The Tennessee Williams Annual Review


Number 10

Tennessee Williams and the Mummers of St. Louis: The Birth of a Playwright

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In the summer of 1936, Tom Williams recorded the following entry in his journal:

> Had a very exciting crazy dream last night. Dreamed I was mixed up in a bloody gang war between lefts and rights. Josephine Johnson was slain. This was not wish fulfillment I'm sure as I recall feeling definite sorrow—in the dream—on reading the newspaper accounts of her death. I was on the "left" side but shocked at their atrocities and spent most of my time in running away. I love to run away in dreams—down dark streets and crooked alleys. Only in this dream one of the streets was garishly lighted—it was old Westminster Place with a park in the middle like Forest Park Ave. (*Notebooks*, Aug. 4, 1936)

Though it was only a fantasy, the dream speaks volumes about the reality of the young writer's circumstances on the threshold of a major life change. The "exciting[,] crazy" dream was both frightening and tantalizing. The bloody gang war between left and right in which Tom found himself was not far from the newspaper headlines of the time. Labor organizers were in open hostilities with police in the streets of St. Louis, and Tom was a friend of some of the leaders of the "left," including the radical writer Jack Conroy and controversial artist Joe Jones. He admired his fellow St. Louis poet Josephine Johnson, who, contrary to the dream, was alive and well. As a sign of the turbulent times Johnson had been arrested in Arkansas for encouraging cotton field workers to strike (Hoffman 270). The mourning for Johnson in Tom's dream may have been a displaced concern for the demise of his own career as a poet, because by the end of 1936 he had relinquished that role and begun to identify himself as a playwright.

¶2 Williams's dream of "running away" was also a signature of much of his writing. The images were possibly connected to his fleeing from his family, his sexual confusion, and his frustration with the city of St. Louis, where he had never felt at home. The short play *Summer at the Lake*, written eight months later, which he claimed to be his most personal, depicts young Donald Fenway, who describes his own desperate dream on a fire escape: "I kept running and running, up it and down it, and I never got anywhere! At last I stopped running, I couldn't run any further, and the black iron thing started twisting around me like a snake! I couldn't breathe!" (62).

¶3 It is not surprising that Tom's August 1936 dream of escape led him to the garishly lit Westminster Place, the street on which his family first lived in St. Louis. It was also the street address of the Wednesday Club Auditorium, the building that became home to three of his first plays—*Headlines*, *Candles to the Sun*, and *Fugitive Kind*—and the stage for which he envisioned *Spring Storm* and *Not About Nightingales*. The auditorium was not only Williams's artistic "home"; it also represented conflicting forces in 1930s St. Louis (and in the young artist): bourgeois society and the politically motivated laboring class.

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After the spring semester of 1932, Tom Williams left the University of Missouri at Columbia and returned home to St. Louis, a city reeling from the impact of the Great Depression. "Hoovervilles," great gatherings of

homeless men and women, had grown up along the Mississippi riverfront. Jerry-built shacks were all that protected inhabitants from the elements, and crowded conditions led to festering unrest near the downtown area —including a major riot at City Hall in July of 1932, in which unemployed workers stormed the building throwing bricks. Shots were fired, and several rioters were killed or injured (*Globe Democrat*, July 12, 1932).

¶5 Into this atmosphere Tom returned to his home in the West End, far removed from the ugliness and social instability of the Hoovervilles. Nevertheless, his daily routine took him downtown to the International Shoe Company, and on evenings and weekends he also ventured to the Mercantile Library, the Old Courthouse, and the Blue Lantern Tavern in the shadow of Eads Bridge. During the years from 1932 to 1937 Williams rubbed elbows with characters who were closely connected to the communist politics that supported the abused working class of St. Louis. His close friend Clark Mills McBurney (who went by the nom de plume Clark Mills) was a member of the John Reed Society, a leftist organization for college-aged individuals. Mills worked on a midwestern proletarian literary magazine, *The Anvil*,with Jack Conroy and Wally Wharton. In his essay on Mills, entitled "Return to Dust," Williams recalled weekly meetings with the John Reed Society's affiliated League of St. Louis Artists and Writers that met at the Old Courthouse. Joe Jones, Conroy's roommate and an outspoken artist, was teaching art classes for the unemployed during that time and got the whole group thrown out of the courthouse for painting an incendiary mural (2). As described in *Time* magazine from June 3, 1935, the mural depicted "American Justice, [as] a vivid picture of a prostitute who had been lynched by hooded Ku-Kluxers" *(Time*).

¶6 Incidents of labor strife continued through the 1930s in the St. Louis vicinity. A May 1933 strike by employees of the Funsten Nut Company sparked large demonstrations. In 1934, the Brown Shoe Company in nearby Moberly, Missouri, went on strike, putting Jack Conroy's wife out of work. In April 1936 the American Workers Union staged a sit-in at the St. Louis Board of Aldermen's office, singing "Solidarity Forever." Autoworkers from General Motors and Emerson Electric workers went on strike in early 1937 (Feurer, *Tour*, 21). Throughout this period, the International Shoe Company was making use of ugly strike-breaking tactics to keep its workers in line (Feurer, "Shoe City," 5).

¶7 Through these tumultuous times Tom Williams, in his twenties, found himself poised between the relative comfort of the St. Louis West End and the politicized laborers centered nearer the waterfront. While his father worked as a sales manager in the shoe company's corporate offices, Tom worked in the warehouse among hourly laborers. Some of these shoe workers took roles in the Mummers of St. Louis, an amateur theatre group that performed at the Wednesday Club Auditorium. The juxtaposition of a working-class theatre group performing in the lap of bourgeois society provided the spark that ignited Williams's early creativity, and this tension marks much of Williams's nascent work. His early politically charged plays chafed at middle-class and middle-American conservative values. And even though the overt political content became less pronounced in his later popular successes, his work continued to present an outsider's critique of the complacent ruling class.

¶8 To completely understand the birth of Tom Williams as a playwright, it helps to review a bit of theatre history. American theatre in the 1930s was rich in new ideas, responding to the political and economic circumstances of the Depression by providing a platform for labor and the working class. As the whole world was looking toward Russia to see what would become of the Soviet Revolution, the theatre world had fixated on Konstantin Stanislavski and the Moscow Art Theatre. Stanislavski and company had toured the U.S. in the 1920s, and by 1936 the first volume of his observations on the art of acting, *An Actor Prepares*, was published

in America. The revolutionary nature of Stanislavskian acting lay in depicting life naturally. This naturalistic acting method suited plays that described the ordinary lives of the working class. Although Stanislavski himself was no political revolutionary, his Russian heritage aligned him with the leftist politics that celebrated the working class.

¶9 Not surprisingly, one major thrust in the 1930s was the development of working-class theatre, or "labor theatre," that presented highly political works portraying the downtrodden working class and ending in a call for action—a strike or a communist revolution. The 1935 anthology *Proletarian Literature in the United States* describes the growth of labor theatres:

> During the last year the American theatre world has awakened to a new phenomenon. This is the working class theatre which exists in its midst—or rather, on its geographical fringes. If the new phenomenon isn't liked, it is at least respected. It has vitality, drive, and a fresh slant on life. You can pick up no theatre journal without reading about it. The critic of the *New York Times* states that the revolutionary play is the "most obvious recent development." *Theatre Arts* publishes learned tracts about it. And *Variety*, the trade sheet, whoops it up for the new left drama. (261)

¶10 The labor theatres were amateur organizations, often without theatre buildings of their own, operating "with a few props, a drape, a screen, a home-made spotlight," and performing "short plays, written generally in doggerel, with stylized characters representing the boss, the worker, the militarist, the imperialist nations" (Hicks 261). Clifford Odets's play *Waiting for Lefty* set the standard for the developing labor theatre. It grew out of the Group Theatre that shared a passion for politics as well as the "realistic" theatre of Stanislavski. Hicks identifies the amateur labor theatre groups springing up in "big industrial cities":

> …Now in Chicago, in San Francisco, in Los Angeles, in Boston, Philadelphia and Milwaukee, theatres like the Theatre Union are being formed to prepare for a similar flowering in America. Much of the young and vigorous playwriting talent of the nation is turning to these theatres for an outlet. (261)

Implicit in this enthusiasm for the workers' theatres is a distinction between this kind of "amateur" theatre and the popular professional theatres of Broadway. Indeed, Hicks's respect for amateur theatre was shared by many in the 1930s. *Theatre Arts Monthly*, the major publication addressing the legitimate theatre of the time, used the term "Tributary Theatre" beginning in 1924, according to Edith J. R. Isaacs, to refer to the continuous stream of theatrical endeavor that included high school, university, amateur community theatres, workers' theatres, and other nonprofessional organizations whose efforts enhanced and fed the mainstream professional theatre (*Theatre Arts Monthly*, July 1935, 487). Each year, *Theatre Arts* celebrated innovations in programming, technology, scene craft, and staging, and hailed the development of new playwrights within the world of amateur theatre. In St. Louis, the "Tributary Theatre" included Webster Groves High School, which had a well-equipped auditorium, and the Webster Groves Theatre Guild, an amateur group that sponsored a playwriting contest. Washington University also had a playwriting contest, playwriting classes, and regular productions, as did the University of Missouri at Columbia. The Little Theatre of St. Louis, which filled the niche as producer of popular plays that had been recent hits on the Broadway stage, was not known for its political edge or experimentation in production.

¶11 The July 1936 issue of *Theatre Arts* featured another amateur theatre in St. Louis: the Mummers. A production photo of W. S. Gilbert's *Engaged*, directed by Willard Holland, depicted a stage dominated by an

enormous pair of spectacles through which we see a drawing room setting (501); there was also an announcement that the Mummers would be presenting new plays by their members—*Here We Go Round* by Rita Oberbeck and *I Pledge Allegiance* by Robert Hahnel (562). A progressive group, the Mummers attempted original scenography and encouraged new playwrights. Serious-minded and politically motivated, the Mummers positioned themselves in opposition to the commercial professional theatre and to the escapist, popular fare of the Little Theatre. In his essay "Something Wild," Williams observes:

> The Mummers of St. Louis were my professional youth. They were the disorderly theater group of St. Louis, standing socially, if not also artistically opposite to the usual Little Theatre group…[which was] eminently respectable, predominantly middle-aged, and devoted mainly to the presentation of Broadway hits a season or two after Broadway. (9)

¶12 Under the leadership of Rudolf Gaber, the Mummers began operation in 1929 at the downtown YMCA. Gaber had worked at Chicago's Hull House Theatre; credited as the first little theatre in the U.S., Hull House involved amateur actors in theatre as a means of socialization, cultural enrichment, and creative expression. Gaber had been invited to take a role in the St. Louis YMCA as organizer of theatre activities—and the Mummers grew out of his efforts. The group, which included both male and female members, produced a "well-balanced program" that included "one modern comedy, a modern play, a costume play of the early Christian era and one of the Renaissance period." The group encouraged its members to write original works presented after coffee as "demitasse" theatre (*Globe*, Aug. 2, 1931). In 1931, membership stood at 53 men and 35 women, with four members (according to Gaber) directing theatre groups elsewhere in St. Louis (*Globe*, Aug. 2, 1931).

¶13 In 1933 the group became independent of the YMCA. According to an interview conducted by Allean Hale with Mummers member Adrienne Kindelsperger, the material the Mummers were interested in producing was not in line with YMCA taste. A *Post-Dispatch* announcement of that year stated, "The Mummers will open their sixth session Friday at the Wednesday Club…with Willard H. Holland as director" (*Post-Dispatch*, Nov. 1, 1933). The Wednesday Club auditorium became home to the Mummers for the next six years. As the place where the first full-length plays of Tennessee Williams were performed, it deserves description.

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The Wednesday Club building at 4504 Westminster Place, on the corner of Taylor and Westminster, was designed by the prominent architect Theodore Link in 1908. (The building still stands as the home of The Learning Center, a private educational organization; the women of The Wednesday Club relocated to a new site in the western suburbs in 1971.) Though it has been in continuous use, the building has not been significantly altered since the 1930s. The basement is loaded with old wooden folding chairs. Backstage light fixtures have been converted from gas to safer electric forms. Old scenic flats covered in sturdy canvas line the walls of the stage. The handsomely designed prairie style building features a broad stairway leading up to the entrance on Westminster Place. A small foyer offers gathering space before the audience enters a spacious fan-shaped, 500-seat auditorium. The auditorium is raked so that all seats have a good view of the stage, though four narrow pillars pose a minor obstacle for those seated in the rear of the house. The green leatherette theatre seats are contoured for comfort. Large windows line each wall, lending the room an airy feeling in the daylight hours,

with blinds to shut out light when necessary. The auditorium has solid acoustics so that an actor can be heard in the back row without amplification.

¶15 The stage is raised approximately three feet above the audience level and is thirty feet wide and twenty feet deep. Offstage is an ancient dimmer system of open levers to control the brightness of stage lights. The stage is hung with gold velvet curtains. There are small bathrooms offstage for performers and small dressing rooms with makeup mirrors that can accommodate six to eight performers. In the Mummers' day, the dressing rooms were likely a bit crowded, with more than twenty actors appearing in many plays.

¶16 A crossover hallway connects the dressing rooms and the stage. At some point in the building's history a storage space was added beyond the upstage crossover. A trap door allows access into an unfinished cellar below the stage, while a backstage stairway provides access to the second floor, which is dominated by a large dining room with a sturdy beamed ceiling. Along one side of the dining room is a well-appointed kitchen and a smaller private dining room. Along the other sides of the dining room are smaller sitting rooms.

¶17 A direct forbear of the Wednesday Club was established as a women's social and cultural organization in 1867; the group adopted the name "Wednesday Club" in 1890. Beginning in 1896, the club met at the YMCA at Franklin and Grand but moved into its new home in 1908 (Wednesday Club Archive). Membership included women of the social elite, but the focus was serious and intellectual. Across the street from the formidable Second Presbyterian Church and only a few blocks from St. Louis Cathedral, it was a bastion of respectability. The club building was designed for lectures, readings, and dramatic and musical events in the auditorium, with the upstairs dining rooms reserved for relaxed socializing.

¶18 The neighborhood surrounding the Wednesday Club was rich in significance for the young Tom Williams. As a child, he briefly attended the Second Presbyterian Church. More significantly, the club building stood only a block and a half from the "Glass Menagerie" apartment—the home at 4633 Westminster Place in which the Williams family lived upon moving to St. Louis. (In 2006 the apartment was converted to condos and its name changed to "The Tennessee.") Just around the corner from the Wednesday Club building is the Eugene Field Elementary School, where Tom Williams was bullied by children on the playground. Directly across the street from the school (on Olive Street) is the building that served as rehearsal hall and offices for the Mummers. Also on Olive Street is an indoor swimming pool, the Lorelei (a name Williams used for the ferry in his play *Not About Nightingales*).

¶19 Edwina Williams never attained membership in the Wednesday Club—although, according to longtime club member Luciana Gladney Ross, she was a guest from time to time (Mitchell interview). Certainly Edwina was there, along with Tom's younger brother Dakin, when Tom received a poetry prize (a silver platter) for his *Three Sonnets of Spring* in March 1936. He described the occasion thus: "No stage, no speech. Just a room full of tired, elegant old ladies, a couple of priests and some very young poets" (*Notebooks* 27). Nine months later, in January 1937, the *Post-Dispatch* announced that the club would hear the poems of Williams's friends Clark Mills McBurney and William Jay Smith. The ladies of the Wednesday Club took particular pride in supporting young poets. It was also their policy to rent the space to outside organizations like the Mummers. The Mummers were not the exclusive theatrical producers in the Wednesday Club auditorium, however. The *Post-Dispatch* of January 24, 1937, notes that *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* will be presented by the Children's Theatre Guild on January 30, 31, and February 6, sandwiched between performances of *Doctor for a Dumb Wife* (produced by the Mummers on January 21 and 22) and *Candles to the Sun* (presented March 18 and 20).

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Thomas Lanier Williams, the homegrown playwright, saw three of his plays staged by the Mummers at the Wednesday Club Auditorium. Williams first mentions the Mummers' Willard Holland in his notebooks on September 22, 1936, when he brings the director his full-length play, *Candles to the Sun*, crafted out of a shorter work begun by Joseph Phelan Hollifield, a friend of Williams's grandfather in Memphis (Isaacs xxiii). Though the play is set in the coal mines of Alabama, it was probably enriched and informed by some of the labor strife of St. Louis and may also have been influenced by mine disasters in Missouri and Illinois.

¶21 Intrigued by this work—and probably aware of Tom's prize-winning play, *The Magic Tower*, being staged by the nearby Webster Groves Theatre Guild—Holland asked Williams to write a short curtain-raiser for the Mummers' Armistice Day production of Irwin Shaw's antiwar play *Bury the Dead*, sponsored by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (*Globe*, Nov. 13, 1936). Williams and Holland pounced upon a story that was all over the St. Louis papers and had even made it to theOctober 11 *New York Times*: two Washington University students were losing their scholarships for sending out letters to incoming freshmen encouraging them to avoid ROTC training (*Post-Dispatch*, Oct. 6, 1936). The campus administration came down hard on the students, Don Ellinger and Phillip Moneypenny, prompting debate in the public forums of the day (Oct. 2, 7). Williams weighed in with a thirty-minute political sketch titled *Headlines*.

¶22 This first collaboration between Williams and Holland opened on November 11, 1936, little more than a month after Holland proposed the idea. In reporting the progress of *Headlines*, Williams enthused that Holland was a "genius." The night after the play opened, however, Tom's journal entry said the piece was "botched." It is not clear whether he laid the blame at the director's feet or at his own. The script seems to have been lost, but the program indicates that the play was composed of four scenes:

> A. Senator McDougherty to Dedicate Memorial Auditorium in Armistice Day Address
>
> B. Magnus returns from Europe: Says "Nobody Wants War."
>
> C. Allison's C. M. E. O. Activities Result in Dismissal from University.
>
> D. Mrs. David Arthur Oakwell to Preside at Meeting. (*Dictionary of Literary Biography*, 35)

The ten characters included an Announcer, Senator McDougherty, Reporter, Magnus, Allison (the student), Dean Harcourt, Dr. Aimwell, Dr. Barrett, Mrs. Oakwell, and Robert Green. (Sam Halley Jr., who played Allison, would play students in two subsequent Mummers productions of Williams plays: Luke in *Candles to the Sun* and Leo in *Fugitive Kind*.)

¶23 In the rehearsals for *Headlines*, Williams made the acquaintance of Rita Oberbeck, another Washington University student and aspiring playwright who had just seen her short play, *Here We Go Round*, staged by the Mummers. She later described Tom Williams as a quiet and unassuming figure—and recalled that the "shy young man" she knew only as "Tom" had invited her to join him in writing either *Headlines* or *Candles to the Sun*. She turned him down, feeling she had her hands full with her own play. Oberbeck observed, however, that she was the first person to pay Tom Williams a royalty for a play. She says she gave him $25 for *Candles to the Sun*. By April 1937, Oberbeck took over the education department for the St. Louis Ladies Garment Workers Union. In that position she returned to the Wednesday Club to stage Sidney Kingsley's *Dead End*, as well as her own ambitious adaptation of Vice President Henry Wallace's speech "The Century of the Common Man," featuring performers from the ILGWU (Oberbeck papers, box 1, folder 1).

¶24 Shortly after the production of *Headlines*, Holland agreed to stage *Candles to the Sun*, the coal mining play. The work is structured in ten scenes, alternating between the cabins of Bram Pilcher and his grown daughter, Star. Betraying Tom's lack of training as a playwright, the story sprawls across twenty years and encompasses the deaths of two sons. With only two simple cabin interiors, which could be changed easily behind a curtain or established on opposite sides of the proscenium stage, *Candles to the Sun* was well suited for the Wednesday Club stage. Most scenes have no more than three to five characters onstage at once. Fortunately, since the stage would not accommodate the whole cast of twenty-four actors onstage for long periods, only a few brief scenes require large groups.

¶25 The play called for dim, pre-dawn lighting, with an interior lit by a coal oil lamp. The only technical challenge is in the play's climactic scene, in which a band of terrorists invades Star Pilcher's cabin to confront the union organizer, Birmingham Red. The stage directions instruct that the terrorists smash the burning lamp on the cabin floor—but doing so would have posed an impossible fire hazard. Chances are that Willard Holland substituted some equally violent but more dramaturgically prudent action. Whatever the solution, the play was a hit with St. Louis reviewers. Colvin McPherson of the *Post-Dispatch* observed that Williams, a "25 year-old Washington University senior is revealed not only as a writer of unusual promise but one of considerable technical skill right now. His theme is spread in realistic, swift strokes, with sound knowledge of locale and a mature appreciation of human affairs" (Mar. 19, 1937).

¶26 After the success of *Candles to the Sun*, Holland seemed eager to consider another play by Williams. Tom shared a new work-in-progress called *April Is the Cruelest Month*, its title drawn from T. S. Eliot—whose boyhood home, coincidentally, also stood on Westminster Place. (The play would eventually develop into *Spring Storm*.) Though Holland showed interest in *April*, it was another new work, *Fugitive Kind*, that the Mummers produced next. Set in a flophouse on the St. Louis waterfront, *Fugitive Kind* depicts an ensemble of transients and focuses on a love affair between Glory Gwendlebaum, the daughter of the flophouse proprietor, and Terry Meighan, a criminal on the lam. In the mix—echoes of *Headlines*, here—is a troubled young writer who has run afoul of his college administrators by speaking out against the ROTC. Though the play is melodramatic and borrows many character types and stock plot devices from gangster movies of the day, it is another example of how, even early in his career, Williams was depicting fascinating, strong women and writing achingly beautiful verbal arias.

¶27 Production circumstances were much different this time around. Holland had traveled to Hollywood for a summer screen test, and some of the loyal Mummers were sensing betrayal. Williams, too, had abandoned St. Louis, leaving for Iowa City in mid-September of 1937, little more than a month before *Fugitive Kind* went into rehearsal. Holland and Williams conferred on the script through the spring and summer—but once Williams left for Iowa all subsequent consultation was long distance. In response to rehearsal insights from Holland, Williams wrote an extensive letter agreeing to changes or suggesting alternatives. The playwright was particularly concerned about "atmospheric touches" relating to one particular set element: a large window overlooking an impersonal and foreboding city covered in a New Year's snowfall. Related imagery is richly embroidered into the monologues of the major characters.

¶28 Although Holland had satisfied Williams's visual sensibility in *Candles to the Sun*, his production fell short with *Fugitive Kind*. In particular, the great window and the atmospheric effects were not what the playwright had envisioned, and he faulted the design for the poor critical notices. Jane Garrett, one of the actors in the play,

related that, distraught by the unsuccessful scenic depiction, Williams threatened to kill himself by jumping out of the rehearsal room window—until the actress reminded him that they were on the first floor (Hale xix).

¶29 Despite the playwright's dramatic disappointment, the production brought positive attention to the Mummers. The young writer was "their" playwright. In their press for *Fugitive Kind*, the Mummers trumpeted the fact that this was their resident writer's second play, following on the success of *Candles to the Sun*. In the program for *Fugitive Kind* they proudly claimed a mission of supporting local talents like Tom Williams. Tom maintained a relationship with the Mummers even after he left St. Louis. In 1938 Anne Jennings, in charge of Mummers' publicity, wrote to the student playwright—now at the University of Iowa—asking him to contact newspapers to help promote the Mummers' upcoming production of Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*. Williams had a good relationship with St. Louis reviewers and an air of celebrity—and he responded to Jennings's request by writing forcefully on behalf of the little amateur theatre group that had given him his start (*Letters* 135).

¶30 After *Fugitive Kind*, Williams continued to correspond with Willard Holland about producing *Spring Storm* and also shared the script for *Not About Nightingales*, which he had written as a class assignment at Iowa. Holland adapted *Me, Vashya*—the odd, short, political play Williams had written at Washington University—into a radio drama that was presented by actors from the Mummers *(Letters* 147). But by 1939, the Mummers were disintegrating as a coherent group. Holland went to Hollywood, and when he returned the troupe briefly regrouped under the name "Town Square Players," producing plays on the roof of the Langan Storage Building.[1]

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Three things are significant about Williams's earliest actualized productions. First, in the Mummers, he benefited from working with an established, consistent ensemble of players. The group's board of directors in 1936 and 1937 included individuals who also played major roles in one or more of his plays; for example, board member Viola Perle played Mrs. Oakwell in "Headlines," Fern in *Candles*, and Glory in *Fugitive Kind*. Frank Novotny played Senator McDougherty in "Headlines," Sean in *Candles*, and Tex in *Fugitive Kind* (DLB, 35; Leverich, 45). Second, he worked with a director whom he trusted and respected for inventiveness and creativity. Willard Holland guided the young playwright in fine-tuning the text as it took a final form. Third, the theatre space in which the plays were first performed was of adequate size and quality to support a young playwright's ambitious scenic needs and to ignite his theatrical imagination.

¶32 The two full-length plays, *Candles to the Sun* and *Fugitive Kind*, both had large casts: twenty-three in *Candles to the Sun* and twenty-six in *Fugitive Kind*. Williams also wrote for casts of twenty-four in both of the other plays he proposed to Holland: *Spring Storm* (*April Is the Cruelest Month*) and *Not About Nightingales*. Paradoxically, working with an amateur theatre group made the large casts more manageable for a novice playwright. In these large ensembles even the small roles were distinctive and gave the actors a challenge in characterization. For example, *Candles to the Sun* includes such substantive small roles as Whitey and Ethel Sunter, religious fanatics, and Sean O'Connor, a reactionary hothead. *Fugitive Kind* features the guitar-playing Texans, Pete and Rocky, two young tramps who scrawl nonsense on the flophouse walls, and Abel White, a psychotic firebug. In *Spring Storm* and *Not About Nightingales*, Williams also created intriguing individual characters in the ensemble. These mostly small roles make his early plays actor-friendly, with details and

peculiarities that amateur actors could sink their teeth into. The small parts also reflect the playwright's appreciation for multi-dimensional characters and a respect for the kind of truthful, detailed acting that had developed out of the Stanislavskian influence.

¶33 Williams's appreciation for acting talent is also evident in the way he wrote plays with particular actors in mind. In both *Candles* and *Fugitive Kind* Willard Holland played the leading man, and Sam Halley Jr. the leftist student role. In both *Candles* and *Fugitive Kind*, the young woman who serves as the play's emotional rock was portrayed by Viola Perle. Even as a young playwright, Williams appreciated acting talent and was able to write with particular individuals' strengths in mind.

¶34 Willard Holland was older than Tom Williams—and by the time they worked together, Holland had been directing the Mummers for six years, often playing leading roles in his own productions. Williams heaped praise on Holland for his inspired ideas (*Notebooks* 65, 75). Although the young playwright met with the director of *The Magic Tower* at the Webster Groves Theatre Guild, no relationship developed that could compare to his relationship with Holland (*Notebooks* 57). Nor is there any real mention of the production of *The Magic Tower* —admittedly a trifling play, compared to those staged by the Mummers—in Williams's journal or letters. This gives further emphasis to the importance of the relationship and collaboration between Williams and Holland.

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Williams is known for his appreciation of the "plastic theatre," the three-dimensional theatrical space shaped by scenery, lights, costumes, sound, and the staging and movement of actors. Even in his first full-length works with the Mummers, he showed concern for the physical space and the staging of the works. *Candles to the Sun* is set in two cabins. Establishing the time of day is usually important to Williams, and he often describes the quality of light. In particular, the playwright's description of the closing moments of scene 4 indicate his sense of how lighting, sound, staging, etc., come together to make "theatrical" moments:

> (*The door is drawn slowly open, admitting a bar of moonlight; they go out; then it is drawn slowly closed. The music comes again more distinctly as though carried up by the wind. Then it fades almost into silence. After a moment Luke's voice is heard calling.)*
>
> Luke: Star—Star!
>
> (*The door is pushed open. He calls her again. He sees she is gone. Then he goes off down the road, still calling her name. The fiddles continue playing.)*
>
> Curtain. (53)

¶36 In *Fugitive Kind*, Williams describes the scene in specific detail and discusses how the space should be treated for theatrical effects:

> *Scene: The lobby of a flophouse in a large Middle Western city. Outside the door, an arc lamp projects a bright electronic bow, spotlighting the passing characters. A large glass window admits a skyline of the city whose towers are outlined at night by a faint electric glow, so that we are always conscious of the city as a great implacable force, pressing in upon the shabby room and crowding its fugitive inhabitants back against their wall.*
>
> *A stair is visible with a red bulb at the first landing.... When lighted the set is realistic. But during the final scenes of the play, where the mood is predominantly lyrical, the stage is darkened, the realistic details are lost—the great window, the red light on the landing and the shadow walls make an almost impressionistic background.* (3)

Both of these examples indicate that the young writer had a strong theatrical image in mind. His descriptions of locale include a sense of space, light, sound, and the mood evoked by the combined effect of all elements. He must have had some sense that the Mummers would be able to create this on the small stage of the Wednesday Club Auditorium. The synergistic relationship between the young poet, Tom Williams, and the adventurous Mummers led to the transformation of poet into playwright—as exemplified by the way Williams crafted an ensemble of characters in each of the early plays; by his reliance on strong actors from the company; by his student-mentor relationship with Willlard Holland; and by his faith in the scenographic potential of the little theatre group.

¶37 As he had recorded in that "exciting crazy dream" of August 1936, Williams found himself in the midst of a war between "left and right." He was positioned between conflicting worlds (his past in the old neighborhood on Westminster Place and his future as a playwright) and contrasting groups (the ruling-class matrons of the Wednesday Club ladies and the politically vibrant members of the Mummers). He was emerging as a playwright and maturing as a writer. Without the artistic home provided by the Mummers, he might not have made the transition so dramatically. His early successes gave him the confidence to move forward to write with the boldness found in *Spring Storm* and *Not About Nightingales*. The sexually provocative and theatrically daring strokes in *Battle of Angels* owe a debt to the frankness in *Fugitive Kind* and *Candles to the Sun*. Because of his accomplishments with the Mummers, Williams was finally able to "run away" from St. Louis and make a career as an American playwright.

Notes

[1] Some confusion has existed due to an article by Jack Balch, a St. Louis journalist whose reminiscences about Williams's theatrical infancy described the theatre-in-the-round on the Langan roof as the Mummers' playing space (15). The Mummers group that produced Williams's plays performed in the Wednesday Club auditorium, not the rooftop space.

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