

# Tom Williams, Proletarian Playwright

*Allean Hale*

---

Thomas Lanier Williams had been happily unaware of the Great Depression until his father took him out of Missouri University in 1932 to work in the shoe factory. Tom saw this as punishment for having flunked military training, but actually his father, like St. Louis, was feeling the financial pinch. "8000 St. Louis Needy Families Cut off Relief" was the headline in the *Post-Dispatch* that July 2nd. Working at the shoe factory, Tom soon learned what it meant to be a small wage earner in a hopelessly routine job. Nevertheless, he managed to set up a writing schedule. He would write poetry by day, on the lids of shoeboxes, then work far into the night in his room, stoked by black coffee and cigarettes. Saturdays he spent at the Mercantile Library in downtown St. Louis, writing a story which he would finish on Sunday. The library was near the river and from there he could stroll down to the levee, breathing the atmosphere which would later appear in his writing. What he saw was a wretched contrast to the genteel interior of the Mercantile Library with its marble busts and parqueted floors.

In 1932 St. Louis had a "Hooverville"—one of the largest in the country—which stretched a mile along the Mississippi riverfront to west of the present Arch. Here people lived like debris washed ashore, in tar paper shacks or old autobodies, and foraged food from the refuse from boats. The waterfront had always been fascinating to Tom as forbidden territory. It was the same bawdy district where W.C. Handy had found his material for "The St. Louis Blues." The Blue Lantern, nearby on Commercial Alley, was a rendezvous for a bohemian mix of artists and writers, intellectuals, and radical activists in an era when conditions fostered activism. Jack Conroy, revolutionary writer and labor organizer, was the keystone of this group.<sup>1</sup> A block away, at the Old Courthouse, Tom watched Joe Jones, a WPA artist who held classes there for the unemployed, and saw the police expel them from the building when their giant mural, "Social Unrest in St. Louis," was declared subversive. The Old Courthouse was also a weekly meeting place for

a group of unconventional students from Washington University who had joined the St. Louis Union of Artists and Writers. Among them, Clark Mills was revered as a published poet, active in the university's chapter of the national College Poetry Society. Williams had belonged to the chapter at Missouri University and, hungry for contacts outside the factory, sought out the poets at Washington. Although shy, he went to a literary meeting where Clark Mills was pointed out as that student who writes "crazy modern verse nobody understands but God and himself!"<sup>2</sup> Tom, who had just had his own verse published in four literary magazines, was instantly attracted. Mills would become a prime influence for his next few years, introducing him to the poetry of Rilke, Rimbaud, and Hart Crane, who became Williams's idol. Until then, his model had been the St. Louis poet, Sara Teasdale, or the sonnets of Edna St. Vincent Millay.

Clark Mills, surnamed McBurney, French scholar, poet and intellectual, had another side. His father was a freight agent for the Union Pacific Railroad and one sister, Adeline, was a social welfare worker.<sup>3</sup> Through them he was aware of the youths, hoboes, and homeless now riding the rails through America, of the strikes going on in St. Louis and of such events as the parade of two thousand local unemployed that ended in a riot. Clark may have been one of those students who heard Jack Conroy speak at the University and was inspired by his revolutionary fervor to help form the local Artists and Writers Union. Although not an actual labor union, it was loosely affiliated with the national John Reed Clubs organized by Conroy, which professed allegiance to the Communist party.<sup>4</sup> Conroy's was a midwestern version of Communism, more pink than red. Although he subscribed to the *Moscow News*, declared allegiance to Marx, and was an activist in the struggle of labor against capital, his true love was literature. Clark Mills was less attracted by the Party than by the fact that Conroy published a literary journal, *The Anvil*, which accepted poetry. Two of his verses were printed in the August 1934 and April 1935 issues. It was through Clark that Tom Williams got acquainted with *The Anvil*, its editor, Jack Conroy, and his satellites.

Conroy, who had grown up working in the coal mines near Moberly, Missouri, was a mostly self-educated writer, poet, and publisher with a missionary zeal for literature as a means of social change. He aimed to give a voice to workers who were also writers and to let them tell their stories in their own speech. His *Anvil*, *The Magazine of Proletarian Fiction* would

become one of the most successful literary journals of the thirties. Although its stories portrayed the oppression of the workers, their heroic struggles against “the system,” the decadence of the bourgeoisie, these themes were secondary to Conroy’s search for new talent. Richard Wright, Erskine Caldwell, Langston Hughes, Josephine Johnson, Nelson Algren and James T. Farrell were among those he published early. Their stories were remarkably similar in plot and constituted what might be a formula for the magazine and the times. Working class characters, jobless or homeless, who in righteous protest or some effort to survive, come up against authority (the police, the welfare system, the law, the factory boss) are dehumanized as menaces to society and violently killed or die of starvation.<sup>5</sup>

Conroy’s own book, *The Disinherited*, (1933) was acclaimed nationally as the work most representative of the Depression era. It gained him the label “The American Gorky” and made him a hero to a group of radical young writers: Jack Balch, a tailor’s son, Joe Jones, housepainter turned artist, Orrick Johns, drama critic and writer for *The New Masses*, and humorist Willie Wharton, a student at Washington University. Whereas Tom’s new comrades (so they called themselves) were indeed from working class families, he lived in the bourgeois “decadence” they despised, his father a member of a country club and his mother a prospective Regent of the D.A.R. To date, his most revolutionary political gestures had been to vote for Socialist Norman Thomas in 1932 and to cut R.O.T.C.. True, he was a day laborer at \$65 a month, even though his labor consisted of dusting shoes or typing endless orders. Now he wrote a poem about the lost denizens of the riverfront, in verse more Marxist than lyric.

They’re waiting in line for bread  
 While the wind blows sharp as a knife. . .  
 They’re waiting in line for a bed,  
 Sweet charity gives them life!

They’re waiting in line for bread  
 They’re shuffling into a gate  
 They’re waiting in line for a bed—  
 Comrades, how long shall they wait?<sup>6</sup>

Eager to be a student like Clark, in 1935 Tom enrolled in the Washington University night school, while working in the factory by day. He took Journalism, Contemporary British and American Literature and the Short Story, a writing course. Along with stories, he worked on a play: *Moony's Kid Don't Cry*.<sup>7</sup> This was a "kitchen sink drama" of the sort the Angry Young Men of Britain like John Osborne would claim to invent twenty-five years later. In it, Moony, a day laborer tied to a dreary job in a big industrial city, dreams of freedom in the north woods but is bound to supporting a sickly wife and baby. The tough working-class dialogue of this play was akin to the realistic regionalism characteristic of *The Anvil*, which encouraged "folk" writing. While Tom was never more than peripheral to the Anvil group, they undoubtedly influenced this and his other proletarian plays of the thirties. They, if they noticed him at all, thought of him as an almost uncommonly mild-seeming guy who when asked his trade would answer politely that he was a poet. Years later, Jack Balch, who became an international reporter for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, remembered him as small, with trusting, "collie-dog-type eyes. . . he was painfully shy, quiet, and unprepared for public encounter with glib easy words and manners."<sup>8</sup> It would be characteristic of Williams that the anger and violence which marked his plays came from such a calm surface.

By now the journal had the largest circulation of any "little" magazine in America and submissions were arriving in batches too large for Conroy and his small staff to handle. Its success had attracted a group of dissidents headed by Philip Rahv, who wanted to remake the magazine into an organ of the Eastern intelligentsia. Conroy, engaged in the struggle to keep his cultural revolution in the midwest, asked Clark Mills who was editor of the Washington U *Eliot* to become an associate editor of *The Anvil*. In 1935 he is listed on the editorial board along with Jones, Balch, and Will Wharton, who was managing editor. Wharton was described as "a wild man," whose verse and actions were designed to shock. Lyle Leverich records how Edwina Williams, always the Southern hostess, would serve Tom's friends tea in pink glass cups which they would refill in the kitchen from a quart of whiskey smuggled in by Wharton. When Tom was caught putting ice cubes in his tea, he told his mother it was better that way. At the drinking party Tom gave when his parents were out of town, it was the rowdy Wharton who so alarmed Rose that she telephoned her mother to come home. Tom, confronting her

on the stairs, said "I never want to see your ugly face again," a remark he regretted all his life.<sup>9</sup>

Tom had submitted a story to *The Anvil* which Conroy accepted, but by the slated date of publication, the April-May 1935 issue, the magazine was being taken over by *The Partisan Review* in a coup by Philip Rahv. Tom's story was shelved and we have no record of its title.<sup>10</sup> (He was in good company; Witter Bynner and Malcolm Brinnin were also rejected.) Disheartened, he nevertheless went with Clark and Will to the June 1936 Midwest Writers' Conference in Chicago where he heard a tirade on the threat of Fascism. Tom, who was trying unsuccessfully to get on the WPA rolls, wrote sardonically of the "Fascist peril" when "the fiercest of our revolutionary writers are now receiving monthly checks of well over a hundred dollars from the Government" (Leverich, 171).

By fall Tom had quit the factory and was enrolled full time at Washington University. Now he came under two new influences: Professor Carson's Playwriting Class and a "long haired" theatre group called The Mummies, whose aim was to deliver social plays with an emotional "punch." Williams made his debut with them by writing an antiwar piece, *Headlines*, as a curtain-raiser for Irwin Shaw's powerful drama, *Bury the Dead*. Director Willard Holland was so enthusiastic that when Tom disclosed he had written a full-length play, *Candles to the Sun*, Holland booked it immediately as the featured production for 1937. *Candles* was the first of Williams's three long proletarian plays.<sup>11</sup> Was it merely coincidence that it was about striking miners, as was Conroy's book, *The Disinherited*? His closest school friends, Mills and fellow poet William Jay Smith, could not remember ever having heard Tom mention miners. Actually, the play had been forming in Tom's mind since the summer of 1935 when, visiting his grandfather in Memphis, he had met one Joseph Phelan Hollifield who told him stories of Alabama coal miners. In a letter to his grandfather a year later he wrote, "If you see Hollifield, tell him I am still working on the coal-miner play. "It was then a one-act, which he first called "The Lamp." He kept the Alabama setting for the full-length play, but the language was midwestern and Williams made a note that he must visit the mines in northern Missouri before he rewrote the script. As an apprentice playwright, he was using all the sources he could find. He may even have recalled from the September 1934 *Anvil* a graphic story of a mine disaster, "Death at Shaft Three;" or the waterfront tale, "Pier

40,” (January 1935) where aroused workers sing “Solidarity Forever” as they do in Williams’s play. In a good Marxist ending, *Candles* shows the individual giving in to the group for the good of the Cause.

*Candles to the Sun* marked Williams’s start in professional theatre. From Holland, Williams learned much about directing and the demands of play production. Holland in turn was impressed by Williams’s willingness to adapt, discard, rewrite lines, with no thought to his own ego but only of what worked in the play. The leading lady, Jane Garrett, recalls how Tom did research for the performance. Feeling that Jane was perhaps too much of a lady for the part of Star, the wayward daughter, he proposed to take her down to a riverfront dive to acquaint her with actual prostitutes. Afterwards, Jane told her mother that the bar they visited featured a stripper who collected quarters in her vagina. “That must have been painful,” said her mother thoughtfully.<sup>12</sup> The play had rave reviews. Seeing it, Bill Smith recognized for the first time that his friend Tom Williams was a writer. “It had such *energy!*” he recalls. Overnight Jane was indeed a star and Thomas Lanier Williams was the coming St. Louis playwright.

Was it also a coincidence that his next “protest” play, written in 1937, was called *Fugitive Kind*—a title reminiscent of *The Disinherited*? Social documents were the order of the day, and *The Disinherited* made a powerful case for the underdog. Conroy’s second book, *A World to Win*, (1937) a title taken from the ending of the Communist Manifesto, was set in the bohemian milieu of the St. Louis waterfront.<sup>13</sup> Was it another coincidence that Tom’s new play was laid in a flophouse in that same area and dealt with the big city’s indifference to its outcasts and unemployed? *Fugitive Kind* was more lyrical than *Candles* but was essentially a melodrama, incorporating mobsters, a shooting, and an F.B.I. agent named O’Connor.<sup>14</sup> (Tom called it “my gangster play.”) This was a local touch, for St. Louis indeed had gangsters in the thirties and Tom’s old fraternity brother at Missouri, Jim Connor, had become a local prosecutor for the F.B.I. The play’s opening scene was a satire on the St. Louis Junior League: a bevy of dazzling society girls appear at the flophouse to deliver baskets of razors, handkerchieves, and neckties to the homeless. The play is chiefly interesting for the many motifs it introduces which would be developed in Williams’s later work. It progresses in scenes, as does *Candles*, with a title or headline summarizing each scene: “This Town’s a Jinx,” “The Big Celebration,” a device he would use with

projections in *The Glass Menagerie*. It should be noted that Tom used this caption technique years before he studied under Piscator, to whom it has been attributed. It reminds one of the vaudeville shows which accompanied most films in those days in St. Louis, where each act was announced by a printed placard.

From Washington he had gone on to the University of Iowa, a noted center for drama. His studying playwriting and stagecraft may account for a more sophisticated use of sets and lighting. The set for *Fugitive Kind* calls for a striking image: the skyline of the city, as "a great implacable force. . . crowding its fugitives against their last wall." This play suffered from the fact that the playwright was no longer working side by side with the director. Instead, Williams would forward pages of manuscript, usually unnumbered, to Holland as he thought of improvements, and Holland would literally paste them together in whatever order seemed best to fit the scene. Also, in an effort to be democratic, Holland did not use Jane, for whom the play had been written, but substituted a different actress. Tom, who drove down to St. Louis for the opening night was so depressed with the performance that at the cast party afterwards he threatened to jump out the window, until Jane reminded him that they were only one floor above the street.

His third long social drama, *Not About Nightingales*, showed the influence of "the Living Newspaper" *agit-prop* drama current at Iowa. Here the Federal Theatre of the Works Progress Administration had a strong influence, since E. C. Mabie, head of the Iowa theatre and of playwriting, had been its Midwestern director. Most of Tom's short plays written as class assignments have a political thrust, especially one on socialized medicine. His vicarious experience with the many doctors who had not been able to cure his sister gave him the fuel to blast the medical profession. *Quit Eating*, another sketch written for his class in Experimental Dramatic Production, was the germ for *Not About Nightingales*, which he was writing in the fall of 1938 after his graduation. *Nightingales* was based on a news story that shocked America. When inmates of a Pennsylvania prison rioted in a hunger strike, the ringleaders were locked into a steam cell where four burned to death. Tom's play showed real power and was to date his most violent indictment of an uncaring society. It was also his most "proletarian" drama, with characters named Butch, Schultz, Black Ollie, Swifty, the Queen speaking the idiom of the streets. Tom sent both *Fugitive Kind* and *Not About*

*Nightingales* to Federal Theatre headquarters hoping that they might be produced nationally. He made a last desperate attempt to get on the WPA rolls, applying to both the Writers' project and the Theatre program. Although he certainly felt poor, getting no help from his niggardly father, and with his only recent income from waiting tables, he clearly was not indigent in WPA terms where to be eligible you had to be on relief. Nor was it a question of whether his plays were too violent or not sufficiently radical to be accepted. Actually, the times were out of joint; it was too late for him or his plays. With the approach of World War II and a more conservative government, the Works Progress Administration was about to fold. From August to December, 1938, the Federal Theatre, its most visible manifestation, was under attack by Martin Dies and the House Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities. Despite valiant protests by Hallie Flanagan and a broad spectrum of theatre and cultural organizations across the country, the Federal Theatre was terminated on June 30, 1939.<sup>15</sup>

In St. Louis, the Union of Artists and Writers had long since disbanded. Midwestern radicals like Jack Conroy were disillusioned with Russian Marxism, as they came up against the rigid restrictions of The Party, which demanded that all literature be propaganda. Tennessee Williams, who would never fit into the confines of any Party, was already writing his own expose of the failure of the American Dream, in a sketch called "Apt. F, 3rd Flo. So.," the setting for *The Glass Menagerie*.<sup>16</sup> It was his personal testament to the Great Depression. As he found his unique voice, lyricism won out over ideology, although his plays continued to deal with society's misfits and made social comments in a more subtle way. *Orpheus Descending* portrayed the tragic results of bigotry; *A Streetcar Named Desire* illustrated the rise of a proletarian industrial society over an agrarian upper class in decay. Even his fantasy, *Camino Real*, in 1953 was sufficiently political in its critique of the military and its depiction of the veteran, Kilroy, as a patsy, to get Williams on Joseph McCarthy's blacklist and into the F.B.I. files.<sup>17</sup> *A House Not Meant to Stand*, "held up by termites," was his metaphor for a declining America. *The Red Devil Battery Sign* portrayed its final chaos. Looking back on his Depression years in St. Louis and his servitude in the shoe factory, Williams once said: "I am glad that I received this bitter education, for I don't think any writer has much purpose back of him unless he feels bitterly the inequi-

ties of the society he lives in. . . .”<sup>18</sup> The proletarian writer Jack Conroy would have agreed with that.

**Allean Hale**  
**University of Illinois, Urbana**

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Douglas Wixson, *Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1898-1990* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), p. 185. This book is the source for facts about Conroy, the history of *The Anvil*, and the activities of the St. Louis Union of Artists and Writers.

<sup>2</sup> Lyle Leverich, *Tom: the Unknown Tennessee Williams* (N.Y.: Crown, 1995), p.155.

<sup>3</sup> *St. Louis City Directory, 1936-1939.*

<sup>4</sup> Williams referred to the Union of St. Louis Artists and Writers as “the league,” which perhaps indicates how loosely connected to it he was. Although Mills apparently was a member, his friend William Jay Smith says Mills never thought of himself as a Communist.

<sup>5</sup> *The Anvil, the Proletarian Fiction Magazine*, 11 11 11ii Nos. 1-12, May 1933-November 1935 (Baskett Collection, 051. University of Illinois Library Special Collections, Urbana.)

<sup>6</sup> Published by permission of the Tennessee Williams Estate, The University of the South.

<sup>7</sup> Tennessee Williams, *Moony's Kid Don't Cry*, in *American Blues* (N.Y.: Dramatists Play Service, 1948).

<sup>8</sup> Jack Balch, “Tennessee Williams,” a profile in “The Theatre” magazine, Vol.1, April 1959, Yale Drama Library.

<sup>9</sup> Reminiscences about Will Wharton are from a William Jay Smith telephone interview with Allean Hale, January 7, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Jack Conroy, letter to Tennessee Williams, 22 February 1934. Douglas Wixson papers, Newberry Library, Chicago.

<sup>11</sup> *Candles to the Sun, Fugitive Kind, and Not About Nightingales* are unpublished manuscripts in the Williams Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Garrett Carter, phone interview with Allean Hale, Oct. 4, 1995.

<sup>13</sup> Jack Conroy, *The Disinherited : A Novel of the 1930's* (Columbia, Mo: University of Missouri Press, 1991, revised edition.) Conroy, *A World to Win* (N.Y. Covici. Friede, Publishers, 1935).

<sup>14</sup> This early work has no connection with the later play or film, *The Fugitive Kind*.

<sup>15</sup> Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: The history of the Federal Theatre* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1940), 334-35.

<sup>16</sup> Williams, *Apt. F, 3rd Flo. So* (Unpublished ms. circa 1938, Collection, HRC.)

<sup>17</sup> Herbert Mitgang, *Dangerous Dossiers: Exposing the Secret War Against America's Greatest Authors* (New York: Ballantine, 1988). Also, a September 1992 telephone interview, Allean Hale with Eli Wallach who starred in the 1953 production of *Camino Real*. *Camino*, *Orpheus*, *Streetcar*, and *The Red Devil Battery Sign* are published in *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams* (New York: New Directions in volumes 2, 3, 1, and 8 respectively). *A House Not Meant to Stand* is an unpublished manuscript at HRC.

<sup>18</sup> Tennessee Williams, "Facts About Me" a biographical sketch for publicity purposes, distributed by Liebling-Wood, 1953.