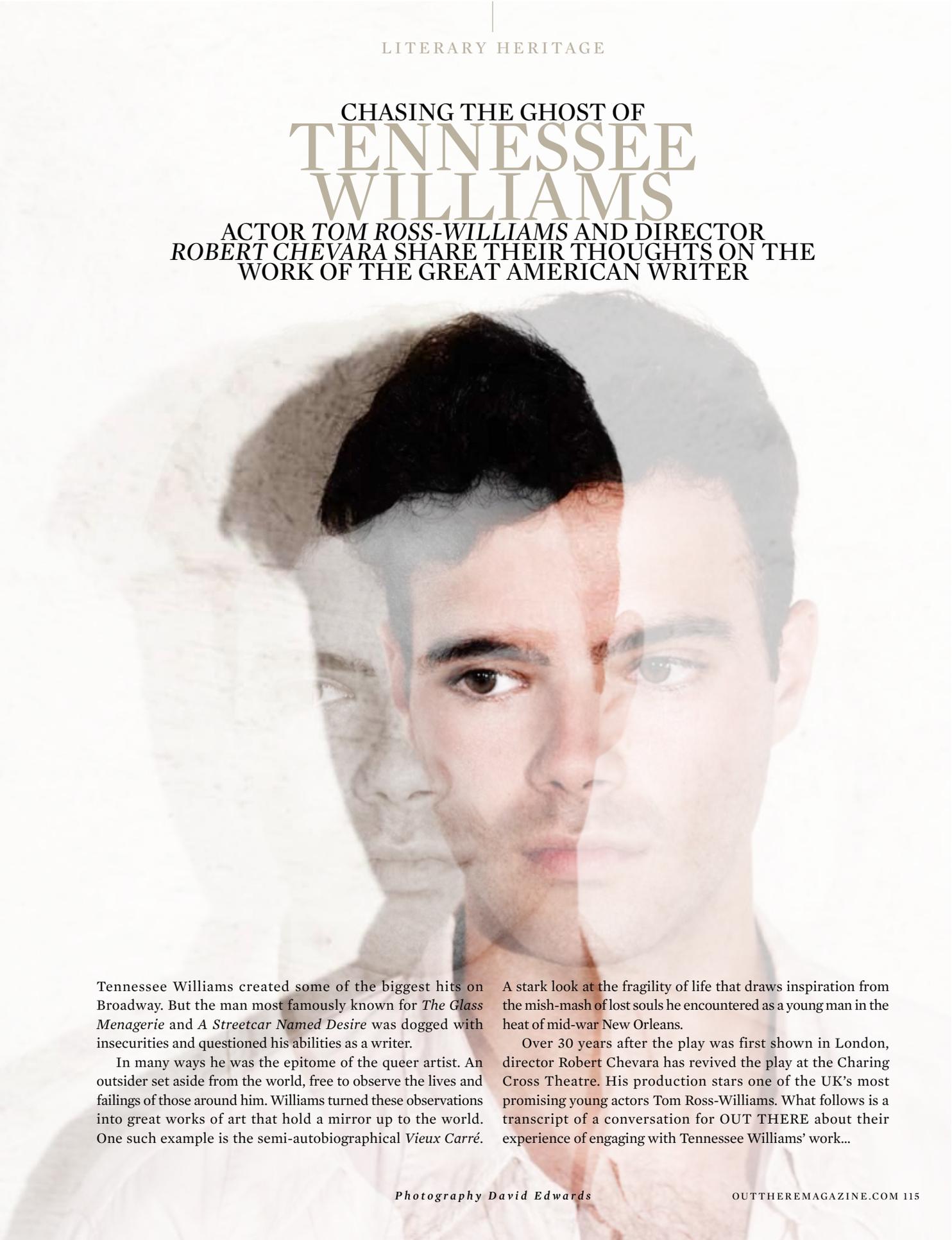


CHASING THE GHOST OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

ACTOR TOM ROSS-WILLIAMS AND DIRECTOR
ROBERT CHEVARA SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS ON THE
WORK OF THE GREAT AMERICAN WRITER



Tennessee Williams created some of the biggest hits on Broadway. But the man most famously known for *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* was dogged with insecurities and questioned his abilities as a writer.

In many ways he was the epitome of the queer artist. An outsider set aside from the world, free to observe the lives and failings of those around him. Williams turned these observations into great works of art that hold a mirror up to the world. One such example is the semi-autobiographical *Vieux Carré*.

A stark look at the fragility of life that draws inspiration from the mish-mash of lost souls he encountered as a young man in the heat of mid-war New Orleans.

Over 30 years after the play was first shown in London, director Robert Chevara has revived the play at the Charing Cross Theatre. His production stars one of the UK's most promising young actors Tom Ross-Williams. What follows is a transcript of a conversation for OUT THERE about their experience of engaging with Tennessee Williams' work...

TRW: When I first read the piece, it felt like the writer was the only sane voice that you can really hold on to. I think that the loneliness is really pointed through Williams' narration, so there is very much a self awareness of that individual voice.

People say it's maybe not the best structured play, but actually from the perspective of the writer the second act is like a constant battle to find independence through loneliness. The first person that tries to drag him down is Nightingale (the dying, destitute painter). He manages to let go of him and then he encounters the landlady Mrs. Wire and she also tries to drag him down with her. Then finally, you have Jane (the middle class runaway) and she almost succeeds in bringing him down, but he somehow escapes. It's almost through other people requiring something of himself that he can find his own independence.

RC: I don't agree, by the way, with the analysis that it's a fractured play. The narrative is fractured because by the 70s with his drugs and booze, and also having looked at a lot of 1970s radical queer theatre, he had kind of assimilated that into his work in a way. So the things people don't like about it were primarily the things that were happening in theatre in the late 70s and early 80s. Actually as artists, your work has to develop sometimes, it can be painful when people don't like the way it has developed. Like de Kooning who had this incredible abstract,

theatre can do, I find there to be quite a nice link between myself and a young Tennessee Williams.

RC: You know Nina Simone said that even though she got all the accolades and she'd get 3,000 people cheering for her every night, she would go back to her hotel room and when she was completely alone, she would look in the mirror and say, "Is it all worth what I'm doing for this?" And I certainly think that when Williams first started to get success, his fear straight away is that he won't be able to write at the level he was writing at, say five years ago. The critics years ago mirrored those fears back at him. "Oh my god, maybe I'm only a one trick wonder. Oh my god, maybe I've only got two or three great plays left inside me," all of that in his later life was thrown right back at him and his face was rubbed in the dirt.

TRW: The deep irony of it was that his only way of coping with it was to write, so here's this prolific writer who kept on writing; but the only way he could cope with dealing with not doing well was to write more.

RC: Absolutely, just like Francis Bacon who would paint every single day because it was the only thing he could do to keep himself alive, and I think in many ways, that's what Williams was doing. He was finding some anchor by the process of creation itself. By sitting and writing he's finding some way of finding a

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expressionist flowering, then as he got older the work became even more radical and people disliked it. They actually liked the earlier work, and I think there's the dichotomy.

What about how you approached finding the genius and the pain of someone like Tennessee Williams, how did you look at your own life for that?

TRW: I guess he writes very well for actors in the sense that almost all of his characters are artists and so that inherent desire to make something of yourself is probably in every actor. That's a real gift because you can just harness that side of yourself. I read this really good quote from him recently in his notebook he wrote while he was actually in *Vieux Carré* or just left it, saying that he thought plays should be "a fearless, unashamed frontal assault on life that gives no room for trepidation". He had this really grandiose idea of what art could do, which I am of the same opinion. He took himself incredibly seriously and believed, I think, because he left so much carnage as a younger person then unless he didn't do something good with it, then it would still all be carnage and I guess that's what I try and do as well.

RC: Don't you think every good artist takes themselves really seriously? Everything about your life can be trivial and trivialized and belittled, but actually the art you make on whatever level that is, needs to feel nourished and intense and alive.

TRW: Absolutely, and I think we have a much more British sentiment of underplaying things and the serious artist is mocked, but I guess in terms of the things that I do and the things I believe

map through the madness of his world.

TRW: I think that map is really obvious in *Vieux Carré* and that's what is really lovely about it, but also quite sad.

RC: Playing someone who is a genius – one, is very hard, and two, trying to find their way through the maze of life is very hard as well. How did you approach that journey? Did you approach it through the words or did you find it through his writing?

TRW: I guess it was a mixture. From that first recording you sent me of his incredibly theatrical voice, which didn't really belong to where he came from, you just got this sense of this man that really liked having a theatricality. There is this great bit in his memoirs where he says "I fell in love with the theatre the same time I fell in love with men." I think that his theatricality as a person was also about him accepting himself and allowing himself to move away from what he was. So I think that was the start of the journey. I guess then I came upon his writing as well, seeing where the parallels were in his notebooks and his memoirs within this play. But because he never thought of himself as a genius, and probably never did in his life – and certainly never did then – he is quite empathetic in that way, and I think he was less so as he got older. He didn't seem to have much time for a lot of people, but I don't know if they had time for him either.

RC: Gore Vidal called him the glorious bird because he was this kind of amazing creature when he walked into the room, and as you said he had this voice and you couldn't stop looking at him. In some ways, HE was the art. He was also as quick as a whip. On



one occasion, all the American writers were up on stage in alphabetical order being introduced to President Kennedy and Thornton Wilder turned to Williams and said:

“I believe that Wilder is before Williams,” and Tennessee shot back, quick as a lightning, “Yes, but only in the A-Z.”

TRW: But you met him, didn't you?

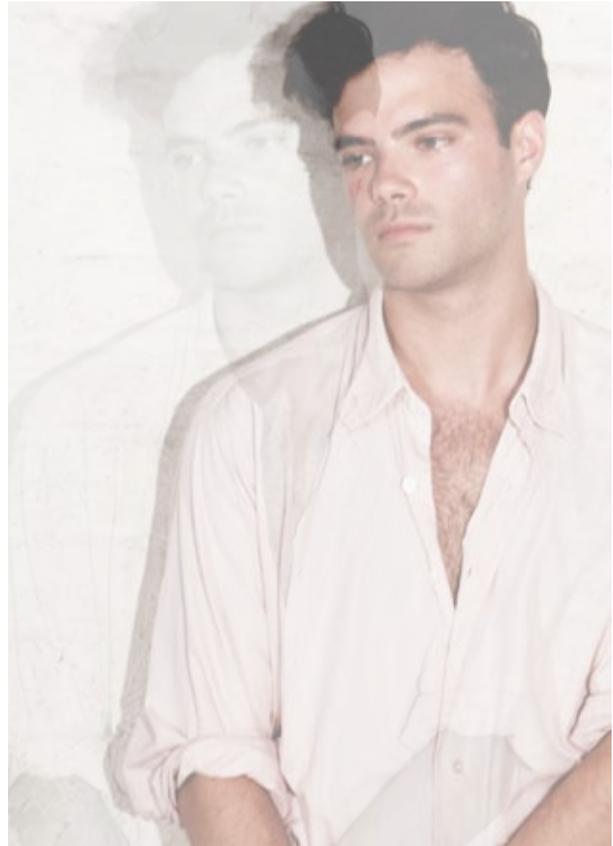
RC: I did, very, very briefly.

TRW: What was it like?

RC: One of my first boyfriends introduced me to Tennessee Williams. He was in a doped-up, drugged-up condition but he sobered up when he saw a pretty 16 year old in front of him. He was really charming and kind of lost. He didn't know where he was almost, but he could turn on those moments of lucidity in the way that artists can when they're completely rubbing themselves off the face of the earth – they suddenly can turn on those moments of complete compassion and understanding of who they are and what they are in the world, and he certainly had those.

TRW: And despite being in a bad way, was he attractive? Did he have this magnetism that you expect from him?

RC: He absolutely did. But I don't even think he was dressed up for the first night. He was with a couple of fierce women, taller women who were there to protect him. A lot of people did that, they realized how vulnerable he was. He was used and abused, and always had hustlers surrounding him trying to pick his bones clean, but a lot of his friends tried to protect him. It's funny because that's somewhere in the writing as well. He tries to save Jane in *Vieux Carré* but she also tries to protect his vulnerability. Because he was so out there in the fifties and sixties, as was Truman Capote, a lot of their friends wanted to protect them because middle



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America wanted to destroy them generally. Which character in the play does he really empathize with do you think?

TRW: I think the old Tennessee Williams empathizes, or certainly sympathizes the most with Nightingale. You can just feel him writing this in his 70s and thinking: I've still got something left in me, don't let me die without doing something great. I think he knew he had done great things. But in terms of his spirit I think he probably empathizes a lot with Sky. That's maybe the contrast that he finds himself being pulled down like Nightingale but at the same time just wants to run off there and see the world. But he's not quite either really.

RC: Bear in mind, he didn't masturbate until he was 27. The first time he did he says he felt so guilty and so dirty and profane. Even having sexual thoughts, you're either going to become such a mess that your life implodes or you find an outlet - which he did with writing. In a way that's how you save yourself isn't it? You make whatever your terrible conundrum in life is your art and so many artists do that. They put all of their beauty, all of their pain into their writing and somehow it

works out, and with Williams it really works out.

TRW: You're making something incredibly unproductive into something productive and allowing other people to sort of alleviate their own stress with those particular problems through watching it and having a safe artistic environment to experience something which is probably really horrible to experience in their own lives. Giving it a lens in which they can really digest this frontal assault on life. That's what's great about Williams because he dares to go to those places that people don't want to realize they have to go to. ∅

TOM ROSS-WILLIAMS trained with the National Youth Theatre and studied theatre at Berkeley, California before landing roles in 'Dunsinane', 'Hooked' and the lead in 'Vieux Carré'.

ROBERT CHEVARA started his own theatre company at the age of only 19 and received critical success with his self-penned 'Larks'. After the success of 'Vieux Carré' he will be working on a revival of 'La Voix Humaine' in Berlin.