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## Tennessee Mothereffing Williams: The 16th Annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival, Part 1

As [Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival](#) curator David Kaplan likes to say, “This isn’t your grandmother’s Tennessee Williams Festival!” That has never been more true than it was this year as artists from all around the country gathered in Provincetown, Massachusetts to share plays and performances that have faced censorship. These topics took (and take) on even greater resonance at the present moment, considering the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic effectively censored 2020’s festival (although a smaller-scale, localized version of the programming did take place). The return to live performance required some outdoor ingenuity, and luckily the weather was generally cooperative. So it was that I came to see 11 plays in a few days after an 18-month absence from in-person theatre viewing.

Before I take you through the bold and creative pieces of this Festival’s oeuvre, a brief word on censorship in the theatre itself. I have always been fascinated by theatre censorship, protests, and riots because they all make one thing very clear: theatre is powerful. If theatre has no power, why would people ever try to keep it from being produced or seen? This is not to say that all provocative plays and performances are good, but I can promise you that censoring or protesting against a performance is a great way of ensuring that it will remain interesting and attractive to future theatre makers.

From Thomas Middleton’s 1610 play *The Witch* to Penny Arcade’s work-in-progress *Who Can Say What to Whom?*, this year’s Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival was the actualization of their 2020 motto: if we can, we will. When it came to a wide variety of interesting texts and approaches to production, they could, and they did!

What follows is the first of a three-part series on the entire TW Festival, please check out parts [2](#) and [3](#) for the full story of this fantastic programming. This review covers *Sex*, *The Municipal Abattoir*, and *The Witch*.





Zarzeses Wade (on flamingo) and Jacob Roberts in Mae West's *Sex*. Photo by Maria Baranova.

***Sex*, by Mae West. Directed by Mitchell Polonsky. Presented by The Goat Exchange (New York, New York).**

The title alone should give a hint as to why this play was deemed scandalous in 1926. In fact, *Sex* has the distinction of being one of the plays that led to the 1927 Wales Padlock Law, which censored plays that dealt with “sex degeneracy, or sex perversion.” This is worth noting because the play is certainly a product of its time. The language is rife with slang from the 1920s, which led to the play’s gritty appeal at the time. But these same words now sound more like a stereotype of the roaring twenties.

New York-based experimental ensemble The Goat Exchange does not try to solve that dissonance. Instead, this production took away any possible sense of realism or immersion in the play’s action through both costume and performance style. Instead we have a 1920s sex worker, Margy, having to deal with a pimp from the 1970s, a soldier John dressed like a character from *The Nutcracker*, other Johns who are literally plastic action figures, and a future father-in-law who is actually a giant stuffed teddy bear. Three separate playing spaces within the outdoor portion of The Boatslip resort brought the action in and around a pool, the main deck, and a tent-covered side-deck. And the audience even got to be part of the action — I read the role of Officer Dawson in the first act, complete with plastic





This is all the more impressive because of the impressive distractions that abounded: constant costume changes, pool float choreography, high heels getting caught in the grooves of the deck, and two audience relocations in between acts. Director Mitchell Polonsky, who co-created this production with Chloe Brooks, also captured the madcap energy of *Sex* through the continuous rotation of Jacob Roberts, Zarzseses Wade, and Juliana N. Sass, who each played several characters surrounding Gentile's Margy. The doubling also gave Roberts, Wade, and Sass the opportunity to explore the differences between the overly exaggerated characters and the ones who are more sympathetic at core. Roberts is both the frightening pimp and the sweet (very rich) young man who wears only a tuxedo speedo and Chippendales collar and cuffs and proposes to Margy with an engagement ring pool float. Wade is another wise guy at the start of the play but later returns as Margy's future mother-in-law. And Sass serves as both Margy's aloof British john and a fellow sex worker who dies by suicide in the middle of the play.

Although the play's plot clearly has serious subject matter, the uproariously funny moments of detachment allowed me to hear the story in a new way. Sass, for example, played the john as if she was a first time actor, enamored with the audience and the laughter, and tied to pat gestures and sing-songy speech. After Sass's sex worker, Agnes, exits for the final time, she changed onstage back into the john on stage, resulting in laughter. Roberts, laughing along with us, turned to the audience and said, "you're not going to be laughing anymore after I say this line." And he was right. Upon learning of Agnes's death, the laughter immediately ceased and the audience let out a mix of "oh no" sounds.

I've shared this particular moment to prove that this outrageous staging might not have been exactly what Mae West wrote, but that doesn't mean it failed to capture the feeling of her play. I believe that realistically staging this play today would be more jarring and distancing than what *The Goat Exchange* did. West's story is not actually outdated, but the very specific aspects of the story that made it feel so dangerously raw and real at the time of its premiere do not have the same connotations today. And so the play's best chance of reaching an audience has to change too.

This became an overall theme of the Festival. Not your grandmother's Tennessee Williams, to me, refers to a continual desire to stage Williams's pieces like



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shake audiences up in the way that these plays once did. And *The Goat Exchange* did that in a very entertaining way.



David Kaplan's production of Tennessee Williams's *The Municipal Abattoir*. Photo by Julia Cumes.





## Massachusetts).

Festival curator David Kaplan thinks about theatre on a grand scale — that much is obvious from the programming of the Festival itself. But he also thinks this way as a director, as I’ve seen from his ambitious projects in previous years. So, when I learned he was taking on a 10-minute Williams play, I was surprised but curious. That was, of course, before I took a seat in the back of a school parking lot. There we sat, facing a series of sand dunes and a giant water-tower.

Even if Kaplan had not clarified that he was inspired by Alfred Hitchcock, I would have recognized the scale and the style anywhere. Real cars trying to exit the parking lot continually crossed beneath the action on the dunes. Birds flew in formation overhead. Vaguely foreboding orchestral music à la Bernard Hermann boomed across the space. After the action of the play had taken place, Kaplan added a repeated moment of choreography where actors climbed the dunes to see the head of the abattoir (slaughterhouse).

Hitchcock and Williams found beauty and horror at the intersections of the quotidian and extreme. William’s brief play is set in a fictional Latin American country. It centers on a man (played by John Dennis Anderson) who is searching for his summons to go to the government slaughterhouse to be turned into food. He does not want to miss his appointment, but he stumbles upon a young revolutionary (Alston Brown) who, after failing to convince his girlfriend (Darlene Van Alstyne) to murder the dictator (Albert Carey), turns to the man for this task. The “General” drives by (here in the sidecar of a motorcycle driven by Michele Lamy), but the man botches the assignment and is left asking once again for the directions to the slaughterhouse.

This brief play serves as a companion piece to *The Demolition Downtown*, which was also performed in this Festival (see Part 3 of my coverage). Both take on new resonance as we think about the ways that “following directions” can both cause harm and save us, depending on whose directions we’re following. The play need not be set in 2020 or 2021 for the relevance of this plot to be obvious, and once again I appreciated the use of a stylized framework to reveal the emotional truth of this piece.



(l to r) Sallie Tighe and Madison Mayer in Thomas Middleton's *The Witch*. Photo by Maria Baranova.

***The Witch*, by Thomas Middleton. Directed by Megan Nussle. Presented by Campfire Quorum (Cape Cod, Massachusetts).**

Nothing gets you in the fall spirit quite like a trip to the woods to see a play about witches. The surprising thing about Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* is that it is a pre-Salem witch trial concept of witches. The play was likely written around 1613–1616, but local Cape Cod company Campfire Quorum sets the action in Provincetown in 1620. As the curtain speech notes, the sandy forest space covered with scrub pines likely looked like it did when the pilgrims colonized the area in 1620.

Director Megan Nussle's production began with the actors milling around in the space, getting into costume. A prompter, also in costume, sat "on stage" as well. The company of women then began to take on all of the roles, setting the scene for a series of characters who believe that the local witches can help them create charms for things they need. Want the handsome Duke to fall in love with you? There's a potion for that. Want that Duke to leave you alone? There's a potion for that too. But dare to offend the witches and you could find yourself at their mercy!

The action of the play was presented simply, with period costumes, but little set







audience. Upon hearing it, the actors scattered — ripping off their costumes and hiding the props. A man dressed in full pilgrim attire arrived to ask what the women were doing before dragging one of the women off stage. All is revealed: we are watching the pilgrim women doing an amateur version of a play they must have encountered before leaving England. But they are censored within the world of the play.

This framework of amateur acting for entertainment made the prompter make perfect sense, but I did wish that the production had made more of a commitment to that reasoning. The language in this play is tricky to be sure, and there was a lot of text to memorize. So, why not make a bit of actors needing to call for line? It would have fit perfectly, even if people did not understand it at first.

Other than this one choice, I thoroughly enjoyed the immersive design and concept of this production. The entire ensemble had a wonderful connection and their willingness to jump into the playful nature of gallivanting in the woods was contagious. Also, the actors handled Middleton's language exceptionally well, despite the occasional need for prompting and the windy acoustics of an outdoor venue. I would happily have watched a longer version of this — if not for the mosquitos. The mosquitos were the true villain of this piece and would not be vanquished by our bug spray potions!

Despite the several parting gifts of mosquito bites that still itch as I write this, *The Witch* was perhaps the only play that was seemingly done in its written style. And yet it did not rest on the laurels of a perfect setting, instead pushing beyond to a concept that highlighted the censorship — particularly the censorship of women — that still haunts us to this day.