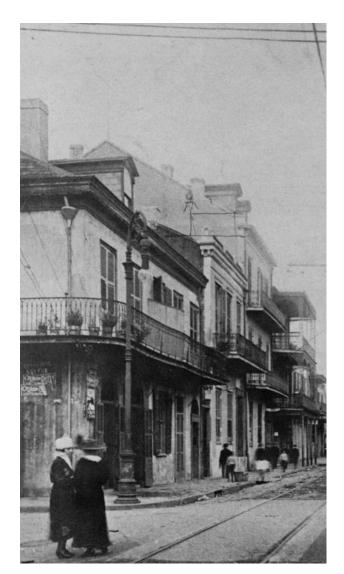
JPSTAGE

A PUBLICATION OF THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT AT ROUNDABOUTTHEATRECOMPANY UP FALL 2006

Suddenly Last Summer







"I have found it easier to identify with the characters who verge upon hysteria, who were frightened of life, who were desperate to reach out to another person. But these seemingly fragile people are the strong people really."

—Tennessee Williams











BOUT THEATRE C Presents DENLY LAST SUN ember 22, 2006 AND MIRIAM SIE NIER FOR THEAT

Suddenly Last Summer

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The Director's

INTERPRETATION

DURING REHEARSALS UPSTAGE CAUGHT UP WITH SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER DIRECTOR MARK BROKAW

Why did you decide to do this play?

Well, first of all it was written by Tennessee Williams. He is one of the great American wordsmiths, and the greatest way that I think the theatre is different from all other performance mediums is that at its absolute core it's about language and what transpires between living, breathing human beings through the exchange of language. He was one of the great masters of language. He was able to harness it in a very specific way unlike anyone else and unleash it emotionally in a way that few other writers have been able to match. Also, on a purely surface level, I think that Suddenly Last Summer is just a fascinating story. It's a great gothic suspense yarn, a really macabre "who dunnit." I also think it's a play that's been rarely seen in New York. It's only had one major revival in this city in the almost fifty years since its premiere. A lot of folks think they know the play because of the film and there are great differences between the two, although the play is done quite often regionally. Lastly, I think I'm just blessed with this terrific cast who I think bring a great compassion to a group of human beings that could easily be caricatured.

What do you think is going to be the biggest challenge about directing this piece?

I think it's an easy story to take a black and white approach towards in terms of who is telling the truth and who is not, and who is right and who is wrong. Of course, the telling of truth is so central to Tennessee Williams in any play he wrote, and especially in anything he wrote about himself personally.

Do you see it as an autobiographical play?

That's a very loaded question. I think that it's one of his most highly personal plays, but it would be reductive to say that it's merely autobiographical. I think that even he admitted in an interview somewhere along the line that it was a play that probably dealt most directly with his life and traumas — and I don't know if pain is the right word, I can't remember — but there was something about it that made it the most directly reflective of his struggle with the demons in his life. It is the only play he wrote while undergoing psychoanalysis. He was going five times a week. I think he really had a desire to exercise some of his demons and hopefully come out on the other side, able to have left behind, and I'm going to slightly paraphrase here, "his need to write about such violent

people in violent situations." As part of the treatment his doctor asked him to cease writing during the course of their daily sessions, which of course he wasn't able to do. He wrote every day. I read somewhere else that a friend of his said that "to understand him you had to understand that his need to write was biological." It was impossible for him not to.

What about the violence in the play? Do you think it will have the same punch as it did when it was first produced?

I think it has just as much punch now. There's that famous saying by him, that "we all devour each other in our fashion." I think it's that idea of devouring, of exploitation of others that is so much at the center of the story. It was something that concerned him greatly. I remember reading another interview where he said something along the lines of "animals feed upon each other for survival, out of hunger, but man doesn't have that excuse." I think that if memory serves me right, Williams' word was that he had a "repulsion" for this characteristic of man, that predatory nature, the way that we use people without conscience, I think that is true on so many levels in this story and just in our world, the way that societies devour other societies, that family members devour other family members any human being exploiting another for their own selfish good and the hypocrisy that goes part and parcel with that, the smoke screens that we all hide behind, and the walls of reasoning that we build to cover that rampant exploitation. Do we invade other countries to protect them, or to exploit their natural resources for our own gain? I think this using of others is really the cannibalism that's at the center of the story and at the center of the debate

How did the creative team come up with the world of this play? It could go in a lot of different directions, don't you think?

I think that it's a very tricky world to realize. At the beginning of the play Mrs. Venable says, "this was Sebastian's garden." It is the creation of a very singular human being, somebody whose personality permeates every aspect of the story. It's a reflection of his world view, one that's mirrored in that story you already mentioned about the devouring of the turtles. There is

"The greatest way that I think the theatre is different from all other performance mediums is that at its absolute core it's about language and what transpires between living, breathing human beings through the exchange of language."



Photo: Joan Marcus

a predatory feeling to this place, a sense that it could reach down and swallow you up just like the Venus flytrap swallows up the unsuspecting insects. I think it's a primeval place filled with, as she says, "plants that prey upon the world around them." So we were always thinking about the garden as the creation of this man who was a man of great appetites, and appetites that were not socially acceptable at the time.

Are you getting a clearer picture of Sebastian?

I think you get a clearer picture, and at the same time there are the ambiguities and the paradoxes. He certainly is one of the most interesting and completely drawn offstage characters I've ever bumped up against, but I think that for all we know about him he also still manages to remain an ambiguous character full of mystery as well.

You mentioned table work and for our students I guess that's a new idea. How much table work are you doing?

That's something that's always different for every production. We will have spent almost four days around the table, and hopefully you're making great discoveries together that are the basis for the creation of this shared world that will be the world of the play. And by that I mean the world of the story in terms of given circumstances. Who is Sebastian? What is everybody's relationship to him and this garden? And to all of the other characters? And what is their stake on this day in the course of events that transpire? Why is it so important for each of them to either suppress, or draw out, this story from Catherine about the events in Cabeza de Lobo? It's about making sure everyone is telling the same story and creating their piece of the same world.

What advice would you share with a student who is interested in a career as a director?

I think that the frustrating answer to that question is that there is no one way, because there are as many ways to become a director as there are directors out there working. I think the most important thing is to know what kind of work you're drawn to, and to search out where that work is happening. It doesn't necessarily mean it's New York City; it may be Chicago, it may be Seattle — and for some, undergraduate and graduate school is the route. For me it wasn't initially. As an undergrad I was a short story writer, and then I went to graduate school for directing. For others, formal training is not the way at all. Some move from acting to directing, or from writing to directing. Basically the right way is the way you do it, and I think that's the thing. You just have to do it. You have to find or create a situation where you get to direct, whether you get friends together and direct scenes, join a theatre group where you get an opportunity to direct, or you create your own group. Or assist other directors along the way and learn from observing. I do believe that technique can be taught, but then you ultimately have to put that technique to the test, and the best way to do that is to direct. It's a very proactive field. It won't come to you. I think you have to go out and put yourself in enough situations so that you ultimately make your own luck, and land or create the job that will give you the opportunity to test your skills and to grow.

Mark Brokaw's directing credits include *The Constant Wife, Reckless, The Long Christmas Ride Home, Lobby Hero, Old Money, Tartuffe, The Dying Gaul, As Bees in Honey Drown, How I Learned to Drive, This is Our Youth, The Good Times are Killing Me, and The Rimers of Eldritch.*

The Actor's INTERPRETATION

UPSTAGE DISCUSSES SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER WITH ACTOR BLYTHE DANNER



You played Alma in *Eccentricities of a Nightingale*, you were nominated for a Tony when you played Blanche in *Streetcar Named Desire*, and now you are playing Mrs. Venable in *Suddenly Last Summer*. What is it that attracts you to Tennessee Williams?

I just have a passion for his work, a real devotion. I knew him slightly when I was at Williamstown Theatre Festival. He asked me to do some of his later plays, but I was in California raising my children. There's no American writer quite like him. He strikes emotional chords that are so deep and releases tremendous feeling through his poetry. It's nearly every actor's dream to embrace and explore his work.

How do you see the character of the playwright revealed through the characters in his plays?

I think both women in this play, Catherine and Mrs. Venable, are different sides of the man himself. He had a real affinity for his women. All his women seem fragile but have strong, if misguided, centers. I suppose many of them would be considered to be iron butterflies.

I was wondering if you were getting a clear picture of the character, Sebastian, since you've been working on the play.

Clearly we learn, as the play progresses, that he was not as Venable paints him to be in the first part of the play. She idealizes him and is seemingly oblivious to his reality, and lurking far underneath is her realization of the truth which she cannot bear — so she has managed to block it out completely.

You have one line in this play that struck me, when she says, "Sebastian's trying to find God."

I love that. Then when she says, "I mean a clear image of

"I think both women in this play, Catherine and Mrs. Venable, are different sides of the man himself."

him," because it's a brutal God that she talks of mostly. It's just extraordinary language. I've been wrestling with it and I'm still wrestling with it, but when she says, "I mean a clear image of him," does she really mean that God is only brutal? It's still enigmatic to me.

What is the challenge for you, or any actress in playing Mrs. Venable?

Playing a Williams character is like painting on a very large canvas but with broad and small subtle strokes, so the challenge is discovering how to play both. None of his characters are black and white. They are all complex, and you must explore each clue, leave no stone unturned. I'll be on that search until closing night.

What is that process like for you?

I always work very slowly. I'm usually the last one off the book as far as learning lines. I just have to really get my footing. I have found working on this play that I experience almost a loss of reality. Because the language is so intoxicating, I often feel as if I am in a dream. It may sound absurd, but when I take my glasses off and can't see everyone clearly, the dreamlike quality is illuminated for me. It's like being in a fog. It somehow allows me to enter the world more easily.

What about dialect? Is that something that is just natural to you or is that something you have to work at?

I have always loved playing Southern women. New Orleans is a little more difficult because it's got a little bit of the Brooklynese, of the "woik," instead of "work." And this is a Garden District lady, so she'd be a little bit more upper class with only a smattering of the Brooklynese.

You've been in film and you've been on television. Do you find that it takes a different technique for each medium?

I used to feel that way and I intensely disliked film. I always found it difficult, and it's just in the last couple of years that I have finally been able to find in film what I have been able to find on the stage. Stage affords you such physical freedom, and that's how I've always found the characters—through the physicality. Now I'm finding

a way to do that on film, in a condensed way, allowing the physicality to build the emotion deep within.

You went to Bard College. Did you meet any teachers that influenced you?

Very much so. We were so fortunate to have three very different kinds of teachers. One who was British and we explored Shakespeare, but in an unorthodox way — very freewheeling, strong parameters, but within those parameters given a lot of leeway. Then we had a teacher who taught us very much the practical, how to physically approach things. Then we had a wonderful Method teacher. So I was getting three different disciplines that were really helpful.

Would you recommend that type of education to a young person?

I think Liberal Arts are really important. We had some brilliant philosophy teachers and literature teachers. Bard was, still is, a very rich place for the arts. My children didn't stay in college because they knew very much what they wanted to do, but they had such a hunger for learning, which is fulfilled through their work and reading and exploring. If you're blessed with curiosity, you never stop learning. But if you can, it's good to start out with a good, well-rounded education.

Blythe Danner's credits include The Last Kiss, Huff, Will & Grace, Meet the Fockers, Meet the Parents, Forces of Nature, The X Files, Brighten Beach Memoirs, The Miser at Lincoln Center, Butterflies are Free, Streetcar Named Desire and Follies.



The Sound Designer's INTERPRETATION

UPSTAGE DISCUSSES SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER WITH SOUND DESIGNER PETER GOLUB

Given the fact that you are doing both composition and sound, what does that mean?

We are trying to create a world that is the embodiment of this garden that's almost like a jungle. It's this overgrown beautiful and yet somewhat dangerous garden that they live in, in New Orleans, that threatens to overwhelm the characters. These sounds of the garden will play a part in creating that world, as will the music. In some respects there may be a fine line between what's music and what's sound because some of the music I'll be doing will be not melodic, thematic material, but will be the atmosphere of this garden. Some of these sounds will be naturalistic, and some will be more abstract, almost musicalized versions of the garden. So both will be working together to create this world.

Do you believe that this garden is a representation of Sebastian?

Yes, in part because it's his creation, but also because of the relationship, the family relationship of the mother and son. That's how I see it. Mark may have a different answer to this question. It's kind of a role that this whole story and these people are part of that envelopes them and embodies their inner life.

How would you describe your process when you're doing both the sound and the music?

I watched some rehearsals over the weekend. I read the script, of course, and have a discussion with the director, because there are so many different possible and valid approaches to any work with Williams I think in particular, because they are such rich plays that they can withstand varying interpretations. So you need to know what the director is thinking. Above and beyond that, it is really important to hear it coming out of the mouths of the cast. How it is cast and who is playing each role is going to really determine what it's going to play like. Until I heard them and saw them move and just saw what they looked like and what they sound like it was kind of a blank page to me, or only a partial page. Now I have a sense of who these people are in this production and what they feel. I have a much better sense of where to go with it.

Once you've seen the people and heard them speak, do you start thinking of them in terms of musical instruments?

Notreally. That's not usually how it works. For me it's more about getting the atmosphere and the color. What are the

instruments that I'm going to want to use that will evoke this atmosphere? Is it going to be strings? Is it going to be woodwinds? Or a combination? Or a lot of percussion? You try to find the color, for lack of a better word, or the timbre of the sound and from that you start to develop musical themes or harmonies that propel it. For me it's just finding that atmosphere.

Have you decided on any instruments?

No, I haven't nailed it down. I'm on a direction now and I'm imagining some strings, some winds, and some percussion. That's what I'm imagining right now.

Will the time period play any part in your decision or your creative process, the fact that it takes place in 1936?

Not in any kind of historical manner. I'm not going to use the music of that period. It's not like you're doing something set in the eighteenth century French court or something where you're trying to do a period. At the same time I don't want to do anything wildly anachronistic because it's not that kind of production. It's not a production that's set out of the time that it was written as so many are these days. It does respect the locale that it's given so I want to be true to that, but I'm not trying to do a New Orleans 1935 jazz score like the movie for Streetcar Named Desire. I'm going more for the internal life of the characters without a real concern for historical authenticity, but at the same time not wanting to do anything that shatters the sense of location in that time.

Do you start with a theme or a melody? How do you work?

It's a little different each time. I'll sit down and just start improvising and come up with some material. It might be a theme, it might be a chord progression, it might just be a color; I'll try to shape that into something and then run it by Mark to see how it gels with his thinking. It all has to be part of his vision for this production as all the elements do. I see what the set looks like. I'm thinking about that all the time the color of the set, the feel of that set, trying to create something that lives in that atmosphere. As if when you walk up there it's been in that space for a long time.

What might you tell a student who is interested in this type of career?

I think you have to go to the opera a lot. You have to really

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figure out how Mozart and Verdi and people like that wrote music for dramatic theme, for specific character, for specific actions, and how they get this sense of color and drama in music. In opera the music is what's really driving the drama. To me that's kind of like the motherload. And also, you have to do it; like anything, talking about it is one thing, but you have to actually do it. If this is something you want to do professionally you have to start doing it in student productions, in amateur productions, whatever you can find. It's really trial and error. Music has this ability to change the audience's perception of some things. Any music you put up there is going to alter the perception of that moment so you have to know how what you do affects the whole process. The other thing is films. I think seeing how film music works can also be a real key of how to write dramatic music.

It seems like film music always heightens whatever emotion they want us to feel.

It's much more prevalent and it's much more full blown in film for various reasons. Incidental music used to be a big thing. In the nineteenth century plays had incidental music and now it's something that's done with much more caution than it used to be. So that's why film can be instructive.

Will there be any underscoring in Suddenly Last Summer?

There might be some, we're just trying to work that out. Again, it's trial and error. With Williams the language is so complete and the language to me is what really drives the thing. It's not so much that you're getting in the way of exposition, but in some plays, like Shaw, for example there's just so much language that's expository and you don't want to get in the way of that.

What is your instrument?

I play piano, that's my main instrument.

So in addition to going to the opera and studying film music, should a young person learn an instrument?

You have to learn an instrument. And these days it's

advisable to be aware of the computer technology that's available. There's so much you can do with it, its such a great tool.

So be computer savvy. I guess most of the kids coming up are.

Very computer savvy, but also learning the music software and being able to manipulate sound and actually make music on the computer.

Once you compose this, then what happens? Do you go to a studio, or hire musicians?

I am going to create mock ups of my pieces for Mark to hear. Then when I see how those are falling, what's working and what isn't, I'll record with real instruments. I can use a computer for a lot of this stuff and some people wouldn't even know it's a computer, but whatever we use will be replaced in the recording studio.

Just to wrap this up is there anything I didn't ask you about or something obvious I'm forgetting? It doesn't necessarily have to be related to Suddenly Last Summer.

Two things: one is that I did a show at the Roundabout quite a few years ago, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. The other thing is that I do a lot of film music and that's become part of my work in the last few years.

Peter has composed and worked on projects for theatre, film, ballet and concert hall including Macbeth at the Delacrote, Measure for Pleasure, Othello, Twelfth Night, and Henry IV at the New York Shakespeare Festival, Hedda Gabler on Broadway, Glass Menagerie at Berkely Rep, The Joy of Going Somewhere Definite at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead at Roundabout, and the films Wordplay, The Laramie Project, The Lost City and The Addams Family. He is the director of the Sundance Film Music Program at the Sundance Institute.

The Lighting Designer's INTERPRETATION

UPSTAGE DISCUSSES SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER WITH LIGHTING DESIGNER DAVID WEINER

Before we talk about *Suddenly Last Summer*, could you talk a little bit about your normal process as a lighting designer?

It varies from project to project and it's tied to the relationship with the director, but it starts with the text. Always. I read the text a number of times. I try to read it the first time without thinking about design. I just read it, absorb it and understand from a text perspective, absorbing the ideas of the play. I don't like to put something on it right away. I want to kind of be with it.

What do you do after that process of just living with the text?

Meeting with the director and set designer are where it usually goes next, and that's where it varies from project to project. Sometimes the director and set designer have met previously and already have developed an idea. Other directors invite me into the process very early. It allows and informs my participation in the process in a different way because I'm in on the ground floor of the idea. But either way, that's usually the next step in the process.

Isn't this a play that really needs to have mood evoked in many ways or am I projecting that on to it?

In this text Tennessee Williams is very specific about the lighting. He talks about the lighting and the atmosphere of the environment that these people are inhabiting. If you really take it on that level, absolutely my work should affect or shape the way the piece is. The playwright said so. You could say, "well, we're not going to do that," but I think and I know Mark Brokaw believes to a certain extent that you have to honor those words. It's different when you read a text that has stage directions in it that were inserted after the fact and those are rarely of interest. These are design ideas and production ideas that were profited by Williams so you have to embrace them to begin with. You may not use them all the way, full out, but I guess they're at least some sort of starting ground. So yes, my work should definitely affect the way the people feel.

It all takes place it seems in one afternoon, outdoors, so we probably get a change of "natural light" right?

Yes, we do, except in our production I don't think we're going to treat it that literally. It's five o'clock on a late summer afternoon and it's September, so in the seventy minutes that the play takes place there really wouldn't

be much of a change by five or six thirty; it's still light out. Williams says in the beginning that it's very hot and steamy right after a rain storm in the garden of central Louisiana. We want it visually to feel like beams of sunlight cutting through the foliage of the garden and making sort of the rays of God, if you will. But as the play evolves, rather than the look progressing towards the sunset, as it were, it actually progresses towards a more brittle version of where we started. It becomes less inviting, less friendly, and more dangerous, more frightening; not in a ghoulish kind of way, but stark and crispier. So the world that started out soft and beautiful becomes more hard-edged and kind of like broken glass.

How do you develop a relationship with the director?

It varies from director to director. I think the key to developing a relationship with a director is listening to them. There's the part of getting to understand who they are as an artistic human being and as a person, the energy they like to have. When it comes down to it, it's really important to be a brilliant visual artist, but it's equally important to want to spend time in a room with somebody. So I just try to tune into the energy of the person. Mark is so lovely and delightful and so smart that it's not so hard to do.

Could you talk a little bit about technology? It seems that lighting technology keeps evolving all the time.

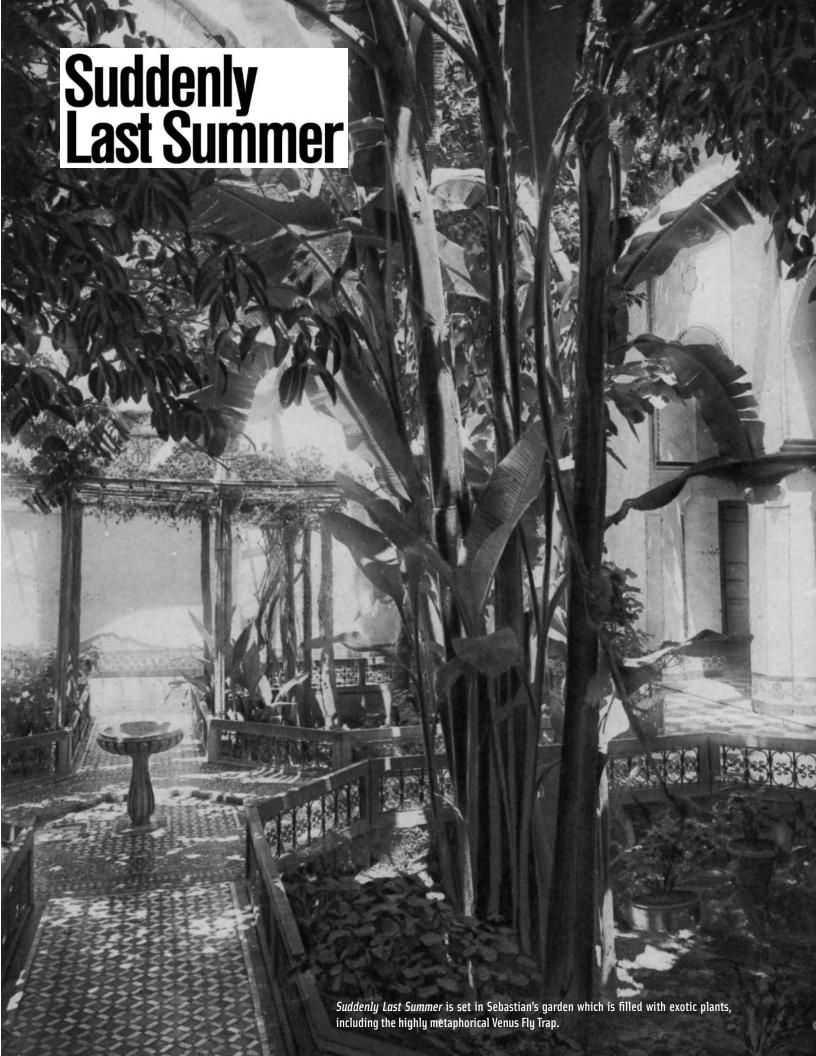
In theatrical lighting today there are lots of toys that one can have on a show. There are moving lights, color scrollers, and strobe lights. It's a long list. And now there is LED (Light Emitting Diode) technology. Technology does play a role, although in Suddenly Last Summer we're not using a great deal of that technology. We're using four hmi (Hydrargyrum Medium-Arc Iodide) lekos. They're manufactured by a company called Robert Juliat out of France. They're extremely bright, but they are projectors in the sense that you can put a template or a gobo in them.

What might you suggest to a young person who is interested in being a lighting designer?

I would start by saying that it's a different deal for everybody. Everybody has different needs in terms of how they learn to do this craft, if they want to do this craft. My path was a little bit unusual in that I originally "With Williams the language is so complete and the language to me is what really drives the thing."



as a young adult came to New York City to be an actor, I was certain of it. I went to NYU undergrad and was in the Tisch program, but even before then I was always interested in the production side of theatre. I had done a fair amount of it on an amateur level in high school, both acting and production work. I came to the city and studied acting at Circle on the Square and after about a year it was pretty clear that I probably didn't want to be an actor. At the same time I started designing shows at NYU. A lot of students did a lot of little things and I was finding more and more that design was drawing my interest. It was at that point that I had to take a class, a design class for non-designers. It was with a scenic designer named Doug Stein, who I think is a really brilliant guy. And Doug completely opened my eyes to this idea that design for the theatre is about ideas. That never occurred to me. It had always been you know, you make a set, you make some lights and you make it look pretty, but he opened up this idea about design being ideas. Some people really want a more formal process and there are some great, great graduate programs. I would certainly never do it now, but there are times I wonder if I would be a different designer if I had gone that route. If I had gone to grad school, what kind of work would I be doing? How would I be different? I'll never know and I'm very happy with the way I went. I got to see a lot of interesting people, do interesting work in the real world. No grad school can give you that.



The Audience's INTERPRETATION

In his interview, Mark Brokow calls Tennessee Williams "one of the great American wordsmiths." He is considered a master of language by many scholars. In his writing, he takes great care to connect his dialogue to emotions.

BEFORE THE PLAY

- Consider the names of the main characters: Mrs. Venable, Catherine and Sebastian. Based upon these names, what do you imagine to be the qualities of these characters?
- Define the word "metaphor". What are some common metaphors that you are familiar with from previous plays, movies and books?
- What do you usually consider poetic language? What makes language poetic?
- At the heart of this play is a question of who is telling the truth; How do you define truth?

DURING THE PLAY

- Listen for various metaphors. What do you think these metaphors represent? There are several events that are metaphorical-what do these events represent to Catherine?
- Notice when your opinion of who is telling the truth changes and why.
- Listen for language that paints a picture. What makes this language sound like poetry?

AFTER THE PLAY

- Write a short poem from Sebastian's perspective about truth, including metaphor when you can.
- Based upon what you have learned about Sebastian, create a drawing using metaphorical images that represents his perspective of truth about his life.



When you get to the theatre...

BELOW ARE SOME HELPFULTIPS FOR MAKING YOUR THEATRE-GOING EXPERIENCE MORE ENJOYABLE.

TICKET POLICY

Performance Date and Time

As a student participant in *Producing Partners*, *Page To Stage* or *Theatre Access*, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

PROGRAMS

Section

All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films, perhaps some you have already seen.

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.

Show Title

Theatre Name and Location

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