Critical Essay by Charles Marowitz

What has always fascinated me about Tennessee Williams, particularly in his early work, is the sense that the plays are never about what they appear to be about. They contain an opposing duality. In *Glass Menagerie*, Amanda Wingfield's mannered gregariousness is constantly at odds with Laura's fragile introversion; just as Tom's poetic yearnings tug against the Gentleman Caller's traditional American drive for 'getting on'. In *Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche du Bois' gentility is virtually at war with Stanley Kowalski's primitive aggression—just as it ultimately clashes with *her* Gentleman Caller Mick, in a last act dénouement reminiscent of that in *Menagerie*. In *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*, Maggie's materialist thrust is pitted against Brick's passivity. It is as if the secret centre of every Williams play is a dramatisation, by proxy, of the interplay that characterises certain kinds of homosexual relationships; active partners and passive partners; doers and done-to. What gives the early plays a curious kind of force is that heterosexual relationships are being dramatised from the standpoint of homosexual experience. In a way I cannot adequately explain, Williams captures (I believe by accident), the character of two opposing life-forces; one, thrusting and materialistic; the other, submissive and spiritual.

Because art works best when it wears masks, the disguises that Williams' characters wear give them an extra dimension: a sense of operating above and beyond their particular concerns. (p. 26)

When Williams began writing for the stage, in the mid-'forties, the American theatre would not permit the degree of explicitness which is, at present, the rage of almost every western theatre capital. He was obliged to use artistic subterfuge in order to transmit his experience and this gave his work greater depth. In his later work, when permissiveness was the by-word, and Williams could deal with all his obsessions without inner censorship, the plays became squat and murky—curiously lacking the deeper texture of the earlier work. In that early work, the plots were part of Williams' disguise. The need to disguise put a greater pressure on him to invent and, in relationships like Stanley's and Blanche's, Amanda's and Laura's in the narrative structure of a play like *Suddenly Last Summer* and even a short work like *Something Unspoken*, the events themselves have a resonance which does not rely upon the language employed by the characters who inhabit them.

In the later period, Williams begins to depend more and more on direct statement or dialogue whose inference is abundantly clear which, in theatrical terms, is the equivalent of direct statement. For this reason, *The Red Devil Battery Sign* strikes me as forced and self-conscious. It's not that the political equation drawn by the play (which concerns an affair between an omnipotent senator's daughter and a mariachi) is not convincing (which it isn't) but that the frame-of-reference of Williams's characters does not legitimise his political commentary. Sexual politics and power politics do interconnect, but in order to accept the equation, one needs a more persuasive political framework for the dramatic characters. Without it, one feels that Williams is telling one story (the one he's really concerned about, impetuous promiscuity in an exotic Texan Setting) and only making reference to the political parallel in order to give that tale a greater significance. (pp. 26-7)

No one quite forgives [Williams] for not producing another *Streetcar Named Desire*—which is gruesomely unfair. *Orpheus Descending* was a fine play and even so small-scale a work as *Period of Adjustment* had virtues which only Tennessee Williams could have produced. Williams writes too much, which is another way of dealing with writer's block—the conventional one being not to write at all. My admiration for the man (and the talent) is so great I am quite prepared to sweat out all his five-finger exercises in the hope that the next full-fledged concerto will eventually arrive…. It is not more plays that we need from Tennessee Williams, but a new insight into the experience the writer is attempting to deal with in those plays, and that is achieved (sometimes) by reflection rather than proliferation. (p. 27)

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