

Academic Spotlight

Faculty Research, Performance and Exhibitions

Tennessee Williams Meets 'American Gothic' in World Premiere

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Tennessee Williams created some of the most original, iconic characters of modern drama—Blanche DuBois, Stanley Kowalski, Big Daddy, Amanda Wingfield—larger-than-life people caught in tangled narratives.



What many Williams fans may not know is that the playwright drew deep inspiration from other iconic works of art and music, which helped him develop the building blocks for his own works.

One of the earliest of these is the classic Grant Wood painting, *American Gothic*. While in his college years in the 1930s, Williams wrote a short one-act based on Wood's famous portrait of the stony-faced farm couple.

Bowdoin Professor of Theater [Davis Robinson](#) and his Beau Jest theater company are staging a world premiere of this one-act, September 23-26, 2010 as part of the [Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival](#) in Provincetown, Mass.

"*American Gothic* is an interesting and unknown piece that demonstrates some of the imagery, language and ideas that captivated a young Tennessee in the 1930s," says Robinson. "He's getting his legs on how to write character, develop a conflict and that sense of

Beau Jest members Lisa Tucker and Bowdoin Professor Davis Robinson channel Grant Wood's characters in *American Gothic*.

poetry that would flourish later one."

In an icon-meets-icon paradigm, Williams re-imagines the farmers as parents who get a surprise visit from their gangster son, who shows up to hide out with his new bride—a la Bonnie and Clyde.

"There's a confrontation and the mother throws him out," says Davis. "Williams liked gangster movies so it has this dry film noir quality to it. It's also a bit humorous. So you are left wondering: Is this a sad American tragedy coming out of the Depression or are you making fun of the image of American pioneers, as Wood himself has sometimes been accused?"

Boston-based [Beau Jest](#) is known for inventive staging and an intensely physical interpretation of new and classic works. Last year, the company did a [world premiere of Tennessee Williams' *The Remarkable Rooming House of Madame LeMonde*](#), another of Williams' many unperformed one-acts.

To create the feeling of Wood's painting, the company is staging *American Gothic* on a real-life front porch in Provincetown. Other Grant Wood canvases will be featured throughout the play—appearing in windows, doorways, and behind the action.

"We liked the idea of using the paintings as a reminder of Grant Wood and his influence in language and line," says Robinson. "The theme to this year's Williams Festival is "Under The Influence."

Among those in the play's cast is recent Bowdoin graduates Kathleen Lewis '10 and Robin Smith '05, Nick Ronan and Lisa Tucker.