

THE STAFF PHILOSOPHER

The St. Louis Rooming House Plays

Philosophers are grownups who persist in asking the questions that annoyed our parents when we were kids. “Is a play still a play even when it isn’t being performed?” They are hard questions. It isn’t always obvious that they have answers, or even make sense. But thinking about them can enrich our lives in unexpected ways.

Tennessee Williams’s *St Louis Rooming House Plays* provoke rich philosophical reflection. “What is theater?” is one question that this production brings into sharp relief. In the same year that two of these plays were written, 1948, Jean Paul Sartre described how art gains its meaning only as the audience freely collaborates with the artist to create that meaning. And theater, unlike most art, provides with every performance the singular opportunity for a mutual and memorable human connection between actors and audience. *The Rooming House Plays* push that definition to the limit. The drama unfolds in each room as you enter it. You sit on the side of Bertha’s sickbed, or you duck out of the way when Mr. C grabs his sample case. The players never acknowledge your presence, but the immediacy affects them as much as you, generating theater at its most essential.

And then, there are the questions prompted by the plays themselves. They may take place in shabby suites, but they are not, like Neil Simon’s *Plaza Suite*, written as a suite. Two of them do end with punch lines, but the other two end with punches to the gut. Yes, they are all set in St. Louis, but as you progress through the rooming house, a deeper commonality emerges. This was a time when theater, indeed, all of high culture, was newly preoccupied with what Gabriel Marcel described as “the drama of the soul in exile, of the soul that suffers from its lack of communion with itself and with others.” And like so many Tennessee Williams characters, these are souls in exile, grasping for a way to bring meaning to their lives. That is to say, they are us. To be remembered is one thing they grasp for. Mr. C touts his fifteen years as the ranking salesman. The others wish for footprints that are more poignantly pitiful: Annabelle is thrilled to be remembered for her two lines in a play; Bertha wonders if she is remembered for good times in the back room; and the pink mistress demands a mere name.

Even more than being remembered, they strive with a desperation bordering on futility for meaningful human connection. Marry me, anybody! Give me the same respect you give your wife! Put your comic book away while I’m talking to you! Hello...know that I love you...no need to write back.

And so, what theater is, and what *this* theater is, merge into the same answer: a quest for mutual, memorable human connection. The questions are hard, and they aren’t definitively answered, but, unexpectedly, our lives are enriched.

David Carl Wilson is a philosopher based at Webster University.
2016, Tennessee Williams St. Louis.