

THE STAFF PHILOSOPHER

Magic of the Other

"Today we are living in a world which is threatened by totalitarianism. Reactionary opinion descends like a ton of bricks on the head of any artist who speaks out against the current of prescribed ideas. Nothing could be more dangerous to democracy, for the irritating grain of sand which is creative work in society must be kept inside the shell, or the pearl of idealistic progress cannot be made."

Tennessee Williams wrote these words almost seventy years ago in an essay that fondly recalled his having been "professionally spawned" in his twenties by a dynamic but short-lived Central West End theater company. He had arrived in St. Louis at age seven as a shy, sensitive, transplant from Mississippi. From that point forward he saw himself as outside the main current—as the other. This was an accidental gift from our city to him. Late in life he said, "I'm glad I spent those years there. They made me a writer." Asked why he left St. Louis, he replied, "I never left." He never left that sense of being an outsider, and the resulting deep appreciation of outsiders that suffuses much of his work. Viewing himself as a freak, he became "the patron saint of freaks." This stance, to his mind, was essential both for theater and for society.

The concept of "otherness" was in the intellectual atmosphere during the middle of the twentieth century. It was still hard to grasp the ghastly truth that totalitarian regimes had slaughtered millions for their otherness. Democracies—democracies!—had caged them in internment camps. And colonial regimes had paradoxically aimed to simultaneously save, exploit, and assimilate them. In every case, identifying someone as the other demonstrated an indefensible posture of superiority and privilege. Philosophers like de Beauvoir, Sartre, and Foucault explored the origins and effects of male privilege, white privilege, straight privilege, class privilege, and religious privilege, concluding that such conceits could only harm us by erecting walls—either figuratively or literally—that barred the outsiders and, with them, barred opportunities to flourish more fully as human beings.

Williams, having learned this firsthand, argued it passionately. "The biologist," he wrote, "will tell you that progress is the result of mutations. Mutations are another word for freaks. For God's sake let's have a little more freakish behavior—not less. Eliminate them, however—bully them into conformity--and we'll be left standing in the dead center of nowhere."

This principle permeates the festival. *Small Craft Warnings* features the habitués of a seaside bar, rudderless small craft, desperate to stay afloat as the fog of life slowly envelops them. They are buoyed by what elevates us all: a glimpse of beauty, a sense of surprise, the holy miracle of

birth and death, and the hope for even transitory human connection. We are warned of the leaks in our own small craft, and, unexpectedly, Doc and Leona and Monk and Violet are us. The other productions pack a similar punch. *Merriwether* reminds us that even illusion can provide meaning. *Deseo* plunges a familiar story, and us, into the dye vat of an unfamiliar culture. *St. Louis Stories* transports us back in time to the city that Williams could neither embrace nor completely leave. And *Naming the Dog* suddenly brings us face-to-face with today's headlines about racial alienation in the same city, prompting us to wonder whether it is a city that is still too much the same.

The plays of Tennessee Williams do not propose first of all to help us understand the world differently, but to help us experience the world differently. An important element of that experience is the magic of the other.

David Carl Wilson is a philosopher at Webster University.
2017, *Tennessee Williams St. Louis*.