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Tennessee Williams Scholars Conference Panel:
A Black *Cat* and Other Plays: African American Productions of Williams's Drama

Moderator: *R. Barton Palmer*

Panelists: *Philip C. Kolin*, *George W. Crandell*, *Harvey Young*

***Editor's Note**: The following panel was transcribed directly from tapes made for this session of the Tennessee Williams Scholars Conference, held on March 25, 2011, in New Orleans.*

Philip Kolin: Let me say that it's an honor to be on this panel with three Williams scholars, all of whom have been in collections I've edited, and their work is stellar. The topic of Tennessee Williams and the African American diaspora is very roomy. It embraces Williams's own views on black performers, black music, and his vigilance in fighting for civil rights. It contains as well all kinds of issues involved in production, particularly if a text is amended. For instance, there is a very long and fruitful history of African American theatre companies doing Williams plays, particularly *Streetcar* and *Glass Menagerie*. The two most notable recent examples, of course, are the Steppenwolf *Glass Menagerie* in 2008 and the James Earl Jones and Phylicia Rashad *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* on Broadway in 2008 and in London in 2009.

¶2 I would like to open our conversation, if I may, with a couple of theoretical issues that look at both the biography and text/performance praxis or text/performance polarity that I'm sure we're going to be addressing. But there are a couple of theoretical issues.

When we say that Tennessee Williams is performed by African American theatre companies, whether they're professional or amateur, I think we need to raise several questions. Number one involves renegotiating questions of universality. Who owns Tennessee Williams? Ruby Dee said at one point, "I feel Tennessee belongs to me." And several critics both here in New Orleans, in New York, and certainly in London, have all raised the point that Blanche could be a black woman. It's not surprising. There is no monopoly on shattered dreams.

¶4 The second important point is that when an African American theatre company does a play by Williams, there are opportunities for enlarging the script, opening the plays up to racial and social messages that are not privileged in white productions. For example, Whitney LeBlanc directed a production of *Glass Menagerie* at the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre, the first play written by a white author done at the Hansberry, in 1991, and the picture of Mr. Wingfield that hung on the wall during performances was of a World War I white doughboy, certainly indicting audiences for being left behind by the white man. Back in the 1980s, at Spelman College, Tom Wingfield was not the suffering poet, but was cast as a black revolutionary caught up in the fervor of Dr. King's "I Have a Dream." In 1983, a Creole production was done by Charles Gordone, the first African American to win the Pulitzer in drama, featuring a black Stanley with a white Blanche, raising, again, all kinds of sociopolitical issues in the script.

The third point I'd like to make is that productions by African American theatre companies actually free the Williams characters from stereotypes imposed by dominant white productions. In other words, we get away from the notion of Jessica Tandy or Vivien Leigh as the seminal Blanche DuBois. We also get away from the idea of cultural encoding: that there are certain actors who can play certain parts. In other words, Blanche is always the southern belle, and Stanley is always the Pole, but in many African American productions of these plays, these cultural encodings have been disrupted.

¶16 And finally, the fourth issue, and I think this is a very polemical one, is that when audiences come to a production of a Williams play by an African American group of actors, I think the audience is forced to come to terms with its own subconscious racism, and the productions challenge as well as enlarge our view of Williams in the process.

R. Barton Palmer: Thank you so much, Philip. George?

¶18 **George Crandell:** My interest in this topic comes from the plays themselves, and certain lines in *A Streetcar Named Desire* that struck me as particularly relevant to this particular topic. If you read a lot of Tennessee Williams's plays, you don't see African American characters in the major roles; that is, they are usually characters who are subservient in some way, rather than the major players. And so it struck me that this is very curious, that a writer from the South, who grew up in the segregated South, would not deal with racism and the subject of African American characters more directly. And I was struck by a phrase in *A Streetcar Named Desire* where Blanche says, "I don't tell truth, I tell what *ought* to be truth," and there's a certain kind of misrepresentation in the way that she tells the truth. In other words, she tells it indirectly, in a way that is coded, as Philip said: that certain audiences can understand, and that other audiences can't understand.

And I think that's a clue to our understanding of Tennessee Williams in general, in terms of misrepresenting certain aspects of reality so that those in the know can understand what's going on. And there's another phrase in *A Streetcar Named Desire* when Blanche speaks to Stella about what she perceives as the future. She says, "Perhaps he's the one that we should mix our blood with." For those who have grown up in the South, "mixing the blood" automatically conjures up images of miscegenation, and this was certainly a taboo topic in the 1930s and 1940s and remained so for a number of decades afterwards. But what I think is going on in *Streetcar* and perhaps other plays is a kind of misrepresentation. And if you look at the character of Stanley Kowalski, for example, and examine some of the characteristics that Williams uses to describe him, they fit some of the stereotypical views of African Americans at the time. And so the suggestion is that Tennessee Williams may have had in mind Stanley as a black man rather than a Pole, and his efforts to assert himself or his identity are his efforts as an "other" black American; to assert himself as an American in a context that would not recognize him, that sees him largely as invisible. So, those are some of the issues in this particular play that I think help us to see how Williams may be misrepresenting African Americans and the society in which he lived, and in other plays, as well.

¶10 **Palmer:** Thank you, George. Harvey?

Harvey Young: I have two additions to the excellent starting points that Philip and George have given us. First, theatre registers differently depending upon scale. Although the same play may have been produced, it matters

whether it was mounted on a university, regional theatre, or Broadway stage. When we talk about African American productions of Tennessee Williams's works, we must pay attention to these levels—such as the difference between the staging of Williams's works by the Howard University Players in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, compared with the more recent Broadway productions. Obviously, we must also attend to the different historical periods, as well.

Second, I would like to expand on something that George mentioned: the role of ethnicity in Williams's works. Earlier today, there was a terrific session about representations of Italian Americans in *Rose Tattoo*. Similarly, I believe that there's a way in which Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire* exists as a flattened or condensed representation of the racialized "other." He is explicitly marked as Polish but could easily be—based upon his occupation and the manner with which he is regarded by Blanche—African American or Italian American within the temporal setting of the play. It would be interesting to talk about the similarities of Williams's ethnic or racial "others."

¶13 **Palmer:** Thank you so much, Harvey. One question I have for the group would be, when one thinks of all-black productions, one's mind might go back to the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s in Hollywood, when we had all-black films and then for a while, on TV, an all-black show, *Amos 'n' Andy*, and there are certain political identity issues raised by those productions. I wonder how the panelists would see those issues in relation to the question of doing, for example, a black production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.*

Kolin: You mentioned *Amos 'n' Andy*. The man who played Lightnin' in that television program was Nick Stewart, who went on to found the Ebony Showcase Theatre in Los Angeles. In 1955, he did the first professional African American production of *Streetcar*, which was a major contribution to Williams on stage. Undeniably, he's an important figure, I think, in the history of this.

¶15 **Young:** The early all-black film productions were created with the aim of reaching black audiences who wanted to see themselves represented on screen. *Amos 'n' Andy* has a different history. It began as a Chicago-based radio show with white voice artists playing the roles of Amos and Andy. Its popularity spawned a film featuring the same two artists in blackface. When the television show was eventually created, the goal was to find people who could approximate the original creators' voices and mannerisms. Today, there's an ongoing debate about how *Amos 'n' Andy* should be remembered. Did it naturalize a caricature of blackness or grant black spectators a rare opportunity to see themselves on television?

It is the desire to see yourself represented on stage that often motivates black audiences to see all-black productions. That's how you can have a 75 percent black audience for Stephen Byrd's 2008 production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* when the usual black Broadway audience is only a small fraction of attendees.

¶17 **Kolin:** There seems to be a polarity running through reviews, criticism, and biographies about African Americans playing in Williams plays. James Earl Jones in one interview said, "My goal was to capture the role of Big Daddy and the poetry without ever leaving the earth, but at the same time I do not regard this as an integrated bit of casting. Instead, I don't want to play him as a black man, I want to play him as a father." And then you have other reviewers and critics who say, "Well, you know, this is an all black cast, and they are

representing African American life." So you have these opposing camps in terms of describing the tradition of African American performances of Williams plays.

Crandell: Just to follow up on what Philip was saying about the reviews, the most frequent kind of reviews, in my opinion, are those that really don't focus on the play as an African American production, but it simply proves once again the sort of universality of what Williams has done. And the colorblindness of casting seems to have the same sort of positive effects in the play, in terms of audience response to it.

¶19 **Young:** I question how central Williams, as author, was to the success of the production. We could look at a poster of the Brando film version of *Streetcar* to see that Tennessee Williams is not the person being promoted. If you look at this poster here [referencing a lobby card of *Streetcar* behind him] for the film version, the title has the largest font, followed by the names of the film's stars: Marlon Brando and Vivien Leigh. At the very bottom—and in the smallest print—you can find Williams's name.

It is my understanding that the all-black *Cat* was similarly designed to appeal to audiences based upon the celebrity of the cast and crew. The original production was supposed to be directed by Lloyd Richards and star Laurence Fishburne and Angela Bassett. James Earl Jones was cast because the Williams estate would not grant permission to stage an all-black production without him. The production was going to be marketed around the name recognition and star power of the production team: Richards, the director of *A Raisin in the Sun* and several August Wilson plays; Jones, the star of *Othello* and *The Great White Hope*; and Fishburne and Bassett, classically trained theatre actors and costars of a recent Hollywood blockbuster. Unfortunately, a series of production delays happened. Fishburne and Bassett left the production. Richards died. When they were replaced, Byrd chose other recognizable figures.

¶21 **Kolin:** In 1989, the Arena Stage in Washington had Ruby Dee as Amanda, and so there is this star power. And I think you mentioned James Earl Jones in *Othello*, and I believe there's an even more salient comparison because James Earl Jones played King Lear. And later he was Big Daddy, a role that deals with issues that Lear has to confront, such as the dissolution of the family and the loss of power.

But I would like to move the discussion in a different direction, if I may. For years, there was a standard party line that Tennessee Williams, unlike Faulkner or Welty, did not include black characters in his work to any great degree, and when he did, they were supernumeraries: they were porters, they were maids, and they were basically nonentities. I have taken strong issue with that position for twenty years. Silence is not erasure, and there are so many instances in Williams's plays, particularly in his one-act play *The Last of My Solid Gold Watches*, where you have a black porter who fulfills many different kinds of symbolic functions. He embodies the Old Testament figure Eliakim, who opens the doors to the temple, but his words are so comforting compared to what we find in the white community. Williams seems to be pointing to the black community as a model of kindness. And then there's *Portrait of a Madonna*, and so we have three Tennessee Williams plays in which he is troping, as George says, white characters through black characters. Certainly this is true as well in *Battle of Angels*, or *Orpheus Descending*, with the linkages between Val Xavier and the escaped black convict that Sheriff Talbott is hunting down. The connections between Val and Uncle Pleasant with the snakeskin jacket are also very strong. *Baby Doll*, as Barton knows very well, and Robert [Bray] too, is a radical screenplay where [Elia] Kazan played a very heavy hand. Kazan's support of civil rights was quite evident. In twenty-two scenes,

or twenty-two frames, rather, African American characters disrupt, subvert, or mock patriarchal white southern traditions. That's pretty strong! People read about Carroll Baker in her risqué baby doll pajamas, but there was something much more controversial going on in the 1950s—that is, the civil rights movement, which *Baby Doll* responds to. And then there is the play that is very much neglected, *Kingdom of Earth*, which features an African American as a central character, Chicken Ravenstock. Williams empowers this black character. He's called the wood's-colt—he's a mixed breed, has a black mother and a white father; but here we have Chicken, who is infinitely better, more virtuous in every way, compared to his tubercular, transvestite white brother, who tries to do him out of an inheritance. And so Tennessee Williams was vitally interested in civil rights and vitally interested in empowering black characters, and I think there's one quote from Williams that I find rather intriguing; it's from that Harry Rasky documentary, *Tennessee Williams: A Portrait in Laughter and Lamentation*, where Williams says, "I always thought I was black." And of course, I think he's choosing "black" there not exclusively in a racial context, but as the "other," the outcast.

¶23 **Crandell:** Well, even in *Kingdom of Earth*, he blurs the lines between black characters, as Chicken is of mixed blood. Williams suggests that he's a foreigner, as if to dismiss the possibility that he could be partially African American.

Young: Part of the appeal of Williams's plays is that they portray the world as neither hopeful nor positive. Instead, it is one marked by struggle and, populated with—to borrow a phrase from an earlier panel—"mutilated characters." This theme connects with the sense of day-to-day struggle that is part of the black experience and could account for the blackness, in both senses, of Williams's dramaturgy.

¶25 **Kolin:** I think we have to address the importance of black music in Tennessee Williams's scripts, and it runs throughout the canon. And since we're talking about stage directions—Robert [Bray] had raised the point about Williams's stage directions—I don't think, except for Eugene O'Neill, that there's any American dramatist who wrote longer stage directions, or more poetic ones, than Williams. But if you look at the beginning of *Streetcar Named Desire*, you've got the brown river god in the background, the Mississippi River. You've got the "infatuated fluency of brown fingers." You've got the blues piano, you've got the hot trumpet, and there you have jazz! And in many productions of Williams's plays by African American theatre companies, the preperformance music comes from black artists, whether it's Duke Ellington or Ethel Waters. Look at Val Xavier, the names he's got on his guitar: Muddy Waters. Remember that Williams grew up in the Mississippi delta. He knew black culture; there was no question about it, and so how it comes into the plays isn't necessarily through just a single character, or a very pronounced antiracist agenda that Williams has. I think it was Michael Billington, in a 2001 *Guardian* review from the London production of *Cat*, who said that Williams wrote his best about the worst in the American South. And so what I'm saying is that race is polyvalent. It's not just characters, it's not just attacking Boss Finley for what he is to blacks, but it's the music, and it's the whole synesthesia of African American culture.

Young: And it becomes environmental, almost.

Kolin: Environmental, exactly.

¶28 **Palmer:** Would you say then that there's a real difference between having, for example, an all-black production of *Come Back, Little Sheba* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*? What would the political difference be? There are certainly artistic differences, but in terms of cultural politics, wouldn't it be the case that the Williams all-black production would have more resonance and meaning than an all-black production of an English play?

Kolin: Well, I think that a play like *Streetcar* or *Orpheus* is far more political than *Come Back, Little Sheba*. Just look at the opening stage direction. Back in 1958, Williams gave his permission for an African American production of *Streetcar* at the Carnegie Playhouse in New York. He never wanted to appear bigoted.

¶30 **Palmer:** George, would you say a bit more about how you see the all-black production as perhaps fulfilling something that Williams was intending? I got the impression from your opening statement that you see this as a kind of organic development in the performances and the plays, rather than simply a kind of "Well, we're in a different period now, and this is how we can show the difference, by having this kind of production." There is a difference between those two things, isn't there?

Crandell: Yes, I think so, and I think Williams was interested in taboo topics, and there's a certain coded language, certainly, for homosexuality in the plays, which could not be demonstrated or articulated explicitly on the stage at certain times during his productions. And I think that fascination carries over into the characterization of African Americans who are what I might call kind of a blending of African Americans, or Italians, or Poles into an "other" character that can't very well be displayed onstage. And so, in a figure like Stanley, I think Williams is playing out in his own mind a demonstration of a possibility. Perhaps it's a fantasy of his: uniting black and white. Is there a possibility that our culture could be different than it was in the 1940s, where blacks and whites come together, where we do not live in a segregated society, where there is the possibility of black and white union, without the stigma of illegality or social taboo?

¶32 **Palmer:** What does the all-black production say about that, rather than, say, an integrated production?

Young: That's a good question. To dodge it for a second, I think that . . .

Palmer: It's a hard one, isn't it?

¶35 **Young:** I agree with George. Let's think about *Streetcar* and the specific location of New Orleans. Throughout the history of New Orleans, there has been a blurring and blending of races and cultures. In the community depicted in *Streetcar*, blacks, Polish, Mexicans all coexist in a working-class setting. The emphasis on class allows an engagement with racial diversity and a presentation of the community as integrated.

"What does the all-black production do?" I agree with Philip. You hear different notes. You might be a bit more attentive to the scene in which Stanley talks about being read as and treated like an animal. You might detect a race-based anxiety within an all-black production that might be understood as the type of personal revelation that can only emerge within a safe space—a community of sameness—rather than an integrated environment. Nuances or details of the script could have more meaning or, at least, offer distinct interpretations.

¶37 **Kolin:** One of the struggles that black directors have faced—certainly not Debbie Allen—is how much of the script to change when you have a black cast working with a Tennessee Williams script that has pejorative words

in it. A black Brick would have never played football for Ole Miss in 1955. Allen changes the time frame, which does not interfere with the script. And so there's been a lot of controversy. I know in some African American productions, particularly those in the 1990s, Galatoire's was stricken for Mule's, to make it a black restaurant. Stanley's engineering unit was changed to have it correspond to a black unit. There's been an awful lot of controversy, too, about Amanda. This came up in the Steppenwolf production in 2008. Would Amanda, a black woman, have all of these gentlemen suitors, sons of rich delta planters? How would that happen? And you know, Ruby Dee got around that years ago, by simply saying, Amanda is charming. Anyone would certainly find Ruby Dee's Amanda engaging and delightful!

But I want to return to something about the Polish Stanley connection. A number of years ago, Nick Moschovakis did a brilliant report on Stanley as Polish. And the name Kowalski from Polish means, roughly, John Smith. A *kowal* is an average man. And Williams worked with someone who was named Stanley Kowalski, so that's where he got the name. But if you look at American social politics from the 1850s, maybe even up to the 1960s, it wasn't just black individuals who were discriminated against. It was the Irish, the Poles . . . so when Stanley says, "what I am is a one hundred percent American," what he is saying is, he is trying to get away from that typecasting that the Pole, like the black man, was the "other." I mean, let's face it: in the 1850s, 1860s, even later than that in Boston, there were signs that said "Irish need not apply." So the Irish, too, were part of the immigrant community that was labeled as "other."

¶39 **Palmer:** Would an all-black production that has as its intent a universalizing recontextualization of Williams more or less write out the history of black people in this country? Would it be a way of not seeing blackness, as seeing the content of the character rather than the color of their skin? And is that a good thing? Politically speaking?

Kolin: I think in a play like *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, it doesn't erase them, but, rather, it accentuates the extent to which, at certain economic levels, there are parallels between blacks and whites. If you take the case of Maggie, for example, she talks about her struggle to advance, to obtain financial security by marrying Brick, and such a response can be true of anyone, regardless of race, in the same sort of economic circumstances. Maggie desires to rise above the level of poverty and to feel secure.

Palmer: So then the meaning of the play would be not to express anything about American blackness, it would be something universal about Americans, regardless of color?

[panelists' general agreement]

¶43 **Young:** With most plays, and all of the good ones, you identify with the characters regardless of their complexion. In the all-black production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, you frequently forget that the characters are black until something gets said that, perhaps, reminds you that the characters were understood by Williams to be white. There can be what I call "dramaturgical tensions" that result from historical inaccuracies. How do I, as a dramaturge, reconcile the fact that a certain group of people or a specific segment of the population was not allowed to go here or there within a particular historical period? However, I suspect that most audiences are less concerned with the historical accuracies of a production.

In addition, it is worth noting that a nostalgia for the South is not inconsistent with black experiences. Within post-Great Migration black communities, it is not uncommon to hear stories of memories of the South and expressions of fondness for southern culture. For example, playwright Adrienne Kennedy, who has been outspoken about the problems of racism and segregation in the South, fondly remembers her grandfather's plantation in Georgia. It is not irreconcilable to have a black actor saying some of Tennessee Williams's lines and speaking wistfully of the southern past.

¶145 **Crandell:** You mentioned Adrienne Kennedy. I've done a lot of work on her, and think she is certainly one of the most important African American playwrights in the twentieth century. And she has a play called *The Owl Answers*, and she takes the scene about Laura at the end of *The Glass Menagerie*, blowing out the candles, only it's a very surrealistic reinterpretation, and the father comes, blows out the candles, and rapes the daughter. So there are all kinds of ways in which influence is reciprocated there. And certainly with Suzan-Lori Parks, you know.

¶146 **Palmer:** Well, thanks to the panelists for a fine discussion. We have time for questions from the audience, if anyone has one. I'm sure there are many. Please stand up, and we'll pass the microphone.

Question 1: Yes, in Natchez they have a house that's now part of the literary tour, and it's the William Johnson House, and it's the house of a free man of color who owned his own slaves during the Civil War. I wonder if that approach has ever been taken in this play, where you could use that as a character who did have slaves and was Big Daddy.

Kolin: Well, that's often been the defense on the part of black actors playing the roles, whether it's Amanda or Blanche. It may be harder to believe in Mississippi than it was in Louisiana, but, yes, there were men of color who owned property. There were even slaves who had bank accounts, so, yes, that is a justification, and it's a historical truth.

Young: Although not all freemen owned slaves, many owned land. The idea of having an estate, or having property that is no longer yours, applies as well. Part of the reason that a significant number of freemen and freed slaves stayed in the South was because they had land.

¶150 **Question 2:** I kept thinking that when Philip mentioned Tennessee Williams saying that he had always thought of himself as a black man, I thought of August Wilson saying in an interview once, that he always thought of himself as a bluesman. And of course he didn't play any blues instruments; he didn't sing any blues, but—of course he knew blues music very well—but he felt that the spirit of that was in black culture, and that he, of course, was celebrating black culture in his plays. And I also thought, when you were talking about blacks having a nostalgia of the South, of August Wilson urging American blacks to move back to the South. And he's talking about a kind of double displacement for blacks in this country: first from Africa, which had been their home, brought over in chains here, but then a couple of hundred years of black American history with a culture that developed in the South, with the food and the climate, and then being displaced when they moved in the Great Migration and being in a hostile—a different kind of environment which wasn't their own. And he was saying, in a sense, get them back in touch with the roots of that culture that developed here for a couple of

hundred years. So I suppose that's not a question so much as comments, but stimulated by the various things you've been saying.

¶51 **Question 3:** I just wanted to come back to the argument about Stanley being black, or embodying certain black stereotypes of the time. I just wondered if you follow that argument, though, does it not become dangerously provocative when you think about the rape later in the play?

Palmer: It's because it's presumably a rape of a white woman by a black man. It would conform to stereotypes about black men: is that your point?

Crandell: Yes, I think that Williams is using these racial stereotypes to evoke certain images and emotions in his audience, and to challenge them to think about these possibilities. I think the short stories as well evoke the same sort of fear and desire associated with miscegenation. If you think of Anthony Burns, in "Desire and the Black Masseur," in that case, it's not between a man and a woman, but between a white man and a black masseur, and Burns takes a great delight in the pain inflicted by this black character. So I think there's some parallel between the fear of certain acts and the desire that's associated with them, which may comprise the notion of a taboo.

¶54 **Kolin:** Can I piggyback off that, and also address something that Harvey had said earlier? There's been an awful lot of work lately on lynching: lynching history, lynching studies. And a very recent article, I think, in the *Southern Literary Journal*, looks at "Desire and the Black Masseur*"* not in terms of Anthony Burns, the fragmented man who's caught between passion and respectability, but looks at that as an antilynching story where the white parlor where the black man works is an oppressive institution representing, metaphorically, lynching, which is a very strong political statement about that story, but Williams had a long history of relationships with African Americans. Back in 1937 when he was at Iowa, one of his best friends was Tom Pawley, who went on to lead the theatre department for thirty, forty years at Lincoln University. And Tom Pawley wrote a play in 1937, against the KKK, and there was a part in there about a black preacher. Williams took the part about the black preacher. So I see Williams's political involvement not just in the plays, per se, but in the life that led up to those plays.

¶55 **Young:** To respond quickly to that last question, the treatment of Stanley as an ethnic "other" anchors itself in his inability to control his passions. That aligns with stereotypes of ethnic "others" in that time period. That's the mark of difference: you are less evolved in some manner because you are overrun by emotion and passion. A lot of stereotypes relating to race hinge on whether a particular group of people are perceived as having the capacity to control or check their emotions and passion.

Kolin: At the risk of being jingoistic, my university, the University of Southern Mississippi, is currently mounting a production of *Streetcar* in which Blanche is taken by a young actress of Eurasian background, and Stanley is played by a young man who is Hispanic.

¶57 **Question 4:** I sort of have a working theory and would like to hear your ideas. An all-black cast versus an integrated cast: it seems to me that with an all-black cast, race disappears, and you look at the universal

elements of the play, whereas with an integrated cast, doesn't that in some ways do the play a disservice by making its focus race, rather than all the other themes that are happening in the plays? I'm just wondering if any of you have ideas on that.

Young: Yes, race becomes another factor. Although *colorblind casting* is a popular phrase, I find that *color-conscious* or *race-conscious* casting to be better descriptors. It signals your understanding that the audience sees race—certainly when a character first enters a scene—and you incorporate this racial awareness into your staging. For example, if you are producing *Streetcar* and a black actor is playing Stanley and the rest of the roles are played by white actors, then the rape scene might conjure thoughts of stereotypes of black masculinity and historical associations (perhaps, to lynching campaigns) that may or may not support your interpretation of the play. Race is often legible. When it is, it becomes another factor within the production.

Kolin: Well, there was a production—again, it was a student production, at Howard University in 1965—in which a white actor played Blanche and a black one played Stella. And I think that does contrast, very emphatically, with what we have in the script. Critics have said for a long time, you know, how can the two DuBois sisters be sisters? They're so unalike. Stella is caught up in the narcotized sexuality of New Orleans and Stanley, and then we have Blanche, the white patrician, who wants to destroy Stanley, but she can't. Casting the two sisters, one played by a white woman, and the other by a black woman, underscores different loyalties.

¶60 **Question 5:** You had mentioned a 1965 production; there have been other productions. Is there any documentation of what Tennessee Williams thought of those productions, or how the rise of African American theatre in this country coincided with his career?

Kolin: Audrey Wood, on many occasions, said that Williams was in favor of anything that would advance race. He's on record as saying that he very much was interested in backing black performers, black actors, so there's biographical information on that. And there was a letter, as I said, to the *New York Times* in 1947, about his not wanting to have *The Glass Menagerie* ever performed in Washington, DC, with a segregated audience. And the possibility of Hilda Sims doing a black Blanche was, again, something that proved this point. So I do think that Williams was very sincere in supporting African American artists.

¶62 **Palmer:** We have time for one more brief question.

Question 6: Is there any documentation that Tennessee Williams ever saw an August Wilson play?

Young: I'm not sure the timing aligns on that one. When did Williams die?

Question 6: I'm thinking of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

Young: Williams died in '83, and August Wilson's *Ma Rainey* premiered the following year. It seems unlikely that they met. However, it is possible that Williams could have been a guest at the O'Neill Center or the Yale Rep when *Ma Rainey* was being developed.

¶67 **Question 6:** Well, it really is amazing that both men had the power that they had in dealing with the human condition. And it's just so wonderful to know that both of them existed, and that we have that treasure in our

literature.

Young: I agree.

Palmer: Please join me in thanking our panelists for a wonderfully stimulating discussion.