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Theatre Review:

Vieux Carré at the Pearl Theatre Company, New York City, May 12–June 14, 2009

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MRS. WIRE: Now watch out boy. Be careful of the future. It's a long ways for the young. Some makes it and others git lost.
—from scene 12 of *Vieux Carré*

Not only did Tennessee Williams make the journey that Mrs. Wire describes, from youth to weathered maturity, but the first steps of that trip became the source for some of his late plays, chief among them the hauntingly beautiful *Vieux Carré*. One way to look at the action of this play is to imagine what might have happened toTom Wingfield after the curtain closes on *The Glass Menagerie—Vieux Carré* is a fictionalized retelling of Williams's first trip to in New Orleans in 1938.Like all of Williams's Broadway plays beginning with *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* in 1964, the original production of *Vieux Carré* was plagued with problems and closed quickly in 1977. Though the London production of *Vieux Carré* was fairly well received a year later, it did not transfer to the United States, and neither did word of its modest success overseas.

¶2 As with most late Tennessee Williams plays, there has yet to be an American staging that proves *Vieux Carré*'s theatrical value for a popular audience, makes a case for its poetry, or rescues it from obscurity when measured against his earlier major work. However, if the recent Pearl Theatre production, under the direction of Austin Pendleton, could have had a longer run or a wider audience, it might well have begun to make audiences and critics reassess the virtues of *Vieux Carré*.

¶3 Any director who approaches a Tennessee Williams play is wise to pay close attention to the stage directions. From his poetic character descriptions to the details of the action and the set, Williams's directions are deliberate, specific, and essential to the theatricality of his plays. After describing the set for *Vieux Carré*—which consists of two stories of a three-story building visible on stage, plywood partitions between various cubicles, and a curved staircase ascending from the street level to the third floor—Williams writes in his stage directions: "Obviously the elevations of these acting areas can be only suggested by a few shallow steps: a realistic setting is impossible, and the solution lies mainly in very skillful lighting and minimal furnishings." Crucial to the success of The Pearl Theatre production of *Vieux Carré* were the creative and resourceful solutions found by set designer Harry Feiner, lighting designer Stephen Petrelli, and director Pendelton, which addressed the limitations of the space and allowed for a free and unencumbered flow of action.

¶4 Theater 80 St. Marks in New York City is a one-story proscenium theatre with little or no backstage, a seating area which slopes upward away from stage, and three aisles of stairs in the audience (one on either side and another up the center). A cyclorama, or scrim, was stretched from stage right to stage left and ran along the upstage wall in a perfect arc. Along the cyclorama, beginning audience left, were chairs for the two spinster sisters, Mary Maude and Carrie, followed at a short distance by an easel and chair for Nightingale; then upstage center held two chairs and a table with a chess set for Jane and Tye. From that point to audience right, the kitchen spread along the cyclorama with a refrigerator, a table and chairs, and a stove. Stage center featured a

metal bed with a thin mattress and some sheets. There were no partitions or levels on the stage, and the beauties of this simple configuration were many.

¶5 The bed belonged to whichever characters were playing on it at a given moment. This choice smoothed transitions from scene to scene and between the "rooms," while the character of The Writer, as narrator, moved easily about the entire stage. The flexibility with space extended to the three sets of stairs in the audience—a character climbing *up* to the kitchen, for example, would actually be walking *down* one of the aisles. The audience quickly made the adjustment, and that allowed for three different stairs to be used during the performance without the clutter of any large set pieces.

¶6 A well-considered lighting design was equally important for the inhabitants in this boarding house of candles, shadows, and burned-out light bulbs. When the bed was lit, the focus of the play became well defined, yet other characters sitting along the cyclorama in varying degrees of semi-darkness could occasionally be seen listening, as if through the walls of the old boardinghouse, accentuating the voyeuristic quality of the play. Lights up in one area did not always plunge the rest of the set into darkness—the entire playing area, including the audience, was part of the visual language of this production, further enforcing the sensation of a house alive with "shadowy occupants like ghosts."

¶7 The strong cast was entirely up to the challenge of bringing this "memory play" to life, led by Sean McNall as The Writer. Being an obvious stand-in for the author, this character presents potential pitfalls that McNall avoided. Choosing *not* to mimic Williams in any way physically or vocally, McNall used a fairly discreet southern accent with an occasionally slow drawl. He maintained the deliberate and inviting rhythm of the dialect, whether speaking directly to the audience or with other characters. McNall also conveyed the proper balance of naïveté and intelligence in this inexperienced but self-aware twenty-eight-year-old.

¶8 The talented Carol Schultz snarled, barked, cackled, and occasionally whimpered her way through the role of the cantankerous landlady, Mrs. Wire, a woman full of more contradictions than her house is full of boarders. Ostensibly her maid (but more practically her friend and caretaker) is the quiet and consistent Nursie, played with smart understatement by Claudia Robinson. Other boarders and visitors include aristocratic Pamela Payton-Wright and Beth Dixon as the starving spinsters, as well as "house guests" Jeff Worden and Joseph Collins as Blake and Sky, the former brought home by Nightingale and the latter brought home by The Writer, but neither welcomed by Mrs. Wire. Having the character of The Writer play some of the smaller roles and offstage voices was not necessarily the most effective choice—The Writer is the one character who connects directly with the audience and is not presented as a ghost or a memory. It would probably have been much more effective if some of the other characters doubled up instead.

¶9 As Jane and Tye, Rachel Botchan and Joseph Collins make daring efforts to find the spines of these characters, and if they were not entirely successful, it was not for lack of talent. The relationship between Tye and Jane is a bit tortured; each of these troubled souls comes with a litany of sorrows and offstage plot lines that in this production remained somewhat unsatisfying. However, Austin Pendleton made the important choice to retain every word of their dialogue, presumably to remain to true to the text and to find out how it played.

¶10 Perhaps most interesting was the casting of George Morfogen as Nightingale, the tubercular painter. Morfogen played Nightingale with a strength, dignity, and wit that distanced him from any stereotypes that might burden the character of a poverty- stricken, failed, lonely, dying, aging homosexual. This Nightingale was

aware of his delusions and his fate; even as he fought for life until the end, he remained full of sexual energy, anger, and disarming truthfulness.

¶11 The pairing of Morfogen and McNall, as Nightingale and The Writer, was often poignant, as their characters bring to mind the younger and older Tennessee Williams. In several of his later works—*Something Cloudy, Something Clear*; *The Chalky White Substance*; *Small Craft Warnings*; *Moise and the World of Reason*; and *The Traveling Companion*, to name a few—Williams created characters that may be identifiable, in certain aspects, as surrogates for himself both at a young age and in his sixties. In effect, he wrote scenes in which his younger and older selves converse, debate, and occasionally, as in *Vieux Carré*, console one another.

¶12 The more often theatre companies and directors take on the challenge of the later work of Tennessee Williams, and the more that they achieve success as the Pearl Theatre did with their production of *Vieux Carré*, then the more we will find out about the strengths and weaknesses of these plays in ways that were simply not possible with all the *sturm und drang* surrounding Williams at the time they were written.