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Tennessee Williams Scholars Conference Panel:
Williams and the Grotesque

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Panelists: *Philip C. Kolin*, *Brian Parker*, *Jacqueline O'Connor*

***Editor's Note**: The following panel was transcribed directly from tapes made at the 2005 Tennessee Williams Scholars Conference.*

Dr. Annette Saddik: I thought that we would begin by having each of the panelists briefly discuss what they want to cover today. I'll then ask some questions, and towards the end of the session we'll take questions from the audience. So, Dr. Kolin, we can start with you.

¶2 **Dr. Philip Kolin:** Thank you, Annette. I think it's more than fortuitous that we're gathered here on April 1st to talk about the grotesque, and I think there a couple of beginning issues that we might want to address. The first one might be definitional. "Grotesque" is an omnibus term. I jotted down some synonyms that might qualify for descriptors of the grotesque: parody, farce, the fantastic, burlesque, satire, the monstrous, the alienated, savage, deformed, and black comedy. So it's a word that has a multiplicity of implications, and I think the panel may want to address some of those in terms of a theoretical or heuristic application. The second thing I would like to look at—and this has fascinated me for a long time—is the grotesque body in Williams. Here we find that representation, from the very earliest short stories to plays from the 1960s through the 1980s that the late Linda Dorff termed "outrageous." Along with the deformed or grotesque body, there's also the sense of the grotesque space in Williams, and that space occurs both in realistic—so-called realistic—settings, as well as in unrealistic ones. And then, finally, looking at Williams and the grotesque, we should discuss the ways in which he blended various kinds of genres and forms, because the grotesque isn't something linear. It goes through transmutations in Williams, and sometimes it's grotesquely ludicrous, as when a Lutheran pastor takes an umbrella and tries to rape a ninety-nine-year-old woman in *Kirche, Küche, und Kinder*; at other times it's absolutely horrifying, as in "Desire and the Black Masseur," when Anthony Burns's body is pummeled, mutilated, and then consumed. So the term, the application of it, and its journey through various stages of Williams's writing, I think, are some topics I'd like to pursue.

¶3 **Dr. Brian Parker:** Well, it is a very complex term. I think the nub of it comes in that first long play of Williams's which has just been published, *Candles to the Sun*, in which he talks about the grotesque in terms of the tragic and comic masque, because the nub of the grotesque is the interpenetration of the tragedy and the comic. Not just the juxtaposition of them, but the interpenetration.

It's hard to know where to begin with such a topic, and I thought we might start by remembering what Virginia Spencer Carr mentioned earlier today, which is Tennessee's curious laugh, that manic laugh which often occurred at the most disconcerting moments. Where other people were very upset, he would laugh. In *Lost Friendships*, a book by his early but alienated friend Donald Windham, Windham begins his memoir of

Tennessee with an account of his laughing as he reads the newspaper story of an old acquaintance being burned to death with his own cigar. He says,

> When Tennessee died, I remembered the wild whoop of laughter with which, when I first knew him, he greeted this item in a newspaper: an old man in a wheelchair had been set afire and burnt to death when he fell asleep with his lit cigar in his mouth. Reading of Tennessee's death, I thought of the equal whoop of laughter with which, in those days, he would have greeted the news: that a famous play writer of renown such as his and with a forty-year history of announcing his impending demise from heart trouble had died by choking to death on a plastic bottle top.

Then skipping a bit, he says,

> Many people looked gravely askance at his humor, even in his drama and fiction. They saw nothing funny, only unpleasantness in a play such as *27 Wagons Full of Cotton*. No poetry, only morbidity in a story such as "Desire and the Black Masseur." They were offended in personal encounters by his laughing at the near and moving tragedy of his sister's madness. They did not understand his hilarity at such incidents as that of the old man in the wheelchair. His unlikely combination of traits in those days embodied Thoreau's designation of humor as "the indispensable pledge of sanity." Tennessee looked at life then with a distant view of comedy rather than with the near view of tragedy because his personal tragedies were so close to the center of his emotion that to preserve his saneness he had to look at them as if they were far off.

¶4 Now, it just occurs to me, that Charlie Chaplin once defined his way of acting in comedy as "tragedy seen in long-shot." It's a matter of distance. Of course, there is a poem in *The Collected Poems of Tennessee Williams* called "Life Story," in which casual lovers bore each other telling their life stories until "one of you falls asleep, and the other one does likewise with a lighted cigarette in his mouth, and that's how people burn to death in hotels." And, as you know, during performances of *Streetcar*, he would often laugh to the rest of the audience's annoyance at Blanche's beautiful line, "I've always depended on the kindness of strangers." Why? Was it self-defensive? I've known it argued that what he was thinking about were his sexual pick-ups, but I think it's deeper than that. Perhaps it should be seen as an extreme case of the bizarre phenomenon of the American smile: all those tooth-whitening ads you've got on television—sheer mania for showing your bones. I mean, no other animal exhibits its skeleton the way we do. And that's what Tennessee writes about, and that's where I think the root of this term that we're kicking around, the grotesque, has to be found.

¶5 **Dr. Jacqueline O'Connor:** I'd like to pick up on that, because I think as Philip was marking off a lot of synonyms for the grotesque, one that I think he didn't mention that I've had very much in mind recently is "the cartoonish." And particularly in light of Allean's comment this morning that Williams may never have stopped reading the funny pages, I think that the cartoonish, or the clownish both go along with what Philip and Brian said about the tragic and comic combination and the grotesque body. The clown is often represented as extreme in feature, in mood, in emotion, and while the clown is more colorful, more exaggerated than the ordinary person, the clown also represents something very human, something to which we all relate. Williams's grotesque figures often accomplish something similar. When I was on the plane coming here, I read Flannery O'Connor's essay, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," and I jotted down a couple of things that she said that I think certainly apply to Williams and to Williams's work and that might be useful for us in defining the grotesque. She talks about the grotesque as "some experience not every-day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life," and that the fictional qualities of grotesque characters "often

lean away from typical social patterns toward mystery and the unexpected." And what has always struck me about Williams—and one of the topics that I hope that we can talk about a little bit—is that, as Philip mentioned, from Williams's very early stories, all the way through his career, he seemed to have a grasp of the grotesque that was precocious. You know, for a very young man he grasped a concept and a part of human experience that many people miss altogether or don't recognize and understand until much later in life when they've experienced the ways that the tragic and comic often overlap in our experiences. So I am interested in the ways that Williams incorpor-ated the grotesque in his work, even early in his career.

And then finally, I would say that I'm interested in the points at which the grotesque actually manifests itself in "real life" situations, such as in the connection between the grotesque and the mad. And, as you may know, I have written a bit about this. But also perhaps the connection—and I think this has already been alluded to—between the grotesque and the violent. Another connection is between the grotesque and aging, and perhaps that would be a useful way to talk about Willliams, his career, and his plays.

¶6 **Saddik:** I'm interested in picking up on this point about aging, and I'd like to ask Philip because I know Philip has some ideas about aging and the grotesque and connections also between the violent and the grotesque that Williams was dealing with.

Kolin: I would first of all like to follow up on something that Jacqueline said. I don't think you can read Tennessee Williams's scripts, stories, poems, memoirs, or letters without having a strong sense of psycho-biography. And I think there are three elements that are quintessential in the Williams psycho-biography. One of them is always the fear of the asylum—always the fear that, like his sister, he would be carted off, and in essence, that happened to him in the 1960s. The second one can be summarized by King Del Rey in *Red Devil Battery Sign*, who says, "I believe in bad dreams," which foregrounds the phantasmagoric element in Williams's work. Then the last part of the Williams psycho-biography, which I think is essential, is a line from *Camino Real*'s Kilroy, who observes, "It is a place where I don't know what it is or how I got there." I think all of these points tie into Williams's representation of the grotesque in plays dealing with growing older. As Annette knows from her perceptive study on the politics of reputation, toward the end of his life Williams wrote a series of hilarious one-acters that combine, as Brian alluded to, the interpenetration of the tragic and the comic. A play like *The Peaceable Kingdom* is set in a senior citizens' home, and the senior citizens there are far from narcotized at the end of the play. They revolt against the administration and its Big Brotherism broadcasted on the loudspeaker. There are many other plays in which Williams presents old age not as the idyllic image of Nono in *The Night of the Iguana*, but, rather, as older characters such as the Witch of Capri in *Milk Train*, who is rather sinister. But it seems to me that Williams did try to establish, as Wolfgang Kaiser describes, that the grotesque is essentially disharmonious, depending on conflict of some sort, and it may be either the expression of a profound sense of dislocation or alienation. I believe this is what links so many of Williams's plays, early and late, with playwrights like Beckett and Pinter. Williams made an attempt, I think, to establish the grotesque as an American phenomenon within his own psychic biography. So many of Williams's later plays are filled with the surrealism of the grotesque world, the anti-mimetic, the subjective.

But again, it's something that isn't confined just to issues involving age. One of Williams's first publications appeared in *Weird Tales* and was entitled "The Vengeance of Nitocris." It's a wonderfully crafted story containing many elements of the grotesque, such as murdering people under the waters of the Nile. But the grotesque and the savage appear in many different forms in Williams. Sometimes he presents almost Albee-esque drawing-room grotesqueries, and at other times Williams is just plain outrageous. One of the last plays he wrote was *The Remarkable Rooming-House of Mme. LeMonde*, which is a microcosm of Williams's late world. There is a woman who, like Medea, kills her son; and one of the people whom she punishes, who is called a gimp, is hung up on metal hooks in an attic, and he can't get around, and he's tortured by Mme. LeMonde's son. The play is both hilarious and, at the same time, *horrifying*. So, I think the notion here of the grotesque, the cartoonish, the outrageousness is something that evolves in Williams's canon, and I could see a book coming out entitled *Tennessee Williams: Master of the Grotesque* because he clearly used it from the very earliest works to the later ones.

¶7 **Saddik:** I like the word you used to describe Williams's depiction of aging as sinister later on in his life, and I think the older he got, the more sinister his portraits of aging became. But I'd like to start again with Jacky regarding this precocious, or early, depiction of the grotesque that Philip just mentioned and that you mentioned earlier. Could you give us some discussion or description of that?

O'Connor: Sure. In addition to a couple of things that Philip mentioned, such as his first story in *Weird Tales*, I was rereading some of his other earlier stories—"Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll" in which Big Black is described as prodigiously, repulsively ugly. His shoulders and arms were gargantuan, and he gorged work as though famished. This story was written around 1932. In the story there are these explicit descriptions of Big Black's grotesque body. And the narrator says he was "too strange, savage, inarticulate. He was a black beast with grotesque human form and no voice." So again, in Williams's early stories he was able to make these bodies so explicit and describe them in such detail that we really get a sense of his interest in depicting the grotesque. But I was thinking, too, even in a play that I don't think you would call grotesque, *The Glass Menagerie*—and again, this relates to aging—I think of that picture, that very often published picture, of Laurette Taylor as Amanda presenting herself in her faded party dress and the sense of the discrepancy between what she was when she first wore the dress and what she is in the play—and how really sort of horrifying she is to her son and daughter and only slightly less so, perhaps, to Jim. But I think about that picture of Laurette Taylor, and it leads me into this idea of the grotesque. I also think of the early play *Fugitive Kind*—not *The Fugitive Kind*, the film—and his depictions there of the consumptive Carl, the transient who is taken away to a sanitarium, to die, and, of course, he is terrified of being taken away. He's a little bit crazy, but also tubercular, and there's the talk of sort of spitting up blood on pillowcases and so forth [also depicted later with the Nightengale in *Vieux Carré*—ed. note]. And here was Williams, not even thirty years old, writing about these aging characters and depicting their aging in very physical terms. And in that play also, there's an early Bertha. As many of you know, Bertha the prostitute appeared in various works, but this early version of Bertha is very grotesque. She's a drug addict, and she comes out on stage for one scene. In the production that I saw in Marin County, she was very jittery. And so those are some of the examples of works in which he's engaging and even

talking about the grotesque specifically, but then there are other plays . . . in which these grotesque characters recur.

¶8 **Saddik:** This description of Williams's youthful preoccupation with the grotesque reminds me of the recent research that's been done on how children use the grotesque as rebellion or subversion . . . that since adults don't like the word, they'll say, "poop," or something like that. In other words, they use this idea of disgust to rebel and to gain some kind of power or agency in their own little domains, and so perhaps that had something to do with Williams's fascination at such an early age.

I'd also like to ask Brian to discuss Williams's development of the grotesque so that we can link this later depiction and the earlier depictions and perhaps see how it progressed throughout his work.

Parker: Well, I'd agree that the obvious elements of the grotesque are more clearly visible at the end of his career. In a conversation with Dotson Rader, Williams said, "You know, with advancing age I find humor more and more interesting. Black humor, especially. My humor is gothic in the theatre. I make some serious, even tragic, observations about society, but I make them through the medium of comedy." And it was 1978 when he said, "There has to be humor in it now. It's so hard for people to take tragedy seriously because people are so wary." Or he might well have said "cowardly." But I want to kind of dissociate myself from the idea that somehow this is associated with an aberrant state. I think Williams saw human life as tragic, and the way he coped with it was to present it through comedy. He said he laughed in order to avoid crying. I don't know if you saw that very good Louis Malle film, *Vanya on 42nd Street*. I hadn't been aware—because I'd been away from teaching for a while when I saw that—how much the media seems to have affected the smiling capacities of people or their need to smile. In that movie, the wife, whose name is Yelena, is talking to her daughter-in-law Sonya, who is sort of the beaten-down daughter. Yelena seems to have everything. Sonya says to Yelena, "Are you happy?" And Yelena says, "No, I'm miserable." And both of them have smiles right out here, and it looks weird. And I said to my wife, "That's wrong." She said, "No, people do that all the time." It's a kind of smile-while-your-heart-is-breaking kind of reaction.

¶9 Laughter is a double-edged aspect of human consciousness with a whole spectrum of possibilities, all of which can surface in the grotesque. In his book *The Art of Creation*, Arthur Koestler points out that the rictus of laughter is physically . . . that is to say in terms of muscle and nerves and all the physical manifestations . . . is physiologically identical with the rictus of a snarl. And that was borne out to me. We were in Vietnam a couple of years ago, and I was in some hotel garden. I was feeding an ape. They had a kind of little menagerie, and this poor ape had been put on a perch and was feeling lonely, and I went up to give him a bit of a banana. And he really didn't want that. He wanted me to hold his hand and stroke his arm and make "tsk-tsk-tsk-tsk-tsk-tsk-tsk," and we were getting on splendidly. And then my wife came up to take a picture with a broad grin, and he went into a spasm of panic and rage. And she couldn't understand it. And then we remembered . . . this sounds like name-dropping, but we had been in Bali a few years before, and we had made friends with a couple from New York, a very nice couple, and the wife had one of these sort of Julia Roberts smiles, you know, thirty-two-front-teeth smiles. And there was a little preserve for monkeys down the road, a little place where they had a monkey preserve, and she went down there with a lot of nuts, etc., to feed them. Purely kindly intentions, but

she went in with this broad smile, and they mobbed her. They absolutely covered her. They tore her hair, they tore her clothes, they took all her gifts, they bit her, and she ran out screaming. She said, "Why would they do that?" And her husband, who was an anthropologist, said, "You *smiled*." In the ape kingdom, which is so close to us, a smile of the rictus, a baring of the teeth, is aggressive. It is not a sign of good fellowship.

¶10 And I suggest there are at least four possibilities for laughter, all or several of which may apply to any particular instance. On the positive side, it may be euphoria, *joie de vivre*, the aspect consciously and mendaciously exploited by advertising. Or, still positive, it can be laughter as self-defense, as Tennessee used it a lot, versus humiliation or hurt. The Japanese laugh when they're embarrassed. And there's the giggling coyness, for example, of Big Mama against Big Daddy's hostile jokes in *Cat*, which she tries to turn into tenderness. I mean, they're clearly attacks which she tries to pretend are jokes, and laughs. On the mildly negative side, you can have the laughter of satiric mockery, laughter *at*, not *with* things. And at the bleak extreme of the negative, it can be nihilistic and brutal. The rictus of the torturer, laughter as snarl, like those awful photos from Abu Ghraib, what I'd like to call the Rumsfeld effect, which to understand you have to delve into complicated layers of sado-masochism. It's very interesting that the human animal has this laughter response to such varied states of mind. I'm not making a political statement. I'm trying to get to the sheer extent of this. And on this negative wing, laughter always goes along with complete lack of respect for the humanity of the victim. It's in a lot of late twentieth-century black humor, where there's a feeling that we're insignificant in the face of the cosmos, which is so big we don't have a clue about it. And remember, you were told this morning that Williams read a lot of stuff about the cosmos and physics that we didn't know about, although it's there in the set for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. If you look at the original set directions, it's supposed to open up to a swirl of cosmic impressionism. And this sense of human insignificance—Philip will pick up on this, I know—is behind the medieval and the Renaissance use of the grotesque, for example, in the Vice characters of the mystery plays or the Richard III character, the sadistic humorist whom you laugh with and at the same time disapprove of. It's a very, very complex thing: what a friend of mine called "horrid laughter."

¶11 I am of the firm belief that these aspects of the grotesque were present in nearly all of Williams's work. It was in his attitude to life and in his work right from the beginning to the end. And I think you can see it at its best—and this is, at last, getting down to Annette's question—you can see it best in the great plays of his middle period because he's got it under control there. He's got it balanced. In the early work, it's fairly crude. At the end of his life, as in *Red Devil Battery Sign* or whatever, I think he lost control of it. But you can see it, for example, in *Camino Real*. He has an unpublished foreword where he talks about the effect of mixing Kilroy with the romantic figures, Marguerite and Casanova. And he says, "This is Kilroy, the most famous citizen of America, and about whom nothing is known except that he goes everywhere that it doesn't cost much to go, the poor man's Don Quixote or Paul Bunyan. Here is the stuff of Picasso, ten or fifteen years after the Blue period." Then, and this is the point: "Here is new congruity of incongruities, which is the root of the power in modern art. The dramatic juxtaposition of the crude and the tender, the poetic and the brutish. It could be done with paint, but with language? In some of Hart Crane, yes? But how about a play?" At least that's what he's going to try to do in *Camino Real*. The other text I'd talk about is *The Rose Tattoo*, which he wrote just before *Camino Real* and is clearly influenced by Pirandello because the introduction to *Tattoo*, called "The Timeless World of a

Play," is absolutely replete with Pirandello's ideas. And Pirandello wrote a form of drama which he called *theatre del grotesqo*, and by that he meant a form of theatre, or view of life, in which the comic and the tragic are constantly juxtaposed: they interleave, they interpenetrate. I think these are both at the same time wildly funny and terribly painful. So it's in those middle plays I see him as being most successful in achieving this effect, when he's most in control.

¶12 **Saddik:** Thank you. This notion that both Jacky and Philip brought up earlier of the physicalization of the grotesque, or the representation of the grotesque body—or the hysterical body, to paraphrase Foucault—can be applied to Williams's work very readily, and I was wondering if any of you had something to say about that. You can just jump in.

Kolin: Yes. I think to approach the grotesque through physicalization is a very good aperture. We could be guided by theorists and look at Julia Kristeva and note the whole idea of abjection, the separation of the child from the mother's womb and mother's breast, and it's that separation which also leads to the grotesque. I think we can look at the "body" in Bakhtian terms because Williams's plays are very much like the carnivals, and it's the carnival not just in *Camino Real*, but it's the carnivalesque atmosphere that you find in a play like *Gnädiges Fräulein*. It's the carnivalesque atmosphere that one finds in Blanche first coming to New Orleans. But there's the sense here I think—to pick up on Annette's question—of the hystericized body, the body that has gone into a new realm of physical expression of pain. Mentioning Foucault, Kristeva, and Bakhtin, I'd like to go backwards a little bit and mention G. K. Chesterton, whom I think can be illuminating. Chesterton wrote that the function of the grotesque is to make us see the world anew from a fresh perspective; to let us see the strange and the disturbing within the realistic. And if you look at Serafina in *The Rose Tattoo*, she is physicalized through the mannequins, and when she has the mad arias and the mannequins fall over, we see a grotesque physicalization of what she is going through as the lost wife, the one whose love has been disappointed. But it seems to me that there are three plays, and they're from the middle period that Brian was talking about, in which Williams really gives bravura performances as someone who is capturing the grotesque. Certainly in *Camino*, when Kilroy is forced to play a variety of roles, everything from a red cap to a clown, a patsy, Williams is talking about the human body being deformed, defaced, devalued. Then we come to *Gnädiges Fräulein*, which I think is a play symbolic of the sixties, almost in Hitchcock terms, because of the imminent threat of nuclear attack. But in that play we find the poor songstress who loses parts of her body. At first she loses an eye, then she loses her hair, and then finally she loses another eye, and she's blood-drenched. So the deconstruction of the body signifies the alienation; it points to, perhaps, the effect of the smile, because she was in an act with a seal. And I think the gross physicalization of the body is something that Williams handled masterfully, but he could also do it in less demonstrative ways, or less outrageous ways. There's a play called *Demolition Downtown*—and Annette has discussed this—in which two couples, very much like Albee's couples, are trying to get out of town because the revolutionaries are coming in and will be taking over. And the couples are figuring out ways they can get the Cadillac out with one liter of petrol, and at the end of the play, one of the wives just decides to bare her chest and to run off with one of the leaders, one of the generalissimos. That, too, is a kind of grotesque physicalization, and the play ends with "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." So here we have Williams, who is blending realism with political commentary, and is doing it in a variety of inventive ways. And one last

comment here: New Orleans, where we're all meeting, was Williams's spiritual home, but it's also the place of nightmares, dereliction, and it's the city of two streets: it's Bourbon and it's Royal.

¶13 **Saddik:** I'm glad you mentioned, actually, the idea of the abject because the abject for Kristeva was that which reminds us that we're mortal or human. It's the bodily fluids, corpses, any kind of excess. And towards the end of his career, in the late plays—especially I'm thinking of *A Lovely Sunday for Crève Coeur*—Williams deals a lot with bodily fluids, bodily functions, that kind of excess . . . there's a kind of disgust associated with the abject, but he's constantly reminding us of reality and reminding us of the human. And that's very . . . well, grotesque. [*Laughter*] Jacky, you want to pick up on Philip's point?

O'Connor: Yes. Thank you, Annette. And I'll pick up on what you just said about *A Lovely Sunday* because I just saw a very good production in Denver in February, and I had never seen it staged before. I had read the play before, but not in a long time, so I reread it before I saw it. But what I was struck by in the production was the emphasis on the bodies of these four women. And, as you said, all the talk about the bodily fluids and the things going on in the bathroom where the toilet overflows, and so forth. But what I liked about the production . . . well, I liked a lot of things about the production, but the women's bodies were all pretty extreme. Whether they were large or small, the actors who were cast had very unique physical characteristics, and their natural qualities were played up, for humor of course, but also to call attention to their physicality and how uniquely they embodied the female form. But above the set there were panels that depicted women and men in very romanticized poses, sort of thirties and forties pictures of brides and grooms and so forth, and so you could really see the distinction between the ideal—the ideal of physical beauty and the ideal of the body—and these four aging women and their own bodies and their own sort of emphasis on their bodies.

¶14 To shift a little bit to this idea of the mad body in Williams, I think about the Victorian portraits of the mad, particularly of mad women and how grotesquely they are represented—often smiling, of course, but again, in this sort of very grotesque way—and I think about, in comparison, that crazy Jane image of the nineteenth century, you know, the Victorian mad woman in a play like *Portrait of a Madonna*, with Lucretia Collins, who has the inappropriate curls, and she's dressed very girlishly, very inappropriately for her age and so forth, and so, I think of those things as well. But also I believe that Annette's work on the later plays really does show the way that the grotesque is no longer presented in that sort of psychologically real way as with the psychological realism in some of the earlier plays, but rather it's much more impressionistic; it's often without language. *Fräulein* is a wonderful example of that. I also think Annette and Linda Dorff and others have done such wonderful work focusing on the theatrical shifts that Williams made in those late plays and how they were misunderstood, and noting the influence of Artaud and others about how the grotesque is represented theatrically very differently there. I can't say a whole lot about it at this point, but I've just been thinking about how, again, the absence of language and even the way those plays are staged really represents a kind of theatrical shift in how the grotesque is depicted.

¶15 **Saddik:** I like this idea of the nineteenth-century hysteric, and if any of you are familiar with the Victorian painting in the amphitheater . . . I think it has to do with Charcot's display of the hysterical woman to a group of other doctors . . . it's a picture that's connected to Freud as well. There's an amphitheater with a woman

diagnosed as a hysteric in the center being looked at by all these men in suits, and she's leaning in a kind of seductive but grotesque pose, which Jacky's discussion reminds me of.

O'Connor: Yes, and if I could just follow that up because I love the film version of *Suddenly Last Summer* for the way that it examines the madhouse. Of course, it steers away from the script of the play, but there are two scenes in that film that are wonderful depictions of the mad and the grotesque of the mad, and in both of them Elizabeth Taylor is up on the catwalk . . . in the first one, I think, she's looking down into the day ward of the men, and we have all those different representations of the mad man. And then inexplicably, she stumbles also into the day ward of the women, and so it's really interesting to think about how the film version represents that grotesque body.

¶16 **Saddik:** And that description of the waiting room in *Suddenly Last Summer* reminds me again of this association with children and the grotesque. I was recently visiting a friend's son in a daycare center, and I walked into this gymnasium with preschool students at play. One was rolling on the floor tearing out his hair. There was another one who was reaching out to me, screaming, "Mama, mama!" There was another girl, twitching in the corner, looking really shy, and another child wandering around aimlessly. And these were all normal children. This is how they behave. [*Laughter*] They were just playing and acting out . . . and I recalled the waiting room in *Suddenly Last Summer*, this kind of excess or madness or play, grotesque as play.

O'Connor: That's right because, in fact, so many of those Hollywood films about madhouses were made during that time, such as *The Snake Pit*—I remember watching it when I was ten years old, and I was fascinated by it. There's always someone who's playing with a doll, who's reciting a nursery rhyme of some kind, so you're right. This connection between play and children and madness is definitely there.

¶17 **Saddik:** As an aside, if you don't notice, in the beginning of *Suddenly Last Summer*, it was Maria St. Just who was the one lifting the doll and holding the doll, so you might want to go back and look at the film again. Brian, would you like to add to anything on the body?

Parker: Leland Starnes wrote an article entitled "The Grotesque Children of *The Rose Tattoo*," and in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* we have the no-neck monsters—"no-neck monsters" was a joke by Maria St. Just. I'm resisting my colleagues because I think you are trying to distance yourselves from the grotesque. You're trying to associate the grotesque with aspects of experience which you do not personally share or get involved in. I don't think you're going to understand Williams unless you have basically a tragic view of life because that's what he had, and let's face it, you belong to a culture that is basically optimistic. It's very hard, I think, for you to attune to someone as desperate as Williams was all of his life, and grotesque was his way of handling it, I think. Now, I was trying to get this into some kind of historical perspective because that's the way I think. Kristeva comes from Artaud, and I'm soaked in Artaud, and if you want the grotesque body, just look at Beckett. I mean, Beckett went a long way with that concept. But it struck me that there is a strong vein of the gothic, the grotesque, in American literature, from Edgar Allan Poe to modern writers like H. P. Lovecraft or Stephen King or the films of Quentin Tarantino. That was originally a Romantic reaction against the eighteenth century's overemphasis on rationality. It was a way of saying, "No, there's an underside to life which you can associate with the mad or with children or whoever isn't in the nice, rational frame." And the problem with this type of

writing and with Tennessee's own oeuvre is, how do you distinguish the good examples from the bad? How to distinguish Tennessee Williams at the top of his form from Quentin Tarantino or late Williams himself? Is Windham right in his suggestion that the quality of Tennessee's laughter changes and becomes more anarchic and less controlled? This is what Linda Dorff called Williams's "outrageous" plays, where he does deliberately go over the edge. Whether he could control it, I don't really know. I think he couldn't. He walked the edge of madness nearly all his life, and that's a terrifying place to be. I think we must *not* think of it as moving away from the center of the plays, the center of his experience—that it is in the late plays or in one or two little early examples. It's always there . . . it's there in Blanche Dubois. *I* think.

¶18 **Saddik:** Do you see the grotesque in any way related to "camp" or perhaps any kind of gay sensibility, because you mentioned Blanche Dubois, and you know, we're all familiar with the argument that "Blanche was a drag queen," or "a male representation of women." Do you see this kind of campiness in the grotesque, or not?

Kolin: I think the camp experience combines the tears underneath with the outrageous laughter, and I think he was concerned with camp in early plays—Blanche in *Streetcar* is a prime example—and certainly, in the new collection of one-act plays, *And Tell Sad Stories on the Deaths of Queens*. And it seems to me that one of the ways to get at Williams's sense of mastery of the grotesque is to see how others borrowed Williams's techniques and incorporated them into their scripts. And I believe you'll find very serious elements from *Streetcar* used hilariously, grotesquely, in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, as well as in the plays of Tony Kushner. You find it in the camp rendition of *Streetcar*, *Belle Reprieve*. For the last year, I have been deeply involved in studying the plays of Adrienne Kennedy, who is an off-Broadway, highly experimental, revolutionary, African American playwright, and when one looks at her works and reads them, one finds hysteria, blood, grotesque beasts, and disembodied heads. Her characters are splintered into five and six selves. In other words, Sarah the Negro is really represented by Patrice Lumumba, the Duchess of Hapsburg, Queen Victoria, and Jesus Christ. And all of the selves exist as distinct characters who repeat lines like mad arias. They run around the stage in frenzied madness. And when I started to look at Kennedy, and of course there were some primary materials in terms of interviews and letters and her autobiography, I started to see elements of Blanche Dubois. I also saw elements of Laura and Amanda. One of the things that Williams did so brilliantly—and perhaps grotesque is not the right word for it, but maybe it is—is that Williams allowed us to see how the mind could be represented expressionistically in ways far more sophisticated than anything done in the 30s or 40s. His plastic theatre had an awful lot of elasticity, and one of the things that Williams did was allow us to hear the inner voices and the inner demons of characters whom we have taken for granted as being singular, unilateral. Amanda is several voices, some of them quite grotesque. Laura, as well, and certainly Blanche—you know, Williams says, "I'm just like Blanche"—we are both hysterics." Well, the various laughs, the various tears, the various outrages that Williams wrote into Blanche have a lot of grotesque implications, applications for playwrights who came after Williams and who saw in him dramatic techniques that they could do more than just exploit. They could celebrate them. And so, I think when we look at Williams and the grotesque, to pursue Brian's point just a little bit—it's more than just the smile; it's Williams's sense of tragedy, but it's also Williams's sense of constructing theatre. His legacy is not just, "Well, he's the Southern gothic. He's the playwright who got into camp

sensibilities." I think he's the playwright who has defined the outrageous, the grotesque that later playwrights were going to develop in a context that will let us see Williams in a new light.

¶19 **Parker:** Well, I'd thought of this camp connection, too. There's that famous essay on camp by Susan Sontag, which you are probably familiar with. Basically camp is protest by way of exaggeration, I think. It's a way of coping with something that is unbearably painful by exaggeration, by sending it up. At least that's one aspect of it. And it's certainly something that was and probably still is associated with the homosexual world because when you say camp, you often think of queens camping. And I don't think it's in any way peculiar to that section of society, but there is basically an element of sado-masochism in it, which is suffering turned into aggression, suffering turned into exaggeration, an in-your-face quality about it. I used to explain my Welsh habit of going over the top by saying that when you're—in England—when you're deeply moved, there are two ways of coping. One is to be stoic and say nothing—keep a tight lip. The other is the Welsh way, the one in which my family exerted itself, which is to react like Maria Callas and really stomp and shriek and wave their arms around and generally control it by exaggerating it. So, I think, there's that element in which the grotesque is camp; if I'm right in defining camp, then that element is very close to what we're talking about in the grotesque.

¶20 **Kolin:** I think Brian's point is very well taken, and I think the script that absolutely illustrates it perfectly is *And Now the Cats with Jewelled Claws*. It's a one-act play, and may not be taught very often except in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, by me.

Saddik [*laughing*]: I've taught it.

Kolin: Did you really? God love you. In this play, we find two women who are at lunch, and they could be clubwomen, and they have shopped. And one of the women has a solution to dealing with the crowds at Christmas: she has a hatpin, and she uses it to prick people to get them out of her way. As they talk about their experiences, they're in a restaurant that is managed by a gay manager with false teeth who is asked to give fellatio to two bikers who visit the place. And the bikers belong to something like the Mystic Rose Biker Club, which, of course, is Tennessee Williams once again paying tribute to his beloved sister and once again combining religious imagery with the secular. At the end of the play, one of the bikers is killed, and the other one is asked to walk through a turnstile run by the manager. The turnstile, of course, moves eerily from life to death. The first time I taught that play, my class was in stitches. They could not believe something this funny had escaped their attention, but upon closer explication, Williams has taken so many of the icons that made his career so wonderfully celebrated on the Broadway stage and now used them with outrageously camp scripts. And so, this sense of camp exhibitionism is something that this play represents, but it can also be found in Amanda, and in Blanche, and Serafina Delle Rose, when she is in one of her states of a mad aria. In all of these scripts the grotesque is present, more or less blatantly so.

¶21 **Saddik:** Thank you, Philip. And actually, I also teach *The Frosted Glass Coffin*. Philip has written the only full-length articles on that play that I've found, so I would urge you to look at them if you get a chance. What I'm getting at from this discussion, which has enlightened me in terms of how the grotesque can be defined, is that it's not only a comic-tragic sensibility, but what all of these things that you're discussing have in common, the carnivalesque, camp—you know, which Brian very helpfully defined as protest by way of exaggeration,

paraphrasing Sontag—and the abject, is that all of these things have an element of excess, of being too much. And I think that's where the rebellion lies at some level, you know. So I think that's what marks it for me: this idea of excess in what you're all saying. But I wanted to thank our panel very much for their wonderful insights—I'm humbled by your knowledge—and open this up to questions in the next fifteen to twenty minutes for the audience.

¶22 **Nancy Tischler [from audience]:** I don't like to keep asking questions, but I was thinking about that original idea of the cartoon moving over into the late plays. I've heard *Gnädiges Fräulein* described as a comic *Oedipus*, and when you move from the one to the other, it seems to me something's happened, because the Joe Palooko character, or the roadrunner or whatever, when he steps off the edge of the cliff, he bounces up and starts again. In *The Gnädiges Fräulein* the character bounces up and starts again, but with all the same damage done. So the grotesque changes in his ideas about its effects on the body.

Kolin: Well, even at the end of *Camino*, we've got Kilroy coming back after an autopsy is being performed on his heart. And the Fräulein is totally blinded, zero-zero, and she runs out the door to battle the cockaloony birds.

Parker: Williams wrote a letter to Brooks Atkinson saying the grotesque comedy, as he called it, which is the dominant element in *Camino Real*, is traceable to "the American comic strip and animated cartoons." But it's treated in a rather different way than in adult cartoons, which go into these rather dark areas. I don't know if you know the *Maus* series about . . . it's a cartoon treatment of the death camps.

¶23 **Saddik:** Barton?

Barton Palmer [from audience]: Would Brian comment on Mangiacavallo in *Rose Tattoo* as a grotesque double or tragic original?

Parker: It's a good question, but I'd have to think about it. I know what you're talking about. I mean, Rosario was originally in there, and then the new lover comes in who has the body of Rosario but the face of a clown, and there's a very good article in one of Philip's collections, I think, by a man with a hyphenated name . . .

Kolin: John Gronbeck-Tedesco.

Parker: . . . that's right. . . who talks about the way that Eli Wallach plays the face off against the body so that he deliberately used body language which was contradictory. He had a foolish face, Eli Wallach. But he had this splendid body, so you have got the contradiction visually there. I don't know how you are supposed to relate that to Rosario, though, because Rosario had disappeared before Wallach was involved in the script.

Palmer: He becomes a substitute for Rosario as well.

Parker: Yes, that's true. Because of his physical resemblance, yes.

¶24 **Kolin:** I have a question for Brian. . . . Are we here delving into the very painful relationship that Williams had with Merlo? And are we delving into something that deals with what Williams saw in his sister's and others' beauty in the midst of dysfunctionality. And something that Una Chaudhuri has done beautifully in an essay in

the collection I edited, *Undiscovered Country: The Later Plays of Tennessee Williams*, which is destroying this whole notion of species binarism; in other words, with Williams, at what point does the grotesque leave homo sapiens and get into other phyla? For example, Mangiacavallo translates into "eat a horse."

Saddik: Or the Cockaloony bird in *Gnädiges Fräulein*. If any of you have seen that production, any production of that, the bird is this grotesque figure played by a human that looms in a very sinister way, to use Philip's word, throughout the play, and it's just creepy. That's the only way I can describe it.

¶25 **Saddik:** Robert?

Robert Bray [from audience]: Yet another context of the grotesque comes from Sherwood Anderson in *Winesburg, Ohio*. He has a chapter called "The Book of the Grotesque," and he attempts a definition of it. It's a very slippery definition, but he roughly defines it in terms of a character in one of his stories who becomes fixated with a Truth, with a capital T. And in effect, the character becomes governed by this monomaniacal viewpoint that he or she sees as Truth. I wonder if we can use that definition with any of Williams's characters.

Parker: Can I just elaborate on that? I don't know whether Sherwood Anderson got it from here—I know the book—but that's a pretty precise definition of the Humor character in Ben Jonson, the character who is totally taken over by one aspect of his personality and becomes grotesque because of that.

Kolin: Well, in John Milton's *Areopagitica*, truth is torn apart, severed, and tossed to the winds. And it's that emphasis on disassociation, disintegration, that runs through our discussion today on the grotesque in Tennessee Williams.

¶26 **[From audience]:** I was thinking about what Robert had mentioned with Sherwood Anderson, how well it fits with what Annette was saying, and about how everyone has some aspect of exaggeration, because if you take *a* truth that becomes *the* truth it always results in a kind of exaggeration or an overemphasis. I had a question I wanted to ask Brian, going back to one of the earliest things that you mentioned, about Williams's seemingly inappropriate laughter. And you mentioned the example of Blanche's line, "Whoever you are, I always depend on the kindness of strangers," that he would laugh at that, and you speculated that perhaps he had in mind his own sexual pickups. You said, "But I think it goes deeper than that." And I want to ask you to follow up on that by perhaps elaborating on what else, and how much deeper, and explore that.

Parker: Oh well, you just go back to the basic sense of what he's saying. This is a man who, although he was gregarious, was an intensely lonely and isolated man. And he depended on these chance encounters. One of the things I'm personally fascinated by, and I think comes out clearly in the second volume of the letters, is his appreciation of Maria St. Just. You know, you probably read the article that John Lahr wrote that kind of trashed her. But the fact is that she was extremely important to Williams during this critical part of his career, and then he kind of dropped her, or she went out of his life. She would like to have stayed in. And the reason he liked Maria is that she was such good company, and she was outrageous. She would make him laugh as no one else could make him laugh and go right over the edge with him. There was a kind of kinship there, which he could not normally find. And I think the deeper meaning of "I've always depended on the kindness of strangers" is

"I've always been lonely. I've always been alone. I've always had to depend on other people looking after me." But that's not what made him laugh. What made him laugh is the shallower, sexual application of it, I think. I don't know. I mean, who knows why someone laughs? I know that people used to turn around and say, "Shh!" and then be aghast because it was Tennessee himself who was laughing.

¶27 **Kolin:** If we're looking for outrageous people in Williams's life, Tallulah Bankhead certainly comes to mind. And yesterday at our celebration for *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, we heard from the portraitist Margaret Sargent, who painted a beautifully striking image of Williams for the 2005 cover. I would urge you to subscribe to this journal now and forever. In the painting Williams is seated in the chair that Tallulah Bankhead had given him. And his relationship with her is a reflection of the outrageous, the grotesque in his plays. She, like Maria St. Just, played Blanche Dubois, and she played it, as so many reviewers thought, to a camp sensibility. And after the show was over, Williams came to her dressing room, and she said, "Well, Tenn! How did I do? Did you love it?" And he said, "You're the worst Blanche I've ever seen!" [*Laughter*] Both friend and foe, tragic and hilarious, Bankhead symbolized the outrageous for Williams. The exchange they had in *The New York Times* foregrounds the grotesque with which both of them were associated.

¶28 **Saddik:** And again that sense of the outrageous, which is what he liked about Tallulah Bankhead and Maria St. Just, that excess, that sense of being too much. And Williams loved excessiveness. There's a photo of Williams that some of you might be familiar with in 1969. I think it was right before he had his nervous breakdown, which required him to spend three months in Barnes Hospital. But he has his hands in his pockets, and he's standing by a pool, and he's just laughing this outrageous, crazy laugh. His face is just so delightfully contorted in a laugh, and that's what Philip's comments reminded me of. Other questions, comments?

Well, thank you again to our very distinguished panelists [*Applause*] . . . and the audience. And we can get a five-minute break and come back at three for the next panel. Thank you.