



THE THEATRE

FUGITIVE MIND

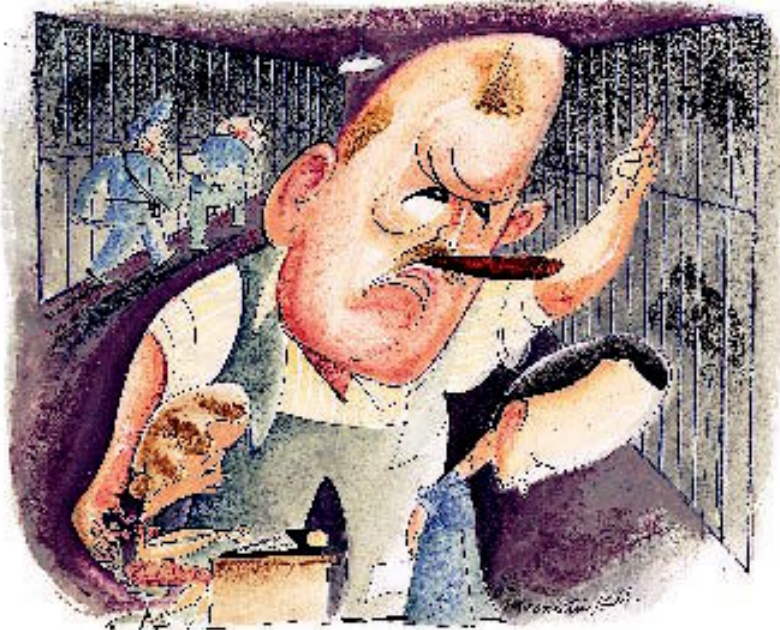
Returning to the origins of Tennessee Williams, and "Death of a Salesman."

BY JOHN LAHR

NOT ABOUT NIGHTINGALES," an unproduced 1938 play about a prison hunger strike which Trevor Nunn successfully resuscitated last year at the Royal National Theatre, in London, and which he has reorchestrated for a transatlantic visit at the Circle in the Square, is the first work that Thomas Lanier Williams signed "Tennessee." In taking the new name, Williams, who was twenty-seven and had finally graduated, with a B.A., from the University of Iowa's writing program, aligned himself with the path-finding ancestors of his bullying and absent father, C. C. Williams, who was a shoe salesman. There were pioneers—and an early Tennessee governor—in the family's background, but his father had given up unknown routes for trade routes; Williams, styling himself as a kind of theatrical pioneer, decided to reclaim his heritage. "Out of the sheer surfeit of being beaten down, I gathered out of my father's fierce blood the power to rise somehow," he wrote to his friend Donald Windham. "And how could the rise be gentle?" At the end of "Not About Nightingales," Williams's leap of faith is prefigured by the literal leap of the play's desperate hero, a stool pigeon known to his fellow-inmates as Canary Jim (Finbar Lynch). "Now is the time for unexpected things, for miracles, for wild adventures like the story-books!" Jim says, just seconds before he dives from the warden's window into the water that surrounds the island fortress, and to what he hopes is his liberation. He continues, "Almost a chance! I've heard of people winning on a long shot."

And Williams did. Like Canary Jim, he was planning a great escape: he was about to spring himself from the incarceration of his unhappy St. Louis family life. In December, 1938, he mailed

the final draft of "Not About Nightingales," along with several other submissions, to the Group Theatre's playwriting contest (he was subsequently awarded a hundred dollars for a trio of one-act plays), and then he high-tailed it for New Orleans, where he discovered both his sexuality and his dramatic voice.



Damnation and blighted love: Corin Redgrave as the brutish prison warden in the American premiere of Williams's early play "Not About Nightingales."

In the production, Williams's sense of spiritual imprisonment finds a haunting correlative in Richard Hoover's coruscating set (well lit by Chris Parry), which submerges the audience in a gray, caged world. One end of the stage is bounded by the sliding doors and steel bars of two-tiered prison cells; at the other end is the warden's office, from whose window an excursion steamer (called, inevitably, the Lorelei) offers the tempting sight and sound of freedom. The environment imposes on both the inmates and the audience a sense of trapped energy. In this bru-

talist universe, there is no color, no softness, no sense of rest or promise. The iron grates on which the prisoners march are transformed efficiently into trapdoors to conjure up the subterranean "Klondike"—a "little suburb of hell" where the inmates are roasted at the whim of the brutish warden (the red-faced and snarling Corin Redgrave); the gratings also make the shape of a crucifix on the stage floor, hinting at the damnation that hangs in the air as grimly as the memory of love.

"Not About Nightingales" is a jejune but fascinating piece. The absence of Williams's distinctive cadences and of his usual psychological complexity marks it as the work of a tenderfoot. Based on a well-publicized incident in a Pennsylvania prison, the play is written

from the outside in, whereas Williams's mature work is built from the inside out. His storytelling skill is apparent as he spins a yarn about the strike and a blighted love affair between Jim and the secretary Eva Crane (Sherri Parker Lee), who works with him in the warden's office; but he can't yet penetrate the characters, who remain largely stick figures. In one ungainly but revealing passage, Eva quotes an entire Keats sonnet ("When I have fears that I may cease to be"), which spells out both Williams's romantic philosophy and his autobiographical special pleading. "He

was like you, he had a lot of things he wanted to say but no chance to say them," Eva tells Jim about Keats. "He got out of his prison by looking at the stars. He wrote about beauty as a form of escape."

The choreographic panache of Nunn's production invests Williams's script with a poetic stylishness that his prose lacks. The clanging bars, the echoing curses, the cadences of the prisoners' chants as guards march them off to supper conjure a suffocating deadliness that makes Jim's yearning for liberty as palpable as Tennessee's. Williams dreamed of being "the first original Homo Emancipatus—meaning (COMPLETELY FREE MAN!);" he even subtitled "Stairs to the Roof," another unproduced early work, "A Prayer for the Wild of Heart That Are Kept in Cages." Until "The Glass Menagerie" made him famous, and even afterward, Williams saw himself as on the run—first from the philistines and then from himself. "I won't ever make a good captive," he wrote in his diary in the early forties. "I guess what I will do is drive beyond safety—till I smash—Cleanly and completely the only hope."

Although "Not About Nightingales" seems on the surface to be more protest than prayer, the unrelenting intensity of Nunn's approach takes it quickly beyond the political to the allegorical. "Ev'ry man living is walking around in a cage," Jim says, preaching the gospel of the imagination, which Williams embraced early and never lost. Even at the end of his career, when his art and his life were a shambles, he was invoking the themes and images first raised in the play. "Occasionally in my work I have offered a slight hint of the difficulties involved in the accident of survival," Williams wrote to his former agent Audrey Wood on August 14, 1973. "Sometimes a moment of grace, a word, a gesture, a letter raps out a code message on the walls of prisons." Williams believed in the imagination's power to transcend barbarity; his tragedy was that he was betrayed by his imagination into a barbarousness of his own making (drugs, drink, loss of community). The Royal National Theatre, which has done more than any other organization on either side of the Atlantic to revive Williams's reputation, has given this small play a wonderful

production, adding a compelling piece to the puzzle of his emergence as the century's great theatrical genius.

THE fiftieth-anniversary production of Arthur Miller's masterpiece "Death of a Salesman" (at the Eugene O'Neill) has to contend with an ugly revolving set, designed by Mark Wendland, which robs it of a sense of place and hobbles its pace. While Willy Loman is breaking down before our eyes, the images that drive him crazy don't so much press in on his disintegrating mind as swing past it like dumplings on a lazy Susan. This throws Loman's character and the play slightly off kilter, but "Death of a Salesman" still packs a wallop. Robert Falls's production, imported from the Goodman Theatre, in Chicago, is muscular without always being nuanced. The massive Brian Dennehy is almost too strong and too solid in himself for the panic-stricken salesman, yet he still makes Loman's misguided love for his son Biff and his crazy competitiveness hurt like a punch to the heart. The casting here is generally uneven. It's impossible to see Ted Koch's Happy as the louche womanizer the script calls for, and Kevin Anderson's Biff has not a whiff of the derelict about him. Howard Witt is droll and shrewd as Charley, the envied next-door neighbor, but Elizabeth Franz turns in the evening's most fully realized performance, as Willy's beleaguered wife, Linda. When she rounds on her sons, accusing them of not being there for Willy, her fragility and resignation are transformed, with startling reality, into a fierce resolve. "His name was never in the paper," she tells the boys. "He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid." Franz, who is as thin as Dennehy is large, grounds the play and gives it a strong, almost stoic emotional center. With its punishing battle between parent and child, the script seems to acquire different meanings as audiences and their dreams grow old with it. Miller's reading of the nation's collective unconscious is so accurate that the flaws in this somewhat overpraised production hardly matter. "Death of a Salesman" is a defining part of the century's story; its revival is not to be missed. ♦