Katharine Hepburn in *Suddenly Last Summer* (1959). Columbia Pictures / Photofest. © Columbia Pictures.

Camp Cannibalism in *Suddenly Last Summer*

Tison Pugh

Veering wildly between searing realism and torrid grotesquerie, Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958) ends with the horror of cannibalism and, almost inevitably ensuing, the damnation of critics. Contemporary reviewers such as Anthony West decried the play's "grotesque and humorless enormity" (211), Tom Driver denigrated it as "shock material" (166), and Brooks Atkinson, in his *New York Times* review, concluded that "What Mr. Williams has to say is in essence repugnant"—although he softened this sentiment by noting that Williams "says it with awareness, sentience, musical grace and conviction" (165). More than forty years after the play's debut, Alan Sinfield witheringly dismissed it as "Williams' most homophobic play" (192), and Michael Paller has more recently compared it to Shakespeare's anti-Semitic *The Merchant of Venice*, recognizing both as problematic plays that trouble modern audiences' appreciation of their authors' genius (145–46).

Unsurprisingly, the play's 1959 cinematic adaptation—directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, with a screenplay by Williams and Gore Vidal—generated a firestorm of controversy even prior to its release. Moira Walsh documents that the film was "originally denied a seal by the Production Code Administration," noting as well that, when eventually approving its release, the Code Administration's Review Board simply overlooked its "provision forbidding the screen treatment of 'sex perversion or any inference of it'" (428–29).[1] In a statement of moral distaste, the National Legion of Decency labeled it as "inappropriate for exhibition to general audiences" ("Legion Labels Film"). Upon the film's release, reviewers were virtually unanimous in their scathing reactions. Writing for the *Observer*, C. A. Lejeune fulminated, "I loathe this film. I say so candidly. To my mind it is a decadent piece of work, sensational, barbarous, and ridiculous," and

one can hear John McCarten's sheer exasperation in the *New Yorker*: "the picture is a preposterous and monotonous potpourri of incest, homosexuality, psychiatry, and, so help me, cannibalism" (75). Even critics who admired the film's technical artistry deplored its storyline, as is evident in Arthur Knight's conclusion: "It is, in short, a wholly admirable rendering into film of a work that is at once fascinating and nauseating, brilliant and immoral." To argue against these reviews would in many ways amount to little more than a fatuous gesture: Lejeune's adjectives—"sensational, barbarous, and ridiculous"—accurately capture the narrative's excesses, but, as I hope to show, critics such as Lejeune also, if inadvertently, captured in their litany of horrors its lasting appeal.

For *Suddenly Last Summer* revels in excess, and by appreciating rather than denigrating this quality, one can enjoy the film for its mercurial yet submerged camp humor. Moe Meyer's succinct definition of camp as "the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity, with enactment defined as the production of social visibility" (5), captures the paradox of the film's outré style, for it produces a vision of queer identity in its margins while simultaneously refusing to depict homosexuality. Viewers hardly see Williams's enigmatic Sebastian Venable—except in flashbacks while shot from behind—because he has been consumed prior to the narrative's beginning, yet his queer (un)presence campily subverts the film's halfhearted flirtations with realism.[2] In looking through *Suddenly Last Summer*'s reception history, it becomes apparent as well that some critics realized, even if they did not approve of, this decadent comic ethos. The *New Republic*'s Stanley Kauffmann states that Williams "has created an exercise in Grand Guignol" and then extends this critique: "To make it worse, he has plunged with such blind fervor that he has not composed a good Guignol" (20). William Whitebait, in a caustic *New Statesman* review, nonetheless hints at *Suddenly Last Summer*'s hidden appeal—"If we wanted a parody of Tennessee Williams, where should we go but to Tennessee Williams?"—and Isabel Quigly similarly declares that the film is "not admirable or deplorable, but absurd. The sort of *jeu d'esprit* someone might think up for a literary competition, a story in the *manner* of Tennessee Williams" (736).

In this light both the play and its adaptation offer themselves to camp interpretations that prize their ostensible failures, for numerous viewers have found reason to laugh heartily at this decadent story: Violet Venable (Katharine Hepburn) desperately seeks to maintain her sense of southern honor by bribing the honorable lobotomist Dr. Cukrowicz (Montgomery Clift) to purge her niece, Catharine Holly (Elizabeth Taylor), of memories of her son Sebastian's gruesome demise. Indeed, in documenting the humor that some audience members enjoyed during its screening, Whitebait skitters near an alternative interpretation: "The plot is so absurd that one couldn't seriously set it down on paper. Even a publicity-stunned audience stirred at times to laughter." On a similar note, Gore Vidal recorded his belief that Williams had transgressed the

limits of theatrical and cinematic decorum, declaring that "Tennessee Williams is the best of American playwrights, but he has gone overboard" ("Vidal"). He later, in his 1995 memoir, also documented the pleasure found by some audiences in this ostensible travesty: "I should note that whenever *Suddenly, Last Summer* appears on Italian television, the local boys find it irresistibly funny" (*Palimpsest* 152). Horrifically demented for many, *Suddenly Last Summer* is humorously demented for many others, and the adaptation's camp sensibility—evident in its exaggerated symbolism, lurid storyline, and uneven performances—illuminates the possibility of finding treasure in a cultural artifact dismissed as trash by so many of its contemporary reviewers.

Williams, Vidal, and Camp Symbolism

Camp frequently springs forth in an audience's interpretation of a given work, not necessarily as a result of the artistic vision of its creator(s). Yet as mid-twentieth-century gay men, Williams and Vidal were widely exposed to camp and camp humor.[3] Camp percolated throughout midcentury American and European queer subcultures, notably documented in such texts as Christopher Isherwood's novel *The World in the Evening* (1954) and Susan Sontag's landmark essay "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964). Williams and Vidal had known each other personally and professionally for over a decade by the time of their collaboration on *Suddenly Last Summer*, and for the most part their friendship ran smoothly (in contrast to Williams's on-again, off-again acquaintanceship with Truman Capote, with whom Vidal feuded publicly for decades). To a notable degree they appreciated each other's sense of humor. In letters to Donald Windham penned in 1948, Williams praised Vidal's good looks—"Gore is a beauty" (qtd. in Windham 211)—while also acknowledging his endearingly madcap mannerisms: "He is such a lunatic that anything he says is partly discountable. I liked him but only through the strenuous effort it took to overlook his conceit" (216). Williams also enjoyed Vidal as a kindly misanthrope, as recorded in a letter to Windham the following year: "I miss him, for it is comforting to know somebody who gets along worse with people than I do, and I still believe that he has a heart of gold" (255). As the years passed and their friendship deepened, Williams's assessments of Vidal's writing, initially disparaging, improved notably. In a 1948 letter to Carson McCullers, he dismissed Vidal's *The City and the Pillar*: "I have just read [it] and while it is not a good book it is absorbing. There is not a really distinguished line in the book and yet a great deal of it has a curiously life-like quality. The end is trashy, alas, murder and suicide both" (171). Moving from this unfavorable appraisal of Vidal's style and plotting, he later wrote, in a 1952 letter to Oliver Evans, "I am impressed by Gore's new book [*The Judgment of Paris*]. [. . .] I am deeply impressed by the cogency of the writing and the liquid smooth style" (421).

From this friendship and a mutual admiration of each other's literary talents grew their collaboration on *Suddenly Last Summer*, with Williams receiving co-credit for the screenplay, although they both, on numerous occasions, admitted that Vidal undertook the lion's share of the writing. As Vidal recalls, Williams and producer Sam Spiegel expressed high ambitions for the artistic and commercial success of *Suddenly Last Summer*'s cinematic adaptation:

> In 1958 I went down to Miami to meet Tennessee and the film producer Sam Spiegel. Would I write the screenplay for *Suddenly, Last Summer*? The Bird [Vidal's nickname for Williams] was manic that season and Sam more than usually devious. I agreed to write the script if Tennessee would have no hand in it. Later, Sam would talk him into taking co-credit for my screenplay on the ground, "Baby, it will win the Academy Award." As the Bird was ravenous for prizes, he put his name alongside mine on the script. Happily, the reviews were so bad that he immediately regretted what he had done; later, he was less disturbed as the press proved to be so bad that the public was driven to see what *The New York Times* shrieked was a celebration of sodomy, incest, cannibalism, and Elizabeth Taylor at her most voluptuous. (*Palimpsest* 335)

Williams conceded that "the screenplay was mostly written by our wonderful new playwright, Gore Vidal," as he further affirmed his preference for his drama: "Of course I prefer the play, naturally" ("Interview" [Murrow] 70). Williams and Vidal's collaboration, then, was largely one in name only, yet it is nonetheless clear that Williams believed Vidal capable of successfully transmuting his play into cinema—if not that the result would (d)evolve into a camp classic.

Key to a camp reading of *Suddenly Last Summer* is the fact that Williams moved from the wrenching emotional drama of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) to a play only tenuously anchored in any sense of realism. He stated that *Suddenly Last Summer* is "not a realistic play," labeling it instead a "moral fable of our times" ("Williams on a Hot Tin Roof" 52) and praising it, in a 1961 interview with Studs Terkel, as "perhaps the most poetic" of his works ("Studs Terkel" 86). Further along these lines, Williams argued that realism frequently hampers an artist's vision of truth:

> Sometimes the truth is more accessible when you ignore realism, because when you see things in a somewhat exaggerated form you capture more of the true essence of life. The exaggeration gets closer to the essence. This essence of life is really very grotesque and gothic. To get to it you've got to do what may strike some people as distortion. ("Interview" [Brown] 264)

Certainly, one can read *Suddenly Last Summer* from a realist perspective, as its events all fall within the realm of, if not the plausible, the nonetheless possible, and key elements of Williams's life—his overbearing mother, his psychologically troubled sister, and even his sex life—invest autobiographical elements into its storyline. As John Lahr observes

in his magisterial account of Williams's life, "*Suddenly Last Summer* was a sort of autobiographical exorcism that worked through Williams's grief and guilt over his sister, Rose, as well as his anger at Edwina for deciding to allow a bilateral prefrontal lobotomy to be performed on her without informing him in advance about the procedure—an omission for which Williams never forgave his mother" (357). Furthermore, Sebastian's use of his European travels as an opportunity to sate his rapacious sexual appetite mirror Williams's own journeys. Albert Devlin and Nancy Tischler note that Williams "used 'Cabeza de Lobo' as fictional shield for the Barcelona scenes in *Suddenly Last Summer*" (13n), and Williams, in a letter to Donald Windham, voices sentiments he later ascribes to Sebastian: "We were both getting an appetite for blonds as the Roman gentry are all sort of dusky types" (qtd. in Windham 215), a line echoed in Catharine's cry, "We were going to blonds next. Blonds were next on the menu. All next summer, Sebastian was famished for blonds. Fed up with the dark ones."[4] But simply because the play and film contain realist edges and hints of Williams's autobiography does not necessitate that they be assessed against the criteria of psychological realism, and this disjunction between critical expectations and grotesque excess has dogged their critical history.

Williams insisted his narrative should be read symbolically, stating that "[Sebastian] is completely enslaved by his baser nature and this is what destroys him. His death is a ritualistic death, symbolic. And when he fails, when he is unable to write his poem that summer, then he is completely lost" ("Meeting" 210). Ironically, in a 1960 interview with Edward R. Murrow, Williams criticized cinematic adaptations that hew too closely to their source: "I think they should create something entirely new in a cinematic form, you see. [. . .] But they stick too close to the stage play and a stage play is not always effective on the screen, you know" ("Intervew" [Murrow] 71). Then, in a double irony, he faulted the adaptation of *Suddenly Last Summer* for failing to adhere to his symbolism, stating that "Sebastian's death is treated realistically on the screen, which was deplorable. Actually, cannibalism was simply a dramatic metaphor. It's never been accepted as such because people have seen the picture and not the play" ("Tennessee Williams" 287). Here Williams locates the film's failure in its ostensibly realist depiction of his symbolism, yet Mankiewicz stages this climactic scene not with the boys literally devouring Sebastian but with Sebastian being pulled down by them as his hand reaches out to escape. It is indeed a metaphoric staging of Williams's key symbol, but one in which this symbolism cannot hide the outré possibility of cannibalism that Williams seeks to camouflage. In many instances a camp sensibility cannot be purged from a storyline so drenched in excess, as this telling controversy about the staging of cannibalism makes clear. Williams may have focused his critique on the fact that the cinematic adaptation of *Suddenly Last Summer* turns cannibalism-as-symbol into cannibalism-as-act, yet numerous other camp elements, many of which appear in the play as well, render the narrative queerly amusing and apt for humor.

Camp Cinema

Suddenly Last Summer begins with a lobotomy, and thus it begins humorously. Some readers might vehemently disagree with this pat statement, and I offer it not as a definitive account of one's viewing of the film but as a potential interpretation aligned with the narrative's dark and campy comedy. Within much of popular culture, lobotomies are simply *beaucoup trop*—not just surgery but brain surgery, not merely a rehabilitative treatment for an ill patient but for a mentally deranged one. Certainly, lobotomies were a subject of great seriousness for Williams, given his sister Rose's psychiatric problems, yet in the wider cultural imagination they often foster humorous responses, such as in a (likely apocryphal) quip attributed to Dorothy Parker ("I'd rather have a bottle in front of me than a frontal lobotomy") and in the stock figure of mad lobotomists who appear in horror films (a tradition that Williams's Dr. Cukrowicz helps inaugurate).[5] Some might decry the concept of brain surgery serving as the foundation for comedy, yet reimagining horror as humor is common within a camp sensibility. Catharine's frantic cry to Dr. Cukrowicz—"Where will you cut my brain, doctor?"—can be interpreted both as the film's dramatic apex and as the campy failure of its drama to cohere within the expected paradigms of realism.

Certainly, the marketing of *Suddenly Last Summer* sought to capitalize on its risqué storyline of lobotomies and cannibalism, giving titillating hints about its content that nod to its camp potential. In the trailer, text splashes across the screen, stating, "Suddenly You are Face to Face with a New Emotional Peak in Motion Picture Making!" and declaring as well that the film is based on "The World's Most Provocative Play."[6] The trailer's narrator tantalizingly acknowledges the film's taboo subject matter: "This generation's great author and poet, writer of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, unashamedly writes of a woman's strong wants and a man's strange needs." The adverb "unashamedly" tacitly implies that perhaps Williams should indeed be ashamed of his shocking narrative, with the telling allusion to a "man's strange needs" hinting at his (and Sebastian's) homosexuality. Again, Meyer's declaration that camp humor makes queer identities visible is relevant, for the trailer acknowledges the film's queer heritage while at the same time disavowing it.

The film's opening scenes at Lion's View asylum feature madness on display—a knitting woman scares off an older woman in a rocking chair, while another woman fetishistically holds up a doll. Dr. Cukrowicz soon lobotomizes this latter inmate. A foreshadowing of Mrs. Venable's nefarious plan for Catharine, this operation illustrates Dr. Cukrowicz's dedication to curing the mentally ill, yet Catharine is not insane and thus never in need of a lobotomy. As the conclusion makes clear, a single session of Freud's talking cure, administered through the magic of a truth serum, suffices to heal

her psychic scars. The threat of her lobotomy nonetheless escalates the film's emotionalism to a fevered, overwrought pitch, such as when she learns her brother, George, and mother have agreed to Mrs. Venable's extortion:

> GEORGE: But, Cathie, the way Aunt Vi put it, there was no choice at all. Mama's got to sign.
>
> MRS. HOLLY: Besides, honey, it's not like it was for always. In fact, they say in no time after the little operation you'll be able to . . .
>
> CATHARINE: What "little operation"?
>
> MRS. HOLLY: Oh, Cathie! Oh, Cathie!
>
> CATHARINE: There's only one "little operation" they perform here! It's on the brain! It's called a lobotomy! You may have heard of it, or read about it. I have. It's that nice, young doctor's specialty! In cases of hopeless lunacy—he bores holes into the skull and operates on the brain!
>
> MRS. HOLLY: Oh, honey, please don't talk about it. Please!

In the ensuing family tempest, George adds unconvincingly, "They say it don't hurt at all . . . No worse than having your tonsils out." Mrs. Holly's and George's paper-thin loyalty to Catharine wavers at the promise of cash, with Catharine's outburst prompting Mrs. Holly, in a virtual parody of the self-martyring mother, to cast herself as the victim ("[P]lease don't talk about it. Please!"). Moreover, in comparing a lobotomy to a tonsillectomy, George diminishes Catharine's suffering and proves the expendability of her brain to his pecuniary desires. An over-the-top presentation of venality, Vidal's depiction of the Holly clan teeters near the edge of humor, and for many viewers totters over.

Violet Venable's dark obsession to preserve Sebastian's reputation against aspersions concerning his homosexuality—truthful though they may be—overshadows other aspects of her character, yet her shallow vanity paints her as deserving of viewers' laughter. Her secretary, Miss Foxhill, primly and ridiculously chastises Dr. Cukrowicz for arriving early to his appointment—"You are twenty-three seconds early. Sit down, please"—and with these words prepares viewers for an exaggerated vision of southern propriety. Descending in her baroque elevator to meet her guest, Mrs. Venable plays her patrician charm as a facade, yet the facade cannot hide the frailties underneath, both maternal and amorous. As she meets Dr. Cukrowicz, she asks, in response to his stare, "Am I only wearing one earring? Have I forgotten my lip rouge?" suggesting that she is in denial about having lost her youthful attractiveness. Furthermore, her erotic interest in the young, alluring Dr. Cukrowicz is evident: "I must say, you're much handsomer than your photograph in the paper, without that awful paraphernalia you doctors wear." In this scene, Mrs. Venable aligns with other aging belles in Williams's work who invite camp stagings, such as Miss Collins in *Portrait of a Madonna*, a connection further heightened by the fact that Mrs. Venable in the film, like Miss Collins in the play, is last

seen succumbing to madness. Miss Collins skirts tragic and comic valences in the loneliness of her life and in her refusal to accept her fading looks, which Williams stages for a grotesquely comic effect: "*Self-consciously she touches her ridiculous corkscrew curls with the faded pink ribbon tied through them. Her manner becomes that of a slightly coquettish but prim little Southern belle*" (114). A flirting youngster in the body of an aged woman, Miss Collins subverts the foundational image of southern women's sexual allure. Along similar lines, Mrs. Venable's queries about her earring and lip rouge precede her statement "I'm in mourning," suggesting that she privileges her vanity over her devotion to her son's memory.

More than merely an aging debutante, Mrs. Venable adheres to the archetypal role of camp femininity—the bitch—evident in her scathing assessment of her niece. Dr. Cukrowicz warns her, "You must realize the operation I do is only for the unapproachable, for the hopeless," to which she callously replies, "If she isn't unapproachable and hopeless, I don't know who is"—a line that elicits laughter, even if unintentional. Seemingly showing concern for Catharine, she observes, "She's mad as a hatter, poor child," but then glibly redirects the conversation to her true interest ("Would you like to see Sebastian's studio? It's at the end of the jungle"), thus disproving the tender concern she sought to portray and reminding viewers of the excessive setting in which the action unfolds, a tropical jungle transported into a New Orleans home. In another line with humor humming underneath its surface, she bitterly declares of Sebastian's relationship with Catharine, "How he must have loathed being touched by her," which reveals more of her blistering, bitchy character. The bitch figure rewrites the traditionally gendered scripts of femininity, with her callousness and brazen style often evoking laughter both despite and due to her sharp tongue.

Camp humor flourishes in melodrama as well, particularly when an ostensibly realist portrayal of heightened emotions reaches beyond its expected registers. When Dr. Hockstader, the hospital administrator, proclaims of Dr. Cukrowicz's plan, "This is very unorthodox," Dr. Cukrowicz replies, "So is insanity. That's why we're here." Montgomery Clift's delivery of his lines cements his character's earnestness, if also his exaggerated naïveté. For all of Dr. Cukrowicz's appealing characteristics in his role as the concerned physician, his unflappable calm merges disjointedly with his insistent innocence: "What would attraction have to do with a son and a mother?" he obliviously wonders, blind to the blatant psychosexual dynamics unfolding before him. In a camp reading of *Suddenly Last Summer*, it is one of the film's funniest lines, for the expert in the workings of the human mind cannot decipher what is apparent to all.

But most ridiculous in *Suddenly Last Summer*'s transition from play to film is the introduction of romance into a storyline of lobotomies and southern sexual secrets.

Catharine continually flirts with Dr. Cukrowicz, such as when she pretends that she will sexually assault him (but then redirects her attention to his cigarettes). As their first session together winds down after she initially confronts the traumatic memory of Sebastian's demise, she kisses the doctor, but he simply brushes it off as a "friendly kiss"—a bizarrely inappropriate response for a medical professional, particularly as Catharine soon admits, "Maybe it wasn't." Certainly, she is concerned about her appearance: "I want you to know that I can look attractive, if I had my hair done and if . . . When I'm at Lion's View, may I wear a pretty dress?" Their romance deepens as they prepare for her to divulge the truth of Sebastian's death. Dr. Cukrowicz asks her not to resist him and to tell him the complete story, and she agrees as they clasp hands—"Here are my hands. But there's no resistance in them." They soon kiss as she cries, "Hold me. I've been so lonely." In the film's conclusion Catharine is cured: "Miss Catharine's here," she proclaims as she walks away with him in a symbolic staging of their budding love. By merging Williams's darkly symbolic play with a romance, Vidal upends expectations based on genre and source text, resulting in a disjointed film humorous in its unexpected courtship scenes.

Camp Casting

In casting Hepburn, Taylor, and Clift in the adaptation's lead roles, Spiegel generated buzz for *Suddenly Last Summer* through their combined star power, and these actors, overwhelmingly admired for their distinguished careers, mostly escaped censure for their performances.[7] With sentiments representative of the critical consensus, Peter Baker praised the threesome in *Films and Filming*, suggesting that they "combine to give one of the most perfectly balanced pieces of teamwork we have seen in the cinema for many years" (21). Both Hepburn and Taylor received Academy Award nominations for Best Actress—although Simone Signoret won for Jack Clayton's *Room at the Top*—with Hepburn's imperious, cruel, and ultimately vulnerable realization of Violet Venable receiving particular praise. Albert Johnson raved of Hepburn that she is "absolutely magnificent. She creates a completely villainous, hawklike creature of [. . .] elegant abstrusity and affectation" (41). Taylor also received plaudits, such as Arthur Knight's assessment that "hers is unquestionably one of the finest performances of this or any year."

At the same time, casting decisions are notoriously subjective and routinely generate controversy, and Williams admitted his doubts about Spiegel's choices:

> When Sam Spiegel bought *Suddenly Last Summer*, we agreed on the casting. At first, I wasn't sure about Katharine Hepburn as Violet Venable. I thought she was quite too young to play such an older woman, as I visualized the part. In the stage production, Hortense Alden played the part in a wheelchair. But I admitted that casting Miss Hepburn might be daring, and it took me

> a while to get accustomed to the idea. Now, of course, I know she was brilliant. So was dear Monty Clift as Dr. Cukrowicz. But while Elizabeth Taylor was very good as Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, she simply wasn't right as Catherine Holly in *Suddenly Last Summer*. ("New Tennessee" 154)

Given the legendary status in Hollywood history enjoyed by Hepburn and Taylor, it is no easy task to join Williams in questioning their performances, yet I find them curiously off, both Hepburn's restrained demeanor and Taylor's excessive emotionality. The reviewer for *Time*, while conceding that Hepburn "does an intelligent job portraying the devouring mother," suggests amusingly that she is "dolled up like a cross between Auntie Mame and the White Queen" ("New Pictures" 66)—a drolly apropos assessment of the decadence repressed under her exterior of southern manners. Bosley Crowther similarly snipes: "Katharine Hepburn plays the arch and airy dowager with what looks like a stork's nest on her head and such bony and bumptious posturing that she acts a Mary Petty caricature." Vidal mentions that Bette Davis was his first choice to play Violet Venable (*Palimpsest* 319), and in the light of Davis's gleefully demented roles in subsequent years—*What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (dir. Robert Aldrich, 1962) and *Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (dir. Robert Aldrich, 1964)—it is easy to imagine an even campier version of *Suddenly Last Summer*, one in which Hepburn's restrained patrician facade gives way to Davis's raw passion of a woman on the edge of sanity.

In a similar vein, the *Time* critic berated Taylor's performance: "Actress Taylor's inability to reproduce a recognizable emotion becomes almost an advantage in a role that contains no recognizable emotions" ("New Pictures" 66). The paradox of Taylor's performance is that she must play, as this reviewer points out, unrecognizable emotions, for what performance can adequately capture the horror of witnessing one's cousin devoured by child cannibals? Taylor's delivery of key lines—such as "He was lying naked on these broken stones. And this you won't believe. Nobody, nobody, could believe it. It looked as if . . . as if they had devoured him!"—range within the likely registers of human expression, but the ludicrousness of the storyline, coupled with her dire situation, almost of necessity conflict. Another scenario that registers either Taylor's brilliance or her incompetence arises when she defends herself against aspersions impugning her sexual morality: "You see, I'm classified as violent, which means I'm apt to attack you physically and then accuse you of rape. . . . I molested an elderly gardener of great virtue." A decadent comedy of manners in such moments as this, *Suddenly Last Summer* appropriates Wildean wit for a narrative on the edge of the macabre, mixing radical tenors of expression and emotion in ways that cannot be contained by its overarching dramatic form.

One of the odder lapses in both Hepburn's and Taylor's performances arises in the fact that they play southern women who only speak with southern accents when

insulting or imitating other southerners, thus oddly undermining the coherency of their portrayals. In her simmering distaste for her nephew, George, Mrs. Venable archly states, "I said take the clothes, George. Don't flaunt them in my face." She then shifts into a cornpone dialect and continues, "Why don't you both kindly let yourselves out?" and then returns to her normal timbre: "Get the rest of the clothes another time." Similarly, Catharine impersonates Sebastian's southern accent while speaking to Dr. Cukrowicz: "Mr. Venable was a good man, but dull to the point of genius," she says, and then continues in her usual tone, "That was Sebastian you just heard talking." Notably, Mrs. Venable uses her exaggerated southern accent to insult despised George, whereas Catharine mimics esteemed Sebastian; these varying southern accents, then, are not so much markers of the characters' social classes but of the actors' regional roots, which Hepburn and Taylor do not modulate for their roles. Camp often emerges in failed performances, and Hepburn's and Taylor's unsteady play with dialect imbues *Suddenly Last Summer* with an ironic distance between the actors and their characters.

With Hepburn's and Taylor's performances receiving outsized attention, many reviews simply overlook Clift, yet the emotional range of his Dr. Cukrowicz is strangely stilted and off-balance. Kauffmann observes that "Montgomery Clift, as the young doctor, is present a good deal of the time, but his contribution is small" and then derides him as "a husk that once contained a small kernel" (20). Albert Johnson describes him simply as "extra-numb in [a] numb role" (41), and Henry Hart gripes that he "is completely impossible" (41). Clift's 1956 car accident is often seen as a turning point in his career, as he increasingly turned to drugs and alcohol to mute its residual pain, and his performance in *Suddenly Last Summer* suffers from an eerie lack of affect. Yet this stiff performance, as suggested previously, imbues the film with an edge of laughter, for Dr. Cukrowicz is simply too slow to grasp the grotesque twists of familial desire surrounding him. A camp sensibility often embraces the performative and narrative lapses that arise when a production fails to reach the rarefied emotional heights to which it aspires, and Hepburn, Taylor, and Clift collectively contribute to *Suddenly Last Summer*'s downfall in this regard, thus also contributing to its apotheosis as a camp classic.

A Camp Conclusion

In the year of its release, Williams endorsed *Suddenly Last Summer* enthusiastically, praising Spiegel for his efforts and predicting their longstanding alliance: "This picture filled out on the screen. The first two-thirds had more dimension than the play had. Sam Spiegel [. . .] is one of the greatest producers in movies today. If there were faults, they weren't his. I want him to do all my plays in the movies from now on. Sam and Gore Vidal plotted the play structure and did a fabulous job" (qtd. in Hyams). In later years,

however, he spoke more openly about his distaste for it, as in a 1974 interview with Cecil Brown: "It horrified me, the film; Sam Spiegel made the mistake of inviting me to a private screening of it in his apartment and I walked out in the middle of it. I was so offended by the literal approach because the play was metaphorical; it was a sort of poem, I thought—I loved Katharine Hepburn in it but I didn't like the film, to be honest" ("Interview" [Brown] 274). Also, Williams recalls that, in his deal with Spiegel, he requested fifty thousand dollars and twenty percent of the profits; Spiegel agreed, but Williams regretted ironically, "the profits were as good as the movie was bad.—that figures" (*Memoirs* 176).

But even if one agrees with Williams that the film of *Suddenly Last Summer* is bad, it is one of the more enjoyably bad films I have ever watched. Its flaws—stylized and overdetermined acting, a ludicrous and lurid plotline, family ties predicated on the roles of bitchy dowager and traumatized innocent—are its most compelling features, ones that dazzle with their sheer outrageousness. In describing the lush set he created as Sebastian's garden, designer Oliver Messel admitted that many of the flowers were fakes but tellingly suggested, "The artificial might do even better than the real" (qtd. in Alpert 8). Indeed, sometimes the artificial is better than the real, the failures more interesting than the successes. As Cukrowicz's colleague Dr. Hockstader concludes of Catharine's disturbing tale, "There's every possibility that the girl's story could be true," and from a camp perspective that prizes artificiality over genuine emotion, one should consider the very real possibility that the film is a black comic masterpiece—one unrealized by its creators and unappreciated by most critics. And in this light even some critics give the film's fans ample opportunity to laugh, such as in Peter Baker's unintentionally hilarious declaration: "If Mr. Williams chooses to be sensational about homosexuality (and heavens knows, it's as old as Man himself), then at least he should find out more about his subject" (21). Truly, Mr. Williams knew a thing or two about homosexuality, as even the most cursory examinations of his biography would divulge, but perhaps Mr. Baker—and Mr. Williams, too—should have learned a thing or two about camp humor before decrying the ostensible horror of *Suddenly Last Summer*.

Notes

[1] For more on *Suddenly Last Summer*'s code violations, see Palmer and Bray 152–57. They quote Code enforcer Geoffrey Shurlock, who complained, "We also felt that the ending—cannibalism with its sexual overtones—was so revolting, that we did not feel justified in giving the Code seal" (154). Here and throughout, this essay uses the play's treatment of the title, i.e., *Suddenly Last Summer*, instead of *Suddenly, Last Summer* (as in the film and some other sources). When the title appears in a direct quotation, original punctuation has been retained. The playscript also serves as the default for the spelling of character names and locations.

[2] For a study of the significance of Sebastian's absence, see Sofer.

[3] For analysis of Tennessee Williams and camp, see Free and Pugh ("Camp Sadomasochism in Tennessee Williams's Plays," a chapter from *Precious Perversions*, treats this subject).

[4] Quotations are taken from the film *Suddenly Last Summer*. Vidal borrowed many lines directly from the playscript.

[5] Jenell Johnson calls lobotomists "a familiar monster in the American imagination"(153) and traces their pop-culture portrayals to *Suddenly Last Summer*.

[6] This trailer is available on the film's DVD; see *Suddenly Last Summer*.

[7] Montgomery Clift's role, Dr. Cukrowicz, was initially offered to William Holden; see Pryors. Vidal reports that Elizabeth Taylor insisted on Clift for the part (*Palimpsest* 399).

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