Looking at the Late Plays of Tennessee Williams

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Editor's Note: The following panel was transcribed directly from tapes made at the 2002 Tennessee Williams Scholars' Conference. Tapes are available from the Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival website.

Bray: Good afternoon. I'm Robert Bray, the Director of the Tennessee Williams Scholars' Conference, and I'm delighted to be here with you today. It's not merely pro forma for me to say that it's a great honor for me to moderate this panel. Between the scholars assembled at this panel and some of the people in the audience who have also written extensively on Williams, I'm not sure that there's ever been a more distinguished gathering of Williams scholars in one place at one time. So I think it's going to be a treat for all of us.

I'm going to have to truncate these introductions a bit because if I were to read all of the accomplishments that these scholars have made at this table it would take almost the whole panel time to do that, so I'm just going to be brief. I'll begin with **Allean Hale.** She is an adjunct professor of theater at the University of Illinois-Urbana. Allean is a specialist in Tennessee Williams studies, with numerous publications on the playwright. She was research assistant on the Leverich authorized biography, *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams* and has been a consultant on four television documentaries on Williams. Recently, she's researched and edited four previously unpublished Williams plays for New Directions: *The Notebook of Trigorin*, *Not About Nightingales*, *Stairs to the Roof*, and *Fugitive Kind*.

Dr. Ruby Cohn was raised in New York City and was in the WAVES during World War II. She took her B.A. from Hunter College, a graduate degree from the University of Paris, and her Ph. D. at Washington University in St. Louis. She has published and edited over a dozen books on modern American and European drama, with four on the works of Samuel Beckett. She's taught at San Francisco State, California Institute for the Arts, and UC-Davis.

Dr. Philip Kolin is professor of English at the University of Southern Mississippi and the founding co-editor of *Studies in American Drama*. He has written or edited more than twenty-five books and published more than 180 scholarly articles on American drama, Shakespeare, and business/technical writing. His Williams work includes the acclaimed Cambridge University Press production history of *Streetcar*, a collection of original essays on *Streetcar*, and a new collection entitled, *The Undiscovered Country: The Later Plays of Tennessee Williams.* Many of the people in this room have essays in that collection. And he has taken on the enormous assignment of putting together the *Tennessee Williams Encyclopedia*.

Dr. Brenda Murphy is professor of English at the University of Connecticut. Among her books are: *O'Neill: Long Day's Journey Into Night*, *Congressional Theatre: Dramatizing McCarthyism On Stage*, *Film and Television*, *Miller: Death of a Salesman*, *Tennessee Williams and Elia*

Kazan: A Collaboration in the Theater, *American Realism_and American Drama*, *1880-1940* and, as editor, The Cambridge Companion to *American Women Playwrights.* Her most recent work on Tennessee Williams includes two forthcoming articles on his politics in the context of the Cold War.

Mr. Thomas Keith is originally from Cleveland, Ohio. He is an editor as well as director of royalties at New Directions Publishing Company in New York, where he has been involved in the preparation of every Tennessee Williams title New Directions has published since *The Red Devil Battery Sign* in 1988. He edited *Robert Burns: Selected_Poems and Songs*, and he has written a variety of critical articles for *The Burns Chronicle* and *Studies in Scottish Literature*. Along with Peggy Fox, Thomas is the co-editor of *The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams and James Laughlin*, to be published by Norton in 2003, and he has also contributed to Philip Kolin's *Undiscovered Country: Tennessee_Williams's Later Plays*.

Dr. Annette Saddik is associate professor of modern and postmodern drama in the department of English at Eastern Michigan University. Her work on Williams includes a book of the later work, *The Politics of Reputation: The Critical Reception of Tennessee Williams' Later Plays*, which came out in 1999, an article in *Modern Drama* on cannibalism in *Suddenly Last Summer* and "Desire and the Black Masseur," an article on Tennessee Williams's later plays for *Undiscovered Country*, and several book reviews. In addition to her most recent project on twentieth-century performance, she is currently working on several entries to the *Tennessee Williams Encyclopedia.* Her 1995 doctoral dissertation for Rutgers University, *Freer Forms or Rambling Discourses?: The Later Work of Tennessee Williams and the Dynamics of Critical Reception*, was one of the first full-length studies to be devoted to the later plays.

Today I'm going to be asking the panelists some questions, and then we're going to take at least thirty minutes with the hope and expectation that those of you in the audience will also have questions. I'd just like to begin by asking Annette Saddik if you think that Williams's artistic goals changed in these later plays, or did he simply change the form and method of articulating the same goals?

Saddik: I don't think the goals changed necessarily but rather the form for articulating his vision was being altered. As early as *The Glass Menagerie,* he said in the production notes that realism wasn't really for him, that all it did was reproduce surfaces, and that he wanted to get to a distorted reality, an inner truth. And so, he's been called a poetic realist, but he never completely embraced that title. So in the later plays, where he completely abandoned realism, I think his goals remained the same. He wanted to articulate a truth, except his method had changed, in that he wasn't using the surfaces of reality any longer. He wasn't showing what reality *looks* like, but what reality *is* like beyond the surfaces. For example, in the *Two Character Play*, or *Outcry*, he wanted the setting to suggest a disordered mind rather than a specific place or time, as you can recognize in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, or *The Glass Menagerie*, or something of that nature. Even a play like *Menagerie*, which has elements of anti-realism, still has some kind of realistic basis. So, I don't think the goals necessarily changed; I think it was more the method of articulating them. What did change, however, was Williams's use of language. And I think in the later plays, he paid a lot more attention, as was characteristic in the sixties and seventies and eighties, to things that language *could not* say. Rather than focusing on what language *could say*

with his long poetic speeches, he focused more on pauses, silences, gaps, truncated sentences, incomplete sentences, focusing on the inexpressible, and I think that aided him in achieving his goal of articulating a truth which is beyond the surface and beyond linguistic signification.

Bray: Excellent observation, Annette, and I'd just also like to mention that if any of you panelists want to pick up on any of these points, by all means, go ahead. With these later plays, we see the influence of certain playwrights, and his later plays have often been compared to the work of Beckett, and Pinter, and Albee—occasionally in complimentary terms, but more often to criticize Williams as a pale and unoriginal imitator. Brenda, what was Williams doing differently than these playwrights in these later works?

Murphy: Well, obviously a lot of things, but I think one of the things that all these playwrights have in common during this period is a lot of techniques that are associated with the theater of the absurd. And I don't think that Williams's fundamental aesthetic or his fundamental world view changes a great deal from the early plays to the later ones, but that what he does is learn to use some of these techniques from the theater of the absurd that help to express his particular point of view, which is not absurdist at all.

Bray: Philip, you've written on *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* in terms of its being a postmodern memory play. Do you think that this structure is limited to this one play? And I'd like for you to comment briefly on what you mean by that term and to get your ideas on whether it's applicable to other plays as well.

Kolin: Well, let me address that by pointing out that the rubric for our session today disturbs me, because when you talk about the late plays, where do they begin? Where do they end? And bibliographically, as Ruby has pointed out and several others, there are still many plays that haven't been published, and even those that have been published are often linked with the earlier plays. Robert Gross has just come out with a very good casebook on Tennessee Williams where his contributors pair some of the earlier plays with the later ones. For example, if you look at *Camino Real*, in 1953, it has many of the characteristics that some of the so-called later plays have. When I did a study of *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, I paired it with *Glass Menagerie* in terms of the ways in which Williams filters memory through different kinds of dramatic experiences. And I think Annette's points, and I agree with them entirely, might be supplemented by saying that in that late play, as he did in so many other late works, the theater itself became the subject of his inquiry. And, in that sense, it became very much a post-modern experience for him and for his audiences.

Bray: Allean, you've noted that Williams once said that he wanted to change to a presentational method. What did he mean by this, and what are some of the examples that you could offer us?

Hale: I'm not sure he knew what he meant by that, and probably some of you know more than I do about it. I think at the time, he was working with a British director, and I thought maybe it was a British term. I haven't heard it much around here. But the way he used it in *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, as I remember, was to turn the acting over to the characters on stage. But I really believe he was thinking of what Artaud meant by theater, you know, to get it away from

the realistic and let the spectator be involved and the actor be involved, rather than the realistic presentation of material.

Bray: Thomas, you've been working on *A House Not Meant to Stand*, one of Williams's unpublished plays, although it has been performed. Do you see this play as breaking new ground? Why don't you tell us a little bit about the history of this play, and when it will be published.

Keith: It will be published eventually. It was his last, full-length, professionally-produced play, and I think with all these later plays, at least if we're talking about from the early to mid-sixties on, you're seeing Williams not being the technician that sometimes he could be, but finding his way as he went along. Sort of like, "I can't tell you what I think until I see what I say." And so, to pin him down, I think, in any of these is very difficult. I know with *House*, there was a great focus on the condition of the set as so dilapidated as to be beyond reason. He indicates in his stage directions that it would be a place where, from the moment the curtain came up, the audience should gasp, "people can't live there." Which then makes the entrance of the two main characters and the husband's complaint about "living in this crummy house" all the more understated and ridiculous. I think sometimes . . . what was the question that you asked, Brenda, about how he was different from the absurdists? Because he was Tennessee Williams. Because I think he could only be himself. And I think while he was finding himself and experimenting in some of the plays, particularly in the seventies, not just the memory plays *Vieux Carré* and *Something Cloudy*, but some of the smaller ones, *Kirche, Küche, und Kinder*, and *This Is*, and, I also think, *A House Not Meant to Stand*, he was approaching something that was more like the ridiculous theater of Charles Ludlum. And I think had he worked with different directors or had the opportunity to see that this style might have taken more shape with those plays. But I just think he was in mid-process with all that when he died.

Bray: One of the truly significant Williams scholars on the late plays is no longer with us. Linda Dorff passed away a couple of years ago. And she described some of these late plays as "theatricalist cartoons," that Williams seems to be sometimes not only parodying theater but parodying his own work. Anybody want to take that on?

Keith: Well, there are spots in *House* where it starts to reach that ridiculous level, and then Bella, the wife, comes in, and she's a Tennessee Williams woman, there are no two ways about it. And so she brings it right back down to the ground, and that's something of what I meant by he could go back to what he can do so well.

Hale: Yes, he went even further with that, though, when he got to *Kirche, Küche, und_Kinder*, which is definitely a cartoon. You can almost see it drawn out like a cartoon. And also *The Gnädiges Fräulein*, there are places such as when her teeth are hit out of her mouth, you can just see a balloon, you know, up above with a cartoon . . . and I think that in those late plays he was influenced by artists such as Andy Warhol and Rauschenberg and what those pop-art painters were doing.

Bray: That's interesting.

Kolin: If I may add just one point to that, and it's a bibliographic one, or biographical, too. A play like *Gnädiges Fräulein* for years was seen vis-a-vis Harold Clurman as a parable on Williams's sad fate in the theater, and he was like the performer, the Fraulein, but it seems to me that with that play or with *Kirche, Küche, und Kinder* and even *The Remarkable Rooming House of Madame Le Monde*, what's on trial in Williams's theater is the whole notion of theater itself. And the cartoon certainly is a part of that, but it's seen with different types of stages. In *Kirche*, for example, the father sends his children into theater districts to solicit sexual favors and then to be compensated for them, and I think it is Williams trying to get back at those who were so cruel to him from *Iguana* onward.

Saddik: Could I add to that? This also relates to Allean's point about Williams's presentational theater, how it's Artaudian, and I think that's absolutely right. That's a very good comparison because in the later work this idea of being presentational was that he was focusing less on the idea of mimesis and representing reality, or (re)presenting reality, and more on the idea of simply presenting it and showing how the theater creates reality and doesn't simply reflect it. And so, this focus on the theater as being the subject of Williams's theater, his deconstructing theater, I think, brings us all together.

Murphy: I'd just like to add a footnote to that, too. The notion of the presentational also goes back to the thirties agitprop theater as a sort of assault on the audience, and there's that confrontational element, too.

Keith: That also ties in with Philip's statement about the reflections of the early plays in the later ones and vice versa when it comes to some of these stylistic elements—for example, Tom narrating *The Glass Menagerie*.

Cohn: I think the words "reality" and "realism" are somewhat dangerous words. I think all Tennessee Williams's plays were very real to him, but he never ceased experimenting. He never ceased reading. He never ceased going to the theater. And as Brian Parker said here the other day, we can't know how many influences he absorbed for what he needed. What I think we have to do is get productions for some of these later plays. Allean and some other people have had the joy of editing some of the early texts, and this is exciting because you see the promising Williams. With the late texts, and I have reached the age to know, one tends to be more disappointed. "He didn't fulfill himself in this play. He repeated himself in this play," is what critics say. I think one has to look at the versions and see good productions. *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, for instance, I think is a lovely play, but evidently the initial production was a nightmare. When will a director undertake to do it well?

Keith: I couldn't agree more. I think that is the case for most of the plays from *Milk Train* on, and I've had an opportunity over the years to speak to some of the people who worked with him on some of those late productions, particularly Eve Adamson, who's a very bright woman, very strong director, and had to deal with an aging and difficult Tennessee and didn't have the sway or the influence that, say, Elia Kazan did. You know, whether it was Eve Adamson or Lyle Leverich or Gregory Mosher, we're talking about very talented people who were working with him when just his ability to get around during the day was inhibited. *A House Not Meant To Stand* never got reviewed outside of Chicago. So I think it's going to take several productions

for a play fully to find its way. I know Williamstown did *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, and it apparently didn't work all that well. But it's going to take the right directors and the right companies to take these scripts and bring them to life, and I think that's a lot of the problem with looking at them on the page also: whether they're unpublished or unproduced, they simply don't tell the whole story.

Bray: Let's change directions a bit. In some of the early plays, we see Williams, probably out of necessity in terms of censorship, coding homosexual subtexts. And, of course, later the plays began to get more overt and more graphic. And I'm just wondering if you attribute this to his coming out later, during the seventies, or is it a combination of that along with the relaxation of censorship standards? If anybody would like to address that . . .

Hale: Well, I think in his later plays he was seeking freedom from everything that pertained to his commercial plays. He was trying to get away from the critics. He was trying to get away from old subject matter. He was trying to get away from Broadway and success and do what he wanted to do. And, yes, I think that the freedom to express his feelings about homosexuality was part of that desire to do what he wanted to do at last, and he didn't expect these plays to be popular anyway.

Kolin: Let me supplement that with just a little bit of information from *Small Craft_Warnings*, which is from 1972, and there you have an avowed homosexual character, Quentin, who is treated not very well by Williams. The character is a malcontent, as a matter of fact, and debases the whole gay lifestyle. But in that same play, you have an erased homosexual character in the figure of Haley, who is Leona's brother. There are two things going on at the same time. A character is identified with the gay community, and then you also have a character who is gay but, like Sebastian Venable or Skipper, or Alan Grey, he is also erased. It's as if Williams is making a statement on homosexuality, but he's also hedging his bets.

Keith: It seems like it's one extreme or the other. There's August in *Something Cloudy*, who is not really self-loathing; he's come to a place where he's accepted himself, but he lets you know he believes he's been immoral in his treatment of people. And he happens to also be the openly gay character in the play. And then there are these bawdy people who show up, such as this Irishman in *Kirche*—I'll abbreviate it, as I have trouble pronouncing it.

Hale: Well he didn't even spell it right.

Keith: I know, so how can we say it right? But I think he delighted in the fact that there were some scantily clad servants in *This Is*? Having these sort of sexual, sexually overt gay characters show up—I think it just cracked him up.

Bray: Brenda?

Murphy: I just wanted to follow up on what Philip said about Quentin. I think on one side you have Quentin, who is exhausted, jaded, but then you also have Bobby, the younger character who's full of life and wonder and, you know, we kind of split those two things.

Kolin: Yes, here is another instance of the duality infused into Williams's work.

Bray: Brenda brought up an interesting point when we were corresponding about topics for this panel. All throughout Williams's artistic career, he represented the artist in his work, whether it was Tom writing on the back of shoe boxes in *Menagerie*, or Val in *Orpheus Descending*, the lyrical guitarist who can't get his subjects and verbs to agree. And I'm wondering about the depiction of the artist in the later plays. Has the representation of the artist and the fundamental issues related to the artist's identity in plays like *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* and *In The Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*, or the *Two Character Play*, has this changed from an early representation like that in *Orpheus Descending* and *Menagerie*?

Saddik: I think one of the differences is that there is more of a focus on the self-consciousness of the process of art. In the play *In The Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*, for example, that's very obvious. He shows Mark creating and what that takes out of him. In *The Two Character Play,* he actually has Felice read the stage directions and compose on stage. So there's an emphasis on the idea of how art is created and how theater is created rather than just the act of spontaneous creation. There's more of a focus on process. So, I think that's one difference.

Cohn: I would agree with that, and the main play there, I think, is *Outcry*, that he worked on for about a decade. Art was the reality he was dealing with, and he was trying to deal with it in his own way. I think *Outcry* is more influenced by Beckett, but that's probably my blinders rather than Williams's, in that the physical reality of the art is so central to both authors. But, of course, they worked with it in completely different ways.

Kolin: I think the play of the sixties where the artist's fate is most at stake is probably *Gnädiges Fräulein*. When I was editing *Undiscovered Country*, I had more essays on that play than any other Williams play, and the Fräulein's fate with the Austrian dandy and the seal is very much the performer's fate. But I think when, at the end of the play, the poor Fräulein is zero-zero, Williams, I think, is commenting on all writers' fate at that point, too.

Bray: Yes, and in several of the later plays the setting is a mental institution. I don't know how many of you are subscribers to *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, but in the issue before last, I found a play that was unpublished which surely has to be—well, one always hesitates to say, but it *must* be the last unpublished work. This one was dated a month before he died, so I'm tempted to think that it might be his last unpublished work. It's called *The One Exception*, and I found this in the Harvard Theater Collection and published it in the *TWAR*. And, since several of these late plays take place in mental institutions, I'm reminded of one of Allean's comments, that it was Tennessee's expectation, if not his wish, that he might spend his final days in an institution with Rose. And I wonder about this orientation to the mental institution as a setting, and whether any of you would like to comment on that, in terms of the biographical element or in terms of his aesthetics or dramaturgy or whatever.

Hale: Well, John Uecker, who was his last caretaker, you might say, when he died, sent me a poem which John said was the last poem Tennessee ever wrote. It was a very sad poem. It was all symbolism about a house, and he said, "I wish I had a house that was not painted in bright colors." I mean, it was all about how his life had been too spectacular, you know, and at the end,

he addresses an unknown person, I don't know who, and says, "You know, this is about my fear of insanity." And he was; the more I read him, the more I realize that he was desperately afraid of going insane. And people would quarrel with this, but I've actually come to believe that he committed suicide, really, by taking a lot of phenobarbital, and he hadn't eaten for five or six days before he died. I think he just wanted to end it all. He hadn't anything left to write about. He couldn't write anymore. He did not want to be in an institution by himself.

Bray: But with Rose perhaps?

Hale: With Rose, yes, that might have worked out.

Kolin: I think a central trope in Williams is the house. I mean, whether it's the apartment in *The Glass Menagerie*, or, even in the later plays, such as *Kirche*, or *The Incredible Rooming House of Madame LeMonde*, there's the sense that the house is the soul, the house is the spirit, the anima, if you will, and Williams was trying to come to terms with the house inside of himself. Perhaps this metaphor is an extension of the institution of theatre itself.

Murphy: Again, another footnote to Philip. I think in extension of that trope, also the houses tend to be fragmented, and we have the image of both the prison and the haven.

Kolin: Yes, in *Madame LeMonde*, which I think is the most wicked play that he ever wrote, there are all kinds of punishments, sexual and psychic, going on in the attic that I don't think could match anything else Williams ever wrote.

Keith: In the decaying *House Not Meant to Stand*, a way to get rid of somebody you don't like is to send them off to the asylum. In the case of Jessie Sykes's husband and their daughters, institutionalization is a point of shame for Cornelius.

Murphy: And, of course, there's the mental asylum in *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, which is where Zelda Fitzgerald burns up, and that's the central image of the play.

Bray: Right. And *Stopped Rocking* is another play set in an institution.

Keith: I would say that the idea of him wanting to be with Rose is logical, but that it would have been more of a fantasy, perhaps a way to let go, but that he actually feared that if it came down to it, it was not something that he would want.

Bray: Let's shift gears a bit. Brenda Murphy's been doing some remarkable work on Cold War and theater, and I'm just wondering, since you're now turning to Williams, do we have a Williams play that says as much about the situation as *The Crucible*? I mean, I think I know the answer to this, but what is the closest approximation that you think Williams comes up with?

Murphy: Well, the play in which he talks about these issues most is *The Red Devil Battery Sign.* But, actually the work where he really gets at the issues of the Cold War is a novella, *The Knightly Quest*, which is a wonderful sort of sci-fi parody—a paranoid, dystopian vision of America in the 1950s.

Kolin: And if I could add a footnote to Brenda, I think there are several plays in the later canon that are overtly political, certainly *Chalky White Substance*, which is set in the apocalyptic world after the bomb has gone off. But, certainly an earlier play, *Kingdom of Earth* (1967), raises all kinds of questions about politics, about colonization, about freedom of self in society.

Bray: How do you account for some of the scatological, or pornographic, elements seen in some of the late plays, like *The Remarkable Rooming House*, or, say, *Now the Cats With Jeweled Claws*? Nancy Tischler said of *Rooming House*, "I hate that little play, but it's important." Didn't you say that to me, Nancy? (Tischler, in audience, says, "I think so.") But, why this scatological bent in the later work? Is it just because he was taking this new freedom of expression to an extreme? I'm not really sure I understand why he went in this direction. Anyone want to tackle that?

Saddik: I don't know why, but I wanted to point out also I noticed that in *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur,* there's a lot of that, and he saw that as his return to realism in a play that he thought would please the critics. And still he felt the need to put in scatological humor and jokes like, "Mr. Butts lets me feel his meat," when one of the women was saying that she goes to the butcher and, you know, all these little jibes that are all over the place.

Keith: I remember seeing a television special, a series they did on American poets, and Allen Ginsberg was talking about Walt Whitman and was looking at some of the very last things he wrote and some rewrites in *Leaves of Grass*. He pointed out that there was a major concern there with his bowel movements and indigestion. And it is right there in the poems, and I think that that may have also been the case with Williams. He wrote far too many monologues for this minor character in *A House Not Meant to Stand,* named Jessie Sykes, where she goes off about her hemorrhoids. And, again, I think he related to it, and I think it also amused him.

Kolin: That certainly is true in *Small Craft Warnings*, where the character of Doc, which is the only role Williams played on stage, has all kinds of references to excrement, to dirt, to skin. It's one of the most physiological of Williams's plays.

Cohn: I think Williams was getting older, and those of us who are aging will have a good deal of sympathy for that.

Hale: Well, you can maybe think he was getting senile or something, but you have to remember what was going on in theater at that time, and what was going into the papers, and how people were talking and behaving, and I think, in a way, a lot of this is just holding up a mirror to what he saw was going on in society.

Bray: Well, if we could make a slight departure from the scatological to the stylistic once again, back to some of these experiments with language that Williams was using in his plays, and not only his plays, in his novel, for example, *Moise and the World of Reason*, which most readers found puzzling, at best, and the product of a demented mind, at worst. But it's my conviction that he was using these stylistic innovations very consciously and very methodically, and I'm just wondering how this repetition, the silences, the incomplete sentences, the ellipses are supposed to work—he loves ellipses in some of these plays and especially this one novel. Is

Williams trying to focus attention on the language of the play, on the performative action of the language as opposed to the rational meaning?

Cohn: I think *Moise* is a beautiful novel, in part because of the language experimentation. I think he tried to do something comparable in *The Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*. You can't play with language that way in a play because an actor has to speak it, and when all the characters speak in fragments, ellipses, silences, you have problems, or Williams has problems.

Saddik: Well, I think you see that in a lot of the later works. In *Life Boat Drill*, for example, the characters do speak in these truncated sentences, but the focus is on communication, not as an act of exchanging in meaning, but as an act of simply connecting. So you have the older couple in *Life Boat Drill*, who are not even speaking in complete sentences, but yet they understand each other, and they have this need for connection. And you see this in Beckett as well, where talk and dialogue is just there to keep the action going, to have something to do, to form connections between people, and it doesn't really matter what's being said, the meaning of what's being said, it's just the act of articulating. And, you know, I think Williams saw that as he got older, that that's one of the functions of language, that's primary, and we don't really pay a lot of attention to this function in the theater (or up until then they hadn't), because playwrights were very busy focusing on articulating a meaning through words, rather than focusing on, again, what language doesn't say and functions of action, what it *does* rather than what it *says*.

Cohn: Beckett criticism does that a lot, talks about the sound of the words rather than the meaning. I'm very uneasy with that. Words mean, and whether the playwright is conscious or not, a meaning is going to be imposed on however elliptical a sentence.

Keith: I agree with you; I think it was an extension of the rhythmic sense that he had all along. So it wasn't that the words didn't mean something, he was still concerned what words were there and what words were heard, but he was allowing more room for visceral reaction from the actors and the audience, to the pauses and the truncations and the abruptness of it all. There's a lot of that in *Kirche,* where people go off on those little Tennessee Williams arias and then stop, and people burst in, and somebody else stops, and it's initially hard to follow. But I think the rhythm of the scene is what he's working on, the way he might have worked on the rhythm when he was writing dialogue between, you know, Stella and Blanche.

Kolin: I think there are so many places where the signifiers of language come into play, whether it's the false teeth in *Life Boat Drill*, or in a play like *This Is The Peaceable_Kingdom*, where the dying matriarch has her false teeth flushed down the commode twice. Along with that, it's Williams experimenting. Annette touches upon this, with the existential void in Williams. For example, *Fräulein* has very little dialogue, except she sings songs and the cockaloonie bird, which is a central image in that play, speaks, "Awk, awk, awk." And Williams is, as Ruby says, trying to convey something about meaning and its absence here. The meaning may not be one we like, not what we're comfortable with, but there is something being conveyed.

Saddik: And I think in addition to that, it's *not* necessarily that the language *could* say anything, that there could be any words there to signify a void. I think it's important that there's a distinction in the later works. Like with Beckett, often what is being said is important, but not in

terms, necessarily, of the rational linear meaning, but rather in terms of the underlying message or the underlying action. So if something is being said, it's that division between how something is said and what is said. And so, for example, in, again, *Life Boat Drill*, their names are Mr. and Mrs. Taske, and there's a sense that language for them has become a task. They're supposed to be around a hundred years old, and they don't want to speak anymore. But yet, what their language does show, what it illustrates, is that they have a connection, they have intimacy between them, because they don't need to speak anymore. And so they speak in these sort of truncated sentences, like, "Chair, sit," that sort of thing. And what it shows is their exhaustion with language and with life, and then there's the irony of *Life Boat Drill,* that the whole play is about salvation at some level, but it's not, you know?

Bray: Well, one of the playwrights for whom Williams expressed great admiration was Pinter, and I'm wondering if you see any of the Pinteresque elements in this kind of language that we're talking about in the plays. I think the point has already been made about the parallels with Beckett.

Hale: Well, I think when Philip said, "experiment," that's the big word. I think that language in his late plays was just one of his many ways to experiment in playwriting. He experimented in his early days, and somehow then he got in his groove, where he had to write the same kind of bestseller all the time, and he wanted to get back to experimenting. And, for instance, in *Tokyo Hotel*, he experimented with Japanese patterns, where in Japan the silence in painting, for instance, the empty spots in the painting are as important as the painting, those painted places. And I think he was using this deliberately in that play, and I think he experimented with it in different ways in different plays.

Kolin: If I could take us in a slightly different direction, Annette had used the word salvation, and I think this is an aperture to looking at the late plays from the standpoint of Tennessee Williams's own theology, and many of these late plays came from the decade when he was converted to Roman Catholicism because of Father LeRoy, who was a Jesuit priest in Key West. And so many of the late plays are really theological documents, whether that's *Small Craft Warnings*, where every character, or almost every character, has a monologue about his or her relationship to God. You find the same in *Peaceable Kingdom*, and it seems to me that even in *Red Devil Battery*, as overtly political as it is, there's a kind of salvation through a reinterpretation of the Antony and Cleopatra myth. I mean, King Del Ray and Woman Downtown, to me, are, you know, the new Antony and Cleopatra, striving to enter a new heaven.

Bray: In the later plays Williams takes us into Dallas, Tokyo, Miami, and a lot of indeterminate cities and settings. And I'm wondering if the conceptualization of setting in the later plays differs in fundamental ways from that in the earlier work. What is the relationship between, for example, the kind of metaphoric sense of space in a play like *Red Devil Battery Sign* and the setting of the play?

Murphy: Well, *Red Devil Battery Sign* is a good example of the whole range of setting you're talking about, because you have Dallas, the city. It takes place in a bar; so many of these plays are set in a bar. I think it's a direct reflection of the shrinking of Tennessee Williams's world, that that's where these plays take place. But then there's also the move into, he calls it the

wasteland, I think, of the people who live beyond the fringes of the town, this image for the wasteland of America. So the setting goes from a very stripped-down, conceptual setting to begin with to just becoming a metaphor, and I think this happens in a lot of these plays.

Kolin: A little bit of stage history here, *Small Craft Warnings*, which takes place at Monk's Bar, somewhere on the California coast near Mexico, when that play was restaged, revived, if you will, three years after its premier, and was staged at Morgan's Old New York Bar, where people in the bar community sat there as part of the audience of the play.

Bray: Philip, one of the things that you brought up when we were talking earlier is in what ways do the later plays form a distinct canon? Do you think that they do form a distinct canon? Is this going to be part of your introduction to your book?

Kolin: My introduction will praise very highly all of those people who have contributed to the volume, and many of them are with us in this room. Canonicity is one of the hotly-debated topics today, but I don't think I would approach it in that way. I think we have to read the late plays in two ways. We have to read them certainly in light of what went before, but we also have to read them with an immense amount of diversity that took place within the canon. *Small Craft Warnings*, *Kingdom of Earth*, are really, it seems to me, in terms of technique, quite different from *Kirche*, or *This Is*. So to say "the late canon" is a very large rubric that implies a kind of consistency which these plays really do not have. They are both an extension of and critique of his earlier works.

Bray: What I'd like to do now is ask the same question to each of our panelists, and we'll start with Dr. Cohn on the end. This question is a way of our coming to some general assessment about these late plays. And then after that, we will take your questions from the audience. I'd like for each of you to consider the following: how would you argue with the critical cliché that Williams produced no first-rate drama after *Iguana*?

Cohn: Well, I emphatically disagree with it. I've already expressed my admiration for *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*. I think, and I don't know what version to choose of *Outcry*, but all of them are interesting, and a first-class production with terrific actors would add immeasurably to his stature. I think those are the two that I would pick as equals of almost anything that went before.

Murphy: I agree about *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*. I think it's interesting that we choose the term "first-rate drama" as our standard of comparison instead of "early Williams play," which was what happened with most of the reviewers. This wasn't *Streetcar*, you know. But, I would agree with *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* and also *Red Devil Battery Sign*, which is, of the seventies, a uniquely developed play, I think, not only for Williams, but for that whole aesthetic of the seventies.

Bray: What about *Vieux Carré*?

Murphy: Um, I'll pass that on . . . I think *Vieux Carré* is a fine play. I mean, that invites comparison with the early Williams, particularly *Streetcar,* you know . . .

Saddik: Williams's early reputation was built on plays that were eventually, most of them, if not all, turned into Hollywood films. And when he wanted to change that trajectory, when he wanted to write in a different style that was more in keeping with the kind of experiments of language that were being done in the sixties and seventies, he was seen either as an imitator of Beckett and Pinter and Albee, most typically, or as drunk, you know, drunk and tired and taking too many pills, or as pretentious, trying to do something that was just out of his range. And so I think one of the problems with the critical reception of Williams's later plays is that he was pigeonholed into being this realist that he never wanted to be, and they didn't allow him to take off with his experiments of language that he was very interested in from the beginning of his career. And so things like, for example, in *The Gnädiges Fräulein*, where he has her scream, almost silently, this "Ahh," which he calls "the inexpressible regret of all her regrets," mirrors things that Brecht was doing. If you know *Mother Courage*, there's a moment in *Mother Courage* where her son dies, and she can't express in language how that feels, and so when Helene Weigel did this, she just opened her mouth. And that was this moment of pain that could not be expressed in language, and you see that in Picasso's "Guernica," also, the open-mouthed horse. So I think Williams was much more interested in this kind of deeper reality, so his anti-realistic plays, in many senses for him, were more real, in terms of an inner-reality and an inner-pain. And I think the critics just didn't understand that. They wanted a good story, and he wasn't doing that.

Kolin: I think holding *The Night of the Iguana* up as some kind of demarcation point, or watershed, is dangerous. It invokes Broadway realism. It invokes commercialism. It invokes a good play with a long run, and that's not always the case. I think as Williams got into the 1960s, the 1970s, certainly the 1980s, he was trying to perfect some other forms, and I'd like to mention one of them, and that is the short play, like *Now the Cats With Jeweled Claws*. Some of these plays are filled with black comedy. They're wonderful short plays, and he really is a master at that. And more attention needs to be paid to that, and it seems to me, as well—I'll go back to my earlier point—there needs to be some appreciation of Williams's sense of the theological. If you take a play like *The Mutilated*, which is the other half of *The Slapstick Tragedy* with *The Gnädiges Fräulein*, I read that play very straight as a play of these two women, both of them suffering mutilations, whether they're physical or whether they're psychic, who are looking for salvation. And he creates the image in the play of the Blessed Mother coming to one of them. It might be an apparition; it might be hallucination, but it's still Williams trying to have his characters hold onto something that's greater than themselves.

Hale: If you don't mind, I'd like to read a little passage from Linda Dorff, who really, I think, was becoming the major expert on the late plays when she died, sadly, and it's about the spiritual aspect. She said, "In Williams's early plays, the path to spiritual purification is found through literal or figurative death or dismemberment. Beginning with *Suddenly Last Summer*, in 1958, Williams's plays belong entirely to the demonic side of apocalypticism, in that they entirely abandon redemptive endings to focus on total destruction." I think you do notice that as you read the late plays. If you read a whole group of them at a time, there's this hopelessness and this, this apocalyptic feeling.

Bray: But even with all that bleakness, there's always the dark humor as well.

Hale: Yes.

Keith: I want to agree with what Annette said about how his getting away from the commercial and wanting to experiment is a demarcation point, but he was also wanting to get back to what he had started to do. He saw himself initially as a poet. He knew he wanted to be some kind of writer, and all along he saw himself as a bohemian and someone in the avant garde. And people have to be reminded that when, you know, sophomore high school English classes now read *The Glass Menagerie*, that it was at one time considered experimental, and it was. And he saw it as very experimental, and I think that he continued experimenting along the way; it just got muted during that more commercially successful period. As for first-rate drama, I think that *Kingdom of Earth* is first-rate drama. I think *Vieux Carré*, I'll speak up for it, is first rate. *Outcry*, and I think also there're probably some first-rate comedies in there if we could see them. I'd like to one day see *A House Not Meant to Stand* and find out if it's a first-rate comedy. From reading it, I think if he had been writing it back when he was working on *Period of Adjustment*, and done *A House Not Meant to Stand* instead, and they're very similar in some ways, it might have been a comic hit, because he was taking more chances and really putting himself out there in the end.

Bray: Thank you very much. I'd like, now, to turn to questions from the audience. And, if you will, stand up and let your question be heard for everyone.

Question: Would his fear of insanity be related to his brother's constantly threatening to have him committed?

Hale: Well, there was a lot of insanity in his family, and he knew it, and I think his sister was such an important part of his life, almost like his second half, that when she became insane, he saw that as his destination. And he said many times in his work that he had to write to keep from going insane.

Bray: Tennessee said of his own family, "We're all crazy, but Dakin is the craziest of all of us." And Dakin's rejoinder was, "Well maybe so, but I'm the one who drove all of you to the mental institutions."

Murphy: In *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, he has Zelda Fitzgerald say, and of course she's in this mad house, he has her say that, paraphrasing, you know, that the fire of the creative spirit forces you to either go mad or create, and since she was kept from creating, she had to go mad, and I think that's central to his vision of his own art.

Kolin: Yes. Not to deprive the Williams family of their claim to insanity, but Williams himself took so many different kinds of pills. A colleague of mine, Mary Lux, at the University of Southern Mississippi, did, I think, a first-rate job tracking down all of the various meds that he took, and the definite side effects of many of these drugs were hallucinations. So, was the insanity inherent, innate, or was it acquired?

Keith: Yes, we shouldn't diminish the notion that he wrote to keep himself sane, which I believe he did. I also think, however, with, combined with the drinking and the different levels of drug taking over the years, that the fear of insanity went hand-in-hand with his hypochondria. I think they were part and parcel of one thing, and that was fear.

Bray: Nancy?

Nancy Tischler (in audience): You know, I'm not quite sure, but I think that one of the things that he was working with was a kind of platonic idea that art and madness are very closely camped. Brian Parker was talking about the Dionysian elements yesterday in *Rose Tattoo*, and I thought, I think he believed that without the Dionysian elements, you don't have real creativity. So he liked being on the verge of madness, and if he didn't have it, he had to cultivate it. You know, I think that's part of the need for intense movement, activity, relationships, everything, so that's the reason he liked Hart Crane . . . you know, that kind of madness that erupts in Crane's poetry.

Bray: It almost suggests the pathology of bipolarism, and one wonders if, during his psychiatric evaluations, this diagnosis was ever brought up. Do any of you know?

Keith: No, but I just heard an interview on the radio with William Styron a few weeks ago, and as you may know, he suffered from severe depression and was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and he said in no uncertain terms that the medications that helped him get over his depression left him with writing he didn't feel was satisfactory, and that although he's in AA, when he wants to write something now he goes ahead and has a few drinks.

Question: What is the status of Volume II of Lyle Leverich's biography?

Hale: I think Tom Keith better answer that.

Keith: I'll tell you what I know. They now definitely have a contract between W. W. Norton and John Lahr, so he will carry on. There's a question of settling Lyle's estate, and the whole business of the work that he did. I had never been there, but Nancy has, it was, like, forty filing cabinets, I think . . . something like that, that he and Paul Jordan had organized over twenty-five years. And so once Lahr has access to that, then he can get going, and there's no publication date that I know of.

Bray: I'd heard 2003, but that's probably wishful thinking.

Keith: I think that's wishful thinking, yes.

Question: Can you talk a little bit, in terms of his later work, about how his state of mind and his fears and all of those things manifested themselves in physical elements of his plays? Settings, characters, whatever?

Saddik: Well, one of the things that comes to mind for me in *Outcry* and *Two Character_Play*, is that he has, not in all versions, if I remember, he has this papier maché statue that looms over the set, that he says is supposed to represent fear. And so he did things like that typically, if any of you can remember other examples, none come to mind for me.

Kolin: I think what we see in the late plays are scenes of great physical punishment. I mean, you can look at Shannon being tied up in the hammock, but even in *Small Craft_Warnings*, Leona

beats the hell out of several characters, and when you come to *Madame_LeMonde*, the punishments that Mint receives from Madame's son and from others are nothing short of gory. They remind me a little bit of the kinds of punishments you find in Marlowe's *Edward II.*

Cohn: Still on the whole, as was said this morning, physical cruelty does not take place in Williams. I mean, your examples are certainly well chosen, but you had to choose them. By and large, it's mental anguish that he stages.

Hale: Well, he wrote as Thomas said up until, let's see, he died in March 1983?

Bray: February.

Hale: February, and he was writing until about a month before that. And then apparently, from what John Uecker said, he just couldn't write, and I think he thought his work was all over. Williams's close friend Jane Smith said the same thing, that she thought writing was his life. Well, if you can't do it anymore, it's time to quit, and I think he thought he'd rather quit it himself than have somebody carry him off to an institution. And I know that there were so many mistakes in the coroner's reports at first, but later the first coroner said that with Williams, they found a lot of barbiturates in his system, and the coroner remarked that when that happens it usually means that the person intended to die.

Question: One of the texts you haven't mentioned, which is a bit unexpected, is *The Notebook of Trigorin*, his adaptation of Chekhov's *The Seagull*. Just listening to you, it seems to me that nearly all the things you praise are placed in that work.

Bray: Good point. We've got time for a couple more questions, or any final comments.

Hale: Well, you might ask Nancy to tell about having seen one of his very late plays recently, and one that you wouldn't think would go over very well at all, isn't that *The Life Boat Drill* or the other one?

Tischler (in audience): Actually, there are two of them I saw up in Hartford, and if you've not been to the Hartford festivals up there, they are wonderful. Michael Wilson does such a beautiful job, and he had a Tennessee Williams marathon last month, and I went up and saw the first one starting at noon was *Tokyo Bar*. There was discussion between the plays, and the last play at night was *Life Boat Drill*. I thought, "It's almost midnight," you know, "what are we doing here?" But, he rolled these old boats in, and I thought, "there's no way this can happen." And you know they brought that play to life, and she was so funny . . . this wonderful old bag of bones, just sure that she was under attack sexually, and the way they would interrupt one another, it was hilarious. I just thought it was a lovely production . . .

Bray: Any other questions? Well, if not, I'd like to invite you to join all of us at Le Petit Théâtre across the street for a panel at four o'clock with Nancy Tischler, Al Devlin, Virginia Spencer Carr, and me on "Tennessee's Women." I'd like to thank the distinguished panelists and thank you for coming.