

PAST IMPERFECT

A Tennessee Williams resurrection, and Bruce Norris on Broadway.

BY JOHN LAHR



"In Masks Outrageous and Austere" is by Williams, six collaborators, and a computer.

Let's imagine for a minute that you are a director and you're unhappy with one of Tennessee Williams's great plays. If you went to one of the archives where reams of his drafts, notes, and outtakes are housed, you would find perfectly readable scenes in which, for instance, at the end of "A Streetcar Named Desire," Stanley beds Blanche, who promises to bear him a son, or Laura and Jim, the Gentleman Caller in "The Glass Menagerie," go out on a date after dinner while Tom and Amanda wash up. These scenes are the author's discarded experiments, not meant for production or publication. To pass off such finger exercises as part of Williams's meaning, to wrangle them into those plays, would be ludicrous and foolhardy, which is the problem with "In Masks Outrageous and Austere" (directed by David Schweizer, at the Culture Project). The show is billed as the "world premiere of Tennes-

see Williams's final full-length play." It is not *his* play; it is yet another regrettable co-authorship—a compilation of six different versions by six well-meaning collaborators and a computer program, *Juxta*, which conducted a "forensic analysis" of the text. To borrow a line from the script, "My God, if this were theatre, I'd think it a metaphor for the idiocy of existence."

A quasi-religious aura hovers over the whole earnest enterprise, which seems to me the theatrical equivalent of trying to clone Christ from shreds of the Shroud of Turin. Williams worked on the play between 1979 and 1983; a Xeroxed copy of his first draft, titled "Tent Worms," is displayed in the lobby of the theatre, like a Gnostic gospel. Nearby, a tabernacle of sorts has been erected: visitors are encouraged to wander through an alcove containing Williams's writing desk and his Royal portable typewriter,

and to watch a television monitor broadcasting images from Williams's late plays, his campy 1970 TV interview with David Frost, and a singer belting out, "I got those Tennessee Williams/Southern decadence blues." The song lingers long after the memory of the play has faded.

"Once the heart is thoroughly insulated, it's also dead," Williams wrote to Kenneth Tynan in 1955. "My problem is to live with it, and to keep it alive." During the next quarter century of his creative life, he kept his heart open by flagellating it and reporting on its destruction. As these winded and arid figments of his imagination testify, by the time Williams started to work on "In Masks Outrageous"—which has been set six months *after* his death, in February, 1983—the game was up. "I am what you see, exhausted: but unashamed of what I have done without choice," says Williams's mouthpiece, Babe (played by the lacklustre Shirley Knight), a billionaire balabusta, who is being held, with her bisexual third husband, by a group of sinister security guards, who patrol the perimeter of an undisclosed location. The play's last words, spoken by Babe, are its most important. "The performance is over," she says, raising her arms, "like wings, as the scene dims out." The moment reads as a kind of liberation for both character and creator. Williams, who had strained for more than forty years to be great, couldn't be "Tennessee Williams" anymore. "The masked ball is over, the disguise is dropped off, and under the disguise was what?" Babe asks herself, adding, "Beneath it was simply animal survival, and the brutality of the unconscious." By the end of his career, Williams, cut off from friends and community, had retreated so far that he'd lost his bearings. "Where are we?" "Find out where I am?" "Here is where?" the characters bleat throughout the evening, trapped, like their author, in an unfathomable emptiness.

Schweizer wraps this small, dishevelled literary effort in a big, elegant package and decorates it with the sparkle of seasoned theatrical names like Knight, and Austin Pendleton and Buck Henry, who make cameo appearances in video projections as Babe's doctor and as the chairman of the board of her late husband's company. The Plexiglas surround

of James Noone's stark, high-tech set effectively reflects the action, transforming the characters into wispy illusions. Alexander V. Nichols's lighting and the sound design, by Dan Moses Schreier, are also evocative and poetic. But the flashy production values don't so much enhance the drama as substitute for it. At intermission, a little amuse-bouche from the production team, I guess—an "Investigative Activity Report" of the Gideon Security Company, which is holding Babe and her husband—is placed on the seats. "The dramaturg obtained this document through the Freedom of Information Act," it says coyly at the top, and goes on to name which of the characters are actually informants, who is captive, how they got there, and what they're feeling. This extra bit of playfulness is evidence, if more were needed, that what's happening onstage isn't clear and isn't self-sufficient.

Bruce Norris's "Clybourne Park," the winner of the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, is getting a deserved lap of honor on Broadway, with its original, excellent, 2010 Off Broadway cast (well directed by Pam MacKinnon, at the Walter Kerr). Norris, who began his career as an actor, understands how the tics of behavior and the stutter steps of speech betray personality and truth. His play is as beautifully constructed as it is eloquent. Taking as his starting point the householders in the white Chicago neighborhood who sell their home to the black family dramatized in Lorraine Hansberry's 1957 "A Raisin in the Sun," Norris examines the racial tensions of the segregated fifties. In the second half of the play, he astutely turns the tables to show the house being repurchased by progressive whites in what is now a black neighborhood in 2009 Obama-era America. The racial terrain is explosive. Norris stewes his characters, both black and white, in their own neurotic juices, making terrific comedy out of his clinical dissection of hypocrisy. His strength and his value is that he finds a way, through his observational humor, to allow the unsayable to be said and the hidden to be seen.

As it turns out, the house is being sold, in the first half of the play, because the owners' son, a Korean War veteran, who evidently snapped in combat and killed innocent people, has hanged himself upstairs; his parents, Russ (Frank

Wood) and Bev (the droll Christina Kirk), need to move on. The tragedy of their personal loss and the historical tragedy of the African-Americans who, as maids and handymen, move almost like ghosts among them create a fascinating emotional no man's land, where, underneath the pleasantries, lies a sump of fierce and confused feelings. The blinkered Bev, for instance, can't see the stupidity of offering her maid, Francine (the superb Crystal A. Dickinson), a silver-plated chafing dish; she doesn't understand the condescension in her gestures of liberality. "How about a dollar? Take a dollar. I don't care," she says, fumbling in her purse to tip Albert (Damon Gupton), Francine's husband, who has helped lug a trunk downstairs. "Or take two. It's just money."

Things get even uglier and funnier in the beautifully orchestrated overlapping conversations in Act II, which jumps the story to 2009. The racial sensitivities of both blacks and whites, who are tangling over planning permissions, are now more educated and nuanced. It's no longer the "N" word that offends but the "R" word. "I'm fairly certain that I've been called a racist," Lena (Dickinson), a resident of Clybourne Park, says, despite frantic defensive protestations from her new, white neighbor Steve (Jeremy Shamos). Lena's husband, Kevin (Gupton), adds, "Uh, *somebody* said 'racism.'" "-Cism! -Cism! Not -cist!" Steve shouts. In their debate over the influx of whites into the black neighborhood, the couples fight with footnotes:

STEVE: The history of America *is* the history of private property.

LENA: That may be—

STEVE: Read De Tocqueville.

LENA: —Though I rather doubt *your* grandparents were *sold as* private property.

STEVE: Ohhhhhh my God. Look. Look. Humans are *territorial*, O.K. . . . *You guys* have *this* territory, right? And you don't like having it *stolen away* from you, the way white people stole everything else from black America. *We get it*, O.K.? And we *apologize*. But what good does it do, if we perpetually fall into the same, predictable little euphemistic tap dance around the top?

KEVIN: You know how to tap dance?

Norris's characters have learned the appearance of civility; it's the substance of it that threatens to defeat them. Norris may not be one of life's optimists, but, as the dyspeptic music of his laughter demonstrates, he's one of our brightest dramatists. ♦