The Tennessee Williams Annual Review

Number 6

Theatre Review:

Taking the Personal Politically: A Review of, and Response to, Michael Wilson's *8 By Tenn* (Hartford Stage, 2003)

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From October 2 through November 2, 2003, director Michael Wilson presented two programs of Tennessee Williams's one-act plays in *8 By Tenn*, a double bill at Hartford Stage.[1] On the "Rose Program" were *The Palooka*, *Portrait of a Madonna*, *The One Exception*, and—after an intermission—*Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws*. On the "Blue Program" were *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*, *Something Unspoken*, *The Chalky White Substance*, and—likewise after a break— *The Gnädiges Fraulein*. Wilson's impeccable sense of timing was apparent in his smoothly choreographed, cabaret-like sequencing, and in unwrinkled transitions between the plays on both programs. His skills—in tandem with those of his actors and with a production design that finely balanced restraint with exuberance—displayed the wealth of expertise being deployed at Hartford and assured the show's popular appeal. This feat is most remarkable in light of the risk that Wilson took by staging several later one-acts, those which Williams wrote between the late 1960s and his death in 1983: these were, in order of composition, *The Gnädiges Fraulein*, *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws*, *The Chalky White Substance*, and *The One Exception*. Through canny cuts and stylistic choices, Wilson persuaded a mainstream audience to enjoy these challenging, often antirealistic works from a phase in the playwright's career that was widely thought negligible, at least until the beginnings of a scholarly revaluation and critical rehabilitation in the late 1990s. In this respect alone, the director has done a service to Williams and to all who take a serious interest in his work.

¶2 With the help of Associate Artistic Director/Dramaturg Chris Baker, Wilson located several unknown and little-known scripts for production in *8 By Tenn*. Their premieres marked an auspicious beginning to a season that will also feature those of four other, unpublished or posthumously published short plays by Williams, to be directed by Michael Kahn as part of his own *Five By Tenn* at the Kennedy Center in April 2004.[2] Among three one-acts by Williams that received world premieres in *8 By Tenn*, one was *The Palooka*, a brief, early sketch about two boxers, young and old, which David Roessel and I brought to Baker and Wilson's attention. The second, written at the latter end of Williams's career, was *The One Exception*. Edited for the first time by Robert Bray in the *Tennessee Williams Annual Review* 3 (2000), this elegiac play hauntingly depicts a mentally ill, housebound woman, her devoted caretaker, and a callous, fair-weather friend. The third performance, billed as a premiere in Hartford, was that of *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws*, an antirealistic "lyric play" that was published by New Directions in 1981 but, according to Baker and Wilson, has only now received its first "professional" production.

¶3 The two programs in *8 By Tenn* were contrived so as to mirror each other along historical and dramaturgical lines. Each began with a script that Williams wrote early in his career, then traced successive stages in his development as a playwright, and concluded with a late, longer play—though this biographical chronology was slightly disrupted by Wilson's ordering of *The One Exception* (1983) to precede *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws* (1981), and of *The Chalky White Substance* (1980) to precede *The Gnädiges Fraulein* (1966). Each program, similarly, followed a comparable dramatic and affective trajectory. First on each bill was the curtain-

raiser, anchored in a comparatively slight, sentimental or seriocomic character sketch (*The Palooka* and *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*). Next came two grimmer plays, whose occasional humor was overshadowed by tragic perspectives on repression, disability, and betrayal (*Portrait of a Madonna*, *The One Exception*, *Something Unspoken*, and *The Chalky White Substance*). Concluding each program was a play that, while in some respects direly gothic, at the same time suggested impudent self-parody. Either *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws* or *The Gnädiges Fraulein* might have yielded further matter for tragedy; in Wilson's mostly upbeat versions, however, both plays became more vaudevillesque than pathetic, leaving audiences with something to wonder at (or puzzle over) on the way home.

¶4 To meet this production's heterogeneous requirements, Wilson assembled an excellent cast, equal to the strenuous demands imposed by quick changes of role, costume and makeup. Of the parts the actors played, one might readily conclude what is sometimes observed of Williams's work, fairly or not: that the women's roles afforded more room for creativity and development than the men's. The two plays dominated by male actors, *The Palooka* and *The Chalky White Substance*, proved least profound in terms of their tonal range and subtlety of characterization. Nonetheless, Remo Airaldi, Curtis Billings, Helmar Augustus Cooper, and Kevin Geer held their own against what were impressive, in some cases riveting performances from Elizabeth Ashley, Denny Dillon, Annalee Jefferies, Jennifer Harmon, and Amanda Plummer. David C. Woolard created sturdily period-appropriate costumes that, without at any moment detracting from *8 By Tenn*, became most memorable in the plays that closed both programs; these fantastically liberated his palette. The same could be remarked of Jeff Cowie's mostly spare and unenclosed mobile sets, John Ambrosone's lighting designs, and Fitz Patton's music and sound designs. All of these elements worked in concerted fashion; unobtrusively efficient during the first half of each program, they remained understated and subordinate to naturalistic constraints until, from the approach of intermission through the finale, they began ambushing the audience with sudden, stark expressiveness, disorienting variety, or even reflexive metatheatricality. Thus *The One Exception* ended with the sight of the invalid Kyra (Amanda Plummer) alone and terrified, in the dark, under a spotlight. *The Chalky White Substance* conjured a nuclear winter with white, ashlike flakes falling continually out of a seemingly unbounded and murky heaven. *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws* staged 1970s decadence with a profusion of red velvet and a collapsed chandelier, coloring its raucous musical interludes with psychedelic disco lights. Finally, *The Gnädiges Fraulein* evoked its setting on "Cocaloony Key" with a convincingly ramshackle veranda, screen doors, rocking chairs, and downstage sand-pit surrounded by a crazy picket fence; in the sand were stuck pink plastic flamingoes, effectively emblematizing the artificiality of this "slapstick tragedy," as of all drama.

¶5 The main intent of this deliberate, highly coordinated contouring in each program—from the mundane and literal to the surreal, expressive and ironic—was not just to bring formal unity to an evening of dramatically disparate work. More pragmatically, it was to revive lagging spectators' attention at midpoint and to ensure their return after the break. It was also necessary to maximize the proportion of sheer sensual distraction in the fourth and final play, which, as the least naturalistic, might otherwise evoke an ultimate sense of disappointment or frustration in some audiences. Moreover, Wilson made significant textual cuts to mitigate this alienating effect in both concluding plays (even while his direction acknowledged, through reliance on standard Brechtianisms, that this effect was part of Williams's original intention). Like the many other aspects in which *8 By Tenn* was polished to a high technical gloss, such strategic calculations made the performances as accessible and palatable

to the uninitiated as they needed to be. As a result, however, their rationale is self-evident, and I shall have little else to say about them. This is partly because Wilson made another choice about how to present the plays in *8 By Tenn*, besides those already mentioned, which I think was a rather more interesting and problematic one, and which I shall discuss at length below.

¶6 In the remainder of this essay I shall proceed as a literary critic more than as a reviewer, concerning myself more with *8 By Tenn* as a whole than with the particulars of each play's execution. To catalog the ingredients that made Wilson's premise a public success would be to account merely for the pragmatic virtues of professionalism, showmanship, and I dare say, novelty in a production that—beyond these comparatively superficial attractions—also suggested more provocative questions about Williams's artistic motives and mission. These deeper questions, I think, have crucially to do with the playwright's relationship to the politics of his times, and of our own.

The Shoe Company Scenes: Escapism and/or Socialism in the Great Depression

Thematically and interpretively, the performances at Hartford were no more unified than one might expect such miscellaneous programs to be. Indeed, they were somewhat less so, per-haps because each was made to embrace such a broad chronological sweep in Williams's career. The very vagueness of the "Rose" and "Blue" subtitles suggests a hint of inevitable arbitrariness in the selection of texts and subjects.[3]

¶8 However, there was also another way—possibly innocuous, yet arguably rather tendentious and interesting —in which Wilson tried to impart unity to *8 By Tenn*. Not content to relate the plays in each program to the writer's life through chronology, and to the aforementioned progression of styles from the realistic to the absurd, Wilson ventured to interpolate some original, lightly dramatized material from Williams's autobiography.

¶9 Each program opened with a similar framing conceit, a scene set in a shoe warehouse of the 1930s. To any spectator who was familiar with the playwright's life and work, or who had read the relevant information in the printed program, this opening setting corresponded recognizably to Williams's recollections of the Depression, when he spent almost three years working at the International Shoe Company in Saint Louis. On the other hand, anyone who was unfamiliar with this story (and had not read about it in the program notes) was sure to be bewildered by the opening scenes. My comments, therefore, should be taken not as a description of the typical spectator's experience, but as a meditation on Wilson's choice and on its implications for *8 By Tenn* as a whole.

¶10 In both the "Red" and "Blue" variants of the Shoe Company scene, silent, dronelike workers briskly ferried inventory to and fro; offstage machines clattered loudly, while the young employee "Tom" Williams entered in a state of frustrated boredom. In the midst of some exasperatingly mundane task, he came upon a forlorn pair of boxer's boots, or of a woman's yellow open-toed heels. Feeling his imagination seized by a force from beyond the factory, he gripped his pencil and began to write—presumably, a draft of the play that was about to start, after the lights had dimmed out and returned. Throughout the rest of each program, however, tall rows of shelving stacked with soul-stifling shoeboxes were left to loom in the background, upstage.

¶11 An uncharitable reviewer might dismiss these initial scenes as irrelevant to the one-acts that followed, and as meant to cater to a general audience's sentimental, ultimately trivial fascination with the playwright's personal history. However, I hesitate to think that Wilson's primary reason for adding the framing device to each

program was as cynical as this. Instead, it seems to me that Wilson may have been proposing an uncommonly provocative reading of the motivations behind Williams's work.

¶12 Williams, in truth as in Wilson's presentation of it, was a writer profoundly influenced by American realities during the Great Depression. His early dramas evinced a sense of solidarity with the working masses, those whom unfettered capitalism—on a view then shared by many Americans—had left behind. If I have divined the intent of Wilson's framing scenes correctly, then the director was not merely trying to illustrate Williams's character as a dreamer, one who "discovered writing as an escape from a world of reality" that offended him (*Where I Live* 106). More than this, Wilson was reaching toward a historical insight into the biographical, social and political contexts that helped to shape and direct Williams's lifelong artistic preoccupations. The playwright's recurrent themes of isolation and escape, Wilson seemed to be saying, represent not just his personal, psychological and spiritual predicaments, but also what a Marxist would call the consciousness of alienated labor in a bourgeois-capitalist state.

¶13 One might easily raise quibbles here, if one took Wilson—or myself—to be implying that the subjects of all eight plays in *8 by Tenn* can be linked directly or indirectly with Williams's own early reactions to workplace alienation. From a scholarly standpoint, surely this would appear to be overstating the case. The time of Williams's employment in the Shoe Company ended in the spring of 1935, when he was still twenty-four years old. Yet, by his thirtieth birthday in 1940, he had written only three of the plays here performed; the remaining five plays are later, postwar creations (four of them much later). Despite such cavils, I think that the political reading implied in Wilson's emphasis on the Shoe Company story is a potentially rewarding, if a debatable one.

¶14 When the young Williams was taken out of college by his father and sent to work, the resulting close encounter with industrial realities left a permanently negative impression on him. Though it was not the last day-job in his life, it was the one that he held longest and against which he chafed the most. He later wrote two plays, *Stairs to the Roof* and *The Glass Menagerie*, in which the Shoe Company, or a place essentially like it, represents nearly everything offensive to human creativity and dignity. Decades later, he would write in his *Memoirs*, "I learned a lot there about the comradeship between co-workers at minimal salary . . . My first year there I came of age and . . . I cast my first and last political vote. It was for Norman Thomas: I had already turned Socialist" (36-7).

¶15 Scholars of Williams often note his penchant for making such anti-capitalistic asides, during the Depression and after. By the same token, though, many would argue that his post-war, Cold-War success actually depended on his tendency to eschew radical commitments of a more formal and public kind: a choice that paralleled his self-proclaimed neglect of the voting booth. Having in the 1930s written a handful of explicit protest plays, notably *Candles to the Sun* and *Not About Nightingales*, he turned in the 1940s to the dramas of domestic and psychosexual conflict that would make him famous. In place of a politics strictly attentive to class interests, or to particular institutional and legislative factors in the oppression of the people, the mature Williams evinced a more socially diffuse awareness of gendered power (Adler 656). Meanwhile, he employed the strategies of oblique symbolism afforded by "modernist poetics" to veil his penchant for "biting social critique" (Devlin 107), if not to submerge his political sensibilities entirely.

¶16 Wilson, I suspect, would like to reposition Williams today in ways that allow his recurrently professed, socialistic or at least anti-capitalistic sympathies to resurface. The ongoing "Williams Marathon" at Hartford Stage has included performances or readings of plays such as *Stairs to the Roof*, *Camino Real*, and *The*

Demolition Downtown, in which Williams came nearest to articulating a view of revolution as something admirable or impending. Elsewhere, Wilson has directed Williams's apocalyptic and anti-imperialist work of protest, *Red Devil Battery Sign*. As I shall argue further, most of the texts in *8 by Tenn* are somehow concerned with the bourgeois ideology of property and its effects, or what Althusser called its "interpellations," in social and personal life.

¶17 Admittedly, it cannot be said that Wilson and his actors consistently sought to find a political meaning in the performances that comprised *8 By Tenn*. Nor, in fact, could any exclusively political interpretation be wholly adequate to Williams's artistic achievement (any more than an exclusively personal, apolitical interpretation could be). But if Williams was a political writer and thinker in ways that have rarely been acknowledged, he was also the other things that he has often been called: an individualist, a painter of psychology and emotion, and an allegorist responsive to spiritual yearnings. The difficulty, if not the impossibility, of putting the politics on stage while also doing justice to these other tendencies ought to be apparent. To direct is to make choices, often hard choices. The question that I shall address is whether, to the extent that Williams's texts do suggest a vein of Marxian social commentary, Wilson made good on the promise to articulate this commentary that seemed implicit in the Shoe Company scenes. Another question, possibly worth considering, is that of whether future productions of Williams might find ways to do this political work more pointedly.

The Politics of Williams's One-Acts: Materialist Critiques without Marxist Solutions

Two of the one-acts in *8 By Tenn*—notably, the only two that Wilson selected in spite of their earlier inclusion in Kahn's *Ten by Tennessee*—have premises that invite materialist analysis on the most obvious level, for they depict strained relations between tenants and landlords. One of these, *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*, begins with a blatantly economic conflict. The landlord, Mrs. Wire (Dillon), uses the material advantage of her position to assert both power and moral superiority over Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore (Ashley), who has desperately tried to salvage a sense of her own dignity by fantasizing a family coat-of-arms and a title to a "Brazilian rubber plantation."

¶19 With her fabrications, the "Lady" tenant presents a sad mockery of the typically bourgeois pretension to aristocratic origins. Yet it is the anti-romantic, brass-tacks materialism of Mrs. Wire, who discriminates between her tenants solely as they are able or unable to pay the rent, that is critiqued by the Writer (played by Geer) in his climactic speech as nothing but a "hideous fabrication of lies." The lies of the escapist and the artist, "stuffed in the mouth by the hard-knuckled hand of need, the cold iron fist of necessity," are venial lies, white lies, scarcely lies at all. Compare them with the terrible mendacity of a class society, based on private property and money, themselves nothing but legal fictions and thus poor substitutes for the wealth of a rich imagination. While the Writer defends such kinder forms of invention according to the principles of poets such as John Keats and Oscar Wilde, he speaks not only as a Romantic bohemian, true to type, but also in a voice of social outrage heard often during the Depression (even if he ends the play by introducing himself, not as Lenin or as Trotsky, but as Chekhov, whose poetic analyses of the bourgeoisie Williams so greatly admired).

¶20 *Portrait of a Madonna* projects different interrelationships between class, money, and identity. Here, Miss Collins (Jefferies), the delusive spinster, hails from the Southern gentry rather than the exploited classes. And, apparently for this very reason, she is regarded not with derision but with sympathy by her landlord, Mr. Abrams (Airaldi); even as he calls the state asylum to haul her off, he expresses admiration for her as a "perfect

lady." Still, the fact is mentioned that ever since Miss Collins's "pension checks" ran out, she has been maintained not through Abrams's generosity, but through that of her church, which has been paying her rent. Her sexual repression, her overprotected upbringing, and (ironically in these circumstances) the failure of religion to compensate for the pleasures it has denied her, are ostensibly greater factors in Miss Collins's tragic end than money. Yet, dramaturgically, it would seem to be a not entirely coincidental fact that, once she has run out of money—even unwittingly—the dissolution of her sanity is not far behind.

¶21 If *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion* adumbrates a quasi-Marxist critique of property coupled to a Shelleyan or, perhaps, a merely decadent and aesthetic alternative measure of value, then *Portrait of a Madonna* approaches the blunter demystifications of bourgeois nostalgia and virtue that Robert Bray has begun to describe in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. There, the reified slave-labor with which Blanche identifies in Belle Reve will be harshly "reduced" to a material reality she can't and won't accept (189). Whereas Blanche's romantic idealizations are met with the degradation of physical rape, the self-denying Christian idealism of Miss Collins discloses its own contradictions through her paranoid rape fantasies. On a related note, in *Portrait of a Madonna*, the Porter (Cooper) casually but caustically observes that today, "important people in Europe" are madder than Miss Collins—"maniacs," who "kill millions of people an' go scot free." The line reminds us that the decade is the 1940s, and that the downfall of Miss Collins, with her unsustainable transcendent consolations, forms a contrast to the near-triumph of another, (collective and more terrifying) expression of bourgeois ideology and persecution mania.[4]

¶22 But it is perhaps time to address a question that I raised indirectly in the previous section, and have suppressed so far in this one. Supposing that anti-capitalist nuances can indeed be elicited from these scripts, are these political meanings performable? Only, I expect, before an audience that is already sufficiently prepared to understand modern individual identities and destinies as the products of material and class relations. In Hartford, some of the touches supplied by Wilson and the actors rewarded politically focused attention. Yet, they did not to any appreciable extent *require* audiences to respond to the one-acts in a politically conscious fashion.

¶23 In *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*, Dillon's convincing realization of her mercenary character as one who draws moral self-righteousness from her kinship to the chief of police, and on that basis threatens prostitutes with eviction from her apartments (but only after they prove insolvent), indicted the selective enforcement of law and morals by the landlord class: a phenomenon that is hardly unique to New Orleans in the 1930s, but pervades societies based on property. In *Portrait of a Madonna*, Jefferies met the incursion of Cooper and the Elevator Boy (Billings) into her home by distractedly shoving piled-up magazines from the armchair to the floor, in a poignant bid to seem hospitable. The scene efficiently conjured up the American bourgeois dreams of leisure, consumption, and comfortable domesticity, which Miss Collins cannot attain in her lonely apartment, but which her long-lost love and his wife, her old rival, have fulfilled; we learn later that they live in a house and own a car. Later, Jefferies's compellingly rapt absorption in the Romantic piece that played on the phonograph—the soundtrack to her climactic monologue—epitomized both the escapist sublimations of bourgeois subjectivity, and the futility of its attempts to disown the brute physical conditions of its own existence.

¶24 One play that did, in performance, overtly convey a critique of bourgeois culture was *The One Exception*. In this poignant, bitter piece, what at first looks like an old friendship (going back to bohemian youth) between the

struggling artist Viola and the wealthy, but now unstable Kyra (Plummer), is exposed as having always been rooted in the insecure Kyra's financial exploitation by Viola. Jefferies was perfect as Viola; she balanced the undisguised cynicism of a longtime art-scene-survivor with a poised, urbanite chattiness, of the kind affected by the denizens of that scene toward its potential supporters. Her hardness fell just short of eradicating any possible sympathy for her character, just as Plummer's stunning performance of the psychic invalid Kyra did not reduce hers to the two-dimensionality of pure victimhood. Instead, Plummer portrayed her symptoms as those of an inherently weak person who has contended all her life with the pressures and intimidating freedoms created by wealth, and has finally lost. Money is vilified in *The One Exception* as the major corrupting influence, conscious or unconscious, in relationships that pretend a basis in love and trust.

¶25 Written at the end of Williams's life, *The One Exception* reflects the writer's own, decades-long struggle with the importunities of aspiring protegés, and the debilitating paranoia with which his own riches consequently afflicted him. While the play is critical of money and the lies it breeds, one must note that it also fails to support Williams's occasional remarks in favor of socialism as a remedy for human ills. In any economy people may lack confidence, feel like failures, come across as overly needy to their peers, or fall victim to mental debility. So *The One Exception*, while it maps the deformations of love and friendship that often occur along class lines in American society, cannot propose any method for preventing those deformations as such.

¶26 A similar sociopolitical pessimism characterizes all of Williams's writing, however class-conscious, during the mid-1930s. In the early play, *The Palooka*, the "worn-out" prizefighter Galveston Joe (played to the full by Geer) realizes his own advice to "do or die" when he willingly allows the Trainer (Airaldi) to feed his old body to newer competition: "Like feeding Christians to the lions." Prior to that fateful moment, we learn that the younger "Kid" who now faces his first fight (Billings) has come to boxing from a previous job as a paper-boy, presumably in flight from destitution. The two men's conversation revolves around the money, or "mazooma," but equally around the "women," "glamour," and general celebrity that attend success in the ring. Both boxers are evidently working-class, and on a Marxist view have interests opposed to the Trainer's; he, knowing the Palooka's sure fate, only laughs. Nevertheless, the Palooka not only fails to question the economic system to which he has submitted, but eggs the boy on to submit to it as well. With yarns of the champion's glory he urges him to use his youth while he can, and grab such pleasures as the profession can offer him—even by devoting himself to the appetites of a bloodthirsty audience, one which Williams equates with pagan audiences at spectacles of martyrdom. In Hartford, as Geer went off to the slaughter, Billings's expression precisely captured the Kid's apprehensions toward his historical destiny. One felt it was possible, but not likely, that he might still change it.

¶27 Another one-act in which class conflicts are superimposed, in a rather counter-revolutionary fashion, on the teleology of Christian submission to Roman ruthlessness is *Something Unspoken*. The play concerns a "wealthy southern spinster" and her "secretary" of fifteen years. Significantly named Cornelia and Grace, the two women manifest, respectively, a haughty, competitive spirit, and the spirit of patient sacrifice that claims the veneration of the proud—in essence, Nietzsche's slave mentality. At first Cornelia (Harmon) displays "Roman grandeur"; if she condescends, it is to affect an aristocratic liberality, phrasing her commands to Grace (Jefferies) as requests. Grace submits, though observing critically that "the requests of an employer are hard to distinguish from orders." But when Cornelia weakens, first losing her leadership of the local Confederate Daughters, and

then begging Grace to acknowledge her love and dependence on her, Grace compares her to "the Emperor Tiberius," reminding her of what divides them: "you have your— *fortune!*"

¶28 At Hartford, Jefferies was an expertly ambiguous Grace. Living in the shadow of Cornelia's entitled narcissism, she seemed, accordingly, all but inscrutable to her, as the exploited usually are to their exploiters. Harmon, for her part, gave one of *8 by Tenn*'s outstandingly persuasive performances, as a Cornelia whose intimidating carriage could not conceal her inward desolation. To the enigmatic smile that Williams scripted for Grace at the play's end, Jefferies pointedly added another, at an earlier point of tension, when Harmon confessed her eternal need for her. Both smiles seemed to insinuate Grace's contentedness with a situation that keeps her at least erotically and morally in command, if also economically subordinate.

¶29 Such insights into the tangled psyche of Christian capitalist culture tend to make revolution look like an extremely unlikely proposition throughout Williams's writings. They do so in part as a result of Williams's Nietzschean recognition that the humble can find real satisfaction in moral superiority, even in the envious pleasure of seeing their masters defeat one another. In *Something Unspoken*, Williams's evocation of lesbian archetypes to let Cornelia play a "man's role," whereas Grace plays the "woman's part," further exemplifies the intertwining of class relations with gender hierarchies, even while deftly defeating easy equations between the oppressor's function and categories like "male" or "straight." In all these ways, *Something Unspoken* highlighted the extent to which Williams does not, after all, see happiness as a matter of material sufficiency, or misery simply as the result of economic dispossession.

¶30 To Williams, human beings are not really born free; throughout their lives they are chained, not only by the contingent historical and economic order of things, but also by an essentially imperfect nature. Their imperfection, whether construed in Christian or in Darwinian/Nietzschean terms, makes people of all classes as selfish and vulnerable to each other's violence as Blanche's "apes." Even the most highly civilized people are locked in a competition as fierce as that of boxers; people who enjoy the most cultivated, intellectual, and spiritual pleasures thereby deprive themselves of the cruder ones, rendering them incomplete and unhappy.

¶31 There are Marxian qualities in this picture of social stratification, but they don't include that of proletarian revolutionary conviction, which is what makes the true Marxist want to get out of bed in the morning. When Williams wants to intimate what is precious, valuable, and even sometimes achievable in life, within the bounds imposed by "the reality of humanity's animal nature in a biological universe" (Holditch 161), he does so by exalting individual acts of charity, and what he sees as analogous, the pleasures of coupling—*agape* and/or *eros* —rather than by envisioning social change and justice.

¶32 The later plays at Hartford were focused, almost exclusively, on human limits in a universe irredeemably tainted by competitive selfishness and cruelty. Hence, from a Marxian perspective, they were also the bleakest. Wilson found ways of making such spectacles watchable, in most cases managing to do so without blunting all of the pieces' sharper edges. I have already discussed *The One Exception*, in which friendship succumbs to cupidity—or, from Viola's perspective, to the material necessities of survival. Plummer's mute, emotive suggestions of Kyra's incompetence in her own body seemed to insinuate the extent to which mental illness may also be a physical handicap, the result of heredity as much as of historical experience. Plummer's decision to close the door on the world at the play's end, though defiant in its way, implied a final and despairing recognition of Kyra's own natural unfitness to compete with the likes of Viola. In *The Gnädiges Fraulein*, Williams similarly equates competition between human beings with the Darwinian, genetically determined

struggle among individuals (here for the privilege of mating with Indian Joe, played by Kevin Geer) and even with animal species such as the giant Cocaloony bird (Airaldi). Wilson's concept for this superficially unrealistic play was circuslike. Highlighting the text's surreality, and making the most of Plummer's honed skills at mime and movement in her role as Polly, the performance splendidly realized the potential indicated by the subtitle of Allean Hale's recent essay, "*The Gnädiges Fraulein*: Tennessee Williams's Clown Show" (in Kolin).

¶33 All the clowning in Wilson's version of *The Gnädiges Fraulein* made this horrid play positively fun, or at least more so than other productions analyzed recently by Hale and by Una Chaudhuri (in Kolin). Yet, no matter how comical the banter between Plummer's character and that of Molly (Ashley), Wilson never quite allowed audiences to make light of the depredations of Airaldi's Cocaloony, with its air of banal, half-intelligent menace. Nor could they possibly ignore the pain of its opponent, the Gnädiges Fraulein herself (Dillon), who is shown horribly mutilated. One of the play's subtexts, that of cutthroat competition in the world of the arts—signalled clearly in the Fraulein's history as part of a Viennese variety act—may have been acknowledged cleverly in the Pollock-splattered costume that Woolard designed for Airaldi. But such metatheatrical reflections took second place to the play's comprehensive allegory of human folly, suffering, and endurance. This universal message was completely realized through Wilson's crisp, finely timed direction and Dillon's ritualistically precise and anguished performance.

¶34 The allegory of life is, of course, a premise to which Williams returned in his writing again and again, from the earliest drafts of *Camino Real* (1946) through *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (1962) and later antirealistic works. Some are informed by the quixotic optimism of *Camino Real*. Others enunciate *The Gnädiges Fraulein*'s vision of perseverance in a hostile world, one that seems nearer to that of absurdism than to revolutionary idealism. Most of Williams's allegorical plays, however, tend to invoke the shared symbolic vocabularies of Christianity and of nineteenth-century romanticism (see Tischler), as well as drawing on such ubiquitous modern influences as Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud. In order to interpret the political content of any of Williams's allegories fully in relation to socialist ideas, a critic would need to tackle the intellectually and historically complicated problem of Marxism's compatibility with these various traditions.

¶35 To a theatrical practitioner such as Wilson, the question of political theory in Williams's allegorical drama might present a different challenge: that of discriminating between alternative themes and selecting carefully for the ones that seem most coherent and urgently compelling. In his version of *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws*, Wilson made deliberate choices of this kind, with results that to my mind were mixed, providing neither a clearly articulate political commentary nor a terribly striking impression of the structural and thematic unities Williams tried to give to this play. Despite the many virtues to be noted in the actors, who gave a colorful, marvelously fluid performance, I was left uncertain of the production's guiding intentions and its overall designs on the audience—which was, I suspect, generally even more confused on these points than I.

¶36 Near the end of *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws*, a waitress in a fashionable Manhattan lunch-room quits her job. The subway commute has become too dangerous, she explains, while cabs are too expensive. In conversation, Wilson made it plain that he regards this as a political allusion to the plight of the urban laboring classes. In tune with this insight, he adopted an approach to this play that dipped the hat ostentatiously to Brecht and Weill. Expanding the work's musical dimension, which qualified it in Williams's mind as a "lyric play," Wilson choreographed the whole as a surrealist cabaret that depended (like *The Gnädiges Fraulein*) upon the

perfect comic timing of its cast. Scenes were repeatedly stolen by Dillon, as the pregnant, bustling waitress subject to bouts of caricatured despair. The major focus of attention fell on Jefferies and Harmon as Madge and Bea, the duo of ladies who shop and lunch (kin to Dolly and Beulah in *Battle of Angels/Orpheus Descending*, and to Bessie and Flora in *A Perfect Analysis Given By A Parrot*). In their rapid, vapid patter—preoccupied by turns with vacation hotels, the possibility that Bea's husband is unfaithful, and a night course that Madge is taking (ironically on the subject of "New Problems Confronting Urban Society in our Time")—Jefferies and Harmon personified the triviality and desperate social disengagement of the bourgeoisie, society's consumers. The velocity of their comic dialogue, though, and the frequency with which it was interrupted by Dillon's stage business and by the razzle-dazzle of song and dance, got in the way of any lessons that they were meant to teach.

¶37 Billings and Airaldi were the opposite couple, the romantically united pair of motorcycle-riding male prostitutes who share the stage with Madge and Bea, yet do not interact with them. Williams presents these two Young Men as politically and morally sympathetic alternatives to the ladies, closer to authentic reality; their way of being, less glamorously romantic than that of a Val Xavier or a Chance Wayne, is more evocative of fast-living New York in the high times of the 1970s. As members of one of the most exploited, unprotected, and shamefully unacknowledged classes of workers, they defend themselves from the aspersions and indignities of their trade through a kind of Beat-inflected irony, talking in jazzy rhymes, but also open up at moments to meditate on the fragility of their living, their life, and their love. Wilson, however, all but sidelined their story, upstaging their dialogue by highlighting the lewd attentions of Madge, Bea, and the restaurant's flamboyantly queenly Manager (Cooper). Wilson also cut key lines that—in Williams's script—associate the two men with Christ's sacrifice, thus fleshing out the meaning of the motto inscribed on their jackets: "The Mystic Rose" (evoking the Virgin Mary and Rose Williams, Blake and Genet, Rosicrucianism and *The Rose Tattoo*). In fact, the text of the play is marked by a leitmotif of Christianity, or more properly of post-Christian nostalgia for Christianity (the time is immediately after Christmas, the waitress is still expecting, and the characters seem obsessed with the theme of belatedness), which Wilson's direction did nothing to address. It may be the case that, in *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws*, such religious symbolism is ultimately superfluous to the dramatic action. If so, then it must pose directors with the problem of "overbearing allegorical significance" that is often remarked in other texts like *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (Saddik 115). But I can't help thinking that the Young Men's plot and the Christ theme should be seen as contributing to, rather than distracting from, the play's message of social criticism, and I can't help wishing that Wilson had thought so too—if only for the sake of experiment in what was at any rate a risky choice of texts. At the conclusion of the play, where Williams indulges his apocalyptic tendencies with a deadly motorcycle crash, followed by an unexplained sound that pierces the sky, Wilson added a further noise of catastrophic collision overhead. This implied the play's relevance to the events of 9/11, yet like the rest of the production, that relevance seemed only vaguely political.

¶38 Neglected by producers and by most scholars until now, *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws* is in some ways an archetypal document of its time. So is *The Chalky White Substance*, "Williams's most radical apocalyptic play" (Dorff 118), which is set in a desiccated world "a hundred years or so after a thermonuclear war, or series of them, have had their predictable effect." Once again, "the competitive struggle for survival" (Cohn 232) undermines Williams's dual ideals of love and charity, here ironically signified by the Christian names of the protagonists, Mark (Cooper) and Luke (Billings), as well as by allusions to the Madonna and God in the script.

The cataclysm having been precipitated, presumably, by the unchecked advance of the military-industrial complex, it has in turn brought out people's most bestial instincts; in effect, the bomb has recreated pre-modern conditions of scarcity, in a society that has forgotten the pre-modern theology of grace. Greed and paranoia poison the love between the characters, while humanity succumbs to a deadly fallout. Meanwhile, it is to be inferred that the rulers of this Orwellian world are being protected from threats to their privilege by the disunity among their subjects, the ordinary survivors whom we see prosecuting a war of all against all.

¶39 An eminent critic has claimed that *The Chalky White Substance* was "harrowing" and transfixing when she saw it, years ago, in an (uncredited) small-theater production (Cohn 232). At Hartford, I was unable to feel this way about the play, for reasons that I am inclined to attribute, not to any inferiority in Wilson's production, but to the text itself and possibly to a decline in the currency of its political message. The dialogue between the younger Luke and the elder Mark, his "protector" who betrays him to the authorities, lacks the devious psychological brilliance and verbal luxury that one associates with Williams. Thus I believe that my disappointment had more to do with the script than with the performances of Cooper and Billings, which were wholly competent. I can only suppose that it was the play's politics that Wilson appreciated and wished to bring to the stage. The constant flurry of particles sinking through the air recalled, like the crash at the end of *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws*, the events of 9/11 and their aftermath. The nightmare-vision of a police state, ruled through informants, illustrated the predictable consequences of recent legislation. The particulars of Williams's scenario, however, tend to distract us from these contemporary resonances, mostly by presenting the nightmare as the result of a superpower confrontation. In 2003, this detail has the effect (for those of us old enough to remember) of displacing the action to The Day After: a day that never came, in the way we feared and imagined it would, and that now seems far less likely to do so. Next to the acts of violent individuals and domestic law-enforcement agencies today, the notion of an international nuclear holocaust feels to most of us like a discredited bogeyman from childhood, and I am afraid that this sense of irrelevance might have concealed the real, immediate applicability of the lessons in *The Chalky White Substance* from those who most need to be confronted with them. While I don't think that I missed Wilson's political point, I can't say either that it seemed too likely to get across to anyone in the Hartford audience who was not already in agreement.

Conclusion: The Political in Williams's Personal?

Throughout his life Williams wrote plays that were critical of capitalist society, but that were rarely so clear-cut in their political lessons as *The Chalky White Substance*, even if they often prefigured its pessimistic view of human destiny. It could be claimed that Williams the Broadway playwright felt compelled to deradicalize or even depoliticize his work, especially during the 1950s, and that this pressure may indeed have originated in the demands of production rather than with the writer himself. Yet in plays like *The Palooka*, *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*, and *Portrait of a Madonna*, all conceived before his rise to commercial success, Williams already showed his tendency to subordinate socioeconomic analysis to the pathos of all human loss—emotional and erotic, as well as material—and to concentrate on the protagonists' tragicomic attempts to compensate for that loss through fantasy. In the 1960s and 1970s, once his New York reviews had turned sour and stayed that way due to his "persisting lack of commitment to realism" (Saddik 111), Williams's political allegories did not become more optimistic. Nor did they, as a general rule, adopt methods of critiquing the existing order that were any more transparent than those of *The Glass Menagerie* or *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

¶41 Nonetheless, the older Williams regarded himself not only as a "personal" playwright, whose chief subject was his inward emotional life (*Memoirs* 188), but also as "an intensely patriotic American," concerned with the condition of his society and with that of the human community (Devlin 90). Perhaps because so many critics have underestimated this political strain in his art, mainstream directors rarely seek to impart current relevance to what Barton Palmer calls Williams's "antiestablishmentarianism" (38). Today, however, public themes loom rather larger in the American psyche than they did during the preceding twenty-five years or so. Thus it seems appropriate to ask anew whether our most renowned postwar playwright was not only a writer of psychological and domestic plays, but also, and to a comparable degree, of political drama. Astonishingly, our domestic political alignments are once again determined by virulent cultural polemics evoking the same disagreements about morality, identity, and the definition of American patriotism that inflamed the United States half a century ago, though these are now manifested in subtly altered ways. If Williams is to endure, then perhaps we should reconsider whether the personal in his plays can, or indeed, must be reappropriated for the political.

¶42 In *8 By Tenn*, Wilson—it seems to me—has invited us to begin this task of reappropriation. This is not to say that the production itself evoked responses that were thoroughly, or even consistently, political, or even that the most political plays on the program were very encouraging ones. One might call Williams's late plays politically effective as magnets for outrage that the world should really be so bad, and thus as possible vehicles for a utopian faith that political action—however futile it can sometimes seem—is therefore all the more ethically imperative in our society. Let us hope that Wilson's productions may have contributed to the growth of these sentiments in some viewers. On reflection I find that they have done so, to some degree, in myself. The thing that art can make happen is not nothing, after all. It is something—even if that thing in itself is as desperately inadequate as the victory of the violets in breaking the rocks.

Notes

[1] Full disclosure: when I viewed these programs on Oct. 19, 2003, Hartford Stage had sponsored my trip to Connecticut in consideration of my participation in a public discussion panel (for which I was also paid a small honorarium). It is my hope that the hospitality I was shown in Hartford that weekend has not made me a less objective reviewer than I would otherwise be. Yet I should acknowledge that the conversations I enjoyed there with Michael Wilson and Chris Baker, and with actors including Denny Dillon and Annalee Jefferies, provided me with much of whatever insight I may have gained into these productions.

[2] It should be noted here that the title of Wilson's *8 By Tenn* paid homage to The Acting Company's successful *Ten By Tennessee*, which Kahn conceived and directed in 1986, and which gave rise at that time to a touring version entitled *Five By Tenn*. However, only two of the one-acts produced by Wilson, *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion* and *Portrait of a Madonna*, were among those formerly included on Kahn's longer program. Kahn's upcoming *Five By Tenn* will be an all-new production.

[3] Still, a few thematic continuities were observable in each group of four plays. The "Rose Program" was named for Williams's lobotomized sister Rose, who animates the characters of Miss Lucretia Collins in *Portrait of a Madonna* and Kyra in *The One Exception*, and who fleetingly reappears in the "Mystic Rose" emblem worn by the two gay bikers in *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws*. The "Blue Program" would seem to have been named more impressionistically. Its title could be taken to refer to the blues that oppress downcast characters like Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore, a.k.a. the Lady of Larkspur Lotion. Or it may allude to the prominence of once scandalous sexual subjects, such as the Lady's prostitution; the loving, although unexpressed lesbian bond between Miss Grace Lancaster and Miss Cornelia Scott in *Something Unspoken*; the relationship between the older Mark and the younger Luke in *The Chalky White Substance*; and the casual, not to say bestial mating of Polly with Indian Joe in *The Gnädiges Fraulein*.

[4] Bray equates the DuBois family with faded aristocracy (cf. Saddik 68-9). It seems to me that one might usefully qualify this account, arguing that the phantom of Belle Reve instead figures the nostalgic, pseudo-aristocratic pretensions of America's bourgeois ruling class (that which desires the pedigreed authenticity that faded aristocrats possess, the only kind of title its wealth cannot

purchase). Similarly, one might call Stanley, with his legalisms, less a representative of the proletariat than an aspiring bourgeois "king," or in other words a nascent fascist. This might explain why his violence ends not in revolution but in a rape.

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