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# "The Embrace is Inevitable": Connection and Audience Engagement in Tennessee Williams' The Two-Character Play

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**“The Embrace is Inevitable”:  
Connection and Audience Engagement in  
Tennessee Williams’ *The Two-Character Play***

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Bachelor of Arts degree from the Department of Theatre,  
Speech, and Dance at the College of William and Mary**

**By  
Kelsey Schneider**

Accepted for \_\_\_\_\_  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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**Professor Elizabeth Wiley**

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**Professor Arthur Knight**

# Epigraph

Well, in answer to your last question,  
I would say this: Nobody ever gets to know *no body*! We're  
all of us sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own  
skins, for life! You understand me, Lady? -I'm tellin' you  
it's the truth, we got to face it, we're under a lifelong sentence  
to solitary confinement inside our own lonely skins  
for as long as we live on this earth!

-Tennessee Williams, *Orpheus Descending*

--Such things play stride-piano across directors' notebooks, slide  
off the pages and scamper across stages, at odd - and sometimes even -  
times. Because "Theatres are prisons for players . . . and writers of  
plays." And directors.

-Jay Leo Colt, "Dancing in Red Hot Shoes"

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## Introduction

FELICE: ...-Of course you realize that I'm trying to catch you and hold you with an opening monologue that has to be extended through several – rather arbitrary – transitions...

-Tennessee Williams, *Out Cry* (8)

“*The Two-Character Play* is an important play. It is not a good play”<sup>1</sup>

So begins Rexford Stamper's loveless vivisection of one of the most artistically inventive yet worst received plays by the American dramatist, Tennessee Williams.

Tennessee Williams made an international name for himself in the 1940s and 50s. His ruthless yet poetic examination of humanity and his tender treatment of tragedy revolutionized theatre. He is remembered for his beautifully troubled heroes, artfully crafted prose, and unflinching exploration of conflict. His plays have been immortalized through film, publicized widely, and revived continually on stages across the world. Professionally, he strove to capture the ambiguities of human relationships. Personally, he was the quintessential troubled artist, using his own personal demons as inspiration for his work. He rapidly became, and has remained, a cultural icon.

Perhaps it is because of Williams' firmly established celebrity that Stamper concedes to call a play for which he holds thinly veiled contempt “important.” Tennessee Williams' 1962 play, *The Night of the Iguana*, is largely believed to be his last commercial success, yet he continued writing and producing his work professionally for

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<sup>1</sup> Rexford Stamper, “*The Two-Character Play: Psychic Individuation*,” in *Tennessee Williams: A Tribute*, ed. Jac Tharpe (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1977), 354.

twenty more years. These last two decades of Williams' career are almost universally ignored. Almost everyone will recognize the title *A Streetcar Named Desire*, if only because of Marlon Brando's cinematically immortalized scream of "Stella!" But would the average person recognize *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*? *Small Craft Warnings*? *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*? Stamper deigns to call *The Two-Character Play* "important," but does anyone know that the same man who left Laura Wingfield's candles burning trapped two siblings in an abandoned theatre with an unfinished play, a revolver, and a host of paralyzing fears? Does anyone care?

The late career of Tennessee Williams, identified for the sake of this argument as the period from *Iguana*'s premiere to his death in 1983, is often shunted into a corner by scholars more interested in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Streetcar* - the big hits. The experimental quality of Williams' late work is often explained away by personal trauma. Williams described the 1960s as the most difficult period of his life. Following the loss of both his beloved grandfather and his long time partner, Williams entered a decade of substance abuse, isolation from his friends, and widespread commercial failure of his work. All of these issues came to a head in 1969 when Williams was forcibly incarcerated in Barnes Hospital in St. Louis for three months. In his *Memoirs*, Williams admits that "Confinement has always been the greatest dread of my life."<sup>2</sup> Even as he healed physically, he suffered mentally and emotionally. He was never the same man again.

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<sup>2</sup> Tennessee Williams, *Memoirs* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 233.

Stamper identifies two prominent flaws of Williams' late plays. First, the emotionally autobiographical<sup>3</sup> nature of Williams' work was no longer expressed in a way that audiences found relatable. Rather, Stamper notes that Williams "fails to see that his work has become a personal statement which, by its very nature, is unintelligible to anyone except himself" (360). He goes further, condemning these late plays as "nothing more than an exercise in ego" (361). A second problem exists in the new forms with which Williams experimented in his late career. Stamper insists, "not enough attention has been paid to the most apparent reason for [the failure of Williams' later plays]: he is no longer writing the type of drama which won him his reputation" (355).

It would be satisfying to brush Stamper's criticism aside as a lone black spot on Williams' otherwise prestigious career. Yet these weaknesses in his later plays are recognized by many Williams scholars. Felicia Hardison Londré notes that the emotionally autobiographical nature of Williams' work was perceived as personal therapy rather than universal expression because critics and audience members "were bringing to bear too much of what they knew about the author" (95). Albert J. Devlin admits that "the long shadows cast by [Williams'] early masterpieces were lengthened and darkened by a theater establishment that often maneuvered Williams into competition with himself."<sup>4</sup> Nancy M. Tischler agrees: "Critics, who had a fixed definition of a Williams play, seemed intent on forcing him to recreate his old stories and theatrical

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<sup>3</sup> Tennessee Williams, as quoted by Felicia Hardison Londré in "The Two-Character Out Cry and Break Out" in *The Undiscovered Country: The Later Plays of Tennessee Williams*, ed. Philip C. Kolin (New York, NY: P. Lang, 2002), 95.

<sup>4</sup> Albert J. Devlin, "The Late Career of Tennessee Williams," in *The Critical Response to Tennessee Williams*, ed. George W. Crandell (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 262.

patterns.”<sup>5</sup> Despite these denunciations, Williams “could not stop writing without stopping living,”<sup>6</sup> and so the critical cycle continued.

None of the late plays exemplify the effects of these trying decades on the playwright as visibly as *The Two-Character Play*. Williams began writing *Two-Character* in the late 1960s and an initial version of the play premiered to tepid reviews in 1967 at the London Hampstead Theatre Club. A few hundred copies of the original edition were published in 1969 by New Directions. The original production’s failure did not deter Williams but instead motivated him to edit the play. It performed again under the title *Out Cry* in Chicago in 1971, then New York in 1973. While the Chicago run met with favorable reviews, the New York production fell short of success. Williams’ final version, once again titled *The Two-Character Play*, was staged in 1975. Another flop; Williams was not exaggerating when he called it “my most difficult play.”<sup>7</sup> It is a bold, artistic adventure into a new genre, as well as a poetic emotional confession about the worst decade of Williams’ life. Yet the script is difficult to grasp and the message rarely reaches the audience. The play has potential that is rarely realized. Time and again in production, Williams’ confession has meant nothing.

What is this impossible story about? *The Two-Character Play* follows siblings Felice and Clare after they are abandoned by their acting company. Felice, the playwright and lead actor, coerces the reluctant Clare into performing one of his own works, “The Two-Character Play.” In the play within the play, Felice and Clare portray adult siblings

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<sup>5</sup> Nancy M. Tischler, *Student Companion to Tennessee Williams* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 141.

<sup>6</sup> Tischler, 150.

<sup>7</sup> Tennessee Williams, as quoted by Jay Leo Colt in “Dancing in Red Hot Shoes,” *The Tennessee Williams Review* 3:2 (1982): 7.



also named Felice and Clare who live in their childhood home where their father killed their mother and himself. The play within the play follows the siblings' struggle to leave their home despite their terror of the outside world. Their vitriolic attacks on one another are matched only by their desperate need for companionship. Clare finally halts the play within the play by announcing that the audience has walked out, and the siblings find they are trapped in the theatre. Unable to escape even through death, the siblings accept their final, dreaded confinement with a loving embrace and the reassurance that they are still together.

*The Two-Character Play* bears all the hallmarks of Williams' major works: familial strife, sibling rivalry, substance abuse, mental illness, death, isolation, and the culture of the American South. Williams was also experimenting with his own take on the Theatre of the Absurd, a popular new genre encompassing such plays as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, and Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*. Yet, audiences felt they were being asked to pity the playwright rather than the characters, and they were confused by the well-established playwright's shift from poetic realism to absurdism.

The merits of the script have been continually lost under the weight of Williams' personal history. This history prejudices the audience against the emotional conflict and Williams' previous successes prejudice them against his foray into the Absurd. The playwright is not reaching his audience. Francis Gillen likens this disconnect between Williams and his audience to that which exists between the siblings and the interpreter they see translating the play within the play to their audience:

Whether this [the interpreter] be the critics who may misinterpret the play [referring to *The Two-Character Play*], or in a broader sense the mind-sets, the whole array of personal experiences and concerns we the audience bring to the play, the point is clear. The unique fantastic message of the play, the heart's unpremeditated outcry, never reaches anyone in its full impact.<sup>8</sup>

How might the message be heard? How can this story be redeemed?

One must simply return to the element of Williams' work that first made him the voice of a generation: his expression of the human need for connection. By connection, I mean the strength and sincerity of human beings' investment in each other. This is exemplified by any shared history, the dynamics of their relationship, and their shared endurance of the struggle of life.

In his *Memoirs*, Williams said that the theme of his writing was "the affliction of loneliness that follows me like my shadow" (99). Seeking an escape from this loneliness, he believed that "the only satisfactory thing we are left with in life is the relations – if they're sincere – between people."<sup>9</sup> Williams survived by relying upon connections with his family, his lovers, his friends, and his audiences. He sought to express this reliance on connection through his art. He believed that the role of the artist was to make his personal truth relatable to all of humanity, "to make what is directly or allusively close to his own being communicable and understandable, however disturbingly, to the hearts and minds of all whom he addresses."<sup>10</sup> Through this, the artist also saved himself: "As long as you

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<sup>8</sup> Francis Gillen, "Horror Shows, Inside and Outside My Skull: Theatre and Life in Tennessee Williams's *Two-Character Play*," in *Forms of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Third International Conference on the Fantastic in Literature and Film*, eds. Jan Hokenson and Howard Pearce (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 229.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis Funke and John E. Booth, "Williams on Williams," in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, ed. Albert J. Devlin (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 102.

<sup>10</sup> Tennessee Williams, "Too Personal?," in *Where I Live: Selected Essays*, eds. Christine R. Day and Bob Woods (New York, NY: New Directions, 1978), 159.

can communicate with someone who is inclined to sympathy, you retain a chance to be rescued.”<sup>11</sup>

Williams admitted to feeling a “highly personal, even intimate relationship with people who go to see plays.”<sup>12</sup> Londré astutely identified Williams’ feeling that “without an audience for one’s art, the world is a prison” (104). Connection with his audience reminded Williams of his own humanity. It allowed him to share his personal truth with people who would, hopefully, understand it and relate. Williams reached out to his audiences through his exquisitely crafted characters. He believed it was possible to connect to a character on stage in the same way one could connect to another person - by sharing in the struggle of life. Specifically, “we want the plays about us to say ‘I understand you. You and I are brothers; the deal is rugged but let’s face and fight it together.’”<sup>13</sup>

How does this apply to *The Two-Character Play*? Gillen explains that through this work Williams expresses his “convictions both that we are all trapped within our own skins and that we desperately need to make connections” (227). Williams recognizes the importance of connection as a necessary component of life. Felice and Clare face abandonment by their acting company, jeers from their audience, attacks from their neighbors in the play within the play, confinement within the theatre, and death itself. They overcome these obstacles through their connection, by relying on each other for support and love in trying times. Connection is their saving grace.

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<sup>11</sup> Williams, *Memoirs*, 204.

<sup>12</sup> Tennessee Williams, “Person-to-Person,” in *Where I Live: Selected Essays*, eds. Christine R. Day and Bob Woods (New York, NY: New Directions, 1978), 78.

<sup>13</sup> Tennessee Williams, “Tennessee Williams Presents His POV,” in *Where I Live: Selected Essays*, eds. Christine R. Day and Bob Woods (New York, NY: New Directions, 1978), 118.

Ruby Cohn notes that the siblings are “abandoned, but they support each other in continued play within a meaningless cosmos.”<sup>14</sup> William J. Free adds that, together, the siblings “find the human closeness necessary to sustain life,”<sup>15</sup> and Jacqueline O’Connor recognizes that “what makes [the siblings’] survival particularly poignant is the fact that they face their struggles together, and they end the play in a moment of communion.”<sup>16</sup> She is referring to Williams’ stage direction at the play’s end that Felice and Clare come together and “*slowly embrace*.”<sup>17</sup>

“We come to each other, gradually, but with love... and with honesty, the embrace is inevitable.”<sup>18</sup> Williams used this phrase to describe the human instinct to connect. It also describes the connection between himself and his audience through his characters. It is equally applicable to the connection between Felice and Clare in *The Two-Character Play*.

Many critics essentially argued that Williams’ play was unappealing because it was too personal to the playwright to be relatable and it was unapproachable due to the inherent obscurity of its genre. These critics believed that audiences felt as though Williams was wasting their time for personal therapy rather than expressing something to which they could relate. They also had a preconceived definition of “a Williams play” as poetic, but realistic. By contrast, a play of the Theatre of the Absurd asks more questions

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<sup>14</sup> Ruby Cohn, “Late Tennessee Williams,” in *Critical Essays on Tennessee Williams*, ed. Robert A. Martin (New York, NY: G.K. Hall, 1997), 293.

<sup>15</sup> William J. Free, “Williams in the Seventies: Directions and Discontents” in *Tennessee Williams: A Tribute*, ed. Jac Tharpe (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1977), 823.

<sup>16</sup> Jacqueline O’Connor, *Dramatizing Dementia: Madness in the Plays of Tennessee Williams* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular, 1997), 91.

<sup>17</sup> Tennessee Williams, *The Two-Character Play* (New York, NY: New Directions, 1976), 10. All future citations of this play are from this edition.

<sup>18</sup> Tennessee Williams, “The History of a Play (With Parentheses),” *Pharos* 1:2 (Spring 1945): 119.

than it answers. To a prejudiced audience, this was frustrating rather than thought-provoking.

The issue is a lack of audience engagement, a term herein defined as the audience's investment in the emotional and literal journey of the characters, as well as their ability to connect to the play. Contrariwise, audience apathy refers to the audience's unwillingness to engage with the show or its characters and an inability to connect with the play. Audience apathy is the natural response to the aforementioned weaknesses in *The Two-Character Play*. Each new production faces the challenge of presenting the play in a way that surmounts these weaknesses and encourages audience engagement. I argue that a production that emphasizes the connection between Felice and Clare would overcome these obstacles and engage the audience.

Connection is a universal need, so it is reasonable to hypothesize that an audience would relate to a strong connection on stage. Rather than feeling disaffected by the playwrights' autobiographical expression or the obscurity of the Theatre of the Absurd, the audience will recognize the connection as something genuine through which they can grasp the play. If a production of *The Two-Character Play* focused on the connection between its titular characters, would the audience remain engaged even if they left with unanswered questions? Admittedly, any answer to this question is inherently subjective; opinions differ across people and productions. There is no way to ensure that a production of *The Two-Character Play* would engage every audience member every time.

In order to test my theory, I directed a production of *The Two-Character Play* at the College of William and Mary in the fall of 2013. My focus during the production was the connection between Felice and Clare as the primary means of audience engagement. In the following chapters, I will support my focus on connection by examining it as a unifying theme across several aspects of *Two-Character*. In the next chapter, I will examine the playwright. Connections with friends, family, and lovers sustained Williams throughout his life and his life became his art. Therefore, connection was a focus across the Williams canon. Next, I will analyze the play itself; in Chapter Two, I will detail the history of *Two-Character*. I will compare the final version to its second incarnation, *Out Cry*, to show that Williams' revisions were aimed at strengthening the connection between Felice and Clare. Then, I will approach the genre; Chapter Three will examine how the play fits into the Theatre of the Absurd. I will show how the theme of connection is relevant to the Theatre of the Absurd, which further emphasizes its importance in *Two-Character*. I will also compare *Two-Character* with two other Absurd plays in which connection between the two protagonists is the primary means of audience engagement. In Chapter Four, I will detail my production of *Two-Character* and how I applied my theory. The final chapter will discuss post production responses to the show and connection as an engaging factor.

## Chapter One

### *Connection in the Life and Works of Tennessee Williams*

FELICE: *It – wasn't – your play!...*

CLARE: No, but you *wrote* it for me.

-Tennessee Williams, *Out Cry* (60)

The theme of connection is given particular attention in the Williams canon. In his early work, connection takes the form of familial devotion, romantic love, or friendship. Influenced in part by tragic losses in the 1950s and 60s, Williams later began to explore the darker side of connection. His later characters are trapped in unhealthy relationships, dangerously co-dependent, or even completely isolated. As Williams' characters search for connection, so does the playwright himself. This search for connection, the forms connection takes, and the inherent risk in reaching out to another person can be found in Williams' life as much as his art.

Thomas Lanier Williams III<sup>19</sup> was born on March 26<sup>th</sup>, 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi. He was the first son of Cornelius and Edwina Williams. Cornelius Williams was a traveling salesman; his life on the road and extended separation from his family took a toll on his marriage. Edwina spent much of her early married life with her parents and children in Columbus, Tennessee and his older sister Rose saw little of their migrant father and instead came to regard their maternal grandfather, the Reverend Walter Dakin,

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<sup>19</sup> “Under that name I published a good deal of lyric poetry... When I grew up I realized this poetry wasn't much good and I felt the name had been compromised so I changed it to Tennessee Williams, the justification being mainly that the Williamses had fought the Indians for Tennessee and I had already discovered that the life of a young writer was going to be something similar to the defense of a stockade against a band of savages.” Tennessee Williams, “Facts About Me” in *Where I Live: Selected Essays*, eds. Christine R. Day and Bob Woods (New York, NY: New Directions, 1978), 59.

as a substitute patriarch. The Reverend is remembered as “a kindly, gentle, affectionate book lover”<sup>20</sup> who doted on the children.

In 1918, Cornelius was employed in a managerial capacity by the International Shoe Company and sent for his wife and children to join him in St. Louis, Missouri. Finally, the disjointed family would be living under the same roof. Despite the promise of this new connection, Williams was heart-broken to leave behind his grandparents.

Cornelius “did not adjust well to the settled and responsible lifestyle....He yearned for the freedom of travel and the open road. He compensated by indulging in heavy drinking and weekend-long poker parties with his friends.”<sup>21</sup> This exacerbated the marital strife between Cornelius and Edwina and led to an unhappy home life for Rose, Tennessee, and their newborn brother Dakin.

To endure this hostile home environment, torment from the local children, and their family’s poor socio-economic status, Tennessee and Rose relied on each other. Tischler describes their co-dependent childhood: “Turning to one another for creature comfort, [Tennessee and Rose] huddled together against the outside world, unnaturally close in their powerful love, which became for both their emotional core of being” (146). Williams said of himself and Rose in his *Memoirs*, “our love was, and is, the deepest in our lives and was, perhaps, very pertinent to our withdrawal from extrafamilial attachments” (120).

Rose began suffering from psychosomatic stomach pains in 1926. Further tormented by her mother’s insistence that a healthy social life would cure all ills, Rose

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<sup>20</sup> Greta Heintzelman, and Alycia Smith-Howard. *Critical Companion to Tennessee Williams: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work* (New York, NY: Facts On File Library of American Literature, 2005), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Heintzelman and Smith-Howard, 4.



was plagued in the early 1930s by “hysteria” and violent mood swings. In *Memoirs*, Williams recalls a harrowing episode in the spring of 1935 in which, “Rose came walking like a somnambulist into my tiny bedroom and said, ‘We must all die together’” (119). Rose began seeing a psychiatrist in 1936, but even counseling could not halt her descent into madness. While Williams was at college, his parents moved Rose to a state asylum in Farmington, Missouri where, beginning in 1937, she received electric shock therapy. That November, Cornelius and Edwina consented to a prefrontal lobotomy for their daughter. The surgery “left her practically autistic and in need of permanent institutionalization.”<sup>22</sup> Williams was not told about the procedure and, upon returning home, met with the gruesome shock. He never forgave himself for failing to save his sister.

Rose’s tragedy had a profound influence on Williams’ life and work. Through years of unstable home life, Rose and Tennessee had sustained each other. This connection was an important support system during Williams’ youth and its loss was catastrophic.<sup>23</sup> Echoes of Rose can be found in many of his plays as he tried to immortalize her through his art and reconnect with her through on-stage parallels. Though mentally a shell of her former self, she remained his muse for the rest of his life. As the Man confesses to the ethereal Miss Rose in Williams’ *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* (1979), “Ah, Miss Rose – ye know ye’ve given me all of poetry that exists in my heart.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Heintzelman and Smith-Howard, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Spoto observes of the Williams siblings, “A sad, inarticulate connection existed between them; it was a scene from *The Two-Character Play* poignantly sprung to life.” Donald Spoto, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1985), 282.

<sup>24</sup> Tennessee Williams, *Kirche, Küche, Kinder (An Outrage for the Stage)* in *The Travelling Companion & Other Plays*, ed. Annette J. Saddik (New York, NY: New Directions, 2008), 142.

Tennessee Williams sky-rocketed to fame with the 1944 premiere of *The Glass Menagerie*, a play that drew heavily on his relationship with Rose and their life in St. Louis. Though it is one of his most well-known works, it focuses more on the narrator Tom's desire for escape rather than connection. In fact, one could argue that Tom actively chooses to break a connection. He deserts his sister Laura to pursue his own desires, though he laments the choice in his final monologue.<sup>25</sup>

*The Purification*, a one-act verse play Williams penned in the same year, better exemplifies the theme of connection. Centered on the trial of a man who murdered his wife, the play focuses on the incestuous relationship between the wife, Elena, and her brother, Rosalio. The motif of contamination is woven into this forbidden passion. Luisa, the murderer's housekeeper, draws attention to Rosalio each time he exhibits incestuous feelings for Elena by repeating the phrase "The tainted spring – is bubbling!"<sup>26</sup> The Judge warns, "A house that breeds in itself / will breed destruction," (43) and so the two siblings are doomed to ruin. Death becomes their "purification" in which they can once again connect. Williams' repeated portrayal of siblings bound by love is an attempt to come to terms with his lost connection with Rose.

The years following his first big hit were very successful for Williams, both personally and professionally. In 1946 he was able to provide a home for the ailing Reverend Dakin, reciprocating the kindness his grandfather showed him in his youth. In 1947, he met Frank Merlo, the man who would become his partner for fifteen years.

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25 Thomas P. Adler argues that in *The Two-Character Play*, Williams "given a second change, so to speak – undoes the brother's desertion of the sister." Thomas P. Adler, "When Ghosts Supplant Memories: Tennessee Williams' *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*" in *Critical Essays on Tennessee Williams*, ed. Robert A. Martin (New York, NY: G.K. Hall, 1997), 179.

26 Tennessee Williams, *The Purification in 27 Wagons Full of Cotton, and Other Plays* (New York, NY: New Directions, 1966), 33. All future citations of this play are from this edition.

Williams' old friend David Gregory said of Merlo, "There were a few people close to Tennessee who loved him over the years, not because he was a great and famous writer, not on a professional basis, but on a human level. Frank Merlo was certainly at the top of this list."<sup>27</sup> Williams said in *Memoirs* that he "did not really fall in love with Frankie all at once" but soon "it became unmistakably clear to me that my heart, too accustomed to transitory attachments, had found in the young Sicilian a home at last" (156). 1947 was also the year in which *Summer and Smoke* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* premiered on Broadway.

*Summer and Smoke* continued to advance Williams' career, and also allowed him to provide for his sister. He assigned half of the royalties of the play to her. This income sustained the invalid Rose for the rest of her life and allowed her to move to a more comfortable institution at Stony Lodge in Ossining, New York.

*Summer and Smoke* also deals extensively with connection as its protagonists, Alma Winemiller and Dr. John Buchanan, Jr., spend the play trying and failing to reach out to each other. John is more interested in the physical side of connection, but Alma protests, "Some people bring just their bodies...there are some people, there are some women, John – who can bring their hearts to it, also – who can bring their souls to it!"<sup>28</sup> To Alma, the act of lovemaking becomes a religious experience and one of the greatest opportunities for connection. As such, she believes sex must be reserved for the sanctity of marriage whereas John is more interested in immediate, sensual fulfillment.

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<sup>27</sup> David Gregory, as quoted by Spoto in *The Kindness of Strangers*, 255.

<sup>28</sup> Tennessee Williams, *Summer and Smoke* in *Plays: 1937-1955*, eds. Mel Gussow and W. Kenneth Holditch (New York, NY: Library of America, 2000), 614. All future citations of this play are from this edition.

Alma is never able to attain connection with John, nor is she able to form connections with her peers. When Alma appears as a young child, Williams prompts in his notoriously detailed stage directions that, “*there is a quality of extraordinary delicacy and tenderness or spirituality in her, which must set her distinctly apart from other children*” (571). Isolation within a couple is explored through Alma’s experiences as well. Alma says that all of her limited attempts at dating went poorly because “A silence would fall between us...I’d try to talk and he’d try to talk and neither would make a go of it” (612). This inability to connect leads to the isolation that characterizes Alma’s life and eventually pushes her over the edge. Desperate, she tells John how the hesitant, reserved Alma died, “and she said to me when she slipped this ring on my finger – Remember I died empty-handed, and so make sure that your hands have *something in them!*” (635). Unfortunately, this change of heart does Alma no good. John is engaged to another woman, so the isolated heroine is doomed to remain alone.

Connection also characterizes the journey of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Blanche insists on staying with her sister, Stella, rather than at a hotel: “I want to be *near* you, got to be *with* somebody, I *can’t* be *alone!*”<sup>29</sup> Stella later reprimands her husband Stanley for his treatment of Blanche, chiding, “You needn’t have been so cruel to someone alone as she is” (540). Stella recognizes that a lack of connection is the worst thing a person can experience. At times connection can be sexual. Williams’ characters search for physical closeness that accompanies the emotional closeness of being together. Stella, for example, explains away much of Stanley’s poor behavior with

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29 Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* in *Plays: 1937-1955*, eds. Mel Gussow and W. Kenneth Holditch (New York, NY: Library of America, 2000), 477. All future citations of this play are from this edition.

her philosophy that, “there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark – that sort of make everything else seem – unimportant” (509).

In 1953, Williams wrote the one-act *Talk to Me Like the Rain and Let Me Listen*. This play centers on two characters called Man and Woman and addresses the theme of connection through their inability to achieve it. Williams describes the interactions between Man and Woman in his opening stage directions:

*In their speech there is a sort of politeness, a sort of tender formality like that of two lonely children who want to be friends, and yet there is an impression that they have lived in this intimate situation for a long time and that the present scene between them is the repetition of one that has been repeated so often that its plausible emotional contents, such as reproach and contrition, have been completely worn out and there is nothing left but acceptance of something hopelessly inalterable between them.<sup>30</sup>*

Man is recently unemployed and an alcoholic. His escapades into the night life of the city have shown him only the crueler side of humanity. He tells Woman how he is frequently abused while intoxicated and the audience has to ask why he continually ventures away to dens of inequity instead of staying with the person who cares for him.

Man wanders the city because he is unable to connect with Woman. Despite their close quarters, they cannot really reach each other. This disconnect is not for lack of trying; Man says to Woman “Let’s find each other and maybe we won’t be lost. Talk to me! I’ve been lost! – I thought of you but couldn’t call you, honey” (214). Unexpectedly, Woman’s response is to declare that she wants to be “*alone!*” (215). She idealizes a life by herself in which she’ll “have no friends...no acquaintances even” (216). She says she hopes to forget “how it feels to be someone waiting for someone that – may not come”

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<sup>30</sup> Tennessee Williams, *Talk to Me Like the Rain and Let Me Listen in 27 Wagons Full of Cotton, and Other Plays* (New York, NY: New Directions, 1966), 211. All future citations of this play are from this edition.

(218). She too longs for connection, but Man does not provide her with the stability she needs. She thinks avoiding connection altogether would help her avoid the pain of disappointment. In the end, neither of them is able to forego connection. Woman screams “*I want to go away!*” but follows almost immediately with a pleading request to Man to “Come on back to bed, baby...” As he looks to her, the play ends and they remain trapped together, but horribly isolated at the same time.

Williams moved on to the staging of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1955. Quite unlike Stella in *Streetcar*, Brick Pollitt found more connection with his friend Skipper than he ever found in his sexual relationship with his wife Maggie: “-Y’know, I think that Maggie always felt sort of left out [from Brick and Skipper’s relationship] because she and me never got any closer together than two people just get in bed, which is not much closer than two cats on a – fence humping. . . .”<sup>31</sup> While sex can be a fulfilling connection to some, to others it is merely superficial.

Maggie the Cat suffers one of the most painful, unfulfilled connections in the Williams canon. Maggie desperately loves Brick, but he continually shuns her. She states solemnly, “Living with someone you love can be lonelier – than living entirely *alone!* – if the one that y’ love doesn’t love you. . . .” (891). Connection has caused Maggie more pain than happiness, pain which makes itself visible in her cry to Brick, “I’m not living with you. We occupy the same cage” (895). Maggie is not the only one Brick pushes away. He has trouble connecting even with his father. Big Daddy keeps trying to talk to him in earnest, but Brick shrugs him off, saying “I try to look like I listen, but I don’t

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<sup>31</sup> Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in *Plays: 1937-1955*, eds. Mel Gussow and W. Kenneth Holditch (New York, NY: Library of America, 2000), 950. All future citations of this play are from this edition.

listen, not much. Communication is – awful hard between people an’ – somehow between you and me, it just don’t—” (931). He recognizes the difficulty of connection, yet does not try harder to reach out. Instead, he chooses isolation.

In 1957, the Reverend Dakin passed away. This was the loss of another connection that had carried Williams through his difficult childhood and “left an emptiness in Williams’s life that would never be filled.”<sup>32</sup> His work began to grow darker and more controversial. *Orpheus Descending*, a reworking of his apprentice play *Battle of Angels*, debuted on Broadway in the same year. In *Orpheus*, Carol Cutrere, willing to take connection at any cost, states sagely, “What on earth can you do on this earth but catch at whatever comes near you, with both hands, until your fingers are broken?”<sup>33</sup> She tries repeatedly to connect with Val Xavier, not caring if her fingers break. Meanwhile, Val accuses Lady Torrance, a shop owner trapped in a loveless marriage, of hiring him as “a store clerk days and a stud nights.” When Lady protests, Val replies, “It’s natural. You felt – lonely” (68). He does not judge her for her actions, recognizing that everyone needs connection to survive. It is Val who articulates Williams’ desolate idea that humanity is naturally isolated, that “we’re all of us sentence to solitary confinement inside our own skins, for life!” (42). Connection is humanity’s attempt to escape this sentence.

While working on the Broadway production of *The Night of the Iguana*, Williams became addicted to alcohol and injected amphetamines. This put a strain on his relationship with Frank Merlo, who saw what was happening to his partner, but could not stop it. Their relationship fell apart when Williams was bitten on the ankle by one of the

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<sup>32</sup> Spoto, 200.

<sup>33</sup> Tennessee Williams, *Orpheus Descending* in *Plays: 1957-1980*, eds. Mel Gussow and W. Kenneth Holditch (New York, NY: Library of America, 2000), 23. All future citations of this play are from this edition.

couple's dogs. Spoto recounts how, in the hospital, Williams lashed out at Merlo: "The dog...had been set on him by Merlo, he raved: Frank wanted him dead, all Frank wanted was his money, the dog always loved Frank more" (247). Merlo left Williams in New York and returned home to Key West, effectively ending his relationship with the playwright. Not long after, Merlo was diagnosed with lung cancer. He devolved into a critical condition, during which Williams was always by his side. Spoto also recounts Meade Roberts' statement that, "As Frank became more and more ill, Tennessee certainly realized how wrong he'd been about his life with Frank, how unfair and how selfish and ungrateful to Frank he'd been in the last few years" (257).

Frank Merlo passed away in 1963. Williams says in *Memoirs* that "as long as Frank was well, I was happy. He had a gift for creating a life and, when he ceased to be alive, I couldn't create a life for myself" (194). Spoto characterizes the loss for Williams as one "whose pain was comparable to what he felt about Rose" (259). As with Rose, Williams would attempt to reconnect by immortalizing Frank in the play *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981). *Something Cloudy* is a memory play recounting Williams' summer of 1940. The protagonist, August, is Williams himself and friends from every period of his life appear as memories.<sup>34</sup> Williams resurrects a dying Frank Merlo and Merlo and August reenact the last night Williams spent with Merlo in the hospital.<sup>35</sup> Williams' inclusion of Merlo eighteen years after the latter's death shows that the loss still hurt him much as did the loss of Rose in 1937.

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<sup>34</sup> The only purely fictional character that appears in *Something Cloudy* is the character Clare, lifted almost directly from *The Two-Character Play* and inserted into Williams' past. I believe Clare's inclusion represents the memory of Rose that never left him, even in his later life.

<sup>35</sup> Tennessee Williams, *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (New York, NY: New Directions, 1995), 17. All future citations of this play are from this edition.



Merlo's death triggered a further spiral into substance abuse and depression. This was also a period of limited to no commercial success, which further unhinged the playwright. Williams entered what he called in his *Memoirs* his "stoned age" during which the works he created were "disastrous – due to my inability to cope with the preparations for them and with a turn, in my work, toward a new style and a new creative world with which the reviewers and the audiences found it very hard to empathize so abruptly" (207).

*In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* was penned in this new style. It premiered in 1969, but failed to receive any favorable reviews. Williams chose to center the search for connection on a married couple. Mark is a painter, Miriam his cynical wife. Miriam accuses Mark of "tyrannical dependence" that keeps her from living her life as she wants. "I don't want to spend my life with my feet in blocks of cement,"<sup>36</sup> she asserts, defending her attempts to leave her husband. Both Mark and Miriam are clearly looking for companionship, but neither is willing to reach out in earnest to the other. The closest they come is when Mark states simply that "The work of a painter is lonely" to which Miriam replies, "So is clipping flowers. I'm afraid that loneliness has become a worn out thing to discuss" (23). Despite this outward disconnect, their relationship is dangerously co-dependent. Though Miriam longs to escape, she finds it impossible to leave her unstable husband. Against Mark's protestations, Miriam asks, "–Are we two people, Mark, or are we–...Two sides of!...One! An artist inhabiting the body of a compulsive–" At this point, Mark cuts her off with, "Bitch!" to which Miriam responds "Call me that, but remember that you're denouncing a side of yourself" (24).

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<sup>36</sup> Tennessee Williams. *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*. (New York, NY: Dramatists Play Service, 1969), 31. All future citations of this play are from this edition.

In 1969, Williams' downward spiral came to a catastrophic climax with Dakin Williams' forcible incarceration of his brother in Barnes Hospital for three months. Though Dakin's actions no doubt saved the damaged playwright's life, Williams' never forgave his younger brother for the ordeal:

Williams had been forced to live his worst nightmare, that of being confined and hospitalized. His greatest fear was madness, his sister's fate. As far as he was concerned his brother had forged fear into reality. For this, he resented and never forgave Dakin. Williams went so far as to excise his brother from his will.<sup>37</sup>

Williams depicts his stay at Barnes Hospital as an endless torment in his *Memoirs*. Despite realizing one of his worst fears, he awakened from the depths of his depression and resolved to endure:

I dutifully came to their [the hospital's] atrocious meals and the rest of the time I crouched like a defenseless animal in a corner while the awful pageantry of the days and the nights went on, a continual performance of horror shows, inside and outside my skull. I intended to survive. (221)

This incarceration and desperate resolve to survive prompted Williams to rewrite *The Two-Character Play* for the first time. The revised play under the title *Out Cry* was first staged in Chicago in 1971.

This production is significant in that it marked the end of Williams' connection with Audrey Wood, his agent of thirty-one years. Williams called her his "brave representative"<sup>38</sup> and, in his *Memoirs*, "a family member on whom I was particularly dependent" (229). Later convinced that Wood had abandoned him and secretly wanted to see *Out Cry* fail, Williams shrieked in a 1970 interview, "I'll dedicate my death to

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<sup>37</sup> Heintzelman and Smith-Howard, 13.

<sup>38</sup> Tennessee Williams, "The Past, the Present, and the Perhaps" in *Where I Live: Selected Essays*, ed. Christine R. Day and Bob Woods (New York, NY: New Directions, 1978), 81.

[seeing *Out Cry* on Broadway], and if she [Wood]...gets...in...the...way...*Out!*”<sup>39</sup> After one of *Out Cry*’s Chicago previews, Williams’ accused Wood of wishing him dead. Wood very publicly left Chicago the next day. Accounts of the separation differ. Williams maintains he simply spoke coldly to her, but others claim he actually attacked her. Regardless, he had alienated her permanently. He reflects in *Memoirs* that accusing her of wishing him dead “was a dreadful thing for me to say” (228). Williams continued on, bereft of yet another connection that had sustained him.<sup>40</sup>

Seemingly fixated on the scenario of two lost souls searching for connection, Williams produced the 1970 one-act *I Can’t Imagine Tomorrow*. The characters are a woman named One and a man named Two, both of whom Williams describes as “*the only friend of the other*”<sup>41</sup> One and Two recognize that their lives are painfully monotonous, characterized only by Two’s daily visits to One’s house. Yet they cling to each other, sustained by their love. One insists, “I wouldn’t have let you enter the house tonight if I didn’t still love you.” Though barely able to form sentences, Two manages to say “You are-...my life: all of it: there’s nothing else” (147). Despite this love, there are times when the characters seem to suffer for their relationship. One admits, “I don’t have the strength any more to try to make you try to save yourself from your paralyzing depression!” (139).

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<sup>39</sup> Tom Buckley, “Tennessee Williams Survives” in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, ed. Albert J. Devlin (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 165.

<sup>40</sup> This painful falling out between the two is immortalized, albeit stylized and mostly from Audrey Wood’s perspective, in Max Wilk’s *Mr. Williams and Miss Wood: A Two-Character Play* (New York, NY: New Directions, 1990).

<sup>41</sup> Tennessee Williams. *I Can’t Imagine Tomorrow* in *Dragon Country: A Book of Plays* (New York, NY: New Directions, 1970), 133. Note: all future citations of this play are from this edition.

Yet isolation is always the worse alternative. One makes a lonely assessment of the world awaiting her, a country she calls “Dragon Country, the country of pain.”<sup>42</sup> She says that everyone must travel Dragon Country, but remain isolated as they do so:

If the inhabitants, the explorers of Dragon Country, looked about them, they’d see other explorers, but in this country of endured but unendurable pain each one is so absorbed, deafened, blinded by his own journey across it, he sees, he looks for, no one else crawling across it with him. (138)

Even though one inherently risks loss, connection is always preferable to isolation. Yet it was isolation that plagued Williams at the end of his life, both from those he loved and the audiences that no longer supported him.

Williams remained haunted by the ghosts of his past because they meant lost connections. He relied heavily on his family, lovers, friends, and audiences. Connection with them guided him through a tumultuous personal and professional life. As connection is vital to the playwright, so it is to his characters; Williams consistently penned characters searching for connection in a world threatening to destroy them. Whether familial love, romantic involvement, friendship, or even the kindness of strangers, connection drives the actions of Williams’ characters from his first successful dramas to his later rejected works. In the end, sadly, Williams was left bereft of family, lover, friends, and even the approval of his audiences. He ventured bravely into a more absurdist style toward the end of his career. While this exploration was admirable from an artistic standpoint, critics and audiences reacted unfavorably. The name Tennessee Williams was associated with a certain type of drama and the playwright remained haunted by his earlier successes.

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<sup>42</sup> Jay Leo Colt, director of the 1976 San Francisco production of *The Two-Character Play*, argues in “Dancing in Red Hot Shoes” that *Two-Character* is not set in an unknown, nondescript location, but is in fact set in Dragon Country (Colt, 7).

Williams died on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1983 after choking to death “on a plastic medicine cap.”<sup>43</sup> He is remembered as one of America’s greatest playwrights, who changed the face of theatre for both the country and an entire generation of audiences, critics, and theatre makers. More than that, he is recognized as a man who suffered a great deal in his lifetime. Instead of isolating himself, he chose to reach out to humanity through dramatic works. Through the theme of connection in his plays, Williams expressed the search for connection in his own life. In this way, he sought to connect to his audiences by relating a universal need.

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<sup>43</sup> Heintzleman and Smith-Howard, 14.

## Chapter Two

### The Two-Character Play *History and Analysis*

CLARE: ...and as for *The Two-Character Play*, when he read it aloud I said to myself, "This is his last one, there's nothing more after this."

-Tennessee Williams, *The Two-Character Play* (54)

Tennessee Williams began writing the first draft of *The Two-Character Play* in the late 1960s. When asked about the play, Williams described it as, "a history of what I went through in the Sixties transmuted into the predicament of a brother and a sister."<sup>44</sup> Williams later spoke of the origins of the play: "When I wrote it in 1967, I was so crazy I didn't know where I was. When you're really crazy you do some of your best work."<sup>45</sup> The frenzy with which he penned the original script resulted in a thought-provoking play which was, at its core, a heartfelt confession by the playwright. Hume Cronyn, an actor and old friend of Williams', said that within the first draft of *Two-Character*, "there was more revelation of Tennessee...than in anything of his that I have ever read."<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, the play did not engage its audience. Williams himself was in no fit mental or physical state to present his best work. Indeed, he later admitted that he barely

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<sup>44</sup> C. Robert Jennings, "Playboy Interview: Tennessee Williams," in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, ed. Albert J. Devlin (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 239.

<sup>45</sup> Ira J. Bilowit, "Roundtable: Tennessee Williams, Craig Anderson, and T.E. Kalem Talk about *Creve Coeur*," in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, ed. Albert J. Devlin (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 308.

<sup>46</sup> Hume Cronyn, as quoted by Mike Steen in *A Look at Tennessee Williams* (New York, NY: Hawthorn Books, 1969), 163.

remembered the original 1967 production.<sup>47</sup> After its brief run in London and limited publication by New Directions in 1969, Williams began revising.

The second version of the script was called *Out Cry*. Williams spoke frequently about this revised version, always with the highest hopes and deepest love. He recounts in his *Memoirs* that *Out Cry* “was especially close to the marrow of my being” (228). In an interview with *Playboy*, he quipped, “*Out Cry* is a major play, as I’ve said. This morning I wrote the best fucking scene since 1961, baby.”<sup>48</sup> Despite the fact that *Out Cry*’s style was radically different from that of his early successes, Williams routinely asserted that his new play had potential. In the same interview, he stressed that “I think *Out Cry* is my most beautiful play since *Streetcar*, and I’ve never stopped working on it. I think it’s a major work. I don’t know whether or not it will be received as one.” (239). In another interview, he claimed it was, “my best play since *Cat*. Maybe better. But it’s got to be more than that. It’s got to be totally invulnerable. The critics don’t like to find out that they’ve been wrong.”<sup>49</sup> Though he believed in the play, he was wary about its reception: “If I live, it’ll be my best play, but that doesn’t mean it will run more than three weeks” (179).

In the hands of director George Keathley, the initial Chicago run of *Out Cry* was well received. Williams records his thoughts in a letter dated August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1971 to his longtime friend, the actress Maria St. Just:

At last, the last night before leaving Chicago, I saw a truly beautiful performance of *OUT CRY*. All the comedy came through..., several people came up to me afterwards and said they considered it my best play. It is far from that, since one

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<sup>47</sup> Lyle Taylor Leverich, “*The Two-Character Play: A Producer’s View*,” *The Tennessee Williams Newsletter* 1:2 (1979): 22.

<sup>48</sup> Jennings, 249.

<sup>49</sup> Buckey, 164.

does not write his best play at sixty, but out of the Chicago gig I feel there has come, at long last, a closely knit and effective piece of theatre<sup>50</sup>

*Out Cry* was then picked up for a Broadway run.

In order to publicize this upcoming production, Williams began performing as Doc in the Broadway production of *Small Craft Warnings* (1972). In his *Memoirs*, he recounts “I think the production of *Out Cry* may hinge upon my demonstration to draw again and to keep a show that received ‘mixed reviews’ [referring to *Small Craft Warnings*] running for five months, which is, I mean would be, quite a prestigious accomplishment and a help with the big one [referring to *Out Cry*]” (129). Williams used his established celebrity to draw audiences to his newer work. This renewed popularity, however, was short lived. In the move to Broadway, the production was given a new cast and a new director, Peter Glenville.

Glenville proved to be, at least in Williams’ opinion, the greatest obstacle to the show’s success: In his *Memoirs*, Williams reveals, “Glenville has restored a lot of material that I excised with remarkable cunning during the Chicago gig. Now I must cut it out once again whether Peter approves or not” (80). Williams also recounts a disappointing episode that occurred during the run of the production: “At the interval on opening night at the Lyceum, I heard someone descending from the balcony with me observe that the play had been better in its Chicago tryout the year before, and I turned to the stranger and said, ‘Thanks, I agree’” (233).

Of the New York production, *Village Voice* critic Julius Novick commented, “It is an annoying, pretentious, slightly maudlin piece of work, but I found it impossible to

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<sup>50</sup> Maria St. Just and Tennessee Williams, *Five O’Clock Angel: Letters of Tennessee Williams to Maria St. Just, 1948-1982* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1990), 244.



dismiss it entirely: there is something haunting about it” and “I wish Mr. Williams could avoid plucking at our sleeves to beg for mercy.”<sup>51</sup> Like many, Novick focuses on the emotionally autobiographical elements of the show, seeing the play as Williams’ personal baggage splattered across the stage rather than a legitimate piece of theatre. Despite the show’s positive qualities, Williams’ own presence overwhelmed the story.

Undeterred, Williams began revising the play yet again. In a 1971 interview, he admits his anxieties about staging this third version:

Although I feel I am only fully alive when involved in a new production, I have great anxiety about this one: it was conceived and written when I was almost completely phased out, and rewritten several times after my release from the psychiatric hospital, but it is still the work of a very disturbed writer, and it is terribly personal and I don’t know how much audience empathy will be engaged.<sup>52</sup>

The playwright was not ignorant of the weaknesses in his work. The frenzy which had fueled Williams’ first draft of *The Two-Character Play* now frightened him. While he maintained he would not change his style to appease the critics, Williams was affected by their condemnations. He admitted that “the failure of a play is one of the world’s most agonizing adventures.”<sup>53</sup> The emotionally autobiographical nature of the play was genuine, but it was also driving the audiences away.

Audience engagement was and has continued to be a huge obstacle in staging the play. The obscurity of the plot and deranged nature of the characters make such engagement difficult enough, but while Williams was alive, the added problem of audience bias was thrown into the mix. Williams’ personal life was not private. It appears

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<sup>51</sup> Julius Novick, “Honest or merely disarming?,” *Village Voice* [New York, NY], March 8, 1973, 58.

<sup>52</sup> Rex Reed, “Tennessee Williams Turns Sixty,” in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, ed. Albert J. Devlin (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 193.

<sup>53</sup> Tennessee Williams, “Questions Without Answers,” in *Where I Live: Selected Essays*, eds. Christine R. Day and Bob Woods (New York, NY: New Directions, 1978), 24.

his contemporaries could not help but see the personal woven into the theatrical. Instead of feeling sympathy for the characters, they felt they were being forced to show sympathy for Williams and resented him for it.

On August 14th, 1975, *The Two-Character Play* debuted at the Quai Theatre in New York. Lawrence Van Gelder reviewed the piece for *The New York Times*. Though critical, Van Gelder did concede that the play had promise. Each of his criticisms was tempered with praise and vice versa. For example, Van Gelder had this to say about the actors: “As the brother, Felice, and the sister, Clare, Robert Stattel and Maryellen Flynn, give performances that at their best invest the play with tension and at worst strip it briefly of its poetic qualities”<sup>54</sup> He did wonder if the play was a “product of a desperate rummaging for material” on Williams’ part, but also argued that the play “endures because of the assurance of its craftsmanship, and it appeals because it plays to what bedevils us all – fear” (1). Van Gelder’s final assessment pinpoints what he felt was the production’s greatest weakness: “as directed by Bill Lentsch, it is a play for players” (1). Appealing solely to such a specific group encourages general audience apathy rather than engagement. This final attempt to stage *Two-Character* met with moderate praise, but ultimately commercial failure.

Despite this, Williams’ ill-fated *Two-Character Play* has remained on the fringes of drama, both at home and abroad, for several decades. Like Van Gelder, many concede that the story has promise. By reviewing the critics’ assessment of recent productions, it becomes clear that certain artistic choices encourage audience engagement. This

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<sup>54</sup> Lawrence Van Gelder, "Stage: Williams's '2 Character Play'," *The New York Times*, August 22, 1975, 1.

assessment does not create a foolproof method for perfectly staging *Two-Character*, but rather useful guidelines for a director approaching the script.

William Wolf hit on one of the biggest pitfalls of the script when he reviewed an off-Broadway production in the summer of 2013: “A problem exists in that once the relationship [between the two characters] is established, a feeling of repetition sets in, and it takes the artistry of the performers to hold our attention rather than the writing itself.”<sup>55</sup> Of the same production, Ben Brantley of *The New York Times* said: “By the end of its much weaker second act, when its symbols overpower its people, it has come to feel like a goulash of avant-garde leftovers.”<sup>56</sup>

Despite this dismissal, Brantley argues that if the text’s obscurities do not overpower the characters, the play’s merits cannot be ignored:

Williams, who seems to have been in a state of nervous breakdown much of the time he was writing [*Two-Character*], might have been just venting here.

But what he’s venting is the accumulation of a passionate and obsessive life in the theater, a place that was both his refuge and his torture chamber. Ms. Plummer and Mr. Dourif’s Clare and Felice occupy this prison and playground with the mad assurance of people who were born in a trunk and will no doubt die there, too.<sup>57</sup>

Whereas reviewers of the original productions of *Out Cry* and *Two-Character* chided Williams for infusing the script with his own emotional journey, Brantley praises its inclusion for adding the power behind the words. Other reviewers of later productions

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<sup>55</sup> William Wolf, “The Two-Character Play,” in *Wolf Entertainment Guide*, <<http://www.wolfentertainmentguide.com/viewpage.aspx?cat=theater&record=5951>>, (June 23, 2013).

<sup>56</sup> Ben Brantley, “Brother, Can You Spare My Sanity?: Amanda Plummer and Brad Dourif in Tennessee Williams Rarity,” *The New York Times*, June 21, 2013 <[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/22/theater/reviews/amanda-plummer-and-brad-dourif-in-tennessee-williams-rarity.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/22/theater/reviews/amanda-plummer-and-brad-dourif-in-tennessee-williams-rarity.html?_r=0)>.).

<sup>57</sup> *The New York Times*, June 21, 2013.

shared this opinion. Indeed, few to none spoke ill of Williams' emotionally autobiographical approach.

While contemporaries of Tennessee Williams viewed his emotionally autobiographical style with disdain, modern critics tend to find the personal elements of the script helpful rather than harmful. Perhaps this is because they view it as the personal story of a man rather than the personal story of a current celebrity. Williams was not trying to make his personal issues more important by tying them into the script, but rather to make the trials of his characters more truthful by drawing from real life. In this way, the emotional conflict of the play remains genuine, but it becomes the emotional conflict of the characters.

A review of a 2010 production staged at London's Jermyn Street Theatre is notable in that it specifically deals with audience apathy and engagement. Dominic Cavendish identifies the difficulty of the play from an audience perspective: "We the audience are at once integral to the experience and irrelevant"<sup>58</sup> He attributes this feeling of purposelessness to the obscurity of the script. The text is rich with intimate moments for Felice and Clare that imply a long history between them. However, the script does not clue the audience in to the exact details of this history. Cavendish postulates: "In lesser hands, the evening could become a suffocating sack of self-referentiality, as [Felice and Clare] collude and quarrel, cosy in their private understandings about particular props and lines."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Dominic Cavendish, "The Two-Character Play, Jermyn Street Theatre, London, Review," *The Telegraph*, Oct. 29, 2010, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/8096987/The-Two-Character-Play-Jermyn-Street-Theatre-London-review.html>>.).

<sup>59</sup> *The Telegraph*, Oct. 29, 2010.

The script does not lend itself to transparency. The reader is left with a laundry list of unanswered questions. Even close, analytical reading can yield, at best, well-informed speculation. It would then seem disloyal to the text for a director to approach *The Two-Character Play* with the intention to explain everything to the audience. The best a director can do is help the actors to formulate potential answers to those unanswered questions and make the story as clear to *them* as possible. If the actors know moment by moment what is happening, where the story is going, and what their characters are doing, then perhaps the audience will be engaged in the emotional arc even if they don't understand every reference. The actors' sense of purpose will guide the audience through the story.

This process of translating *The Two-Character Play* for the audience lies almost entirely in the hands of the actors. Their performances will either engage the audience or let them slip into apathy. It is up to the actors to take the complicated connection within the script and bring it to life on stage in a way that helps the audience relate to the story and holds their attention. Cory Conley praises Brad Dourif and Amanda Plummer of the 2013 New York production for a dynamic, engaging connection: "Together, [Dourif and Plummer] reflect the ease of people who've known each other forever, and the unease of people who worry that there are unsavory things left to discover."<sup>60</sup>

The reviews indicate that connection between Felice and Clare could serve as the primary means of audience engagement. In the rest of this chapter, this theory will be further supported by comparing the final version of *The Two-Character Play* to *Out Cry*.

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<sup>60</sup> Cory Conley, "The Two-Character Play," in *The New York Theatre Experience*, <<http://www.nytheatre.com/Review/cory-conley-2013-6-14-the-two-character-play>>.), (June 20, 2013).

Williams' most noticeable alteration between *Out Cry* and final version of *The Two-Character Play* is the connection between Felice and Clare. From one play to the next, Williams gives the connection a more complex dynamic. He layers in interactions and moments indicative of a more realistic relationship. This makes Felice and Clare's connection more believable in *Two-Character*. The third version also contains more conflict. In *Out Cry* Felice and Clare squabble intermittently, but always end up agreeing. In *Two-Character*, however, Felice and Clare's constant attacks on each other are matched only by their desperate need to stay together. Williams also increases the characters' co-dependency.

The connection is more complex in *The Two-Character Play* because it is given a love/hate dynamic. The siblings say horrible things to each other, but also share moments of compelling devotion. Why do they stay together if they hate each other so much? Why do they fight so ferociously if they love each other? These questions keep the audience engaged in trying to determine the nature of Felice and Clare's connection. It is ever-changing and fascinating. It accurately represents the intricacy of real human connections. This new, complex dynamic is exemplified in an exchange Williams added to the final version of *Two-Character*. Clare interrogates her brother, asking "–Do you *hate* me, Felice?" His compelling response sums up their connection in one line: "Of *course* I do, if I *love* you, and I think that I do" (56). This ever-shifting connection is more fully developed in the final version of the script and provides a more effective means of audience engagement.

In *Two-Character*, Felice and Clare suddenly seem to have a history; their speech is more indicative of years spent together and an understanding of each other's habits.

For example, in *Out Cry*, Felice cries out “*Migraine!* – no codeine left!”<sup>61</sup> This outburst serves no real purpose other than to indicate the strain under which he will be performing. By contrast, in *Two-Character*, Felice remarks off-handedly, “I swear I wouldn’t know my head was on me if it wasn’t aching like hell.” When pressed by his sister, he clarifies, “An attack of migraine.” Clare suggests, “You’d better take your codeine” (7). This moment is fleeting, but it shows that Clare knows her brother’s ailments. It bears the tone of a nagging wife or concerned mother. It suggests that Clare looks after Felice and has done so for many years. Rather than leaving Felice focused inward, the revised moment brings Clare into his suffering and shows her loving concern for him.

Another minor interaction that adds more depth to the connection also provides additional humor. In *Out Cry*, Clare whines that she is starting to lose her voice. Felice responds with, “. . . You never come on stage just before curtain time, without giving me the comforting bit of news that your voice is gone and you’ll have to perform in pantomime tonight” (13). While this does make evident Felice and Clare’s long history of performing together and Clare’s host of neuroses, Williams improves upon this line in *Two-Character*. It is barely altered, but, when Clare warns Felice that her voice is not at performance standards, he responds with, “Yes, you never come on stage before an opening night performance without giving me the comforting bit of news that your voice is gone and . . . [*Imitating her voice:*] ‘I’ll have to perform in pantomime tonight.’” (9). In its revised form, Felice’s line becomes an opportunity for the brother to tease his sister. This innocent taunting is recognizable as a realistic interaction between siblings. It helps

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<sup>61</sup> Tennessee Williams, *Out Cry* (New York, NY: New Directions, 1973), 10. All future citations of this play are from this edition.

not only to specify the nature of the siblings' connection, but add humor to an otherwise dark play.

Another key alteration is increased conflict between Felice and Clare. Instead of fighting solely against their imaginary audience, Felice and Clare also contend with each other. They are not perfectly unified as before, but instead battle ferociously for dominance. As the performance is about to begin in *Out Cry*, Clare threatens to leave, calling "*Bonne chance!* I'll see you later." The stage directions say, "*Disregarding this threat, Felice advances to the proscenium*" (22). In *Two-Character*, the siblings never "disregard" one another. As Clare threatens to leave, Felice drops everything and hisses, "Will you take your place? I'm going to open the curtains! – Now, this instant!" (16). He is furious that she would even think to leave him. He orders her around to keep her from sabotaging the performance of his play.

The revision of Clare's character significantly contributes to this increased conflict. In *Out Cry*, she is very similar to her brother, though perhaps more fragile and, as she describes herself, "more realistic" (16). *Two-Character* Clare, on the other hand, has her own unique characterization. William J. Free applauds this alteration, saying that, as a result, "[Felice and Clare's] outlines are distinct and the conflicts between them are more believable" (827). While Felice remains largely unchanged, Clare develops multiple personalities. Williams describes them in his stage directions for her entrance:

*...But her condition when she appears is 'stoned' and her grand theatre manner will alternate with something startlingly coarse, the change occurring as abruptly as if another personality seized hold of her at these moments. Both of these aspects, the grand and the vulgar, disappear entirely from the part of CLARE in "The Performance," when she will have a childlike simplicity, the pure and sad precociousness of a little girl. (3)*



This Clare curses like a sailor (5), is addicted to drugs and alcohol, and has no time for any of her brother's high-and-mighty ideals (8). Though Felice finally bullies her into performing, Clare manages to seize a sliver of power. In a device absent from *Out Cry*, *Two-Character* Clare devises a system with which she may cut lines in this performance of "The Two-Character Play":

I'm not going to be given cuts, I'm going to make them myself. Now can you hear this C-sharp on the piano? [*She strikes a note on the piano.*] Whenever you hear this C-sharp struck on the piano it means a cut's coming at you, and don't try to duck it or I'll take a walk. (16-17)

And she's not bluffing. Clare's C-sharp frequently interrupts the performance, resulting even in a comedic moment when Felice "*slams the piano lid shut*" (23) to keep her from cutting one of his monologues short. Clare also refuses to listen to Felice's direction.

While *Out Cry* Clare goes politely to her place when Felice directs her (24), *Two-Character* Clare chooses a new top-of-show place for herself. Felice motions towards the window of the set and insists, "Your place is —", but Clare cuts him off with "*Here at the phone!*" and he is forced to let her do as she pleases (17).

As Clare continues to battle Felice, he begins to lose patience. The resulting outbursts do more than simply exhibit Felice's capacity for fury. In addition, they emphasize Clare's importance to him by showing how powerfully her actions affect him. This is particularly evident in an episode immediately preceding the start of the play within the play. *Two-Character* repurposes a line of Clare's from *Out Cry* as Felice's and makes clear that the fights between the siblings are born out of their need for each other.

In *Out Cry*, Clare tells Felice, "I want you to look at me on stage, stop avoiding my eyes" Felice responds rather cryptically, "Clare, I'd continue to see you if I were

stone-blind” (13). The line gives no depth or history to the connection. Repurposed in *Two-Character*, it carries a thundering power. It appears in one of Felice’s scathing attacks on his sister: “You – castrating bitch, you – drunk – *slut!* ...I don’t look at you on stage because I can’t bear the sight of your – eyes, they’re the eyes of an – old demented – whore! Yes, a water-front whore! Lewd, degenerate, leering!” (17). This line both emphasizes Felice’s ability to wound Clare and how he too suffers from her addiction.

The connection is at times emphasized between revisions simply with a changed pronoun. *Out Cry* Felice’s “...you’ll fly like a bird through the play, and if you dry up – use it” (15) becomes *Two-Character* Felice’s “...we’ll fly like birds through the play, and if we dry up, we’ll use it” (11). The siblings are in the performance together for better or for worse. *Out Cry* Clare’s “...So it’s a prison, this last theater of yours” (68) is altered in *Two-Character* so that Clare says, “...So it’s a prison, this last theatre of ours?” (57). There is never any question that the siblings will stay together.

Felice and Clare’s desperate need for closeness in spite of conflict makes their connection more engaging to the audience because it is more dynamic. Between the two plays, Williams makes his characters so dependent that they cannot function without each other. This is evidenced by the subtle details of their smoking habits. In *Out Cry*, Felice tells Clare to “Strike a match” (12) and Clare later tells her brother she is on her “Last cigarette, unless you have some” (63). In *Two-Character*, however, Felice must constantly strike matches for Clare as she carries none (9) and Clare passes out the cigarettes for the two of them to share (51). They both smoke, but Felice carries the matches while Clare carries the cigarettes. They never imagine they will be apart long

enough for this arrangement to be inconvenient. They fight almost constantly, but the siblings simply cannot do without each other.

In spite of its rocky beginnings, *The Two-Character Play* has resurfaced in recent years. The original audience bias stemming from contemporary familiarity with Williams' personal life has since become less of an issue. Modern critics believe Williams' emotionally autobiographical style adds to rather than detracts from the play. In successful productions in recent years, critics responded favorably to focus on the actors, a clear sense of Felice and Clare's shared history, and a strong connection between the siblings. Examining *Out Cry* and comparing it to *The Two-Character Play* reveals that Williams' revisions highlight the connection and make it stronger within the text. Williams wanted his audience to engage with this work and the strengthened connection between the siblings provided the vehicle for engagement.

In the next chapter, I will analyze connection in *The Two-Character Play* in the context of its genre.

## Chapter Three

### *Two by Two: Connection in the Theatre of the Absurd*

FELICE: There's always something to be done. There's no such thing as an inescapable corner with two people in it.

-Tennessee Williams, *The Two-Character Play* (59)

In this chapter, I will discuss the Theatre of the Absurd. I will briefly recount its influences, origin as a term, and the characteristics that categorize a play as Absurd. *The Two-Character Play* belongs to the Theatre of the Absurd because it exhibits many of these characteristics. I will show how the play's genre emphasizes connection by examining a specific subset of the Theatre of the Absurd of which *Two-Character* is a part. This subset consists of plays with two protagonists whose connection serves as the primary means of audience engagement. Focusing on two plays within this subset, I will compare the connection of their protagonists with that of Felice and Clare. I will argue that Williams' change in style from poetic realism to absurdism emphasizes the importance of connection as much as his revisions.

Some critics feel that the genre contributed to the play's failure. One of the Theatre of the Absurd's most prevalent themes is humanity's confinement in a meaningless universe. This theme derives directly from the philosophy of Absurdism. To symbolize humanity's confinement, Absurd characters are often trapped in repetitive actions and inescapable locations. Their existence is characterized by a lack of action, while the play is characterized by a lack of plot. Lanelle Daniels illustrates how this leads to audience apathy in *The Two-Character Play*: "[Felice and Clare's] inability to move in

any direction leaves the audience frozen also – immersed in frustration, lost in the futility of it all.”<sup>62</sup> Londré agrees that, “fear of confinement is a rather abstract obstacle on which to build dramatic conflict. It is a passive, psychological source of conflict rather than an active, dramatic one” (100).

Initially, Absurdism and the Theatre of the Absurd seem to advocate surrender. If humanity is trapped in a meaningless universe, action becomes purposeless and it seems best to resign oneself to one’s fate. A possible refutation of this argument lies in the humanistic aspect that is so often ignored in Absurdism and the Theatre of the Absurd. Michael Y. Bennett argues that, “the Theatre of the Absurd is not about absurdity, but about making life meaningful given our absurd situation.”<sup>63</sup> Many proponents of the Absurd do not seek to find a greater meaning in life because life itself is enough. Struggle in a meaningless universe defines a human being. Moreover, humanity is connected by this shared struggle. By setting his characters in the isolated, lawless, unrealistic world necessitated by the Theatre of the Absurd, Williams emphasizes the importance of connection and uses Felice and Clare’s connection to engage the audience.

The term “Theatre of the Absurd” was coined by Martin Esslin. He used this term to categorize a group of plays written in mid-twentieth century Europe which he believed were inspired by society’s shift to an Absurd world view. In his opinion, the end of World War II brought about a world-wide weakening of religious faith, nationalism, and patriotism.<sup>64</sup> The morals, virtues, and values that had guided life thus far were irrevocably

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<sup>62</sup> Lanelle Daniel, “*The Two-Character Play and Out Cry*” in *Tennessee Williams: A Guide to Research and Performance*, ed. Philip C. Kolin (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998. 176-82), 181.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Y. Bennett, *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 4.

<sup>64</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Rev. updated ed. (Woodstock, NY: Overlook, 1973), 5.

shaken by global catastrophe. Humanity sought to reaffirm life's meaning, but their old belief systems proved useless in the effort. In this climate Existentialism gave birth to Absurdism, a development which is evidenced in the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.

Camus, an absurdist, spoke more about humanity's ability to find meaning in a meaningless world than did the existentialist Sartre. However, their philosophies are similar. In "Existentialism is a Humanism," an essay adapted from Sartre's 1945 lecture of the same name, Sartre sought to defend Existentialism from its detractors. Critics mentioned by Sartre accused Existentialism of encouraging a hopeless lethargy with its doctrine that the actions of man had no effect on the universe. If action could not change the universe, what was the point of acting?<sup>65</sup> In the minds of the critics, this doctrine also undercut the importance of any action by making it seem pointless (71). Sartre also mentioned critics who felt that Existentialism inaccurately portrayed man as isolated and alone (70).

Sartre's defense draws attention to the humanistic aspect of Existentialism. Man is indeed alone in the universe, unguarded by a higher power. Yet, because of this, man is given the ultimate authority as, "there is no lawmaker other than himself" (84). Man is left to define himself. He is fully responsible for his own actions (78) and for his own fulfillment (80). Rather than trivializing human action, Existentialism emphasizes its significance. Humanity's path is not determined by a greater will, but by the actions of each individual being.

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<sup>65</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism" in *Existentialism versus Marxism: Conflicting Views on Humanism*, ed. George Edward Novack (New York, NY: Dell Pub. Co., 1966), 70. All future citations of this essay are from this edition.

In “The Myth of Sisyphus,” Albert Camus<sup>66</sup> voiced many assertions similar to Sartre’s. Comparing humanity to the mythological figure of Sisyphus, doomed to roll a boulder up a mountain for all eternity, Camus shows the humanistic side of his philosophy. He defines the Absurd as the conflict born from the co-existence of a meaningless universe and man searching for meaning.<sup>67</sup> He aims to make man aware that meaninglessness is the nature of the universe. However, meaninglessness is not inherently negative; it is the simple fact of the world and the sooner it is accepted, the better. By accepting the universe in all its lawlessness, man frees himself from the illusions that kept him bound (75).

Here, Camus expands upon Sartre’s humanistic point. He compares man to Sisyphus, condemned to an eternity “in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth” (76). Miraculously, Camus makes this an uplifting statement about the nature of the human spirit. Man pays a price for the passions of the earth; he must suffer in order to know happiness. Humanity is resilient even in the face of a meaningless universe. Rather than struggling to find meaning where none exists, man may become his own master and find meaning in the act of living (78). As Camus says, “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (78).

Camus adopted the Absurd mindset based on his changed world and strove to enlighten humanity to his conclusions. As reiterated by Bennett, “the contradiction

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<sup>66</sup> Williams felt he and Camus were similar in that they examined both the pleasant and unpleasant sides of life despite accusations of moral depravity from critics. Williams, “Tennessee Williams Presents His POV,” 115.

<sup>67</sup> Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus” in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1955), 21. All future citations of this essay are from this edition.

between our desires and what the world has to offer, forces us to understand the paradox [of our existence]. Only when we contemplate the paradox can we create meaning for our lives” (14). These ideas are reflected in the Theatre of the Absurd. Esslin echoes Camus, stating “the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions – and to laugh at it” (377).

Esslin defines the purpose of the Theatre of the Absurd: “to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought.” Further, “Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being – that is, in terms of concrete stage images” (6). Esslin says that plays of the Theatre of the Absurd “have no story or plot to speak of,” are “often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets,” “often have neither a beginning nor an end,” “seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares,” and “often consist of incoherent babblings” (3-4). Comedy is married to tragedy with no clear divide and realism is thrown entirely out the window. The characters are isolated, abandoned, and caught in repetitive, unfulfilled lives.

Esslin explains that the Theatre of the Absurd was not a conscious movement (5). No collective of playwrights actively sought to adopt the viewpoints of Sartre and Camus or challenge contemporary theatre with a new form. Like the aforementioned philosophers, these playwrights were expressing the feeling of their time. The Absurd was and remains a poignant subset of drama because it was born from the genuine, deep-seated feeling that the universe was devoid of meaning. This feeling transcended cultures, crossed the boundaries of nations, and united the world in the Absurd.



In light of this, Tennessee Williams' insistent remark about the singularity of his new style becomes questionable. It appears the playwright doth protest too much: "I am doing a different thing, which is altogether my own, not influenced at all by other playwrights at home or abroad, or by other schools of theatre."<sup>68</sup> It is unlikely Williams is consciously concealing outside inspiration. Yet it is not easy to imagine any playwright of the latter half of the twentieth century *unaffected* by *Waiting for Godot*. Perhaps Williams believed he was the sole practitioner of this new style, but simply failed to recognize that his style belonged to the Absurd.

It would not be difficult for Williams to miss the similarities between styles as he himself completely misunderstood the message of the Absurd. In a 1965 interview, he said he would never be able to write a play in the tradition of the Theatre of the Absurd because he "could never just make a joke out of human existence."<sup>69</sup> Williams, like many, misinterpreted the Theatre of the Absurd as bemoaning the meaninglessness of life without offering redemption. Despite his prejudices against the genre, Williams might very well have unknowingly held the same doctrines as the playwrights of the Absurd.

Esslin says, "The artists of an epoch have certain traits in common, but they are not necessarily conscious of them. Nor does the fact that they have these traits in common preclude them from being widely different in other respects" (x). The playwrights are similar because they are similarly affected by their environment, not through any conscious affiliation. Williams echoes this in his essay "The World I Live In": "I think, without planning to do so, I have followed the developing tension and anger

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<sup>68</sup> Charles Ruas, "Tennessee Williams" in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, ed. Albert J. Devlin (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 284-5.

<sup>69</sup> John Gruen, "Tennessee Williams" in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, ed. Albert J. Devlin (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 118.

and violence of the world and time that I live in through my own steadily increasing tension as a writer”<sup>70</sup> If forged in the fires of the same world, it is no surprise that Williams and the Absurd playwrights would share similar traits.

Albert J. Devlin neatly rattles off a list of Absurd themes evident in *The Two-Character Play*: “...a nameless fear that underlies all experience, the frightening prospect of communication, the plentitude of time coupled with its nullity, and, of course, waiting” (256). From their isolation in the theatre, their indescribable terror of the outside, their twisting words and shifting identities, Felice and Clare clearly fit the mold of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Where does connection play into all of this? Sartre, Camus, and Esslin seem more interested in man’s relationship with the universe than his relationship with his fellow human beings. Is connection then to be disregarded? To see the answer, one need only look at Camus’ choice to compare humanity to Sisyphus. Even though Sisyphus is mythological, Camus identifies with him through their mutual struggle of life in a meaningless universe. Williams said in his *Memoirs*, “To have a problem in common is much like love” (3). Mutual struggle in a meaningless universe creates an inherent connection between human beings. This is reflected in the Theatre of the Absurd. Though the plots are repetitious, the situations inescapable, and hope next to nonexistent, the characters still try. Not all challenges are meant to be won, not all tragedies are meant to be explained, and the meaning for which they search may not exist. To fight against all of these odds is a uniquely human action.

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<sup>70</sup> Tennessee Williams, “The World I Live In,” in *Where I Live: Selected Essays*, eds. Christine R. Day and Bob Woods (New York: New Directions, 1978), 89.

Felice and Clare cannot possibly put on a good performance of “The Two-Character Play” in their present circumstances, but they try because trying is what they have left. The communal endeavor to beat the odds and find meaning in life is what brings humanity together. When human beings cannot make sense of life, they find comfort in shared circumstances. Though Felice and Clare are trapped at the end of *The Two-Character Play*, they are still together. All other fears are eclipsed by their fear of separation from each other. Each is the only meaning the other is able to find.

Though the isolation of characters is a recurring theme in the Theatre of the Absurd, rarely is one character abandoned on stage to the discordant universe. The isolation of *humanity* rather than the isolation of *a human being* is explored. The audience gains understanding of this collective isolation by watching multiple characters in their mutual struggle rather than one character abandoned to torment. More often than not in Absurd drama, a pair of characters is presented leading the charge against the meaningless universe. This is not discussed by Sartre, Camus, or Esslin, but is a clear trend I noticed in my research. I think it emphasizes that the conflict against a meaningless universe is a communal battle without compromising the core theme of isolation. To quote Felice, “There’s no such thing as an inescapable corner with two people in it” (59). With loneliness comes desolation, while companionship brings hope, even if one ultimately fails. This theme serves to engage audiences.

Esslin makes the contrary argument that the characters of the Theatre of the Absurd engage the audience by *not* being relatable at all. Through this, he argues, the audience remains emotionally distant from the plot and is able to intellectually assess their own place in the universe (361). I disagree as I believe this undercuts the very

circumstances that founded the Theatre of the Absurd: individuals united only by common *feeling* and *connection* rather than an intellectual circle looking to declare a point to the anonymous public. This argument also seems to me to paint theatre in general as an intellectual and impersonal rather than emotional and personal art form, which appears utterly counterintuitive to years of dramatic scholarship. The situation of *The Two-Character Play* is Absurd, but the reliance upon another human being to face the obstacles of life is very real. The depth of Felice and Clare's love for each other is profound; their terror is understandable and their perseverance is brave. Their fear is their private badge of courage; their love is their driving force; their battle is ours.

*The Two-Character Play* is not straight forward, but neither is it incomprehensible. Felice and Clare's relatable connection eases the absurdity of the circumstances and allows the audience to engage in the play. *Two-Character* is not alone in this; some of the better known works to emerge from the Theatre of the Absurd use connection between the characters as the primary means of audience engagement. Amidst an absence of plot, unrealistic circumstances, and overwhelming obscurity, playwrights give the audience two characters with whom to engage.

*Waiting for Godot* (1953) by Samuel Beckett and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) by Tom Stoppard engage audiences primarily through the connection between the two main characters. Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's play and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Stoppard's are old friends with a long history that precedes the action of the play. Their conversation is laden with references to their past, shared experiences. They joke with each other, insult one another, and rely on each other. Each serves as both a comfort and antagonist to the other. They approach the mutual

struggle in different ways, allowing them to play off each other's ideologies. With no plot to follow, audiences watch as two characters try to free themselves from their Absurd situations. Felice and Clare function in much this same fashion in *Two-Character*.

Williams greatly admired Samuel Beckett,<sup>71</sup> one of the most successful playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd. Beckett's masterpiece *Waiting for Godot* is a paragon of the genre. The play has multiple characters, but focuses on the interactions of Vladimir and Estragon. The two men remain stranded on the same stretch of road, waiting for a mysterious figure named Godot. As Godot continually fails to appear, Vladimir and Estragon try to make sense of the world around them, the people they meet, and their own existence.

Within the Theatre of the Absurd, the mutual struggle is often characterized by a lack of memory. By depriving his characters of their immediate history, Beckett, like Williams, leaves them lost. They cannot remember the details of their lives, they can only remember that they were together. In this way, the playwrights at once possess their characters with a feeling abandonment while making them cling to each other more fiercely. They cannot remember anything defining about themselves other than their relationship, and so their connection becomes their guiding force. Vladimir and Estragon are uncertain as to where they came from and how long they have been where they are. They can only recall vague episodes in their shared past, such as trips to Paris "in the nineties" when they were "respectable."<sup>72</sup> These references challenge actors and directors to endow them with specific details of the characters' shared history. If these references

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<sup>71</sup> Gruen, 120.

<sup>72</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot in Nine Plays of the Modern Theater*, ed. Harold Clurman (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1990), 118. All future citations of this play are from this edition.

are undefined in the rehearsal process, they will not read to the audience. If properly addressed, they can give a clearer sense of the connection between the characters.

Alan Astro notes in *Understanding Samuel Beckett* that one can see the strength of the connection in *Godot* by examining the structure of the dialogue. He says that “[Vladimir and Estragon] speak to each other in extremely short phrases, as though they knew each other’s thoughts so well as to need only to refer to things in the barest of terms.”<sup>73</sup> This can be seen in *Two-Character* as well when Felice and Clare, “finish each other’s sentences and constantly employ ‘chiasmus’ – a grammatical mirror effect – in their sentence structures.”<sup>74</sup> William J. Free reasons that this signifies “they are giving each other needed support in an emotionally difficult situation” (822).

The love/hate relationship between Vladimir and Estragon proves an interesting parallel between *Godot* and *Two-Character*. Like Felice and Clare, the two men are fiercely co-dependent. Early in *Godot*, Vladimir refuses to let Estragon sleep because he “felt lonely” (123). When Lucky kicks Estragon’s leg, Estragon cries “I’ll never walk again!” to which Vladimir responds “I’ll carry you” (138). Yet the relationship consists of both love and conflict. In Act Two, Estragon demands of his partner, “Don’t touch me! Don’t question me! Don’t speak to me! Stay with me!” (161). At times the relationship confuses even the characters. Estragon assures Vladimir, “You see, you feel worse when I’m with you. I feel better alone, too.” Vladimir retorts, “Then why do you come crawling back?” to which Estragon can only respond, “I don’t know” (162).

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<sup>73</sup> Alan Astro, *Understanding Samuel Beckett*, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 115.

<sup>74</sup> R.B. Parker, “The Circle Closed: A Psychological Reading of *The Glass Menagerie* and *The Two Character Play* in *Critical Essays on Tennessee Williams*, ed. Robert A. Martin (New York, NY: G.K. Hall, 1997), 76.

Felice and Clare experience much the same battle between dependency and the desire for independence. Estragon muses that, “There are times when I wonder if it wouldn’t be better for us to part” to which Vladimir flatly responds “You wouldn’t go far” (123). Clare muses that the siblings should have taken “a long, meditative rest on some Riviera” instead of continuing their tour. Felice assures her that “You couldn’t stop any more than I could, Clare” to which she immediately counters, “If you’d stopped with me, I could have” (9). Toward the end of Act One of *Godot*, Vladimir offers “We can still part, if you think it would be better,” but Estragon claims that “It’s too late now” (158). In the middle of Act Two of *Two-Character*, Clare lyrically recites, “Oh, what a long, long way we’ve traveled together, too long, now, for separation... and there’s no turning back on the road even if the road’s backward” (50).

Neither pair can part even in death. Though they long to escape their circumstances, their greatest fear is separation. Estragon dissuades Vladimir from allowing Estragon to hang himself first because, “Gogo light – bough not break – Gogo dead. Didi heavy – bough break – Didi alone” (125). Likewise, Clare and Felice are unable to reenact the murder/suicide of their parents because they dread separation. They fear that once one of them pulls the trigger, they will be unable to kill themselves and left to live in solitude. This dilemma is encapsulated in Clare’s final lines, “*I can’t!...Can you?*” (62-3).

Like *Godot*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* by Tom Stoppard focuses on the connection between its protagonists. The play adapts Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, following two minor courtiers lost and confused amidst the events of the famous tragedy. Much like humanity, the two men are subject to inexplicable occurrences in a universe

they cannot explain. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern continually try to understand the world around them, their roles within the larger play, and their eventual deaths. In *The Theatre of Tom Stoppard*, Anthony Jenkins articulates how their trials and demise engage an audience: “Though Ros and Guil can never be at home, we are their supporters, and it is through them that we come to feel what death is,”<sup>75</sup> and “The action on stage punches home a sense of injustice which we share with the two lost wanderers” (47).

Like Vladimir and Estragon, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot clearly remember the details of where they came from, only that they have been together for a while. They are ill-equipped to face the trials that await them and cling to each other for reassurance. Similarly, Felice and Clare have no clear memory of where they came from before they arrived at the theatre and are forced into a panic-stricken battle to escape.

This lack of memory is established from the beginning of Stoppard’s play. As Rosencrantz spins coins, Guildenstern points out the irregularity of the coins turning heads up each time. He tries to refer to an earlier instance in which the coins spun normally, but is unable to pin-point a specific occurrence. He is left simply spluttering, “This is not the first time we have spun coins!”<sup>76</sup> Rosencrantz seems to offer a glimmer of hope, agreeing “we’ve been spinning coins for as long as I remember.” However, when pressed for details, Rosencrantz is forced to admit, “I forget” (681).

When Clare insists in Act One of *The Two-Character Play* that she will leave the stage and return to her hotel, Felice presses her, “What hotel did you think you were

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<sup>75</sup> Anthony Jenkins, *The Theatre of Tom Stoppard* (Cambridge, Cambridgeshire: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 42.

<sup>76</sup> Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in *Nine Plays of the Modern Theater*, ed. Harold Clurman (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1990), 680. All future citations of this play are from this edition.



going to, Clare?” Clare’s baffled response “—Whichever—hotel we—stay at...” reveals her lack of memory. When Clare asks when they might have checked into a hotel, Felice, instead of answering, postulates, “Yes, when? After we got off the train, before we came to the theatre, is that when?” (15). All four characters are left with only the faintest memories. They are not sure what led them to their current predicaments and, therefore, are unsure how to escape. All they know is that they arrived together. They continue to look for answers within each other, refusing to be left alone.

The theme of fear is also tied into connection in the case of both pairs.

Guildenstern, though frightened and confused, reacts to the terror of Rosencrantz. As Rosencrantz cries out “Oh, what’s going to become of us!” Guildenstern calms him with, “Don’t cry . . . it’s all right . . . there . . . there, I’ll see we’re alright” (768). Rosencrantz’s distress motivates Guildenstern to search for a solution. The two of them never question that their fates are joined; Rosencrantz uses “us” and Guildenstern uses “we” without even thinking. Felice speaks of a similar feeling in *Two-Character*. Realizing they are trapped with no hope of escape, Felice postulates, “. . .I think fear *is* limited, don’t you, Clare? . . .Isn’t it limited to the ability of a person to care anymore?” His sister replies haltingly with, “–For anything but–” Here, Williams makes his voice heard in his stage directions by announcing, “*she means for ‘one other person’*” (57).

The siblings can endure anything so long as they are together. Their paralyzing fear is limited; they don’t care what happens as long as they are not separated. In this way their connection, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s, becomes not only a means of engagement, but the main source of tension within the plot. If the characters’ greatest fear is separation, then the audience is going to watch to see if the connection will hold. Any

time one character threatens to leave could mean doom for the other. And any time a character fails to leave speaks to the strength of the connection.

The philosophies of Sartre and Camus dictated a world view in which humanity was left in a meaningless universe, but found fulfillment through its struggle. This world view is reflected in many of the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd. Despite the genre's emphasis on isolation, characters are most often portrayed trapped in pairs. This is to communicate that humanity mutually struggles in a meaningless universe. The philosophical background of the Absurd supports that the mutual struggle unites humanity. Therefore, connection between characters can serve to engage the audience because they relate to this struggle. *Waiting for Godot* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* use connection in this way. The connection between Vladimir and Estragon and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is very similar to the connection between Felice and Clare. By examining the play in the context of its genre, it becomes clear that Williams' change in style emphasized connection between Felice and Clare as much as his revisions of the script.

In the next chapter, I will recount my experience directing *The Two-Character Play* at the College of William and Mary in the fall of 2013.

## Chapter Four

### *The Directorial*

CLARE: Total theatre is going to be total collaboration on this occasion, ducks.

-Tennessee Williams, *The Two-Character Play* (17)

My emphasis on connection meant that my focus during the production would be almost solely on the actors. I did, however, make two production choices independent of connection. These choices would aid the play by helping both the actors and the audience follow the action. Both of these choices were made to more clearly divide between the frame story and the play within the play, reality and illusion. While the script does benefit at times from some ambiguity between the two, too much mystery leads to an unclear plot. Specific moments would need to be designated reality and others designated illusion if the audience and actors wanted any hope of approaching the story.

I decided to make the audience for whom Felice and Clare performed the play within the play a separate entity from the actual audience attending the production.<sup>77</sup> Londré points out that, unlike *Out Cry*, *The Two-Character Play* does not “adequately set up the convention of the live audience doubling as a component in the narrative.” She refers to the instance in which Felice tells Clare that the audience for “The Two-Character Play” is entering the theatre when the audience for *The Two-Character Play*

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<sup>77</sup> Many scholars, such as Kalliopi Nikolopoulou, argue that Felice and Clare are not actually performing for any audience, but are in fact trapped in their family home: “Felice and Clare have been... performing their life as a theatrical act...Having been all along at the same place – their New Bethesda home, which serves as their prison and their stage – neither of them can specify the location of the theatre.” While it is certainly possible to ground this interpretation in the text, it is a weak choice and lowers the stakes by making a successful performance less important for the characters. Kalliopi Nikolopoulou, “Le Jeu Suprême: Some Mallarmean Echoes in Tennessee Williams’ *Out Cry*” in *Tennessee Williams: A Casebook*, ed. Robert F. Gross (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 123.

has been seated for a while (99-100). Because of this, the actual audience and the play within the play's audience are not naturally merged into one. The audience of the play within the play is hostile to and unloved by the siblings. Ideally, the real audience would identify as Felice and Clare's confederates rather than their enemies.

To achieve this identification, I arranged the audience risers in the Studio Theatre in a standard set up with three tiers of risers right near the entrance facing out from the fly rail. Felice and Clare would play the frame story – before and after the play within the play, at the beginning of Act One and the end of Act Two – directly to the risers. However, when the play within the play began, Felice and Clare would turn to the downstage right corner and perform as though their invisible audience were seated out there. The set and lights for the production were oriented to reinforce this, with the furniture angled to face the invisible audience and most of the “performance” light originating from that downstage right corner. The idea was to give the real audience the sense that they were backstage.

The addition of the invisible audience would not only help the actual audience relate to the characters, but would help more clearly delineate between the frame story and the play within the play. To further clarify when the characters were performing and when they were not, I decided to have Felice and Clare use Southern accents when they were performing the play within the play. When urging Clare to take off her coat for the performance, Felice says “We’re in our home, Clare, in the deep South and in summer” (15). This coupled with Williams’ tendency to set his plays in the South led to this decision with the hopes that the accents would be a clear marker for the play within the

play. The characters would assume these accents when speaking the lines of Felice's script, but drop them whenever they broke character or came out of the play.

Other than these choices, my focus was entirely on working with the actors to bring Felice and Clare's connection to life. Approaching the script as a director, I decided the connection would be strengthened by giving Felice and Clare a clear back story and making use of the opposites within their relationship.

In order to be useful, back story must directly affect events on stage. Felice and Clare needed to have a clear back story which would manifest itself in the references to past, shared experiences. The actors would need to know the details of these experiences, such as the trip to the Gulf Coast referred to in Act One (26). The audience would not know the back story, but the details would give weight to the connection by specifying the siblings' history. This would make their relationship more believable and ensure that the actors understood the story.

The love/hate dynamic in Felice and Clare's relationship strengthens their connection and can be used to improve the play in performance. The siblings are constantly at each other's throats, yet they desperately need each other's support. They are adults, yet tease each other like children. They are siblings, yet speak to each other like lovers. They create a false world to hide from the truth, and then savagely tear it apart in a search for reality. They love each other unconditionally, yet hate each other furiously. This constantly shifting dynamic between opposite extremes makes the relationship thought provoking and a source of tension with which the audience can engage.

The relationship Williams has penned for these siblings is a gold mine for any actor or director. One can read the script and argue that it lacks a plot, but, in fact, a vicious power play is at work within the lines. At one moment, Felice has the upper hand, and then Clare seizes it by cutting his text. More than that, even, the dialogue between the siblings is laden with such a deep and personal history that one need only seize those moments to create a profound connection on stage.

Having thus determined how this production would adapt the script and how to work with the actors, I articulated an interpretation of each character and decided what kind of actors would best carry out this concept.

Felice can be aggressive and domineering, particularly in the Act One frame story. He is often antagonistic toward his sister, dominating her by controlling the play within the play. The love between the two siblings is present, but aggression and antagonism in the opening of the show provides an engaging contrast to those tender moments. The actor playing Felice would need a strong stage presence to accomplish this. By contrast, dependency on Clare is also integral to Felice's characterization. An actor would need to find the push and pull between the two forces to fully capture the character.

The difficulty posed for an actress playing Clare is synthesizing the personalities Williams assigns her. She is at once delicate and brassy, childlike and womanly. Clare is also resilient and it becomes clear at the end she is the stronger sibling. This not only creates an engaging power-play between the two, but provides a truer portrait of Rose than previously seen in Williams' work: he once said, "I never find broken spirits in

women I admire...[Rose's] spirit is much stronger than my spirit. Nobody who tried to put her down could possibly put her down."<sup>78</sup> The childlike aspect of Clare could not compromise her resilience. Additionally, though both characters are complicated, Felice is given many more words to express himself while Clare is often left silent. The actress would need to keep the inner conflict of the character alive and visible to the audience.

With this in mind, I auditioned actors for my production in August of 2013. It is important for me to detail my casting choices because the actors were the show. Not only would their performances be the final product, but their connection would actually form the basis of the connection between their characters.

Robin Crigler won me over almost immediately at his audition as he read Felice's opening monologue. Robin has a very performative delivery and an "actor voice" but that seemed to work for the character. He also had no trouble commanding a stage. Serendipitously (almost alarmingly so, actually), one of my very good friends had directed Robin in Tennessee Williams' one-act *Me, Vashya* the previous fall. She mentioned that Robin had problems actually talking *to* his scene partner rather than just *at* them. I determined to cast him only if I thought I could fix this habit.

Taylor Schwabe has a very quiet voice, which initially made me think she could not hold her ground against as strong Felice. However, I had seen several of Taylor's past performances in which she had managed to command the stage next to a louder scene partner. She tended to use sultry tactics in moments of strength, which would be

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<sup>78</sup> Tennessee Williams, as quoted in Gruen, 116.

inappropriate for Clare. I would need to see her be more aggressive than sultry and also wanted to see how she would approach Clare's multiple personalities.

I was also hoping that Robin and Taylor's strengths might help to fix each other's weaknesses; since Taylor is a very strong internal actress, perhaps her style would encourage Robin to connect. Additionally, perhaps Robin's powerful voice and stage presence would encourage Taylor to be more outwardly strong.

At callbacks, I had them read three separate scenes. In the Act One play within the play, when Clare recounts the night their parents died, I asked Taylor to use the story to punish Felice. This direction was intended to make Taylor and Robin connect by defining their character's objectives in terms of one another. The connection was only partly realized, but Taylor had no trouble taking control. Her low volume actually gave her a sinister quality and she managed to seamlessly work in the childlike aspect of Clare.

I gave Robin the opening monologue again and asked him, for the sake of callbacks, to deliver the monologue to Taylor as though he were trying to explain something very important and his ultimate goal was to *see* her agree with him. The first time he did it, he did not manage to connect with her. I amended the direction and asked him to take any time the script indicated Felice should pause or say "what?" as though he were waiting for Taylor to speak. Those "what?" lines became questions to her rather than to himself. Robin delivered the monologue more purposefully, watching Taylor for a reaction and letting her silent responses affect him.

With their final reading, my focus shifted from their individual problems to whether or not they could connect. Robin and Taylor are both very strong actors. When



they performed a scene in which Felice and Clare argued, it became a full out brawl; they were not afraid to be combative and raised the energy of the scene with their delivery. However, they did not naturally connect. They were both very self sustaining, so the underlying connection was lacking. Only the combative side of the relationship was being realized. The few moments when they did connect, however, were absolutely beautiful.

I determined that Robin and Taylor's individual performances and combative dynamic were the strongest among the actors who auditioned and, while I had concerns about their ability to connect, I felt I could develop it through rehearsals. I viewed the rehearsal process as collaborative and left many important character decisions to Robin and Taylor. I would ask them about a detail in the script and let them determine the answer, providing guidance as needed. I did not remove myself from the process, but rather used my research to shape the parameters of the production and let the actors work out the details. They were both made aware that the focus of this production was on the connection between Felice and Clare. It was up to them to determine the details of that connection.

Rather than making all the decisions for them, I focused my energy on fostering trust between the actors. As rehearsals progressed, they began to rely on each other for the details of Felice and Clare's history instead of looking to me for answers. Two actors who had barely known each other established a connection by creating the details of their characters together. This connection of theirs not only aided them in performance, but also formed the basis of the connection between Felice and Clare. The siblings' connection was, therefore, imbued with a sense of reality.

The final production was not drastically different from Williams' script, but every production is inherently an adaptation. Aspects of the play naturally changed from the script to the stage. A few collaborative decisions made in rehearsals built upon moments of connection within the text. Some of these decisions were premeditated by me, others were born spontaneously in rehearsal, and still others were made by one or both of the actors. By enumerating a select few of these moments in detail, I will indicate how the connection between the characters was further accentuated in the production work with the actors and remained the focus of the final product.

The siblings' back story was left entirely in Robin and Taylor's hands. Their ultimate decision came out of several conversations over the first few weeks of rehearsal. They decided that Felice and Clare's father had been sent away to a mental institution when they were young. Clare – who they decided was the older sibling - was old enough to remember their father's mental collapse and that his institutionalization was justified. Felice still idolized their father and did not understand his absence. He created the dramatic representation of their father's disappearance in the play within the play to explain his absent patriarch. Felice was later sent away to a mental institution following a collapse in his early twenties. Clare freed her brother, then the two left their mother's care to take up performing. Separated from their parents, the siblings became dangerously co-dependent, a choice that further highlights the importance and strength of their connection.

The construction of back story applied to the siblings' more recent history as well. Robin and Taylor had to explain the history behind the "private badge of courage" exchange in the middle of Act Two (37). At one moment, Felice is screaming at Clare

about leaving the house. The next, Clare and Felice are finishing each other's sentences again, repeating the "private badge of courage" phrase.

Robin had earlier decided that Felice suffered panic attacks characterized by a shortness of breath. Taylor took this decision and referred to one of Clare's first lines:

-A doctor once told me that you and I were the bravest people he knew. I said, 'Why, that's absurd, my brother and I are terrified of our shadows.' And he said, 'Yes, I know that, and that's why I admire your courage so much. . .' (4)

Taylor reasoned that "private badge of courage" was a phrase Clare used to calm her brother. It was a mantra they could both return to when they got lost. The final staging of this moment was full of deep, personal history and a weighty connection. After Robin shouted at her, Taylor put her hands on the side of his head and drew him toward her so that their foreheads rested together. Robin held onto Taylor's wrists as they said the "private badge of courage" lines almost nose to nose. The connection was emphasized through the indication of its history as well as the visible affection between the two.

A lot of this more immediate back story centered on creating identities for the other characters mentioned in the script. For example, Clare refers to a man named Franz shortly after her entrance. Taylor decided that Franz was a member of the company and Clare's current beau. Clare says, "I'm very annoyed with Franz. He didn't call me...- Had you forbidden him to?" (5). Felice does not reply. This moment provided an ample opportunity for the implication of incest. In the final product, Robin responded to this question by staring at Taylor until she broke eye contact. The audience was not clued into the exact details of this silent beat, but Robin and Taylor's awareness of the back story

showed the audience that there was a deep, emotional, and possibly unsettling basis to their characters' connection.

This textual moment and others like it necessitated the discussion of whether or not the sibling's relationship was incestuous. Williams begins his "Notes for *The Two Character Play*," by stating explicitly "There may be no apparent sexuality in The Two Character Play, and yet it is actually the Liebestod of the two characters from whom the title derives."<sup>79</sup> He qualifies this almost immediately by adding, "This fact should be recognized by the director and players, but then it should appear to be forgotten."<sup>80</sup> I took this to mean while Williams believed the undercurrent of the play was fueled by romantic love, he did not mandate visible manifestations of incest. The strength of the connection rather than its exact nature was important to him.

Robin and Taylor decided that Felice and Clare did not have a physically incestuous relationship, but that Felice had romantic feelings for his sister. In Felice's mind, Clare is his muse and his savior. He grows angry with her when she is drugged because she tarnishes his perfect vision of her. Robin focused on Felice's repeated use of the phrase "face of an angel" to describe Clare. Robin said that, while the line sounds cliché, Felice genuinely means it and the line has become almost holy. Taylor decided that Clare does not return his romantic feelings on the same level. Clare feels that no one will ever love her as much as Felice does, justifying her desire to stay with him. After this conversation, I asked the actors to find more moments of intimacy throughout the show through which this element of the connection could manifest. It took a while, but they

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<sup>79</sup> From the German *Liebe* (love) and *Tod* (death), *liebestod* can refer to the final consummation of two characters' love in death (a la Romeo and Juliet).

<sup>80</sup> Tennessee Williams, "Notes for *The Two Character Play*," *The Tennessee Williams Review* 3:2 (1982): 3.

found a few key beats where the more taboo element of their characters' relationship came into play. The inclusion of incestuous implications in the connection strengthened it by taking it from a brother-sister relationship of familial loyalty to one bound by both blood and romantic love.

Several instances of affection between the siblings were used to emphasize the connection. When Felice finds the invisible card from Citizen's Relief, he reasons that he and Clare should not try to contact the organization. He worries that "It might be an excuse to intrude on our—" when Clare cuts him off with "Privacy, yes" (25). In one of the early rehearsals, Robin accidentally said "privacy" at the same time as Taylor. I asked him to make the mistake a choice, so that Felice and Clare said the same word together. This beat brought to life Felice's continued assertion that the siblings do "the same things at the same time" (50). The audience could see this manifestation of their connection instead of just hearing about it. Another instance in which affection appeared was an added, silent action in the Act Two frame story born from an impulse of Taylor's. Felice returns from his search for an exit from the theatre with blood all over his hands (56). In this production, Robin followed the announcement that the siblings were trapped by slumping down on the couch, exhausted. Taylor pulled a towel from a box of props, joined him on the couch, and began to wipe the blood off of his hands. Robin then snuggled up next to Taylor, resting his head on her shoulder as she cared for him. This innocent moment of affection amidst the horror of confinement showed that even in the face of their greatest fear the siblings could still take comfort in each other.

The importance and strength of connection was also made clear in a moment in which the connection was severed. At the end of the play within the play, Felice returns

from outside of the house suddenly narrating his actions, almost as if he is reading the stage directions of the script (46). He continues narrating his actions through the end of the play within the play. Robin and I decided that this was Felice writing the elusive end of “The Two-Character Play” as he was performing it. Because Clare was outside of this moment of his, it provided an opportunity. As the connection is the core of the play, true terror only occurs when the connection is broken. I gave Robin the direction not to make eye contact with Taylor from the moment he re-entered the house until she brought him out of the play. I also told him to say his lines almost on top of hers, as though he was unaware of her presence. Felice begins narrating Clare’s actions (48), but I decided that I would not have Taylor perform the tasks described in his speech. Instead, Felice would be imagining a Clare that was performing as he wanted, the Clare of the play he had written rather than his sister. Robin’s portrayal of Felice in this segment was cold, trance-like, and unsettling while Taylor’s Clare was near hysterical and terrified by the change in her brother. Both of these factors made the moment about connection. The level to which Felice had come unhinged and the enormity of Clare’s distress asserted how necessary connection was for their survival.

Indeed, the siblings only survive the climactic end of the play because of their connection. The ending of the play was the final moment in which the strength of the connection was solidified by Robin and Taylor’s performances. In table work, I asked Robin whether or not Felice was telling the truth when he said there was no way out of the theatre. Robin said that Felice was lying and had consciously decided to trap them. The company’s departure had tipped Felice over the edge of depression. He wanted to end his life, but his connection with his sister meant he could not do so alone. Ultimately,

he loved her so much that he couldn't be parted from her even in death, but couldn't be forced to kill her as their father had. He wanted her to pull the trigger for him. By performing the dark and introspective "Two-Character Play" and trapping them in the theatre, he hoped to force her to choose death for them both.

By the time we blocked the end of the play, Robin and Taylor had grown to really understand their characters and their connection. They were also more comfortable with each other as actors, willing to respond to each other naturally. The first time they ever performed the ending with no initial direction or blocking, Robin began sobbing when he pointed the gun at Taylor. He fell to his knees and Taylor, responding in character, ran over to him and put her arms around him, repeating "it's okay, it's okay" as he grabbed onto one of her hands. Robin later said that Felice's line "face of an angel" came to his mind when he looked at Taylor. He realized that Felice could not kill Clare in that moment because he could see her face, the same face that had been there to free him from State Haven and support him his whole life. Upon realizing this, Robin said the emotion just hit him. Taylor said she responded instinctively to what Robin was doing, just as Clare would have. Not only did this powerful, natural ending emphasize the connection between the characters, but it was born from the connection between the actors. Robin trusted Taylor enough to give way to his instincts and Taylor was so aware of Robin that she was instantly ready to comfort him. Because of the actors' connection in real life, a natural, genuine moment was possible between the characters.

It took a lengthy and rigorous rehearsal process to bring all of these moments to their ultimate performance quality. To help gauge how the show was progressing, I had three "preview" audience members. My advisor Dr. Palmer attended two of our run

throughs. Additionally, I asked two of my fellow students, Miles Drawdy and Leah Beyer, to watch a run through. Miles and Leah are both performers, but Miles knew much more about the show while Leah knew next to nothing.

After the first run through, Dr. Palmer voiced some concerns. His chief worry was Robin's vocal habits. Dr. Palmer said that Robin's performative voice kept him from connecting with Taylor. It seemed that he was talking at her rather than to her. He also commented that the connection between the two needed to be clear from the moment they entered the stage. He suggested I tell them to define their characters' objectives in terms of each other moment by moment to keep both the conflict and the connection alive.

To address these concerns, I told Robin and Taylor to think of connection as the ultimate goal. Their fights became obstacles to achieving that connection. I asked them to use "carrot and stick" tactics. They could not just use the "stick" all the time and attack the other person or the other person would leave. They needed to find moments to use kindness to get what they wanted. I told them to define in the most basic terms what they wanted the other person to do that the other person was not doing. I also went through the moments of the show in which they recount episodes in their past and clarified the telling of these moments. In the story about their trip to the Gulf Coast, I asked them to find specifically what they responded to in the other person's description of the trip. In an effort to control Robin's vocal habit, I explained to him how it read from an audience perspective. Tying this in with my "carrot and stick" discussion, I said that his loud voice made it seem as though he were using only hostile tactics to get his way. I had to stop and restart a lot of our later rehearsals to tell Robin to stop projecting. It was a difficult adjustment to make as his "actor voice" is a very ingrained habit, but he made progress.



At the next run through, all three of the preview audience members were present. The connection was generally well received, but each of the three had suggestions for how to improve it. Leah said that the incestuous side of the connection was not fully developed, so it merely muddled rather than added to the connection. Miles said Robin and Taylor needed to sustain their combativeness throughout, but could also find more playfulness and banter when appropriate to make the connection nuanced. He specified continuing to clarify the history of the characters in regards to some of the references in the script. Dr. Palmer was very pleased with Taylor's performance. He said that she had a strong inner life and was trying to connect in earnest. Robin was still having issues connecting. He had to actually listen to and respond to what Taylor said. Dr. Palmer also said that Robin appeared unaffected by Taylor's attacks.

I addressed each of these responses in rehearsal, but specifically focused on the problem of Robin's connection. If Robin did not connect with Taylor, my theory would not have a chance. I talked to Robin about responding to Clare's insults and attacks specifically. Clare probably does know how to push his buttons, so at least a few of these insults would actually hurt. The audience needed to see that vulnerability. He started listening to Taylor's lines and responding noticeably when she attacked him. In addition to helping the connection, this gave even more of a sense of their past relationship. It also aided the power play between the characters because the audience could see that Clare had a chance at dominating Felice, whereas before Felice had seemed impervious to all assaults.

In performance, unfortunately, Robin took one huge step backwards due to opening night jitters. As soon as the first performance started, he bounced right back into

his loud “actor voice” and a lot of the more intimate moments we had found got lost. He made a minimal adjustment at the next performance, but still did not achieve the level of intimacy established in rehearsal. The final day of the production included both a matinee and an evening performance. Robin’s voice had started to go the day before and a two show day wreaked further havoc. The audible pain was not only distracting, but detracted from his performance.

Dr. Palmer was the only one of the preview audience members to whom I spoke about their thoughts after seeing the actual performance. In the next chapter, I will detail the audience responses to the actors both individually and as a unit, and to the show and connection as a whole.

## Chapter Five

### *Post-Production Responses*

CLARE: ... - You're terrible with the press, you go on and on about 'total theatre' and, oh, do they turn off you and onto me ...

-Tennessee Williams, *The Two-Character Play* (5)

While many directors choose to have audience talk-backs in order to gauge responses to their productions, I chose to go a different route. I created for myself a sample audience. Two of my sources were campus newspapers that came to review the production: *The Flat Hat* and *The Virginia Informer*. Dr. Palmer then provided me with another source by allowing me to attend one of his Introduction to Theatre class sessions. This class was a freshman seminar comprised of thirteen students. They had been studying Tennessee Williams all semester and had spent quite a bit of time with *The Two-Character Play*, though they had never been required to read it. Dr. Palmer led a discussion about the production while I took notes. He also submitted written reviews by the students. These anonymous responses provided greater insight into topics that were only briefly mentioned during class discussion.

My final source was a sample of audience members. I arranged to meet with eight people after the production closed. I wanted to get responses from attendees with different personalities, backgrounds, and theatrical experience. Two of these participants are members of the William and Mary Theatre Department faculty, Professor Robert Ruffin and Dr. Laurie J. Wolf. The other six were fellow students. Ryan Warsing and Rebecca Turner are primarily performers. Josh Blum and Cris Ruthenberg-Marshall, on

the other hand, are both theatre technicians. Ricky Portner and Rebecca Youngdahl were chosen specifically because they are not heavily involved in theatre.

I met with all eight of these sample audience members and took copious notes on their responses. Some had more to say than others and some opinions were unanimous, so not every section will include input from every source. I will review the responses to each actor's individual and collaborative performance, then move on to more general responses to the show, the effectiveness of connection as a means of audience engagement, and the various ways it manifested.

Unfortunately, the overall consensus indicated that Robin's voice detracted from his performance. He also seemed unaffected by Taylor and his emotional moments seemed to come out of nowhere. In addition, too consistent a tension in his performance resulted in his having nowhere to go emotionally throughout the course of the play.

Ryan Warsing saw the production's opening and closing nights. He noticed a decline in Robin's performance by the final show during which Robin was struggling to be understood. Cris Ruthenberg-Marshall also saw the closing show and commented that Robin's vocal exhaustion kept her from getting lost in the play. Likewise, Ricky Portner, who saw the second to last show, said that he was so worried about the actor's health that he could not get lost in the play. He did say that he thought Robin's "actor voice" worked for the character. Similarly, Rebecca Turner, who saw the opening night performance, said while Robin's performative vocal delivery was distracting, she did think it worked for the play within the play when Felice himself was performing. Because of the high

level of vocal intensity throughout the play, Rebecca said the moments when Robin's voice became lower and more intimate were very compelling.

Josh Blum attended the Friday night performance. He commented that Robin seemed more interested in the play within the play than in connecting with Taylor. Because Robin played everything at such an emotionally intense level, Josh said he found himself watching Taylor's more subtle reactions. He did say that at the end of the show when Felice finally broke, he brought him into the play. The issue was that up until that point, nothing seemed to affect Robin. As such, Josh qualified his earlier statement by saying he felt the breakdown happened a little too quickly considering how seemingly impervious Robin had been. Professor Robert Ruffin commented in a similar vein that Robin's expression of anger or pain manifested itself in shouting, which worked against any potential moments of vulnerability. Dr. Palmer said later that Robin's vulnerability was theatrical, not genuine. This reading of Robin's performance would make it harder for an audience member to empathize with Felice if the character got lost behind the actor playing a role.

Dr. Palmer's Introduction to Theatre class had a lot to say about Robin's performance. One student made a comment that I had honestly not considered during the rehearsal process: that person mentioned the hypnotic element of the show and how Robin's delivery worked against it. Many of the students in the class had attended the closing performance. For them, Robin's strained voice made both the dialogue and the accent difficult to understand. They felt that Robin was more memorable simply because of how bombastic he was, but that his performance was not as nuanced as Taylor's. However, the students conceded that moments when Robin was clearly vulnerable at the

end of each act were very powerful, so much so that they wished there had been more moments of vulnerability.

The written reviews from the Introduction to Theatre class reiterate many of the same comments about Robin's performance. One review chided him for "almost constantly shouting" as it made some scenes "seem too aggressive and abrasive."<sup>81</sup> Another review commented, "[Robin's] only outlet of emotion was yelling and his southern accent constantly became mumbled and hard to understand. . . . It doesn't matter how well you act if you can't be understood."<sup>82</sup> A third student was put off by Robin's habits, stating that with his shouting, Robin "ruined any dynamic that his character could have utilized. . . . Not only did this make the audience cringe; it crushed any hopes of the audience becoming mesmerized with the show. When performing a character with hours of time in front of an audience, one must shake things up to avoid monotony."<sup>83</sup>

The review by Polly Lauer published in *The Virginia Informer* also had the audience retreating into their seats, but for different reasons: "Crigler's character of Felice was especially prone to impassioned rants, and Crigler executed these moments perfectly – the realism of his anger was so genuine that the audience shrank back into their seats."<sup>84</sup> The review by Kayla Sharpe in *The Flat Hat* said "Crigler demonstrated a great range of ability as his character transformed."<sup>85</sup> Review #1, cited earlier criticizing Robin's vocal delivery, first praised him by saying "The amount of commitment Crigler

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<sup>81</sup> Introduction to Theatre Review #1, 2.

<sup>82</sup> Introduction to Theatre Review #4, 2.

<sup>83</sup> Introduction to Theatre Review #2, 1.

<sup>84</sup> Polly Lauer, "'The Two Character Play': Two Plays, Two Characters, Two Stunned Audiences," *The Virginia Informer* <<http://thevai.squarespace.com/arts-culture/2013/10/22/the-two-character-play-two-plays-two-characters-two-stunned-audiences>>).

<sup>85</sup> Kayla Sharpe, "The Two Character Play: A Spartan, Powerful Production," *The Flat Hat*, Oct. 21 2013 <<http://flathatnews.com/2013/10/21/the-two-character-play-a-spartan-powerful-production/>>.)

gave to this emotionally draining role was almost so complete that he emotionally drained the audience watching him.” (2).

No doubt Robin’s vocal delivery, despite the mixed responses it elicited, was an unfortunate actor habit that inhibited the rest of his work. Additionally, the aggression for which I cast Robin either numbed the audience due to sensory overload or produced a shock and awe response. Some of them appreciated Felice as a character, but they did not engage with him. The praise of Robin’s performance in the previous paragraph describes him not as a character, but as a powerful force wreaking havoc on Taylor. The bombastic quality of his performance helped the energy of the show, but it did not make it easy for the audience to relate to him or for him to connect with Taylor.

Many more people had thoughts about Robin’s individual performance than Taylor’s. However, those who did discuss Taylor’s performance were very impressed with her work. Though a few people mentioned that she underplayed some moments and was guilty of mechanical acting, she was the winning element of the show for most. The inner life of her character was very strong and helped a lot of audience members empathize with her. Several praised her synthesis of Clare’s personalities and portrayal of mental instability. Overall, many people viewed her performance as more carefully crafted than Robin’s.

Josh Blum said that Taylor helped get him lost in the play because she was most invested in the connection between the two characters. He also said that Clare’s arc throughout the show was clear through Taylor’s work and made sense to him. The Introduction to Theatre class seemed to agree with this assessment. Though they did think

Taylor underplayed some moments, they thought her characterization of Clare was much more intricate than Robin's of Felice. Professor Ruffin very much enjoyed Taylor's performance. He said that not only did she come across as genuinely insane, but he saw influence of Williams' background on her character. Professor Ruffin, unlike many of my sample audience members, knew enough about Williams' life and work to comment that Clare's childlike persona reminded him of Rose Williams while she managed to embody a bit of Blanche DuBois in her drugged up state. Dr. Wolf and Dr. Palmer agreed when it came to Taylor's connection with Robin. They both saw her giving a lot more to him than he was giving to her. Dr. Palmer added that he saw her really trying to make contact with Robin, though due to Robin's imperviousness she was not always successful.

Specific criticisms of Taylor's performance had to do with a perception of mechanical acting. The two reviewers who mentioned this concern qualified it by saying that the problem was not present throughout the show, but was frequent enough. One reviewer commented on Taylor's pacing specifically, saying she was "guilty of taking long, forced pauses." Like the discussion in Dr. Palmer's class, this reviewer felt that Taylor underplayed some key moments: "At certain points in her performance, I felt genuine emotion from her. Other points were lackluster. She could have put much more into her character in these dry spells."<sup>86</sup> The second reviewer briefly commented that there were "moments where [Taylor's] acting came off forced as if she did not believe in her character or that she forgot she was Clare."<sup>87</sup> Several audience members mentioned something similar regarding the general performance: at times, Robin and Taylor seemed

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<sup>86</sup> Introduction to Theatre Review #3, 1.

<sup>87</sup> Introduction to Theatre Review #8, 2.



not to understand the subtext of a scene. In these moments, the characters became inconsistent and the performances suffered. I will discuss these comments later.

While Robin seemed to confuse the audience, Taylor managed to clarify the story. One reviewer states that, “[Taylor’s] high level of facial vivacity and understated, precise humor amused and cradled the audience throughout the potentially alienating piece.”<sup>88</sup> Another commented both on her portrayal of mental instability and her relation to the audience: “The audience is completely unnerved by [Taylor], and it could have easily ended there. Schwabe manages to layer underneath a quiet desperation to her actions that leaves her entirely more sympathetic than most characters that disconnected from the audience and reality can manage.”<sup>89</sup>

The moral of the story appears to be less is more; Taylor’s more nuanced and internalized performance resonated with the audience much more than Robin’s bombastic energy. At times, she underplayed moments or lost the meaning of what she was saying, but overall she held on to the connection between the two characters and Clare’s inner arc, which kept the audience engaged. She also brought a more tempered intensity to her performance. It not only seemed more natural to the audience, but it made her more engaging on stage; just enough questions about Clare were left unanswered to peak interest.

Many of my reviewers gave me their general thoughts about the acting in the production overall. Two common criticisms that arose were a lack of clarity and excessive energy.

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<sup>88</sup> Introduction to Theatre Review #9, 2.

<sup>89</sup> Introduction to Theatre Review #10, 2.

Dr. Palmer's introduction to Theatre class said that the play lost its audience when the actors did not seem to know the subtext of their lines or the details of their objectives.

Review #2, which was cited earlier, elaborated:

At times Crigler and Schwabe still seem to lose the meaning of what they are saying, which in turn keeps the audience even more in the dark. Although this is understandable to a certain extent given the unwieldy and dense nature of the script, the actors seemed at points to be desperate for more guidance on the deeper meaning behind what they were saying. There are conversely moments that read very clearly and pack a mean punch in the gut when they hit, but overall the show is uneven. (1)

A few audience members also mentioned the excessive energy with which the show was performed. Cris Ruthenberg-Marshall commented that sometimes more intimate moments were played at full volume and full energy. She wanted to see more subtle, internal moments rather than everything big and externalized. One reviewer mentioned, “[playing with full energy] so early in the performance proved to be costly, as it gave these two characters little room to build and raise the stakes as their situation grew more and more dire.”<sup>90</sup>

Most audience members had very positive things to say about the two actors working together. Review #2 said: “Criticisms aside, when fully audible and in command of the subtext in their lines, the two actors work together quite well. In moments when Felice and Clare connect or share a thought, the play shakes off its confusion and comes alive as a vibrant, gripping drama” (2). Review #1 commented, “The acting also turned a piece that could sometimes feel pretentious into something that felt very human and relatable” (1) while another said, “From the first frustrated line to the last weeping

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<sup>90</sup> Introduction to Theatre Review #5, 1.

moments, these two talented and lively actors never slip in their passion and expressiveness.”<sup>91</sup>

The rawness of the final performance lent itself to both praise and criticism. Robin and Taylor were both whirling balls of energy, though they expressed that energy in different ways. Each performance was exhausting for them *and* the audience as the show ran the gauntlet from tragedy to comedy and back again. They put a lot of energy into the show, especially in the more powerful moments when one or both of them broke down. Many people were struck by these moments, as evidenced above.

However, that level of rawness led to some of the confusion mentioned. At times, it may have tipped the scales from the character being lost and confused to the actor appearing lost and confused. If Robin and Taylor lost control of their energy, it became messy. In rehearsals, I aimed to create as much tension as possible in order to keep the rather amorphous plot engaging. Judging by the aforementioned feedback, this worked in the favor of the script only some of the time. Rehearsals would have been better spent clarifying which moments needed full tension and which could be smaller. Such an approach would have at least helped the excessive energy problem and, hopefully, have given the actors a clearer understanding of the emotional arc of the show to improve the clarity of their lines.

Responses to the show as a whole were positive. Many of the sample audience members left with unanswered questions, but were still engaged. Ryan Warsing said it was a good idea to emphasize that the audience should not try to follow the plot, but

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<sup>91</sup> Introduction to Theatre Review #7, 1.

rather the connection and emotional journey of the characters. He said as an execution of the play, it was successful; there were moments that were particularly moving and some which provided unexpected, but welcome humor.

Rebecca Turner thought that she understood what was going on fairly well, but was still willing to have some questions unanswered. She said that the unanswered questions did not feel like loose ends because she did not feel pressured to know every detail. She was conscious of the ambiguities in the plot, but they did not bother her and she found the words that were *not* said particularly interesting. Cris Ruthenberg-Marshall began the conversation by admitting that she hated the script. Despite this, she responded to the portrayal of mental illness. She appreciated the thematic concern with mental illness impeding day-to-day life and was appreciative of Robin and Taylor's portrayal of these difficulties.

Professor Ruffin summed up his thoughts by saying that the audience understood the show because Robin and Taylor understood the show. The sense that the actors knew where they were, what they were doing, and why they were there helped to clarify the script to the audience. Dr. Wolf's first comment was that it was a "bloody difficult script" to work with. She found the ambiguities interesting, however, because she was constantly kept guessing. This did have its downside, however, as she said the first act was difficult to follow. Ricky Portner took a much more sensory approach to his summation of the show. He felt very drawn to the arc of the characters and, as a result of their tragic breakdown at the end, left feeling cold and detached.

In brief, responses to the imaginary audience were mixed. While many seemed to understand the intention behind the choice, most felt that it was not fully realized. Ryan thought that the real audience still identified with the fake audience, Rebecca Turner said it made her feel more like an observer than participant in the play, and Cris felt a lot of the energy from the actors was wasted on a wall. Two of the Introduction to Theatre reviews were exemplary of the mixed receptions. One of the reviewers commented that the fake audience “clearly and concisely separated ‘Two Character Play’ from *The Two Character Play*.”<sup>92</sup> However, another reviewer chided that “at times it was difficult to understand who [the two characters] were performing too [*sic*].”<sup>93</sup> The choice to use Southern accents was met with unanimous praise. Ryan Warsing, Professor Ruffin, Rebecca Youngdahl, and the Introduction to Theatre class said that the use of accents was very helpful. Rebecca Turner specifically loved when one of the actors would purposefully drop the Southern accent and the other would not.

My main focus was the audience response to the connection between the characters. Review #5 chided that there was a lack of variation throughout the performance in regards to the power play between the two characters: “Crigler and Schwabe were unwilling to compromise, and at times it seemed as though they were unmoved and not affected by what the other had to say....this performance could have benefited from additional ‘give and take’” (1-2). This was the biggest criticism the connection received.

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<sup>92</sup> Review #4, 1.

<sup>93</sup> Introduction to Theatre Review #11, 1.

Ryan Warsing stated that the connection was successful throughout and the two actors used the language to strengthen it. Rebecca Turner commented that the actors had particularly strong chemistry and she saw how much the characters needed each other. Cris Ruthenberg-Marshall added that the emotional conflict was very clear and Josh Blum said that the connection helped him engage in spite of the absurdism. Professor Ruffin thought the actors captured familial love and the connection sold the play. Even if the story got lost, the connection between the characters remained the same. Ricky Portner said he engaged with the connection so much that he wanted to pull the trigger for them at the end. The Introduction to Theatre class added that the connection was very clear throughout the performance.

The written reviews had more praise for the connection. One reviewer stated that “Despite [Robin’s shouting], the connection between Schwabe and Crigler was consistently outstanding. They both played into their childish side at times which made the audience believe that they had a history as brother and sister and that they had shared experiences – even if the audience doesn’t know what those experiences are.”<sup>94</sup> Another reviewer added, “Schwabe and Crilger had a strong connection and painted vibrant pictures of the past.”<sup>95</sup> A third commented, “these two manage to work effortlessly as a unit. This actually manages to cover up problems that occur in the acting of the two independently as this is such an important aspect of the play.”<sup>96</sup>

As a manifestation of this connection, the implication of incest received a lot of commentary. Cris Ruthenberg-Marshall knew in advance that the implications were

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<sup>94</sup> Review #1, 2.

<sup>95</sup> Review #4, 1.

<sup>96</sup> Review #10, 2.

forthcoming. She questioned whether we really needed it as she felt it made the characters morally questionable. She did admit, however, that it was supported by the script and at least merited our consideration, though maybe not as much attention. A written review agreed with her, saying, “Forcing [the questions of incest] to the surface dredges up another layer of uncertainty towards the main characters, with whom we want to sympathize.”<sup>97</sup> Josh Blum was also forewarned about the incest, but he did not see as much as he was expecting. He saw the siblings need for physical contact as motivated more from their broken emotional state than romantic feelings for each other.

On the other side of the spectrum, Rebecca Turner agreed that the implications of incest were supported by the script, particularly with the mention that Felice and Clare once played opposite each other as Antony and Cleopatra (10) and Felice’s quote from the Song of Solomon (56). The Introduction to Theatre class did think the incest was uncomfortable for the audience, but they agreed that it added positively to the awkwardness of Felice and Clare’s attempts to connect. Rebecca Youngdahl got a very clear sense of the incest from the moments of physical intimacy between the characters and the pregnant pauses. She thought the script supported the choice because the siblings’ arguments sounded like lovers’ spats.

A few audience members added that the implications of incest added positively to the connection between the two characters. Rebecca Turner said that it added to the sense of dependency between the siblings while the Introduction to Theatre class agreed that it helped emphasize their love/hate relationship. Ricky Portner said the implications explained the inability of Felice and Clare to kill each other. Dr. Wolf went further and

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<sup>97</sup> Review #7, 3.

said that without the implications of incest, the relationship would not have made sense. Because the two characters were clearly everything to each other, the feelings were inevitable and natural.

Almost every reviewer had something to say about the ending of the show. Most appreciated it as a powerful moment justified by the script, but some thought it was taken too far. Ryan Warsing thought that Robin had had too many outbursts and was put off by his sobbing collapse in the final moments. Josh Blum agreed that Robin's breakdown at the end of the show happened very quickly while Rebecca Youngdahl said that the actors failed to make it clear that they were going to kill each other. She was therefore confused as to what exactly was happening in the final moments. However, she did concede that the collapse at the end of the show was a natural and appropriate conclusion.

All the other audience members who mentioned the ending felt it was justified and very impressive. Rebecca Turner said the ending felt right to her and almost seemed uplifting because the siblings avoided their parents' tragic fate. She thought it made absolute sense that Felice would collapse and Clare would go to comfort him. Cris Ruthenberg-Marshall and Ricky Portner agreed that the ending seemed a natural conclusion to the play and that our staging was very powerful. Dr. Wolf said she could see why the ending might seem over the top, but Robin was wound so tight throughout the rest of the show that it had to be big when he broke at the end. The Introduction to Theatre class thought it was very powerful and effective in adding to the connection between the siblings.



## Conclusion

FELICE: ...There are punctuation marks in life and it's time to admit that they include periods – one of which is final . . .

-Tennessee Williams, *Out Cry* (68)

So what is to be concluded from all of this?

I tried to determine whether a production of Tennessee Williams' *The Two-Character Play* in which the focus was placed on the connection between Felice and Clare would engage the audience even if they were left with unanswered questions. Could the on-stage relationship between two actors help the audience to see past the obscurities of the script and engage with the emotional journey of the characters?

While I will be the first to admit that my production of *The Two-Character Play* was not perfect, I do think it proved my theory. None of the audience members claimed to understand every detail of the show, but almost all were engaged by the connection between Felice and Clare. The connection served as a dynamic through line in an otherwise plot-less play, and transformed the obscurities of the script into tools with which the connection was further explored. Powerful moments, such as Felice and Clare's collapse at the end of the show, engaged the audience emotionally while strong choices by the actors, such as the implication of incest, made the connection intellectually engaging.

Had I the chance to revisit the production, I would certainly readdress vulnerability. Moments in which the tension became monotonous encouraged audience apathy. To avoid this, I would start with the actors at a lower energy in rehearsal and

build them up to key moments of intensity. I would also have made more of an effort to attack Robin's vocal habit earlier if I had known how negatively it would affect his final performance. The production was mostly successful in defining the history behind the lines and clarifying when the characters were performing and when they were not. However, I think we still could have defined the lines and the difference between performing and not performing more thoroughly to eliminate moments in which the actors seemed lost.

I do not think that the connection between Robin and Taylor as Felice and Clare was as strong as it could have been, or, rather, as strong as it ideally would be in any given production of *The Two-Character Play*. I agree with some of my audience members that the actors got lost in the lines at times and I think had more focus been directed at lower energy moments, the connection would not have read as presentational to some. And yet, as I have evidenced with my audiences' responses, the connection still managed to engage. If even in this production in which the connection was not fully realized audience members were able to engage, then it seems logical to conclude that a production of *The Two-Character Play* in which the focus is placed on the connection between Felice and Clare will succeed in engaging the audience. Though I failed to direct a perfect production, it's clear that connection can be used to engage the audience of this play.

In "The History of a Play (With Parentheses)," a thirty-four year old Williams said:

I have never for one moment doubted that there are people – millions! – to say things to. We come to each other, gradually, but with love. It is the short reach of

my arms that hinders, not the length and multiplicity of theirs. With love and with honesty, the embrace is inevitable. (121)

Williams believed that humanity was condemned to isolated lives, but sought to reach out for connection at any cost. The playwright and his characters risked their careers, their reputations, their safety, and their sanity to be close to people and achieve communion in an unforgiving world. In the mutual struggle of life, humanity finds comfort in each other and meaning in an otherwise meaningless universe.

The story of Felice and Clare is not and was never a tragedy. It is a story of the power of connection. As an epigraph to the original manuscript, Williams chose a phrase he credited to Hemingway: “Man can be destroyed but not defeated.”<sup>98</sup> Death cannot part the siblings and life will not defeat them. They will combat hordes of hostile audiences and bend reality itself to stay together. At the end of the play, they are not dead. They are united in a loving embrace. They are damaged, but not broken. They go on to face the world. It is not an easy journey they make through life, but we make it with them, together. Dragon Country is a lonely place to travel, but if we simply open our eyes, see our fellow travelers and reach out to them, we have nothing to fear. The embrace is inevitable.

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<sup>98</sup> O'Connor, 97.

## Appendix

### *Selected Production History of The Two-Character Play*

In its final version, *The Two-Character Play* performed in San Francisco in 1976 with Jay Leo Colt directing. Another production followed in 1977 at the Callboard Theatre in Los Angeles. 1982 saw a production in New York's Open Space. The play went abroad in 1988, premiering at the Todifestival in Perugia, Italy. In April of 1989, the play was performed in Chicago, Illinois at the Raven Theatre.

In March of 1995, a production was staged at the Theatre Marigny in New Orleans, Louisiana with William Heard serving as the director and playing the role of Felice. The play appeared at the Peabody House Theatre in Boston, Massachusetts in 1997 and at the Zoo District in Los Angeles during the 1999 Artshare. In 2001, the Walnut Street Theatre Company in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania staged the play. It had its Australian debut in 2005 at the Guild Theatre at the University of Melbourne. It returned to Chicago in December of 2005 and was staged at the Viaduct Theatre. A staged reading of the play was presented on March 26th, 2010 at the Backyard Ballroom in New Orleans, Louisiana.

The next few years proved very successful for *The Two-Character Play*. Director Gene David Kirk staged a production in 2010 at the Jermyn Street Theatre in London that met with great acclaim. Kirk later brought the production to the Provincetown Theatre Festival. On May 9th, 2011, another staged reading of the play was presented by the Classic Stage Company in New York with Alan Cumming and Jessica Hecht as the two siblings.

Wesleyan University incorporated the play into their original production *Glass Guignol: The Brother and Sister Play*. This piece was an adaptation of several of Williams' plays, including *The Two-Character Play* and *The Glass Menagerie*. The Theatre Rhinoceros at the Eureka Theatre in San Francisco mounted a production in January of 2012. On June 19th, 2013, Gene David Kirk's second production of *The Two-Character Play* began a successful run off-Broadway at New World Stage. The production starred Brad Dourif and Amanda Plummer.

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