

Wonderful Tennessee

AUSTIN, TEX.: How Thomas Lanier Williams transformed himself into Tennessee Williams is the theme of the Harry Ransom Center's exhibition "Becoming Tennessee Williams," on view starting this month at the University of Texas at Austin. The retrospective, timed for the 100th anniversary of Williams's birth, displays some 250 items from the Ransom Center's mind-bogglingly extensive collection of Williams manuscripts, correspondence, photographs and artwork, which the humanities research library and museum began to acquire between 1962 and 1969. So rich is this archive that to this day researchers and scholars continue to mine it for new discoveries. The center most recently purchased the draft screenplay of A Streetcar Named Desire.

Charlotte Canning, curator of the exhibition and professor in the university's department of theatre and dance, has organized the show into five thematic sections. One part is devoted to how an early play, Battle of Angels, recurs as a motif in the playwright's work. Another section delves into the creative process behind The Glass Menagerie, still another to the development of A Streetcar Named Desire, with a special focus on the character of Blanche DuBois. One explores themes of masculinity in Williams's work. There is also a survey of the adaptation of his plays from stage to screen. As Williams explained to his literary agent, Audrey Wood: "I have only one major theme for my work, which is the destructive impact of society on the non-conformist individual."

"The center's rich holdings allow us to better understand how these extraordinary works came into being," says Canning. "Glass Menagerie, Streetcar and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof are just a few of the masterpieces the exhibit follows from early drafts to fullfledged productions. We believe visitors will find themselves as much in awe of Williams as we are." See www.hrc.utexas.edu.

Short Story Long

SAN FRANCISCO: Last December's issue of the quarterly literary journal McSweeney's was packaged in a 275-cubic-inch crate painted to resemble the nearly life-sized head of

a balding man. But the container wasn't the only novelty on offer in the 36th edition of the hipster quarterly, edited by Dave Eggers. Among the books inside was-for the first time in the magazine's 12-year history—a play: a 131-page comic drama by Wajahat Ali, The Domestic Crusaders, about a day in the life of a multigenerational Pakistani-American family.

The script's route to McSweeney's has been circuitous: Ali was an undergrad in Ishmael Reed's short-story class at Berkeley when 9/11 happened, and Reed's advice to the young Muslim-American writer in dealing with the event's loaded aftermath was forthright: "He told me, 'You're wasting your time writing short stories,"

recalls Ali, whose submissions to the class had really been monologues and dialogues. "He said I was a natural playwright, and that I should write him a play, 20 pages, and I would pass the class." Reed went on to tell Ali, "I'm tired of Muslims not getting a fair shake. Have you read Death of a Salesman or Long Day's Fourney into Night? Write a play like that about Muslim Americans."

Even after he passed the class, Ali kept adding pages, at Reed's encouragement. In 2004, with Reed's wife Carla Blank as director, the two-act play debuted at Chandni, a popular Bay Area dining hall for South Asians, and was a hit. A subsequent showcase on the stage of Berkeley Repertory Theatre and a 2009 run at New York City's Nuyorican Poets Café followed, and last November The Domestic Crusaders, was staged at Washington, D.C.'s Atlas Performing Arts Center.

The play's ironic title refers to "hundreds of years of alleged inherent acrimony between the West and Islam," Ali says. "I wanted to reframe that within this multi-hyphenated Muslim-American



From left, Imran Javaid, Adeel Ahmed, Monisha Shiva and Abbas Zaidi in The Domestic Crusaders in a reading at the Kennedy Center.

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family. These 'crusaders,' instead of being blood-thirsty warmongers, are nuanced, hypocritical, self-involved, quirky people. Instead of Kalashnikovs and swords and missiles, we see them fighting with stinging barbs and wit and regrets and secrets—good old-fashioned drama and melodrama." Visit www.mcsweeneys.net.

Haunted by Hallie

POUGHKEEPSIE, N.Y.:

"You could write 100 plays about Hallie Flanagan," gushes Mattie Brickman, a playwright who is starting out with just one play, titled *Playground*, that recalls the famed Federal Theatre Project director's days in the late 1920s as a founder of Vassar's



Experimental Theater. Subtitled "The Hallie Flanagan Project," the play is a commission from the formerly women-only college on the occasion of its 150th anniversary, and will be performed March 1–3 as part of festivities and exhibitions that continue through the year.

Vassar alumna Jen Wineman will direct the show in the campus's Martel Theater, which



has the "same footprint," Wineman points out, "as the theatre where Hallie did her staging of *The Marriage Proposal.*" Flanagan's legendary staging of that Chekhov one-act—she presented it three times consecutively, in three widely divergent styles—is the present-day setting of Brickman's play, which will also flash back and forward to other periods of Flanagan's storied career.

There's mention of the Guggenheim Fellowship that took her to Europe and Russia to see theatre, and of course her fouryear tenure as President Roosevelt's appointee in charge of the only nationally supported theatre in U.S. history. For her part, Wineman is excited to have a "one-on-one confrontation" with a figure who "always haunted the campus." Visit http://150.vassar.edu.

Mind the GAP

BERKELEY, CALIF.: Aurora Theatre Company artistic director Tom Ross has coined two new words: "GAP-able" and "non-GAP-able." Since founding his theatre's Global Age Project in 2006, Ross has come to define what



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NEWS IN BRI



Carrie Paff, left, and Gabriel Marin in Allison Moore's Collapse, at Aurora Theatre Company of Berkeley, Calif.

shows do and don't belong in Aurora's annual new works festival (this year's runs through March 6): "If there's not a cell phone in the play, it's probably not GAP-able."

Ross, who co-founded the theatre two decades ago with Barbara Oliver and took over the artistic directorship six years ago, noted that the theatre's new play submissions were overstacked with "historical plays, as opposed to people writing about now. I wanted to support plays that grapple with today." Hence Aurora's annual call for "global age" plays that deal with "the 21st century and beyond."

One "mother ship"

mainstage play anchors the festival (this year it's Allison Moore's Collapse, a GAP finalist from last year, inspired by the 2007 cavein of the Mississippi River Bridge in Minneapolis), and there are consecutive staged readings on darknight Mondays of four new plays. This year's include Fire Work by Bay Area writer Lauren Gunderson, Silent Disco by Australian Lachlan Philpott (the farthest-flung GAP participant yet), Bird in the Hand by Queens, N.Y.-based Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas, and Our Practical Heaven by Berkeley's own Anthony Clarvoe.

Each year's submission process has allowed Ross to "get the pulse of what playwrights

are thinking about. At the start, there were a lot of postapocalyptic comedies and plays about terrorism—plays set in airports, and plays about the war. In the last two years, the plays have been circling back around to homefront issues. Most of the ones we're reading are about relationships."

They're still GAP-able, though: Today's relationships are often mediated by Twitter or Facebook, and human contact is attenuated. Even the festival, Ross says, prefers electronic submissions. But making theatre remains irreducibly personal: GAP pays each writer \$1,000 and provides travel and housing. For details: www.auroratheatre.org.

A BOMB GOES OFF IN HUNGARY

IN MID-NOVEMBER, INTERNATIONALLY known Hungarian theatre and film director János Szász woke up in Budapest to find his name and photograph posted on a wiki-style "Metapedia" list, on which more than 200 Hungarian public figures and artists are tagged as Jews, and occasionally as "homosexuals" or "Socialists." (Some are identified as "Romas." too.) Szász's now-deceased father, a Holocaust survivor, was also on the list. So was Róbert Alföldi, the director of the Hungarian National Theatre.

Even as Szász was discussing the online list by phone with American friends on Dec. 20 in Budapest, another ominous change was taking place in the nation's Parliament. Hungary's right-wing Fidesz government—which coasted to victory on a wave of resurgent nationalism in April-was in the process of passing a new media law which has been denounced by the International Journalists' Federation as "the strictest set of regulations in the Western world." Upon going into effect on Jan. 1, it authorized a government commission of five members to punish whatever they choose to define as "unbalanced" journalism in print and online media with crippling fines.

In a career that includes an ongoing relationship with Massachusetts's American

Repertory Theater and a raft of European film awards, Szász has determinedly maintained Hungary as a home base. He's also been pointedly apolitical. "I have always hated politics. I don't talk about it. My friends don't talk about it," says Szász, in halting English on the phone from Budapest. Now, however, politics has forced itself into his family's world and, if necessary, he's prepared to leave. "It is hell here," he says. And then he wonders if it's the right metaphor. "Or you could say it's freezing, like a refrigerator. This isn't a country I want my six-year-old son to grow up in. People are saying it's 2011. How can this be happening in Europe? But it is happening."

And it's happening fast. In April 2010, the Fidesz party booted the Socialist party from power with an overwhelming 52.8-percent majority of the vote, winning 263 of the 386 seats in Parliament. More ominously, the ultranationalist Jobbik party surged to a 17-percent share of the vote and 47 seats in Parliament. Since then, in an uneasy alliance with Jobbik, Fidesz has moved to radically amend the constitution to consolidate its hold over Hungary's legal system and its media and to muffle its thriving artistic community.

As director of the Center for International

Theater Development, Philip Arnoult has spent nearly two decades creating a partnership between U.S. and Hungarian theatres. "It's a dangerous cocktail," he warns, speaking of the combination of nationalism, economic discontent and an effective one-party system. "And Hungary's independent cultural life could be the collateral damage when this bomb goes off."

Initially, Hungary's own artistic community





2010 1st Stage New Works Festival, in Florida.

A New Works Beachhead

WEST PALM BEACH, FLA.:

A love triangle among 70-year-olds, a secret government project involving video-game addicts, a hurricane-tossed family gathering, a torrid Cuban-American romance—sounds like just another day in the Sunshine State,

or another program of Florida Stage's 1st Stage New Works Festival, which runs Feb. 3–6. The aforementioned plays, for the record, are Israel Horowitz's Beverley, Deborah Zoe Laufer's Leveling Up, Christopher Demos-Brown's Captiva and John Herrera's Tiempo de Amor. Also included in

new-play readings—along with workshops, panel discussions and a keynote address (this year's speaker had not been announced by press time)—are Kew Henry's Poet, about Edgar Allan Poe's dueling muses; Carter W. Lewis's The Americans Across the Street, about a washed-up author whose life is complicated by the arrival of his sister and niece; and Florida Stage resident playwright Andrew Rosendorf's Brilliant Corners, about a divorced jazz musician in debt to his loved ones. Visit www.floridastage.org/festival.

this year's whirlwind of

The People's Stage

CLEVELAND: All theatre is local, but with **Cleveland**

Public Theatre's annual Big [Box] residency program, the plays are not only local—they're all over the map. The performance series, which hands over the stagedoor keys to a diverse roster of 13 artists for two months, runs through March 6, encompassing themes from Japanese ritual suicide (Melissa Crum and BC Miles's Seppuku) to countryfried rhyming (Deborah Magid's Cowboy Poet, A C&W Musical), from death and recrimination (Paul Shoulberg's Sick Fuck) to the sex-related side effects of Parkinson's disease (Marc Jaffe and Eric Coble's Side Effects May Include). For festival details, see www.cptonline.org.

was circumspect in its response to the new political order. "Friends in Hungary told me the reports were too alarmist," says Barbara Lanciers, a U.S. theatre director, choreographer and Fulbright scholar with family roots in Hungary.

This time, the alarmists have been proven right. Fidesz, seeking to ride the tide of fear and anger that Jobbik represents, has taken its nationalist agenda to the cultural sector.



In theatres, a display of a manifesto instituting a "National Cooperation System" touting "family" and "home" virtues is now mandatory. Independent theatres are bracing for the elimination of the "contemporary moving arts" element of the state arts budget. The government is moving to sweep out directors—including Alföldi, whose tenure at the National Theatre is under siege—seen as insufficiently dedicated to the nationalist agenda.

Jim Nicola, artistic director of New York
Theatre Workshop, who dates his close association with the Hungarian theatre scene to his
visit there a decade ago, says that while fearmongering is fast becoming a political tool of
choice across Europe, this new media law sets
a particularly dangerous precedent: "These
are huge powers with no defined limitations."

Response in the E.U. initially was muted, but that may change. In late November, the independent Hungarian Theatre Critics' Association released a letter calling on outsiders to protest the actions of the Fidesz government. Speaking from Budapest on the day after the imposition of the media law, Andrea Tompa, head of the Hungarian critics' association, notes that "the worst thing that will happen will be the self-censorship. Editors and writers

will be much more aware of what they publish."
On Dec. 20 and Dec. 28, journalists on Hungary's public Radio Kossuth asked for minutes of silence to protest the passage of the media law.
All three journalists involved were suspended and, in the second instance, the show was taken off the air before the protest was completed.

The strong response by the Hungarian Theatre Critics' Association has sparked supportive letters by the International Association of Theatre Critics and New York Theatre Workshop, and a "Hands Off Culture and Media in Hungary" petition that had accumulated more than 3,000 signatures at press time. A blog has been set up at www.hungarianwatch. wordpress.com to track new developments.

Last month, Hungary gained the rotating six-month presidency of the E.U. Now that it's the ruling party of a country that relies on the IMF, Fidesz has little to gain by being fingered as an authoritarian regime. Members of the theatre community both inside and outside Hungary hope that international pressure will make the country's government think twice about its overreaching policies.

"The voice from inside is critical," says Lanciers, "but the voice from outside can make a difference." —John Barry

FEBRUARY11 AMERICANTHEATRE

An Auspicious Change

CEDAR CITY, UTAH: What's in a name change? Sometimes no more than two tiny letters. To kick off its 50th anniversary, the company formerly known as the Utah Shakespearean Festival has rebranded itself as the Utah Shakespeare Festival. The makeover includes a subtly redesigned logo, with flags set inside cupolas to represent the flags that fly over the festival's Adams Shakespearean Theatre. The festival's URL remains a keeper: www.bard.org.

Village Hellos and Goodbyes

NEW YORK CITY: A roiling restoration drama came to a happy ending last December with the formal reopening of Greenwich Village's historic Provincetown Playhouse, founded in 1918 by the likes of Eugene O'Neill and Susan Glaspell. The theatre went on to host early plays by Arthur Miller and Edward Albee. So when, in April 2008, New York University, whose Steinhardt School owns and operates the theatre, announced the university's law school planned a new building on the premises, preservationists fretted that the historic playhouse would be demolished.

But plans to include the playhouse in the façade of the law school's new Wilf Hall, designed by Morris Adjmi Architects, got community board approval and finally came to fruition at the end of 2010 with a

series of celebratory events, including a production of Promenade, a 1965 musical by Maria Irene Fornés and Al Carmines, featuring students from NYU's program in vocal performance. On Feb. 11, a free storytelling session with Regina Ress will recount the playhouse's history, and a series of plays by the playhouse founders will be presented Feb. 25-March 6. The full calendar: http:// steinhardt.nyu.edu/music/ provincetown_calendar.

Meanwhile, another fixture in the Village landscape, Cherry Lane Theatre, is closing its doors. Following the summer 2010 announcement that the company, facing a deficit, would take a hiatus to regroup, artistic director Angelina Fiordellisi

has declared she will step down next spring and sell the company's building, which was first used as a playhouse in 1924 by a group of artists led by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Cherry Lane's current notfor-profit incarnation took root in the building under Fiordellisi in 1996.

The New York Times quoted Fiordellisi's reasoning: "I feel that we can no longer do theatre for the sake of the art form. We have to adhere to the formula of having a film star in our productions to sell tickets because it's so financially prohibitive. I don't want to do theatre like that." She also told the Times she has identified potential successors to lead the company. Visit www. cherrylanetheatre.com.

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