

Tennessee Williams Discussed by Directors

The Playhouse Creatures Theatre Company presented their 2nd Annual Tennessee Williams Festival with a wine reception, a reading of the Williams' one act play, *Kingdom of Earth*, introduced by Playhouse Creatures Artistic Director Joseph W. Rodriguez, followed by a panel discussion featuring accomplished directors known for successful interpretations of the dramatist's work.



Austin Pendleton, Emily Mann, Jodie Markell, Cosmin Chivu, Travis Chamberlain, Thomas Keith

The panel was moderated by Williams scholar Thomas Keith, Consulting Editor at New Directions, Williams' original and only publisher. He had asked each of the guests to focus their comments on one specific project, in relation to the topic of directing Williams' later, lesser-known works and, in one case, bringing a fresh approach to an early iconic play.

Jodie Markell is an OBIE-winning actress who also teaches at the Masters Film Program of the Columbia University School of the Arts. She spoke of her deep affection for Williams' writing, which dates to her adolescence, and how she was inspired to adapt an unproduced Williams' screenplay for her feature-film directing debut, *The Loss of a Teardrop Diamond*.

The New School's **Travis Chamberlain** directed the Boston and New York City premiers of *Green Eyes*, which earned a prestigious "2011 Best Theater of the Year" from The New Yorker. The 14-page play from the Viet Nam era is set in a hotel room, and features a combat soldier home on leave, and the newlywed wife who goads her resistant husband to recreate the violent rough sex that had erupted the night before. Chamberlain's site-specific production was staged for audiences of 14 people, in the

room of an actual trendy hotel, which was converted with various jungle elements, for this tense exploration of the graying lines between domestic violence and animal passion.

Cosmin Chivu is the Romanian-born theater artist who has directed productions in many nations, and is currently heading Pace University's B.A. Acting/Directing program. He spoke of the creative process required of him and others responsible for the recent Drama League-nominated revival of Williams' black comedy, *The Mutilated*, for which Thomas Keith was Creative Producer, and which included commissioning music to score the songs written by the playwright, as the original music had been lost to history.

Emily Mann has served for 24 seasons as Artistic Director of McCarter Theatre Center in Princeton, New Jersey. A playwright herself, she has directed a variety of works written by her late friend Tennessee Williams. Years ago, she acquired a unique fascination with *A Streetcar Named Desire*, after her in-depth discussions with the playwright about race, and how the unusual mingling of races in the patois community of the French Quarter may have influenced the goings on in the play. This ultimately surfaced decades later, when she directed the recent mixed-race production on Broadway, which was not a typical case of non-traditional casting, but rather based on the choice that Stella and Blanche were well-to-do Creoles, (the modern decedents from the mix of Louisiana's early French inhabitants and free peoples of color) and the dynamics that surface when Stella then married a black man.

Austin Pendleton has appeared in well over 100 productions for film, television, and the stage, teaches acting at HB Studio in NYC, and has directed works by Tennessee Williams on multiple occasions. He spoke about *Vieux Carre*, which he has staged three times, and particularly the version which closed the final season of the Pearl Theatre Company's residence at Theatre 80 St. Marks.

Drama and comedy written for the theater is as old as civilization itself, and at its heart has always been language that reveals fundamental aspects of what it means to be human and what it means to be inhuman. The greatest playwrights are poets whose words can reach across years and even centuries to present an artistic mirror that compels us humans to laugh (or weep) at ourselves, reaffirm our values, or reexamine the validity of our most cherished beliefs in what we hold to be sacred or profane. And Tennessee Williams is arguably the greatest playwright that America may ever produce. From the shortest stories to the grandest pageants, his wit and wisdom wove poetic tapestries featuring memorable characters and speaking directly to issues of class, race, sexuality, and social justice in ways that were daring for his time, but which remain just as relevant today. It is the universal aspect of his themes, usually presented in the specific environs of the American South during the middle of the twentieth century, that provide audiences so much treasure, as well as his ability to provide actors with language that appears to be rendered in our common speech, but is in fact poetry and how we only wish we spoke to one another.

Moderator Keith had asked for comments relating to issues faced when staging later Williams offerings or those known to have been "difficult." But down the line, the panel stressed that there was nothing wrong with Williams' later plays. Rather, they agreed, any real issues lay with critics and a public that wanted him to keep writing the traditional dramas from the early 50s, when he had evolved toward deeply personal works, expressionistic in style, and intimate in their nuanced structure and language,

which could not be adequately expressed in the cavernous Broadway houses where they were first staged, often coming off as melodramas.

Austin Pendleton supported this point of view when he said that *Vieux Carre*, which takes place in a claustrophobic 1930s boardinghouse, was initially produced in a large Broadway theater in 1977, with three stories of a building constructed for the set. It was a disaster that closed in a week. Whereas his production at Theater 80 St. Marks was staged before a much smaller house, with the actors right on top of the audience, and with only lightening and some furniture to suggest boardinghouse rooms, because, as he told the designer, he wanted the feeling that they were all in the same place.

Each of Pendleton's attempts to direct *Vieux Carre* proved enormously successful, where "the audience was compelled for two and a half hours." He quipped that there were some productions that were hits because of his directorial talents, "but *Vieux Carre* wasn't one of them... It is all right there in the text." It was a message echoed throughout the evening.

Cosmin Chivu's production of *The Mutilated* included a great deal of music, as intended by the playwright. But Chivu found he did not need to change a word of the script, he just had to create an environment that would successfully provide the energy and life of Jazz-age New Orleans, and find actors who could find the humanity in the poetry. And for the two central floozies of a certain age, the roles were filled by the venerable performance artist Penny Arcade, and John Waters actress Mink Stole, who each brought a vibrancy and comedic sensibility that proved similar to casting two veteran comic clowns in *Waiting for Godot*. Unlike the original production, this one received a glowing review in the New York Times. *The Mutilated* is considered one of his few comedies, but someone pointed out that there is a great deal of humor in the entire Tennessee Williams canon.

The panel nodded in earnest support when Keith replied, "If you do Tennessee Williams and no one is laughing, you have a problem with your production!"

Jodie Markell is a Southerner who has seen too many misguided revivals of Williams' plays staged by directors and actors who clearly had no understanding of the world and inhabitants that inspired them. And the others agreed that like the so-called problem plays of Shakespeare, the fault lay with those who failed to understand what was necessary to mount a successful production of any Tennessee Williams play, and not in the style or the poetry.

Travis Chamberlain remained in awe of how Tennessee Williams could achieve so much in the way of character, depth, tension and compelling drama in the 14 pages that make up *Green Eyes*. He said it would leave the audience shaking from the intensity, and bursting into discussion when they reached the hotel lobby. We got to see a bit of that same type of artistry earlier in the evening, during the reading of the one-act version of *Kingdom of Earth*.

Kingdom of Earth was originally published as a short story, in the February 1967 issue of *Esquire* magazine, before Williams transformed it into a one-act play, which was greatly changed and expanded into the full-length production that appeared on Broadway the following year, produced by David Merrick under the title *The Seven Descents of Myrtle*. Directed by Jose Quintero, it closed after 29 performances, but garnered Estelle Parsons a Tony Award nomination for her portrayal of the title character. The playwright returned to the original title thereafter.

The one-act version is a lean and tightly-woven confrontation between two survivors, Chicken, a hardscrabble delta farmer (read with suitable drive by Bobby Moreno) facing yet another killer flood, and Myrtle, a city gal with a checkered past (the winningly expressive Geneva Carr) who suddenly appears as the new wife of Lot, Chicken's consumptive half-brother who owns the place but promised to leave it to Chicken for doing all the hard labor required to keep it going.

Lot's brief lines were well read by Ted Ednie. Also appearing were Klahr Thorsen and Eric Doss as a neighbor couple fleeing the impending flood, and the stage directions were read by Jamahl Garrison-Lowe.

Having met her husband only two days earlier, Myrtle claims to have married on a whim after Lot "struck the maternal chord in her", in complete ignorance of the brothers' arrangement or the fact Lot had recently left a sanitarium in the final stages of tuberculosis.

Lot collapses in an upstairs bedroom and expires a short time later. In between his feeble cries from above, Myrtle and Chicken get to know each other a bit better over coffee spiked from a jug. She has made the best of a transient life, and reveals an unfulfilled need to be needed by a man for more than a one-night stand. He has striven to create and keep a little patch of the world, all on his own since an ex-girlfriend spread rumors years ago that his mother had "Nigger blood."

Chicken makes it clear he has no intention of losing his legal claim on the property to a sister-in-law. The only way Myrtle is going to find a helping hand up to the roof, where Chicken and his chickens expect to wait out the latest act of God, will be to tear up the marriage license, which she does, and make up the bed with clean sheets so she can prove her willingness to accommodate the new man in her life. This she also intends to do, when a sudden explosion declares the levy is down, the waters are coming, and Myrtle suddenly clings to Chicken "like a scared child to a parent, as the curtain completes its descent." As Williams wrote in an earlier "problematic play," which was also misunderstood by the critics, *When so many are lonely as seem to be lonely, it would be inexcusably selfish to be lonely alone.*

And like many gentile and not so gentile souls brought to life by the typewriter of Tennessee Williams, Myrtle and Chicken find that creature comforts are trumped by animal passions, and the kindness of strangers will never provide the solace and fulfillment so desired. It is only obtainable in the hearts, minds and desire of the most intimate of friends and lovers.

The following panel discussion referred to the reading of *Kingdom of Earth* multiple times. The evening went way over its allotted time, but no one seemed to mind. The question and answer period contained many interesting and entertaining anecdotes about Williams, primarily from Austin Pendleton and Emily Mann, who had working relationships with the dramatist and poet now considered by many to be America's most important playwright.

Unfortunately Austin had to leave before it ended. I had looked forward to reminding him of our conversations in the 1990s, when he was portraying Keats in a one-man show, at Synchronicity Space, where I was serving as Artistic Director for one of the resident theater companies, and my flatmate at that time was studying with Austin at HB Studio.

And as the panel discussion progressed I was reminded fondly of another celebration of Tennessee Williams that I witnessed in 2009, when he was inducted into the Poet's Corner of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. That evening was also led by Thomas Keith, and featured such luminous readers as Vanessa Redgrave, and Tandy Cronin, who read the cherished postcard that Tennessee had sent her mother from Europe, which helped dissuade the actress from dropping out of the original production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, by providing a succinct and enlightening revelation about the essence of Blanche's character.

And there too was Eli Wallach, who passed away Tuesday at the age of 98. One of my favorite actors, he will be forever connected to Williams, after having starred in *Baby Doll*, the 1956 film adaptation of *27 Wagons Full of Cotton*, and for creating the role of Kilroy in *Camino Real* three years earlier, a play that had such an impact upon my formative years, I directed it as my Masters thesis project, some five years after Williams passed away.