

**review of The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams, Volume 2: 1945 – 1957**

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Devlin and Tischler's mammoth project divides Tennessee Williams' life into three parts. This, the middle tranche of letters, picks up with Tennessee at the height of his powers, flushed after the recent success of *The Glass Menagerie* and with his greatest works, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*, right around the corner. (It seems mildly perverse to use his unevocative surname and, touchingly, he signs a good number of his letters simply '10'.)

Travelling through Mexico, Europe and finally onto the near shores of McCarthyism Tennessee finds himself an outsider in most locations and an observer in all. Much of this can be put down to his unambiguous homosexuality, which must have made him as subtle in his native region as a peacock on a dairy farm. It is easy to forget how amusing a moniker 'Tennessee' must have seemed for him, akin to Quentin Crisp changing his first name to 'Glasgow'.

Unquestionably successful now, he nonetheless manages to use this success as a psychological tool working against himself. He struggles fervently and at length with the increase in pressure for him to produce the next – preferably similar – hit. All the while Tennessee lives in fear of criticism, particularly professional criticism, and yet unconsciously pays tribute to its value by using the fear of scorn to work harder on the structure and thematic unity of his plays. One feels that the ideas, the texture and the *soul* of the plays come easily, but he must forever battle with the problem of presenting these in a digestible, entertaining format.

Of course, money worries to the playwright are like rain to the Englishman – if not deluging him then threatening to do so imminently. Either Tennessee does not perceive himself to be sufficiently flourishing or he is all too aware of how swiftly the funds might evaporate. Although living now in relative luxury he endlessly frets over lack of capital for his productions. Even when the money is available he worries whether it is the right sort of money; does the backer prefer profit to art?

Desire and sexual conquest, of course, often raise their exotic heads and rarely lower them again without dishing out a vicious pecking or two. Tennessee particularly suffered at the hands of Pancho Rodriguez and his 'mysterious Mexican rages'. Other relationships are referred to as casually as they were taken up and dropped. 'I wish I could tell you more about this [Italian] boxer, details, positions, amiabilities – but this pale blue paper would blush!' he writes at one point. There were many dalliances in his life but at his core he remained so committed to his work he did not even notice its

unquestioned centrality. Equally constant was Audrey Wood, his agent and most loyal ally who comes across in these pages as the best partner any writer could ask for.

A common problem with published collections of letters is of course that rarely do the publishers hold copyright for the replies, and this denial of dialogue, always contrary to the spirit of correspondence, seems particularly perverse for a playwright who consciously or not would seize on the events and words around him as material. Nevertheless Devlin and Tischler partially compensate for this omission by their lengthy and well-written footnotes which ensure background is provided and narrative is preserved. Another great strength in this elegant book are the occasional photographs and reproduced postcards that delightfully bookmark the text.

There is much humour here, both giddy and arch. A pitch-perfect parody of a concerned missive to a daughter on the brink of leaving her convent is sent to his long-standing friend Oliver Evans; 'You have acquired many graces for the drawing-room, but it is time that you learned there are rooms to a house besides the music room, the drawing room, the library and the kitchen'. This and others smack of the brittle, self-conscious correspondence of Philip Larkin, another writer often patrolling the fringes of society with a testy squint. Tennessee comes across as child-like rather than childish in his perennial enthusiasm for the new, his indefatigable semi-ironic optimism and his sugar-rush highs and lows.

Seared across most of these letters, however, is the infinite sensitivity of the writer. Even a normal life would have been all but impossibly painful for a man of his feelings, and a normal life was something he rarely achieved. Quick to smart, slow to heal, Tennessee finds himself in a profession for which he is both perfectly equipped and hideously unsuited.

Most fascinating are Tennessee's thoughts when buried deep in his work. The progress of drafts and the beady focus beyond the initial smudges of his romanticism are far more salutary than the ever-dreadful process of seeing the work to production; 'it literally takes the strength of an ox,' he wrote, 'to carry a play from conception all the way through to its opening night on Broadway.' With all his success he never quite escaped from the suspicion that he was being financially ripped off somehow, and sadly this was not always paranoia.

Throughout his life, both publicly and privately, Tennessee was rarely more than a paragraph away from a memorable insight or observation. His arrival in Texas prompts him to comment: 'All the energy and colour seems to have gone into the Dallas females and the poor husbands look as if they had donated entirely too much blood to the wrong cause.' This volume is essential for anyone wishing to gain a heightened appreciation and understanding of the textural richness of the plays. Combining the stature of an old master with the eye of a cartoonist, Tennessee Williams paints vividly the broad strokes of human tragedy but is never too busy to notice the oddly-named streetcar running by his house.

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