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NEWS AND
FEATURES

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SPECIAL TICKET
OFFERS

Calendar

Registered Companies

Now Playing

- Boys Just Wanna Have Fun
- Figaro
- Five by Tenn
- The Game Boy
- Maggie
- Oberon 10th Season Rep
- Pinkalicious
- Spring EATfest 2007

Coming Soon

- And He Made a Her
- As You Like It
- Catch a Cabaret
- Don Giovanni
- Expressing Willie
- Five Years Later
- Kosher Harry's
- Laugh Out Loud
- The Learned Ladies
- Notes from a Page
- One Woman Standing
- Picasso at the Lapin Agile
- Richard III
- The Sessions
- ShakespeareNYC Rep King
John/Richard II
- Tales of the Lost Formicans
- With Milk and Four Equals

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Five by Tenn

March 8th, 2007 - March 25th, 2007
The Turtle's Shell Theater
300 W 43rd ST. Suite #403

TURTLE SHELL PRODUCTIONS

[SYNOPSIS](#) [TIX INFO](#) [UP TO THE MINUTE](#)



"Thank You, Kind Spirit" featuring Natalie Carter as Mother DuClos. Other cast members from left to right: Emily Arrington, Joyce Feurring, Michael Culhane, Lennard Sillevs, Trish Montoya, Sylvia Mincewicz and Candice Palladino.

Viewed Sunday March 11, at The Turtle's Shell Theater

If one has the opportunity to peruse the sketches of Michelangelo, one will find illustration upon illustration of the human hand. Each study improves upon the next to eventually serve as the model for the hand of God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Similarly, the short plays of Tennessee Williams illustrate the origins of the master playwright's process from character exploration to full-length masterpiece.

Five by Tenn, presented by Turtle Shell Productions, The Terrapin Troupe and Off The Leash Productions, puts five Williams rarities up for analysis—each an early tracing of emotional topography brought to full scale in future classics such as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass Menagerie* and *Vieux Carre*. Director John W. Cooper has chosen to frame four of the pieces, *Talk to Me Like the Rain and Let Me Listen*, *Hello from Bertha*, *Why Do You Smoke So Much*, *Lily* and *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*, within the New York premiere of *Thank You, Kind Spirit*, a voodoo mass. The conceit works well. The rite is presided over by one

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Mother DuClos, played with impressive vigor by Natalie Carter. The lonely souls we encounter in rooms throughout the Quarter are called forward by her rich mournful blues. Aided by scenic designer Ryan Scott's dilapidated room and the constant rainstorm made visceral by lighting designer Eric Larson and sound designer Roman Battaglia, we are transported to four run-down rooms in the French Quarter in which Williams' characters are held hostage by disease, poverty and lost direction.

Unfortunate circumstances weigh heavily on Williams' characters and the way in which they cope is what makes his dramas so involving. One is made to feel the quality of pity that makes one wish fate would lighten up a bit and show some mercy to its hapless victims. In *Talk To Me Like The Rain...* an estranged couple (Nina Covalesky and Daniel Kipler) attempt to negotiate the emotional distance between them. In *Hello From Bertha*, Kay Bailey brings us an ailing prostitute clinging desperately to the



"The Lady of Larkspur Lotion" with Vincent Oppecker as the Writer.

remembered affections of a youthful love. It is one of the standout performances of the evening that persuasively conveys the power of human hope central to Williams work. In *Why Do You Smoke So Much, Lily* a girl (Christie Booker) haunted by the overbearing echoes of her mother (Susan Capra) vies for independence against her family's need to have her marry into wealth. *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion* brings us to the rented room of a fallen woman (Rebecca Street) who finds refuge inside her imagination. The crux of Williams' work is brought into full focus in the personage of Mrs. Wire, a landlady who craves her rent. Played dexterously by Barbara Ann Davison, she demonstrates the pitfalls and redemption of imagination as survival tool against harsh reality. A young writer (Leon Fallon), perhaps a stand-in for Williams himself, joins the woman in her fantasy, and we are left with little doubt as to which approach to adversity Williams would champion.

Five by Tenn is an ambitious evening of theater and while at the Sunday matinee early in their run, the balance of performances were not yet confident, a few standout performances and the opportunity to see scarcely produced Tennessee Williams was well worth the price of admission.

Up-to-the-minute review written by Wendy Taylor

