

The Staff Philosopher

The Timeless World of *The Rose Tattoo*

Serafina has a graduation present for Rosa—a wrist-watch. She loses it, finds it, winds it, shakes it, listens to it intently, later shakes it again, cannot make it tick, and never quite remembers to give it to Rosa. Once she declares, “My clock is my heart and my heart don't say tick-tick, it says love-love!” These small moments are easy to overlook if you are swept away by the play's perpetual motion and, especially, if you did not read Williams' preface to the official version of *The Rose Tattoo*, “The Timeless World of a Play.”

That essay provides a clue to the watch that does not tick, that is never given, and that, if it did tick, would do so as a poor substitute for a loving heart. For it illustrates what plays are all about. Plays, Williams explains, introduce us to people and events “in a world outside of time.” If we were to meet Serafina, Rosa, or Alvaro in the course of a normal day, we would feel the pressure to interact with them face-to-face, and so we would not “be able to see them.” Further, the encounter would be followed by other occurrences, other interactions; so, even if they touched us, they would soon fade into oblivion. But the timeless world of a play eliminates these distractions and “allows for contemplation.”

Williams' idea, in short, is that a play is a *model*. The playwright is like the scientist, who builds a model of the solar system to help us understand cosmology, or the philosopher, who diagrams the premises of an argument to guide us to a conclusion. Each pares away the inessential so as to concentrate our contemplation upon the essential. But, unlike the scientist and the philosopher, the playwright's model is crafted not of reason but of passion, the true trigger of human behavior. In plays, he explains, spectators learn that they “love each other more deeply than they permit themselves to know.” Indeed, says Williams, plays encourage them “deliberately to choose certain moral values by which to live as steadfastly as if they too, like characters in a play, were immured against the corrupting rush of time.”

And what are the “certain moral values” of *The Rose Tattoo*? They are signaled before a word is spoken. “SEWING.” That is the sign, in the original Broadway production, that marked Serafina's cottage. She sews clothing for a living, but the Thread of Life poses the truer test of her talents. In Greek mythology, the Fates make the choices. For each of our lives, one Fate spins the thread, another measures it, and the third snips it when it reaches its predetermined length. The threads of our lives are Fated. And so it seems to be for Serafina—paralyzed by the loss of one love and by the fear of losing Rosa's, serving a self-imposed sentence under her own tin roof in the company of her dead husband's ashes, a Madonna, and her despair.

But after three years, she makes a choice. Serafina picks up the thread of her life, and takes her fate into her *own* hands. In doing so, she embroiders a new future for herself, using a back stitch—what the Italians call *punto indietro*. She goes back, underneath, with one stitch, to ensure continuity—to Rosa, to her “molto modesto” cottage, and to the customs of the old country—and, thus secured, goes forward two stitches, to fashion something new—featuring a child in her womb, a life with Alvaro, and a fresh openness to Rosa's independence. Her initial, tentative, step forward is to sew together Alvaro's ripped jacket. But then, in the play's final scene, she fully commits. She alters the meaning of the rosy silk shirt that she sewed so long ago—no longer a symbol of despair, it now stands for hope. She sends it up the hillside to Alvaro in, to borrow from Williams' notes, a “rhapsodic moment of flight and play.” Her heart once again goes “love, love”—more deeply than she had permitted herself to know.

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