



Tennessee Williams (Sam Shaw, courtesy of New Directions)

Notable Playwrights

Tennessee Williams

Born: Columbus, Mississippi; March 26, 1911

Died: New York, New York; February 25, 1983

Principal Drama

Fugitive Kind, pr. 1937, pb. 2001; *Spring Storm*, wr. 1937, pr., pb. 1999; *Not About Nightingales*, wr. 1939, pr., pb. 1998; *Battle of Angels*, pr. 1940, pb. 1945; *This Property Is Condemned*, pb. 1941, pr. 1946 (one act); *I Rise in Flame, Cried the Phoenix*, wr. 1941, pb. 1951, pr. 1959 (one act); *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*, pb. 1942 (one act); *The Glass Menagerie*, pr. 1944, pb. 1945; *Twenty-seven Wagons Full of Cotton*, pb. 1945, pr. 1955 (one act); *You Touched Me*, pr. 1945, pb. 1947 (with Donald Windham); *Summer and Smoke*, pr. 1947, pb. 1948; *A Streetcar Named Desire*, pr., pb. 1947; *American Blues*, pb. 1948 (collection); *Five Short Plays*, pb. 1948; *The Long Stay Cut Short: Or, The Unsatisfactory Supper*, pb. 1948 (one act); *The Rose Tattoo*, pr. 1950, pb. 1951; *Camino Real*, pr., pb. 1953; *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, pr., pb. 1955; *Orpheus Descending*, pr. 1957, pb. 1958 (revision of *Battle of Angels*); *Suddenly Last Summer*, pr., pb. 1958; *The Enemy: Time*, pb. 1959; *Sweet Bird of Youth*, pr., pb. 1959 (based on *The Enemy: Time*); *Period of Adjustment*, pr. 1959, pb. 1960; *The Night of the Iguana*, pr., pb. 1961; *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, pr. 1963, revised pb. 1976; *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale*, pr., pb. 1964 (revision of *Summer and Smoke*); *Slapstick Tragedy: The Mutilated and The Gnädiges Fräulein*, pr. 1966, pb. 1970 (one acts); *The Two-Character Play*, pr. 1967, pb. 1969; *The Seven Descents of Myrtle*, pr., pb. 1968 (as *Kingdom of Earth*); *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*, pr. 1969, pb. 1970; *Confessional*, pb. 1970; *Dragon Country*, pb. 1970 (collection); *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*, pb. 1971-1981 (7 volumes); *Out Cry*, pr. 1971, pb. 1973 (revision of *The Two-Character Play*); *Small Craft Warnings*, pr., pb. 1972 (revision of *Confessional*); *Vieux Carré*, pr. 1977, pb. 1979; *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur*, pr. 1979, pb. 1980; *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, pr. 1980; *A House Not Meant to Stand*, pr. 1981; *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, pr. 1981, pb. 1995

Other Literary Forms

Besides his plays, Tennessee Williams produced essays, letters, memoirs, music lyrics, original screenplays, poetry, short stories, and novels.

Achievements

By critical consensus, Tennessee Williams ranks second after Eugene O'Neill among American dramatists. He was greatly influenced by Anton Chekhov in his ability to universalize strongly realized local settings, in his portrayal of frail characters in a cold and alien world, in his frequently superb use of symbol and in his development of a natural structure that does not call attention to itself. Like Chekhov's best works, Williams's best plays appear to unfold as naturally as life itself. Williams has been accused at times of "purple" writing, sentimentality, and an overemphasis on violence and depravity. Although such criticism may occasionally be justified, Williams remains one of the most dramatically effective and profoundly perceptive playwrights of the modern theater.

Biography

Tennessee Williams was born Thomas Lanier Williams in 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi, the son of Cornelius Coffin Williams and Edwina Dakin Williams. He lived his early years in the home of his grandparents, for whom he felt great affection. His grandfather was a minister, and Williams's father was a traveling salesperson, apparently at home infrequently. In about 1919, his father accepted a nontraveling position at his firm's headquarters in St. Louis. The move from a more or less traditional southern environment to a very different metropolitan world was extremely painful both for Williams and for his older sister, neither of whom ever really recovered from it.

The Glass Menagerie is clearly a play about the Williams family and its life in St. Louis, though Williams's *Memoirs* (1975) and other known facts make it clear that the play is by no means a precise transcription of actuality. On the other hand, *The Glass Menagerie* is not the only Williams play that has biographical elements. His father, his mother, and his sister (who became mentally ill) are reflected in his characters in various plays. Williams's homosexuality, which he examines in some detail in his *Memoirs*, is also an important element in a number of his plays, including *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Suddenly Last Summer*.

Williams attended the University of Missouri and Washington University and was graduated in 1938 from the University of Iowa. His adult life involved considerable wandering, with periods in such places as Key West, New Orleans, and New York. After various attempts at writing, some of which gained helpful recognition, Williams first won acclaim with *The Glass Menagerie*. Most of his plays from that point through *The Night of the Iguana* were successful, either on first production or later. He won Pulitzer Prizes for *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and New York Drama Critics Circle Awards for those two and for *The Glass Menagerie* and *The Night of the Iguana*. The many plays that he wrote in the last twenty years of his life, however, achieved almost no success, either in the United States or abroad. Depending on one's point of view, either Williams's inspiration had run out, or he was writing a kind of play for which neither the public nor most critics were yet ready. Williams died in New York on February 25, 1983, having choked on a foreign object lodged in his throat.

Analysis

If the weight of critical opinion places Tennessee Williams below Eugene O'Neill as America's premiere dramatist, there should be no question that the former playwright is without peer in either the diversity of genres in which he wrote or his impact on the cultural consciousness of mid-twentieth century America. In the course of his long career, Williams wrote essays; letters; memoirs; music lyrics; original screenplays, including that for the controversial *Baby Doll*; poetry; short stories; and novels, one of which, the bittersweet *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, was made into a major motion picture.

It is as a playwright, however, that Williams's genius shines most brightly, particularly from the early 1940's to the early 1960's, a period comprising *The Glass Menagerie*, *Summer and Smoke*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Rose Tattoo*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Orpheus Descending*, *Suddenly Last Summer*, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, and *The Night of the Iguana*. These plays encompass an unrelenting exploration of the dark underbelly of human experience: frigidity and nymphomania, impotence and rape, pedophilia and fetishism, cannibalism and coprophagy, alcohol and drug addiction, castration and syphilis, violence and madness, and aging and death. These themes place Williams squarely in the gothic tradition and reflect his early interest in the bizarre and grotesque. As a child he was fed large doses of Edgar Allan Poe by his grandfather. Tormented by a sense of existential loneliness, Williams was able to sublimate his dark vision into plays that bring to life such iconic characters as Big Daddy, Stanley Kowalski, Blanche Dubois, and Amanda Wingfield in language that has been compared favorably with William Shakespeare's. Williams is second to none among American writers whose works have been successfully made into major films. His plays have been translated into more than a score of languages and continue to be performed in theaters throughout the world.

The Glass Menagerie

Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* was regarded when first produced as highly unusual; one of the play's four characters serves as commentator as well as participant; the play itself represents the memories of the commentator years later, and hence, as he says, is not a depiction of actuality; its employment of symbolism is unusual; and in the very effective ending, a scrim descends in front of mother and daughter, so that by stage convention one can see but not hear them, with the result that both, but especially the mother, become much more moving and even archetypal. The play is also almost unique historically, in that it first opened in Chicago, came close to flopping before Chicago newspaper theater critics verbally whipped people into going, and then played successfully for months in Chicago before finally moving to equal success in New York.

One device that Williams provided for the play was quickly abandoned: A series of legends and images flashed on a screen, indicating the central idea of scenes and parts of scenes. This device provides a triple insight into Williams: first, his skill at organizing scenes into meaningful wholes; second, his willingness to experiment, sometimes successfully, sometimes not; and third, his occasional tendency to spell out by external devices what a play itself makes clear.

The Glass Menagerie opens on a near-slum apartment, with Tom Wingfield setting the time (the Depression and Spanish-Civil-War 1930's); the play's method as memory, with its consequent use of music and symbol; and the names and relationships of the characters: Tom, his sister Laura, his mother Amanda, and an initially unnamed gentleman caller. A fifth character, Tom says, is his father, who,