

Tennessee Williams' decadence explored

Alcoholism, male prostitutes tell poignant tale of playwright's debauchery

Jo Ledingham, Vancouver Courier

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HIS GREATNESS

At the Arts Club Granville Island Stage until Nov. 10

Tickets: 604-687-1644



Allan Gray plays Tennessee Williams in Daniel MacIvor's His Greatness.

As a student back in 1980, I was lucky enough to sit around a table with His Greatness--Tennessee Williams--and a dozen or so other UBC students. By that time Williams was already spiralling down into a morass of booze and drugs; nevertheless, we knew we were in the presence of greatness.

Later that year, I attended the opening of The Red Devil Battery Sign, Williams' much-rewritten play that had bombed elsewhere. Although it was far from his best work, in the final moments of the play when walls came crashing down and the howling began, I thought my heart would stop.

Vancouver critics were unimpressed and I suspect some will quibble about playwright Daniel MacIvor's script based on the day before, and several days after, The Red Devil Battery Sign opened in Vancouver.

Not me. I loved this show; I loved everything about it: Kevin McAllister's gorgeous replica of William's Hotel Vancouver suite with its finely-crafted moldings and French Provincial furnishings; Alan Brodie's lighting that takes the glare of daylight and softens it into the romantic illumination so loved by the Mississippi-born playwright; the sad, stately music that floods the theatre as Williams prepares for a night of hot sex with a cocky, would-be porn star. The juxtaposition of all this elegance with the tawdry decadence that finally defined Williams is heartbreaking.

His Greatness is full of compassion and generosity. The Playwright--as Williams is referred to--slyly gets his hands on alcohol and nasal spray (to soothe inflamed nasal membranes due to years of snorting cocaine.) He's petulant, self-indulgent and grumpy.

And yet actor Allan Gray imbues his character with such passion, such overwhelming joy in all things beautiful that we, like his long-suffering assistant, forgive him all his shortcomings. Gray's virtuoso performance spans Williams' languorous drawl to his foxy, gleeful anticipation of yet another beautiful "young gentleman." Even at The Playwright's worst, Gray shows us the flawed, frightened, sweet man behind the seediness.

The Attendant looks after every detail of The Playwright's life: the phone interviews, the tuxedo for opening night, getting him to the theatre on time. He also cleans up after nights of debauchery, hides liquor bottles and hires young men for The Playwright's insatiable needs.

Actor David Marr does all this with the uptight fussiness of a mother hen but it's more complicated than that: even at his most biting, Marr reveals the deep affection his character has for The Playwright.

Studio 58 grad Charles Christien Gallant makes a stunning, swaggering Playhouse debut as The Young Man who is charmingly sex-savvy yet naïve. It's no wonder The Playwright is so besotted. In tight leather pants, he checks his ass in the mirror before meeting Williams, about whom he knows nothing. Playwright MacIvor and director Linda Moore let His Greatness be sweet and sad. It's as fragile as Laura Wingfield's glass menagerie, as sexy as Stanley Kowalski. I loved every delicately nuanced minute of it.