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A Reading of *The Reading*

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The Reading, a previously unpublished one-act play by Tennessee Williams, was submitted to New Directions for publication by his agent Audrey Wood in September 1971, the year Williams unceremoniously fired her. When the play (along with two other one-acts, *Green Eyes* and *Demolition Downtown*) reached New Directions offices, the resulting in-house correspondence between New Directions founder and publisher James Laughlin and editor Robert MacGregor details their ambivalence over whether these three plays merited publication in a separate volume—or at all. Though both men agreed the plays should ultimately be published, Laughlin found all three submissions “rather slight.” He preferred *Green Eyes* to the other two plays and wondered if the short dramas would “do much for Tennessee’s reputation at this stage.” MacGregor mostly agreed with Laughlin, but he wrote to Wood that he “may be a little more enthusiastic about *The Reading*” than was his boss. *Demolition Downtown* was published in *Esquire* later that year and again by New Directions in 1981. *Green Eyes* was eventually included in *The Traveling Companion and Other Plays* (New Directions, 2008).

¶2 This short play, like many relatively obscure Williams one-acts, is part of a larger scheme—in this case, the full-length *Vieux Carré*. It is not surprising to discover that this one-act organically relates to a better-known play. Archival investigations, especially over the last decade, have resulted in the publication and performance of several previously neglected one-act plays that are akin to their more-famous full-length cousins, such as *The Pretty Trap* (*The Glass Menagerie*), *Interior: Panic* (*A Streetcar Named Desire*), as well as one-act versions of *The Rose Tattoo* and *The Night of the Iguana*. A surprising aspect of these short plays is that they are not merely truncated “outtakes” of full-length works but rather self-contained dramas, often featuring variant dialogue and plotting, particularly in terms of their conclusions. Fittingly, all of these recently discovered typescripts have been published in this journal and have been performed at various theatres across the United States.

¶3 Williams’s plays often began with a single, compelling image—his clay that he might remold for years. As he said in a 1981 interview, “If a play grips me, I’ll continue to work on it until I reach a point where I can no longer decide what to do with it. Then I’ll discontinue work on it.” Biographical material reveals that Williams revised many of his plays even when, to everyone else’s thinking, they were complete. This artistic devotion—or obsession—is certainly evident in the myriad versions of *Vieux Carré*, a play begun in 1939, during Williams’s first visit to New Orleans, and revised—through no fewer than ten different stages of development—up until just weeks before the author’s death, when he was collaborating in an off-off-Broadway production. In one 1973 unpublished draft of *Vieux Carré*, the Leading Actor says, “I thought this play was locked.” The actress playing Jane retorts, “Plays are never locked up till indicted and convicted.” When one considers Williams’s decades-long preoccupation with his early French Quarter sojourns, which resulted in dozens of stories, plays, and poems, it would appear that the memories absorbed during his initial visits to New Orleans were never completely “incarcerated.”

¶4

The Reading should not be regarded as merely an “extract” of *Vieux Carré*, however, because the dialogue, situation, and characters, though similar to some other versions of the longer play(s), are not merely replicated here.¹ However these plays may differ in their intricacies, constantly present among all the versions are Jane and Tye, two of the most intriguing characters in the entire Williams canon. (Interestingly, in one version they are named Virginia and Paul and were written expressly for JoAnne Woodward and Paul Newman.) Williams’s *dramatis personae* are often embellished realizations of people whom he actually knew well, or at least had some association with, and his acquaintance with Jane and Tye most probably goes back to his second visit to New Orleans in 1941. As the playwright told William Burroughs in a 1977 interview, the 722 Toulouse Street boarding house (the setting for all versions of *Vieux Carré*) did not furnish all the characters for the play. “The events in that house did actually take place ... [but] there are two characters in it, a boy and a girl, whom I knew later in another house, not that one.”

¹⁵ *The Reading* is structured as a play-within-a-play, with two actors auditioning for their respective parts. Their script centers on Jane’s depiction of a mysterious merchant whom she believes (or wants to believe) will rescue her from penury and dependence on Tye. The play’s only other characters are Two Voices presiding over the audition, as well as a stage manager named Mr. Eckhart, who has no lines. The thin plot also involves Jane’s advancing leukemia (named here but only poetically described in *Vieux Carré*) and her futile attempt to abandon Tye to run off with her wealthy suitor. But by the play’s end she comes to the conclusion that “I don’t give a damn about the responsible man” who might possibly extricate her. In fact, the conversation between Jane and Tye casts so much uncertainty about this “responsible man” that we come to doubt his actual existence, especially since Jane remains so vague about him (Does he trade in bananas or coffee? Will he actually show up? What is his name?). As with Blanche’s delusion toward the end of *Streetcar*—that Shep Huntleigh will come to her rescue—Jane’s white knight, her “responsible man,” probably exists only as a fabricated desire.

¹⁶ *The Reading*’s metadramatic structure; the sometimes incomplete, staccato sentences; the ironic, intertextual reflections on the script; the actors’ breaking in and out of character—all suggest a writer playfully tinkering with form and convention, as well as with the vagaries of tryouts. Consider especially the play’s delicious final line, when the actor auditioning for Tye—now described as “Tye’s Voice,” thus *removed from* that character yet paradoxically remaining *in* character—hurls the script at the appraising Voices, exclaiming, “Cotton candy, that’s what your goddamn play is!” Is this characteristic outburst the actor’s spontaneous, final attempt to “Tye up” the audition successfully? Might the actor be giving voice to the current theatre critics, who had by this time savagely disparaged Williams’s more experimental efforts? Or could this exclamation be an ironic, self-effacing comment by Williams about his late work? Unfortunately, we cannot ask the playwright these questions, but we can now honor his wish—going back to 1971—to have *The Reading* published and performed.