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Tennessee Williams

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NOTE: The version of the play contained in this acting edition is one which was specifically revised by the author for release to the nonprofessional theatre. As George Oppenheimer describes "We first encounter Mrs. Goforth in one of her three villas on the southern coast of Italy frantically endeavoring to complete her memoirs before her death. However, there is still life in the old girl as she bullies her attractive female secretary, spits venom at a visitor whom she dubs "the witch of Capri," makes propositions to a handsome young itinerant poet over half her age, and dictates night and day, either to the secretary or to any number of tape recorders scattered about the premises, her vapid and ridiculous memories which she believes will form an important social commentary. To the triple homes of Mrs. Goforth comes Chris Flanders, the young poet, who because of his past presence in the company of so many elderly women at the time of their deaths has won the mocking nickname of "the angel of death." At first we take him to be, as does Mrs. Goforth, a hustler who is willing to sell his poems, his mobiles, or his body to susceptible and lonely ancients. To Mrs. Goforth, who has lived a full and promiscuous life and is in mortal fear of relinquishing it, Chris comes as an answer to a carnal prayer, a last fling before she is forced to face ultimate loneliness. Then she discovers that he is unwilling to give in to her seductions at any price, that his is a spiritual nature which seeks only to allay her fears and soothe her pain. Until almost the very end she refuses to believe in his virtue. Her life has been so hedged in viciousness that she cannot accept readily anything but venality."

The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore Details

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From Reader Review The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore for online ebook

Jim says

I chose to read this play because I liked the title. The play itself was not a success on Broadway, though I think it could have been. Tennessee Williams writes of a rich old lady named Sissy Goforth, having survived six marriages, and dictating her memoirs as her health declines. She is interrupted in this by a trespasser, a youngish (but not actually young) poet named Chris Flanders. Sissy treats him abominably -- the way she treats everyone.

Perhaps The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore failed because Miss Goforth's character is essentially static: She dies unchanged from the virago she was in Scene One.

Chris the Poet seems to be a tad mercurial. He creates mobiles. His one book of poetry was written ten years ago, And he likes to be a companion to dying old women, which earns him the nickname "The Angel of Death." In fact, he is no angel of any sort; and his dealings with Miss Goforth are ambiguous.

Even when he is not at the top of his form, Tennessee Williams is worth reading -- and worth seeing.

Franc says

First, this is a seriously underrated Tennessee play. It seemed to be one of those plays where two sides of Williams' character wrestle with each other: a rich, panicky old diva and a young striving artist, who knows that while he cannot save his older wildly successful self, he can at least help it to a peaceful end. For this reason, it has the feel of a valedictory play. It seems as if Williams intends to break his staff and drown his book, even though he has another 17 years to write.

Ellie says

While the play had an interesting mix of culture, from the frequently spoken Italian, to the Kabuki robes and stagehands, I think that their use was too convoluted and lacked purpose.

The use of stagehands I found particularly frustrating, as though Williams goes to great lengths to explain them, they don't really appear to add any value to the play's content.

Still an interesting read, but not nearly as good as Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (though this is the only other Williams play I have read). Milk Train left me slightly bewildered and disappointed.

Mariana says

I don't understand why this play has such a bad rep; maybe the productions were just plain bad or something, I don't know, I imagine that this text can come off as a bit heavy-handed on stage, but I really enjoyed reading it and was genuinely intrigued by it. I especially liked the fact that Williams intended it to be a kind

of fairytale play - maybe those elements weren't properly incorporated in the productions... I get the feeling the play would fail miserably unless that is done just right. In any case, I strongly recommend that anyone interested in theatre and in Williams' work in particular give this a read and never mind the bad press. It's definitely worth it.

Jessica J. says

goooood

Elie says

As the angel of death climbs the narrow mountain road. The world around her starts to get in focus.

Remus says

I thought there was a very interesting (and enjoyably read) mixtures of cultures. At some point the setting seemed to be a bit too ostentatious for me (as much as I understand where he was coming from with the 'plastic theatre' style). Plot-wise I enjoyed it quite a lot: the underlying theme of death and companionship (loneliness) was expertly brought up through engaging, multi-dimensional characters, leaving me somewhat pensive and broody.

Davethorson says

I feel this play is one of Williams' most underrated works. While it can be difficult if not high handed in its characters and dialogue, it is at its core, a sad and touching document with a very spiritual message.

One reason I think that it suffers the reputation that it does is that, as with many of Williams' works, there are two versions of the play. The "published" or reading version includes the two stage hands in the manner of Kabuki theatre which as other reviewers have pointed out add nothing to the plot and tend to distract through their artifice. The "staged" or performing version does not include these characters and I think comes off much better.

Williams loved such devices. I believe it is the "reading" version of "The Glass Menagerie" which includes the strange scrim with various slides projected on it throughout the play as when the young girl talks of suffering from pleurosis which the gentleman caller recalls as thinking she was referring to "blue roses," at which time a slide of blue roses appears.

I saw the "Milk Train" performed in Los Angeles at the intimate Fountain Theatre, with a great cast. I enjoyed it so much I went several times.

I think the play can be appreciated on two different levels. On its surface it is sharp, witty, Tennessee Williams dialogue at its most acerbic (and likely therefore hard to really enjoy or care about the characters).

But with a good cast, or I think if you are able to read the version without the Kabuki touches, it reveals much deeper insights into death approaching someone who is certainly not ready for it. Instead of Chris Flanders being the "Angel of Death" as he is quickly identified to be, I saw him as a Christ figure trying to help Sissy transition to her own passing and finally accept it. Although Sissy is largely unlikable if you read her lines as they are written, with a good performer, much of the dialogue becomes largely comic and amusing. Many great actresses have played this role; it is unfortunate that the filmed version features Elizabeth Taylor who was too young at the time and clearly lacked the acting chops to tackle such a role. I would have liked to have seen Elizabeth Ashley who also played it on stage; it seems to me she had the bite as well as the depth to give the character life. Olympia Dukakis was acclaimed in the part though to me she's a little too earthy to play it.

All in all, probably a play only for lovers of Williams, but I think one which deserves a second look. Seek out the performing version without the Kabuki touches and stage hand characters to get closer to what is a more humanistic approach to this play which touches on very universal themes of death and loss.

Brandon says

Eh, this one didn't really hold my attention. Didn't really care for any of the characters and just felt like I slogged through reading it.

Elinaz Ys says

Robin Friedman says

Tennessee Williams play, "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore" has never been regarded with much favor but is too good to let go. The play has had a long, difficult history. First produced in Spoleto in 1962, the play had its Broadway premier in 1963 directed by Herbert Marchiz and starring Hermione Baddeley and Paul Roebling. The play closed after 66 performances but received a second chance in 1964 featuring the unlikely combination of Tallulah Bankhead and Tab Hunter in the lead roles directed by Tony Richardson. This time, the play failed catastrophically after only five performances. But that was not the end of Williams' play. In 1968, Williams wrote the screenplay for a film version of the play, retitled "Boom!". Joseph Losey directed the movie which starred none other than Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. Unfortunately, the movie is difficult to find today. In a 2011 revival of the play, Olympia Dukakis played the lead in a New York production directed by Michael Wilson.

The work is suggestive, poetical, and uneven. It is set in 1963 high in the mountains in an elaborate estate in Italy overlooking the Mediterranean Sea owned by a wealthy elderly American widow, Flora (or Sissy) Goforth. She is terminally ill and, the viewer is told at the outset of the play, has only two days to live. Goforth lives on a mixture of drugs and pills and spends her time dictating her memoirs to a young American woman, a "Vassar girl" named Blackie who is likewise an early widow. Goforth has survived four (or six) husbands, the first of whom died leaving her fabulously wealthy while still in her teens. Only the last marriage was based on love. Goforth's memoirs in progress detail her relationships with her husbands and her attempt to bring back a small feeling of love into her ailing, calloused heart.

The play centers on Goforth's relationship with Christopher Flanders 35, a self-described burned out poet and a maker of mobiles. Flanders has acquired the dubious nickname, the "Angel of Death" for reasons unfolded during the play. He climbs to the villa on an old mountain train carrying a heavy bag of mobiles and is attacked by Goforth's watchdogs. Goforth has strong reason to distrust him. She is torn between her distrust and hardness and her need for sexuality and one final attempt at love and intimacy. Flanders is at least equally conflicted. He has made his life preying on elderly women who are lonely, dying, and in need of male companionship. Yet he also has a poetic, compassionate side to his nature. The play develops into a lengthy, twisting emotional dialogue between Goforth and Flanders on what becomes the day of her death. Caught in their own deceptions and shells, both Goforth and Flanders make efforts to be honest with themselves and with each other. The dying Goforth tries to entice Flanders to her bed. In a short intermediary scene, a third character, a friend of Goforth known as "The Witch of Capri" pays a visit and reveals unwelcome details about both Goforth and Flanders. In early productions, the witch was cast as a woman, but in some later versions, a male plays the witch. Thus in "Boom!" Noel Coward played the part.

The play is garish indeed. Goforth dresses in elaborate Japanese costumes and expensive ostentatious jewelry while engaging in extreme, eccentric behavior. The writing has a great deal of power and beauty in Williams' florid, sometimes over-wrought style. The scenes involving Goforth, Flanders, and the witch are frequently moving with the dialogue provocative and themes of mortality, purpose, and God seriously explored. The play is also opaque and difficult to follow. Reading the "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore" requires a great deal of time and attention as there is much detail to be missed. With the reading, it is easy to understand that watching the play cold over its roughly two and one-half hour running time could be a frustrating and difficult experience. Another problem with the play is the dialogue. While it is frequently beautiful, little happens besides talk in the second half of the play, and it comes to a weak, anticlimactic conclusion.

John Lahr's new biography "Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh" (2014) discusses this difficult play at length. He offers insight into the themes of the play while relating it to Williams' own life and to the playwright's fear that he was losing his creative impulse. Lahr discusses the difficulty of working with the iconic Tallulah Bankhead, who was an important model for Goforth. Bankhead apparently performed miserably in the failed 1964 production while Tab Hunter, who was derided for his status as teen age idol, good looks and alleged lack of talent, performed credibly in the role of Flanders.

With its flaws and excesses, "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore" holds on to a tenuous life. Admirers of Williams will want to read the play. It is available both separately and in the second of the two-volume Library of America set of the plays of Tennessee Williams.

Robin Friedman

Jim Leckband says

I can try to tap into Williams' thought process on this one - "I've got this really cool thing going with dominant and outlandish female characters of a certain age...but I'm running out of places to put them. I've done the old plantation sex maniac thing, I've done the mad sister thing, I've done the overbearing mother thing (oh boy, have I done the overbearing mother thing...)...what is left? Death. That is what is **always** left. Death. Death Comes To The Harridan? Death Be Not Loud and Obnoxious? Death of a Medusa?...Ah, I'll get the title later, but I think I can work with this..."

I'm ragging on it, but this one does have the feel of a one-trick pony. A not very nice woman almost comes to terms with her mortality on an Italian coast villa when a stranger ("The Angel of Death", aka Flanders ,not the Simpson's Ned Flanders...alas...) comes to visit.

There is a lot of great comic monologues, but there just isn't much depth to the characters or the situation. I did like the Kabuki staging effects, but it wasn't essential as Williams seems to think. It is only essential because there isn't much else to generate interest. I imagine if I was in the audience I would be concentrating on two things: 1. Waiting for the next outrageous thing to come out of the main character's mouth and 2. Waiting for what the next Kabuki-like effect will be. That isn't the recipe for a good play.

Myyst says

?να πολ? βαρετ? ?ργο του συν?θως εξαιρετικο? θεατρικο? συγγραφ?α. ?ταν μ?λιστα μπλ?χτηκαν στη μ?ση και δι?φορες περ?εργες θεολογικ?ς αναζητ?σεις, το ?ργο ?χασε κ?θε ενδιαφ?ρον...

αναδημοσ?ευση απ? το sff.gr, 2016

Lenore Skomal says

You have to be a Williams fan to love this play because it is not one of his seminal works. However, there are such wonderful lines of dialogue and great acerbic wit to it, that I found it equally as compelling as his better known works. I strongly suggest you see it performed, as I did on Broadway with Olympia Dukakis. It simply comes alive. It confirmed that Williams deserves his place in American literature.

Roland says

It's hard to enjoy spending an entire play with one of the most unlikable characters imaginable. There's some great bitchy dialog in this play, but it feels like a slog after awhile since you don't get the sense that Sissy is going to develop any. I almost want to read what was going on in Williams' life when he wrote this so I can get a better idea of how to process this play. I'm thinking maybe it was inspired by Bette Davis' notorious behavior during the Broadway run of Night of the Iguana? I'm not sure.
