Teatro do Mundo

Teatro e Violência

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"The World Becomes Darker to Me As I Pass Through It"

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Tennessee Williams was always alert to the new. His early plays of the 1930s were inspired in part by the Group Theater, whose insistence on connecting art to the concerns and crises of daily life during the Depression was a bracing challenge to the way American commercial theater did business. Echoes of Clifford Odets and Irwin Shaw can clearly be heard in *Honor the Living, Candles to the Sun, The Fugitive Kind*, and *Not About Nightengales*, as can the voices of the avant garde and often-censored D.H. Lawrence Eugene O'Neill. The social-conscience films being made by Warner Brothers-First National – the sort of movies that didn't afford the audience the escapism of musicals – also made left their mark on the young playwright, and he absorbed their hard-boiled sound, as well. These voices would recede as his own grew clearer in the great plays of the forties and fifties. In

the late fifties he heard the new voices of Beckett and Ionesco, followed Pinter and Albee (who had very clearly heard his), and in the sixties, the camp of Charles Ludlam. All of these found their way into his later work.

However, the greatest influence over the plays Williams wrote after 1963's *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* wasn't literary. The death of his partner Frank Merlo from cancer that same year precipitated the disasters of addiction and depression that lasted the rest of Williams's life, and set off the chain of events that culminated in his confinement in the psychiatric ward of Barnes Hospital in St. Louis in September, 1969. Most of the plays he wrote from then until his death in 1983 were attempts to express, to find a shape for, the pain, loss and terror of those years.

Merlo's love and the attention he gave to the details of daily life made it possible for Williams to devote so many hours of his day at his typewriter. With Merlo gone, Williams sank into a depression that he sought to alleviate with alcohol and drugs. Controlling his drinking was not a new problem for Williams, but following Merlo's death he added an increasingly complex regimen of pills, as well as injections of amphetamines and other

drugs provided by the notorious Max Jacobson, known to his clients and the gossip press as Dr. Feelgood, whose clientele ranged from Truman Capote to Mickey Mantle to John F. Kennedy. These substances may have provided the basic fuel necessary to get him to the typewriter every morning, but they couldn't alleviate the depression, which was compounded by the increasingly hostile reaction to his work. Finally, fearing for his elder brother's health and safety, Dakin Williams admitted him to Barnes, where he was confined until December. The enforced stay supplied many of the images and circumstances that filled the plays of his last fourteen years, and also led to distinct changes in his characters' inner lives and the worlds in which they existed.

Perhaps reflecting his own feelings of chaos, anger, and helplessness, the world of many of the post-Barnes plays grew increasingly chaotic and dangerous. The characters in these plays usually have fewer inner resources to draw on then their predecessors, who carried within themselves a desire for survival and the strength to fight for it.

For these earlier characters, survival on their own terms is all. The four people who populate *The Glass Menagerie* are all going

to survive. Tom will flee his home at great cost; his mother, Amanda, who has held the family together by the strength of her own hectoring will, will find a way to go on because there isn't another choice; her equally willful daughter, Laura, will cling to the fantasy world she's built around herself; Jim, the Gentleman Caller, will draw strength from his drive for knowledge, power, and money. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stella and Stanley Kowalski expel her intruding sister Blanche and will continue to make love and babies beneath their colored lights. Blanche is led away to the asylum, defeated less by the brutality of Stanley and the callousness of her sister than by the implacable power of her own conscience, which never lets her escape the memory of the night that her husband killed himself. It requires the guns, rope, and fire of the small-minded men of Two River County to extinguish the urge for life in Lady and Val in *Orpheus Descending*; Catherine Holly's desperate connection to the truth may be her only salvation in *Suddenly Last Summer*.

In these pre-Barnes plays, the strength of Williams's characters is their connection to strong inner lives and a will to live that's extinguishable only by death. This will finds expression not only through action but also through vigorous language that

unfolds in skeins of multi-thought, multi-clause sentences often expressed with an urgency that belies an apparent southern languor. Their speech, heightened by circumstance and inner necessity, expresses a full, deep range of feelings and desires.

This is how Val Xavier, the young musician, describes himself to Lady in *Orpheus Descending*, as a man who can never be branded:

You know they's a kind of bird that don't have legs so it can't light on nothing but has to stay all its life on its wings in the sky?

That's true. I seen one once, it had died and fallen to earth and it was light-blue colored and its body was tiny as your little finger...and so light on the palm of your hand it didn't weigh more than a feather, but its wings spread out this wide but they was transparent, the color of the sky and you could see through them. That's what they call protection coloring. Camouflage, they call it. You can't tell those birds from the sky and that's why the hawks don't catch them, don't see them up there in the high blue sky near the sun!…They fly so high in the gray weather the goddam hawks would get dizzy. But those little birds, they don't have no legs at all and they live their whole lives on the wing, and they sleep on the wind, that's how they sleep at night, they

just spread their wings and go to sleep on the wind like other birds fold their wings and go to sleep on a tree…"

The speech comes at the beginning of a high-stakes love affair in which he rekindles Lady's desire to live, and she provides him with shelter and tenderness. The play's trajectory follows two people reaching fiercely for life until they are murdered by the bigoted, uncomprehending men of Two River County.

Williams worked on this play, which emerged first in 1940 as *Battle of Angels*, throughout the forties and fifties, until its premiere in 1957. It was, he wrote, a play about the unanswered questions that people ask themselves, and the price they pay for living among those too fearful to ask or answer them.

A dozen years later, and four months before Williams was incarcerated in Barnes Hospital, *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* opened and closed on Broadway after 25 performances. In place of *Orpheus*'s aria-like speeches are simple declarative sentences and sentence fragments. Val Xavier himself is replaced by another artist, a middle-aged painter with only one name: Mark. Val existed easily with his music, and his guitar was a natural extension of his arm; his struggles were with the outside world. Mark is dying of the anxiety created by the unceasing demands

of his inner world. He tries to describe his condition to his disaffected wife Miriam: "I feel as if I were crossing the frontier of a country I have no permission to enter but I enter, this, this! I tell you, it *terrifies* me!" In *Orpheus* we meet Val and Lady at the beginning of something. Mark and Miriam are at the end, and there is no sympathy between them. They talk at each other with little comprehension. Where Val reached out to Lady, who was reborn in his love, Mark admits, "I've always felt that. After the work, so little is left of me. To give to another person." Miriam is untouched by his pain and fear. Before the play ends, he is dead, not at the hands of the cruel world, but of his own inner confusion and loss of confidence.

Shortly after his release from Barnes, Williams wrote the one-act "I Can't Imagine Tomorrow". Now, the characters are nameless. They're called simply One and Two. One, a woman, is dying a painful death; she can barely climb the stairs to her second floor bedroom. Two, a man, is in a deep depression; he can barely summon the strength to talk and is in danger of losing his job as a junior high school teacher. The sentence fragments of *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* have become more numerous and more fragmentary:

One: You can walk one street every day and feel secure on that street, and then one day it collapses under your feet and the sky goes black.

Two: – We have to –

One: We have to what?

Two: —try not to—

One: What?

Two: —think about that. It doesn't—

One: What?

Two: —help to—

One: What?

Two: —think about that, it's better to—

One: What?

Two: —to feel—

One: What?

Two: —protected, even if—

One: What?

Two: —the feeling can't be—

One: What?

Two: —trusted.

In these two plays which bracket Williams's stay in Barnes, the characters' inability to speak even short sentences suggests not merely a loss for words, but a numbness to feeling, ad a lack of desire even to speak, to make themselves heard: a situation utterly unknown to Williams's earlier characters.

In *Menagerie*, Tom's wish to escape the stifling confines of the St. Louis apartment is so great that he's willing to sacrifice the futures of his mother and sister. Carole Cutrere, the young woman brave enough to defy the men of Two River County in *Orpheus*, tells Val of the dead in Cyprus Hill Cemetery who chatter like birds, saying one word over and over: "'live,' they say, 'Live, live, live, live, live!'" Even in *Tokyo Bar*, while Mark is terrified to enter the new country of an unknown form of art, he enters, nonetheless, and pays for it with his life. In "Tomorrow", however, Two can't bear the thought of living without his friend, and One tells him repeatedly that she can't imagine tomorrow. Survival is no longer an affirmation; it's a punishment.

Shortly after his release from Barnes, Williams told a gathering at the London Poetry Festival that in the years between Merlo's death and his own enforced hospitalization, he had "elected the cool death". And indeed, many of the plays that followed his

three months in Barnes replaced a yearning for life with the growing presence of death. In the essay he read at the Festival, "What's Next on the Agenda, Mr. Williams?", he recalls saying to a doctor, "I'm not afraid of dying, I'm more afraid of *not* dying."

II

Just as the inner lives of the post-Barnes plays differ from their predecessors, so do the worlds they inhabit. What we see in *The Glass Menagerie* may be confined to the tiny apartment where the three Wingfields live on top of each other, but the outside world makes its presence felt. The play opens with Tom's evocation of a world on fire, from Guernica in Spain to violence in formerly peaceful cities of the Midwest. There are sharp descriptions of the Continental Shoemakers warehouse where Tom ekes out a living, with its celotex interior and fluorescent tubes, and of the bustling movie theater to which Tom escapes at night. His description of the Paradise Dance Hall across the alley, with its large glass sphere that, turning slowly, creates delicate rainbow colors, and Amanda's of a vanished Delta world of jonquils and gentleman callers, together create a world which works on, and provides a context for, the characters' desires and the actions they take to get them. It's a world beyond the apartment, beyond St. Louis, that the characters either yearn to discover, retreat from, or regard as a danger to be overcome.

The rich world of *Orpheus*, its terror and its small refuges of fantasy (Lady's confectionary and Vee Talbot's paintings), are evoked not only by vivid description but through its vivid, teeming characters, who range from the passionate Val and the repressed Lady, to the visionary Vee, the wild Carole, the deadly Jabe and his cohorts, and the mysterious Uncle Pleasant. Each is different and specific; taken together, they suggest a Two River County that is a cosmos unto itself. Similarly, the lush world of *Suddenly Last Summer* resides not only in its setting but in the small but specifically delineated cast of characters, all of whom have a life-or-death need for freedom, money, or reputation.

The imaginative energy that Williams invests in these worlds, and the significance he attaches to their specific physicality, derives from his own attachment to sensuality: to the look, feel, sound, and smell of things. So specific is the physical world of *The Glass Menagerie* that it requires almost two pages to describe the building in which the Wingfields live — "one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centers," — and the dark alleys that surround it. Before a single word of dialogue is

spoken, we've gained crucial information about the physical and emotional qualities if its world.

The page-long description of the set of *Orpheus* is similarly detailed though more concise — just over a page of specific imagery —with its dark walls streaked with moisture and cobwebs, "black skeleton of a dressmaker's dummy", ceiling fan draped in flypaper, and sinister-looking artificial palm tree on the landing of the stairs. It's a dark, claustrophobic world with only two hints of intimacy and touches of warmth and life: the offstage confectionary, "shadowy and poetic," and the alcove where Val will sleep, hidden by the "Oriental" tapestry with its "gold tree, with scarlet fruit and fantastic birds," that covers the entrance.

Mrs. Venable's garden in *Suddenly Last Summer* is perhaps the most specific world of all, conjuring both a physical and metaphorical world where every living thing contests a high-stakes game of eat-or-be-eaten. The colors of this jungle-garden are violent, especially since it is steaming with heat after rain, There are massive tree-flowers that suggest organs of a body torn out, still glistening with undried blood; there are harsh cries and sibilant

hissings and thrashing sounds in the garden as if it were inhabited by beasts, serpents and birds, all of a savage nature…

Compared to these, the worlds of most of the post-Barnes plays are radically attenuated. The physical world of *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* barely exists beyond a round table and "a bar of polished bamboo." The most striking elements as the play begins are two bright, tightly-focused pools of light surrounding Miriam and the Barman, illuminating and imprisoning them. The description of One's home in "I Can't Imagine Tomorrow," is slightly fuller. Williams calls for upholstery on the living room furniture and suggests that it be satin, perhaps pastel-colored, "light rose or turquoise." But to the extent that Williams describes it at all, the room is generic. He calls for only, "such pieces of furniture that are required by the action of the play," providing only the bare minimum of imagery needed to imagine this small world in which the characters again are enclosed in the lights from follow-spots. Where the detailed descriptions of the settings for *The Glass Menagerie*, *Orpheus Descending*, and *Suddenly Last Summer* are also metaphors for the multi-textured worlds in which they take place, the set descriptions in *Tokyo Bar* and "Tomorrow" are just that: descriptions of a place. If there's

a metaphor in these descriptions, it's for emptiness. They could take place in a bar in Milwaukee, in any living room anywhere. By early 1983, when he wrote what the scholar Annette Saddick has determined was his last complete play, "The One Exception," about a mentally fragile artist terrified of being confined in a mental institution, Williams described the world in a single sentence: "The front room of a private home which looks as if it's not ready for occupancy."

In an interview in 1961, he said that his long and "pseudo-literary" plays no longer interested to audiences; he felt ready to embark in new directions. By then, many of the post-war playwrights whom he admired were creating similarly empty worlds. Perhaps Williams was merely trying to keep up. After all, he was as interested in the new in 1961 as he'd been in the thirties. Still, when writers write authentically, they respond to the new in themselves as well as what's new in the air around him. If an increasingly desperate and barren landscape had not been growing inside Williams's imagination, would he have responded to similar exterior worlds?

Not all the worlds of the post-Barnes are as empty of specifics as "I Can't Imagine Tomorrow". The one-act "Confessional," and

its full-length version, *Small Craft Warnings*, have specific physical worlds that also function as metaphors. In those plays in which he looks back from the sixties and seventies to the thirties when he dreamed of fame and success, the world he imagines lies somewhere between the crowded, specific, metaphorical universes of *Menagerie, Orpheus,* and *Suddenly Last Summer* and the desolation of *Tokyo Bar*, "I Can't Imagine Tomorrow," and other later plays. The world of *Vieux Carre* conjures up the boarding house he lived in at 722 Toulouse in the French Quarter of New Orleans in 1939. The descriptions of each room are perfunctory and without much detail, like the empty rooms of a fading memory, but Williams populates them with a cast of characters both larger and more diverse than he had for several years: the tight-fisted, desperate landlady Mrs. Wire, the starving crones Miss Maude and Miss Carey, the lovers Jane and Tye, the dying poet Nightingale, the clarinetist with in love with long distances Skye, all wanting to live and all circling around Williams's memory of his younger self, The Writer. The unseen French Quarter itself is as much a presence here as it is in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, music from its bars and streets filling the transitions between scenes.

Perhaps the most interesting world in this context is the one he created for *The Two-Character Play*. This memory play-within-a-play, on which he worked for several years before and after Barnes, is set on the stage of an abandoned theater where the brother and sister actor-managers, Felice and Claire, deserted by their company, find themselves trapped. The set for their production, "The Two-Character Play," is the parlor of an old Victorian house in a town in the deep South called New Bethesda. Though he calls this set "incomplete," Williams describes it with some of the old specificity: there is an external garden, furnishings including an upright piano, and "various tokens of the vocation of the astrologer, who apparently gave 'readings' in this room"; he suggests the wallpaper be patterned with astrological symbols, as well.

Surrounding this set for the inner play is the one for the outer play, where Felice and Claire contend with the revolt of their company, the absence of an audience for their work, and each other's implacable natures. It's not quite an empty space, but it reflects the broken world of a failing imagination:

About the stage enclosing this incomplete interior are scattered unassembled pieces of scenery for other plays than the play-within-a-play….Perhaps this exterior setting is the more important of the two. It must not only suggest the disordered images of a mind approaching collapse but also, correspondingly, the phantasmagoria of the nightmarish world that all of us live in in the present, not just the subjective but the true world with all its dismaying shapes and shadows . . .

It's a world that represents both the terrifying external world in which Williams increasingly found himself, and the scarcely more comforting one of his imagination where, in the years just before and after Barnes, he strived to give that world a satisfying artistic shape and meaning. "The world becomes darker to me as I pass through it," he wrote in a program note. The dual set for *The Two Character Play* reflects that darkness, and what seemed to audiences and critics, and at times to Williams, an increasing inability to shed on it any light.

III

The post-Barnes plays do not fit any one model or type of style or genre and employ multiple kinds of worlds. There is much more variation of tone and convention in the post-Barnes plays than there are in the pre-Barnes ones — which, if hardly examples of typical American realism, didn't, for the most part, depart so radically from it as to be unrecognizable to his Broadway audience. It's as if his experiences in the hospital released something in him or removed something from him that gave him access to a wider range of worlds — of experiences — that he'd had before. Something in his experience in Barnes changed his way of seeing. "This is the Peaceable Kingdom", "Now the Cat With Jewelled Claws," "The Destruction Downtown," "A Cavalier for Milady," "The Pronoun 'I'" and many other of the late plays employ different styles and techniques, explore different manifestations of worlds interior and exterior beyond the halting, depressed, defeated characters of "I Can't Imagine Tomorrow".

That so much of the late work took the form of small-cast one-act plays suggests, perhaps, a retreat from what he saw as an

increasingly violent, dangerous world into the intimacy of chamber plays, populated with only a few characters. Even here, however, the violence of the world, no longer softened by lyrical language and the possibility of love, intrudes, all the more powerfully for operating in such confined quarters and in a single painful or absurd tone.

The world of *Orpheus*, deadly as it is, is softened by Lady's confectionary, and by the safe haven of the alcove where she and Val make love, separated from the rest of the store by its delicately decorated Oriental curtain. How different this is from the world of "The Remarkable Rooming-House of Mme. Le Monde," of 1982. This play, too, takes place in a room with an alcove. Like the alcove in *Orpheus*, it is separated from the larger space by a curtain. Unlike the Oriental one, however, this curtain is semi-transparent, and provides no privacy for the acts committed behind it, the daily rape of Mint by the landlady's son. The larger room is called the "rectangle with hooks". The hooks hang from the ceiling and perhaps the walls ("The whole attic is equipped with curved metal hooks," Williams writes) and provide the only means of locomotion for the room's resident, Mint, a "delicate little" man who has lost the use of his legs. He

is confined to this room without the ability to flee, as Williams was in Barnes. To get around the room, Mint must swing from hook to hook with his arms. The hooks, the alcove and the curtain are the sum total of the physical elements of the brutal world of this play.

The new directions in which Williams struck out just prior to and after Barnes weren't an entire break from his past, however. *Tokyo Hotel* takes as its starting point, as Allean Hale has pointed out, the Noh dramas he discovered in the fifties, the techniques of which he had begun adopting in "The Day on Which a Man Dies," and *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*. The flattened-out cartoon world of *Kirche, Küche*, *Kinder* has its roots not only in the Warner Brothers cartoons he saw at the movies in his youth (preceding the social-conscience Warner Brothers-First National films on the bill) but also in *Camino Real*, his earliest Broadway effort that departed so decisively from traditional realism that the audience rejected it after 60 performances.

When he was first admitted to Barnes, as Armando Nascimento Rosa shows in *Doctor Feelgood – A journey back to Belle Reve* (2012), Williams experienced hallucinations. People whose reality he was uncertain of came and went, and he said later that he

couldn't always tell when he was awake and when he was dreaming. He reproduced that kind of hallucinatory experience in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* in 1981, in which a writer named August sees and talks with people from several decades of us life, who come and go freely, across time and space. Characters from various periods of Williams's own life mix with fictional ones, and fictionalized characters based on people he knew well. The play is not a hallucination, but it is hallucinatory. Perhaps it was while he was in Barnes that he first experienced the phenomenon that August describes in *Something Cloudy*: "Life is all—it's just one time. It finally seems to all occur at one time."

Although *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* deals in the predatory ways with which people use each other and jockey endlessly for position, the world it portrays isn't the brutal one of so many of the late plays. Characters may use others as pawns, but there is understanding and, occasionally, forgiveness. While there can be so much violence and despair in the plays that Williams wrote after Barnes, so little warmth or comfort, not all was hopelessness. That he kept writing almost everyday until the end was itself a sign of hope, a refusal to

surrender – even if the last play he finished was likely "The One Exception", its final image that of the terrified artist locking herself in the room so that she won't be taken away. In it, the struggling artist Viola states a credo that could have been Williams's own: "If one has a life and a creative impulse—no, I've never, never, and I hope I will never *ever*—comprehend *giving up*!—that's just not what an artist's life is about as I can possibly conceive it." Even in so many of his post-Barnes plays, where characters are stripped of language and desire, and exist in a barren landscape, sometimes there still existed the will to go on.