



**The very heart of my life:
some analytic considerations about
The two-character play, by Tennessee Williams¹**

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Maria Sílvia Betti²

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Abstract

This essay gives an overview of Tennessee Williams' career as a playwright, and briefly analyzes *The two-character play* as a work in which Tennessee purposely expresses the exhaustion of the standards that had made him famous.

Keywords: Dramaturgy; Periodization; Criticism; Metatheater.

Resumo

Depois de empreender uma breve visão de conjunto do percurso de criação de Tennessee Williams como dramaturgo, este artigo faz uma breve análise de *The two-character play* como trabalho em que Tennessee propositalmente expressa a exaustão dos padrões que o haviam notabilizado.

Palavras-chave: Dramaturgia; Periodização; Crítica; Metateatro.

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² Maria Sílvia Betti is a researcher, advisor and senior lecturer at the Faculty of Philosophy, Literature and Human Sciences of the University of São Paulo, in the Graduate Program in Linguistic and Literary Studies in English. She is the organizer of the Oduvaldo Vianna Filho Collection for Editora Temporal. Her works include *Oduvaldo Vianna Filho* (Brazilian Artists Collection, Edusp/FAPESP, 1997) and *Comparative Dramaturgy United States-Brazil. Three studies* (Cia Fagulha, 2017).

To research is to investigate and organize, in an orderly and systematic way, all the concrete aspects of an object in its different manifestations, relationships and projections. To analyze is to examine, in the light of theoretical, methodological and interpretative criteria, everything that emerged from the researched material.

We are presently living in an era of overwhelming prevalence of media in all areas. Research and analysis increasingly depend on exhaustive searches for intertextual references. Within this context, Tennessee Williams' vast dramaturgical production is extremely challenging for those who try to understand it in its entirety and aiming at deeper forms of understanding. The playwright's work spans almost five decades and covers an extensive repertoire of themes, techniques and styles. His plays gained recognition in the second post-war period from productions on Broadway and film adaptations in Hollywood. Critics were enthusiastic about his use of lyricism, of the symbolic projection of memory, and of elements of autobiographical inspiration. However, the fact that most of the central characters were marginalized in the world of production relations in American capitalist society always received little or no attention. Tennessee became a reference name within the modernization of theater and dramaturgy in the United States and internationally.

When, from the early 1960s onwards, New York's small alternative theaters and cafes expanded beyond the areas adjacent to Broadway, dramaturgical and scenic aesthetics rooted in countercultural movements began to attract other audiences, and this brought considerable changes to the previously existing standard of reception of the author's works. Given the experimental vigor of the so-called off-off-Broadway, Tennessee's theater increasingly came to be seen as a modern classic already consolidated and revered within the establishment. Just over a decade and a half had passed since his rise to fame, and he had already become associated with the cultural and artistic mainstream of theater and the mass cultural industry.

There were countless attempts by the author to renew himself as a playwright and to absorb other compositional processes into his plays. Pressured by contractual commitments with publishers and studios and shaken by the existential and emotional desolation in which, for numerous personal reasons, he found himself, Tennessee sought

dramatic and scenic audacity, but this displeased critics without having managed to fully captivate audiences in the new circuits.

Other American modernizers of dramaturgy such as Miller and Albee were also targets of negative criticism when they tried to use patterns that differed from those used in the plays that had made them famous. In the case of Tennessee, however, expressions of disapproval began to recurrently affect most of the plays he wrote from the second half of the 1960s and 1970s on, the period of his life that he himself called the stoned age, a bitter pun (and untranslatable to Portuguese) alluding to the chemical dependency he had developed in an attempt to combat depression, alcoholism and anxiety.

In 1983, eight years after the release of his memoirs, Tennessee's sudden death opened a period of new productions of plays of various styles and phases of his career. In the years that followed, criticism (mainly in the academic area) began to use an analytical nomenclature that divided the author's production into two phases and styles of plays: the one of the early period, when the rise to fame took place, was characterized as that of the so-called canonical plays, performed on Broadway and adapted into screenplays in Hollywood; the following phase, from the early 1960s onwards, was characterized by plays that came to be called post-canonical, associated with different types of experimentalism. As they were written shortly before the author's death, these plays came to be called "late plays." Most of them were parodies and farces with extensive use of resources from the theater of the absurd, from camp, from dark humor, from the vigorous and emerging gay theater, from the Noh theater, from the grotesque forms of performance, and due to the reaction of shock and scandal they caused, several of them were called "outrageous plays."

The unprecedented international prestige, as well as the growing volume of translations and adaptations around the world, began to coexist with critical diagnoses of the decline in the quality of more recent works and the systematic repudiation of the dramaturgical and scenic devices used in them.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the immense growth of academic cultural studies focused on questions of identity and gender (queer studies) meant that Tennessee's post-canonical plays began to attract increasing interest from researchers and directors. His dramaturgy became the subject of debates in academia and in alternative theater and performance circuits, with emphasis on the repertoire of themes and techniques used by the author in

late plays. Increasingly, the attention of researchers and directors has turned to homosexual issues and thematic and intertextual approaches with works by prominent artists in the field of countercultural performativity and gay culture already incorporated into socially accepted institutions and codes.

Inevitably, within this line of approach, some researchers and critics began to regard post-canonical plays as the most forceful and complete materialization of the anti-establishment critical content in the playwright's work. At the same time, the success of the canonical plays came to be considered by them as a result of the fact that they were supposedly palatable to the commercial and business system of Broadway and the dominant thought, and not of the fact that this system and this thought had managed to organize itself ideologically and institutionally in order to neutralize them, "metabolize" them and incorporate them without altering or excluding the critical substance that made them up.

One of the elements that most efficiently contributed to this fact was, no doubt, Tennessee's use of autobiographical aspects within the dramaturgical plots and the characters' imagery, symbolic, associative and psychological mechanisms. The wide network of associations linked to the author's individual and family memory ended up allowing plays from this final period, whether canonical or outrageous, to be approached predominantly from perspectives focused on identity particularities, thus failing to expose in the analysis potentially critical aspects of dominant thinking in the United States.

Having become a public figure of great recognition, Tennessee became a "persona" whose personal and family history began to be treated as a central key to understanding his own work. With this perspective duly legitimized, the discussion began to converge on the individual-author and his private context of life and coexistence, preventing other issues present in his work that concerned class contradictions and relationships of alienation, exploitation and exclusion within society.

There is still another aspect to be remembered: a good part of Tennessee Williams' so-called post-canonical pieces are characterized by the large number of references to thematic, stylistic and formal elements taken from extremely varied sources, located both within the scope of American counterculture and that of American culture, classical and modern European culture, Japanese culture, and the mass cultural industry. A large volume of late plays have not (to date) been organized into a definitive editorial version.

Thus, the identification and analytical survey of these references began to gain more and more relevance for academic studies of Tennessee's dramaturgy, whether with regard to aspects of the text or with regard to scenic possibilities.

What can be concluded is that the plays of this final phase, belated and/or outrageous, written by a Tennessee committed to developing his work outside the parameters of the mainstream (Broadway and Hollywood), began to be recurrently analyzed and discussed in the field of identity studies and queer approaches, currently hegemonic lines within the contemporary world of performing arts research.

At this point, some unavoidable research questions arise: from the point of view of those who study the historical role of Tennessee drama in its time, how do the plays from the post-canonical phase compare to the plays from the rise to fame phase and vice-versa? Was Tennessee's work inexorably "split in half" and forever divided into two stages that repudiate each other? If his rise to celebrity in the first phase represented a process of linking his work to the machine of the establishment, to what extent did identity and gender analyses, dominant in the contemporary academic world, free him to a different condition with regard to the pieces of final phase?

These are questions that have not yet been asked, and therefore will not be the subject of debate anytime soon. Hence, repeating what was said at the beginning, Tennessee Williams' vast dramaturgical production is extremely challenging for those who try to understand it in its entirety and with the expectation of reaching deeper forms of understanding.

II

A play written by Tennessee in the second phase of his production is noteworthy for distinguishing itself from all those that preceded it and all those that followed it. It is not an "outrageous" play and it is quite different from his so-called late production: it is *The two-character play*, written in 1966 and rewritten in 1969 with the title *Out cry*. This new version was published in 1973, but in 1975 Tennessee revised the text and resumed the previous title, publishing what came to be considered the final version of the play.

It was a habit of his to make constant changes and revisions to his plays, even if they had already been published, but *The two-character play* seems to have been one of the

most obsessively revised and reworked by him, as if something in the writing had escaped him or had resulted unsatisfactory. It took him almost ten years to give play what was considered its definitive version, a longer time than that required by any other of his works. His own words about the play show his special appreciation for it: “my most beautiful play since *Streetcar*, the very heart of my life” (Williams, 1979; Galton, 2021; Hampstead, 2021).

Another noteworthy fact related to *The two-character play* is that its first version was better received by the public and critics than its re-elaboration. Tennessee apparently wanted to display a deliberate departure from the poetic naturalism with which his dramaturgy had been identified, and the exacerbation of this characteristic can be observed in the comparison with the two other versions.

Despite this desire to differentiate it as much as possible from his previous production, the play was considered partially autobiographical because it revisited two striking aspects of the plays from the first phase: it dealt with intra-family issues and with the presence of “reminiscences” from the past projected through narrated fragments of memories, such as in *The glass menagerie*.

The great distinguishing mark of *The two-character play* is the use of metatheatricality, marked by the very characteristic of the space described in the first stage direction: everything takes place on the stage of an old theater located in some unspecified part of the inlands of the United States. Several partially assembled sets recreate the inside of an old Victorian-style house located in the south of the country. There are pieces of props from other productions also on view, and you can see a field of sunflowers through a window. The center of the stage is occupied by a gigantic, sinister-looking statue fixed on a pedestal. The characters are the siblings Felice and Claire, the two main artists of a theater company deserted by all the other members on the opening night of their season.

Pressed by this distressing situation, all that’s left for Felice and Claire is to rehearse “a two-character play” in the hope of having something to present to the public. A “play within a play” structure is the fictional result of the fragmented memory of the two siblings’ family past. The situation experienced is one of confinement, abandonment and perplexity. There is no one else in the theater but themselves, and the dramatic text they rehearse brings out traumatic memories from the past related to the death of their parents

involving suicide and crime to which the two siblings were apparently the only witnesses.

The psychological condition of Felice and Claire is critical, and the fictional past being rehearsed onstage intermingles with their past life recollected in the performance, as dark memories gradually start to emerge.

As the time of the play being rehearsed passes, facts and fragments of facts that have slipped from Clare's and Felice's memory have to be replaced by improvised lines, and with that, it becomes more and more difficult for the reader and for the spectator to clearly distinguish the characters of the fictional text from the actor and actress who are on stage. After a certain point, it is no longer possible to discern to what extent the improvised scenes had actually happened in the past and to what extent they are no more than fictional projections of introjected fears coming from the past. Claire and Felice have no other option than to rehearse/remember/improvise/present their own past, now transformed into a tattered fabric of incongruous memories and a final act.

There is a duplication of their confinement at this point: in the recollected past, they are mentally imprisoned in the family home, a space of suicide and crime; in the present, the space of confinement is the one of the empty theatre where the rehearsal takes place and where they wait for the manager, who will not come, and for the theatrical season which is not going to take place. Their mental alienation reaches its maximum level at this point. While in *The glass menagerie* the relationship between Tom (the brother) and Laura (the sister) is evoked with delicate lyricism focused on the past, here the relationship between Felice and Claire takes on increasingly darker contours that highlight the state of psychic disturbance in the face of terrifying memories of disintegrated family life.

The two-character play is full of elements suggestive of latent symbolic associations. A hypothetical researcher eager to delve into it based on first impressions caused by the play could even run the risk of giving in to the temptation of seeing Felice and Claire as autobiographical projections of Tennessee and Rose Williams, and of seeing the play as a symbolic representation of 'human existence' or the inevitable enclosure of consciousness in the face of the impossibility of facing or transcending madness and death.

This form of understanding would fail to consider, however, that in *The two-character play* the relationship between Felice and Claire is not only based on the family bonds, but also and mainly on the roles they play in the play being rehearsed: the one of the first actor/playwright (Felice) and the one of first actress (Clare). At the same time,

among the countless symbolic elements used in the play, we have countless undeniably concrete references associated with theater making and modern 20th century dramaturgy itself.

Felice and Claire establish, from the beginning of the play, a relationship full of tensions and disagreements. The points of divergence concern the immediate and concrete situation of the show they will have to stage: Claire wishes to receive the press before the performance, as she considers herself skilled in this task. Felice objects to this saying that she is drunk, and that in other similar interviews she started to speak against fascism, a subject that he considers inappropriate. Claire wants Felice to manage the specific issues of the performance, and Felice says that if they don't do well on stage, that night, the season will end up not taking place.

The disagreement degenerates into a violent exchange of insults. Claire confesses that she wants to go home, but Felice reminds her that their home is the theater, and that they will have nowhere else to go. Amid the altercation, Felice ends up telling Claire that the other cast members had sent a telegram leaving the company, and therefore it would no longer be possible to carry out the season. Claire feels tired and asks to go to the hotel room, and Felice replies that they don't have any hotel room available, and that's why the show needs to be staged, as there is nothing else left for them to do. Fox, the manager, would have to pay Felice and Claire for previously presented shows, but nothing indicates that he will come or that he will make contact. The situational mechanism that engenders these dialogues configures a circularity with no way out and no possible solution: everything goes wrong and seems to have roots in similar clashes between Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

In the second act, with the series of improvisations they do onstage, there is an increasing lack of distinction between the fictional past and the concrete situation. None of their material needs can be met: Fox (the manager) won't come, the season won't take place, there will be no hotel room where they could possibly go to after the show. The fictional space of the evoked home is the space of witnessed deaths and family disintegration, and the play that they are now rehearsing/performing/improvising updates the trauma in the theater, where they are now confined. Reader, spectator and interpreters are taken out of any possible comfort zone. Claire and Felice's speeches oscillate between past and present without differences in light or spatial demarcation. The

stage is cluttered with props unrelated to the play the two are rehearsing. The center of the staging area is occupied by the huge statue with a somber countenance, an icon not referred to or indicated by any of the speeches or gestures. There are no certainties, there are no clear perceptions and there is no possible cause and consequence chain of events for the desired or attempted actions. *The two-character play* seems, in this second act, to exacerbate the opacity of the meanings, speeches and memories of the characters themselves, who at the beginning had offered readers and spectators the ephemeral comfort of the parallel with Laura/Rose and with Tom/Tennessee.

III

Faced with these disturbing findings, some hypotheses arise: it appears that Tennessee effectively deconstructed, in *The two-character play*, what the spectators and critics had previously enthusiastically acclaimed in the beginning of his work. Now, however, nothing remains and there is no catharsis for the anguish represented by Felice and Claire. There is only perplexity, abandonment and the pain of final confinement figured in the play.

Given this impressive collection of images and meanings, we now ask: would it be possible to say that *The two-character play*, obsessively written and rewritten over almost ten years, ended up synthesizing the agonizing vision that Tennessee would have arrived at concerning his own work and concerning theater in general? If we remember that Claire and Felice, in addition to being sister and brother, are also actress and actor/playwright within a theater company, would it be possible to see the play as a work that purposefully displays its own exhaustion in the face of the Tennessee had been made famous for? Would it be possible, in the scattered fragments of sceneries among which Felice and Claire rehearse, to see the fractured pieces of an integrity now irretrievable to theater, now made imprisoned in its own opacity of meaning? Would *The two-character play* be a kind of metatheatrical *huis clos*?

May the questions be left open with the expectation that future looks at the play will not forget the definition Tennessee himself gave it when he referred to it as “the very heart of my life.”

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