



Georgetown University produces the Tennessee Williams Centennial Festival

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By Hunter Styles

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American theatre celebrates a milestone this year: on the 26th of March, the late, great playwright Tennessee Williams turns 100 years old. Schools, theaters, and arts companies around the world are celebrating this centennial year with performances dedicated to Williams, drawing inspiration from his fiction, essays, poems, and scores of plays. But when crafting a tribute to an icon as prolific as Williams, it's not always clear where to start. Like the infinitely fertile ground of Williams's plays, the possibilities for a festival are nearly endless.

In putting together the Tenn Cent Fest – Georgetown University's take on the Tennessee Williams Centennial Festival – Derek Goldman's fascination has only deepened. Goldman is the Artistic Director of the festival, and of Georgetown's Department of Performing Arts.

"What a world to swim into!" he said recently during a conversation with DC Theatre Scene. "As an artist, it's something to swim into and never swim out of. Williams is so prolific. There's so much material."



Among the special guests: Edward Albee, Kathleen Chalfant and John Waters

The festival — which is centered on a Centennial Weekend Celebration running March 24 to 27 — is open to the public, comprised of both paid and free events and featuring accomplished guest artists such as Edward Albee, John Waters, Kathleen Chalfant and Christopher Durang. A number of well-known DC artists will make appearances as well, including actors Ted van Griethuysen, Sarah Marshall, and Rick Foucheux, and directors Michael Kahn and Joy Zinoman.

In many ways, the Tenn Cent Fest is the largest project that Georgetown's performing arts program has ever undertaken: an eclectic and ongoing artistic festival built as a direct extension of the department's curriculum. It will be, at the same time, a major platform for Tennessee Williams projects and discussions across the District this year.

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Through the process of building a festival, Georgetown University has established a solid partnership with the **Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival** in Massachusetts.

"We've been very happy to collaborate and share ideas with them," said Jef Hall-Flavin, Director of the Provincetown Festival. "I'm thrilled." Hall-Flavin, who worked for several years in the 1990s as the Associate Director of Shakespeare Theatre Company, returns to DC to direct a reading of the one-act play *Adam and Eve* on a Ferry during the weekend celebration. He is also serving as a consultant during Georgetown's festival planning, using his executive experience from Provincetown to help determine both the possibilities and demands of each event.

"Williams is getting the attention he deserves because of the great care that people are taking to see that his work is done well this year," Hall-Flavin said. "The 100th anniversary of any American icon will only come around once in a lifetime. So, I feel this tremendous surge of energy. And, I feel a tremendous responsibility to our playwright."

DC gets fresh ideas and new collaborators out of the partnership, and Provincetown gets to share in the rewards of propagating work by Williams. “It’s not enough just to have these plays published,” said David Kaplan, curator of the festival in Provincetown. “It’s great that they’re not forgotten, but it’s even more important that they see the light of day. He’s not just a four-play playwright. That’s what I love about what Georgetown is doing. They’re trying to expand people’s knowledge of Williams beyond the four big plays.”

Is it possible there’s a point at which the sheer number of Williams pieces being done this year will render some redundant? Hall-Flavin doubts this. “Here’s an artist who wrote every day of his life, pretty much without fail. There’s so much to know. I don’t think we’ll run out of things to do.”

Provincetown’s really another world from DC. “It’s a combination of a sweet New England town and Mardi Gras,” Kaplan said with a laugh. “That’s one of the reasons we do the festival in late September. The light is different, but it’s pretty. It’s still warm. It’s a great place to be.” Or, as Hall-Flavin put it: “If you can’t have a good time in Provincetown, something’s wrong with you.”

But the landscape has a legacy as well, particularly for our playwright. “In 1940 Williams was inspired at the cape, at Provincetown. And that’s where he began these really great works,” he said. Williams began composing *A Streetcar Named Desire*, for example, while sitting at a typewriter in Provincetown, breathing the Cape Cod air. “When he was a nobody, he was inspired by the dunes and the sun. And we are about performing works that are inspired by him.”

Although the Provincetown festival is only for a week in September, Kaplan and Hall-Flavin begin work the previous October, meeting right after the past festival closes and laying plans for the next one. The seaside town’s deep investment in Tennessee Williams struck Goldman right away during his first visit, and the joint desire to commemorate him grew quickly from there.



Derek Goldman, artistic director of the Davis Performing Arts Center and associate professor in the Georgetown University Theater and Performance Studies Program

At Georgetown, Goldman can certainly appreciate the decades Williams spent creating such a thrilling continuum of dramatic writing. “But, he wrote in every form.” he said. “Plays and screenplays, letters, essays, poetry and fiction, biography and memoir.”

The department is producing a piece in their season called *The Glass Menagerie Project*, which includes the full text of the famous play. But students are currently mid-process in a substantial and intensive engagement with this other material as well. “The goal of *The Glass Menagerie Project* is to think of the play as a prism,” Goldman said. “To have a festival that celebrates the life and the work of Williams is not to create a linear narrative. Like to say, for example, his early work and his late work. That’s not Williams. This is more about concentric circles — about curating how eight or ten pieces move and orbit together.”

“And we’re trying to be really vigilant to their connection to the play,” he added, “but what’s extraordinary, actually, is how expansively a play can open out into a larger life and body of work.”

In addition to enhancing a partnership with Georgetown’s American Studies program, the Tenn Cent Fest also strengthens the Performing Arts program’s growing ties to Arena Stage. *The Glass Menagerie Project* will be Georgetown’s first full-scale co-production with Arena. After a run on campus through March 27th, it will move to the Mead Center, where it will play in the new Kogod Cradle from June 9th through July 3rd.

Other elements of the project — including new adaptations, design projects, and site-specific work — will debut and unfold over the coming weeks, some opening over the next week or two and others during the Celebration weekend in March.

Goldman also taught an advanced topics course on Williams this past fall. He designed the course to immerse a group of students in parallel tracks, feeding the development of performance and practice alongside paper writing and history lessons. “Students put themselves in that hall of mirrors, to develop a kind of personal investment and engagement connected to their own work and identity,” he said.

“This is our year to brand Williams as our great American playwright,” said Hall-Flavin. “He is our American version of Shakespeare. I really believe that. A literary legend has to withstand the test of time, so only time can tell. But I think his mastery of language, his imagery, and the universal and beautiful way he elevated dialogue into poetry... he is going to be around for a long long time.”

“It’s not about how old a piece is,” he added, “but in how deeply it delves into the universal mysteries we struggle with. I’m really happy to have found a playwright that consistently challenges me on that level. He wasn’t just a topical writer. He knew that he wanted something greater.”



(l-r) Rachel Caywood, Clark Young with Sarah Marshall in the Festival's production of *The Glass Menagerie* (Photo: Leslie E. Nordby)

Kaplan shares this enthusiasm. “The words on the page are incantations. When you read them, you have a vision, you share a vision. It’s not just that they describe something, although they do. It’s not just that they’re beautiful, although they are. “It’s that they resonate in a shared vision.”

And more and more people are getting in on the vision. “There’s a recognition this year, and it’s been bubbling for a while,” Kaplan said. “But, it’s very hard to get newspapers, magazines, or mass media to pay attention to it. It’s hard to try and pitch a story about a play, or even a playwright.” They have found recently, however, that the centennial gives them a hook: it gives the media a chance to write about more than one event at once. Nicole Kidman, for example, comes to Broadway this fall in a new production of *Sweet Bird of Youth*. Olympia Dukakis is currently performing in *The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore* in New York as well. “In the centennial year, it’s easier to point to these things,” Kaplan said.

Why, decades and decades later, on the other end of a transformative modern century, do people still connect with Williams, still seek out his stories and long to return to those mythic streets, hotel rooms, and locked-away lives he found so enchanting?

“He’s a poet,” said Hall-Flavin. “He found his medium in theater, but he really is a poet.”

Kaplan took it one step further. “He’s like a shaman,” he said. “A shaman goes to other worlds and reports back to the tribe on what they saw and endured. And the tribe shares the vision. It’s not enough to go off and have your mystical experience — you have to bring it back so others can have it as well.”

“It happens in translation as well,” he added. “I see it over and over again. It’s an undeniable thing. You hear two lines from the script and you know that it’s Tennessee Williams. There are other playwrights that move me just as deeply and in other ways, like Chekhov and Ibsen. But words from Williams on the page — they resonate. They perform magic.”

For a full listing of the events in Georgetown's Tenn Cent Fest, including pricing for tickets and event passes, visit the Performing Arts program's website:

<http://performingarts.georgetown.edu/tenncentfest/festival>

An article on The Glass Menagerie Project — specifically on the new pieces playing alongside the full-length production — may be found here:

<http://performingarts.georgetown.edu/148537.html>

For more information on the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival, visit their website:

<http://www.twptown.org>