

# The Tennessee Williams Annual Review

## An Interview with Douglas McKeown on the Production of *Kirche, Kutchen, und Kinder*, 1979

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The Jean Cocteau Repertory Company staged the world premiere of Tennessee Williams's *Kirche, Kutchen, und Kinder* at the start of its ninth season at the Bouwerie Lane Theatre on September 14, 1979. The play was scheduled to run until September 23, but, having the honor of showcasing a new Williams work off Broadway, Eve Adamson, the Cocteau's artistic director, extended performances through April 1980 with a rotating repertoire. By Williams's request, though, *Kirche* was to have no formal opening but play only to the Cocteau's subscription audience—not to the critics, who had savagely disparaged his other experimental plays in the dailies. In an open letter, dated August 30, 1979, presumably addressed to these critics, Craig V. Smith, who was in charge of press relations for the Cocteau and who played "Man" in *Kirche*, announced that the play was "Tennessee Williams's new work in progress" and offered the following diplomatic explanation about why it was not open to reviewers:

Throughout the rehearsal period and, we anticipate, into the performance schedule *Kirche, Kutchen, und Kinder* will be undergoing substantial rewriting and reshaping by Mr. Williams and Ms. Adamson, as the term "work-in-progress" implies. We have agreed that Mr. Williams has full discretion on selecting an opening date. When that decision has been made, we will offer as many performances for review as possible, which hopefully will not conflict with your busy schedule. (Smith)

Although Williams had offered the play to the Cocteau and had certainly met with Adamson, his own schedule precluded the extensive rewrites that Smith forecasted. *Kirche* opened while Williams was preoccupied readying *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* for its Broadway premiere.

<sup>12</sup> Williams was very pleased with the *Kirche* premiere; in fact, Adamson and the Cocteau remained high on his list of preferred directors and theaters. Two years before they staged *Kirche*, the Cocteau produced *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*, which received a hearty approval from Williams. The group included his endorsement in brochures announcing their tenth season, in which *Kirche* and *Bar* played back to back: "*In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* [has been] brilliantly revived by the Jean Cocteau Repertory at the Bouwerie Lane Theatre—and I was just as pleased [with it] as I was at the opening nights on Broadway of *Menagerie* and *Streetcar*" (program).

<sup>13</sup> Sketching in the back-story of how the Cocteau was able to stage a world premiere of a new Tennessee Williams play, Adamson reported that she had first met him when a German television crew wanted to film him reading his essays and chose the Cocteau's Bouwerie Lane location for the setting (Patterson 13). After learning that the Cocteau had already done productions of *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Bar*, Williams suggested that they produce *Bar* again. He was so delighted by the performance that he instructed his agent at the time, Mitch Douglas, to send the script of *Kirche* to Adamson (Patterson 13). Two years later, in July 1981, he sent still another script—*Something Cloudy, Something Clear*—which premiered at the Cocteau, bestowing on him the title of playwright-in-residence at the Bouwerie Lane. In a 1981 interview, Williams explained why he chose the

Off Broadway Cocteau rather than a Broadway premiere for *Something Cloudy*, again showering accolades on Adamson and the company:

I met Miss Adamson and her repertory company through their brilliantly luminous and concise revival of one of my least popular plays, the one which all but entirely took off from the earth's remaining stability as I myself was at the point of doing in the last year of the Sixties. I refer to *In The Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*. In a work written under such conditions...the playwright is the voice of his unconscious mind....In Eve Adamson, I discovered a director...[who could] take the coded messages of a collapsing reality and make intelligible meaning of them. Miss Adamson has the power to interpret and make an integrated and sympathetic stage presentation of a building photographed in the frozen instant of its act of falling. (Williams, "Something Tennessee")

Emphasizing her "equally remarkable feat" in directing *Kirche*, Williams declared that "Adamson took a play that was a work in progress and [with] characters that would horrify The Moral Majority, [and] she staged it, with such inventiveness, both lyric and comic, that it played to good houses" (Williams, "Something Tennessee").

<sup>14</sup> To say that *Kirche* would "horrify" the "Moral Majority" is a quintessential Williams understatement. With the exception of *The Incredible Rooming House of Mme. LeMonde*, no other play of his could match *Kirche* in vulgarity. Ranking as one of Williams's most bawdy, grotesque, and parodic plays, *Kirche* ferociously attacked organized religion, the theater, and the critical establishment that had vilified his later works and dismissed them as bad versions of *Menagerie*, *Streetcar*, and *Summer and Smoke*. He rightfully subtitled *Kirche* "*An Outrage for the Stage*." A cursory summary indicates why.

<sup>15</sup> In Manhattan's Soho District, a gay hustler/father and sometime-priest of mythical Irish descent pretends to be an invalid but does somersaults when no one is looking. He educates his twins (who have dropped out of kindergarten after 15 years) to become prostitutes. He is married to an axe-swinging *hausfrau* who speaks with a Katzenjammer dialect and who fights with her Lutheran pastor/father, a man who rapes a 99-year-old woman whom he had previously impregnated. In one comically horrific scene, he mounts her on stage after sliding a huge Bible under her derriere. As the character Hotsy, Harris Berlinsky brought the house down with his ribald humor. Amid all this grotesque hilarity, Miss Rose, a saintly reincarnation of Williams's sister, wanders in and out of the script sweetly playing an organ. Given such a mélange of grotesqueries, Williams perceptively realized that *Kirche* was "unlikely to surface again during my time." There do not appear to have been any other professional productions of *Kirche* save that at the Bouwerie Lane. In fact, the play remained unpublished until mid 2008 when Annette Saddik included it in her edition of *Traveling Companion and Other Plays*.

<sup>16</sup> With a few exceptions, the critics have bypassed *Kirche* as well. In what has become a landmark article, Linda Dorff labeled the play a "theatricalist cartoon" reflecting camp techniques and characters. She argues that the play contains "the outrageous use of the theatricalized animated cartoon [which] functions as a parodic cry of outrage that subverts the authority of the family and the theatre by transgressing the boundaries of what is regarded on Broadway as good taste" (22). In an equally perceptive analysis of the play, Roy Huss pointed out that *Kirche* "seeks to dramatize the discontinuous and shattered selves of our increasingly narcissistic culture" (181). Allean Hale has also focused on *Kirche* as part of Williams's later canon (26), and Annette Saddik has profitably linked the play to an Artaudian Theatre of Cruelty ("The Inexpressible" 6). Now that the text of *Kirche* is available, the play may attract even more attention, especially in the ways it stages the "collapsing reality" of the artist's subconscious mind. Despite its outrageous antics, however, *Kirche* documents Williams's

lifelong struggle between the spirit (the lyrical) and the flesh (slapstick and the bawdy). Though Williams characterized *Kirche* as “its author’s Rabelaisian antics” (“Something Tennessee”), paradoxically *Kirche* contains some of his most lyrical later passages, especially those surrounding Miss Rose’s performance on stage.

¶17 Vital to understanding this contentious script is learning how the Cocteau brought Williams’s ideas to life on stage. Douglas McKeown, the Cocteau’s set and costume designer, working with Adamson, was given that challenge. The following interview with McKeown, conducted in the winter of 2008–9, addresses a wealth of issues ranging from practical matters of theater to theories of postmodern art.

### Interview with Douglas McKeown

¶18 PCK: The theater world was saddened by the death of Eve Adamson in 2006. What was it like working with her on *Kirche*?

DM: One reason Eve and I worked well together was my experience as a director. I knew where she was coming from, so to speak. I was not a specialist in design, by any means. But I think in Eve’s mind I fit Jean Cocteau’s concept of a man of the theater. By the time I arrived at the Cocteau in 1976, I had about 10 years’ experience directing and designing productions for schools, summer stock, and community theaters, as well as working as a filmmaker and make-up designer. I was also a writer and a teacher. When *Kirche* came along, Eve and I had been working together for about three years, so she was comfortable with me. I should add that we shared a taste for the grotesque. That fact, and the skill I’d developed for whipping up fanciful imagery from mundane materials, probably made me the right designer for this low-budget production of Tennessee’s overtly theatrical piece.

¶19 PCK: Would you describe your interactions with Adamson and Williams during rehearsals?

DM: I did not interact with Williams on this production. That would happen later on, with *Something Cloudy*. I don’t remember why not exactly, except I had the impression that Tennessee was busy with his Broadway play and so would leave this offering to Eve and the designer she had chosen—me! In reading *Kirche*, I found the scenes easy to picture right away, just like a cartoon, and I mostly just followed Tennessee’s lead on paper. His writing is highly visual, tactile, sensuous—his words leave the page in a way you can almost feel them. Eve and I talked more than once about Tennessee as a visual artist, the fact that he painted and so forth, and she and I eagerly discussed the cinematic feel of the play and how I wanted to achieve it.

¶10 PCK: How would you characterize your overall designs for Cocteau productions, including *Kirche*?

DM: None of my stage designs for the Cocteau was ever really “representational,” since the kind of play revivals done there did not require realistic scenery, and the restrictions of the space did not permit it, anyway. I can’t say how much those restrictions influenced Eve’s choice of plays, and, alas, we can’t ask her. But it meant following a design culture of reductions or abstractions, alternatives, fabrications—less always being more. Consequently, I dealt with the visual equivalents of psychological and emotional values in *Kirche* and other plays more than with the solid reality of windows, doors, and stairways—though reality always makes its demands, doesn’t it? In general, my job was coming up with imagery and sets that evoked and sustained the

*Kirche* environment by using the minimum, those indispensable props and locations Tennessee referred to in the script.

¶11 PCK: What were the specific scene or set requirements that Williams indicated were necessary to stage *Kirche*?

DM: Tennessee was very precise in his directions. He wanted there to be two main playing areas—the “chambered nautilus,” or the kirche, the church, the Man’s domain; and the kutchen, the Wife’s territory. He saw the design for these places in primary colors of red, blue, and yellow, I assume because of the lurid nature of this “outrage for the stage.” In specifying such vibrant colors, it seemed to me Williams wanted to distance the play from reality and to make it look almost like a coloring book, or cartoon—I imagine he did this to match or accentuate the play’s obviousness, while making it easier to serve up the intended puerility to an audience that might otherwise resist it.

¶12 PCK: Was the Cocteau stage large enough to encompass these two places in addition to Williams’s other images?

DM: Tennessee had initially thought that the play should be done with two separate places on stage, but the Bouwerie Lane was quite small, without wings or fly space. Basically, it was a black box, approximately as deep as it was wide, with a curtained-off area upstage that had a loft area above it, which we referred to as the “Number Four.” Since we could not put both spaces side by side on our stage, I came up with the idea of designing the three primary-colored “walls” of the kirche as giant Venetian blinds, demarcating the playing areas by having the kutchen set revealed from behind one of them, and by taking all color out of the kutchen, making that look like a black and white movie. The Wife’s domain, consequently, would be drab and grim in contrast with the Man’s kirche, which would always be extra colorful and alive.

¶13 PCK: How exactly did you accomplish this?

DM: The three walls—red, blue, and yellow indicated in the script—would serve as the main design element against what might be called the usual Cocteau’s “black limbo.” This meant that the kirche was the main playing area, with a raked platform left of center on which Miss Rose’s organ was placed. But Eve and I decided early on to dispense with the many “high church” items Tennessee suggested in the script: altar, candles, etc. To keep it simple I let the organ suggest the church ambience. Given the limits of our stage, this worked just fine.

¶14 PCK: Did you encounter any problems in carrying out your design?

DM: Not at first. The biggest problem had been how quickly and effectively to change scenes between the kirche and the kutchen. This I thought I solved with the Venetian blind concept. When the shutters shifted to the open position, just like regular blinds, the colors of the blinds would seem to fade. Behind the slats of the red wall and the slats of the yellow one, audiences could see through to the black velvets hanging upstage, making both walls seem virtually to disappear. But through the blue wall of blinds, stage right, the audience would first glimpse the kutchen concealed behind it, just before the entire wall rose, at that point fully revealing the stove, chair, et cetera. With a well-timed crossfade of lights, presto! The technicolor kirche would fade into the

shadows, leaving the tiny, isolated black-and-white kitchen visible. The process would then reverse itself for the kitchen scenes. I thought the shifting blinds would make the transitions similar to the effect of a movie dissolve from one scene to the other, the whole effect reminiscent of when Dorothy goes from black and white to color and back again in *The Wizard of Oz*.

¶15 PCK: In stressing the moving frames of Tennessee's cartoons, was it easy to effect this cinematic transformation?

DM: In practice, the shift to the open position went smoothly enough for all three walls, but raising that wall stage right turned out to be a horror. Once we'd built it, the question became how to get the power required to haul it up. Due to the plastic material I had chosen, the combined weight of the many lengthy slats of quarter-inch hard plastic made raising it a suspenseful nightly trial backstage. I was afraid to go back and watch our technician, Tom Keever, make these difficult, heavy scene changes. But he had ingeniously contrived a sort of counterweight-and-pulley system, with his own body becoming the counterweight! He would don heavy gloves, grab hold of the cable, and jump off the Number Four to provide enough weight to lift the whole thing at once. I hoped the cable wouldn't snap. Throughout the run of the play, these were never the smooth transitions I had envisioned, nor were they ever silent.

PCK: Did the noise unintentionally add something to the production, perhaps enhancing Williams's purpose?

DM: (*laughing*) Possibly.

¶16 PCK: What about Williams's imagery? How did you realize it on stage?

DM: Working with Eve, I continually had to adapt to the Cocteau's small space and miniscule budget to create a limiting concept that, paradoxically, freed us up to approach a script more imaginatively, more visually. For instance, the guiding motif I presented her for our 1977 *Hamlet* was a circus ring, all the action being forced to connect to that performance circle, either within it, outside of it, or above it, even on its rim—a kind of theater in the round in the middle of the Bouverie Lane's little proscenium, an echo of the play-within-the-play. When I first read *Kirche*, aside from being surprised by how outrageous yet obvious it was, I was struck by how visually organic Tennessee's stage directions were. I had always been ready to supply a symbolic prop such as Duke Senior's great tree created from robes of court for Eve's production of *As You Like It* (my interpretation only, since of course no such idea is indicated by Shakespeare), but here Tennessee linked his props to character. For example, in *Kirche* he had spelled out Freudian abstractions like Miss Rose's pipe organ. The character of Miss Rose never speaks—just as Tennessee's actual sister Rose's metaphorical voice was forever muted—yet her music accompanies the Man, who almost never shuts up!

¶17 PCK: How did you envision the symbolic "Giant Daisy of the Day" and the "Night Blooming Vine," the two symbols that Williams saw as integral to *Kirche*?

DM: I wanted them to appear so gradually during a scene that the audience wouldn't actually perceive movement. Clearly these two props symbolized the passing of time. The gigantic daisy, which opened up in the morning, was five to six feet in diameter and constructed as a huge inside-out or backward umbrella that opened

outward to reveal bright flower petals. It was made of a shiny vinyl or plastic sheeting, in keeping with the other surfaces on stage. The other leading image, the long night-blooming vine, was more suggestive. I fashioned it freehand of foam latex covering heavy wire in two extended segments, twisted together and tapering down to curling tendrils. It was manipulated from behind the black velvets the way the daisy grew, very slowly, so as not to pull focus from the scene. The idea was that it would make its way searchingly and insinuatingly down the back wall. One could not escape the phallic implications of this prop. I believe I spray painted it in shades of violet-purple-lavender, but so as not to be too obvious, I included details such as leafy offshoots, small flowers, et cetera. I saw it as a sort of a Jack-in-the-Beanstalk-like growth, but sensual, and not friendly at all—as if something from *The Day of the Triffids* were to appear in *Suddenly Last Summer*. Absurd, bizarre, cartoonish.

¶18 PCK: How did you costume the characters to reflect Williams's idea of the play?

DM: For one thing, I decided that whenever a character entered the kitchen, that actor's clothing would be entirely in black and white and shades of gray to match the bland set. The inverse of this was that any time anybody entered the kitchen, he or she would be in technicolor. For example, the Wife eventually had four quick-change, "slatternly" house dresses to wear, cut identically, so she not only went miraculously back and forth from black and white to color, she changed primary colors with each kitchen entrance, again like the shifts in color in *The Wizard of Oz*. I extended this motif by dressing subsidiary characters (who appear in the kitchen) in the complementary colors of the color wheel. Thus the Kinder, Boy and Girl, wore bright orange and green respectively—he outfitted as a kind of leering Tazio-like sailor; she as a milkmaid-like nymphet Heidi, and Miss Rose was clad all in shimmering purple and violet. The "First Lutheran Minister of the Island of Staten" appeared only in the kitchen, so he was exclusively costumed in black and gray with a long topcoat, black beard, and stovepipe hat. In fact, the actor who played the minister, Coral Potter, devised a pasty makeup that meant to take his character back into the silent film era, which would be a great look for this severe, old-fashioned villain. But it took him back farther still, I think, and he ended up looking like a Matthew Brady daguerreotype of Abe Lincoln—a strange and unintended association! He carried an extra large Bible and an umbrella. Of course, Fraulein Haussmitzschlogger, the ninety-nine-year-old plaything for the minister, appeared in both sets, and so we had to have two complete outfits, one in shades of gray and the other in purples, with two saucy Fritz the Cat-style comic characters drawn on her sweatshirts. She wore old-fashioned white stockings similar to anti-embolism hose, held up by garters. The Man was not color-coordinated, but he was designed as a cartoon fantasy of a gay hustler. He wore shiny, tight black leatherette pants, which could have been cut from the same cloth, so to speak, as the daisy, the night vine, or the pipe organ; a white t-shirt; and red bandana. His studded belt and boots completed the cartoon stereotype of a call boy.

¶19 PCK: How and where did you go beyond Williams's stage directions? That is, what do you see as your main contribution to designing *Kirche*?

DM: The notion I had that was not suggested by Williams's script was to create various props as soft sculptures, inspired by the work of the contemporary artist Claes Oldenburg, who, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, had been producing soft, collapsing versions of hard, rigid objects like kitchen and bathroom fixtures. For me, Oldenburg's soft sculptures accomplished in three dimensions something of what Salvador Dali's melting clocks

accomplished in two. I thought these soft sculptures nicely symbolized the shifting states of mind, moods, emotions in *Kirche* that I believe Tennessee was after, the “collapsing reality” he spoke about in referring to his later plays. Accordingly, I made the props as if they had a palpable existence but in a slightly different dimension than the one the conscious mind deals with—just as Oldenberg made his sculptures out of materials appropriate to the purpose such as vinyl, cloth, and canvas. I also used these materials, plus plastic and foam, to construct the hausfrau’s lopsided old stove with ugly black streaks down its side, in the kitchen, and also for the pipe organ, in the kirche. This large instrument, by the way, was a weird, gaudy affair that bore a passing resemblance to that Victorian wonder in Walt Disney’s *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. It was like the organ of Captain Nemo—except it was collapsing! It also looked vaguely like a jukebox. Onstage it gave the impression of a decadent movie palace artifact performing solemn spiritual duty. These great soft forms seemed to me to fit perfectly the world of fantasy, the subconscious in *Kirche, Kutchen, und Kinder*. The small, curvy platforms—with no right angles—made soft with foam and vinyl coverings accommodated the cartoon/comic strip feel of the play. Moreover, some hand props as well—the soft axe wielded by the wife, for example—fit well on Tennessee’s burlesque stage, reminiscent of rubber chickens in vaudeville skits. If it could have been made at all practical, I would have had the Man seated in a soft, collapsing wheelchair as well! In any case, I was most enthusiastic about my sculptural additions to his concept.

¶20 PCK: Your use of Oldenberg’s art provides a powerful insight into this late Williams play. How did you arrive at the connection?

DM: The idea just popped into my head, and once it did I couldn’t shake it. I really wanted to make these things! The links between the two artists are so revealing. I made the connection between the two sensibilities and brought them together for this play. Tennessee wrote and painted; Claes Oldenberg painted and sculpted. Years later I read that Oldenberg wrote he was in favor of “an art that is political-erotic-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum,” that “embroils itself with the everyday crap...that imitates the human, that is comic, if necessary, or violent...” For me, as outré and outlandish as it was, *Kirche, Kutchen, und Kinder* fit Oldenberg’s description fairly well.

¶21 PCK: Near the end of the play, Williams calls for a trap door, a fairly conventional acting area on a proscenium stage. How were you able to incorporate this acting area in your production of *Kirche* on the Cocteau’s small stage?

DM: The Bouwerie Lane was not a conventional stage—we didn’t have a trap. Moreover, there was no room under the stage floor for characters to make an entrance up through any sort of opening as on Shakespeare’s stage. All we had was a grimy crawl space a few inches high. But since Williams’s script called for a trap, I thought we could use the effect if I could gain another twelve inches or so of stage. That was why I created a raked platform for the organ to sit on. I cut a trap in it above another opening in the stage floor beneath, through which the devil and the angel in the *Kirche* would pop up. They were large, one-dimensional stick puppets made, again, out of foam and cloth, manipulated by an actor lying down, cramped between supports under the stage proper. I think that poor guy was also responsible for creating the smoke effect under the devil.

¶22 PCK: How did you see these figures in terms of Williams’s intentions in the script?

DM: Again trying to visualize what Tennessee was after, I conceived the angel and devil as cardboard cutouts of conventional figures, recalling Shakespeare's line, "'tis the eye of childhood that fears a painted devil." My design once again strove to visualize a child's-coloring-book world with its big, soft toys. Following the suggestion in the script of a "chambered nautilus," I wanted the look of the pipe organ, with its gleaming shell-like pattern of lopsided pipes and iridescent mother-of-pearl (plastic) stops, to recall Captain Nemo's Victorian sub, which was also called the *Nautilus* and which gave us still another level of fantasy to work off of.

¶23 PCK: Do you see relationships/connections between your designs for *Kirche* and those you did for *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* that premiered at the Cocteau two years later?

DM: I can only say that I conceived the environment of each play to encompass or embody the world of the central character, which in both cases was a stand-in for the latter-day Tennessee Williams. But the feeling and approach to *Something Cloudy* was very different visually because it differed so much stylistically from *Kirche*. The Man's world is entirely interior, while August's in *Something Cloudy* is, at least superficially, an exterior, remembered world of a particular time and place, the character's present-day intrusion into past events notwithstanding. It's solid, too, with a real typewriter as a prop, for example. Visually, too, the setting was all open air, light, blue sky, and sand. Of course, to stretch a point, maybe, I suppose one could see the ruins of the beach house and dock in *Something Cloudy* as another version of the chambered nautilus, and the silver phonograph August plays as the equivalent of the pipe organ in *Kirche*.

PCK: They're certainly both lyrical signifiers, from a design standpoint.

DM: I agree.

¶24 PCK: Finally, can you share any conversations you, Eve, or the actors had with Williams that help us to understand his relationship with the Cocteau Rep?

DM: Yes, two come to mind. The Cocteau didn't do new plays, only revivals of classics, at least not until Tennessee came along. Eve always said she didn't like to work with living playwrights! Apropos of this, once, at a production meeting/lunch at Phoebe's restaurant on the Bowery, I half-jokingly reminded Eve and Tennessee that he was "America's Greatest Living Playwright," which Tennessee immediately corrected: "You mean 'America's Greatest Not-Yet-Dead Playwright!'" And when we were doing *Something Cloudy*, Craig Smith, who played August, was talking to Williams and said, "I've played you twice, Tennessee." But Tennessee retorted, "No, you've played me once. The first time, you played my vulgarity."