

# The Tennessee Williams Annual Review



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## Tennessee Williams's *Three Plays for the Lyric Theatre*

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In a 1974 interview with Cecil Brown, Tennessee Williams, at age 63, said: “I’m just writing little plays now, plays that involve dancing, mime and dancing. . . .” (qtd. in Devlin 276). The “big” plays written between his last success, *The Night of the Iguana* in 1961, and his most monumental failure, *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* in 1969, were lambasted mercilessly by critics who failed to appreciate the continuing experimentation in Williams’s writing. The “little” plays that followed continued to strike experimental notes—perhaps none more boldly than the *Three Plays for the Lyric Theatre*, submitted to New Directions Publishers in August 1980. The trilogy was composed of *The Youthfully Departed*, *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws*, and *A Cavalier for Milady*. *The Youthfully Departed* is a brief poetic fantasy in which two dead lovers attempt to relive their passion through dance. Its subject, youthful death, links it to *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws*, as does Williams’s use of dance to propel the plot. *Now the Cats* is linked, in turn, to *A Cavalier for Milady* and by the reemployment of two women characters. Although only one of the plays—*Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws*—has been published and produced, the trio demands consideration alongside other challenging “late plays” that scholars have been investigating with great scrutiny over the last decade.

<sup>¶12</sup> Williams’s plays are notoriously difficult to date, and the component parts of *Three Plays* are no exception. As Linda Dorff has pointed out, Williams’s late plays were often extensions of earlier work, written from a different viewpoint, seen through the opposite end of the glass. There are indications that *The Youthfully Departed* may be an early work reconstructed for this lyric trio as “relief” between the two longer, more controversial plays. (It is listed in Columbia University’s Williams archives at the Butler Library as the center play of the trilogy and was submitted thus to New Directions.) In fact, its key scene resembles the climactic ending of Williams’s very first play, *Beauty is the Word*, written at the University of Missouri when the playwright was nineteen, and in genre it seems to fit with several early dance dramas he wrote at the beginning of his career.

<sup>¶13</sup> While we are not accustomed to connecting Williams’s dramas with dance, he incorporates dance, in some form, in a number of his best-known plays. In *The Glass Menagerie* the Gentleman Caller teaches Laura to dance to the music from the Paradise Dance Hall across the alley, ephemerally offering her the possibility of romance. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche seduces Mitch by luring him into a waltz. In *Summer and Smoke*, the gypsy’s wild dance embodies “flesh” as opposed to Alma’s “spirit.” In *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, the flamenco dance of King’s daughter, la Niña, recalls his glory days when they were on the road. *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* recalls the ghost of Zelda Fitzgerald as a dancer.

<sup>¶14</sup> Williams himself was an excellent dancer. Although he was reared in an Episcopalian rectory, his church evidently held no strictures against dancing. Before her marriage, his mother, Edwina, had danced in the chorus

of several school productions and, as a debutante, treasured her many dance cards. Tom was taught to dance by his sister, Rose, as he suggests in an early story, “apt. F. 3<sup>rd</sup>. Flo. So.” As a freshman at the University of Missouri, too shy to ask for a date, he was a welcome stag at sorority dances because of his accomplished dancing.

¶15 When he went to New York in 1940 to study playwriting at the New School for Social Research, Williams incidentally received an informal education in dance. He was exposed to the professional dance world through his best friend, Donald Windham, who introduced him to Lincoln Kirstein, head of the School of American Ballet, Kirstein’s wife Fidelma, and her brother Paul Cadmus, the painter. Kirstein was deeply involved in gathering material for his history, *Movement and Metaphor: Four Centuries of Ballet*, so there was undoubtedly much discussion among his friends of photographs and legends of famous dancers. Williams was especially attracted to descriptions of the dancer Nijinsky.

¶16 In 1942, when Kirstein was drafted into the army, Windham was hired to put out the issues of *Dance Index* magazine which Kirstein had initiated that year. Williams, by then so broke that he had to sell his typewriter, would spend his day at the *Dance Index* office in the School of American Ballet, turning out poems and plays on an office typewriter. In this atmosphere it would have been natural for him to experiment with transposing various play ideas into dance. His short play *Sacre de Printemps* implies an acquaintance with Nijinsky’s epoch-making dance of that title which was described in Kirstein’s book. Another Williams dance drama, *The Paper Lantern: A Dance Play for Martha Graham*, was obviously written in the ’40s, when Graham had a wide audience.

¶17 That *The Youthfully Departed* may have originated at the start of Williams’s career instead of at the end is suggested by another source—the poems of Rainer Maria Rilke. Williams had read Rilke as early as 1937 when, as a student at Washington University in Saint Louis, he met Clark Mills, the leader of a campus poetry group. The two became firm friends, and Mills introduced Tom to Hart Crane, T.S. Eliot, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Rilke, whom Mills read in both German and French. Williams later invoked Rilke in the title and plot of *Battle of Angels* (1940) (revised as *Orpheus Descending* [1957]) and in the foreword to *Summer and Smoke* (1948): “Who, if I were to cry out, would hear me among the angelic orders?” Four lines from Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus* (Second Series, no. 4) may have been one inspiration for Williams’s portrait of Laura with her unicorn in *The Glass Menagerie*:

Oh this is the creature that doesn’t exist.  
 .....  
 it grew one horn out of its brow. One horn  
 It came here to a virgin, all white—  
 and was in the mirror-silver and in her. (1, 12-14)

Rilke’s influence may also be gleaned from handwritten notes on the end pages of a 1939 edition of Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* now in the Williams archives at Columbia, which include lines from *Battle of Angels* and a proposed speech for the *The Youthfully Departed*. Williams would also pay tribute to Rilke in his dedication to *The Youthfully Departed*: “Homage to Ranier Maria Rilke and the Tenth Duino Elegy.”

### *The Youthfully Departed: An Elegy*

The subject of youthful death that unifies *Three Plays for the Lyric Theatre* is expressed most clearly in *The Youthfully Departed*, the trio's brief central play. The play's title comes from Rilke's line 57, "Nur die jungen Toten," which Stephen Spender translates as "Only those who die young" and Williams converts to "the youthfully departed." While Williams invents the background exposition and action necessary for a play, Rilke's description of the Laments and their Land of Lamentations is virtually acted out in Williams's drama. *The Youthfully Departed* is in fact a meditation on death, performed as dance. This cross between fantasy and dance drama takes place in an afterworld. Two young lovers, drowned when their car went into a lake while they were making love, now start their journey into oblivion. Their ghosts sit on separate benches; a Lament, or figure of mourning, stands behind each, acting as a monitor. When the lovers try to move to the same bench or even turn their heads towards each other, they are restrained. As the youths recall their former sexual heat and complain of the advancing chill, the two Laments do a *pavanne*, a stately funeral dance, chanting their lines in antiphonal manner. As they place laurel wreaths on the youths' heads, preparing them to accept death as sacrificial victims, the lovers break loose and leap up to perform

*a passionately erotic dance between them; it must contain whirls and leaps to evade their captors . . . At its climax, THEY may tear their clothes off, flinging them in the faces of the pursuing ATTENDANTS with savage outcries: then their bodies join—appear to—and a great, startled "Ahhh" rises from their throats and the place itself. . . . (9-10)*

The dance ends with the two lovers at the base of the Sphinx where they were to be sacrificed. The Second Lament chants a speech which takes phrases from Rilke:

Even the guarding sepulchral stone, emerges out of dusk, that replica carving of the lofty Sphinx, its taciturn chamber's gaze from which they drew back at first view, that regal head that silently poised forever the human and mortal face on the scale of the stars. (12)

Compare to Rilke, lines 74-78:

. . . bathed in moonlight, the all-guarding sepulchral stone. Twin brother to that on the Nile, the lofty Sphinx, the taciturn chamber's gaze, And they start at the regal head that has silently poised, forever, the human face on the scale of the stars.

The couple's rebellion has caused a fire, setting ablaze the house of Laments. The youths are finally restrained, but the Laments mourn that nothing will ever be the same again in this place.

<sup>19</sup> *The Youthfully Departed* was set in type at New Directions in 1981 to be included in Volume VI of *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams* when the playwright asked that it be withdrawn, no excuse given. Perhaps he felt, with some reason, that the work was not finished to perfection. His 1980 play, *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, had not been well received, so he may have hesitated to provoke his audience with further experimentation. Certainly the dance scene, with its implication of intercourse, had the potential to shock audiences. That said, nudity and sex were no longer experiments on the American stage. For whatever reasons, *The Youthfully Departed* has never been produced.

*Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws: A Dance of Death*

When Williams submitted *Three Plays* to New Directions in August 1980, he intended *Now the Cats with Jewelled Claws* to stand as the first of the trio. But in October 1981, after seeing the text in print, Williams wrote New Directions to ask if there was any way to indicate, in the volume, that the play had been published as the result of a misunderstanding. Blaming its submission on his agent, he added: “it was written while I was quite ill in the Sixties and the fact is embarrassingly evident in the text. . . . I was holding it back for re-writes of a considerable nature” (Letter to Frederick Martin). This confession seems curious, since the manuscript was professionally typed; but as Williams’s late plays were increasingly condemned as failures, he had an instinct to sabotage them before they could reach the critics.

¶11 In spirit and style *Now the Cats* does at first seem to relate to the so-called absurdist mode of Williams’s ’60s plays. Like *The Gnädiges Fräulein* (1966) it has comic aspects and uses rhyming sentences and puns: “scuffle at Guffles,” “stitches in britches,” “to be seen . . . obscene.” Like *Fräulein*’s companion piece, *The Mutilated*, it mixes vulgarity with religious references and contains a hint of allegory, even borrowing “Mr. Black” (death) from that play. Just as the two ’60s plays were combined to form *Slapstick Tragedy*, here the three short ’80s plays are combined as one performance piece. While *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws* (as turned in to New Directions) does not seem “embarrassingly” in need of rewrites, earlier versions found in the Butler Library and the UCLA special collections more closely resemble drafts. Both are entitled *Now and at the Hour of Our Death*. The first is dated 1969, but on the script someone has written “April 1963” with a question mark. The manuscript’s garbled typing, numerous cross outs, and insertions might indeed reflect the author who had drugged himself into a zombie state following the death of his long-time companion, Frank Merlo, in 1963. The script introduces two young motorcycle bikers, whose jackets are inscribed “The Mystic Rose.” One of the bikers dies in the play. There are two trial endings: one, an elaborate scene in which a priest accompanied by acolytes gives the remaining biker the holy sacrament; and another in which a hunched man enters and proclaims: “The deaths of the young and beautiful and savage are always sacramental.”

¶12 The second ’60s draft of *Now and at the Hour of Our Death*, thirty-nine pages long and typed by Williams, appears to be a more polished version: it bears agent Audrey Wood’s stamp and says under the title: “A Play in Two Scenes by Tennessee Williams.” The ending of this draft is particularly interesting: discarding the priest and the hunched man, Williams has a character called “The Manager” end the play with a significant speech:

Who would a character called The Manager be but the mouth-piece of the playwright? Half an hour before curtain-time, he came to my dressing-room, drunk, of course, and handed me a re-write: this!

The Manager explains the lines he has been asked to read come from:

those lines of the tenth and last of those elegies that the poet Rilke wrote in a storm on a sea-cliff at Schloss-Duino in 1911 . . . Something about the youthfully-dead, A Lament, and a Sphinx at the edge of a desert that “silently poises forever the human face on the scale of the stars.”

In each of these drafts, Williams is working explicitly with the concepts of elegy and religious sacrifice, both themes building on Rilke—and building toward *The Youthfully Departed*.

¶13 Revised and retitled, *Now the Cats* was published in volume 7 of *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*. This version is much darker in tone and significantly better written than the earlier drafts, although the basic plot and

characters are the same. Two women, Madge and Bea, meet for lunch during the Christmas shopping rush. Supposedly best friends, they engage in a game of catty one-upmanship. (We have met these ladies before, as Flora and Bessie of Williams's earlier one-act, *A Perfect Analysis Given by a Parrot*.) Along with trivia about unfaithful husbands, the women manage to discuss the atom bomb, the state of the world, and the hazards of city life. Madge, in fact, takes a night course at N.Y.U. on "Problems Confronting Urban Society in Our Time." As if to illustrate the danger of urban living, the waitress who takes their order has a black eye, having been assaulted on the cross-town bus. The two bikers who are waiting for their motorcycle to be repaired enter in their pink leather jackets inscribed "The Mystic Rose." In a rhyming duet, the First Young Man sings: "Height of a hill, where He died, the first Mystic Rose was crucified," but the Second Young Man retorts, "We're on a flat surface, Babe." We learn that they are lovers but that one has lately been involved in solitary hustling, on call for well-paying "trade." Ignoring his partner's remonstrations that their love should be exclusive, one disappears into the men's room with the gay restaurant manager, demonstrating how to earn a free meal. Their cycle repaired, the two exit, but immediately there is a crash, drawing the women to the stage window. The promiscuous youth has been killed, and the street sweeper is mopping up his brains. As the women decide to go home, the surviving youth rushes in, retching, and plunges into the bathroom.

*Now the MANAGER turns upstage, facing the lavatory. He knocks, peremptorily. The YOUNG MAN emerges and stares, aghast, at the MANAGER.*

YOUNG MAN: —Who in hell are you?

MANAGER: Your future. I'll introduce you to it. Shall we go?

*The YOUNG MAN closes his eyes. The MANAGER takes his arm and leads him toward the revolving door.*

¶14

What does one make of this strange, unpleasant play? A film marquee, seen through the window of the restaurant as the play opens (Williams had a way of telegraphing his messages) reads "Defiance of Decency." Donald Spoto's assessment of the play in his 1985 biography of Williams would probably have been typical of the time: "Set in hell (or its anteroom), it is a tale of madness, depravity and death" (353). Along with the recently published *And Tell Sad Stories of the Deaths of Queens*, this is one of Williams's most openly homosexual plays and contains his frankest assessment of gay life since Quentin's speech in *Small Craft Warnings*. Quentin's speech and the hustler's manifesto in *Now the Cats*, however, are light years apart. Not only does *Now the Cats* disclose the brevity of homosexual attachments, the casual betrayals, the sordid "tricks" the hustler encounters, and the self-abasing acts he is asked to perform, it also makes a visual comment in the hustler's gruesome death. Although these elements could be read as homophobic, such a reading is contradicted by allusions that link the two men specifically to the crucifixion and the resurrection. According to Spoto, Williams was still working on the play in April of 1981. In March of 1982 he wrote to his friend Maria St. Just, "I had begun to turn completely against all 'gays' and was killing them off in my plays" (386). *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws* is in the same vein as *The Chalky White Substance*, the playwright's final vision of a universe where God is dead. The play ends with a strange lyric:

And now the cats with jewelled claws  
glide down the wall of night  
softly to crouch with bated breath  
and glare at all below,

their malice on each upturned face  
 descending cool as snow. . . .

¶15 The poem's meaning seems mysterious, although John Uecker, the friend who consulted Williams on some of his last plays and was staying with the playwright when he died, explains that the "cats" are the super wealthy who control America. This interpretation brings us back to Rilke's Tenth Elegy, lines 20-33, in which Rilke describes the "carnival" of modern life in terms of the death of religion, the decay of the city, the power of money, and the dominance of sex:

How an Angel would tread beyond trace their market of comfort,  
 with the church alongside, bought ready for use: as clean  
 and disenchanting and shut as the Post on a Sunday!  
 Outside, though, there's always the billowing edge of the fair.  
 Swings of Freedom! Divers and Jugglers of Zeal!  
 And the lifelike shooting-ranges of bedizened Happiness: targets  
 tumbling in tinny contortions whenever some better shot  
 happens to hit one. Cheer-struck, on he goes reeling  
 after his luck. For booths that can please  
 the most curious tastes are drumming and bawling. Especially  
 worth seeing (for adults only): the breeding of Money!  
 Anatomy made amusing! Money's organs on view!  
 Nothing concealed! Instructive, and guaranteed  
 to increase fertility!

So Williams translates the elegy into theatre: the "Mystic Rose" emblem, destroyed, suggests the "dead" church; the excessive sexual details (even for "the most curious tastes") and the emphasis on money all apply to the sexual illustrations of the elegy. This seems the only valid interpretation linking this play to *The Youthfully Departed* as one of the *Three Lyric Plays*. In the face of these explanations, is the play produceable?

¶16 Hartford Stage, in Connecticut, premiered *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws* on 2 October 2003, in its program *8 by Tenn*, a combination of eight Williams one-acts. The performance was based on the published version of the play as well as two unpublished handwritten scraps discovered in the Columbia University Williams archives, with sub-titles, "A libretto for an opera with dance" and "A stage entertainment resembling an opera-bouffé." The director Michael Wilson seized upon this comic opera interpretation, concentrating on the play's style, lyric aspect, and toning down the homosexual content to perform it like a Brecht/Weill piece. The production did not attempt the occasional atonal chants in lines assigned to the women or a rhyming duet by the young men, but instead hired a choreographer and concentrated on dance. This transformed the play towards bawdy comedy, as the two women hoisted their skirts during the performance and The Manager performed a suggestive dance. As the play progressed, The Manager became a more sinister figure, and at the end, as he sang "Now the cats with jewelled claws glide down the walls at night," the other members joined in a dance that became increasingly violent. As they danced, a loud explosion sounded, and all cast members looked up to the sky as white debris began to fall. No doubt Williams, playwright and prophet, would have approved this cataclysmic ending, especially in the post 9/11 climate of New York City.<sup>1</sup>

Tennessee's Waltz: *A Cavalier for Milady*

The third play of the trilogy, perhaps the only one that Williams was working on two years before he died, may be seen as illustrating Rilke's condemnation of modern life in a still more outrageous way. *A Cavalier for Milady* delivers more shock than *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws* because it takes place in what at first seems a normal atmosphere—an elegant Victorian parlor on Park Avenue, where two sixty-plus well-to-do matrons are preparing to go out for the evening as soon as the sitter arrives to stay with the child. But, as we notice not far into the dialogue, all is far from normal. The “child” is an apparently disturbed young woman called “Nance” who wears an old-fashioned party dress and little-girl curls. The Park Avenue widows, the Mother and her sarcastic friend, Mrs. Aid, are the two stock clowns from *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws* here pictured as man-hunting females. (The name “Mrs. Aid” is provocative. Mrs. Aide was the mother of Rose Williams's best childhood friend in St. Louis, Mary Louise Aide, but today's reader will instantly construe “Aids” as HIV positive. Williams turned this play in to New Directions in 1980; however, the first reports of a “gay cancer” did not appear in the mainstream press until 1981, and the condition was not labeled “Aids” until 1982.)

¶18 The women are anxious to embark; they have an appointment at the Plaza to meet unknown male companions for a “good time.” First, though, Mother must leave instructions for the sitter, who is already eyeing her charge with mistrust. Nance sits in the sun room, fingering a book with photos of the dancer Nijinsky as she looks at the marble statue of a fig-leafed Grecian male. She is also fingering herself, the sitter notices. “I don't sit with perverts and mental patients,” declares the sitter. Promised more compensation, she stays and the women leave.

¶19 Nance, however, has summoned up her own male companion, an apparition of Nijinsky, the dancer supreme. (If the reader rightly construes the girl as the playwright's sister Rose, this dream scene and the apparition of Nijinsky recall his famous dance, *Le Spectre de la Rose*.) As Nijinsky dances for Nance, executing one of his famous leaps, the two enact a sort of conversational *pas de deux*. His part centers on his past, his life story, his seduction by the producer Diaghilev, his rise to fame as a dancer, and his decline into madness. Hers is a thwarted attempt to touch him, caress him, and have sex with him. This duet constitutes the heart of *A Cavalier for Milady*, as Williams presents two compelling points: Nance's need for physical contact, and Nijinsky's reminder that spirituality may be sullied by sex.

¶20 A humorous interlude tempers the desperation of the duet scene. At midnight the women return, pay the sitter, and discuss their evening in raunchy detail, including a carriage ride through Central Park with excursions into the shrubbery—the sort of adventures usually indulged in by gay men. Mother produces a calling card she has picked up, advertising “Cavaliers for Milady,” which has a comfortable sound of refinement.

¶21 As the women pour themselves nightcaps and exit into the garden, Nijinsky's apparition tells Nance goodbye and disappears. Nance, screaming despairingly, tries to follow him. She collides with the statue, and tries to embrace it. Hearing the noise, the women return and notice blood on the male statue's fig leaf:

MRS. AID: Obscene, salacious, face it, you're harboring a monster in your house, a travesty of a child in a ruffled white skirt and pink sash and Dotty Dimple curls!

MOTHER: Yes, it is a little bit *de trop*, the blood on the fig-leaf bit. I had no idea she had such—embarrassing aberrations . . . Tomorrow I'll simply have to find a place away for her. I suppose Riggs Institute or—

MRS. AID: They wouldn't accept her. She'd make disgusting advances to the attractive male patients and even young doctors. Where she belongs, if anywhere on earth, is in a segregated ward of a real asylum, that sort of institution is the only solution: face it!

¶22

This conversation may well echo the playwright's memory of the discussions his parents had when Rose began to openly exhibit her emerging sexual feelings. Ever since his sister, almost his twin, was declared schizophrenic in 1937 and condemned to an asylum, Tom had feared the same fate for himself. From adolescence he had suffered panic attacks, and his later journals record his sessions with "the blue devils," the almost clinical depression which he described as a family curse. He had followed with horror Rose's psychiatric progression, her diagnoses, the verdict of her psychiatrist that "she needed to get married," and the various attempts at cures. He grew morbidly attracted to the biographies of artists who went mad, and even attempted to write plays about Vachel Lindsay and Vincent Van Gogh. In mid-life the playwright himself suffered two breakdowns that led him to a progression of psychiatrists. Above all, Williams was fascinated by the case of Nijinsky, who had been restored to mental health by the then-experimental treatment of insulin shock. Rose Williams's sessions of insulin shock, in contrast, seem not to have helped her; her subsequent lobotomy in 1943 left her peaceful but with the mentality of a six-year-old child.

¶23

Nijinsky's influence on Williams's late work, and the parallels between the two men's lives, make interesting subjects for speculation. In the 1974 interview with Cecil Brown about his late plays, Williams mentioned that he was reading Nijinsky's diary covering the years when the dancer went mad. If he was working on his play about Nijinsky by then, he did not mention it. However, a list of manuscripts found in Williams's apartment at the Hotel Elysée before 1979 includes fragments in his typing entitled "Cavaliers for Milady."<sup>2</sup> The 1981 *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*—Williams's final New York production—records an older man's seduction of a young, inexperienced heterosexual youth, echoing Nijinsky's similar seduction by Diaghilev. Williams's memoir relates his affair with Kip Kiernan, a ballet dancer of Russian descent whom he met in Provincetown in July 1940 and who had almost the same bodily dimensions as Nijinsky, as well as a phenomenal facial resemblance, with his slightly slanted green eyes and high cheek bones. Williams would have been interested in Diaghilev's claim that homosexuality was the superior way of life and that most geniuses were homosexual. Nijinsky's religiosity may have attracted the playwright, who, even at his most sacrilegious moments, never abandoned his spiritual search.

¶24

Williams was in the habit of writing parts with outstanding actors in mind, but in writing a dance drama featuring the apparition of Nijinsky, the playwright needed a dancer. The most famous dancer of the seventies was Rudolph Nureyev—known, like Nijinsky, not only for his technical virtuosity but also for his physical beauty. Just as Nijinski had been fired from the Russian Ballet for appearing in white tights without the required modesty "apron," Nureyev, who was exceptionally well-endowed, had gotten into trouble by not wearing his dance belt under white silk tights in *Marguerite and Armand*. Williams had met Nureyev in London at a party hosted by Maria St. Just a year or so after the dancer had defected from Russia in 1961. The playwright was not feeling well, so St. Just asked Nureyev to drive Williams to his hotel, the Savoy. Instead, after some conversation, they drove to Nureyev's apartment. Later, Williams, the connoisseur, commented specifically on the beauty of the dancer's body, asserting that it was definitely not true that he "padded his basket" (Leavitt). Williams and Nureyev continued to meet occasionally. They are described at a party at Andy Warhol's Factory for the "Fifty Most Beautiful People" where David Whitney danced by in the arms of Rudolph Nureyev and Tennessee Williams danced by in the arms of Marie Menken. In fact, Nureyev once mentioned that Tennessee Williams had asked him to be in a play—no doubt *A Cavalier for Milady*—but nothing came of the request,

which may be why the play was never performed. A souvenir of their friendship is a 20x16 oil portrait of Nureyev, painted by Williams around 1977.

¶25 If the dancer in *A Cavalier for Milady* combined memories of Kip Kiernan, Nijinsky, and Nureyev, Williams hints at himself in his portrait of Rose. She is called “Nance” (a homosexual boy; Williams was nicknamed “Miss Nancy” by his father). If Nance represents both Tom and Rose, by extension The Mother suggests Edwina. There is a streak of cruelty in the playwright’s revisionist portrayals of both mother and daughter. While The Mother has no surface resemblance to Edwina Williams except a certain silliness, the playwright converts her hysterical aversion to sex into its opposite, making her a sex-crazed adventuress on nightly quests for rendezvous. He portrays her as her opposite in every way—vulgar, frivolous, and heartless in her disposal of her daughter. The girl is shown at her most infantile, acting out her inhibited sexual fantasies. The real-life analogy is recorded when The Mother agrees, as Edwina did, that her daughter has such shocking aberrations that it would be best to put her away in an institution. The masturbation acted out by Nance was clinically described as one of Rose’s symptoms when she was diagnosed with “dementia praecox.” It is also a reminder of the story Edwina never accepted about Rose: that the girls who were confined at her Episcopal school in Vicksburg, Mississippi, abused themselves with altar candles. “Cut that hideous story out of her brain,” Williams claimed that his mother said in agreeing to the lobotomy, a line echoed by Mrs. Venable in *Suddenly Last Summer*.

¶26 In this final portrait of mother and daughter, one feels that Williams, toward the end of his life, was trying to exorcise both. Even as he destroys the memory of his mother and sister, by the curious touch of calling Rose “Nance,” his own nickname, he includes himself in the destruction of this long-time literary trio. In this grotesque comedy he does insert a poignant ending to grant Nance/Rose the possible consummation she never had in real life. The play ends with an inversion of *The Glass Menagerie* scene in which Laura blows out her candles, resigning herself to a celibate life. *Milady* ends with Nance telephoning the number on the calling card for “Cavaliers for Milady” to make an urgent appointment for an escort. In the final stage directions

(SHE . . . snatches a candle from the candelabra on the table and rushes out to the entrance which becomes visible as the interior is dimmed. NANCE is lighted with her lighted candle and evening-bag.)

Oh, God, make him hurry, I don’t have—a few years left me!

*Slow Curtain. Vals Lente.*

¶27 What is *Cavalier*’s *raison d’être*? At first, the most shocking aspect of this play is its thematic distance from *The Glass Menagerie*. Beyond its obvious autobiographical aspects, the play clearly relates to Williams’s “outrageous” late plays, works that Linda Dorff calls “bawdy over-the-top farces” which “disfigure” or mock realism (“Theatricalist” 13). They are grotesque, cartoonish, “camp” in the same way that painter Andy Warhol’s surface realism—an exact rendering of a tomato soup can, for instance—becomes a social commentary when stripped of content and replicated several dozen times.

¶28 In picturing his mother as her opposite in *Cavalier*, Tennessee Williams has “disfigured” or obliterated the Amanda of *The Glass Menagerie* by re-imagining her puritanical prudence as reckless carnality. The surreal vision of two society matrons having sex behind bushes in Central Park also mocks the “reality” of the Victorian parlor from which they plan their expeditions and thus comments on the falsity of stage realism itself. Reexamined in this light, *A Cavalier for Milady* fits into the experimental plays of Williams’s last years whose

purpose critics failed to understand. These plays are anti-literary; gone are the poetic arias and the unforgettable characters for which the playwright was famous. They are presentational, using all the aspects of theatre—actors, music, dance, stage effects, along with surprise and shock—to create theatrical excitement and express ideas.

¶29 In a February 1981 letter to New Directions, along with three other short plays, Williams described *A Cavalier for Milady* as “more experimental than the others” he had sent them. Along with experimenting, which the playwright had done from the start of his career, Williams, as death approached, had a warning to leave. In the same letter to New Directions, he mentioned that the Goodman Theatre in Chicago would soon start rehearsals on an as-yet-untitled play. It would be the last new text produced in his lifetime. The title he eventually chose, *A House Not Meant to Stand*, depicted an America in decay as he saw it in his late apocalyptic plays. Works like *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws* and *A Cavalier for Milady*, his jeremiads against the present Babylon, reveal both the preacher and the prophet in the late Tennessee Williams.

¶30 *A Cavalier for Milady* was not published, and to date has never been produced, although it is the most approachable of *The Three Plays for the Lyric Theatre*. Perhaps the requirement of an actor who is also a ballet dancer has held it back. It is questionable whether the three plays will ever be produced together. Rilke seems to have been a continuing influence through Williams’s life. In 1974, Cecil Brown noticed a copy of Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* on the worktable beside Williams’s typewriter. Earlier, in 1953, when he was writing *Camino Real*, he wrote to his friend Maria St. Just from Rome: “I want to ask you a favor. Will you please copy down for me those beautiful lines of Rilke about ‘how strange it is to be no longer alive—putting off even our names like toys we have hardly grown used to . . .’” (St Just 61). And in 1957, when St. Just had her first child, Williams sent the baby a copy of Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* inscribed: “Bring her up on this! Love, 10” (146).

¶31 An odd gift, elegies for a newborn, but perhaps the playwright had to some extent followed his own injunction. The poem he asked St. Just to copy, from Rilke’s First Elegy, applies to the dead lovers in *The Youthfully Departed*, the young biker in *Now the Cats With Jewelled Claws*, even Rose—pictured as Nance—in *A Cavalier for Milady*. It must also have expressed Williams’s own concerns as he neared death.

True, it is strange to inhabit the earth no longer,  
to use no longer customs scarcely acquired,  
not to interpret roses, and other things  
that promise so much, in terms of a human future;  
to be no longer all that one used to be  
in endlessly anxious hands, and to lay aside  
even one’s proper name like a broken toy.  
Strange, not to go on wishing one’s wishes. Strange,  
to see all that was once relation so loosely fluttering hither and thither in space. (69-79)

Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* embrace all aspects of the human condition. Although Williams would have humbly denied any comparison with the poet, his plays, early and late, work towards that same goal. His erstwhile friend, Donald Windham, invoked Rilke when, in 1960, he entitled his rather snide *roman à clef* about Williams *The Hero Continues*, quoting lines 41-42 from that same elegy:

Consider: the Hero continues, even his fall  
was a pretext for further existence, an ultimate birth. (41-42)

Williams did continue, against growing disfavor, writing up to a month of his death in February 1983. As unknown scripts like *Three Plays for the Lyric Theatre* are published by New Directions and other presses and performed in venues such as Hartford Stage, the Kennedy Center, and The Manhattan Theatre Club, the Hero will continue to be explored, reinterpreted, and reborn.

## Notes

All quotations from Rilke's *Duino Elegies* are from the translation and commentary by J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender, the edition Tennessee Williams used (New York: W. W. Norton, 1939). All line references are numbered according to the original German text included in the Leishman-Spender volume.

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<sup>1</sup> The 9/11 reference was deliberately implied by director Michael Wilson, according to Nicholas Moschovakis's theatre review. See Moschovakis, par. 37.

<sup>2</sup> The actress, Roxana Stewart Prosser, whose husband William was director of the Key West Tennessee Williams Fine Arts Center, compiled a list of Williams's writings found at the Manhattan Plaza in New York. "Cavaliers for Milady" (sic) is described as "Typewritten. Holograph. Ca. mid-1970s fragment."

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