Jim Hutton and Jane Fonda in *Period of Adjustment* (1962). Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer / Photofest.

Period of Adjustment and Hack Writing

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> There is nothing wrong with being a hack writer. I would point with pride to the inspired hacking of Shakespeare, Michelangelo—you can go through a big list.
> —Leslie Stevens, successful Broadway playwright and the subject of *Time*'s "The Happy Hack" (1959)

> It's all here—all the nervous bickering of two couples [. . .] that was cellophane-wrapped and delivered in Mr. Williams' play. [. . .] Furthermore, since this is the kind of study in human relations they know how to make in Hollywood, it is put on and played in proper fashion: Much better, we would say, than it was on the Broadway stage.
> —Bosley Crowther, reviewing the film version of *Period of Adjustment* (1962)

> Conformity is depressing, and these Williams characters are worse than conformist—they are composites. [. . .] The characters in *Period of Adjustment* are real not by intuition but by definition: they are compiled from all the television commercials, suburban sociologies, Norman Rockwell magazine covers [. . .]. [T]he results are not genuine people; they are genuine statistics—and statistics burdened with a characteristic Williams tic.
> —Robert Hatch, commenting on the contemporary Broadway scene in *Horizon* (1961)

Small Beer

The only "serious comedy" Tennessee Williams would ever write, *Period of Adjustment*, was produced on Broadway in 1960 by Cheryl Crawford and directed by George Roy Hill. Since its debut, the play has received scant approval from critics, both journalistic and academic, including and perhaps especially those who count themselves as Williams admirers. Reviewing the 1962 London production, Robert Muller of the *Daily Mail* undoubtedly spoke for many then and later when he observed that the play was "pretty small beer coming from one of the major dramatists of the century" (qtd. in "Comedy"). Williams introduced *Period* to the public as the first in what he suggested would be a series of similar works. A financially disappointing short run (and a distinct lack of the acclaim to which Williams was accustomed) apparently convinced him not to follow through on this public pledge to explore the "kinder aspects of life." "From now on," he had proclaimed to a *New York Times* reporter just before production began, "my plays will be different," presumably in the humorous, if still psychologically penetrating and occasionally acerbic, manner of *Period*, with at least a partial switch to comedy implicitly playing an important part of the transformation (Gelb 1).

For this play he would focus on "quieter aspects of existence" than those controversially, if appealingly, dramatized in Broadway productions such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), and, more recently, *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959) (see Wenning). Inevitably, of course, as reviewers such as Howard Taubman of the *Times* recognized, the characters Williams now put on stage bore striking resemblances to the more tortured souls of these earlier works, and they struggled with similar themes, even if the tone was slightly different: "The vengeful dissection of women is muted, if not absent. The men are not permanently crippled. Dr. Williams' prognosis is more cheerful than usual. Destruction is not inevitable; healing is possible" ("Hospital Ward"). The play's two ill-sorted couples suffer from incompatibilities of different kinds. Isabel and George, both virgins, are on their honeymoon, but her fears of sexual intimacy and his war-damaged psyche, which makes him excessively anxious, prevent them from any easy consummation. A visit to George's army buddy Ralph promises even more trouble. Ralph has been married for some time to Dorothea, but when the newlyweds arrive, she has left him, and for good reason: he finds himself unable to continue sleeping with a woman he does not find attractive. From the outset it was her family's money, and it alone, that appealed to Ralph; Dorothea's appearance in some ways repelled him. Neither man thus finds himself able at present to pay the marital debt owed his wife. In this respect they resemble *Cat*'s Brick, including the closeness they feel to one another, an aspect reminiscent of Brick's affection for the now-dead Skipper, another buddy from a time of masculine endeavor. But in that earlier play the football field rather than the battlefield provides the context. Moreover, the long untouched and undesired Dorothea seems another version of *Cat*'s Maggie, struggling to find some kind of future with a man who has made clear his physical indifference. As Taubman suggests, "healing is possible" in this play, even if the notion of a "period of adjustment" is thoroughly ironized, as marriage is revealed as a conflict between egos and personalities that is always in the process of adjusting.

Much like Blanche in *Streetcar*, Isabel is propelled by circumstances into an unfamiliar environment with another couple in crisis, and there struggles with her sexuality, including the strong attraction she and Ralph first experience at the end of the powerful *scène à deux* with which the play opens. In the end, however, social pressure compels the more traditionally acceptable expression of her desire, as she takes on the burden of helping George become a man. The other characters find (or recover) their conventional places in the social order, as they more or less overcome dysfunction and eschew violations of conventional morality. Their idiosyncrasies are more charming than disabling. It is in a newly purchased hearse that George delivers to the cheap hotel for their wedding night his inexperienced bride, whose "inhibitions" are, as she emphasizes, truly "*inhibitions*" (161). But the young man is only tone deaf, in need of some education

about the female sensibility, which his chagrined partner soon provides, as he regains his psychological balance.

If, in Williams's most famous metaphor of the private life, the streetcar of desire ends its journey at the cemetery, *Period* thus features something like a comic inversion of that distressing trip. Postponed, so it seems, because of the fecklessness and inexperience of the newlyweds, their honeymoon proceeds toward its conventional coupling as Isabel transcends her fears and saves George from what, as the play progresses, is the dead end of his connection to Ralph, with its adolescent posturing and pointless fantasizing. Marriage thus emerges as the unavoidable goal of desire. Less grandly, coupling responds to the need to go on living. Marriage, however, is shown to be rickety and unstable, like the house, precariously balanced over a cavern, in which Ralph and Dorothea will resume their life together. It bears noting that a never-achieved adjustment is not too different from the ambiguous resolutions Williams designed for *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Rose Tattoo*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, among other of his darker plays. As Taubman suggests, in the hospital ward that is the playwright's imagined world, Dr. Williams's prognosis for the diseased and troubled patients is more hopeful in *Period*. But not by much.

As it turned out, *Period* became an unanticipated one-off, a generic anomaly in a career that was devoted at first to composing, in the form of poetic realism, dark visions of human relations—and then, during the 1960s, in a striking change of direction, experimental and modernist dramas whose metatheatricality did not play well for largely middlebrow Broadway audiences. Williams's admirers in that later decade, and after, regretted, sometimes angrily, that Williams had changed his "brand," and his reputation—as well as his once formidable bankability—plummeted, making continuing his career, as least as far as commercial production was concerned, increasingly problematic (Saddik). Much the same might well have happened even earlier in his career had Williams determined to hold fast to his plan to explore the expressive possibilities of comedy. His choice to forgo that plan was perhaps a canny career decision, perhaps a lost opportunity. In any case, it does not follow from *Period*'s lukewarm reception or from Williams's abandonment of comedies of this type that the play was somehow flawed in either intention or execution. It proved easier for playgoers and critics to lament what it was not rather than to appreciate Williams's accomplishment for what it was. Authorial context was all.

Strong evidence of different kinds leads to a quite different conclusion, namely that the play achieved only limited success *because* it was associated inextricably with Williams and the notion of authorship he had established with a stream of successful productions. That he was considered an author of note as well as a talented playwright was evident from the endorsements the literary establishment had showered on him. By

the time he was finishing work on *Period*, he had received two Pulitzer Prizes, three New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards, three Donaldson Awards, and a Tony. Few dramatists have in the course of their careers enjoyed such overwhelming critical and popular success. Few among the literati doubted his talent, even as legions of playgoers had found themselves attracted deeply to his troubling, yet strangely compelling, take on human nature. And yet, as the play's reception makes clear, it was his very eminence that made it impossible for both New York audiences and the Broadway critical establishment to accept his turning to a genre held in low critical, if not popular, esteem. Perhaps foolishly, Williams proclaimed that he would henceforth be writing against the personal demons that, even if they deeply pained him, had also been the creative sources of his success.

Period was a project developed with Elia Kazan, and Williams thought the director's participation was crucial to its success, especially considering the substantial contributions he had made to the sensation that was *Baby Doll*, of which more below. But then Kazan withdrew from the project. The story he released to the *Times* was that he had been forced to do so because of a "conflict in schedules," a perennial problem in the entertainment business that usually admits of some practical solution (Zolotow). And yet in offering his excuses to the *Times* reporter, Kazan perhaps protested too much that a schedule problem was all there was to it. Embarrassed, Williams refused to let the matter drop: he aired his hurt feelings to another reporter at the same paper, and Kazan's departure was at once transformed into a professional feud that played out in public, to the chagrin of both parties (see Gelb; Murphy; and Lahr). Of course, the brouhaha created the worst kind of publicity for the Broadway production, as Williams simply would not accept Kazan's explanation that he was occupied with directing the William Inge adaptation *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) for his own film production company. Instead, Williams preferred to think, and complain, that Kazan had lost faith in the play and its author, implying that Kazan feared being associated with what might be a career-damaging failure. This scenario is certainly possible, perhaps even likely, and once Williams complained bitterly in public about the director's demurral, it became difficult to doubt that Kazan, and perhaps the playwright himself, had grave reservations about the artistic value, or, perhaps to the point, commercial appeal, of this new play. In the event, the hiring of George Roy Hill as the eminent director's replacement seemed to confirm that others in the business were unsure about *Period*'s prospects for success. Why else would producer Cheryl Crawford, who was a formidable force in postwar Broadway, prove unable to find a more experienced and bankable replacement for Kazan than Hill? And surely Hill came at a cheaper price than that commanded by the American theatre's most famous director, an important hedge, perhaps, against the possibility of the production's failing to succeed with an audience bound to be somewhat bewildered by Williams's sudden change in artistic direction.

Once again, Williams unwittingly, or perhaps maladroitly, made the situation worse by going public and explaining too much, much as Kazan had done in making public his excuses for declining to direct. In the immediate aftermath of the controversy with Kazan, Williams spoke with the columnist T. H. Wenning (of the widely read *Newsweek*) and tried to explain what he had attempted to do in writing *Period*. He did so by outlining the play's considerable differences from his earlier work. Such a rhetorical approach was impolitic, to say the least. According to Wenning, with this kind of work the playwright was remaking himself as "unbeastly." This descriptor must have seemed to many an unflattering formulation of the temporarily transformed Williams aesthetic, and it inevitably cast the new play more as a rejection of what had come before and less as a welcome change of theme and treatment. Of course, the problem was that it was upon these earlier, "beastly" plays that his then unrivaled reputation had come to rest. To those who subscribed to the neoromantic aesthetic that demands that artists remain true to their unique vision, Williams's striking out in a quite different direction would have seemed inauthentic and perhaps foolish as well. Wenning seems to have held this view, and he was, of course, one of America's most noted dramatic and literary critics. As we have seen, even Williams admirers like Taubman found it difficult to avoid such a conclusion. Ironically enough, when critics slighted *Period*, they slighted a compositional volte-face that was in part a response to earlier criticism of Williams's supposed one-dimensional obsession with the morbid and perverse. Critics might have judged that in tackling a very different dramatic genre, Williams was simply showing another side of his artistic self. The playwright's broadening of what many thought was a narrow range of subject matter might have been interpreted as a welcome sign of artistic growth, as a maturing and softening of his understanding of the human struggle toward wholeness. And if, in the process, Williams extended his commercial appeal by assaying one of the American commercial theatre's most popular forms, then he should perhaps have been praised for serving Broadway's never-satisfied need for fresh material. But the critical establishment, and New York audiences, were not so generous in their appraisal of this self-refashioning, particularly, it appears, after Kazan abandoned the project.

Undoubtedly reflecting the largely negative judgments of the play's value and its anomalous place within his oeuvre, accounts of Williams's influence, including the book-length study Robert Bray and I published in 2009, have uniformly ignored *Period* or dismissed it with brief comment. Critic Brendan Gill called *Period* a "harmless trifle," and our findings about the play supported Williams's own evaluation of it as "an unambitious work" (qtd. in Palmer and Bray 169). These are comments that I now think should be read instead as symptomatic of the playwright's uncomfortable feelings about the entire episode, with its public announcement of a new artistic direction and then its silent retraction, which must have been embarrassing (Palmer and Bray 196). In other

words, I do not now think we should credit Williams's characterization of the play as "unambitious," except in the sense that he was acknowledging it as hack work of a sort. The play did have ambitions; they simply remained unfulfilled. Just to make the obvious point, it was Williams himself who ballyhooed *Period* as momentous, as the first artistic step forward in a radically transformed literary approach.

My intention in this essay is to argue that *Period* was no failure but an attempt on Williams's part to explore Broadway's most popular nonmusical form. The play is what often is characterized as hack work; it was designed to be a stage and screen hit that would provide its author with financial security if his popularity began to wane, as he suspected it might. But if *Period* did not prove a success for Williams, it began a cycle of stage and screen productions in the genre of the serious comedy form that he resurrected from the theatre's past. More than any other Williams play, *Period* influenced production trends on Broadway and in Hollywood during the 1960s, when the connections between these two institutions devoted to dramatic performance art were never closer.

To be clear, I am not here advocating that the play, and the 1962 film subsequently made from it by MGM, deserve some kind of aesthetic reassessment, that they are "better" or "worthier" than critics (including myself) for more than half a century have been more or less unanimous in proclaiming. My intention here is more cultural than literary, and such a focus is crucial for the proper assessment of Williams's influence on postwar America since all his major works were adapted by Hollywood shortly after their original stage runs, providing them with an exposure to the public that few if any other authors have achieved. As Robert Bray and I have written, it is as "cultural productions" that the Williams films, including *Period*, can be seen as possessing a "value and importance [. . .] not to be measured by the artistic capital of their source texts" (Palmer and Bray xi). That value and importance is especially on display when a text generates others that feed off, adapt, appropriate, imitate, or even contest it—when, in short, institutions of cultural production like the theatre and the cinema do not ignore a text but pay it the most sincere compliment of using and reusing it as a point of departure for the continuing production of new work. *Period* perhaps manifests more complexity of theme and structure than has previously been thought to have been the case, but I will not be concerned with that issue here.

It is possible to argue convincingly, as Alexander Pettit has done, that the play constitutes "a pivot between [Williams's] best-known work and the assortment of plays that follow," and that it does so by constituting the playwright's "first sustained rejection of comic norms with which he had once been content to experiment, respectfully and by way of developing his familiar theme of alienation." In other words, in *Period* "Williams is keener on mocking than on molding the assumptions of the genre," and this new approach to genre suggests the direction his career would take in its closing decades

(97). Thus *Period* fits neatly into a newly configured trajectory for the playwright's career because it "points toward a future rich in intelligent experimentation while remaining uniquely ambitious in its conception" (115). Author-centered criticism characteristically displays a strong interest in conceiving the oeuvre as a whole that makes sense and possesses value because of its coherence, if not its consistency, strictly speaking. Pettit strives to recast the critical consensus that *Period* is an anomaly that should be dismissed from the understanding of the Williams canon, both as a completed whole and as a series of texts that emerged diachronically (and thus could not be seen in the context of an oeuvre which was, ipso facto, then still incomplete). The kind of cultural approach taken here, in contrast, conceives authorness not in creative or aesthetic terms, but as the source of texts that, once produced and released, often have lives beyond themselves that are of critical interest when they affect and condition the very institutions within which they were originally produced.

Why Better on the Silver Screen?

The film version of *Period*, released by MGM in 1962, two years after its Broadway premiere and directed, again, by George Roy Hill, was substantially more successful than its stage counterpart. As the always perceptive Bosley Crowther observed, the success of the film can probably be attributed to the fact that "this is the kind of study in human relations they know how to make in Hollywood." The film was for that reason "much better" than the play (Crowther, "'Period'"). On a limited budget (black and white, no stars or elaborate production values), it earned more than four million dollars, yielding the studio a tidy profit on a film for which there were only limited expectations, especially after the poor Broadway run. Box-office success is a literary and dramatic evaluation of *Period* that is hard to dispute. Robert Hatch offered a more devastating comment on the stage production, whose characters, he sniped, were "composites," not people, real only by "definition" rather than intuition, drawn from the low materials with which the culture was then becoming inundated, including "television commercials" and "suburban sociologies" (102). For the highbrow-minded Hatch, the carefully calculated appeal of *Period* contrasted—to the detriment of Williams—with the "new shine on the human race" provided by Shelagh Delaney's *Taste of Honey*, then basking in the glow of its move from London's Royal Court to Broadway (102). At play's end, Delaney's characters, Hatch suggests, can be imagined backstage, "planning their next sorties on life." When the curtain "falls on *Period of Adjustment*, the characters are stacked in the wings, ready for the next demonstration" (103). Capable of being recycled, such characters, one might add, would be useful for the next production in that theatre, even in a work by a different author. Delaney's play provides a stark contrast. According to Hatch, *Taste*

of Honey's unique individuals have continuing life only in the work that first imagined them; they are neither "stackable" nor reusable.

Some critics, most notably Williams's very sympathetic biographer John Lahr, have attempted to find an interest, if not exactly a value, in *Period* by reading it as autobiographical wish fulfillment, with young husband Ralph and wife Dorothea supposedly standing in for Williams and longtime lover Frank Merlo, whose relationship was then also in crisis. Such a reading, however, does not stand up to close scrutiny. His turning to comedy, Williams confessed, was based at least in part on the advice of his psychotherapist, Lawrence Kubie, who told him that the composition of the "violent melodramas" upon which his reputation had come to rest had done him little personal good: "I had too much hate in me. [. . .] I am going to make a change," Williams told the press before *Period*'s Broadway opening (qtd. in Lahr 402). It is easy enough to provide à clef readings of the play's characters, especially the pair of unhappy husbands and former army buddies, George and Ralph, whose reunion *in extremis matrimoniae* constitutes the center of the plot. Was Williams, in the guise of dramatizing the discontent and eventual reconciliation of two heterosexual couples, actually telling something of the story of his long-term same-sex relationship with Frank Merlo, then in much-regretted decline? Was the playwright himself visible in the character of Ralph, as Lahr suggests?

Such a "life and works" approach to literary criticism has in general been fairly well debunked in the last century or so, even famously stigmatized as the "biographical fallacy," and the customary difficulties inherent in juxtaposing biographical narratives and dramatic plot points appear in Lahr's analysis (402). The biographer suggests that "like Ralph, Williams wanted to renew the tenderness between him and his lover" (403), but while this statement about Williams is well supported biographically, the reading of the play offered here—a kind of wish-fulfillment projection—is more than a little problematic; an important element of Ralph's backstory is that he has never been attracted to Dorothea and certainly does not love her. This strained attempt to read *Period* slantly as a happy-ending chronicle of how the magic with Frankie might be recaptured even affects Lahr's summary of the play's theme, which turns out to be strangely inaccurate, a rare slip for the otherwise careful scholar: he writes, "for both men, love has temporarily been lost" (402).

Yet there is clearly no "tenderness" to be renewed on either side (especially for Isabel and George, who have not yet been able to manage paying the marriage debt); and there is no "love" to be regained, especially in Ralph's case. Instead, the play, as the oft-repeated formula makes clear, is about the "period of adjustment" that consecrates a marriage where there once was none and saves another on the verge of dissolution. In the play's closing moments, Ralph attempts to reconcile with Dorothea by observing that "you used to be homely but you improved in appearance" (245). (It had earlier been

revealed that the poor woman's buck teeth have been pulled and replaced by a false set that at least makes her more kissable.) Ralph's backhanded compliment (if that is what it is) can hardly be understood as even a proclamation of renewed affection, much less of any deep emotion that suddenly burbles to the surface. Desperate for any sign that her husband no longer finds her repellent, Dorothea accepts the straw he offers as a sufficient reason for moving back home. The other reconciliation is equally unconvincing. Isabel comforts George about what we would now term his "performance anxiety" by observing that "[t]he world is a big hospital, and I am a nurse in it" (244), thus embracing a melodramatic stereotype about women; for the skittishly virginal Isabel, who is disgusted by George's first attempts at lovemaking, this seems an improbable shift in character. Even less credible is that after Isabel dons a sexy nightgown, the damaged soul that is her husband instantly assumes the burden of manhood he had earlier refused; the play ends with his move toward the bedroom, where she awaits him. Is it possible that Williams here gestures toward the famous concluding sequence confected by screenwriter Richard Brooks for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, in which a suitably chastened Maggie (Elizabeth Taylor) cheerfully accepts the invitation from Brick (Paul Newman) to join him in their bedroom for a renewal of their romantic connection?

Period's finale is riddled with obvious irony, allowing audiences to see it as a happily-ever-after recoupling in the tradition of stage and screen melodrama. At the same time, this wrapping-up of loose plot ends is just unlikely enough and just off-putting enough to deconstruct the comic conventions Williams recycles. Such sly ambiguity, of course, is a feature of most romantic comedies. Consider, for example, the finale of Mike Nichols's *The Graduate* (1967). Against all odds, the young couple find themselves reunited after a furious pursuit. But their escape from family and conventionality ends anticlimactically, on a slow-moving bus, whose destination, like their own, is uncertain. In any event, the story of Ralph and Dorothea bears no resemblance to the passionate, turbulent relationship Williams enjoyed (and endured) with Merlo. Not dependent on dubious à clef readings, the playwright's explanation of why he turned toward comedy does carry a bit more weight, though it too must be carefully examined; one wonders, for example, whether the adjective "kinder" can be applied appropriately to the tone of *Period* as a whole. We can provisionally credit Williams's testimony that his sudden turn toward comedy reflected in some fashion a breakthrough in self-understanding overseen by Kubie, who issued what was essentially a neo-Freudian injunction to embrace what, during the 1950s in another variety of therapeutic context, was understood as "the power of positive thinking" (Peale). But it is also possible Williams turned to comedy of a rather traditional form because he was also desperate to make money at a time when he felt his period of popularity, and the earning power it had given him, was nearing its inevitable end.

Such a consideration seems likely when we note that Ralph and Dorothea, as well as newlyweds George and Isabel, are more or less two-dimensional types, as Hatch suggests. They are the conventional stuff of both romantic comedy and the comedy of manners, the time-honored form that Williams seems here intent on reviving. Both couples are comic characters thoroughly stackable in playhouse wings, as Hatch might complain, but that is surely a good thing for the theatre, which is an institution dependent on the continuing production of new plays that must, for the most part, respond to established tastes and fashion. As Taubman conceded, *Period*'s characters are indeed "shrewdly observed," and "on the surface they are convincing" ("Serious Comedy"). Williams follows the rules of solid theatrical construction by having them "fitted out with reasonable psychological problems and smooth psychiatric explanations." And yet, Taubman continues, they "lack the depth or warmth to hold your sympathy," an indication (given the playwright's customary emotional investment in his creations) that they are in fact confections, as Crowther and Hatch declare more directly. But why must dramatic characters have depth, we might ask? And what is wrong with their being only "convincing on the surface," which is surely just another way of saying that they work smoothly and plausibly in the advancement of the plot toward the reconciliatory coupling that is comedy's conventional finale? After all, Ibsenian modernism, with its tortured, contradictory, and finally mysterious characters, is not the only dramatic mode permitted to those writing for the American commercial theatre, even though Williams put himself squarely in that tradition from the beginning of his career with the very arty *Battle of Angels* (1940), a spectacular failure in its Boston premiere. (A rewritten version, *Orpheus Descending*, which retained the original's mythological cadre and unconventional plot, was again a failure when produced on Broadway, in 1957.) His stage hits from *Streetcar* to *The Night of the Iguana* connected with audiences because they were better accommodated to the realism that was Broadway's default mode for serious plays. But as showbiz wisdom and the history of Broadway made clear in the late 1950s, a surer commercial bet would be a sexy comedy, which is what *Period* is at bottom. And it was not the first sexy comedy Williams had in some sense written, although this important fact is often forgotten by his critics, as I shall explain below.

Even if we agree with Hatch, Crowther, Taubman, and company, we should not dismiss the potential cultural power of what we can, without embarrassment, call hack work. Playwright, director, and entertainment impresario Leslie Stevens argues that hack work can in fact be "inspired" and has been indulged in by talented and respected artists (qtd. in "Happy Hack"). His *Marriage-Go-Round* owed its origin, so the legend goes, to an offhand remark made by Isadora Duncan that gave him the idea (Hollywood would call it a "high concept") around which he built up his drama: a beautiful woman, eager to bear an exceptional child, goes looking for the ideal mate, who, it turns out, is already

married. Stevens embraced the task of calculating what the audience wanted from such a tale and ramped up the naughtiness. He was proven right—on his own terms, at least—when the play ran for over four hundred performances and served as his entrée to Hollywood directing and, later, television production. His facility in self-promotion was celebrated unabashedly in *Time*, which termed him one of the era's "hottest writer tycoons," one of a new breed—a potent combination of "corporation executive and creative artist that is taking over the town" ("Happy Hack"). Another example of a showbiz tycoon was Kazan, who explored, after an acting career, the roles of director (in both Hollywood and on Broadway), dramatist, film producer and distributor, and, eventually, novelist. The film version of *Marriage-Go-Round* received a thumbs-up from Crowther, who identified the appeal of the property as its unabashed portrayal of sexual themes: the film, he opined, "plunges us right into the middle of a tangle of squirming libidos, coiling and tugging energetically as only healthy, happy libidos can do" ("*Marriage Go Round*").

By the late 1950s, sex, and especially frank sex, had begun to sell big on Broadway and in Hollywood, and in forms that neither industry had seen before. This was a development prepared in large part by Williams himself, perhaps most notably when he partnered with Kazan in the writing and production of one of the era's most notorious films, which was more comedy than drama. *Baby Doll* (1956) reconfigured material drawn from two Williams one-acts, with Kazan doing much additional writing and taking the lead pushing the project, which, as its production history makes clear, would never have been realized otherwise; the film would, Kazan thought, be an ideal sequel of sorts to *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), repeating that groundbreaking release's potent mixture of literary value and eroticism. This time Kazan would produce and direct the film, which his company Newtown Productions would own after a release sponsored by Warners. If successful, the producer-writer-director would be in for a substantial payday. Kazan's collaboration with Williams on *Baby Doll* resulted in a steamy bricolage, the audacious suggestiveness of which was given added commercial value by Kazan's desire to advertise the film's opening run in New York with the era's largest and most controversial billboard (see Palmer and Bray 123–49). Though illustrative of Kazan's confessed attempt to be a showman in the tradition of P. T. Barnum, the episode has been expunged from the considerable literature devoted to his career, including and especially Richard Schickel's hagiographic biography, which also glosses over Kazan's attempt, eminently successful, to produce another provocative release for Newtown—namely, *Splendor in the Grass* (1961), a project in which Kazan again took the lead, with dramatist William Inge. As in the case of *Baby Doll*, this film's success was due to Kazan's contributions to the script and his marketing talent (see Schickel). "There is a miracle in being young . . . and a fear," reads the slug line for the film's poster (*Splendor*), which featured stars Warren

Beatty and Natalie Wood in a torrid embrace, recalling the notorious, and extremely profitable, *Peyton Place* (1957), which had, among other attractions, also featured a lusty teenage romance.

Even more than *Splendor*, *Baby Doll* was hack work, a tinkering with composites. Stereotypes and suggestiveness, more than any desire to create memorably deep characters, dominated the project, as its lengthy and constantly shifting production history suggests, and different forms of sexual provocativeness were advanced at different stages by both Williams and, especially, Kazan. Like *Baby Doll*, Stevens's *Marriage-Go-Round* was deliberately exploitative (its constant talk of sperm donors and illegitimate children was not common in either plays or films of the period); the naughty situations in both films pushed the limit of good taste as the era defined it. The play was too much of a smash hit not to draw the attention of Williams, for whom it might well have served as a kind of reminder, if he needed one, of how sexual hijinks could be dramatized with wit and humor. *The Marriage-Go-Round* had certainly provided its author with a big payday, and writing something similar might do the same for Williams—if he needed money, that is. And he did need money, of which more below. The downside was indulging once again in hack work, but then, as we will see, Broadway critics did not always turn their noses up at more demotic forms of theatre that hardly classified as art. There was a difference, as they and Williams surely recognized, between drama (a literary form he was devoted to practicing) and the theatre (the entertainment business, dependent on satisfying audience desires, upon which he depended for his livelihood).

The Problem with Reputation

Hollywood films of the period were marketed and sold on the bases of genre, narrative slickness, and star power; characters, with few exceptions, were conveniently flat, suited to simple arcs of development and consensus-reinforcing forms of closure. Though more sophisticated in many ways than the properties usually bought for screen versioning by Hollywood, *Period* suited well that model of dramatic entertainment, which drew more on then-circulating cultural materials and less on the creative expressiveness of screenwriters or original authors. Williams likely intended, as much for professional as for personal reasons, to write a play that was resolutely middlebrow and also appealing to Hollywood—abandoning, at least for a time, the highbrow drama for which at this point in his career he had become justly famed. He calculated carefully; *Period* is a most competent and well-constructed piece of hack work, and it should have done well on the New York stage. Williams recognized that he would face some difficulty with disappointed expectations, hence his eagerness to promote the play as an exercise in self-therapy.

But a change in artistic focus prompted by a therapeutic breakthrough was soon revealed as clearly not the whole story. That he quickly abandoned comedy in the face of audience indifference and critical disapproval suggests that this new artistic initiative was motivated less by a desire for spiritual renewal than by his evident anxiety to extend his popularity. He could not, of course, confess to his public that his embrace of a new aesthetic had been in some sense a bid for their continued interest in and patronage of his work. The "new" Williams, to hear Tennessee tell the tale, wasn't an artist trying to reenergize his career (as, for example, W. Somerset Maugham did when he abandoned writing witty comedies for West End productions and turned instead to the short story as a new form and set of themes to explore). In his interview with the *Times*, Williams instead presented himself as a damaged soul who was now seeking psychic wholeness through the embrace of happy endings and genial laughter at human foibles (Gelb). Is it too cynical to suggest that this "confession" was at least in part an attempt to provide his new production with a certain buzz by encouraging biographical readings that playgoers might find compelling? If so, the gesture was misconceived. In suggesting that the turn toward comedy required a special kind of explanation, he implied that the play could not stand on its own merits. More fatally, in this interview, Williams revealed himself to be just as tortured by an inner darkness as the most memorably troubled of his characters. If Williams's worldview was indeed so dark, then *Period*, with its relentless progress toward a somewhat sunny ending, could only be understood as depicting life as he needed to convince himself it might be, not as he felt it truly was in his heart of hearts.

That Williams was the author of *Period* also proved to be a problem for Hollywood, but one more easily sidestepped in an industry where promoting the artistry of adapted properties was optional, not de rigueur. In a strange turn, it proved necessary for MGM to discard one of the very features that had attracted them to the property. Because the play was signed by Williams, the studio had been eager to bid on it even before the production began. But, in the wake of *Period*'s weak showing on Broadway, the marketing campaign designed for the resulting film very much downplayed its connection to the playwright. *Period*'s success with filmgoers suggests strongly that the marketing strategy was appropriate. MGM arranged for Lawrence Weingarten to take charge of production: a canny move, since Weingarten, working with the would-be auteur Richard Brooks, had been able four years earlier to turn *Cat*, which had been a huge stage hit (a run of 694 performances), into a high-earning entertainment vehicle that still had literary pretensions. The film version of *Cat* had turned in a box office of nearly twelve million dollars, making it one of the industry's most profitable releases that year.

A studio old hand who had gotten his start in the business during the early sound era, Weingarten had just produced *The Honeymoon Machine*, yet another profitable transfer to the silver screen of a play that had found some success on Broadway and

was likely seen by the studio as a useful model of sorts for this Williams comedy. Both films would be sold to exhibitors on the basis of their entertaining conformity to generic expectations. "Tennessee Williams? A comedy?" the narrator of *Period*'s trailer intones with mock incredulity, hurrying to ensure prospective viewers that the film indeed offers "warmth and humor." In producing *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Weingarten had emphasized the property's connection to America's most notorious writer. The film, so the banner headline on its poster proclaimed, offered "all the shock and fervor of Tennessee Williams's scorchingly outspoken play" (*Cat*). In *Period*, however, there was nothing that might scorch anybody. And certainly there was no authorial outspokenness from a playwright who now was said to have embraced not only comedy, but warmth as well. *Period* was a success as a film, even though it was disappointing on stage.

But the change in the fortunes of the property is explicable only in part by this switch from the commercial theatre to a more thoroughly demotic medium. Because dramatic productions with literary pretensions often turned a nifty profit on limited production budgets and were crucial to the institution's image in American culture, the postwar Broadway theatre, following a trend that began in the late 1920s, offered such productions an increasingly friendly home in the first decade or so after World War II. And it was this trend that had made possible the career that Williams had enjoyed up to that point (see the introduction in Bray and Palmer). But, for the most part, Broadway was devoted to providing forms of entertainment not essentially different from what Hollywood had on offer, and this similarity of product was the chief reason why hit shows so often made unproblematic transitions to the silver screen, with creative and technical personnel moving easily between the two industries. There is some reason to believe that the stage version of *Period*, irrevocably tied to the playwright's considerable reputation, would have done better had the author been some unknown: say, a young TV comedy writer—with no playwriting experience and no literary bona fides—named Neil Simon, who at the moment *Period* debuted was endlessly rewriting his first play, *Come Blow Your Horn*. Featuring, like many of his subsequent works, strong sexual themes (including the nervous virginity also central to *Period*'s dramatization of erotic discontents), *Come Blow* would open that next season at the Brooks Atkinson Theater, not far from the Helen Hayes, where *Period* was finishing out its run with cut-rate tickets and sparse attendance. If Williams was in New York during late February 1961, the seasoned playwright must have found himself disappointed or perhaps even angry that this upstart, who had only recently given up writing gags for Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows*, was suddenly quite a hit, while Williams's own attempt at doing something rather similar was lurching toward oblivion. Why had this happened?

Come Blow, as Taubman observed in the second notice he wrote, after the play became a huge hit, "says nothing. Its purpose is to entertain, and it frequently does.

[. . .] It's no crime to make a huge sum of money, and a play that can fill a theatre with laughter is an easily merchandised commodity. Mr. Simon has accomplished what he set out to do. [. . .] The achievement should not be patronized, nor should it be magnified" ("Aiming Low"). Taubman had earlier credited Simon with bringing back to the commercial stage "an old-fashioned Broadway product"; *Come Blow* was a "slick, lively, funny comedy" ("Lively Comedy"). But the playwright truly reviving that old-fashioned product was actually Williams, who with *Period* had first hearkened back to risqué productions such as Noël Coward's *Private Lives* (1930), one of Broadway's most famous and profitable comedies of manners, revived six times after its initial run through the 1940s and '50s. Coward's play likewise features the complex erotic and romantic relationships that develop between two couples—the situation, mutatis mutandis, at the heart of *Period*. An obvious homage to Coward is that *Period*'s long, expertly managed first act features an encounter that almost accidently lurches into adultery, the naughty theme at the center of *Private Lives*. And yet *Private Lives*, it bears remarking, ends with a pair of romantic reconciliations every bit as improbable, and yet conventional, as those featured in *Period*.

When reviewing *Period*, Taubman opined that "even in comedy" the "world of Williams is sick"; he might now find himself in a "benevolent mood," but "his basic view is unchanged." According to Taubman, "The writer's duty is to be true to himself, and Mr. Williams cannot be accused of ever being false to his vision of life" ("Hospital Ward"). Taubman could only manage to evaluate *Period* in the context of the Williams oeuvre; it could not be a play that "says nothing" because Williams, unlike Simon, could only be true to himself. And if Taubman could credit Simon with working in a genre with a substantial Broadway history, the critic could not do the same for Williams, even though *Period* is much more reminiscent of classic Broadway comedy than *Come Blow*, which concerns itself with the relationship between two brothers. Williams could insist he was making a new beginning, moving away from what he called "violent melodrama," but the result, as the critic suggested in another piece, only fell into the gray area between generic types: it was "neither especially serious nor notably comic," suggesting the failure of the artist's intentions to embrace wholly and competently another genre ("Serious Comedy"). Taubman was one of the mandarins of the critical establishment, but, as we have seen, he was not dismissive of Broadway's aim to entertain. His 1965 book *The Making of the American Theatre* is not an author-centered survey of modern American drama but a contextually based analysis, rich in its depiction of the shifting nature of show business, that offers in-depth portraits of the commercial institutions that displayed the work of writers like Williams to the public. And yet in his review of *Period*, he displays a palpable author-centeredness and an inability to look at Williams except through the lens of neoromanticism's promotion of truth, authenticity, and self.

From this perspective, *Period* manifests the contradictions of any action undertaken *à contrecoeur*, with its failure to be what its author intended explained by his irrepressible expressivity, his vision. Taubman, his knee metaphorically bent, reminds the paper's readers that "Mr. Williams is one of the finest writers in the theatre today," even though too much of the play "moves in a gray light that does not reflect the playwright's capacity for illumination" ("Serious Comedy"). The reviewer, uncomfortable with this assigned task, strains for some formulation that avoids charging the play with inauthenticity, but surely this is the meaning of the gray light that shines uncertainly on the dramatic proceedings. It is easy enough to understand Neil Simon's motives for writing a play that "says nothing," but why would Williams, with his acknowledged capacity for "illumination," be satisfied with merely a gray light? Was more than self-therapy involved?

Williams might have been worried about his mental health, but the record shows that as the 1950s came to an end he was also concerned about earning enough from the stage and screen productions of his work to keep him in the not extravagant, but hardly budget-minded, lifestyle to which he had become accustomed. As Frank Donahue reports, while *Period* was enjoying a short tryout run in Miami before the move to New York, "the playwright was [. . .] thinking of forthcoming expenses":

> A Broadway hit at this time would brighten up his bank account. He was not interested in money as a means to luxury living, but rather as a way of meeting current and future expenses. [. . . H]e pointed out "even when I had a hit on Broadway my annual income never exceeded $300,000. [. . .] And after 1966, my accountants tell me, my income will drop to $15,000 a year. My movie sales will have been finished by then—and I'd better have something else ready by that time." (124)

Williams would never have admitted it, for obvious reasons, but at the end of the 1950s, the sudden turn to comedy, certainly Broadway's most bankable nonmusical genre then as now, looked very much like an attempt to confect (if not "create" in the neoromantic sense) a "something else" that would pay the bills when his period of greatest popularity on Broadway ended. In short, the play was hack work.

When *Period* closed after a disappointing run, Williams thought that there would be no more chances for the kind of substantial earnings provided by a Broadway success and the subsequent screen version. He had become accustomed to the pre-soldness of his plays guaranteeing substantial front-end money for the transfer of rights, but that source of income would dry up if the initial Broadway productions proved only to be indifferent successes, as had been the case with *Sweet Bird*, whose lavish MGM film version proved to be spectacularly unprofitable, despite the considerable star appeal of Paul Newman. "I figure I have had my day in the Broadway theatre," the playwright complained to his friend Maria St. Just (qtd. in Lahr 412). He was not exactly correct.

Just a year later, *The Night of the Iguana* would enjoy a Broadway premiere, followed by a moderately successful run of 316 performances. It subsequently was made into a 1964 film, directed by John Huston, that earned twelve million dollars in box office, then a substantial take for a rather arty black-and-white release, even though Williams likely did not get the sort of very lucrative rights payment he had received for several sales to Hollywood in the 1950s. After *Iguana*, there would, in fact, be no more big paydays.

But Neil Simon's *Barefoot in the Park*, which opened in 1963 on Broadway and enjoyed an amazing four-year run of 1,520 performances, showed that there was box office potential in serious comedies focusing on that period of adjustment between the honeymoon and the beginning of the marriage. Transferred to the screen in 1967, and starring Jane Fonda in a reprise of her role as Isabel in the film version of *Period*, *Barefoot* earned almost twenty million dollars on a budget of only two million, making it one of the most profitable films at the end of a decade in which Hollywood in general was suffering a downturn in ticket sales. *Barefoot*, it is worth noting, shares much more with *Period* than it does with *Come Blow*, including a dramatic structure à la Coward built up around two couples sharing the same social space. *Barefoot* was hardly the only play (and film) to follow the path blazed by Williams, but this history of influence is complicated and requires tracing in a future study.

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