



Tennessee Williams' muses explored

Tennessee Williams Festival considers what inspired playwright and how he inspired others

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Why does a playwright focus on the themes that he does? What helps him create his characters? And what parts of his own life find their way into the pages of his scripts?

Questions like that have been implicit from the start five years ago of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival, notes founder David Kaplan, but this year's theme of "under the influence" spells it right out. Several events during the four-day festival explore what inspired Williams, such as a production of the rarely done "Orpheus Descending," based on Williams' youth, and Eugene O'Neill's "Diff'rent," the only play Williams ever attended during his summers in Provincetown.

But the festival schedule goes further to include work that was inspired by Williams and his art, including "The Jazz Funeral of Stella Brooks," presented as a New Orleans-style funeral (and Commercial Street parade) for a singer who was a sensation in Provincetown and became Williams' friend. Kaplan says he's been trying to have that production put together since the festival's inception.

"What I've consistently wanted to do is show we're not a mausoleum and that Williams inspires new work," Kaplan says. "Orpheus Descending" is, in fact, also an example of that influence, he says, because it's being produced by people who met at the festival doing last year's "Hotel Plays."

"As things started to shake down, that production ("Orpheus Descending") became the centerpiece of the festival," he says. "Everything is connected to inspiration and also to the descent into the underworld and back."

"Diff'rent," Kaplan notes, also represents the idea that influence isn't just a one-time "Eureka!" moment, but can be long-term. Themes from that play, such as repression and sexual identity, showed up often in Williams' work.

"O'Neill had an influence on (Williams') life, just like his summers in Provincetown continued to influence Williams throughout his life," he says.

The festival runs Sept. 23-26 in venues around Provincetown, including such unusual spaces as a church and — for a Williams play inspired by Grant Wood's "American Gothic" painting — a front porch. Kaplan believes those venues — plus a tour of three galleries to see Orpheus myth-related artwork — will help audiences get the idea of how the town itself was an influence on the playwright.

Details of the schedule, ticket prices and parking options can be found at www.twptown.org. Some of the highlights of the 2010 Williams festival include:

- Stage and screen star Dana Ivey ("The Color Purple," "Legally Blonde 2") will play Mrs. Venable and Robert Bogue (TV's "Guiding Light") will be Doctor Sugar in a staged reading of Williams' "Suddenly Last Summer," a one-act that, as a festival press release describes it, "unfolds as a crime story told by a traumatized young woman." Ivey's many stage roles have included Williams' Amanda Wingfield and Big Mama. The director is filmmaker-actress Jodie Markell, who helped rediscover a never-before-produced Williams film script that she directed last year as "Loss of a Teardrop Diamond."
- Williams' "Orpheus Descending," about a boy-singer's descent into a hell of a variety store, which will be staged by New York City's Infinite Theatre as a morality play inside a Provincetown church. This play began as "Battle of Angels," an early Williams play that he considered an "emotional record" of his youth.
- "Escape," a program of two plays: One is an event overheard in "Orpheus Descending," when the sounds of a

jailbreak interrupt a chain-gang's nightly card game; the other is about a teenage boy who swims to his death rather than return to the life his domineering mother has planned for him. DanszLoop Chicago Ensemble will perform choreography by Paula Frasz inspired by the scripts.

- The world premiere of a never-seen Williams short play "American Gothic" is based on the famous couple in the Grant Wood painting reimagined as the stern parents of Bonnie and Clyde-style gangsters for a production by Boston's Beau Jest Moving Theatre that will be staged on a porch.
- "27 Wagons Full of Cotton" is a Southern Gothic one-act comedy that includes some themes from "Orpheus Descending." The show will be produced on the porch of a historical sea captain's home by director Jeff Glickman from Florida's Big Finish Productions.
- Eugene O'Neill's "Diff'rent," about a woman's sexual repression and its consequences, which Williams saw in Provincetown in 1940. Provincetown Theater Company produces.
- CTEK Arts' production of "The Jazz Funeral of Stella Brooks," written by Chicago's Terry Abrahamson, was inspired by Williams' friendship with the jazz singer known as "the white Billie Holiday." The New Orleans-style funeral begins in a storefront church with live music, testifying mourners, and ends with a line dance down Commercial Street with umbrellas.
- "Coffee With William Jay Smith" offers a chance to see the former U.S. poet laureate, who will talk about his friendship (especially from 1935 to 1940) with the then-unknown Williams. Smith has written a book called "My Friend Tom — The Poet-Playwright Tennessee Williams" that will be published next year.
- "Bent to the Flame" is a one-man show by Doug Tompos of Los Angeles that shows a young Williams "besotted" by poet Hart Crane, who influenced Williams throughout his life.

If you go: What: fifth annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival. When: Thursday through Sept. 26.

Where: Venues throughout Provincetown. Information: www.twptown.org.

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