INTRODUCTION

Thomas Lanier “Tennessee” Williams III (1911 – 1983) was a playwright, short story writer, poet and essayist. He is best remembered for his plays, which established him alongside Eugene O’Neill (1888-1953) and Arthur Miller (1915-2005) as one of the foremost American dramatists of the 20th century. Over the course of a prolific career he wrote more than 30 full-length and 70 one-act plays. Works such as The Glass Menagerie (1944) and A Streetcar Named Desire (1947) have become cornerstones of the American theatrical canon, whilst much of his later output was more experimental, and remains rarely produced. His writing is often characterised by its lyricism, by a geographical preoccupation with the southern United States, and by a compassionate interest in characters brought low by chance and circumstance; as an innovator in both form and content, he exerted a profound influence on the narrative of American drama.

HISTORY

Williams was born in Mississippi, the second of three children. His mother Edwina was the daughter of a well-to-do Southern family, his father Cornelius an alcoholic travelling shoe salesman. For the first eight years of Williams’ life the family lived with his maternal grandparents until Cornelius won an office job at the International Shoe Company in St. Louis and moved the family there.

It was not a happy childhood. An early battle with diphtheria confined Williams indoors for a year; even afterwards he was never of robust health, and more likely to be found in his grandfather’s library than tossing a ball. His parents’ marriage was an unhappy one, and Williams bore the suffocating brunt of the attention which Edwina did not care to give her
husband. Meanwhile, accounts suggest Cornelius was boisterous and violent, a man’s man who had little sympathy for his son’s sensitive nature or literary ambitions; he pulled the 21-year-old Williams out of his studies at the University of Missouri to put him to work in the International Shoe Company factory. Williams’ closest familial relationship was with his older sister Rose who, in her late teens, began to suffer the symptoms of what would later be diagnosed as schizophrenia. Her mental illness stretched tensions among the family still further. In 1943, without Williams’ knowledge but with his mother’s sanction, Rose was subject to a frontal lobotomy, a medical intervention that resulted in her being institutionalised for most of the rest of her life.

Much has been made of the autobiographical aspects of Williams’ plays, the ways in which they rake over the physical and psychological circumstances of his early life, his homosexuality, and his later dependencies on alcohol and drugs. On this subject, the director Elia Kazan said of Williams, “Everything in his life is in his plays, and everything in his plays is in his life” (Oakes, 2004, p.373). Certainly, it is difficult to read Williams’ first major success, *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) and not see his family reflected in the Wingfields: the highly-strung, social obsessive Amanda; her sickly and mentally fragile daughter Laura; and the writerly son, desperate to escape, who shares Williams’ birth name: Tom. *The Glass Menagerie* opened on Broadway in 1945. It catapulted Williams to fame and marked the beginning of a 15-year period in which Williams wrote hit after hit, winning Pulitzer Prizes for *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1956), and the Tony Award for *The Rose Tattoo* (1951). These plays make up a body of work which succeeded in challenging and changing the conventions of American drama. Their symbolic idiom, expressionistic treatment of theatrical space, and unabashed embrace of the erotic marked a sharp departure from the status quo and widened the horizon of possibilities for those writers who followed. They were also plays which made Williams incredibly wealthy and so facilitated his growing problems with drugs and alcohol that came to a head after the death of his lover Frank Merlo in 1963. The loss sent Williams into a deep depression; he was hospitalised several times and developed a dependence on prescription drugs that he never entirely overcame. Nevertheless, he continued to write, though not to great acclaim. Williams followed up his Tony-nominated *The Night of the Iguana* (1961) with the critical and commercial flop *The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop*
*Here Anymore* (1963), after which it was rare for his plays to run for more than a few months, with some closing within weeks or days.

The jury remains out on the merit of these late plays, of which there are more than a dozen, though none are frequently produced today. Some argue that Williams ran out of things to say and resorted to recycling ideas from previous plays and stories, whilst others contend that experimental works such as *The Two-Character Play* (1973) were simply not compatible with public expectation; that “sex, south and violence brought Williams to a Broadway which then allowed him no deviations” (Cohn, 1984, p.1).

Williams never fell into obscurity. His most significant plays continued to be revived and adapted for television and film throughout the final years of his life, and in 1979 he was inducted into the American Theatre Hall of Fame. He died in 1983, but remains today one of the most widely-performed playwrights of the 20th century.

**AIMS**

In his own words, the impulse behind Williams’ works is “the need for understanding and tenderness and fortitude among individuals trapped by circumstance” (cited in Singh, 2009, p.55). For the multitude of themes and forms which abound in his oeuvre, one feels that the driving force is most often an interest in “the damaged and the doomed” (Ibell, 2016, p.184), the “delicate people” as he frequently called them, and an ambition to stage their struggles. If one of Williams’ signal virtues is his poetry, then another is his unflinching honesty; in his best works he presents these characters both sympathetically and unsentimentally. One such character remains perhaps Williams’ most famous and enduring creation: Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Among much else, the play is about a character whom circumstance has rendered unequipped to survive in the world of post-war urban America. By the time we meet Blanche, her options are running out. Born into fast-fading wealth in a post-Reconstruction South where pre-Civil War expectations are still in place, especially for women, but without the money to keep up those redundant appearances, the deaths of Blanche’s relatives have necessitated the sale of the family home. Many years previously she
had married “a boy, just a boy, when [she] was a very young girl” (Williams, *Streetcar*, 2009, p.66), but her husband has since committed suicide. She arrives at her sister’s in New Orleans having been forced from her job as a high school teacher in Mississippi for some improper relationship with a student. Williams stacks the deck against Blanche; she is as much out of place temporally as geographically, a fading Southern belle wilting outside of the contextual frame of the pre-war South. Crucially, however, Williams complicates Blanche’s victimhood. Her deep-seated insecurities about her age and appearance manifest themselves as dependencies, on attention and on alcohol, which have tangible impacts on the people around her. She is snobbish, superior, and makes no effort to conceal her disdain for either her sister’s home or choice of husband, the working-class, Polish American Stanley Kowalski. Blanche’s expectations of the world were forged in a vanished Southern past, and finding these expectations unmet at every turn, she retreats increasingly into fantasy: ‘I don’t want realism... I’ll tell you what I want. Magic!’ (Williams, 2009, p.86).

Blanche’s resistance to fixity and harsh truth finds its parallel in Williams’ writing, which favours nuance and ambiguity over didacticism and easy interpretation. So it is that in Blanche’s recollection of her husband’s suicide, we learn that ‘there was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn’t like a man’s,’ and that prior to the fatal gunshot she had ‘[come] suddenly into a room that I thought was empty – which wasn’t empty, but had two people in it’ (Williams, 2009, p.66). Many have assumed that Blanche had discovered her husband to be a homosexual, but Williams is unconcerned with the crudity of specifics; far more evocative than detail is Blanche’s lament that ‘he was in the quicksands and clutching at me – but I wasn’t holding out, I was slipping in with him!’ (Williams, 2009, p.66).

Similarly, in the climactic scene in which Stanley rapes Blanche, he asserts that they have “had this date with each other from the beginning” (Williams, 2009, p.97). The line operates in that audiences are hard-pressed to deny some truth in it; Williams spends much of the play painting Blanche and Stanley as characters who are only able to relate to members of the opposite sex on a sexual level. The tragedy of the event, and of its repercussions, is enhanced rather than diminished by the ways in which Williams allows for the possibility of a kind of inevitability to the encounter. That Williams does not soft-pedal the unattractive qualities of his heroine then, is only one of the ways in which he resists the urge to lock down
meaning when it might be left diffuse. Characters such as Blanche emerge not as binary constructs, either “self-made figures” or “products of society,” but as individuals located somewhere on that spectrum; both possessed of agency and will, and perennially thwarted by a world which crushes the marginalised and downtrodden under its weight.

To a greater or lesser extent, such figures recur throughout Williams’ work: in *The Rose Tattoo, Orpheus Descending* (1957) and *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959) to name but a few. As is the case with *Streetcar*, these plays are most often acclaimed for the rewarding roles they offer actors and their rich psychological acuity, but it would be a mistake to think of Williams as not being a social or political dramatist. Rather, as in the works of his favourite playwright, the 19th century Russian writer Anton Chekhov, Williams expresses the political in the personal, submerged beneath the interplay of characters.

He does not shy away from the prejudices of the American South, and examines economic realities from both ends of the spectrum. *The Glass Menagerie* counterpoints both Tom and Amanda’s dreams of escape with the poverty that entraps them; *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* serves as an indictment of prevailing fiscal structures, in which the terminal illness of a family patriarch can be read as a metaphor for the cancer of capitalism. A handful of Williams’ less frequently produced plays work even more overtly: the early *Not About Nightingales* (1938) concerns a group of prison inmates who go on a hunger strike in an act of resistance against a fascistic warden.

In later life, Williams developed an interest in more formally and linguistically experimental work; he wrote of his intention “to move to something freer, like presentational theatre, when you depart from realism” (Saddik, 1999, p.40). Efforts such as *The Two Character Play* (1973) are generally regarded as less accomplished than his early work; nonetheless, they serve to indicate the wide and developing range of Williams’ artistic ambitions over the course of a career spanning more than 50 years.
METHODS

Williams was one of the great innovators of 20th century drama, and his work constitutes nothing less than “a grand experiment to dramatize human consciousness on stage” (Adler, 2012, p.65). It was Williams’ belief that the American theatre had exhausted itself in its reliance on the conventions of naturalism and that the key to revitalising the form was an understanding that it could be possible for a theatrical experience to be truthful without being realistic. In his production notes for The Glass Menagerie, he discusses his vision of a “plastic theatre” which eschews naturalism for expressionism and uses the stage not simply as a screenless television, but as a uniquely poeticoised and metaphoric space. He writes that:

“when a play employs unconventional techniques it is not, or certainly shouldn’t be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually or should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are” (Williams, 2009, xvi).

At their best, Williams’ plays powerfully combine psychological depth of character with the use of stylistic devices that embrace the fundamental artifice of theatre. The function of that artifice is expressed well by Jo Mielziner (1901-1976), designer of many of the original productions of Williams’ plays, who explains that in working on the designs his:

“use of translucent and transparent scenic interior walls was not just another trick [but] a true reflection of the contemporary playwright’s interest in – and at times obsession with – the exploration of the inner man” (cited in Bigsby, 1984, pp.49-50).

It is this concern which animates so much of Williams’ work, not only in terms of the narratives of his plays, but the forms they take.
In the opening scene of *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom speaks to us directly, telling us that we are watching ‘a memory play’ (Williams, 2009, p.5). He goes on to deliver a truncated version of Williams’ production notes, explaining what we can expect in the way of lighting and music, and even discussing the symbolic significance of the play’s design and characters. In that Tom serves a dual purpose as both character and narrator, he is himself an unconventional dramatic technique, a vehicle by which Williams can advance his dramaturgical ideology not in essays about theatre, but in theatre itself.

Music and lighting are used similarly to symbolic effect in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Consider the polka tune which begins whenever Blanche is prompted to remember her past. This music is not a naturalistic feature of the onstage action but a recurring motif, audible only to us and Blanche, which serves to illustrate how she is haunted by her history; late in the play we learn that it is the music which was playing the moment Allan interrupted it with a shot to his head. Then there is Blanche’s pathological avoidance of bright light and insistence on covering her lamp with a paper lantern. It is no coincidence that Mitch tears this lantern away in the same scene that he confronts Blanche with what he has learned of her past life; for Blanche, to be lit is to be unmasked and confronted with her true self. Although this light is realistic in the sense that it exists physically within the world of the play, it nevertheless also works as a metaphor, as so much in Williams’ work does: he wrote that “symbols are nothing but the natural speech of drama” (cited in Styan, 1983, p.120).

Itemising each of Williams’ uses of unconventional dramatic techniques in pursuit of deep human truths would be the work of a lifetime; the principles described here provide a lens through which any and all of his plays might be viewed. In using them as such, one encounters a catalogue of work that consistently reinvents the possibilities of the stage in representing characters’ inner lives. Williams left a great gift to theatre in the enduring poetry of his language; the radical poetry of his stagecraft may be a greater gift still.
FURTHER READING


