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Tennessee Williams Scholars Conference Panel:

Out of the Closet, Onto the Page: A Discussion of Williams's Public Coming Out on The David Frost Show in 1970 and His Confessional Writing of the '70s

Moderator: *Annette J. Saddik*
Panelists: *David Savran*, *Michael Paller*, *Dirk Gindt*

***Editor's Note**: The following panel was transcribed directly from tapes made for this session of the Tennessee Williams Scholars Conference, held on March 24, 2010, in New Orleans.*

Robert Bray: My friend Annette Saddik is going to moderate. Annette is an associate professor in the English department of New York City College of Technology and also teaches at the CUNY Graduate Center, in theater. Her area of specialization is twentieth-century drama and performance, particularly the work of Tennessee Williams. Many of you have read her work. She is the author of *Contemporary American Drama*, recently published by the University of Edinburgh Press, and *The Politics of Reputation: The Critical Reception of Tennessee Williams' Later Plays*, an oft-cited work. She has also edited and introduced a collection of Williams's previously unpublished later plays, *The Traveling Companion and Other Plays*.

¶2 **Saddik:** Thank you. Hello. It is my great pleasure this morning to introduce our three panelists. To my left is David Savran, who is a specialist in twentieth- and twenty-first-century American theater, popular culture, and social theory. He is the author of eight books, including *Breaking the Rules: The Wooster Group*; *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams*; and, most recently, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class*. He has published two collections of interviews with playwrights, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights*; and *The Playwright's Voice: American Dramatists on Memory, Writing, and the Politics of Culture*. David has served as a judge for the Obie Awards and the Lucille Lortel Awards. He is editor of the *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* and is the Vera Mowry Roberts Distinguished Professor of Theater at the Graduate Center at the City University of New York (CUNY).

¶3 Next is Michael Paller, who is dramaturge and director of humanities for the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco and also teaches in their MFA acting conservatory. Since joining ACT in August 2005 he has served as dramaturge for thirty main-stage productions and several readings in ACT's First Look series of new work. He has been a dramaturge and literary manager at several theaters, including the George Street Playhouse, the Berkshire Theatre Festival, the Long Wharf Theatre, the Roundabout Theatre, and others. Before coming to ACT he taught at Columbia University and the State University of New York at Purchase. He served as dramaturge for the Russian premiere of Tennessee Williams's *Small Craft Warnings* in Moscow and is the author of *Gentlemen Callers: Tennessee Williams, Homosexuality, and Mid-Twentieth-Century Drama*, which

came out in 2005, and a new text that will soon be released, *Tennessee Williams: The Playwright in Context*, as well as several essays on Williams's work.

¶4 Finally, Dirk Gindt holds a PhD in performance studies and has worked as an assistant professor at the Centre for Fashion Studies at Stockholm University, where in autumn 2009 he was awarded a two-year research position as a post-doctoral associate. Gindt is coeditor of *Fashion: An Interdisciplinary Reflection* (2009). He has published in *Nordic Theatre Studies*, *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, and is also the editor in chief of *Lambda Nordica*, for which he has recently edited a double issue on queer fashion. His current research project investigates the original Swedish stage productions of Tennessee Williams's plays in the 1950s, and he'll be talking about that today as well.

¶5 I was excited to see that the last panel had addressed some of the issues we'll be dealing with this morning on our panel, so I think everything will come together nicely. And I'd like to begin, as per our title, with this issue of coming out—not only in terms of Williams's coming out as a gay man in particular but the complexities of coming out as a process, and how he deals with that in his work. As the last panel confirmed, Williams officially came out in 1970 on national television on *The David Frost Show*, but he was never really in the closet; his sexuality was more or less an open secret. And he did write very openly gay texts before he came out on television, particularly his short stories "Hard Candy," "The Mysteries of the Joy Rio," "Desire and the Black Masseur," and "The Killer Chicken and the Closet Queen," as fiction was a less public medium than plays and had fewer constraints on it during the 1940s and '50s. But even his early plays—those considered to constitute his work before 1961—pushed the boundaries in terms of their gay subtexts.

¶6 Certainly after the 1970s, Williams was able to deal more openly with gay themes and characters in his plays, and we're going to be talking about some of those—*Small Craft Warnings* (1972), *Vieux Carré* (1977), *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981)—as well as his fiction, *Moise and the World of Reason*, and his *Memoirs*, which were both published in 1975. More recently, *The Parade*, *The Remarkable Rooming-House of Mme. Le Monde*, *The Chalky White Substance*, and *The Traveling Companion* all deal very openly with gay themes.

So, with that said, I'd like to ask the panel—and anyone can take this—if you can say something about this process of coming out as perhaps both a turning point and an ongoing process in terms of Williams's work of the '70s and '80s in particular.

¶7 **Savran:** Well, there are different ways of coming out for different people. I mean, one thing to bear in mind is that when a celebrity comes out, there's something irrevocable about it. And the celebrity's gay or lesbian-ness really gets solidified, which is not necessarily the case for average people, especially those who are not obviously gay or lesbian, for whom there's more of a kind of continuous process. I think you're right—and it's crucial—that during the '50s and '60s, Williams's homosexuality really was an open secret. And during the 1960s, there were so many articles written, in prominent places by prominent authors, spreading all sorts of nasty innuendo, not only about Williams but about Inge, about Edward Albee. But yes, 1970 was the year in which he took up the mantle, in a way.

Saddik: And that was post-Stonewall, of course, so the timing was right.

¶8 **Paller:** Yes, it's kind of a conundrum because, as David was saying, he was never really in the closet, given the context of his time and the context of when he was born and how he grew up and the family in which he grew up. And in some of his work . . . you look at a play that was written in 1953, *Camino Real*, which has not only an openly gay character, but a very outré openly gay character who is a sadomasochist who's not there asking for tolerance; he's not there asking anybody for permission to be what he is—he just is. And for his pains he is killed by the state. Now, no one else was doing this in 1953 in the mainstream commercial theater, which was really the only theater that there was in America at that time. And certainly *Suddenly Last Summer* has another sort of very controversial gay figure, but a gay figure nonetheless. Not a Broadway play, an off-Broadway play, but even so, there was no one else doing this.

¶9 And even when he came out on *David Frost*—which I certainly don't think he intended to do; I mean, he doesn't even look particularly sober actually, when you look at that tape [laughter]—who else was doing that? No other mainstream American playwright did that. Lanford Wilson didn't do that. Edward Albee didn't do that. None of them did. It was quiet—and he lived with it. It was a courageous thing. And it is a continual coming out, and he made sure it was continual because he kept talking about it in ways that made some people, including a lot of gay people, uncomfortable and unhappy and angry and distressed. And when the *Memoirs* came out, there was a certain amount of very negative reaction on the part of a lot of gay people. He also got a lot of mail from young gay people who thanked him for that book. But a lot of what you read, if you read gay press or even the *New York Times*, was that no one cared, in a sense. I mean, not that no one cared, but they weren't impressed. And because his images of gay men were not positive, this was another issue that came up.

¶10 **Gindt:** I think it's also important to remember why he kept on talking about his homosexuality, or why gay people want to come out of the closet and still *need* to do it, and I think it has to do with how you conceptualize this institution of the closet and what a "coming out" means. If we look at the scholarly literature, there are different approaches to it. There's the British gay historian Jeffrey Weeks, who conceptualizes coming out as a rite of passage: first you acknowledge your desires to yourself, then you approach other lesbian and gay people to build a community, and finally it is time to tell the rest of the world. So it's a very linear development that Weeks describes, whereas if we look at the work of the American-literature scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who in 1990 published her book *Epistemology of the Closet*, in which she conceptualizes the closet or coming out as a spiral movement that you have to repeat again and again because there's always someone who doesn't know, even after you come out. Or there's always someone whom you don't want to know. And, as a result, you can never leave the closet behind yourself; there's never a sense of closure. You have to repeat the coming out again and again, and I think this is one of the reasons why Williams turned to these more confessional writings in the '70s.

¶11 **Saddik:** And I think that's a good point to remind us of, Michael—that he didn't go on *The David Frost Show* intending to come out. David Frost had asked him about his characters and about different kinds of sexuality of his characters, and Williams says words, to the effect, "Well, I don't think anyone is all man or all woman," and then Frost pushed him some more, and then his answer when Frost asked him was "Well, I don't want to cause a

scandal, but I've covered the waterfront" [laughter]. And he didn't look particularly sober, and he was very playful. So I think that is a good point to bring up. Also, in your book *Gentlemen Callers*, Michael, you touch upon something that Dirk mentioned: this negative reception of the rather unsympathetic gay character Quentin in *Small Craft Warnings*. The *Memoirs*, of course, as well, were widely attacked when they came out, somewhat surprisingly by gay writers, for whom Williams was not gay enough, who believed that he was not addressing these gay themes and ideas in a very open way. And then there were the more mainstream critics, for whom Williams was too gay, and too much, and too revealing of his gay life. So I wonder if the panel could address this issue of how certain figures were rejected by the immediate post-Stonewall generation during the 1970s and '80s, and reflect on how this might be different in 2010, if you will.

¶12 **Paller:** Well, it seemed almost inevitable that Tennessee Williams and the people who were really involved in gay identity politics in the 1970s were going to misunderstand each other. And, you know, Williams had been attacked since *Streetcar*, in reviews of *Streetcar*, as being too gay. If you look at those reviews in the New York press, the way they refer to Allan Grey is pretty awful. And then they would attribute those kinds of terms to Williams. After Stonewall, it's not unlike, I think, many minority communities, when there's a sudden moment where they're forging a communal identity. There's going to be dissent around it, but eventually there's going to be sort of one really significant, one mostly agreed-upon, identity. There's not a lot of room for dissent in terms of an emerging public identity. And because for gays and lesbians the issue around their oppression had always been about sex, I think if you look at the plays written by young gay playwrights in the '70s who identify as gay, like Victor Bumbalo and Robert Patrick and Terry Miller and others . . . the idea was that, if you were gay, it was because you had gay sex, which was healthy and liberating and beautiful. And people who didn't look at it in that way were shunted aside.

¶13 And it wasn't just the '70s; it went into the '80s, almost until the advent of AIDS. Well, this was not Tennessee Williams. Although his friend Donald Windham had written repeatedly and said repeatedly that, while Tennessee Williams felt guilty about a *lot* of things, he loved being a gay person. Now, you can buy that or not, but this is evidence from someone who spent an awful lot of time with him in the '40s and '50s, cruising together, picking up guys together, getting beat up together sometimes. So, there is that element, but Williams's personality was such that there were a lot of conflicts around being gay, but not to the degree that he should be accused of being homophobic or self-loathing. I think that's inaccurate.

¶14 You know, he came from a culture and a family where sex was frowned on, not just gay sex, and if you look at some of his early journal entries, he talks about perhaps ending up with a woman, *if* there was going to be sex of any kind at all. Now, this happened after his affair with Kip Kiernan ended so tragically and, from his point of view, horrifically, but, I mean, sex for him was a very fraught thing. And those who were interested in identity politics on the gay side had no time for subtleties or nuances, and they would look only at those characters who they thought made their case. If you take a play like *Small Craft Warnings*, which is a really beautiful play, Quentin, the gay figure, has a long monologue about the deadening, dehumanizing effects of sex with someone of one's own sex. And this was really pounced upon, jumped on. If you look at the whole play, and look at the other six or seven characters in that play, all of them are in exactly the same state. They all are suffering from what Williams was suffering from, which was not homophobia but depression and an inability to feel surprise in

life. That's what those characters grappled with, all except one. Quentin is the only one who addresses it forthrightly and knows it about himself. But the others in the play had the same situation.

That's one example, and I don't want to take up any more time, but if you've got a community that is building an identity around sex as a positive, liberating, beautiful thing, they are not going to be so interested in a man born in 1911 who had a much more complicated experience of life and sex.

¶15 **Saddik:** Well, David [Savran], in *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers*, also addresses this issue of Williams as a self-hating gay man and debunks that. So if you would say something about that?

Savran: When I wrote the book twenty years ago, so much of the Williams scholarship was really homophobic, and usually by implication, like so much of the journalism of the time. And reading especially the short stories but also the early plays, I felt that in a way he was trying to safeguard his gay characters, which may seem peculiar—I mean, having them kill themselves may seem like a curious way of safeguarding them—but you have to remember that positive representations of lesbians and gay men were forbidden on the New York stage. So it's not as though Williams could simply invent all these wonderful gay characters. They were not allowed.

¶16 **Paller:** And actually, technically, legally, *no* depiction of "sex perversion" . . .

Saddik: Until 1968.

Paller: . . . was allowed from around 1928 or whatever . . .

Savran: The Wales Padlock Law.

Paller: . . . Mae West's play, *The Drag*, opened and then closed.

Savran: And in fact I have a theory about the difference between Williams's narrative prose and his plays. This ties in with the point that Shelley Akers was making [in the previous panel] about *Moise and the World of Reason*, the way that his prose—because it was not as public—was a place where he could write his sexuality and write his desires, which could not be represented on the stage. I think this is important to keep in mind.

¶17 **Gindt:** I would like to add that it's also time to re-evaluate some of these characters thirty years after they were created, because there's a lot to learn from them. First of all, most of them are very complex and highly conflicted personalities, like most of Williams's characters, but the difference I think is that the contemporary gay movement, specifically white gay males, I would say, are increasingly uncomfortable with sexual identities or sexual practices that are not embraced by contemporary social norms. Or even neoliberalism, I might add. And I think a lot of the later gay characters in Williams's work are hilariously provocative: they are in your face, they are substance abusing, they don't apologize for their sexual tastes, and they show no interest whatsoever in being embraced by a normative gay movement, and this is something we should re-evaluate.

¶18 One more thing I would like to add is that Williams, in all his later works, including the *Memoirs*, always expresses an awareness of the homophobic context surrounding both himself and these characters, so one cannot claim that they only suffer from internalized homophobia. On the contrary: there's a lot of homophobia

around them. If we look at *Vieux Carré*, we have Tye, who's both homophobic and misogynist. In the *Memoirs*, Williams makes it clear that there still exist a lot of prejudices, even though it's not politically correct to vent them openly—but they're still there. In *Moise* we have the encounter with the two policemen who beat up the narrator, so the potential for violence is always there.

¶19 **Paller:** Yes, I think also one thing that's worth mentioning in this context is that one of the things that was important to the identity building that was going on in the gay community, particularly among activists, was an insistence on positive images, which is not what any artist is particularly interested in. And Tennessee Williams, you know, painted very few positive images of anybody; certainly you don't find very many happy heterosexual marriages in Tennessee Williams at all. It's hard to name one, offhand, that's significant. Artists don't tend to respond, most of them, to an external agenda. They write what they need to write, what their own inner pressures drive them to write, and to demand that they toe a particular ideological line is nonproductive.

¶20 **Savran:** And actually, I think Tennessee's representations of gay men in fact make a lot more sense in the twenty-first century than they did in the 1970s. In preparing for this panel, I was looking at how the *New York Times* covered the publication of the *Memoirs*—which they were clearly terribly embarrassed about, as so many critics were—and Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, in his review, talks about being assaulted by the book; he's really disturbed and disgusted. And of course he means disgusted by Williams's homosexuality, or rather the manner in which he seems compelled to flaunt it. And this is 1975. In 2006 John Waters, the wonderful director, published also in the *Times*—was this connected with the reissue of the *Memoirs*?

Saddik: Yes, it was the introduction to the new edition

Savran: John Waters says something very interesting. He's talking about when he was coming out and going to a gay bar in Washington [DC]: "Some referred to it as the Chicken Hut, and it was filled with early 1960s gay men in fluffy sweaters who cruised each other by calling table-to-table on phones provided by the bar. 'I may be queer, but I ain't this,' I remember thinking,'" Waters writes. "Still reading everything Tennessee Williams wrote, I knew he would understand my dilemma. Tennessee never seemed 'gayly-correct' even then, and sexual ambiguity and confusion were always made appealing and exciting in his work. 'My type doesn't know who I am,' he stated, according to legend, and even if the sex lives of his characters weren't always healthy, they certainly seemed hearty." I find it interesting how the tenor has changed in thirty, forty years. Which is, I think, one reason why today we're able to celebrate the later Williams in a way that could not have happened even twenty years ago.

¶21 **Gindt:** You mention the homophobic criticism, David, especially up until 1990, and I think one of the most notorious criticisms of Williams's expressing his own internalized homophobia was raised by John Clum in a number of articles. And, just to give you one example, in *Vieux Carré* The Writer, who is the main character, is struggling with his sexual desires. He hasn't really come out of the closet yet. He's only had one sexual experience; then he has another one in the play, which isn't particularly gratifying, and afterwards he's praying for forgiveness and hopes that the angel of his deceased grandmother will appear and forgive him for what he calls—this is a quote—"perversions of longings." And John Clum criticized this particular line very harshly. But we have to remember this play is set in 1938/early 1939, when there was an intense stigma attached to

homosexuality, and moreover I would actually dare to say that, even today, coming out of the closet and acknowledging an identity that is still socially deviant is not an easy thing. And, in that respect, what The Writer, the main character in *Vieux Carré*, goes through is still a very contemporary experience.

¶22 **Saddik:** I think these are all good points in terms of the fact that Williams wrote complex human beings. He wrote, rather than gay characters or straight characters—this is not a simple issue—he wrote human beings and desire in all their complexity. Would you like to say something maybe about some of the short stories? I know, Dirk, you reminded me of "Killer Chicken and the Closet Queen," which I'd forgotten about. And actually New Directions just put out a volume called *Tales of Desire*, which is Williams's short stories that deal with desire: "Mysteries of the Joy Rio," "Hard Candy," "Killer Chicken," "One Arm" . . . there's one more . . .

Gindt: "Desire and the Black Masseur."

Saddik: "Desire and the Black Masseur." They couldn't call them the "gay hustler stories," so they titled them *Tales of Desire*. But I'm just wondering if you see something in these short stories—"Killer Chicken" was written during the 1970s—if there's something you want to say about that, in terms of maybe the differences with the earlier short stories of the '50s?

¶23 **Gindt:** I think that David is the expert on the short stories, but "Killer Chicken and the Closet Queen," which was written very late—I think it's one of his last short stories published—is hilarious. Its narrative tone is very different compared to the stories from the '40s and '50s; it's very in your face, it's very provocative. But it also shows—and I think it was written in like '77, '78, I'm not quite sure—but once again it also shows what a murderous institution the closet continues to be. The main character, the closet queen "with a broomstick up his butt," as I think Williams writes in the tale, is basically contributing to a young accountant being fired because the young accountant is suspected of being homosexual. And so the attorneys have a discussion about it, and they decide to fire him, and the main character keeps quiet about it because he's afraid that he too will get fired. And this actually happens later in the story, so I think it shows brilliantly how the closet informs life, even after Stonewall.

Saddik: And one of the partners who's married is constantly hitting on this young attorney in very subtle ways—they take saunas together, and he brushes his crotch and his thigh, but the young man thinks that this might be a test. So there is that constant fear, and paranoia, which really isn't paranoia. Dirk, could you also tell us a little bit about Williams's reception in Sweden, and how it fits into all this?

Gindt: OK. This might take a few minutes, OK? [laughter]

Saddik: I'll sit back.

¶24 **Gindt:** Williams was one of the most popular foreign playwrights in Sweden in the 1950s. Williams and Jean Anouilh were the most performed non-Swedish playwrights. Williams himself came to Sweden in 1955 to attend the European premiere of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. The press covered the visit intensively and, between the lines, alluded to his then-closeted homosexuality in a very unsympathetic—not to say homophobic—way. I'm not going to develop that—you can read about that in this year's *Tennessee Williams Annual Review* [2010]. But

the point is, in 1955, his homosexuality was an open secret in Sweden as well, and Williams thought that the press and the homophobic descriptions of him ruined his chances of ever winning the Nobel Prize. Which is not completely true, because in 1958 he was actually nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature. The Swedish Academy asked a well-renowned theater critic to write a fourteen-page assessment and evaluation and recommendation. It's a very detailed account of all of Williams's prose works and plays up until 1958. He got a very favorable review, actually, and the academy decided to wait a few more years and see what else he would produce. However, what is interesting about this fourteen-page evaluation is that it names the open secret of Williams's homosexuality. I'm going to quote from the section on *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*: "The play is distinguished by the fact that it is Tennessee Williams's first, if hesitant, grapple to stage the secondary issue of homosexuality. A problem that, as far as is known, has played some part in his personal way of life." So this is 1958; this is an official report to the Swedish Academy, and you can't help but wonder why they would do that. Why was this comment even necessary? But once again it shows you how contradictory the closet is.

¶25 And then, if we fast forward to 1970, after Williams came out on *The David Frost Show*, interest in him had faded completely in Sweden. After *Iguana*, no more new plays were being staged, with the exception of *Kingdom of Earth*, which I think has more to do with the fact that it only requires three characters . . . so his coming out passed almost unnoticed in the Swedish press, with one exception: an article that was written by the Swedish-American cultural journalist Eugénie Söderberg a few weeks after *The David Frost Show*. Interestingly, she never mentions the word "homosexuality." I mean, Williams had just come out of the closet, and what this person does—it's a very obscure article that deals with the revival of *Camino Real*, but the author, the journalist, calls it *The Seven Descents of Myrtle*, so she really didn't get all the facts straight. But she writes this about the TV show: "When the TV interviewer wanted some details from Williams's more intimate life, his special love life, Williams was completely speechless, surely just like millions of viewers with him. What he said, and what he didn't want to answer, is something for future biographers to explore" [laughter]. This really shows that even when you come out, when you openly declare that you've "covered the waterfront," you're still not a sovereign subject or an authority on the issue. Someone else will once again speak for you, rebuild the closet in this case, and lock you up once again. And I think this is one of the contradictions that also forced Williams to go back to it again and again and again in his confessional writings.

¶26 **Saddik:** I want to continue this process, this discussion on the process of coming out, especially in terms of queer theory, which was mentioned during the last panel. And also address theorists like Eve Sedgwick, whom Dirk had mentioned, who wrote *Epistemology of the Closet* in 1990, and Judith Butler, who was mentioned in one of the audience questions during the last panel. Judith Butler wrote several books, but her most famous one, I think, in 1990, was *Gender Trouble*, which also addressed this issue. And both Sedgwick and Butler theorized this ongoing process of coming out as a process that changes as the social context changes. Jeffrey Weeks, whom Dirk also mentioned, conceptualizes it as a linear rite of passage: that there's an existence before coming out, and then coming out is a turning point, and then an existence after coming out, whereas Sedgwick and Butler point to the circular movement, that you're always coming out at some level; you're never done. So I'd like to ask, and perhaps we can start with David, if you can say something about this dialectical relationship

between subject and society, as these queer subject positions are constantly transformed—that relationship between the gay man coming out and the social response, perhaps.

¶27 **Savran:** Let me give what is probably an indirect answer to that question. And it has to do with the changes in Tennessee Williams's playwriting. It's not just about before and after 1970, but between the earlier plays and the later work, which has been almost universally condemned. That was something that really fascinated me when I was working on my book. Why were people so up in arms about these plays? And I have a few things to say about this. First of all, the thing about the early plays is that Williams deals with his own sexuality, his own desires, in oblique ways. In a 1966 interview he said, "I always try to write obliquely," and he repeated that. "I think I write mainly from my unconscious mind." So there are all these subtle things, complex things going on in the early plays, and I think they give the early plays an incredible poetic richness. Now, something happened in the 1960s, certainly by the time he came out in 1970, which is to say that the love that dare not speak its name was in fact speaking voluminously and very loudly, and Tennessee Williams was really faced with a problem—his oblique language, his language of innuendo, no longer made sense. So what I see happening—and this goes back to a point Shelley [Akers] made—was Tennessee Williams re-inventing himself, but really as a kind of avant-gardist. In other words, he responded to this problem by fragmenting texts, fragmenting plays, writing incomplete sentences. He began writing plays that are in fact very, very difficult to read and very, very difficult to produce. For him, this was a new way of speaking indirectly. But in a completely different mode. And it's very curious and, I think, virtually unique, because most playwrights move in the opposite direction, beginning as avant-gardists but becoming much more conservative. Take Eugene O'Neill, for example, or Sam Shepard, or so many others. But with Williams it was the opposite. He had to find a way of answering the question: How do I write, how do I express my desires without just putting ideas out there in affirmative ways or creating positive role models?

¶28 **Paller:** I look at it a little differently. Although this is one good and convincing way to look at it: I may be queer, but I'm not a theorist, so I really can't comment theoretically. But, you know, sometimes we do get a little caught up in looking at Williams through a particular single lens. And when he talked about writing obliquely, if I'm thinking about the same interview he was asked about, the interviewer said something like, "Why don't you write more politically? About things like civil rights?" This was in the mid-'60s. And on the one hand he said, Well, I don't want to hit the nail on the head, I always write obliquely, poetically, but all my plays are political, in terms of the values that they hold. I think, you know, in terms of the moving to a more avant-garde, sort of fractured language, which is enormously significant, and David's right—he probably is alone among playwrights whose work took that kind of trajectory. Which puzzled and then infuriated people because it had nothing to do with what he had written before.

¶29 I think there are other reasons why that happened as well. He was extremely interested in postwar playwrights who wrote about characters in a more destabilized way, who didn't have a specific past that you would get in exposition, who often changed, when they came back on stage, from who they seemed to be the first time you saw them. People like Beckett—he [Williams] was one of the investors in the first production of *Waiting for Godot* at the Coconut Grove Playhouse—he was extremely interested in this kind of development. And Pinter and Albee as well, I think they really did influence him, in terms of turning to that kind of language.

¶30 Also I think it's useful to remember that while he was, on the one hand, a gay person, he was also in this period a deeply, deeply depressed person. And his depression was exacerbated by pills and alcohol, and the speech—this very fragmented, sometimes lines of one word or two words—also reflects someone who was coming from a very deeply depressed state. That's often how very deeply depressed people speak. It's also kind of an expressionist mode of speaking, which is a much older form. So there are a lot of ways of looking at it, but I think David's point is one good way of looking at it, and then there are others as well.

¶31 **Saddik:** Yes, and I think . . . that a lot of this experimental, fragmented language was deliberate, for whatever reason. That, like Beckett, it's very minimalist, and there is nothing to say. Language fails. And so he has these stops and these pauses that are very significant. And when I was doing the research for my book on Williams's later plays, I saw that the critical establishment was often saying things like, "Well, Williams couldn't finish a sentence because he was drunk." No! No, that's just not true. And it is in keeping with Albee and Pinter and Beckett and the new kinds of styles that were being done in the '60s and '70s.

¶32 And Williams was never a realistic playwright. If you know *The Glass Menagerie*'s original text, there were these titles borrowed from Piscator and from Brecht and the cinema, and Tom was very much an antirealistic character as both narrator and character in the play. And we were talking last night about a production of *The Glass Menagerie* that's being done in New York now by the Roundabout. It was at the Long Wharf, and the director, Gordon Edelstein, played around with the beginning, and he has Tom in a hotel room in New Orleans writing the play, and the characters come in and out of his memory onto the stage, and Tom is always on stage, as both a character and a narrator. So that antirealistic element comes out. But I think that there will continue to be discussions about this topic beyond what we've been able to cover in our time today.