

# Memory as Theme and Production Value in Tennessee Williams's *The Red Devil Battery Sign*

*Robert J. Grosch*

---

“Memory,” says Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, “takes a lot of liberties. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the articles it touches, for memory is seated predominantly in the heart.”<sup>1</sup> No production of Williams’s work attests to this statement more eloquently than the 1996 production of *The Red Devil Battery Sign* at New York’s WPA Theatre, directed by Michael Wilson. Thematically, memory has been a traditional concern of Williams. In this production, however, it also becomes a substantial production value. It is manipulated as an adjunct to language to ensure director Michael Wilson’s desired effect.

As background, consider *The Red Devil Battery Sign*’s production history. The play was originally produced in Boston in 1975, but it never moved to New York. In Europe it received productions in Vienna and London. Since the working script of the 1996 WPA Theatre production is not available, all references cited are from Williams’s 1979 revision of the London script.<sup>2</sup>

When *The Red Devil Battery Sign* arrived in New York, it did not share the encumbrances normally shouldered by a revival. The audience and the critics had no expectations. There were neither stellar performances to live up to nor signature lines to anticipate. The only advance word that preceded the WPA’s production was the play’s reputation as one of the most maligned pieces of work that Williams ever wrote.

*The Red Devil Battery Sign* is a departure from Williams’s earlier work, most of which exists in a recognizable world. The lead character in this play, known only as the Woman Downtown, is in hiding, fearful for her life. Her terror is at times paranoiac, and the lack of substantive detail around her increases that sense of nameless terror. Her only ally and confidante is a

lounge act mariachi singer who is suffering from “an accident,” presumably a brain tumor. The Woman Downtown’s panic springs from the fact that she is holding papers which she believes prove that President Kennedy was murdered by a conspiracy including the head of industrial giant, Red Devil Battery. This industrialist also happens to be her husband.

Anyone who is familiar with the published London script will notice substantial changes in this incarnation. The subplot of La Niña, King’s daughter and musical partner, is deleted. Originally this storyline detailed King’s shattered hopes for her success. The most important change in the script is that the New York production uses the Kennedy assassination much more explicitly than earlier versions of the play. In the published edition, there are only veiled references to an industrial/governmental cover-up. In the WPA production, the Kennedy assassination is unarguably responsible for the Woman Downtown’s behavior. The references are pointed, and the effect is electrifying. By giving the character a definite obsession, the script eliminates the air of generalized, unspecified paranoia. The Woman Downtown may be losing her reason, but we can understand the root for her behavior.

Wilson also edits out much of the animal imagery surrounding the Woman Downtown. Occasional references remain to the wildness of her love-making, but her unexplained lapses into lupine behavior are nearly eradicated. Additionally, some of her longer monologues are shortened.

Rather than seeming like an amputation of Williams’s work, the excision of the story of La Niña enhances the playwright’s purpose by concentrating focus on the Woman Downtown. The magnitude of La Niña’s domestic problems are not consonant with the scope of the Woman’s nightmare world, which affects the whole country.

The deemphasis of the animal in the Woman Downtown, however, is less successful. Unless the audience witnesses her increasingly atavistic behavior, the ending loses impact. In the original script she lapses into inappropriate outbursts of animal behavior. She howls, and her reason gives way to her appetites. When the rioting gang member leads her away at the end of the play, it is not as a prisoner or a mate. He leads her away as an icon, referring to her as “mother of all” and “Sister of Wolf.” It is difficult to follow the connection when the audience has not witnessed the progressive degeneration in her behavior.

Although the elimination of La Niña helps sharpen the focus of the writing, the script is still by no means a linear or a narrative experience. It is as close as Williams gets to expressionism, and that departure from his earlier lyricism may be responsible for the strong emotions (usually negative) that this play elicits.

Portrayed by Elizabeth Ashley, a masterful interpreter of Williams's work, the Woman Downtown joins a list of distinguished predecessors as one of the "Sisters on the Brink." Like Blanche, like Amanda, like Serafina, she is a woman bedeviled by memory. At times she is haunted and irrational; at other times, her lucidity is as substantial as a slap across the face. The Woman Downtown can not escape the knowledge she possesses of a cover-up. She cannot elude the memory of industry's betrayal of humanity in its search for profits. Alone, her memory is torture enough, but the additional knowledge of her helplessness is unhinging her.

On one hand, the Woman Downtown is overpowered by her persistent memory of the fact; but on the other hand, some aspects of her memory are failing. Words escape her; ideas slip from her grasp. "You see, my memory's still scrambled like. . . *huevos rancheros*, good for breakfast, but not for — recollection. . . ." <sup>3</sup> With little warning, she slips into the mentality of an animal. In the context of *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, this forgetfulness is not an individual character trait. It represents a cultural failure or, more exactly, the failure of culture.

In a foreword to *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Williams quotes a letter he wrote: "We are all civilized people, which means that we are all savages at heart but observing a few amenities of civilized behavior."<sup>4</sup> The amenities are slipping away for the Woman Downtown. Her memory of what civilization means is failing her.

Memory is indeed a significant theme in Williams's original script; however, in the revised version of the New York script it becomes a substantial production value. Director Michael Wilson's awareness of the power of the audience's memory allows him to shape it, rendering it susceptible to the horror Williams establishes on the stage.

On the most literal level, *The Red Devil Battery Sign* concerns one of this country's most devastating memories. Presidential assassination is the equivalent of regicide, and it carries the same deep-seated revulsion. Reports of a public leader's murder are always unsettling, but this death entered

America's living rooms. The reality of President Kennedy's death was unavoidable. It dominated the television, eclipsed all other stories in the newspapers, and inspired shelf upon shelf of books. As John Patrick Shanley observed in *Kennedy's Children*, there is an entire generation of people who define history in terms of that day. Williams could not have chosen a subject with stronger nationwide emotional impact.

Refreshing the audience's memory of the assassination was a simple chore, even when the viewer was too young to remember the actual event. In this production, black and white televisions from the 1960s were positioned on stage and were used to broadcast the moment of the bullet's impact and Mrs. Kennedy's scramble over the back of the car. When not showing scenes from that day in Dallas, the televisions were dominated by period television commercials of housewives who wore high heels to bake a cake and pearls to Hoover the rug. The contrast provided by these slices of idealized Americana hones more sharply the edge of the viewer's sense of loss. This is the memory that was gunned down by an assassin.

The palliative effect that time can have on memory also smoothes out some of the more strident references in the script. When the Woman Downtown expresses pity for Lee Harvey Oswald, referring to him as "a little boy," the audience squirms in its seats. Her point is that Oswald was too inept to act alone, as proven by the crudity of his weaponry; but still, this "boy" is the murderer of a president. The director is relying on time to soft-pedal our anger toward Oswald, allowing us to hear the reasoning behind the Downtown Woman's statement instead of reacting in deaf outrage. We remember the photograph of Oswald's face as Ruby's bullet plunged into him. He did not look very dangerous at that moment, and that is the moment frozen on film. For most of us, that is the clearest image we possess of Oswald. Can it be that references such as these are easier to hear now than they were twenty years ago? Director Wilson counts on it. He banks on the softening effect of time to add clemency to our judgment.

Finally, the New York production uses another visual technique to massage audience memory. In addition to historical newsreels, *The Red Devil Battery Sign* also features custom footage of the Woman Downtown and King. These images were shot as a pastiche of black and white film from the 1960s. The effect is disturbing, conjuring up images of omniscient Orwellian government and reinforcing the hysteria and paranoia of the Woman Down-

town. The film shows the characters walking down halls just moments before they enter the room. As a technique for smooth transition, it is highly effective. That is, it would be highly effective if all the footage adhered faithfully to the storyline, but much of it "tweaks" the facts. One of the most jarring clips shows King being shot in the face. In the next scene, he appears wearing a large bandage. Logic dictates that one event leads to another, but the narrative of the play contradicts what we just saw. In other words, the director is challenging the legitimacy of our memories about the film. If we cannot be certain what we saw only a few moments earlier, can we really trust our memories of thirty years ago? The seed of self-doubt is planted in the audience.

To view *The Red Devil Battery Sign* as a play about the conspiracy theory, however, is a mistake. This is not a play of logic. If a writer were propounding a political theory, he would not discredit his argument by employing an hysterical lead character as Williams does. Instead, this play answers a question which had been driving Williams's work for over thirty years. Can gentleness co-exist in a world with brutal truth? Although Tom's world may be "lit by lightening," he still retains the soft memory of Laura. At the end of *Suddenly Last Summer* there is still hope that Catherine's story may be given credence. It is a horrible story, but Catherine's affection is born out of a gentle love that knows the man and forgives his faults. Throughout the years, Williams has been fascinated by quixotic characters who fight for a semblance of gentility, who struggle for the revivifying aspects of truth. He has been obsessed with the battle between Blanche's view of the stars and Stanley's clay feet.

In *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, Williams closes the argument. As we end this millennium, Williams seems to be saying that the battle is over. This play is his view of the end of the world, and Stanley has won. The animals are taking over the earth, and the "civilities" Williams once wrote about are slipping away. No matter how she struggles, the Woman Downtown is forgetting them. More than earlier productions, the 1996 New York staging concentrates on this character, and the audience is forced to watch her fail. Her veil of humanity slips. Her debutante breeding is replaced by the appetites of a wolf. Williams sees a world in which presidential murder is covered up, in which nations are set to war with each other in the name of profit, and domestic anger is so inarticulate that the streets erupt into violence.

The New York critics were divided in their reaction to the play last year. *New York Times* writer Ben Brantley quoted critic Richard Gilman's belief that *The Red Devil Battery Sign* is Williams's worst play. Brantley, however, chose to see the Kennedy scenario as a political statement, rather than a cultural and emotional trigger.<sup>5</sup>

Howard Kissel of the *New York Daily News* had a more enlightening viewpoint: "Yes, 'Devil,' as a play, is a mess, but it riveted me far more than many better, less ambitious works I've seen in some time."<sup>6</sup>

Although *The Red Devil Battery Sign* concerns itself with memory, it is not a memory play in the vein of Williams's earlier works. It is the artist's coda to his own career, and most of us do not like the conclusion he reaches. Considering the loathsome nature of the play's message, Williams could do far worse than having Mr. Kissel describe his work as "rivet[ing]."

**Robert J. Grosch**  
Jersey City, NJ

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, 34th printing, (New York, New Directions Books, 1970), 21.

<sup>2</sup>Tennessee Williams, *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, (New York, New Directions Books, 1988).

<sup>3</sup>Tennessee Williams, *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, 17.

<sup>4</sup>Tennessee Williams, *Three by Tennessee*, (New York, Signet Classic, 1976), ix.

<sup>5</sup>Ben Brantley, "Up the Grassy Knoll and Down: The Plot is Thick." *New York Times*, November 14, 1996.

<sup>6</sup>Howard Kissel, "Williams' 'Devil' of a Play." *New York Daily News*, November 14, 1996.