

Theatricalist Cartoons: Tennessee Williams's Late, "Outrageous" Plays

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I was brought up puritanically, . . . I try to outrage that puritanism.
I have an instinct to shock. Hit them with something.

—Tennessee Williams, 1962

In the late 1950s, Tennessee Williams, who had established a reputation as one of America's most distinguished dramatists with a string of Broadway "successes,"¹ ranging from *The Glass Menagerie* in 1945 to *Orpheus Descending* in 1957, began to undergo a gradual sea change as a playwright, moving into dramatic territory that seemed, to critics and audiences, to represent a radical break from his earlier plays. But rather than breaking with the style of the earlier plays, the shift in Williams's work may be viewed as a gradual *evolution* of dramaturgic elements which had been present in his work from the beginning. The shift toward grotesque parody in some of Williams's later plays represents one of the more crucial aspects of this evolution, for comedy was never far beneath the surface of the tragic elements in his drama. These plays, including *The Gnädiges Fräulein* (1965), *THIS IS (An Entertainment)* (unpublished, 1976), *Kirche, Küche und Kinder: An Outrage for the Stage* (unpublished, 1979), *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* (1975-1979) and a fragment entitled *The Everlasting Ticket* (1981), all attack various aspects of traditional theatre through an unconventional, fantastic mode that I call the "outrageous." The outrageous late plays are bawdy, over-the-top farces that appropriate systems of metadrama and the aesthetics of the cartoon to parody the state of contemporary theatre, foregrounding its corruption through farcical renderings of actors, scripts, sets, playwrights, producers, and critics. The outrageous qualities of these plays are too often interpreted as uncontrolled, autobiographical excesses on Williams's part, ignoring the voice of outrage,² or violent critique, that underlies the notion of the outrageous.

The roots for the late outrageous plays extend back to some of Williams's earliest drama. In 1941, he wrote a farce-satire entitled *The Case of the Crushed Petunias: A Lyrical Fantasy*, which, although it is "respectfully dedicated" (22) to Helen Hayes, is anything but respectful. Set in the Simple Notion Shop in Primanproper, Massachusetts, the play's satiric "fantasy" anticipates the more exaggerated qualities of the late outrageous plays in its farcical action, framed as a whodunit mystery that attempts to detect the identity of a "petuniacidal maniac" (23) who has trampled Miss Simple's bed of petunias. Like the outrageous plays, it critiques the theatre, as seen in a character's remark that "Boston's a state of mind you grow out of" (30), referring obliquely to the disastrous Boston premiere of Williams's first major production, *Battles of Angels*, which was quickly closed by

negative reviews in 1940. The late outrageous comedy is also foreshadowed in the “patsy” scenes of *Camino Real*, which were not a part of the first published version of the play, *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real* (1948), but were added for the 1953 Broadway production. In these scenes, Kilroy dons a “Patsy outfit” (478), consisting of a clownish “red fright wig, the big crimson nose that lights up and has horn-rimmed glasses attached, a pair of clown pants that have a huge footprint on the seat” (478-79). He engages in “Chaplinesque dumb-play” (531) as he races through the theatre aisles with his nose lighting up, parodying not only the actions of other characters in the play, but breaking the fourth wall, and thereby metadramatically thumbing (or lighting) his nose at the “serious” American tradition of Broadway realism. Williams describes another play-within-a-play sequence in *Camino Real* as a pagan ritual with “*serio-comic, grotesque-lyric*” (533) overtones, which could be a summation of the form of the entire play, in which the “grotesque-lyric” scenes with the metafictional characters of Lord Byron, Marguerite Gautier and Jacques Casanova, are disrupted by the “serio-comic,” outrageous antics of Kilroy in his fright wig.

In Williams’s late plays the sense of the outrageous is articulated diversely through forms of parody, parable and farce, all of which function on a level of *meta-mimesis*. That is, they take as their subject a pre-existing dramatic form, convention or maxim that claims to mimetically represent a condition in the “real” world and, through the superimposition of a metatheatrical level that emphasizes doubleness, create an “ironic . . . repetition with a difference” (Hutcheon 32), which establishes the subject of meta-mimesis as drama *about* mimetic representation. When meta-mimesis is given over to parody, as it is in several of the outrageous plays, it accomplishes what Mikhail Bakhtin has identified as a textual dialogism in which “mimicry rips the word away from its object” (*DI* 136), “liberat[ing] the object from the power of language . . . [and] destroy[ing] the homogenizing power of myth over language” (*DI* 139). This form of parodic meta-mimesis, which empowers the parodic text over the mimetic text that it parodies, is nevertheless dependent upon the reader’s/spectator’s ability to recognize and interpret the ironic doubling of the two forms.

The failure of most American critics to regard the outrageous plays as anything more than “thinly disguised self-portraits” (Hirsch 72), depicting “Williams’ fears of having passed his prime” (Hirsch 78) and of the “loss of artistic power” (Hirsch 79), led critics such as Foster Hirsch to conclude that Williams was now having “his nightmares in public” (79). Such autobiographical approaches devalue parody as a serious form and ignore the metadramatic implications of the works—namely, their critique of the theatre-as-world—and proceed as though the plays belonged to the realist tradition, attempting to divine individualist, psychological, and thematic meanings from *anti-mimetic* works that subvert psychological processes. The outrageously exaggerated nature of these works, which Williams describes as “vaudeville, burlesque, and slapstick, with a dash of pop art thrown in” (“Preface” 95), had not previously been seen on a Broadway stage, and

critics could only reference the new style to the Theatre of the Absurd and find it wanting.³ Refusing to acknowledge the infiltration of pop art and popular culture onto the Broadway stage, much less into what had come to be recognized as a "Williams play," most critics were blind to the ironic, meta-mimetic project of the outrageous plays, which was anything but subtle, foregrounding the ridiculous nature of the theatrical enterprise in an over-the-top manner that could be compared, in its effects, with camp.

Several theorists of camp, beginning with Susan Sontag have defined it as a "way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon" (277), stressing, as the high practitioner of camp, Charles Ludlam, observed that "camp is a way of looking at things, never what's looked at" (227). In other words, camp does *not* mimetically mirror the world (or the self-portrait of the artist), but, like parody, cubist painting, or pop art, engages in self-conscious play with representations that already exist. David Savran further articulates camp as "a celebration of artifice and extravagance, an epicene style" (118). Because the outrageous plays are about the theatre—the home of artifice—they play with artificiality, exaggerating a consciousness of theatricalism beyond the bounds of what journalistic critics, with their realist frames of reference, could consider as acceptable, or even tasteful. To American critics such as Henry Hewes, the camp, meta-mimetic outrageous drama seemed to be little more than a "theatrical stunt" (28). Such critics are clearly not participating in a mode of interpretation that Savran defines as a "'camp' [way of] reading" (118), which

pay[s] particular attention to problems of coding and language, to innuendo and gossip; it will make elaborate substitutions and delight in the capriciousness of spoken and performative languages. (Savran 118)

The elaborate nature of outrageous substitution in these plays depends, for its effectiveness, upon the ability of critics and audiences to "read" them in a camp mode, perceiving the ways in which, according to Ludlam, camp turns values "upside down" (226) in a reversal that is capable of producing a "rigorous revaluing of everything" (Ludlam 226). The meta-mimetic project of the outrageous plays demands that spectators be able to recognize the doubled codes and substitutions through which this revaluation takes place, in order to understand the critiques of contemporary theatre which they present.

The voices of outrage in these plays may be interpreted, through a camp reading/viewing, as grotesquely comic, alluding at times to styles of the animated cartoon. But they are not necessarily meant to produce laughter, for they may be seen as being similar to the post-Romantic tradition of the grotesque in which the principle of laughter was transformed. Bakhtin has theorized that the Romantic conception of the grotesque departed from medieval and Renaissance notions of the grotesque comic, which were based on the notion of the body as humorous.

He articulates that the Romantic grotesque, as seen in the work of Ludwig Tieck and Frederich Schlegel,

was a reaction against the cold rationalism, against official, formalistic, and logical authoritarianism; it was a rejection of that which is finished and completed, of the didactic and utilitarian spirit of the Enlighteners with their narrow and artificial optimism. (*Rabelais* 37)

Similarly, the grotesque nature of many of Williams's late plays—especially his outrageous plays—could be seen as a reaction against the “cold rationalism” of late nineteenth and twentieth century naturalism and realism, as well as a rejection of the “finished . . . didactic” real-life drama of the Group Theatre, whose tradition, with its style of Method acting, continues to influence American drama. The “artificial optimism” of the Enlightenment (and the Group Theatre) saw laughter as a joyous element with regenerative power. The principle of laughter in the Romantic grotesque, however, relies most heavily upon irony, and, as Bakhtin observes, laughter all but disappears and is no longer restorative, transforming the everyday world into a “terrifying world, alien to man” (38). The emphasis upon individual isolation and madness in an alienating world enacts the subjectivity upon which expressionism is based and from which Williams's work evolved.

Williams's use of the grotesque comic, while reacting against similar forms of rationalism, is nevertheless different from the Romantic grotesque, for although it still relies upon heavy irony as its primary form of humor, it parodies mimetic representation in distinctly postmodern ways, appropriating cartoon imagery from popular culture. Like artist Philip Guston, whose later paintings were filled with cartoonish images of Ku Klux Klan figures, Williams explored the aesthetic possibilities of the cartoon to represent the grotesquely disfigured position of the artist within the frames of the theatre and the larger American society. The two-dimensional aesthetics of the cartoon—and particularly the animated cartoon—provided Williams with a minimalist slate on which he could sketch reductive, parodic outcries against the theatre-as-world, both foregoing and lampooning the psychological processes of the realist tradition in order to emphasize the actual critique itself and the voices of outrage in which it is made.

The Gnädiges Fräulein is a grotesquely animated cartoon of a play that was written in 1965 and first produced in New York in 1966 with another one-act play, *The Mutilated*, under the banner title of *Slapstick Tragedy*.⁴ The oxymoronic juxtaposition of “slapstick” with “tragedy” gestures at the serious project of the cartoon, contextualizing the “tragic” situation of the Fräulein, a faded soubrette who has long since passed the “zenith of her career in show-biz and as a B-girl” (238) in European vaudeville, as a comic parable and parody of the position of the actor in the theatre. Pop culture cartoons and vaudevillian slapstick routines are utilized to parody not only the increasingly disfigured condition of the Fräulein, whose eyes are pecked out by the coccolony birds she battles for fish,⁵ but also

the conditions of the theatre, its producers and critics, who are responsible for her plight. If this were realist drama, the Fräulein's condition would be framed as tragic, with emphasis upon how her psychological history brought about her fate. The play's attitude toward her is quite different, though, caricaturing her through what Harold Clurman has described as "an odd but effective mixture of gallows humor and Rabelaisian zest" (73). Because she is portrayed as a two-dimensional cartoon figure, her psychological processes are of no importance, foregrounding her metatheatrical performances, in which she battles cocaloony birds for fish, presenting camp parables of what it means to be an actor in a corrupt theatre and world.

The play's cartoon action is set in a boarding house on Cocaloony Key, which is defined by the looming presence of cocaloony birds. Stage directions specify that its "*lusterless gray zinc roof . . . sits at the angle of Charlie Chaplin's derby on the house*" (217),⁶ establishing the slapstick tone that delineates the characters, dialogue and action of the play. By far, the most outrageously cartoonish character in the play is the cocaloony bird, played by an actor in a pelican-like bird suit, whose domination of the play's world is reflected in the grey color of the set, based upon the "*chromatic scale of the pelican*" (217). Williams writes in his "Production Notes" that in his first draft, he had "typed the word 'pelican,' scratched it out and written over it 'cocaloony'" (218), disfiguring the birds with a fantastic name that connotes the "loony" insanity that their presence brings to the play. The cocaloonies are scavengers of the fish docks who are described by Polly as animated cartoon characters:

they just hang around and goof off on the fish-docks, mentally drifting and dreaming till animated by the— [*She whistles between two fingers as if calling a cab.*]—of a fish boat coming in with a good haul of fish. Oh, then they're animated, they waddle and flap, flap and waddle out toward where the boat's docked to catch the fish thrown away, the ones not fit for the markets, but delectable or at least cordially acceptable to the cocaloonies, they flap and waddle out to the boat with their beaks wide open on their elastic gullets to catch the throwaway fish, the discards, the re-jecks, because, y'see, —tell it not Gath!—the once self-reliant-and-self-sufficient character of this southernmost sea bird has degenerated to where it could justly be described as a parasitical creature, yes, gone are the days when it would condescend to fish for itself, oh, no, no, *no*, it— (220)

The degeneration of the cocaloonies into "parasitical creatures" who feed on the garbage of society is physicalized in performance through the two-dimensional, cartoonish presence of the Cocaloony character, who enters, "stalking jerkily about, poking its gruesome head this way and that with spastic motions" (234), ominously squawking one cartoon-like monosyllable of dialogue, "*AWK!*" (235). Un-

like the predatory black birds of *Suddenly Last Summer*, the cocaloopies have degenerated to a two-dimensional cartoon image of "natural" life grotesquely and comically disfigured by the presence of civilization and its everpresent garbage.

The character of The Gnädiges Fräulein is no less grotesque than the cocaloopies, being, like the other characters, a cartoon-"loony" in her own right, perhaps the ironic opposite of the German meaning of her name, which translates as "gracious miss," which was a common form of address to a "proper" woman. In the meta-symbolic system of the play, however, she is a performer, who still wears "the remnants of her theatrical wardrobe" (230), which have been disfigured by the addition of a blood-stained bandage over her eyes, for, in the course of her performances, they peck out her eyes. The birds may be considered to be critics of her performances, who, as Clurman suggests, have the power to permanently close her play (72). He interprets the other characters as archetypes of the theatre:

The clownish lady who runs the boarding house may stand for managerial powers, producers, editors, publishers and the like. There is also a blond Indian who steals and makes a banquet of the fish which the Fräulein has struggled and lost her eyes to catch. Is this meant to stand for one of Williams' directors? (72-72)

Although, like other critics, Clurman believes that the Fräulein is a "projection of [Williams's] present situation" (72), he also appreciates that the play is a "satiric" parable of the theatre, "filled with sardonic mirth at the plight of the artist applauded and glamorized in his triumphs and then repudiated and derided when he fails" (72).

The characters of Polly, the "southernmost gossip columnist and Society Editor of the southernmost news organ in the Disunited Mistakes" (219), and Molly, the proprietor of the "big dormitory" (226), are also cartoonish. Zoe Caldwell, who played Polly in the 1966 production, remembers that the stage directions of the production script, which do not appear in the published version, call for Polly and Molly to wear white-face clown makeup and large, floppy clown shoes and to take occasional pratfalls (Caldwell).⁷ Although Clurman suggests that Molly might be seen as a producer in the theatre, she and Polly also function as a metadramatic audience, sitting in rockers on a porch smoking marijuana cigarettes. The theatre audience sees through their drugged vision, watching the cartoon performances of the boarding house residents, including the Fräulein and Indian Joe, a "blond Indian with Caribbean-blue eyes" (226), a camp contradiction of realist representations of Native Americans. Appearing "dressed like a Hollywood Indian" (239) and brandishing a tomahawk, Indian Joe's performances are enacted primarily in pantomime, punctuated his monosyllabic "UGH!"s, to which the Cocaloony replies "AWK!" Polly says that it "reminds me of the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Don't it remind you of the Lincoln-Douglas debates?" (239), but Molly ignores her, telling Polly to "Concentrate on the action" (240). The action consists of a

series of similar cartoonish vignettes done primarily in pantomime or in abbreviated utterances that would fit well into comic strip balloons. The bulk of the dialogue is given to the audience, Polly and Molly, who hold a running commentary on the performances of their guests. Their stoned vision—similar to Rimbaud's "calculated disordering of the senses"—permits them to enter into a camp mode of viewing, giving them an ironic distance and allowing them to interpret the Fräulein's performance on the fish docks as a meta-mimetic commentary on the life of a performer. Each time the Fräulein returns from her scavenging performance on the stage of the fish docks, she is increasingly disfigured, and finally completely blinded and "*streaked with blood*" (245), appearing "*transfigured as a saint under torture*" (245). Her transfiguration allows her to cross over temporarily from her disfiguration as a "social derelict" (230) into an ironic caricature of a saint, purified for a moment by her blinded vision, in which she sings in a "*high, sing-song voice*," like an outraged priest/performer saying mass:

the talented young soubrette astonished her audience as well as her fellow performers when she cleverly intercepted a rather large mackerel thrown to the seal by catching this same rather large mackerel in her own lovely jaws!"—Ahhhhhh!
Ahhhhhh! (247)

Molly interprets the Fräulein's story as a parody of her triumph before "the crowned heads at the Royal in Copenhagen" (257), in which she worked with a trained seal and its trainer and "suddenly felt the need to compete for attention with the trained seal" (255) by catching the fish in her mouth. According to Molly, one night, the seal turned on her a struck her with his flipper, and "her pearly whites flew from her mouth like popcorn out of a popper . . . After that? She drifted. The Gnädiges Fräulein just drifted *and* drifted and *drifted*. . . —She lost her sense of reality and she drifted. . . ." (257). Her drifting is contextualized in the vocabulary of the impossible, non-realist imagery of the animated cartoon, with her teeth flying out of her mouth "like popcorn out of a popper," juxtaposing a slapstick vision of the grotesque body with a more tragic loss of self and "sense of reality." This loss reduces her speech to just one cartoonish vowel: "AHHHHHHHHHHH! HHHHHHHHHH" (248), which Polly ironically characterizes as "the saddest soliloquy on the stage since Hamlet's. . . ." (248).

The outrageous two-dimensional action of the animated cartoon appears again in another of Williams's late one-act plays, *Kirche, Küche und Kinder: An Outrage for the Stage* (unpublished, 1979), which premiered off-off Broadway at the Jean Cocteau Repertory Company in New York in 1979.⁸ Because the play was performed as a work-in-progress, and, no doubt, because of the extremely outrageous nature of the play, no press was admitted, allowing Williams to work with the director and actors with the feeling of complete freedom. The play is a metadramatic, bawdy farce that, on one level, registers the actions of a strange

family in Soho, which, in the 1970s, was a marginal neighborhood of New York where artists inhabited lofts illegally. The play takes place in two dramatic places in their loft: a “kirche,” or area similar to a church, that “contains elements suggestive of ‘High Church’” (1), and a “küche,” or kitchen.⁹ As in many of Williams’s plays from the late 1970s and early 1980s, walls—both the walls of the dramatic places and the boundaries of the self—have all but disappeared. In this play walls are signified only by colored venetian blinds, which flip open when the play shifts from the kirche to the küche, calling attention to the theatricality of stage space.

The kirche is a space identified with the character of the “Man,” a gay hustler in a wheelchair who also functions as the play’s narrator, but, unlike the character/narrators of *The Glass Menagerie*, *Vieux Carré* and *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, he does not look back in time as if to construct a “memory” play. Rather, his long monologues refer to the present action of the play. In his opening monologue, accompanied by an organ, he links the kirche space to his position as a narrator, saying that:

a man constructs about him, willy nilly, his own world and is then obliged to occupy it till he’s evicted by— —The expiration of his lease on personal—existence . . .

The chambered nautilus, when its lease on existence has expired, leaves behind it those shimmering, iridescent chambers in which it once existed, as lovely as if its existence had been devoted to acts of charity, to saintliness and prayer. . . .

But I, when my time’s run out, will leave behind me this single chamber now visible to you. (2)

He holds the chamber of self and the stage space of the kirche about him as a “sanctuary such as one once sought in places of worship” (7)—or in the theatre, for as he speaks directly to the audience, he acknowledges the invisible fourth wall that protects him, while simultaneously breaking it. The kirche is thus established as the theatrical podium from which the Man, who identifies himself variously as not only a hustler, but as a writer and an actor playing roles, being “a legitimate card-holding member of that union [Actors’ Equity] that is devoted to the care an’ feedin’ of actors of any gender” (2), comments on the action of the play, as well as upon the state of the theatre, like the cocaloonies who drift and dream.

In contrast, the küche is the site of the frenetic animated cartoon of the play’s action, alluding to the American brand of “kitchen sink,” or real-life drama. The Man literalizes this idea when he says that the küche “has exposed itself now as a subtle symbol for show-biz on Broadway” (23). He prefers to remain in his kirche, the space in which he reflects on his various careers, where he “is mentally occupied with reflections on beauty” (23). The director of the first production in 1979,

Eve Adamson, says that she juxtaposed action in the kirche and the küche as if they play were a "collage" (or montage) in a Fellini film, in which, "on the one hand, you have the kirche side, where I think he has written some of his loveliest, lyrical language. And then on the other side [the küche] you have this Katzenjammer humor" (Adamson). Her reference to the early twentieth century comic strip featuring the Katzenjammer kids emphasizes the cartoonish nature of the action in the küche, which Adamson asked designers to conceive as a black and white film, in contrast to the "color film" of the kirche.

From the kirche, the Man narrates the cartoonish action going on in the kitchen, where his Wife, the "daughter of a Lutheran minister of the island known as Staten" (3) and her father squabble in heavy German accents over the Fräulein Haussmitzenschlogger. The Fräulein is a ninety-nine year old woman with "a few geriatric problems, a wood leg and a glass eye" (3), who has sex with the Minister behind the organ. As the Wife turns toward the stove, the Lutheran Minister hits her over the head with his umbrella and "*invisible canaries sing as she turns slowly and dizzily about*" (5). This action and sound effect occur repeatedly in the "küche" play, which borrows language and imagery from the animated cartoon. As this scene ends, the Wife brings the cartoon into the kirche, carrying a rubber axe, where the Man sits obliviously reading *Screw* magazine, and she swings the axe "*like a vertically mobile pendulum*" (8) over his head. The cartoon continues as the Fräulein known as "Hotsy" (who was played by a male actor in drag in the 1979 production) enters to announce that she is pregnant, saying to the Man:

FRÄULEIN: Die pregnancy, is it noticeable, mein herr?

MAN: —Noticeable, yes. Credible, no. —However—

FRÄULEIN: If the conversation is done with—I give you head, a good blow job, personal, private, no talk of?

(MAN smiles slowly and sadly)

FRÄULEIN: —Ja?

(Pause)

MAN: Madam . . . you are a lost soul in a lost world . . . (13)

Like Hotsy's pregnancy, the cartoon drama is noticeable, but not credible by realist standards. The cartoon, which, like caricature, plays upon the impossible exaggeration of details and actions from real life, is funny primarily because such actions could never occur in the world. Sigmund Freud theorized that caricature, like parody and travesty, "are directed against people and objects which lay claim to authority and respect" (200). While caricature subverts authority by means of a

single illustration, the animated cartoon engages in activities that more closely resemble parody, in its potential for “destroying the unity that exists between people’s characters as we know them and their speeches and actions” (Freud 201), producing a mechanism for unmasking subjects.

In the case of *Kirche, Küche und Kinder*, the attack upon authority through the outrageous use of the theatricalized animated cartoon functions as a parodic cry of outrage that subverts the authority of the family and of theatre by transgressing the boundaries of what is regarded, on Broadway, as good taste. The cartoon of the family explodes myths of the American family as the “kinder,” or children, “*TALL ADOLESCENTS OF OPPOSITE GENDER rush in . . . dressed as kindergarten students*” (15) and their father, the Man, proceeds to inspect their genitals and instruct them in the trade of hustling, which he sees as a more useful education than school:

This is a world of many and varied vocations, not all of them best prepared for by such a protracted loitering in a room furnished with tiny chairs and tables and colored with alphabets and frames of colored beads on which you are first instructed in the important business of counting. (16)

As he teaches them how to count money received from their trade, the Wife metadramatically comments on the departure from a realist rendering of the family, remarking, “—*This is possible to see but not to believe!*” (15). Good taste is further turned upside down as the Minister throws a paper bag over Hotsy’s head and “*plops a huge Bible under [her] derriere and mounts her [as] MEMBERS OF THE PRESS burst in: there is a burst of flash-photos, shouts of ribaldry*” (22), as the Wife observes that “all hell’s broken loose in mein küche” (22).

As Man interprets this “antic [cartoon] behavior” (16) through a camp lens, telling the audience that “something is impending” (7), or observing ironically that “somebody is breaking the door down in die küche” (10), he also comments, in a metadramatic frame, on the theatre and his position within it. From his confinement in the wheelchair, he is writing his “Great Memoirs” (14), an allusion to Williams’s own *Memoirs*, published in 1975 and considered by most reviewers to be altogether too frank about his sexual life. The Man refers to the early closing of two Williams plays in Boston, *Battle of Angels* (1940) and *The Red Devil Battery Sign* (1975), saying that

MAN: I’ve written a number of epic dramas not all of which closed in Boston, if opened. Let’s say I have served my apprenticeship in the literary world, having composed a sequence of sonnets of spring, but most importantly, Madam, a three paragraph novella that won the Hotlicker Award at the age of fifteen.

WIFE: Die Hotlicker, vot iss die Hotlicker?

MAN: The Hotlicker Award's not one of those annual tributes of no more than annual significance but one that's awarded on only such rare occasions as it's *deserved*, ever if that be no more than once in a lifetime of an immortal. (24)

The Hotlicker Award clearly refers to Williams's two Pulitzer prizes, and while this is an overtly autobiographical detail, it is also used to critique the theatre, suggesting that Professor Emeritus Hotlicker gave him the award because he was one of the Man's best clients when he was a hustler. In thus comparing the theatre to prostitution, Williams cries out in a cartoonish voice of outrage against the system that will not leave him alone to dream in his wheelchair.

Against the backdrop of this grotesque, obscene cartoon, the Man pauses, at moments, to deliver poetic hymns to the power of "the verb to endure . . . the verb to survive" (30) that are in stark contrast to the satiric language of the rest of the play:

Interpretation of experience never fails to discover something of the beautiful as one discovers bits of a broken bottle catching sunlight in an otherwise sordid and ugly heap of rubbish. I do not deny that experience is a heap of rubbish, but I affirm, as I have always affirmed, there is somewhere hidden in this sordid heap of rubbish the translucent and hence lovely fragment of broken glass refracting the pure light of heaven as a mirror held to the eyes of Our Lady Immaculate. I have seen it with reverence and wonder in the eyes of the mad, innocent beings too fondly touched by the moon . . . (10)

In the sordid heap of rubbish that is the family, the theatre and civilization, the poetic voice of Williams captures here the glistening light of wonder that Tom found more than thirty years before in his last monologue of *The Glass Menagerie*, when he discovers a memory of Laura in a shop window "filled with pieces of colored glass, tiny transparent bottles in delicate colors, like bits of a shattered rainbow" (237).¹⁰

The Man alludes metadramatically to several works of drama and literature, as when the Wife says, "It's like a dream . . ." (19), and he quickly identifies it as "that exit line ye lifted from Chekhov's *Sea Gull*" (19), as if to frame the cartoon action of his play as a dream play. The Man refers to his isolation as being "walled off from things external" (22), much as Poe's victims are walled off in Gothic houses. The Wife prepares kidneys sautéed in butter, recalling Leopold Bloom's epiphany while cooking and eating kidneys in *Ulysses*, but no such revelation is about to occur here, for as the Lutheran Minister stabs and consumes the kidneys, he raps Hotsy on the head and the sound of cartoon birds is heard again, perhaps commenting on the absurdity of epiphany in the disfigured, postmodern world. As the Man laments his paralyzed condition in the wheelchair, he is reminiscent of the immobile

character of Hamm in the nearly cartoonish action of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1957).

Soon the room, this box square as a block, containing a single window, set so high in the wall that it could only be reached by a wall-painter on a ladder, of which I believe we have neither, nor the pecuniary means by which to procure them . . . And due to the paralysis which afflicts me, how could I mount the ladder to take a look out at the—but soon the room. How very soon the room . . . (25)

Here, the Man alludes directly to Beckett's stage directions at the start of *Endgame*, in which Hamm and Clov seem to be entrapped in a small room with high windows. Clov climbs a ladder to peer into the outer world as if the windows were eyes, positing *Endgame* as an ontologic inquiry into consciousness.¹¹ Whereas Beckett emphasizes the tragedy in tragicomedy, in his outrageous works Williams plays on the comic grotesque. As a postmodern, parodic commentary on the modernist *Endgame*, *Kirche, Küche und Kinder* responds in irreverent ways to Beckett's existential tone. The Man functions a serio-comic Hamm, whose paralysis is revealed to be a theatrical imposture when he jumps out of his "shameless sham and ham of the wheelchair" (7) to perform calisthenics, as if to unmask the writer masquerading behind the cartoon-play. Its comedic stance rescues Williams's outrageous play from *Endgame*'s totalized cynicism, however, as the Man finds—speaking from the cartoon podium of the kirche—that "Our existence is magic devoutly to be believed in" (26), even if it is just a "touch of beauty" (22) "redeemed from the squalor" (22).

Earlier in 1979, *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur*,¹² another outrageous play (on the tamer side of *Kirche Küche und Kinder*) premiered in New York, and because it seemed to resemble earlier "Williams plays" on the surface, it fared better with the press than most of the late plays. Called a "little jewel box of a play" (Douglas) by Williams's agent at the time, Mitch Douglas, *Lovely Sunday* contains all the things critics looked for: it is set in St. Louis in 1935, in the same time frame of *The Glass Menagerie*, it features Southern heroines, and, according to Clive Barnes, it reprises one of Williams's "usual themes, the survival of the under-bitch woman in the over-drive world of stud man" (35). While these superficial elements gained positive reviews from critics such as Barnes and the *New York Times*' Richard Eder, it disappointed others, who expected to discover another *Menagerie*, and were confused by what was seen as the "absurd trivial[ity]" of the play (Watt 27). *Lovely Sunday* does, indeed, focus upon the absurdity of trivial details of everyday life, exaggerating them to the point that they appear to be outrageous, but it stops short of cartoon imagery. Despite his affinity for the popular sin, sex and South stereotype of a "Williams play," Barnes recognizes that, in this play, "Williams is singing a different tune" (35), in which "characters bounce off each other like indeterminate balloons" (35). He correctly pinpoints the "serio-

comic" nature of the play, citing that, although "pathos is usually dimly associated with tragedy—here it is brightly linked with comedy" (35).

The comic bathos of the play is exemplified in the garish set for the apartment which Bodey, a large German-American woman who is "hard-of-hearing" (119), shares with Dorothea, a younger woman. Located in the "*dried-blood horror*" (119) of a working class neighborhood that Dorothea jokingly labels "Schlogger Haven" (137), their "*attempts to give the apartment brightness and cheer have gone brilliantly and disastrously wrong*" (119), foreshadowing the disastrously wrong, yet comic, turn that Bodey's plan for Dorothea will take. Bodey, nearly deaf to Dorothea's protests, plays matchmaker, preparing to take her on a Sunday picnic to Creve Coeur with her near-double (off stage) brother Buddy. She fries chicken, delivering a long monologue scattered with outrageously trivial detail:

I think Roosevelt did something for the country when he got us half Saturdays off because it used to be by the time I got off the streetcar from International Shoe, Piggly-Wiggly's on the corner would be closed, but now it's still wide open. So I went in Piggly-Wiggly's, I went to the meat department and I said to the nice old man, Mr. Butts, the butcher, "Mr. Butts, have you got any real nice fryers?"—"You bet your life!" he said, "I must of been expecting you to drop in. Feel these nice plump fryers." Mr. Butts always lets me feel his meat. The feel of a piece of meat is the way to test it, but there's very few modern butchers will allow you to feel it. It's the German in me. I got to feel the meat to know it's good. (122)

Bodey's unquestioning, pragmatic acceptance of her role as a single, working class woman, with its absurd focus on the details of life, does not stop her from wanting something different for Dorothea, a civics teacher, who has different ideas about her future. Arguing with Bodey, she says:

—you've been deliberately planning and plotting to marry me off to your twin brother so that my life would be just one long Creve Coeur picnic, interspersed with knockwurst, sauerkraut—hot potato salad dinners. —Would I be expected to prepare these dinners? Even in summer? I know what you Germans regard as the limits, the boundaries of a woman's life—*Kirche, Küche, und Kinder*—while being asphyxiated gradually by cheap cigars. (133)

The model of Church, Kitchen and Children (*Kirche, Küche, und Kinder*), which is ironized and lampooned in the outrageous cartoon of the play *Kirche, Küche, und Kinder*, is, to Bodey and Dorothea, an all-too-real probability. Dorothea protests that she wants "romance," which she seeks with her high school principal,

the diegetic (off stage) “Mr T. Ralph Ellis” (127) and finds only disappointment—the “broken” heart signified by Creve Coeur. This seeming reach by Williams into his lyric theatrical past is overlain with grotesque comedy as Bodey and Helena, an art history teacher, do comic battle over Dorothea. In this short, but significant play, Williams subtly revises the tragic overtones of his “Broadway” plays, reconfiguring the concept of *pathos*, or the tragic, as *bathos*—the sudden or unexpected appearance of the commonplace in an otherwise elevated style. In this play, the commonplace *is* the outrageous.

While *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* is Williams’s most understated outrageous play, the others, including a fragmentary play entitled *The Everlasting Ticket* (unpublished and unperformed 1981), push the “serio-comic” cartoon to its dramatic limits. In a *Paris Review* interview Williams said that he was dedicating this play to Joe Orton, mentioning that he was at work on the third draft (Williams, “Art of Theatre” 335). At the time of publication, however, I have been able to locate only 27 fragmentary pages of this work.¹³ These fragments indicate that Williams was in the process of intertwining elements derived from *Kirche, Küche und Kinder*, such as the cartoon chirping of “invisible canaries,” with Orton’s style of exaggerated metadramatic farce, laden with overt sexual innuendo. John Lahr wrote that “farce allowed Orton to make a spectacle of disintegration” (7), much as Williams’s brand of the outrageous, grotesque comic allowed him to make a spectacle of disfiguration, using comedy as an cry of outrage against the powers of the theatre-as-world. In *The Everlasting Ticket*, a terminally ill woman, Eva, searches for an everlasting ticket that will ensure that “death shall have no dominion” (*ET*). She inhabits a cruelly comic world whose authority is embodied in a “Teutonic type Dominatrix in leather with complete equipment for bondage and extremes of punishment for penitents” (*ET*). The Dominatrix, who casually beheads a “faggot” (*ET*) hairdresser, tossing his head into a cupboard, places an ad in the paper guaranteeing satisfaction to all who respond, promising to spill “buckets!” (*ET*) of blood. As in several late plays, including *The Two-Character Play*, a rehearsal of a metadramatic play-within-a-play occurs, with Eva’s mother, Mona, or “Miss Parable,” as the diva-type lead actress, who continually shouts, “Book!” (*ET*). Such elements in this play, which will most likely be discovered in a complete draft form at some point, promises to provide an even more coherent portrait than *Kirche, Küche und Kinder*, of the evolution of Williams’s outrageous style.

The potential of the outrageous play-within-a-play to foreground a metadramatic critique of the theatre reaches its most effective development in Williams’s full-length, unpublished play *THIS IS (An Entertainment)*, which received its first and only production in 1976 at the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco.¹⁴ The hotel setting doubles as a theatre, as the actor/characters of the Countess and Count slip in and out of multiple outrageous roles, self-consciously enacting the collapse of their supposed nobility. They announce, as if to the audience:

COUNT: Madam, this is.

COUNTESS: Yes?

COUNT: This is.

(Helpless outraged gesture)

COUNTESS: *(Exhilarated)* Yes, precisely this is.

(Two Maids attired only in lace aprons assist her in unpacking wardrobe trunk, 'Oooing' and 'Ahhhing' over her gorgeous gowns and lingerie. The Count pinches a Maid. The Countess kicks him.)

COUNT: An entertainment, my dear.

COUNTESS: In dubious taste.

COUNT: Ah, yes. (Scene 1, p. 2)

The sentence "This is." is semantically incomplete in the sense that "this" should point to a word which defines what "this" is. But, because of the period, which calls for the actor to deliver it as a complete sentence, it breaks the logical flow of syntax just short of meaning—a linguistic disruption that Williams employs in plays such as *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* (1969) and *The Two-Character Play*. "This is." metatheatrically gestures at the performance they are engaged in as actor/characters, and, on another level, points to a metaphysical level in which "this is." signifies their incomplete state of being, dangling without definitive connection to any semantic system of stable reference. Therefore, when the Count completes the thought with another incomplete sentence, "An entertainment.", it relegates the notion of entertainment to a subordinate, parenthetical comment (as in the title), which deconstructs their state of "being" in the hotel/theatre as an entertainment. Theories of drama in the first half of the twentieth century, including those of Brecht, Meyerhold and Artaud, regarded entertainment as antithetical to "serious" dramatic projects, for the word came to signify the superficial sort of titillation experienced by vaudeville or circus audiences. As Bernard Beckerman has pointed out, however, the etymology of "entertainment" is rooted in the concept of interaction and interplay, infusing it "with tremendously compressed energy of a vivid give-and-take" (145). The interchange between the Count and Countess, in which "This is." "An entertainment." is repeated throughout the play, establishes a vivid give-and-take on a metadramatic level which indexically points back to the play as an entertainment that is not unlike a circus or cartoon, but also not unlike "serious" drama.

Williams uses the actor/character split to denaturalize the play's entertainment, which unfolds illogically as the Countess and Count overtly refer to the "joke book," similar to a comic book, which scripts their relationship to characters and stage space. As actors, their main concerns are their costumes and their lines: the Countess wears "diaphanous gowns . . . Enticing transparencies. Close friends call me Chiffon" (Scene 1, p. 2). Her double awareness of the transparency of her role as an actor/character erases the idea of a stabile dramatic "self," saying:

COUNTESS: It [vulgarity] isn't naturally mine, an element of my true nature, if I do have a nature outside the one I'm forced to portray in this joke-book. And you're probably mystified by that illusion to a joke-book and it's too early to define it.

PROMPTER'S VOICE FROM WINGS: (*Loud, warning*) 'Oh, it was exhilarating—'

COUNTESS: (*Appearing helplessly baffled for a moment*) What, what?

COUNT: (*His voice in character*) Deliver the lines as written, Madam!

COUNTESS: I would rather walk off!

COUNT: (*His voice in character*) Madam, if you should presume to walk off-stage without an exit cue in the joke-book, it would mean instant oblivion for you! (Scene 1, p. 3)

The strange joke-book that is the play's text is the source of their characters, and yet, in the face of a disfiguring "oblivion," the actors insist upon violating it. This transgression makes visible the actor/character split, which, in the theatres of Brecht and Pirandello, stages the gap between actors and their characters, revealing the theatrical nature of drama. In her review of the only production of this play, staged in 1976 at San Francisco's American Conservatory Theatre, academic critic Ruby Cohn overlooks the cartoon aesthetics of the play's "joke-book" text, referring to what she views as an "empty pretentious script" (406). Her admission, however, that her objections may be "too realistic for a play that calls itself an entertainment" (406), exemplifies one of the major problems in critical response to the late plays—that is, critics employ realist frames of reference to judge work that is engaged in the subversion of realism. Another academic critic of this production, Judith Hersh Clark, comes closer to recognizing the actor/character split, but sees it as a rendering of the Countess' "near schizophrenia" (180) through split personalities, leading her to read the play through a lens of psychological realism. Clark identifies three personalities, the first of which is a "sensualist" (180) "bitch" (180), which she finds reminiscent of the characters of Miriam and Mark in *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*. The second personality she identifies is a "sad romantic" (181), which Clark links to Clare in *The Two-Character Play*. Her sketchy analysis of the third personality comes closest to acknowledging the actor/character split when she notes that, as the Countess "declares that her part is a mockery of a human being" (180), she "breaks theatrical illusion" (181). Clark, however, views this break as an "afterthought" (181) on Williams's part, and expresses her hope that Williams "may yet resolve the conflicting personalities of the Countess" (181), as if the playwright's role were that of the psychoanalyst in *The Three Faces of Eve*. In their reliance on realist methodologies, both Cohn and Clark disregard the play's metadramatic subversion of realist conventions. A part of this subver-

sion is enacted when the hotel is invaded by the revolution outside in the person of a rebel leader, General Eros, who becomes a lover of the Countess. His invasion/seduction prompts the Countess to break out of her character for a brief moment, abandoning the script, which is:

Countess: The lines
 General Eros: That bind
 Countess: Us to a joke-book! (Scene 11, p. 70-A-REV)

But even this bawdy, outrageous vision is temporary, for "all moments are passing moments" (Scene 11, p. 71-REV) in the theatre. As the hotel's lobby is invaded by the revolt, the Countess says, "We are into revolution, now and it is into me" (Second revision, p. 85), suggesting that the final collapse of the actor/character split has occurred, erasing the "tyrannical joke-books" (Scene 9, p. 66-REV). This play, like the other outrageous late plays, leaves in its stead a revolutionary theatre that liberates character and dialogue from realist modes of signification through meta-mimetic cries of outrage.

Notes

¹In his essay, "On a Streetcar Named Success," Williams regarded the notion of his "success" with irony, writing that:

You know, then, that the public Somebody you are when you "have a name" is a fiction created with mirrors and that the only somebody worth being is the solitary and unseen you that existed from your first breath and which is the sum of your actions and so is constantly in a state of becoming under your own volition—and knowing these things, you can even survive the catastrophe of Success! (17).

In this essay, written in 1947 as a meditation on the "success" of *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams reflects his awareness that the public image of his plays and person are constructed by the phenomenon of fame. Even the "unseen you" (perhaps the Whitmanian Me) is not a stable self, but exists in a state of flux.

²Among the dozens of academic and journalistic critics who approach the late outrageous plays as if they were self-portraits, Foster Hirsch, who labels these plays "portraits of the playwright as failure" (71), offers the most overt articulation of the "decline" theory that underlines such criticism. (See Hirsch, *A Portrait of the Artist: The Plays of Tennessee Williams* [Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1979].)

³Such references that negatively compare Williams's outrageous plays to absurdist drama are exemplified by a *Time* magazine reviewer (unnamed), who wrote that *The Gnädiges Fräulein* is "a rubber dagger stab at theatre of the absurd that lacks Ionesco's lunacy or Pinter's menace. It has come less from Williams's pen than from his pen wiper" ("Penwiper Papers," *Time*, 4 March 1966: 88). While some aspects of the outrageous plays derive from absurdism, it is clear that Williams is doing something quite different in his superimposition of cartoon imagery and slapstick comedy. The allusion to the "rubber dagger stab" indicates that, somewhere, the reviewer has a consciousness that s/he is watching a form of pop art—which Ionesco and Pinter did not directly engage.

⁴*Slapstick Tragedy* is a banner title under which two one-act plays, *The Gnädiges Fräulein* and *The Mutilated*, were produced from February 22-26, 1966, at the Longacre Theatre in New York. Directed by Alan Schneider, with design by Ming Cho Lee, Noel Taylor and Martin Aronstein, the plays ran for only seven performances before they were closed by negative reviews. The cast for *The Gnädiges Fräulein* included Margaret Leighton as the Fräulein, Zoe Caldwell as Polly and Kate Reid as Molly. In *The Mutilated*, Leighton played Trinket and Reid played Celeste.

⁵In his dissertation on Williams's plays from 1963 to 1971, Ronald Gordon Perrier proposes that the Fräulein's blinding establishes her as an Oedipus figure, writing that "she, like Oedipus, is struggling blindly, suffering, and seeking for the wisdom and truth that must be found" ("A Study of the Dramatic Works of Tennessee Williams from 1963 to 1971," Diss., U of Minnesota, 1972: 104). This reading, while avoiding direct allusion to Freudian analysis, and focusing on the dramatic figure of Oedipus, nevertheless, attempts to elucidate a psychology of the character that there is no foundation for in the two-dimensional world of the play. It is, like so many other realist approaches, inadequate for Williams's new dramatic explorations.

⁶Cocaloony Key is, quite obviously based upon Key West, where Williams owned a small cottage from 1950 until his death in 1983. When I visited the house in Key West in 1997, it seemed that the grey roof of the house was, indeed, sitting atop it like Chaplin's derby, and the cries of pelicans could be heard overhead.

⁷Zoe Caldwell recalls that on her first trip to Key West, a few years after the production of *Slapstick Tragedy*, she went into a bar and saw Key West residents costumed in a similar manner to the original script directions, wearing nearly clown-style makeup.

⁸*Kirche, Küche und Kinder: An Outrage for the Stage* premiered at the Jean Cocteau Repertory Theatre in New York in September 1979. It was directed by Eve Adamson, with Craig Smith (Man), Phyllis Deitschel (Hausfrau), Coral S. Potter (Lutheran Minister) and Harris Berlinsky (Fräulein). As Artistic Director, Adamson had produced and directed revivals of *Suddenly Last Summer* and *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* that Williams had particularly liked. He had repeatedly forsworn Broadway only to return to it and receive negative reviews in his later years. At his best

moments, he realized that his late plays would be better received off Broadway, where audiences were more receptive to experimentation, and this, along with his respect for Adamson's dedication, contributed to his decision to allow her to produce and direct two new plays, *Kirche, Küche und Kinder* and *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* in 1981. He found his work with Adamson on these original productions to be some of the most positive, creative moments of his later career. References and quotations from the play derive from the unpublished performance script.

⁹In Williams's manuscript for the Jean Cocteau Repertory production in 1979, he uses the German word *kuchen*, meaning a cake or pastry chef. This is obviously an error, for stage directions clearly refer to it as a kitchen space. Therefore, I have changed this word to the German word for kitchen: *küche*.

¹⁰Williams's use of rainbow imagery also alludes to D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1915).

¹¹Harold Pinter's plays (to some extent following Beckett's lead) also use the idea of a room to signify certain limitations of knowledge and consciousness. Arthur Ganz suggests that Pinter uses the setting of a room to eliminate the outside world, thereby focusing intense scrutiny on the issues of the play (12-13)—a decidedly minimalist interpretation. Una Chaudhuri pushes this idea farther, seeing Pinter's use of the room as "not purely a matter of authorial control over meaning: it is also the sign of a certain historically determined limitation on the possibilities of dramatic meaning" (95). Whereas both Beckett and Pinter may be seen as employing contexts of limitation to construct modernist, existential dramatic worlds, Williams's later outrageous plays parody this room and its occupants, exploding the serious tone of both writers and replacing it with polymorphous theatricality.

¹²Williams began writing *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* sometime in 1975, under the title *Creve Coeur*. The play was first produced at the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina, beginning on June 5, 1978. Directed by Keith Hack, who also directed the London production of *Vieux Carré*, it starred Shirley Knight as Dorothea, Jan Miner as Bodey and Charlotte Moore as Helena. It was produced off Broadway in New York the following year at the Hudson Guild Theatre, beginning on January 10, 1979. Also directed by Hack, Miss Knight continued her role as Dorothea, and Peg Murray played Bodey, with Charlotte Moore as Helena. It was first published in an individual volume by New Directions in 1980.

¹³After searching for *The Everlasting Ticket* for several years, I finally located twenty-seven fragmentary pages among a group of miscellaneous manuscript pages from a large purchase made by the Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library in 1996. These pages have since been catalogued by Columbia as fragments of *The Everlasting Ticket*. The fragments carry Williams's holograph emendations. The order of pagination is questionable. If, as Williams indicated, it is true that he was working through his third revision in 1981 (as the

variation in the manuscript pages would seem to provide evidence of) then it is likely that a complete manuscript must exist somewhere.

¹⁴Quotations from *THIS IS (An Entertainment)* derive from the script for the American Conservatory Theatre's 1976 production.

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