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The Williams Centenary on New York Stages

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I am widely regarded as the ghost of a writer,” Tennessee Williams acknowledged in the *New York Times* the Sunday before the opening of *Vieux Carré* at the St. James Theater in 1977, “a writer remembered mostly for works which were staged between 1944 and 1961.” Williams categorized these earlier plays as “poetic naturalism,” but the playwright, who was sixty-five at the time, defended his exploration of new territory: “certain radically and dreadfully altered circumstances of my life compelled me to work in correspondingly different styles” (“I Am Widely Regarded” 184). Not surprisingly, then, the Williams centenary year in New York City was bookended by two productions of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947)—the triumphant Australian staging directed by Liv Ullmann and starring Cate Blanchett as Blanche DuBois that opened November 27, 2010, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and a Broadway production announced for spring 2012 directed by Emily Mann and featuring an interracial cast led by Blair Underwood as Stanley Kowalski. During 2011, however, four New York productions of less familiar Williams works invited audiences to look again at the playwright from new, informed perspectives and implicitly provided the kind of insightful appraisal due a dramatist whose vision, one hundred years after his birth, remains as compelling as ever.

^{¶2} The Roundabout Theatre Company’s decision to produce *The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore* (1963) during the Williams centenary, rather than to stage a more popular work from the Williams canon for its largely subscription audience, offered the possibility for a genuine reconsideration of this deeply personal play. Having once disclosed in an interview with John Gruen that *Milk Train* was “the play that I worked on longest,” Williams did not decode the play’s lack of success. “Why did it fail? It did fail” (Gruen 117). The Roundabout, as is its usual practice, spared no expense in mounting this production of *Milk Train* but seemed to have invested very little creative capital pursuing answers to the kind of fundamental question Williams himself posed about the play’s failure. The production that opened January 30, 2011, at the Laura Pels Theatre, was less daring and memorable than it might have been.

^{¶3} Directed by Michael Wilson and starring Olympia Dukakis as Flora Goforth, this *Milk Train*, according to the show’s *Playbill*, was inspired by the 2008 Hartford Stage production, also directed by Wilson and starring Dukakis. The script seems to have been cobbled together from various versions that Williams continued to work on well into the 1970s, and a heavy blue pencil has been used to cut chunks of obtuse but often funny dialogue, as well as the more experimental staging devices adapted by Williams from traditional Japanese Kabuki theater. In particular, Wilson mounted this *Milk Train* without Williams’s complicated theatrical conceit of two stage assistants who directly address the audience, play various minor characters, arrange screens to create playing spaces, and—like the *kuroko* in Japanese theater—move furniture and props as if invisible to their fellow actors. Cutting this convention removed an inventive layer that unifies the play’s mix of styles and, in performance, deprived the audience of visual reminders of the vaguely Eastern worldview that loosely infuses the text.

^{¶4} These deletions, however, were consistent with Wilson’s decision to mount an essentially realistic production of *Milk Train*, defying Williams’s assertion in his Author’s Notes to the third version of the play that

it “will come off better the further it is removed from conventional theatre” (Williams, *Milk Train* 491). Before the play began, for instance, the audience was prompted to understand *Milk Train* through familiar conventions. Set designer Jeff Cowie hung billowing curtains across the proscenium, their relaxed movement accompanied, in John Gromada’s faultless sound design, by soothing waves crashing against an unseen shore. The production’s seductive preamble soon gave way to Mrs. Goforth’s elaborately detailed mountaintop villa on Italy’s Divina Costiera, decorated with tacky bursts of geometric pop art wall designs that help identify the time as 1962. Moreover, in every nook and cranny of this imposing set, Cowie placed wires, microphones, Dictaphones, tape recorders, buzzers, and call buttons; as Mrs. Goforth says, “I’ve got this place wired for sound” (525). With the assistance of her secretary (a recently widowed Vassar alumna nicknamed Blackie who, as played by Maggie Lacey, exuded a weary physicality consistent with her self-description as “not dead but not living” [516]), the aging Mrs. Goforth intends to complete her memoirs for publishers in New York and London before the summer ends. Her heart barely beating after four marriages and countless affairs and her obstreperous demeanor hardly masking the fury of a celebrated socialite whose revels across two continents for half a century are now ended, Mrs. Goforth now faces a deeper race—against time itself. As a survivor of the excesses of an era she once embodied—and, in Williams’s unpersuasive allegorical overlay, represents as well—Flora Goforth clings to life by reliving it, recording her unreliable recollections of high society events that once were fodder for the gossip pages. An impetuous youthful decision to keep her first husband’s surname has crowned Mrs. Goforth with an ironic title in the immobile terror of her old age. Her recordings conjure up friends and lovers from her past and into her lonely present—people, in her words, “before they all seemed like the same person over and over and I got tired of the person” (516).

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As the central figure in a piece “rightly described as an allegory and as a ‘sophisticated fairy tale’” in the Author’s Notes to *Milk Train* (491), Mrs. Goforth inhabits multiple thematic levels, yet in the here-and-now of the play, her personality seems to be derived from familiar Williams heroines who preceded her, particularly the Princess Kosmonopolis of *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959). Moreover, Mrs. Goforth, from the vantage point of half a century, can be construed as a self-portrait of the playwright during a period that Williams in his *Memoirs* nicknamed “my stoned age” (203). In the years following the death of the playwright’s longtime companion, Frank Merlo, in 1963, Williams developed a serious drug dependency that included frequent injections from Dr. Max Jacobson, aka Dr. Feelgood; in *Milk Train*, Flora Goforth is plied with as many different pills and shots as was her creator at the time. Furthermore, Mrs. Goforth speaks in a vernacular similar to Williams’s own voice in letters to his closest friends, and her lines are sprinkled with idiosyncratic exclamations—notably “Baby”—that surface with regularity in many published interviews with Williams. Such parallels enhance the much weightier connections Williams makes in *Milk Train* between the mundane and aimless specificity of Mrs. Goforth’s memoirs and his own writing, which, after Merlo’s death, assumed a pattern that he described as “the dangerous course of reflecting . . . private panic” (“I Am Widely Regarded” 185). The symbiotic relationship between Mrs. Goforth and Blackie—especially as portrayed by Dukakis and Lacey in scenes charged with a visceral intensity missing from the rest of production—affords Williams a distorted mirror reflecting the inexplicable private process of his art. Their intractable and opposing perspectives reveal, in the shorthand language of the stage, the irrational inner struggle of an artist—imaginative flights grounded by the necessities of form and the logic of design. *Milk Train*, in its most astute moments, vindicates the artistic principles (albeit those shaped from deeply private, irrational conflict) upon which Williams built his work. As Mrs. Goforth declares to Christopher

Flanders, “To be good a poem’s got to be tough and to write a good, tough poem you’ve got to cut your teeth on the marrow bone of this world” (575).

¶16 Williams told interviewer Jeanne Fayard that the character Christopher Flanders was the principal problem with *Milk Train*. “He really didn’t have depth,” Williams said. “I didn’t understand him myself . . . I wanted to make him deliberately ambiguous, but I think that I made him too ambiguous” (Fayard 211). Nothing about Darren Pettie’s performance as Flanders challenged the veracity of Williams’s observation, but this production revealed that an equally important difficulty in *Milk Train* arises from the many discrepancies between Mrs. Goforth’s character and the declarations she makes in the service of the playwright’s themes that defy credibility. Writing about *Milk Train* in his *Memoirs*, Williams recognized the source of this difficulty: “I was fanatically obsessed with trying to say certain things. It was a work of art manqué” (198). Dukakis brought so much conviction to her delivery of the playwright’s pronouncements, however, that the exhilaration of witnessing her performance very nearly eclipsed misgivings about the array of thematic needs her character is called upon to meet.

¶17 In a production with fewer cuts to the text, Dukakis perhaps could have woven Mrs. Goforth’s lofty decrees into the larger fabric of a character who defines herself in terms of performance and possesses a magical versatility, seamlessly navigating her play-acting from role to role in a variety of outlandish costumes. A comic high point of this *Milk Train* featured Dukakis adorned in full Kabuki dress moving from one *mie*, or pose, to the next like a slideshow presentation on overdrive. Few other instances highlighting Mrs. Goforth’s performing self were retained in Wilson’s staging, however, obliging Dukakis to convey the world-weary woman’s flair for the dramatic through such eventually tiresome substitutes as exaggerated gestures and over-the-top body language.

¶18 Like the title character in Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958), whom she resembles in many ways, Mrs. Goforth sifts through the debris of her life in an attempt to impose some sort of order upon it, an endeavor that Wilson staged not as a correlative to the artistic process (which might have opened Williams’s text in provocative ways) but as a frantic last outburst of a woman whose rational faculties are in retreat. In a perverse way, Wilson’s blocking and his movement of the actors echoed Flanders’s description of the “worst of all human maladies”: “the thing people feel when they go from room to room for no reason, and then they go back from room to room for no reason, and then they go *out* for no reason and come back *in* for no reason” (559).

¶19 Because *Milk Train* is “a play with a very strong female role,” Williams erroneously predicted in his *Memoirs* that it “is likely to surface repeatedly, since female stars of a certain age have a rough time finding vehicles suitable to their talents, personalities, and their public images” (198). A viable production of *Milk Train* requires the strong presence of a seasoned actor with incredible stamina who can meet the physical and vocal demands of playing Flora Goforth. Bursting with energy and pacing the stage like a trapped animal, Dukakis added yet another skillfully crafted performance to her long and distinguished career. Part businesswoman and part society matron, her Mrs. Goforth wore her rough-and-tumble American roots like an old bathrobe, and neither Lacey’s neurotic Blackie nor Pettie’s ethereal Flanders matched Dukakis in range or passion. Mrs. Goforth’s quiet moments, however, arrive so unexpectedly that Dukakis sometimes faltered in embracing them. But overall her performance, physically raw and sexually vulnerable, was as risky as it was courageous—and nearly freed the audience from what Williams described in his *Memoirs* as the fear of “plays that are deeply concerned with human mortality” (201).

¶10 The genesis, initial performances, and subsequent revisions of *Milk Train* coincided with Merlo's terminal illness; his death on September 21, 1963, sent Williams into what he described in his *Memoirs* as "a seven-year depression" (194). Williams nonetheless continued to rework *Milk Train*, and a third version—directed by Tony Richardson and starring Tallulah Bankhead as Goforth—opened in New York on January 1, 1964, and closed after three performances. Nearly a decade later, Williams mused in his *Memoirs* that he might write "the final version of *Milk Train* for Michael York and Angela Lansbury" (41); as late as June 1979, he wrote to Maria St. Just that he was working on a new version that would star Sylvia Miles (St. Just 372).

¶11 As Williams confessed in his *Memoirs*, "the history of that play . . . reflected so painfully the deepening shadows of my life as man and artist" (187–88). In retrospect, his career-long refusal to abandon *Milk Train*, thus maintaining his connection to the excruciating personal loss concurrent with the play's creation, eventually seems to have merged with the central inner conflict around which the play's meager action revolves—Flora Goforth dictating her memoirs as a futile weapon to ward off her inevitable end. Unfortunately, little sense of the unrelenting mortality and heartbreak that permeates Williams's many versions of *Milk Train* made its way into the Roundabout production.

¶12 According to Williams's stage directions, Christopher Flanders, representing the allegorical Angel of Death, "has the look of a powerful, battered, but still undefeated, fighter" (505). Yet the character as played by Pettie seemed untouched by struggle, exuding an inner peace that makes him immune to Mrs. Goforth's barbed verbal assaults as well as attacks by her guard dogs. Pettie, despite appearing in various states of undress, lacked the charisma appropriate for an aging stud whose attractiveness objectifies him into an irresistible and untouchable paradox. Scruffy and thin, Pettie's Flanders possessed neither the "long, golden hair" nor the looks of "a young Greta Gah-bo" that Williams, in a 1971 interview with Rex Reed, ascribed to a runaway hippie he had met aboard ship from Japan to Hawaii who "was somewhat as I'd visualize Chris Flanders, the young man in my play *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*" (Reed 195).

¶13 Lacey as Blackie, however, succeeded in creating a young woman of deeply held contradictions whose path of withdrawal from the world has brought her to the illusory refuge of Mrs. Goforth's estate. Ironically, her secretarial duties require contact, however tenuous, with the world she has fled, and Mrs. Goforth imprisons her around the clock with an array of torturous communication devices. Blackie's observation that "Everything signifies something" (511) goes unchallenged amid the pointless commotion of the play until the very end, after Flanders has smoothed Mrs. Goforth's way to death and the sound of the waves envelops the stage. Through Flanders, Williams suggests a connection between the movement of the waves and the repeated chanting of Hindu meditation that he practices; for Blackie, however, the repetition of the waves is a manifestation of the great equalizer of all experience. Flanders affirms her understanding: "It says 'Boom' and that's what it means. No translation, no explanation, just 'Boom'" (582).

¶14 This final moment of the play provides the title for the 1968 film adaptation of *Milk Train*, for which Williams wrote parts of the screenplay. Directed by Joseph Losey, *Boom!* featured Noël Coward as the Witch of Capri, a change in gender for the role that Wilson's *Milk Train* wisely emulated. Played by Edward Hibbert with delicious bitchiness, this Witch of Capri burst onstage with outrageous comic style, providing all-too-brief moments of camp in a production that inexplicably disregarded Williams's own occasional flights of campiness and thus lacked much of the humor he derived, especially late in his career, from a queer perspective and sensibility. "Sissy," the Witch's gay appellation for Flora Goforth, rolled off Hibbert's tongue as a playful

invective; in response, Dukakis let go with some hilarious business of her own, as if the two were acting out a long private joke. Unfortunately, similar comic inventiveness did not extend to the exchanges between Mrs. Goforth's non-English-speaking staff—Elisa Bocanegra as Simonetta and Curtis Billings as Giulio—and their employer, who despite living in Italy has never learned much of the native language. Barking orders in pidgin Italian, Dukakis came across as an ugly American tyrant, intentionally or not. By diffusing these recurring moments of comic potential, the production exhibited a nasty streak that is unwarranted by the various texts of *Milk Train* and contradicted by Williams's lifelong passion for Italy.

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¶15 Memory and the artistic process are also central to *Vieux Carré*, a slice of Williams's autobiography that he first mentions in a letter to his grandmother circa January 26, 1939: "I have started a new play with a New Orleans background" (*Selected Letters* 145). Although he soon abandoned this project, then tentatively titled "Dead Planet, the Moon!" he would return to it again and again during his career. His letters from 722 Toulouse Street in the French Quarter, where he briefly relocated from St. Louis in 1938, mention incidents and people that eventually would make vivid appearances as scenes and characters in *Vieux Carré*. The Writer—"myself those many years ago," notes Williams in his description of the setting for *Vieux Carré* (*Vieux Carré* 827)—also boards at 722 Toulouse Street; the accurate address of the rooming house is but one of many factual details in a play poised between ghostly nostalgia and raw sexual awakening. Williams worked on *Vieux Carré* in 1976 and revised it in early 1977 during rehearsals for a Broadway production that, under the direction of Arthur Allan Seideman, opened on May 11, 1977, and closed after five performances, receiving some of the most scathing reviews of the playwright's career.^[1]

¶16 The Wooster Group's *Vieux Carré*, which opened February 2, 2011, for a sold-out five-week run at Manhattan's Baryshnikov Arts Center—following performances in 2009 and 2010 in Paris, at the Edinburgh International Festival, and at REDCAT in Los Angeles—treated Williams's dialogue with a faithful, almost reverential accuracy. More typical of the group's postmodern aesthetic, the production—under the brilliant direction of longtime Wooster luminary Elizabeth LeCompte—generated a startling and unforgettable series of images, often in juxtaposition with the specifics of time and place in Williams's text. This directorial strategy gave rise to a deeply felt performance that, through multiple points of view, suggested how our inner lives might intersect with the bewildered turmoil never far beneath the surface of Williams's work.

¶17 The lighting by Jennifer Tipton, video by Andrew Schneider, and sound by Matt Schloss and Omar Zubair provided LeCompte and her accomplished actors with the full array of Wooster Group trademark touches. Video monitors with the look of a tag sale hung menacingly among the catwalks above the performance space, and a half dozen more were suspended at different levels upstage; they ceaselessly displayed images, cloudy and clear in turn, that overlapped in a montage of the subconscious that remained just beyond understanding. Snippets of pop music merged with disturbing electronic riffs as a kind of soundscape dubbed over audio bits and pieces from inside Mrs. Wire's boarding house—and, beyond its walls, the French Quarter—in an aural wet dream. *Vieux Carré*, like *The Glass Menagerie*, is a memory play, and the production's design appeared to have been informed by Tom's meditation on memory at the start of the earlier play: "it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic" (*The Glass Menagerie* 400). At unexpected moments, however, blinding light crashed across the stage, momentarily obliterating the Writer's youthful addiction to poetry, and recalling the language with which

Tom—another of Williams’s autobiographical narrators—ends *The Glass Menagerie*: “nowadays the world is lit by lightening” (465).

¶18 Comprising seven live actors, three actors on video, and one voice-over, the cast of *Vieux Carré* moved effortlessly from one rolling platform to the next, a kinetic solution to the play’s difficult scenic demands. As Williams noted in a letter to Maria St. Just on April 15, 1977, “the set . . . is too complicated for any theater I’ve ever seen” (St. Just 357). Despite the objections of such New York critics as John Lahr, who compared the setting to a crack house (Lahr 85), the organized clutter of the Wooster Group’s production effectively captured the seedy atmosphere of a boarding house and provided a sufficiently informal environment in which performers changed roles as if they were changing their clothes and glided through other characters’ space as if the cheap plywood partitions between rooms warranted invisibility. “In the barrenness,” Williams’s stage directions state, “there should be a poetic evocation of all the cheap rooming houses of the world” (*Vieux Carré* 827). The production transformed such characters as Mary Maud, Miss Carrie, and the Judge into flickering video images and scratchy voice-overs; by depicting these characters as haunting apparitions, the production found a high-tech equivalent that effectively translated Williams’s assertion in his stage directions that the characters “seem bewildered as if caught in a dream” (850).

¶19 As the Writer, Ari Fliakos played Williams’s surrogate without a southern accent and devoid of any of the playwright’s mannerisms. Confiding to the audience, at the end of scene 10, that “Writers are shameless spies” (887), Fliakos’s sense of discovery almost liberates the Writer into artistic adulthood. The production forced the audience to spy with him, and upon him as well—voyeuristically watching him clad only in a black jockstrap for most of the play. Wooster Group veteran Kate Valk played both the tyrannical Mrs. Wire and Jane Sparks, the Yankee refugee denying her terminal illness in the sexual embrace of Tye McCool, a charismatic lowlife whose libidinous masculinity awakens the Writer’s homosexual leanings. In an effective piece of doubling, Scott Shepherd played both McCool and Nightingale, the aging consumptive artist who reflects the Writer’s deepest fears about himself and his vocation. As Nightingale, Shepherd, draped in a faded queenly robe and sporting an exaggerated rubber phallus, nonetheless managed to create a portrait of the artist as an old man that was a triumph of heartbreak and the production’s chief accomplishment.

¶20 The production was inconsistent in observing Williams’s designation of “[t]he period between winter 1938 and spring 1939” (827) for the play’s setting. Enver Chakartash dressed the cast with some period costume pieces, but LeCompte’s direction, with its focus on collision and rupture, paid little heed to such details. The production occasionally suffered, too, when its provocative explorations came across as gratuitous vulgarity; such images as Valk burying her face in Shepherd’s naked buttocks made many in the audience visibly uncomfortable. The production also discarded Williams’s tender use of his short story “The Angel in the Alcove” (1943; pub. 1948) as a means to free the Writer of homosexual guilt, replacing it with a bizarre scene in which the Writer recalled his dead grandmother while masturbating to a grainy gay porn reel on a video screen.

¶21 On March 29, 1952, Williams wrote to Maria St. Just, “I’m not at all clever about people unless they’re people of my own invention” (St. Just 55). The Wooster Group’s *Vieux Carré*, through riveting performances born of Williams’s distinct lyric voice, transformed that cleverness. More interesting, in the end, than the production’s technical wizardry were the characters themselves, as haunting as the ghosts of the Writer’s memory.

¶22 First presented in Chicago on December 2, 2004, at Steppenwolf's Downstairs Theatre, a revised version of Tennessee Williams's "One Arm," adapted for the stage and directed by Moisés Kaufman, had its New York premiere May 19, 2011, off-Broadway at the Acorn Theatre, produced by the New Group and Tectonic Theater Project. Kaufman and two dramaturges created *One Arm* from the short story of the same title and several archival drafts of Williams's 1967 screenplay of *One Arm* (Mandell). The meticulous research and detailed preparation that informed such earlier Tectonic productions as *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1997) and *The Laramie Project* (2000) initially might seem unsuitable tools for shaping Williams's visceral and idiosyncratic sources into a worthwhile theater piece. Yet Kaufman has elicited strong performances from his uniformly excellent cast, and the docudrama feel inherent in much of Tectonic's work has imbued *Tennessee Williams' One Arm*, which is the full title, with the perfect level of cool detachment. Kaufman and his ensemble created the netherworld of gay hustlers and their johns without a hint of the sensationalism in the material that, in less capable hands, could easily have been exploited.

¶23 In a letter to Donald Windham dated May 31, 1942, Williams first mentioned "One Arm" in terms that suggest both men were acquainted with his subject: "Today wrote new story *One Arm* about the 1-armed hustler in New Orleans" (Windham 27). On July 28, 1943, he wrote again to Windham, this time about "the story *One Arm* which I had just gotten into final shape when I left Mexico" and his great fear, proven to be unfounded when the manuscript showed up in his luggage, that customs border officials had confiscated it. "I suspected it was being held because of its subject matter," Williams wrote (Windham 175). As the 1948 publication date of the story collection *One Arm, and Other Stories* approached, Williams expressed concern in letters to New Directions publisher James "Jay" Laughlin about marketing the book beyond a select audience: he wrote on December 29, 1947, "I don't think the book should be publicized and sold through the usual channels" (*Selected Letters* 1: 139), and on October 27, 1948, "Please remember not to let ONE ARM be displayed for sale in bookstores" (*Selected Letters* 1: 211).

¶24 Williams clearly understood the boundaries imposed on public discourse by heterosexual society and did not want the deeply personal, homosexual nature of "One Arm" to be misunderstood or misconstrued by readers lacking some awareness of gay life. In an unpublished letter to *Time* written in January 1955, Williams explained, "These stories stretch all the way back, in time, to my adolescence" (*Selected Letters* 1: 563). Implicit in this assertion is the idea that gay life, which at the time was both closeted and underground, had been very much a part of Williams's private identity since his youth. Williams sought to preserve the artistic integrity of *One Arm, and Other Stories* by restricting its readership—an impractical but nonetheless understandable wish for an artist whose sensibility had been shaped in part by gay culture.

¶25 Kaufman and his design team gave Williams's frank and unapologetic treatment of homosexuality a production style of dazzling simplicity. Stretching the playing space into the dark recesses of shadowy pipes and mechanical equipment upstage and in the wings, set designer Derek McLane established a no-man's land that propels threatening characters—straight and gay—into the world of Ollie Oliver (Oliver Winemiller in the short story), the romanticized hustler at the center of the play. David Lander's expert lighting design moved quickly and clearly among the flashbacks that make up most of the narrative, and such ostensibly theatrical devices as a handheld scoop and a blinding shaft of white light bursting through an open door enhanced the dimly lit staging with sudden reminders of the powerful jolt awaiting Ollie in the electric chair. Both detailed and evocative,

Shane Rettig's original music and sound design linked the production's rapid succession of characters and images into a chain of echoes from empty encounters.

¶26 As the Narrator, Noah Bean set the stylistic tone of the production in its first moments; he took his place at a small table, turned on a desk lamp, opened a bound film script, and read: "*One Arm*, an unproduced screenplay by Tennessee Williams." The parallel fictive realms of the unproduced screenplay and the produced play continue to merge sporadically for the next eighty minutes, and although in the *New York Times* review of the production, Ben Brantley complained that "cobwebs . . . cling to Sean, as a device and a character," Kaufman's script wisely and quickly transformed the Narrator's function from that of reading directions from the screenplay to reading passages from the short story. The Narrator's commentary became a tool applying finishing touches on arresting stage pictures; Kaufman thus used Williams's words to complete what he and his collaborators had created with images.

¶27 With his chiseled good looks and aloof naïveté, Claybourne Elder brought deep sensitivity and even deeper rage to Ollie Oliver, the Arkansas farm boy who became the lightweight boxing champion of the Pacific Fleet until he lost his right arm—and his capacity to feel—in a drunken car accident. The simple gesture of binding the actor's arm to his torso with a tight leather belt not only established the deformity that a parade of lonely homosexual clients would later find alluring but also served as a restraint on Ollie's anger, which he gradually channels into writing notes and making crude pencil sketches in response to the letters he receives on death row from johns whose lives he has touched. The penultimate scene, an encounter between Ollie and a sexually repressed divinity student played by Todd Lawson with creepy accuracy, revisits every trick Ollie has ever turned. As the divinity student's visit to death row deteriorates from his prayerful entreaties into sexual fervor ignited by massaging Ollie's naked back, Elder created an astonishing moment that translated Ollie's realization in the short story that "I have feelings, too" ("*One Arm*" 187) into a haunting piece of theatre.

¶28 This raw encounter chillingly conveyed the hypocrisy inherent in a religious establishment peopled with repressed homosexuals who preach against homosexuality. As a short story, "*One Arm*" paints a distressing picture of gay men drawn to "some broken Apollo that no one was likely to carve so purely again" ("*One Arm*" 188) as a way of assuaging their own feelings of incompleteness and mutilation in an era that persecuted and victimized them. The production, regrettably, forfeited this crucial aspect of *One Arm* by setting the action in 1967 rather than, as in Williams's story, between 1939 and 1942. Although the costumes by Clint Ramos effectively evoked the late 1960s and the ensemble—notably when portraying hustlers and trade—moved with rock 'n' roll attitude, the choice of era diluted the repression that permeates the short story and stuck the single dissonant note in an otherwise pitch-perfect piece of theater.

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¶29 In August the Acorn Theatre was home again to another of Williams's works: *The Pretty Trap*, a short variation of *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) with a happy ending, produced by Cause Célèbre, an off-Broadway group, for a two-week run. Seldom staged, and accessible only in manuscript form until 2006,^[2] *The Pretty Trap* might provide bits of interest to the most tolerant Williams scholars and aficionados. But Cause Célèbre's production, as lifeless and lackluster as a job in a shoe warehouse, contributed little more to the Williams centenary than an inadvertent, but nonetheless persuasive, validation of the playwright's obsession with rewriting and revising his

work. As Anita Gates observed in her review of the production in the *New York Times*, the play serves as “a vivid example of a dreadfully ordinary piece that evolved into a masterwork.”

¶30 Running at about fifty minutes, *The Pretty Trap* seemed much longer, due in some measure to ponderously slow pacing inappropriate for a piece that, according to Brian Parker, Williams consistently subtitled “A Comedy in One Act” through various versions. Based on his research into the numerous manuscripts related to the evolution of *The Glass Menagerie*, Parker also has proposed that *The Pretty Trap*—unlike Williams’s short story “Portrait of a Girl in Glass” or his unproduced screenplay *The Gentleman Caller* (1943)—is most accurately understood not as an early version of *The Glass Menagerie* but as an experiment the playwright undertook while developing the full-length play: a “‘spin-off’ rather than a ‘source’” (3).

¶31 Nonetheless, it is almost impossible to respond to *The Pretty Trap* without reference to Williams’s superior achievement in *The Glass Menagerie*. Of particular interest to devotees of that masterwork are the insights *The Pretty Trap* provides into the different perspectives Williams explored in creating his characters—all of whom turn up in both plays. Laura, for instance, appears without the odd and reclusive young woman’s familiar hobble. As portrayed by Nisi Sturgis, an actor with a seductive and unusual beauty, Laura lives almost silently with her glass animals in a dream world that shatters when she opens her mouth to speak to Jim. Hers is the cracking, oddly pitched voice of a refugee from reality who quite simply is not used to talking very much. The character of the gentleman caller in *The Pretty Trap* is more fleshed-out than his successor in *The Glass Menagerie*, a pleasant but self-centered dullard. Indeed, Jim—whose surname here is Delaney rather than O’Connor—has an extended conversation with Amanda before dinner and later delivers the play’s central thematic speech, about workers, drivers, and dreamers. Although Robert Eli looked too old for the role of Jim, he gave the production’s most polished performance, an accomplishment aided by the strength of his scripted character. The play’s other male character, Tom Wingfield, does not fare as well in the script of *The Pretty Trap*, in which he is an insipid cipher functioning as a plot device to bring Jim home to meet Laura. To his great credit, Loren Dunn, who has performed in both *The Glass Menagerie* and *The Night of the Iguana*, managed to convey something of Tom’s inner life. As brother and sister, Dunn and Sturgis exhibited a remarkable gift for conveying the unspoken lives of the dreamers on stage; their silences were the most affecting moments in the production. Williams often claimed Anton Chekhov as an important influence, and these nuanced performances offered noteworthy evidence.

¶32 Amanda Wingfield, the central character in *The Pretty Trap*, looms large and a bit ludicrously over the proceedings. One of the clearest conclusions that can be drawn from this lackluster production is that Williams’s vision of Amanda, brought barely to life in *The Pretty Trap* by Katharine Houghton, remained unswerving and coherently detailed as he molded his autobiographical material into the exquisite form of *The Glass Menagerie*. Indeed, until the climactic scene between Jim and Laura, this performance of *The Pretty Trap* comes across as an extended monologue, occasionally punctuated with comments from other characters that Amanda ignores. Houghton, a niece of Katharine Hepburn who rose to fame in her first film role as her aunt’s screen daughter in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967) and who has remained active in regional theater during the four decades since the film’s release, failed to decode Amanda in any interesting ways. Despite using a southern accent—albeit a generic one—Houghton never captured the rhythm of Williams’s language, which even in this minor work is a clear achievement. Slight in stature and weak in voice, Houghton was unable to communicate the explosive energy seething inside Amanda; to be fair, however, Houghton’s scene-to-scene material in *The Pretty*

Trap offered fewer opportunities than *The Glass Menagerie*, which established Amanda Wingfield as one of the iconic roles in American drama.

¶33 *The Pretty Trap* remains one of Williams's few comedies; its tentative happy ending (for everyone but Tom) is the antithesis of Amanda's lament in the final moments of *The Glass Menagerie*: "Things have a way of turning out so badly" (460). However, under the bland direction of Antony Marsellis, the production offered very few laughs; and despite some very funny lines that *The Glass Menagerie* replicates to roars of laughter, nothing in this production generated much in the way of a smile. The costumes by David Toser and the lighting design by Bernie Dove contributed little artistic excitement to the production, and in its lack of interesting detail, Ray Klausen's set design provided a visual correlative for the undistinguished language of the play itself.

¶34 Established in December 2007, Cause Célèbre is a sister organization of Food For Thought Productions, which since September 2000 has endeavored to advance the one-act play form in various off-Broadway venues. Food for Thought introduced *The Pretty Trap* to New York audiences through a reading at the Players Club on October 25, 2005, that featured Kathleen Turner as Amanda. Mounting this full production of *The Pretty Trap* six years later confirmed the limitations of the play. Lacking a tightly constructed script and the kinds of layered meaning essential for one-act plays to be effective, *The Pretty Trap* has contributed very little to the worthy effort of its producers to enhance audience appreciation for the merits of short works written for the stage.

¶35 In August 1944, Williams wrote from Provincetown to Donald Windham that he had finished the manuscript of what would become *The Glass Menagerie*, declaring, "It is the *last* play I will try to write for the *now* existing theater" (Windham 148). Devoid of the narrative frame and overt theatricality intrinsic to the production of *The Glass Menagerie*, which premiered later that year, *The Pretty Trap* serves as a particularly painful example of the "now existing theater" that Williams abhorred.

¶36 Whereas considerable effort and resources went into staging *The Pretty Trap* and into marketing the production on internet sites such as *The AndyGram*, it seems ironic that the playwright's centenary has come and gone without a notable production of *The Glass Menagerie* as Williams envisioned the play. However, the Williams plays that were performed in New York City during 2011 suggested interesting and exciting ways of approaching Williams's theatre pieces as we enter the playwright's second century. Both the Roundabout Theatre Company's production of *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* and the Wooster Group's *Vieux Carré* provided ample evidence that the theatre's transition from a dramatist-centered endeavor (as it was in Williams's mid-career) to a director-centered enterprise continues. Substantial directorial innovation in staging *Vieux Carré* affirmed the rich possibilities of exploring Williams's language through technology that would have been unknown to the playwright. Conversely, *Milk Train* suffered from the director's decision to narrow the play's global reach by ignoring conventions Williams borrowed from Asian theater and by trimming his language to fit an inappropriate realistic style. Thus, the production inadvertently made a strong case for revisiting *Milk Train* and Williams's other late plays in the current theatre environment where the multicultural dimension of performance and production continues to grow. The delightful and campy exchanges between Hibbert's Witch of Capri and Dukakis's Goforth in *Milk Train*, as well as the unapologetic depiction of homosexual characters in *Vieux Carré* and *One Arm*, strongly indicated that Williams's gay sensibility, which until recently has remained largely unexplored on stage, can enrich future productions of his plays. *One Arm*, moreover, demonstrated the vast potential for transforming Williams's short fiction into viable works for the theater.

In the final decades of his life, Williams claimed with some regularity that his two favorites among his plays were *Camino Real* (1953) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). Although these two works may represent opposite ends of a theatrical spectrum, Williams had little difficulty appreciating the merits of each in equal measure. The Williams productions in New York City during the centenary of his birth urged us to do likewise with all of his plays.

Notes

¹ For more on this disastrous production, see Robert Bray's introduction to the 2000 New Directions edition of *Vieux Carré* and Craig Clinton's "Reprise of Tennessee Williams' *Vieux Carré*."

² Following its debut publication in the 2006 *Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, the play was included in a published anthology of Williams's short theatre pieces, *The Magic Tower and Other One-Act Plays*, in 2011.

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