

# Stunning bio recalls tortured soul of Tennessee Williams



## NONFICTION

### Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh

By John Lahr

Norton

784 pages, \$39.95

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NEWS BOOK REVIEWER

For Tennessee Williams, every act of creation was also an act of self-destruction.

Across his charmed and tortured life, Williams bit off little pieces of himself and spit them up onto the stage. A “Glass Menagerie” here, a “Streetcar Named Desire” or “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” there, each one a still-pulsing piece of connective tissue between his outer relationships and inner demons.

When there was nothing left to destroy, no more strangers on whose kindness he could bring himself to depend, Williams washed down a fistful of Second with some wine in his room at the Hotel Elysée in New York City and drifted off into history and legend.

That long and slow self-sacrifice upon the altar of the American theater was a source of constant revelation for Williams’ audience and near-constant despair for the playwright. And now, 31 years after Williams’ death and at a time when his genius and his incalculable effect on the art form has never seemed clearer, that sacrifice finally has biography it deserves.

John Lahr’s “Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh,” the product of some 12 years of painstaking writing and research, presents a crisp and harrowing portrait of Williams from several angles at once.

At 784 pages, it’s a doorstop of a book that reads like a playbill, an exquisitely balanced compendium of personal anecdotes and incisive analysis so deftly intertwined that it’s often difficult to tell one from the other.

Lahr, the former chief drama critic of *The New Yorker* and no slouch at dramatic interpretation, weaves his close readings of Williams’ major and minor works with personal details that reveal the playwright’s unique and uniquely self-destructive approach to his art.

This is no chronological account, one of its great strengths. It dispenses with most of Williams’ early childhood and teens, opening instead with a riveting description of the Broadway opening of “The Glass Menagerie” in 1945.

In Lahr’s account of that opening, for which the stage and silent film actress Laurette Taylor had been dragged out of retirement to give what many regarded as the best performance of her career, it was clear that a blinding talent had arrived and that Broadway would



Illustration by Adam Zyglis/Buffalo News

never be the same again.

The glimpses Lahr provides into Williams’ working process, which always mined his personal experiences and cast light on some tortured part of his soul, are invaluable. Here he is, for example, on the almost tangible sensation of absence that gave “Glass Menagerie” its ineffable draw:

“Williams, who often complained of feeling ‘like a ghost,’ grew up in not one but two haunted households where secrets and the unsayable suffused daily life with a sense of masquerade, creating an emptiness as palpable, elusive and corrosive as it was to the Wingfields,” Lahr writes, referring to a poem that was the basis for the play. “Haunted restless, guilt-ridden, searching for a truth that keeps him in perpetual motion, he is released by the luck of talent into the world, no longer earthbound but airborne by his imagination.”

The book shines brightest when it comes to Elia Kazan, with whom Williams formed what Lahr called, with some authority, “the most important theatrical collaboration of twentieth-century American theater.”

Without Kazan, Lahr makes clear, we would have no Williams as we know him. We learn that Williams’ best and most enduring plays were the result of arduous and often exhausting battles between playwright and director that turn what might otherwise have been brief flashes of brilliance into commercial powerhouses.

Kazan was blessed with a keen eye not only for what would make money at the box office, but for how to achieve emotional transference

from the performer to the audience. He wasn’t always right, as in his ill-advised change to the ending of “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,” which Williams later returned to its superior original form. But when he was right, he was dead right. And Williams, with dollar signs in his eyes and sometimes to his eventual shame, went along with Kazan’s suggestions more often than not.

In page after page, Lahr delivers a riveting account of their creative relationship, which resulted in productions that defined the middle of the century: “A Streetcar Named Desire,” “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,” “Sweet Bird of Youth” and, the least successful, “Camino Real.”

If you had no interest in the details of Williams’ life but simply wanted to learn something invaluable about the process of creating and producing a great play, Lahr’s exploration of the Williams-Kazan relationship alone justifies the price.

“Thesis and antithesis must have a synthesis in a work of art but I don’t think all of the syntheses must occur on the stage, perhaps about 40 percent of it can be left to occur in the minds of the audience,” Williams wrote to Kazan when he was considering directing his 1951 play “The Rose Tattoo,” which he later declined. “MYSTERY MUST BE KEPT! But I must not confuse it with sloppy writing which is probably what I have done a good deal of in *Rose Tattoo*.”

The details of Williams’ great successes and crashing theatrical failures rightly take up the bulk of the narrative here, but his personal relationships also loom large – if only because they provided fodder

for his work. We meet a series of companions, starting with the physically violent Pancho Rodriguez and ending with the emotionally violent writer Robert Carroll. Violence is a major theme.

From each of his lovers, Williams drew something he could use on the stage. Williams’ first love Kip Kiernan, a physical beauty who died of a brain tumor in 1944, echoed through his male characters for the rest of his career. Rodriguez’s temper and physical intimidation manifested itself in Stanley Kowalski from “A Streetcar Named Desire.” And Frank Merlo, with whom Williams carried on a tortured, 13-year relationship he likened to “the longest war on record,” loomed large in later work that considered the soul-effacing terrors of playing second-fiddle to a great talent.

Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the most searing insights about Williams’ abuse of his own souls and those of his friends and lovers come from Gore Vidal, who had the playwright’s number from the start.

He’d begin, Vidal said, with a sexual desire. Out of that desire he’d write a story. If he remained unsatisfied, “he would make a play of the story and then – and this is why he was so compulsive a working playwright – he would have the play produced so he could, at relative leisure, like God, rearrange his original experience into something that was no longer God’s and unpossessable but *his*.”

Lahr put it this way:

“Rather like an actor who stays in character offstage in order not to lose the reality of his performance, Williams had begun to intuit the utility of his masochism, to become a connoisseur of his own collapse ... He was prepared to destroy himself for meaning. He took himself right up to the precipice, so that he could stare into it.”

The only drawback to the book is Lahr’s occasional tendency to cast himself as an amateur psychoanalyst in an effort to peer into the souls of Williams’ characters and thus into his own, or vice versa.

Some otherwise clear-eyed passages suffer from Freudian analysis – he speculates in one passage that Williams’ lover Pancho Rodriguez was searching for “the mother he never had” – but they’re few enough to gloss over.

The final 200 pages are utterly painful to read, as Williams tries to sustain himself through a series of commercially unsuccessful ventures. After being institutionalized by his brother, Dakin Williams, he takes a long slow slide into misery that finally ends in that New York City hotel room on Feb. 25, 1983.

“For awhile the theater loved him, and then it went back to searching in its pockets for its soul,” Arthur Miller said of Williams at his funeral, reducing the playwright’s life to its terrible, beautiful essence. “He chose a hard life that requires the skin of an alligator and the heart of a poet. To his everlasting honor, he persevered and bore all of us toward glory.”

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