

# **Tennessee Williams in Provincetown**



David Kaplan



HANSEN PUBLISHING GROUP, LLC  
EAST BRUNSWICK, NJ

© 2007 by David Kaplan

All rights reserved. Published 2007

Printed in the United States of America

14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 1 2 3 4 5

**International Standard Book Number:** 978-1-60182-421-9

**Library of Congress Control Number:** 2006932593

No part of this book shall be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without written permission from the publisher.

**Warning and Disclaimer**

Every effort has been made to make this book as complete and as accurate as possible, but no warranty or fitness is implied. The information provided is on an “as is” basis. The author and the publisher shall have neither liability nor responsibility to any person or entity with respect to any loss or damages arising from the information contained in this book.



Hansen Publishing Group, LLC  
302 Ryders Lane  
East Brunswick, NJ 08816

[www.hansenpublishing.com](http://www.hansenpublishing.com)

For Jerry Stacy



# *Contents*

*List of Photographs ix*

*Preface xi*

*Acknowledgements xvii*

The Sense of Season 3

At the Edge 13

Drive 21

Falling in Love 33

Prolonged Adolescence 47

Continuity—Rich or Poor 57

Suspension from Time 71

Private and Public 81

Recollection 97

*Credits 101*

*Abbreviations 105*

*Notes 107*

*Selected Bibliography 121*

*Index 125*

*About the Author 130*



# *Photographs*

Frontispiece: Williams striding the Provincetown dunes, circa 1940	ii
Kip Kiernan imitating Nijinsky	43
Snapshot of Williams in the dunes	44
Snapshot of Williams squinting in the dunes	44
Pictured on the dunes: Joe Hazan, Williams, Ethel Elkovsky, and Walter Hollander	44
Williams in 1944, on the dunes	45
Williams in 1944, sitting in the doorway of Karl Knath's cabin	45
1947, Pancho Rodriguez y Gonzalez lies peacefully on the Provincetown beach	46
Williams outside Rancho Pancho	46





## Preface



**T**he story of Tennessee Williams in Provincetown begins in 1940, which means more than sixty-five years separate what I have written from the events I have described. There are still participants and witnesses alive from the time, and those I spoke to—Jeanne Bultman, who lent Williams the typewriter on which he wrote *The Glass Menagerie*; Donald Windham, to whom Williams wrote ecstatic descriptions of falling in love in Provincetown; Joe Hazan, who lived with Williams (chastely) for three summers; Harold Norse who lived with Williams (also chastely) in a cabin in the dunes for six weeks—were generous with their memories and their photographs. Tennessee Williams kept journals and saved his unpublished writing; his friends and colleagues kept his letters to them. Issues of the four-page weekly Provincetown *Advocate*, published while Williams was in Provincetown—eight pages in the flush of August—are available on microfilm and online. They do not mention Williams until 1946, when *The Glass Menagerie* had made him famous, but they confirm and help specify what is in the letters and reminiscences.

Many, though not all of the stories from P-town, have been told in the excellent (and heartfelt) biography by Lyle Leverich titled *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee*, though Leverich

concludes the narrative in 1945, intending a second volume that he did not live long enough to complete. An especially rich source for insight into Williams in Provincetown (and many other things) are the books written by Donald Windham: *Lost Friendships* and *Tennessee Williams' Letters to Donald Windham*. There are, of course, Williams own *Memoirs*, some of which seem to be more or less true. By a happy coincidence Mary Heaton Vorse's delightful history, *Time and the Town*, was written in 1941 and describes in detail the transformation happening in Provincetown during the first two summers Williams lived there.

It says something about the spirit of generosity in Williams' work that it attracted the elite circle of Williams scholars who have researched and written about Williams for decades: Kenneth Holditch, Allean Hale, Robert Bray, Janet Haedicke, Albert Devlin, Nancy Tischler, Nick Moschovakis, David Roessel, and Thomas Keith. All were welcoming, helpful, and generous with their time and information, especially in the way they pointed me towards material that was unpublished or not yet catalogued. Not all of these people will be happy to be in the same sentence together, but there it is.

That the playwright's life was unusually interesting has often overshadowed his accomplishment as a writer. As he grew older he offered up broad targets for sensationalistic biographers and journalists. Distracted critics confused the state of his life with the stature of his work. The time when Tennessee Williams' life was most messy, and most public, and most undisciplined, was a time when his writing was neither messy, nor undisciplined, but brave. If we compare Eugene O'Neill with Tennessee Williams, it is obvious how much O'Neill's wife Carlotta did for her husband by secluding him. O'Neill's deterioration was kept from his friends,

from the public, and from his children. O'Neill's overuse of prescription medicine was a secret; Williams brought up the subject of his own overuse of prescription medicine in interviews. O'Neill shuffled and tottered and lost his mind in private. Williams' deterioration was so public as to become a performance that rivaled his plays for the notoriously short attention span of the American public.

This book is about a more innocent time in the author's life, an unambiguously focused Williams: poor, hungry, unknown, writing. Even so, it is not my intention to substitute the spectacle of Williams' life for his work. I think the time Williams spent in Provincetown shaped him for the rest of his life, and I hope that understanding his life helps to understand his work.

This book is a monograph, not a biography. In the course of researching my narrow topic—Tennessee Williams in Provincetown—I discovered photos, plays, poems, stories, letters, gossip. Best of all, again and again I discovered, and with renewed pleasure, the potency of Williams' words and the inspiration of his work ethic. I have assumed readers are familiar with *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Other plays I have described, in particular the two plays set in Provincetown: *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* and *The Parade*.

In researching I could not help but notice, and with revulsion, the shabby sensationalistic treatment of Williams' life and work in other places. I left out a word: lazy. The "painfully biased"<sup>1</sup> and perfunctory<sup>2</sup> biography of Williams commissioned and published by Yale University Press did not even bother to get the name right for the family in *The Glass Menagerie*,<sup>3</sup> and no editor at Yale University Press seems to have been familiar enough with the play to recognize it was

the wrong name. Donald Spoto's biography, *The Kindness of Strangers*, seems to have been written out of the impulse that leads flies to open wounds. Williams' escapades late in life gave Spoto plenty of food for thought. Particularly dismal has been the record of theatre critics, who have been flogging Williams for seven decades now, often castigating him for what he did not do, rather than consider what he did do. In America, theatre reviewers have responded to Williams' experiments the way the least sophisticated of visitors to museums and art galleries have responded to Jackson Pollack's drip paintings: smug derision born of carefully cultivated ignorance and a prejudice for what is old-fashioned that is all-too-often confused with good taste. In America we expect more sophistication from our art critics; we accept less sophistication from our theater critics. We do not need to accept it.

There was something else I discovered among those who have written about Williams: homophobia. We do not need to accept that any longer, nor let pass without comment, a critical vocabulary of bigotry: *fruity*, *unmanly*, *sterile*. The word *camp*, never applied to the outré experiments of Eugene O'Neill, is a catch-all for unthinking critics writing about Williams' experiments. Williams respected his critics; their cruelty hurt the playwright deeply. Even so, Williams found the bravery and discipline to write every morning knowing the odds were good he would be mocked for what he was writing.

The lack of preparation of theatre critics and journalists continues. For some reason *non-realistic*, *caricature*, and *melodramatic* persist as damning phrases in the theater a very long time after Impressionism, Expressionism, Pop Art, and naïve art have become accepted genres in painting, not

to mention abstract sculpture or experimental cinema. It reveals a lot, but not about the playwright, when someone condemns Williams' late caricatures and distortions for not being realistic or of the same aesthetic as his early work. To paraphrase what Eve Adamson the director of *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* wrote in her introduction to the published version of that play, what would we say about an art critic in the twenty-first century bemoaning Picasso's abandonment of his Blue period?

In a way other playwrights have been luckier: we do not know too much about Shakespeare, not enough to spoil our pleasure that *The Winter's Tale* is not as tightly constructed as *Macbeth* nor as luscious in its wordplay as *Midsummer Night's Dream*. We know less about Euripides, and all the better that we do not know about his sister and can think instead about his Hecuba. Eugene O'Neill's wife kept her husband secluded. Thornton Wilder stayed in a closet. Not coincidentally, the other great American writer whose accomplishment as a writer has so far been buried by interest in their lifestyle is Gertrude Stein, and for the same reason: homophobia.

Reputation is a tricky thing. Henry James (another closet case) does not mention Herman Melville—and James lived long enough to revise his opinion of Walt Whitman (the good gay poet). The nineteenth century American poets: Whittier, Longfellow, fell from the height of their reputations when Emily Dickinson was discovered four years after her death, many years after she had stopped writing poems. Melville's achievement waited until the 1920s for recognition. It is my prediction, and personal belief, that Williams' reputation will rise in time, because the way he combines words is potent, even in translation, and his concerns as a writer are universal: family, the beauty of impossible aspirations,

the necessity of recollection, the terror and ecstasy of love. His work is performed regularly around the world. I think, in the future, Williams will be seen as American: reared in the South, shaped by New England, by New York, and by California—and in the ranks with Whitman, Dickinson and Melville, that is to say what America offers the world. In time his sexuality will be neither sniggered over nor ignored: it is the basis of his passion, and his passion is the basis for his words.

David Kaplan  
Provincetown  
2006

# *Acknowledgements*



**S**pecial thanks:

Jeanne Bultman is the one who set me off on this work when she said to me, very casually, “you might as well,” when I mentioned I was thinking of writing a book about Williams in Provincetown. She had the candor to begin our conversation with “I never liked him,” and if you read his letters, he returned the feeling. Donald Windham was buoyant and witty and sharp and extended me the great privilege of looking at a part of his collection of photographs and Williams-related memorabilia. Harold Norse, a few weeks before his ninetieth birthday, took the time to talk to me about how sweet and beagle-like Williams was when they lived together in 1944. Joe Hazan, tall and graceful at eighty, patiently answered questions and spontaneously remembered he had some photographs I might like to use for this book, including the one on the cover. Jane Freilicher, his wife, looking at his photograph, remembered that she herself knew Ethel Elkvosky from high school and passed on a good story about her. Ellen Adler was kind enough to call me and talk about Marlon Brando on the day after his famous audition (they were dating). Gaby Rodgers, could not remember much at first, then called me back three times with useful details of

life in Provincetown in 1947. The remarkable ninety-two year-old Flyer Santos sat on his porch in the West End and politely educated me about the nuances of the Azorean community in Provincetown. Napi Van Dereck did the same in his restaurant while he shared his large historical postcard collection. Napi was a boy in 1940, and he remembered the things I wanted to know about the town, including the call the boys made when diving off the pier to catch coins. Helen Valentine, as delightful as her name, told me stories about her brother-in-law Sherman and his friendship with Mr. Williams. "They were bachelors together," she told me. Then asked, "Wasn't Tennessee ever married?"

Personal thanks to:

Researchers: Alison Roberts (in New York), Robertson Dean (in Los Angeles), and Marion Nophut (in Austin). Librarians: Tara C. Craig (Columbia University), Richard Workman (University of Texas at Austin), Becky Cape (University of Indiana), Elizabeth Dunham (University of Tennessee), Sally Stassi (New Orleans Historic Collection), Debbie Dejonker-Berry, Karen MacDonald and the entire staff of the Provincetown Public Library. Also: Helen A. Harrison, Director Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, Andreas Brown and Laurence Senelick. In New Orleans: Fred Todd, Bess Carrick, Dalt Wonk and Josephine Sacabo. In Provincetown: Clyde Shelby, Jon Pacheco, Jerry Scally, Alix Ritchie and Patrick Falco. In Germany: Manja Barth. In New Jersey: the Hansens and the staff of RAK Computers. Listening friends: Currin, Sullivan, Spingler, and McGowan. Patient friends: Robert Brunelli, Ed Schloss, and Scott Baron (always). Thanks especially to Thomas Keith, without whom this book would be impossible.