

THE GARDEN PLAYERS
present
"CAIRO, SHANGHAI, BOMBAY"

Jessie Arthon's

by
BERNICE DOROTHY SHAPIRO & TOM WILLIAMS

Directed by: ARTHUR B. SCHARFF

Cast in order of first appearance:

GEORGE MADLINGER
LOLE ROSEBROUGH
MRS. HUBERT HASTINGS with
BABY MARY LOU HURT
CATHERINE GIBSON
MARY BETH CLOWER as MILLIE
DOROTHY WILSON as AILEEN
ARTHUR B. SCHARFF as UNKNOWN AUTHOR
FRED FAEHRMAN as FAMOUS AUTHOR
HARRIETT LOOP
TOMMY SANDERS as CHUCK
CHESTER LOOP as HARRY
HARVEY PIERCE
RAYMOND HURT
HUBERT HASTINGS

TIME: TODAY
PLACE: A SEAPORT TOWN

- SCENE I. A park facing harbour; early evening.
- SCENE II. A cheap Oriental Garden; 2 hours later.
- SCENE III. A backyard; few hours later.
- SCENE IV. Another part of the park, as in Scene I;
one-half hour later.

Playbill for the Garden Players production of *Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay!* by Bernice Dorothy Shapiro and Tom Williams (1935). Harry Ransom Center; University of Texas at Austin.

Foreword to *Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay!*

Annette J. Saddik

C*airo, Shanghai, Bombay!*—Tennessee Williams’s “one-act melodrama”—was his first play ever to receive a production, presented on the “great sloping back lawn” of a member of “a little dramatic club” in Memphis while he was staying with his grandparents in the summer of 1935 (51–52). Williams went to Memphis to recuperate from what was essentially a nervous breakdown after working under his father for three years at a clerical position for Continental Shoemakers, a division of International Shoe Company, which he dramatized in *The Glass Menagerie* (1944). Cowritten with his neighbor and friend Dorothy Shapiro, this short play is important to scholars because it marks the moment the twenty-four-year-old Tom Williams “first became a playwright,” as he tells us in his *Memoirs*, misremembering the year as 1934¹:

My first play was produced when I was 24 years old and staying in my grandparents’ home in Memphis. [. . .] This play (*Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay!*) was successfully produced by The Rose Arbor Players, a little-theatre group, in Memphis. Grand and Grandfather Dakin had a pleasant little house on Snowden Avenue. [. . .]

In that summer of 1934, when I first became a playwright, there lived next door to my grandparents in Memphis a family of Jews with a very warm-hearted and actively disposed daughter named Bernice Dorothy Shapiro. She was a member of a little dramatic club in Memphis. Their productions took place on the great sloping back lawn of a lady named Mrs. Rosebrough, which accounts for the “Rose Arbor” name of that cry of players. Dorothy wanted me to collaborate with her on a play for the group—she knew that I was a writer and she wasn’t. I wrote a play called *Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay!*—a farcical but rather touching little comedy about two sailors on a date with a couple of “light ladies.” Bernice Dorothy Shapiro wrote a quite unnecessary and, I must confess, undistinguished prologue to the play. Thank God the prologue was short: that’s all I can remember in its favor.

The play was produced late that summer. It was not long, either, but it was a great success for the group. On the program I was identified as the collaborator and was given second billing to Dorothy. Still, the laughter, genuine and loud, at the comedy I had written enchanted me.

Then and there the theatre and I found each other for better and for worse.

I know it’s the only thing that’s saved my life. (50–52)

Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay! was not presented again until 2013, in a slightly altered version from the one published here, at the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival as part of an evening of burlesque-inspired performances titled *The Chorus Girl Plays*. This piece, by DanszLoop Chicago, also included two other early Williams one-acts that feature good-time girls: *At Liberty* (1941) and *Curtains for the Gentleman* (1936). It was directed by Robert Chevera, with choreography by Paula Frasz. Chevera, however, chose not to use the prologue and the epilogue in his production. While Williams attributes the prologue to Shapiro and is critical of her contribution in his *Memoirs*, collaboration is a tricky endeavor, and we have no way of knowing for certain who wrote what.

The original script, in three scenes, plus the prologue and epilogue, is housed in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. The manuscript, while complete in its story arc, presented editorial challenges—multiple and overlapping versions of each scene; variations of certain lines; and repetitious draft pages that needed to be checked against one another, cut, and/or reorganized. Editorial insertions, set off in the text below with square brackets, were made only in cases where clarity would otherwise have been compromised.

While *Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay!* is clearly juvenilia, it significantly reveals a sensibility rooted in the 1930s film culture of “light ladies” and chorus girl types, the incarnation of society’s marginalized “fugitive kind” with big dreams and gentle souls who can’t catch a break—characters who would appear in various guises throughout Williams’s career.

Note

¹ While the typed program for the play lists the theatre group as the Garden Players rather than the Rose Arbor Players Williams recalled in his *Memoirs*, the discrepancy isn’t necessarily an error on Williams’s part. Lyle Leverich’s biography of Williams does identify the group as the Garden Players, yet other biographical sources state that it was known by both names. Still others distinguish between the theatre group called the Garden Players and the location of the production, Mrs. Rosebrough’s backyard theatre, called the Rose Arbor Theater. And John S. Bak writes in his biography of Williams that the play was done by the Garden Players, a small theatre company in Memphis, for the Rose Arbor Players, of which Shapiro was a member. Finally, the Memphis Arts Council refers to the theatre group that put on *Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay!* as the Rose Garden Players (most likely an error), and other historical documentation in Memphis identifies Mrs. Rosebrough’s house at 1780 Glenview Avenue as Rose Arbor. In any case, it does seem that the theatre company was called the Garden Players, with Rose Arbor being a reference to the location where it was performed, so it would be plausible that the group might take on both names.

Works Cited

- Bak, John S. *Tennessee Williams: A Literary Life*. London: Palgrave, 2013.
 Leverich, Lyle. *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*. New York: Crown, 1995.
 Williams, Tennessee. *Memoirs*. New York: New Directions, 1975.