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Theatre Review:

Williams Through a "*great window*": A Theatre Review of *Fugitive Kind*

Jacqueline O'Connor

As I sat in the darkened theatre I could almost imagine Tennessee Williams sitting behind me in the shadows, perhaps laughing inappropriately during the performance and slipping outside to smoke just before intermission. It was the first weekend of February 2003, and I had come to Mill Valley, CA to see the professional world premiere of Williams's 1937 play *Fugitive Kind* at the Marin Theatre Company. The production, opening some sixty years after the play was composed and twenty years after Williams's death, attests to the interest that a number of his early "apprentice" plays are enjoying with new stagings and new scholarship; *Fugitive Kind*, unpublished until 2001, had been produced only once before, by the St. Louis Mummers at the Wednesday Club in a two-performance amateur run during November and December of 1937.

¶2 The new production of *Fugitive Kind*, which enjoyed a month-long run at this Northern California regional theatre located on the main street of an upscale San Francisco bedroom community, is the second play to be produced on the Marin stage as part of the company's "Tennessee Williams Project." In 1998, artistic director Lee Sankowich began working with Williams biographer Lyle Leverich, Peggy Fox at New Directions, and others to produce several early plays that had been previously familiar only to archival readers at the Harry Ransom Center. Sankowich directed *Spring Storm* in 1999 and *Fugitive Kind* in January-February 2003. The latter show then moved across the bay for a one-month run from March to April 2003 at Center REPertory Company in Walnut Creek, with different actors playing leads Glory and Terry. Williams, a standard of regional theater, has made an unusually strong appearance in the Bay Area in recent years, with *Suddenly Last Summer* at Berkeley Rep this spring and productions of *The Glass Menagerie* at both American Conservatory Theater and Center Rep last season.

¶3 Although Mill Valley is some distance from Broadway, and wealthy Marin County seems an unlikely backdrop for a play with a cast of characters from the economic underclass, the company proved more than capable of producing this large-cast single-set work, a love story set against Depression-era conditions in a St. Louis flophouse during the Christmas season 1937. The flophouse lobby, produced in exquisite detail by designer J. B. Wilson, serves the playwright's vision grandly, as it follows Williams's careful stage directions for the creation of OKAY BEDS. The choice to give the set such loving attention serves this play particularly well, for Williams writes into his setting a capacity for conveying emotional content; it is one of the script's strengths, and this production takes full advantage of it. I imagined Williams pleased when I thought of his ghostly presence behind me, as he saw, finally, the realization of the set design that had not materialized in the 1937 version.

¶4 Williams was not satisfied with the Mummers' depiction of the flophouse and its environment, and at the time he expressed his dissatisfaction as well as his insistence on the set's significant role in embodying the play's psychological life. In a December letter to Willard Holland, the Mummers director, he wrote:

> Of course the weakness lay considerably if not mainly in the script—I wrote it too hastily and without sufficient reflection—but it seems to me that the whole burden was thrown on *me*—on the *lines*—in the latter half. There was hardly an effort at atmospheric build-up in the setting for that half. The lighting was all wrong—there was no large window to bring the city and the snow onto the stage—what became of the cathedral-like effect which we had agreed upon? The neon sign? (*Selected Letters* 119)

The details here reinforce Williams's intentions for the script, which provides directions for an "atmospheric build-up," and his vision of a charged emotional setting allows him to conclude that the lines should not be expected to bear the "whole burden" of the play. He would eventually use a similar kind of backdrop to much effect in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, where Blanche's emotional susceptibility is played out in part through an anonymous city scene behind her, an act of violence between a man and a prostitute that is seen through the transparent walls of the apartment just before Stanley rapes her.

¶5 Influenced by the film version of Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset*, Williams wrote *Fugitive Kind*, or what his father called "the G-man play," in an attempt to merge social issues with his own concerns for love and transcendence in a cruel world. The play recalls a decade when hard economic times engendered idealistic dreams of a better society. The Marin production, set in the 230-seat mainstage proscenium theatre, realizes one of Williams's most detailed and realistic flophouse sets, complete with shiny dark wooden banisters, functional doors, one of which spells "OKAY BEDS" backwards in an arch across its glass, wooden benches and a large calendar on the wall by the desk for passing and marking the time. But these realistic elements serve as a striking counterpoint to the set's "*great window*," a feature that Williams conceived of as a kind of emotional projection screen.

¶6 As described by Williams, the "*large glass window*" admits a "*skyline of the city whose towers are outlined at night by a faint electric glow*," combining with the light and the shadowed walls to "*make an almost expressionistic background*" (*FK* 3). Designer Wilson created a window that reflects the heightened emotional levels called for in the script; the window itself and its expressionistic cityscape behind pulsate with energy as lighting designer Kurt Landisman fills the area with light and shadow that shimmer and shift throughout the performance. The window invites the audience to look into and beyond the stage, into the dark corners of 1930s St. Louis. The lighting behind the window shapes our view of the world outside the lobby of OKAY BEDS, where several luridly-shaped buildings line either side of a horizon that appears to fade into the distance well beyond the glass panes. As characters come and go through the flophouse door, they pass the big window; as they do, the city's influence appears stamped on them as the lighting reflects onto their bodies the lines and shadows of the buildings behind them. The set's asymmetrical structure also conjures a film noir mood, with fog creeping up on the slightly tilted windows.

¶7 The "*great window*" allows for an important perspective shift that the play depends upon: the rooming house residents are plainly visible to us without distortion, while the passers-by, the police, the partygoers and the office buildings, in other words all the more common features and figures of the city, take on surreal and distant properties as viewed through the enormous panes of glass that together form the window. Once again lighting plays a key role, for "*an arc lamp projects a bright electronic bow, spotlighting the passing characters*" (3). But if they are seen clearly they are also distorted by the effects of the set, while, in contrast, the "fugitive kind" we see inside the flophouse become clearer and more knowable to us, their emotional lives more vivid and real.

¶8 Fumiko Bielefeldt's costumes and the energy level of the large cast of transients are significantly less effective in conveying the reality of the play's Depression themes, particularly in the first scene. Clean, energetic, and dressed in warm-looking coats and hats, the flophouse residents fail to reflect in clothing and demeanor the draining circumstances (false arrest, jail, chain gangs, cold weather) that they describe. As the play proceeds, however, Williams's careful construction of some of the minor characters combines with the actors' performances to individuate the members of this colorful group, so that in several individual instances and in the creation of the theatrical group dynamic we recognize his early talent for filling the stage with unique characters.

¶9 As might be expected, it is in his crafting of the female characters and the most lowly down and out types that Williams's skill for characterization is best revealed, as two supporting characters from the latter category demonstrate: Carl the tubercular, played by Ralph Miller in a brief but powerful performance, reveals to us a striking battle between his fading body and his fear of institutional care. His astute awareness of his vulnerability makes him all the more sympathetic. The other supporting role filled amply was Chuck, the resident dreamer with plans to shovel snow for profit, although he hocked his snow shovel during an alcoholic binge the previous summer. Michael Ray Wisely plays him with soft, hesitant mannerisms, a floppy hat with earmuffs attached, and fingerless gloves. Chuck's plans go awry, predictably, in a bottle of whiskey, and we witness the cycle of hope to hopeless and back around again that marks the movements of many of Williams's most sympathetic creatures.

¶10 Another neighborhood resident, beaten by the system but still struggling, demonstrates the playwright's capacity for creating gritty realism as well as his talent for creating sympathetic women: Bertha, the drug-addicted prostitute who appears only once, in Scene Three, but who is referred to frequently as the site for "snow" (cocaine) and sexual pleasure. As played by Danielle Thys, Bertha's bird-like white frame jitters its way across the stage as she evokes the desperateness and the deprivation of the times. Already at age twenty-six Williams had a flair for creating female figures, faults and failures in plain view who nonetheless hold tight to life. Bertha speaks of her inability to remain straight even after being "strapped in bed seven week las' summer in the psychopathic ward," admitting her weakness but gaining strength by owning it (49).

¶11 Williams places another female character at the center of the action. Glory Gwendlebaum clerks at OKAY BEDS as she portions out her affections and services to a variety of men: her demanding father, her whining brother, and her impatient boyfriend Herman (the latter appears to us only as a distorted face pounding on the glass window from the other side of it). Emily Ackerman, who plays Glory, does not physically match her name nor appear capable of managing so many difficult men; a buxom blonde might better fit this role. A tiny redhead, Ackerman nonetheless transmits a wiry energy that does befit her character's status as a first-generation immigrant. As Glory falls in love with bank robber Terry and chooses the path that makes her vulnerable to love and loss, she exudes a survivor's strength.

¶12 Although the roles of Terry and Glory's brother Leo are significant to both the melodramatic and socialist forces of the plot, they both recite too much of the socialist sentiment that Williams felt compelled to include in this work, and their roles are weaker for it. (Sankowich decided wisely to cut some of the more repetitious parts of these speeches.) With his rages against the campus R.O.T.C. in the student newspaper, university student Leo, played by Richard Gallagher, serves as one of Williams's representatives in this play. However, the casting and acting choices here render Texas, with his guitar and his singing voice, a more effective narrator and

commentator. Indeed, Kurt Ziskie plays Texas as a kind of singing Tom Wingfield, moving in and out of the action. He's also an early Val Xavier, without the snakeskin jacket. Hung here in brown suede fringe, Texas uses his hatful of songs to provide ironic distance and commentary. He does not speak directly to the audience, but his open manner and his charisma frame him as briefly separated from the others while he sings his songs, and his smile is a knowing one.

¶13 Ultimately, however, the set remains the most striking "character" in the production, and just when it can't get better, it does. Chuck gets his impossible wish, and the audience gets to enjoy a rare treat: snow! It swirls around the street behind the great window, lending the play another element of the city's physical reality even while it alters the expressionistic cityscape. It reminds us that Carl is better off dead, for he would not have gotten through this cold and snowy winter, even while it softens the tragedy of Terry's death and signals a brief period of comfort: in the final line Leo suggests that they "sleep for a time and forget, while the snow keeps on falling" (147). Depicted realistically, the snow nonetheless contributes to Chuck's flights of fancy and it reduces the threat of the oppressive city, obscuring the buildings that hover until, as Terry remarks, they "just ain't there any more" (120).

¶14 In the introduction to *Fugitive Kind*'s published version, Allean Hale provides details on the period of composition for this play, when Williams and his friend Clark Mills passed time together writing in their "literary factory." In his poetic memoir Mills pictures the two young writers, as on "one St. Louis summer day,/sweat pouring down us, we conjured up / —snow! / Once, I recall, you thus explored a drama in a flophouse / while I wrote of a winter white with tons of snow" (qtd. in Hale, "Introduction," *Fugitive Kind* xii). The Mills poem of that "summer day" was called "The White Winter," and its bells, cathedrals, and its "great flakes" appear much as they do in *Fugitive Kind*. The city overpowers and occupies the mind fully, according to the speaker of the poem, who "stood alone, with none but the city in my thoughts," but the final image is one of oblivion and forgetfulness here as well, for the "silence and the fallen snow lay deep" (x).

¶15 Imagining a young Williams last February in Marin may be particularly appropriate considering the circumstances that led to this staging of this play: Williams biographer Lyle Leverich approached Sankowich after a show one night and said, "How would you like to read an un-produced play by an unknown playwright?" Sankowich said at first he thought the worst. But then he heard more. The play: *Spring Storm*. The playwright: Thomas Lanier Williams. Although Sankowich knew of the success that would come for this "unknown," he was willing to risk the possibility that this young playwright's work would prove dated or unplayable.

¶16 In the case of *Fugitive Kind*, however, the directing and designing team put their faith in Williams's vision of the play, and they created the space as he conceived it. Lyricism pulsated from the walls and an expressionistic landscape of light and shadow threw into relief the realism of benches and banisters. The production captured a previous decade in its details while echoing current economic woes in its generalities, and in doing so it proved itself quite relevant to a new audience. Despite the young playwright's attempt to offer hope in a downtrodden world using a curious mix of agit-prop and melodrama, the emotional tone is mournful, deep, experiential, anything but formulaic. It looks ahead to the blues music that punctuates his later Quarter plays; the twangy cowboy songs from a man named Texas point there as well. In the marriage of set directions and stage design, this premiere production of *Fugitive Kind* offers something old, and something new, something borrowed, perhaps, from a popular form, but authentic Williams nonetheless, and something more than a little blue.

Notes

Fugitive Kind.

By Tennessee Williams; directed by Lee Sankowich; set by J.B. Wilson; lighting by Kurt Landisman; costumes by Fumiko Bielefeldt; sound by Don Seaver; properties artisan Kelly Ground. Presented by Marin Theatre Company, 397 Miller Ave., Mill Valley, CA 94941. Lee Sankowich, artistic director.

Cast

WITH: Emily Ackerman (Glory), Scott Coopwood (Terry), Richard Gallagher (Leo), Ed Sarafian (Mr. Gwendlebawm), Kurt Ziskie (Texas), Michael Ray Wisely (Chuck), Ralph Miller (Carl), Rober Ernst (Jabe), Danielle Thys (Bertha), Mark Manske Olsen), Nick Sholley (Pete), Mark LaRiviere (Rocky), Louis Parnell (Abel), Pat Parker (Mrs. Finchwell), Kerri Simoneau (Sylvia), and Christina Kramlich, Reed Harvey, Matt Silverman in various roles.

Works Cited

Sankowich, Lee. Personal Interview. Feb. 2003.

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