

The Tennessee Williams Annual Review

Confronting the Late Plays of Tennessee Williams

Allean Hale



Number 6

The plays following *The Night of the Iguana* in 1961, usually referred to as “the late plays,” were generally considered failures. *The Night of the Iguana* found Williams enshrined on the cover of the March 9, 1962 *Time* magazine as the “world’s greatest living playwright.” By 1969, after *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*, *Time*’s affiliate *Life* was describing him as a burned-out cinder. Although other reviewers were more generous, many agreed with the idea that Williams’s career was in an irreversible decline. What was seen as the downward slide began in 1963 with *The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore*. A so-called comedy, the play was a prolonged and pitiless recording of an ageing actress’s death. “Death is my best theme,” Williams told one reporter, announcing that there would be no more Southern belles. Most reviews of *Milk Train* were negative to the point of being abusive. Richard Gilman in the February 8, 1963 *Commonweal* titled his, “Mistuh Williams, He Dead.” Only one review noticed a new progression in Tennessee Williams towards prophecy, and little heed was paid to the warning projected in the play’s title.

¶2

The milk of human kindness did seem to vanish from his plays of the sixties after the 1963 death of his partner, Frank Merlo, when Williams entered his drugged-out “stoned age.” His compassion turned more virulent in *Slapstick Tragedy*, 1966, a double bill of two short plays, *The Mutilated* and *The Gnädiges Fräulein*. The play alienated most of the critics and all of the audience and closed after seven performances, despite the efforts of three brilliant performers, Zoe Caldwell, Margaret Leighton, and Kate Reid. Reviews described it as “strangely unwholesome,” “a graveside rite for a dying art,” and “a disaster.” One snidely compared it to the performance of an ageing soprano and announced that Williams had broken completely with the world of reality. *The Two Character Play*, introduced in London in 1967, baffled most critics; one said it would take a psychoanalyst to interpret the enigma. *The Seven Descents of Myrtle*, in 1968, was at least understandable, so it was widely reviewed, although terms like “self parody” and “retread” crept into the write-ups. *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*, in 1969, ignited the frustration of critics who pounced on the word “bar” as the key to interpretation. It was usually seen as a series of monologues between a drunk and a nymphomaniac. In one of the most unprincipled attacks in modern journalism, the Time-Life Corporation directed their venom towards Williams with *Life*’s full-page ad in *The New York Times* of June 10, 1969. Beneath a head shot of Williams was printed in huge type: “Played Out?” In *Life* of June 13, Stefan Kanfer’s piece, entitled “White Dwarf’s Tragic Fade-Out,” described Williams in terms of “infantile regression.” From this criticism Williams fled to Japan and in September was placed in Barnes hospital for two months of drug treatment, a step taken by his brother Dakin that probably saved his life.

¶3

What critics had failed to accept was that Tennessee Williams would no longer stay in the slot in which they had placed him: as great American playwright, winner of every theatrical award, author of America’s two most celebrated plays, a realist whose memorable characters enacted their traumas in deftly constructed scenes and whose unerringly true dialogue was always written with an exquisitely lyrical touch. As with Beckett, his new plays were abstract, with characters who were more the embodiment of an idea than real people and who might

simply be named MAN and WOMAN or ONE and TWO. It seemed he no longer bothered with the dialogue for which he was famous, but wrote in unfinished sentences or let one character complete another's thought. There was none of the plot development—complications and climaxes—that had propelled his scenes; at times it was difficult to know when the play ended or what it was about. The plays of the sixties broke all the rules; they followed no chronological or biographical development; they would not fit into any one category; no two were necessarily alike.

¶4 Thus *Small Craft Warnings* in 1972 seemed a comforting return to realism—but a return to old themes as well, even in imitation of O'Neill and Saroyan. It also drew attacks on Williams as a playwright who had been hiding his homosexuality. *Out Cry*, the revision of *Two Character Play* presented in the U.S. in 1973, revived reviewers' infuriation. It seemed that Tennessee Williams could no longer finish his sentences! Unable to assess the plays with quick generalizations, the critics gave up, transferring blame to the playwright.

¶5 Few had heeded Williams's own occasional explanations: that he was tired of the strain of Broadway and of being expected to produce another *Streetcar Named Desire*; that the most interesting work was being produced Off-Broadway. He was physically tired, as well. He had been writing since age fifteen, and after reaching fifty, a play took him twice as long to compose. He had written his symphonies, he said; why couldn't he be allowed to write his chamber music? He had been excited by the new wave of European playwrights: Beckett, Pinter, Genet, Anouilh. In the United States he admired Albee's abrasive style. Now he wanted the freedom to experiment.

¶6 By 1971 there were few reviews, as by this time the scholars rather than journalists began to approach the unknown plays. Tennessee Williams scholarship can be said to have started in 1961 with Nancy Tischler's ground-breaking *Tennessee Williams: Rebellious Puritan*, followed closely by descriptive books on Williams's work by Signi Falk (who denigrates it) and Benjamin Nelson. These studies all concluded with *The Night of the Iguana*, as did *The Broken World of Tennessee Williams* by Esther Merle Jackson in 1966, still one of the best analytical studies of the playwright's work. Foster Hirsch, in his *A Portrait of the Artist: The Plays of Tennessee Williams* in 1976, added a description of *The Red Devil Battery Sign* to the list of hitherto unknown plays but reiterated the reviewers' appraisal that Williams was finished. That same year, *THIS IS (An Entertainment)* premiered at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. A daring experiment, *This Is* would remain one of Williams's most provocative plays, and it remains unpublished. Two professors from the University of California-Davis came to see it. Judith Hersh Clark found it "complicated and confusing," while Ruby Cohn, a Williams admirer, reported ruefully that it "simply stinks" (qtd. in McCann 14).

¶7 In 1977, Stephen Stanton's *Tennessee Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays* demonstrated that interest in Williams scholarship was no longer the domain of a few individuals. This might be called the first in a series of Tennessee Williams essay collections that would increase and continue for the next twenty-five years and that show no signs of diminishing at present. In "Tennessee Williams' Achievement in the Sixties," Gerald Weales discusses the plays since *Iguana*. Thomas Adler addresses the "dialogue of incompleteness" in plays through *Out Cry*, concluding that Williams's experiments in language patterns were generally unsuccessful but served as attempts to expand his dramatic technique.

¶8 In 1979, a special session of the Modern Language Association held a panel on "Tennessee Williams: The Plays of the Seventies." Only a minority concluded that the work was maturing and becoming more complex in a new experimental form that neither the public nor most critics appreciated. Perhaps the tide of opinion began

to turn with Felicia Hardison Londré's *Tennessee Williams* in 1979. Her perceptive descriptions of the long and short plays were the most complete to date, adding *The Demolition Downtown* to those explored. She ends by quoting Walter Kerr's declaration that Williams's voice was the most distinctively poetic, moving, and dramatic in American theatre: "He is America's best playwright, and let qualifications go hang" (qtd. in Londré 195).

¶9 It was Stanton who founded the *Tennessee Williams Newsletter* (Fall 1979-Spring 1981) that became *The Tennessee Williams Review* (Spring 1981-Spring 1983) and led to a series of journals continuing today. These first two journals, published at the University of Michigan, had the advantage of immediacy, exposing what was current in the Tennessee Williams world. These offered the first evaluations of the plays as they were produced (not only by scholars but also by actors and directors) and by 1983 had identified twenty-one plays written since *Iguana*. Especially valuable was the Selective Bibliography, recording more than two hundred references on the playwright between 1966-1978. Unfortunately, the *Review* was not widely circulated or easily available. Publication ended with Williams's death, but in 1989 Kenneth Holditch of New Orleans issued *The Tennessee Williams Literary Journal* (1989-99). An attractive magazine with photographs and a variety of articles, its eight issues covered Williams news and events, especially the yearly Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival inaugurated in 1986. *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, founded in 1998 by Robert Bray at Middle Tennessee State University, focuses on scholarly articles and introduces hitherto unpublished examples of Williams's late work. In tune with the times, its 2002 issue would abandon hard cover to reach a wider audience on the Internet.

¶10 The massive 1980 volume, *Tennessee Williams: A Tribute*, edited by Jac Tharpe three years before Williams died, offered fifty-three essays covering most of his drama but only six concerning the late plays. Norman Fedder's summary, concluding that Williams was self-indulgent and had lost control, seemed to sum up the general opinion of the time. Although the word "tribute" indicated affirmation at last, it had a tone of finality. Williams himself seems not to have paid attention to the bulk of scholarship about him, but only to the opinions of newspaper reviewers. It was a British scholar, C.W.E. Bigsby, whose *Critical Introduction to 20th Century American Drama* (1984) included a section on Williams that gave the most complete treatment of the playwright in relation to his plays to date. His brilliant analysis of fourteen works since *Iguana* added *Vieux Carré*, *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur*, *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, and *Secret Places of the Heart* to plays previously studied. While he agreed that both Williams's quality of work and reputation declined in his later years, he concluded that this also revealed something about the culture in which the writer lived.

¶11 Also in 1984, Allean Hale, in "Tennessee's Long Trip," (Gale Research volume 45 of *Contemporary Criticism*) described her discovery of an unknown script at the University of California-LA, which added another play to the canon: *The Day on Which a Man Dies (An Occidental Noh Play)* was dated 1960. After a trip to Japan in 1959 where he visited Yukio Mishima and was introduced to Kabuki theatre, Williams had mentioned to a reporter that he was writing a Noh play. No one followed up on this, his most uncharacteristic experiment. Hale, who was taking a course in Japanese theatre at the time, found in this script a possible answer to the playwright's troublesome "unfinished sentences." In Noh plays the dialogue is like an oratorio or duet where one person introduces a line or theme, and the other completes it. As in Japanese painting, where the empty spaces have as much meaning as the obvious design, the play's silences have significance equal to the sounds. The Noh formula of drama is built around a journey, a pilgrim-seeker pursued by a demon-ghost, and

the intervening priest. This genre gave new meaning to a play like *Milk Train*, whose very stage directions called for Japanese touches. *The Day on Which a Man Dies* was rewritten as *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*, with Miriam as demon, the artist Mark as seeker, and Leonard as priest. The static *I Can't Imagine Tomorrow* seemed Noh-influenced as well, and the ghost theory reappeared in *Clothes for a Summer Hotel: A Ghost Play* and perhaps influenced the subsequent plays whose characters are exhumed from memory. Hale, in a 1987 PEN proposal, made the first serious attempt to catalogue 20 plays thematically under such titles as “New Directions,” “Passion Plays,” “Incomplete Sentences,” “Strange Interludes,” “Ghost Stories,” and “Exorcism and Apocalypse.”

¶12 In the 1986 *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, edited by Albert Devlin, the playwright was able to explain his development in his own words. These dialogues furnished important clues to understanding the plays, but since the book consisted of interviews rather than criticism, it was often overlooked as a source of scholarship. Three other books that were indispensable references for scholars were Drewey Gunn's *Bibliography* (1980, 1991), John McCann's *The Critical Reputation of Tennessee Williams* (1983), and George Crandell's *Descriptive Bibliography* (1995). In 1987 Roger Boxhill's succinct *Tennessee Williams* extended the growing list of publishers' textbook series that included the late plays. He characterized these as imitations of the “absurdist” trend of the sixties, ignoring Williams's declaration that he could never make a joke out of human existence. The nineties brought a flood of scholarly criticism, including George Crandell's *Critical Response to Tennessee Williams* (1996), Robert Martin's *Critical Essays on Tennessee Williams* (1997), and *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams* (1998). In *The Cambridge Companion*, Ruby Cohn's excellent survey, “Tennessee Williams: The Last Two Decades,” extended the list of twenty-one known late plays to include one of the last, *The Chalky White Substance*, warning that any comprehensive list was still tentative. She, too, attempted to group them thematically as Socio-Political, Poetic Regional, Lyric, and Gothic-Grotesque, although she found, as others had, that some would not fit into such neat groupings. An indication of how understanding had changed is demonstrated in her reassessment of *THIS IS (An Entertainment)* after twenty-two years: she now viewed it as political, a study in revolution.

¶13 It was David Savran, in his 1992 book *Communists, Cowboys and Queers: the Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams*, who broke new ground to treat in depth what others had mostly avoided—the homosexual references inherent in Williams's work. Savran was the first of a group of postmodern writers in the nineties—such as John Clum, Nicholas de Jongh, Robert Vorlicky, Steven Bruhm, and others—to look at Williams in the light of gay politics. Indeed, as times changed, Williams had been moving from the hinted homosexuality of Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1956 to Quentin's description of the gay life in *Small Craft Warnings* in 1972 and Trigorin's denunciation of society's homophobia in *The Notebook of Trigorin* in 1980. Savran points out how the playwright consistently addressed gender issues through the days of the McCarthy witch hunts to the Stonewall riots in 1969 and the heated political atmosphere of Vietnam. Citing Williams's “All good art is essentially revolutionary,” he analyzes the revolution implicit in Williams's work, fitting it into the context of postmodern writing. However, Savran's speculation that the unfinished sentences in the late plays demonstrated that the playwright, once out of the closet, had nothing more to say and consequently “stuttered” seems naive.

¶14 In 1995, at the San Francisco conference of the ATHE (Association for Theatre in Higher Education), Linda Dorff organized a panel on the Late Plays, which included Savran, Vorlicky, Bruhm, Hale, and Leverich. Dorff

had the advantage of being both a scholar and producer. She had been advisor to Director Michael Wilson of The Hartford Stage, Connecticut, on his marathon project of producing Williams's most complete work in ten years. In 1996 The Hartford introduced *The Red Devil Battery Sign* in a political interpretation specifically tied to the Kennedy assassination. Dorff carried Savran's analysis further to demonstrate how Williams's late plays commented on the upheaval of the world in his time, zeroing in on what the playwright saw as corruption in America and in the American theatre. She pointed out that the "outrageous plays" like *Fräulein* and *THIS IS (An Entertainment)* were both imitations and critiques of current avant-garde theatre in their minimalism and nihilism, even as they subverted realistic conventions. She saw *Kirche, Küche und Kinder* as a cartoon, an exercise in "camp" similar to the Pop Art of the day.

¶15 By 1997 Dorff was in line to be the leading authority on the late plays. She had announced her forthcoming book, *Disfigured Stages: The Late Plays of Tennessee Williams*, and had in progress a documentary film called *Tennessee Williams' Dragon Country*, featuring leading actors and directors of Williams's work whom she had interviewed. She was the major source for the publication of an important revisionist piece, "Raising Williams," by Frank Rizzo in the 1998 *American Theatre*, which helped to elevate Williams's reputation in the theatre world, and she had articles published in Yale's *Theater* and in the *Tennessee Williams Annual Review*. Dorff had explored more of the unknown plays than anyone else to date. She, too, had attempted to classify them as "Outrageous Plays," "Ghost Sonatas," "Parody and Apocalypse," and "Works in Progress," but as with previous attempts to put Williams in a "slot," the works themselves resisted. She noted that Williams had from the beginning an apocalyptic vision that pointed to redemption and rebirth, but that the redemptive endings of his earlier plays gradually evolve into patterns of one-way descent. It is true that in *Stairs to the Roof*, Williams's apprentice play written when he was twenty-nine, the stairs on which the lovers escape lead upward to the Millennium, an imagined golden age of peace, prosperity, and happiness. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* allows the possibility of a new life for Maggie and Brick; *Sweet Bird of Youth* implies that the faded actress will revive her career; and *The Night of the Iguana* allows solutions, if compromised, for all the characters. But in Williams's last play, *The Lingerin' Hour*, there is no escape, as explosions from a crater rain destruction, and offstage voices shout "*Fine del mondo!*" Furthermore, in *The Chalky White Substance* the earth has been destroyed, and God is dead.

¶16 Dorff was working on a project to publish the lesser-known late works when she died suddenly of a heart attack in 2000. It was Annette Saddick who in 1999 published the first book devoted to the late plays, *The Politics of Reputation*. Although her emphasis is on their critical reception, she also analyzes fifteen plays, devoting twenty-two pages to *The Two Character Play* in one of the most enlightened treatments to date. She feels that its broken dialogue exists mostly for diversion to subdue the characters' panic and that the play expresses the contemporary "sense of dreadfulness." Dividing the late plays simply into non-realistic and "a return to realism," she, like Dorff, considers them from the production point of view. She offers interesting comparisons to Beckett, Genet, and Pinter, concluding that the late plays failed partly because both critics and audience approached them expecting realism.

¶17 Meanwhile, Philip Kolin, Robert Bray, Dan Isaac, and others continued to interpret these plays one by one in journal articles. In *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review* of 2000, Bray edited and published Williams's final one-act play, *The One Exception*, dated January 1983 before his death in February of that year. Another collection, *Magical Muse: Millennial Essays on Tennessee Williams*, edited by Ralph Voss, appeared in 2002,

with an article by George Crandell summing up Williams scholarship at the turn of the century. In addition, yet another collection of essays, Robert Gross's *Tennessee Williams: A Casebook*, appeared, offering some new and more radical views.

¶18 In March 2002 Robert Bray organized a panel of scholars at the New Orleans Tennessee Williams Literary Festival Scholars' Conference whose lively discussion of the late plays touched on some unanswered questions and reached some new conclusions (panel available at [The Tennessee Williams Annual Review](#)). Implicit, if not stated, was the query: are scholars justified in exposing these aborted and uncharacteristic plays, written during the diminishment of the author's powers? While most would agree that the playwright, if alive, might demur, the fact is that these plays will be read, and they might best be investigated by the open-minded reader.

¶19 The panel also debated the changed character of Williams's late plays: what was the author trying to accomplish? Some suggested that he was putting past notions of theatre on trial—deconstructing theatre—as had Artaud with his “Theatre of Cruelty,” trying for an anti-literary theatre that would be spontaneous, exciting, and combine all the theatrical arts. Thomas Keith of New Directions, who was involved in editing Williams, suggested that in his “outrageous” plays he was moving towards the “Theatre of the Ridiculous,” and that Williams himself would have “cracked up” at the earthy humor of *THIS IS (An Entertainment)*.

¶20 In *Sweet Bird of Youth* Williams had been concerned with the artist; in *Out Cry* he was looking into the process of creating art. The panel discussed the problem of his new language—the ellipses, the unfinished sentences. It was pointed out that, like Beckett, he sometimes used language simply as a means to keep the action going between characters who needed no words to understand each other, as in *I Can't Imagine Tomorrow*. How to account for the salacious nature of some late plays? Had Williams, without the influence of an Audrey Wood or Elia Kazan, lost control of his material? Was it the drugs, causing him to discard all inhibitions? Was he becoming senile? Or was he, in these more permissive times, continuing to push sexual boundaries, to show onstage what he had only hinted at before? In his early *Camino Real* the old prostitute simply hitches up her skirts in a proposition to Kilroy. In *Streetcar* the rape of Blanche is blacked out. In *Sweet Bird of Youth*, the couple is shown in bed. But in *Kirche, Küche und Kinder*, the Man inspects his children's genitals with comic gusto. Again, one must consider what was going on in commercial theatre, films, and television. Panel members suggested that, if the late plays had details that were vulgar, pornographic, or violent, Williams was simply holding up a mirror to the times. “People have lost their sense of decency,” he had said in an interview with John Given in 1965 (qtd. in Devlin 118).

¶21 Conversely, Philip Kolin insisted on the theological elements in plays like *Small Craft Warnings* and *Kingdom of Earth*. To use *Iguana* as the dividing point in Williams's work might be a dangerous assumption, he suggested; plays like *Creve Coeur* or *Vieux Carré* seemed to be reflections on early works. The late plays could not really be catalogued, because that “order” implies a likeness that they do not have. The panelists agreed that, while the plays discussed did not equal Williams's earlier work, at least two—*The Two Character Play* and *The Red Devil Battery Sign*—and perhaps *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*—would in time be appreciated, along with his works of the fifties. Furthermore, a new book, the only collection of essays devoted to the late plays alone, was announced: *Undiscovered Country: The Late Plays of Tennessee Williams*, edited by Kolin, covers thirteen titles and promises to be a seminal work offering the most recent scholarship. Seminal, perhaps, but not final. It now appears that in the twenty years after he was declared finished, Tennessee Williams wrote thirty-nine plays

whose titles we know. I believe that there are at least twenty more out there to be “discovered” in various archives, repositories, and private collections across the nation.

¶22 The next year, the 2003 Tennessee Williams Scholars’ Conference considered many aspects of Williams’s uncollected work in a panel entitled “The Unpublished Tennessee Williams” (also available at [*The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*](#)). So now that we are confronting what we might call “the late late plays,” what surprises remain for future exploration? Some of them are known but have been avoided by readers dismayed by their aggressively sexual details. There are crude personal references to formerly sacred subjects like mother and sister that seem totally uncharacteristic of the man who wrote *The Glass Menagerie*. Although Williams’s publisher, New Directions, had commenced issuing individual plays as early as 1968 as they appeared and had devoted volumes 5 through 8 of their *Theatre of Tennessee Williams* series to his late plays, some scripts are still hard to locate. Some were privately printed. At least one was withdrawn from publication. Was Tennessee Williams deliberately writing for a gay audience? To label him a homosexual writer is to narrow his scope as a playwright, yet that is the direction in which some current criticism is moving.

¶23 Troubling, for example, is a play like *The Remarkable Rooming House of Mme. Le Monde* where, in a seemingly irrelevant scene, a homosexual rape is performed on stage and treated as comedic. The play does have a savage humor in the mode of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*, which, in a 1952 letter to Maria St. Just, Williams had called “the first surrealist work for the theatre and one of the funniest things ever written,” adding that no censor would permit it. Such remarks indicate that Williams knew exactly what he was doing. *Mme Le Monde*, written in 1982, was published in a limited edition intended for a special audience. Scholars struggling to interpret its sadism might concentrate instead on its title and in particular its images. Its minimal set of a bare room with hooks along the ceiling suggests a slaughterhouse. Its original title, *A Rectangle With Hooks*, supports this interpretation. Its plot consists of a small man who, unable to walk, can only progress by swinging himself from hook to hook, reinforcing the slaughterhouse image. Tennessee Williams, noticeably short, and with weak limbs from a childhood disease, wrote this while he was on a drug that contributed to his frequently falling down. *Rooming House* is another instance of Williams using “house,” “hotel,” or “boarding house” to represent the house of life. I believe he was translating *Le Monde* literally as “the world” to suggest to his special audience, “The world is a slaughterhouse”—perhaps adding silently, “to a homosexual.” This play also illustrates the reviewers’ complaints that the late plays were “too personal.” While the current trend in criticism has eschewed consideration of the writer in connection with his work, to discover what was going on in Williams’s life as he wrote a certain play can sometimes keep us from making erroneous, even ridiculous assumptions. Since adolescence, as Williams often said, he had written to fend off insanity, his sister’s fate. Six of the late plays are about insanity. In his last two decades he was writing to fend off death. Ten of his late plays are about death. The clearest example of this is his final play, *The One Exception*. The woman who locks herself in a room to starve rather than be taken to an asylum by besieging “friends” clearly portrays the playwright’s sister Rose, as it anticipates her final days. He calls the character “Kyra”—for the ecclesiastic invocation *Kyrie eleison*, translated as “Lord Have Mercy Upon Us.”

¶24 One can find many clues in statements Williams made about his work. As early as *Iguana* he said, “I think . . . my style of writing for the theatre is on its way out” (qtd. in Devlin 99). At about the time he was writing *Milk Train*, a play that portrays decadence, he began to speak of himself as “decadent.” By 1972 he was saying, “I’ve certainly grown less naturalistic . . . I’m growing into a more direct form, one that fits people and societies

going a bit mad . . .” (qtd. in Devlin 71). In 1975: “the work has become darker. It began to become dark in the Sixties and it became so dark that people find it painful.” (qtd. in Devlin 287). Williams’s titles also serve as guides to meaning: *Fräulein* is both *Slapstick* and *Tragedy*, *Kirche*—” *An Outrage for the Stage*,” *Red Devil*—*A Play for the Presentational Theatre*, and *THIS IS (An Entertainment)*, originally subtitled (*The Whore of Babylon*). Apparently Williams saw Babylon as the metaphor for present-day America.

¶25 Tennessee Williams, who had little regard for scholarly speculation, might have said: *stop theorizing and put these plays on the boards!* We need to recognize the primary importance of producing any play as the test of its value. They cannot finally be judged until performed. To assess them fairly, one must consider some of them works in progress. No assessment can be absolutely fair because with many of them Williams did not have the opportunity, as he had with his earlier plays, to see them tested and to make the four or five complete revisions he always made. As a rule, Williams’s plays perform better than they read, showing his strong dramatic sense. (He customarily acted them out as he composed.) Nancy Tischler reported seeing *Lifeboat Drill*, which, when read, seems an inconsequential farce about an old couple’s quarrel, but as performed at The Hartford Stage was hilarious. It appeared that the play was about salvation. *Will Mr. Merriwether Return From Memphis?*, a dreamlike, incoherent mixture written when Williams was in the psychiatric ward at Barnes hospital, was produced by Dan Isaac at the Common Basis theatre, New York in 2001 and proved interesting for its leads to other plays, its two strange dream scenes, and the completely novel vaudeville ending, a cakewalk chorus. *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws* was performed at Columbia University’s Butler Library; John Uecker’s Running Sun Theatre Company produced a double bill called *Tennessee Williams’ Guignol*, including *The Traveling Companion* in New York City. The Noh play was done once in Hawaii as Kabuki and in 2001 at the White Barn Theatre in Westport, Connecticut. To locate these productions takes research; they are often confined to small venues, special audiences, and experimental performances. Yet even as “works in progress” they can inform and interest. When produced professionally—as was *A House Not Meant to Stand* at the Goodman Theatre, Chicago, with director Gregory Mosher, or *The Notebook of Trigorin* at the Cincinnati Playhouse with Lynn Redgrave—they are often well received. One might also recall that *Camino Real*, put aside as incomprehensible in 1953, is frequently produced and easily understood in 2002.

¶26 If these late, late plays are Williams’s “chamber music,” they are atonal, dissonant. An art comparison might be more appropriate. Picasso, whom Williams often mentioned, in his late years deserted painting for paper “cutouts” that were simply accepted as a stage in his development. These often brief and fragmented plays might be called Tennessee Williams’s cutouts. However we approach them, any conclusions reached to date may well be discarded as each new experiment breaks former rules, refuses to fit into previous categories, and demands its own interpretation.

Cited Works by Williams

Williams, Tennessee. *Camino Real*. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 2 417-591.

—. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 3 1-215.

—. *The Chalky White Substance*. *Antaeus* 66 (Spring 1991) 467-473.

—. *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 8 201-280.

—. *The Day on Which a Man Dies (An Occidental Noh Play)*. Unpublished script, 1960. Special Collections. UCLA Research Library, Los Angeles.

—. *The Demolition Downtown*. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 6 331-58.

- . *The Glass Menagerie*. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 1 123-238.
- . *The Gnädiges Fräulein*. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 7 219-264.
- . *A House Not Meant to Stand: A Gothic Comedy*. Unpublished production script, 1982. The Goodman Theater, Chicago.
- . *I Can't Imagine Tomorrow*. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 7 133-152.
- . *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 7 3-58.
- . *Kingdom of Earth (The Seven Descents of Myrtle)*. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 5 121-214.
- . *Kirche, Küche und Kinder: An Outrage for the Stage*. Unpublished script as produced at Jean Cocteau Repertory Theatre, New York.
- . *Lifeboat Drill*. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 7 281-298.
- . *The Lingering Hour, A Fragment*. Ed. Erika Munk. *Theater* 29.3 (Fall 1999): 122-23.
- . *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur*. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 7 117-200.
- . *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 5 1-120.
- . *The Mutilated*. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 7 81-132.
- . *The Night of the Iguana*. 1961. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 4 247-376.
- . *The Notebook of Trigorin*. New York: New Directions, 1997.
- . *Now The Cats With Jewelled Claws*. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 7 299-332.
- . *The One Exception*. *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review* 3 (2000): vii-xvii.
- . *Out Cry*. New York: New Directions, 1973.
- . *The Red Devil Battery Sign*. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 8 281-387.
- . *The Remarkable Rooming House of Mme. Le Monde*. New York: Albondocani, 1984.
- . *Secret Places of the Heart (Stopped Rocking)*. *Stopped Rocking and Other Screenplays*. New York: New Directions, 1984.
- . *Slapstick Tragedy*. See *The Gnädiges Fräulein* and *The Mutilated*.
- . *Small Craft Warnings*. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 5 215-300.
- . *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*. New York: New Directions, 1995.
- . *Stairs to the Roof*. New York: New Directions, 2000.
- . *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 1 239-419.
- . *Sweet Bird of Youth*. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 4 1-124.
- . *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*. 8 vols. New York: New Directions, 1971-1992.
- . *THIS IS (An Entertainment)*. Unpublished script, 1975. Columbia University Rare Books Library, New York.
- . *The Traveling Companion*. *Christopher Street* 58 (Nov.-Dec. 1981).
- . *The Two-Character Play*. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 5 301-370.
- . *Vieux Carré*. Williams, *Theatre*, Vol. 8 1-116.
- . *Will Mr. Merriwether Return From Memphis?* *Missouri Review* 20.2 (1997): 79-131.

Works Cited

- Adler, Thomas P. "The Dialogue of Incompletion in Tennessee Williams' Later Plays." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61 (Feb. 1975): 48-58.
- Bigsby, C.W.E. "Tennessee Williams." *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984. 15-134.
- Bray, Robert, ed. "Looking at the Late Plays of Tennessee Williams." *Tennessee Williams Annual Review* 5 (2002). 19 July 2003
<http://www.tennesseewilliamsstudies.org/journal/work.php?ID=43>.
- Bruhm, Steven. *Reflecting Narcissus: A Queer Aesthetic*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001.
- Clum, John M. *Acting Gay*. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.
- Crandell, George W. *The Critical Response to Tennessee Williams*. London: Greenwood P, 1996.
- . *Tennessee Williams: A Descriptive Bibliography*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1995.
- . "Tennessee Williams Scholarship at the Turn of the Century." *Magical Muse: Millennial Essays on Tennessee Williams*. Ed. Ralph F. Voss. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2002. 8-34.
- de Jongh, Nicholas. *Not in Front of the Audience*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

- Devlin, Albert J. ed. *Conversations With Tennessee Williams*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1986.
- Dorff, Linda. "All very [not!] Pirandello": Radical Theatrics in the Evolution of *Vieux Carré*." *Tennessee Williams Annual Review* 3 (2000): 1-23.
- . "Disfigured Stages: The Late Plays of Tennessee Williams, 1958- 1983." Diss. New York U, 1997.
- . "Theatricalist Cartoons: Tennessee Williams's Late 'Outrageous' Plays." *Tennessee Williams Annual Review* 2 (1999): 13-33.
- Faulk, Signi. *Tennessee Williams*. 2nd ed. Boston: Twayne, 1978.
- Gilman, Richard. "Mistuh Williams, He Dead." *Commonweal* 77 (1963): 515-17.
- Gross, Robert F. *Tennessee Williams: A Casebook*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Gunn, Drewey Wayne. *Tennessee Williams: A Bibliography*. 2nd Ed. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1991.
- Hale, Allean. "The Secret Script of Tennessee Williams." *The Southern Review* 27.2 (1991): 363-75.
- Hirsch, Foster. *A Portrait of the Artist: The Plays of Tennessee Williams*. Port Washington, NY: Kennika, 1979.
- Jackson, Esther Merle. *The Broken World of Tennessee Williams*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1965.
- Kanfer, Stefan. "White Dwarf's Tragic Fade-Out." *Life* 13 June 1969: 10.
- Kolin, Philip C. ed., *The Undiscovered Country: The Later Plays of Tennessee Williams*. New York: Peter Lang, 2002.
- Londré, Felicia Hardison. *Tennessee Williams*. New York: Ungar, 1983.
- Martin, Robert, ed. *Critical Essays on Tennessee Williams*. New York: Simon, 1997.
- McCann, John S. *The Critical Reputation of Tennessee Williams: A Reference Guide*. Boston: Hall, 1983.
- Nelson, Benjamin. *Tennessee Williams: The Man and His Work*. New York: Obolensky, 1961.
- Rizzo, Frank. "Raising Tennessee." *American Theatre* 15.8 (1998): 20-25.
- Roudané, Matthew, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Saddick, Annette. *The Politics of Reputation: The Critical Reception of Tennessee Williams' Later Plays*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1999.
- Savran, David. *Communists, Cowboys and Queers*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1992.
- Stanton, Stephen, ed. *Tennessee Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1977.
- St. Just, Maria. *Five O'Clock Angel: Letters of Tennessee Williams to Maria St. Just*. New York: Knopf, 1990.
- Tharpe, Jac, ed. *Tennessee Williams: A Tribute*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1977.
- Tischler, Nancy. *Tennessee Williams: Rebellious Puritan*. New York: Citadel, 1961.
- Voss, Ralph F. *Magical Muse: Millennial Essays on Tennessee Williams*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2002.
- Vorlicky, Robert. *Act Like a Man*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 1998.
- Weales, Gerald. "Tennessee Williams' Achievement in the Sixties." *Stanton* 61-70.