“You Can’t Retire From Being An Artist”

Glenn Loney

It is understandably easier to assess an artist’s life-work when he’s no longer around to confound any ringing, resounding judgments. There is always the danger—for the critic, not the artist—that in his advancing seniority the artist may suddenly surprise with an astoundingly insightful work which bears little relation to what came before, or which proves to be the absolute capstone of his literary monument. The latter was certainly the case with Eugene O’Neill’s Long Day’s Journey Into Night. And, although Henrik Ibsen’s last play remains unsatisfactory as a stage-work for some, When We Dead Awaken must surely be viewed, if not as a capstone, at least as a final comment on the significance of an artist’s life—possibly for Ibsen a metaphoric memorial.

Among artists, authors are frequently more fortunate than Julius Caesar, for whom Marc Antony cryptically wished that the good might be interred with his bones. With publishing costs what they are today, it’s not likely that a writer or playwright’s worst efforts will long outlive him. So let it be with Tennessee Williams, now his time has come to face that great Critic in the sky. Up to the end, however, Williams continued to write, even though many critics believed—and often reminded their readers—that his best work was far behind him. Not only did Williams pursue his elusive, once generous muse, but he also granted interviews notable for their charm, thoughtfulness, and honesty. When he was a guest-speaker at some assemblage of theatre folk or drama editors, his sense of survival, tempered by a benevolent humanity, was readily apparent.

Some Williams-watchers would have been happier with him if he’d settled into an august posture as America’s oldest-living Great Dramatic Poet, giving gracious audiences, awarding playwriting prizes to young hopefuls, delighting the denizens of major universities with spritely sallies at seminars, and generally enjoying the role of Grand Old Man of American Letters, without feeling the need to write yet another play, which the fervent admirers of The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire would be compelled to condemn as only another evidence of his lost or waning talents.
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

THE CATASTROPHE OF SUCCESS
Most of Williams's plays of the 1960s and 1970s are an embarrassment to those who lauded his genius in the 1940s and 1950s. Whether they are quite as bad as some of New York's daily and weekly drama critics judged them to be when they premiered is another question, a question which cannot be answered by any absolute standards. In fact, although some efforts such as *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* (1969) and *Out Cry* (1973) were generally excoriated—despite Williams's own apparent affection for them—a study of the full range of reviews of each new Williams opus will show that critical opinion is seldom unanimously negative. Some critics even seemed to espy signs of fresh inspiration, new techniques, or an unaccustomed personal honesty.

Of all the practicing drama critics, *New York* 's John Simon best knows how to damn with the faintest of praise, as he did the 1980 premiere of *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*: "... Williams has finally written a play that, unlike its eight or ten predecessors, is not embarrassing. Neither, however, is it good."¹ⁱ For all those critics who continued to use *Menagerie* and *Streetcar* as their yardsticks for measuring Williams's later creations, it was to be expected that his more recent efforts would disappoint, whatever their merits. It did Williams no good at all to protest to critics, or anyone who would listen—as he did occasionally—that he was not trying to repeat those impressive artistic and commercial successes, that his writing had taken a new direction, that he had been developing a new kind of dramaturgy.

What was often perceived, instead, was not a new direction but a sad deterioration in Williams's former skill in imagining affecting characters, in evoking arresting environments, and in invoking potentially explosive situations. Always excused, even at the peak of his powers, for what some took to be a weakness in plotting—pardoned by his poetic gift in developing memorable fictional human-beings—Williams found his imagined innovations in dramatic structure in the 1960s and 1970s being viewed by the more acerbic critics as the evaporation of plot, the disappearance of structure.

And yet there were plays in these difficult decades which did find admirers. *Small Craft Warnings* (1972) was warmly received—though as a minor effort of a formerly great playwright—by reviewers and audiences. *Creve Coeur*, whose full title is *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* (1978), produced at Spoleto/Charleston and in New York, while not universally hailed, drew an appreciative response from Mel Gussow, of the *New York Times*, who said of it: "... a step forward from the apocalyptic metaphors of 'Out Cry' and 'The Red Devil Battery Sign' into a world that is tender, poignant, and measurably human. To a certain degree, it is also a return, or at least a look back—the mellowness of age linked to the impetuosity and the innocence of youth. As the title indicates, this a play about heartbreak. . . ."²

It had been suggested, not long after the success of *Streetcar*, by some critics of a psycho-historical or *National Enquirer* inclination, that as a
writer Tennessee Williams was clearly drawing on the details of his own family life and other intense personal experiences. While it was generally agreed that his unique poetic, dramatic genius lay in his remarkable ability to transmute the painful realities of the oppressive, banal routines of daily life into works of art for the theatre, the more cynical of the critics felt his transmutations were entirely too artful for full belief. Blanche DuBois, it was suggested, was really a homosexual in drag, though the charge was more guardedly phrased. The implication was that the sorrows and longings of Blanche, as well as those of Alma Winemiller, in *Summer and Smoke* (1948), weren't really the genuine emotions of honestly imagined women, but rather the passions and agonies of inversion.

If it were so—a dubious premise, considering a writer's myriad sources and uses of human experience—it were perhaps a grievous fault. If it were so, Tennessee Williams certainly did not continue to disguise homophile frustrations with skirts in his more recent plays. In 1981, with *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*—not in the least cloudily, but clearly autobiographical—the mature playwright showed his audiences the young playwright—though not named Tennessee or even Tom—in 1940, on the beach in Provincetown, preparing a play for production, harrassed by his producers, and depending on the casual kindness of male strangers for brief release. (*Battle of Angels* [1940], premiered by the Theatre Guild in Boston but not presented in New York, is surely the play in question.)

Whatever Williams's more negative critics have said about his recent work, they could not with justice call this a play lacking in honesty or even in humor. It even had an interesting self-awareness, the perception of the mature playwright, which the novice artist could hardly have possessed. Unfortunately for Williams, at any given moment, he had seldom seemed to have as clear a sense of himself as a man, as a playwright, or as a judge of his works and achievements, as have his voluble critics. Perhaps that's as it should be: critics exist to judge the merits of artists' creations and of their gifts and skills. But it may be a bit much that some presume to understand Williams as a man better than he understood himself. In his many acts of creation, in his writing of plays, both short and long, in his writing of poems, novellas, and memoirs, he was always interpreting himself and the world he knew—or imagined—trying to understand, trying to communicate, trying to help others to understand what may at last be beyond rational comprehension.

Nonetheless, especially in the 1960s, when Williams was putting himself through a Harrowing of Hell with drink and drugs, it was a painful spectacle for those who regarded *Menagerie* and *Streetcar* as authentic modern classics to see Williams bringing forth yet another effortful and often grotesque drama in New York, proclaiming each as very close to his heart, or the best he'd done to date. To those who recognized the unquestioned qualities of *Menagerie* and *Streetcar*, his seeming preference for the plays
at hand proved perverse and baffling, lacking in judgment or perspective.

But how can a playwright have any perspective about an untried play he's just written, hoping it will find its voice in a sensitive production, and be effectively, creatively analyzed by intelligent, caring critics, and valued by absorbed, engaged audiences? If every time he takes up a pen or sits down at a typewriter, he is confronted either with memories of the magic of earlier resounding successes or, worse, visible proofs in the forms of plaques, citations, scrolls, and Tonys, those legendary successes will intimidate him.

Tennessee Williams wrote and spoke of the "catastrophe of success." In his curious case, it proved a double-barrelled catastrophe to him, both as a person and as a playwright of unusual gifts. After the privations, repressions, disappointments, obsessions—and occasional joys—of his childhood and youth, which have been amply documented, not least graphically by Williams himself in Memoirs (1975), his initial efforts as a young man at both playwriting and survival seem to have been daunting indeed. Then, thanks to the interest and support of Texas' dynamic director, Margo Jones, and of the Theatre Guild's distinguished play-reader, John Gassner, Williams's fortunes began to change. With the unexpected success of The Glass Menagerie (1944/45), Williams found himself quite suddenly a celebrity, acknowledged as an exciting new talent in an American theatre sadly in want of new blood, new ideas, new images. The even greater success and acclaim which greeted A Streetcar Named Desire (1947) seemed to put the seal on Williams's poetic, dramatic genius.

In Paris, there would be a most bizarre, sensational production by Jean Cocteau—Le Tramway Nomme Desir—astonishing even to Williams, by now somewhat accustomed to the more bizarre aspects of life. With money, fame, and adulation, he would become even more so, as both the balanced and the bizarre flocked to admire and associate. In West Germany, with its many state and city subsidized theatres, this remarkable play would be enormously popular, as Endstation Sehnsucht.

The phenomenal acceptance of Streetcar, so soon after the success of Menagerie, sealed not only the certification of Williams's genius—but also his fate. From that time forward, he would, at least for the critics, always have to match or exceed the achievement of Streetcar—even if in quite a different vein, which already, in the light of his early short plays, seemed unlikely. Although Williams on occasion insisted on the merits of more recent plays such as Out Cry—without so much as a verbal reference or comparison to Menagerie or Streetcar, as though he wished to forget their existence—as his best work, thus far no serious critic has supported his views.

The Gentleman Caller, Williams's earlier version of The Glass Menagerie,
may not have been good enough to be an MGM film, as Williams hoped it would, but once Eddie Dowling, Laurette Taylor, Julie Haydon, and Anthony Ross had brought this fragile tale to vibrant life on stage in Chicago, the playwright had unwittingly set himself an artistic challenge he was to meet with brilliance only once thereafter: in Streetcar. So one aspect of the Catastrophe of Success for Williams was constantly trying to match his previous best.

Had Williams—not to mention Broadway producers—been content to rest on the laurels of Menagerie and Streetcar, never writing another drama and living out his life as a Literary Sacred Cow at endless chicken-a-la-king luncheons, his reputation would have remained secure. With those two plays alone he had secured it, at least for his immediate age. But, like his contemporary Arthur Miller, with two impressive modern classics, The Death of a Salesman and The Crucible, to his credit, he could not abandon the craft, the calling, the obsession of playwriting, even if critics and audiences found a gradual but distinct diminution in his inspiration, his imagination, his structure, and his use of language.

As Williams was also to say, surveying the Catastrophe of Success: “You can’t retire from being an artist.” There have been playwrights who have burst on the scene with an amazing play, apparently the only drama they had it in them to write. There have been others who have begun slowly, learning their craft, feeling their way, until they achieved mastery—leaving behind them a respectable collection of competent, even durable dramas. Because they were primarily craftsmen, there was seldom any major falling-off toward the ends of their careers. Native wit, a good sense of theatre, and solid formulas sufficed.

Thus far in twentieth-century American drama, only Eugene O’Neill has a really impressive record—despite his shortcomings, especially in dialogue—in the wide variety of styles, symbols, and stories with which he experimented, leaving behind a large body of often curious, challenging dramas. Neither Williams nor Miller, often cited as the other two major successful, serious American playwrights of this century, have approached O’Neill in terms of experimentation with themes and forms.

And, despite what Williams saw as new directions in his playwriting, some of them induced by his dependence on alcohol and on other stimulants and depressants in the desperate 1960s, real novelty or innovation in the later works is hard to find. Camino Real, after all, was produced in 1953, the visualization of an earlier fantasy and about as daringly innovative as Williams’s work was ever to be—even if of questionable theatrical viability. Gore Vidal, a longtime Williams intimate and himself a playwright of real but uneven and generally unexplored talent, has perceived what Williams, understandably, could not. Vidal, quoted by critic John Simon in his attack on Creve Coeur, has said that Williams “... is the sort of writer who does
not develop; he simply continues." Simon added Vidal's observation that, in his opinion, not a new thought nor a new feeling had got through to Williams in 28 years.

In the early years of Williams's success and celebrity, it was amusing to find some of the details and the imagery, as well as the character crochets of such memorable stage ladies as Amanda and Blanche, in other Williams plays, especially shorter ones, and in his fiction. Naked lightbulbs, it seemed, were always best disguised with the artificial prettiness and romance of Japanese lanterns. And there were other repeated notes which evoked echoes. This had a certain charm to it, but it did arouse suspicions that Tennessee Williams might be a powerful playwright of limited means. That certain images, certain kinds of characters, certain situations, certain surroundings, certain peculiarly Southern patterns of diction were the things Williams knew and loved/hated best. That they were to be his stock-in-trade, to be endlessly recycled and rehashed. When that is the case with any writer, diminishing returns set in rather quickly, unless he very carefully ration the fictions he unleashes on the world.

With the notable exceptions of Camino Real—a difficult, metaphorically parable, peopled by such Romantics as Marguerite Gauthier, Casanova, Byron, Don Quixote, and Kilroy—and Clothes for a Summer Hotel—centering on the tragedy of Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald, with Mrs. Patrick Campbell for stage dressing—Williams seldom plundered either history or other people's plays and fictions. He was content to plunder his own treasure chest of fond memories and Southern Gothic Grotesques. Not for Williams a Royal Hunt of the Sun, an Amadeus, a Sunrise at Campobello, a Marat/Sade, a Night Must Fall, a Winterset, a Great God Brown, or even a Private Lives. Unwilling or unable to tackle an historical theme, apparently uninterested in writing superficial social comedy, unsuccessful in dealing with the larger economic implications of international industrial power—glancingly noted in The Red Devil Battery Sign (1975)—Williams seemed most secure with his old familiar faces and materials.

It would be tempting to explain Tennessee Williams's impressive achievements as a playwright, as well as his uneven output, in terms of some kind of inspiration from an Emersonian Oversoul, or the dynamics of shamanism, well and ill-used. There is perhaps a much simpler explanation, though it is never entirely satisfactory: when one is writing out of intense, obsessive personal experience and detailed observation of life immediately around one, it's just possible that such raw materials will provide the substance, the inspiration for only one or two works of real power. From his voluminous outpourings, whether the materials were recycled or not, it's obvious that Tennessee Williams certainly had more than "one play in him." But what might have happened, had he not nearly succumbed to the buckshot in the other barrel of that double-barrelled Catastrophe of Success?
For it was not only the forbidding challenge of his own success that Williams had to face each time he set out to write a new play, after *Menagerie* and *Streetcar*, but also the seductive attractions of celebrity; new-found friends—eager to lionize the young writer, royalties and advances to finance intriguing travels to fascinating places, flatterers full of praise even when not merited, personal appearances and interviews, parties and food and drinks—and, eventually, drugs as well. And in the midst of all this—a rather rapid change from Williams’s existence as a novice playwright and expert chicken-plucker, or even as a frustrated screenwriter—there was the persona of the playwright, shy, hurt, scared, and lonely, but needing some loneliness and privacy to go on writing, creating, meeting his own high challenge. It’s sad, unfortunate, that it happened, but much of the decade of the 1960s was a lost period for Williams, who called it his “Stoned Age.” It culminated in forcible hospitalization, judged the wisest solution to a worsening problem by Williams’s younger brother Dakin. Whatever the rights or wrongs of that decision, it eventually brought Williams very much to his senses and gave him a different kind of challenge: to regain control of himself as a person and a writer, which he set about doing to the relief of his admirers.

So much has been said about the essentials of Williams’s dramatic fictions that the terms are virtual clichés now. Richard F. Leavitt, in his picture-book, *The World of Tennessee Williams*, titles a major section—dealing with the successes of the 1940s and 1950s—simply “Dramatist of Lost Souls.” Williams’s concern with the past, which infects so many of his plays and characters, is not at all a pleasurable nostalgia for lovely, wonderful things now gone. Nor is it entirely, or even usually, a tragic sense of loss, a loss not forgiven nor forgotten, because most of Williams’s characters—unlike the pathetic Blanche—are finally, somehow, survivors.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, for instance, Amanda’s lost youth remains to her a bittersweet source of pleasure, however much it may irritate her son Tom, faced with some rather unpleasant realities, with only the momentary fantasy of the movies into which to escape, while his lamed sister, Laura, projects herself into an imaginary world of glass animals. Amanda’s memories, moreover, provide by design some wryly comic moments for the play’s spectators. The characters are losers—but interesting, unique, almost poetic losers. Usually, the plays’ environments are shabby and mean, sometimes almost comically so, strong contrasts to memories of lost elegance and social status—though it’s by no means certain that the memories relate to any past reality, possibly representing the embroidery of wishful thinking or imperfect recall.

Early in Williams’s career, some major critics saluted his gift for creating such strong, riveting characters as Amanda, Stanley, and Blanche, praising as well what they chose to call his poetic gifts—not that Williams was writing in verse, but that his vision, his imagination, his language were
those of a poet, in Aristotle's classic definition. These talents, these playwriting strengths, it was suggested, more than made up for Williams's perceived weakness in structure, or simple lack of interest in plotting. The Glass Menagerie was seen by some as an entirely charming, captivating, affecting character study, amiably ambling from here to there, with nothing of any import really happening at all.

Now, after hundreds, even thousands of productions and performances, after hordes of students have explored the text line-by-line with their teachers, after countless theatre buffs have read and re-read the play, it's apparent that what Williams modestly offered as a "Memory Play" is indeed very strongly, but subtly, plotted.

There are critics who can see in A Streetcar Named Desire and Arthur Miller's The Death of a Salesman America's two major modern tragedies. Miller has helped this idea along with his essay on "Tragedy and the Common Man." If Blanche and Willy's sufferings, experiences, and mistakes had made clear to them where they went wrong in their perceptions of how to survive—and even triumph—then they would truly have achieved a tragic wisdom, and possibly even come to terms with the unpleasant realities of their worlds, however late in time. But Willy already has been seeking the escape of suicide, and at the end of both plays, the protagonists never really face the consequences of their longings and actions but instead escape into madness. Willy's is soon followed by suicide; Blanche's, by institutionalization. In both of these plays, then, there is not finally the substance of tragedy, especially because the protagonists, no matter how they initiate action or how strongly they react, are seen basically as victims of society, of values—false values—they did not understand. They are truly deserving of pity; they are indeed pathetic people. Perhaps both Death and Streetcar should be called, not tragedies, but Patheties.

Menagerie and Streetcar, early and major Williams plays—arguably the two most major—introduce basic themes, characters, and environments which recur in his work, although much later they seem almost reductionist. They were followed by a number of plays of real merit, though not so strikingly original after critics and audiences became more familiar with the world of Tennessee Williams—which it often seemed was fortunately not their world. Summer and Smoke premiered in 1948, presenting an interesting heroine, Alma Winemiller, with echoes of Blanche DuBois in her later small-town promiscuity, following youthful prudery which partly had lost her the handsome young doctor she secretly adored. Later, in 1976, it spoke even more forcefully in Williams's revision, The Eccentricities of a Nightingale, a needlessly obscure title. Once again, however, the effect of the drama was pathos. In 1950, Williams came forth with another vital, stageworthy play. This was The Rose Tattoo. The story is at least as old as Boccaccio, but Williams managed to make it earthy, fresh, comical, and vital, when the widowed heroine, Rosa, finds herself bombarded with love tokens and pro-
posals from a clumsy clown of a man.

As elemental, believable, and entertaining as Rose Tattoo was, its successor, Camino Real, in 1953, was none of those things, unfortunately. Williams had traveled the real Camino Real, the California Mission Trail. But there was very little that seemed real on this road to nowhere. It was only too obvious that Williams was trying to say something ambiguously profound, but his borrowed characters—from the worlds of Romance, Satire, and Folklore—seemed totally confused, trapped in an Hispanic village-square, from which most seemed unable ever to escape, and trapped in their own illusions, attitudes, and habits as well. That was as nothing to the confusion of audiences.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, in 1955, caused a lot of excitement among audiences, with Burl Ives as Big Daddy, a larger-than-life Southern patriarch, about to die. Whatever the attractions for audiences in secret scandals and in impressive performances by admired actors, the play demonstrated—and continues to do so—its own strong vitality and craftsmanlike structure.

The revision of Battle of Angels, as Orpheus Descending, in 1957, ran slightly more than eight weeks on Broadway and did not fare well elsewhere either, even abroad, though Richard Leavitt has noted its seven-year tenure in the repertoire of a theatre in the Soviet Union. Leavitt also says: “This play is a key work to understanding Tennessee Williams. The poets of the world destroyed by the furies is a conflict basic to his imagination. Orpheus Descending is a protest against the cruelty of human beings and against a society that destroys its non-conformists.” With Suddenly Last Summer, in 1958, the destruction of Williams’s promiscuous poet, Sebastian, had occurred before the dramatic action unfolded, but it had left such an impression of vivid horror on his young wife that his mother decided on lobotomy to quell her outbursts—harking back to Williams’s own anguish when his beloved sister Rose was similarly pacified.

In 1959, in Miami, in Period of Adjustment, Williams feebly essayed a wry comedy on the difficulties of some young marrieds. That same year, however, his Sweet Bird of Youth achieved popular and critical success, partly thanks to forceful and flamboyant performances by Geraldine Page as a faded Hollywood star, fleeing the supposed failure of her comeback attempt and Paul Newman as her paid stud, who has brought her back to the small southern town where his ruined former fiancee and his doom await him.

The Night of the Iguana was memorable on Broadway for the presence of Bette Davis in the role of Maxine, proprietor of a tourist hotel of dubious virtues south of the border. The hotel was not the only thing with dubious virtues in this 1961 success. At the core of the play was a sense of frenzied desperation, like that of a frantic iguana, tied up and waiting for its violent
death.

At least Williams had been using his royalties for recreative travel, broadening his horizons, finding new locales for dramas, new desperations, new kinds of grotesques. But at the heart, there seemed to be no astounding new insights into the presumed desperation of the human condition. If anything, Williams began to focus, more and more, upon grotesques for their own sakes, for shock value, for raucous and painful comedy. *The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore*, set on the “Divina” Costeria of Italy, avoided the lower depths environments so often favored by Williams, but its fictions and portents were largely symbolic.

This was perceived as the beginning of a palpable decline in Williams’s powers of imagination and his skills as a craftsman, even by those who were not aware of his extended personal crisis—artistic and emotional—in the 1960s. In 1966, Williams saw a bill of two of his one-acts come to curious life on Broadway as *Slapstick Tragedy*. It was not well received.

In 1967, *The Two-Character Play* was shown in London at the Hampstead Theatre Club. By 1970, Williams had spent a decade on the play, rewriting it seven or eight times. He had tried to get a great British actress to agree to play Clare, the sister, in the play, without success. Possibly Williams had been so impressed with the performances of Page and Newman in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, that he thought similar magic could be worked on what had become *Out Cry*. It was a strange tale, with a play-within-a-play, of a brother and sister, abandoned, trapped in an empty theatre in a dangerous, hostile city, where they go on acting their play. For those who knew of Williams’s long-standing claustrophobia, hardly allayed by his forcible confinement in the 1960s, and of his enduring deep affection for his unfortunate sister Rose, it was possible to see some external influences from the real world in this hermetic drama. One could even intuit why Williams felt so strongly about the worth, the significance of this play.

Despite disappointments in productions and critical and audience responses, despite his own problems of physical and mental health, Williams continued to try to write, conscious then—if of little else sometimes—that “You can’t retire from being an artist.” 1968 saw production of *The Seven Descents of Myrtle*, a grotesque fable of the Southland, grotesquely realized on Broadway. In 1969, the effort was titled *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*, featuring Anne Meacham as the sexually voracious spider-lady-wife of a faltering famous artist, whom she deftly manages to destroy. It was unbearably talky in performance and remains so in reading, its most distinguishing stylistic aspect being Williams's penchant for not letting his characters finish their sentences before the next speech begins.

Nobody liked it much, but people sitting around in bars and talking about their problems was to prove fairly successful the next time Williams tried it;
this was his new direction. *Small Craft Warnings* opened off-Broadway in 1972, in the East Village at the Truck and Warehouse Theatre, where Williams on occasion appeared onstage as Doc or post-performance as a playwright willing to discuss the work with audiences. After repeated Broadway disappointments, Williams had announced that henceforth he'd take his new plays to the off-Broadway arena, which had already shown its ability to give some of his dramas more sensitive treatment in revivals than they'd initially received in midtown playhouses. Later, savaged off-Broadway as well by critics, he threatened to abandon the New York theatre altogether.

Some wits took Williams's title *Small Craft Warnings* to be a pun: not only nautical, but also a *caveat* to audiences that they shouldn't expect much in the way of playwriting techniques. In the event, the play proved an evening of philosophising by a random assortment of bar habitues, something of which Eugene O'Neill was also fond. Walter Kerr, in a review titled "Talkers, Drinkers, and Losers," noted that the play was "... going to have to get along without a narrative of any sort, that we were simply eavesdropping on people—derelicts all—tonight and waiting to hear if we could catch a breath of what kept them living between bouts of candor and abuse." Fortunately for Williams, the play found audiences of people who apparently enjoyed the shock of recognition, having themselves spent many wasted hours talking in bars.

In 1975, Williams's *The Red Devil Battery Sign* was closed by producer David Merrick after an unsatisfactory Boston tryout before its planned New York premiere. Produced at Vienna's famed English Theatre, the drama excited admiration from German and Austrian critics, most of whom admitted they had considered Williams written out before seeing the play. The drama is oddly similar to *Out Cry*, in that the heroine, "Woman Downtown," is hiding out from the evil minions of an American corporation—up to no good in a nameless Latin land—taking shelter with a valiant but dying ex-bandleader, King del Rey.

*Vieux Carre*, in 1977, returned to New Orleans, but not to Stanley and Stella's block. Although it did feature familiar characters and situations, it did not enliven or illuminate them dramatically or humanly to any perceptible degree. The interesting attractions of *Creve Coeur* (1979) have already been noted; it is a wryly comic play of survivors which may not challenge *The Rose Tattoo* in invention or vitality, but it is a believable, playable script. The same cannot be said of *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, in 1980, which not only failed to evoke the tragic Fitzgeralds, but also failed to cohere as a drama or to inspire much interest in readers or spectators.

With *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, in 1981, shown first on New York's notorious Bowery at the Jean Cocteau Repertory Theatre, Williams seemed to have regained his perspective and his control as a dramatist.
Not a major work, it was nonetheless an honest and an interesting one, obviously based on his own experiences at the outset of his bittersweet association with Broadway and his near-catastrophic experience with the Bitch Goddess of Success.

One cannot with any confidence prophesy which, if any, of Williams's works will survive this era into the twenty-first century, approved and accepted as classics of the American theatre. It's tempting to think that at least Menagerie and Streetcar will survive, both for their affective power and for their theatricality—not to mention their value as poetic records of America in the Age of the Great Depression—Menagerie—and in the aftermath of World War II—Streetcar. But who can know what future generations will find interesting, or will even understand, about our times? The critic who tries to outguess the future is suffering from the Berlioz Syndrome. He knows how thunderingly wrong some noted critics of the past have been about artists such as Wagner, Berlioz, and Richard Strauss—to cite some musical instances—so, to cover himself in the eyes of posterity, he praises everything he encounters.

Tennessee Williams has generally been spared that kind of mindless approbation. On the other hand, he has occasionally been judged too harshly, when newer works were compared with Menagerie and Streetcar to their detriment. For Williams, however, thanks to his solid literary and theatrical achievements, as well as for his many prizes and awards, there is a kind of printed immortality in store for him. New Directions has faithfully published his collected works, volume by volume. They are now part of the archival record. The good has been preserved with the bad—and with the mediocre. And one day in the dim, distant future, who will say what is good and what is bad? What will future generations yet unborn think of this poet-dramatist's many plays, transmuting as they have his own life, observations, and perceptions into art distinctive to our period?

One thing is certain: despite the ongoing interest of both literary scholars and the merely curious in the details of Tennessee Williams's private life, while such information and documentation may suggest inspirations and influences on the various dramas, the data do not supplant the plays, nor make them more theatrically effective. The plays finally achieve their respective effects only as plays, not as surrogates for the life and experiences of Tennessee Williams.

Footnotes

1John Simon, "Damsels Inducing Distress," New York (7 April 1960), 82.


Glenn Loney recently edited two volumes of Twentieth Century Theatre. *His California Gold-Rush Plays will be published this summer by PAJ Publications.*

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