

The Tennessee Williams Annual Review

Working with Tennessee: Charlotte Moore Discusses the Production of *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur*

Craig Clinton



Number 9

Two of the most shattering failures suffered by Tennessee Williams in the last years of his life were the New York premieres of his autobiographical *Vieux Carré* in 1977 and of *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, his exploration of the Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald story, three years later. Sandwiched between these critical and commercial failures, however, was a smaller, more delicately wrought, less ambitious play, *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur*. This relatively short play had its premiere at Charleston's Spoleto Festival in June 1978 before moving to Off Broadway in January of 1979, where it received polite, though less than enthusiastic, notices. Like a number of Williams's much-maligned later works, *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* deserves both reevaluation and far greater appreciation.

¹² Set in a cramped St. Louis apartment in the mid-1930s, *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* focuses on the tragicomic desperation of Dorothea, a high school civics teacher whose romantic illusions regarding the school's principal collapse in the jostling exchange between two other characters: her protective roommate, Bodey, who views Dorothea as a match for Bodey's twin brother, Buddy, and Dorothea's domineering teaching colleague, Helena, who is desperate to move Dorothea into an expensive duplex with shared expenses. In the background hovers the elderly and grotesquely comic Miss Gluck, whimpering in German over the recent loss of her mother. Through the lens of the play's triangular conflict, Williams depicts the valor that at times can emerge in coping with human loneliness and despair. Although small in scale, the play does not trivialize the characters' depth of feeling nor the poignancy of their rather uneventful lives.

¹³ Originally entitled simply *Creve Coeur*, the play began as a one-act that Williams viewed as a companion piece for another short work, *Demolition Downtown*, which was first published in *Esquire* magazine in 1971. Produced together, Williams remarked, the two works would comprise "a double bill that is focused upon the Gothic joke of the American dream gone wrong" (Williams 2). Further, as was frequently the case with his later work, he was quite intent that *Creve Coeur* not be viewed as traditional realism. Early in the text of the one-act, he offers the following aside: "By this time I have probably made it clear that the surface realism of this little play is really surface" (2). Indeed, the play—especially in its expanded form—takes frequent departures from realistic technique.

¹⁴ *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur*'s production at the Spoleto Festival came about through the efforts of Craig Anderson, Producing Director of New York City's Hudson Guild Theatre. Speaking to reporter Margaret Locklair, Williams recollected being "pleasantly surprised" at the call from Anderson that led to the play's expansion and premiere. "Audience reaction on opening night," Locklair wrote, "helped him revise it even further in the three days before the official opening." Reviews of the Spoleto production make clear that ongoing revisions and additions had substantially altered, by the opening night, the one-act that had been the play's source. Mel Gussow in *The New York Times* spoke of *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* as "tender, poignant and measurably human" but also stressed "that this is still a play in evolution." Indeed, while key

revisions had been accomplished by the opening in Charleston, further work would transpire before the play was produced in New York City.

¶15 In the Charleston production, Miss Gluck, although remaining essentially an ancillary character, became more central through two textual expansions: the comic disarray brought on by her attack of diarrhea at the end of scene 1, and her assault on Helena in scene 2 (at which, according to reviewer Helen Smith, “the audience cheered”). Helena also became a more substantial character, gaining, among other features, a wealthy cousin (Dee-Dee from *La Due*) on whom she models her predatory social ambitions. Further, in the expanded text, Dorothea is involved in an earlier unhappy relationship with one Hathaway James that continues to haunt her. In addition, Dorothea is depicted as being mentally unstable, a condition she deals with by ingesting tranquilizers and sherry.

¶16 *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* was directed by Keith Hack who, earlier that year, had staged to critical acclaim a revised *Vieux Carré* in London. Hack became part of the company late in the game, replacing the original director and, according to Gussow, proving to be “extremely successful in orchestrating his actresses into an ensemble and in maintaining the play’s understated mood.” Apparently this was not a straightforward task; speaking to reporter Enid Gomez during the throes of rehearsal, Williams remarked, “Each day one of the actresses will walk out in a rage. They take turns.”

¶17 Appearing in the starring roles of Dorothea and Helena were, respectively, Shirley Knight and Charlotte Moore, both of whom would reprise their roles for the New York City production, which opened Off Broadway on January 21, 1979, at the Hudson Guild Theater. Richard Eder, in his *New York Times* review, lavished praise on Hack’s “first-rate” direction while, in the *New York Post*, Clive Barnes also spoke warmly of the play: “This is not your usual Tennessee tourist trip,” he wrote. “But it is sweet, honest, compassionate, different and totally enjoyable.”

¶18 The following interview with Charlotte Moore was conducted in June 1987 at her home on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Her comments offer a fascinating and detailed account of Williams’s work with the actors and the director during the premiere of a remarkable play, one of the most significant in the author’s late career.

¶19 Ms. Moore’s extensive credits include the celebrated Richard Burton/Elizabeth Taylor production of *Private Lives*, a critically acclaimed performance in the New York premiere of A.R. Gurney’s *The Perfect Party*, and a starring role in the long-running Broadway revival of *Meet Me in St. Louis*. She was a co-founder (in 1988) of New York City’s acclaimed Irish Repertory Theatre and continues to serve as the company’s artistic director. Her many directing credits with the Rep include the widely praised revival of Sean O’Casey’s *Shadow of a Gunman*.

¶10 As she recounts the circumstances of production, Ms. Moore reveals the considerable difficulties attendant on both the Spoleto and New York stagings of the play—the backstage realities that shaped the public event. Her comments add to our appreciation of the problems Williams faced in the climate of rejection that surrounded his later work.

¶11 **CRAIG CLINTON:** Tell me how you came to be involved in the production of *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur*.

CHARLOTTE MOORE: In the early spring I got a call from Craig Anderson, the producing director of the Hudson Guild Theatre, who asked me if I would speak to Keith Hack, a director who had just come over from England. I said okay. Minutes later the doorbell rang and in came Keith and Craig with a manuscript.

They said: “This is a new Tennessee Williams script that’s going to be done at the Spoleto Festival; would you consider doing it? We need to know tonight.”

“Well let me read a couple of pages.”

They told me the cast; I read a couple pages and said—“I’ll do it!”

“We’ll pick you up at six in the morning,” Craig said.

“We want to take you down to work with Shirley Knight before the rehearsal starts at nine.”

Six o’clock!

“All right,” I said.

They left a script, I read it, and at six in the morning, in pouring rain, they picked me up and took me down to where Shirley was living on Washington Street. We read the play for them, and at nine o’clock we went to the rehearsal. Now, they said they wanted me to open it in Spoleto. What they didn’t tell me was that we had to be in Charleston the day after tomorrow, that we opened in four days, and that this was Keith’s second day as the director!

On the way down in the plane, we were up in the back, in the aisle, being directed by Keith, and once we got down there we were at it day and night. We were desperate. We were in a panic. Keith was demanding things of us—demanding! Tennessee was there, handing us rewrites all the time. It was chaos! The day before we opened, we literally rehearsed twenty hours and I slept in the theatre and I got up after four hours and went right back at it. Keith just pushed it into my head, and at 7:30 the night we opened—curtain was in an hour—we were twenty pages from the end. I mean—we weren’t ready to do that play. That’s a *hard* play—a *hard* play—to do. But we got it open. It was a miracle.

On opening night, or the night after, Shirley could not find the newspaper in the waste can that had the announcement of the marriage of her intended on it. Now Shirley is absolutely literal—an Actor’s Studio product—has to feel it or see it. And remember, I’d been in this four days.

Shirley says, “I can’t find it,” and I say (feeble voice) “You can’t find it?”

“I can’t find it,” she says, clutching the waste can.

“Well,” I thought.

Then I said, “I’ll tell you what it says,” and I heard Tennessee from the audience say, “Go to it!”

So I recited the article. Now I tell you, before this, I couldn’t have recited that article. But I saw it in my mind. I read it off the paper. I recited the article to her, and the play went on.

^{¶12} **CLINTON:** Wonderful.

MOORE: Shirley and I are terribly good friends, by the way, and laugh and laugh at one another’s foibles. But you know, don’t you, of Tennessee’s terrible habit of sitting in the audience during performance and talking to you on the stage? And saying to people around in a booming voice, “Oh, she’s so good! She’s *so* good!” [clapping hands] “Isn’t she good?” When Shirley came on to do her monologue, he was just awful. He would sit

there talking to her during it. Of course people loved it; they were delighted. But I mean, if it had been anyone else they would have thrown him out. It's terribly distracting.

¶13 **CLINTON:** To say the least. What was the run at Spoleto?

MOORE: Two weeks. And we rehearsed all day, every day, during that time.

CLINTON: Were there rewrites once the play opened?

MOORE: Tennessee rewrote the entire time.

CLINTON: What was the thrust of the revision?

MOORE: Tennessee had not really honed his characters. He always did his best work with directors who made him rewrite—hone the characters, focus the scenes. Words came out of Tennessee like a volcano; he couldn't get them down fast enough. He's very intuitive. He has this gift of language—this divine, all inclusive, incredible gift—for poetry and language. It's beautifully said, it's fascinating—but, to get the characters in focus, you really do have to hone. It's verbiage if you don't. You cut a lot, and he rewrites a lot. We worked it out. We fought it out. It was chaos, but it came together . . . it somehow came together. The opening night was nothing like the closing night at Spoleto. By the time it was over, it was pretty good!

¶14 **CLINTON:** What were the reviews like?

MOORE: Well, we didn't get any *bad* reviews, which we deserved. Who knew what we were doing at that point? Tennessee responded to the fair to middling reviews with sadness—quiet sadness. The day after they came out, I went out to the garden of the hotel and Tennessee was there painting; he was doing a painting of the pool and garden. He was alone. I sat down to talk to him.

“I don't understand what they want,” he said. “I don't understand what they want from me anymore. I work hard and I do my best and I do what I do like nobody else in the world does. I still do, but they hate it. Why do they hate it?”

I said, “Well, in the first place, I don't think they want to hear poetry—see poetry—any more and, in the second place, Tenn, we didn't do justice to your play. We really weren't ready. If we do the play again, it will get better notices.”

And it sure did. It sure did.

¶15 **CLINTON:** Did Williams discuss characterization in rehearsal?

MOORE: Constantly. He had in mind elaborate character schemes, and he was very generous, both with his time and with his knowledge. In fact, I believe Tennessee is the most generous writer that I have ever worked with. He often put dots where you had to finish a sentence so we'd finish the sentence and he'd incorporate what was said. Or sometimes we would not learn the line right in the early stages, and he would say, “It sounds better than mine,” and change it. I believe he was the least protective about his words than any playwright I've known. Totally unafraid. But when it sounded right to him, and he was the judge, then that was it. He'd just remark, “say it that way.”

¶16 **CLINTON:** How was it that Keith Hack came to direct the premiere of *Creve Coeur*?

MOORE: Two years before, Keith had read *Vieux Carré* and thought it was an absolutely brilliant play. He had read all the reviews of the New York production, talked to people who had been in it, and he thought he could make it a success in London. He went to Key West, worked with Tennessee on the script, went back to London, cast it and did it, and it indeed was Tennessee's biggest success in years, and it indeed was a brilliant, brilliant production.¹ Tennessee thought *Vieux Carré* marked a great comeback, which it did. The notices in the London papers were brilliant: "Williams is back." "He's his old self again"—all wonderful! Tennessee was so thankful and so relieved and so appreciative of what Keith did that, when *Creve Coeur* was in trouble and it looked like it was going to be another failure—an embarrassment—and they were thinking about changing the director, Tennessee thought immediately of Keith. Keith was rough on him. He would say, "Make her be this way. Make her be that way. In this scene what I want is *this*, and I don't want it to take fifty lines to get there. I want you to do it in ten."

¶17 **CLINTON:** Hack was that direct?

MOORE: Absolutely. In this play it was line by line, word by word, that Keith felt should be fixed, and he usually got his way. It's a small theme, you see, a very small theme, and so small things became important. Tennessee would come in with pages and Keith would say, "That's not good enough. Go back and do it again."

¶18 **CLINTON:** The play doesn't have what I'd call the symbolic "accessories" which characterize so much of Williams's work.

MOORE: Some of those symbolic accessories were cut out, many of them just snipped out in their entirety and never referred to again.

CLINTON: Williams apparently needed that hard edge to rub against—to challenge him.

MOORE: I'll tell you what he doesn't need. He doesn't need someone who sits around and agrees with him and compliments him. That's the worst thing of all for Tennessee. The adulation, the loss of that—the loss of the accolades—was something that drove him crazy. But that's after the fact. He likes to have the finished work praised, but I think he really enjoys the fight to get it there. He seemed to. He thrived on it. He was sharp as a tack. Boy, is he sharp.

¶19 **CLINTON:** He wasn't heavily involved, then, in drinking?

MOORE: Luckily we hit him at a time when he was well. Later he began to take the pills again and to drink heavily again. But that period was such a good period in his life. And no matter what they say about Keith—and he has detractors—Keith kept him on his toes. Keith was good for that play. He was straight-arrow and good for that play. He's the one who made it.

¶20 **CLINTON:** After Spoleto, was it determined immediately to move the show to New York?

MOORE: Not at all. After Spoleto, I came back to New York and then went to London. Coincidentally, Tennessee was also in London, so Keith and Tennessee and I had a couple of meetings about the play—talked about it, and Tennessee made some rewrites. We worked a couple of long days at the Grosvenor Hotel. I would read it and they would see how it sounded. We asked for permission to do it in London, but British Equity adamantly refused to let us—even when Tennessee went and begged.

CLINTON: What happened next?

MOORE: Keith and I both went down to Key West. We stayed with Tennessee a month and worked on the play every day—all afternoon every day—as he sharpened the scenes. I’d read Helena in character and the other parts straight; that’s what I tried to do. Tennessee was expanding the part of Helena—or Hel-LEAN-ah. Tennessee always called her Hel-LEAN-ah. We called her Helena—but he was expanding that part, which I adored his doing, and so I couldn’t have been more available. He wrote the “*allein allein*” speech for me—a little monologue—and he sharpened the scenes between Helena and Dorothea. He said he had two actresses who wouldn’t overplay—who could say his words and not seem caricaturish. It got better and better and better.

^{¶21} **CLINTON:** Williams writes that *Creve Coeur* “is quite separate from my other work...almost a different genre. It is not realism.” What does he mean by that, do you think? From an audience point of view—apart from the interior monologues—the play seems very realistic.

MOORE: Well, you’re right. You go in, and the set is absolutely lower-class realistic, the clothes are absolutely realistic, the situation is real, the places are real, the geography he talks about is absolutely there, and the dialogue is—if you don’t catch yourself—quite realistic. But if you listen to the things they’re saying, it really isn’t. It’s far out, the things they’re saying.

CLINTON: Can you elaborate?

MOORE: That monologue of Dorothea’s—where she talks about sitting on the front steps with her boyfriend—I mean, she’s in a drug dream. She’s taken too many pills. She takes pills and she drinks. Dorothea is drugged throughout this play, and Bodey is isolated in some strange relationship with her brother and has a prisoner, a young blond prisoner in the apartment with whom she’s obsessed. Helena certainly is an unrealistic character. Tennessee describes her eyes as the eyes of a predatory bird. But I think part of that quote, if you’ll allow me to say so, that idea of Tennessee’s, comes from the fact that he worked on this play differently than he has ever worked on any other play. It is certainly set apart in those terms. During that time in Key West while we were working on it—realism in our own lives *and* in the play went out the window. We were quite isolated working on it. We were terribly “in” it—terribly involved—all of us—during that time. It was a time out of time.

^{¶22} **CLINTON:** I gather there were further revisions made in the rehearsals prior to the New York opening. What was the nature of these rewrites?

MOORE: It was the same battle. Keith felt it could be better. He always felt it could be better. It was Tennessee bringing in sheets and Keith throwing them out, making him do it over. It was Shirley being argumentative, saying this line didn’t follow that line. On the day we closed, Shirley and I came in and rehearsed for four

hours. I mean, that's Shirley. She never, ever, gives in to one second that doesn't work for her. She and Keith fought to the death. I mean, they *really* fought. I learned from Shirley to stand up for myself. I've been an actress a long time, but in that production, in working with her, I learned how to do it much better. I admire her for that very much. She's difficult, but I admire her. Then on opening day we replaced [the actress playing] Miss Gluck! Opening day, I'm telling you! Shirley and Miss Gluck did not hit it off—ever. Shirley is impatient with people who can't produce the work. So am I, but not nearly as blatantly as Shirley. It almost came to blows. To make a long story short, it became apparent that Miss Gluck had difficulty repeating the blocking and learning the lines, so on opening day, in a panic, she was replaced. It was a nightmare—a nightmare. But it came together. It somehow came together in a happy, happy production.

¶23 **CLINTON:** Williams mentioned in an interview that he had to take the lyricism out of his characters' mouths. How did he rein in his impulse to lyricism?

MOORE: He lowered it degree by degree by degree until it was acceptable. You can't have people in that setting talking lyric poetry. It would be silly. He would say, "Is that too high-toned?" and you'd say, "Yes, Tennessee, that's so high-toned, I hardly know what I'm saying," and he'd say, "Well, I'll bring in another speech tomorrow." And he would.

¶24 **CLINTON:** From what you've told me, I gather Williams was more interested in the characters than in the structure of the play.

MOORE: That's right. He has this overriding sense of good and evil. Every character is good or evil. Tennessee doesn't have any really ambivalent characters in his plays. They're either good or they're bad; that's the way his life was. That's his sense of things. He adores things, or he doesn't like them at all. Blanche DuBois is a good character, I think. Or I think *he* thinks so. She's weak, but she's basically an angel. He always said, "She's an angel. If you want to know how to play her, she's an angel."

Tennessee did mention a couple of times the obvious comparison between Blanche and Dorothea—simply because they were both school teachers. He said he consciously made Dorothea fat, solid, stolid, exercising and, in the end, strong—her own person. He very consciously made Dorothea come to a decision about herself, get a hold of herself, stop taking drugs, stop having stupid and phony illusions about herself, so that she would never turn into Blanche DuBois. He often said, "Don't you think Dorothea's going to be all right? She's going to be all right, isn't she." He had in mind that Dorothea was going to be fine. He wanted that.

¶25 **CLINTON:** The production at the Hudson Guild was a limited run?

MOORE: Yes. We did extend the run, and we were all quite happy with it, but Keith had to go back to London and both Shirley and I had something to do, so to move it, we would have had to have dispersed and then gotten together and done it once again. We just never did that. It's a shame.

¶26 **CLINTON:** Did Williams think *Creve Coeur* marked a comeback for him?

MOORE: He thought it marked a small comeback. The play was small, and I think he liked the idea of a small move—testing the waters—before he tried to do a major work again in New York because he certainly didn't

want to be knocked out like he was with *Vieux Carré*.

¶27 **CLINTON:** Any final thoughts?

MOORE: Tennessee loved *Creve Coeur*. “It’s a bijou,” he would say, “a bijou.” A small jewel.

¶28 The Off Broadway production of *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* closed in February 1979. Twenty years would elapse before the 1999 New York revival. In reviewing this misguided production, *The New York Times* condemned the attempt “to turn the play into a zany comedy” through performances “exaggerated to the point of caricature.” Clive Barnes, in his review of the 1979 production, makes clear that the Hudson Guild staging avoided such distortion, dexterously maintaining a tension in which “pathos is brightly linked with comedy. An unusual match.” It is precisely this extraordinary tension that makes *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur*, as Barnes also observes, “a play that, in the long stretch of time, will provide insight into the nature of Williams as a playwright.” And indeed it does. In his “bijou,” Williams writes knowingly, with heartbreak leavened by humor, of the fortitude that can, on occasion, transcend rejection.

Notes

¹ Williams paid tribute to *Vieux Carré*’s director by dedicating the published version of the play to Hack.

Works Cited

- Barnes, Clive. “Williams’ ‘Creve Coeur’ is an Exceptional Excursion.” *New York Post* 22 January 1979: 35.
- Eder, Richard. “New Drama by Tennessee Williams.” *The New York Times* 22 January 1979: C15.
- Gomez, Enid. “Tennessee Williams on the Lam.” *San Juan Star* clipping. Box 12, folder 1: *Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur*. Tennessee Williams Papers.
- Gussow, Mel. “Theatre: Premiere of a Williams Play.” *The New York Times* 7 June 1978: C19.
- Hampton, Wilborn. “A Late Williams Vision of Heartbreak.” *The New York Times* 8 February 1999: E3.
- Locklair, Margaret. “The Medical University Comes to Spoleto.” *Atacus* 1978–79: 13. Box 8, folder 7: *Creve Coeur*. Tennessee Williams Papers.
- Smith, Helen. “Williams’ ‘Creve Coeur’ Weak But Likable.” *Atlantic Constitution*. Box 8, folder 7: *Creve Coeur*. Tennessee Williams Papers.
- Tennessee Williams Papers. Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Columbia U, New York.
- Williams, Tennessee. *Creve Coeur* manuscript. Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.