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**You Are Not the Playwright I Was Expecting:  
Tennessee Williams's Late Plays**by [Thomas Keith](#)

If you are not familiar with the later plays of Tennessee Williams and would like to be, then it is helpful to put aside some assumptions about the playwright, or throw them out entirely.

Except in snatches, snippets, and occasional arias, you will not find Williams's familiar language—the dialogue that, as Arthur Miller declared, "plant[ed] the flag of beauty on the shores of commercial theater." Forget it. Let it go and, for better or worse, take the dialogue as it comes.

Okay, *some* of it will still be beautiful. You'll find a few Southern stories, but even those are not your mother's Tennessee Williams. Certain elements of his aesthetic will be recognizable, but these works do not have the rhythms or tone of his most famous plays.

**No More Southern Belles**

Williams declared to the press in the early 1960s, "There will be no more Southern belles!" A decade later he told an interviewer, "I used to write symphonies; now I write chamber music, smaller plays."



Tennessee Williams in 1965.

You will recognize familiar themes: the plight of outsiders—the fugitive, the sensitive, the isolated, the artist; the nature of compassion and desire; the naked cruelty of life. The late plays maintain Williams's outlook on the brutality of the world, though some are overtly comic and occasionally even ridiculous.

Some characters speak in sparse, truncated sentences and are more emotionally contained than we are used to in Williams; others are broad or cartoonish. Likewise, these late plays do not all read effortlessly as literature, for the moment anyway—they read as theater; the plays work, when they do work, as theater, not literature.

People who reject all the late Williams plays—i.e., anything post-*The Night of the Iguana* (1961)—have usually not read most of the plays and have seen very few on stage. They may project their negative opinion of the man in his later years onto their assumptions about the plays. (If every late play must measure up to his greatest works, then there really is not any motivation to look into them. They *don't* measure up, they *can't*—and why would they?)

But if one looks at the consistency that runs through Williams's work from that of the unknown poet to the celebrated playwright, then the late work becomes a complex part of the Williams oeuvre. "Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: that truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation . . ." wrote Williams in what comes as close to his artistic manifesto as anything—his "Production Notes" for *The Glass Menagerie* (1944).

There is a lot of late work—at least 16 full-length and more than two-dozen one-acts and shorter plays, over 40 in all. New Directions, Williams's publisher since 1944, brought out about half of these plays while Williams was alive, and the rest have appeared (along with his letters, poems, essays, early plays, screenplays and stories) during the 28 years since.

So where does one begin? And where does one get to see them performed?

**He Just Kept Writing**

The fact is that many of the late plays, perhaps a majority, will fall to the wayside over time; the best of them will rise to the top and find their way into the Williams canon. However, they will first have to be read, considered, performed and, one hopes, understood. Public curiosity about all things Williams is too great to prevent it, no matter what baggage still clings to the playwright or his plays.

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It can be jaw-dropping to grasp fully how low Williams's reputation had fallen by the time of his death in 1983. The slide began in 1963, when the Broadway production of *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* altered the view that a Williams play was necessarily a commercial property.

*Milk Train* involves a dying woman who flies the flag of a monster at her private villa where she is visited by a witch, an angel of death, and two stage assistants (assistants that function, as Williams described them, "in a way that's between the Kabuki Theatre of Japan and the chorus of Greek theater"). The playwright also explained that the play had "been rightly described as an allegory and as a 'sophisticated fairy tale.'"

After the failed Broadway outings of *Milk Train* in 1963 and 1964, every new production of a Williams play was dogged, and often crippled, by the author's deteriorating physical and mental health, exacerbated by drug and alcohol addiction, a syndrome made worse by the pressure from critics, and the pressure he put on himself, to achieve another success.

It never happened. The reviews became atrocious, later pitying, until eventually the reviewers just stopped attending. In some quarters, Williams's death and subsequent silence were a relief. David Mamet wrote in a eulogy in *Rolling Stone*:

"When his life and view of life became less immediately accessible, our gratitude was changed to distant reverence for a man who we felt obliged—if we were to continue in our happy feelings toward him—to consider already dead.

"His continued being and the fact of his later work disturbed our illusion, and we were embarrassed as this process was hidden neither from ourselves nor from its subject, Tennessee. And we were piqued as he seemed neither to contest nor shun this attitude. He just kept writing."

Although Arthur Miller and Edward Albee experienced similar periods of rejection, neither encountered the contempt that Williams did. Each of them lived long enough to become elder statesmen of the American theater. Williams died at the nadir of his career, and the critical chill continued post-mortem. His plays from the 1960s and 1970s were mostly forgotten or avoided, and the unproduced material seemed to be solely the concern of scholars.

### **Breaking With Reality**

Purportedly written while the author was on speed, *The Slapstick Tragedy* opened on Broadway in 1966 and was taken as evidence by one critic that Williams "had broken completely with reality." The play is comprised of two fantastical one-acts, *The Mutilated* and *The Gnädiges Fräulein*, each a kind of existential vaudeville. (As it turns out, *The Gnädiges Fräulein* is now widely considered a brilliantly funny play that was ahead of its time.)

Of the Williams plays produced between 1968 and 1982, only *Kingdom of Earth* (1968, a.k.a. *The Seven Descents of Myrtle*), *Small Craft Warnings* (1972), *Vieux Carré* (1977), and the comedy *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* (1979) have been revived with some frequency. *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* (1969) is occasionally revived, yet still treated as an exotic delicacy for specialized tastes.

Although producer David Merrick closed *The Red Devil Battery Sign* during its out-of-town Boston tryout, thwarting its 1975 move to Broadway, the play fared better in London (as did *Small Craft Warnings* and *Vieux Carré*) and Vienna, where audiences and critics found much to admire, and Michael Wilson directed an ambitious revival starring Elizabeth Ashley at the WPA Theater in 1996.

Every few years, news of a Broadway revival of the complex and intense *The Two-Character Play* (1973, a.k.a. *Out Cry*) makes the trades, but a production has yet to materialize.

In Williams's final Broadway premiere, *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, the ghosts of F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda relive their mutual self-destruction at the asylum where she burned to death. The production, which starred Geraldine Page and was directed by José Quintero, closed less than a week after opening in 1980.

Though written in 1969, *Will Mr. Merrivether Return from Memphis?* received its premiere in 1980 at the Tennessee Williams Arts Center in Key West, Florida. The play involves, among other things, an Irish widow who holds séances, conjuring up the spirits of Arthur Rimbaud and Vincent Van Gogh, hags who weave the fate of the other characters with knitting needles and yarn, and most rare for a Williams play, a "happy ending."

Until 2011, there had been no major revival of *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* since it was originally staged at the Jean Cocteau Repertory in 1981. A bluntly autobiographical play that takes place in 1940, 1980, and various times in between, it presents a challenge in how to cast the main character of August, who appears both at ages 29 and 69. For the 2011 production at the Provincetown

Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, director Cosmin Chivu decided to split the difference by casting the perennially youthful Lou Liberatore in the role.

Originally staged in Vancouver in 1981, *The Notebook of Trigorin* (an adaptation of Chekhov's *The Seagull*) premiered in the U.S. in 1996 at the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park with Lynn Redgrave as Arkadina.

Gregory Mosher produced three incarnations of the gothic comedy *A House Not Meant to Stand*, culminating in the Goodman Theatre of Chicago's 1982 production; it has never been staged in New York City, though it was staged in 2011 at Los Angeles's Fountain Theatre, directed by Simon Lew.

### **I Was Convinced That Tennessee Williams Had Lost His Mind**

Perhaps the wildest play Williams wrote during this period is *Kirche, Küche, Kinder*, staged as a work in progress by Eve Adamson at Cocteau Rep in 1979. Infused with smatterings of pop art, performance art, pornography, sentimental ballads, vaudeville, and farce, the play generated mainly discomfort among audiences and critics. It has not yet been revived.

Even the most dedicated Williams aficionados can be taken aback by some of the late plays. "When I first read the 1982 play *The Remarkable Rooming-House of Mme. Le Monde*, I was convinced that Tennessee Williams had lost his mind—I mean, really lost his mind," Williams scholar Annette Saddik said in a recent essay. "I had always been a defender, even a champion, of Williams's late work, and I appreciated his experimentations with a more presentational, anti-realistic style, combined with an outrageous, often grotesque, sensibility. But this was too much."

Upon closer reading, Saddik realized that the play's excess, exaggeration, and violence do contribute to a true sense of the world Williams was trying to portray—in the attic of a London boarding house, a paraplegic must swing from dozens of hooks in the ceiling to reach food left for him by his sadistic landlady—and, yes, it is a world that some people will find repellent.

It is also a world that is inexorably funny. The original production of *Mme. Le Monde*, directed in 2009 by Davis Robinson at Boston's Beau Jest Moving Theatre and at Provincetown, was by turns disconcerting and hilarious. At the conclusion of a more recent production directed by Cosmin Chivu at La MaMa E.T.C. in New York, the audience cheered.

To make a qualitative comparison between *Mme. Le Monde*, completed in 1982, and a Williams masterpiece such as *Streetcar*, completed in 1947, does not really do justice to either. Though it may be worth recalling that after *Streetcar* opened in London in 1949, it was attacked in Parliament as "low and repugnant," and by the Public Morality Council as "salacious and pornographic." Williams envisioned that *Mme. Le Monde* would be performed as part of an evening that he accurately titled "Williams' *Guignol*," and also include two apocalyptic one-acts, *The Demolition Downtown* (1971) and *The Chalky White Substance* (1980).

"Picasso made line drawings and paper sculpture late in life, and no one demanded that he repeat *Guernica* or remain perennially in his Blue Period," Eve Adamson wrote in her introduction to *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*. "It is a sad comment on our American culture that to the end of his life we censured the most original poet of our theater for continuing to explore, whatever the cost or danger, the boundaries of his consciousness."

### **If I Wanna Write A Drag Queen, I'll Write A Drag Queen**

Interest in Williams's later works has been growing over the last decade, and when the plays are produced they are sometimes described in the publicity as "lost," "found," "discovered" or "unknown," when, in fact, that is rarely the case. Many were performed during Williams's lifetime, and would be better described as "shunned" or "sidestepped."

*The Municipal Abattoir* actually was a lost Williams gem, unknown except as a title listed in a 1966 New Directions memo for possible inclusion in the one-act play volume *Dragon Country* (1970). It turns out that Williams had given the play to composer Lee Hoiby, who gave it to director Michael Kahn for safekeeping.

Kahn staged this sharp political satire with his Shakespeare Theatre Company in 2004 as a part of an evening of one-acts, *Five by Tenn*, that also included the bleak, poignant two-person play from 1966, *I Can't Imagine Tomorrow*, premieres of two early titles (*These Are the Stairs You Got to Watch* from 1941 and *Summer at the Lake* from 1937), and the provocative *And Tell Sad Stories of the Deaths of Queens . . .* (1957/68).

Annoyed with the oft-repeated homophobic canard that his female heroines were actually men in drag, Williams exploded in a 1971 interview, "If I'm writing a female character, goddamnit, I'm gonna

write a female character, I'm not gonna write a drag queen! If I wanna write a drag queen, I'll write a drag queen, and I *have* written one, as a matter of fact, which *will* be produced someday. The setting is New Orleans and it's called *And Tell Sad Stories of the Deaths of Queens . . .*, and it's about a drag queen, and I think it's quite funny."

The play was indeed produced 33 years later, when scholars Nicholas Moschovakis and David Roessel found the text in the archives at UCLA and brought it to Kahn's attention. An exquisite chamber piece, *Tell Sad Stories* is the sagacious tale of a 30-year-old queen named Candy, trying to find a replacement for the man who "raised" him from age 18. Kahn moved the evening to the Manhattan Theatre Club in the fall of 2004, where it played to mixed reviews.

Many of Williams's later plays—including *Chalky White Substance*, *And Tell Sad Stories . . .*, *Kirche, Küche, Kinder*, *The Parade* (1962), *The Traveling Companion* (1981), *The Pronoun 'I'* (c. 1977), *Sunburst* (1980), and *Mme. Le Monde*—include gay relationships and deal with gay characters more candidly than in his previous work.

Along with eleven previously unpublished early one-acts, New Directions published *Abattoir* and *Tell Sad Stories* in a collection edited by Roessel and Moschovakis, *Mister Paradise and Other One-Act Plays*, in 2005. Several of those early plays have found their way into the Williams repertoire and are now regularly performed alongside one-acts from the well-known 1945 volume, *27 Wagons Full of Cotton and Other Plays*.

As part of his unique, 10-year Tennessee Williams Marathon at Hartford Stage Company, Michael Wilson directed *Milk Train* and *Creve Coeur*, and two evenings of one-acts in 2003 that included premieres of two late plays.

*The One Exception* (1983) deals with a female painter isolated after a mental breakdown who receives a visit from an old friend in search of money. In the *New York Times*, Bruce Weber observed that the play "betrays a terrible fear of loneliness and the cruel isolation of despair."

*Now the Cats with Jewelled Claws* (1981)—written as part of a trio Williams called "Three Plays for the Lyric Theatre" that includes *The Youthfully Departed* (c. 1979) and *A Cavalier for Milady* (c. 1979)—concerns two society woman and two gay bikers lunching at a Manhattan restaurant. Fragmented, funny, and sinister, it includes lyrics as well as stage direction for dialogue to be sung, though no music was written for it during Williams's lifetime.

### **A Williams Theater Festival**

In September 2006, the Tennessee Williams Provincetown Theater Festival was launched with the world premiere of *The Parade* (1962), directed by Jef Hall-Flavin and Eric Powell Holm. The brainchild of Festival Curator David Kaplan, the Provincetown Festival is dedicated to producing classic as well as lesser-known Williams, with a particular emphasis on the late and innovative work.

The festival has also premiered the one-acts *The Pronoun 'I'*, *Sunburst*, *Green Eyes* (1970), and, in conjunction with Boston's Beau Jest, the aforementioned *Mme. Le Monde*. In 2008, Kaplan himself directed the critically acclaimed first production of *The Day on Which a Man Dies* (1960) in Chicago before bringing it to Provincetown.

Two volumes of previously unpublished late plays were brought out by New Directions in 2008: Williams's last full-length play, *A House Not Meant to Stand*, with a Foreword by Gregory Mosher, and *The Traveling Companion and Other Plays*, edited by Annette Saddik, which contains many of the one-acts and shorter plays that premiered at the Provincetown Festival.

The only full-length late play by Williams that has yet to be published is *This Is (An Entertainment)*, produced at San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater in 1976. Williams was working on several scripts at the time of his death, the best known of which is the unfinished *In Masks Outrageous and Austere*.

Late Williams has been the focus of New York City's White Horse Theater Company. Under the direction of Cyndy Marion, it has produced revivals of *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*, *Small Craft Warnings*, and *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*. And in 2010 in Brooklyn, David Herskovitz's Target Margin Theater presented "The Unknown Williams Lab," a short festival of nine late one-acts. At the Pearl Theater in 2009, Austin Pendleton directed a moving production of Williams's memory play, *Vieux Carré*.

### **Centennial Williams**

A renewed focus on Williams's late work during 2011, his centennial year, showed that cracks are forming in the critical ice that had kept some of the late plays frozen for 28 years.

Elizabeth LeCompte's production of *Vieux Carré* was an energized staging using techniques from the Wooster Group's tool bag.

Michael Wilson brought his adaptation of *Milk Train* to Roundabout Theatre Company, starring Olympia Dukakis, and Moisés Kaufman adapted Williams's arresting short story/screenplay *One Arm* (1944/1967) into an acclaimed play at the New Group.

Some of the reviews that greeted Travis Chamberlain's snug, site-specific hotel-room production of *Green Eyes*, like so many reviews of late Williams, could have been written 40 years earlier, they were so full of the vintage fretting about the author's terrible condition when he wrote the play, and about its slightness next to, say, *Streetcar*.

However, while perfectly familiar with the history of Williams's late failures, John Lahr wrote in the *New Yorker*, "The play is gorgeous: a short, eloquent evening that feels complete, complex and entirely satisfying. His dialogue flows with uncanny surprise, catching in its resonance all the psychosexual tension in the alchemy of desire."

Other centennial productions included an Austin Pendleton-directed showcase of *Small Craft Warnings* and the London premieres of *I Never Get Dressed Till After Dark on Sundays* (1973) and *A Cavalier for Miady*, as well as successful London revivals of *The Two-Character Play* and *Kingdom of Earth*.

In 2011, *I Never Get Dressed* and *Cavalier* were both published for the first time in a collection of fifteen early and late one-acts, *The Magic Tower and Other One-Act Plays*.

In November of 2011, Jonathan Warman directed Mink Stole, Everett Quinton, Regina Bartkoff, Joseph Kecker, Max Steele, and Erin Markey in the New York premiere of *Now the Cats with Jewelled Claws*. This production began in Provincetown in September 2011.

The 2011 Provincetown festival featured David Gene Kirk's recent London production of *Two-Character Play* as well as revivals of *Green Eyes* directed by Hall-Flavin, *Sunburst* directed by Patrick Falco and *The Traveling Companion* directed by Kaplan. Reflecting the theme of "Double Exposure," two plays about Williams's affair with a Canadian dancer in Provincetown in 1940 were presented in tandem: The aforementioned 1962 one-act, *The Parade*, directed by Grant Kretchik, and its full-length cousin, *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, directed by Cosmin Chivu.

This is all evidence that more theater companies and directors are visiting, or revisiting, the late plays of Tennessee Williams. Whether they come to them with or without preconceived notions of what a Williams play should be, they have the interest and the energy to explore the texts and discover what they mean as theater today.

### Conclusion

In 1941, when he was 30 years old, Williams wrote *Mister Paradise*, a prescient one-act about an aging poet, Jonathan Jones, who writes under a nom de plume, Anthony Paradise, and lives in squalor, certain that his work will only be appreciated after his death. The following is his advice to a young woman who comes to him determined to revive his career and resurrect his reputation:

*"Keep the book, remember my name, and watch the obituary column. Someday you will see the name of Jonathan Jones. Then come back again and look up Mr. Anthony Paradise. That will be his time—when Jones is dead. Jones is a living contradiction of Paradise. Paradise won't have a chance to breathe till Jones has stopped breathing."*

Thomas Lanier Williams III stopped breathing on February 25, 1983, in a room at the Hotel Elysee in New York City. Twenty-nine years have passed. Tennessee Williams is flourishing. By all means, check out the inevitable revivals of *Streetcar*, *Ménagerie* and *Cat*, but also look out for more and more productions of those late plays you were not expecting.

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These works are all published by New Directions. See [Tennessee Williams](#).

### About Thomas Keith

Thomas Keith, a freelance editor in New York, has been involved in the preparation and editing of over twenty plays by Tennessee Williams for New Directions Publishing along with Williams's collected poetry, essays, three collections of one-acts, and he wrote the introduction for *A House Not Meant to Stand*. He has recently edited a collection of original essays by LGBT writers, *Love, Christopher Street: Reflections of New York City*, which will be published by Vantage Point Books in June of 2012. Keith is also an adjunct professor in the Performing Arts Department at Pace University.



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