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Tennessee Williams Scholars Conference Panel: The Early Plays of Tennessee Williams

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Number 7

Moderator: *Robert Bray*

Panelists: *Allean Hale, Philip C. Kolin, George W. Crandell, Brian Parker, Nick Moschovakis*

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Editor's Note: The following panel was transcribed directly from tapes made at the 2004 Tennessee Williams Scholars' Conference.

Dr. Robert Bray: For those of you just joining us, I'm Robert Bray, the conference director, and I will be moderating this session. I'm going to read briefly the introductions to each of our distinguished speakers. As I say every time, if I were to list all of their contributions, we wouldn't have any time for our discussion.

^{¶2} **Allean Hale** is adjunct professor of theater and a Tennessee Williams specialist at the University of Illinois, Urbana. She has published extensively on the playwright and was research assistant to Lyle Leverich's monumental *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*. She's been a consultant on four television documentaries on Williams, including *American Masters*, and has edited four Williams plays for New Directions Publishers. She serves on the editorial board of the *Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, I'm happy to report.

Dr. Philip Kolin has been a professor of English at the University of Southern Mississippi since 1974. He has written the Cambridge University Press history of *Streetcar* on the world stage. He has edited *Undiscovered Country*, the recent volume on the late plays. He's also edited four other books on Williams, including the most recently published *Tennessee Williams Encyclopedia*, as well as 25 other books and some 200 articles. He's the founding co-editor of *Studies in American Drama, 1945-Present*, and he has also edited a special Tennessee Williams collection for the *South Atlantic Review*.

Dr. George Crandell is professor of American Literature at Auburn and is currently serving as head of the English department. He is the author of *Tennessee Williams: A Descriptive Bibliography*, published by the University of Pittsburgh Press, and also *The Critical Response to Tennessee Williams*. His articles on Williams have appeared in a variety of publications including *Modern Drama* and *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*. His scholarly interests include, in addition to Williams, the humorist poet Ogden Nash and playwright Arthur Miller. Professor Crandell was largely responsible for selecting the poems that appear on the postage stamp commemorating the 100th anniversary of Nash's birth, and he is currently working on a descriptive bibliography for the published works of Arthur Miller.

Dr. Brian Parker is professor emeritus at the University of Toronto, who in retirement is using his skills as a Shakespearean editor to try to sort out the confusing and widely dispersed drafts and revisions that lie behind all

of Tennessee Williams's major plays. So far he's worked out the sequence and manuscripts for five plays, including *The Rose Tattoo*, *Camino Real*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Suddenly Last Summer*, and *Night of the Iguana*. He has also published interpretive articles based on this evolutionary process in Williams's work. He is currently working on *Sweet Bird of Youth*. Brian has located, and we've edited, a one-act version of *The Rose Tattoo* and a one-act version of *Night of the Iguana*, and these have both been published in *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review* and were performed at The Food for Thought Theater in Manhattan. So Brian is not only finding this work, but we are bringing it into production as well.

Dr. Nick Moschovakis is the contributor of two articles on "Hart Crane" and "Poems" to *The Tennessee Williams Encyclopedia*. He has co-edited Williams's *Collected Poems* with David Roessel, and their collaboration has continued with editions of unpublished one-act plays from the archives. Three of these one-acts will receive their world premieres at the Kennedy Center this coming April 23 as part of the new program *Five by Tenn*, directed by Michael Kahn; and Nick was also instrumental in helping put together the one-acts for Hartford Stage a few months back.

So, you can see that we have well-qualified people for this panel, and what I'd like to do is just begin with Dr. Moschovakis and have Nick talk about his interest in the early plays, and then move the questions toward this end of the table. Why don't we talk about the work you've done, and what particularly fascinates you, perhaps, about the early plays.

Moschovakis: Well, I guess I'm primarily prepared, right now, to ask a sort of big, general question that I hope will be provocative for all of us—and I might be able to say some general things about other work that I'm doing related to this as well—but my specific question has to do with Tennessee's early influences and his own self-consciousness about those influences as a dramatic writer. I remember at one of these conferences in the past few years, Brian Parker raised the issue that we don't have any real thorough studies of Williams's reading, and we still don't have any of those studies. There are people who have, of course, made insightful remarks and observations in various essays and books, but a more systematic overview of them would be interesting, as would an overview of critical remarks and responses that Williams is on record as having written, himself. There is an essay, apparently extant, at Washington University in St. Louis, which I haven't seen, from 1937 with a title that's something like "Anton Chekhov and the Challenge of the New Drama" or something like that. Its existence is recorded in Leverich. I would like to know what's in that; I've never seen it. What did he think, in 1937, about the importance of Chekhov, for instance? One of the plays, which I've co-edited for production next month at the Kennedy Center, called *Escape (Summer at the Lake)*, seems to be based entirely on one line in Chekhov's *The Seagull*. I may come back to this later on, but it's an example of the kind of thing that you discover when you're putting the pieces together of what Williams was reading, what he was influenced by, and what he was writing that is still in the archives and hasn't been published. There are at least another couple of essays on poetics and on literature and the artistic process and the goals of modernist art, generally speaking, by Williams that are in the archives. So, I guess the question is how did Williams get to *Menagerie*, really, and how did he *think* that he was getting there *as* he was getting there? And who were his guides? I think that question has been raised by several of the things we've been hearing about already today and yesterday, and that'd be the wedge that I want to drive into this subject from the beginning.

14 **Brian Parker:** Well, I am a kind of sixth wheel here because I'm not an expert at all on the early plays. I've been looking into the various manuscripts of the middle plays, the plays written after *Streetcar*. And you know that crazy way that Williams worked: he did draft after draft after draft after draft after draft, partly because he had to write to remain sane. I mean, he literally would have had a breakdown like his sister if he hadn't been able to write. The other reason was—at least this is the way he explained it to himself—that you had to dip into your subconscious to get the real stuff, and therefore you had to work fast enough to stop your conscious mind from doing too much prior arrangement, otherwise you wouldn't get down there to the real stuff. One of my colleagues at Toronto, Northrop Frye, was also a speed typist, and Norrie had a saying which I think applies absolutely to Tennessee: “How do I know what I mean 'til I see what I say.”

I did do some work—if you'll forgive the anecdote—when I was editing Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, and I was at the Huntington Library in California, and the man next to me was Maynard Mack from Yale who was editing the Modern Interpretation series for Prentice-Hall, and we were standing there with our trays, and, you know, we chatted away. And he said, “You like Tennessee Williams.” And I said, “Yeah, I think he's probably the greatest of the American playwrights.” He said, “What about *Glass Menagerie*?” And I said, “I think it's a very fine play, but it irritates me that they don't use the projections on the stage because I think they're essential in order to stop it getting sentimental.” He said, “Would you like to edit a collection of essays on *The Glass Menagerie*?” And, you know, I was young; I'd do anything in those days. I said, “Sure!” So then I collected essays, and I thought, “Nobody's looked at this very thoroughly. Les Beauline from Virginia had looked at the Virginia manuscripts, but he made this kind of neat little lock-step, A moves to B moves to C moves to D. I'll go down to Texas; they just got the papers.” I went down there, and there was this enormous mass of papers. And I only had a week; it was my spring break. So I zipped through the papers and discovered a very interesting screen treatment in the Selznick papers, which arrived literally the day before I was leaving. And then I went home, and I did an article for *Modern Drama* entitled “An Argument for Complexity: Manuscripts for *The Glass Menagerie*.” It isn't the neat progression, A to B to C to D.

15 And what I propose to do now, with the chairman's permission, is just read you a little bit of that early draft. To give you some idea of what's behind *The Gentleman Caller*—this huge, *huge* pile of manuscripts—I mean, it's so huge because it was so personal, and he couldn't get it under control—this is a treatment, a provisional story treatment that he did for MGM which was not accepted but is down there at Texas. And just listen to the difference of this from the finished product we have come to know as *The Glass Menagerie*.

It's divided into three parts, linked by Tom as narrator. Part One dramatizes events at Blue Mountain with scenes of gentlemen callers visiting Amanda, her first meeting with Wingfield, his proposal at a picnic, and his fight with another of her admirers, and her snubbing of his next visit but sudden decision to elope with him. The narrator then bridges to a hotel in Memphis where Amanda watches boats go down the river and tells Wingfield of her first pregnancy. Wingfield enlists for World War I, and Amanda, pregnant with his second child, returns to Blue Mountain. Wingfield comes home a shell-shocked hero but begins bootlegging, and an elaborate sequence follows in which his still blows up, killing a Negro, and the bloodhounds track him to his father-in-law's church. The dogs attack Laura on the church steps, and Wingfield, rescuing her, is arrested and taken to prison.

That's Part One. [Laughter]

Part Two tells of the family's life in St. Louis, the embittered father working in a shirt factory. Laura has been so traumatized by the bloodhounds that she cannot talk until her father delights her into speech by bringing home a victrola on which he plays "Dardanella." Amanda objects [to] the expense of this, and Wingfield leaves for good. The narrator, Tom, then tells of the children growing up over shots of Tom reading magazines instead of selling them and brooding despairingly in a warehouse, Amanda selling magazine subscriptions over the telephone, and Laura having a nightmare about dogs, failing to recite at school, playing "Dardanella," polishing her glass collection, and endlessly rereading Gene Stratton-Porter's novel, *Freckles*.

[*Laughter*]

Part Three covers, more or less, the area covered by the play. It begins on Christmas Eve with Laura, who is morbidly shy—but not, in this version, lame—decorating a tree while her brother reads poetry aloud. They attempt to attract passing carolers with a candle at the window, and Amanda gives some unsuitable Christmas presents: a six-month business course for Laura and books on salesmanship and executive personalities for Tom. Laura fails at business college, largely because she's bullied by a hawk-like, spinster instructor, and the machine clatter of the typewriters sounds to her like hounds baying. There's no poetry prize in this version, and Laura likes Jim solely because his freckles remind her of her favorite Gene Stratton-Porter novel not because she knew him in high school. The lights don't go off. Little is made of the glass collection, and there is no unicorn to have its horn broken. As in *Stairs to the Roof*, Tom loses his job for smoking on the roof, not for writing poems on cartons; and on the morning after his departure, Laura tries to comfort her mother by volunteering to telephone for magazine subscriptions, but does so too early at 6:30 a.m., which makes them both laugh and restores Amanda's morale. Tom's speech on leaving home is now made to echo his father's earlier recrimination when he left, and after the scene in which Laura makes her comically early telephone calls, three alternative endings are suggested. [I missed Barton Palmer's talk but I'd be interested to know if some of these were picked up for the movie.] Either Amanda and Laura return to Blue Mountain where Laura insists that her mother is just as beautiful as she was in the beginning, or Laura is shown welcoming hosts of gentleman callers at Blue Mountain like her mother earlier, or one or other of the Tom Wingfields returns. "At any rate," quoting Williams, "Amanda has finally found security and rest, what she searched for in the faces of the gentleman callers."

^{¶16} The Texas Archive contains multiple overlapping drafts of this, including twenty-two . . . it's about five hundred pages—I won't go into all the details. There is a twenty-page fragment entitled *The Gentleman Caller: A Gentle Comedy*, which is interesting for a reason I'll come to in a minute. And the sequence is complicated further because Williams used to break off sections of them and try them out as one-acts. And one particularly interesting one-act that I think Robert might be interested in for his journal is called *The Pretty Trap: A Comedy in One Act*, which has the title page note, "This play is derived from a longer work in progress, *The Gentleman Caller*, corresponds to the last act of that play roughly, but has a lighter treatment and a different end." Jim's visit takes place on Sadie Hawkins Day, when girls can propose to men; Laura is shy but not lame; the lights, however, do go out; a bit more is made of the glass animals than in the film script; and the unicorn appears but isn't broken. After Jim's kiss, he mentions no fiancée but asks if he may take Laura for a walk. When they've left, Amanda ends the play exulting to Tom, "Girls are a pretty trap. That's what they've always been and always ever will be, even when dreams plus action take over the world. Now dreamy type, let's finish the dishes." A similar ending occurs in the full-length *The Gentleman Caller: A Gentle Comedy* with the addition that Amanda tells Tom to take out the suitcase he's hidden under the bed and now to leave with her blessing: "Then come home, and I'll be waiting for you, no matter how long."

Bray: Interesting material, Brian. The Historic New Orleans Collection also has a copy of this early film treatment of *The Gentleman Caller*. George, would you care to comment?

Crandell: My work with Tennessee Williams began back in 1988, about three years after I finished graduate school at the University of Texas, so I was well familiar with the archive there. At that time, the early plays of Tennessee Williams were *Battle of Angels* and *The Glass Menagerie* in terms of the published work, and I made a decision at that time to focus largely on the published work given the volume and complexity of the manuscript material. And it took about seven years to complete the descriptive bibliography, which was an attempt to locate all of the published work of Tennessee Williams, at least through about 1991. Since then, obviously, many plays have been published, which makes my work largely obsolete at least in terms of the early work, but it suggests that there's more to do in terms of those early plays; and, especially as Brian has begun to do with the later plays, looking at how they developed, evolved, and changed.

There are a couple of interesting things still worth looking for, I think, in terms of bibliographical work. Those of you who like to collect books might want to keep looking for copies of *American Blues*, that early collection published by the Dramatist Play Service in which Tennessee Williams's name is misspelled on the cover, for example. I expect it's a little bit more valuable than some of the other ones, and there's also a curious reference in the publication records of the Dramatist Play Service. Originally, there were to be five plays, of course, in *American Blues*, but one of them was not *Camino Real*. There was another play that was originally to go in that collection. *Camino Real* was substituted, but I haven't been able to locate any other reference to that play, so there may be yet another Tennessee Williams play out there that we don't know about.

Kolin: Like Brian, I got my start as a Shakespearean, and over the years in teaching Williams and directing doctoral work on Williams, I found myself more and more attracted to studying Tennessee Williams through representation, through his staged productions. And several years ago I did a book for Cambridge on *Streetcar* on the world stage, and one of the panel members here whom I shall not identify by name—except to say that he's wearing a dapper bow tie [Bray]—once said I knew more about *Streetcar* than it was natural for a human being to know. So, that has been my primary interest, and that is stage history. Like everyone else on the panel, we are deeply indebted to Allean Hale for her editions of these early plays. It seems that one of the issues that the panel may want to confront is the definitional issue of determining *what is* early Williams. As George indicated, early Tennessee Williams when I was new to the profession was *Battle of Angels*, and very little was known about anything before that, particularly his work with the Mummies.

My primary interest in the early plays is a continuation of the work I've done with *Streetcar* and *Kingdom of Earth*, and that is to look at Williams's representation of minorities, of the "other." I've always contended that Williams is a political writer, although he voted in only one election—and he didn't vote for Republican or Democrat. He does have a strong sense of social consciousness in his work. His hero, or heroes, in the 1930s were Clifford Odets and Eugene O'Neill, and he did write a term paper on O'Neill. And so I'm very interested in what the early work says about Williams's social agenda, his social consciousness. If you look at a play like *Nightingales*, there are some small parts for marginalized characters, such as Ollie, who is brutally sentenced to the Klondike and is maltreated by the warden and ends up banging his head against the wall because he cannot

stand the torture. There certainly are references in *Fugitive Kind* to the Alabama chain gangs and the prejudice back in the '30s that were part of the newspaper headlines that Williams consulted to write the early plays. When he was at the University of Missouri in the 1930s, one of the topics that the class had was to write about "black life," and Williams explored African-American folklore—perhaps not very far—but delved into black folklore and the like to produce some early stories such as "Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll." If you look at Williams's career as evolving, a little bit like John Milton's, you see him looking at black characters as a way of protesting injustices extended to the major characters in the plays. And this is all the way through the canon, whether it is somebody like a Sheriff Talbott in *Battle of Angels*, or whether it is Stanley Kowalski, or whether it is some of the later work. But it seems to me that something else that the early plays, early fiction, do emphasize is that they became the forum for Tennessee Williams to discover himself, and he did evolve tremendously. And rather than seeing them as isolated—early works, middle works, later works—there is a continuum here, and that has been my focus through studying Williams's canon.

¶9 **Hale:** Well, I think that's true about the continuum, and I think it started very early. For instance, *Glass Menagerie* . . . I would say the strongest piece of evidence of how it started are the two pieces he wrote about Rose: "Portrait of a Girl in Glass" and "The Difference between a Violin Case and a Coffin"—isn't that it?

Bray: "The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin."

Hale: Yes, and those are very much preparations for the play, *The Glass Menagerie*. And then you can even go into other forms of art, like painting and all because Williams did this. I think, for instance, the unicorn—that's interesting . . . he wrote, he was reading the sonnets of Rilke, and there is a sonnet about the unicorn, and the unicorn represents virginity, and so the unicorn had a lot more meaning in *The Glass Menagerie* than the average theatergoer would see. And that's one of the problems with Williams: there's so much in every play that you wouldn't get by seeing it. You'd have to read it.

I have to tell Nick that I did read the Chekhov thing, and it was written for a term paper, I believe, or at least for a teacher, and it really was very good. It was several pages on what he thought of Chekhov, and the teacher had written his comment across the top, and he said, "This does not at all fit the assignment." [*Laughter.*] So that was pretty much what happened with him all the time: he never fit the assignment. He just went his own way.

But I think, for instance, all these very early plays—at least the ones I worked on—have touches of *The Glass Menagerie* in them. You have the character in *Stairs to the Roof*, Ben, who's caught in a no-exit job, you know, like Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*. And one thing that kind of amused me was *Stairs*—there are all these different mean wives, there are these little scenes, and in a way—one of them even says, "Rise and shine"—in a way, they are a completely different portrait of Amanda than he finally reached . . . he softened it a great deal before he got to *The Glass Menagerie*.

¶10 **Bray:** We talked a lot about Williams's politics this morning, and it was a subject as well at the Washington University symposium a while back. And we were looking at that year that he was at Washington U, 1936-37, and talking about how Williams and his colleagues fancied themselves as radicals, reticent radicals, maybe . . . genteel Bolsheviks, however you want to put it. And this is not to question the sincerity of their conviction to

social causes, but I'm just wondering how all these middle class students arrived at their radicalism. Yet the early Williams work is not Clifford Odets, it's not Rice, so I guess the question that I would ask you is, do you think Williams made a conscious effort to avoid the heavy-handed didacticism that some of his contemporaries were engaging in?

Hale: Well, there was a year at Washington U where Williams got in with a radical group who were linked to Jack Conroy, who was editor of *The Anvil*, which was called a proletarian paper, and it was based on Russian precepts and Russian magazines. So, I don't think that really ran very deep in Williams, but I think you can't read a Williams play, even *Night of the Iguana*, without finding some social comment. Remember about the dung heap in *Night of the Iguana*? And I think that was very much a part of him, and in fact, he says in one of these, "This might become the great American play, and I'm just as interested in the sociological as I am in the theatrical." Well, actually he wasn't, but I think this was genuine with him.

¶11 **Kolin:** If I could add something to that, I think if you did a study of Clifford Odets's career and Williams's, you would find so many parallels, so many intersections between the two playwrights. When Williams was working for Professor Mabie [at the U of Iowa] and was very much accustomed to seeing success come through writing works that would be turned into living headlines, living newspaper stories, Odets was his model. When he got his start and got the award for a hundred dollars sponsored by the Group Theater, Clifford Odets was a part of that. When Williams wrote plays that had vernacular poetry, poetry of protest—think of, certainly, Canary Jim in *Not About Nightingales* and Terry and Leo in *Fugitive Kind*—we're hearing Tom Williams filtering Clifford Odets through Williams's aesthetic consciousness. And I think it's interesting—two biographical points, here—Williams was called a "gentle Odets" and got into the Odets circle with Kazan, Molly Day Thacher, and got his start that way, and he even dated Odets's sister, Florence. So, there are a lot of connections here that are worth pursuing.

¶12 **Crandell:** I don't think Williams deliberately avoided the political. I think, along the continuum that Philip referred to, we see Williams is developing his own vision, his own sense of what his subject matter would be. In *Not About Nightingales*, for example, he based that on a true story, and I think he takes that to the limits that he can go with something that's not completely his own. Then he begins, with *Battle of Angels*, even *Glass Menagerie*, and even in *Spring Storm*, I think, to discover some of the characters that would be the focus of his later work, and his strength truly is in his character development, not the plots and the political ideas that still persist in small doses in his plays. But we see, along that continuum, his development in terms of himself as a playwright.

¶13 **Bray:** Beyond the idea of politics either as a guiding issue or as a subtext in his plays, I'm wondering if any of you can think of any other theme that seems to inform these early plays. I think the answer might lie in the tremendous production of scenes from the early plays that we saw yesterday with Tom Mitchell and his students, but for those of you who didn't see that, does anyone care to address some of the issues that seem common to all of these very early plays?

Hale: I was trying to think if you could find one word, which of course you can't, but I think for these early plays, if you could find one word that characterized them it would be "escape."

Bray: That's absolutely true, Allean. Brian, were you going to say something?

¶14 **Parker:** Yes, this is an old argument that I've had with Philip and Allean for decades now. I'm uncomfortable with any description of Tennessee Williams as a political writer. Now this may be fuddy-duddy semantics, but to be a political writer, you've got to be *for* something in the way of politics, and Williams wasn't. He only knew what he was against, and he was really a radical individual. He was the "fugitive kind." He was someone who didn't want any kind of limitations imposed on him from outside by whatever. And unless you're going to go into the left wing of anarchism, you're not going to find that in any political party. I call him—in these early plays—I call him a social protest writer. That's not a politician. That really isn't. Politics by definition, by derivation, is a consideration of what is best for the community, the *polis*. And really Tennessee . . . could you imagine Tennessee a member of a union? No way! So, I'd agree with Allean that his basic thing is escape. It's getting away from the constraints.

¶15 **Bray:** Nick, you've been instrumental in finding some of these early plays and getting them out before the public both in terms of printed versions and having these produced. I am wondering, as you're going through some of the manuscripts, how do you as a Williams scholar filter out the ones you think are worthy of pursuing? What are some of the criteria that you use, and how fair are we to Williams in publishing some of these early materials?

Moschovakis: Two good questions. When looking through an archive that contains early one-act plays, which is really what I've been dealing with together with my collaborator, David Roessel, what we found ourselves looking for—because there was just so much—there were so many scripts that were even in some technical sense complete—what we found ourselves looking for were scripts in which we could recognize some kind of integrity as drama with, you know, some kind of shape and some kind of characters. And we don't consider ourselves terribly competent to judge what is and is not performable beyond that sort of baseline of what seems to make for a drama because we are not theatrical practitioners ourselves. And the way in which several of these plays have come to the stage, or are in the process of coming to the stage now, is that we have responded to inquiries from people who have heard through word of mouth—directors, even people who are just planning to hold staged readings and are interested in investigating some of this unperformed material—they'll come to us, or in the case of Michael Kahn over at the Shakespeare Theater, David approached him and, since Kahn has a distinguished record as a director of Williams, asked Kahn whether he might be interested in looking at some of this material, and we submitted a number of copies of one-act scripts to him, and he was interested in some and not interested in others, and then he changed his mind about some. And I might be able to try to assess the criteria that Michael Kahn used, ultimately. I think he wanted to put together a program of one-acts. There are five in this upcoming program, one of which has been previously performed, three of which are world premieres that we supplied him with, and the fourth unperformed play is one that he had sitting around that a friend of Williams had given to him at one point. I think his criterion was basically that he wanted a varied program that would have some sort of shape to it, that it would go from the earliest writings to something later. *I Can't Imagine Tomorrow* is the previously performed script that's at the end of that program. And some of the plays are more conventional in their method, and conventional in the sense of sort of pre-modernist, or pre-expressionist, whatever you want to call it—one of them is, at least, although it has some symbolic elements;

and others are less conventional, and more kind of wacky. And I think he wanted variety, and he wanted things that looked like they might have a chance of working. And I'd like to point out that one thing that all of these scripts have in common, that directors have selected for actual readings or production, is that they surprise you when good actors perform them; they surprise you with how unexpectedly rich they are. They may not be as rich as the great plays we know and love, but there is always something of Williams in there, and there is always something that you recognize . . . in it you recognize a kinship with something you know and love that's deeply rich and complicated, and it sort of complicates your sense of some of the great characters from the well-known plays as well.

As far as the second question that Robert asked about, which is one that has come up before at a panel last year, which I was also on at this conference, the question of whether we are doing justice, whether it be to Williams's intentions or to the integrity of Williams's oeuvre as a whole by bringing out more things that he himself never saw through the process of production or publication—well, I don't consider myself some sort of moral authority like, you know, the ethicist in charge of these matters—but the best justification that I can give is that to publish these scripts—you know, as with the case of publishing some of the one-act versions that Brian Parker has been editing for publication and so forth—to publish these and even to make them available thereby to directors for possible performance is not an attempt to reshape the Williams corpus so much as it is a way of enabling that more complex, richer experience of the plays and response to Williams's great work that is thereby made available to those people who are interested in having that experience and in doing this reading. You can't all go to the archives and spend the time that we as scholars spend in the archives reading through typescripts, and I honestly don't have any sense that Williams would feel insulted by this process at all.

¶16 **Bray:** We'll get to Philip as a follow up, but I got a different perspective on this the other day because I was talking with a gentleman named Victor Campbell, who was Williams's traveling companion for about six years in the early seventies, 1971 to around '77. Williams had given him sort of a treasure chest of materials for his safe keeping that he wanted given to Dakin, actually. And one of the things that Williams said, according to Victor Campbell, was, "I am giving these materials to you because I don't want them just to sit in some basement somewhere. I want these things to be published or to be accessible to the public in some way." And so that in a way, I think, encourages us in terms of how we might feel about dealing with this work, because otherwise it does make one a little bit apprehensive about what the great man might be thinking about when we posthumously publish his work.

¶17 **Kolin:** I think the editorial question is one of the central ones. There is another question I think that is central, and perhaps more accessible to us today, stemming from Barton Palmer's wonderful presentation last session. These early works, both the fiction and the plays, are very much Hollywood oriented. There is the strong sense of the cinema. Each time I teach "The Vengeance of Nitocris" I come up with Hollywood analogues, whether it's *The Mummy*, whether it's *Indiana Jones*. If you look at *Fugitive Kind* or, certainly, *Not About Nightingales*, the scenes are constructed the way they would be for a Hollywood movie: there are dissolves, there are screen devices, voice overs, close-ups, and theme music—all kinds of Hollywood feats. I think Canary Jim jumping off at the end of [*Nightingales*] is, as Allean has pointed out in her introduction, very much indebted to crime prison movies of 1930's; so I think the cinema was a source both for the content of Williams's work as well as its

technique. And I know that in teaching the early plays, my students try to point things out like references to film noir: shadows, the detective in *Fugitive Kind*, and so many of these early plays set in the city, the urban landscape. The city has a thousand stories; well, Tennessee Williams had a thousand movies to draw from.

¶18 **Bray:** We call these early plays—*Candles to the Sun*, *Fugitive Kind*, *Not About Nightingales*, *Spring Storm*, and others—apprentice works. And what do you think of when you think of an apprentice? You think of someone who is learning the trade. You think of a metal smith, a carpenter’s apprentice, or something like this. What do you think it is about these plays that makes them obviously apprentice works? Or should we be using that term? Is it that the characters are not fully drawn? That the plays have unconvincing plot lines? Of course, the idea of someone disappearing into another dimension, as with *Stairs to the Roof*, is not necessarily convincing, but it’s fun. It seems to work for that play. Is it the hackneyed dialogue? In *Fugitive Kind* you have sort of the dialogue *du jour*. You have Cagney-esque phraseology and so forth. So is it these things, or are we just looking at an immature Williams who hadn’t found his voice? What do you think about this, Allean, and anyone else who wants to comment on it?

¶19 **Hale:** Well I think those early plays are derivative, and in that way they are apprentice. I mean, he was learning his trade, and, being very smart, he would pick out some outstanding playwright or outstanding actor to use, like choosing Elmer Rice, for instance, who had just won the first critics’ award. I mean, he was always very ambitious, and I think in that way, he hadn’t written plays before. So you can find a derivation for each early play from something he’d read or something he’d seen. And I think after those first five plays or so, then he’s more confident about going his own way. But you can find definite traces of different playwrights in the different plays.

¶20 **Bray:** Anyone else want to tackle that one?

Crandell: I think you could argue he’s always working on an apprentice play and that he’s continually revising his works. *Battle of Angels* is one that he never gave up revising; it came back as *Orpheus Descending* in 1957. I think that one of the things the early plays shows us is that he very much needed the help of a collaborator like Kazan to select what is good, what is bad. I don’t think he was always a very good judge of his own work, and with *The Glass Menagerie*, he accepted changes that Eddie Dowling and some others suggested, such as the inclusion of the drunk scene, for example. He didn’t have the confidence then that he had after the success of *The Glass Menagerie*, and he gained strength with his career. I think with *Streetcar* he had very strong feelings about how it would be successful, but he also desired the help of Kazan who he knew could realize the potential that that play had. So even then, in what might be called his most mature work, he’s still seeking the help of others.

¶21 **Bray:** The point about his working on *Battle* and *Orpheus* for seventeen years reminds me of the length of time he worked on *Vieux Carré*, which went all the way back to 1938 and ’39 during his initial residence here. He returned to this play several times over more than four decades. It was performed in 1977, and he was actually working on an Off-Broadway production of it two weeks before he died in 1983. So that’s just to illustrate George’s point that he could never give up some ideas. Some plays he could never turn away from, and of course he always said that a play’s never finished; it’s just abandoned.

Hale: You might say he was an apprentice in that he had a terrible time ever ending a play, and that still puzzles me, why it was so hard for him to find an ending for a play. And you can see it in almost every play.

¶22 **Parker:** A little anecdote for that: Gore Vidal tells the story about walking in on Williams in Rome sometime in the late sixties, I think. And it was about eight o'clock in the morning, and Williams had already been working for a couple of hours—he always worked in the early hours—and he had his first martini out and his cigarette going. And Gore Vidal said, “Hi, Tenn. What are you working on?” And he said, “I’m writing the scene between Blanche and Stanley.” And Vidal said, “But you already finished that play, and they made a movie of it, and you got the Pulitzer Prize for it.” And he said, “Nothing’s finished if I’m still thinking about it.” And I think that’s the way his mind worked.

One thing struck me, listening to those really talented young actors do their presentation yesterday, is how uneven the writing is. It moves from brilliance to vapidness, I mean, to cliché; it moves in and out in those early plays. It’s what Williams himself was fond of calling texture. And you have to work and work and work to get that texture throughout the play. And I think the early plays show a real big zigzag, a real grafting of very good writing and very bad writing such as you don’t get in the great plays that he’s managed to control. The way I understand how he used to write is that he basically wrote from dialogue: he would think of a couple of characters and get them talking, and they would talk, and usually they would talk around something, a symbol—at least one symbol would be in there—and then it would grow. It would accrete the way a coral island grows. It accretes. What he was very weak at, and is extra weak at in the early plays, is he really did not think in terms of Aristotelian unity. That is his weakest area, and he’s apt to go into cliché melodrama just to organize his work, and you see that also in the earlier plays. And he manages, by and large, to get rid of that in the great plays in the middle. He’s back in that area towards the end of his life.

Bray: Well, that’s why he said that he was so pleased with *Cat*, because it conformed to the so-called unities: time and place and so forth.

¶23 **Kolin:** I think we look at Williams as the poet in the theater, but he’s also the master architect in the theater. And I don’t want to sound too much like a formalist in these days of postmodernism, but as I read the early plays, I’m constantly reminded of two sets of linked images—one verbal, one physical—that go throughout these plays. One is inside/outside: characters who talk about how they’re feeling inside and how that conflicts with the outside world. The second group of images both in terms of stagecraft and in terms of verbal imagery is the whole notion we talked about, escape; well, antecedent to that is the notion of entrapment. We’ve got cells, we’ve got flophouses, we’ve got gentlemen sleeping on the second floor, and no one’s allowed above that. And we get this sense of Williams himself trying to escape, trying to break out, and I think, you know, one of his less pleasant writing experiences was when he went home to Clayton, Missouri, and was in the attic and wrote and could hardly wait to escape.

¶24 **Bray:** I wanted to talk about the experimental quality of his work. Now correct me if I’m wrong, but when I first started Williams scholarship over twenty years ago, we didn’t talk much about Williams being experimental—or, rather, critics hadn’t talked that much about his experimentation. Of course, I think that when most people think of Williams the experimenter, they think of these radical departures from his existing work

such as *Camino Real* and some of the late plays like *Outcry*, the two-character play that you might have seen last night; but really when you think about it, some of the innovations that he was using in these early plays, such as screen devices, were for their time very experimental, such as the narrator framing the action and reappearing in it in *Menagerie*. And when Amanda and Tom sit down to eat, they're feigning the motion rather than having actual food on their fork; it was probably confusing to theatergoers. Of course, it's hard for us these days to believe that people might be surprised by this stage business—the same thing happened when O'Neill had his hairy ape swinging at people, not making contact, and yet they would fall back. You get the picture. Realism was being abandoned at this point. But I wonder if some of you would like to comment on the legacy of Williams's experimentation, how it might have evolved into his middle and later work, and whether what we now see as his experimentation might have influenced some other playwrights as well. Nick, you want to take that one?

¶25 **Moschovakis:** Well, I'm not sure I have any argument to mount here, but it is a topic that seems like it's in need of serious reevaluation in light of all the early work that's coming into publication and circulation because the range of the kinds of experiments that Williams was doing in his dramatic writing throughout the apprentice period is really pretty astounding. He was very conscious of all kinds of modernist developments, and this was true—I speak as an editor of the poems—of his writing poetry as well. He didn't make too much headway as an experimental modernist poet, lyric poet, but in his dramatic writing, he was trying out lots of different things. Henry Schvey spoke to us, making an argument earlier today that the seeming melodrama, political melodrama, *Me, Vashya* was actually a kind of experimental, expressionist play. And I have something from the Texas archives here . . . it's from a script, which was never really completed although it kind of has a shape to it, called *Act of Love*. I'm not sure if anyone else here has encountered these materials. They're just one of hundreds of sets of papers that you could look at. But this is a very symbolic play, and it also speaks to the question we were discussing earlier of the extent to which Williams could be considered a political dramatist. I can't summarize the action here because there are too many different symbolic characters representing different things. It's really a series of tableaux that goes beyond *Stairs to the Roof* even in terms of presenting a really modernist, cubist style set of different angles on the contemporary situation, but it must be from the late '30s. This is one of the scenes, one of the stage directions early on in this work. There are these characters, a boy and a girl, whose fates are somehow going to be symbolic of the fate of humanity in the present world. But this is the scene we encounter a couple of pages into the play:

A DIM BLUE LIGHT COMES UP ON THE CHORUS arranged in sections behind the couple. They are grouped on either side of a flight of steps, the end of which is in shadow. Faintly luminous designs are above and behind them, factory wheels, armaments, sabers, symbols of regimentation, death and destruction. The chorus consists of three youths in military uniform, three older men in identical factory uniforms of blue denim, three girls in grey, three women in black. There is a group of military guards and superintendents who speak for the State. Then there is a very old man and an old woman who are seated slightly apart and whose speeches are passive reiterations and expressions of hopelessness. Then, in the foreground are standing two figures, almost nude, a man and a woman with silver stars on their foreheads—they are the cosmic voices and speak the lines in italics alternately or together. There is a soft musical background in keeping with the emotional tone of the poem.

There is a sort of group collective poem between the choral figures and these symbolic, allegorical personifications that ensues. They all speak in turn, and just to give you a sense of what some of these characters represent, I'll read another brief paragraph here from *Act of Love*. One of the three youths in the chorus stands up—they each stand up in turn and tell their stories—and the second one stands up, and I suppose that these youths all represent the state of American youth of today—and the second youth rises. He says:

My name was Clemence.

Kind of a sissified name, I never liked it.

I had a judicial mind. Serious, people called me. My parents were pleased with the grades that I got on my essays.

Yeah . . .

I majored in political science. You see, I wanted to know what was the matter with things, why wealth was concentrated, why poverty existed, why some had nothing and some had much too much and not a God damn thing was being done about it!

Excuse me. (Grins) I spit when I get excited.

I read a lot of books, on these and similar subjects, would like to share my bibliographies with you. Do you know what—!

(Restrains himself, grins)—Excuse me.

At first I believed, with youthful cynicism, that the Earth contained nothing but *fools* and *fools*. And then I found, to my infinite surprise and tremendous pleasure, that just a few intelligent men had existed. But strangely enough, their voices appeared to be—muffled! They didn't sound through the meaningless *howl* of the others!—You had to listen *closely* to get them at all. Very, very closely. And so I thought to myself—

I'll *amplify* those voices! I'll make them louder! Yes, that was my purpose, that's what I wanted to do! I'll fix it so they sound out over the others as wind sounds out above the whispering leaves, as waves sound out above the whisper of sand, as thunder sounds above the sound of rain—Yes, that was my purpose, I was going to do that, I was going to construct a public speaking system for Absolute Truth, a radio station for God and the good and the Wise—

I didn't do that. Something obstructed my purpose.

You know what it was.

(Sits down slowly)

That might actually speak volumes about the question of Williams as a political playwright. But in any case, it also speaks to the issue of his experimentation.

¹²⁶ **Kolin:** The experimental in Williams goes both ways. The very long stage direction at the beginning of *Fugitive Kind* is pure O'Neill that's proleptic of later Williams. Let me read just one little bit of it:

When lighted, the set is realistic, but during the final scenes of the play where the mood is predominately lyrical, the stage is darkened, the realistic details are lost. The great window, the red light on the landing, and the shadow walls make an almost expressionistic background.

And this reminds us also of *Stairs to the Roof*. The set there looks forward to the expressionistic staging in *Glass Menagerie*. Two years ago, my university, University of Southern Mississippi, put on a production of *Glass Menagerie* that was absolutely stunning, reminiscent of some of the things Brecht did in the 1930s, particularly in the way in which he had characters positioned. In the USM production Tom is dressed as a

merchant seaman perched in a crow's nest of a ship high above the stage looking down on Laura and Amanda. This staging beautifully expressed Williams's experiments with time and space.

Getting back to something that Robert mentioned in terms of Tennessee Williams's influences, I'm very interested, too, in Williams's legacy to late twentieth-century dramatists. As Nick was reading that passage, I was thinking of passages from *Angels in America*. It's that very full, elaborate stage that he uses. And, as I was mentioning to Ruby Cohn yesterday, there are so many connections between Tennessee Williams and African-American playwrights, particularly Adrienne Kennedy, whose first play is a spin-off of *Glass Menagerie*. So, Williams is a fulcrum character in terms of what he borrowed, what he transmuted, and what he projected.

¶27 **Bray:** I'd like to ask George a question, and this is about the state of Williams scholarship in relation to this unpublished material. We've come to the conclusion based largely on Allean's findings that there might be as many as one hundred unpublished plays.

Hale: One hundred forty-two.

Bray: One hundred forty-two. It's tough to come up with a definitive number. For example, sometimes it's difficult to determine the genre of an unpublished work. If you go to Texas and you look at the finding aids, it doesn't tell you whether the work is a poem or a play.

Hale: Well, I think I did what Ruby Cohn did before me. I went to the Gunn bibliography and counted all the plays that I have never heard of being produced. These were all early plays. And I think I counted 142, and I'm sure there are more out there. And I think what, when you were talking about his being experimental, I think that's what comes through, even in these titles. One was a puppet play. One was written for Martha Graham. He wrote two or three dance dramas. He wrote a whole series called [*Three Plays for the Lyric Theatre*]. He just tried every form of theatre, really, in those very early plays. He wrote a play that was based on Old Man Adam and his children, but it was lyrical. There was a Pierrot thing, even a couple of those. So, if you had one word description of all those, of these 142 plays, it would probably be "experimental."

¶28 **Bray:** To get back to the issue of the bibliography, George has done a great job with his descriptive bibliography. Since I don't have it in front of me, I don't know how many of these early plays you've dealt with and have catalogued. Is it, in other words, time to update this descriptive bibliography in your estimation?

Crandell: If you're meaning do I need to do something else, yes, it probably is time. Really, all of the early plays that we've been talking about here today are not included in the bibliography. At the time I was completing the work, there were still a good number of restrictions about publication of the unpublished material. So, until the death of Maria St. Just, when those restrictions were eased, it wasn't possible to publish some of those things, but now they're coming out and they certainly need to update what is available and to catalog many of the unpublished works that Allean and others have referred to here today.

¶29 **Bray:** It's time to turn to the audience for questions, so I'd like for you to be thinking about what you'd like to ask. And what I'll do is repeat the question, just for the sake of recording. So what's on your mind about these early plays?

Audience: How open is the estate to productions of these early works?

Bray: I've had no trouble getting some of the later work printed and produced. With the two one-act plays that Brian Parker found, *The Rose Tattoo* and *The Night of the Iguana*, Sewanee was very cooperative about both the publication rights and the production rights, so . . . was that your experience, Tom?

Thomas Keith (from the audience): Well, I don't know if everyone here knows this, but there are now two agencies. They split the agency. So Tom Erhardt is handling theatrical productions and Georges Borchardt is handling publications of published and unpublished material. And my impression, from the Hartford situation and the Kennedy plays coming up is that Tom Erhardt's been pretty open to productions.

Bray: Other questions?

Audience: Those two are in separate houses?

Thomas Keith: Tom Erhardt's with an agency in London and Georges Borchardt's agency is in New York.

¶30 **Audience:** Since we saw *The Two-Character Play* last night, and I know that there was an earlier version of *Outcry*, I just wondered if you had run across even any earlier versions, short stories, anything about that particular play which he always said he was quite fond of. Have you found any material on that play?

Bray: It's probably a play he had in his mind almost all of his adult life, but I don't know that he ever committed pen to paper on it until, what, the '60s?

Parker: I'm going to look at what Texas has on them, really, because I was very moved last night when I saw the play performed. They have about twenty items. I have no idea what's there. In print, there are different versions already. I have no idea what's behind it, yet.

I have one spanner to throw in the works. I largely agree with what people have been saying, and it's very good to get these things into the public realm and realm of discussion, debate. I think we have to be careful if we really value what is good in Tennessee not to do boosterism, not to overpraise where that is not valid. It's very easy to do so because we're all enthusiasts, but I think it's important not to do that. I'd remind you that in his will, Williams added a codicil that he didn't want any play produced in a form that he himself had not agreed to during his lifetime. That is a non-issue actually because Maria St. Just promptly broke that, and these days, anyone doing the major plays looks at drafts and versions and decides what they're going to do. It is interesting what Robert said about him giving texts to someone else and saying, "I'm giving you these because I don't want them lost in the basement." On the other hand, he added to his will this codicil, which Maria promptly broke, so I just throw that in for what it's worth.

¶31 **Bray:** Other questions . . .

Audience: Just taking off from this gentleman that just spoke, the question of those who become heirs or controllers of archival material seeking to make money by producing or publishing things that might not be worthy of publication, or that the author himself might not have wanted published—this pertains also to

Hemingway. Do you have any concern about these works that are not well known being exploited to the detriment of Williams? Has that happened? Or, is that an issue, an ethics issue? An exploitation issue?

Bray: Of course, if it's exploited, then it's unethical. But, I think, for our own part, the people at this table who have tried to find and edit this work, we've been extremely respectful and tried to be very conscientious of how it affects Williams's reputation and his readership.

Hale: Frankly, there are some late plays that I would hate to see aired because I know they were written when he was on drugs or when he was more or less out of his mind, and one of them is that *Masks Outrageous*. Do you know that play? I don't know, to me it has no value at all in any way. And I think if you did enough of the bad plays, enough of the early plays, that might detract from his reputation. I don't know. I'm two ways about it. I know no matter what I think, they're going to be done, you know . . . sooner or later.

Bray: That play is really interesting if for no other reason than its tone of paranoia, and it's an undercurrent that you see in several of the late plays.

¶32 **Kolin:** If you look at Williams's canon in terms of sheer numbers, the so-called late plays, after *Iguana* in 1961, they outnumber the early works and all those in between. And certainly while not everything Williams wrote was of *Streetcar* quality, it still deserves to be read, and if directors are willing, to be staged.

Ruby Cohn (from audience): What do you think should and should not be staged?

Kolin: We began with that issue, Ruby, and that's one I think we have to grapple with a little bit more. But I'm just saying in terms of sheer quantity, we've got to at least be honest enough to admit the texts are there, and they should be available. And what we do with them then is another matter.

¶33 **Bray:** In all fairness, New Directions is very judicious in what they recommend to publish and not to publish, as well, so . . . and speaking of New Directions, Mr. Keith?

Thomas Keith (from audience): I was just going to say . . . I was going to turn that back . . . in terms of the scholarship . . . Maria St. Just did throw up some blockades, there's no doubt about it. But I think that people sometimes will say, "Well, why is this published, or that published? Why aren't there more, more, more?" It's because people are doing the scholarship, it's because people are looking for the various versions, it's because Williams is not around to speak for himself, so it's taking a certain amount of time. And I think that time is also doing a little sifting, so that, you know, there is going to come a time when what's going to be published—say, what New Directions publishes are trade editions—and so, whether or not that's firmly adding something to the canon is for other people to decide. Something like *Masks* maybe will be published in a literary journal. I don't think the wider world is going to see it. I think it'll be for the scholars, and I think that the scholars will probably make good use of some of those things that aren't as attractive or that are bad.

¶34 **Kolin:** Well, yesterday I had a conversation with the curator at LSU Shreveport who had just purchased a manuscript copy for *Will Mr. Merriwether Return from Memphis?*, and he showed it to me, and it was like ninety pages. And as Allean knows, an earlier version draft, or an abridged version, appeared in the "Found

Text” series of *The Missouri Review*. And he and I were talking about that, and I said, “I didn’t know the play was that long.” He didn’t know it was that short. So, we have to be honest here, and, you know, the question I raised several years ago with Brian is will we ever in our lifetime see a variorum edition of *Streetcar*?

¶135 **Audience:** . . . but after the Gore Vidal story . . . that Brian Parker told . . .

Parker: Yeah, it’s a good question. That’s really what I initially was working towards, the idea that because I’m an editor, that I find out what the variants are and I get them. And then I realized it was such a complicated thing. No way of publishing that I knew could do justice to it. Maybe the computers will be able to handle it, but not ordinary publishing. I think the way to do it would be to go ahead, maybe in ten years time, when texts have stopped surfacing—I just realized that the collection here in The Historic New Orleans Collection just recently acquired yet another copy of *Streetcar*, you know, that we didn’t know about. And I have no idea if it’s a carbon of one we already know about, or something new. And that’s going to keep on happening. But I think *Streetcar* is the obvious choice—because it’s, I think, the best-known play—in my opinion the best play—to do an initial volume on as soon as we can, and eventually New Directions will have this *Complete Works of Tennessee Williams* if it wants to go in for this, which will run to something like sixty volumes, probably. [Laughter.] And will be bought by all university libraries.

¶136 **Ruby Cohn (from audience):** Do you mean a variorum edition?

Parker: Well, I was thinking really of a critical edition, Ruby, but a variorum, you see, includes the criticism as well, and I think that would be just too elephantine where Williams is concerned. Just getting hold of the texts’ various versions would be extraordinary. I won’t live to see it. I’ll make the assembled company an offer which you can’t refuse. In my long list of things to do, I have Tennessee Williams’s *The Gentleman Caller* because I looked at that in one week in 1983, and as far as I know, nobody else has actually been over that material. And it will take at least a year, probably more if you go outside Texas to look at drafts elsewhere, which you should do. I’m not going to get around to it. I give it to you, whoever wants it . . . one of you younger scholars. It’s a marvelous, meaty, essential project. Anyone who’s looking for a Ph.D. project, you’ve got one there, and/or a good thing to do a five-year grant project on.

¶137 **Moschovakis:** It’d be hard to get hired doing that Ph.D. project. [Laughter.] Do we need to finish? Okay. I wanted to make a closing comment. I think I can make it quickly enough. The question of a canon of Williams’s works . . . it seems to me, that the nature of that question changes over time, and while he’s alive—and then maybe for a certain amount of time thereafter—it’s a question of how Tennessee or those who speak for Tennessee choose to make Tennessee compete in a field with other dramatists of his generation or his immediate successors. But then over time, as a writer gets canonized as a classic, it seems to me that those writings get invested with a kind of cultural importance that transcends the individual, and that’s just the nature of it. The idea of the canon comes from sacred scripture, and the works of writers who have been canonized as the greatest writers in their cultures, in their generations, become essentially a kind of secular scripture. And so the nature of the decision about what to canonize and what not becomes a different sort of decision; and I’m not sure that canonization means that, only works that are in the canon need to be published and available and performed even. I think that maybe the “apocrypha” of Williams can still be out there and available for people

to read without thereby diluting our sense of the comparative importance and worth of the truly canonical works.

¹³⁸ **Kolin:** I would like to close with birthday wishes to Tennessee, whose birthday is this week. God love him.

Bray: March 26. He would have been 93. Thank you for coming.