

Theater Review: *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* *(An Outrage for the Stage)*

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Tennessee Williams's play *Kirche, Küche, Kinder (An Outrage for the Stage)*, written and produced in 1979, lives up to its title. It contains all the listed elements: a church, a kitchen, children, and plenty of outrages, including a pregnant ninety-nine-year-old, an Irish former-hustler narrator who is pretending to be confined to a wheelchair, and simpering twins who have turned to hustling after failing kindergarten for fifteen years straight. I had the privilege of seeing the first fully staged production of this play since its initial 1979 run while at the eleventh annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival in September 2016. Texas Tech University workshopped the production before they traveled from Lubbock to Provincetown, bringing with them the gift of gab of the *Kirche*, the slapstick humor of the *Küche*, and the tragicomic life lessons of the *Kinder*. The director Robertson Dean and his company not only understood but embraced the multiple genres and styles featured in this unusual play, and the smart, faithful, and hilarious production was a pleasure to watch.

Williams's later works are now understood to have been influenced by everything from Charles Ludlam and the Theater of the Ridiculous to the turbulent social changes happening in the sixties, seventies, and eighties. However, even by those standards, the play often referred to as *K3* is a particularly avant-garde piece in both form and content. Each word of the three-part title references a different area of life, which in turn corresponds to a distinct staging area and theatrical style. As Annette J. Saddik explains in her introduction to the 2008 *New Directions* volume that contains the

play, *The Traveling Companion and Other Plays*, the title is a reference to and reconfiguration of an old German expression describing women's roles: "Kinder, Küche, Kirche," meaning "'Children, Kitchen, Church'—functionally equivalent to 'barefoot and pregnant'" (xxvii). Williams, ever one to disrupt and overturn traditional female narratives, reverses the order of these words before lampooning each and every one of the roles.

In the *Kirche*, church services are led by the character called Man, here beautifully played by the director, Dean, himself, who stepped into the production only a few days before it premiered at Riley's T-shirt Shop. He is accompanied by an appropriately festooned organist, Miss Rose, ably played by Kelly Grandjean. Dean was a perfect fit for Williams's protagonist, whom Williams describes as "blond Irish, a self-proclaimed descendant of 'the old kings of Ireland'" (109). Aside from a slightly slippery Irish brogue, which occasionally escaped him entirely, Dean's performance was strong. Particularly notable was his charm and his expert balance between the somber tone one would expect of a devoted churchgoer and the cheekiness of a former hustler pretending to be wheelchair-bound in order to trick his family into self-sufficiency.

Dean's area of the set was not designated by a wall, but rather by an ambiguous structure that served as both organ and altar, a slight deviation from Williams's stage directions but a smart, simplifying change. The play text calls for three walls resembling venetian blinds to represent the three different rooms: instead, the scenic, lighting, and projection designer, Matthew Schrief, built two blind-like backdrops, supplemented by a great many lighting and projection cues. This pared-down approach was conducive to the large and structurally unforgiving corner of the performance space and also to the challenge of sharing the space with a production of Eugene O'Neill's *Marco Millions*, with very little turnaround time. This design choice did not limit the production in the least, instead allowing the actors' performances to shine and Williams's language to take center stage.

The abstracted design also had beautiful moments. I particularly enjoyed the treatment of the stage direction "*A giant daisy begins unfolding upstage*" (111). As Dean's Man delivered the line "The wall behind me is yellow as the center of a giant daisy, yes—," lights with flower-shaped

diffusers patterned the stage in an explosion of yellow and white. This moment was one of many in which the creators of the Texas Tech production proved how closely they studied the play's text. Their attention to the details of the stage directions was particularly noteworthy. The vast majority of the stage directions were fully adhered to, and the few that were not logistically possible were performed in spirit.

Indeed, the spirit of this play is where Texas Tech's production truly succeeded. Not only Dean's Man but the entire cast embraced the style and tone of *K3*. Rachel Hirshorn's uproariously funny Wife, also known as the Fräulein, stole the show. Hirshorn's German Wife was joined by her father, the Lutheran Minister (played by Dean Nolen), and his ninety-nine-year-old pregnant girlfriend, Fräulien Haussmitzenschlogger (Randall Rapstine), in the *Küche*. This space leaves behind any pretense of morality lent to the play by a "church" setting in favor of a Punch-and-Judy-style slapstick farce. Nolen's silent, cartoonlike Minister of, as the Wife puts it, the "first, last, and only Lutheran Church on the Island of Staten" (113) did a great deal with absolutely no spoken lines, but it was Hirshorn and Rapstine whose excellent character work stood out above the rest. Hirshorn's Wife easily moved between the roles of sarcastic, in-control head of household and put-upon, victimized, overwhelmed household member. The text can be played in such a way that the Wife appears to be only the latter, but Hirshorn's (and Dean's directorial) approach not only sounds truer to Williams but also makes the play's tension between the characters much more dynamic and layered. Dean and Hirshorn were able to verbally spar in a way that highlighted the Man and Wife's power to work together as a devilish team.

Hirshorn's approach to the Wife was also comic gold in her interactions with her father's pregnant girlfriend, affectionately referred to as Hotsy. Rapstine's performance oscillated between camp and naturalism, allowing Hotsy to be both the punchline that a pregnant almost-centenarian is surely meant to be and also the compassion-worthy stand-in for Williams himself. When "*the Minister plops his huge bible under the Fräulein's derriere and mounts her*" and then "[m]embers of the press burst in" (136), the Man states that the Wife should "git back to the *Küche*, which has exposed itself now as a subtle symbol for show-biz on Broadway" (137). Given

Williams's experiences with Broadway around that time—namely, the near-total rejection of his work after “the big three”—and the subtheme of artist-as-hustler in this play, it is hard to not read some authorial sympathy for Hotsy into that scene, no matter how hilarious it is. Rapstine played Hotsy in a way that allowed the audience to share this pity.

The *Kinder* component of the play was played by Nate Hall and Josylynn Reid, the sniveling and snickering pair of dropouts—expelled after failing kindergarten for fifteen years—whom the Man and Wife send out on the street to help support the family. This production also used the *Kinder* to assist with transitions, where they opened and closed the blinds separating the rooms and also entertained the audience during the intermission. These choices were very effective, as the *Kinder* are clearly in the play to be seen and not heard. After the *Kinder* do everything their father taught them to do in the practice of hustling—except take money for their deeds—the Man is forced to reveal his wheelchair scam and go back out to ply his trade for the good of his family. Thus ends *Kirche, Küche, Kinder*, in a wry, yet hopeful place. The Man is not too old or too feeble to hustle, and therefore he will do precisely that. The night-blooming daisy that so dazzled the audience at the start of the play has faded, but Williams's play reminds readers and audiences alike that on the next night the flower, the play, and life will bloom again. This Texas Tech production allowed the flower of *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* to bloom for many nights, and it was a glory to behold.