



White Horse Theater Co.

Tennessee Williams: *Suddenly Last*

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Hudson Guild Theater

September 16 - October 2, 2011

Suddenly Last Summer is considered to be Tennessee Williams's most poetic play. Williams's carefully crafted words are heard primarily in two long monologues within the play, around which the action takes place. The 1959 film version is a staple of Turner Classic Movies, and I was curious to attend a version based on the original stage script, apparently mounted in honor of the hundredth anniversary of Williams's birth.

The story, for those who have been watching *American Idol*, *The Hills*, and *Dancing with the Stars*, concerns a New Orleans dowager, Mrs. Venable. She is attempting to use her wealth to manipulate both her poor relations and a doctor (who is researching a radical surgical approach to mental illness) into lobotomizing her niece by marriage. The niece, Katherine, has been hospitalized in an hysterical state since witnessing the murder of Sebastian, Mrs. Venable's son and Katherine's cousin. Katherine is ranting stories that Mrs. Venable does *not* want to be heard. Will Mrs. Venable get her way?

The press release waxes on about the play's "bold imagery, symbolism, and rich aural landscape." Yet apparently the director, Cyndy A. Marion, did not consider the play--as written--to have stood the test of time. It has been gussied up with "humor" and some outlandish costumes on supporting players. This is simply an unnecessary distraction. The play as written already included ironic humor, which was natural to the story.

In the stretches when it is played straight, this version of *Suddenly Last Summer* included three very good performances. **Elizabeth Bove is superb as Mrs. Venable. Her performance is outstanding and true to the spirit of the play.**

Lué McWilliams is excellent as Katherine's mother, Mrs. Holly, the "concerned" and cheerful butterfly who only wants the best for her daughter--and the \$50,000 (in 1935 dollars!) that she and her son are each to receive when Katherine's brain is lobotomized and Mrs. Venable lets the probate of Sebastian's will proceed. Haas Regen, as George Holly, gives a fine and authentic performance as the borderline-violent money-groveling brother of Katherine. Ms. Bove, Ms. McWilliams, and Mr. Regen give performances indeed worthy of the superbly shaped words Mr. Williams has given them, and truly honor the Williams centennial.

Suddenly Last Summer is an intensely serious chamber drama which could work, unembellished, as a radio drama, with only Williams's words to carry it. Why futz with it? I suppose a contemporary director might think that modern audiences with short attention spans, unaccustomed to listening closely, need more than fine playwriting to be compelling theater.

After the play's conclusion, a Special Panel was presented, entitled *Tenn at 100: Re-imagining the work of Tennessee Williams*. Four panelists with stellar theater credentials, academic and otherwise, were on stage to pontificate about Williams. The first question dealt with the contemporary relevance of Williams. I waited to hear the answer by the first panelist, who proceeded to give a reasonable response. Alas, it was obvious that the quality of what they had just viewed would *not* be part of the discussion. That topic was a rhinoceros in the room, as far as I was concerned. What rhinoceros?

In closing: [White Horse Theater Company](#)'s presentation of *Suddenly Last Summer* is worth seeing, if only for the fine and authentic performances of Elizabeth Bove, Lué McWilliams, and Haas Regen. - *Jay Reisberg*

Mr. Reisberg is a UCLA film school grad, professional singer, comedian, assistant to the founder of New York's Love Street Theatre, and bon vivant at large.

