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A Streetcar Named *Interior Panic*

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Note: Below is Robert Bray's introductory essay for the one-act play *Interior: Panic* published in the 2007 issue of *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*. The one-act play itself is available only in print copies of the journal. You can [order a copy here!](#)

Interior: Panic provides a fascinating glimpse into Williams's aggregate method of composing. Written in 1945–46, the play is believed to be the only extant one-act version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Although it is not terribly unusual to discover previously unpublished manuscript and typescript fragments that pertain to a well-known play, it is very rare to find a complete one-act play relating to a major work, especially one as important as *Streetcar*. Sometimes Williams seems to have used one-acts as a method to explore structure and character; at other times he would extract material from a full-length play in progress and create a one-act play. *The Pretty Trap*, a one-act version of *The Glass Menagerie* that appeared in the 2006 issue of this journal, provides a suitable example of this cannibalizing process. Williams is not unique in borrowing from his own material. Writers and artists often proceed along these lines; Vincent Van Gogh, for example, completed preliminary pencil drawings that served as sketches for what would become full-scale canvasses, but he would also move in the opposite direction—by extracting a detail from a finished landscape, such as a house, and turning it into a separate, completed painting.

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With *Interior: Panic* Williams seems to be laying the tracks for his *Streetcar*. As with most of his other plays, the author fretted over how best to end this early version. In March of 1945 Williams sent his agent Audrey Wood a letter expressing his difficulty in concluding what would become *Streetcar*. He wrote, “There are at least three possible ends. One, Blanche simply leaves, with no destination. Two, she goes mad. Three, throws herself in front of a train in the freight-yards.” For his Broadway and film version of *Streetcar* he would eventually settle for ending number two, perhaps because he had incorporated the melodramatic ending number three into an earlier play that had been completed but not yet produced, *Spring Storm* (1938). However, *Interior: Panic* offers yet another ending, one drastically different from and more ambiguous than the other conclusions that Williams had considered. At the end of this one-act, Blanche's suitor magically appears with chocolates and flowers, and Blanche, in an effort to stifle her dissociative break, asks her sister, “Can I come back or have I gone too far?” Blanche actually answers her own question, and the final lines, “I will! I will! I will!” seem to indicate that she might *will* her way back to mental stability. However, the “certainty” of these last lines can also be read as Blanche's effort to persuade *herself* as much as her sister of her newly found control, and the richness of this ambiguity offers actors an opportunity to deliver the lines either ironically or convincingly.

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As with much of Williams's finished work, the play's title and character names changed numerous times as he was composing the early drafts. Rejected titles for *Streetcar* include “The Primary Colors,” “The Passion of a Moth,” “Electric Avenue,” “Blanche's Chair in the Moon,” and, of course, “The Poker Night.” In *Interior: Panic*, Blanche's last name is “Shannon.” Williams also changed her first name while drafting this one-act, from

“Gladys” to the more poetic “Blanche.” In other fragments of *Streetcar* she is named Blanche Boisseau and even Caroline Kraus. He would return to “Shannon” for the main character in *The Night of the Iguana*.

¶14

The setting also shifts significantly in *Interior: Panic*, from the Midwest to the South (in yet another fragment, the play is set in Macon, Georgia). At one point in *Interior: Panic* Williams labels the action as taking place “in the living-room of a lower middle-class apartment in Chicago” but later moves the setting to “the interior of a shot-gun cottage in a poor section of New Orleans.” This shift in locale thus becomes a crucial stage in the accretive development of *Streetcar*, which would come to be known as Tennessee Williams’s quintessential “New Orleans play.” As Williams went through his draft of *Interior: Panic*, he crossed out *The Chicago Tribune* and wrote above it, “Picayune” (as in the New Orleans paper *The Times-Picayune*). The play was now apparently fixed in his mind as taking place in New Orleans, but he had not yet settled on characters’ names. Stella’s name is Grace Kiefaber; Jack is her husband, and in this version, Mitch is called “George.” Even with all the changes, some of the iconography so essential to the success of *Streetcar* is present in *Interior: Panic* as well, such as Jack’s bringing home the red meat, the loss of Belle Reve, Blanche’s lewd conduct back home, George’s finding out about her sordid past, and Blanche’s hydrophilia. In addition, at one point in this play Blanche tells her sister that while she’s at the hospital having her baby, Jack will rape her. This premonition/prediction eventually became realized in the scandalous rape scene in *Streetcar* that took place on stage but was banned from the 1951 movie by the Production Code Administration.

¶15

At first glance there appear to be two different versions of *Interior: Panic*, both located at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas-Austin. However, one of these “versions” is actually a continuation of the other, as mentioned above. These two fragments have been combined by this editor and thus establish the continuity that Williams would probably have sought had the plays been published or produced in his lifetime. Williams’s first eight-page typescript corresponds to the first eight pages printed here. This fragment ended with Grace’s opening the door for the “Tradesman’s Collector,” and the second fragment begins at this point, where part of the dialogue is “real” and part is “auditory hallucination” heard only by Blanche. Here, as in other parts of the one-act play, much of the dialogue between the Collector and Grace is, as Williams writes, “projected through the senses of Blanche Shannon.” In this second part of the play Williams portrays Blanche as being increasingly detached from reality by hearing disembodied voices and becoming more and more paranoid. In stage directions that Williams later rejected, he describes the set as follows: “The scene is a room as it appears to a person on the verge of insanity. Everything is distorted in a similar fashion . . . In fact, nearly everything that occurs on the stage is what is seen, heard, felt, or suspected in a state of hysteria.” In *Interior: Panic*, Blanche’s struggle with sanity achieves a pathos different from but almost equal to the final scene in *Streetcar*, when she departs with the doctor.

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Interestingly, as this one-act and other fragments eventually evolved into the final play, Williams wanted to keep in place many of the early expressionistic devices, including the hallucinatory voices and a scrim, but Kazan convinced him to jettison much of this material. This one-act play thus has the additional importance of demonstrating Williams’s early interest in experimental drama and in stretching the boundaries of what he called his “new, plastic theatre.” *Interior: Panic* was performed at the New Orleans Tennessee Williams Festival in March of 2004 and at The Players Club in Manhattan in October of 2005. It is published here for the first time.

