

Tennessee

W I L L I A M S

F E S T I V A L S T . L O U I S

Tennessee Williams Biography

Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Tennessee Williams' renowned work reflects the nearly 20 years his family lived in St. Louis, and his creations range from the famed classics, to adaptations for film and opera, to dozens of newly discovered plays and writings that have been continuously documented, performed and studied around the world. Considered one of three most iconic American drama playwrights of the 20th century, along with Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill, Williams is best known for his award-winning powerful plays, "A Streetcar Named Desire," "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," and "The Glass Menagerie."

His beloved and enduring characters throughout his more than 30 full-length plays -- Stanley Kowalski and Blanche DuBois, Amanda and Laura, Maggie the Cat, to name a few -- represent the loneliness, depression and uncertainty that were a part of his personal life. A product of a tumultuous marriage, his difficult and troubling childhood provided fodder for his art. In fact, his mother and sister became the models for the foolish but strong character of Amanda Wingfield, and the fragile daughter Laura, respectively, in "The Glass Menagerie," while his abusive father represented the aggressive and verbally abusive Big Daddy in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." As for himself -- the main character in "Night of the Iguana" -- struggled with depression and alcoholism just like Williams did.

References to his time and coming of age in St. Louis are sprinkled throughout his work. Originally christened with the name Thomas Lanier Williams III, his family moved when he was eight from Columbus, Miss., to St. Louis in 1918. In St. Louis, he attended the Eugene Field School, Soldan High, University City High, the University of Missouri in Columbia, and Washington University. He also worked downtown at the International Shoe Company, where his father was an executive. The Tivoli Theater, Forest Park, the Muny and the Saint Louis Art Museum were all frequent stops for him, and many of them have been included on the St. Louis-based TWF bus tours that were held the first two years of the Festival. He eventually moved to New Orleans in 1938, took the name Tennessee, a nickname he'd been given in college due to his Southern drawl, and accepted his status as a gay man.

The turning point in his career occurred in 1944 with the production of "The Glass Menagerie," which won a New York Critics Circle Award. The financial returns from the production freed up more time for him to write. His next piece of work, written

in Mexico, was a play titled “Poker Night,” eventually retitled “A Streetcar Named Desire,” which became one of his masterpieces. “Streetcar” won Williams his second New York Critics Circle Award. Recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama (1948), the original Broadway “Streetcar” cast included Jessica Tandy, Marlon Brando, Karl Malden and Kim Hunter. Two years later, Laurence Olivier directed the London premiere starring Vivien Leigh and Bonar Colleano. In 1951, the movie “A Streetcar Named Desire” won four Academy Awards with the reprisal cast of Brando, Hunter, Leigh and Malden.

The ensuing years were some of Williams’ most productive, with his plays being widely received throughout the country, as well as worldwide. His partner, Frank Merlo, whom he met in Provincetown, Mass., and later moved to Key West with, proved to be a steadying influence on Williams. In fact, Williams’ play, “The Rose Tattoo,” considered his most comedic work, was dedicated to Merlo. In 1951, the play won Tony Awards for Best Actor, Actress and Play; Italian actress Anna Magnani won an Oscar for her portrayal of Serafina in the 1955 film adaptation. It was during his early years with Merlo that Williams also garnered his second Pulitzer Prize for “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.” The play was later adapted into a film in 1958 which starred Paul Newman, Elizabeth Taylor and Burl Ives, who originated the role of Big Daddy on Broadway.

The negativities of human life – incest, madness, depression, repressed sexual identity, and alcoholism– continued to be reoccurring themes in his work. His own depression and dependence on drugs in the 1960s continued to take a toll on him long after Merlo’s death of lung cancer in the early ‘60s, and eventually succumbing himself in 1983 after choking on the lid of one of his pill bottles.

Williams’ powerful voice continues to impress audiences with his haunting tales of humanity. Audiences absorb his work at literary and play festivals, readings, panel discussions, concerts, art exhibitions, productions and playwright contests throughout the world – from Athens and Caracas to Moscow and Tehran. Celebrations and academic conferences occur frequently at elite institutions including Georgetown University, University of Illinois, Columbia University, Harvard, Washington University in St. Louis, among others. A few of the U.S.-based annual festivals include the following: Tennessee Williams Literary Festival, New Orleans (March 21-25); Tennessee Williams Festival, St. Louis (May 10-19); 13th annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival (Sept. 21-24); and the Columbus (Miss.) Tennessee Williams Tribute (September, 2018).

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