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# Tennessee Williams's Creative Frisson, Censorship, and the Queering of Theatre

The world around Tennessee Williams in the 1960s, 1970s, and into the 1980s was changing at an astonishing pace, the cultural revolution of the period rendering most of his themes of sexual closeting and repression almost inconsequential. At least the entrenched cultural taboos against which he wrote seem to have disappeared by the mid-1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s, Broadway productions of his work grew infrequent, while those mounted tended to have short runs. He told interviewers from *Theatre Arts* magazine: 'I think my kind of literary or pseudo-literary style of writing for the theatre is on its way out.' European productions of his work, on the other hand, seemed regenerative: Howard Davies's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1989), in which the director used Williams's original third act and not the version rewritten by Elia Kazan for the New York premiere; Peter Hall's revival of *Orpheus Descending* (1989–91); Benedict Andrews's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (2014), followed by his 2017 *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* – a revival deemed 'so courageous'; and in Italy, Elio De Capitani's productions of *Un tram che si chiama desiderio* (1995) and *Improvvisamente, l'estate scorsa* (2011), both in fresh, new, up-to-date translations by Masolino D'Amico – all these have maintained an edge to Williams's theatre lost in so many American productions. All seem to suggest the continued vitality of Williams's work in Europe by directors willing to probe and rediscover Williams's depths, who consider him 'a playwright worthy of further artistic investigation', as European audiences, correspondingly, seem less inclined to dismiss him as an artist whom history has overtaken. S. E. Gontarski is Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor of English at Florida State University. His critical, bilingual edition of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* was published as *Un tram che si chiama desiderio / A Streetcar Named Desire* (Pisa: Editioni ETS, 2012). His *Włodzimierz Staniewski and the Phenomenon of 'Gardzienice'*, co-edited with Tomasz Wiśniewski and Katarzyna Kręglewska, is forthcoming (Routledge).

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*For the first time in its history, English theatre has been swayed and shaped by America.*

Kenneth Tynan (1948)

REVIEWING a series of productions for the *New York Times* on 15 December 1988 under the title 'In London: Taking Williams Seriously', Frank Rich makes an insightful comment about America's most influential playwright five years after his freakish, accidental death in 1983:

In death Tennessee Williams is more often regarded by the American theater as a tragic icon than as a playwright worthy of further artistic investigation. The reverse is true in London, where the Williams canon, neglected by the major

companies during the writer's lifetime, is suddenly being rediscovered.

Rich's observation could be extended to the better part of Europe, of course, where the most serious rediscoveries of Williams's work seem centred. Much of the neglect of Williams in the United States has indeed been fuelled by preoccupations with the playwright's biography, his tempestuous life and sensational, even clownish, public and media appearances, all of which often overshadowed his art. His *Memoirs* in particular, published in 1975 and admittedly written for the cash advance, was exceptionally candid about his sexuality and love life and so did little to redeem his falling reputation.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Williams's early plays were quickly performed by Allies and newly liberated European countries, including the European premiere of *The Glass Menagerie* in Stockholm in 1946 (although Sweden was nominally neutral during the Second World War); *A Streetcar Named Desire* had opened in most major European capitals, including Rome, London, and Paris, by 1949.<sup>1</sup> These were subsequently followed by 'the critically controversial yet financially successful Paris production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* a decade later'.<sup>2</sup> In a Britain still struggling to emerge from its Victorian legacy, Williams's work appeared in heavily censored productions, and early publications tended to follow those sanitized versions of his work. The two 1980s revivals under discussion in Rich's review include *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, which opened on Broadway in March of 1955 under the direction of Elia Kazan, but saw its full, uncensored public British premiere at London's National Theatre only in this 1988 production under the 'sizzling direction' of Howard Davies, with Lindsay Duncan and Ian Charleson. (The production was restaged on Broadway in March 1990 with American actors Kathleen Turner, Daniel Hugh Kelly, and Charles Durning.) The second offering is Peter Hall's inaugural production for the Peter Hall Company, the group he formed upon retiring after his fifteen-year tenure as head of the Royal National Theatre:

Mr. Hall's *Orpheus* [*Descending*, notes Rich], which opened Tuesday night [13 December 1988] at the Haymarket Theatre, may well prove a landmark. The director has not only given his fledgling company a hit and reclaimed a little-seen work that expired in two months on Broadway in 1957; he has also rethought the whole style of Williams staging.

### Racializing Tennessee

Rethinking 'the whole style', as Rich's praise of Hall suggests, has not always proved a fruitful formula with Williams, however. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* would be rethought in America along racial lines with an all African American cast featuring Anika Noni Rose as Maggie and *Hustle & Flow* film star Terrence

Howard as Brick, beside James Earl Jones as Big Daddy and Phylicia Rashad, director Debbie Allen's sister, as Big Mama. As Professor Harvey Young noted at a 2011 round table on 'African American Productions of Williams's Drama', 'It is my understanding that the all-black *Cat* was . . . designed to appeal to audiences based upon the celebrity of the cast and crew'.<sup>3</sup> The production played at the Broadhurst Theatre in New York from 28 February through 22 June 2009.<sup>4</sup>

It was followed in 2012 by a Broadway revival of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, directed by Emily Mann and starring Blair Underwood, Nicole Ari Parker and Daphne Rubin-Vega in what *Playbill* called 'a multi-ethnic staging' by the same producers as those for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Stephen C. Byrd and Alia M. Jones, the play opening also at the Broadhurst Theatre. The all African American casting of *A Streetcar Named Desire* necessitated some overt rewriting of Williams's text, the producers eliminating the family name of Kowalski and the dialogue associated with Stanley's Polish heritage. Such cuts diminished episodes of Stanley's rage over his 'outsider' status, his being deemed 'common'; gone, too, is the grammar lesson that he delivers to the superior sisters on the difference between 'Polack' and 'Poles'. He is deemed 'sub-human' and likened to an ape by Blanche, and even Stella calls her husband 'a different species'.

That 'different species' is visually accented on the original racialized cover of the New Directions edition of the play that features three abstracted human figures, white figures, clearly female since they have stylized breasts, on either side of a black one in the Alvin Lustig-designed graphic.<sup>5</sup> Such imagery and descriptors applied to an African American rather than to a Polish American resonate quite differently. Critic George Crandell, however, defends such rewriting, what Philip Kolin on the same panel has called 'enlarging the script', and further noted at the 2011 Williams symposium round table that:

if you look at the character of Stanley Kowalski, for example, and examine the characteristics that Williams uses to describe him, they fit some of

the stereotypical views of African Americans at the time. And so the suggestion is that Tennessee Williams may have had in mind Stanley as a black man rather than a Pole, and his efforts to assert himself or his identity are his efforts as an 'other' black American; to assert himself as an American in a context that would not recognize him, that sees him [i.e. treats him] largely as invisible.

Harvey Young is also comfortable with something of a swerve in the play from ethnicity to race:

I would like to expand on . . . the role of ethnicity in Williams's work. Earlier today, there was a terrific session on the representation of Italian Americans in *The Rose Tattoo*. Similarly, I believe there's a way in which Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire* exists as a flattened or condensed representation of the racialized 'other'. He is explicitly marked as Polish but could easily be – based on his occupation and the manner with which he is regarded by Blanche – African American or Italian American within the temporal setting of the play.

At the same round table, Philip C. Kolin offers a strong counter to the general critical perception that Williams was inattentive to African Americans and civil-rights issues, and he cites Harry Rasky's documentary, *Tennessee Williams: A Portrait in Laughter and Lamentations*, where Williams says, 'I always thought I was black.'<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, when the American Place Theatre was created in 1963 in New York's St Clements Church as an off-Broadway theatre, but in Hell's Kitchen, the theatre was receptive to and encouraged the African American theatre movement, and Tennessee Williams was among its original Board of Directors.

*New Yorker* theatre critic John Lahr, on the other hand, would set an unfortunate tone to the critical response of such rethinking and even rewriting of Williams when he called for 'no more infernal all-black productions of Tennessee Williams plays unless we can have their equal in folly: all-white productions of August Wilson', from whose objections to racial or ethnic interchangeability on stage, along with cross-cultural productions in general, which may be his/their underlying thread, Lahr takes his cue.<sup>7</sup> Most unsettling is Lahr's re-establishing something of an 'us

v. them' chasm, which such 'racially neutral' productions struggle to bridge. Critics of Lahr have characterized his position as a reassertion not only of otherness, a theme Williams takes on although not always through race directly, but of white exceptionalism, and, further, objections such as Lahr's may have resounded, since this high profile, 'race neutral' *Streetcar* revival was ignored at the 2012 Tony Awards, despite the extension of its Broadway run. Ben Brantley, however, may have had as much impact on that decision as Lahr as he deemed this production a 'torpid revival of the play', noting further that 'this *Streetcar* is mostly an exquisite snooze'.<sup>8</sup>

Director Debbie Allen's updating of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to the 1980s sought to diffuse at least one racial and historical issue that might further have skewed her revival had she retained Williams's setting in the heavily segregated American South under what were then called Jim Crow laws. Nonetheless, Allen foregrounds and potentially muddles one of the great themes of the American South that Williams himself tended to avoid dealing with directly – race relations.<sup>9</sup> Allen establishes a set of credibility issues by rendering a 'red-neck' Big Daddy, a former overseer, the reputations of which were generally that of ruthless and violent plantation managers, as now a *Black* plantation owner with his own *Black* servants and plantation help, \$10 million to distribute, and '28,000 acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile' up for grabs. Such amassed wealth and its associated social standing stretch credulity, even in the play's updated 1980s setting, as they did in its 2009 performances. After a limited New York run, deemed an economic success by Paul Taylor writing in the *Independent*, the production transferred to the Novello Theatre in London in November of 2009, with replacements Sanaa Lathan and Adrian Lester as the dysfunctional couple, where it ran until 10 April 2010.

Michael Billington's review in the *Guardian* was generous but not without blind spots as he relies on the ploy of the rhetorical question. That said, he doubtless helped to increase the house even as he avoided the central issue of race in America:

What difference does it make that Tennessee Williams's play is performed by a Black cast in Debbie Allen's Broadway production? It undoubtedly gives the work a new dynamic. But ethnicity [i.e. race] matters less than emotional firepower and an awareness of the essential Williams conflict between lies and truth; and both are abundantly present in this exhilarating evening.<sup>10</sup>

That West End production went on to win the 2010 Laurence Olivier Award for 'Best Revival' of a play.

The Allen and Mann productions may have relied on the late-twentieth-century theatrical convention of 'colour blind', 'race neutral', or, more broadly, 'non-traditional casting', in which audience members were thought, taught, or otherwise encouraged not to see race (subsequently gender or ability) on stage. But the lessons of 'colour blind casting' (sometimes 'reverse casting', as in some productions with a white Othello as part of an otherwise Black cast) have tended to work better with mixed race productions, that is, with integration, as in the confusions over two sets of identical but racially mixed twins in Shakespeare's *A Comedy of Errors*, or, in fact, in the less-than-high-profile Nashville Repertory Theatre's 2020 revival of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (just before the world theatre pandemic lockdown), directed by Ned McIntyre with an African American Stella in an otherwise white cast.<sup>11</sup>

In the round-table symposium cited above, Kolin noted that 'In 1983, a Creole production was done by Charles Gordone, the first African American to win the Pulitzer in drama, featuring a black Stanley with a white Blanche, raising again all kinds of sociopolitical issues in the script'. Such expanding of the Williams script, Kolin adds, is how 'We get away from the idea of cultural encoding: that there are certain actors that can play certain parts. Blanche is always the southern belle, Stanley always the Pole, but in many African American productions of these plays these cultural encodings have been disrupted.'

The convention of racial 'blindness' is often more difficult to credit with a mono-racial cast in which one is asked not to see race in the Politt family itself, the patriarch of which (Big Daddy), Billington accurately describes as a

'domestic tyrant', on the one hand, but to treat it as conspicuous among the underclass of that social structure, the Politt servants and farm workers over whom this 'domestic tyrant' also rules, on the other. The assertion, at least theatrically, of a 'post-racial' world, may thus also entail or necessitate a 'post-historical' perspective or to require a certain cultural amnesia.

Paul Taylor lays out his version of the convention: 'What is remarkable, though, about Allen's compelling, sensitive, and acerbically comic production is how swiftly you become so absorbed by the universal elements in the story that you almost completely forget about the counter-intuitive colour of the actors' skins.' Taylor's 'almost completely forget' may need considerable unpacking for the level of cultural amnesia or suspended history necessary among his projected 'you' as his comment sidesteps or brackets the cultural and economic divide that continues to separate the races in the USA, which the integration movements of the 1950s and 1960s have, finally, failed to bridge or otherwise overcome.

Admittedly, 'free people of colour' did exist for a time, and some of them owned plantations, particularly in territories that would finally become the United States in 1803. American playwright John Guare has explored and detailed some of these issues in his 2010 play *Free Man of Colour*, set in a New Orleans of 1801, which, at that time, was an integrated international city where free humans of every race and creed enjoyed almost unrestricted freedoms. Its main character, Jacques Cornet, is 'a new world Don Juan' who is the wealthiest man of colour in New Orleans; technically a mulatto, his wealth was acquired through his father, who is a major plantation owner.<sup>12</sup> That theatrical moment might be seen as something of a validation for the racial transformation of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, but wealth in *Free Man of Colour* is a corrupting influence associated with and, indeed, enabling political corruption, immorality, and debauchery. The city's international status with its social freedoms essentially vanished with the Louisiana Purchase with the reintroduction of colour lines



and the system of enslavement two years later. As an historical moment, 'free men of colour' remain deeply buried historically and culturally in the American psyche, and the almost concurrent production of an all Black *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is set as a contemporary reality rather than an historical depiction.

On the other hand, what needed little rethinking, rewriting, expansion, or updating, on either side of the Atlantic, are classic Williams themes. Billington cites one as 'the essential Williams conflict between lies and truth', to which Brick offers the counter, self-reflexive riposte, 'mendacity is the system that we live in', punctuating his comment with, 'Liquor is one way out and death's the other'. What plays less well in such rethinking, however, is Williams's more frequent issue, something of the passing of the old and segregated order, what might generally be called the residue of a plantation social structure that depended for its social hierarchies on slaves, and later on hordes of sharecroppers, plantation help, and underpaid household servants, and that still haunts the Southern American legacy. Servants – owned, indentured, or salaried – formed the bulwark not only of the so-called and vanishing aristocratic South (see William Faulkner and Eudora Welty, say), but of middle-class life through and beyond the Civil Rights Movement and the overt demise of Jim Crow laws, and whose servants and household help were predominantly African Americans (with on occasion immigrant labour). That post-Louisiana Purchase, slavery-supported plantation system, and its persistent residue through twentieth- and twenty-first-century middle-class Southern life, are difficult to erase from history. It is one thing to put the sex back into Williams in the UK, as Davies apparently did with *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, but quite another to be as blind to the dominant strain of the American ethos as Allen was.

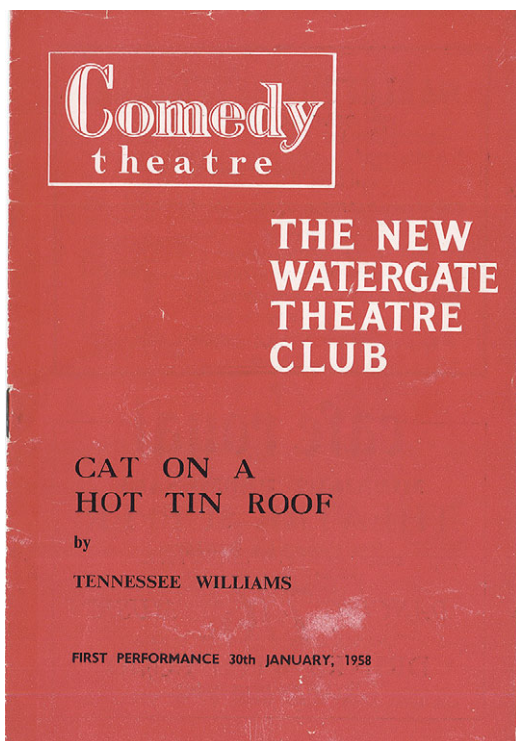
Admittedly, by 2008, another kind of history seems to have caught up with Williams, as even a rethought play becomes something of a period piece in a new, uncertain century, a quaint anachronism that Allen's partial updating is at a loss to address as central and shocking issues explored by Williams

have dissipated in subsequent years. In the playwright's day, for instance, homosexuality was still illegal in England and Wales until the Sexual Offences Act of 1967. Britain's Lord Chamberlain refused to license public performances of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, focusing on that issue. Topics like cancer, moreover, tended to remain secret in the 1950s, and alcoholism was still a misunderstood failing rather than an ailment. What were restricted topics and shocking medical ignorance in the 1950s, both part of the world in which Williams came of age and themes that his contemporary censors were eager to delete, are neither provocative nor shocking in the twenty-first century. To continue to make Williams's work contemporary, producers, directors and actors need to plumb those depths in Williams that still resonate in culture, and, as Rich suggests, many have.

### London's Post-Second World War Theatre Climate

The post-Second World War era was another matter. In his 1997 reminiscence, director Peter Hall writes of another opportunity that arose from his early struggles with the Lord Chamberlain over his staging the English language premiere of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: 'One morning the phone rang and a gentle voice from the South announced improbably that it belonged to Tennessee Williams. He had seen *Godot* and wished to meet me. He gave me the rights to direct his plays in London.'<sup>13</sup>

The phone call would launch another series of battles between the Lord Chamberlain and Hall as the director went on to stage Williams's less culturally controversial but phantasmagoric play, *Camino Real*, at the Phoenix Theatre in 1957 without incident, but the more controversial, since unexpurgated, production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* needed to be staged at the Comedy Theatre functioning as a private club theatre, and so was presented 'by subterfuge' in 1958 (Figure 1).<sup>14</sup> Such restrictions on public performance created something of a paradox according to *Guardian* critic Philip Hope-Wallace, writing on 31 January 1958, since *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*



**Figure 1.** Programme of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* at the New Watergate Theatre Club, directed by Peter Hall, January 1958.



**Figure 2.** *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* at the New Watergate Theatre Club, 1958.

‘can be bought on any bookstall in the Penguin edition, [but] is nevertheless a banned play and was last night put on by subterfuge as a club theatre production at the Watergate Theatre Club’:<sup>15</sup>

Such censorship may look fatuous and hypocritical but, if the facade serves as a filter to keep out the shockable, it is not so foolish a device. For this play is in a true sense shocking. It has a violence of utterance beyond anything else Mr. Williams has written, and it is about sawn-off, coarse, violent people, often seen with a savage veracity but not, as in some of Williams’s other plays, winning much sympathy.<sup>16</sup>

The British Library’s censorship blog notes further that whilst the Lord Chamberlain’s Office could ban a play from public performance, it had no jurisdiction over private performances which could take place in ‘private’ theatres often established as club theatres where access was granted to audiences who

paid a nominal subscription to the club. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was first performed ‘privately’ in Britain for the New Watergate Club at the Comedy Theatre in January 1958. Founded with the intention of staging plays without censorship, the club boasted 64,000 members at the time of the play’s premiere and helped undermine the authority of the Lord Chamberlain’s Office enabling plays with LGBTQ content to be performed uncensored.<sup>17</sup>

The first query about Hall’s production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* came from London’s Arts Theatre on 29 October 1955, sent by Anne Jenkins, the theatre’s manager (Figure 2). The Lord Chamberlain’s report was issued by the Examiner of Plays, C. D. Heriot, quickly, on 2 November 1955, Williams’s reputation preceding him, and it contained the following damning assessment:

Once again Mr. Williams vomits up the recurring theme of his not-too-subconscious. This is the

fourth play (and there are sure to be others) where we are confronted by the gentlewoman debased, sunk in her private dreams as a remedy for her sexual frustration, and over all [is] the author's horror, disgust and rage against the sexual act.

Two versions of the last act are submitted. In the first, and original version, the family bicker and quarrel in the absence of the father, until Margaret suddenly announces the fact that she is pregnant – this ensuring that she and Brick will inherit the larger part (if not the whole) of the estate – and at the very end of the play, hiding all the bottles of drink from Brick and telling him that if he wants one, he must impregnate her first.

The second version of the last act is the one in which the producer, Elia Kazan, collaborated with the author for the New York production. It is sentimental and false. Margaret's announcement is made in the presence of the father amid a symbolic thunderstorm, the brother and sister in law are foiled of their share of the estate and Margaret dramatically splinters all the drink bottles on the concrete below the veranda, while Brick sheepishly remembers his manhood. There is an added and unnecessary incident story about elephants.

The whole thing is pretentious, over-strained, and hysterical. The author obviously believes he is writing Literature with a big L. (An example of his pretentiousness can be seen on page 46 of Act II.) The language is repetitively coarse – and loses its effect in consequence.

As far as I can judge, the homosexual element is false – that is to say, we are to believe Brick when he says that his wife and relations 'dreamed it up'. I think, therefore, that with a lot of cuts, listed below, the Lord Chamberlain might consider granting a licence for this bogus play.<sup>18</sup>

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was resubmitted on 1 December 1958, and submitted yet again by the Connaught Theatre of Worthing on 8 July 1959; re-reviewing the play on 12 July 1963, Heriot cites the submissions 'in 1955 and 1958' (see above) that were finally rejected 'because there was no time or place of production' and so 'no licence was issued'. Such persistent and adamant licensing denials were issued in the face of 'this bogus play', this 'pretentious, over-strained, and hysterical' work's having won not only the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in the United States in 1955 (Williams's second, *A Streetcar Named Desire* having received the award in 1948), but, across the Atlantic, Hall's club production also having won the *London Evening Standard* theatre award for 1958 (Figure 3).

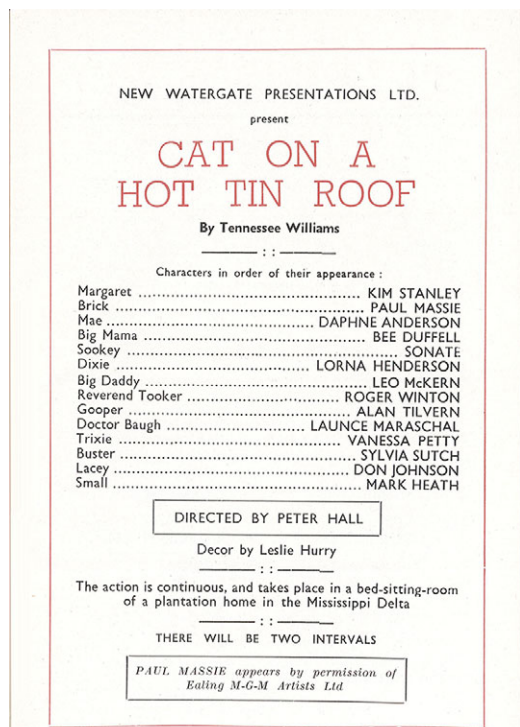


Figure 3. Cast list, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* at the New Watergate Theatre Club, 1958.

Other European countries found Williams less toxic:

Gothenburg City Theatre hosted the lucrative European premiere of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in September 1955. Apart from the numerous regional theatres where Williams's plays were frequently performed, his works found a welcoming home at the private Vasa Theatre in Stockholm (which enjoyed record box-office success with a production of *Cat* in 1956, and hosted the European premiere of *Sweet Bird of Youth* in 1959).

On two separate occasions, Williams paid a visit to Sweden in order to attend the European premieres of *The Rose Tattoo* in 1951 and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1955, both at Gothenburg City Theatre. The latter production was significantly more sexually daring than Elia Kazan's Broadway version and notable for its lead actress, Gunnel Broström, as Maggie Politt, who played the major part of the first act in nothing but a bra and panties (unlike Barbara Bel Geddes on Broadway, who wore a less-revealing slip during these scenes). The production, which also offered a rather exoticized view of the Deep South, mesmerized Swedish audiences and critics and precipitated a media debate over the representation of female sexuality, which continued for several months following opening night.



Despite Williams's own doubts about the merits of the Gothenburg production, 'done so badly that I could hardly sit through it', as he (arguably unfairly) dismissed it, he approached Schmidt the following year with a request to produce *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in Paris, a market that up until then had been less than embracing of both his own plays and American drama in general. In December 1956, for instance, the same month that *Cat* opened in the French capital, the influential magazine *Arts* published a long condemnation of American theatre, which it deemed to be melodramatic, predictable, and spiced up with 'eroticism or perversity, sadism or drugs'.<sup>19</sup>

### 'The Start of Modern Drama'

In his historical retrospect, Hall dated 'the start of modern drama' to this 1950s period: not just modern British drama, that is, but 'modern drama' itself; and not with the landmark staging of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* by the English Stage Company in 1956,<sup>20</sup> but a year earlier, with his own staging of *Waiting for Godot* in August 1955, to which we might further add his daring *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1958 to create something like an internationalist trilogy of modern twentieth-century drama – a tetralogy if we add the English Stage Company's production of *Orpheus Descending*, directed by Tony Richardson in May 1959.

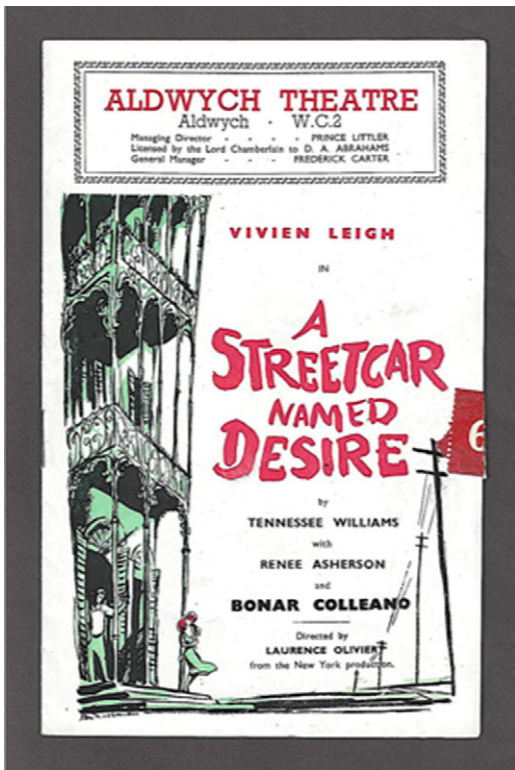
What Hall avoided or ignored, however, were two earlier, seminal Williams productions that paved the way for much theatrical change in the UK. The first was the West End production of *The Glass Menagerie* at the Theatre Royal Haymarket, directed by John Gielgud. The original Broadway production opened on 31 March 1945 at the Playhouse Theatre in New York City, and ran for 563 performances. The London production opened on 28 July 1948, and ran for 109 performances, with Helen Hayes making her London debut in a cast including Frances Heflin, Phil Brown, and Hugh McDermott. Original music was composed by Paul Bowles, with sets by Jo Mielziner. It was produced by Tennent Productions Ltd., in association with the Arts Council of Great Britain and by arrangement with The Theater Guild of New York, the last suggesting that the British production followed closely that

in New York. The second, landmark UK production, likewise following closely the one in New York, was Laurence Olivier's staging of *A Streetcar Named Desire* with his then wife, Vivien Leigh, as Blanche, which opened in London's West End on 11 October 1949 and ran at the Aldwych Theatre for 326 performances.

These two productions of Williams plays suggest that Hall's dating of modernity and the drama, particularly in the UK, may be out by close to a decade – and his timeline thus a bit self-serving. While *The Glass Menagerie* was staged in London without much resistance, *Streetcar's* route to the West End was contentious and fraught with obstacles as the British premiere ran up against the persistent remnants of Victorianism amid the austerities of a post-war Britain's re-establishing its identity, which censorship Philip Hope-Wallace continued to justify, as we have seen. *A Streetcar Named Desire* met with primarily moral resistance, if not downright hostility, from newspapers like the *Sunday Pictorial* (with a circulation of 5 million), which, on 2 October 1949, called the play 'salacious and degrading'.<sup>21</sup>

When Leigh was chosen to play Blanche for the British premiere, she agreed on condition that her husband, Laurence Olivier, direct – a condition quickly agreed, after which Olivier became co-producer as well.<sup>22</sup> And although the English production was not an exact copy of the New York staging, a substantial level of reproduction was inevitable since the New York production made so strong an international impact; Gore Vidal famously called it 'an earthquake'.<sup>23</sup> Olivier received copies of and worked closely with Elia Kazan's promptbooks, for example, and the production finally looked and sounded much like the one in New York since Olivier also used Joseph 'Jo' Mielziner's sets and Alex North's music. The advertising imagery also mimicked exactly that of the New York production,<sup>24</sup> and the playbill's acknowledgement reads as follows: 'Directed by Laurence Olivier from the New York production' (Figure 4). The British staging was, however, much shortened and substantially censored.





**Figure 4.** Programme of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, directed by Laurence Olivier, Aldwych Theatre, 1949.

The licence to perform was applied for in 1948, and only granted after protracted negotiation in October 1949, with extensive cuts, including Stanley's reference to his 'kidneys' suffering from Blanche's extended use of the apartment's single toilet. Further, Olivier was warned, there should be 'no suggestive business accompanying any undressing'. Olivier accepted such sanitizing, but he also sent Williams his own redrafting of the play, a sixteen-page, handwritten letter with suggested cuts and changes for the London opening, many designed to deal with what some critics attending the Manchester Opera House try-outs, from 27 September to 7 October 1949, considered the play's excessive length. Olivier would call scenes 'dangerously loaded with length', offering in the process a writing tutorial to the playwright: 'It is highly dangerous to have an early scene between two people like Stella and Blanche seem long'.<sup>25</sup> He also offered a 'new reading' of Stanley as 'not the bruiser type', Olivier generally defending his

new readings to the playwright as 'a slightly subtler approach' that claimed an added vitality to the play, but finally modulated it.<sup>26</sup>

Essentially, Olivier was rewriting the play, and Williams's Stanley in particular, for his male lead and his British audience, which was unaccustomed to such tectonic slippages as Williams had to offer. Looking back on the issues in 1974, Williams famously quipped that anyone who writes so detailed a letter deserves respect, so he acceded to Olivier's cuts and revisions, many of which simply copied and justified those mandated by the Lord Chamberlain. Other suggestions were based on Olivier's work with the play in its Manchester try-out and the nature of his leading actors. The result was an overall reduction of the play's running time by nearly an hour, from three hours (with two intervals) in Manchester, to just over two hours in London.<sup>27</sup> So it was not until the renewed interest in Williams in the 1980s (see Frank Rich's comments above) that Britain's theatre audiences finally saw the complete play, since the American film, available in the UK in 1952, was itself heavily censored.

Olivier seems to have got Williams wrong again, this time as an actor, when he played Big Daddy in a ninety-minute truncated version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* for British television in 1976.<sup>28</sup> According to Michael Billington, writing in 2012:

The author wasn't . . . thrilled with a 1976 Granada TV production, starring Natalie Wood and Robert Wagner. Here, according to Williams, Laurence Olivier mistakenly conceived Big Daddy as 'a southern planter gentleman instead of a former overseer who struck it rich through hard work'. In fact, you have to leap forward to 1988 to find a British production that finally did full justice to Williams's symphonic play. This was Howard Davies's superlative revival at the National Theatre [cited by Rich above], starring Lindsay Duncan as Maggie, Ian Charleson as Brick, and Eric Porter as Big Daddy'.<sup>29</sup>

Billington here seems to be echoing Kolin as well, who, two years earlier, writing in the 2010 Methuen Drama edition of the play, noted more pointedly that 'Olivier looked more like a stately elder Mark Twain or slimmer Colonel Sanders projecting an aristocratic

Big Daddy, not the self-made, coarse man Williams imagined'.<sup>30</sup>

Olivier's 'new reading' of Stanley Kowalski's character in 1949 did not, mercifully, establish a standard for staging in the UK, despite Olivier's claim that his re-rendering added vitality to the play. As Billington wrote in reference to Benedict Andrews's updated, heavily sexualized, if at times also anachronistic, revival of the play at the Young Vic in March 2014:

Ben Foster . . . plays Stanley as a deeply physical man whose natural instinct when crossed is to lash out. There is something dangerous about this sweaty, tattooed, close-cropped Stanley who has recently been discharged from the military and who has not lost his combative instinct. At the same time, you understand his refusal to be patronized and insulted by his affected sister-in-law.<sup>31</sup>

The *Daily Mail* called Foster's Stanley 'chillingly thuggish'; Billington's appraisal returns to Kenneth Tynan's observation of Olivier's (censored) production and the theatrical change generated in post-war Britain:

For the first time in its history, English theatre has been swayed and shaped by America, by which I mean Hollywood as well as Broadway. The young people . . . cut their teeth on the films of Welles, Wyler, Wilder, and Kazan, and on the plays (later adapted for the screen) of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams.<sup>32</sup>

Billington's assessment punctuates such cross-fertilization – the two-way, transatlantic traffic in 2014 that had been adumbrated by Frank Rich in 1988.

Peter Hall was less tolerant of British theatrical repression and the Lord Chamberlain's demanding cuts with his 1958 production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. His 'subversive' solution was to repeat his initial 1955 strategy for Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which was also a victim of the Lord Chamberlain's blue pencil: circumvention. The play was performed at a private club, which put the performance outside the reach of the Lord Chamberlain, although Hall, too, would accede to the Lord Chamberlain's demands for the Beckett premiere once the show moved to the West End.

## The Lord Chamberlain's Blue Pencil

The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas in Austin celebrated the Williams centenary in 2011 with an exhibition entitled 'Becoming Tennessee Williams', and it offered an overview not only of Williams's difficulties with the censors, American and European, but those of Hall as well.<sup>33</sup> Guy Adams, writing for London's *Independent*, summarized the long list of cuts and requests for alterations that Hall received:

*Streetcar* was eventually staged, with Laurence Olivier as a director, in 1949, two years after it had opened on Broadway. But an effort to bring *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to the UK almost a decade later met even more severe difficulties. A 1955 letter from the Lord Chamberlain – part of a collection at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas – reveals that the producers were told to make 34 changes to the script before it was deemed acceptable for London.

Williams was told to delete allegedly offensive words, including 'crap', 'Christ', 'Jesus', 'bull crap', 'frig', 'half ass', 'boobs', 'humping' and 'ass-aching'. He was also told to cut a paragraph in which a character discusses a sexual liaison by saying: 'I laid her, regular as a piston' . . . [There were] instructions to remove entire pages that referred to the homosexuality of Brick [ . . . ] Phrases such as 'ducking sissies' and 'queers' had to be cut. A typical paragraph [of the report] reads: 'The discussion on page 45 [must] be altered, so as to eliminate the suggestion that there may have been a homosexual relationship'.<sup>34</sup>

The response to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* thus almost duplicated the Lord Chamberlain's required alterations to *A Streetcar Named Desire* a decade earlier. H. M. Tennent for the Globe Theatre on Shaftsbury Avenue submitted *A Streetcar Named Desire* for licence on 23 June 1948 with the requisite reading fee of 2 pounds 2 shillings. N. W. Gwatkin sent the results to William Conway on 12 July 1948. What was read was a mimeographed copy stamped 24 June 1948, the multiple copies made by the well-regarded Mrs Marshall's Typewriting Service in the Strand, a member of the Society of Typists, that is, 'Play typists'. This was a service that Oscar Wilde had used as well. In June of 1949 the following comments were made on one such copy:

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I-2-13	marked for cut: 'The four-letter word deprived us of our plantation'.
I-3-2	'for the sake of Jesus' altered to 'for god's sake'.
I-3-6	'Well, one night – the plaster cracked!' marked as questionable.
I-4-9	'But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark'; 'in the dark' marked as questionable with the question 'leave?'
II-1-3	'That ruttin' hunk' marked 'alter everywhere' and a request for 'euphemism'.
II-1-5	'I only do that with other girls because I love you'; 'do that' marked for cutting; 'fool with' offered as an alternative.
II-2-3	'In fact I was somewhat flattered that – desired me!'; 'desired me' questioned with the note 'seems unnecessary'. Another comment: 'I should leave [it]'.
II-2-4	Marked for cut all of Blanche's French with Mitch.
II-2-10	'Then I found out. In the worst of all possible ways.' Good deal of marginalia erased, but 'for his negress' offered as a possibility; 'and another' offered as well. To 'Afterwards we pretended that nothing had been discovered. Yes, the three of us drove out to Moon Lake Casino'; 'the three of us' cut and a 'we' substituted.
III-1-6	'It's not my soul, it's my kidneys I'm worried about.' One comment: 'Pity to cut this but I suppose we should.'
III-1-7	'This beautiful and talented young man was a degenerate' marked for cutting.
III-2-2	'God damns' left here unaltered.
III-2-4	'God, honey, it's gonna be sweet when we can make noise in the night the way we used to and get the coloured lights going with nobody's sister behind the curtains to hear us.' Comment: 'This I gather is an elaborate euphemism, which I should leave'.
III-3-5	'Christ' changed to 'God'.
III-5-1	'rutting' cut.
III-5-11	'rutting' cut. <sup>135</sup>

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The Lord Chamberlain's Reader's Report of 25 June 1948 was followed by the Lord Chamberlain's stamp dated 13 April 1949, apparently the date of approval. *Streetcar* was described in the reports as 'a mixture of the lurid and the high-brow', a play about 'a tragic

nymphomaniac'. The approval came with a general 'Warning about undressing'. But 'there is nothing in the story that would justify a ban' and so 'nothing insuperable over production of the play'. 'There are also a number of god-damns, but they have already typed some of them with the "god" [set off] in brackets [as an alternative], and so [the producers] are no doubt ready to modify them accordingly'; these comments including the note, read by H. C. Game citing Allardyce Nicoll. Another handwritten note on the script emphasized, 'cut "rutting" everywhere' and was part of the call to issue 'a general warning to Tennent that they must see that reasonable restraint is exercised in production to suit the (still) milder tastes of an English audience compared to the American'.

The Assistant Comptroller for the Lord Chamberlain writes (to Tennent presumably) agreeing with Game's recommendations, adding further, specifically:

Act 2, scene 2, p. 10, the passage from 'Then I found out. In the worst of all possible ways' down to 'the three of us drove out to Moon Lake Casion [*sic*]', on p. 11. The Lord Chamberlain is of the opinion that this passage should be altered, making the young man found with a negress, instead of another man. This would entail altering or omitting, the lines on page 7, Act III, scene 1, 'This beautiful and talented young man was a degenerate'.<sup>36</sup>

Olivier conceded, in a letter of 6 October 1949, on behalf of Laurence Olivier Productions, Limited, written from the Midland Hotel in Manchester to Brigadier Norman Gwatkin, acknowledging the Lord Chamberlain's cuts and agreeing that the Lord Chamberlain's 'Endorsement' depended on:

1. Act 1, scene 2, p. 13. 'The four-letter word' is out [i.e., this phrase, not any particular 'four-letter word'].
2. Act 1, scene 2, p. 13. 'for God's sake' is substituted for 'for the sake of Jesus'.
3. All use of the word 'ruttin' is omitted.
4. Act 2, scene 1, p. 5. 'fool with' is substituted for 'do that'.
5. Act 2, scene 2, p. 11. 'an older man who had been his friend for years' is omitted.
6. Act 3, scene 1, p. 6. You kindly allowed me to have 'It's not my soul I'm worried about'

cutting the words 'it's my kidneys' from the sentence.

7. Act 3, scene 3, p. 6. 'God' is substituted for 'Christ'.
8. All the undressing business is conducted in a perfectly wholesome domestic manner.
9. Over and above these points, you allowed me to include:

Act 1, scene 1. The following joke told by Steve: 'And the old lady is on her way to Mass and she's late and there's a cop standin' in front of th' church an' she comes runnin' up an' says 'Officer – is Mass out yet?' He looks her over and says 'No, Lady, but y'r hat is on crooked!' There is a great deal of business accompanying this dialogue and the point of the story receives no mark of appreciation from the audience. It is, however, helpful as a piece of character and mood setting.

Act 2, scene 1, p. 3. 'that dribble puss hunk' as alternative to 'ruttin'.

Act 3, scene 5, p. 1. Pablo: 'I'm cursing your Godamn luck,' in place of 'ruttin'.'<sup>37</sup>

Hugh Beaumont, writing for H. M. Tennent on 6 April 1949, suggests further:

I have now talked at length to Tennessee Williams and Irene Selznick in New York and read them your latest suggestions.<sup>38</sup> Both Mr. Williams and Mrs. Selznick are very upset in view of the fact that the play has now been running for over 18 months in New York, for nearly a year in Chicago, and has been produced in most of the European capitals with great success, and in no instance has any member of the American or European press raised any unfavourable comment upon the particular scene in question [Grey's suicide], or indeed upon the nature of the play.

Tennessee Williams feels that the speech under discussion is the entire basis of 'Blanche's character'.<sup>39</sup>

Much of the popular British press was, however, unkind, particularly the *Sunday Pictorial* of 2 October 1949 (p. 7), where in 'A Streetcar Named Desire', Ralph Champion notes that:

For three hours last week [i.e., the long version], I felt like a Peeping Tom. . . . instead of sitting in the stalls of a Manchester theatre, I seemed to be peering through the window of a bed-sitter in New Orleans watching with fascinated horror the intimacies of a bunch of sub-humans. . . . The censor made some cuts before the play received his blessing. Apart from occasional lines, there remain few verbal shocks.<sup>40</sup>

Harold Hobson, on the other hand, defended the play in *The Sunday Times* on 13 November 1949 along curiously moralistic grounds:

it is strictly, and even puritanically, moral. . . . Mr. Tennessee Williams's play, far from being daring, is rigidly, even timidly, conventional. . . . the wages of sin is death. . . . Mr. Williams looking into Blanche with inflexible judgement but also with human pity, legitimately finds in her story many moments of touching beauty.<sup>41</sup>

### Creative Frisson

Such cultural friction, such resistance, seemed to fuel Williams's creativity rather than dampen it, even as he often languished in self-doubt. Williams ranks among those writers whose work is difficult to separate from their personalities, and his self-doubt was legendary. It comes as little surprise, then, that, during the writing and staging of *Suddenly, Last Summer*, the play that not only treats closeted homosexuality and not so much mental illness itself as period treatment of mental illness most directly, Williams himself was in the midst of analysis with New York psychiatrist Dr Lawrence Kubie, and mostly resenting the experience. As he wrote to Maria St. Just on 30 October 1957:<sup>42</sup>

The analysis is still going on, and it gets a bit dreary. It can be an awful drag, concentrating so thoroughly, day after day, on all the horrid things about yourself. If only we could turn up something nice. . . . Of course he is attacking my sex life and has succeeded in destroying my interest in all except the Horse [or 'Little Horse', Williams's nickname for his lover, Frank Merlo].<sup>43</sup>

Kubie seemed determined to cure Williams of what was perhaps the source of his creativity, as the playwright was suffering not only his usual self-doubt but also a number of professional setbacks as well during this period. The psychiatrist even suggested that Williams give up writing, which was Williams's life. *A Streetcar Named Desire*, starring Jessica Tandy in 1947, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, first staged on Broadway in 1955 with Barbara Bel Geddes in the title role, became instant classics, the latter reputedly Williams's favourite



play, and both were made into highly successful films, albeit with different leading ladies and a new leading man for *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof*.

*Orpheus Descending*, whose revival Rich cites above, also derives from this early period. It was a rewrite not only of the Orpheus myth but also of an earlier Williams failed play from 1940 called *Battle of Angels*, which was professionally produced but had closed on its opening night in Boston after an on-stage fire emptied the theatre.<sup>44</sup> The New York run of *Battle of Angels* was subsequently cancelled, and its rewrite as *Orpheus Descending* was something of a flop on Broadway with its overload of Williams's Southern Gothic themes and imagery. Its principal actors, Maureen Stapleton, playing 'the part I meant for Anna [Magnani]', and Cliff Robertson, were praised by New York critics, but the play ran for only two months, from 21 March to 18 May 1957.<sup>45</sup> Of Magnani, who was scheduled to play the stage version of Lady, Williams wrote on 3 January 1957: 'Deal fell through because of her unwillingness to play more than two months.' The 1959 film version, directed by Sidney Lumet and now retitled *The Fugitive Kind*, fared better in part because of the casting of Marlon Brando as Val and Magnani as Lady. And the 1990 made-for-TV version of Peter Hall's 1988–9 London and New York stagings, cited by Rich above, with Vanessa Redgrave and Kevin Anderson, and using the title of the stage play, was also well received.

The paperback publication of the play in 1960 was not so straightforward, however. The text published is that of the Broadway play of 1957, but it was issued under the film's title and the eight pages of interior photographs and the cover art were taken from the film rather than from the stage performance. After the 1957 failures of *Orpheus Descending*, however, Williams turned immediately to another mythic theme and wrote *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1958), which ends with the recollection of scenes of repressed homosexual rape and cannibalism reminiscent of *The Bacchae*.

Much of Williams's creative uncertainty, something of a self-analysis, is laid out in a

letter to Gadge – Elia Kazan – on 3 April 1957: 'I have been living for years with an always partially and sometimes completely blocked talent, which was only quite free in *Streetcar* and for the very special reason that I thought I was dying, and that thought eclipsed the anxiety which had always blocked my talent.'<sup>46</sup> He went on to question the Broadway production of *Orpheus* directed by Harold Clurman:

Am I wrong in thinking that if you had directed *Orpheus* it would have been one of our greatest successes? I don't think so. I think your appreciation of its basic truth would have inspired me to lift it above its theatricalism [the complaint levelled against the play by critic Walter Kerr in his review for the *New York Herald Tribune*, 22 March 1957] . . . You could have staged the ending so it would play and score. You would have found the key in which the play is written, not just intellectually but with the artist's and poet's vision, and gotten a stunning performance from Maureen [Stapleton] all the way through.<sup>47</sup>

Williams then offers himself some advice, announcing his return to New Orleans to cut down on his drinking and to 'start analysis there if I still feel I need it'. The reliance of Williams on Kazan is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the staging of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in March 1955. The 1958 paperback publication includes two third acts: the one Williams originally wrote, and the one 'As Played in New York Production'.<sup>48</sup> In a 'Note of Explanation' to this latter third act, Williams acknowledges the influence of a powerful director like Kazan: 'I wanted Kazan to direct the play, and though these suggestions were not made in the form of an ultimatum, I was fearful that I would lose his interest if I didn't re-examine the script from his point of view. I did.'<sup>49</sup> Writing in the *New York Times* on 2 November 2003, Jason Zinoman cites Kenneth Tynan's comments on the original New York production:

When the legendary theatre critic Kenneth Tynan saw the 1955 Broadway premiere of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, directed by Elia Kazan, he thought something was amiss. 'It was August, all right, and turbulent, but there were moments of unaccountable wrongness, as if a kazoo had intruded into a string quartet,' he wrote in an essay for *Mademoiselle* magazine.

Tynan discovered the source of his discontent when he compared Tennessee Williams's original 1954 script with the Broadway version, which included a revamped third act, with changes recommended by Kazan. 'The kazoo,' Tynan wrote, 'was Kazan.' Kazan had encouraged Williams to soften the play's bleak conclusion for a Broadway audience.<sup>50</sup>

The published record of this collaboration suggests almost two different plays, a situation that rankled Williams. In an exchange of letters with Peter Brook in 1956, Williams addressed the issue forthrightly. Brook wrote:

Of course I am thrilled and delighted as I have always longed to do one of your plays. I will endeavour to do it as best as I can – will you in exchange please do something for me? Just write down at random any thoughts, comments, ideas, reactions, criticisms, etc. that have crossed your mind in connection with the New York production, the performance of the play in general, the characters, the background and so on.<sup>51</sup>

Williams, excited by the prospect, replied:

I have always wanted to see a play of mine produced by you, and I will put everything else aside and fly over to see this one if you will open with my own third act, I mean as I originally conceived and wrote it, but there is no point in my seeing it again in the form that doesn't have the intense honesty that I think is the play's chief virtue.<sup>52</sup>

The play he would take up after the eventual failure of *Orpheus Descending* would feature a return to New Orleans, to the city's Garden District, the title that he gave his diptych, which included *Suddenly, Last Summer* as one of its panels. Here Williams returned to his core themes, the repressed homosexuality that triggered cuts to early British productions of his work, particularly to *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, until the abolition of the censoring function of the Lord Chamberlain in 1968, and so he regenerated the frisson of what then might have been termed forbidden love or desire. The first reading of *Suddenly, Last Summer* by the Lord Chamberlain's office in 1958 denied production rights, the initial reviewer noting that 'T. Williams has a mind like a sewer' and so '[I] shall not recommend the play for

licence'.<sup>53</sup> Cutting was not an option since eliminating references to homosexuality in the play would be like 'cutting the story of Sodom and Gomorrah out of the Bible'. That initial negative ruling was overturned internally, however:

I do not think it calls for banning. The only question is whether the two references to homosexuality should be deleted. They are very indirect – in fact barely recognizable as homosexual references. They are part of the tale not action. This part of the tale is an essential part of the play and I think it is a question of banning the whole play or allowing it all. I will allow it all and a licence can be issued.<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion

The world around Williams in the 1960s and 1970s was changing at an astonishing pace, the cultural revolution of the period rendering most of his themes of sexual closeting and repression almost inconsequential. At least, the entrenched cultural taboos against which he wrote seem to have disappeared by the mid 1960s and 1970s. Broadway productions of his work consequently grew infrequent, while those mounted tended to have short runs. The exceptions relied on star power for their draw, like the 1990 revival of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* with Kathleen Turner as Maggie the Cat, Daniel Hugh Kelly as Brick, and Charles Durning as Big Daddy, in Howard Davies's Broadway re-staging of his 1988 London success.

Somehow, by the 1980s, Williams's plays seem to have resonated more fully, even in America, with European directors willing to probe the subtleties of their psychological depths, even as Williams himself seems to have acknowledged not only that attitudes towards sexuality, particularly homosexuality, his principal taboo, had changed drastically over his creative lifetime but that theatre itself was moving in new directions. After the very limited success of *The Night of the Iguana* in 1962, he mused to an interviewer from *Theatre Arts*: 'I think my kind of literary or pseudo-literary style of writing for the theatre is on its way out.'<sup>55</sup> In his forthright *Memoirs*, in fact, he admitted that today's audiences seem 'obdurately resistant to my kind of

theatre. . . [they] seem to be conditioned to a kind of theatre which is quite different from the kind I wish to practise. . . . I am quite through with the kind of plays that established my early and popular reputation.<sup>56</sup>

He embraced and absorbed such theatrical change, and sought to follow it, for a time, but in his own way. As he continues: 'I am doing a different thing, which is altogether my own, not influenced at all by other playwrights at home or abroad or by other schools of theatre. My thing is what it always was, to express my world and my experience of it in whatever forms seems suitable to the material.' That is, Williams seemed both to lament the change that appeared to diminish his sort of theatre and to embrace the work of new playwrights, 'who are exploring the subtleties of human relations that haven't been explored'. As he suggested in a 1962 interview, 'It's something that drives me crazy with jealousy. I love it. While I'm in the theatre, I'm enthralled by it and I say, Oh, God, if I could write like that. If only I were twenty-five and just starting out, what these boys could have given me.'<sup>57</sup> He was, thus, an enthusiastic supporter of, and was perhaps regenerated by, the work of a new generation of experimental playwrights like Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, and Samuel Beckett.

European productions, like Davies's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1989), which returned to Williams's original third act and so rejected the sort of tailoring to contemporary Broadway taste that Kazan's rewritten third act for the New York premiere represented, tended to emphasize aesthetic over more commercial values. Davies's rethinking 'the whole style' of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was therefore of a piece with Peter Hall's *Orpheus Descending* (1989–91) and with Benedict Andrews's 'updated' 2017 revival of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, deemed 'so courageous' because of its overt nudity. While in Italy, Elio De Capitani's productions of *Un tram che si chiama desiderio* (1995) and *Improvvisamente, l'estate scorsa* (2011) were staged in fresh, new, up-to-date translations by Masolino D'Amico. These directors appear to have tapped into the energy and freshness that Williams found in that new generation of playwrights he called 'these boys'.

Contemporary European directors seem, somehow, to have recovered an innovative edge to Williams's theatre, blunted in so many American productions. Such a thread suggests the continued vitality of Williams's work in Europe, among directors willing to probe and rediscover his depths, to treat him as 'a playwright worthy of further artistic investigation', as Rich suggested, and as European audiences, correspondingly, appear less inclined to dismiss him as an artist whom history has overtaken.<sup>58</sup> But as many questions are raised as answered in such an assessment: as, for example, what actually constitutes innovation, the so-called rethinking 'the whole style' of Williams? For De Capitani, much new energy was generated linguistically with fresh translations replacing those made immediately or shortly after the Second World War. Rob Ashford's revival of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* at the Richard Rodgers Theater in New York in 2013, with Scarlett Johansson, on the other hand, tended to rely on star power with which the producers had hoped to make the leap to the West End:

There had been rumours that the sell-out [New York] production, directed by London-based Old Vic Associate Director Rob Ashford and which also stars Irish actor Ciaran Hands, would travel to the West End (Ashford directed [Rachel] Weisz in Williams's classic play *A Streetcar Named Desire* at the Donmar Warehouse in 2009).<sup>59</sup>

Too often, however, what passes for innovation, daring, or rethinking means recalibrating the shock value of Williams's work, making more explicit what Williams left implicit, thus foregrounding elements the Lord Chamberlain found objectionable in the post-war 1940s and 1950s British climate. We have, then, Benedict Andrews's 2017 nudity-laced version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, produced by the Young Vic but which opened directly in the West End and was also subsequently broadcast internationally during the 2020 pandemic, although the obviously contrived southern accents of the cast, apparently used to punctuate the production's Southern American authenticity, wound up sounding risible if not painful, like warmed-over *Dallas*.<sup>60</sup> Likewise, the feigned cunnilingus in Andrews's

'radical overhaul' in his 2014 revival of *A Streetcar Named Desire* at the Young Vic, also streamed free world-wide to an international audience during the 2020 pandemic and West End shut-down, might be deemed unnecessarily sensationalist even as the cast insisted, 'We're not doing a full-on sex show.'<sup>61</sup>

Whether such scenes are pandering, misguided contemporization or a legitimate probing of the work's reach and depths remains as contentious as William's original rape scene in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Williams himself had serious reservation about a coarsening of his work, particularly the language of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*:

I would regret very much if this new play had to rely even in a minor degree on the public's appetite for salaciousness. . . . when I heard that word was getting around that we had a dirty show filled with dirty dialogue I strongly advised their removal.<sup>62</sup>

Williams finally retained the coarseness of language since 'it helped establish some of the characters, most of all the crude and uncouth Big Daddy'.<sup>63</sup>

We might conclude, glibly perhaps, that the UK is still struggling with its legacy of sexual repression, driven especially by what Williams called the 'intense honesty' of his plays, as, equally glibly, we might add that the USA remains entangled in the inextricable legacy of race, an issue that Williams tended to underplay in favour of other 'outsider' and immigrant figures, although the Ku Klux Klan (called 'the Mystic Crew') features directly in *Orpheus Descending* and other of his plays. That said, we can add that no comparable line-up of Williams productions (or that of any other dramatist, American or not) can compete with those staged on the eastern side of the Atlantic, which observation returns us to, and perhaps revalidates, Rich's acute theatrical insight of 1988.

Theatre critic Gordon Rogoff put the matter even more bluntly as he opens his assessment of 'Peter Hall's lucid passionate [London] production of *Orpheus [Descending]*' and in the process offers a coda to this broader reassessment of the arcs of Williams's professional reputation as the last word:

That the London West End is the home to what must be the best Tennessee Williams production in thirty years is only part of America's mounting national and theatrical disgrace. . . . Evidently, Broadway prefers death to the honour of going down fighting on behalf of a great American play acted with harrowing accuracy by a splendid cast.<sup>64</sup>

## Notes and References

1. For details, see *Un tram che si chiama desiderio / A Streetcar Named Desire. Canone teatrale europeo / Canon of European Drama*, No. 7, ed. S. E. Gontarski (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2012).

2. Dirk Gindt, 'Transatlantic Translations and Transactions: Lars Schmidt and the Implementation of Postwar American Theatre in Europe', *Theatre Journal*, LXV, No.1 (2013), p. 19–37: <<https://www.loc.gov/collections/lars-schmidt/articles-and-essays/implementation-of-postwar-american-theatre-in-europe/>>.

3. Round-table conversation: 'A Black Cat and other Plays: African American productions of Tennessee Williams's Drama', *Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, XIII (2012): <<http://www.tennesseewilliamsstudies.org/journal/work.php?ID=118>>.

4. For the New York productions, see <<https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-show/cat-on-a-hot-tin-roof-2442>>.

5. See cover image and discussion at British Library blog: <<https://blogs.bl.uk/americas/2020/02/from-the-collections-a-streetcar-named-desire.html>>.

6. Cited by Philip C. Kolin at round-table conversation, 'A Black Cat and other Plays'. A book version of the film appeared from the Mosaic Press, Oakville, Ontario, in 2002.

7. See Lahr's theatrical wish list for Christmas, 22 December 2011: <<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-best-theatre-of-the-year>>. See also the 'prequel' to Lahr's position where he objects to other forms of textual alterations: 'To replace the Jewish Willy Loman with an African American is to change something elemental in the nature of the play's lament', <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/05/25/hard-sell>>. See further Lahr's 2012 objections to further tampering with Williams's work for *In Masks Outrageous and Austere*, directed by David Schweizer, at the Culture Project. 'The show is billed as the "world premiere of Tennessee Williams's final full-length play". It is not *his* play; it is yet another regrettable co-authorship – a compilation of six different versions by six well-meaning collaborators and a computer [collation] program, Juxta [Commons], which conducted a "forensic analysis" of the text. To borrow a line from the script, "My God, if this were theatre, I'd think it a metaphor for the idiocy of existence": <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/04/30/past-imperfect>>. We should add that Lahr's *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh* won the 2014 National Book Critics Circle Award for biography.

8. Ben Brantley, 'Hey, Stella! You Want to Banter?', *New York Times*, 22 April 2012: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/23/theater/reviews/a-streetcar-named-desire-at-the-broadhurst-theater.html>>.

9. A major exception is found in the notorious short story of cannibalism and homosexuality in 'Desire and the



Black Masseur', written in 1946 and so essentially concurrent with *A Streetcar Named Desire*. See also *Noir et Blanc*, the 1986 black-and-white film version adapted and directed by Claire Devers.

10. Michael Billington, 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof', *Guardian*, 1 December 2009: <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/dec/02/cat-on-a-hot-tin-roof-billington>>.

11. Nashville Ballet, however, hosted an American performance of Annabelle Lopez Ochoa's 'narrative ballet' version of *Streetcar* in November 2019: <<https://www.pointemagazine.com/streetcar-named-desire-annabelle-lopez-ochoa-2641165926.html?rebelltitem=1#rebelltitem1>>. See also André Previn's 1998 opera version of *Streetcar*: <<https://www.operaamerica.org/applications/newworks/details.aspx?id=73>>.

12. For issues of the subsequent colour line, see the politically charged musical (or opera) of 1950 by Langston Hughes, *The Barrier: A Musical Drama*, adapted from his earlier Broadway success, *Mulatto*, the story of a southern white plantation owner living conjugally with his Black housekeeper. That relationship produced several light-skinned children who, nonetheless, must legally be classified as Mulatto and so face the racial divide, the barrier, what in 1926 Hughes called 'the Racial Mountain', even within the family. It ran, also at the Broadhurst Theatre, from 2 to 4 November 1950. See also Hughes's poem 'Cross': 'I wonder where I'm gonna die / Being neither white nor black'; and William Allen, 'The Barrier: A Critique', *Phylon* (1940–1956), XI, no. 2 (1950), p. 134–6.

13. See <<http://samuel-beckett.net/PeterHallGodot.html>>.

14. Philip C. Kolin, *Tennessee Williams: A Guide to Research and Performance* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 104. The play opened at the Comedy Theatre on 30 January 1958, with Kim Stanley as Maggie, Paul Massie as Brick, and Leo McKern as Big Daddy.

15. This club was founded in 1957 within the Comedy Theatre in order to stage an unexpurgated production of Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge*, banned by the Lord Chamberlain for its homosexual references. The following year Hall's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was produced there despite the ban. See 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof Beats the Censor', 1957–58': <<http://www.overthefootlights.co.uk/1957-58.pdf>>. That uncredited story also cites a Dublin theatre manager's arrest for producing Williams's *The Rose Tattoo*, even though Dublin had no official theatre censorship at the time.

16. See <<http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2013/jan/31/tennesseewilliams-theatre>>.

17. 'Homosexuality, Censorship, and the British Stage', British Library Blog, 27 June 2019: <<https://blogs.bl.uk/untoldlives/2019/06/homosexuality-censorship-and-the-british-stage.html>>.

18. The Lord Chamberlain Archive, British Library, LPC CORR 1964/4496.

19. Dirk Gindt, 'Transatlantic Translations and Translations: Lars Schmidt and the Implementation of Postwar American Theatre in Europe', *Theatre Journal*, LXV, No.1 (2013), p. 26. For more on Sweden's role in early European performances of Williams's work, see publisher Lars Schmidt's dedicated website: <<https://www.loc.gov/collections/lars-schmidt/articles-and-essays/tennessee-williams/>>.

20. In 2005 Hall recalled that 'Look Back in Anger was a play formed by the careful naturalism of the 1930s and the craft beloved by the old repertory theatres. It now looks

dated and prolix because it uses the convention of the old well-made play. I think that my generation heard more political revolution in it than was actually there – largely because we desperately needed to.'

21. Cited in Philip C. Kolin, *Tennessee Williams: A Streetcar Named Desire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 62.

22. See Leigh's contract for *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 'Papers relating to H. M. Tennent', RP95, 2363, Theatre Museum, London.

23. Vidal, cited in John Lahr, *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), p. 146. The diluted UK production produced no such tremors.

24. See the American playbill reproduced at <<https://blogs.bl.uk/americas/2020/02/from-the-collections-a-streetcar-named-desire.html>>.

25. Kolin, *Tennessee Williams: A Streetcar Named Desire*, p. 151.

26. Letter on deposit at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas Austin, Tennessee Williams Collection, box 59.7; see also the papers of his agent, Audrey Wood, in box 4.5.

27. Peter Hall's production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* at the Watergate Theatre Club in January 1958 retained two intervals.

28. For images, see <<https://screenplaystv.wordpress.com/2015/01/12/cat-on-a-hot-tin-roof-1976/>>.

29. Michael Billington, 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof: Tennessee Williams's southern discomfort', *Guardian*, 30 December 2012, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/sep/30/cat-on-a-hot-tin-roof>>.

30. Tennessee Williams, *A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, ed. Philip C. Kolin (London: Methuen, 2010), p. lxii–lxiii.

31. Michael Billington, 'A Streetcar Named Desire review – Gillian Anderson gives stellar performance', *Guardian*, 28 July 2014.

32. Quentin Letts, 'Sozzled Gillian is simply sizzling', 31 July 2014, <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/reviews/article-2712484/Sozzled-Gillian-simply-sizzling-QUENTIN-LETTIS-reviews-A-Streetcar-Named-Desire.html>>; Dominic Shellard, *Kenneth Tynan: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 245.

33. 'Becoming Tennessee Williams', 2011: <<https://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/2011/becoming-tennessee-williams/>>.

34. Guy Adams, 'The problem with Tennessee: Too hot and too cool: A new exhibition reveals the American playwright's battles to stage his plays in post-war London', *Independent*, 13 March 2011. See also British Library, Add MS 68871, referenced ts. p. 45, available for viewing at <<https://blogs.bl.uk/untoldlives/2019/06/homosexuality-censorship-and-the-british-stage.html>>.

35. British Library, Olivier Archive. Vol. CCLXIX ff.: *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams; produced by Olivier for Tennant Productions, starring Vivien Leigh as Blanche Dubois. First performance at the Aldwych, 11 October 1949, 1. ff. (Add MS 80034). The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas Austin also holds a mimeographed copy of the *Streetcar* script from 1949 in box 44.4, as well as a copy of Vivien Leigh's 1949 playscript from the Olivier production.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*; also cited in Kolin, *Tennessee Williams: A Streetcar Named Desire*, p. 151.

38. Irene Selznick, wife of movie mogul David O. Selznick, covered some 25 per cent of the show's

\$100,000 production costs. In 1947, as a birthday gift, David commissioned a painting of one of the play's scenes from American regionalist painter Thomas Hart Benton, who painted the famous 'Poker Night' scene now part of the Whitney Museum's permanent collection: <<https://whitney.org/collection/works/4174>>. The painting was subsequently used as the cover for the Signet paperback edition, and a detail was used for a Penguin edition of the play in 2000, for its 'Penguin Modern Classics' series, but the script printed in *A Streetcar Named Desire and other Plays* was the one censored to conform with the Lord Chamberlain's objections.

39. British Library, Olivier Archive. Vol. CCLXIX (Add MS 80034).

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*

42. Maria Britneva (Maria St. Just) would be his confidante for thirty-five years and his 'Five-O'Clock Angel', on whom he based the character of Maggie the Cat.

43. *Five O'Clock Angel*, p. 150; cited by Tennessee Williams in *Notebooks*, ed. Margaret Bradham Thornton (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 709.

44. See 'Tennessee Williams on the Past, the Present and the Perhaps', *New York Times*, 17 March 1957, reprinted (as 'The Past, Present and Perhaps') as the 'Introduction' to the Signet edition of *The Fugitive Kind*, p. v–ix.

45. *Five O'Clock Angel*, p. 141.

46. Tennessee Williams, *The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams. Volume II: 1945–1957*, ed. Albert J. Devlin and Nancy Marie Patterson Tischler (New York: New Directions Books, 2007), p. 645–6.

47. *Ibid.*

48. Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (New York: A Signet Book, 1958), p. 124

49. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

50. Jason Zinoman, 'Theater: Excerpt; *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*', *New York Times*, 2 November 2003, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/02/theater/theater-excerpt-cat-on-a-hot-tin-roof.html>>.

51. Peter Brook would stage the Paris premiere of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1956–57. It opened at the Théâtre

Antoine in 1956 with Jeanne Moreau as Maggie. Coco Chanel designed the costumes.

52. Martin Brown, 'Dear Tennessee Williams . . . Peter Brook's letters acquired by the V&A', *Guardian*, 25 September 2014, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/sep/25/peter-brook-victoria-and-albert-archives-purchased-stage>>.

53. Lord Chamberlain Archive, British Library. LPC CORR 1964/4496.

54. *Ibid.*

55. Reprinted in Albert J. Devlin, ed., *Conversations with Tennessee Williams* (Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), p. 99. Also cited in Lahr, *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh*, p. 440–1.

56. Tennessee Williams, 'Foreword', *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), p. xvii.

57. Devlin, ed., *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, p. 98. Also cited in Peter Hall's 1988 programme for *Orpheus Descending*.

58. For an attempt at an analysis of this transatlantic relationship, see Michael Billington's assessment in 2000, which suggests, finally, 'I suspect we have often misunderstood Williams in Britain.' His references to productions of *Baby Doll* at the Albery Theatre and the National's revival of *Not about Nightingales* could have been folded into this analysis had space permitted: <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2000/jun/21/artsfeatures.stage>>.

59. See <<https://www.standard.co.uk/go/london/theatre/scarlett-johansson-triumphs-in-cat-on-a-hot-tin-roof-and-vows-to-be-back-in-londons-west-end-8456770.html>>.

60. See <<https://www.youngvic.org/whats-on/cat-on-a-hot-tin-roof>> and <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LEIE8KG3IZw>>.

61. See the full range of reviews at <<http://ntlive.nationaltheatre.org.uk/productions/ntlout7-a-streetcar-named-desire>>.

62. Devlin, ed., *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, p. 34–5.

63. *Ibid.*

64. Gordon Rogoff, 'The Fugitive Play', *Vanishing Acts: Theatre since the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 115.