

# The Tennessee Williams Annual Review

## Tennessee Williams Scholars Conference Panel: Williams and His Contemporaries: William Inge

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Number 9

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**Editor's Note:** The following panel was transcribed directly from tapes made at the 2006 Tennessee Williams Scholars' Conference.

**Annette Saddik:** I'd like to begin with this question: why is Tennessee Williams's reputation much more substantial today than that of Inge? In the 1950s Inge had more success than either Arthur Miller or Williams, with four huge Broadway hits, and yet today he's not as well known.

Next, can we contrast and discuss the ways in which both Williams and Inge characterize male sexuality and the male as the object of desire? And in Inge's work, let's specifically address the object of "the gaze," to use Laura Mulvey's cinematic term that she proposed in 1975.

We might also discuss the references to Tennessee Williams in Inge's work and references to Inge in Williams's letters, as well as the question of Inge and Williams in psychoanalysis. Finally, may we address the issue of Williams's mounting jealousy and his paranoia over the idea that Inge tried to have him put away . . .

So please, if you'd like to start, Barton?

**R. Barton Palmer:** I'd be happy to. I'm most interested in the relationship of Williams and Inge to Hollywood in the 1950s, and it's surprising how often one runs into their interconnections. For example, in dealing with the screen adaptation of *The Rose Tattoo* by Williams, one of the fascinating things is that this film was conceived by the executive producer, Hal Wallis, as one of a series of films, the second of which (it was the third in the series of films) was, of course, his adaptation of *Come Back, Little Sheba*, by Inge, and the first was one called *About Mrs. Leslie*, which is based on a novel. But all three films and materials share in common their focus on the sexual discontentment of a woman of some years, shall we say, and the manner in which this unhappiness works itself out in different ways. *The Rose Tattoo* is a more exotic kind of treatment of this, but both *About Mrs. Leslie* and *Come Back, Little Sheba* are also very insightful and interesting treatments of it. And one of the things one learns by studying the adaptation of Williams is how Inge very often was working along much the same lines, and yet there's a strong difference. If you consider those two adaptations, one of the things that's striking is that it was possible for Shirley Booth to play the main character in *Come Back, Little Sheba*, whereas I think it's difficult for us to imagine Shirley Booth playing Rosa in *Rose Tattoo*, and that film, of course, is dominated by the presence of Anna Magnani. And that contrast, I think, says something about the difference

between Williams and Inge in the 1950s: they share a similar interest, and yet there's something more exotic, more transgressive, more striking, more extraordinary about Williams's dramatic conceptions than those of Inge. On the other hand, Inge seems to me to have in many ways explored some of the issues of sexual dissatisfaction more thoroughly in a cultural way than Williams ever did, and I'll speak later on it, in particular about his original film script for *Splendor in the Grass*, which I think is one of the most extraordinary filmic presentations of sexual unhappiness, very much a film that bears resemblance to some of Williams's properties, but at the same time it strikes out in very different directions and centers on a key '50s and '60s concept, which is that of "the nice girl." Not that Williams doesn't deal with that theme also, but I think that *Splendor in the Grass* is a really extraordinary treatment of that.

¶3 **Saddik:** Thank you. John?

**John S. Bak:** I think what surprised me the most when I started working on Inge back around 1995, and I think it still strikes me today, is how Inge and Williams are treated by us, by the Inge and the Williams scholars. If you look at the indices alone of the various books on Inge, what you find is Tennessee Williams's name repeated quite frequently; if you look at the books on Williams, you find that Inge's name appears very infrequently, and I think that's very telling, to some extent, not just of the relationship of the two dramatists to the public, but also how the two dramatists have been filtered through the critics and the scholars over time. And I think that, except for Ralph Voss's work on Williams and Inge, there isn't anyone else out there writing on the subject. My article seems old by standards now, I think. I'd like to see that improve, and I am hopeful that something like this panel might re-ignite a better appraisal of the relationship between the two playwrights.

**Palmer:** I was just going to add that I saw a recent book by Jeff Johnson, which I think Ralph was involved in the production of, and it does mention Williams on occasion and sometimes uses contrasting examples of Williams and Inge plays, but once again, it doesn't treat the subject matter comprehensively.

¶4 **Ralph F. Voss:** Well, I want to say a few things about how important I think William Inge's friendship—relationship—with Tennessee Williams actually was. There were some very, very important intersections that made a huge difference in Inge's life. It is not too much of a stretch to say that we wouldn't be here talking about William Inge today if it had not been for Tennessee Williams—not that Williams was all that charitable toward him all the time. The point is that in the "City of St. Pollution," otherwise known as St. Louis, they did meet, and the question of whether or not they became lovers at that point has always been of far less interest to me than what happened there, which was a case of mutual admiration.

¶5 Inge was the drama critic for the *St. Louis Star-Times*, and he went way off his beat to go to Chicago for the opening of *The Glass Menagerie* because he had made this new friend, and when he saw this play, he was spellbound. He thought it was the most amazing drama, and he was surprised that Williams seemed to lack confidence about it. Inge later wrote, "Doesn't he know he's wonderful?" And it was on that occasion that Inge told Williams of his own playwriting ambitions. Inge had earlier abandoned acting and teaching careers, and he was very unhappy because he knew he was going to lose his drama critic's job as soon as the war was over because the regular critic who had been drafted would be coming back. He just said, "I've gone to so many

plays and walked out thinking that I could write a better play than that,” and it was Tennessee Williams who said, “Well, why don’t you?”

¶16 And there’s more. It was Tennessee Williams who introduced William Inge to Audrey Wood, and Audrey Wood subsequently became Inge’s agent as well. And Inge took it very hard, but Audrey Wood was tough enough with Inge to say, “You know what? I don’t think *Farther Off from Heaven* is the play that we can bring to Broadway for you. Go back to the drawing board.” And Inge, who was a repressed, shy, alcoholic, and eventually self-destructive man, took that hard, but he did go back to the drawing board, and what he wrote was *Come Back, Little Sheba*. And that’s the one that Audrey Wood said, “I think we can sell this one to the Theatre Guild.”

¶17 And then it was Tennessee Williams who introduced William Inge to his longtime friend, Margo Jones, who at the time was starting a regional theatre in Dallas, which now we know historically was one of the pioneering little theatres. She had believed in Tennessee Williams for so long and was so loyal to him that even after he had the success of *Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, he gave her his next play, which was *Summer and Smoke*, and it premiered in Dallas at Margo Jones’s theatre in 1947. It just so happens that while Inge was upset that Audrey Wood didn’t like *Farther Off from Heaven*, Margo Jones *did* like it, and she opened it at the same Theatre ’47 in Dallas, where Tennessee Williams’s *Summer and Smoke* was first produced.

¶18 I think these marvelous intersections—and you see how Williams is so crucial in each one of them—got Inge to believe enough in himself to write plays, got him an agent who would become a legendary promoter doing wonderful things for both of them (which later on in their lives they didn’t appreciate as much), and got him introduced to Margo Jones, who gave Inge his first production. Some acquaintances of Inge’s later speculated that he was in such a bad psychological way before these things started happening for him, that if it hadn’t been for Inge suddenly finding his voice as a playwright, he probably would have taken his own life a lot sooner than he did. I can’t stress it too greatly; I think it was Tennessee Williams more than any other one individual who made that kind of difference in Inge’s life.

¶19 William Inge had all those hits in the ’50s, and they did have a rivalry. I think there was probably more than once when Tennessee felt like, “Now, I give this guy all these breaks, and he’s doing better than I am.” But Inge was far too careful about his reputation, far too upset if people might not like his work, that he would never have had the guts to write a play like *Camino Real* and put it on, or push it. He was fretting over *Picnic* when Williams wrote *Camino Real*. So it’s just that these two are really, really important to each other, and Inge owed more to Williams than the other way around, but I think it’s great that there’s some room being made for Inge at the festival this year. I think it’s very important.

¶10 **Saddik:** So do you think that part of the reason that Williams had more staying power was because Inge didn’t take as many risks?

**Voss:** Inge was a popular playwright who wanted people to love his work, and later on when they didn’t like his work and the critics were very nasty to him, he took it much harder than Williams did, and yet Williams had critics taking out full-page ads against him. But if I were going to try to sum it up, I think that Tennessee Williams had a better idea of how to live, a better idea of how to take the bumps and bruises that come along,

and Inge was devastated by things like that, and he was so shy and so repressed, so upset with himself about his sexuality and many other things. He didn't have a significant other to rely upon; he didn't have a Frankie Merlo in his life. He had no one but his work, and when his work was no longer popular, I just don't think he was up to it.

And I think *Picnic* is a good way to respond to your question. He hated the ending of *Picnic*, but he was so eager to have a hit and so desirous of keeping Joshua Logan as the director on Broadway that he capitulated and said, "Okay, let it end the way everybody seems to want it to end," which is that Madge and Hal, the central couple, are together at the end.

**Palmer:** Sort of.

**Voss:** . . . and that's a one night stand if ever there was one. And Inge knew it—in his bones he knew it—but he went with the popular ending, and how are you going to argue with the Pulitzer Prize? But deep down, William Inge was not about happy resolutions, and you find that in his work. But I think his popularity had to do with the fact that he was the right kind of playwright for the 1950s in New York and Hollywood, and he would tweak things so he would get the desired result. And he did stop later, and his popularity stopped, too.

¶11 **Saddik:** Williams deferred at times, like with the version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in the third act, but then he fought it, and now they're published side by side. So, yes, it's very different. Barton, what do you think about this point?

**Palmer:** Well, I was just going to tell a little story. We just learned so much from Ralph. I just wanted to give you a little story about my own experience with Inge. Just the other day, I was preparing for this presentation, and I had a filmed still from the film poster for *Picnic*—you mentioned *Picnic*—and the film still has got the two main characters, Hal and Madge played by William Holden and Kim Novak, and Hal is in a ripped t-shirt, and he is standing over, but not really touching Madge, who is reclining in kind of a classic, *Venus at Her Bath* position. And my wife came in and said, "Oh my goodness, a bodice-ripper!" And I thought to myself, very interesting, yes, it's the same kind of iconography that one would associate with that particular form of the popular romance, except the gender values are all screwed around. It's not the woman's bodice that's ripped. It's the man's bodice that's ripped. And, although he is presented rather conventionally in a kind of domineering position, it is not the one that one usually sees on bodice-ripper covers where . . . I don't know if you're much aficionados of this genre, but the man is usually presented as nearly raping the woman. I mean, such is the implication. And what you get in this pose is the woman in a position of power, gazing directly at the camera and not really touched by the man. I thought, what an extraordinarily perceptive reading of the Inge play, where you have something like a conventional romance, and yet the gender values are so terrifically altered.

¶12 It's not that Williams is also not interested in men being the object of desire. Obviously that's true in plays from *Streetcar* to *Sweet Bird of Youth* to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and yet in many ways Inge schematizes this cultural change in much more interesting ways by actually presenting the characters as objects of the gaze within the action of the play or, in my main interest, in the films themselves. So, for example, in *Come Back, Little Sheba*, Turk, who is a track and field athlete, poses to be represented in the story. And this is also true of Madge and

Rosemary's gazing at Hal in *Picnic*, and you get in the film the most extraordinarily unconvincing way in which Hal's shirt gets torn. I don't know if anyone has seen the film recently, but he's dancing with Rosemary, and Rosemary literally pulls his shirt off. And I was thinking to myself, what an extraordinary moment in its revelation of the way 1950s sexual culture was changing. It's as if Inge had read Kinsey's book on women and was putting this all into practice. So that, I think, is an extraordinarily interesting and fascinating aspect to Inge's dramaturgy, and it extends, by the way, into his film work, where one of his films—a much neglected one, *All Fall Down*—has as the main character a very strangely named fellow, named Berry-Berry, played by Warren Beatty, who is obviously meant as a kind of Narcissus, since his female companion is named Echo, and he is a male sexual predator mostly because women find him attractive, and there are several instances in the film where he is presented specifically as the object of the gaze, offering himself to women. One is when he's hitchhiking on the highway and girls stop in order to pick him up. Another is when he puts himself in a bar, looking for a woman to take care of him, and just at that moment, an attractive older woman walks in, fulfilling every eighteen-year-old's fantasy of how to begin your sexual career. I remember when I saw this film, I thought, what a wonderful moment. But Inge gives you this material in ways that go beyond even Williams's exploration of sexual politics, and I think that *Splendor in the Grass*, with its examination of female hysteria, a sort of classic Freudian case where Deanie, who is once again paired up with Warren Beatty—Warren Beatty seems the archetypal Inge figure—is treating her as a good girl and won't have sex with her, and she doesn't want to have sex with him, and yet that frustrates him so much that he dumps her, and then she tries to be a bad girl, but he won't accept her as that, and her only alternative then is to try to commit suicide. It's a very moving and yet disturbing presentation of gender politics, such as the kind of which we associate very much with Tennessee Williams—and of course Williams is a master at it—but Inge has been neglected, I think, for this kind of very interesting and penetrating cultural relevance.

¶13 **Saddik:** John, did you want to comment on this topic?

**Bak:** Yes, Barton mentioned the character, Turk, and having reread the plays over the past few months, what I find most interesting about Turk is when Maria describes the painting sequences . . . she says, in response to Lola's question if Turk will pose nude, "No. The women do. But the men are always more proper. Turk's going to pose in his tracksuit. . . . The man always keeps covered" [*Four Plays* 23]. And I find that telling of Inge. I think that if Turk were a Williams character, he probably would have been nude. Williams was simply willing to push the envelope much further than Inge was . . . that is, with sexual politics of the 1950s. And if I could give a response to the question why Williams's stature is higher than Inge's today, at least in terms of the 1950s gender politics, I think it's because while Inge tugged at America's heartstrings, Williams touched the nation's nerve, and I think it's the "nerve-writers" that have a longer-lasting status among scholars, at least, than those who play up to the more traditional views; even though I know that there is going to be, as with Jeff Johnson's book on gender bending, more reexamination of Inge's sexual politics in the '50s. But certainly Inge's version was much tamer than Williams's. "Risk" was the word you used, Annette, before, and I think that's part of it as well: Williams was much more confrontational than Inge was.

¶14 **Palmer:** His treatment of desire often takes place outside of sanctioned relationships, too. I think that's another issue with Williams. The sexual tension in *Streetcar*, for example, is so multi-layered and complex, and I don't

think you get anything like that in Inge. Although, to be fair, the sort of triangular relationship with desire in *Come Back, Little Sheba*—Doc and Turk and Marie—is a very interesting dramatic device, and it bears some resemblance to *Streetcar*. I would agree with John, though: it's just that Williams is a bit more concerned with pushing the envelope a bit further, and his characters are more extraordinary. In looking at the difference between Anna Magnani and Shirley Booth—to be fair, Inge hated that Shirley Booth was asked to play Lola because he never could understand how she would have been sexually desirable at some point. This character is supposed to have been a *faded* sexual beauty, and somehow Shirley Booth didn't convey that. I think maybe we all agree, watching the movie. And yet, at the same time, she does an extraordinary job in the role in the film. And then the male figure, Burt Lancaster, is deliberately made less attractive, and yet, the complicated way in which this film works, it's hard to make Burt Lancaster look too ugly, and he wasn't asked to wear one of those potbelly pads, and there's something about his sexual energy in that film version that's really interesting and compelling. It bears comparison, once again, with the role he's asked to play in *Rose Tattoo*, where's he's also de-glamorized to a degree. If you compare those two performances by Burt Lancaster with what Fred Zinnemann does with him in *From Here to Eternity* in the same period where he's turned into an absolute sexual icon, then you get in some sense the difference between what Inge and Williams are doing with the men in those two plays and what Zinnemann does with the James Jones book.

¶15 **Saddik:** What about references, or cross-references to Williams in Inge's work and Inge in Williams's letters—do any of you have something enlightening to say about that?

**Voss:** Well, there are Williams references in Inge's plays. For example, *Natural Affection*, which was Inge's second commercial failure. There's a reference to *Sweet Bird of Youth* that is pretty explicit about what happens to Chance Wayne. It's a castration, and Inge has one of his characters, an older man, say, "Ooh, ouch. Where does that Tennessee Williams get his characters?" And then his wife says something like, "How do they let people get away with stuff like that?" I think the reference was actually a tribute because I believe that Inge always really respected Tennessee Williams and cared very much about him, but, in a klutzy way, maybe because it was like unrequited love. I don't know what it was. He wanted to pay compliments to Williams, and so he would seed some of his plays with these things, but I'm not sure Williams ever appreciated the allusions at all. But I would say that he wanted to pay homage to his friend who had been so important to him and to pay respect in a kind of way that doesn't seem merely adulatory. I always thought it was a kind of touching way to pay tribute, but maybe, since it wasn't taken that way, it didn't work out at all. But that's the way I view Williams references in Inge's plays. And as for letters, you don't find many references to Williams in Inge's letters because there apparently aren't many extant Inge letters. One of the things that frustrates William Inge scholarship is that there are very few letters, and I think it was because of his careful way of concealing things about himself. I don't think Inge wrote very much that he wanted anybody to see, and from the voluminous correspondence on Williams's part, we know that Williams didn't really share Inge's sense of circumspection.

¶16 **Saddik:** And John, you've done some work with the letters, Williams's letters and how Inge figures in them.

**Bak:** Yes. But before talking about the letters, I'd like to add something to what Ralph was just talking about. One reference to Williams in an Inge work that strikes me as being most curious comes from *My Son is a*

*Splendid Driver*, when Betsy says to Joey, “Wouldn’t I have made a wonderful Blanche. Tennessee Williams is a real genius. It’s the most exciting American play I ever saw” [213]. The question for me lies in discerning sincere homage from backhanded praise, which I’m sure is what Williams was asking himself at the time. And I think what Ralph has worked on over the years and what he’s talking about now is most interesting in the sense that you just don’t know how much, if any, irony lies behind Inge’s adulation. While Ralph would probably suggest that there isn’t any irony, I’m not entirely convinced of it myself—especially given the *Sweet Bird of Youth*/*Bus Riley’s* incident that Ralph wrote about, as well as both playwrights’ debt to Mae West’s *The Pleasure Man* in these two plays, which is something I’d like to return to later.

¶17 But getting back to the letters, there were two that caught my eye when I was preparing for this panel, letters that address a topic that we cannot avoid discussing today: the jealousy that took place in the 1950s between them. The first one was from Williams to Brooks Atkinson in 1955, in response to Atkinson’s positive review of *Cat*, and for Williams, the success of *Cat* was a comeback in many ways because he felt that he had failed and that Inge’s star was on the rise. And he writes to Brooks Atkinson, saying he had this fear that failing as a playwright “must stem from some really fearful lack of security, some abysmal self-doubt. Also it takes such ugly, odious tangential forms, such as my invidious resentment of Inge’s great success despite my friendly attitude toward Bill and his toward me. I was consumed with envy of his play’s success and could hardly discuss it with you when we met in the Village a week or so ago. Hideous competitiveness which I never had in me before!” [SL II 569]. Then a couple of months later, Williams wrote a letter to Cheryl Crawford from Cuba, in May 1955. He writes, “The matter of *Orpheus* is settled as far as I am concerned. We are going to produce it together. No playwrights!—in my heart it is hard for me to like any playwright who is still writing plays. Miller, yes! Inge, sometimes . . . an ugly effect of the competitive system. They have to stun me with splendor that drives vanity out! Or I wish they’d quit writing as I have nearly this summer” [SL II 592, Williams’s ellipses]. So I think Williams did have this jealousy—and I think we’ve covered that pretty well in the criticism on Williams and Inge—but I don’t think Inge had any to Williams’s extent, even when Inge’s star started to fade a bit as well. I’d like to think that he did not look upon any of Williams’s late successes, particularly with *Night of the Iguana*, with resentment towards him for having found success again, as Williams had resented Inge for his success.

¶18 **Saddik:** Barton?

**Palmer:** Well, one thing I would say is I think there is a kind of interesting relationship between *All Fall Down* and *Sweet Bird of Youth*. I know that Inge was very influenced by *Sweet Bird of Youth*. It seems to me the structure of *All Fall Down* very much resembles that of *Sweet Bird of Youth* with a different kind of ending, as you have two brothers—one is the Narcissus character, and he is sort of like the Chance Wayne character in *Sweet Bird*. If not prostituting himself, then he comes close with his incredible promiscuity, and he does ruin the life of Echo. She becomes pregnant, and it’s clear in the film that she then commits suicide in a very dramatic way. And there’s a climactic scene in the film where the younger brother, who had also fallen in love with Echo, is about to kill his brother, who finds him back in his room alone and doesn’t pull the trigger because his brother finally breaks down and cries and seeks repentance and forgiveness from God for having destroyed the life of the woman that he loved. It’s a very interesting sort of variation on many of the elements of *Sweet Bird of Youth*.

I don't know that you could say that Williams is the source for that film, but it seems to me that there are some extraordinary resemblances. Of course, there's a lot of stuff there that Inge is simply recycling from his own plays, such as the mother and father roles who seem to be some characteristic figures. The chorus of women from the town seems right out of *Picnic*. But those two properties seem to me to be kind of connected. I don't know if anybody else has ever thought that. It is probably the case that many people don't see *All Fall Down* all that much. In many ways it was a film before its time. It's extremely un-Hollywood, even at a point when Hollywood was still Hollywood in the '60s. It hadn't gone into the '70s and been influenced by the French New Wave and by modernism in general, and it's really kind of an extraordinary performance by Inge in making that play the way that he did.

¶19 **Voss:** *All Fall Down*, I agree, is a very fine film, and it was in A-list production from the beginning. John Frankenheimer was the director, John Houseman was the producer, and it's an adaptation from a novel by James Leo Herlihy. I'm somewhat embarrassed to say that I've never read Herlihy's novel, but I do know that Herlihy also wrote *Midnight Cowboy*. And I think that Berry-Berry certainly has strong resemblances to Chance Wayne. He represents the idea of the incredibly good-looking man who flutters hearts actually on both sides of the sexual divide, which is what Jeff Johnson's book is all about. Johnson coined a word based on political gerrymandering: he calls it gendermandering. He looks chiefly at Hal, and the cover of the book has a wonderful picture of Ralph Meeker, who was Hal on Broadway in 1953, in the white t-shirt—it was a kind of staple of repressed playwrights, I guess, back in the '50s.

¶20 I do want to mention that Warren Beatty had a special relationship with William Inge, and Inge cast him in *A Loss of Roses* in 1959 on Broadway, which was Warren Beatty's first big opportunity. That play bombed, but Inge also saw to it that Beatty got his very first film role as Bud Stamper in *Splendor in the Grass*, leading some people later, I understand, to whisper that William Inge was Warren's fairy godfather.

¶21 You mentioned letters that Tennessee Williams wrote referring to Inge. Beyond his published work, Inge didn't leave much evidence of his personal life behind. I've had a couple of phone calls over the years from people who are working on unauthorized biographies of Warren Beatty. They think I know something, and I don't. I just know that Beatty was so-so on Broadway in *A Loss of Roses* in a so-so play—very much an Inge play—and he was brilliant as Bud Stamper in *Splendor in the Grass*, for which Inge won the Academy Award for best original screenplay in 1961. It was Inge's last triumph.

¶22 Back to relationships between Inge and Williams, there's one I want to mention for sure, and it speaks again to the strength of their friendship, because there was a bond there in spite of the jealousy. And I know this by way of Barbara Baxley, who was close to both of them at one time. I refer to when Robert Brustein just sledgehammered Inge with an article in 1958, "The Men-Taming Women of William Inge," which summarily trashed everything that Inge had done—all the plays since *Sheba* right on through *Dark at the Top of the Stairs*. I call it a critical mugging, but Inge took it so hard that—as Baxley says—he called Tennessee Williams, who had also taken a few shots. This was the first time Inge had ever taken a nasty critical appraisal, but Tennessee had been in that ballpark a few times already, and according to Baxley, they all got together, along with Elia Kazan, at Inge's place and talked about what would be the right response to Brustein, and they decided that no

response was the best response. Brustein was described as a fast-rising, hard-hitting young critic back then, and the article was really a career move for him. But Inge took it very hard, and according to Baxley, Williams was there, giving him some support, counseling him, saying things along the lines of, “You know, this is going to happen. If you stand tall very long at all, somebody’s going to take these kinds of shots at you.” And so that was very important. And of course this was before the failure of *A Loss of Roses* and *Natural Affection* and some of the references we talked about. Baxley’s take on it was, when all was said and done, these two men were actually very good friends and very true to one another in what they had chosen to do.

¶23 **Saddik:** John, you mentioned a few minutes ago that Williams was jealous of Inge. What about this business around 1967 where Williams started thinking that Inge wanted to have him put away? Can you illuminate this anecdote?

**Bak:** Well, in fact Ralph covers that in his last article pretty well [ed. note: “Tennessee Williams and Williams Inge: Friends, Rivals, Great American Playwrights,” in *Tennessee Williams Literary Journal* (Fall 1999): 9–19]. I might let him answer, and then I could add some comments, but I don’t want to steal his thunder on this.

¶24 **Palmer:** While John is looking for a quotation, let me provide a brief note on *Loss of Roses*, which was mentioned earlier. That was made into a film called *The Stripper*, and it offers one of Joanne Woodward’s most extraordinary screen performances, so if you ever get a chance to see it, I recommend it. You’ll have to catch it on TV. It’s not on videocassette. But a very interesting presentation of, shall we say, self-assertive female sexuality.

¶25 **Bak:** Back to our earlier point; this is from the actual *Memoirs*. Williams does describe “One fantastic night in the summer of 1967”—and I know Ralph talks about this in his last article—the idea that Williams had resented his psychoanalysis in 1957, and while both he and Inge went to Dr. Lawrence Kubie, Williams was not accepting of the advice Kubie had given him, i.e. stop writing and leave Frank. I think the incident in 1967 took place . . . and I’m vague on the actual facts, and even the *Memoirs* do not provide us with much more detail beyond the story that Williams had somehow charged William Inge with having hired another psychoanalyst to come and drag him out of his house . . . of course, this was at the height of his “stoned age.” This is just prior to Dakin’s institutionalizing his brother in 1969, so I think you have the paranoia reaching its height here, and he describes that in the *Memoirs*, but that’s all I’ve got on the subject.

¶26 **Saddik:** Williams, for those of you who don’t know, was put into the psychiatric ward of Barnes Hospital by his brother, Dakin, in 1969 for three months because he collapsed, essentially. He was taking Seconal, drinking heavily, and he collapsed and spilled boiling water on himself, and he was unconscious. Finally Dakin decided to have him committed, realizing Tennessee Williams’s worst fears.

Well what about their experiences with psychoanalysis and with Lawrence Kubie? Did you want to say anything further on that?

¶27 **Voss:** Well, I’ll just say, they both were at different times patients of Dr. Lawrence Kubie, and I think Michael Paller has done the most detailed work on that in terms of how Kubie’s was, at the very best, an outmoded

approach to psychoanalysis, and the short version of Kubie's approach was, I think, "If you're gay, and you're troubled about it, well, just stop being gay." This was the doctor's advice. I think in terms of where Inge was concerned with psychiatrists, he was a person who paid a lot of money to have a perfectly reasonable psychoanalytical profile of himself. There it all is, the things he actually shared in common with Williams: the neurotic, overprotective mother, the absent father, his being called a sissy, all of it is there for the classic Freudian explanation of things. But what I've often said is that Inge paid his money to get a good explanation; the problem was that he couldn't accept that explanation. And I think that late in his life he no longer turned to psychiatry. In 1970, there was a book that came out called *Celebrities on the Couch*, and it was a collection of interviews with several famous people who had gone through psychoanalysis, and Inge had very little to say that was good about it. He said something like, "It helped me at the time, but I would never go through it all again." And I really see that attitude as being consistent with my earlier remark that, in some ways, meeting Tennessee Williams and having a career like he did saved Inge's life for another ten, fifteen years or so and enabled us to get to know him through his work. I think psychoanalysis helped Inge a lot in the '50s, but he definitely got to the place where he didn't think it was beneficial for him anymore, and I daresay the same is probably true of Williams, but I'm not sure.

¶28 **Bak:** That reminds me: in *Bus Stop*, Doc Lyman says, "Friends have been hinting for quite awhile that I should get psychoanalyzed." Then he chuckles, "I don't know if they've had my interests at heart." I think that this comment, in many ways, probably sums up Inge's own response to his psychoanalysis. What I find interesting in Williams's response to Inge's psychoanalytical experiences is that Williams often criticizes both the process of psychoanalysis and Inge himself for having been involved with it, but you get the feeling that Williams is actually talking about himself most of the time. I'd like to cite one letter that he wrote to Cheryl Crawford around the time of his own psychoanalysis in '57. He says,

[I don't] want Inge's man, I don't like what he has done with Inge who seems to be living in a state of false complacency, peaceful on the surface but with an apparent suspension of his critical faculties at least regarding his own work, an "afflatus" that only makes him pompously self-satisfied and showing bad scripts around like fresh-plucked flowers. There is probably not more than one man who would be any good for me but I want to find him and find out, one way or the other, if I am susceptible to outside help. *Without* illusions. . . . So much for the screaming "ME-mies"!

Emphasis on the word "me" here. And I think lots of times you find that in Williams's letters: when he's writing about William Inge, he's also writing about himself, and Inge becomes this sort of persona upon whom he can bounce off a lot of his own frustrations and problems that he had with his own work.

¶29 **Saddik:** There's an interesting treatment of these issues in Lucy Freeman's book, *Remember Me to Tom*, and there's also *Gentleman Callers*, the Michael Paller book, if anyone's interested in a very original treatment of Williams and homosexuality, especially during the 1950s. That's a book I highly recommend, as well.

Well, I think we've covered all our topics, and so I want to have some time for questions. The panel officially ends around 4:00, so I wanted to preliminarily thank our panel and open the floor up to questions.

¶30 **From Audience:** Did Inge have some of the same problems with drugs and alcohol that Williams did?

**Voss:** Oh yes, absolutely. Inge was an alcoholic already when they first met in 1944 in St. Louis, and it was from going to AA meetings that he began to draw on his characterization for Doc Delaney in *Come Back, Little Sheba*. He had that struggle all of his life. It got worse later when his career started going alternately up and down. When he thought Broadway had rejected him, he went to Hollywood, won an Academy Award, and thought Hollywood was a great place. But he had Elia Kazan running interference on *Splendor in the Grass*, and later he started swimming with barracudas on his own. In Hollywood, he soon found that people didn't respect him as a writer. If you're a serious playwright, Hollywood's a dangerous place. So there he was, and so then he began with the pill abuse. I don't think he ever had a "Dr. Feelgood" giving him shots two or three times a day like Williams, but he was abusing pills, and when his sister Helene went to live with him out in the Hollywood hills about a year before he took his own life, he was in and out of the hospital a lot. There was a final interview with him that was published in the *Los Angeles Free Press*. It's very, very touching. The man who interviewed him, Lloyd Steele, said that Inge was so out of it and so frumpy and lost-seeming that out of courtesy and respect he didn't publish the interview. A couple of weeks later, Inge took his own life, and then Steele did publish it. And, in fact, I saw a copy of the death certificate in the Inge Collection in Independence, Kansas, and the cause of death is listed as asphyxiation. He had asphyxiated himself with auto exhaust in his garage, but about three days before that he had signed himself out of rehab at the hospital. So he was in a pretty bad way, and I think such substance abuse was a pattern of his life from the early 1940s. It just gathered. And it tended to fluctuate; when he was riding high, he was going to AA meetings, and he was staying sober, and he'd try to hide that, and he'd try to hide the problem when he'd go to the inevitable cocktail parties. But it was a lifelong struggle for him after becoming an adult.

¶31 **Saddik:** Other questions? I have one. Ralph said he's not interested in this so much, so I will leave it open to anybody: were Williams and Inge lovers? What do you think?

**Voss:** Lyle Leverich thinks so. I don't know. You know, my problem in being an Inge scholar is that I'm heterosexual. And I think there could be a very good biography, lots of good scholarship done on Inge, that I wouldn't have had the imagination to do, in a sense. That's a poor way for me to put it. But I think it's probably inevitable that there was an attraction between them. They had so much in common. Inge so admired *The Glass Menagerie*—but then, who wouldn't?—that the subject of the very first play that Inge wrote, *Farther Off from Heaven*, was quite similar. You don't recognize the play, maybe, by that title, but he reworked it later, and it became *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*. So he sees this play about Williams's family that's so personal, and then he goes and writes his own play about his family. I think the two may have been lovers at some point. Lyle Leverich told me that he thought it was a pretty likely thing. If you want authority of a dubious nature, you might go to Donald Spoto who says flat out, "Oh, yeah." Perhaps because of the battalions of researchers he had, they discovered something that substantiates what Spoto said. I would say, yes, early on, as a reasonable guess, but . . .

¶32 **Saddik:** Just to rephrase what Allean Hale said, because we're taping this, she had read that Williams and Inge had three episodes together. So it wasn't very much.

**Bak:** In the first volume of the *Selected Letters*, I know that Albert Devlin and Nancy Tischler say that Williams and Inge were “occasional lovers, it seems.” So again, even in the *Selected Letters*, there’s a bit of hedging. No one’s quite sure. Ralph in his book mentions Williams’s comments that Inge and a nameless companion had joined Williams and Merlo in bed for a ménage à quatre . . . But again . . . it’s difficult at times to separate fact from fiction where Williams’s sex life is concerned.

¶33 **From Audience:** How helpful do you think film biographies like *Wounded Genius* are towards understanding these writers?

**Palmer:** I’m more inclined, personally, to have very little interest in star biographies or artist biographies. I think we’re always more interested in the work that artists do, and it’s often very complexly connected to their experiences. I don’t think that complexity usually comes out very much in biographical research. It’s not that biographies aren’t useful here and there, but to use them as the mine where you seek the essence of an artist? I just think that’s always very dubious. That’s just my personal opinion. And star biographies—Hollywood star biographies—are really worthless most of the time. And sometimes these people lie. I mean, I do a lot of work on Elia Kazan, in connection with the book that Robert Bray and I are doing, and he lies all the time. So that’s something you have to keep in mind—or maybe Kazan doesn’t remember correctly. He selectively misremembers. Maybe that’s what we should say. So you’ve got to take it with a grain of salt, and very often what artists say about their own lives is just banal and not particularly interesting or illuminating, so that’s another thing to consider—the accuracy of autobiographies.

¶34 **Saddik:** That’s true with even basic information, like how Tom became *Tennessee* Williams. He’s told contradictory stories. One of course is that his father’s family comes from Tennessee, and they were pioneers, so he took that name. And the other one is that he was at a fraternity when he was in college—the ATO fraternity—and his brothers could remember that he was from a southern state with a long name, which was of course Mississippi, but they kept saying Tennessee, and so that’s how he adopted the name. So who knows?

**From Audience:** Earlier today on a panel Jeremy Lawrence addressed this topic and said that it was best, instead of referring to him as a liar, to call him a “fabulist.”

He was always, from the very beginning, creating this persona, and in doing so, drawing on different resources, and it’s sometimes apparent that he just mixed up dates and other facts, and sometimes these things reinforce that persona of Tennessee Williams.

¶35 **Voss:** And I think that’s a huge difference between William Inge and Tennessee Williams. Inge was not a self-promoter in that sense. He would never have dreamed of taking a name like Missouri Inge or Kansas Inge. Williams was more outer-directed, and Inge was more inner-directed, and when things went bad for Inge, he pulled in even more. He was very happy to let popular media report surface details of his life. When you hit it big, you get all this shallow coverage . . . remember *Current Biography*? Whoever’s “hot” and the “latest,” you read them in such sources. When Inge won a Pulitzer Prize for *Picnic* in 1953, he was in *Current Biography*, and he seemed perfectly happy with its portrayal of this shy man from Kansas who used to be a schoolteacher. That was the public persona that he wanted projected. He didn’t mind publicity if it would help sell stuff. For

example, he was photographed dancing with Marilyn Monroe at some Hollywood club, and he thought that was fine, and the story said he was a good dancer and all. But he was not about to divulge very much. In a sense, he was a “fabulist,” too. But he wanted that very simple kind of homespun image of the Kansas playwright, and the plays backed that up, of course. Everybody liked Ike in the ’50s. It was okay to be from Kansas in the ’50s. He kind of left it at that. It’s like he didn’t want anybody to think that he was sensational or likely to say any kind of outrageous thing. And as for his women . . . Barton mentioned the nice girl?

**Palmer:** Yes.

**Voss:** He knew the “nice girl.” He knew who she was. And Rosemary, the repressed schoolteacher in *Picnic*, the one who rips Hal’s shirt . . . he knew that repressed schoolteacher, too, because he’d seen her in his little town. And he had actually *been* her, himself, teaching in a little Kansas high school. So I think that he was just more subdued than Williams in his creative vision, and that went right down to the way he presented himself. He didn’t want the kind of publicity that might draw more attention to him.

¶36 **Saddik:** They have a question, I believe, in the back?

**From Audience:** It’s just that I’ve been sitting here listening all day long, and I know enough about Tennessee Williams to make me dangerous, and I know even less about William Inge, so thank you. This has been very illuminating. I’m wondering if William Inge perhaps is more limited in terms of his drama. It was great for the ’50s, and that was his time and that was his place, but fifty years from now, will we still be talking about Inge?

**Voss:** I don’t know. I think it’s a great question. I believe part of the staying power of *Picnic*, quite frankly, is because it’s a clean play. And by that I mean it’s been produced probably in every little town in America that’s got a local theatre group, and the most outrageous thing that happens in it is that Hal takes his shirt off. Everything is under the surface. And it has an ensemble cast, so you can give a lot of people a role in it. I think part of its appeal—I don’t mean this as a negative—I think part of its enduring appeal is you can put this play on in Peoria, and people will come out to see it, so there’s that aspect about it. I think that his plays are very much of a time and place, maybe not so much the 1950s as really the 1930s, which is when Inge forged his sensibility. There was a revival of *Picnic* on Broadway not too many years ago, and they just went ahead and set it in the ’30s because that’s where it seems to fit. But there was great appeal for that kind of subdued, subterranean sexuality in plays of the ’50s, and Inge was a master at that, maybe more so than he even realized. He was a playwright of repression. And at the annual Inge Festival, Jackson Bryer said that he thought so many of the plays of the ’50s were really like foreplay because that’s as far as sex could possibly go in the ’50s. All things changed after that in the ’60s. But Inge was the right playwright for that time, and whether or not he’ll endure, I just don’t know. I think he’s going to have a life in theatre as long as people put on his plays. I saw a wonderful production of *Bus Stop* in Greensboro, North Carolina, last fall. *Bus Stop* is a great show. *Picnic* is a great show. And I think that that’s going to continue to resonate. But I’m a little biased.

¶37 **Palmer:** I would just add *Sheba* to the list. I think that *Sheba* is a terrific play, and it doesn’t seem to me to be particularly of the ’50s because it deals with something that endures as a theme, and that is a sexual malaise. I mean, you don’t have to live in the ’50s to feel that. That’s still something you can feel today, even in the post-

sexual-revolution era. And the sense of the life of quiet frustration, of quiet desperation in that play, is certainly something that I think resonates today. I've been teaching that play for twenty years, and I'm always astounded by the way in which today's college students understand the depth of that play: its complexity, the way it deals with the love and hatred and boredom and anger in a marriage. It seems to me that it's a play that will certainly stick around. There's so much in '50s Broadway serious drama that is obviously very dated and that we wouldn't want to see, perhaps, live, but I think *Sheba* and *Picnic*, for sure . . . and *Bus Stop* is still very interesting. I don't think it's that dated either, but it seems to me a little less vital than the other two. Those will endure . . . I hope they will, anyway.

**Voss:** *Sheba* doesn't get produced as much as *Picnic* perhaps partly because you have to have a really good male actor to do Doc's big drunk scene . . . I mean, that's a huge challenge.

**Palmer:** Yes, that's a terrifically hard part, and Burt Lancaster did one film version, and Laurence Olivier did the other one, and neither one of them works particularly well.

¶38 **From Audience:** We're all aware of Williams's international popularity at the time, and I was wondering, John, are there any Inge revivals in France or any place else on the continent? And if not, why do you think that's the case?

**Bak:** There are none to my knowledge. American theatre itself is rather poorly represented in France. There are a select few who are interested in Inge, but if there were ever to be an Inge Revival in France, I fear that I'd be president, vice-president and secretary of the organizing committee . In fact, one thing that I've discovered recently in my own research is that there is no Professor of American Drama in France at all. France looks to England and English drama. American drama, ironically, is better represented in the films. We do find the occasional American play appearing on the French CAPES and Agrégation exams—these are very competitive state exams to become high school and university teachers. We had *Streetcar* a couple of years ago. There was also *Death of a Salesman* some years back. So it crops up now and again, but American drama, as far as the French academy is concerned, is almost nonexistent.

Even in the theatre, with the “Boulevard” in Paris, again, you find more of a fascination with British playwrights, but they're almost always translated into French. You don't find many English-speaking plays performed, even in Paris. For instance, I was in Paris a few months back trying to look for a play to go and see and could not find one in English. I don't even know if Inge has ever been translated into French. I have no idea. It's an interesting question. My guess would be no. Or, if he was, it would not be something that you could lay your hands on right away. Among the American playwrights who do have force in France, Williams is surely one of them, as well as O'Neill and Miller, as one might assume. But that's about it.

¶39 **Saddik:** Any other questions?

**From Audience:** I just have a quick one for John, to close. You mentioned that, while Williams and Inge were having lunch at the Algonquin Hotel, Inge asked Williams the famous question, “Tennessee, don't you feel that you are blocked as a writer?” What was Williams's response?

**Bak:** Well, it's something that Ralph has spent a lot of time on. And [to Voss] do you want to start? I would like to conclude because there is a point that I'd like to mention which would build upon what you have already noted, Ralph. Start out, and then I'll finish up.

**Voss:** I think I'll remember the answer to this better than to the question about that night in Hollywood when Inge tried to get Tennessee committed. They were having lunch at the Algonquin in 1957, and Inge had just had *Dark at the Top of the Stairs* go on Broadway, and it was well-received, so at that point he had written four plays in a row for New York production, and each one of them had been a success. And each one of them had been sold to Hollywood for a significant sum. At the time, Williams had reworked his first play, *Battle of Angels*, into *Orpheus Descending*, which was a failure in New York. Once again, I have this idea that Inge was trying to make things better for his friend, Tennessee, and somehow stepped in the wrong direction. And so here's Inge with all this success, sitting at lunch and saying to Tennessee Williams, "Do you feel you're blocked as a writer?" And this is not something Tennessee wanted to hear from the guy that he had encouraged to write plays, and especially since Williams had given him his agent, as well as his Margo Jones connection. That lunch was one of the high points in the rivalry between the two, and it does plug in to the quotes that John gave from the more recent collection of letters where Williams owns up to being jealous. So you've got a very successful guy who's trying to sound sympathetic and supportive, but it sounds to Williams as though it might be mockery, perhaps a little bit of, "Well, I guess I left you in the dust. I've got another hit, and you don't." And so, that's the context.

¶40 **Bak:** That's right. This is a letter from October 1953 that Williams wrote to Audrey Wood, and in it he says,

Just before I sailed for Europe this time, Bill Inge said to me, Tenn, don't you feel that you are blocked as a writer? I told him that I had always been blocked as a writer but that my desire to write had always been so strong that it broke through the block. But this summer I'm afraid the block has been stronger than I am and the break-through hasn't occurred. The situation is much plainer than the solution. There is a mysterious weakness and fatigue in my work now, the morning energy expires in about half an hour or an hour. I pick it up, artificially, with a stiff drink or two but this sort of "forced" energy is reflected in forced writing, which is often off-key and leaves me each day a little more depleted than the day before. I can't help thinking that there is something physiological at the root of this, some organic trouble that is sapping the physical vitality that I need for good work. I feel so "fagged out" in the evenings that I can hardly stay awake through a good movie and have lost all interest in any evening society but Frank's and Mr. Moon's [his dog].

I think the letter had been published after Ralph's article, so this quote does not appear there, but I think it supports what Ralph has argued, namely that indeed there was some tension there between them over this comment. It wasn't just a casual line that Williams dismissed. I think it hit Williams at the heart.

**Voss:** Yes, I agree.

¶41 **Saddik:** Well, thank you very much. I want to thank our panelists. We're honored to have you here today. And many of you have come from very far away, like John who came from France. And I especially wanted to thank you for coming this year to support the Tennessee Williams Festival and to support New Orleans.

