

## DIXIE DELIRIUM

*David Cromer takes on "Sweet Bird of Youth."*

BY JOHN LAHR

*Odd bedfellows: Diane Lane and Finn Wittrock in Tennessee Williams's 1959 play.*

"I think this is the most truly autobiographic play Williams ever wrote," Elia Kazan said of Tennessee Williams's "Sweet Bird of Youth," which he staged on Broadway in 1959. "Not a memory, softened and romanticized by time, of his youth, but Tennessee trying to describe his state of soul and state of being today and now. It is the frankest play he has written, dealing as it does with his own corruption and his wish to return to the purity he once had." The play marked a sea change in Williams's writing. Four years earlier, in a bid for commercial success, he had bowdlerized his own work, "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof"; the play won a Pulitzer Prize, but, as Williams said, "it seemed almost like a prostitution." His

1957 play, "Orpheus Descending," failed on Broadway. Williams felt as if his career and his life were in free fall—so close to collapse that he put himself into psychoanalysis. Exhausted, he began to write as much out of fear as out of love.

"My approach to my work is hysterical," Williams said. "I don't know what it is to take anything calmly." In David Cromer's vivid revival of "Sweet Bird of Youth" (at the Goodman, in Chicago), that almost hallucinatory panic is suggested by gargantuan shadowy black-and-white palm fronds that are projected eerily onto the curtain before it rises. It comes up on what Williams called "beanstalk country"—an exaggerated realm between paranoia and mad-

ness. A huge expressionistic translucent curtain separates shuttered hotel windows from a king-size bed, on which the well-named wannabe movie star and gigolo Chance Wayne (Finn Wittrock) and an aging film diva, Alexandra Del Lago (Diane Lane), travelling under the name Princess Kosmonopolis, have crashed. (The set design is by James Schuette.) These two haunted characters hold up a kind of magnifying glass to Williams's spooked soul: the Princess is a winner who fears being washed up; Chance is a loser who longs to be part of "the parade." Both, in their own way, are blocked.

The play starts on a note as high and hyperventilating as Jacobean melodrama. Chance has returned to his home town in Florida after an absence of several years. Within five minutes, he learns that his mother has died, that his beloved sweetheart, Heavenly (Kristina Johnson), whom he has come to claim, is getting married, and that she has undergone some terrible "ordeal" because of him. He is immediately commanded to leave the state by order of the local demagogue, Boss Finley (the effective John Judd), who happens to be Heavenly's father, and who will otherwise make good on his threat to have Chance castrated.

Cromer, with his fluid use of the large stage, and with the help of Maya Ciarrochi's marvellous projections, manages to give pacing and panache to the cumbersome second act, which tells the Boss's political tale. But, despite the production's suggestive design and sometimes brilliant handling of the scenic rhythms of the play, it struggles to deliver the frantic feeling that gives Williams's lines their distinctive, pungent pitch and roll. We get the song but not all the music. This doesn't stop the show from being good—the audience listens hard and happily—but it stops it from being great. The gnarly issue of casting and chemistry is where it falters.

Of the casting requirements for the Princess, Williams wrote, "It's a virtuoso part, demanding great stature, stage presence, power, vocal richness and variety." I have seen Geraldine Page, Lauren Bacall, and Clare Higgins in the role, but, in our homogenized time, it's difficult to find an actress who checks all the necessary oversized boxes. Diane Lane, who exudes sinew and sensibility and brings to the

part the bona fides of her own movie stardom, is intelligent and vulnerable as the Princess, but she lacks a crazy gene, the sense of ravaged irrationality that should make the Princess at once poignant and pulverizing. "When monster meets monster, one monster has to give way, AND IT WILL NEVER BE ME," the Princess brays to Chance, when he tries to blackmail her. But Lane isn't a monster; imperiousness and heartlessness just aren't in her metabolism. Nor does she have the physical qualities for the role: her Princess may talk about not being "young anymore" and about the horror of the closeup, in which "all your terrible history screams," but when a closeup of her face is projected onto the hotel curtain what's shocking isn't the way that time has ravaged the Princess; it's that Lane's skin looks so robustly fresh and tight.

After the Princess learns that her new movie, which she feared would be a flop, is actually a hit, she tells Chance almost matter-of-factly, "Out of the passion and torment of my existence I have created a thing that I can unveil, a sculpture, almost heroic, that I can unveil, which is true." Unable to inhabit fully the Princess's vainglory and vindictiveness, Lane can't punctuate these lines or make them land with the proper tragicomic clout. She is best in the intimate moments, where her natural tenderness and decency work for her: sharing a joint with Chance; watching him in her makeup mirror as he auditions for her, telling the story of his botched life. Lane turns Williams's wilderness of panic into a topiary garden—something off-kilter but captivating in its tidy way.

Finn Wittrock has the requisite body and beauty for the twenty-nine-year-old Chance, who claims to be "truly meant for lovemaking." But he and Lane don't seem to spark each other much. Wittrock is good at portraying Chance's need for the big car, the big contract, the big life, but a sense of Chance's psychological fatigue is missing from his dreamy enterprise. When he learns that he gave Heavenly an infection that permanently damaged her, he is literally floored. "Princess, the age of some people can only be calculated by the level of—level of—rot in them. And by that measure I'm ancient," he says. Always the passenger, never the ticket, Chance balks at the Princess's suggestion that he escape with

her at the finale. "I'm not part of your luggage," he says. "What else can you be?" she asks. "Nothing," he replies, "but not part of your luggage."

Will he stay or will he go? Cromer could make more drama of the seesaw; instead, he smudges the dignity of Chance's decision. "I don't ask for your pity, but just for your understanding—not even that—no. Just for your recognition of me in you, and the enemy, time, in us all," Chance says. Boss Finley's men are visible behind the partly closed curtain; instead of going to face them, Chance draws the curtain across the stage as the lights fade. This leaves the audience puzzled about the trajectory of his character, which is meant to be more heroic than it plays here. "Something's got to mean something, don't it, Princess?" Chance says in one of his last lines. He chooses to destroy himself for that meaning. So did Williams. In the great, and not-so-great, plays that followed "Sweet Bird," Williams took himself to the brink in order to write about it. He became an epicure of his own extinction.

Before Brian Friel was a playwright, he was a writer of short stories. "Winners" and "Losers," the two one-acts in "Lovers" (directed by Drew Barr, at the Beckett), written in 1967, are windy études in which Friel taught himself how to speak with space as well as with language. In "Winners," an exuberant soon-to-be-married teen-age couple, Joe (Cameron Scoggins) and Mag (Justine Salata), meet on a hill to study, to play, and to talk about their life together and their baby on the way. Their well-acted high jinks are a counterpoint to their backstory and to the tragedy that will destroy them on this seemingly happy day. "Losers"—a sort of shaggy shagging story—depicts the courtship of another couple, Andy (James Rioridan) and the blowsy Hanna (Kati Brazda). In order to keep Hanna's pious, bedridden mother from ringing a bell whenever they fall silent upstairs, the pair learn to make out while reciting Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." It's a funny idea, which reverses once they're married and the mother-in-law's controlling bell starts clanging whenever she hears talking. But the gaiety of Friel's conceit sinks under the weight of his prolix exposition. These plays were last seen in New York in 1968; there's a reason for that. ♦