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## REVIEW

# Theater Review: *Five by Tenn* - Five Landmark Plays by Tennessee Williams, New York

Written by [Elvira Black](#)

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Legendary playwright Tennessee Williams (1911–1983) was the kind of larger than life, tormented American artist who tried to transcend human suffering through the magic of his craft. As Tom in his groundbreaking 1944 play *The Glass Menagerie* put it, by combining memory with “artistic license,” Williams attempted, time and again, to turn back time and erase the wounds his sister endured at the hands of their mother after he left them behind for [New Orleans’](#) French Quarter in his late twenties. But both mother and sister lived on, in body and spirit — as well as metaphorically via stage and screen — for many decades to come.

Williams grew up in a complex new century — one which, despite its new technological wonders and scientific breakthroughs, often left the individual unable to confront the dark undercurrents of life. Despite the new “science” of psychoanalysis, with its franker examination of such “vices” as homosexuality, Oedipal conflicts, addiction, and sexual desire, most of Williams’ contemporaries were simply not culturally evolved enough to digest the truth about life’s seamy underbelly served up on a tarnished platter.

Williams was as just as much a product of this repressed sensibility — if not more so — thanks to his genteel Southern background and early Episcopal upbringing. Thus, one of the great conflicts of his life and work was the attempt to reconcile the sacred and the profane elements that coexisted in himself and in all of us.

Like other great artists who endured great pain, Williams did not suffer in silence. Via his plays, he gathered together the lemons he had accrued in life and concocted vast pitchers of lemonade palatable enough for audiences of any age to eagerly ingest. Granted, he may have taken surreptitious swigs from a bottle of fine Southern bourbon under cover of the serving tablecloth, and those who were mature and aware enough to take the unvarnished truth were welcome to join him and consume the undiluted drink he offered for those who could stomach it.



Emily Arrington in *Thank You, Kind Spirit*

Williams himself probably realized that some of his work was quite ahead of its time. The playwright, who died in 1983, left behind an incredible legacy which seemed to include every manuscript he had ever written. The sheer quantity of his offerings is formidable indeed — for this was a man who wrote through triumph and tragedy, lean years and great. All of these obscure or even undiscovered works lie safe within the private libraries of various university collections throughout the country.

In the year 2000 – the start of the new millennium – eleven plays by Tennessee Williams were discovered in an archive at the University of Texas at Austin. Although the finished manuscripts had been typed and emended in the author's own hand, they had never been published or performed.

Though the reasons why these eleven works had never seen the light of day may remain a mystery, it is hardly surprising that so many producers, directors, actors, and dramaturges have eagerly chosen to breathe life into these newly discovered works. Typically, with each new production, a few of these old yet new plays have been debuted, usually as part of other lesser-known Williams one-acts.

Following in this new tradition, director John W. Cooper presents to the New York stage two virtually unknown Williams plays along with three others — all but one written before Williams's first major work, *The Glass Menagerie*, galvanized 20th century theater when it opened in Chicago in 1944, and then again in New York in 1946.

With *Five by Tenn*, Cooper has chosen to premiere *Thank You, Kind Spirit* (1941) and *Why Do You Smoke So Much, Lily?* (1935) for their first New York City run, along with three other rarely performed early one-acts: *Talk to Me Like the Rain and Let me Listen* (1945), *Hello From Bertha* (1939), and *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion* (1941). Taken together, this brilliant staging presents a portrait of a young Williams and introduces the enduring themes from which he would later fashion all his major plays. More delightful still, *Five by Tenn* audiences will encounter the earliest examples of some of the major prototypes which continued to dominate the playwright's later works.

In 1941, the then-30-year-old Williams composed *Kind Spirit* and *Larkspur*, envisioning them as part of an evening of one-acts to be set in New Orleans. The set was to be entitled *Vieux Carre*, after the French Quarter where the young playwright first came to live in 1939. Like narrator/protagonist Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams fled St. Louis to escape the “coffin”-like atmosphere he had endured while living there with his mother and sister. Having completed his degree at the University of Iowa, he left behind his schizophrenic sister Rose in the charge of their manipulative, controlling mother and went to seek his fortune in the Vieux Carre, then a haven for fellow writers, painters, and other bohemians seeking refuge during an economically depressed, socially repressed era in American culture.

Like *The Glass Menagerie* — written a year after Williams' parents agreed to subject Rose to a prefrontal lobotomy that left her incapacitated and institutionalized for the rest of her life — *Vieux Carre* was a “memory play.” The protagonist was the Author, and just as with *The Glass Menagerie*'s Tom (named after the playwright, whose given name was Thomas Lanier Williams III), the Author clearly presented himself as both writer/narrator and character. Thus, the on-stage Author was the young, twenty-something writer newly arrived in 1939 New Orleans. The offstage author is the older and perhaps wiser — or at least, more wizened — Williams who composed *Vieux Carre* in his mid-sixties. Although it hardly garnered rave reviews at its New York premiere in 1977, Michael Ramach, managing director of Milwaukee's Theater X, which staged a [revival](#) of the play in 1997 and who knew the playwright for decades, noted that Williams considered *Vieux Carre* to be his masterpiece.

Although *Vieux Carre* was ultimately produced as a full length play, all the one-acts of *Five by Tenn* contained the major themes which would again weave their way through most of his later plays. Nevertheless, a crucial distinction remains, for *Vieux Carre* was completed decades after Williams first conceived of it, while the plays of *Five by Tenn* were composed during Williams's earliest years as a writer. The author's maturity lent greater depth and coherence to the themes revisited in *Vieux Carre* and served to temper and soften some of the guilt-steeped subject matter which had obsessed him from youth onward.

For instance, the fourth play presented, *Why Do You Smoke so Much, Lily?* was written in 1935, when the young playwright, still then in his twenties, was, like his youthful character Tom, a firsthand witness to an already tragically dysfunctional family psychodrama. This metaphysical new staging, however, sets the time in the 1920s, when Williams would have been either a young boy or teenager.

By the time a much older Williams had authored 1977's full-length *Vieux Carre*, Mother DuClos — the central character in 1941's *Thank You, Kind Spirit* — had been wholly replaced by the now fully “in control” Author who acts as both character and narrator of the play. He is, of course, none other than Williams himself, who first came to New Orleans' French Quarter in 1939 at the age of 28, first to work for the WPA, but mainly to try to make a name for himself as a writer. All the scenes in *Vieux Carre* take place at the same boarding house where Williams first resided when he arrived, and are populated by the misfits and lost souls who rent rooms there along with the lonely, conflicted, and struggling young Williams.

However, for this inventive new staging, Mother DuClos (featuring a command performance by Natalie E. Carter) inhabits the Author's dual role as central protagonist and author/master of ceremonies. Rather than a writer recalling his youth from the viewpoint of the 30-year-old Williams who wrote *Kind Spirit* in 1941, or the 60-something elder statesman of the theater who wrote *Vieux Carre* in 1977, Mother DuClos and her lost parishioners reside in “an abandoned building in New Orleans” in the 1960s following an unnamed disaster.

This decade was one of the most trying times for Williams both personally and professionally. His secretary of over 15 years, Frank Merlo — who had been lover and emotional support system to him since 1947 when he wrote *A Streetcar Named Desire* — died of cancer in 1963. This “abandonment” plunged Williams into a decade-long episode of deep depression, and few if any plays of critical “substance” were subsequently produced — at least publicly — until 1977's *Vieux Carre*. In this production, the events recounted in the other four plays featured in *Five by Tenn* are not culled from the brief period during which Williams resided at this run-down boarding house on Toulouse Street, but rather span the four decades from the 1920s through the 1950s — a vast window of time which takes Williams and the audience from his earliest youth to an incredibly successful and productive early middle age.

*Thank You, Kind Spirit* is the first play presented, and Mother DuClos, like *Vieux Carre*'s aging author, transcends her role as this play's central character as her presence weaves itself in and out of the four plays to follow. A true spiritualist in the Creole tradition of the old French Quarter, her “power” flows from a combination

of devout Catholicism (Williams converted to Catholicism as well) and the spells and incantations of voodoo (*Glass's* Tom also wished to become a “magician” who could eradicate the pain he brought to others when he broke free from his family). The “magic” is that of the author’s own making; the “spirits” Mother DuClos conjures up are the family, friends, and acquaintances of Williams’ own life; the “voodoo” is evidenced in the characters thus conjured up, transformed and enhanced by the writer’s memories, and colored in both bright and somber tones via his artful imagination.



Natalie Carter as Mother DuClos in *Thank You, Kind Spirit* along with, from left, Emily Arrington, Joyce Feuring, Michael Culhane, Lennard Sillevs, Trish Montoya, Sylvia Mincewicz and Candice Palladino.

Is this African American “mother” figure a true medium or a fraud? A kindly soul or a charlatan? A righteous woman or yet another lost soul trying to mask the depravity hidden beneath a saintly facade? Does she really channel the spirits, does she really hear the voices? And what will become of her — yet another deluded, ultimately tormented Williams character — in the end? The answer to that at first seems inevitable; like her author, she seems destined to remain both victim and healer, saint and sinner, compulsively trying to mend the “unmendable” past and attempting over and over to reconcile all her sins of omission and commission.

Mother DuClos and her small circle of followers remain seated at stage left in the same abandoned room in the old Quarter throughout the play. Alternately singing and prophesizing, Mother entreats the “Kind Spirit” to not only conjure up the ghosts of those who have inhabited this room in the decades before her, but to help her channel the visions that will bring hope to the hopeless and abandoned congregants who now huddle around her. Among these is the “Second Young Woman,” played with consummate southern belle guilelessness and charm by Sylvia Mincewicz, who wants to know when her husband, who has left, in typical Williams style, without warning or explanation, will at last return home from his drunken wanderings. After much chanting and incantations, Mother is possessed by the Spirit and tells the Second Young Woman that her husband will return to her—around Christmastime, or perhaps a little before—presumably after his debauches have at last left him penniless and repentant. Her word can (perhaps) be trusted, since as the de facto Author, she does in fact hold the fate of all characters, past and present, in her hands.



Brenda Bell, Natalie E. Carter and Sylvia Mincewicz in *Thank You, Kind Spirit*

But there is one perennial skeptic in the crowd — the Woman in Rear (played with wry and biting sarcasm by Joyce Feurring), who, sitting closest to the audience in the front of the stage, makes periodic cynical asides to no one and anyone in particular as to the dubiousness of Mother’s claims. Mother, in turn, senses an “unkind presence” in her midst, one who will exact her full revenge by the end of the evening. As Mother and Second Young Woman thank the Kind Spirit for his/her guidance, Mother passes the basket around and continues singing until she hears the echoed voices of “spirits” who intone over and over: “Talk to me... talk to me like the rain and let me listen.” As the thunder and the rain beat down outside the lone window, the second play opens.

*Talk to Me Like the Rain and Let me Listen*(1945) — written one year after his first breakaway success *The Glass Menagerie* and two years after his sister Rose’s botched lobotomy — here takes place in the same room in the 1950s. A man (played on alternate nights by Daniel Kipler and Chris Ford) and a Woman (played by Nina Covalesky/Elizabeth Clark) carry on a “dialogue” that chiefly consists of alternating, poignant, poetic monologues. The Man has returned after days of drunken debauchery, the details of which are hazy to him since most of them were experienced while in a blackout.

The Woman has been sitting and waiting for his return in a passive, vegetative state. She has not eaten, and, like a fragile, fading southern rose, has remained there — silent, helpless, and alone — with only water to drink and the rain beating relentlessly outside. The play opens with the Man languishing on the bed and the Woman sitting stiffly in a chair. In between his own monologues, he alternately entreats his lover to come to bed and to “talk” to him “like the rain” and let him “listen.”



Nina Covalesky and Daniel Kipler in *Talk To Me Like the Rain and Let Me Listen*

And talk she does — in almost neverending torrents. And listen he does — to her sorrowful, poetic soliloquy as she reveals that she wants to “go away” to a place by the sea where she can live alone in a room where the rain casts cool shadows on the walls. All her expenses will be taken care of and her kind, motherly landlady, who will have a daughter, will tell her how her daughter is doing when the Woman stops by to collect her mail. She will sometimes venture into town, anonymous and undisturbed, perhaps strolling by the sea or occasionally attending a movie where she will sit silently in the darkness amongst strangers and immerse herself in the fictional lives of the characters on the screen. A year will pass, and then a decade, and finally she will look in the mirror and see with little surprise that her hair has turned white and she has lived there for half a century. One day she will go to the sea and fade away, having wasted away over time to almost nothing, getting thinner and thinner and more and more ethereal until she ceases to exist at all.

In addition to being an apparent referent for the now isolated, lobotomized Rose, *Talk* is a direct precursor to a character who will later appear in *Vieux Carre* — a young, tubercular woman in an adjoining apartment who stays alone and sick in her room while her drug addicted, reprobate husband comes and goes at will. At the end of the play, the Author must decide whether to stay and help the woman to escape or abandon her and the insane, soul-killing atmosphere of the boarding house and its inhabitants, just as Tom/Williams did in *Menagerie*. Parts of this theme will emerge yet again in *Suddenly, Last Summer* when young Catherine Holly is encouraged to talk — with the aid of a truth serum — to the psychosurgeon who has been summoned by her aunt in an attempt to silence her insane “rantings” (concerning a terrible incident that led to her homosexual son’s death by cannibalism) with a lobotomy.

*Hello from Bertha* (1939) is for the purposes of this production also set in the 1930s and was written during the same year Williams came to the French Quarter for the first time. Like most of Williams’ plays, its R-rated material is cloaked behind its G-rated language — mild enough so that the children who sat near me could, along with their parents, enjoy an all-American family night of entertainment together — with the children perhaps taking the language literally while the parents saw through to the obvious implications between the lines.

As the play begins, we see Bertha (superbly played by Kay Bailey, complete with languid southern lilt and fitful drawl), an ailing, aging drunk (and/or prostitute), lying prone on a bed in a fitful near sleep, plagued by a relentless “sick headache.” She is soon disturbed by Goldie, her landlady/madam played with delightful, spiteful maliciousness by Margaret O’Connor, who insists that she must vacate the bed, the room, and the building at once because the space is needed for the “other girls” who can still pay their rent (or cut) to her. Bertha entreats her to leave her be and let her nurse her hangover from the night before, but Goldie declares her intention to call the authorities and have Bertha taken to a mental institution where she will be fed and housed at no charge, and she can rest and “recover” from her drunken, half-insane ravings without worry or bother to anyone.

Goldie, like Stanley Kowalski in *Streetcar* and countless other Williams villains, relentlessly, meticulously delivers Bertha of her most cherished delusions by declaring her to be a worthless, insane, immoral drunk and worse. Williams, who believed that people were destroyed by others’ attempts to thwart their fragile dreams and silence the truth (via wanton cruelty, lies, or even psychosurgery if necessary), presents Goldie as both heartlessly brazen “truth” teller and instrument of Bertha’s imminent confinement.

As with so many other desperate Williams’ heroines, the play ends with Bertha — who has by this time reluctantly crawled out of bed and half-sat, half-writhed on the floor in torment — sitting huddled and defeated, descending into madness as she cries out for her savior/ex-lover/brother/john/pimp/father to rescue her, demanding that a fellow tenant/prostitute (the lovely, cynically resigned Jovanka Clares) take a letter she dictates for him. The would-be recipient is a man she still loves and once “worked for” in another town, and Bertha, like Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, feels confident that he will send for her at once when she hears of his plight. The play ends as she waits for the authorities to come, once again declaring her undying,

unrequited love for her long-lost would-be savior.

*Why Do You Smoke So Much, Lily?* written in 1935 when the author was in his early 20s, is staged for this production in the 1920s, when Williams would have been either a young child or teenager — way too young to escape his dysfunctional home environment. In it, Mrs. Yorke (played brilliantly by Susan Capra) is *The Glass Menagerie's* Amanda incarnate, while Lily (played on alternate nights by Christie Booker and Christina Christman) is her bookish, somewhat defiant but helpless teenage daughter. The young Williams is not a participant in the action here, but rather a “silent” observer of the psychotic dynamic between a controlling, deluded “fading southern belle” of a mother and her deeply troubled young sister.

(It is worth noting that despite William's unabashed exploration of the depths of human suffering and “vice,” the only thing that could possibly offend a 2007 audience was the fact that Lily chain smoked onstage, and caveats were posted in the lobby and in the program to that effect.)

The Turtle's Shell Theater is a small venue, and I was seated in the front row, no more than a foot or two from the front of the small stage where Booker's fidgety, twitching, tightly wound Lily was so close that I could have easily grabbed a cig from her crumpled pack and joined her as she puffed away throughout the play. This intimate staging served the production well, since one could not help but feel that one was, like the young Williams, a silent and powerless observer who was nevertheless a mere arm's length away from the action and the characters being brought to life. As the “unseen, unheard” child, Williams would forever remain the third inhabitant of that same “room” in his memory — desperately but helplessly invested in the events unfolding and their ultimate outcome.

Mrs. Yorke, who is seen preparing for an evening out as the play opens, will leave Lily mercifully alone to her own devices — in this case, her cigarettes and her books — for a few hours. Nevertheless, she can't resist nagging Lily not only about her compulsive smoking but about her apparent refusal to engage the attentions of suitable young men. She reminds Lily of the opportunity she missed on a recent cruise which was also attended by a number of charming young bachelors. Lily, however, was well aware that these bachelors were eminently unsuitable since they were, in fact, all homosexual.

Still fuming, literally and figuratively, as her mother closes the door and exits the apartment, Lily hurriedly extinguishes her last butt, impulsively rises from her chair, and slowly and with great relish deposits the contents of her overflowing cup/ ashtray all over the front of the stage. After sitting in front of her mirrored bureau and bemoaning her fate for awhile, she eventually returns to her chair at stage right. Exhausted by her ruminations, she begins to hear echoed voices of her mother admonishing her about her smoking and other failings, and endures a hellacious hallucination of her mother, who abruptly appears in red backlit silhouette at the front door, writhing around suggestively in what looks to be a decidedly un-genteel negligee. Lily then passes out, but awakens again when her mother returns from her night on the town, and once again, Mrs. Yorke's litany on the vices of smoking and the virtues of social interaction are repeated ad infinitum as the play ends.

The final play presented is *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion* (1941). Also originally designed to be incorporated into *Vieux Carre* (as indeed it is, well over three decades later), it concerns another Bertha-esque character — also broke, also during the Depression — whose ersatz “faded southern belle” composure is disrupted when her landlady, one Mrs. Wire, barges in demanding the back rent on pain of immediate eviction. Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore (in a truly remarkable performance by Rebecca Street) is clearly another precursor to Blanche in *Streetcar*. Here, in an unsuccessful yet poignant attempt to weasel her way out of paying the rent, she complains to Mrs. Wire that she is unaccustomed to an abode that not only is infested with cockroaches, but big flying ones at that. Declaring that her rooming house has no more cockroaches and fewer bedbugs than any other in the Quarter, Mrs. Wire again demands her back rent at once on pain of immediate eviction.

This landlady is, in fact, the self-same Mrs. Wire who will appear in *Vieux Carre*, who is in turn modeled after Williams' own landlady who held court in that same shabby boarding house in the Quarter back in 1939. It was said that she was so maniacal that she would sleep in the corridors in order to prevent her tenants from engaging in their "immoral" pursuits, and was once said to have dug a hole in the floor and poured boiling water onto the occupants of the room below after suspecting them of engaging in unsavory activities. Barbara Ann Davison does justice to the role as the stocky, bespectacled, relentlessly moralistic and materialistic landlady, hell bent on getting her back rent at any cost.

Despite Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore's fluttery tales of refinement and delicacy and gentlemen admirers, Mrs. Wire takes great relish in mocking her aversion to flying roaches when she spies a bottle of larkspur lotion, used at that time to treat lice and presumably pubic crabs as well, on Mrs. Moore's dresser.

A veritable Stanley Kowalski in a cheap dress, the rude, crude Mrs. Wire makes no bones about shattering the delicate fantasies and vulnerable sensibilities of not only Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore, but none other than the Author (here, the Writer, played on alternate evenings by Leon Fallon and Vincent Oppenheimer). In this penultimate scene of the night, he wanders by casually from next door, still in his robe and doubtless recovering from a drunk the night before. He tries to protect Moore from the slings and arrows of the outrageous Mrs. Wire, but receives only scorn as well as a demand for *his* back rent for his trouble.



Vincent Oppencker as The Writer in *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*

Nevertheless, the Writer (played with a charming mixture of self-deprecating charm and impotent chivalry by Leon Fallon on that particular night) makes a noble case for the alcohol fueled fever dreams which both these kindred souls cling to — in her case, for a Shangri La to come; in his case, for fame and fortune which will surely follow as soon as he completes his great American novel in progress. In any case, as he tells Mrs. Wire, even if these dreams never come to fruition, they are still entitled to cherish these "harmless" fantasies in the face of the cruel realities they face in the Quarter. As the play ends, this neo-prototype of Blanche meets the Author face to face, and they comfort each other in their mutual dreams of glory still to come.

The denouement to *Five by Tenn* returns the audience to the same corner of the stage where Mother DuClos and her flock have sat silently in darkness throughout each of the four previous plays. Now, a final lost soul comes to join this hapless group in the person of the Little Girl, played alternately by Grace Manzo and Emily Arrington. On the night in question, ten-year-old Manzo gave a touching performance as a sweet young girl who, like Laura, walks with a slight limp. As Mother proceeds to evoke the Kind Spirit with her preaching and incantations, the "unkind presence" at last emerges as the Woman in the Rear confronts Mother openly, declaring her to be a fraud and a sham, a drunkard and a scam artist with illegitimate children of undetermined parentage. The local priest is summoned and handed a carton, and the whole congregation proceeds to dismantle all the mementoes in Mother's ramshackle room — the tattered pictures and trinkets, the voodoo-like paraphernalia, the collection



basket. When the Woman in Rear finally grabs the last item — Mother's crucifix — from the wall, Mother collapses in despair with cries of "My Jesus! Don't take away my Jesus!" followed by soft, incoherent African-tinged utterings.

At long last, Mother is left alone with the Little Girl, who in her innocence declares her unconditional love and faith in Mother. With Manzo's dark hair and slightly dusky complexion, it is at least possible that she may indeed be Mother's very own daughter. As she haltingly approaches her with her gently limping gait, the two embrace and Mother and "daughter" both declare their thanks to the Kind Spirit — perhaps the Mother, perhaps the Little Girl, perhaps Williams himself, perhaps all of the above — for permitting them to at long last give and receive the love and tender understanding they have always craved.

The audience is left with an enduring Williams-esque mystery. Is the Kind Spirit male or female, black or white, Williams or DuClos, the Writer or the Young Girl — or perhaps even the audience itself?

One thing seems certain. In *Mother DuClos*, Williams has at last reinvented himself as the savior he most wanted to personify, namely, the loving mother he and Rose never had. In *DuClos* are combined the elements of the sacred and profane that made up so much of Williams's major themes and characters, as well as Williams himself. At long last, Williams/DuClos can confound the boundaries of time and reinvent memory, morphing into the Savior who will not "abandon" his sister to confinement and doom, and the Mother who will protect her young charge from all harm. And the Little Girl in turn, in her still-pure innocence and faith, can forgive the Mother/Author their trespasses as S/He at long last returns, with the help of *Vieux Carre* Voodoo, to rescue all "three" from an eternity of despair.

The spirit of Williams permeates these one-act plays, at least in a metaphorical sense, and perhaps a more literal one as well. Never a stickler when it came to adaptations of his films or plays to fit the more prudish mores of the time, many have noted that Williams would unabashedly change an ending from sad to happy for a screen adaptation or even amend an actress's monologue if she found difficulty with it. By the same token, Williams would likely have no qualms about a production of his earlier works from the viewpoint of a more worldly, 21st century perspective. "No play of mine is ever finished," he once declared, "even after production."

Williams' work [continues to endure](#), as revivals of his plays continue apace worldwide and seasoned and aspiring actors alike continue to take on his greatest roles. A new digital century seems custom made for further discoveries of yet-undiscovered work, as the Internet makes it easier than ever to unearth the "inventory lists" of even the most obscure collections.

So, too, in the small space of the Turtle's Shell Theater — a mere stone's throw away from the Broadway venues where his greatest works were performed — one can almost discern the ghost of Williams still abroad. Some of the great actors and actresses who brought his characters to life have attested to the fact that he seemed delighted with virtually every new production and adaptation of his work. One can almost imagine spying him in the audience — his shoulders, perhaps, shaking with laughter as he occasionally talks back to his own characters — as friends and colleagues sometimes caught him doing when he first saw another of his works realized on stage, screen, or television.

Williams would doubtless be pleased with this postmodern rendering of his earlier works, which pays posthumous homage to his self-declared masterpiece *Vieux Carre*.

In fact, a spate of recent postmodern takes on William's works also pay homage to his enduring influence. One of the most ambitious and masterful of these is the award winning film by the Spanish director Pedro Almodovar. His widely-acclaimed [All About my Mother](#) is a veritable homage to, and retelling of, *A Streetcar Named Desire* with a brilliant postmodern twist. In this film, William's "love that dare not speak its name" is allowed to shout for all to hear, as the director openly explores such erstwhile "forbidden" topics as

transvestitism, gay fatherhood via an impregnated nun, AIDS, drug addiction, and all the other “dark” themes which ran so surreptitiously throughout Williams’ work. Perhaps Almodovar’s final dedication at the end of the film might also be aptly applied to Williams’s life’s work as well:

"To all actresses who have played actresses. To all women who act. To men who act and become women. To all the people who want to be mothers. To my mother."



Natalie E. Carter and Emily Arrington in *Thank You, Kind Spirit*

*Five by Tenn* is presented by Turtle Shell Productions, The Terrapin Troupe, and Off the Leash Productions and is directed by John W. Cooper, founder and artistic director of Turtle Shell Productions.

[Turtle Shell Productions](#) aspires to create theater with a focus on current issues, ethics, culture, and history. It provides a safe haven where youth and artists may grow in their craft and develop practical skills, while collaborating on productions that celebrate the universal truths of human experience and inspire the community.

## PRODUCTION

Director John W. Cooper is an award winning actor as well as producer, artistic director and founder of Turtle Shell Productions, which has produced over ninety plays, including an acclaimed presentation of Tennessee Williams’ *Summer and Smoke* in 2004.

Co-producer Jeremy Handelman is Founder of [Off the Leash Productions](#) and is a playwright, filmmaker and

video editor. Off the Leash Productions recently concluded a very successful New York production of Mr. Handelmann's play *The Bronx Balms*.

Stage Manager: TaShawn "Pope" Jackson  
Assistant Director: Patrick Mills  
Dramaturge: Scott McCrea  
Scenic Designer: Ryan Scott  
Costume Designer: A Christina Giannini  
Lighting Designer: Eric Larson  
Sound Designer: Roman Battaglia  
Dialect Coach: Karla Nielson



*Five by Tenn*: Five Landmark Plays by Tennessee Williams

Remaining shows run through March 25, 2007  
Monday & Wednesday through Saturday at 8 PM  
Sunday at 3 PM  
The Turtle's Shell Theater  
At the Times Square Arts Center, 4th floor  
300 West 43rd Street, New York, NY 10036

Tickets: \$18 available from [SmartTix](#)  
(212) 868-4444

Elvira Black is a "retired" New York writer blogging for her own amusement here on BC and at [Shithouse rat](#). Elvira's real estate obsessed doppelganger, Elvira Dark, can be found at [All things New York](#)--designed for anyone moving to or visiting this one of a kind, kickass city.

## Comments

