

A One-Act Version of *The Night of the Iguana*

All the *Iguana* texts are based on Tennessee Williams's experiences in 1940 at the Hotel Costa Verde outside Acapulco, Mexico, as recorded in his *Letters*, in an essay called "A Summer of Discovery" that is printed in *Where I Live*, and in his *Memoirs*. He first worked this material up into a short story entitled, like the play versions, "The Night of the Iguana," which was drafted in 1946 and revised and expanded for publication in 1948. It was turned down as too risqué by *Harper's Bazaar* but was published later that same year in *One Arm*, a New Directions anthology of Williams's stories, and is reprinted in his posthumous *Collected Stories*.

This narrative version is closer to Williams's actual experience than the plays, though its protagonist—an "unearthly" looking art teacher from Mississippi named Edith Jelkes, who is travelling to recover from a breakdown—seems to be a fictionalized version of his sister, Rose. Needing "sympathetic companionship," she makes friendly advances to two homosexual American writers and tries to enlist their aid in freeing a captive iguana. Her intrusiveness merely provokes the older, more hostile writer to assault her sexually during a tropical storm, an experience that paradoxically helps to assuage her loneliness.

The moment when Williams decided to rework this material dramatically can be pinpointed by a letter he wrote from Provincetown on 15 August 1947 to the Texas director Margo Jones:

I started working on another long play today: just the opening shot. But I shall not push it hard until after "Streetcar" is in. I call it *Quebrada*, meaning The Cliff. The scene is a hotel at Acapulco built on a cliff over the Pacific which will be used symbolically as the social and moral precipice of our times, the characters some intellectual derelicts: will be able to use Mexican music! (HRC, Univ. of Texas at Austin)

This was before revision of the short story, so it is likely to have been a dramatization of the same events. Such a draft does exist, in fact, at the HRC in Austin, with the Edith character renamed "Grace Perry" and the younger writer called "Kip"—obviously after Kip Kernan, the lover to forget whose loss Williams had fled to Mexico in the first place. Frank Corsaro, who first directed both the one-act and the full-length plays of *Iguana*, tells me that this was the version that Williams first offered him, probably in April 1959, when he requested a one-act play to be presented in July at Spoleto's Festival of the Two Worlds.

After some discussion, however, Williams decided that audiences might not

yet accept the version's open homosexuality, so he began to redraft the play, focussing initially, according to Corsaro, on his experiences travelling with his ninety-year-old grandfather, the Reverend Walter Dakin. Early draft fragments survive of the poem about the orange tree (though it is a lemon tree in the draft) and of a scene in which the granddaughter—here called “Miss Venable” (as in *Suddenly Last Summer*)—reads out a hotel menu loudly to the deaf and noisy old man. On May 7, 1959, Williams telegraphed his agent, Audrey Wood, from Tangiers to say he had “Completed first draft of play Spoleto.”

He then began expanding it in his usual accretive, mosaic way, and the text presented here seems to have been the one with which rehearsals began, with a cast drawn from the Actors Studio. Two copies of this text have been located so far, one at UC Davis, the other in the Fred Todd collection recently acquired by the Historical Society of New Orleans. These are to all intents and purposes identical, though the Todd copy has the logo of a New York duplicating service and the name Audrey Wood on the title page and appends a “cancel” (i.e. an addition) of four pages numbered separately at the end. The Davis copy lacks the logo or any indication of ownership but has a pencil note on the title page in Williams's own hand dating the script “June 1959” with an admonitory “(script still *in work*).” It inserts the cancel into its proper place in the text, with the passages it replaces clearly deleted, though it conserves the cancel's separate page numbering. Thus the Davis text was probably slightly later than the Todd copy.

Neither of these is the script performed at Spoleto on July 2, 1959, however, which was apparently much longer. According to Corsaro, during rehearsal it had grown closer to 80 pages than to 40 and was subtitled “Three Acts of Grace”; reviewers described it as “a long one-act” that took one-and-a-half hours to perform. Traces of this longer version can be found, cannibalized in Williams's usual fashion, in his successive drafts for the first full-length *The Night of the Iguana*, called alternatively *Southern Cross*, which was produced at the Coconut Grove theatre, Miami, in late August 1960; but no complete version of it has so far been discovered.

If the actual Spoleto text disappeared in this process of expansion, as seems likely, the present text will be as close as we can get to Williams's vision of *Iguana* as a one-act. It shows what he first considered its imaginative core—especially the long third scene of Shannon and Hannah's conversation—and conversely makes clear the elements he must have decided to add or elaborate later—such as making Shannon a disgraced priest, a change with many ramifications that Corsaro says was already in place for the Spoleto performance. In this version all quasi-clerical references are to the Grandfather.

The text is reprinted with a minimum of alteration. Occasional spelling errors and typos are corrected silently and any editorial additions (eg. exits) are distinguished by square brackets. Inconsistencies in speech headings have been maintained because they pose no difficulty for comprehension. Thus GRANDFATHER is sometimes MR. JELKES, and MISS FELLOWES is sometime J.F. or JUDITH; additions are made to the character list to clarify these alternatives. In a stage direction when she first appears HANNAH is referred to as ELIZABETH (an earlier name); this has been silently regularized.

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