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**Then & Now: The Relevance of
Tennessee Williams for the 21st -
Century Actress**

Marcie Danae Bealer

Honors Thesis

Ouachita Baptist University

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Finding a place to begin, discussing the role Tennessee Williams has played in the American Theatre is a daunting task. As a playwright Williams has “sustained dramatic power,” which allow him to continue to be a large part of American Theatre, from small theatre groups to actor’s workshops across the country. Williams holds a central location in the history of American Theatre (Roudane 1). Williams’s impact is evidenced in that “there is no actress on earth who will not testify that Williams created the best women characters in the modern theatre” (Benedict, par 1). According to Gore Vidal, “it is widely believed that since Tennessee Williams liked to have sex with men (true), he hated women (untrue); as a result his women characters are thought to be malicious creatures, designed to subvert and destroy godly straightness” (Benedict, par. 1).

The foundation for this discussion comes from the notion that “Actresses have leapt to play his roles. With their huge emotional range and their emphasis on disguise and exposure, they present unique opportunities. Williams' women, more than those of any other 20th-century dramatist, only truly exist in performance” (Benedict, pars. 3). In order to understand the role that Tennessee Williams played for actresses through the Southern Women that he wrote, one must first look to the South and how women of the South are uniquely different than those from other areas in the United States. Second, it is important to have an idea of Williams the person and playwright. Thirdly, I will look at the actresses who worked on Williams’ plays while he was living, some of theatre’s great legends. Finally, I will look at current actresses understanding of Williams, and the importance of Williams for young actresses today. What does Williams have left to say to a society that is so markedly different from the forties and sixties, when his great works were first produced? Are Williams works outdated and uninteresting for actresses

today? Does Williams deal with themes that are universal enough to give actresses today a connection to his characters? These are all questions that will be taken up in the following pages.

In her studies of Southern Women Virginia Bernhard discovered that “in the south women’s identities have always been fashioned by the communities to which they have belonged, even as women’s experiences and values have shaped the life of the community” (Bernhard 1). The picture of Southern Women has often been painted by men as the ideal of women’s fragility which is called the myth of the “southern lady” (Bernhard 3). Race, class, and religion shaped the role of the Southern Woman. The roles of women had not changed since the times of their grandmother’s until the Suffrage movement (Schneider 4). Instead of The women’s movement being simply about gaining the right to vote, it was about the betterment of society for future generations (Schneider 168). Because they saw it as a threat to the structure of society Southern Men were fearful of the women’s movement. Suffragists saw that men of the South outwardly gave women more credence, but in reality women were extremely dependent upon the men for food, a home, position, and approval (Schultz, pars. 6).

In 1920 the South was forced to accept women’s rights along with the rest of the nation. Women differed in where they lived from the urbanized Northeast to the rural South. Economic opportunities and everyday activities varied among women from the North and South. Women of the North went out and made themselves known, while Southern women were typically more content to stay home living quiet lives behind doors (Sneider 1-3). Southern Women often led double lives, a life that the world saw and a life that was only lived in private often internalized moments. In defining Southern

Women further one finds that they “are inscrutable, no matter how bad things get. The true Southern woman will never fall to pieces, or heaven forbid, cry, in public. No stranger or acquaintance will ever know if they are having a bad day” (Mountaineer, pars. 5). It is interesting to note that “unlike their Northern sisters, women refrained from questioning male authority; instead restricting themselves to insisting politely that women needed the ballot to expedite their own separate, non-interfering interests” (Schultz, pars. 10). Men were concerned that if women started to think for themselves and get freedoms equal to men’s, then their hot meals would no longer be waiting for them promptly at six. During World War I and II women entered the factories and took the jobs once held by men. However, once the war was over the woman worker was no longer a symbol of patriotism, but a threat to America’s social and economic security (Woloch 469). A staggering eight-six percent of the population opposed the employment of American women immediately after the war. There was a movement to get women back in the home where they belonged; in the end this proved unsuccessful (Woloch 468). Eight years after Tennessee Williams was born women were granted the right to vote in 1919 according to the Nineteenth amendment.

Women in the Southern United States during the early 1900’s experienced a lot of changes in their social stations. Women who decided to be different and go outside the social norms meaning that they “tried to do anything which men had hitherto done exclusively, she [a woman] was funny” (Schneider 165). During Tennessee Williams’ life Jane Addams won the Nobel Peace Prize (1931), Amelia Earhart flew a plane (1932), Pearl S. Buck won the Nobel Prize in Literature (1935), and Ruth Bran Owen was appointed as the first female diplomat in 1931. Eleanor Roosevelt was the first lady from

1933 to 1945 and worked closely with the Equal Rights Amendment due to its connections to Women's Rights. President Kennedy actually placed Roosevelt in charge of "A President's Commission for Women" in 1961. Despite these achievements, the typical Southern Woman still found herself in the same situation, taking care of the family and being the picture perfect Southern belle wife, subject to her husband and rarely having a voice of her own. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, women were completely obligated to either their fathers or husbands with no rights afforded them, to vote, to own land, or even to maintain certain wages. Women that abandoned this tradition were shunned and not considered a valued part of society.

In the 21st century women are no longer tied to their lives at home. The messages that are important to them are vastly different. However, there are residual concepts about what women can and can not do, especially in the South, that linger yet. Southern families assumed that the role of a woman was limited to that of wife and mother, this concept can still be found today. Even with many job opportunities and freedoms that women have at this point, there are still many expectations placed upon them in terms of relationships and positions in the home. Women today continue to look for a ways to express themselves and thus are able to connect to the characters of Tennessee Williams. Similar to actresses of the past, actresses today still struggle to get away from the stereotypical female roles written for them and find roles that give women depth and reality. This is why Williams' characters and plays will live on in a contrasting spectrum from other contemporaries of his such as William Inge and Arthur Miller. Williams provides a unique and relevant voice for women on and off stage.

Women and theatre have had a very long tumultuous relationship. The first

recorded woman playwright was the nun Hrotsvitha in the 10th—century. The first recorded professional—meaning employed female playwright was England’s Aphra Behn who published works around 1670. As is evidenced by these two women “the history of women in theatre begins surprisingly enough in view of their classic exclusion from the stage at the very source and center of its being” (Gilder 1). This means that the one place where theatre would most likely not appear—a nunnery—is where women initially began to have firsthand experience with the stage.

When theatre first came to America, women’s roles were limited and women were only allowed to participate in companies if they were married to a member of the company or if their fathers worked in the theatre. “The story of America’s theatre standing offers to women is deeply intertwined with the history of modern women and public life” (Jenkins 45). The idea of “public women” often equaled “prostitute.” At the close of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century theatre began to offer actresses a chance to get away from the roles that had been written by men with certain limited ideas of women and they were able to imagine a new way of life. The American stage had the potential to allow women to boldly discuss gender and politics, something that women were not prone to share openly at this point (Jenkins 68). Women struggled with the images that men projected on them in theatre. At the close of the nineteenth century theatre for women needed to change. Their roles were limited to the idea of a show piece—something pretty to look at. Tennessee Williams brought to theatre such feminine forces as Blanche Dubois, Lady Torrance, Alma Winemiller, Amanda Wingfield, and Maggie the Cat.

* * *

Cornelius and Edwina Dakin Williams welcomed their son Thomas Lanier Williams III into the world on March 26, 1911, in Columbus, Mississippi. Columbus was a cotton center in the heart of the South. They had no idea that their son would one day be a Pulitzer Prize winning dramatist, with thirty some plays to his name and a life filled with the drama that radiated from the pages of his works. A theme that would show up later in his life was prevalent in his mother, a genteel Southern women—the picturesque Southern belle who compulsively fretted over her children to the point of smothering them. Despite her treatment of him, it was Edwina Dakin Williams who gave her eleven-year-old son his first typewriter and set him on the path of being an author. At the age of sixteen Williams was awarded a prize for a short story he wrote, which began a lifetime love affair with writing. Upon attending college Williams continued to face challenges and road blocks from his own family.

Williams' first attended the University of Missouri and later Washington University. He finally graduated from the University of Iowa. While attending the University of Missouri he garnered the nickname “Tennessee,” which would stay with him the rest of his life. He received this nickname due to his southern drawl that many of his friends found entertaining. After failing the ROTC program, Williams was pulled out of Washington University by his father and put to work in a shoe factory, a job Williams disdained (Spoto 75).

It was during his years at college that the playwright in Williams emerged. Writing was the most important thing to Williams, as he said he felt his plays had been “the most important element of [his] life for God knows how many years” (Williams 154). Williams discovered writing as “an escape from the world of reality in which [I]

felt acutely uncomfortable. It immediately became [his] place of retreat, [his] cave, [his] refuge” (Tischler 29). The typical treatment of women in literature when Williams began his career can be evidenced through the first writing contest Williams won based upon the answer to the question “Can a Good Wife Be a Good Sport?” (Spoto 23). Not only did this serve as an illustration of the American South at the time, but it also showed the direction Williams would later take. In terms of style, Williams is considered to be the Poet Laureate of the theatre with plays overflowing in poetic dialogue.

Perhaps some of the poetry Williams found in the Psalms. Religion had an important role in Williams’ life. Edwina Williams’ father had been a Episcopalian minister. Williams spent much of his youth with his grandfather and was raised in what he termed the “shadow of the church.” Due to this direct contact with the church “a great deal of religion permeates his work. Forcefully so in *Summer and Smoke*” (Benedict, par. 22). Although Williams consistently touches on religious themes in his works, in his own life Williams did not appear to have deep religious convictions (Falk 165).

Williams’ relationship with his family was often rocky. His father Cornelius traveled a lot and was rarely home; when he was home, the children were often uncomfortable and not used to have him around. According to Dakin Williams—Tennessee Williams younger brother, “my father took a dislike to my brother, because my father took him to be a sissy because he had a theory he couldn’t play baseball or things of that sort” (Dakin Williams).

Williams never had to look far for inspiration; he wrote about what he knew best. It seems that his family and especially the women in his life provided the most inspiration. Edwina was a very protective mother and as Williams’ younger brother

Dakin recalled, “she was so overly attentive to us, and clearly the model for Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*” (Spoto 42). This theme of a child’s attachment to its mother occurs other times in Williams’ plays (Tischler 19). His sister Rose, whom he cared deeply for, also provided inspiration for characters such as Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* and Alma in *Summer and Smoke*. It is not uncommon to find echoes of the playwright in his female characters.

Outside of his family Williams had numerous acquaintances as he traveled across the country, finding homes in New Orleans and Key West most suitable for inspiration. He sometimes lived the life of a Bohemian nomad, which he recalled in his *Memoirs* stating that he belonged “then and possibly always since then, in Bohemia” (Williams xiii). Once he traveled from New Orleans to California on a bike after his car broke down and he did not have the money to fix it (Tischler 65). Williams often struggled with depression, addiction, and feeling alone in a world he could not truly connect with. Like his characters Williams spent his whole life looking for love, finding it from time to time, but being emotionally ill-equipped to have substantially lasting relationships.

Williams was a homosexual. At the time it was much more shocking, but today homosexuals have a relatively accepted position in society. However, Williams did not have the freedom to express himself openly and so he did the next best thing; he created female characters that represented both women accurately, and his own internalizations and fears. It has been observed by critics that Williams’ “female characters were nothing but men in drag” (Kolin 123). The most notable relationship of Williams’ life was that with Frank Merlo, the long union was filled with ups and downs. Merlo’s death was one of the most devastating experiences of Williams’ life, which left him depressed and

expecting his own impending death. However, Williams would not die for several years to come and continued his work as a playwright.

Williams visibly conceived *Southern Women* onto the stage. He not only gave women a fresh voice, but along with theatre he “provided a way out for women” (Jenkins 57). “Escape is a large part of the appeal of theatre for actors and audiences alike. Actresses have looked for ways to be better express themselves and are constantly looking for reinventions on stage. Tennessee Williams successfully brought this escape to many actresses.

* * *

In American dramas of the late nineteenth century female characters determined the outcome of their futures in three specific ways. One was to work at jobs outside the home. Secondly, they took an active role in solving issues that came up in their lives. Finally, by defining the moral climate in which the action takes place (Hill 66). Another interesting thing to note about female characters just before Williams began writing is that they typically were preoccupied with love—women in search of a happily ever after “love-story,” they were plagued by irrationality and emotionality—women were “slaves” to their emotional natures, unable to have rational thought or work through problems logically. “Sinclair Lewis’s novels presented the idea that it would be absurd for women to think they could compete with men in a professional environment” (Dooley). Women were also portrayed as either selfish or selfless and passive—they were virtually written in for men to rescue, for men to provide for, and for men to make love to. They were trophies that struggled to stay balanced emotionally—due to the instability of female emotions.

The 1930's was a time when change in the theatre began to happen in women's roles and this is no better evidenced than through Tennessee Williams' plays. Women needed an accurate representation on the stage. Up until this point there had been few memorable female protagonists. Men often tried to either make women stereotypical instead of getting to the heart of the matter, which really was a search for love. It is true that romance interests many women; the quest for love for many is a lifelong journey. Tennessee Williams' female characters are no different; for them love seems to be the answer, if only they could find it. His characters "live in a world of their own imagination and are unable to cope with highly competitive, commercial society. Their dreams center on men who were never there" (Tischler 168). In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the loss of love has shattered Blanche Dubois's world. Unsure of who she is without a man and trying to figure out her role as a woman, the answer seems to be to imagine a perfect love and a perfect life, which are no longer possible in her ruined state. Alma in *Summer and Smoke* has lived next door to her love all her life; she is what today would be considered "stuck in the friends zone." Lady in *Orpheus Descending* has been brokenhearted most of her life and forced to marry a man who murdered her father. She risks it all for a chance at a love with Val. Even the controlling Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie* is on the lookout for love for her daughter, since her own time has passed. These are a few examples of love in Williams' plays.

Williams is a playwright with deep insight into the mind of women, possessing a unique way of viewing women on the whole. It has been noted that "he doesn't separate men and women in the way most playwrights do. He affords them the same respect and dignity" (Benedict, par. 17). An important aspect of his plays is that

“many of his women commit violence to themselves and so many actresses are excited by the possibilities of this. We tend to turn upon ourselves and implode when unhappy. Williams understood that in an uncanny way” (Benedict, par. 25). On the heels of *Women’s Suffrage* it would have been easy for Williams to create characters merely for the sake of shock and with little depth. However, this would have made the female characters less empathetic with the audiences. In his article “Tennessee Williams and His Women” David Benedict stated that the refreshing thing “about his women is that they may be victims of circumstance, but they make choices. Right or wrong, doesn't matter” (Benedict, par. 18).

In the twenty years before his death Williams’ work was highly criticized, due to his perceived failure to recreate anything that compared to *Streetcar Named Desire* or *Glass Menagerie*. However, this does not mean the later work of Williams was entirely worthless art. No matter what the critics think, audiences still have a strong opinion as do the actresses involved in productions of later work. Williams felt that his “greatest affliction is perhaps the major theme of [his] writings, the affliction of loneliness that follows [him] like a shadow, a very ponderous shadow too heavy to drag after [him] all of [his] days and nights” (Williams, *Memoirs*). This theme of loneliness was much easier for Williams to express in female characters.

Tennessee Williams is known for his unique female characters and by looking at them through the eyes of an actress the deeper complexities come to light than might be seen on the stage. These women have been described as, “tragic, weary and self-loathing” (Osgood, par. 1) and some view them as a “chink in the writer’s dramatic armor” (Osgood, par. 1). From Blanche Dubois, Alma Winemiller, Lady Torrance,

Maggie the Cat, Laura and Amanda Wingfield actresses are given a wide scope of characters to deal with. In its own way each character brings to light certain common problems that women dealt with in the South. The true test of a great author is the test of time and the fact that Williams' characters still resonate with female actresses today is a testament to the genius he was.

* * *

The actresses who brought Williams' characters to life on stage validate his ability to understand the powerful psyches of women, from soft spoken conservatives to brash out-spoken Australians. Williams often reflected upon the actresses in his plays and stated that

in a state of sobriety, I have always been more or less guarded or diffident in my relations with actresses: that is, with the exceptions of Laurette Taylor, who wouldn't tolerate diffidence in a playwright, and the great and dazzling and sometimes wrathful Tallulah Bankhead, whom I think it is appropriate to mention in the same breath with Laurette (Williams, *Memoirs* 230).

Williams had great respect for actresses and knew that his plays were never fully complete until they were given life by real women.

The character of Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is no doubt one of Williams' most extraordinary female characters. Blanche has an obsession with romance and avoiding the impending doom of age. Through Blanche, Williams' contemplates the complexities of the human heart as she states, "What is straight? A line can be straight, or a street, but a human heart, oh no, its curved like a road through mountains" (SND). This monument of a woman was portrayed by many aspiring actresses from Jessica Tandy to

Gone with the Wind's Vivien Leigh. Rosemary Harris took on the task of one of the most challenging roles Williams ever conceived in 1973. Williams considered the character of Blanche as a “demonic creature, the size of her feeling was too great for her to contain with out the escape of madness” (Williams 235). Jessica Tandy first embodied the role of Blanche on Broadway. Blanche “represents tradition and idealism, seeing herself as she would like to be, denying what , trying to appear special and different. She is in the tradition of heroines of Medieval Romances” (Tischler 138). The transition of Blanche from moth to tigress was a very important part of her character arch. Williams’ created other moth-like characters, such as Alma Winemiller in *Summer and Smoke*.

A preacher’s daughter Alma Winemiller suffers from one of the most common ailments known to women: unrequited love. The character of Alma has lived next door to her love John and built an obsession around an idea of their being together. At the climax of the play she finally works up the courage to tell John of her feelings. However, John has always seen Alma as an angel, out of his reach. With this rejection Alma bids farewell to her Stone Angel self and is last seen trekking off with an unidentified stranger. Williams saw Alma as the truest expression of himself in a character. He also felt that “her passion gave stature to the drama” (Williams 235). Lois Weaver, an actress for *Summer and Smoke*, says “recognizing the sense of missing out, the longing. Finding out about my own desire. It crops up all the time in his work. The conflict between body and soul” (Benedict, par. 40). Weaver was not the only actress who had strong connections with Alma.

Eva Marie Saint took the character that Williams described as most like him and gave it life. Williams also believed that Alma “came right down from his being, and it

was easy to put on paper” (Osgood, par. 17). Saint recalled the experience stating that, “Usually when we do roles, we go onto the next part and forget the previous one. Alma stayed with me a long time” (Osgood, par. 18). Saint also believed that as an actress

you were spoiled after you’ve done one of his plays. A Williams’ character has layer upon layer, and I don’t care who you are or what age you are, you find something of yourself in the character. Many writers today write what they think people want to hear or want to see, and it’s not out of their own experiences. I didn’t know him as a friend, but I know he didn’t have an easy life. He had highs and low lows. He could be funny, and then he could be unfunny. He was a very volatile person and led a very, very difficult life. He took all that joy and pain and it in into his characters (Osgood, par. 19).

In terms of his place in history as a playwright Saint holds the view that he is one of the best (Osgood, par. 77). Although the original production of *Summer and Smoke* was not well received by critics, it showed Williams’ illustrations of Southern Women searching for love and their constant battle against inner desire.

The lost love and life of Lady Torrance in *Orpheus Descending* has been portrayed by a number of noteworthy actresses. The character of Lady was first written for Anna Magini, Williams’ favorite Italian actress, but her inability to speak English allowed for Maureen Stapleton to originate the role on the New York stage. Williams first worked on the show under the title *Battle of Angels*. In 1957 the show premiered and Williams described it as being

[o]n the surface...the tale of a wild-spirited boy who wanders into a conventional community of the South and creates the commotion of a fox in a

chicken coop. But beneath that now familiar surface it is a play about unanswered questions that haunt the hearts of people and the difference between continuing to ask them...and the acceptance of prescribed answers that are not answers at all.

(Williams, *Four Plays* vi)

Vanessa Redgrave took the stage on Broadway in 1989 as the secluded and forgotten woman looking for a way to redeem her past. Williams easily could have filled the play with “licentious wiggling in filmy costumes replete with allusions to the latrine, a play what was built about some titillating and vulgarly ribald predicament in the bedroom” (Tischler 85). Yet, Williams felt that this play, unlike others was a “clean” play despite its realistic drama.

Williams Pulitzer Prize winning drama *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* has been said to encapsulate “the agony of sexual frustration” (Klein, par. 1). The role of Maggie the Cat—a woman who married into a wealthy family is spending the day with that family and her husband who she no longer finds fulfillment in. Maggie is a woman with an “anxious voice, strident. In the heat of combat, is unpleasantly, sometimes even odiously disturbing” (Tischler 201). The role was originated by Babara Bel Geddes in 1955. Three years later Elizabeth Taylor brought Maggie to the big screen. In 1974 Elizabeth Ashley performed the role of Maggie in a Broadway revival. According to Williams “Elizabeth Ashley has a real southern quality.” He continues, “People have a misconception of what a lady is. A lady can use all the filthy words; Elizabeth does and gets away with it. She has terrific vitality” (Davis, par. 2). Of Williams, Ashley held the belief that “Tennessee comes from the darkest of places. He’s looking into the belly of the beast and the darkest part of the human heart, but little by little he will start to shred

that canvas and you see light coming through” (Henderson, par. 8). In terms of playing Maggie she said “ it was like being kissed on the butt by God” (Henderson, par. 9). She only was able to take the part after Tuesday Weld turned it down. She felt that as an actor “if you are extremely lucky and circumstances fall the right way, you sometimes come across a part that has your name on it. Maggie had never been played by anybody southern, for one thing. And Tennessee was there, on site. I was essentially playing my mother, in terms of how Maggie thought” (Henderson, par. 9).

Mother and daughter relationships make for good drama, Laura and Amanda Wingfield leave nothing to be desired in the drama department. These two women can be seen as victims of their fate. Frances Sternhagen portrayed the character of Laura twice and Alma. She said it was not only Williams’ rhythm, but also the amazing “characters that he created that made him so great” (Sternhagen 2009). Sternhagen stated that "There are so many layers to the play and the characters. It is like looking at a painting from a different angle and discovering new details and insights into it" (Sternhagen 2009). Shirley Booth’s portrayal of Amanda was one of Williams most loved performances.

There was no one like Laurette Taylor. Not only would she come to work drunk, but when the show opened she was suddenly transformed into the perfect Amanda Wingfield. Williams recalled in his *Memoirs* that before the opening of *The Glass Menagerie* “everybody but Laurette Taylor was in a state of panic...Taylor did not seem to know her lines as Amanda Wingfield, hardly a fraction of them, and those she did seem to know she was delivering in a Southern accent which she had acquired from some long-age black domestic” (81). At the end of the day though, Taylor’s performance was more than anyone could have expected. Williams felt that Taylor’s performance was

reward enough for all his work on the play and character. Taylor's most important affirmation to Williams came when she told him how good he was as a playwright. Williams did not even begin to accept this until the success of *The Glass Menagerie* without Taylor to which she states, "what did I tell you boy—you don't need me" (Tischler 114).

Tallulah Bankhead believed, and told Williams, that he had written all his plays for her except for one that he wrote for that "Italian" better known as Anna Magnini. Bankhead memorably portrayed the role of Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*. One of her performances led Williams to "shed tears almost all the way through" (Tischler 142). Williams' described the event as a moment when the actresses took on more than the playwright could have hoped for and transformed the role into something entirely new (Tischler 142).

The number of critically acclaimed actresses who brought Tennessee Williams characters to life on stage is astounding. From Zoe Caldwell's Tony Award winning performance in *Slapstick Tragedy*, which she fondly recalled recently in New Orleans at the Tennessee Williams Literary Festival 2009. Caldwell's brash and unrelenting attitude won Williams' admiration from afar. As a young actress in her first Broadway show, Caldwell had great respect for the role of a playwright and Williams was no exception. The young actress felt that director Alan Schnieder was leading the actors away from the world that Williams had purposefully created. Instead of going along with Schnieder's direction, she boldly stood up for Williams' work and risked losing her job over it. In the end, Caldwell was awarded a Tony for her performance in 1966. Despite the shows' short run (only seven performances). Caldwell established herself as a force to be

reckoned with and showed the importance of a playwright's words to the success of a script. Above all else, Caldwell "trusted what Tennessee wrote" even if it meant sitting in a rocking chair, getting high while wearing clown shoes. She owed her victory to Williams. Caldwell says, "[I] won not because I was brilliant, but because Tennessee was brilliant" (Caldwell 2009).

Suddenly Last Summer premiered off-Broadway in 1958 and the role of Catherine Holly was performed by Anne Meacham. Before her death Meacham recalled how Tennessee was absolutely terrified of this play. The play was so close to him that he wouldn't allow Audrey [Wood] to be at the casting or rehearsals, and he took a long time before he could show her the play. He was so protective of it and frightened by it. Although I think he knew it was one of his best plays, and that in Catharine Holly he created one of the greatest roles ever written for an actress (Spoto 221).

Williams' true insight into the twisted way the world sees love was brought to light in the character of Catharine Holly as she said "we all use each other and that's what we think of as love" (Spoto 222). Meacham was not only well acquainted with Williams' work onstage, but she had a close relationship with the author—one of the few to see him at his lowest.

Marian Seldes a five-time Tony Award nominee noted that "So many plays today can be written for any medium. A Williams' play is different. It's not surprising that whenever Williams' works have been made into films, they've been seen as lesser versions of the plays. His work can't live anywhere else. It has to be before an audience. That is the miracle of the theater" (Seldes 2005). Although, *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop*

Here Anymore is not considered one of Williams' greatest achievements, Seldes took a lot from the experience as she delved into a character created by a literary genius.

* * *

In the nearly forty-years since Williams' plays first debuted on Broadway the role of American women and the American stage have gone through some changes. Women now work in powerful executive positions and the voice of feminism is quick to be heard in many arenas. Even the good old South has witnessed further transitions from "belle's" to "brokers." However, the changes might not be as stark as one might expect. The South has held onto its ideals and the differences between women in the East and West Coasts with the women in the south continue to hold true. One thing that has kept audiences and actresses interested in Williams characters are his sexually repressed female characters. As revivals of his plays continue to occur across the globe, actresses find lasting worth in bringing these women to life.

In 1992 Jessica Lange starred in the highly anticipated revival of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The production did extremely well and was also filmed for television in 1995 for which Lange received a Golden Globe and an Emmy nomination. Lange described her experiences of working on a Williams play in an interview. As an actress she felt of Williams' works that

the moment you step on stage you are being enveloped by this freight train that picks you up and you are on it until the play ends. It is constructed in such a way if you want to look at it from like at technical point of view or the poetry or the universality of the human emotion, it like just encompasses you and takes you there and as long as you don't resist it, it takes you there (Lange 2004).

Lange and other actresses discovered the freedom that Williams allowed for interpretation because of the large spectrum he covered in his writing. Lange believes that

one of the problems with Tennessee because he is so revered and so represented there have been so many productions of him. That people even though they may not have read the plays in the last thirty-forty years, think they know it. They come in thinking they are going to see their versions of the plays. It unsettles them. (Lange 2004)

This sheds light on the difficulties productions of Williams' plays face today. Audiences may have set notions about the plays they are going to watch, without fully understanding the characters and plots that Williams crafted.

Disillusionment and cynicism are characteristics of Lady Torrance in *Orpheus Descending*. One of Williams' older heroines gives actresses of a different age range something to work for. As the characters ponder how "the future is called 'perhaps,' which is the only possible thing to call the future. And the only important thing is not to allow that to scare you" (*Orpheus Descending*). In 2000 Academy Award winner Helen Mirren beautifully portrayed the double-edged character of Lady Torrance, which led to her being nominated for a Laurence Olivier Theatre Award in 2001.

Actress Natasha Richardson saw Vivien Leigh and Jessica Tandy perform the role of Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* long before she performed in the role. Richardson stated that an actress "can't ignore the flourid beauty and choice of his words" (Richardson 2004). She believed that Tennessee Williams demands that the actress stay in the moment. "The extraordinary thing about is the poetry is so muscular and dimensional. It's not airy fairy, it just flesh and blood, pain and sex" (Richardson).

The complexities of playing Blanche are increased due to the fact that she is “universal in being a woman dependent on men, aware of her waning physical appeal, terrified of her looming extinction. She drinks to dim her world, seeks sex to forget her loneliness and when the real world catches up with her she retreats in to the all out fantasy of madness” (Tischler 138). In support of the assumption that Williams’ women are universal, critically acclaimed and Academy Award winning actress Rachel Weisz will be stepping on stage as Blanche Dubois in June 2009.

Williams created characters that allow actors to feel that they can bring so much of themselves to the part, but yet remaining so specific with the action and repetitions put in for very specific reasons. Sheila Gish who also played the character of Blanche described the experience in 1994 and how the women’s “parts in his plays are the best parts. That’s so unusual. We get used to it being the other way round and having to flesh roles out. Men find it rather difficult to play what are seen as subsidiary roles” (Benedict, par. 30). Gish also felt that

Streetcar is his greatest play and Blanche is the single greatest part ever written for an actress. It’s easy to get involved in the liquor, the sex, the lurid quality, but the thing that makes Blanche such a true heroine is her spirituality. It’s what makes her tragic. Without it she’d just be tiresome. In the film, they took all of that away. So come the second half of the film, you really like Stanley a lot. You sit there thinking, ‘Go on, get her out of there. (Benedict, par. 30)

Maggie’s words still hold true for many women today as she cried, “Oh, you weak people, you weak beautiful people!—Who give up. What you want is someone to—take hold of you—gently, gently, with love!” (CHTF). . A recent production of *Cat*

on a Hot Tin Roof took a different look at the play by using an entirely African American cast.

The Glass Menagerie was recently produced at Washington University and directed by Have Schvey. Jessica Lange said in a recent interview that

Times change, that's the great thing about Williams is his plays are really timeless. The whole emotion and mindset, universal subconscious. Everything is different. The productions had to do with the issues at the time. Amanda could just have easily been a black mother in the projects in 2005. You bring your experience of this time to the play. (Lange 2005)

This character exemplifies many mothers and people can relate to her over-dotting mindset. For actresses, Amanda offers a blend of wisecracking with very tender poignant moments. Amanda allows for actresses to show diversity.

Amanda Plummer appeared in *Summer and Smoke* in 2006 and also in *The Glass Menagerie* revival in 1983. Plummer's contemporary portrayal of Alma is taken "less from Alma's description of herself as 'one of those weak and divided people who slip like shadows among you solid ones,' than from her subsequent line: 'But sometimes, out of necessity, we shadowy people take on a strength of our own'" (Rooney, par. 6).

Rosamond Pike also portrayed the role of Alma in *Summer and Smoke* in London's West End in 2006. Pike's recent performance gave audiences a "very fine and sympathetic portrayal that shows a delicate Alma who combines fragility with repressed passion. Utterly isolated and full of impossible yearning, this role is incredibly affecting" (Loveridge, par. 4).

It was recently noted that if *A Streetcar Named Desire* were to have premiered in

2009, it likely wouldn't make it to Broadway (Broussard). It would be unfounded to say that this statement has no merit. With the way the business on Broadway is run today it is hard for any show to make it, and so many stories have already been told, it is less about what is being sold than who is selling it. Williams wrote characters in a time when people were involved in theatre merely for the love of it. Broadway according to numerous sources has lost much of that love. Actresses' love for Williams can continue to be seen. Not only mature actresses who lived during Williams' time, but also young up-and-coming actresses are able to find connections to their own lives in the rich, honest women Williams conceived long before their own births.

Tennessee Williams will have an enduring presence in the theatre, with productions of his plays being performed regularly in high schools, colleges, and many other locales, which are not limited to the American South. It can be seen from decades of work and countless productions that Williams' plays have continued to be important for actresses. The complexity of his characters attracts actresses to perform his work. The appeal of his women for actresses stems from the depth of character he created. His voice will continue to hold true for women due to the relevant and universal themes he presents in them. Actresses will find women dealing with the complexities of love, loss of identity, and the limitations of expectations placed on women—especially Southern Women. On few occasions has a man had such an accurate and touching interpretation of women. Williams took everything he knew and transformed it into women who displayed the times he wrote in, but what Williams could not have known was the continued relevance of his female characters into the 21st century.

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