

George Cram “Jig” Cook

AN AMERICAN ORIGINAL

By Susan Rand Brown

IN THIS CENTENNIAL YEAR of the Provincetown Players, professor of theater studies and Susan Glaspell biographer Linda Ben-Zvi, at a stage when retirement to her home in Jaffa, Israel, overlooking the Mediterranean, would be a respectable option, is instead climbing mountains in Delphi, Greece, in search of material illuminating the life of George Cram “Jig” Cook, Glaspell’s husband and arguably the key figure in the formation and direction of the Players themselves.

Just as she showed that Glaspell was much more than a walk-on figure in the narrative of Eugene O’Neill’s arrival on the Provincetown stage, in her new book, Ben-Zvi hopes to provide a fuller context for evaluating the charismatic Cook, whose fervor and tenacity made the Players a reality, first in Provincetown in 1915 and then in Manhattan, where he moved the theater in 1916. Just as Ben-Zvi, during her extensive research for her Glaspell biography (*Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times*, Oxford University Press, 2005, awarded the Special Jury Prize from the American Library Association), was concerned with preserving the legacy of this pioneering feminist novelist and playwright, whose radical boldness in life and art had been threatened by cultural erasure, so too her current concern is that Cook’s central role in the establishment of modern American drama not be diminished or overlooked.

To this end, she is preparing a cultural study of Cook and his times, researching his writings on various social and political issues, and the parallels between many of his ideas and those of central intellectuals of the time, such as Van Wyck Brooks, Randolph Bourne, and Max Eastman, who shared with Cook a passion for Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, as well as an avid interest in modern European literature and in many of the “isms” that mattered to Cook’s generation. “Cook was not this oddity, as he has often been described, but a figure very much of his time,” Ben-Zvi said, though she adds that his originality sprang from his ability to meld a Midwestern heritage—drawn from his antecedents and shaped by his bohemian mother, who taught him a love for literature and beauty—with Native American myth and history, and his lifelong love of classical Greece.



(above and below) Cook in a tavern in Delphi, 1922



IN ANDREAS' WINESHOP, DELPHI. LEFT TO RIGHT: ANDREAS, ELIAS SCARMOUCHES, "KYRIOS KOUK," ANOTHER SCARMOUCHES, OUR MAN ATHANASIOS.

He finally visited Greece in 1922 and, two years later, he tragically died there at the age of fifty.

A late-March Manhattan sun streaming onto her face, Linda Ben-Zvi, sitting on the edge of a chair in a midtown pub, describes “1915: The Cultural Moment,” the June 1987 conference at the Provincetown Inn that was to generate her own cultural moment, as Mary Heaton Vorse, Miriam Hapgood DeWitt, Joel O’Brien, and others shared firsthand memories of the Provincetown Players. Then a theater specialist early in a teaching career, familiar with library research and about to begin a book on Samuel Beckett (one of four she has authored and edited), Ben-Zvi became captivated by Provincetown and the theater it inspired.

Suddenly, she was discovering a cast of characters only one generation removed from the Players themselves, willing to open scrapbooks— theater ephemera, including photographs—to share what they remembered of Gene O’Neill, “Jig” Cook, Susan Glaspell, and the other left-wing bohemian artists who trekked from Greenwich Village to Provincetown by boat and train during two pivotal summers, 1915–16. Here, the Players—first in living rooms and then in a repurposed, two-story fishing “shack” loaned by Mary Heaton Vorse and now known as the Wharf Theatre—wrote plays, built and painted sets, and performed for one another. The primary source materials the Hapgood daughters provided for her would go to the Beinecke Library of Yale University to be catalogued; eventually they would be accessible to all scholars, though without the gift of personal transmission she had received.

Not long after that first Provincetown visit, during a National Endowment for the Humanities yearlong grant at the Library of Congress for a work on Beckett, she wandered the stacks, came across novels and plays by Susan Glaspell, and became aware of the extent of Glaspell’s writing—fifty short stories, nine novels, and fourteen plays, including her Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Alison’s House*, and her classic one-act *Trifles*. She also became aware of Glaspell’s erasure from dramatic and literary history, except as the mythologized handmaiden who brought Eugene O’Neill and the Provincetown group together, a meeting that resulted in the first production of an O’Neill play: *Bound East for Cardiff*.

Much work remains to be done in Glaspell studies and, especially, in Cook studies, Ben-Zvi maintains. The paradigm surrounding Glaspell’s reputation, as a woman overshadowed by O’Neill as well as Cook, has not completely been put to rest; some researchers still prefer to frame her within the context of being a victim, dominated by the overbearing men in her life. They forget that, in her own writing, she always portrays women as strong figures, fighting gender restraints.

“Most researchers working on Glaspell are disinterested in looking freshly at Cook, perhaps because he has been portrayed, erroneously, as someone who was jealous of her, kept her in check, and, like O’Neill, was a masculine figure from whom she had to escape. I don’t accept that. From my research,” Ben-Zvi explained, “I’ve found ample proof that Glaspell and O’Neill were close, supportive colleagues, and that she and Cook had a



Glaspell and Cook visiting neighbors’ newborn goats in Delphi, with their dog Tópuppy, fall 1923

very positive, nurturing relationship, which in some ways mirrored that of Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O’Keeffe: his satisfaction derived from initially providing a venue in which she could display her art. Some critics see Cook as a negative force, casting a shadow on Glaspell’s life—separating her from the Players, dragging her against her will off to Greece. I think such a reading of their marriage is far too simplistic.”

Just as Ben-Zvi has been Glaspell’s biographer, Glaspell too was a biographer, telling her husband’s life story in *The Road to the Temple*, first published in 1927, then reissued in 1942 and in a 2005 edition, which Ben-Zvi edited with an extensive introduction. “Now I am hoping to brush away some of the dust from Glaspell’s biography,” Ben-Zvi told me. “It has to be remembered that it was she, his wife, an accomplished fiction writer, who provided this record of his life, and also her own—hardly an objective view.”

Looking back at her own work, Ben-Zvi now sees some of the errors in perspective she too might have made, such as seeing Glaspell and other women of her generation as victims of their time, needing to be “saved” by later feminist scholars. “In truth,” Ben-Zvi said, “it was Glaspell who offered a model for us: she went to college when few women did, she sought a career and achieved great success, she was the breadwinner of the marriage, and, like the women who were her friends in Provincetown, Neith Boyce and Mary Heaton Vorse, she went her own way, indifferent to societal attitudes toward women at that time. These were independent women.

“As the Players’ centennial approaches, I decided to come back to Cook, whom I had researched extensively for the Glaspell biography—a fascinating figure not only in Glaspell’s life but in the history of Greenwich Village between 1910 and 1922, the period that brought Modernism to America. He needs to be studied—in relation to O’Neill and the Players certainly, but also, as

importantly, for his own accomplishments and legacy to American culture.”

In the preface to her Glaspell biography, Ben-Zvi opened the door for other researchers interested in exploring the life of Jig Cook, whom she refers to as one of the great, larger-than-life characters that America has produced. “He deserves to be more than a footnote in Eugene O’Neill’s story,” Ben-Zvi wrote in 2005, “the surrogate father in decline, denied by the son in ascendancy—or even in Susan Glaspell’s life, as her greatest love and partner in her greatest adventure, the Provincetown Players. In this book, I suggest the outlines of a study someone else may choose to write.”

It has been a full decade since the Glaspell biography came out. My question to her was obvious: has anyone accepted this invitation to follow Cook where her research led, from the shores of the Mississippi River in Davenport, Iowa, where both Cook and Glaspell were born, to the mountains of Delphi, locus of his lifelong quest to become immersed in the soil where ancient theater was born?

Ben-Zvi smiled broadly: not really. A year ago, when Ben-Zvi was looking online to see if anyone was writing about Cook, one of the few articles she spotted was a blog by an archivist at the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, who wrote about Cook and his Delphi gravesite. This led to their correspondence and Ben-Zvi’s invitation to present the school’s 2015 Annual Archivist Lecture, which she gave in January. “To this classical studies audience, my Cook research was modern history,” she said with a grin. In fact, the lead archivist and other archeologists asked Ben-Zvi to show them the various sites in Delphi where Cook and Glaspell had lived.

“In Delphi I introduced them to Fanis Tsakalos,” she remembered, “the grandson of the man who worked for Jig and Susan during their two years in Delphi, and made it possible for them to experience life in the town and on Mount Parnassus, as Cook had long dreamed.”

What Ben-Zvi discovered was that Cook’s passion for the theater still existed after he left Greenwich Village and the Provincetown Players, and was only replanted in Delphi, where he began the Delphi Players. He inspired the peasants of Parnassus to play roles in the epic story of their little-known history, which he discussed with them. He also involved students from the University of Athens in the project. Cook was such a positive force in Greece that when he died the government allowed a stone from the ancient city to be used as his headstone, the only person to be so honored.

He was influential as well in inspiring another American Grecophile, Eva Palmer, who, with her husband, the Greek national poet Angelos Sikelianos, included theater in the revival of the Delphic Festivals they produced in 1927 and 1930, and who dedicated the Pythian Games there to the memory of Cook, whose love of Greek drama inspired them.

“This changes the whole notion of Cook as a broken-down alcoholic who went off to Delphi to die. His Greek years were not an end, but a continuation of what he did in Provincetown: create a community within which theater could flourish,” Ben-Zvi said.

“The way Cook is portrayed in many O’Neill biographies and in Glaspell’s *Road to the Temple* as well—as a dreamer, unfulfilled, a failure, even as he often described himself—is false. If there was failure, it was not only his but that of the revolutionaries and dreamers who, in their youth, dreamed of making the world a better place. Cook dreamed more, and accomplished more, than he himself realized.”

Our conversation ended with a less scholarly, more sentimental story, one that also linked the two cultures and the lovers whose history loomed large in the making of modern American drama. The last time Ben-Zvi was in Greece, she took a stone from Susan Glaspell’s gravesite in Truro and placed it (in the Jewish tradition) on the grave of Cook in Delphi. She then took a stone from Delphi, and brought it to Truro. “They may be geographically far apart, but I was able at least to make this connection, as I have been able to make connections through my writing on the couple.”

In restoring Susan Glaspell to a prominent position within the pantheon of early American drama, and in the process reframing the mythologies surrounding George Cram “Jig” Cook, Ben-Zvi and her passion for connection can only renew interest in Provincetown’s theatrical and cultural history. Ben-Zvi will be in Provincetown this July, interested in meeting others with information about Cook and taking part in the centennial celebration of the Provincetown Players, hosted by the Provincetown Theater. The March wind over midtown the day we met was by this time creating quite a stir: just the kind of excitement Linda Ben-Zvi has in mind. ❧

SUSAN RAND BROWN has spent summers in her family’s Commercial Street home since her teens, and began writing about the arts for the Provincetown Advocate in the late 1970s, covering local celebrities from painter Robert Motherwell and photographer Renate Ponsold to performers Wayland Flowers and Divine. She has since profiled many of the Outer Cape’s major artists for Provincetown Arts and the Provincetown Banner, and is also a regular contributor to Art New England, covering Connecticut as well as the Outer Cape. “Mothers and Sons in the Plays of Eugene O’Neill” was the topic of her PhD dissertation.

Neith Boyce

AND THE GREAT PROVINCETOWN SUMMER OF 1915

By Carol DeBoer-Langworthy

NOW, ONE HUNDRED YEARS later, one wonders whether Neith Boyce had any idea, when she moved into a seaside cottage at 621 Commercial Street, that her summer of 1915 in Provincetown would have an international impact on theater, painting, and the decorative arts in the coming century. Looking back, cultural historians paint that season in a glow of pregnant light, rather like those fourteenth-century Sieneese paintings in which the Virgin sits enthroned in rays of golden glory, contemplating her coming role in human history. In my mind at least, Neith Boyce (1872–1951) is the centerpiece of a similar tableau for 1915, surrounded by cultural saints: Eugene O’Neill, Susan Glaspell, Mary Heaton Vorse, George Cram (“Jig”) Cook, Mabel Dodge, and Wilbur Steele—not to mention Boyce’s husband, the journalist Hutchins Hapgood. Or is it just that Neith’s hair was often described as “Titian”?

Like the story told in those paintings, what actually went on in the summer of 1915 is now lost in a cloud of myth. But we do know one thing: Boyce’s play *Constancy*, performed on Thursday, July 15 on the porch/veranda of what was later called Bissell Cottage, did set in motion a revolution in theater, staging, acting, and a whole new way of living. As a believer in Boyce, and as her biographer, I like to think that, despite her ironic tone in letters at this time, Boyce *did* know that something revolutionary was happening that summer. In chronicling her life, I have often been struck by how often she sensed just what new thing was coming, as well as how to introduce that novelty. She was a person who took action, but often diminished her own role in these innovations. Her autobiography states, half-humorously, that she agreed with a Chinese belief that inventors of new things should be put to death.

Here’s how I think it went on the fifteenth. About ten o’clock, after the children had been put to bed, neighbors and friends toted their own chairs into the living room of the Hapgood cottage for an evening of theater featuring two short plays. Directed to arrange their chairs facing the porch, they watched Boyce’s one-act play about two of their own: the affair, recently ended, between art patroness Mabel Dodge and radical journalist John Reed. *Constancy*, originally titled *The Faithful Lover*, had been rejected by the Washington Square Players in New York’s Greenwich Village that spring. So had the second play on the bill that night, *Suppressed Desires*, a spoof on the Freudian analysis sweeping the Village.

For Boyce’s play, audience members beheld a porch that Robert Edmond Jones—later a famous theater designer—had “set” with a long sofa and bright cushions backed by a moonlit bay. Boyce herself took the leading role of Moira, and Joe O’Brien, Mary Heaton Vorse’s husband, played Rex in a Shavian talk play about fidelity in relationships.

Boyce also directed this thinly veiled retelling of the breakup of Dodge, one of her best friends, and Reed, who had been introduced to Mabel by Neith’s husband. The audience later reversed its chairs to view through broad open doors—perhaps pocket doors separating a dining and living room?—the second play, which was written and acted by two other Provincetown “regulars,” novelist Susan Glaspell and renaissance artist/director Jig Cook. Scholars now credit this play more to Glaspell, but Cook was the brilliant stage manager.

This evening was the culmination of events and relationships that started when Boyce and Hapgood and their four children began summering in Provincetown in 1911. Novelist Susan Glaspell and labor journalist Mary Heaton Vorse soon became Boyce’s best friends (and neighbors), their friendship ending only when Vorse monitored Boyce’s condition during her last days of life in Provincetown in 1951. According to Vorse’s biographer, Dee Garrison, this trio of women (Glaspell, Boyce, and Vorse), along with their husbands, “formed the nucleus that would bring the town its renown as a suburb for the Villagers and as the birthplace of the Provincetown Players.” The difference in 1915 was the addition of the indefatigable Mabel Dodge.

Indeed, Provincetown was full of people that summer—people who usually would have decamped for Europe, but 1915 was the second year of World War I. Earlier, in the spring of 1915, Vorse herself had been trapped abroad, in England, after covering the Women’s International Peace Conference in the Hague and touring European war sites. She returned to Provincetown with what would now be termed a post-traumatic stress disorder. She felt unable to speak to her friends about the horrors she had seen. And she was on the outs with Mabel Dodge. Or perhaps Dodge had it “in” for Vorse. The two salon hostesses were dueling for top billing in Provincetown that summer. (Hutch Hapgood, who knew them both well, eventually

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put a stop to it.) According to Hapgood's memoir, everybody in Provincetown was depressed about the war. According to Vorse's memoir, only the founding of the Provincetown Players relieved her ennui.

And who was Neith Boyce? A serious feminist who had established a writing career as a single woman in Greenwich Village, Boyce insisted on using her birth name after marriage, at least for publishing her short stories and novels. Since 1899, she had been married to Hutchins Hapgood (1869–1944), a labor journalist and memoirist whose *A Victorian in the Modern World* (1939) would become a classic text for people wanting to understand the cultural shifts of the early twentieth century. In 1915, Boyce was probably better known as a serious writer than her husband, who was, at this point, an out-of-work newspaperman.

In fact, she had just sold a story and was working on selling another, "Sand." Some of her stories appeared in the well-known national publication *Harper's Weekly*, edited by her brother-in-law, Norman Hapgood. Her most recent novel, *The Bond* (1908), had vivisected the new forms of marriage being attempted by Greenwich Villagers and other forward-looking thinkers. In retrospect, that book looks remarkably like a portrait of the Boyce-Hapgood marriage and sounds a grim bell for women's hopes of true equality, even within a companionate marriage. It also tolls one of Boyce's constant themes, that of the futility of the struggle to change human existence. Even so, her tragic view of the universe did not mean giving up the fight.

In 1915, just preceding the historic performance, Boyce and Hapgood, along with their second son, Charles, and daughters Miriam and Beatrix, had settled into their seaside cottage for the summer. Hutch had a vegetable garden. Boyce, their elder son, who had renamed himself "Harry," was off to the Rainy Lake area of northern Minnesota at



The Bissell Cottage, 1984 PHOTO BY ELIZABETH BROOKE

his uncle Billy Hapgood's "camp," along with a cousin, Powers Hapgood, who would later become a famous labor organizer.

As usual, there was a lot going on in the family and the couple's relationship. The Hapgood marriage had already survived several crises as Boyce and Hapgood attempted to enact a Varietist union based on anarchist principles. Scholar Ellen Kay Trimberger has analyzed their relationship as one of "sexualized warfare." Christine Stansell, a leading historian on American women, thinks that "[d]isclosure was the turn-on," as the couple disclosed their attractions to other persons. These entanglements were mostly platonic on Boyce's side.

So this was the scene for the summer of 1915, which I argue was crucial to what painter Marsden Hartley later called "the Great Summer of 1916." Without the summer of 1915 and the founding of the Provincetown Players, there would have been no venue for Eugene O'Neill's *Bound East for Cardiff*, which launched his career as a performed playwright. Scholars now say that O'Neill, Glaspell, and Boyce—in that order—are the most important playwrights to come out of the Players.



Hutchins Hapgood and Neith Boyce in their cowritten play, *Enemies*, in the Wharf Theatre in summer 1916. Starting with the group's first production in 1915, Boyce wrote, acted in, and directed three other plays with the Provincetown Players.

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According to Susan Glaspell's memoir about her husband, *The Road to the Temple* (1926), the idea of putting on plays had been born by the "Regulars" over a campfire on the dunes. The married couples included Boyce and Hapgood, Mary Heaton Vorse and Joe O'Brien, Jig Cook and Susan Glaspell, and Wilbur and Margaret Steele. On July 1, Hapgood wrote to Mabel Dodge that "play fever was on." After the performance, Boyce wrote to her father-in-law, Charles Hapgood I:

You will be amused to hear that I made my first appearance on the stage Thursday night!—I have been stirring up the people here to write & act some short plays—We began the season with one of mine. Bobby J[ones] staged it on our veranda. The colors were orange & yellow against the sea—We give it at 10 o'clock at night & really it was lovely—the scene I mean—I have been highly complimented on my acting!!!

The play opens with a scene in which Moira/Mabel/Neith makes Rex/Reed/Joe enter the house by the door instead of climbing up a rope ladder from the floor below. This mimicked the device Mabel Dodge had installed in her Florentine villa to entice/excite her husband, Edwin Dodge, and then John Reed, as foreplay. The crowd would have recognized this trope, as everybody knew everybody else's business in Provincetown that summer. Rex has just returned from an adventure abroad that included an engagement to another woman. He broke it off, however, upon realizing that she intended to make him settle down. He reconsiders his relationship to Moira and decides to reignite it. But he is in for a surprise. Healed from her heartbreak, Moira assertively, civilly, and intelligently explains to Rex that she has moved on in the world and holds no malice against him. Rex, in contrast, thinks they can and should go back to their earlier state of commitment, even while admitting that he needs his freedom and cannot settle down. Nonetheless, he pledges that "I would always come back. . . . Yes, always. I couldn't help myself. I couldn't stay away for long. I couldn't forget you." Moira is unmoved, even while admitting that she'll always be fond of him as a friend. Moira has become truly self-sufficient in her healing, which

drives Rex mad. He charges off at the end of the play, shouting “Constancy!”

An alternate ending appears in another version of the play in Boyce’s papers at Yale’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, however. This one has Moira asking Rex, “Who is the unfaithful one? You—who left me!” with Rex retorting, “You—who forgot me!” as the curtain falls. So the question of constancy remains constant as a human mystery. As the audience well knew, this question of fidelity was a major issue in the Boyce-Hapgood marriage as well. Scholars now read the play with Moira and Rex as stand-ins for Neith and Hutch as much as, or more than, for Mabel and Jack. Hutch’s many sexual escapades were well known, but he often accused Neith of “spiritual infidelity.”

The two plays were such a hit that the cast agreed to an encore. But there was a problem: no theater. The charismatic Jig Cook, who has often been called the founder of the Provincetown Players, talked Mary Heaton Vorse into the use of a fish warehouse on her recently purchased Lewis Wharf as a theater. Then he talked Margaret Steele out of using the fish house as her painting studio. The second run still required attendees to bring their own seating. Opening a wharf door onto the sea gave Neith’s play another moonlit backdrop.

The theater group was up and running and became organized around anarchist principles in 1916. They still needed, however, a statement of purpose for their new take on theater. Susan Glaspell wrote that “Jig and Neith said it together.

He came home and wrote it down as an affirmation of faith.” Here is their credo:

One man cannot produce drama. True drama is born only of one feeling animating all the members of a clan—a spirit shared by all and expressed by the few for the all. If there is nothing to take the place of the common religious purpose and passion of the primitive group, out of which the Dionysian dance was born, no new vital drama can arise in any people.

Constancy, while specific to Boyce and Hapgood’s relationship that summer of 1915, continues the discussion of what was called the New Marriage in Boyce’s fiction. As a New Woman, she pondered the cost of those new freedoms, and her works reveal some of the guilt experienced by women who felt they might have neglected their children while pursuing their own intellectual and artistic projects. She, too, was a Victorian in a number of ways—not least by choosing to stay with a philandering husband for the sake of her four children. Nonetheless, many of Boyce’s long stories, which she called novellas or novelettes, call for granting women the same personal sexual freedoms as men. In “The Undertow,” her 1914 story in *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*, for instance, the young heroine falls for a handsome but shallow lifeguard, loses her “virtue,” and ends the summer sadder and wiser. But the tone of the story suggests that the wisdom gained is worth

the price—implying that women deserve an equal chance to make mistakes in love, as do men. The subtlety of Boyce’s arguments, many of which are founded on anarchist philosophies of personal freedom, perhaps contributed to her being overlooked by critics for generations.

Theater scholar Judith E. Barlow believes that Boyce may have written her next play, *Winter’s Night*, in 1915, with the Players in mind. This work features a romantic triangle, a familiar device in O’Neill’s plays, and a grim Midwestern farmscape in winter—very similar to that used in Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles*, also produced by the Provincetown Players. Mary Heaton Vorse became famous for her bloodcurdling scream that heralds the suicide at the end of Boyce’s second play with the group. Later came *The Two Sons*, featuring another set of brothers competing for the same woman in a romantic triangle.

In 1968 and 1969, Boyce’s younger son, Charles H. Hapgood II, gave an interview to Louis Sheaffer, an early biographer of Eugene O’Neill. A transcript of that interview is now in the Sheaffer-O’Neill Collection of Connecticut College. In the interview, he gives an inside view of the genesis of the theater group:

The Provincetown Players was originally my mother’s idea, she had written plays, done quite a bit of writing, and thought no use to wait for Broadway to produce their work but should do it themselves . . . She was the one who urged it. She was the builder type, kept after things, didn’t let them drop . . . organizer and builder, felt very strongly about this . . . she sold the idea to Jig cook, who grabbed it. (Ellipses in original transcript)

At the end of the summer of 1916, the group decided to try its luck in New York and began performing on MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village. The rest is, as they say, history—of the little theater movement that affected major theater and lives on today as the off-Broadway movement.

In all, the Provincetown Players would put on three of Boyce’s plays—*Constancy*, *Winter’s Night*, and *The Two Sons*—and *Enemies*, the dialogue she cowrote and performed with her husband. Judith Barlow credits Boyce with most of the writing of that play as well, however. Boyce’s plays have survived and are now being rediscovered: today, her *Winter’s Night* is considered an American classic, along with Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles*. A revival performance occurred in Provincetown in June of 1987 as part of an international conference, “Beginnings: 1915, the Cultural Moment,” organized by Adele Heller and Lois Palken Rudnick. Revolutionary beginnings, indeed: one night on the wooden porch of a cottage by the sea, where Neith Boyce and a small band of artists introduced a new generation of thought and work that is still influencing us today. ❏

CAROL DEBOER-LANGWORTHY teaches in the Nonfiction Writing Program of the English Department at Brown University. She dedicates this article to the memory of Neith Boyce Souza, 1940–2008, known in the family as Neith Junior.

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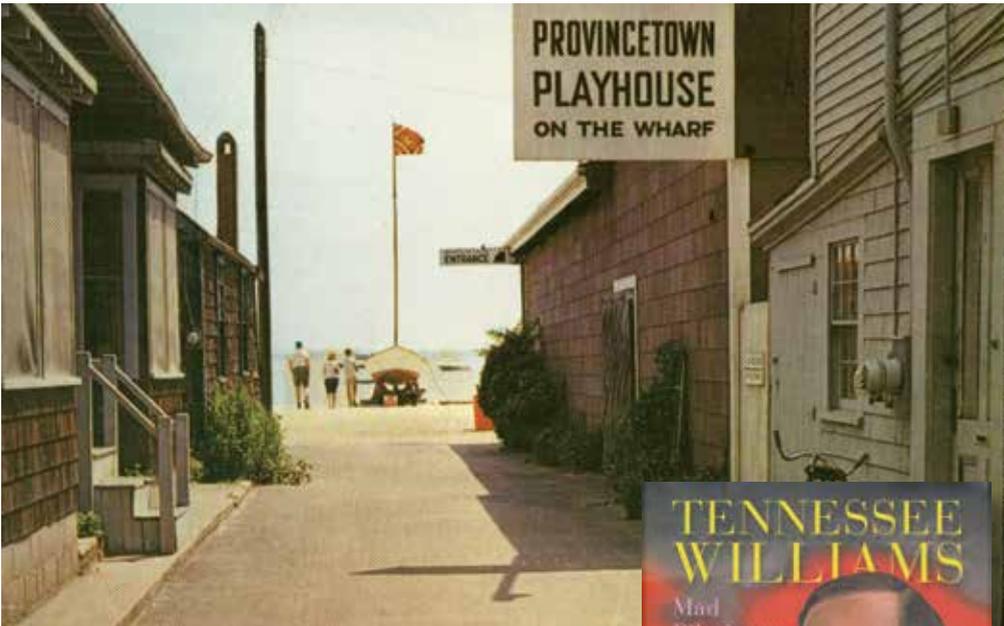
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Tennessee Williams

HIS LONG FAREWELL TO PROVINCETOWN

By Leona Rust Egan

JOHN LAHR, THE WELL-KNOWN THEATER CRITIC, begins his 2014 biography, *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh* (W. W. Norton), in 1945, at the time of Tennessee Williams's breakthrough success *The Glass Menagerie*. The subtitle chosen by Lahr, "Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh," is a significant phrase that Williams wrote much earlier, when, as a young writer, he was struggling with the conflicting impulses of his life. It so happens that the phrase appears in a 1940 letter Williams wrote reflecting on life, particularly his first summer in Provincetown. He was aboard the Boston boat, leaving Provincetown for a quick return trip to Manhattan. Williams's 1940 letter reads:

I had an awfully strange feeling as the Boston boat sailed slowly around the light-house point and then distantly—usterely—past the new beach and the glittering white sand-dunes. Saw P-town dwindling sort of dream-like behind me. Not real at all. The Pilgrim monument getting smaller till it was just a tooth-pick—"mad pilgrimage of the flesh" is what it seemed to stand for.

The Provincetown summer of 1940 was a pivotal time for the young playwright Williams as he wrestled with his artistic career, his spiritual values, and the demands of the "flesh." It was an intense conflict, with aftermaths that lingered for a lifetime. The 1940 summer was the first of Williams's four trips to Provincetown. After 1940, he returned three other times: in the summers of 1941, 1944, and 1947. But his first encounter with the liberating atmosphere of Provincetown was the most indelible. He came with high expectations. He was nearly thirty years old, had recently gained

some recognition as a professional writer, and, in Provincetown for the first time, he could overtly express his sexuality.

It was also a disappointing summer. He experienced two major setbacks. He was rejected by his newly discovered ideal lover. The staging of his premiere play was postponed for months, and then bombed in Boston. How he dealt with these personal misfortunes is relevant to his later successful career.

On a ramshackle wharf overlooking the Provincetown harbor, he had found and then quickly lost Kip, his ideal lover, a burnished-bronze ballet dancer, whose image Williams nostalgically recalled for the rest of his life. At the same time, he was anxious about his play, for he had heard nothing reassuring from the Theatre Guild, his producer. He made a hasty round-trip back to New York not only to check on the impending staging of *Battle of Angels*, his first Broadway-backed play, but also to escape the bitterness of Kip's

rejection, hoping that while he was away his new lover would reconsider their brief affair. The 1940 letter continues:

Leaving makes you conscious of that fatal, inevitable forward motion in life which at other times can seem so curiously stagnant. When you see a shore-line recede behind you, you realize very keenly and bitterly and excitedly what is happening to you all the time of your life. — The Long Goodbye.

Kip Kiernan (alias Bernard Dubowsky, 1918–1944) was an illegal alien from Canada, of Jewish-Russian heritage. He sneaked into the United States to escape the draft and to pursue a career as a professional dancer. The summer of 1940 was Kip's first and only trip to Provincetown. He was one of the models paid to pose for the summer in Hans Hofmann's art school, located near Captain Jack's Wharf. Hofmann, who also had a New York school, encouraged his students to follow him to his new Provincetown art school.

Kip never returned to Provincetown. He married and joined the Hanya Holm Dance Company and performed in several productions. In 1944, at the age of twenty-six, Kip died from a brain tumor. Williams alleged in his *Memoirs* that he visited Kip in the hospital at that time. He did dedicate his collection *One Arm and Other Stories* (1945) to Kip's memory. In this collection, the phrase "mad pilgrimage of the flesh" appears in print for the first time, in the short story "The Malediction." Many years later, in 1980, Williams wrote directly about Kip in his play *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*.

After the summer of 1940, Williams returned to New York and was faced with the indefinite delay of the production of his play *Battle of Angels*, and then the punishing blow when, in December 1940, its premiere bombed in Boston. Another failure was his many attempts to reestablish contact with Kip, who would not answer his letters; he persisted as the epitome of the physical and conceptual qualities Williams wanted in a lover. He mourned the loss of Kip the rest of his life.

In February 1948, while on a solo tour of Italy, he wrote an elegiac poem of deep remembrance:

Testa dell'Efebo

Of Flora did his lustre spring
And gushing waters did bathe him so
That strings of instruments were held
Until his turning let them go.

And gold he was when summer was,
Unchangeable this turning seemed
And celebrants with strings have tried
How golden then his temples gleamed

But finally as metals will
The lustre of his body dimmed
And that town burned wherein was turned
This slender copper cast of him.
[Sgd] TW Napoli 1948

(above) Vintage postcard of the Provincetown Playhouse on the Wharf

In a concurrent letter in February 1948, Williams mentioned that he had “got some nice little art-objects” in Naples, “including a copper statue of a boy in Pompeii, which I wrote a poem about.” He also enclosed in the letter a typescript of the poem, which Williams revised and published that year in *Harper’s Bazaar*.

The statue is a bronze male nude, belatedly discovered in the archives of the estate of Tennessee Williams at Sewanee, University of the South. This remarkable discovery was made by Christopher McDonough, chair of classical languages at the University of the South. His account of this unexpected discovery, and his research into its provenance, is published in the *Humanities* journal (September/October 2011), entitled “Property of Tennessee Williams.” The discovery of this two-foot bronze-coated statuette coincided with the university’s planning for the centennial of Williams’s birthday, which took place in New Orleans in 2011.

In a profile in the May 26, 1975, issue of *People* magazine, entitled “A Playwright Lives His Greatest Drama: The Resurrection of Tennessee Williams,” Jack Horne recounted that when he visited Williams in Key West, Williams said that “his only fully realized work is not *Menagerie* or *Streetcar*, or any other of the other celebrated plays, but a short poem he wrote years ago called ‘Testa dell’Efebo.’”

That Williams cited a poem as “his only fully realized work” is not surprising, for his poetic, intrinsic romantic self was expressed in his poetry, short stories, and journals, and in letters to

understanding friends. On the other hand, his staged productions were for a commercial theater audience.

By August 18, 1940, Williams was back in New York City. He wrote to a mutual friend, Joe Hazan, about his love for Kip: “I think almost continually about Kip. Memories—dreams—longings—little hopes and great desolations. Will he ever come back?” Joe responded to this letter and advised Williams “to seek in meditation what was rationally inaccessible.” Williams replied, “I pray for the strength to be separate, to be austere . . . and for concentrated work. . . . But what an animal I am!”

Williams decided to travel to Mexico. Before he left in September, he wrote one last plea to Kip: “I love you (with robust manly love as Whitman would call it) as much as I love anybody, and want you to write!” Kip finally did write, but it was a distant reply. Williams noted, “The heart forgets to feel even sorrow after a while.”

BATTLE OF ANGELS

During the summer of 1940, Williams attended a performance of Eugene O’Neill’s early play *Diff’rent*, at the Provincetown Playhouse on the Wharf. O’Neill called the play “a tale of the eternal, romantic idealist who is in all of us.” The characters were outcasts, a theme Williams was developing in his own *Battle of Angels*.

Williams was already familiar with Eugene O’Neill’s plays. While at Washington University, he had planned a career writing poetry and short

John Lahr on Tennessee Williams and his art: “We’ve forgotten . . . the power of eloquence and the power of poetry onstage, because most people can’t do it. So when you hear it, you’re spellbound by it.”

stories, until 1931, when he saw a road performance of O’Neill’s play *Mourning Becomes Electra*, with Alla Nazimova, that inspired him to change his career plans to focus on writing for the theater.

Battle of Angels was finally staged months later in Boston on December 30, 1940. And it was a monstrous flop. Boston at the time was noted for its prudery and snobbism, and Audrey Wood, Williams’s literary agent, called the last-minute decision to open the play in Boston a “manifestation of a deep collective death wish.” The critic from the *Boston Herald* wrote, “Mr. Tennessee Williams has certainly written an astonishing play. Some of the strangest mixtures of poetry, realism, melodrama, comedy, whimsy and eroticism that it has ever been our privilege to see upon the boards.”

To add to the antagonism of the audience, there was a fire onstage, a technical fiasco. The cue sheet called for a simulated offstage fire, but it got out of hand: “Billows of black smoke were sent into the audience, who hastily exited the theater.” Miriam Hopkins, the star, did defend the young playwright, recommending that the city council be dumped, as British tea once was, into the Boston Harbor. Nonetheless, because of the Boston subscribers’ complaints, the producers decided to close the show.

Even after its failed Boston debut, Williams continuously revised and rewrote *Battle of Angels* with the hope that the play would be staged again. In 1939, Williams had described his play as a tale about a boy who hungered for something beyond reality, and got death by torture at the hands of a mob. He confesses in an “imaginary interview” with himself, “There was something about it that was inescapably close to my heart, that never let go, and I kept re-writing the play; I guess I must have rewritten it once every two or three years since 1940.” The play embodied a theme central to his writing—“a prayer for the wild at heart kept in cages.” The play eventually reemerged some sixteen years later, transfigured as *Orpheus Descending* (1957).

Ironically, the phrase “a prayer for the wild at heart kept in cages” became the subtitle for another early play, *Stairs to the Roof*, which premiered (as a full-scale production) at the Pasadena Playhouse on February 26, 1947.

“A PRAYER FOR THE WILD AT HEART KEPT IN CAGES . . .”

After the failure of his play *Battle of Angels*, Williams traveled for several months, escaping to Mexico, Georgia, St. Louis. After a short stay in New York, he then returned to Provincetown, via Gloucester, on July 27, 1941. During that period, Audrey Wood had negotiated two monetary grants: one with the

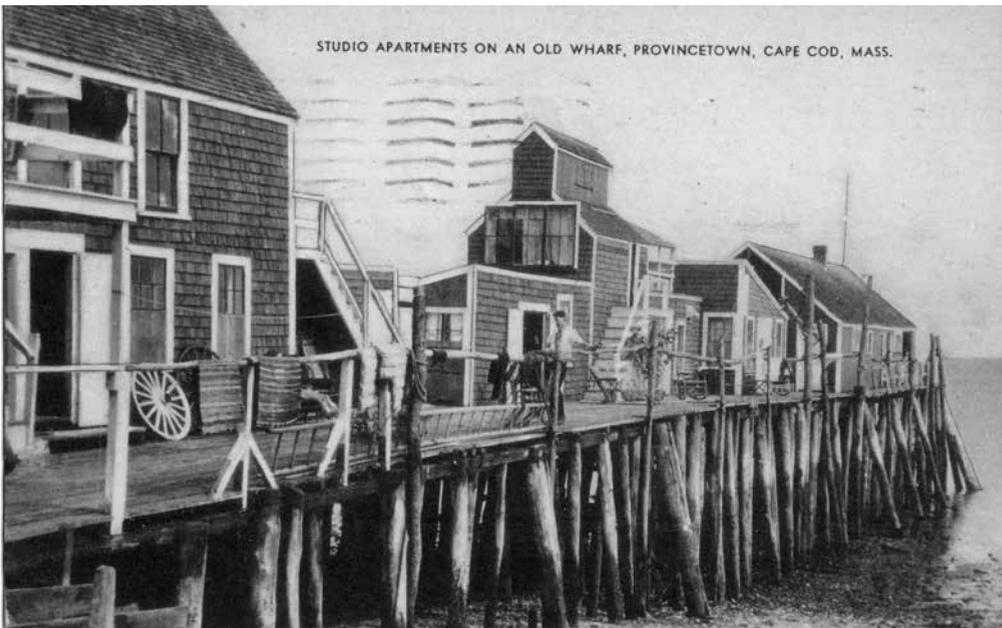
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Captain Jack's Wharf in 1940; (below) Bronze statuette COURTESY OF SEWANEE UNIVERSITY

Theatre Guild for the rewriting of *Battle*, and the other a Rockefeller fellowship to develop a new play.

Williams went first to Gloucester, Massachusetts, and stayed in a “very elegant old hotel,” where it was not permissible “to go on the beach in shirtless trunks.” Gloucester was his attempt to “return to my goodness,” a phrase he used after episodes of intense sexuality. Williams left shortly after this for Provincetown. Joe Hazan, a member of a New York dance troupe, was there, and had leased a large house with many rooms that he rented out to friends from New York. Williams rented such a room: “The household shifts in number from seven to twenty. We eat fish at every meal because we get it for nothing.”

During this visit in Provincetown, Williams met and befriended two men. Fritz Bultman was an avant-garde painter from New Orleans who was studying under Hans Hofmann. Bultman remembered Williams as a bohemian type, at times absolutely charming, but with an undercurrent of self-absorption.

Like many struggling bohemians, Williams took up temporary quarters with more fortunate New Yorkers—though he had the reputation of an undesirable, slovenly houseguest.

Oliver Evans, a young professor also from New Orleans, a flamboyant homosexual, became a longtime friend and correspondent. He and Williams often argued the dangers of being a homosexual. In his 1941 diary, Williams recorded a comment by Evans: “We ought to be exterminated for the good of society.” Williams countered, “How many of us feel this way . . . this intolerable burden of guilt. . . . But feeling guilty is foolish. . . . I am a kinder man for the deviation. More conscious of need in others, and what power I have to express the human heart must be in large part due to this circumstance.”

Williams's theatrical world and his lyrical voice seemed swamped in the tumult of the Second World War. He confided in his diary: “I cannot see ahead nor can anyone. I suspect it will be especially

hard for us who are not made to be warriors. . . . What little I can give to the world in the way of poetic truth—is rapidly going down in the wartime market.” He even lost faith in his own work. In 1943, he reread an earlier one-act version of *The Glass Menagerie* and had a strong negative reaction: “It is appalling. Something has definitely gone wrong—that I was able to write such shit. Hysterical and empty.”

He was once again saved by Audrey Wood, who was for decades a significant anchor and promoter for Williams. She arranged important theater connections, steered him to grant-giving agencies, and, after the fiasco of *Battle of Angels*, was instrumental in his award by MGM to join a screenwriters' group in Hollywood from May to August 1943 at \$250 a week. During that time, he shunned his assignment—to write a script for a Lana Turner movie—which he dubbed “a celluloid brassiere,” and worked on his own play, *The Gentleman Caller*.

BACK TO PROVINCETOWN, 1944

In February 1944, Williams received a grant of \$1,000 from the American Academy and Institute



of Arts and Letters. This allowed him to stay in New York and work on final drafts of *The Gentleman Caller* (*The Glass Menagerie*). That summer he once again relocated to Provincetown, first staying on Captain Jack's Wharf. There was little peace in Provincetown, according to Williams: “Not since the Roaring Twenties had there been such rampant hedonism.”

Eventually, he left the Wharf and rented a “log cabin” nearby, on the property of the painter Karl Knaths. Harold Norse, a well-known bohemian poet, relates in his 1989 *Memoirs of a Bastard Angel* that he shared that cottage with Williams in the summer of 1944:

Tennessee was working on the final draft of the *Glass Menagerie*. The small rustic cabin we shared for the six weeks belonged to the painter Karl Knaths, a gentle gray-haired man who lived with his wife in a large clapboard house in front. As Tennessee's guest I paid nothing, slept in the lower bunk, Ten in the upper bunk. He rose early, brewed endless pots of strong black coffee, and wrote all morning. On the door he tacked a sign he had printed in red and black crayon: WRITER AT WORK—DO NOT DISTURB.

Williams was a prodigious writer on several levels: poetry for himself; letters to the family and understanding friends and agents; journals, a record of his ruminations—disguised for family and more open for friends. One-act plays were closer to his poetic self than the early plays, which were cloaked in gender subterfuge. Only after his financial independence did he inject a homosexual aspect into his characters. During this period, he made seven trips to Europe, especially Italy, where he could act out his sexuality on the streets of Rome—his favorite city, “the capitol of my heart . . . the Greek ideal surviving . . . and the antique sculpture.”

Before leaving Provincetown in 1944, he mailed his only copy of *The Gentleman Caller* to Audrey Wood. Only a few months later, on a cold night in Chicago, December 26, 1944, *The Glass Menagerie* opened to rave reviews, and became an instant classic in the literature of the American theatre. On March 31, 1945, it opened on Broadway. There were twenty-four curtain calls. The run lasted for 563 performances.

Just before the 1946 New Year, Williams moved back to the French Quarter of New Orleans. For

Brenda Murphy, in The Theatre of Tennessee Williams: “Despite the eclipse of his reputation during his lifetime, in the 30 years since his death, Williams has continued to occupy the place as one of the three or four great playwrights the United States has produced. . . . He holds a fascination for a new generation . . . in which theatrical experimentation is expected and it is homophobia rather than homosexuality that is seen as unacceptable.”



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a few months, he reveled in his sudden good fortune—money, sex, fame, recognition. He then promised Wood, “I’m going to be a very serious, hard-working boy again.” The ensuing twenty-four months would indeed be the most productive of his life. He wrote *Summer and Smoke*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the first draft of *Camino Real*, two major short stories, and a story form of *The Night of the Iguana*.

A FINAL TRIP TO PROVINCETOWN

In 1947, Williams made his last trip to Provincetown. This time he was a celebrity, a man of “artistic vanity” who was in charge of his own destiny. He was sent by his director, Elia Kazan, to rewrite the script of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Kazan’s production crew arranged his visit and his lodging. On June 6, Williams was in a rented cottage on the eastern edge of Provincetown, over a mile away from the center of town. He brought his current lover, Pancho Rodriguez, with whom he was engaged in a disruptive relationship that interfered with his need to concentrate on rewriting.

By the end of August, Kazan decided to take a chance on auditioning Marlon Brando, a relatively unknown twenty-three-year-old actor; he gave Brando twenty dollars and sent him to Provincetown to read for the part of Stanley. Brando hitchhiked with his girlfriend and arrived three days later than expected. Williams reported that Brando arrived into a scene of “domestic cataclysm”—the kitchen floor was flooded, the toilets blocked, and the light fuse had blown. Brando fixed the lights,

unblocked the pipes. Then he got around to reading. He gave a sensitive reading, “letting Williams’s words take him where they would.” Williams called his agent to give his approval, then returned to Manhattan on September 14 and began rewriting and rehearsals.

On December 4, 1947, Williams wrote to his publisher about the Broadway premiere: “*Streetcar* opened last night to tumultuous applause.” From that moment on, Williams was on a first-name basis with the world. December 10, 1947—four weeks after the glamorous opening of *Streetcar*—Williams sailed alone for Europe. He said, “I don’t intend to get seriously involved with anyone ever again.” For him, “austerity and anonymity” were things of the past. But that summer he began to confront his “spiritual dislocation,” the loss of his concept of himself as a fugitive outsider, and the demands of success.

Frank Merlo accompanied Williams on most of his subsequent trips to Europe. Williams claimed he had first encountered Merlo in Provincetown in 1947 in the A-House, and had been intrigued by his muscular Grecian back. They met again a year later and remained lovers for nearly fourteen years, the longest affair of Williams’s life. He described Merlo as “fleshed in a god’s perfection,” muscular, with thick black hair and a swarthy complexion.

Tennessee Williams never achieved his ideal life. He had hoped to model himself after Hart Crane, the poet-modernist, whose book of poetry he always carried with him on his travels. He envisioned a romantic death for himself, much like the one Hart Crane had experienced, disappearing in the Gulf Stream as his boat headed back to New York City. Williams’s brother Dakin, the only surviving family member, rewrote this script. He had Williams buried on land in St. Louis, the place that Williams fought all his life to escape. Ironically, *A House Not Meant to Stand*, which was his last rewrite, was about his family.

But perhaps Tennessee Williams’s own words, in the 1953 afterword to *Camino Real*, provide a fitting coda to his life, which he led with a belief, always, in the power of beauty and love:

My own creed as a playwright is fairly close to the painter in Shaw’s play *The Doctor’s Dilemma*: “I believe in Michelangelo, Velasquez and Rembrandt; in the might of design, the mystery of color, the redemption of all things by beauty everlasting and the message of art that has made these hands blessed. Amen.” ❖

Further reading:

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- Lyle Leverich, *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*. Crown Publishers, 1995.
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