

Williams Festival packs them in

By Sue Harrison and Susan Rand Brown

A serendipitous accord of good theater, good weather and unusual venues laid the framework for a successful fourth annual Tennessee Williams Festival held in Provincetown last Thursday through Sunday.

Festivalgoers were delighted. The box office sported lines most of the four days and many plays were sold out, performance after performance.

Festival director Jef Hall-Flavin called it the most successful ever. "We had patrons from over 20 states and four foreign countries. We had 660 patrons and 120 artists involved in the productions."

Ticket sales, he said, topped 3,000, which is nearly 1,000 more than the preceding year.

"I think this proves that even in a recession year, people are still hungry for theater," he says.

Space prevents mentioning all the works produced but a few recaps are found below.

CRUSHED PETUNIAS

The combination of an hour-long historic walking tour and a short play by Williams was a wonderful way to capture Provincetown during the war years of 1940-45. The tour began in a "nightclub" setting with WWII era songs that quickly moved to the street for a series of vignettes by a quick changing troupe of actors that gave a glimpse of fishing families, Portuguese immigrants, the local war effort, a dance for the sailors, artists on the beach and more.

The tour ended at Miss Simple's notion store, the set for the play. Braunwyn Jackett delivered a buttoned up spinster enraged by the intentional crushing of her petunia bed. Aaron Tone proved he is a man to watch in future productions. He was last seen as the hulking and frightening pitcher in "Take Me Out." In this play he emerges as charismatic and assured, a sort of young Sean Connery with a dash of Cary Grant. He's a salesman, selling life in a time of death and ultimately he makes a sale to Miss Simple that involves a dangerous liaison on a very dark road. Brian Carlson and Sasha Curran play supporting roles in this CTEK production directed by Patrick Falco. —SH

HOTEL PLAYS

Three guest bedrooms and the bar area of the sprawling Gifford House, its decor a charming tongue-in-cheek nod to high bordello style, served the festival as perfect and ready-made for Williams' one act Hotel Plays, set in New Orleans' French Quarter. As presented over two days by The Infinite Theatre, NYC, these inspired character studies proved a shim-

mering showcase for Williams' lyrical voice and recognizable themes: the beleaguered resilient artist (the outcast, the forgotten, the disenfranchised) burnished with tender empathy and viewed under blue or rose-colored lights.

Audiences moved from room to room, keeping it lively. Experiencing these tasty dramatic vignettes in a genuine hotel space, where a rumpled bedcover sends a signal, was its own delight, a reminder that all the town is a stage awaiting its storytellers.

"Thank You, Kind Spirit" featured Robbie McCauley as Mother Duclose, spiritualist in white, pushed to battle for her visions against the censorious Woman in Rear (Kathleen Donohue), who pushes her weight to the stage as she denounces the faith healer as fraud. Of course, the spiritualist is a fraud, yet her eagerness to offer light and hope brings a moment of connection and kindness. We sense the outlines of a Blanche DuBois-type con artist whose ruse is all too easily unmasked, but whose insistence on belief and improbable rescue in the face of what others call reality is a gift, to be received as such.

"The Last of My Solid Gold Watches" was spell-binding as the Housekeeper (embodied by Phylicia Wissa) transforms herself from timid to boldly self-adoring, parading in the sassy wardrobe of the woman whose room she cleans.

"Hello from Bertha" was another perfect marriage of script and actor, with Ciera Payton as a lady of the night, pushed to confront daylight after two weeks spent hiding under rumpled covers. As she battles the hard-as-nails madam threatening eviction, we witness a small glimmer of light in the face of defeat, fueled by irrational optimism before the plunge into raging despair. The experience of sitting or standing in the small hotel room directly in front of Payton's Bertha as she bellows for dignity was exhilarating. —SRB

"MADAME LAMONDE"

In "The Remarkable Rooming House of Madame LaMonde" we again see many of Williams' recurring themes. We have the brutish Son played by Nick Ronan; the overpainted, overblown and incestuous Madame (Lisa Tucker) and the cruel and self-serving Hall (Larry Coen), all circling around Mint (Jordan Harrison), the cripple who depends on Madame's kindness, endures Son's endless sexual assaults and hopes to regain the friendship of old schoolmate Hall.

This is a late-in-life play by Williams inspired by an incident when his legs gave out and he had to

drag himself around. When he wrote this play he was by then deeply in an alcoholic spiral and watching his own vitality ebb. What we and he are left with in this play is a claustrophobic room without redemption. Mint will not be saved and neither will anyone else.

This is powerfully executed by Beau Jest Moving Theater and those who saw it will long recall Mint swinging from his hooks like so much meat at the market waiting for the butcher's knife. —SH

"THE DAY ON WHICH A MAN DIES"

Williams' "The Day on Which a Man Dies," directed by festival curator and Williams scholar David Kaplan, comes with an intriguing back story worthy of a Williams character, of a manuscript nearly lost, then rescued through detective work and inspiration.

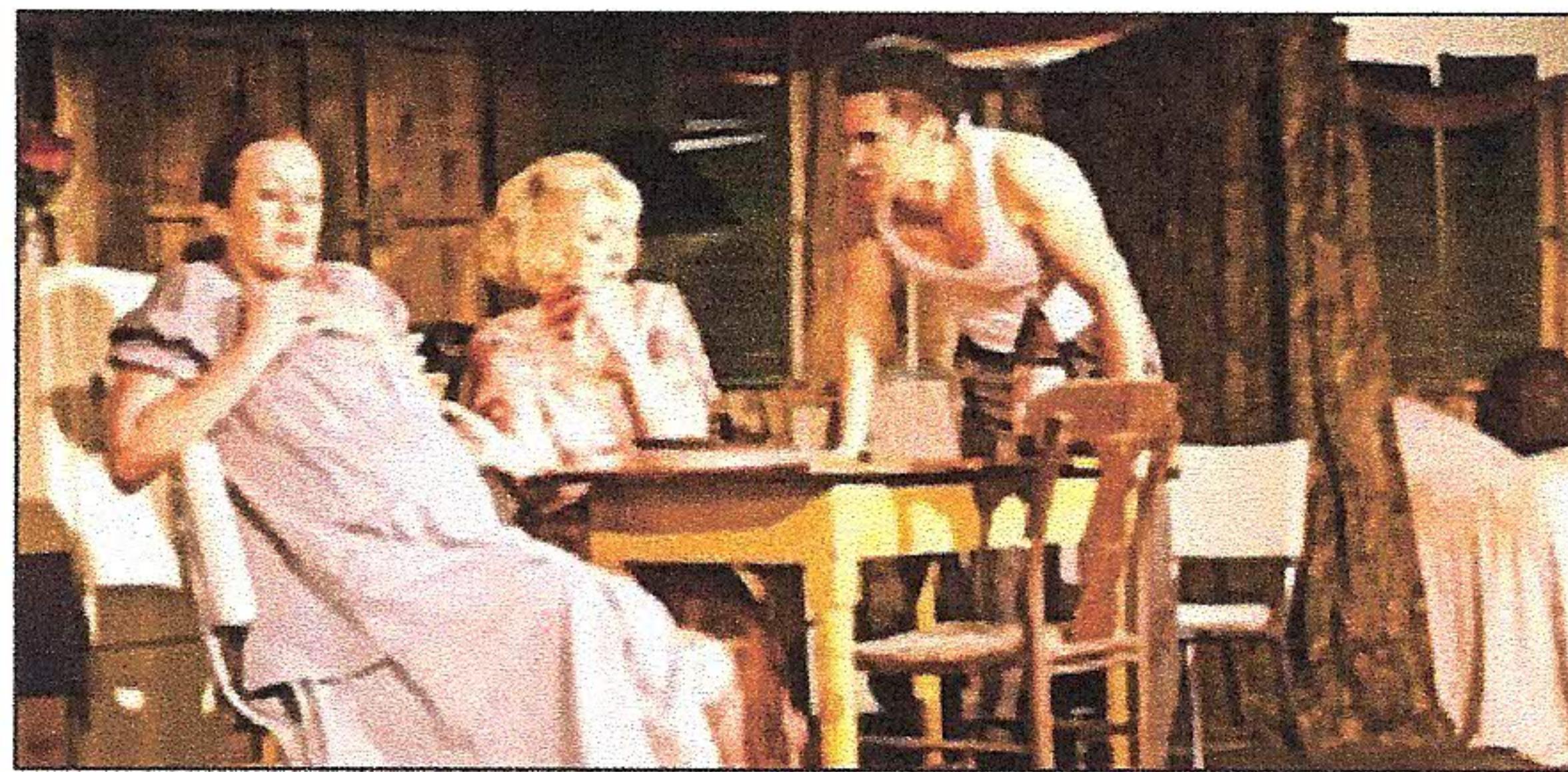
As produced by Chicago's National Pastime Theatre in front of two sold-out performances at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, the script, based on the last years of artist-suicide Jackson Pollock (who, we are told in Kaplan's program notes, Williams knew in Provincetown) alternately fascinated and flagged in its portrayal of an artist undone by insecurities, the business world of galleries and sales, and above all a love-hate liaison to a self-absorbed mistress (played with a slithering hauteur by Jennie Moreau) who stokes his misery and feeds on his pain.

The script is shaped to resemble a specific Japanese theater tradition, with hints of explosive surrealism and seemingly unscripted actions ("happenings"). And there was a surfeit of colorful stage-business, the body-painted Man (Jeff Christian as Jackson Pollock) rolling on his canvas, paper being slashed, but for all the spectacle, Williams seemed distant from his material. It lacks poetry. "Man" is a complex theatrical experiment, a casting of Williams' archetypes into stylized figures whose destiny has been pre-determined; for reminding us how rich is the oeuvre, we applaud gratefully.

"THE ENEMY: TIME"

Director Jef Hall-Flavin describes this play as four acts condensed into 40 minutes. It is the precursor of "Sweet Bird of Youth" and tracks those themes of beautiful young man with broken dreams living by compromise and his one true love who ultimately is destroyed by that love.

The Gremlin Theater of St. Paul, Minn. uses sound and lights to turn the entire room at the Art-House into the set. Bright lights sweep across the audience from the rear as cars approach the park-



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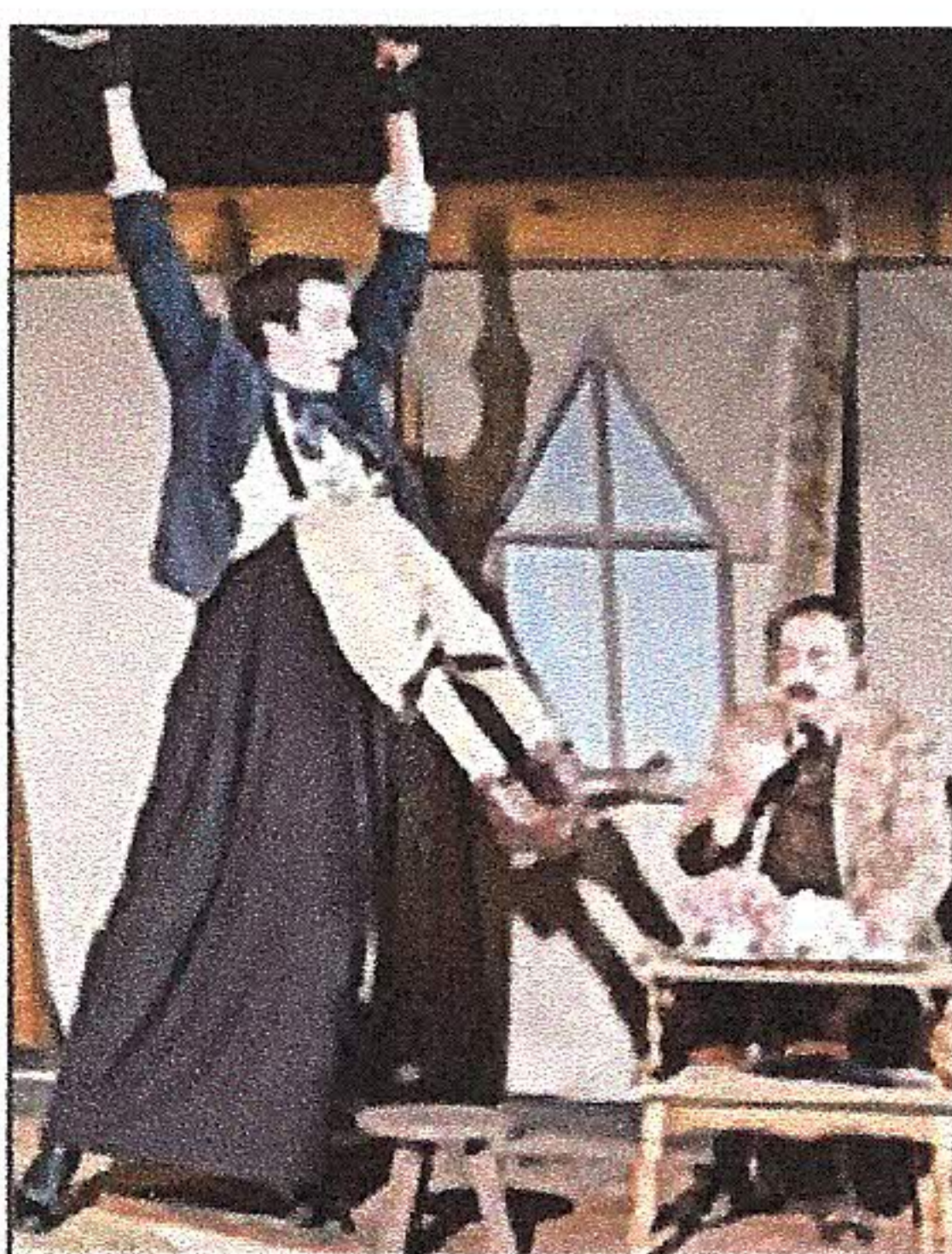
"A Streetcar Named Desire."



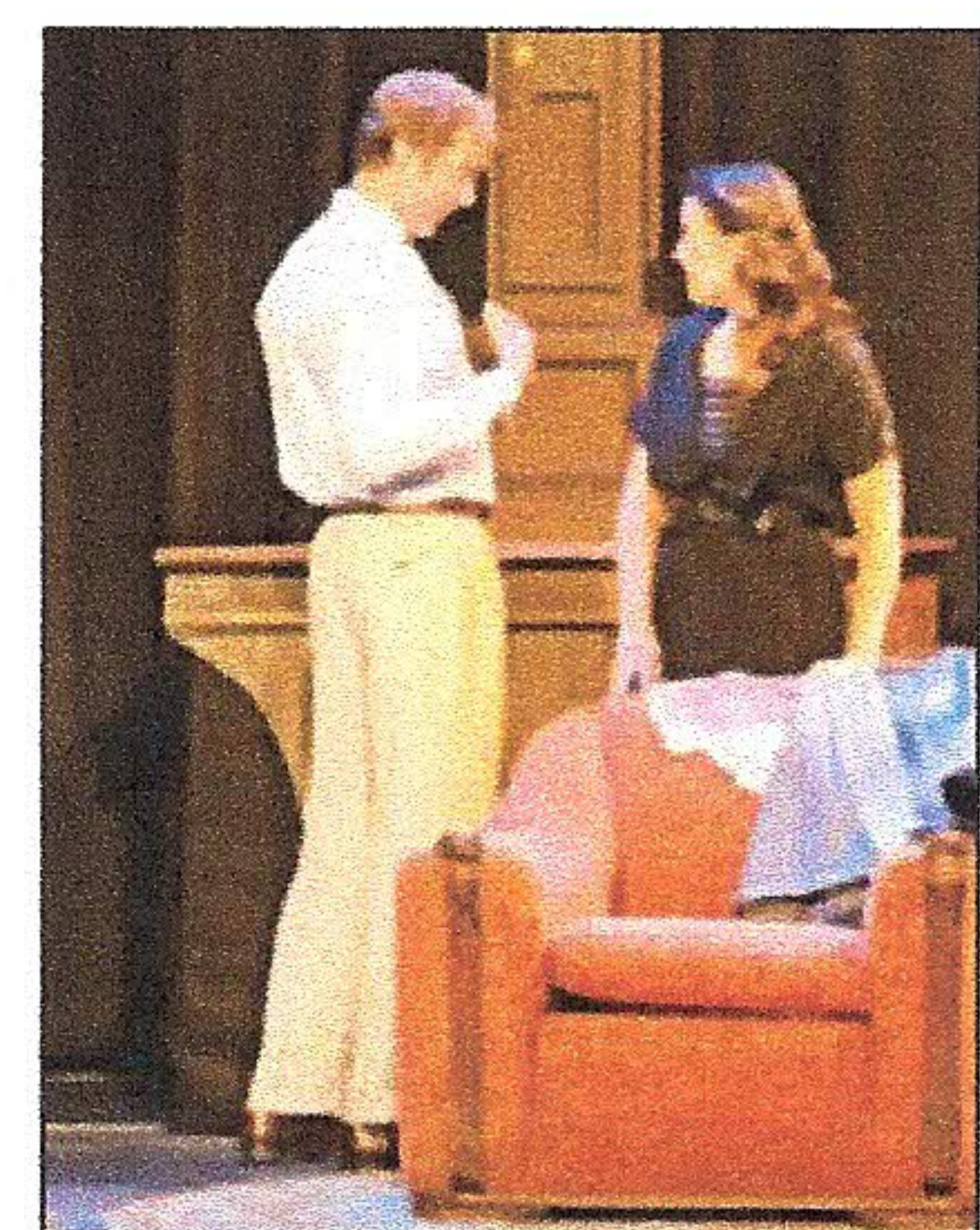
A scene from "Hotel—Pink."



A fishing family comforts one another during the historic tour.



"The Remarkable Rooming House of Madame LaMonde."



"The Enemy: Time."

ing lot of Rose Finley's (Caroline Cooney) tenement house. Phil Beam (Peter Christian Hansen), former prodigal son now turned laughing stock, is back to woo Rose but it's far too late for that. Even his Cadillac is not his own; it belongs to the "Princess" he "works" for. Nothing fixes the thing that is broken, nothing brings back hope.

The play was followed by the sizzling Paul Newman movie version of "Sweet Bird of Youth" and it was intriguing to see this early version later all grown up. —SH

The festival also offered coffee with playwright Lanford Wilson, a night of theater with Betty Buckley, performance art by Jay Critchley, the Strindberg play "Miss Julie" and a New Zealand company's version of "A Streetcar Named Desire" complete with a Maori Stanley and several off-script additions.

Planning for next year is well underway.

"The grants are due Oct. 10," Hall-Flavin says as he runs around town taking down sets and packing up the shows.