

# Orpheus in the Galleries

BY DAVID KAPLAN

**THE FIFTH PROVINCETOWN** Tennessee Williams Theater Festival is titled *Under the Influence*. For four days—from September 23 to 26—plays written by Williams will be performed with a complement of poetry, music, films, paintings, and other writers' plays that influenced Tennessee Williams as he wrote. New work will be performed, too: dances, plays, and music influenced by Williams. At the core of this year's programming is Williams's play *Orpheus Descending*.

*Orpheus in the Galleries*—a ticketed event at the festival this fall—is an installation of related artwork at neighboring Provincetown galleries in the northeast corner of the town. At the Berta Walker Gallery, DNA, and artSTRAND, paintings, sculpture, video, and other media will echo the myth of the poet who visits the underworld and returns to share a vision of loss—a poet whose own death by dismemberment gains him reunion with the spirit of love.

*Orpheus in the Galleries* opens on the customary gallery-going Friday night, on the week of the Festival: September 24. Ticket holders will be invited to make their own paths—and timetables—between gallery shows of individual artists, as well as environments created by artists where visitors may linger or pass through. Those participating include Varujan Boghosian, Sky Power, Jay Critchley, Jim Peters, Kathline Carr, and John Choly.

Williams ran a marathon of six decades chasing the theme of Orpheus. He began in the late 1930s with the play titled *Battle of Angels*, in which an itinerant blues guitar player visits a Mississippi Delta town, brings love to its women, and is lynched by its men. The play was optioned for Broadway, with a Boston tryout. In 1940 Williams summered in Provincetown to polish his draft, but the Boston run that December was disastrous. An overwrought smoke effect during the final scene sent the opening night audience fleeing out the aisles. *Orpheus Descending* is the 1957 revision, but before that, in 1952, Williams wrote a poem titled “Orpheus Descending.”

The memorable opening lines:

They say that the gold of the under kingdom weighs so  
that heads cannot lift beneath the weight of their crowns

continue to Williams's reflection on the poet's failure to rescue his beloved from hell:

and it will not be completed,  
no, it will not be completed,

for you must learn, even you, what we have learned,  
that some things are marked by their nature to be not completed  
but only longed for and sought for a while and abandoned.

The 1957 play was poorly received by critics who mistook its stage poetry for melodrama, and belittled its images of sacrificial pain with homophobic Freudian psychology. Even so, the playwright's popularity was such that a Hollywood film based on the play was inevitable. Williams himself, assisted by Meade Roberts, wrote the screenplay, now titled *The Fugitive Kind*. Starring Marlon Brando and Anna Magnani, it premiered in 1960.

Not yet done with the subject, Williams worked throughout the 1970s on an autobiographical play eventually titled *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, set in 1940 Provincetown, in which he depicts himself under pressure from his producers—who arrive on the dunes by helicopter!—to rewrite the ending of his Orpheus text. The movie star meant to headline the production quotes a speech she has already memorized. Williams quotes himself from *Orpheus Descending*:



TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, 1971 PHOTO BY EVENING STANDARD/GETTY IMAGES

There's something still wild in this country, this country used to be wild, the men and the women were wild and there was a wild sort of sweetness in their hearts, for each other, but now it's sick with neon, it's broken out sick, with neon like most other places. . . . I'll wait outside in my car. It's the fastest thing on wheels in Two River County.

That car might be fast, but the guitar player doesn't leave in it.

Several other plays to be shown in September reflect on the story. Among them, a short one-act written by Williams in the mid-1930s, titled *Escape*, in which a black chain gang, tense with anticipation and dread, listens to a jailbreak. The same running away is overheard outside a window in *Orpheus Descending*. The guitar player cheers on the convict's flight from a pack of furiously pursuing dogs. The chain gang knows better than to cheer. As Williams put it in the concluding lines of his 1952 poem:

Now Orpheus, crawl, O shamefaced fugitive, crawl  
back under the crumbling broken wall of yourself,  
for you are not stars, sky-set in the shape of a lyre,  
but the dust of those who have been dismembered by Furies!

The artists involved with *Orpheus in the Galleries* have their own understandings of the myth. Boghosian's long engagement with the story of Orpheus was the cover story of last year's *Provincetown Arts*.

Love visited in hell was, in part, the inspiration for Sky Power's mural painted for last year's Tennessee Williams Festival on the back wall of the Paramount Room of the Crown & Anchor. The text performed on the shallow low stage was a version of Williams's play *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, in which F. Scott Fitzgerald (acted by Jeff Zinn) visits his wife, Zelda (played by Broadway legend Betty Buckley), in the North Carolina asylum where Zelda would later burn to death.

Power's response to the play came in stages, at first to the words describing two lovers (“the blades of your bones carved into mine”), then to the practical requirements of stage directions (the asylum gate, a tower, stairs, a fiery sunset), then a further understanding



SKY POWER, MURAL FOR "GHOSTS FROM A SUMMER HOTEL" BY TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, CONCERT READING IN PROVINCETOWN, MA, 2009, ACRYLIC AND LAYTEX ON SHEETROCK AND WOOD, 7 BY 25 FEET

of the mural as a parallel expression of the play's melding of present, past, and future. In the garden of the asylum, watched over onstage center by an unsympathetic nurse in medicinal white, Zelda and Scott revisit a Riviera hotel in their memories, and Zelda foresees her own death. As Power's mural progressed, the illustrating details of stair steps, tower, and gate were obliterated with a wet rag. Only a hawk escaped the wreckage. The result on the wall was a molten browned red pouring over the indentations of the door frames and into the corners of the stage. The paint still seemed wet and dripping, not so much backdrop, but another element in the narrative line, as the implications

of the glow and the disintegration of form became more and more connected to the revelations of the text building a bridge between the heaven of memory and the fires of an inevitable future in hell. The production was accompanied by music from the original Broadway score, played live by its composer, Michael Valenti. Power's notes on the work in process:

Tennessee Williams is a writer who appeals to my sensibilities—rich, deep, full of our human grit. I see orange-red as the core of the monochromatic theme. We will need to use the other ends of that color spectrum to convey

the depth: yellow and a purple brown.

Her last note on the process:

Today, I am rolling out latex yellow, and red (as a base color to keep the violet from looking muddy). As I talked with David in the beginning, the color range will be violet and yellow, creating tones that include both colors. The yellow will predominantly be in a strip across the upper edge of the rectangular wall representing light (fire) in the distance. The violet will be painted with large brush strokes and applied with a rag over the red. I want that area to be massive, foreboding, and a dark background for the nurse in white.

It was.

DAVID KAPLAN is the curator and a cofounder of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival and author of the book *Tennessee Williams in Provincetown*. More information about festival activities is available at [twptown.org](http://twptown.org).

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