

WHAT IT MEANS TO MISS NEW ORLEANS? (PART 2)

PRINT

Theater - Review

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DO YOU KNOW WHAT IT MEANS TO MISS NEW ORLEANS?***Memories of the 21st Annual Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival... and of the City that George W. DUH Forgot*****TICKETHOLDERS**

*Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans
And miss it each night and day?
I know I'm not wrong
This feeling's getting' stronger
The longer I stay away...*

CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK

Katrina, which has so changed the face of this beautiful city, has had its casualties everywhere you go in town. For that reason I volunteered my services to the Festival this year rather than being one of the many people they couldn't even consider flying in, housing and paying to participate until things get back to normal—if anything has ever been normal in New Orleans. What a wonderful decision it was to return at this special, courageous time for the city, when so many residents are trying valiantly to bring the place's celebrated cultural and artistic wonders home where they belong.

In return for passes to the Festival's multitude of events, seminars and theatrical presentations, I had the great privilege to once again step onstage at Le Petit to perform in the weekend's culminating stage event *Ode to Tennessee*, another golden opportunity to tackle the evocative, gossamer poetry of Tennessee Williams, something he had personally introduced me to as a suitably wide-eyed teenager working in the original Chicago pre-Broadway production of his classic *The Night of the Iguana*.

Thrilled by my youthful heartfelt reaction to his poetry featured in *Iguana*, Tenn later gave me a small self-published book of his poems collected under the blanket title *Androgyne, Mon Amour*. When I asked him way back then why he'd printed this modest 200-copy edition himself, he whined it was "because I'm the only goddam person in the world who thinks I'm a poet." How that perception has changed and, luckily for me, I still ferociously prize that my coveted signed copy #168 of Tenn's little book of poetry that so energized me as an artist in my formative years.

A brief fortysomething years later, here I was again onstage in *Ode to Tennessee*, honoring that same poetry along with Emmy-winning actress-turned-author Louise Shaffer, my old dear friend Jeremy Lawrence, and my new dear friend Annette Cardona (Cha-Cha in the film version of *Grease*). As the four of us offered our best renditions of Williams' unforgettable verse, each work was then discussed and expounded upon by celebrated Williams scholar Dr. Kenneth Holditch, author of *Tennessee Williams and the South* and many other publications on our greatest American playwright.



PHOTO BY TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER
Neighbor on Dumaine still ravaged by Katrina

The opening night gala was entertaining to see this year from the other side of the footlights, featuring three rarely staged Williams one-acts under the blanket title *Tennessee Trio*. The first was a strange departure for Tenn, one of his few rather unsuccessful attempts at writing comedy called *Lifeboat Drill*, in which a bedridden geriatric couple aboard the QE2 (the rather underprepared Bob Edes and Charlotte Schully) try to find their dentures, make it Three Stooges-style into life preservers and, hopefully, eventually arrive on deck to participate in the dreaded drill.

Under the confusingly arbitrary direction of Perry Martin, *Drill* was hardly the best of the Festival offerings this year, but the night was quickly saved by a precision pair of playlets directed by David Kaplan and transferred to New Orleans from that *other* Tennessee Williams Festival in Provincetown, Massachusetts—and Perry was far better represented this season by *Mirrors on Chartres Street: Faulkner in New Orleans / New Orleans in Faulkner*, a remarkably promising one-man show starring Ryan Reinike and adapted by Rob Florence which “opened windows not only onto the Vieux Carre, but also onto Faulkner.”

Featuring mesmerizing performances by Jeremy Lawrence and Ben Griessmeyer in both the opening gala’s second and third pieces, *Tennessee Trio* redeemed itself with Williams’ *The Traveling Companion*, a poignant though characteristically sad autobiographical work introducing an aging, disengaged writer, not even vaguely disguised from being anyone but Williams himself, and the volatile, often humiliating relationship he shares on the road with his latest in an inexhaustible line of rough-trade rentboys for hire.

Next, set in some dreamlike *Blade Runner*-y future, a monk-cowled figure (Lawrence) and his comely young novice (Griessmeyer) join to face an uncertain future in an apocalyptic world, linked both by a need to survive and in some bizarrely conflicted and almost taunting sexual relationship neither seems to fully understand—nor do we, but the play does make one think about what it all means long into the next few days.

Aside from the aborted *Drill* session, *Tennessee Trio* proved an auspicious send-off to begin this year’s festivities, but the performance itself wasn’t the eventual highlight of the evening. After the show at Le Petit, we were guided through the Quarter on foot to observe the beginning of the Festival’s 21st consecutive year at a spectacularly lavish party hosted by N’awlins’ entrepreneur Dr. Brobson Lutz at his incredible art-filled home and grounds at 1014 Dumaine Street, which left me slack-jawed upon the realization it was also the last residence Tennessee owned there, an invitingly atmospheric property surrounding the first pool ever installed in a Quarter property, added in the 1970s by one Mr. Thomas Lanier (“Tennessee”) Williams.

One Festival official admitted a strong mischievous temptation to give me a little push into the pool, which was something, besides his own regimented daily swim, I was told Tennessee “adored to do to his boys.” Unfortunately, the sight of me rising from the waters soaking wet these days might have turned the old rogue celibate, although at age 14 in Chicago for *Iguana*, those puzzling fantasies of the flesh he kept whispering to me about backstage would have at least been somewhat less intense for him to surmount (gratefully, my skills at avoiding being caught in such unwanted situations had been honed to perfection back then after 18 months running from Paul Lynde in *Bye Bye Birdie*).

Perhaps one of the major highlights of this year’s Festival was Jeremy Lawrence’s arresting solo *Everyone Expects Me to Write Another Streetcar: Another Evening with Tennessee Williams*, a follow-up to his indelible *Talking Tennessee*. Where Jeremy’s first piece provided a glorious evening sitting with Tenn as he spouted off about his life in his own words, *Everyone Expects Me...*, still admittedly a work-in-progress, explores Williams’ life in his final, hideously darker years when his prolific writing continued but commercial success—and personal happiness—continued to elude him. In so many ways, *Everyone Expects Me...* is even more interesting than Jeremy’s first, which debuted here in LA in a career-altering appearance at the



PHOTO BY TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER

Tennessee Williams' flat at 632 1/2 St. Peter (black wrought iron balcony) where he wrote 'A Streetcar Named Desire' in 1946

Laurelgrove's former home in Studio City.

It was the summer of 2002 when *Lament for the Moths* debuted at the Laurelgrove featuring me, Monica McSwain, Julie Janney, *The O.C.*'s future superstar Chris Carmack as my lover Frank Merlo, and my friend of thirtysomething years Jolie Jones, daughter of the legendary Quincy, whom I'd recommended to replace the ailing Virginia Capers. Who knew our little show would be such a success—promoting its replacement director Michael Clark Haney to forever since declare himself the creator/adaptor of the collaborative piece which was in actuality the epitome of the term “artistic collaboration” and the brainchild of the Laurelgrove's artistic director Jack Heller.

But as Jeremy pointed out from the stage during our *Ode to Tennessee* at Le Petit, I was opportunely included in the serendipity that brought him to his current international career playing Tennessee. Even as the original run of *Lament* winded to its scheduled close, the popularity of the piece continued to grow, yet a new play in the Laurelgrove's summer Williams Festival was ready to open, prompting Heller to suggest we extend the run of *Lament* with two shows a week on the otherwise dark Sunday. Since I had been rehearsing for the premiere of Murray Mednick's *Fedunn* at the Odyssey, which had Sunday matinees scheduled, Jeremy agreed to take over my part for the afternoon performances.

In a story-of-my-life kinda thing, the performance of *Lament* attended by David Roessel and Williams specialist Nicholas Moschovakis, whose *The Collected Poems of Tennessee Williams* had just been published, featured Jeremy in my role and, within a short time, he was brought to Washington, DC to play opposite my cherished friend Kathleen Chalfant and be directed by Michael Kahn as the Writer (Williams) in *Five by Tenn* at the Kennedy Center, which then transferred to New York and won Jeremy many deserving accolades at Manhattan Theatre Club.

From there, Jeremy relocated to his hometown of New York and has made a cottage industry of appearing as Tennessee ever since, as well as touring in his other one-man adventure, playing Albert Einstein in *Albert in Wonderland*. As he told the audience from the Le Petit stage, “If it wasn't for Travis' inability to do the *Lament* matinees, none of this would have happened for me.” Of course, I couldn't be more pleased for Jeremy, my friend since we starred together as Oscar Wilde and Oskar Kokochska in Leon Katz' *Beds* in 2000 in LA, but in all honesty it's also a bit bittersweet for me. Ah well... he does look amazingly like Tenn and, although I think I found the essence of the man in my interpretation, I always looked like the Widette version of Mr. Williams anyway.

Also presented under the tutelage of David Hoover, professor of theatre at the University of New Orleans, other offerings at the 21st annual Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival this season included a captivating new play by former Angeleno Greg Barrios called *Rancho Pancho*, examining the volatile two-year love affair between Williams and his Texas-bred Mexican-American paramour Pancho Rodriguez, reportedly the model for *Streetcar's* Stanley, played here by the suitably dapper yet macho Eric Lozano, an actor transported from the original San Antonio production.

Barrios' promising play, concluding 30 years later when Tenn and Pancho met again by chance right outside the very Le Petit theatre doors where the play was now unfolding, could still use a little judicious pruning of extraneous events and characters. In its current incarnation, it suffers from too much information, losing some necessary emotional depth by concentrating on more historical data and characters than theatre viewers need to absorb. Still, it's definitely a play with a remarkable future if the fickle god Terpsichore is aligned behind it.



PHOTO BY TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER

Jeremy Lawrence (Left) and Travis Michael Holder (Right) on Jackson Square

Also of note this year was a seminar featuring indie badboy filmmaker extraordinaire John Waters, hosted by New Directions editor Thomas Keith at the gorgeous Bourbon Orleans Hotel ballroom, discussing Tenn's 1975 autobiography *Memoirs* which, was first published, attracted major controversy besides its bestseller status, much of it because of the writer's jarring openness about his randy sex life and rampant drug use.

Waters, however, admitted that "Mr. Williams saved my life" as the panelists, including the aforementioned Dr. Holditch and Provincetown's Kaplan, considered some of the observations made by Waters in his preface written for the newly reissued *Memoirs*, calling Williams one of his "first role models." Thirty-two years after its initial publication, panelists brought much-needed perspective to *Memoirs* and to the ever-growing public interest in the life of the 20th century's most remarkable theatrical wordsmith.

Between the Lines, presented at the Cabildo, discussed Yale University Press' recently published tome *Notebooks of Tennessee Williams*, featuring extensive academically generated annotations illustrated with startling photos and reproductions from earlier manuscripts. Williams kept journals from 1936 to 1959, then again from 1979 to 1981, providing an "uninhibited and rare look" at his private thoughts and feelings. *Notebooks* editor Margaret Bradham Thornton joined Mr. Keith to discuss the history of Williams' journals and some of the surprising discoveries she made about the illusive genius during the process.

One of the most interesting events of the 2007 Festival, however, besides my own joy at once again getting to perform Williams' heartbreaking *The Rented Room* at the Festival's concluding *Ode to Tennessee*, was a rare viewing of the obscure documentary *Tennessee Williams: Theatre in Progress*, which unprecedentedly traced the development of his last play, *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, from its opening press conference in the early 1970s to its first fatal performances at Boston's Schubert Theater in 1975.

The film, which was accompanied by a live discussion with California State University, Northridge professor Annette Cardona, who starred opposite Katy Jurado, Claire Bloom, and played the daughter of Anthony Quinn in the original quickly-abandoned and ill-fated Broadway production of *Red Devil*, offered an unusually personal look behind the scenes at a different kind of drama, the process of bringing live theatre to life.

According to the Festival's world-class PR guru Ellen Johnson, "What we see and hear in the film is what makes the play possible. We witness the rehearsals, follow the revisions, and encounter the problems Williams faced in bringing the work to stage. The film reveals the work in progress—the collaborative effort between the writer, director, and actors that is the creative process of theatre." Aside from all that good stuff, I got to meet Miss Cardona who, upon our mutual return to LA, has become a meteorically fast friend and frequent companion for me at LA theatre productions.

I stayed first at the resplendently atmospheric Jungle Suite at the charmingly idiosyncratic Lookout Inn Bed & Breakfast, located right along the river in the Bywater (featuring an always heated saltwater pool, an eight-person jacuzzi, and incredibly nifty two-room themed guest rooms with names like the Mardi Gras Suite, the Mission Suite, and the whimsical Elvis Suite) and then moving in for a stay with my best bud Penny Stallings, who came to the Festival with us in 2003 and ended up with a second home there.

TO BE CONTINUED...

For information about the 22nd annual Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival next March, check out their website at www.tennesseewilliams.net . For information on how to help the non-profit Sweet Home New Orleans, contact them at www.sweethomeneworleans.org . For a look at the highly recommendable Lookout Inn Bed & Breakfast, contact innkeeper/interior designer/art director/rock musician/rollerderby babe Lisa Rohan at www.lookoutneworleans.com



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TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER has been writing about LA theatre since 1987 and for Entertainment Today since 1990. As an actor, he received the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Best Actor Award as Kenneth Halliwell in the west coast premiere of Nasty Little Secrets at Theatre/Theater. He has also been honored with a Drama-Logue Award as Lennie in Of Mice and Men at the Egyptian Arena, four Maddy Awards, a ReviewPlays.com Award, NAACP, Ovation and GLAAD Award nominations, and five nominations from LA Weekly....

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