

Double Exposure: Tennessee Williams Turns 100

BY JEANETTE DE BEAUVOIR

It's said that Tennessee Williams wrote part of *The Glass Menagerie* while sitting at a local bar here in Provincetown. Whether or not that actually happened, what is true is that, starting in 1940, the playwright lived and wrote here for many years. He's now honored every summer with the Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, which takes place the last weekend in September, this year on the 22nd through the 25th. 2011 marks an especially important festival, as it celebrates the 100th anniversary of the playwright's birth; and because of that it required a very special theme.

"We're looking at the past and the present in Williams' work in the sense of simultaneity, something that I'm calling double exposure,"



says David Kaplan, curator of the festival and author of the upcoming *Tenn At One Hundred*. "He did this, too, in his work, going back and forth, seeing one's younger self as well as one's present self. It's a beautiful way to look at the world."

Festival director Jef Hall-Flavin agrees. "The metaphor can mean a lot of things. In one sense, it means we're bringing back some hit shows," he says. "Like *Orpheus Descending*, for example, which sold out all three performances last year. We're also bringing back the hotel plays that take place in real hotel rooms." Another way of looking at the metaphor: "We live in the moment with an awareness of the past," says curator Kaplan. "It's not an optical illusion, it's seeing both at once."

The festival always works around a theme, selected several years in advance. "It's a way of

organizing events, so that there's a journey," explains Kaplan. "In one sense, you can look at it as a four-day cruise to understanding Williams." And what a cruise it is! The festival takes place all over town and engages everyone, visitors and residents alike, not only in straight theater but in music, dance, even a stand-up comedian – a range of shows, ideas, and activities from the passionate to the surprising.

Visitors – and over six hundred of them come just for the festival – are especially appreciative of the scheduling that builds in down time for other pursuits. Kaplan says people need time to go on whale watches as well. The organizers are very sensitive to the venue since, in a sense, Provincetown is the festival. "We use the town itself like a musical instrument," says Kaplan. "Every year, you learn more about the range of your instrument. Part of the subject matter here is the town itself." Hall-Flavin adds, "We sold three thousand tickets last year. That's a testament to the support of the entire community."

Provincetown is as intrinsic to the festival as the festival is to Provincetown. "It's very appropriate that the centerpiece is two Provincetown plays," says Kaplan. "One written in the '40s and the other in the '80s, giving two views of Williams and his sense of place." And it reflects Provincetown, "Look at what we see here. Architecture, water, light, and art all coexist," says Kaplan. "All of these have that same sense of simultaneity."

And it's international in scope. "It's a boutique festival with a specific mission," says director Hall-Flavin. "This is collected from all over the world," agrees Kaplan. "It's not just local theater. The level of professionalism makes this a destination."

It's certainly a destination not to be missed, and a perfect way to end the summer. Plan on being here for Double Exposure, and see what echoes you bring of your own past to the experience. Festival passes, including access to all shows, are available at twptown.org.

And then there are a few others you may have heard of...

While Tennessee Williams is a town favorite, any of the walking tours available around town will quickly show that other literary geniuses lived – and continue to live – here in Provincetown. When the bohemians of Greenwich Village wanted less restricting quarters, they discovered Provincetown, a sleepy fishing village that offered them beauty, seclusion, and inspiration.

Eugene O'Neill – Williams' inspiration for moving here – was one of the first to hear the call. He did in fact write several plays in town. *Bound East for Cardiff* saw its first production at Lewis Wharf, an old fishing shack repurposed for the theater.

Edna St. Vincent Millay lived and worked in Provincetown, as did John Dos Passos and John Reed, Susan Glaspell, Mary Heaton Vorse, Sinclair Lewis, Harry Kemp, Wilbur Daniel Steele, and Djuna Barnes. Henry David Thoreau came to Cape Cod "to see the ocean" and stayed in North Truro.

A friend of mine remembers playing on one of the town beaches as a child and having an irascible old man yell at her to be quiet; it was Norman Mailer. He is deceased, but poet Mary Oliver and writers Michael Cunningham and Sebastian Junger still call Provincetown home.

It's said that visual artists come to Provincetown for the light; writers come here, perhaps, for the echoes of these previous literary luminaries, and the town and nature that engaged them. Come and see for yourself. You may find you're inspired