

The Tennessee Williams Annual Review

Drawn to Life: Al Hirschfeld and the Theater of Tennessee Williams

David Leopold



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Note: Below is David Leopold's introductory statement for the Hirschfeld drawings published in the 2011 issue of The Tennessee Williams Annual Review. The drawings themselves are available only in print copies of the journal. You can [order a copy here!](#)

“Williams was a great poet as well as playwright. Poetic images such as his are, for me, the permanent material of great art, defying time and current opinion.”

— Al Hirschfeld

Over six decades, Al Hirschfeld (1903–2003) saw all the major Tennessee Williams productions on and off Broadway and created a landmark series of works based on the 1951 film of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Beginning with *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), Hirschfeld captured Williams's stage successes—*The Rose Tattoo* (1951), *Summer and Smoke* (1952), *Camino Real* (1953), *Orpheus Descending* (1957), *Sweet Bird Of Youth* (1959), *The Night Of The Iguana* (1961)—as well as revivals starring Al Pacino, Katharine Hepburn, Elizabeth Ashley, Vanessa Redgrave, Charles Durning, and Jessica Lange. For Hollywood studios he drew the films of *The Fugitive Kind* (1960) and *The Night Of The Iguana* (1964). No other artist so thoroughly documented Tennessee Williams in the playwright's own lifetime.

^{¶2} Hirschfeld looked with an artist's eye, but with a journalist's intent, to capture Williams's unique brand of stage magic. His contribution, Hirschfeld said, was to take the character—created by the playwright and portrayed by the actor—and reinvent it for the reader. When he made his theatrical debut in 1926, he brought a new set of visual conventions to the task of performance portraiture. His signature work, defined by a linear calligraphic style, informed by a distinctly modern aesthetic, and leavened by wit, communicates volumes in a single stroke.

^{¶3} Hirschfeld created a fascinating archive of Williams's Broadway career, one that gives viewers a real sense of the performance and personality of the actors who inhabited these roles. Hirschfeld typically drew the productions before they opened in New York, often in out-of-town tryouts or rehearsals. Unencumbered by the critical response that followed the premieres, Hirschfeld was free to observe Williams's plays as intended by the writer and his theatrical team.

^{¶4} In spring 2011, for the first time, these original ink drawings, augmented by related material drawn from The Historic New Orleans Collection, have been assembled under one roof to give visitors a contemporaneous account, literally drawn from life, of the work of Tennessee Williams on Broadway and beyond.