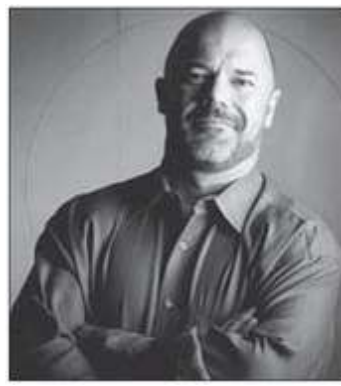


Benefit party and screening for Williams Festival

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Andrew Sullivan, senior editor for The Atlantic

This September marks the fifth season of the Tennessee Williams Theater Festival celebrating the great American playwright from Columbus, Miss. On Sunday, July 18, festival committee members will host their annual fundraiser event. This year, curator and festival cofounder David Kaplan has chosen to screen the documentary film “The Sons of Tennessee Williams,” by Tim Wolff. It will be shown after a cocktail social during which participants can meet special guests Andrew Sullivan, senior editor and “Daily Dish” blogger for “The Atlantic,” as well as award winning drag performer Varla Jean Merman from New Orleans.

Each fall, the festival brings fans of Tennessee Williams from around the country when Williams’ plays are produced for a week. It also showcases works that were inspired by the playwright. The lineup for this year, including “Orpheus Descending” and the world premiere of the unpublished “American Gothic,” is as ambitious as last year’s was.

The festival has a track record of mounting world premieres that then get produced elsewhere. Williams wrote many plays that weren’t produced or published during his lifetime and they ended up in libraries around the country. Kaplan has made it a mission to seek them out, spending a great deal of time carefully turning over pages with white, dustless gloves. The festival has become the place where Williams’ fans can finally see these plays produced.

This year Kaplan has chosen to build the festival around the theme “Under the Influence,” suggesting the spell that Williams holds for artists of future generations.

Jerry Scally, Alix Ritchie, Patrick Falco and David Kaplan founded the festival to preserve the legacy of Williams and celebrate Provincetown’s status as a birthplace of American theater. An international theater director based in New York City, Kaplan is also a Tennessee Williams scholar whose second book about Williams will be coming out in January. The first book chronicled the four summers Williams spent in Provincetown in the early part of his life. This next book, “Ten at 100,” written for the 100th anniversary of Williams’ birth, is about the influence of Williams over the course of a century.



Albert Carey, Queen of the Krewe of Armeinius

Ball, 1974.

After finding a trailer of Wolff’s film online, Patrick Falco forwarded it to Kaplan, who was fascinated. Meeting at the Tennessee Williams’ festival in New Orleans, Kaplan and Wolff exchanged ideas and Kaplan was able to see an early cut of the film.

By phone from New York City, Kaplan says, “I was really moved by the subject matter and what the footage was, and by Tim’s devotion to following the story.”

In early 1959, Fernando Rio, an openly gay man living in New Orleans, was beaten to death in an alley beside a cathedral. The three Tulane University students who committed the crime were members of a fraternity whose rites of membership included "rolling a fag." The evidence was incontrovertible. Yet the three men were acquitted on the evidence that the man had an unusually thin skull, "essentially transferring the guilt onto the victim," says a fellow student.

Wolff deftly traces the aftermath of this hate crime when it catalyzed gay men to organize Mardi Gras "krewes" in the New Orleans tradition. He interlaces historical footage with interviews of the drag performers today. Says Kaplan, "These men are Southern gentlemen. They are very proud of their relationship with their families, their communities."

Interestingly, Wolff pairs the interviews with the archival footage showing the Southern gents dressed in floor length, sequined ballroom gowns and copious feathers.

Police often raided the underground balls. In the early '60s, the krewes grew in strength and numbers, in brave defiance of the laws that restricted crossdressing and same-sex dancing. One of the performers says in the film, "We were doing absolutely nothing wrong so we just stood up, that's all."

Two of the men bemoan the lack of political mettle shown by young gay people today. Another of the performers, now in his 70s, says, "The gay community is lost to a point. They are not offering very much for the next generation." He continues on to say that the struggle for gay rights is far from over, which is why it isn't time for complacency.

The theme of generational disappointment and misunderstanding is a trope of Tennessee Williams's plays. It's the central theme to well-known works such as "Glass Menagerie," and it's also found in the unknown "American Gothic" that will make its world premiere at the festival.

While perhaps the young can't understand the generations that came before, and vice versa, some things never change. In the film, the drag performers come back to celebrate the performances of years past. And just like always, no one wants to be king.