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TENNESSEE WILLIAMS AND HIS MEMORY PLAY

BY DAN SANDERS

"Everything a writer produces is his inner history, transposed into another time," Tennessee Williams once said. There is, however, a difference between autobiography and memory. Much of *The Glass Menagerie* is the playwright's life, but on its first page he warns the reader: "Memory takes a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated." To examine his life -- before and after fame marked him -- is to know what in *Menagerie* is real and what is not.

WHEN HE WAS TOM, NOT TENNESSEE

Williams' first great play, *The Glass Menagerie,* depicts three struggles. Tom's is to flee the confines of the big, cold city and his overbearing mother. His crippled, shy sister Laura is terrified anywhere but at home with her precious, fragile collection of glass animal figurines. Their mother, Amanda, fights to hold her crumbling family together, but is unable to accept anything but the sweeter, distant past.

Thomas Lanier Williams' early life was one of frequent illness, parental fights, moves, and tears. The only happy time was his first seven years, in rural Mississippi. For the white families in the area, life was gracious, cloistered, and quiet; it was much as it had been before the terrors of the Civil War, and everyone liked it that way. Cornelius Williams, Tom's father, was a brusque, forceful sort who cared little for the area's charms. He was an outsider (from Memphis), and his sales job constantly took him away from home. He was a rough character -- handsome and charming when wooing Edwina Dakin, but often drunk, unfaithful and broke from gambling once married. Edwina had been pretty and popular. Her

diaries record a constant stream of "gentleman callers" during a strictly chaperoned adolescence. Virtually all Anglo girls in 1906 Mississippi were married and bearing children by their early twenties, and Edwina submitted to the strict social order. It was a troubled union from the outset. Even the birth of a daughter, Rose, in 1909 didn't settle Cornelius down; nor did a son, Thomas, two years later.

The two children were very close; whenever illness struck Tom, Rose was convinced she was sick too. Tom contracted diphtheria and was held out of first grade. Alone in his room recovering, in the days without a radio or television to amuse him, he learned to pass the time inventing games, reading, and writing stories of his own. Edwina was fiercely overprotective of her shy, sickly son. Cornelius found little use in a boy too frail for sports; he either ignored Tom or gave him sneering nicknames like "Miss Nancy."

Then lightning struck the life of young Tom Williams. Edwina became pregnant with a third child, and Cornelius got a better job that required the family to move to St. Louis. In days the children went from a genteel, rural Southern culture to a crowded, noisy Midwest city. No one cared about Edwina's regal past or the children's delicate natures. At school other children mocked Tom's accent and picked on the small, frightened boy. Edwina was soon busy caring for a newborn boy named Dakin, and Tom was completely traumatized.

Later childhood got no better. The family moved an average of once a year. The relationship between Tom's parents had descended to mutual loathing, and Rose's terrors in the home and outside it had hardened into deep mental illness. Tom's only refuge lay in a used typewriter Edwina had bought him to help boost his lackluster grades in school. He wrote constantly and began to win small writing prizes.

Williams at work in New Orleans. Success found him only after long years of failure.

Success came late to Williams. His twenties were spent at one college after another, dropping out and starting up again without completing his degree. The first four years of his thirties were spent working in sad, menial jobs during the day and writing feverishly at night; his health suffered from the poverty and lack of sleep. More than once he was forced to pawn his typewriter or his clothes. "Before the success of *Menagerie* I'd reached the very, very bottom," he told a biographer named Dotson Rader. "I would have died without the money... I couldn't have gone on with those hand-to-mouth jobs, these jobs for which I had no aptitude, like waiting on tables or running elevators."

FAME

Success has a familiar path in most American art. Anyone who follows music, for example, has seen the gifted but late-blooming singer: a few early albums make nary a splash, then one becomes a gigantic hit. The record's success is so pervasive that it becomes nothing less than a cultural icon. A long sweet run of awards, critical huzzahs and more hits follow, with all the celebrity treatment -- and celebrity behaviors -- that go with it. Then the public's tastes change. The venues get smaller, the critics harsher.

No matter what the singer does, there will be no return to that earlier glory, no hope of it. Post-peak celebrityhood becomes a grim, diminishing universe, and his later years are salved with alcohol or pills. To quote Amanda's character description in *Menagerie,* the artist acquires a "Great but confused vitality clinging frantically to another time and place."

In the no less volatile realm of theater, this was much like what happened to Tennessee Williams. After wandering through a series of mediocre colleges, bad jobs and largely ignored plays, *The Glass Menagerie* utterly exploded on the American theater scene of the 1940's. And Williams' best work was in front of him still, including *A Streetcar Named Desire,* perhaps the finest play ever written by American hands. But the heyday ended as they all do, and Williams still had thirty years of life remaining. He never returned to the power and glory of his mid-career masterpieces. Nothing would approach the tender honesty of his first great success. Arthur Miller, no stranger to greatness, said of it, "*The Glass Menagerie* in one stroke lifted lyricism to its highest level in our theater's history... In him the American theater found, perhaps for the first time, an eloquence and an amplitude of feeling."

HIS LIFE AND HIS WORK

Many of Williams' plays, *Menagerie* in particular, are so profoundly personal they often take on a dimension of agonized voyeurism. According to Williams' brother Dakin in Donald Spoto's *The Kindness of Strangers,* "The events of *The Glass Menagerie* are a virtually literal rendering of our life at 6254 Enright Avenue, St. Louis... There was a real Jim O'Connor, who was brought home for my sister. The Tom of the play is my brother Tom, and Amanda Wingfield is certainly Mother." But the tragic Laura was drawn even more from real life. In fact, Williams later told biographer Rader that his pathologically shy sister Rose was the initial seed for the entire play. "I believe I was thinking of my sister, because she was madly in love with some young man at the International Shoe Company who paid her court. He was extremely handsome, and she was profoundly in love with him. Whenever the phone would ring she'd nearly faint. They saw each other every other night, and then one time he just didn't call anymore. That was when Rose began to go into a mental decline." Williams was forever haunted by leaving her behind to face a complete psychotic breakdown and subsequent lobotomy (sanctioned by her parents) without him. "I don't think I would have been the poet I am without that anguished familial situation," he later said.

Other mirrorings throughout the play, if not literal, are but a hairbreadth from actual events. Williams *did* work a dull job in a shoe plant, writing poetry on shoe boxes and finding refuge at the movies at night. He failed at selling magazine subscriptions, as we see Amanda fail. Williams' mother joined the Daughters of the American Revolution. His father, described in the play as "a telephone man who fell in love with long distances," worked in that business early on; the family often moved when his gambling left them with no rent money. Both Tom and Rose were delicate and soulful creatures crushed by a hostile environment, a favorite Williams theme. Once an adult, Williams wandered rudderless, behavior frowned upon in the 1930's.

All of it converged into *Menagerie,* a portrait of the artist as a troubled young man. It was written during World War II,

so Williams was one of the very few men his age not wearing an Army or Navy uniform -- at thirty-four, still the isolated misfit. Williams was homosexual, and for all the difficulties that go with being gay today, things were much worse in 1945. It was considered a “sickness” and almost never discussed in public; “homosexual” was a word said aloud only in a psychiatrist’s office -- in horror. Gays were arrested simply for being in a bar together under the vice laws of the day. There were no support groups to help gays or their parents, no laws forbidding discrimination against them. It took Williams years to realize and accept this aspect of himself, in part because there were so few people to talk to about it.

Not surprisingly, being gay made Williams feel as if he were different from everyone else, an outcast – a common characteristic of a playwright. Many of the premier American playwrights of the twentieth century happened to be minorities -- Jewish, or homosexual, perhaps. Socially, they were on the outside looking in, and this detachment from society’s rank-and-file was essential to the objectivity they gave us in their plays. The insider is *too close* to see all of his or her world, but the outsider sees everything. It can be The Fraud of the American Dream (exposed by Arthur Miller, a Jew, in *Death of a Salesman*), or Marriage As War (captured by gay playwright Edward Albee in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*). Or it can be, as Williams reveals in *Menagerie,* The Fragmenting Family.

But few highly autobiographical plays are more than mere therapy for their authors. *Menagerie* succeeds because it manages the ultimate goal of most art: many people identify with it. The multiple specters of urban fears, an absent father, a delusional mother, and a doomed sibling were things the audience knew well -- even in supposedly innocent 1945. Our greatest war was raging, and there was strictly defined good and evil. But plays like *Menagerie* were the first gray ambiguities on the horizon. Vietnam and the Sexual Revolution were in the forecast.

The struggles of Tom, Amanda and Laura are not Williams’ memoirs. He wrote those in 1975, eight years before his death. But “The play is memory,” he writes at the beginning of *The Glass Menagerie,* and “memory is predominantly seated in the heart.” What the heart holds dear is sometimes factual, but more often not. Tennessee Williams made magic out of these heartfelt blurrings.

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Williams late in life (1980).

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

1.) What are some examples of actual history that appear in *The Glass Menagerie,* and what are some examples of fictitious events in it?

2.) How does being an “outsider” in society affect and aid an artist? Cite examples from music and film.

3.) How does fame change an artist’s life and subsequent work?

OTHER MAJOR WORKS

A Streetcar Named Desire, 1947 (won Pulitzer Prize and was made into a film)

The Rose Tattoo, 1950 (was made into a film)

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, 1954 (won Pulitzer Prize and was made into a film)

Night of the Iguana, 1961.