THE FRAGMENTED ARTIST: REPRESENTATIONS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS IN BIOGRAPHICAL SOLO-PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

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Today, there is more information available about Tennessee Williams than ever before. Yet, despite this deluge of information, I argue that we are no closer to defining who Tennessee Williams was than the day that he died. In fact, one might even go so far to say that with each publishing of a new, rediscovered play or correspondence, we move one-step further from a strict definition of Tennessee Williams. Indeed, our search for Tennessee Williams is a fruitless one as a platonic form of Williams does not exist. The real, complete, or authentic Tennessee is a mirage. For every text that is brought into the light another interpretation of Williams is born. This process is mimicked in the multiplicity of biographical solo-performances that playwrights keep writing about Tennessee Williams with each passing year.

In this study, I examine the works of three different playwrights to see how they construct a fragmented image of Tennessee Williams within the genre of biographical solo-performance. I begin with an examination of Ray Stricklyn's Confession's of a Nightingale and how he fashions a performance of Williams's biography and celebrity. Next, I look at Will Scheffer's Tennessee and Me to examine how gay playwrights and activists have tried to reclaim Williams as a distinctly homosexual artist. Finally, I discuss Steve Lawson's A Distant Country Called Youth and Blanche and Beyond as performances that seek to objectify and sanitize the narrative of Williams. In addition to this "case-study," I also offer the political implications and consequences that each production has on our historical understanding of Tennessee Williams and on the genre of biographical solo-performance itself.
For my parents, who gave me everything,

for Emily, who was always there to talk,

and for Rowlf, who always listened.
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INTRODUCTION

“You know, then, that the public Somebody you are when you ‘have a name’ is a fiction created with mirrors . . .”

--Tennessee Williams, "The Catastrophe of Success" 35

During a 1959 broadcast of Playboy’s Penthouse, vocalist Teddi King introduced her selection for the evening as “a very strange blues.” Encouraged by none other than Hugh Hefner, King had decided to sing a new satirical song entitled “Tennessee Williams’s Southern Decadence Blues.” King’s song framed Williams and his works as depressing and hopeless. King claimed that after seeing “some shows by him . . . now the whole world’s future seems dim.” Additionally, King touched on the author’s perceived abuse of drugs and alcohol by singing about having “switched from Coke to five-star Hennessey.” But perhaps the sharpest barbs in the song were King's description of the works of other authors (William Inge and Edgar Allen Poe) as a “howdy doody show” compared to Williams’s plays.

1959, the year the song was performed on television, was a critical year for Tennessee Williams. Although Williams had won the Pulitzer Prize just four years earlier for Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, his current Broadway offering, Sweet Bird of Youth, was receiving a poor critical reception. Though a seemingly playful parody, King’s song represents a critical moment of change in Williams’s career and identity, a shift from one of success to failure. Cat on a Hot Tin Roof would be the last outright success Williams would ever enjoy. More importantly, however, the completion of “Cat” marked the last of three plays that would form a large part of the general public’s perception and memory of Tennessee Williams. The Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desire, and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof worked to frame Williams as a troubled Southern
playwright who dealt in sex, drugs, dysfunction—what King playfully called “a new shade of blue” or “Southern Decadence.”

In the years after 1959, more images, habits, characteristics, and labels would become associated with the man who was Tennessee: homosexual, wasted genius, desperate, drug addict, and failure were among the many terms that comprised the identity of Williams in his later life. During his four decades as major American playwright, Williams’s identity only became more fractured, complicated, and complex. The fracturing of Williams’s identity is even reflected in his name. In his obituary, for example, Mel Gussow describes the many complications attributed simply to his choice of name: “[Tennessee] was a reaction against his early inferior work, published under his real name. It was a college nickname. It was because his father was from Tennessee. It was distinctive” (Gussow 3). By the time of Williams's death in 1983, numerous scholars had inquired into his life and work. Memoirs, countless biographies, his published letters, his books and poems, his notebooks, his essays, and even his early drafts of plays have all been taken from the archives, anthologized, and made available to the public. Yet, despite all these materials, we still grapple with the larger question of identity: “Who was Tennessee Williams?”

Essentially, Teddi King's song is an artistic interpretation of the public celebrity persona of Tennessee Williams. In the song, she chooses one striking narrative line of Williams's life, in this case failure and depression, and weaves it into a kind of miniature performance about Williams's artistic life. Yet, in creating her song, King avoided other narrative lines and aspects of Williams's life. Should King have also sung, for example, about the success and emotional power of Williams's plays? Not necessarily: it would not have been in her best interest. Teddi King is on Playboy's Penthouse to entertain and deliver laughs ("Hef" does introduce it as a satire
song) and what better way to achieve that agenda than by taking cheap shots at Williams's expense? Though some may find King's song "inaccurate," it would be futile to try and correct King. How should she represent Tennessee Williams? King reveals her subjectivity. She plainly states that the song is a satire and that it is not meant to be taken seriously. But, is this all that we can say regarding Williams and the people who try to characterize his life and work? Beyond the world of musical satire, the struggle to capture Williams's persona fully has continued on in the repeated attempts by playwrights and actors to capture the essence of Tennessee Williams onstage.

In the years after his death, there has been a series of performances that has sought to represent the tumultuous life of Williams. In 1985, Ray Stricklyn first attempted the feat in Confessions of a Nightingale, using Williams’s own words taken from two interviews recorded not long before his death. In a strange, ironic twist, one of the sources for Stricklyn's text is an interview from none other than Playboy magazine. The 1990s saw more fictional representations of Williams. In 1992, for example, Sky Gilbert imagined a meeting between a young man and an older Tennessee Williams in My Night with Tennessee. Will Scheffer’s Tennessee and Me which presented a gay man dealing with the haunting experience of being possessed by the ghost of Tennessee Williams (during an intense orgasm, no less) opened in 1997. Finally, in 2001 and 2005, Steve Lawson returned to Tennessee Williams's words as he strictly adapted volume one and two from The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams into A Distant Country Called Youth and Blanche and Beyond respectively. In the two decades after his death, the plethora of works concerning Williams remains a testament not only to the difficulty of defining his nature, but also to the myriad of methods available of representing Tennessee Williams.
In his book, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, Marvin Carlson describes American culture's "simultaneous attraction to and fear of the dead, [and] need to continually rehearse and renegotiate the relationship with memory and the past" (Carlson, 167). Each of these theatrical endeavors, some more than others, attempts to capture the spirit of Tennessee Williams onstage. Yet, for better or for worse, each playwright must choose how to represent Tennessee Williams and from what they will draw their stage narratives.

**STATEMENT OF KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Though long since dead, Tennessee Williams is hardly forgotten. A recent poll of "The 10 Most Important American Plays" by the Denver Post asked "a long list of theater professionals" (Moore 1) to name what they considered to be the ten most important American plays. Two of the Williams's plays, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *The Glass Menagerie*, made it into the list. In the contemporary American theater landscape, Tennessee Williams is still recognized as one of the great American playwrights. Even his later works, which were demonized by critics, are receiving a second look. Writing in 1983, Mel Gussow commented how most of his failed plays "have been seen again in major revivals (Gussow 4). Accompanying this wave of change in opinion on Williams are biographical solo-performances that seek to retell the narrative of Williams's life on the stage. Far from stories of failure, these plays evoke feelings of empathy, emotion, empowerment, and rebirth for a playwright who, during his life, had been labeled a "has-been."

To describe the purpose of this thesis I first must define biographical solo-performance. John Gentile, in his book *Cast of One*, cites playwright Tom Topor's definition: "Shows of this sort are attempts at living biographies. The performer impersonates the historical figure (sometimes very closely, sometimes just impressionistically) and, using letters, and documents
and other historical (or quasi-historical) material, offers the audience a slice of the figure's life" (qtd. in Gentile 130). This thesis will explore how playwrights and actors have characterized Tennessee Williams through the genre of biographical performance. Specifically, I will examine the plays *Confessions of a Nightingale*, *Tennessee and Me*, *A Distant Country Called Youth*, and *Blanche and Beyond* and locate how they function as biographical solo-performances. I will look at how the representational choices that these playwrights made established their artistic works as biographical solo-performance. By looking at reviews and critical responses, I hope to address what particular aspects of the genre audience members recognized and enjoyed or criticized.

Another essential question involves finding out from which sources, if any, did each particular playwright draw? How was the audience involved or implicated, if at all, in the performance? Furthermore, by analyzing these representational choices I argue that each playwright used the genre of biographical solo-performance to frame the persona of Tennessee Williams in a very particular light. Ray Stricklyn, in *Confessions of a Nightingale*, presents the audience with an intimate evening with the "famous" Tennessee Williams. Will Scheffer, in *Tennessee and Me*, makes clear the oblique history of Williams's homosexuality and personifies Williams as a distinctly queer playwright. Finally, Steve Lawson "sanitizes" the persona of the author in his two plays *A Distant Country Called Youth* and *Blanche and Beyond*. By looking at the representational strategies at play in each of these works, I argue that we can see how each playwright's subjectivity and personal agenda in (re)presenting Tennessee Williams is revealed.

Finally, I will describe the problematic implications of each play and how they ultimately pushed the boundaries of the genre of biographical solo-performance with strategies that point toward new frontiers for this style of performance.

METHODOLOGY
Scholars today continue to tease out biographical threads from Williams’s plays. No stones have been left unturned in terms of studies of the artistic output of Tennessee Williams. Yet, outside of a few biographers, few have considered the implications of the image and identity that Williams carefully cultivated throughout his life. Indeed, Williams’s reckless indulgence in drugs, alcohol, sex, and (in the opinion of some critics) writing, have led scholars to believe that Williams could not have possibly exerted any sense of control over his own identity. Yet, throughout his career, there is evidence of Williams strategically responding to and interacting with his critics and the public in an effort to make himself understood. Throughout his life Tom Williams routinely perfected his performance as Tennessee Williams. Nonetheless, a scholarly pursuit to find the "real" or "authentic" Tennessee Williams will not be a main component of my study. Rather, I wish to look at how the compilers of the plays I have selected have constructed an image of Tennessee Williams and how that image might align or be at odds with our historical understanding of Williams.

Since each play either reinforces or challenges previous memories of Tennessee Williams, the central concept that I wish to weave throughout my study is Marvin Carlson’s concept of “haunting” or “ghosting” as described in his book The Haunted Stage. Essentially, Carlson states that “every play is a memory play” that recalls a succession of actors and their performances (Carlson 2). This concept is evident in Tennessee Williams’s plays as more than twenty years after his death his plays continue to be reenacted. Every performer who plays Amanda in The Glass Menagerie, for example, will ultimately be compared to the “original” Amanda (Laurette Taylor). The same concept of “ghosting” applies to Tennessee Williams’s construction of identity. Each dramatic recycling of Tennessee Williams is “ghosted” by various historical narratives of Tennessee Williams. In his study, Carlson remarks how “each recycling
almost inevitably encouraged audiences to be alert to the particular features of the new version and to experience it in part as a contribution to an ongoing comparative process if not a direct competition” (26). Indeed, the concept of “ghosting” spurs the comparative impulse of this study.

Why is the celebrity persona of Tennessee Williams still intriguing to audiences today? Recently the *New York Times* ran a story covering the emergence of one-woman shows concerning the controversial actress Tallulah Bankhead. Williams had an appreciation for Bankhead and even wrote some of his heroines with her in mind to play them. More important, however, is that Bankhead and Williams shared the same controversial reputation as she was described as a “hodgepodge of thrilling talent, ego, drunkenness, bisexuality, and drug use” (Belcher 1). Indeed, the similarly scandalous lifestyles shared by Williams and Bankhead may be the reason for their staying power in the public imagination. In fact, it is the scandals of homosexuality, abuse, and loneliness that is at the heart of Ray Stricklyn’s *Confessions of a Nightingale*. In the beginning of “Confessions” Stricklyn’s Williams promises a “true confessions evening” and thus constructs Williams as the celebrity confessor retelling the details of his life for absolution and entertainment (Stricklyn 7). In the first chapter, I argue that “Confessions” resembles what Barry King calls the “para-confession – a commercial rendition of repentance designed to display the star or celebrity from a position of persuasive authority” (King 115). In this first chapter, I will use this theoretical construction of fame to frame Stricklyn's performance of Williams as a celebrity confession (a performance constructed from interviews from *Playboy* and Charlotte Chandler’s *Ultimate Seduction*). Ultimately, I argue that such a framework reveals the problematic and competing agenda behind Stricklyn's representation of the "celebrity" Williams: the performer's ultimate desire for celebrity alongside that of the subject.
In my opinion, *Confessions of a Nightingale* addresses the relationship between the celebrity Tennessee Williams and the general public. However, in recent years there has been a move by some authors to reclaim the image of Tennessee Williams by queering him as a figurehead or forefather of the gay liberation movement. In his article, "The Angels of Fructification: Tennessee Williams, Tony Kushner, and Images of Homosexuality on the American Stage" James Fisher claims that Tony Kushner is “following in [Williams’s] footsteps” in terms of representing and advocating for a queer presence on the American stage (Fisher 2). Ironically, Fisher himself is the first to admit that placing Williams within a history of gay liberation is problematic at best. Though Williams and Kushner both faced discrimination, Williams rarely claimed that his plays contained positive homosexual representations (as such an action entailed the possibility of legal trouble). Fisher states: “In retrospect, Williams’s cautious exploration of homosexuality--or at least his unwillingness to be more overt about it in his plays--pales by comparison with the defiant openness of Kushner’s work. Williams balked at writing what he called gay plays” (Fisher 2). Williams’s problematic position within the history of gay liberation is mirrored in his problematic representation in Will Scheffer's *Tennessee and Me*. Unlike *Confessions of a Nightingale*, Scheffer does not draw from the exact words of Williams but rather constructs a semi-fictional, "outed" representation of him. In the second chapter, I will examine how Will Scheffer combines the genre of biographical solo-performance with queer theory (specifically, Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*) to create a queer persona of Williams that is distinctly "out of the closet."

In the concluding section of my study, I will explore two distinctly linked plays that examine Williams’s identity with a measure of intimacy and critical distance not found in the plays discussed so far in this study. Steve Lawson’s *A Distant Country Called Youth* and
Blanche and Beyond establish the identity of Tennessee Williams through the letters that Williams wrote to family and close friends throughout his life. By utilizing Williams’s private letters and eschewing impersonation central to the performance style that similar plays have relied on, Lawson hopes that the audience can see into Williams “discovering his sexual identity and honing his creative writing side. You can see him trying out different identities when he wrote to different people, something I think we all do” (Cuthbert 1). While Lawson's plays operate within the genre of biographical solo-performance, the use of authentic, private letters coupled with the Lawson's prescribed directions that the actor/reader not strictly embody Tennessee Williams, recalls techniques of living history and historical performance. Specifically, I argue that Lawson uses techniques of museum theater and first-person interpretation to lend an aura of "objectivity" to his performance text. Stacy Roth, in her book, Past into Present: Effective Techniques for First-Person Interpretation, claims that "first-person interpretation, [is] a challenging living history education method in which interpreters transform themselves into people of the past" (Roth 3). By using techniques of historical performance, Lawson’s play becomes “educational” and based upon the “facts.” Furthermore, Lawson's savvy choice of "interpreter" (former Waltons star Richard Thomas) points toward Lawson's intent to not only be objective, but also to create a sanitized persona of Tennessee Williams that might garner empathy for the often controversial playwright.

LIMITATIONS

I have limited the scope of my study to these plays performed within twenty years of Williams’s death. I will not be considering works that have appeared since Steve Lawson’s Blanche and Beyond. Furthermore, I have selected works that have been approved by Tennessee Williams’s estate and have met all legal obligations concerning the publishing of Williams’s
material. I have actively chosen to exclude scripts that have not conformed to these legal
standards. It is no coincidence that the scripts that have met these legal standards are the only
ones that are published and widely available to the public. I did not make any attempt to secure
texts that could not be reproduced for legal reasons.

I do not want to offer, at any point during my study, my own opinion on the “quality” of
the plays in question. It is not the purpose of my study to label these plays and the choices the
playwrights have made in constructing them as “good” or “bad.” The purpose of this study is to
evaluate how each play interrogates the identity of Tennessee Williams. Each play I analyze
constructs a specific Williams persona for the audience from the fragments of Williams's life. I
begin with an examination of Ray Stricklyn's *Confession's of a Nightingale* and how he fashions
a performance of Williams as celebrity. Next, I look at Will Scheffer's *Tennessee and Me* to
examine how Williams is personified as a distinctly homosexual artist. Finally, I discuss Steve
Lawson's *A Distant Country Called Youth* and *Blanche and Beyond* as performances that seek to
objectify and sanitize Williams's persona. Throughout my study, I will analyze the specific
representational choices that each playwright makes in respect to their own construction of
Tennessee Williams. I will take note, for example, if a playwright or actor chooses to rely on
Williams's archive or detract from his narrative and invent text. In each chapter, I will be arguing
whether these choices reinforce or undermine a given playwright's vision of Williams's persona.
I will not, however, be passing judgments on whether the representational choices made result in
a "good" or "bad" performance.

Finally, it is important to understand that, while my study relies on the accuracy of many
definitions in various genres of performance, the fact of the matter is that most of these terms and
definitions are still "blurry" or inherently loosely defined. On biographical solo-performance, for
example, Gentile claims that within the genre, "there exists a tremendous variation" (Gentile 130). The final chapter, in particular, deals with the myriad of performance styles under the broad banner of historical performance or living history. In any case, I will narrow and expose my use of a particular definition as much as possible and attempt to always reveal the "looseness" of a particular definition.
CHAPTER ONE: CONSUMING TENNESSEE: RAY STRICKLYN AND CONFESSIONS OF A NIGHTINGALE

In the introduction to Plays for the End of the Century, editor Bonnie Marranca describes two theatrical reactions in the late 1980s and early 1990s that were, in her view, responding to the "extraordinary events [that] have transpired to make the world so much less stable and knowable than it seemed a moment ago" (Marranca xi). On one side, Marranca describes with relish the postmodern texts that make up the volume as moving closer to the formal, rhetorical styles and literary wisdom of poetry, and with that shift comes a more complex, highly charged language of nuance and ambiguity and a quality of imagination that only lyrical freedom encourages. Some of the most thoughtful plays written today join poetic language to a new spiritual energy that addresses metaphysical questions . . . (xii).

Those "thoughtful" postmodern texts contrast sharply, in Marranca's view, from the theatrical genre of solo-performance that still is "absorbed in psychological obsessions, hyperattenuated individualism, and social reportage" (xii). Marranca ultimately concludes that this form of "theatre is no longer substantially different from the TV talk show or magazine feature" (xii).

Though Bonnie Marranca bemoans solo-performance and its close resemblance to what we encounter daily on television, I believe that television and solo-performance do not make strange bedfellows and, more importantly, that studies of the former can yield a greater insight and understanding of the changes undergoing the latter. Moreover, the similarities between television and solo-performance do not represent an implosion of "good" theatre or "tasteful" art as Marranca might suggest. No, in this case the answer is much more nuanced. John Gentile, in his study on solo-performance entitled Cast of One remarks that "the pervasiveness of television and
our hunger for celebrity often work together, creating media stars faster than live performance, film, or print, could ever hope to" (Gentile 196). Television has only increased American audience's desire for celebrity and solo-performance. Solo-performance has been in America for quite some time. Gentile traces its lineage to performances in the nineteenth century. However, in the age of television the popularity of biographical solo-performance has soared and this is no coincidence, as Gentile has already pointed out.

Before I move on, I wish to define that, in this study, solo-performance refers to what Gentile calls "biographical solo-performance." Though solo-performance encompasses monologue performances (such as Spalding Gray and Whoopi Goldberg) and public readings (such as John Gielgud's *Ages of Man*) the form I will be discussing most is specifically the sub-genre of biographical solo-performance. In such a performance, the actor recreates the presence of a historical figure. The methods of recreation and representation vary from performance to performance but the intense focus on a historical figure is what they all share in common.

Perhaps a more succinct definition would be Gentile's use of a description by playwright Tom Topor: "Shows of this sort are attempts at living biographies. The performer impersonates the historical figure (sometimes very closely, sometimes just impressionistically) and, using letters, documents, and other historical (or quasi-historical) material, offers the audience a slice of the figure's life" (qtd. in Gentile 130). Naturally, biographical solo-performance requires an intense focus not only required on the part of the actor who embodies the historical figure or the playwright who assembles his or her history, but also the audience who must give in to the intimate illusion happening onstage. Again, Gentile rightly asserts that "The intimate camera close-ups of television and film have made the heightened focus on a single character and direct audience address on stage in a one-person show entirely plausible" (196).
The renewed focus on and desire for biographical solo-performance has enabled actors, directors, and playwrights to explore historical celebrities in performance that would otherwise be ignored. Though considered one of the greatest American playwrights of all time, Tennessee Williams led a tumultuous and scandal filled life that was rivaled only by his chaotic playwrighting career. By the time of his death in 1983, Williams's career had been in decline for over twenty years. For all intents and purposes, Williams was a has-been at the time of his death and few would have thought that the life of this "failed artist" warranted a biographical solo-performance. Yet, in 1986, Ray Stricklyn took on the task of embodying Tennessee Williams in *Confessions of a Nightingale*.

In this chapter, I use John Gentile's *Cast of One* to establish Ray Stricklyn's *Confessions of a Nightingale* as a prototypical example of biographical solo-performance. I analyze Stricklyn's text and his performance to establish the tenets of a genre that other solo-performances of Tennessee Williams will be measured against in subsequent chapters. It is important to emphasize that, outside of the performance of *Confessions of a Nightingale*, however, Ray Stricklyn encouraged others in the entertainment industry to see him as Tennessee Williams. Stricklyn accepted television roles as a "Southern gentleman" and took no issue with being told to play a given role like Tennessee Williams (Stricklyn 257). Marvin Carlson, in his study *The Haunted Stage* might say that Stricklyn and others believed that "the desire to sell a familiar face was far more important than providing an accurate image of" Williams himself (Carlson 76). Indeed, there is much Carlson can "say" about Stricklyn's performance of Tennessee Williams. In his study, Carlson describes how actors can, in the minds of audiences, be "ghosted" or "haunted" by the memory of their past performances. In this chapter I explore how Stricklyn's personal ties to the real-life Tennessee Williams haunted his performance as
Tennessee Williams, for example, and later how Stricklyn's televised roles were haunted by his performance as Tennessee Williams.

Yet, Marvin Carlson's study does not explain the "confessional" nature of Stricklyn's performance. *Confessions of a Nightingale* is billed as a "true confession evening" (Chandler and Stricklyn 7). The word "true" is misleading and critics have been quick to note that *Confessions of a Nightingale* only draws from two interviews of Tennessee Williams. Furthermore, these interviews were readily available to the public and, in fact, most reviewers had long since read them. Since nothing new is revealed and no act of "forgiveness" acted out, then what is the real "motive" behind the confession? To answer this question I turn to Sean Redmond and Barry King.

Sean Redmond, in his study *Pieces of Me: Celebrity Confessional Carnality*, describes the performative aspects of the "celebrity confessionals" that are regularly televised on contemporary shows such as *Oprah* or *Larry King Live*. According to Redmond, "The television therapy talkshow readily presents itself as an embodied performance" (Redmond 151). While Redmond sketches the performative aspects of the celebrity confessional, Barry King extends the analysis of the televised celebrity confession and defines what he calls the "para-confession--a commercial rendition of repentance designed to display the star or celebrity's persona from a position of persuasive authority" (King 1). While Redmond and King may differ in their use of terminology, they both discuss basic theatrical concepts that link a genre associated strictly with television (the celebrity confessional) to the stage and, more specifically, to biographical solo-performance. Most important, Redmond and King implicate both the audience and performer as they outline a system in which the audience rewards the celebrity-performer with fame and fortune for the performance of their supposedly authentic confession.
In order to understand *Confessions of a Nightingale* as a biographical solo-performance, I will analyze Stricklyn's text and performance against John Gentile's analysis of this genre in *Cast of One*. In his study, Gentile states that "The major areas of concern--including the playwright's characterization of the central figure, the performance's responsibility to historical accuracy, and the need to fulfill the audience's expectations for the form--all directly impinge on the paramount aim of the genre: capturing the essence of the historical figure" (147). Therefore, the question now becomes how did Stricklyn capture the essence of the historical figure and celebrity Tennessee Williams? Per Gentile's suggestion, I offer an in-depth analysis of Stricklyn's text and performance.

To begin my analysis of *Confessions of Nightingale* in terms of biographical solo-performance, I would like to explore the history of the text itself. Ray Stricklyn began to explore the possibility of assembling a text about Tennessee Williams not long after his run as Mr. Nightingale in *Vieux Carrè* in 1983. It has long been understood that, in the world of the play, the character of Mr. Nightingale was a stand-in for Tennessee Williams. The critics who reviewed the production in which Ray Stricklyn acted were quick to point out how it was "a pity" Tennessee Williams did not see "his luminous creation" and that Stricklyn's performance "haunts, transcending technical acting proficiency to create magic" (Stricklyn 224). Here, the "magic" occurring onstage is Stricklyn's seemingly uncanny resemblance to the real life Mr. Nightingale--Tennessee Williams. Indeed, in his autobiography, *Angels and Demons*, Stricklyn comments that "When I did *Vieux Carrè*, a couple of critics had commented that I'd make an interesting Tennessee Williams, suggesting that I should maybe do a play about him" and he even admits that "I had loved the character of Mr. Nightingale so much, and it had been so successful for me, that I somehow wanted to keep the memory going" (Stricklyn 235 and 236).
Not long after *Vieux Carrè* closed, director Milton Katselas who had successfully staged revivals of Williams's *The Rose Tattoo* and *Camino Real*, asked Stricklyn "if [he would] be interested in putting together an evening saluting Tennessee, followed by the unveiling of [a] sculptured bust" (235). At the time Stricklyn was asked to create the piece for Katselas, Williams had recently died and "evening salutes" to Tennessee Williams were, according to Stricklyn, quite common and formulaic (235). Typically, some of Williams's poetry might be read followed by a few cuttings from one or more of Williams's plays. Stricklyn decided he wanted to do something different. He wanted to write a biographical solo-performance piece.

In doing his research, Stricklyn commented on how he "kept going back to a most revealing interview [Tennessee had] given to *Playboy Magazine*" (235) Stricklyn easily obtained permission from C. Robert Jennings to use the in-depth interview in his text. Coming from *Playboy Magazine*, it is no surprise that the interview focuses extensively on Williams's homosexuality. Jennings, however, does also inquire about Williams's aesthetics and artistic life. While searching for other material, Stricklyn recalled that he had done publicity work for a book entitled *The Ultimate Seduction* written by Charlotte Chandler. The book was essentially a collection of interviews of famous celebrities and Stricklyn recalled that Tennessee Williams had been one of Chandler's subjects: "I remember her telling me that it was probably the last lengthy interview [Tennessee Williams] had given before his death" (236). Stricklyn was able to obtain a "verbal contract" from Chandler and then began working on combining the two pieces into a performance text.

As I have already stated, John Gentile claims that the author/adapter must make a choice concerning "historical accuracy" as he or she begins to compile the text. In the case of *Confessions of a Nightingale*, the situation appears straightforward: Stricklyn chooses to remain
historically faithful to Tennessee Williams's words by assembling his text from two interviews. However, what Stricklyn's audiences never saw was the back room dealings between himself and Chandler that resulted in a text that was always blurring the lines of historical accuracy. In Stricklyn's first performance at the Beverly Hills Playhouse in 1985, he presented an hour-long show that contained both the Jennings and Chandler interviews. After a strong opening run at the Beverly Hills Playhouse, Charlotte Chandler told Stricklyn that "the show must come to New York" (241). The two met with producers and entered into contract negotiations where Stricklyn was told that the Jennings material would have to be dropped: "It wouldn't be 'classy,' I was told, to have Playboy magazine involved in any way" (242). Additionally, Stricklyn was told to lengthen the piece and change the billing on any future scripts. Stricklyn was enraged: "I had created the piece, I had adapted their words . . . Neither Charlotte nor Jennings had had any input in what materials of theirs I used" (242). Moreover, Stricklyn vents his regret in his autobiography at the ultimate commercial failure of the negotiations as "[Charlotte Chandler] was demanding 60 percent, with Jack Lawrence, as producer, receiving 25 percent. That left me with 15 percent. I had created it, for chrissakes! . . . I felt like I had been raped" (243).

After the negotiations Stricklyn adapted "the new material Charlotte was supplying to replace the Jennings material we were deleting. [Charlotte Chandler] became more involved now, sending me reams of new ideas and suggestions" (244). The commercial desires of the contract negotiations coupled with this "new material" from Chandler's supposedly complete and authentic interview of Tennessee Williams raise some doubts as to the concern for and realization of historical accuracy in Stricklyn's text. In Gentile's view, however, this situation is not problematic as he states that "the intent to suggest, as opposed to duplicate, often extends to the script as well. Instead of trying to deliver a factual record of biographic details, [some] shows
aim to understand the character's subjective experience" (Gentile 144). Gentile argues that historical accuracy is not crucial to the text of the biographical solo-performance. Indeed, the playwright may only need to supply enough "authentic text" to suggest the presence of the playwright. Gentile even goes so far to say that, "Historical accuracy . . . is not a guarantee for success in the genre" (145). Gentile's assertion carries more weight in the case of Confessions of a Nightingale since, despite this apparent tampering, critics and audiences alike enjoyed the show. Generally, most the reviews of "Confessions" I encountered were positive. Interestingly enough, both positive and negative reviewers commented on the possible appearance of material outside of Chandler's original interview. Mel Gussow, for the New York Times, catches on to material "from other unidentified sources" and "statements from other places, including, it would seem, the playwright's 'Memoirs'" (Gussow 20).

At this point, it appears that Stricklyn and Chandler have distorted the history of Williams for their own gain. While it may be easy to characterize Stricklyn's writing methods and Chandler's sources as questionable, the problem concerning the "real" voice of Tennessee Williams originates with the author himself. In a Time Magazine review of Confessions of a Nightingale, William A. Henry discusses how "Like many people with long practice at being interviewed, Williams tended to repeat well-rehearsed witticisms" (Henry 1). Going back to the Jennings interview that was supposedly cut from Confessions of a Nightingale, Williams himself said that "I think the theater public has an image of me that has very little relation to the truth" (Jennings 240). Williams continually "acted" his public persona and, therefore, it is not hard to imagine him reciting and repeating his "script." Despite this insight, however, the point I wish to make here is that it was not important that Stricklyn and Chandler might have bent the facts. What is important, for the purpose of this study, is why Stricklyn and Chandler bent the facts:
Both were participating in a system of celebrity and frame that rewarded those who fed the audience's desire with the recognition, fame, and wealth associated with celebrity.

While it is important to consider the performance text in relation to the genre of biographical solo-performance, John Gentile also asserts that we must take into account the "characterization of the central figure." How did Ray Stricklyn invite his audiences to think of him as Tennessee Williams? What were Stricklyn's performance tactics in bringing this solo-performance of Tennessee Williams back to life? Again, I return to John Gentile's *Cast of One* and the insights of theater critics to analyze how *Confessions of a Nightingale* operated on a level beyond the text.

When discussing the mechanics of solo-performance, John Gentile calls attention to "the fact that there are so few one-person shows that do not use some form of audience address and participation attests to the importance of the presentational mode for the genre" (Gentile 136). It is not uncommon in the biographical solo-performance genre for characters to directly engage with the audience in the telling of their story. *Confessions of a Nightingale* is no different in this respect. At the beginning of the show, Stricklyn-as-Williams "ambles onstage" and greets the audience with "Good evening . . . Thank you, thank you. You act as if you think something wonderful is going to happen" (Chandler and Stricklyn 7). What is interesting about Chandler and Stricklyn's opening is not only that it does not "close off the audience behind the fourth wall of stage realism" (Gentile 136) but also that the moment calls for action on the part of the audience. Gentile states that most biographical solo-performance "requires of the audience a collaborative imagining to fill in suggested scenes and evoked characters" (136). In addition to the audience participating in imagining Williams onstage, they are also invited to be active participants in the realization of Stricklyn as Williams (albeit through the simple gesture of
applause). What is most interesting about this moment of participation, however, is that it is actually written into the script as follows: "he acknowledges the applause" (Chandler and Stricklyn 7). Not only does Stricklyn rely on the presentational method of breaking the fourth wall, but also he takes advantage what Gentile describes as "The audience-performer relationship in one person shows [that] hinges on the device of "casting" the audience. (Gentile 136) In Confessions of a Nightingale, the audience is cast as adoring fans of Tennessee Williams.

Continuing in the vein of casting the audience, I would like to comment on a more general role which Gentile claims most audience members are cast. In order to sustain the conceit that a biographical subject is alive and, more importantly, justify his or her revealing important details about his or her life through casual conversation, Gentile asserts that "we assume the role of guest in his home . . . we become not only house guests but also a collective ideal listener and confidant" (Gentile 138). Confessions of a Nightingale encourages the audience to identify as the "confidant" visiting Williams at his home in Key West. This illusion is reinforced by a set recreating Williams's Key West home. Nearly all the reviews I have studied make some mention of an impressive set. Hedy Weiss of the Chicago Sun-Times, for example, relished the "wicker peacock chair in the gazebo of [Williams's] semi-tropical hideaway in Key West, Fla . . . the set has been designed beautifully by Jon Gantt" (Weiss 1). Beyond the set, the show itself had been "billed as an intimate visit" (Richards 6) which prepared the audience for the "confidant" role that they would eventually be encouraged to assume. Though Gentile generalizes the role of "confidant" and "ideal listener" as features of all biographical solo-performances, I assert that these roles are specifically essential to Confessions of a Nightingale not only to sustain the illusion that Tennessee Williams is alive and confessing, but also to
reinforce the idea that the audience is sharing a special, intimate evening with a celebrity playwright.

Now I shall move on to the key component of Confessions of a Nightingale: Ray Stricklyn's performance. Speaking in terms of his physical appearance, Ray Stricklyn does not resemble Tennessee Williams in a strict sense. That is to say that if you encountered Ray Stricklyn on the street you would not confuse him for Tennessee Williams. Comparing Stricklyn's headshot on the dust jacket of his autobiography to a picture of an elder Williams (he was near death at the time of Chandler's interview), I am not inclined to say the two look alike. John Gentile, however, claims that "productions rely on the performer's ability to suggest the presence of the central character" if they do not have the natural appearance of the biographical subject (144). In this case, Stricklyn drew upon his knowledge of having met and worked with Tennessee Williams to augment his body and performance. The "costume plot" at the end of the Confessions of a Nightingale script calls for:

1. off-white linen suit (slightly rumpled)
2. A faded blue denim shirt (open at neck)
3. A pair of white sneakers (slightly soiled; no socks)
4. 1 belt
5. 1 white handkerchief (Stricklyn 47).

Combine this "Williams costume" with such iconic props as a cigarette holder, a wine goblet, an old typewriter, and a well-worn pair of horn-rimmed glasses and Stricklyn was able to resemble Williams enough to convince a majority of the critics. Before I move on to Stricklyn's mannerisms as Williams, I should note that the subject of impersonation is of special concern to John Gentile and, in his study, he goes to great lengths to differentiate between the limited levels
of impersonation (parody) utilized by stand-up comedians and the more extensive "extended impersonations" of biographical characters in solo-performance pieces (Gentile 142).

"Biographical one person shows at their very best" Gentile explains, "do not offer superficial caricature but, instead, present characterization of depth" (142). Stricklyn naturally avoids "superficial caricature" by the simple fact that he does not physically resemble Williams. He must dig deeper and explore Williams's habits, ways of speaking, and ranges of emotion in order to get at the spirit of Williams.

When judging the embodiment of a biographical subject in solo-performance, it is important to recall Gentile's statement that "While it is true that for some solo shows part of the magic of the performance is the physical re-creation . . . many of the most acclaimed one-person shows do not even attempt physical verisimilitude" (143). Stricklyn's embodiment, according to some of the professional critics, falls somewhere between the "magic recreation" and the non-attempt at "physical verisimilitude." New York Times critic Mel Gussow comments that "although Mr. Stricklyn is no Williams look-alike and his Southern delivery is closer to Truman Capote that to the playwright, he offers a reasonable approximation of his subject" (Gussow 20). Alan Wallach offers the same approximation, claiming that although "Stricklyn doesn't resemble Williams greatly, he projects a quality that is close to the real thing, especially when he laughs" (Wallach 9). This middle-of-the-road judgment of Stricklyn's performance was the most common critical reaction to Confessions of a Nightingale, though there were a few extremes in either critical direction. David Richards, for example, skews toward the negative as he "suppose[s] it can all be considered vaguely lifelike. But doesn't Disney make talking mannequins for this sort of thing?" (Richards 6). On the other end of the spectrum, one reviewer writes that "Stricklyn's portrayal of this period is difficult to watch at times because it is so real"
(Riddle C1). One review, however, captures the criticisms and accolades of all the reviews quite succinctly. Alan Stern writes that "Physically, Stricklyn isn't particularly suited to playing Williams. Although he has a Southern drawl and a mustache, the actor is slighter, has finer features and he speaks much faster. Yet Stricklyn plays Williams with such skill, sensitivity, and conviction that disparity soon vanishes" (Stern 4).

With the exception of a few detractors, the disparities between Ray Stricklyn and Tennessee Williams vanish beneath all of the elements of biographical solo-performance as described by John Gentile. Stricklyn-as-Williams first invites the audience to participate in the illusion of Williams by addressing them directly and by soliciting applause. He then presents them with the mask of Williams; the pain-stakingly recreated Key West set, the detailed costume design, well-placed props, all accompanied by what Hedy Weiss of the Chicago Sun-Times describes as "[Williams's] greatly self-mocking grin and imploding laugh" (Weiss 45). The audience believes Stricklyn is Tennessee Williams, which is to his advantage because the revival of Ray Stricklyn the celebrity depended on it.

As he concludes his discussion of biographical solo-performance, John Gentile briefly explores those few performers who are the subject of their pieces. Gentile quotes Richard Schechner: "I don't mean monologues in the traditional sense of a one-person show, but in the more radical sense of using the one person who is performing as the source of the material being performed. Compressed into a single presence is author-director-performer" (qtd. in Gentile 148). Gentile describes this genre as autobiographical solo-performance and presents the work of Spalding Gray as "the most widely known autoperformer" (148). Gentile is quick to point out that "autoperformers" are not their "authentic" selves onstage, but rather playing a role or version of themselves: "Gray appears as himself and speaks intimately of his own life" (emphasis added
Biographical and autobiographical performance both call for the actor to assume a role and play a character. However, the distinction between character and performer is much more slippery in autobiographical solo-performance than in its biographical counterpart.

Though Gentile goes on to describe further distinctions between the two sub-genres, I wish to return to Schechner's comments here to concretize the fact that, in adapting, acting, and directing *Confessions of a Nightingale* Ray Stricklyn literally and figuratively became Tennessee Williams. Stricklyn desired his biographical performance to become a representation of both his life and that of Tennessee Williams. In Stricklyn's autobiography, there is the suggestion for the biographical solo-performance to become autobiographical. Furthermore, the compression of the actor/author and the subject of solo-performance that Schechner describes seems to anticipate Marvin Carlson's study *The Haunted Stage*. At this point, I will draw upon Carlson's discussion of "the haunted body" to show how Ray Stricklyn, slowly but surely, appropriated the celebrity persona of Tennessee Williams in order to achieve commercial success.

What is "the haunted body?" For the purposes of my study, the haunted body is simply an actor's past performance that in some way "will inevitably carry some memory . . . production to production" (Carlson 53). Who is carrying on the memory? Audiences of *Confessions of a Nightingale*, for example, might carry with them Ray Stricklyn's past performance as Mr. Nightingale in *Vieux Carrè*. The television audience of *The Colbys*, a 1980s *Dynasty* spinoff, might recognize Ray Stricklyn's performance as Dr. James L. Parris as bearing a striking resemblance (physically and emotionally) to his Tennessee Williams. Though the memories lie with the audience themselves, the haunted body here is Ray Stricklyn's. His body is haunted by the ghosts of his performances prior to and immediately following *Confessions of a Nightingale*. 
Interestingly enough, biographical solo-performance is naturally inclined to what Carlson calls "haunting." Carlson's discussion of the theatrical organization and practices of European theatre companies, where actors often assume the same role or type for their entire lives, resonates strongly with biographical solo-performance. On this subject, Carlson writes that "In theatrical cultures in which theatre companies have operated under detailed and specific rules of organization, this close relationship between actors and predictable types of roles played is often embodied within the organizational legislation of the company" (54). I assert that the risk of becoming intimately associated with the biographical subject an actor seeks to portray is embodied "within the organizational legislation" of the genre of biographical solo-performance. Who can mention the solo-performer Hal Holbrooke, for example, without instantly recalling his portrayal of Mark Twain?

What is especially interesting about the intersection of the haunted body and biographical solo-performance in the case of Ray Stricklyn, was that he actively invited the "ghosting" that Carlson touches on. Carlson describes how "we must recall that every new performance of these roles will be ghosted by a theatrical recollection of the previous performances, so that audience reception of each new performance is conditioned by inevitable memories of this actor playing similar roles in the past" (Carlson 58). First, we must recall that, before he started adapting Confessions of a Nightingale, Stricklyn had a list of past experiences working with Tennessee Williams and acting in his plays. Matt Wolf, writing for the Associated Press, investigates how Williams "had been an important influence in [Stricklyn's] life figuring in [Stricklyn's words] 'the beginnings, the so-called end and then restart (of my career)'" (Wolf 1). Wolf describes how Stricklyn used a monologue from Williams's play Mooney's Kid Don't Cry to audition for drama school in 1953. The first Broadway play that Stricklyn saw was The Glass Menagerie and he
even auditioned with Williams at the home of a producer. Working for the Theater Guild, Stricklyn typed revisions to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and eventually was cast in revivals of Williams's *Camino Real* and *Vieux Carrè*. As Stricklyn became more personally tied to Williams, he embraced the idea that he could embody the playwright. After all, it was the critics of *Vieux Carrè* who suggested that he would be a great Tennessee Williams. Instead of broadening his theatrical career or fighting the "ghost" of Williams that was beginning to settle upon his frame, Stricklyn took this idea and ran with it.

Towards the end of his autobiography, Stricklyn writes of Tennessee Williams's influence saying "Personally, I owe so much to Tennessee Williams. How could I have possibly known that he would play such an important role in my life, a powerful force in my involvement? From the very first he was there" (Stricklyn 278). Stricklyn was just as indebted to Williams for his career before *Confessions of a Nightingale* as he was after the show premiered. Previously, when I described Stricklyn's performance as Williams, I noted how the critics described his lack of distinct physical resemblance to Tennessee Williams. However, most of the reviewers were able to look past this deficiency and see the "ghost" of Williams onstage. Quoting Joseph Roach, Marvin Carlson would say, in this case, that the audience "looked past the infirmities of his physical body to his 'other body,' the one that existed outside itself in the fact of his performance of it. Transcending the body of flesh and blood, this other body consisted of actions, gestures, intonations, vocal colors, mannerisms, expressions . . ." (qtd. in Carlson 58). As the audience participates in the performance, the body of Ray Stricklyn disappears and the ghost of Tennessee Williams is made present. What is surprising about this fact is that as Stricklyn continued to perform Williams, the "ghost" of Williams began to make itself present
even outside of performance. In Carlson's terms "the ghost had a greater performance visibility than the body it haunted" (58).

At some point in Stricklyn's long run of performances, the memory of his performance became tied to his identity. Even outside of Confessions of a Nightingale he was recognized as Tennessee Williams. At this point, I would like to introduce two concepts that Marvin Carlson discusses that make this process possible. First Carlson describes how "the theatre . . . offers many examples of actors who literally appear as the same character in a number of different narrative contexts" (64). Continuing in this line of thought, he states "that sequels may be created not necessarily because of an interest in the adventures of the character but to repeat the pleasure of once again seeing a specific actor appearing as this character" (64). Finally, Carlson discusses "the vehicle play, a work constructed precisely to feature the already familiar aspects of a particular actor's performance" (68). In the case of Stricklyn, various "vehicle" roles were constructed for him as audience members, producers, and directors desired the pleasure of his specific characterization of Tennessee Williams.

As Confessions of a Nightingale became more successful, Stricklyn desired to expand his acting career into television. However, Stricklyn was promptly turned down when he first tried to secure an agent (Nicole David). Stricklyn recalls the exchange saying "her first words to me were, 'Well, you'll never be a star.' I am when I'm Tennessee Williams, I wanted to tell her!" (Stricklyn 253). Even at the very beginning of his television career, Stricklyn seemingly took no issue with capitalizing on his ability to become Tennessee Williams. In terms of the entertainment industry, Carlson comments on this when he discusses how "Directors and producers, and of course the actors themselves, are also aware, as they have always been, of the importance of an audience's previous experience with an actor in conditioning their reception of
him or her in a new role" (Carlson 72). Though initially turned down for an agent, Stricklyn would nevertheless be offered roles that bore a striking resemblance to his Tennessee Williams. His first was playing a southern psychiatrist named Dr. Parris on the daytime soap opera, The Colbys. The directors and producers in charge wasted no time in introducing Stricklyn as "the distinguished stage actor who's recently had such success as Tennessee Williams" (Stricklyn 256) and even Stricklyn himself is in on the strategy as he had no qualms recalling that "When I'd initially discussed my role of Dr. Parris with Esther Shapiro, she told me to play him 'just like you play Tennessee Williams.' (257) Why should Stricklyn have objected to playing Williams again? He had something to gain as "the show also helped when I was touring with "Confessions." The box office always seemed to jump up if it was publicized that I had been a 'star' on Days of Our Lives" (260).

The Colbys was not the only television show where Stricklyn was asked to bring his characteristic Williams style. On the television series Wiseguy, Stricklyn "played Senator Pickering, a no nonsense southern politico, who ruled in the senate" (261) and in Veronica Clare "the script just for [Stricklyn]--the title character, a real tour-de-force--as a wealthy southern gentleman who turns out not to be so gentlemanly" (263). In the case of this not-so-gentlemanly "Barclay Duvall," the writer appears to have drawn the character specifically from Stricklyn's performance as Williams. More interesting than the roles he was offered, however, was Stricklyn's rationale for ultimately leaving behind his television career: "The stage was my artistic satisfaction, the television a financial plus. Over the years, I'd occasionally be offered other plays, either on Los Angeles or at some regional theatre, but I always turned them down. My success as Tennessee made everything else pale in comparison" (261).
By the early 1990s, which was fairly late in his career, Ray Stricklyn seemed more than content to continue being and becoming Tennessee Williams. Indeed, it is fair to say that Stricklyn preferred the financial security, fame, and celebrity that came with being the vessel of Tennessee Williams's "ghost." Marvin Carlson is fully aware of this phenomenon, when the line between actor and character become blurred. Carlson quotes H.L Mencken to suggest that, in this instance, the actor "becomes a grotesque boiling down of all the preposterous characters he has ever impersonated. Their characteristics are seen in this manner, in his reactions to stimuli, in his point of view. He becomes a walking artificiality, a strutting dummy, a thematic catalogue of imbecilities" (qtd. in Carlson 67). Put more gingerly, Stricklyn sought to become an artificial Williams, aligning his persona with Williams's. Going further on this concept, Carlson quotes Joseph Roach's use of the term "Surrogation" which "occurs when 'survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternates' into 'the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure.' the fit, of course, can never be exact" (qtd. in Carlson 79). The fit is never exact in the case of Stricklyn-as-Williams. As I have already pointed out, numerous critics have observed Stricklyn's deficits when it comes to filling Williams's void.

Throughout this chapter, I have been framing Stricklyn's motivation or "intent" for adapting Confessions of a Nightingale as a desire for fame, fortune, and celebrity. Though I have Stricklyn's own words in his adapted script, autobiography, and interviews it is still nonetheless problematic to assume that these three factors were the only concepts driving Stricklyn to continually become Williams. Up to this point, I have viewed Confessions of a Nightingale as an example of the genre of biographical solo-performance as outlined by John Gentile. However, it is not in the interest of Gentile's study to deeply explore why these shows are successful and what continually draws actors and audiences to them. I alluded to one possible answer in my
introduction to this chapter: In our heavily televised and mediated culture, our desire for celebrity has only increased. By viewing *Confessions of a Nightingale* through the lens of "celebrity confession" as defined by Sean Redmond and Barry King, we can see how this show participates in a system that not only encouraged and awarded Ray Stricklyn with fame and celebrity but also satiates the audience's desire for celebrity.

In his article, *Pieces of Me: Celebrity Confessional Carnality*, Sean Redmond posits that "the television therapy talkshow confession readily presents itself as an embodied performance" (Redmond 151). Indeed, to some extent the celebrity appearing on *Oprah* or *Dr. Phil* is giving a scripted performance to an audience primed for his or her reception. In many ways, the contemporary talk show format resembles biographical solo-performance. Redmond describes how "the celebrity confessor is nearly always, then, already a performer, acting out their contrition through the intertextual signs of their famedom" (152). Stricklyn-as-Williams is similar in this respect as he acts out his "contrition" through signs that inform the audience that he *is* Williams. Stricklyn's costume, props, gesture, and voice all work together to create the type of "performance" Redmond describes. Furthermore Redmond examines how televised celebrity confessions are "above all an emotional form of communication that attempts to draw the viewer/fan/reader into an affective economy of inner feeling and authentic sentiment" (156). Recall how the audience is encouraged to applaud for Stricklyn-as-Williams in the beginning of "Confessions?" Or how the audience assumes the role of confidant, ideal listener, and house guest? The resemblances between the performed celebrity confession and biographical solo-performance are striking. This relationship is made stronger by the fact that, in "Confessions," Stricklyn-as-Williams promises a "true confessions evening. I'm gonna let it all hang out" (Chandler and Stricklyn 7). Furthermore, Redmond justifies the system of celebrity and how it
"grants one access to the media centre: it promises or prophesizes celebritification" (154). After all, celebrities do not confess on television for free. For their contrition they are well-paid and their celebrity is distributed far and wide via the medium they appear in. Stricklyn himself claims to have performed *Confessions of a Nightingale* more than 1500 times. It is fair to say that Stricklyn all too willingly participated in the system of the celebrity confessional.

The question arises, however, what is Stricklyn confessing? Is he, like Tom Cruise or O.J. Simpson, atoning for some past sin or performing an act of contrition? The critics of *Confessions of a Nightingale* are quick to pick up on this constructed evening of confessions. Robert Feldberg notes how "we have doubts, initially, about his frankness" (Feldberg 26) and Allan Wallach wryly states that "For the next hour and a half, without an intermission, it all hangs out. The trouble is, it's all hung out before, many, many, times. By now nothing remains to be said" (Wallach 9). For an explanation, I look to Barry King and his article *Stardom, Celebrity, and the Para-confession*, in which he extends Redmond's concept of the celebrity confession to include the commercial realities of celebrity performance. For King "confessions on television are staged for entertainment without deep moral consequences that are intended to follow from a confession" (King 120). Since the idea of an authentic celebrity confession is a merely a constructed idea, King posits his own definition of this performative event and chooses to label it as a "para-confession." King writes that the "para-confession [is] a commercial rendition of repentance designed to display the star or celebrity's persona from a position of persuasive authority" (115). With this definition in mind, we can see how, in Stricklyn's case, "his true object is not the spread of confession, but rather of confession as one of the modes of governmentality" (116) Stricklyn's performance as Williams is an act of control over the audience and the narrative of Williams's life. Furthermore King writes that celebrities and
audiences "are not exempt from the austere judgment of audiences, hosts, and other guests that they are lifestyle failures. But the process is rigged to reflect a pre-existent schema of fame" (121).

While King does comment on the real "motive" of the actor/celebrities involved in the para-confession, it is apparent that King views the para-confession as a system or "process [that] is designed to be a demonstration of competence and success, or--in the event of failure, of exemplary survival--the rebuilding of a career or a comeback" (123). The Tennessee Williams presented in Confessions of a Nightingale was, in reality, a failure and "has-been" among critics. Stricklyn, however, attempts to rebuild the late career of Williams by presenting him as a celebrity who had "rubbed elbows" with some of the biggest names in Hollywood. Unfortunately for Stricklyn, his performance did not do much to actually improve the image of Tennessee Williams. David Richards comments on his unchanged perception of Williams: "Chandler and Stricklyn . . . have orchestrated the bavardage in a manner that might suggest that [Williams] is anything other than what he says he is" (Richards 6). Stricklyn, however, gained much from the performance. For Stricklyn, "Confessions" was "the 'little show' that kept growing, that became my life, my bread-earner, winning me not only great critical acclaim and many awards, but most importantly, gave me back my self-respect" (Stricklyn 277). By performing his role as Tennessee over and over again, by taking television roles that colluded with his Williams persona, and by choosing not to let himself known as anyone otherwise than the man who played Tennessee Williams, Ray Stricklyn participated in a system that allowed him the "reproduction or refurbishment of a prestigious and marketable self-image, or persona." (King 123)

To say that Stricklyn was entirely "at fault" (if that phrase even applies here), however, would be to disregard all the other audience members, producers, directors, and actors that
participated in the system of celebrity. The celebrity confessions we see on television and the proliferation of solo-performances that Bonnie Marranca warned of at the beginning of this chapter, allude to the fascination in American theatre with the intersection of performance and celebrity. Alluding specifically to Britney Spears, Sean Redmond discusses the fascination in America with the celebrity persona as a sign of "Western culture's tripartite concern for death, celebrity and emotional truth" (160). He posits the bodily end of celebrity confessions with this rhetorical question: "will it be only her corpse that will satisfy the public and media craving for her, and that will tragically release her from the divided celebrity self?" (160) Ray Stricklyn was able to cement his success, fame, and celebrity through the corpse of Tennessee Williams. Yet the public's craving for Williams was not satiated by Stricklyn's enduring performance. In the next two chapters, I will explore how playwrights have used varying methods to interrogate and appropriate (as Ray Stricklyn has) the identity, persona, and celebrity of Tennessee Williams.
CHAPTER TWO: WITH A QUEER EYE: REPRESENTATIONS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS’S HOMOSEXUALITY

On an episode of The David Frost Show in 1970, Tennessee Williams publicly admitted his homosexuality: “I don’t want to be involved in some sort of scandal, but I’ve covered the waterfront” (Savran 1). This is the short answer to the question "when did Tennessee Williams accept his homosexuality?" On the surface, we are able to pin down a date and time when Williams publicly confessed his sexual orientation. Yet, upon further examination, this answer is hardly satisfactory. Some might argue that Williams’s most famous plays Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and A Streetcar Named Desire, with their simultaneously present and absent references to homosexuality, functioned as public stand-ins for Williams “coming out.” Additionally, there were those who knew about Williams’s “hardly-private” private life. Since his first excursion to New Orleans in the 1940s, Williams publicly frequented gay bars and had relationships with other gay men. The most well-known of these, his long-term relationship with Frank Merlo, was hardly a secret but, on the other hand, Williams never sought to publicize the relationship.

In his article "By Coming Suddenly into a Room that I Thought was Empty: Mapping the Closet with Tennessee Williams," David Savran accurately summarizes Tennessee Williams’s homosexual identity as “a site of manifold contradictions” (Savran 1). Savran goes on to claim that "a cursory glance at Williams's Memoirs and interviews reveals that he conceives his homosexuality in extremely conflicted ways, as a locus of desire and scandal, ‘freedom’ and ‘crime,’” (1). Through his artistic works, interviews, and multiple biographies Williams is at worst completely contradictory concerning his homosexuality and at best wryly toying with interviewers, readers, and audience members as to whether he was “in” or “out” of the proverbial closet. Furthermore, Williams’s lack of a concrete stance on his own sexuality also extended into
his position of gay liberation. It appears to be more than a coincidence that Williams’s confession on The David Frost Show followed the infamous Stonewall Riots in New York City by only six months, yet David Savran claims that Williams’s attitude towards gay liberation was luke-warm and contradictory. Mining the vast array of Williams’s commentary, Savran finds that [Williams] is one who considers "Gay Lib" a "serious crusade," who insists that all "gay people" should support "legitimate revolutionary movements," who urges the consolidation of "the gay lib movement" with other "revolutionary" and "non-violent" organizations, and yet who also maintains that he is "bored" with other "movements" and that he finds the "gay lib’s public displays . . . so vulgar they defeat their purpose" (2). While Williams may have had some personal grievances against the gay liberation movement and a contradictory tone towards homosexuality itself, we must also understand that Williams was, as it were, a product of his time. Michael Paller outlines the homophobic historical moment that surrounded Williams in Gentleman Callers: Tennessee Williams, Homosexuality, and Mid-Twentieth Century Broadway Drama. Paller explains how "Williams's plays with gay characters come to us from a world that is quite different from our own" (Paller 3). As Williams rose to stardom in the 1940s and 50s, homosexuals were constantly under attack from an increasingly homophobic public. For example, in 1950 a report entitled "Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government" effectively sanctioned and encouraged government agencies to fire employees based on the mere suggestion of homosexuality (whatever that might be). Paller describes how "the surveillance of law-abiding gay men and lesbians became institutionalized" (Paller 55). Furthermore, homosexuality was considered by most psychiatrists to be a disease that had to be treated and cured (often with ruthless regimens), and in the world of theatre, plays were shuttered by critics and audiences alike if the "homosexual influence" was too
strong or sympathetic. Even underground institutions designed to support homosexuals often hurt more than helped. David Savran outlines how ONE magazine, a secretive publication for the gay community "tended to appropriate the vocabulary (while merely adjusting the attitude) of those mid-century sociological and psychological texts in which homosexual behavior was characterized, in a series of negative definitions, as deviant and neurotic, and the homosexual subject, as incomplete, regressive, and guilty" (Savran 4).

After uncovering this history of homosexual repression, it is surprising to see that Williams was able to present commercially successfully plays. For all intents and purposes, the system of institutionalized homophobia that was rampant during Williams's era should have caught up with him and ended his career. Indeed, Williams's survival despite the historical circumstances might be a cause for celebration among gay and lesbian historians. Perhaps it would not be out of step to compare Williams to revolutionary gay dramatists like Tony Kushner, for example. James Fisher does exactly that as he charts a brief history of homosexuality in the American theater and frames Williams's work in the 1950s and 1960s, where his success (Fisher claims) grew "out of a guarded self-awareness and desire for self preservation, as well as the constraints of the prevailing values of his day" (Fisher 2). Williams worked within the homosexual space of the closet and skillfully advanced a theater of homosexuality. By framing Williams as a playwright of "gay plays" Fisher claims that "there are significant parallels to be found in Kushner's two Angels in America plays, Millennium Approaches and Perestroika, and the dramas of Williams" and that "the emergence of Williams and those dramatists like Kushner following in his footsteps, says much on a subject about which the stage has been silent for too long" (1 and 2). Fisher's rhetorical moves link the drama of Williams with the overtly political and unabashedly homosexual works of Tony Kushner. Yet,
Fisher himself is the first to admit that, despite his compositional gymnastics, the reality remains that "Williams was often ambivalent about homosexuality--either his own or anyone else's--in his writings" (2). Most damning, however, is Williams's own claim that "I've nothing to conceal. Homosexuality isn't the theme of my plays. They're about all human relationships. I've never faked it" (qtd. in Fisher 2). Ultimately, Fisher has to conclude that "In retrospect, Williams's cautious exploration of homosexuality--or at least his unwillingness to be more overt about it in his plays--pales in comparison with the defiant openness of Kushner's work. Williams balked at writing what he called gay plays" (2).

The problem of how to frame Williams's relationship with homosexuality has not, however, only been an issue for scholars. Playwrights Sky Gilbert and Will Scheffer both wrestled with the realities of Tennessee Williams and his homosexuality in their plays My Night with Tennessee and Tennessee and Me. Fisher and other scholars have pointed out that "One device often used [in Williams's plays] is 'transference,' the act of hiding gay viewpoints and situations behind a mask of heterosexuality" (3). Gilbert and Scheffer, on the contrary, seize upon Williams's homosexuality and brazenly expose it and bring it to the fore in their plays. Sky Gilbert, for example, reconfigures Williams's secret desire for younger men and presents it as a site of mourning, loss, and love for the Toronto gay community for whom he writes. Will Scheffer, using the tactics of biographical solo-performance, presents a portrait of Tennessee Williams as a gay man looking for love in an increasingly homophobic world. Both plays recast Williams as a figurehead of homosexuality in American culture. Such an endeavor, however, is not without pitfalls. How do Gilbert and Scheffer reframe Williams despite the biographical "facts" and textual traces of his ambivalence toward his own queer identity? What texts, both literary and non-literary, do Gilbert and Scheffer call upon to make their respective cases? Most
importantly, how does Will Scheffer capitalize on the genre of biographical solo-performance to sketch a portrait of Tennessee Williams, American playwright and gay man? These are the questions I will explore in this chapter of my study.

In the previous chapter, I examined how Ray Stricklyn's body in performance became haunted (in Marvin Carlson's terms) by the ghost of Tennessee Williams. Interestingly enough, Will Sheffer's *Tennessee and Me* and Sky Gilbert's *My Night with Tennessee* do not call for the actor playing Tennessee Williams to embody the habits and mannerisms of the playwright to the extent that Ray Stricklyn did. Instead of the actor's body, it is the texts themselves that are haunted. In the first chapter of *The Haunted Stage* entitled "the haunted text," Marvin Carlson discusses how "the dramatic text is distinguished in part by the extent and specificity of its relationship to previous texts, literary and nonliterary" (Carlson 17). Understanding how previous texts are used and reframed is crucial to uncovering how Gilbert and Scheffer reframe Tennessee Williams. At this point, I will examine how Carlson's position that the recycling of previous texts is embedded within theatre and performance itself and illustrate how this reveals Gilbert's and Scheffer's tactics.

"The conditions of the theatrical event" Carlson claims, "enacted not only in a brief period of time but before a mass audience, provide none of the opportunity for reflection or even rereading offered by novels or lyric poetry and thus encourage the use of material already somewhat familiar to an audience for ease in reception" (23). In Carlson's view, dramatists are encouraged to recycle previous texts out of necessity. By using twice told tales, whether in pieces or in their entirety, dramatists can embed their own particular narratives within a structure of text and signs familiar to the audience. Such a practice could, in theory, guarantee the success of a dramatic text, since the audience would be more inclined to accept a revision of an already
popular narrative. Indeed, Carlson claims that "there are very practical advantages for a dramatist in taking already known narratives for his raw material" (23).

However, in the case of the haunted texts of *Tennessee and Me* and *My Night with Tennessee*, the focus of these playwrights is not with fame and box office success. Both texts were written as one-acts that had very limited runs (most likely a few nights) and though both texts are published, the lack of a wide-spread critical response only reinforces the reality that these plays have not been restaged (at least by well-known or popular theatre companies) beyond their initial runs. Carlson claims another motivation for recycling may be "because the retelling of a familiar story allowed emphasis to be placed on subtle variations, thus providing the author with a convenient means of stressing certain matters of content and style" (27).

By looking closely at these texts, it is easy to see how Scheffer and Gilbert recycled previous texts into something unique. Carlson describes this phenomenon as "each recycling almost inevitably encouraged audiences to be alert to the particular features of the new version" (26). Both *Tennessee and Me* and *My Night with Tennessee* exploit already widely known narratives concerning Williams and his homosexuality, yet each playwright adds their own distinct voice in a way that shifts the perception of Williams's homosexuality from a contested space to a site of sympathy and empowerment. Carlson explains that another reason dramatists recycle texts is with hopes of creating the "ultimate version" and offers the example of how playwrights, throughout the ages, have labored to create the ultimate Oedipus. Again, this is not the case with Scheffer and Gilbert, who tackle very particular aspects of the relationship between Williams and his homosexuality, in regards to the whole. In Carlson's terms, Scheffer and Gilbert "establish their position within a tradition," in this case a tradition of representing
Tennessee Williams, "by producing their own version of standard narratives, even when there was no thought to any of these being the ultimate one" (26).

Since these authors were not ultimately concerned with any attempts at broad box-office success or telling the "ultimate" version of Williams's biography, it should come as no surprise then that their recycling of texts and narratives particular to Williams's homosexuality contain a discreet political agenda. Specifically, Scheffer and Gilbert weave narratives of Tennessee Williams that create spaces for positive expressions of gay love on the stage. However, recycling texts for political purposes is not new in this sense. Carlson, for example, describes how dramatists "came to understand that the theatre's presentation of material in a vivid and public manner made it a valuable tool for inculcating, reinforcing, and celebrating particular social concerns" and that, in most cases, "the material selected for recycling was selected for its educative or even propagandistic value" (32). Despite Williams's contradictory tone towards "gay liberation," Scheffer and Gilbert saw something to be gained by realigning the sexual identity one of America's foremost literary figures.

Within the texts of Tennessee and Me and My Night with Tennessee Carlson's examination of the haunted text raises questions. What narratives are being recycled? Why are these playwrights choosing to recycle them? Broadly speaking, Will Scheffer and Sky Gilbert are recycling texts and narratives from Tennessee Williams's life that concern his homosexuality. Each play reconfigures, reimages, and recycles Williams's problematic relationship with his own homosexuality and the gay community writ large into new dramatic tales that emphasize Williams's identity as a gay man.

It should be understood that Sky Gilbert's play My Night with Tennessee does not fit into the genre of biographical solo-performance. There are three distinct characters in Gilbert's play
and while multiple characters are a feature of biographical solo-performance, they are usually imaginary or merely suggested by the solo-performer. Sky Gilbert's piece, however, presents three distinct and present bodies onstage. Yet, I argue that Sky Gilbert's *My Night with Tennessee* is worth examining because of the way Gilbert consciously reframes Tennessee Williams's homosexuality, which is crucial to understanding how and why Will Scheffer makes similar moves in his biographical solo-performance, *Tennessee and Me*. Before I delve into the play, however, it is worth exploring Gilbert's own aesthetics as well as those practiced by the theatre he worked in at the time he wrote *My Night with Tennessee* in the mid-1980s, "Buddies in Bad Times Theatre." Robert Wallace, who wrote the introduction to Gilbert's collection of plays *The Unknown Flesh*, comments how Gilbert's theatrical practices blur the boundaries that distinguish life from art. Wallace describes Gilbert as a "pragmatist," "queer activist," and having a "political agenda" (18). Moreover, Wallace says of Gilbert's aesthetic choices that "In general, Gilbert replaces the conventions of realistic theatre with overt theatricality, disposing 'inner truth' for the candid performance of 'lies'" (17). In this context, Wallace's use of "lies" refers to the ways in which Gilbert, in his plays, fabricates a new reality to question the traditional roles of gender, queerness, and sexual behavior. In Wallace's words "[Gilbert's] plays both deconstruct the control of the 'real' and reconstruct it as the realm of the possible" (18).

Sky Gilbert theatrically constructs new worlds that are often devoid of the hetero-normative rules that govern gender and sexual behavior. It is no surprise then, that the theatre company he founded in 1979, Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, merges comfortably with his own style of theatre. The "mandate" of the Buddies in Bad Times Theatre states that it is "a not-for-profit, professional theatre company dedicated to the promotion of Queer Canadian Culture" ("Buddies Organizational Profile"). Interestingly enough, within this mandate Buddies has taken
advantage of the multiple meanings of "Queer." For Buddies, their "Queer" mission is at once "representing the LGBT community by supporting its artists, and by telling its stories" and "dedicated to work that is different, outside the mainstream, challenging in both content and form" ("Buddies Organizational Profile"). This combination of commitment to LGBT theatre and theatrical works outside the mainstream create an environment at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre that is conducive to reworking queer cultural myths. It is no surprise then that Sky Gilbert wrote and staged his reworking of Tennessee Williams's homosexuality at Buddies.

The stage at "Buddies" was set for Sky Gilbert to dramatize Tennessee. Yet, the source material for his text would come from coincidental acquaintances. In his memoir, Ejaculations from the Charm Factory, Gilbert recounts the stories that initially inspired him to write My Night with Tennessee:

About Tennessee Williams: I happen to know two boys he tried to pick up. One is an ex-boyfriend, Shaun, and the other is Daniel Allman, who performed in my play Pasolini/Pelosi. These two encounters inspired a play I wrote in the mid-'80s called My Night with Tennessee.

Shaun was just a 15-year-old boy living in a Vancouver hotel with his mom back in 1979. Williams was staying there during a production of The Red Devil Battery Sign. He saw my lithe and lovely future boyfriend and slipped him his card, inviting Shaun to "come up and see him sometime." Shaun was too shy and didn't take him up on the request. He's cursed himself ever since. Daniel Allman was also propositioned by Tennessee in Vancouver. He invited the small, dark pretty boy to visit his hotel room and read poetry. There was one hitch--Daniel had to read in his underwear. Well, Daniel agreed. He said that Tennessee was pretty stoned and that nothing sexual happened.
In the world of the play, Daniel and Shaun's experience would converge to form the character of Jamie Angell. The cast also includes Crummy Mullin, a fictional, on-again off-again boyfriend of Tennessee Williams. The plot Gilbert creates essentially follows the stories he recalls: Tennessee Williams sees a young boy he desires and invites him to his room to read poetry in his underwear. As Gilbert's memoir suggests, the narrative of Williams that is being recycled in My Night with Tennessee exists outside of Tennessee Williams's standard archive. Yet, Marvin Carlson points out that "recycled texts" can also include those "sources offered not by history or legend but by popular or folk material" (Carlson 40). Indeed, we cannot discount Gilbert's "folk material" because the nature of homosexuality and, in particular, Williams's scandalous desire for boys was naturally kept outside of the official written texts (newspapers, interviews, and biographies) of Williams's era. Though it was kept out of the official record, it was apparently no secret that Tennessee Williams enjoyed the company of underage male companions. Robert Wallace remarks that "Tennessee Williams's attraction to adolescent boys,[was] a 'compulsion' reputed to have contributed to his despair and demise" (Wallace 22). Additionally, the playwright Edward Albee, who visited with Williams towards the end of his life, glibly comments on the issue: "he came out to Montauk several times and took a room, a couple of rooms in a place up beyond the town. And he usually brought some pretty boy--usually some nice young kid--unfortunately, he would beat up on him. Tennessee was something of a sadist, but he would swim in my pool, for hours at a time. He loved swimming" (Crespy 219). One wonders if Albee's hasty transition to Williams's love of swimming is a marker of his own discomfort with the subject. Did Edward Albee, as a gay man himself, feel any regret at admitting Williams's transgressive sexual behaviors? Though such speculations on Albee are ultimately outside the scope of this study, I doubt that the seasoned playwright harbored such
feelings of guilt. Yet, the question does remain relevant to other playwrights, such as Gilbert and Scheffer, who seek to capitalize on and personify Tennessee Williams's homosexuality. What is most interesting about Gilbert's merger of story and text is that he retains the original age of the boy Williams sought to seduce. The only description for Jamie Angell given in the cast list is that he is fifteen. In keeping this detail of the original story, Sky Gilbert is actively courting controversy. Specifically, he risks appearing to normalize Tennessee Williams's desire for underage boys. In the standard or received historical narrative of homosexuality in the United States, gay men are often grouped with pedophiles and "perverts" with "twisted desires." In making this choice, Gilbert risks personifying his vision of Tennessee Williams as a pedophile instead of a distinctly queer artist. Though Gilbert's tale ultimately does not end with Williams having intercourse with Jamie, Gilbert still must address the transgressive behavior suggested if the persona of Williams as queer artist is to be retained.

In focusing on this particular "text," Sky Gilbert is calling the audience's attention to a particular characterization of Tennessee Williams. Out of this found text, Gilbert creates a "recycled character" based on Tennessee Williams. "In the case of recycled characters" Carlson explains, "the audience is expected to bring its experience not a knowledge so much of such a specific narrative line but, rather, of the character traits of one or more familiar figures, who continue to demonstrate those already known traits within changing situations" (Carlson 44). In the case of My Night with Tennessee, Sky Gilbert brings the familiar "character" of Tennessee Williams the gay playwright and inserts him into a new situation with the fictional Jamie and Crummy. Despite these realizations of the haunted or recycled text and character at work within Gilbert's play, however, questions still remain: Why does Gilbert choose to recycle this "text?"
How can playwrights (re)claim a specifically queer-oriented Tennessee Williams given this seemingly damning evidence of pedophilia?

I believe that the answer to these questions lies in Gilbert's choice to retain Jamie's underage status and confront Williams's scandalous behavior. What better way for Gilbert to reclaim Williams's homosexuality than to take what some might consider the most sensational aspect of it and turn it into a major theme of the production? Again, Wallace describes Gilbert's work as having "The potential for knowing more--and for knowing differently" (Wallace 17) and speaking on My Night with Tennessee specifically, Wallace comments that Gilbert "recasts Williams's desire to fashion an alternative to the melodramatic treatment it frequently receives" (22). Within his constructed text, Gilbert is able to simultaneously confront and detract from the historical narrative of Williams's desire for young men. To go back to Carlson, he states that "audience memory is still essential to his effectiveness, but now it is memory only of the character and his way of being in the theatrical world, unrelated to any specific narrative thread" (Carlson 48). In the world of the play, Gilbert renders Williams's desire for young men harmless by reconstructing that desire as a manifestation of Williams's longing for and mourning of his deceased love, Frank Merlo. Williams will not consummate his desire for Jamie because ultimately, he longs for Frank. Gilbert opens up this memory of Williams and the "folkloric material" associated with it for reconsideration by the audience. Now the question concerning Gilbert's production shifts from can he reclaim Williams's homosexuality to specifically how does he reclaim Williams's homosexuality. To answer this question, I will now offer a close reading of My Night with Tennessee.

In My Night with Tennessee, Sky Gilbert does not stray far from the anecdote he offered in his memoir. The one-act begins with Crummy, Jamie, and Tennessee each delivering
individual monologues. Crummy begins with a story from his childhood that ultimately centers on the first night he stayed up all night with his cousins. Though the story appears to have no relevance whatsoever to the dramatic event that is about to unfold, Crummy closes with "I became a creature of the night this night person. I think that was my first association with this world that I live in now" (Gilbert 149) which leads to the assumption that Crummy is a male prostitute. Jamie's monologue is short and defensive. "It's no big deal" Jamie offers, "I met Tennessee Williams and everything" (150). Reflecting on his meeting with Williams, Jamie merely states that he's "got something to tell my grandchildren. [pause] I know he's a fag and everything, but he's a pretty big writer, right?" (150) Williams delivers the final monologue, a long discussion on the particular beauty of his green porcelain toilet when the morning sun shone through his bathroom skylight in Key West. Williams waxes poetically on the subject of his toilet by claiming that "there was no other word for it would look very poignant and it would make me want to cry" (150).

In these three speeches, Gilbert defines the roles for these three characters for the rest of the production. Much like his opening, Crummy only deals in the realm of the superficial and the sexual for the rest of the play. He talks very frankly (and some might say, obscenely) about having sex with Williams, his penis size, and his drug use. "Do you think the romance has gone out of our relationship?" Crummy asks Williams "You never stuff crumpets up my bum anymore" (151). Indeed, Crummy's exclamation of "Ahhh . . . debauchery" (151) neatly sums up what seems to drive the character. Jamie, on the other hand, is much less provocative than Crummy. In fact, Jamie Angell essentially acts as an object upon which Williams's desires are to be put. As reflected in his opening monologue, Jamie is essentially indifferent about the whole encounter. Though he initially conveys some interest in meeting Williams when the author first
approaches him, Jamie admits that "we read you in school" (154) and offers no other flattery or interest in the author. For the purposes of this play, Jamie is literally Williams's ethereal desires fleshed out.

While Crummy and Jamie operate on a straightforward basis, Gilbert's Tennessee Williams is much more complicated and problematic. In Williams's first appearance, he establishes himself as an artist of the beautiful not concerned with baser desires. Yet, Gilbert uses Williams's love of his sacred green toilet as a metaphor to illustrate that, for Williams, his idea of beauty was inexplicably tied to the body, bodily functions, and male flesh in particular. Gilbert's Williams claims that he "felt very strange telling people about it. Getting all excited about my toilet. I could only tell certain people, in fact" (150). Thus, Williams’s opening monologue casts him as an artist conflicted by his own desire. As the show progresses, Williams begins to see Jamie as he sees his toilet: an object of desire that he probably should only tell certain people about.

Throughout the play, Gilbert does not do Williams any favors concerning his relationship with Jamie. If it was not for Jamie's admission at the beginning of the text, "well he did ask me to do this pretty weird thing. [pause] No it didn't have anything to do with sex" (150), the audience might be inclined to believe that Gilbert was intentionally writing Williams as a pedophile. A particularly questionable exchange occurs when Williams first approaches Jamie, despite the many protests by Crummy, after observing him drink a glass of milk:

TENNESSEE. You had . . . a milk moustache on your face a minute ago.

JAMIE. Yeah. I know. Didn't I wipe it off?

TENNESSEE. Oh yes, you did. There's no mustache anymore.

JAMIE. [strangely] Good.
TENNESSEE. It wouldn't be right for a boy like you to have a mustache (Gilbert, 154). Gilbert also does not help his cause a few pages later when he gets into another argument with Crummy over inviting Jamie to their hotel room:

CRUMMY. You didn't invite him over here for a threesome. You didn't.

TENNESSEE. Yes I did--

CRUMMY. Oh God fuck shit piss how many times do I have to tell you that it takes three to make a threesome. I don't want to have sex with him. I think he's creepy

(Gilbert 158).

As the audience, we know that Tennessee did not explicitly invite Jamie to a threesome and we know from Jamie’s opening monologue that no sex will come of this meeting, yet the previous exchanges foment some serious doubts concerning Williams’s transgressive sexual behaviors. Leading into the last few pages of the text, it is hard to grasp Gilbert’s work as one that offers an affirmative view of Williams’s as a queer artist.

After Crummy leaves and Jamie enters, Williams tells the boy that “I would very much like to see what you look like with your clothes off” (164). Despite the explicit suggestion, Williams allows Jamie to keep his underwear on. What follows is the strange request Jamie alluded to at the beginning of the show: Williams asks Jamie to read The Hill, a poem by Robert Brooke. As Jamie finishes the poem, Williams begins to cry and reveals that Jamie “remind[s] me very much of someone . . . someone who left me a long time ago and he was a very kind person . . . and how unfair it is when a very kind person gets ill and dies” (168). Here, Williams is referring to the death of his longtime partner, Frank Merlo. Williams even goes so far as to call Jamie “Frank” as Jamie cordially leaves the room shortly after. Crummy soon enters the room.
and as Williams comforts a somber and apologetic Crummy, Gilbert reveals his rationale for Williams’s behavior:

TENNESSEE. I always have been looking for Frank, and even when I was with Frank I was looking for Frank, because you see, Frank wasn’t even Frank.

CRUMMY. I don’t get it.

TENNESSEE. Frank is an idea. An idea of something that can never be gotten a hold of. So when you find that [he sniffles] I’m looking for Frank, or thinking about him or searching the eyes of boys for Frank, just remember that nobody is Frank, and not even Frank was Frank. Do you understand? (Gilbert 170).

Tennessee Williams was looking for the only relationship in which he had found true love and companionship. Thus, in the end, Gilbert’s play becomes not about sexual desire and lust for young boys, but the search for the remnants of love or something beautiful. Ultimately, Jamie leaves Tennessee’s hotel room having gained a meeting with a famous playwright and a story to tell his grandchildren. Ironically, it is Tennessee who becomes the victim, reliving the pain of losing Frank all over again. Jamie Angell, in the end, does not turn out to be Williams’s saving grace. Furthermore, Crummy and Williams’s final exchange cements Williams's identity as a queer artist and creates a space of redemption and grace for gay men:

TENNESSEE. Let’s go to sleep and dream of heaven.

CRUMMY. but what if there isn’t a heaven?

TENNESSEE. Shhh. Be quiet boy . . . and dream (Gilbert 171).

Produced at Toronto in 1992, at a time when the AIDS crisis and its human devastation was still in the minds of many gay men, My Night with Tennessee is a play that reconfigures Williams’s
sexual behaviors as a manifestation of longing, mourning and loss. Gilbert's play asks that if, after a career of personal and professional failure, Tennessee Williams can dream of a heaven where “the angels are and boys don’t hurt you” (171) why can’t the gay community that Gilbert writes for, that has experienced both the AIDS crisis and widespread discrimination, dream that dream as well? Ultimately, it will be Gilbert's audience that decides that fact. However, I argue that the audience does experience (in Gilbert's play and later, Sheffer's) a distinctly queer persona of Tennessee Williams.

In his memoirs, Sky Gilbert muses on the nature of art and interpretation: "And isn't every artistic interpretation of life filtered through the artist's own consciousness, quirks and prejudices? And isn't that ultimately what makes it interesting?" (Gilbert 50). In My Night with Tennessee, Sky Gilbert does not back away from Williams's controversial past. Rather, he filters it through the lens of his artistic eye and creates something new, unique, and possibly empowering. Robert Wallace states that "The unknown flesh of the queer body is as much a theatrical construction as a corporeal entity with material limits" (Wallace 17). Wallace points to the slippery slope of the queer body that Gilbert presents in his plays. Is "queerness" defined by sexual behaviors or gender roles? Sky Gilbert, in his play, forces the audience to look beyond sexual acts in defining the queer body, especially when considering Tennessee Williams. What ultimately defines the queer body? Gilbert does not give that answer outright and Wallace himself explains that "In his plays Gilbert uses ambiguity to question the separation of art from life as well as to interrogate moral and cultural values" (Wallace 22). In the end, we can be sure that Sky Gilbert exposes narratives of Tennessee Williams's homosexuality and forces us to think differently about them. It is this strategy of retelling and reclaiming that it is also at play in Will Scheffer's Tennessee and Me.
Compared to Ray Stricklyn's *Confessions of a Nightingale*, it is hard to view Will Schefer's *Tennessee and Me* as befitting the genre of biographical solo-performance. Schefer's piece is only a slim five pages, hardly matching the ninety-minute run time of Stricklyn's show. Schefer does not stipulate that his actor wear the stereotypical off-white suit and glasses. Indeed, Schefer does not stipulate his actor wear anything specific at all to suggest the spirit of Williams. Despite this shortfall of suggestive costuming, Williams's spirit is still evoked throughout the entirety of this short text. Schefer's play centers around a male prostitute, identified only as "ME," and his brief experience of being possessed by the spirit of Tennessee Williams. After fleeing a customer who was suffering from a cardiac arrest, ME flees to the safety of the St. Marks Baths, "a popular gay bathhouse on the lower east side that flourished in the innocent age before the plague had come to live with us in this city of strangers" (27). After taking up stay in a honeymoon suite, ME purchases an unidentified assortment of pills and decides to relax in the hotel spa. There, ME attracts the "attention of an attractive blonde bodied fellow with a mustache and highly developed pectoral muscles" and the two return to ME's room to "satisfy our mutual desire" (28). What comes next marks the beginning of a performance that pushes the boundaries of biographical solo-performance and, in my opinion, queer camp:

After approximately fifteen minutes, and at precisely 2:00 A.M., exactly as uptown from us Mr. Williams was choking in his tub, I began to come. And for a reason that till this day must remain a mystery to me - all at once I was coming and screaming and choking and yelling: "Oh baby, Oh baby," in a ridiculously southern accent that stuck foreignly in my throat . . . the soul of Tennessee Williams had leapt into my body like a candle flame leaping into the dark night; I was possessed. (*Tubular bells play*) (28).
For the rest of the show, ME struggles internally with the spirit of Tennessee who only seems to be able to express himself in memorable lines from his most famous productions, such as A Streetcar Named Desire:

ME. You can't move in. Get out of me!

TENNESSEE. But honey--we've had this date with each other from the beginning (Scheffer 29).

As the play rushes towards its conclusion, the two embark on a series of misadventures involving a sexual encounter with a Catholic priest in a confessional and a spiritual meeting with Truman Capote. It is only after falling in love with another gay man, "the object of our mutual affection" and the subsequent loss of that love does Tennessee decide to leave ME's body. Tennessee consoles ME by telling him to "take hold of yourself - and gently, gently with love, hand your life back to yourself" and exits ME's body by "flying up, up in his bathtub, and into the night" (31).

Tennessee and Me raises many questions concerning biographical performance. Returning to Tom Topor and his definition of biographical solo-performance from the last chapter, he states that the "The performer impersonates the historical figure (sometimes very closely, sometimes just impressionistically) and, using letters, documents, and other historical (or quasi-historical) material, offers the audience a slice of the figure's life" (qtd. in Gentile 130). Unlike Ray Stricklyn, the central character in Tennessee and Me does not engage in the "extended impersonation" (Gentile 142) that John Gentile outlines on his spectrum of characterization. Despite this "shortcoming," however, I argue that Tennessee and Me functions as biographical solo-performance.
Though most examples of biographical solo-performance rely on impersonations of great depth and detail to hold the attention of the audience, not all such performance need to follow this form. Though John Gentile in *Cast of One* primarily examines performances that follow the tried and true formula of suggesting the historical figure in costume, manner, and voice, Gentile claims that "Research indicated that successful biographical one-person shows do not necessarily present a literal facsimile of the central persona" (143). Though an actor's ability to present a stunning replica of the historical figure is often met with applause from an audience, it is by no means a guarantee for the overall success of the performance. Gentile explains that, more often than not, the success of plays within the genre of biographical solo-performance are "due to the actor's ability to convey the essence . . . the spirit of the impersonated figure" (143). In *Tennessee and Me* the "essence" or "spirit" of the dead playwright is made present both in the literal possession of ME by Tennessee and by the calling forth of Williams's past texts.

*Tennessee and Me* is "haunted," in Marvin Carlson's terms, by the past texts of Tennessee Williams, both literal and non-literal. Throughout the play, the spirit of Tennessee spouts iconic lines such as 'I've always depended on the kindness of strangers" and "sometimes there's God - so quickly" from *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Scheffer 29). Additionally, the character of ME evokes *The Glass Menagerie* as the spirit of Williams leaves his body: "Oh Tennessee I tried to forget you," ME cries "But it's been harder than I ever thought it would be. For nowadays the world is lit by lightning, so blow out your candles Tennessee. And so good-bye" (31). With any other playwright, the summoning of past literary works might not be enough to offer a "slice of life" of the historical subject. David Savran, however, points out that Williams himself has said of his work that "every word is autobiographical and no word is autobiographical" (Savran 2). Though hardly a conclusive statement, Williams's judgment of his own corpus does invite
scholars, critics, and audience members to speculate as to how close Williams was to his work.

Numerous critics, for example, have already taken up this challenge as they have pointed out that details of The Glass Menagerie: the overbearing mother, the crippled sister, the absentee father, the apartment in St. Louis, and the central character's (Jim) poetry all share a close connection to the playwright. As is often the case, Williams's plays speak just as much about him as his personal letters, interviews, and other "biographical" material.

Since the spirit of Tennessee and the body of ME converge to create a singular character in Tennessee and Me, it must be said that ME also suggests an "essence" or "spirit" of Tennessee Williams, in a figurative sense beyond that of his literal possession, of course. Specifically, ME's brief historical trajectory echoes key aspects of Williams's personal life. Before he is possessed, for example, ME discusses how he acquires an assortment of pills not long after checking into a honeymoon suite at St. Marks Baths. ME's drug habit bears a remarkable resemblance to Williams's own penchant for drugs, ME even goes so far as to refer to Williams's death "asphyxiated by the cap of a pill vial, lodged in his throat" (Scheffer 27). Furthermore, ME comments how "I had practiced a lifetime avoiding such flagrant effeminacy" (29) which rings of David Savran's findings that Williams "disdain[ed] the 'obvious types' and believe[ed] that 'travesties of the Mae West . . . make the whole homosexual thing seem ridiculous" (Savran 2).

After becoming possessed, ME "instinctively searched for the nearest Catholic church, believing exorcism to be my only hope" (Scheffer 29) which recalls Williams retreat to and baptism in the Catholic church towards the end of his life as a spiritual "last hope." ME even resorts to buying a typewriter and writing "bad plays which Tennessee criticized unmercifully" (30). If all these details were not enough, the unabashedly homosexual material also recalls a less discussed but equally important part of Tennessee Williams. In Tennessee and Me, the audience is confronted
at every turn with the residue of textual and extra-textual sources of Williams's life. All of these references and details combine to create a performance that is distinctly, though not in the traditional sense, biographical solo-performance.

Before I move on, I would like to pause briefly and address a particular concern with *Tennessee and Me*. The treatment of Williams within the play is, to some extent, less than flattering. In fact, one might say that this play is nothing more than a parody, or comic-rewriting, of Tennessee Williams. Despite the seemingly parodic use of Williams's texts-as-dialogue, *Tennessee and Me* is still able to retain its status as biographical solo-performance and not, as some would suggest, superficial caricature. Marvin Carlson, for example, divides parody into two distinct categories, "The first is mockery, in which the parody creator shows a certain contempt for the original material; the second is more sympathetic, even admiring, in which the parodist imitates in order to write in that style" (Carlson 39). Though comedic in presentation, parody functions in *Tennessee and Me* as a function of respect and sympathy for the deceased playwright. After all, at the end of the play Tennessee exits the body of ME offering sage advice on life and love. ME himself does not want the playwright to leave. Furthermore, a review of the play by Peter Marks entitled "Loving Sendup of an Artist's Instincts" recognizes the work of parody in *Tennessee and Me* as a sympathizing force. Marks states that though the play is a "sendup of an artist's basic instincts" the play "is also a tribute to dead poets and all the wishes and impulses that die with them" (Marks 12). Most telling, however, is Marks's assessment that "'Tennessee and Me' uses the supernatural as a door to the expression of deeper feeling" (12). What Marks recognizes in the performance is not a superficial caricature of Williams, but rather a "loving sendup" or a sympathetic biographical solo-performance of Tennessee Williams.
Towards the end of his commentary on the nature of parody, Marvin Carlson explains how "parody both reinscribes and subverts" (Carlson 39). The "loving sendup" of Williams not only creates a sympathetic portrait of the deceased author, but also realigns Williams as a positive figurehead of homosexuality in American culture. Speaking on the haunted text generally, Carlson relates how it is "in the very nature of the theatrical experience itself that encourages, in this genre more than others, a simultaneous awareness of something previously experienced and of something being offered in the present that is both the same and different, which can only be fully appreciated by a kind of doubleness of perception in the audience" (51).

In Tennessee and Me the audience is made aware of Williams's texts, such as A Streetcar Named Desire and The Glass Menagerie. The recycling of these texts in the context of the queer acts happening onstage in Tennessee and Me allow a "doubleness" of perception among the audience. On one hand, Tennessee's texts are symbols of repressed or absent homosexuality. Think of Allen Grey, Blanche's former husband in "Streetcar," who committed suicide after being "outed" by Blanche. The always suggested but never discussed relationship between Skipper and Brick in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is another famous example. On the other hand, iconic lines from Williams's texts are used in the service of an unabashedly gay narrative in Tennessee and Me. Upon meeting another gay man, Freddy, the spirit of Tennessee possessing ME, forces ME to kiss Freddy with these words: "Something I had never done before, not even for money--because I guess I knew that it would make me a real homosexual" (Scheffer 30). This moment in particular represents Scheffer's fusion of Williams's queer persona and gay liberation. Within this line, there is the suggestion that Williams himself was a "real homosexual" and that his possession of ME, who describes himself as "just street trash without [Williams]," is an act of empowerment (31). No more will ME walk the streets as a male prostitute. The ghost of
Williams leaves ME's body and leaves a space for a sincere, loving relationship that is defined as more than just sex. Essentially, Williams is able to make ME realize homosexuality as something beyond sex or money. In Tennessee and Me, Williams encourages ME to live "gently, gently with love, hand your life back to yourself" (31) and thus encourages ME (and thus all gay men) to love sincerely, to "[kiss] back with sincerity" (30), and define themselves as more than just what they do in the bedroom. Tennessee and Me is a play about gay men not identifying themselves by any particular sexual act, like a prostitute. Rather, through parody and recycling, Tennessee and Me encourages gay men to look to Tennessee Williams as a source of sincerity, love, and freedom.

Before I close this chapter, I would like to briefly comment on Eve Sedgwick's Epistemology of the Closet as it reflects aspects of these themes. In her study, Sedgewick claims that the homosexual/heterosexual binary "actually subsist[s] in a more unsettled and dynamic relation according to which, first [homosexual] is not symmetrical with but subordinated to [heterosexual]" (Sedgwick 10). Sedgwick warns against the binary opposition of heterosexual and homosexual because it ultimately creates a power relationship in which one term is subservient to the other. Instead, Sedgewick encourages "a deconstructive understanding of these binarisms" and urges us to approach these terms "as sites that are peculiarly densely charged with lasting potentials for powerful manipulation" (10). Sky Gilbert and Will Scheffer both manipulate the homosexual definition of Tennessee Williams. Is he a closeted anti-gay man? Or a figurehead of gay liberation? If Sedgwick were to have her way, Williams's identity would become blurred, freed from these rhetorical questions and "liberated from the binary prison, [to] achieve a state of infinite expansion" (10). Indeed, while I argue that Gilbert and Scheffer construct an image of Williams that posits him as a homosexual figurehead, it is also possible to
see the traces of traditional view of Williams as a problematic homosexual celebrity. Sky Gilbert unapologetically presents Williams desire for young boys and Will Scheffer pulls lines from Williams plays that actively mask and defer homosexual expression.

When speaking of "definitional binarisms" Sedgwick concludes that "contests for discursive power can be specified as competitions for the material and rhetorical leverage required to set the terms of, and to profit in some way from, the operations of such an incoherence of definition" (11). With this statement in mind, we can see how both *My Night with Tennessee* and *Tennessee and Me* complicate the persona of Tennessee Williams the gay man as well as the definition of homosexual writ large. To do so, these plays bid for power and control over the dead playwright's image. Though Gilbert and Scheffer's plays sketch situations of gay sympathy and empowerment, their attempts do not unproblematize the enterprise of defining Tennessee Williams, as "in" or "out" of the closet, through biographical solo-performance. Indeed, in the next chapter I will illustrate how Steve Lawson's biographical solo-performance pieces *A Distant Country Called Youth* and *Blanche and Beyond*, which seek to "sanitize" and "rehabilitate" the image of Tennessee Williams, finally fall into this same "binary prison" as well.
CHAPTER THREE: CREATING NOTHING OUT OF SOMETHING: REMATERIALIZING TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

As far as biographical solo-performance is concerned, Ray Stricklyn's Confessions of a Nightingale and Will Scheffer's Tennessee and Me are on opposite sides of the performance spectrum: Stricklyn's work represents the prime example of the "traditional" biographical solo-performance; Scheffer's piece boldly explores new territory concerning the three central aspects of the genre (the choice of source text, "casting" the audience, and the level of character representation). In this chapter, however, I will examine Steve Lawson's biographical solo-performance pieces, A Distant Country Called Youth and Blanche and Beyond, which present their own mysteries concerning the three categories central to biographical solo-performance. Indeed, it is difficult to explain how Lawson's plays function when comparing them to Confessions of a Nightingale and Tennessee and Me. Unlike either play, Lawson strictly adheres to and adapts from Albert Devlin and Nancy Tischler's assembled volumes of The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams Vol. I and II. Lawson does not attempt to "hide the seams" of his adaptation like Stricklyn nor does he craft his plays from multiple textual and extra-textual sources like Scheffer. Interestingly enough, the vague nature of Lawson's works extends further into the next category of "casting" the audience. On the surface, Lawson's text calls for the simple act of reading the text to the audience. Is this direct address? Does Lawson erect a fourth wall between the reader and audience member? Do Lawson's plays invite the guest to an intimate evening with Tennessee Williams (as does Stricklyn) or do they function as a site for community storytelling and reconfiguration (as does Scheffer)? Unfortunately there is little evidence in the text for either view. The vague nature of Lawson's work continues into the final category of characterization. By looking at Stricklyn's body in performance and by using Marvin Carlson's
theory of the haunted body, I argued that Ray Stricklyn desperately sought to figuratively and literally become Tennessee Williams. Conversely, Will Scheffer used textual and non-textual sources to demonstrate Marvin Carlson's theory of the haunted text in a performance that eschewed accurate bodily representation. Contrary to these works, both of Lawson's plays call for "an outfit . . . preferable to a full-fledged costumed" in addition to a merely suggestible "light southern accent" (Lawson 5). Finally, Lawson's actor-of-choice for both of his shows is none other than Richard Thomas ("John-Boy" of The Waltons fame). In Lawson's work, Thomas's semi-costumed body and half-accented voice combine to place his performance of A Distant Country Called Youth and Blanche and Beyond in an indeterminate space between Scheffer and Stricklyn and their methods of presenting biographical solo-performance.

At the very least, it can be said that Lawson's plays are not in the same league as the standard, traditional fare of biographical solo-performance that Ray Stricklyn crafts in Confessions of a Nightingale. The importance of defining how A Distant Country Called Youth and Blanche and Beyond operate as biographical solo-performance is critical to understanding how Lawson's plays push the boundaries of the genre. In the case of Will Scheffer's Tennessee and Me, for example, Scheffer "outed" the homosexual aspects of Williams's texts (both textual and non-textual) to posit Williams as a prominent historical, homosexual figure. What theatrical and theoretical strategies are at work in Lawson's plays and how do those strategies frame our understanding of his plays specifically and as biographical solo-performance generally? To answer these questions, I argue that Lawson, in his plays A Distant Country Called Youth and Blanche and Beyond, draws on the techniques and methodologies of museum theater and first-person interpretation (all under the umbrella of "living history" or "historical performance") to craft an "objective" performance that is concerned with performing the "facts." Additionally,
Lawson's preference for Richard Thomas highlights, in Marvin Carlson's terms, the haunted aspects of these plays. Specifically, it could be argued that Richard Thomas is remembered by the audience as his previous role on the television series *The Waltons* playing the innocent, amateur writer "John-Boy." If so, I argue, this innocence appears to write over the scandalous nature of not only Williams's letters but also Williams's public persona.

Interestingly enough, there is already an established link between biographical solo-performance and the techniques of living history. Marvin Carlson comments that "in [theatrical cultures], especially those with a strong commitment to artistic originality and innovation, [recycling] . . . has always been central to the functioning of theatre as a repository and living museum of cultural memory" (Carlson 165). Carlson further describes the theatre as an art form that "has always sought to provide orientation aides in the form of such devices as already known plots, already familiar characters, already experienced situations" (166). The point I wish to make here is that Carlson chooses to describe the traditional dramatic theatre in the terms of living history and historical performance. For Carlson, the theatre is just as much a "living museum of cultural memory" with various "orientation aides" as a comparable living history site such as Colonial Williamsburg, though some of the interpreters might balk at even the slightest suggestion of a link to drama or theatre.

Most telling, however, is the acknowledgement by leading scholars in the field of living history of the shared genesis of biographical solo-performance and various genres of living history. In her introduction to her book, *Past into Present: Effective Techniques for First-Person Interpretation*, Stacy Roth comments how her study "acknowledges a theatrical side to many first-person interpretations" (Roth 4) and specifically describes the dual nature of Hal Holbrook's
Mark Twain Tonight! which, according to Roth and others, transcends both genres. Roth details that

Although Mark Twain Tonight! was conceived as a theater piece, one cannot read Holbrook's own account of how he built his dramatization of Twain without recognizing that he possessed the same sense of mission as a first-person interpreter. The actor spent years developing the character. He studied the author’s writings and letters, analyzed secondary accounts, and viewed photographs and videos (34).

It is important to note that Roth argues that Holbrook's play is not essentially a first-person interpretation or living history; rather, Mark Twain Tonight! is an example of biographical solo-performance that uses techniques and shares the "same sense of mission" as the genres of living history. Indeed, other living history scholars are quick to place barriers between biographical solo-performance and living history. Joyce Thierer, in her book Telling History: A Manual for Performers and Presenters of First-Person Narratives, asks: "What is a historical performance without a question-and-answer session, without care about accuracy of clothing, and, often without direct address? a dramatic monologue" (Thierer 25). Theirer and Roth both label biographical solo-performances as merely "dramatic monologues" and both scholars dismiss this type of performance because it does not offer direct audience participation or a high degree of historical accuracy. Theirer quotes and credits Stacy Roth for "nail[ing] this difference between a historical performance [and] many monologues when she describes Holbrook's portrait of Samuel Clemens as 'creat[ing] a situation that place[s] theatergoers in a comfortable role as an audience rather than voyeurs intruding on a private scene'" (qtd. in Thierer 25). Moreover, practitioners of living history, the actual first-person interpreters that populate mythical sites such as Colonial Williamsburg, also debate the role of theater within their
discipline. Roth sums up the controversy succinctly: "interpreters at one end of the spectrum consider themselves strictly educators and/or historians; they blanch at any insinuation that they are acting. Those at the opposite pole claim first-person is theater. In the middle are those who describe it as a hybrid that marries history and education with effective performance technique" (51). Scholars and practitioners of living history can rest easy because I have no intention of claiming that Steve Lawson's plays belong firmly within the genre of living history. Yet, I do argue that the nascent, pre-existing link between biographical solo-performance and living history only adds more credence to the argument Lawson's play can be credited as examples of the strategies of museum performance, first-person interpretation, and historical performance, all use to create a crafty narrative of an "objective" and "sanitized" Tennessee Williams.

At this point, I would like to begin my examination of Steve Lawson's work by reflecting on the relationship between the content of his plays and the techniques of museum theater. I should note that, throughout this chapter, I will be often discussing A Distant Country Called Youth and Blanche and Beyond in very similar terms. The fact of the matter is that there are no essential differences in the construction of the two performance texts. Although they differ on their themes, both of Lawson's plays are adapted from a volume of Williams's letters edited by Albert Devlin and Nancy Tischler, both had Richard Thomas as a leading man, both called for a "set" of three semi-abstract performance sites, and both performances were accompanied by projected photographs. In sum, A Distant Country Called Youth and Blanche and Beyond differ in content but are clones in form.

To begin, I offer a definition of museum theater via Tessa Bridal and her book Exploring Museum Theatre. Bridal suggests that the label of museum theatre describes "Performances of scripted pieces by actors in defined [museum] spaces" among other varied descriptions (1).
Bridal herself is hesitant to add her own definition to an already crowded field as she frequently quotes the definition of others. For example, Bridal cites Gigi Dornfest's suggested interrogation thus:

First does the piece evoke a different time and place? That is to say, is the imagination of the audience engaged to the point that their world expands to include the story that is before them? In such a situation, the script and the abilities of the actors become the agents of emotional transport. The second element needed to differentiate demos from theatre is the narrative structure. Theatre tells a story (qtd. in Bridal 2).

Based on this "definition," Lawson's work, at the very least, can be seen as utilizing techniques of museum theater. The letters that he presents are from a different time and, as such, contain references to people and places that, in some cases, do not exist anymore. Furthermore, the "themes" of the plays, A Distant Country Called Youth's concern with a "young man from St. Louis who wanted so fiercely to become a writer and, against the odds, ultimately did" (Lawson 5) and Blanche and Beyond's focus "on a playwright facing the seismic shock of international fame . . . and trying to hold on to what he's achieved" (5) basically works to frame these letters as self-contained "stories" to be told. Furthermore, Bridal relates how "the intended audience plays an important part in defining museum theatre. Our audiences typically have not made a choice to come to our museums to see a play" (Bridal 3). Indeed, people often go to museums to see and learn about exhibits and artifacts. Museum performance provides an intermediary between the audience and said exhibits and gives audience members a chance to respond with questions after the "show." Though lacking a distinct interactive component, I argue that Lawson's choice of Williams's letters and photos constitute a museum-like exhibit that is mediated to the audience through performance.
Marvin Carlson, toward the end of *The Haunted Stage*, discusses how plays recycle images and other historical objects to create and reinforce meaning. Carlson describes a particular example:

Beaumarchais incorporated copies of well-known paintings into his Figaro plays . . . [in] *The Rent Day*, however, the painting is not simply a quotation for effect; it is the motivation for the play. The play tells story of the painting. They are or are assumed to be, the same narrative expressed in different media, theatre providing the dimensionality and movement through time forbidden to the painting (Carlson 113).

What is interesting about Carlson's observation is that he links the stage narrative with the "story" of the painting. The painting, in this sense, functions beyond a mere "set piece." I argue that the same can be said about the images that Lawson chooses to project during both "A Distant Country" and *Blanche and Beyond*. The projected images and the spoken letters combine to create "the same narrative" though "expressed in different media." Indeed, I believe that, the techniques of museum theater present these "exhibits" as an essential part of the narrative of Tennessee Williams in Lawson's plays. I do not think it is a stretch to view Richard Thomas as dramatically presenting Lawson's "exhibit" of Tennessee Williams's letters and photos. Indeed, Stacy Roth comments on how "museum theater or gallery drama add[s] dimension to art, architecture, science, and other 'static' exhibits" (Roth 11). Bridal claims "Theatre is a catalyst, a motivator, a mean of encouraging audiences to want to wrestle with ideas. Theatre fosters an imaginative, creative, and culturally diverse understanding of the objects we choose to display" (Bridal 6). Moreover, Bridal describes a particular museum theater piece where the audience was able to meet with famous historical figures (in this case, Frederick Douglass) before seeing the exhibit and "After the performance . . . all paid a visit to the RMSC's library, where they could
view photographs of the period and see a real Underground Railroad pass, as well as Douglass's signed copy of his speech" (133). Additionally, Bridal cites fellow museum theater scholar Mellissa Marlowe, who "believes that museum theatre can transform points of view by 'taking . . . hidden history, history that is rarely taught in schools and is not often discussed" (qtd. in Bridal 8) Though the letters and images that Lawson adapts are available to the public, I believe that it is fair to say that these sources are hidden in the archive. In most cases, the letters would only be sought out by serious Williams scholars and enthusiasts. By using museum theater to dramatize the exhibit, Lawson is popularizing, disseminating, and exposing Tennessee Williams to a wider audience.

The fact that Lawson mediates artifacts of Williams's life to the general public recalls another facet of museum theater, its comforting effect on the audience. In their article "Enlightening or Embarrassing? Drama in the Science Museum, London, United Kingdom," Sandra Bicknell and Susie Fisher describe how museum theater generates a "feeling of warmth though both the interactive nature of the drama and its ability to enliven and entertain" (Bicknell and Fisher 8). Bicknell and Fisher both make the point that presenting the museum exhibit as drama in the form of compelling story creates a familiar, non-threatening space to the audience. By bringing the theater to the museum exhibit, Tessa Bridal claims that "characters can embody what we most love and most fear; couched in a theatrical performance, issues can be discussed and examined in a non-threatening way, and we can be invited to laugh and to cry about ourselves and others" (Bridal 7). On their own, Tennessee Williams's letters may appear to be "non-threatening," however, some audience members may find certain letters in which Williams discusses his sexual life particularly obscene. Lawson, in A Distant Country Called Youth, includes letters to Kip Kiernan, Williams's first boyfriend. In one such letter Williams addresses
Kip, after their relationship ended, to "Fuck the whys and wherefores. Just write me a letter because you're my friend" but goes on to mock Kip's alleged interest in women by relinquishing him to "the female vagina, which vortex will inevitably receive you with or without my permission" (27). Additionally, a letter Williams wrote to Joseph Hazan recounts an evening spent with "Juanita, who is the queen of the male whores in Mexico City" (28) where he observes a crucifix over the bed and comments that Jesus Christ would "no doubt [be] thanking his lucky stars that he remained a celibate on earth, because if he had not--it is quite likely he would have been a fairy" (28).

Although Lawson cannot or does not choose to censor the material presented, he does make use of the techniques of museum theater to blunt the impact. Lawson, in terms of biographical solo-performance, "casts his audience" as spectators at a museum theater performance. Lawson, for example, can ease his audience into the letters merely through his choice of space. Ultimately, Lawson does not perform his piece in a museum space and, as Bridal notes, museum "visitors rarely come to museums to attend performance. Theirs is a different agenda, and museum theatre provides an unexpected experience" (Bridal 39). There is a difference in expectation between a night at the theatre and a day at the museum. At the museum, attendees are more active and are encouraged to ask questions, probe for information, and offer disagreements. This is especially true of museum theater because, often times, there is an interactive component between the audience and performer, usually in the form of an immediate "post-show" discussion or written feed-back form. Though Lawson's show is easily staged in a variety of spaces, he keeps it within the confines of the traditional theater. This choice has its distinct advantages over the museum space as Bridal cites the Association of Science and Technology Centers for pointing out describing theatre as a "fiction to which the audience
consents, and thus it can provide a non-threatening framework for dealing with complex, crucial social issues relating to science" (qtd. in Bridal 132). Additionally, the traditional, familiar, and passive theater space "makes it safe to contemplate disturbing controversies and to probe attitudes" (qtd. in Bridal 132). Though the subject in this example is science, I believe that the same performance concepts can be applied to biographical solo-performance and specifically Lawson's work. Steve Lawson is able to take the "best practices" or techniques of museum theater by framing his Williams artifacts, his "exhibits" in a familiar, non-threatening environment for his audience. Furthermore, Lawson does not demand the level of audience-interaction that some scholars see as an essential component of museum theatre. Again, this works in Lawson's favor as Bicknell and Fisher point out the "fear and trepidation" (Bicknell and Fisher 85) on the part of the audience when interacting with historical characters in museum spaces. "What do I do in this situation?" and "How do I talk to these strange people? What's going on here?" (85) are just some of the reactions spectators have when physically confronting the performer, in or out of character.

In museum theater, we see a special concern for the audience. It is in the best interests of the museum to not "scare away" or otherwise intimidate audience members. Yet, interactive performances of museum theater can do just that. Lawson takes this awkwardness away in exchange for a comfortable environment. It would be wrong, however, to characterize Lawson's audience as passive observers. When considering more "theatrical" genres such as biographical solo-performance, Stacy Roth claims that "the premise created a situation that placed theatergoers in a comfortable role as an audience rather than voyeurs intruding on a private scene" (Roth 34). I disagree with Roth on this point precisely because she has not encountered or at least, does not put into her consideration the type of "hybrid" performances that are Steve
Lawson's plays. After all, what can be more private than Tennessee Williams's private letters? The audience is encouraged to believe that they are intruding on a secret scene and uncovering hidden mysteries about Williams's life and plays. Reviewer David Cuthbert describes how "Part of the fun . . . is recognizing incidents, people and phrases that would later appear in his plays. It's kind of picking up clues and playing connect-the-dots" (Cuthbert 22). Stacy Roth accurately describes how Lawson "casts his audience" as she relates how, at performances of living history, the audience "play[s] detective. They are presented with a less pedantic version of 'the facts' as they roam at will and ask questions, fitting together pieces of the puzzle" (Roth 27). Though hardly physically roaming around and asking questions, the audience of *A Distant Country Called Youth* and *Blanche and Beyond* are still solving a puzzle, it just so happens that the final image that they piece together has been already determined. As Joyce Thierer states "You [the writer] decide what you want the audience to take away with them about your historic figure and her or his era" (Thierer 36).

One of the critical issues that I have been side-stepping, which was raised earlier by Melissa Marlowe in Bridal's study, is that when theater aligns itself with the museum exhibit, the possibility to "transform points of view" is opened to the audience (Bridal 8). For some, it may seem ludicrous to suggest that Steve Lawson is trying to create his own "objective" and "sanitized" characterization of Tennessee Williams. Yet, if we see how he manipulates the methods of museum theatre, first-person interpretation, and historical performance, then it is easy to see that Lawson is able to operate under the auspices of objectivity in his presentation of Williams. Discussing living history generally, Stacy Roth claims that "Today there is a much greater concern for authentic detail, fidelity to documentation, and the appropriate application of research" (Roth 1). Indeed, the sub-genres of living history carry with them an air of accuracy,
authenticity . . . a sense of having dealt with the "facts." Roth, however, is quick to comment that by adding "roleplay" into the mix of representing history, the appearance of objectivity becomes more like an illusion. Roth claims that the act of performance "personalizes history, it creates a greater sense of empathy and emotion than lectures, guided tours, and third-person description" (Roth 3). I have already shown how Lawson uses museum theater techniques to create a performance that "personalizes" the artifacts of Williams's life. However, the problematic framing of these objects pales in comparison to Lawson's choice to have Richard Thomas act as both an interpreter and embodiment of Tennessee Williams.

In the two previous chapters, I have outlined Marvin Carlson's theory of the haunted body and how, in American theater and film, there is a penchant for actors and their careers to become "haunted" by the past roles that they play. In the case of Richard Thomas, his long stint on the television show *The Waltons* may have created a strong memory in the minds of audience members of Thomas's portrayal of the youthful writer "John-Boy." Richard Thomas is arguably the main character of the show, as he opens and closes each show with a brief voice-over (suggesting the episode's events are from his point of view). I do not think it would out of step to suggest that, broadly speaking, *The Waltons* was a homespun television show about American values (thrift, hard-work, honesty, and community) set during the early twentieth century. Broadcast in the 1970's, *The Waltons* was a nostalgic show that, presented American audiences with the opportunity to return to a more quaint and simple time. When looking at Richard Thomas and his role on *The Waltons*, it is hard to reconcile the calm, quiet John-Boy with the raucous and racy persona of Tennessee Williams. Moreover, Marvin Carlson comments that "Celebrity . . . while a powerful source of ghosting, is an ambiguous one, which may work either to reinforce or subvert the desired effect of the production, whether it involves the individual
actor or the interrelationships of several actors" (Carlson 112). From this perspective, Thomas's previous role as John-Boy would seem to undermine his characterization of Tennessee Williams.

Reviewing a production at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C., Debbie Jackson writes that "Richard Thomas has come a long way from playing John Boy Walton . . . although the familiar visage is recognizable as soon as he steps on the set, all flashbacks to his antics growing up in that homespun version of early Americana disappear as Thomas anchors himself firmly in the flamboyant, boisterous, boozing personae of Tennessee Williams" (Jackson 1). Though Jackson claims to see through Thomas's John-Boy, for others the distinction is not so clear. Dolores Gregory, also reviewing the production in D.C., describes a particular moment where Thomas reads "'She wants me to send her ice cream' . . . his voice catching in grief as he realizes that his beautiful sister would spend the rest of her life in an institution, too far out of touch with reality ever to return home" (Gregory 1). There appears to be a confusion of pronouns and identities as Gregory aligns Thomas's distinct voice with Williams's words. Most tellingly, Gregory describes how "'A Distant Country' is tailor-made for star power; different actors can--and have--moved the part with relatively scant rehearsal" (Gregory 2). Clearly, reviewers and audience members welcome the clash of Richard Thomas's "star power" and first-person interpretation that A Distant Country Called Youth and Blanche and Beyond provide. This clash, however, does pose an interesting problem concerning biographical solo-performance: How can we describe the "level of characterization" of Richard Thomas's performance?

John Gentile, in Cast of One, encourages the examination of biographical solo-performance in terms of an actor's "level of characterization." However, this is an especially complex task given the nature of A Distant Country Called Youth and Blanche and Beyond. Specifically, in A Distant Country Called Youth, for example, Lawson dictates:
No attempt should be made to "impersonate" Tennessee Williams. This applies not just to vocal intonations, but to physical appearance--an outfit (say, an off-white linen suit) is preferable to a full-fledged costume. All the actors I have worked with have used a very light Southern accent for approximately the first half of the play. As Thomas Lanier segues into Tennessee, a more pronounced dialect--think of it as the playwright's public self--can gradually emerge.

This is a different experience from recent one-person shows about Callas or Barrymore or Capote, where a dramatist built a play around a famous figure and invented dialogue. "Distant Country" is taken entirely from correspondence. But the range of letters it draws on is so rich, so simultaneously funny and poignant, that there was no need for anything else. The actor should locate the ups and downs, the roller-coaster rhythms of Williams' early life, and trust them to help him evoke the young man from St. Louis (5).

This direction from Lawson makes it particularly difficult for the actor to characterize Tennessee Williams. How is an "outfit" of a full "off-white linen suit" any different from a "full-fledged costume" (especially considering that said choice of suit is the standard "Williams" costume). What constitutes a "light accent?" How can the actor locate the "rhythms of Williams early life" if he or she is expected to surrender to the text? Complicating things further is the fact that Richard Thomas's persona is also onstage. If Thomas is encouraged not to embody Williams, then how can the audience look past or through his performance as John-Boy? Is this even possible? The point of all these rhetorical questions is to illustrate the fact that, considering Lawson's preface, it is extremely difficult to locate the "level of characterization" a la Gentile. Is there anything that can be said about A Distant Country Called Youth and Blanche and Beyond
concerning biographical solo-performance? In order to understand the "level of characterization" we need to examine the genre of first-person interpretation that, as with museum theater, Steve Lawson is drawing upon to create his text and performance.

Why first-person interpretation? In his plays, Lawson gives a contradictory set of directions for the actor. The only way to reconcile these directions is to view Thomas as both Richard Thomas as interpreter and Richard Thomas as Tennessee Williams. As with museum theater, Lawson takes the techniques that work best in first-person interpretation and adapts them to his needs. For example, Joyce Thierer describes the "Chautauqua-style first-person narrative" as a "monologue in character and then as the scholar out of character" (Thierer 6). In Lawson's work, Thomas eschews interactive questions but presents himself as Richard Thomas in the costume of Williams reading Williams. Thus, the audience is always aware of the dual nature of Thomas's performance.

The task of defining what exactly first-person interpretation is has proven just as difficult as defining museum theater. As with museum theater, first-person interpretation is a "blurred genre" that is difficult to define concretely. Stacy Roth, for example, claims that "The goal of first-person interpretation is to relate the past and relate to the past in a way that personalizes and humanizes it" (Roth 20). Though Richard Thomas certainly "humanizes" Williams for his audience, concentrating on this aspect of first-person interpretation alone is still too vague for my purposes. Though not strictly a clear-cut definition, Roth does provide five characteristics from which to view and categorize first-person interpretation, "the individual style of the interpreter, the format . . . the passive or active role of the audience, the subject matter, and the venue" (51). For the purposes of this section of this chapter, I will not be examining the role of the audience or the subject matter as I have already addressed those concerns. By focusing on "the individual
style of the interpreter" and the "venue," I argue that we can view Richard Thomas as a
costumed, first-person interpreter guiding the audience along the narrative of Tennessee
Williams.

In *Telling History: A Manual for Performers and Presenters of First-Person Narratives*,
Joyce Thierer claims that "setting is crucial to living history interpreters because setting
determines their activities" (Thierer 21). In the genre of living history, first-person interpreters
generally demonstrate in locations tied to their characters. The performance of a colonial
blacksmith, for example, is directly tied to the "setting" of his workshop. Thierer offers her take
on this example by claiming that "if you are in a farmhouse or a farm garden it is going to be
different than if you are in a blacksmith shop. Thus, the setting is going to determine the skills
that you demonstrate and interpret" (21). Lawson, in a similar way, uses settings to signal the
subjects that Thomas is going to interpret. Both the settings for *A Distant Country Called Youth*
and *Blanche and Beyond* contain three separate and distinct "sites" (Lawson's term) for Thomas
to perform his interpretation. In *A Distant Country Called Youth*, these sites are "A) stage right,
standing for home and family, B) center representing Williams the writer, and C) stage left,
epitomizing Williams the traveler, adventurer, and sensual being" (Lawson 5). Of course, for
*Blanche and Beyond* these sites change as "A) upstage center, standing for New York, B)
downstage right, embodying the South, and C) downstage left representing experiences abroad"
(Lawson 5). Furthermore, though these sites must have, at a bare minimum, music stands from
which Thomas reads the letters, Lawson encourages the use of "small round tables . . . water,
glasses, an ashtray (if the actor decides to smoke), and elements for mixing martinis . . . Oriental
carpets of different patterns under each music stand can help sharpen the different identities"
(Lawson 5).
It is unclear if the addresses of the letters are read or projected; however, either case would work to reinforce the relationship between place and narrative in A Distant Country Called Youth and Blanche and Beyond. As Thierer has pointed out, the interpreter and their setting are involved in a dynamic, interdependent relationship. The audience needs Thomas as interpreter to familiarize each site for us. Additionally, the sites work upon Thomas, establishing which particular characterization of Williams he is at any given time. Indeed, this same interdependent relationship can be said of Thomas and his costume. However, the concept of costuming is far more contentious than setting in the first-person interpreter community. Thierer describes how "Clothing and costume has been the center of debate within and between interpreters, reenactors, and historical performers" (80). Thierer sketches the arguments of the debating camps as revolving around intent and accuracy. For some, the suggestion of a costume is enough while others call for full, period-accurate reproduction of costume by citing the fact that reenactors are facing an "increasingly sophisticated audience, an audience that expects an experience as close to authenticity as can be achieved" (Thierer 82). Fortunately for Lawson, he is able to appeal to both sides. In his preface to the performance text, Lawson aims for a suggestion or intent of Williams, saying that an "off-white linen suit" will do. However, Tennessee Williams actually wore off-white linen suits. In fact, it is the costume of choice for Ray Stricklyn's meticulously costumed Tennessee Williams. One benefit of interpreting a historical character who lived in the 20th century is the relative ease of reproducing accurate and evocative clothing.

Thomas's "costume" has the benefit of being both culturally general (people still wear off-white linen suits) and historically specific (as Tennessee Williams made it part of his "calling card"). This works in favor of Lawson's production. As an interpreter of Williams, Thomas
effectively dresses in a "Williams costume" that is not specific to any of the "sites" or identities that he has to interpret. The off-white linen suit, for example, gives the audience enough to imagine Williams the traveler, Williams the writer, or Williams the gay man with Richard Thomas filling in the rest with his historical performance. In discussing living history and first person interpretation, Thierer comments that "Ideally, living history interpreters are representing a particular person or composite of real people who would have been in the location in which she or he is now meeting the public" (23). As an interpreter, Richard Thomas is able to act as a composite of many Williams characters. Though it may be hard to believe, audiences seem to have caught on to the concept of Thomas-as-interpreter and buy into the spectacle of John-Boy without questioning (or even noticing) Thomas's contradictory relationship to the famous playwright he portrays. Peter Marks, writing for the Washington Post, said that "Thomas seems to know just how much actor-y interpretation to impose on Williams's words . . . he's created a character and established an intimate connection with the audience, without putting a distracting filter on the dramatist's own voice" (Marks C01). Marks really sells Thomas's skill to readers, assuming that "You'd desire no less accomplished an actor than Thomas as an escort through this interesting material. He recites it all with a relish that winningly sheds light on a great writer's joie de vivre" (C01).

As the audience and critics recognized Richard Thomas as a first-person interpreter, they also bought into the supposed "objectivity" of Steve Lawson's play. Debbie Jackson claims that "Thomas provided a consistent and authentic portrayal throughout" (Jackson 1) and Richard Ouzounian writes that "offering only the flavor of a Southern accent, [Thomas] gives us an impressionist painting of Williams rather than a realistic portrait" (Ouzounian 32). Peter marks describes how, despite Thomas's distinct reading, he "allows us to draw close to Williams at the
thrilling time in his evolution from aspiring talent to literary giant" (Marks C01). Dolores Gregory wholeheartedly embraces the "objectivity" of A Distant Country Called Youth as she describes Richard Thomas's performance as "wonderfully transparent," allowing the brave and vulnerable heart of young Tennessee to beat ferociously on stage" (Gregory 2) In reality, however, Steve Lawson's text and Richard Thomas's performance do not draw any closer to the "real" Williams than other biographical solo-performances by Ray Stricklyn and Will Scheffer. Like these authors, Lawson made subjective choices in constructing his performance text. This does not mean, however, that Lawson's text is of poor quality. Rather, it only reinforces the fact that subjectivity is part of portraying historical figures in biographical solo-performance.

Yet, subjectivity is not just limited to biographical solo-performance: Joyce Thierer claims that "one of the most interesting--and challenging--aspects of creating a first person narrative is, like all art and scholarly activity, subjective" (Theirer 36). Speaking on the work of history generally, Thierer also makes the point that "history is no more objective than is life itself" (36). It is important to note that Thierer's observation does not lead her to wallow in her own subjectivity. On the contrary, Theirer encourages interpreters and historians to examine their subjectivity "to expand your own awareness of both how other people have perceived the person and era over time and how that individual interpreted her or his own world and being" (36).

Some may argue that Lawson does reveal the subjective nature of his text via the cover of his plays. After all, "adapted by Steve Lawson from The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams" is written on the cover of each of his plays. Yet, the lack of any dynamic, interactive component in Lawson's works establishes a wall between the audience and Lawson. Roth and Thierer both discuss how first-person interpretation "by definition, has a primary responsibility to relay a message" (Roth 53) and how the genre places "a responsibility on interpreters and costumed
historians to be authentic" (Thierer 22). Lawson takes the techniques of first-person interpretation to give his text an aura of authenticity, realism, and objectivity. Yet, Lawson does not allow his audience members to question or interrogate his methods. How would they know that, for example, Lawson chooses 90 letters out of 300 to comprise *A Distant Country Called Youth*?

I would like to conclude my discussion of *A Distant Country Called Youth* and *Blanche and Beyond* by first stating that I am not suggesting that it was Steve Lawson's intent to draw the techniques of museum theater and first-person interpretation into the genre of biographical solo-performance. I am not arguing a view of Lawson's intent in crafting these performance texts. However, that does not diminish the fact that by viewing *A Distant Country Called Youth* and *Blanche and Beyond* through the lenses of museum history and first-person interpretation, we can discover the strategies of biographical solo-performance at work. John Gentile often examines the source text (textual and non-textual) that playwrights of this genre draw upon when creating their performance pieces. In *A Distant Country Called Youth* and *Blanche and Beyond*, the source texts have a distinct presence onstage as Lawson frames his sources as museum exhibits to be dramatized for his audience. By framing his source texts, the actual letters and photographs of Tennessee Williams, as exhibits to be displayed, Lawson creates the illusion of his performance as more "real" and "authentic" than other biographical solo-performances by artists such as Ray Stricklyn. In Stricklyn's piece, we are unsure of the true-nature of the source texts and, looking at the cover of *Confessions of a Nightingale* itself, Stricklyn does not describe himself as an "adapter" like Lawson. In Stricklyn, the sources and the subsequent performance text become compromised by Stricklyn's methods. Lawson however, by using techniques of
museum performance to present his "exhibit" supposedly maintains a level objectivity and authenticity, despite being just as subjective as any other author/adapter.

Beyond the source text, Gentile examines how biographical solo-performers "cast the audience." In *A Distant Country Called Youth* and *Blanche and Beyond*, Lawson again picks and chooses techniques of museum theater while not subscribing to others. One of the aspects of museum theater is the space it is performed in. Often times, it is performed in a museum or other exhibition space. As Bicknell and Fisher have pointed out, museum theater often suffers "embarrassment" because of the awkward interactions between audience and performers in the unfamiliar museum space. Lawson sidesteps this issue by keeping his show in the theater. Audience members know "how to act" as "passive" observers in the theater space. Lawson, however, adds a wrinkle to this by "casting" his audience as historical investigators "reading" along to Williams's private letters. Debbie Jackson described how the letters revealed motivations behind Williams's plays and casting choices and how each revelation "created a wave of delight in the audience" (Jackson 1). While the audience may get a kick out of "investigating" and "revealing" the puzzle of Williams's life, this role is ultimately an illusion. The "puzzle" is pre-planned and organized by Lawson. What is "revealed" is not original...the letters themselves were already published when Lawson was writing.

Finally, John Gentile distinguishes various examples of biographical solo-performance by the "level of characterization" performers engage in when representing their historical characters. Again, Lawson's play offers the techniques of first-person interpretation as a cover for the subjective methods of biographical solo-performance. Much of what defines first-person interpretation is the site at which it is performed and the costume of those performing it. In his text, Lawson calls for multiple, distinct sites for Richard Thomas to dramatize Williams's letters.
Each site dictates the subject matter that Thomas will be discussing. Furthermore, his "basic" costume of an off-white linen suit calls forth the image not of the Tennessee Williams but rather a Tennessee Williams. Throughout A Distant Country Called Youth and Blanche and Beyond, Richard Thomas moves to different sites and uses his "suggestive" costume to evoke and interpret the different personas of Tennessee Williams that are expressed in the letters. Since the first-person interpreters are, first and foremost, concerned with historical accuracy, Steve Lawson gains a sense of that accuracy and authenticity by using techniques of first-person interpretation. Furthermore, Lawson's decision to use Richard Thomas as the preferred performer of A Distant Country Called Youth and Blanche and Beyond reflects a possible desire to sanitize Williams's persona. Every reviewer commented on Thomas's role as John-Boy on the television show The Waltons. Lawson encouraged audiences to identify Thomas as the innocent "John-Boy" by only having him adopt a light-characterization through a light-accent and suggestive costume. Though the Southern accent and off-white linen suit are present, it is ultimately the calm, quite, and innocent voice of John-Boy that the audience hears reading Williams's letters.

Stacy Roth quotes David Lowenthal as he describes how "the 'spell' of the past affects the present and that modern attempts to restore and re-create the past reshape it by inflicting modern aesthetics, tastes, and comforts on it" (qtd. in Roth 23). In Steven Lawson's plays we can see how Lawson reshapes the past narratives and biographical solo-performances of Tennessee Williams by incorporating techniques from the genres of living history and historical performance. More than the two previous chapters, this examination of Lawson's work has demonstrated, in Roth's words, "how historians of successive eras have distilled starkly different messages from the same primary documentation to create patriotic, nostalgic, religious, and economic meanings" (Roth 23). Lawson has taken the existing, public material of The Selected Letters of Tennessee
Williams and created or "distilled" two plays filled with new meaning. Yet these new creations are not without their ethical quandaries. By dismissing the interactive elements of museum theater and first-person interpretation, Lawson keeps his subjectivity hidden and appears to present an objective and sanitized version of Tennessee Williams. Though he reveals himself as an adapter, Lawson does not reveal how he adapts or constructs his texts. Lawson would do well to heed the words of Stacy Roth as she claims that "History is not 'the past.' It is an interpretation of the past, ever shifting because our uses for it change" (Roth 23).
CONCLUSION

There is more information available about Tennessee Williams today than ever before. Yet, despite this deluge of information, I argue that we are no closer to defining who Tennessee Williams was than the day that he died. In fact, I would even go so far to say that with each publishing of a new, rediscovered play or correspondence, we move one-step further from a strict definition of Tennessee Williams. Indeed, our search for Tennessee Williams is a fruitless one as a platonic form of Williams does not exist. The real, complete, or authentic Tennessee is a mirage. For every text that is brought into the light, another interpretation of Williams is born. This process is mimicked with each new appearance of a biographical solo-performance that playwrights keep writing about Tennessee Williams.

If the plays presented in this thesis are any indication, future playwrights of biographical solo-performance will continue to grapple with the problems and issues inherent in the genre. In the first chapter, for example, I presented Ray Stricklyn's Confessions of a Nightingale as a prime example of biographical solo-performance. Stricklyn's work closely follows the template laid out by John Gentile. Though Stricklyn's play "follows the rules," his performance is still marred by several problematic issues. Throughout the first chapter, I illustrated how Stricklyn relied on his personal encounters with Tennessee Williams to shape his performance. In Stricklyn's mind, his personal experience coupled with the fact that he believed he "wrote" the show (as opposed to adapting it) made him (and him alone) uniquely qualified to tell Williams's story. Confessions of a Nightingale was strictly Stricklyn’s show and he took his performance with him to the grave. In 2003, actor Ross Michael attempted to revive Confessions of a Nightingale in Pittsburg. After witnessing the performance, the first thing the reviewer comments on is Stricklyn, who originally performed and "shaped" the characterization of Williams in
Confessions of a Nightingale (Rawson 12). It maybe is no surprise that actor Ross Michael gets panned in the review. Michael is not Stricklyn and he lacks the strong association with role of Tennessee Williams that Stricklyn meticulously cultivated during his life. More problematic than Stricklyn constructing Confessions of a Nightingale for his body only, however, is the implied idea within the review that Michael is too "young for the role" (Rawson 12). On one level, the reviewer is describing the lack of a resemblance between Michael and Williams. Yet, on a deeper level, he implies that Michael does not have the same personal experience that Stricklyn did and is, therefore, unqualified to present Confessions of a Nightingale.

Most interesting of all is Stricklyn's desire for fame and celebrity as told through his autobiography. I argue that Stricklyn indulged critics and audience members who desired to see him portray the titillating life of the dead playwright. Stricklyn's desire to participate in the system of celebrity outweighed concerns of source material and representation. Stricklyn may very well have fabricated portions of the performance text, however, his use of the performance as a "para-confession" or as a site of authority puts Stricklyn in charge. To say that Stricklyn was actively exploiting his audience, however, is to ignore the contract between Stricklyn and his audience that was present as soon as the audience entered the theater. In Confessions of a Nightingale the audience is promised an intimate evening in the home of a famous playwright. At the end of the evening, the audience leaves the theater having shared the life-experiences of a celebrity. On the surface, Stricklyn appears to have simply fulfilled his promise to the audience. Yet, By looking deeper into his life and career during and after Confessions of a Nightingale, potential ethical quandaries are revealed as Stricklyn profits from the fame, fortune, and celebrity that the real Tennessee Williams garnered in his life.
For scholars of biographical solo-performance, Ray Stricklyn's *Confessions of a Nightingale* raises some serious questions as to the ethical consequences of authorial intent. We must look "behind the scenes" of Stricklyn's performance and other representations of Tennessee Williams in order to find potential ethical quandaries. While Ray Stricklyn tried to hide the motivation behind his construction of Williams, Sky Gilbert and Will Scheffer reveal the seams of their construction and showed, quite explicitly, that they were out to "out" Tennessee Williams as a prominent gay literary figure.

In the second chapter, I discussed how Sky Gilbert refashioned Tennessee Williams's narrative into one of empowerment, despite his checkered past. Though I argued that Gilbert attempted to create a positive characterization of Williams, I am still concerned with the question of "was Gilbert right to 'out' Williams in the first place?" Though Gilbert confronts Williams’s attraction to underage boys head-on, it does not diminish the fact that Williams probably had inappropriate relationships with some of these boys. While others might cringe at the fact, Gilbert appears to relish the thought of these many encounters: "But think about it. If I just happen to know two boys who were propositioned by Tennessee Williams during a short stay in Vancouver, how many people do you think Tennessee approached in his lifetime? I'd say there must be a whole lot of boys with these stories and yellowing Tennessee Williams business cards to prove them" (Gilbert 50). Granted, Gilbert is presenting this piece to a gay community in Toronto and it is possible that this community recognizes the long history (going back to the Greeks) of "acceptable" sexual relationships between minors and older men. Yet it is seriously problematic to say that all the gay audience members who saw this show felt that way. Because the show had such a short run and because it was presented to a minority community, there was
essentially no mainstream critical response. We may never know how audiences responded. We do know, however, that this play was staged despite its pedophilic implications.

Should Gilbert have "outed" Williams in the first place? The same question needs to be asked of Will Scheffer and his play *Tennessee and Me*. In many ways, Scheffer's play is less problematic than Gilbert's representation of Williams. Yet, issues concerning the representation of Williams and homosexuality still persist in *Tennessee and Me*. While Scheffer posits Williams as a "*real* homosexual," he never exactly defines in his own terms what constitutes a real homosexual (Scheffer 30). Furthermore, in absence of a definition, we are left with a description of acts. For example, ME supposedly becomes a "*real* homosexual when he kisses his crush Frankie. In this moment, Scheffer merely moves the definition of homosexuality from a more explicit sex act to one with a more innocent connotation. Furthermore, Scheffer does not totally move away from defining homosexuality by the sex act. Recall how, in the beginning of the play, Williams's spirit is summoned by a sex act between two men. Williams does not enter the play until ME climaxes.

Beyond Scheffer's problematic use of sex acts, the use of Williams's texts also raises some issues. Williams never intended to write gay plays and he rarely wrote plays with positive characterizations of gay men. In fact, in most of his plays, homosexual characters are either always offstage or meet some unseemly early demise. By "outing" Tennessee Williams's texts, Scheffer is effectively going against Williams's wishes. Scheffer is effectively sacrificing the needs and desires of one homosexual for the "good" of a wider audience of contemporary gay men. Should Will Scheffer have "outed" Williams in the first place? Scheffer's performance promises to flesh out the textual and extra-textual remnants of Williams's homosexuality. The audience, in both *My Night with Tennessee* and *Tennessee and Me*, is treated to an explicit
evening with a queer Tennessee Williams. Their choice to present an "out" Williams, however, is not without ethical repercussions. Both playwrights choose some narratives over others that might compromise their performances. In the end, Scheffer's theatrical experiment is representative of the very serious ethical issues that playwrights grapple with when choosing to present queerness within the genre of biographical solo-performance.

Finally, in the third chapter I examined Steve Lawson's plays *A Distant Country Called Youth* and *Blanche and Beyond* to see how Williams was being represented after the millennium. Initially, Lawson's plays appeared to avoid some of the pitfalls that earlier playwrights had made. Unlike Stricklyn, Lawson was very open and specific about the material he was adapting. Unlike Gilbert and Scheffer, Lawson presented a multitude of Williams's opinions and viewpoints. After examining the texts, I could hardly say that Lawson constructed a very narrow and specific version of Williams. Furthermore, Lawson stuck to the letters and never invented dialogue or dramatic situations. Though Lawson avoids "mistakes" of other playwrights, his concern for objectivity gets him into trouble. By using techniques of historical performance, Lawson gives the appearance that he had no hand in the construction of the plays. Also, Lawson is able to sidestep the controversial nature of Williams's sexual life by choosing to cast Richard Thomas in the role of interpreter. Reviewers and audiences both enjoyed seeing "John-Boy" recite the sometimes scandalous letters of Williams's life. Indeed, I think it is fair to say that audiences came to see "John-Boy" as much as Williams. Moreover, the reassuring and familiar voice of "John-Boy" softens the blow of Williams's racy letters and effectively "sanitizes" the narrative of Williams's life. In *A Distant Country Called Youth* and *Blanche and Beyond*, the representation of Tennessee Williams is now objective, educational, and family-friendly.
Though Lawson addresses some chief criticisms of biographical solo-performance, he still remains in league with Srieklyn, Gilbert, and Scheffer when he chooses not to reveal his hand in constructing the performance. Looking back on Williams's life and how we understand him, it is easy to see that there is no "essential" or "authentic" version of Tennessee Williams. The playwright was many things to many people. In the future, playwrights would do well to reveal their subjectivity (though programs or pre-show discussions, for example) by acknowledging what they use as well as what they leave out in their particular portrait of Tennessee Williams.

As this time, I would like to shift from discussing each of these plays and their shortcomings to their impact of the genre of biographical solo-performance. In Cast of One, John Gentile claims that the tradition of representing Williams and other historical figures may be coming to an end. First, Gentile points to the fact that theater critics often times do not view biographical solo-performance as "real theater." In Gentile's words, critics "have thus diminished their contributions as theatre" (Gentile 200). Gentile, at the end of his book, continues in this foreboding vein when he describes the booking issues faced by actors like Mark Stevenson, who tours with biographical solo-performance on John Keats. Gentile chalks-up Stevenson's lack of success to the diminishing of heroes in American culture and an a decreasing of historical awareness generally "along with a disregard for history," Gentile explains, "our insatiable preoccupation with the private lives of famous people also results in diminishing our heroes. If we are losing are heroes as well as our appreciation of history, then the reserve of material on which to develop a one person show--particularly of the biographical kind--may simply become depleted" (Gentile 205). Moreover, Stacy Roth comments on the debate surrounding historical performance in general as the detractors of the genre "argue that the attempt to re-create the past
is quixotical, misleading, incomplete, inaccurate, lopsided, rude, embarrassing, nostalgic, phony, too entertaining or theatrical, to shockingly unlike the present, or alternately, to homogenous with the present" (Roth 21).

I disagree with Gentile's claim that the content and subjects of biographical solo-performance are slowly drying up. While interest may be waning in the area of traditional literary figures like John Keats, the loss of these subjects are being replaced by, as Gentile suggests, our ever increasing desire for celebrities. As both a playwright and (briefly) actor with a penchant for scandal, Tennessee Williams resembles the contemporary celebrity more than a historical hero. Moreover, Williams’s most famous plays are continually revived and received by new fans and admirers every year. The insatiable hunger for celebrity and celebrity history will drive biographical solo-performance into the future. Furthermore, Roth's discussion of the debate surrounding historical performance and biographical solo-performance points to the importance of Marvin Carlson's work on performance and memory and to how important his theoretical contributions are to the genre. While biographical solo-performance may be "misleading" or "inaccurate," Carlson claims that "recycling today often serves to call the attention of the audience to the constructedness of the theatrical performance, to its status as a product not spontaneously appearing but consciously assembled out of preexisting elements, many of them already known to the observers from other, somewhat different contexts" (Carlson 173). As audiences become more aware of the role or memory and remembering in performance, recycling will be a more consciously received part of the performance. Audiences will not at all be "misled." On the contrary, they will recognize how particular playwrights construct their historical narratives and characters in response to already known plays, narratives, and texts in the same tradition or genre.
I have already stated that this study goes beyond a mere case study. By examining these plays, I have shown how particular playwrights in this study have drawn up various theatrical and theoretical frameworks to push the boundaries of biographical solo-performance. Stacy Roth comments on the changing tides in historical representation: "Perhaps the evolution of the way we manipulate the past symbolizes a reaction to modern mental overload that still cannot escape the pervasiveness of an information-age techno-mentality" (Roth 2). Indeed, our modern age is filled with new technological advances that are changing the way we receive entertainment and information. The internet, for example, can collect and aggregate large amounts of information and entertainment with just a click of a mouse. The result of a typical Google search, for example, yields a dizzying, fragmented array of hyperlinks. The result on biographical solo-performance has been interesting to say the least. In order to remain relevant and interesting, biographical solo-performance has adopted new performance techniques and tactics from other theatrical genres.

At the beginning of my study, I discussed how Bonnie Marranca described a new environment for performance as “new global economies and technologies [were] transforming all manner of human exchange” (Marranca xi). Marranca claims that the tide of technology has created two opposing camps of performance: non-experimental solo-performance, which “is no longer substantially different from the TV talk show or magazine feature” (Marranca xii) and the more complex, poetic form of postmodern theater. While I do agree that biographical solo-performance may have much in common with television and cinema, I am reluctant to admit that solo-performance does not participate in postmodern performance techniques. I argue, for example, that Will Scheffer’s *Tennessee and Me* dramatizes the process of biographical solo-performance. In a delightful postmodern twist, Scheffer’s piece is a biographical solo-
performance piece that comments on and literally illustrates how actors within the genre seek to present the “spirit” of a historical character. Scheffer’s complicit critique of the genre is an example of postmodern theater par excellence.

What Marranca and other critics argue for is merely superfluous barriers between genres of performance. While it is ultimately useful for scholars to be able to work with concrete definitions and defined genres of performance, such scholars cannot ignore the slippages within those definitions and genres. As John Gentile comments "Whereas literary critics have typically perceived a distinction separating the printed word from the spoken word and theatre critics have seen a distinction between 'true theatre' and solo-performance, history has shown us that as art forms these manifestations of language and performance are in a constant, dynamic, creative interplay" (Gentile 200).

Biographical solo-performance and, in particular, the plays that I have analyzed in this study reflect a genre that is constantly shifting and absorbing new ways of performing history and identity. As our understanding of celebrities and historical figures change, I have no doubt that the genre of biographical solo-performance will continue to adapt while remaining true to its core principles or as Gentile describes: “the essential distinguishing characteristic is the solo performer’s impersonation of a single historical figure” (Gentile 130).

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

After incorporating almost the entirety of Marvin Carlson’s study The Haunted Stage into my study, I discovered that an actor’s previous roles, only if they were a celebrity, had a profound impact on how the performance was received. Ray Stricklyn and Richard Thomas’s performances, for example, enjoyed a much wider audience than Will Scheffer’s piece. There is already much scholarship on the politics of celebrity in performance. Personally, I am curious to
see if any biographical solo-performance pieces have been specifically constructed with a specific celebrity in mind. The clashing of identities between Richard Thomas and Tennessee Williams was somewhat incidental. Has a playwright ever had a specific celebrity in mind to play a specific historical character? Surely this has happened in the case of cinema, but what about on the stage? Are the effects similar to those in cinema?

There are other plays that were outside the scope of this study, due to legal reasons, that examine the persona of Tennessee Williams. However, that does not diminish the fact that these plays are still performed all over the country. Doug Tompos’ *Bent to the Flame: An Evening with Tennessee Williams* and Jeremy Lawrence’s *Everyone Expects Me to Write Another Streetcar* appear to present Tennessee Williams on an even more particular and detailed level than some of the plays presented here. Additionally, it would be interesting to see how these plays operate as biographical solo-performance and if, like the other plays in this study, continue to push the boundaries of the genre.

Finally, it should be said that Gentile’s subject of study should be continued to examine solo-performance pieces in the 21st century. How are new performance techniques and technologies changing the landscape of solo-performance? In his study, Gentile also provides a list of solo-performances that were contemporary to his time. Again, it would useful to add to this list and see what major solo-performance production have been added to the list since Gentile’s study was published. Furthermore, are there any repeats or revisions of selected plays or historical subjects? How do these differ from the original and what does that say about current aesthetic tastes and choices?

As I begin to mark the end of this study I reflect on Gentile’s description of the genre of solo-performances as a “both seductive and frightening” (Gentile 201). Indeed, the stakes are
high in biographical solo-performance and as the American theater continues to move past the “hey-day” of biographical solo-performances in the 1980s, new challenges and obstacles face the genre. However, as I have argued, biographical solo-performance is not above shifting strategies or revisiting historical figures and celebrities as our thoughts about the past and our relationship to it continue to change.
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