

## ICONIC PLAYWRIGHT TENNESSEE WILLIAMS IS THE SUBJECT OF A MAJOR EXHIBITION AT THE MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM

*SHOW HIGHLIGHTS HIS CAREER AT THE TIME OF THE GLASS MENAGERIE, A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE, AND CAT ON HOT TIN ROOF*

**Tennessee Williams: No Refuge but Writing**  
February 2 through May 13

**Press Preview: Thursday, February 1, 10:00 – 11:30 am**  
RSVP: [media@themorgan.org](mailto:media@themorgan.org)

**New York, NY, January 16, 2018** — The plays of Tennessee Williams (1911–1983) are intimate, confessional, and autobiographical. They are touchstones not only of American theatrical history but American literary history as well.

During the period 1939 to 1957, Williams composed such masterpieces as *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, cementing his reputation as America's most celebrated playwright. By 1955 he had earned two Pulitzer Prizes, three New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards, and a Tony.

Williams embraced his celebrity even as he struggled in his private life with alcohol and drug addiction and a series of stormy relationships with lovers. Moreover, he was often at odds professionally with critics and censors concerned about the sexuality and other subject matter, then



Irving Penn (1917–2009), *Tennessee Williams*, New York, 13 March 1951 (negative), 1983 (print), gelatin silver print on paper, The Morgan Library & Museum. Purchased as the gift of Richard L. Menschel and with the support of The Horace W. Goldsmith Fund for Americana and The Margaret T. Morris Fund. 2007.38. Photograph by Irving Penn for Vogue, April 15, 1951 © Condé Nast. Used with permission of George Borchardt, Inc.

unconventional, explored in his plays. He found his safe haven in writing.

Opening February 2 and continuing through May 13, ***Tennessee Williams: No Refuge but Writing*** highlights the playwright's creative process and his close involvement with the theatrical production of his works, as well as their reception and lasting impact. Uniting his original drafts, private diaries, and personal letters with paintings, photographs, production stills, and other objects, the exhibition tells the story of one man's ongoing struggle for self-expression and how it forever changed the landscape of American drama.

"It is almost impossible to overstate the impact of Tennessee Williams on theatre as we know it," said Colin. B. Bailey, director of the Morgan Library & Museum. "His plays are so acclaimed and so well-known that one can conjure his unforgettable characters and their immortal lines almost at will. Yet, behind these great works is an artist who struggled mightily—sometimes publicly—with a host of personal demons. Real life was unsatisfactory, Williams once said in an interview, so he wrote to create imaginary worlds. Writing was his refuge."

### **Introduction**

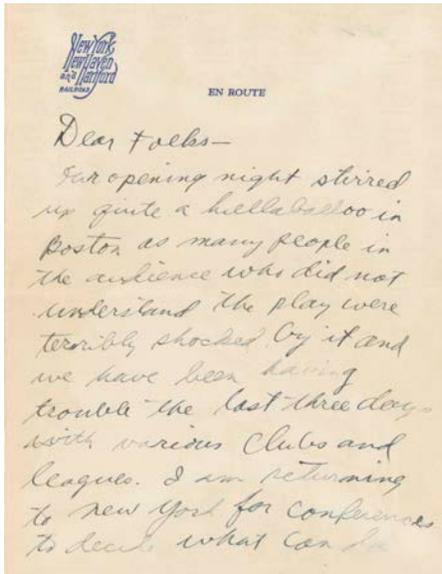
Thomas Lanier Williams III was born in Columbus, Mississippi, on March 26, 1911. Named after his paternal grandfather, he was always known to family and close friends as Tom, but adopted the name "Tennessee" when submitting his work to a play contest in 1938. He was one of three children born to C.C., a traveling salesman, and Edwina Williams. The family would move to St. Louis in 1919 and from his earliest years Williams was fiercely dedicated to his older sister, Rose, who suffered from schizophrenia. Tom also had to contend with the derision of his father, who often referred to him as "Miss Nancy." Later, Williams would explore the dysfunction of his home life in his plays and Rose would remain a lifelong muse.



**Left:** Photographer unknown, *Tennessee Williams as a boy*, undated, photographic print, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.  
**Right:** Photographer unknown, *Rose Isabel Williams on the beach*, undated, photographic print, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

## **Battle of Angels**

Williams began a lifetime of restless travel in the late 1930s, but returned to his family in St. Louis in the summer of 1939 to spend several months working furiously —“with seven wild cats under [his] skin”—on



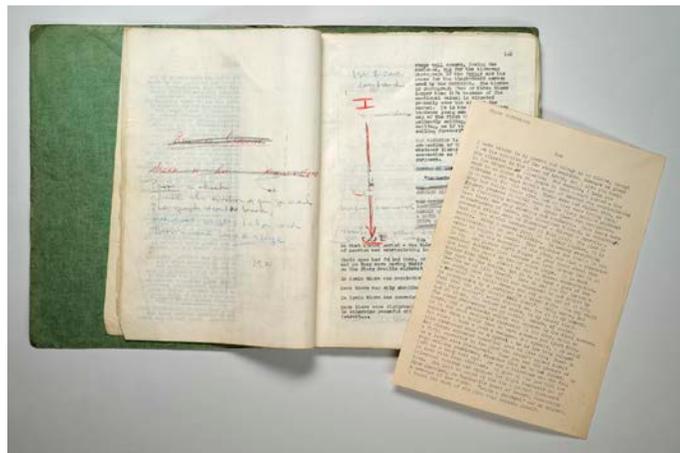
Tennessee Williams (1911–1983), *Letter to the Williams family, signed "Tom" and dated en route to New York, ca. 4 January 1941*, Tennessee Williams Collection, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library, Used with permission of George Borchardt, Inc.

the play that would become his first commercially produced, *Battle of Angels*. He sent a draft to his agent, Audrey Wood, that November, and, as soon as he won a Rockefeller Fellowship at the end of the year, moved to New York to keep working on it. In the theatrical capital of America, he made important new contacts, attended plays regularly, and recorded in his diary a period of “appalling” promiscuity. But what his new friends, who nicknamed him “Tennacity,” remembered most was his commitment to work: he could sit in the middle of a bustling apartment “typing ninety words a minute, plainly deaf and blind to all the bedlam.”

*Battle of Angels* failed in its tryout in Boston. Some of the audience, offended by its violent and sexual themes, walked out. The show was scheduled to open at the National Theatre Broadway, but the production was cancelled.

## **The Glass Menagerie — “The Catastrophe of Success”**

Structurally, *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) is a simple play: it is the portrait of a struggling family and its dissolution. Its strength lies in its poetic lyricism. Drafting it, Williams never imagined it would make his career. He thought it was too quiet, too simple, just “the ruins of a play.” It grew slowly out of unrelated one-act plays, poems, and stories. These early works, which often contained elements that would become central to both *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*,



Tennessee Williams (1911–1983), *The Glass Menagerie*, playscript, annotated by Margo Jones and others, and with typed insertions, early December 1944, The Morgan Library & Museum, MA 5739. Photography by Graham S. Haber, 2015. Used with permission of George Borchardt, Inc.

coalesced into “The Gentleman Caller,” *Menagerie*’s immediate predecessor, shortly after Williams’s sister, Rose, was subjected to a prefrontal lobotomy in 1943. Rose is embodied in the character of Laura, while Amanda is modeled on their mother, Edwina, and Tom, the restless poet employed in the warehouse of the Continental Shoemakers, is Williams’s projection of himself.

The play opened in Chicago that December and transferred to Broadway the following March, where it ran for 563 performances and won the Drama Critics Circle Award and the Donaldson Award. Williams wholeheartedly embraced the wealth, fame, and the parties that came with his “catastrophe of success.”

### ***A Streetcar Named Desire***

Williams began concentrating on the play that would become *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) about six months after *The Glass Menagerie* opened on Broadway. He had gone to Mexico to work on it, but soon settled in New Orleans with his new lover Pancho Rodriguez. Williams, who famously claimed “I was and still am Blanche ... [although] God knows I have a Stanley in me, too,” drew on their tumultuous relationship for the play. This he wove together with elements from earlier poems, short plays, and character studies to draft and re-draft “The Poker Night,” the immediate precursor to *A Streetcar Named Desire*.



**Left:** Photographer unknown, Karl Malden, Marlon Brando, Jessica Tandy and Kim Hunter in rehearsals for *A Streetcar Named Desire*, ca. October 1947, photographic print, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. MARLON BRANDO and related rights <sup>TM</sup>/ ©2016 of Brando Enterprise, LP. **Right:** *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Playbill for the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, New York, 1947-49, Houghton Library, Harvard University, purchased with the Frank E. Chase Fund, bMS Thr 550 (41)

When the play opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on December 3, 1947, it sent the audience “zowing to mad heights.” Directed by Elia Kazan and starring Jessica Tandy and Marlon Brando, the “savagely arresting tragedy” ran for an astonishing 855 performances and won the Drama Critics Circle Award, the Donaldson Award, and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

### ***The Rose Tattoo* — A "love-play to the world"**

Williams may have begun working on what would become *The Rose Tattoo*—his “love-play to the world”—as early as the spring and summer of 1948, which he spent largely abroad. He returned to Italy the following year with his lover, Frank Merlo. As they explored Rome and the Sicilian countryside, Williams gathered more material for the play and for his first novel, *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*.



Photographer unknown, Tennessee Williams (right) and Frank Merlo (left) on the beach, possibly in Key West, undated, photographic print Tennessee Williams Collection, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library



Top: Fred Fehl (1906–1995), Production photograph of Ben Gazzara as Brick and Burl Ives as Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, 1954-55, silver gelatin print, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin © Fred Fehl. Bottom: *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, window card for the Morosco Theatre, New York, 1955, screen print on heavy paper, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

The first draft of *The Rose Tattoo* was completed in January 1950, and Williams revised the comedy incessantly, even after the play opened in previews in December of that year. During the first few weeks of the run, Maureen Stapleton, the leading actress, recalled that “we were performing every night and working on new business all day, every day.” A final change—the elimination of “an unmentionable article”—was not in place until fully three and a half months after opening.

The play launched the careers of Stapleton and Eli Wallach. It ran for nine months on Broadway and garnered four Tony Awards, including for Best Play.

### ***Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* — Cat and Kazan**

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) was Williams’s favorite of his plays. It was also one of the most lastingly painful and fraught. In the character of Big Daddy, Williams achieved eloquence never again matched, but he doubted whether it was a truly good work—even after it had won the Pulitzer Prize, the Drama Critics Circle Award, and the Donaldson Award.

The focus is not any single character: “The bird that I hope to catch in the net of this play is not the solution of one man’s psychological

problem. I'm trying to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people, that cloudy, flickering, evanescent—fiercely charged!—interplay of live human beings in the thundercloud of a common crisis," he wrote. To bring the intangible to life, the action is continuous, the set is not supposed to be realistic, and the characters are left mysterious, not fully clarified.

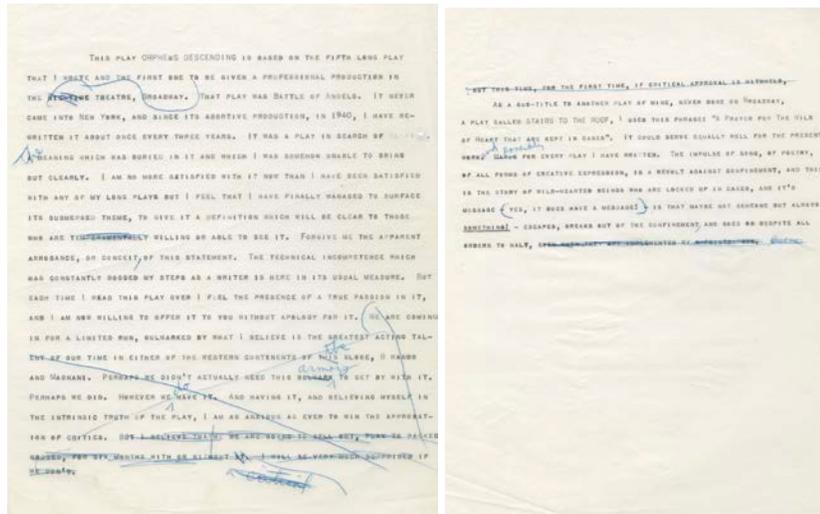
The play grew out of the short story "Three Players of a Summer Game," and was radically expanded and restructured following suggestions made by Elia Kazan. Their collaboration propelled the play towards lyric perfection, but, later, it left Williams suspicious of its qualities.

### ***Orpheus Descending* — "Why have I stuck so stubbornly to this play?"**

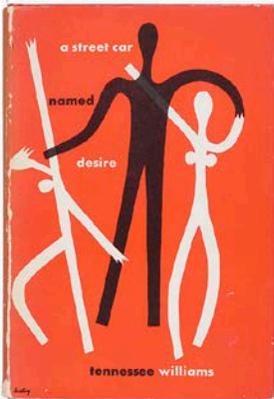
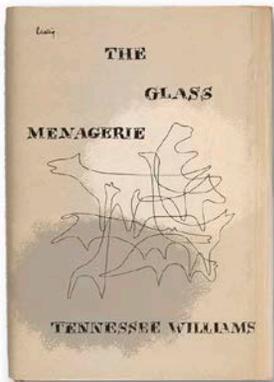
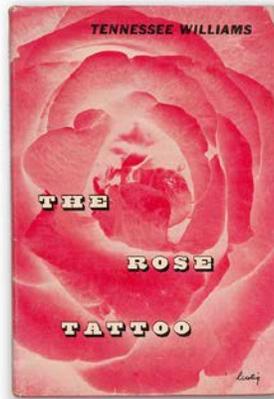
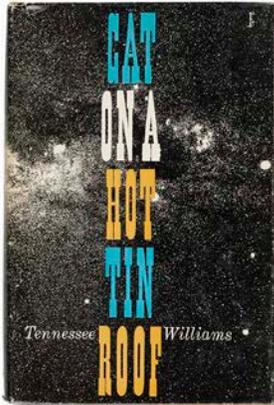
*Orpheus Descending* was the reemergence of Williams's first commercially produced play, *Battle of Angels*. Williams reworked the script every few years. "Why have I stuck so stubbornly to this play? For seventeen years, in fact?" he asked himself a few days before the work finally appeared on Broadway. "Nothing is more precious to anybody than the emotional record of his youth, and you will find the trail of my sleeve-worn heart in this completed play."

The work follows the same structure and themes as its predecessor, *Battle of Angels*. It opened at the Martin Beck Theatre on March 21, 1957. Williams was disappointed by the tepid critical reception and initially feared his career was at an end. This, of course, would not be the case; the great playwright would see eleven more of his plays open on

Broadway, including the critically renowned and commercially successful *The Night of the Iguana*, which was based on the summer Williams spent travelling through Mexico while thinking that *Battle of Angels* would never be produced.



Tennessee Williams (1911–1983), *Typescript draft related to the foreword for Orpheus Descending*, ca. 1958, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Used with permission of George Borchardt, Inc.



"CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF" by Tennessee Williams. Cover design by Alvin Lustig. © 1955 by Alvin Lustig. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp. "THE ROSE TATTOO" by Tennessee Williams. Cover design by Alvin Lustig. © 1951 by Alvin Lustig. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp. "THE GLASS MENAGERIE" by Tennessee Williams. Cover design by Alvin Lustig. © 1949 by Alvin Lustig. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing. "STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE" by Tennessee Williams. Cover design by Alvin Lustig. © 1947 by Alvin Lustig. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing. Photography by Janny Chiu, 2017.

## Publications

Pinning down the text of Williams's plays is challenging. Not only did he continue to make changes to the scripts up to the last minute—sometimes even after opening—but it also must be acknowledged that plays are by nature ephemeral and collaborative. Often, there were discrepancies between the play as produced and as published.

For all of Williams's major works, there are at least two texts to consider: the acting editions brought out by the Dramatists Play Service and the library editions, published, with only a couple of exceptions, by New Directions. Unsurprisingly, there are often differences between these texts, usually in the case of production notes. But the library editions—the editions that Williams used to present his plays as literary texts for a reading audience—were not necessarily stable from the beginning. Even after

publication, Williams returned to editing; he was always refining and recrafting his work.

## Publication

*Tennessee Williams: No Refuge But Writing*, published to accompany the exhibition, features a foreword from director Colin B. Bailey, a chronology by curator Carolyn Vega, and three essays.

Authors: John Lahr, Margaret Bradham Thornton, and Carolyn Vega.

Publisher: The Morgan Library & Museum, New York, 2018.

96 pages.

## Public Programs

### **DISCUSSION Tennessee Williams and James Laughlin: Selected Letters Thomas Keith and Peggy L. Fox**

These newly published letters chronicle the forty year friendship between the playwright Tennessee Williams and James Laughlin, founder of *New Directions*. Join Peggy L. Fox, former president and publisher of *New Directions*, and Thomas Keith, Consulting Editor for *New Directions*, for a conversation about the letters compiled for their new publication *The Luck of Friendship: The Letters of Tennessee Williams and James Laughlin* and what they reveal about one of literature's most enduring friendships.

**Wednesday, April 11, 6:30 pm\***

**Tickets:** \$15; 10 for members; free for students with a valid ID.

*\*The exhibition Tennessee Williams: No Refuge but Writing will open at 5:30 pm for program attendees.*

## **FILMS**

### **Tennessee Williams on Screen**

This series of classic film adaptations of Tennessee Williams's plays coincides with the exhibition *Tennessee Williams: No Refuge but Writing*.

#### ***A Streetcar Named Desire***

**Director:** Elia Kazan

(1951, 122 minutes)

This film adaptation of Tennessee Williams's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1947 play features actors from the original Broadway cast. In the film Blanche DuBois (Vivien Leigh) moves in with her sister, Stella (Kim Hunter), in New Orleans and is tormented by her brutish brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski (Marlon Brando), while her reality crumbles around her.

**Friday, February 2, 7 pm\***

#### ***The Rose Tattoo***

**Director:** Daniel Mann

(1955, 117 minutes)

Based on the 1951 Tony Award-winning play by Tennessee Williams, this classic drama centers on Serafina (Anna Magnani), a widowed Sicilian woman living in the American South who is left devastated by the death of her husband. The arrival of Alvaro (Burt Lancaster), offers hope of a new love in her life.

**Friday, April 20, 7 pm\***

#### ***Cat on a Hot Tin Roof***

**Director:** Richard Brooks

(1958, 108 minutes)

Adapted from the 1955 Pulitzer Prize-winning play of the same name by Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* stars Paul Newman as Brick, an alcoholic ex-football player who drinks his days away and resists the affections of his wife, Maggie (Elizabeth Taylor). His reunion with his father, Big Daddy (Burl Ives), who is dying of cancer, jogs a host of memories and revelations for both father and son.

**Friday, May 4, 7 pm\***

Exhibition-related films are free with museum admission.

Advance reservations for members only. Tickets are available at the Admission Desk on the day of the screening.

*\*The exhibition Tennessee Williams: No Refuge but Writing will open at 6 pm for program attendees.*

**GALLERY TALKS** ***Tennessee Williams: No Refuge but Writing***  
Carolyn Vega, Associate Curator, Literary and Historical Manuscripts  
**Friday, February 23, 6 PM**  
**Friday, April 20, 1 PM**

**ADULT WORKSHOP** **Reading Tennessee Williams**  
***The Glass Menagerie & Cat on a Hot Tin Roof***

Annette J. Saddik, Professor at The Graduate Center, CUNY and author of four books, most recently *Tennessee Williams and the Theatre of Excess: The Strange, The Crazy, The Queer*, will lead a reading group on two of Tennessee Williams' plays. Session one will focus on *The Glass Menagerie* and session two will examine *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. The group will explore Williams' writing and revision practices as well as participate in close readings of selections from the works. Advance tickets are required, as space is limited.

**Wednesday, February 28 and Wednesday, March 7, 2–4 pm**  
**Tickets:** (two sessions) \$45; \$35 for members.

### **Organization and Sponsorship**

*Tennessee Williams: No Refuge but Writing* is organized by the Morgan Library & Museum, New York, in collaboration with the Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. The curator of this exhibition is Carolyn Vega, Associate Curator, Literary and Historical Manuscripts

The exhibition is made possible with lead funding from an anonymous donor and generous support from Katharine J. Rayner, Alyce Williams Toonk, the Franklin Jasper Walls Lecture Fund, and the Charles E. Pierce, Jr. Fund for Exhibitions.

The programs of the Morgan Library & Museum are made possible with public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, and by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature.



### **The Morgan Library & Museum**

A complex of buildings in the heart of New York City, the Morgan Library & Museum began as the private library of financier Pierpont Morgan, one of the preeminent collectors and cultural benefactors in the United States. Today it is a museum, independent research library, music venue, architectural landmark, and historic site. A century after its founding, the Morgan maintains a unique position in the cultural life of New York City and is considered one of its greatest treasures. With the 2006 reopening of its newly renovated campus, designed by renowned architect Renzo Piano, and the 2010 refurbishment of the original library, the Morgan reaffirmed its role as an important repository for the history, art, and literature of Western civilization from 4000 B.C. to the twenty-first century.

**The Morgan Library & Museum**  
**225 Madison Avenue, at 36th Street, New York, NY 10016-3405**  
**212.685.0008**  
**themorgan.org**