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Tennessee Williams Festival :: the Eugene O'Neill connection

by Robert Israel
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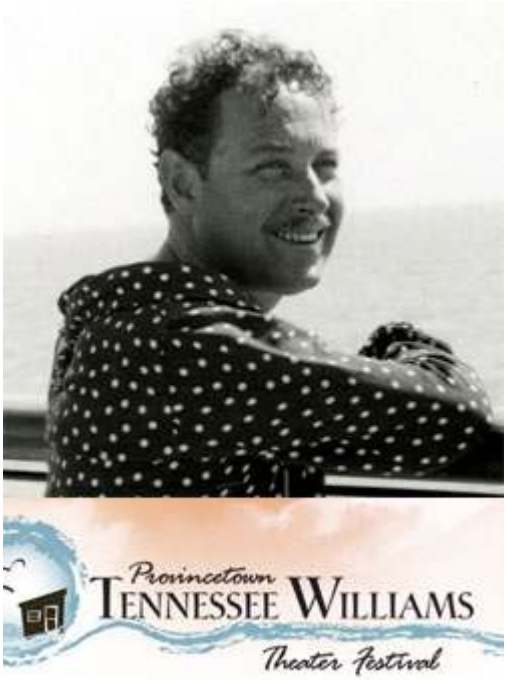
Jef Hall-Flavin, director of the **Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival**, is a Minnesota native with a soft-spoken voice as wide open as the Midwestern prairies, free of accent, recognizable for its understated succinctness.

His Minnesota roots go deep: with the exception of time spent away at college and a two-year stint with the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, D.C., Hall-Flavin, 41, has pursued a theater career in his home state, at the Guthrie, the Twin Cities' repertory company, and at Outward Spiral, a gay theater in Minneapolis, where he spent five years as co-artistic director.

But there's one other place with a magnetic pull over him, Provincetown, where he currently resides busily making ready for the debut of the Williams Festival's fifth season, which runs in various venues in the town from September 23 to 26, 2010.



Jef Hall-Flavin

On the wharf

In addition to administrative duties, he will direct Diff'rent, a two-act play by Eugene O'Neill, originally performed in 1920 by the Provincetown Players. It is known to be one of O'Neill's works that a young Tennessee Williams actually attended in Provincetown during its revival in 1940. It has not been performed in Provincetown in 70 years. Paying homage to the original production, the play will be presented on a wharf at the Boatslip Resort Hotel, in full view of the harbor.

"I came to Provincetown during the first season initially to direct one play, and that was supposed to be it," Hall-Flavin says. "But then something happened. I became enthralled with the place, the people, and with Williams' work. And I've stayed these five years and intend to keep coming back because that work is compelling. What we do at the Festival is to produce accessible and artistic productions. I'm proud of that."

Tennessee Williams in the early 1940s.

Lessons learned

Hall-Flavin says the sum of his experiences have brought him to savor his current life in the theatre.

"When I started at Outward Spiral," Hall-Flavin says, "we did a lot of gay identity plays. And then we became more sophisticated. We did a production of Hedwig and the Angry Inch, the third production of the musical after it opened in New York, and it was remarkable because there was so much love on stage. It was supposed to run for three weeks but ended up running for three months. Initially, there were no queer plays being produced by the mainstream theatres. By the time I left five years later, the mainstream theatres were doing a lot of gay-themed plays."

It was this development and subsequent directorial assignments that led Hall-Flavin to the realization that the plays he was most attracted to are those, as he puts it, that "move audiences toward an understanding of humanity."

"That's why I am part of the Williams Festival," he says. "Tennessee Williams did not write small plays, he embraced big ideas and he distilled them into jewels for the theatre," Hall-Flavin says. "The Festival allows us to explore his work - and these themes -- in depth."

One of those "jewels" Hall-Flavin refers to was his direction last season of The Enemy: Time, a script completed by Williams in 1952 (he later expanded it and re-named it Sweet Bird of Youth.) It was performed by the Minneapolis-based Gremlin Theatre Company at Art House. Reviewing it for Edge last year, I noted, "At 30 minutes, the play is a gem. All of Williams' intimate knowledge of people - their vanity, mendacity, and dashed hopes - is revealed in this short running time."

But how many of Williams' plays can the Festival produce before running out of material?

"Let me answer your question by asking you how many Shakespeare festivals there are going on around the world," he answered rhetorically.

"That's just the point," Hall-Flavin continues. "Tennessee Williams' output was quadruple the size of the Bard's. I'm not worried about running out of material. I have high hopes we'll be producing Festivals for a long time to come."

Eugene O'Neill (right) in Provincetown in the 1920s.

Williams, O'Neill and the A-House

Eugene O'Neill described his play Diff'rent, set "in a seaport village in New England," as "a tale of the eternal, romantic idealist who is in all of us - the eternally defeated one." It was selected this year because it reflects the Festival's theme, Under the Influence, which seeks to present works Williams was inspired by, and, in turn, works of his that inspired others.

David Kaplan, the Festival's curator, researched the Williams-O'Neill connection. He found that it dated from the 1930s, when Williams was a college student assigned to write a paper on O'Neill's work:

"Williams took O'Neill's measure in a 1936 term paper," Kaplan says. "He admired the acknowledged master begrudgingly, with the fellow craftsman's critique of O'Neill's 'coarse' dialect and a fellow artist's esteem for the dominant quality of O'Neill's work, as, 'A sincere and sometimes profound search for truth in human personality.' Both those aspects of O'Neill's writing would have been reinforced when Williams went to see 'Diff'rent' in Provincetown in the summer of 1940. By the way, Williams's professor agreed about O'Neill's dialog, and thought Williams's tone 'too truculent' and gave him a grade of A/B for it."

But there is another historical Provincetown connection between the two playwrights: both O'Neill and Williams were known to have spent time at Atlantic House, now affectionately known as A-House.

Atlantic House was a popular tavern when Williams and O'Neill were living and writing in Provincetown. Today it is a gay bar, still situated on Masonic Place, a skinny lane that runs off Commercial Street. A photograph of a youthful (and nude) Williams striding across the dunes is displayed inside. Outside, a bronze plaque affixed to the front entrance heralds O'Neill's connection to the place.

Did the two writers ever meet each other there? There is no record of O'Neill attending the revival of Diff'rent in Provincetown in 1940. He was in poor health that year and was writing his masterwork, Long Day's Journey into Night (awarded the Pulitzer Prize after his death, in 1957).

Williams, on the other hand, according to a research published in a book, Tennessee Williams in Provincetown, by David Kaplan, was in robust good health, falling in love with a dancer, Kip Kiernan, and retreating to A-House's upstairs rooms to hide out from a jealous boyfriend.

Today (aside from the antics of Ryan Landry), the great legacy of Provincetown theater is pretty much gone; but thanks to this festival, the ghosts of Williams and O'Neill will continue to haunt the streets and wharves of this romantic resort at the end of Cape Cod.

"There's something special about producing and directing plays in Provincetown," Hall-Flavin admits. "We sometimes rehearse on the beach, in the dunes. It's a fabulous experience, actually. It's very creative, and, at the same time, very disarming. But that's Provincetown. And Provincetown is a part of everything we do."

***Diff'rent**, by Eugene O'Neill, directed by Jef Hall-Flavin, will be performed at the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theatre Festival, on September 24-26. For ticket information visit the Festival's website at www.twptown.org.*

Robert Israel writes about theater, arts, culture and travel.

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