DISPENSATION, NO CLEMENCY, NO UNUSUAL ATTENTION SUCH AS WE PAY TO THE HALT AND THE BLIND.

HELP ME TO REMEMBER THAT I AM A "TOUGH OLD BIRD", AND THAT I HAVE CERTAIN PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS WHICH WOULD MAKE ME INCONGRUOUS IN THE ROLE OF CAMILLE OR JOAN OF ARC, WHICH ~~HAS~~ ^{roles have} NEVER BEEN SUCCESSFULLY PORTRAYED BY A PLUMP CHARACTER ACTOR WITH A FROWZY MUSTACHE.

AND PLEASE DON'T LET ANYONE TELL ME AND CONVINC ME THAT I CAN OFF-SET A LESS-THANN-HOPED-FOR RECEPTION BY EXPOSING MYSELF ON TV, TWITCHING MY EYEBROWS AND LICKING MY DRY LIPS AND SPEAKING WITH THE "SLIGHT LISP" THAT I ACQUIRED WHEN MY ORIGINAL FRONT TEETH WERE REPLACED BY A BRIDGE CONSTRUCTED BY A CHAIN-STORE DENTIST DURING A PERIOD OF ECONOMIC RETRENCHMENT IN CALIFORNIA.

KEEP ME AWAY FROM THE OPENING-NIGHT PARTY: LET ME BE ALREADY BOOKED, VIA JET PLANE, TO SOMEWHERE AWAY, AWAY.

AND AFTERWARDS, WHEN I'M "AWAY, FAR AWAY", HELP ME TO STAY THERE
AND BE AS LITTLE CONCERNED AS POSSIBLE WITH ANYTHING BUT THE WORK THAT I
STILL HAVE TO DO.

GIVE ME THE WILL-POWER NOT TO READ ANY REVIEWS TILL I HAVE ALREADY BECOME
CAUGHT UP IN THE NEXT PIECE OF WORK.

~~AND, FINALLY, LET ME REMEMBER WITH ALL THAT IS LEFT OF MY HEART AFTER
NINETEEN YEARS OF PUTTING IT ON PAPER AND ON THE STAGE.~~

AND, FINALLY, LET ME REMEMBER THE WORDS, THE QUESTION, OF A GREAT AND
WISE DOCTOR WITH WHOM I HAD THE PRIVILEGE OF WORKING LAST YEAR:

"WHEN WILL YOU KNOW AN HONEST MAN WHEN YOU MEET ONE?"

AND LET ME KNOW THE HONESTY AND THE GOOD FAITH AND TRUE AFFECTION OF
MY FRIENDS AND COLLABORATORS, ALL WHOM I WORK WITH, AND LET ME BELIEVE CONTINUALLY
AS I CAN IN ALL GOOD THINGS IN PEOPLE,

LET ME BE ONLY AGNOSTIC ABOUT MYSELF, WHEN I BECOME SENTIMENTAL.

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