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## *Why Now* TENNESSEE WILLIAMS *and* SHAKESPEARE

By David Kaplan

THE PROVINCETOWN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS THEATER FESTIVAL celebrates its twelfth season this September with a lineup that includes presentations of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Pericles* alongside Williams's *Sweet Bird of Youth*, *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real*, and *The Gnädiges Fräulein*. Why Shakespeare at a Tennessee Williams Festival? Watching Shakespeare's plays performed with Tennessee Williams in mind tips off a laughing audience that both poet/playwrights wrote with the same swings between tragedy and farce we live with now in America.

A writer of Tennessee Williams's visionary power shares a way of understanding the time he lives in, the time that comes after him, and—perhaps most powerfully—shares a way of understanding what has come before him. We may usefully recognize Williams in what Shakespeare wrote three and a half centuries before Williams's birth, just as aspects of Shakespeare's plays—the crosscutting in Shakespeare's history plays from long shot to close-up, for example—may usefully be understood as cinematic, centuries before the invention of film editing. With Williams in mind while watching performances of plays by Shakespeare, we recognize, in the twisted plot of Shakespeare's *Pericles*, with its bighearted hero tossed about by a treacherous world, the fate of Williams's Kilroy on

the Camino Real. When Shakespeare's Cleopatra drinks hallucinogenic mandragora, we may reflect on the Princess Kosmonopolis puffing hashish in Williams's *Sweet Bird of Youth*. Thinking of Kosmonopolis and Cleopatra, we may consider the onus and honor of being a famous woman, like Williams's *Gnädiges Fräulein*, dragging a reputation behind her like a dead fish. That Hamlet might kill the murderous Claudius, but doesn't, mirrors *Sweet Bird's* Chance Wayne, who might escape lynching but does not, leading those who watch Hamlet and Chance onstage to consider the shame of being a prince who fails expectations: in Denmark or the small Gulf Coast town of St. Cloud.

Recognizing more of Williams's vision in Shakespeare's writing, we may notice insanity (feigned or certifiable) as a



PHOTO BY RUTH SMITH

(above) Greg McGoan (Gutman), Esther Scott (the Gypsy), Joycelyn Delali (Esmerelda) in *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real*; (facing page) Marcel Meyer as Hamlet

strategy for negotiating life in a world gone mad (Hamlet and Blanche DuBois); or recognize in the work of both poet/playwrights the recurring image of an old-fashioned rose that shatters at the apex of its bloom, dying in beauty (*Romeo and Juliet* and *Suddenly Last Summer*).

There are parallels in the last twenty years of both men's lives. Shakespeare died in 1623. In 1603, Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet, died. Queen Elizabeth I passed away in the same year, and with her there passed away a sense that England was fulfilling, with God's blessings, an auspicious destiny. After Elizabeth, King James I—the son of Elizabeth's archrival, Mary, Queen of Scots—ruled England. Conspiracy theories flourished: Was King James secretly Catholic? Secretly gay? In league with France? The English world was unsure. Its order had been upended.

Williams passed away in 1983. In 1963, his longtime partner Frank Merlo died of lung cancer. Two months later, President Kennedy was shot to death. Who or what was responsible for the assassination? A single gunman? Russian agents? The CIA? American self-esteem and solidarity, swollen since 1945 with victory in the Second World War, was, after Kennedy's assassination, punctured by suspicion and dissent.

The response of each playwright to the double whammy of personal loss and political upheaval was to construct plays that would have audiences laugh and cry at a world simultaneously tragic and absurd. Critics were not having it, not for either playwright. The insults to Williams are still fresh enough (and continue): he was too drunk to finish his sentences, too undisciplined to maintain the rigor of realism. Shakespeare suffered worse, and for far longer. The parts of Shakespeare's plays that didn't fit ideas of decorum were cut from performances. Gone, for centuries, the Porter in *Macbeth*, who jokes that alcohol, the great equivocator, increases the desire, but takes away from the performance. Onstage, he spills this out immediately after an audience has watched equivocation of desire and performance play out in a murder. The recitation of the theme of equivocation from terror to cheap jokes was too vulgar for proper audiences to hear. Gone, too, and for the same reason, *Lear's Fool*, who chases after the King's folly, and *Cleopatra's Clown*, who brings her "joy of the worm" in a poisonous asp: one last commingling of death, lust, and bawdy wordplay.

Respected editors and revered theater practitioners—for centuries—passed on the notion that Shakespeare's work was in need of rescuing from such vulgarities. A seventeenth-century metaphor for Shakespeare's words: a heap of jewels in the mud, though these were jewels thought valuable enough to be worth the effort of restringing.

In a world like our own, teetering between farce and tragedy, unsure of its leaders, unsure of its future, unsure now of the meaning of our past, the insight of Williams to be found in Shakespeare helps clarify Shakespeare's insight into our own circumstances. In all

of Shakespeare's history plays, and *Hamlet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, the processes of history extend beyond the last scene of the fifth act, past the concluding proclamations of a new commander in chief—Fortinbras or Augustus Caesar—or any numbered Henry or Richard. The processes of history—political and personal—continue on in audiences unsettled by doubts about their own past, present, and future.

From the vantage point of Provincetown, we notice that water runs throughout these plays as a constant of instability: three plays by Shakespeare being performed at the festival this year have scenes on the deck of a rolling ship. Drought and a surprise drenching are the alpha and omega of *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real*. The waves lapping against the Florida Keys keep the beat of the *Gnädiges Fräulein*. Both authors deploy rain to cleanse and storms to annihilate. The presence of water hints at the potential for renewal in the most dire times, as does the fertile slime of the river Nile.

This year, our audience shares with Tennessee Williams and William Shakespeare the experience of instability (in personal life, perhaps; in politics, surely). Performing these plays in 2017 and seeing them performed expands our capacity to see, understand, and, most importantly, feel

unruly writing (and lives and history) that came before and will come after our own. Art that is itself willfully unstable (and this is what the critics detested: the instability) has, these days, a power to inspire. ❖

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).

# Braunwyn Jackett

PORTRAIT OF AN ACTOR

By Lynda Sturmer

BRAUNWYN JACKETT is an actor who has played many roles in her life, onstage and off. For the last eighteen years, she's worked as an actor in Provincetown, honing her craft and playing a wide range of characters. She has been in over forty-five theater productions, as well as ten indie films, TV roles, and festivals.

Her favorite roles have been playing Amanda in *The Food Chain*, Ruth in *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*, Molly in *Just Say Yes!*, Kate in *Eastham Land of First Light*, and Sandra in *Dolores*. She is currently appearing alongside a who's who of Provincetown actors in a TV series on Amazon Prime called *Offseason*, created by Nathan Butera and produced by Frank Vasello.

"It feels amazing," she says. "It was just a bunch of us getting together because winters are really tough here. Most people are on



PHOTO BY NATHAN BUTERA

Braunwyn Jackett

unemployment, and they have a lot of downtime. I don't think any one of us thought we would get that far. Each episode is forty-five minutes long, and we did fourteen of them. My youngest daughter, Iris, was in it. She was four years old when the series began. Now she is nine."

Offstage, Braunwyn is a mother with three children (Etel, Ezra, and Iris), a grandmother to Daisy, and a sister with six siblings, including two, Beau and Luke, who are also actors. Her parents are Tony and Susan Jackett, and her partner is Nathaniel McKean (her high-school sweetheart). She is a homemaker and family leader. A true steel magnolia, she's calm and focused during family crises as she successfully juggles family and professional roles like an aerialist on a high wire holding a Boston cream pie.

Jackett proudly calls herself a local, a townie, and a Provincetown native born and raised. "My father's family has deep roots in Provincetown. My dad's mother was a Snow—Nicholas Snow arrived in Plymouth in 1623 on the *Anne*, the second boat after the *Mayflower* to land in America," says Jackett. "Snow married Connie Hopkins, who was on the actual *Mayflower*. My mother's family is a mixture of Portuguese, Irish, and German."

She graduated from high school in 1991, and then traveled for five years, but eventually found herself back on the Cape. "I came back because Provincetown is my home. I know there are many more opportunities for an actress in other places but it's very important for me to live here surrounded by family. I want to raise my family here because it was so important for

me growing up," says Jackett. "I want the same for my children."

Working in theater is a collaborative art and another way of forming a family. When you're in a play, the cast, director, and crew become very close. Although this relationship formally ends when the show closes, during production it is a commitment, with each person depending on and supporting the others. Director Patrick Falco, who directs at the Provincetown Theater and the Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, was one of the first to recognize Braunwyn's potential and began casting her in his productions. In 2009, I had the good fortune to play her mother in *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* at the Provincetown Theater. Falco also directed her in *The Food Chain*. "I love working with Braunwyn. She creates a sense of community, a spirit in a company. She's a great asset to the theater," says Falco.

Jackett returns this sentiment: "If only I had Patrick Falco in my life when I was a teenager. I was so painfully shy the teachers didn't know what to do with me. He believes in me. He said, 'I have this great role for you in *The Food Chain*. You can do it.'"

The play begins with Braunwyn's character performing a forty-five-minute monologue, and she had pages and pages of dialogue to learn. With Falco's support, she not only succeeded but also won a Best Actress of the Year Award from the *Cape Cod Times*, and received accolades in *Provincetown Magazine*: "Jackett is phenomenal as the poetess in distress, rambling about the tyranny of women's purses, reciting her poems



PHOTO BY MISCHA RICHTER

Braunwyn with Halcyone Hurst

with titles like 'Untitled Number 101' and 'Untitled Number 21.'

"This experience made me realize I could do anything I wanted to. I'm so grateful to Patrick," says Jackett.

This long journey to self-confidence took many years—shyness is a trait she shares with many actors, who eventually find their voices playing other people. She never considered acting until she was cast in a small role in *Annie* during her junior year at Provincetown High School. However, it was in her senior year, when she was cast as one of the ugly stepsisters in *Cinderella*, that the acting bug hit.

"For the first time in my life, I said, 'Wow, I can do this.' I told my father this is what I wanted to do," says Jackett. "My parents have always been very supportive. They come to every production."

Her parents are proud of her achievements and the fact that she's found a career that is so fulfilling for her. "I think it's wonderful. She's very good and I'm very proud of her," says mother Susan. "She was fun, always a joy." Father Tony agrees: "She sparkles."

Braunwyn also sparkles onstage and brings a strong sense of truth to every role she tackles. I asked her to describe her process, how she creates a role.

"I begin by reading the script over and over again in order to understand who my character is and what she wants," she explains. "Then I memorize my lines. I do this every morning for two hours after the kids have gone to school. After I have my lines down, the real work begins. I continue developing my character while rehearsing with the other actors. We learn from each other and grow together with the help of a good director. I bring my own life experience to every role I play."

While she refers to herself as a "homebody," the theater has given her a new social life, an identity that blends right in with her close-knit family and Provincetown connections. However, even after all these years, there are echoes of her early shyness as she gets opening-night jitters: "I still get butterflies in my stomach. I have a routine before I go on. I breathe, pray, and reach out to the universe. I do the same for everyone I work with. I'm very blessed to have had all these opportunities." ❧

*LYNDA STURNER is an actress, playwright, and journalist. Her plays include Almost Sisters, The Death of Huey Newton, Look What You Made Me Do, and A Twist of Lemon; Super-Lubricated and A Talented Woman (winner of the 2013 Kaplan Prize awarded by Eventide Arts) were written with Jim Dalglish. She has written for TheaterMania, the Provincetown Banner, and Nite Life Exchange.*

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