

Red Devil Battery Sign: An Approach to a Mytho-Political Theatre

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Conventional critical wisdom has long held that the final two decades of Tennessee Williams's writing life constituted a sad, embarrassing, but perhaps ultimately unavoidable slide into artistic self-caricature, self-pity, and drug-induced self-annihilation. Obsessively working and re-working dramatic material, he still could not, so it is argued, write himself out of that great theatre of himself, returning like a dog to his vomit to the same pubescent myths, the same psychic traumas, the same guilt and remorse. He had said it all before, and better, a long time ago.

An even more conventional and more petrified piece of critical wisdom holds that Williams was never really, except in the most generically leftist-humanist way, a committed political writer, a writer of explicit social commentary. As C.W.E. Bigsby writes in Volume Two of *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, "Williams was more inclined [than Arthur Miller] to see that public world as an image of determinism that could never be defeated or transformed by the impact of the moral will, but only resisted by the imagination, . . ." (30). Whatever the ruling order—family, business, politics—it is domineering, repressive, and spiritually destructive, and the true artist must define himself against it at all costs as the rebel, the fugitive, the romantic wanderer.

It is not the purpose of this essay to refute either of these long-entrenched positions but rather, through an investigation of *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, produced originally on Broadway in 1975, to render them irrelevant, not because these positions are so awfully wrong or even only partially right but because they prevent us—writers, directors, actors, scholars—from getting at the plays themselves. They forestall our attempts to chart the hard evolutionary struggles of one of the greatest playwriting imaginations of the Twentieth Century to reshape itself into new forms for new times. *Red Devil* is

significant here because it is, first of all, a work of political—or one might say more accurately public—imagination. It is also a play in which Williams, in his attempt speak to the American political culture of the 1970's, took key characters, themes, and theatrical motifs with which he had been creatively absorbed since the beginning of his writing life and radically re-fashioned them to create a fundamentally new work.

In order to effectively situate *Red Devil Battery Sign* both within Williams's own writing career and within the larger historical moment of mid-1970's America, it is necessary first to recall briefly the political and emotional temper of those times. It is undeniable that in the 1970's, sadly, Williams slipped into ever deepening states of delusional paranoia regarding friends, colleagues, those who had devoted a significant share of their lives to his career, in particular Audrey Wood. But the nation was also steeped in its own American brand of self-absorption, self-pity, and paranoia, or at least so was our head of state. There was probably no more lonely, frightened, or paranoid man in America in those times than the Quaker boy from Whittier.

The Seventies was also the era of Max Jacobson, "Dr. Feelgood," who shot up Hollywood celebrities, rock stars, politicians, and politicians' wives with amphetamine and barbiturate cocktails. If the drug of choice in 1965 was L.S.D., then in 1975 it was Seconal. If Williams was popping pills to deaden his private pain and retreat further into himself in the Seventies, so was a lot of the rest of the country. The Woman Downtown, one of the central characters of *Red Devil* (a slang term for a powerful sedative), at one point cries out in desperation: "Who in hell on earth doesn't have a confused head now?"(48). It could be an epitaph for the age.

And *Red Devil Battery Sign* was written for those times. I have chosen to call it a "mytho-political" play because the world it evokes has less in common with a specific socio-economic milieu as created by, say, Arthur Miller or Clifford Odets, and more with the wasted landscapes of Sam Shepard, whose plays evoke a mythical America in which the primal forces of the national psyche—love, sex, death, dreams, and power—rise up and take exotic or grotesque human shape. *Red Devil* is grounded in an immediate political context. Conceived during the Watergate hearings, the play is set in Dallas just after Kennedy's assassination. But the atmosphere is less that of a particular and immediately recognizable time and place than of a

Kafkaesque political present in which faceless men in grey suits wear dark glasses and tiny white ear phones, and in which anonymous powers rule by assassination and “disappearing” dissenters.

What is most revealing about *Red Devil*, however, is how Williams takes certain archetypes of character and ritualized action which had deeply engaged him virtually throughout his writing career and fundamentally re-fashions them to construct an image of a contemporary political world in crisis. King del Rey and the Woman Downtown, the two central characters around whose passionate and passionately honest relationship the play is constructed, are both well-familiar figures from Williams’s playwriting past. *Red Devil* is a remarkably reimagined version of a story to which Williams had been drawn as early as 1940: the Orpheus and Eurydice myth. *Battle of Angels* and its substantially rewritten version, *Orpheus Descending*, follow a vagabond singer-guitar player into a dark Southern underworld of racist hatred and carnal and capitalist rapacity to rescue his beloved. In these earlier Orpheus-Eurydice versions Williams seemed rather morbidly drawn to this myth. As Hugh Dickinson writes in *Myth on the Modern Stage*, “[I]t contains the three elements most appealing to his stubborn romanticism, the same that drew Cocteau to it: poetry, love, and death”(283). Such a potent admixture of powers must end in catastrophe, and Orpheus is destined, tragically if beautifully, to die.

But if King del Rey also dies in *Red Devil* he doesn’t go down without putting up an honorable fight to rescue the Woman Downtown, although her rescue, as will be discussed, is a deeply ironic one. And if King and the Woman are recognizable from earlier work, they speak here in a new voice, a voice that is unmistakably Williams’s own but strengthened by a new moral authority. It is a public rather than a specifically political voice, one that refuses any longer to retreat into narcissistic self-dramatization and wallow in self-pity. It is the voice of characters who choose to stop running and to take a stand, however unsteady, and who refuse any longer to be silent.

In the character of King Del Rey Williams attempts to bridge an emotional chasm within himself in his attitude toward male power, an ambivalence which forced a split in his imagination between the sexual mystique of the romantic desperado and the fearful authority of the father as procreator and patriarch. In creating his male characters he seems emotionally split between such figures as Val Xavier and Jabe Torrance in *Orpheus Descend-*

ing or Chance Wayne and Boss Finley in *Sweet Bird of Youth*. Ironically, when he did create male characters such as Stanley Kowalski and Big Daddy, who exhibit both a vital Lawrentian potency and patriarchal power, he produced some of his most impressive and complex characters. But the balance was almost impossible to maintain.

King Del Rey is just such a complex hybrid. He is, like Val Xavier, a singer, the leader of a mariachi band. He is Latin—actually part Mexican, part American—and he carries himself with the relaxed sexual authority and unself-conscious ease that Williams perceived in and came to love so much about the men of that culture. But King is also a father and family man. His daughter, La Nina, is a kind of soul mate to him. He does not own her, as Boss Finley owns his daughter. In fact, years before father and daughter had sung “duetos” together with his band when its star was on the rise. But because of King’s patriarchal tendencies to idealize and control La Nina, she ran away to Chicago and fell in love with a young man, Terrence McCabe. In the play the young couple come home to be married and reconcile with King.

The image of a protective, doting father/daughter relationship is positively alien to William’s world. Indeed, the portrayal of a relationship between any parent and child, male or female, that is not emotionally wounded or crippled beyond healing is rare in his work. And Williams portrays several in *Red Devil*. King actually comes to serve as a surrogate father to his daughter’s fiancé. In a moving scene that recalls that between Brick and Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, King and McCabe come to understand and even respect each other, although King initially despises McCabe because the chief source of his allure for La Nina is the fact that he carries a gun. The first thing La Nina whispers to her mother when they meet again is, “Mama, he’s got a pistol on him!”(66). McCabe is a doomed juvenile desperado in the making, and King has to stop him.

King convinces McCabe to hand him the gun as a pledge of McCabe’s sincerity and honor in loving his daughter. McCabe then tells King that the real reason La Nina fell in love was because she saw that “[y]ou [McCabe] are in pain like—my father”(77). He also tells King that La Nina is pregnant, and because the two men meet now as fathers McCabe acknowledges to King that “I may be a stranger to you. You’re not to me”(80). If a writer who lived much of his emotional life on the run could create a scene in which

two characters, more significantly two men, could stand together and make their truce, then I think that we must at least consider that that writer is attempting to move out of his self-protective world of personal emotional fetishes and into a public world of social meaning and moral choice. It is especially moving to read this scene in the light of Lyle Leverich's biography, which reveals that Williams actually had a fierce love/hate relationship with his father, who broke his son's heart because he was incapable of loving unconditionally his "unmanly" son.

King del Rey remains tragically split between his responsibility to his family and to the Woman Downtown, whom he also attempts to save, chiefly from herself. He not only loves but respects her. Indeed, he refuses to allow her to become, to be named, "the Woman Downtown," which is a derisive epithet for a woman who prowls the hotel bars in downtown Dallas in a pathetic search for nightly company. In this new incarnation of the Orpheus-Eurydice myth, Williams appears much more focused on the bond of respect and recognition that grows between King and the Woman Downtown and less on the catastrophe that fate, in his earlier work, seemed inevitably to wreak upon fugitive lovers.

The Woman Downtown has been as radically refashioned from earlier models of Williams's Southern women as has King Del Rey from earlier male characters. And like King, she is a fascinating hybrid. She radiates some of the genteel dignity and enduring spirit of Alma Winemiller or Lady Torrance but also the raw animal urges of Maggie the Cat. She is a product of the forces both of light and of darkness; she is both the all-American beauty queen and the Great Whore of Babylon.

The Woman Downtown does need desperately to be saved, but it is not her fragile soul or broken sexuality that needs protection but her voice, specifically the voice of her conscience. Raised by her rich and powerful Texas senator father to be symbolic public property, she supplied the wholesome human face of Machiavellian power politics. Kept always on the periphery of the inner circles of power, she remained a non-entity, essentially non-existent, and so silently absorbed the dark secrets of powerful men. Horrified by the Kennedy assassination, she goes on the run with a pile of deeply incriminating papers and with the help of a kind judge, her godfather (and another benevolent father-figure in the play), she is on her way to Washington to tell what she knows. So she must be silenced.

For her temporary protection the Woman has been hidden away in a hotel room in Dallas, but that has rendered her "speechless," as she says, and forced her into a private hell of "anonymity"(3). Her silence and isolation have driven her into deepening states of paranoia, aggravated by large doses of sedatives. Terrified of losing herself and refusing to disappear, she flees from the room and into the hotel bar where she meets King. They recognize each other as soul mates in part because they both have "a cyclone" in their head and because, as a consequence, they both have had their brains operated on. Surgeons cut into King's skull to remove part of a tumor which continues to rob him of his power of speech, and, although the narrative is sketchy, it seems that the Woman had been given electric shock treatment to stop her mouth even before Kennedy was killed.

Tormented by her political stalkers and half-maddened by fear, the Woman wants to lose herself in fantasy, physical intimacy, and alcohol. (The perfume she wears is called "Night Flight.") But King does not allow her to lose herself, to forsake her will. He refuses to let her become "the Woman Downtown." He refuses her offer to escape into bed and sex and demands that she sit in a chair and tell him who she really is: "Just sit there like a lady and tell me who it is that I love and make love to"(49). And she does, and so recovers her voice. King actually gives her a new name. He calls her "la verdad. Truth"(91).

Trying to escape the city and the assassins closing in, King and the Woman are cornered by the Drummer, a punk on the make, who has joined and tried to take over King's band by becoming a crude, ersatz Mick Jagger. He is no Orpheus but a debased Dionysus, who loves his cock, his drums, and his gun. He becomes a paid thug hired by the C.I.A. to take back the property of the powers that be. In a final showdown, King shoots and kills the Drummer, with the gun he convinced his soon-to-be son-in-law to give up. It can be argued whether this is morally self-contradictory or an ironically appropriate application of power, but it is dramatically and emotionally fulfilling.

It's important to note that the Drummer himself represents a reworking of older dramatic material. He first appears in a one-act written by Williams in the late thirties called "Death is a Drummer," which was rewritten as a full-length play titled *Me, Vashya!*. The Drummer, whose given name is Sir Vashya Zontine, is an unscrupulous arms dealer and sexual carnivore who

beats the drums of war. His mentally and physically abused wife shoots him dead with one of his own guns after she is rescued from him by a young pacifist poet. In looking at the Drummer character one can see the influence on Williams of the highly politicized theatre culture of the 1930's, in which the plays of Clifford Odets, the Group Theater, and the W.P.A. Living Newspapers played an integral role.

Red Devil Battery Sign ends with a bizarre and disturbingly ambiguous tableau. Having killed the Drummer, King himself dies. It's unclear, but it appears that his brain, which had been deteriorating through the course of the play, just finally gives out, silencing him for good. The Woman neither goes on to Washington nor falls back into the clutches of the men in grey suits. Instead, she is taken up by a roaming pack of wild children, a terrorist street gang whose turf is the "Wasteland," as Williams calls it, on the outskirts of Dallas. Here again one sees Williams reshaping older, more psychologically symbolic material into contemporary political forms. The pack of violent youths recalls the swarm of street urchins who hunt down and devour Sebastian Venable in *Suddenly Last Summer*. It also echoes the filthy orphaned children who hound Big Daddy and Big Mama during their trip through Europe, one of whose sexual overtures so sickens Big Daddy. Since the horrific "wilding" attack in Central Park in 1987 and the advent of gangbanger warfare and drive-by shootings in America's inner cities, *Red Devil Battery Sign* seems even more a play for the 1990's than for the 1970's.

The image that closes the play is apocalyptic. The Woman Downtown has joined this pack of young predators, whose leader is called "Wolf." He names her the "[m]other of all"(93), and she becomes the she-wolf nurturer of this primal brood. The Woman, returning to the lifeless body of King, lets out an "awesome" animal cry that seems full both of grief and rage. Rejoining the pack, she takes the hand of her brother, Wolf, and turns silently to face the audience as white electrical explosions detonate in the distance.

It may be argued whether the play earns the grotesque power of this final apocalyptic image. Clearly, Williams intends the action of *Red Devil* to move inexorably from the plain of realism toward a deepening condition of collective dementia and expressionistic nightmare. One may also question whether the radical refashioning of so much old material amounts to a truly reconstituted and coherent theatrical vision or just a many-headed monster of scattered ideas, images, and sensational affects. But it is possible

to approach the play, not as a unified dramaturgical whole but rather as a complex network of motifs woven around the central action of the play, the ritual of the Orpheus/Eurydice quest and also, more important, around the play's central idea, which is that of the political worth of a free, independent, public voice.

And a discussion of voice inevitably brings us back to the real Tennessee Williams, the Williams we seem to know so—or too—well. But here in *Red Devil Battery Sign* we find, I would argue, a new Williams. The voice is still unmistakably his, but here it no longer sounds only the lonely lyric of the nightingale or the soft song of an impassive Orpheus. It is grounded in a wounded or psychologically damaged heroism, but it can still reach the world in a desperate cry of moral defiance or a fury's mad howl. We are in a new, if no less forbidding world as well. The hot, dark jungle of primal desires and drives gives way to a devastated wasteland, an alien plain of utter emotional sterility and efficient, 1984-style brutality.

As I stated at the outset of this essay, the real damage done by uncontested critical opinion is that it keeps Tennessee Williams's plays from us, specifically by keeping them from the stage. *Red Devil* is a fractured, phantasmagoric, postmodern opera, complete with mariachi band chorus. Only directors, actors, designers, and dramaturgs, working together, can really make even a provisional—let alone any final—judgment about this difficult and complex work. It is hoped, perhaps foolishly, that this present essay may help to begin to turn the critical tide that threatens to carry Tennessee Williams later work still further from us.

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