

Tennessee Williams Fest celebrates menagerie of creative souls seduced by New Orleans

Times-Picayune: March 20, 2012 Updated: Wednesday, March 21, 2012



By Chris Waddington

Can you picture the next Tennessee Williams? Will it be that dreadlocked neighbor who blew into town with a bicycle and a horn? Or how about the girl, sprinkled with glitter, who scribbles so intently in a Bywater coffee shop?



Cavorting with the staff at Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop Bar. Tennessee Williams takes a stroll around the French Quarter to his favorite haunts, Friday, March 16, 2012.

Take away the tattoos and smartphones, and those could be the same people that the great playwright met as a 28-year-old apprentice, when he briefly moved to Toulouse Street in 1939. The bohemians were still here when Williams returned in 1941. And things were much the same, in Williams' last years, when the lion of American theater took another French Quarter apartment.

New Orleans filled the soul of Tennessee Williams — and blossomed again in stories, letters, memoirs and plays like “A Streetcar Named Desire.” And the city that seduced him — our funky, late night, read-on-a-barstool, ride-on-a-blue-note, live cheap, think big, long-way-from-Kansas port town — is still here for those with gumption and talent.

If you want to understand Williams, come to the Crescent City.

Do the same if you want to meet people, like Williams, who burn their bridges and plunge into the creative life.

That's especially true this week, as the 26th annual **Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival** gets under way. From Wednesday through Sunday, the festival will fill 11 venues in the French Quarter, CBD and Faubourg Marigny, showcasing the ideas and artistry of creative types from around the country.

We spoke with four festival participants about the city's appeal for artists: playwright John Guare (“Six Degrees of Separation”), roots music scholar and radio host Nick Spitzer (“American Routes”), geographer Richard Campanella (“Lincoln in New Orleans”) and literary scholar and memoirist Randy Fertel (“The Gorilla Man and the Empress of Steak”).

“If you're going to be an artist, you have to commit yourself to a new life,” Guare said. “New Orleans was the place that helped Williams do that. It gave him a new name, a new identity. In a way, he was born there.”

Guare, a lifelong New Yorker, said that New Orleans has done the same thing for the country.

“New Orleans is the wild card in our cultural life: our first African city, our first Latin American city, a city that's the opposite of white, Protestant America. It's a party town, a place to mingle, and who doesn't like that? It's been the spice in the melting pot since 1803,” he said. “New Orleans also shares something with New York: It's a place

that feels like the center of the world. It blinds you to other places, and makes everything you do feel more important. For artists, that's essential."

Fertel offered a local's perspective on the Crescent City ethos.

"Most of America is aspirational. It's all about improvement and what people hope to be. In New Orleans we just wallow in what we are, and make art from it," he said. "Artists are drawn here because we welcome characters instead of automatically ostracizing them. And you don't have to be an artist to appreciate that part of the city. New Orleanians are open to the dark side of life, to longings that we don't like to admit. That's why we have Mardi Gras and Bourbon Street and Tennessee Williams."

Guare said that places like New Orleans are rare, especially today.

"Every year, our cities get duller, more like airports or suburbs. And that's not just a loss for artists. They aren't the only people who enjoy a sense of place and a bit of mystery mixed into daily life."

Campanella, a Tulane University geographer, notes that New Orleans has been drawing artists since the late 19th century, and that Williams belongs to a long and continuing tradition. In the 1920s, for example, writers such as William Faulkner and Sherwood Anderson came here, joining a wild bohemian scene.

"They found cheap rent, good food, and abundant alcohol despite Prohibition," Campanella said. "But most of all they found the same European atmosphere, tropical allure, and inspiring sense of place that 'local color' writers described a generation earlier. New Orleans allowed these migrants to expatriate culturally without actually leaving the country. Moreover, upon finding kindred spirits in the bars and cafés, they formed intellectual and social networks among themselves."

Does that sound familiar? If not, you need to check out the gallery scene along St. Claude Avenue, listen to the new bands on Frenchmen Street, or tune in to the literary readings at places like the Gold Mine and the Antenna Gallery.

"New Orleans continues to attract the creative class, and for similar reasons as in the 1920s and 1930s," Campanella said. "What ratcheted up that attraction recently was Katrina. The tragedy breathed new life, for better or worse, into the perception that New Orleans represents a place apart, a beleaguered city, a society that does not fit into the rest of the nation. These notions tend to attract those who see themselves in the same way."

If the city feels more bohemian in 2012, it's not because artists have ceased moving to other cultural hubs. Campanella notes that cities such as New York still draw artists in far greater numbers than New Orleans. But Campanella believes that New Orleans draws artists in disproportionate numbers — more than any other American city its size — making the impact of newcomers much more obvious here.

The effect is also magnified by the city's famed sociability.

Spitzer, the folklorist, described it this way: "Compared to most places, New Orleans is incredibly intimate and artistic. Here you can talk to musicians on the street, meet people at a beautiful St. Joseph's Altar, drink a beer at a second-line parade. We're not worried about top-down, 'quality of life' indices. We're living out a way of life with our neighbors. To me, it's a city of 400,000 actors in search of a plot — and each of us knows exactly what it means to miss New Orleans. What kind of artist wouldn't like to join in?"

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