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Popular Culture as Cyclic Phenomenon in the Evolution of Tennessee Williams

by John J. Fritscher, Ph.D.

In a wagon so newly painted as Popular Culture, every ride we take is-like the Popular Culture Association-to our Traditionalist critics, whether we like it or not, a kind of defensive apologia for the premises, principles, and relevancy of the new discipline of Popular Culture. Not only has the sense of what ought to be considered "cultural" widened, but so have the ways changed to get into. inside, the old traditions. The reality is that the new novel, the new theatre, the new film are arrived. Let's face it: Traditionalists have very few real issues still to be ascertained. But in the now-moment relevancy of Popular Culture VERDICTS ARE CONSTANTLY IN THE MAKING. It's traditionally safe to talk of Jamesian attitudes of America, just as it is traditionally safe to say "1492." But to be so untraditionally open-ended as to say, "Wait, America still hasn't been discovered" plays serious fun with uptight tradition, opens up the relevant now moment into which art gives insight, especially if the moment be as now revolutionary.

In art forms of human concern, We are Curious (Popular). Our style may be new, our forms different, but yet the heart transplant of our matter is solidly from Sophocles and Thomas Mann and Dostoevsky. Our heart is the universal same. Our massage is new and now. Myra Breckinridge compared, to, say the women of Butch Hemingway and Sundance Capote, is the New American Woman, William Buckley notwithstanding. At first glance, she's far from Phaedra or Juliet because she is popcartoon. Her dialog is written in over-head balloons. And just as looking at Claes Oldenburg's Giant Pool Balls or Giant Raisin Bread sculpture causes us once seeing so large. to perceive the small real thing afterwards ever so differently, so does billboard size Ekberg-like Myra cause us to look into the human male-female character with new eyes.

Post Pollock, post Williams Burroughs, post the destruction of form into formlessness concealing form, we cannot validly monitor the current human condition through traditionalist form and matter. This we accept; but to rap with Traditionalists we ought to be able to show them that oftentimes their very terms are in fact revolvable. Tennessee Williams, saint-dramatist in the Traditionalist canon, is excellent case in point.

Williams' career began in the late Thirties/early Forties, coincidental with that time when, so Myra Breckinridge claims, the movies of the Forties were the highpoint of Western Culture. Back in those Forties, Tennessee Williams hired himself out to MGM; the Studio wanted him to knit plots for Lana's Sweater Flicks. Instead he wrote a screenplay called *Girl in Glass.* He was fired. Six years later MGM was outbid by Warner Bros. for screen rights to Glass *Menagerie,* a vehicle conceived on their time.

The flowing form of this Forties' stage play is owed to the story's filmic conception. In fact, *Glass Menagerie,* a drama of gapping generations, was conceived by Williams for the stage

as a Mixed Media Production using slides, filmed words, and taped music. Producer Eddie Dowling refused to humor Williams whom he considered eccentric rather than in advance of his time.

1945's *Glass Menagerie,* therefore, while it was a huge financial and critical success was less than the plastic organic futurentity Williams had conceived. Because the forward-lookin ideas were dropped, Williams was given a safe Establishment production. In turn, he was lauded for singing to days gone by. The Establishment saw it as Amanda's play about the lost pastness, not Tom's play about the raw future. Chagrined Williams has since all but set himself afire to destroy the Establishment image that he is not avant garde.

Williams' work currently is out of vogue. Small wonder; after all, he's in his fifth decade of production; yet if his plays have shorter runs, Williams as personality garners more publicity; jumping into Catholicism when everyone short of the Pope is jumping out, being chased by Mafia hoods, doing his own version of Judy Garland's Final Show, himself bedded, however, hospital-safe and covered well with *TimeLife* reporters. He knows a good show in times when it is the personality as much as the art product that counts. Faster than you can say Jacqueline Susann he keeps himself in the news.

The fact is neither he nor the theater would be today the same without the other. In direct reciprocity Williams has both created and been created by the theatricality which ingests Everything in Every American Subculture: Our mass media are voracious to raise or lower everything to the middle-class consumer level. April 1969 McCalls published a chapter of *The Love Machine* and editoralized how it cleaned up the language for its consumers.

Raquel's Myra seems a long way from Williams' bitches, but the mold is the same. Williams, like Myron, like their American context, has been movie-bred. He writes, as did the classical dramatists, using the cultural mythology at hand: Hollywood Goddess or Super Stud. He takes the measure of the popular archetypes of our time-exactly the way Hemingway's Old Man and Simon/Garfunkel look at Joe Dimaggio. His characters talk so much about the movies in plays that have in turn been made into movies that watching his films talking about the movies is (if not coincident with a form of absurd drama) at least like the Op Experience--known to every little boy in his first barbershop--of sitting between two facing mirrors whose images curve off to infinity.

Williams adapts well to the screen (despite an occasional fiasco like Burton-Taylor's *Boom* or an elaboration like Natalie Wood's *This Property Is Condemned.* This, because he is basically cinematic. When I interviewed Mr. Williams two years ago in Chicago at the world premiere of *Eccentricities of a Nightingale,* he said that he intended to write no more three-act plays. He prefers now to compose a 70-80 page script divided like *Suddenly Last Summer* into six or seven scenes which slide easily into one another like overlap dissolves of the movie camera. The stage length he intends approximates the length of the feature film. This evolution in his form to scenes commanding shorter attention spans shows him picking up on the pacing that TV, segmented by commercials, has given to American audiences. Thus he has become one of the umbrella contributors to *Oh Calcutta,* that TV-like review which sees that movies in the 40's style (confer Joshua Logan directing anything) are no longer really simpatically with-it, that movies stylized

after TV dramas (confer Otto Preminger directing anything) are a cross-media mistake. What films, what plays need now is the spirit of the TV commercial; short attention demands, with visceral point.

Williams grew up in movie theatres much like his short stories' Joy Rio and Delta Brilliant. Small wonder, then, he has always employed materials popular in the period his plays were conceived or set. Many Williams women are associated with a particular Tin Pop Alley song. Alexandra del Lago, Chance Wayne, Sissy Goforth, and *Camino Real*'s Street People are all turned on to, are all well linked and lettered into the American drug scene. His attitude toward Blacks has always been well tempered and surprisingly Afro in orientation as in *Battle of Angels/The Fugitive Kind*. (Attention to folk heritage and pop culture often overlap.) The combined image of Brando/Kowalski which Brando careered into the seminal Stanley Kramer motorcycle film *The Wild One* produced the exclusively American phenomenon, the black leather motorcycle outlaw (now under contract to American-International Films), the motorcycle easyrider, independent as Natty Bumppo and the Marlboro TV cowboys worshiped enviously by the highly urban males of *Period of Adjustment*.

Brando, in fact, is a good point of real reality and reality of the movie reel overlapping. Just as Brando engineered the torn T-shirt image out of *Streetcar* and the Williams motorcycle stories, so have Paul Newman, Rip Torn, Geraldine Page, Elizabeth Taylor, Anne Meacham, and Shirley Knight all to greater than lesser extents gratefully allowed the Williams characters to tub off on their own pop marquee images. And Williams has certainly, too, been proliferated upon by protege William Inge tonally in any play and Mart Crowley in *Boys in the Band* where Sebastian Venable is recalled as martyr-saint in the gay camp canon

Williams has always had touches of madness about him. But since the Andy advent of the Warholed Sixties, he has gotten even wilder. His characters like Chance Wayne (whose chances are waning) and Sissy Goforth (who is afraid to go forth to die) often have names Ian Fleming's Pussy Galore or Al Capp's Moonbeam McSwine would envy. Just as many of his later characters, so are his plays of the Sixties littered with Roy Liechtenstein dialog-for-Comic-Strip Balloons as he animates characters like *Kingdom of Earth's* Chicken and the superbly lithographed Molly-Polly, Fraulein, and Hollywood Indian Joe in 1966's *Gnadiges Fraülein*. Is Latter-day Williams one gross put-on? He recently claimed *The National Enquirer* to be the only honest, real literature being printed in the USA. He appears in the December '69 *Playboy* between Tiny Tim and Raquel Welch with his newest horror story: "A Recluse and His Guest." The stage and film versions will undoubtedly follow.

His latest novella, *The Knightly Quest*, is in fact pop para-literature in the same outrageous vein of Gore as *Myra Breckinridge*. Williams has always been poetic social observer, but with the best or worst of them he can leave subtlety behind (should the *Laugh-in* times not favor Amanda-like gentility of statement.) He satirizes in the New American Scene the plastic fantastic chromium American drive-ins, the stuffed levi codpieces and stuffed silicone bosoms, the Detroit City cars parked next to moonlaunch pads, the eternal American Question: not "To be or not to be?" or "Do I dare?" but "Is it Clean?"

Such Comic Book Panels are a decade or two this side Menagerie and Streetcar Named

Desire (a title sufficiently pop-mythological for Volkswagen to borrow this year to billboard its product.) But such Comic Book Panels he has long signaled. In the mid-fifties Williams' only published film script was an excellent animated Cartoon Panel of Chaucerian bawdry. Mating the child-bride folklore of his native South to the child-bride of *The Canterbury Tales,* he created a Classics Comic book pair of young lovers who end up a tree while the young girl's old husband searches for the pair in the dark. The Oldenburg pop exaggeration of this was lost on the late Cardinal Spellman and the Traditionalist Legion of Decency who pressured Warner Bros. to the extent that no one will ever see *Baby Doll* on TV's late show. Southern writer Reynolds Price, close friend of "Baby Doll" Carol Baker, disclosed recently in a conversation with a fellow Southerner, Professor William Combs at Western Michigan University, that Warners destroyed all the prints except for three: one owned by director Kazan, one by Miss Baker, and one by co-star Eli Wallach.

Williams' latest play *Two Scenes in the Bar of the Tokyo Hotel* opened in May for a six weeks run to mixed4o-unreceptive reviews. Two points here: Pinter producers Richard Marks and Henry Jaffe opened *Tokyo Hotel* off-Broadway, this new location of great significance to the new Underground Williams; and secondly, the play, regardless of its reviews has gone into almost immediate film production, much like the immediate stage-to-celluloid transferral of Crowley's current hit *Boys in the Band*. Williams is a prime example of a certain American pop mystique: we don't consider a play or novel complete until it is movified.

And mystically when pop astrology and *Hair* are pumping this as the Age of Aquarius when Eastern culture will suffuse Western, then look to the waterfloods of *Kingdom of Earth* as well as to Williams' knowledgeable use of Eastern Mysticism in *Night of the Iguana* and of the Noh Theatre in *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore.* He is that much into McLuhan's Global tribe, pop united by Lennon-McCartney's Iamheandyouaremeandwearealltogether raga blues.

In conclusion, a quote from *Period of Adjustment*, spoken by the Jane Fonda character, gives not only, I think, Williams' view of himself as tuned-in artist, but also defines the role of any visionary critic examining the human condition by taking the now-pulse of his popular culture.

The world is a big hospital, a big neurological ward and I am a student nurse in it.

Analogically Williams is both measurer and matter of the American pulse. He has a where-it's-at mythic pop capacity: every artist starts out as seer then becomes sayer for his culture. When the culture in turn picks up on his work and takes it into its mythology like Leonard Cohen's Suzanne or Charles Webb's Mrs. Robinson, the circle is complete; for Mrs. Robinson herself is created in the image of Williams' almost-menopausal American women who stay their *Roman Springs* by vamping confused but hot young boys.

Thus the artist who comes out of his culture takes that culture's disparate ends, pulls them together, and in-forms (that is, gives new form) to that culture. In this doublefeed, Tennessee Williams-so long *in*, *of* and *with* the Popular Culture-offers himself out of the Old Traditions to new consideration by Popcultists. For us to know where Popculture is, it's imperative to know

where it has been. For Popculture is an elusive quicksilver discipline at any given moment. Popculture is, in fact, like that bit of Labrador Spar Emerson talked of: you hold it, turn it, the facets flash by, each relevant for its *moment* of view, the effect *cumulative* and *insightful.* Tennessee Williams has had and is giving yet his facet for us.

An Analysis of Campus Revolution at the 1969 American Studies Association Conference, Toledo, October 30-November 1, 1969

A contentious moment or "representative act" for the American Studies movement began in 1969 at the American Studies Association conference in Toledo, Ohio, when the group identifying as "The Radical Caucus" threatened to divide the ASA over student representation on the ASA Council, involvement of Third World countries in the American Studies movement, continuation of the Civil Rights movement, and opposition to the Vietnam War. The matter appeared to have been resolved by 1971 with negotiations to change ASA policies and election procedures. In his report to the ASA, president Robert Walker declared that "a wasteful and destructive confrontation was avoided" (Walker 1971, 260). Walker commented that accord was reached because both sides agreed on maintaining the professionalism, rather than political partisanship, of scholars in the American Studies movement. According to Walker, "It should be clear by now that, in spite of the terminology [of 'radical'], the ASA has not been 'politicized'" (1971, 260). Referring to surveys conducted by the ASA Council, Walker claimed that "the very large majority of the membership has expressed a strong wish that the ASA remain a professional association and avoid stands on political issues external to immediate professional concerns" (1971, 260; emphasis added). Davis reflecting on the turmoil two decades later agreed with Walker's assessment that "the sympathetic hearing extended to the Radical Caucus prevented the division that occurred in other professional organizations" (1990, 362). He also observed another consequence of the conflict: the ASA became more of a national body rather than a federation of regional organizations. This nationalization appeared in keeping with a push to establish American Studies as a discipline with a global group that met annually in prominent locations and represented a primary affiliation for its members. © 2018, Simon J. Bronner. SOURCE: Abstract, "The Death of American Studies?" by Simon J. Bronner, European Journal of American Studies, 13-2 | 2018, Summer 2018.

