

A Noise Within Study Guide



The Night of the Iguana

Destiny's
Embrace
A NOISE
WITHIN
2007/08 SEASON



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Tennessee Williams

(1911-1983)



CONSIDERED ONE OF America's most prominent playwrights, Thomas Lanier Williams III was born in Columbus, Mississippi into a troubled family which was to prove the inspiration for many of his works. His father, Cornelius, was a traveling salesman who became abusive to his children as they grew older. His mother, Edwina, came from an aristocratic southern family and was somewhat smothering. At the age of eight, Tom contracted diphtheria and was unable to do much for about two years. His mother, in an attempt to keep him from being idle, encouraged him to use his imagination and bought him a typewriter.

In 1918, the family moved to St Louis, Missouri. In 1927, Tom won third prize for an essay published in *Smart Set* entitled, *Can a Good Wife be a Good Sport?* A year later he published *The Vengeance of Nitocris* in *Weird Tales*.

Williams attended the University of Missouri — Columbia where he was a member of the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity. His frat brothers nicknamed him 'Tennessee' because of his broad southern drawl. In the late 1930's Williams transferred to Washington University for a year and eventually received his degree from the University of Iowa in 1938.

In 1939 Williams moved to New Orleans' French Quarter to write for the WPA. This setting would find its way into his plays *Vieux Carré* (1977) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947).

The person who had the greatest influence on him was his sister Rose, a fragile beauty who was diagnosed with schizophrenia and spent most her adult life in mental hospitals. After unsuccessful attempts at therapy, she became paranoid. Her parents eventually allowed a prefrontal lobotomy in an effort to treat her. The operation went badly and Rose was incapacitated for the remainder of her



life. This was a hard blow for Tennessee who never forgave his parents for agreeing to the operation. Williams suffered from depression and addictions to prescription drugs and alcohol throughout his life. Most biographers attribute his inner torment to the social strain placed on him as a known homosexual. He had suffered a nervous breakdown at a young age and was always haunted by the constant fear that he would go mad like his sister.

Williams had achieved a fame few playwrights of his day could equal. Williams wrote twenty-five full-length plays and dozens of short plays and screenplays, two novels, a novella, sixty short stories, over one hundred poems and an autobiography. His works have been translated into twenty seven languages. Among his many awards were two Pulitzer Prizes (in 1948 for *A Streetcar Named Desire* and in 1955 for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*) and four New York Drama Critics Circle Awards.

Characters in his plays are often seen as a direct representation of his family members. Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* is modeled on Rose, as is the character of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and the subject of lobotomy arises in *Suddenly Last Summer*. Amanda Wingfield can be seen to represent Tennessee's mother. Characters such as Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* and Sebastian in *Suddenly Last Summer* are considered autobiographical.

Williams' play, *The Parade, or Approaching the End of a Summer*, was written when he was 29 and worked on throughout his life. This play is an autobiographical depiction of an early romance in Provincetown, MA. Williams met and fell in love with Frank Merlo in 1947 while living in New Orleans. Merlo was a second generation Sicilian American who had served in the navy during World War II. Williams' 1948 play *The Rose Tattoo* was inspired by this relationship. The relationship lasted from 1947 until Merlo's death in 1963 and provided the stability that Williams' needed to produce his enduring works. With Merlo's death, Williams fell into a long period of depression. He was the victim of a gay-bashing in January 1979 in Key West. He was beaten by five teenagers, but was not seriously injured.

Williams died at the age of 71 after he choked on a bottle cap in his room at the Hotel Elysee in New York. Some believed that he had been murdered, but the police report indicated that drugs were involved. Many prescription drugs were found in his room, and the lack of an adequate gag response that would have released the bottle cap from his throat may have been due to drug and alcohol influence.

Williams was buried at Calvary Cemetery, St Louis Missouri, despite his desire to be buried at sea near the same place as the poet Hart Crane, whom he considered one of his most important influences. ❖

About the Author **Tennessee Williams Timeline**



1911 Thomas Lanier Williams is born in Columbia, Mississippi to Cornelius and Edwina Dakin Williams.

1918 The family relocates to St. Louis, Missouri.

1927 Tom places third in a national essay contest sponsored by *The Smart Set* magazine.

1929 Tom Williams enters the University of Missouri.

1931 Tom's father forces him to withdraw from school and work in a shoe factory where he meets a young man by the name of Stanley Kowalski who was to inspire a character in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

1935 Tom writes *Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay*, a four-scene comedy about the love affairs of two sailors, which was performed by the Memphis Garden Players.

1937 Two of Tom's plays, *Candles to the Sun* and *The Fugitive Kind* are produced by the Mummings of St Louis.

1938 Tom graduates from the University of Iowa with a B.A. degree.

1939 Tom moves to New Orleans and changes his name to "Tennessee". He wins \$100 Group Theatre prize for *American Blues* and receives a Rockefeller Grant to develop a new play.

1940 *Battle of Angels* (later revised as *Orpheus Descending*) produced.

1943 Pre-frontal lobotomy performed on Williams' sister Rose. The operation is a failure and leaves Rose incapacitated for the rest of her life. Tennessee never forgives his parents who allowed this experimental surgery to take place.

1944 *The Glass Menagerie* premieres at the Lyric Theatre in Chicago.

1945 *The Glass Menagerie* opens at the Playhouse Theatre Broadway and wins the NY Drama Critics Circle Award.



1947 Williams meets and falls in love with Frank Merlo. *A Streetcar Named Desire* opens on Broadway and wins the Drama Critics' Circle Award.

1948 *A Streetcar Named Desire* wins the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. *Summer and Smoke* opens at the Music Box Theatre on Broadway.

1951 *The Rose Tattoo* opens at the Martin Beck Theatre on Broadway earning Williams a Tony Award for Best Play.

1953 *Camino Real* opens at the National Theatre on Broadway.

1955 *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* opens at the Morosco Theatre on Broadway and wins The Drama Critics' Circle Award and a Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

1956 Williams writes the screenplay for *Baby Doll*.

1957 *Orpheus Descending* opens at the Martin Beck Theatre on Broadway.

1958 *Suddenly Last Summer* produced.

1959 *Sweet Bird of Youth* opens at the Martin Beck Theatre on Broadway.

1960 *Period of Adjustment* opens at the Helen Hayes Theatre on Broadway.

1961 *The Night of the Iguana* opens at the Royale Theatre on Broadway and wins the Drama Critics' Circle Award.

1963 *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* opens at the Morosco Theatre on Broadway.

1968 *The Seven Descents of Myrtle* opens at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre and closes after 29 performances.

1969 *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* produced.

1973 *Small Craft Warnings* produced. *Out Cry* opens at the Lyceum Theatre on Broadway closing after 12 performances.

1976 *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale* (reworked from *Summer and Smoke*) opens at the Morosco Theatre closing after 24 performances. *This is Entertainment* produced.

1980 *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* opens at the Cort Theatre on Broadway closing after 14 performances.

1981 *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* produced.

1983 Tennessee Williams dies in New York on February 24.

About the Author **Works and Awards**

Full-Length Plays

Battle of Angels
Stairs to the Roof
The Glass Menagerie
You Touched Me (in collaboration with Donald Windham)
A Streetcar Named Desire
Summer and Smoke
The Eccentricities of a Nightingale
The Rose Tattoo
Camino Real
Cat on a Hot Tin Roof
Orpheus Descending
Garden District: Something Unspoken & Suddenly Last Summer
Sweet Bird of Youth
Period of Adjustment
The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore
The Night of the Iguana
Slapstick Tragedy: The Mutilated & The Gnädiges Fräulein
Kingdom of Earth
The Seven Descents of Myrtle
The Two-Character Play
In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel
Small Craft Warnings
Out Cry
The Red Devil Battery Sign
Vieux Carre

Short Plays

27 Wagons Full of Cotton
The Purification
The Lady of Larkspur Lotion
The Last of My Solid Gold Watches
Portrait of a Madonna
Auto-Da-Fe
Lord Byron's Love Letter
The Strangest Kind of Romance
The Long Goodbye
Hello from Bertha
This Property is Condemned
Talk to Me Like the Rain
I Rise in Flame, Cried the Phoenix
I Can't Imagine Tomorrow
Confessional
The Frosted Glass Coffin
A Perfect Analysis Given by a Parrot

At Liberty
The Enemy: Time
The Dark Room
10 Blocks to the Camino Real
The Case of the Crushed Petunias
The Unsatisfactory Supper
Moony's Kid Don't Cry
Demolition Downtown
Life-Boat Drill

Original Screenplay

Baby Doll
One Arm

Television Plays

The Migrants (with Lanford Wilson)
Stopped Rocking

Poetry

In the Winter of Cities
Androgyne, Mon Amour

Prose

One Arm (stories)
The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone (novella)
Hard Candy (stories)
The Knightly Quest (novella and stories)
Eight Mortal Ladies Possessed (stories)
Moise and the World of Reason (novel)
Memoirs (autobiography)

Awards

2 Rockefeller Fellowships
Grant from the Institute of Arts and Letters
New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for *The Glass Menagerie* (1945)
The Sidney Howard Memorial Award for *The Glass Menagerie* (1945)
New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1948)
The Donaldson Award for *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1948)
The Pulitzer Prize for *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1948)

The New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955)
The Pulitzer Prize for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955)
The New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for *The Night of the Iguana* (1962)
Brandeis University Creative Arts Award (1965)
Gold Medal for Drama by the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1969)
Doctor of Humanities, University of Missouri (1969)
National Theatre Conference Annual Award (1972)
Doctor of Literature, Honoris Causa (1972), University of Hartford, Connecticut
Centennial Medal of the Cathedral of the Church of St. John the Divine (1973)
Entertainment Hall of Fame Award (1974)
Medal of Honor for Literature by National Arts Club (1975)

About the Play **Cast of Characters & Setting**



Cast of Characters

Maxine Faulk, proprietor the Costa Verde Hotel

Lawrence Shannon, a de-frocked Episcopalian minister working for Blake Tours as a guide in Mexico

Hannah Jelkes, a travelling artist

Nonno, Hannah's grandfather, the world's oldest living poet

Hank, Blake Tours bus driver

Miss Fellowes, a voice teacher from Texas and member of Shannon's tour group

Charlotte Goodall, sixteen years old, a member of Shannon's tour group

Pedro, young Mexican hotel employee

Pancho, young Mexican hotel employee

Jake Latta, Blake Tours employee

German tourists: Wolfgang, Hilda, Herr Fahrenkopf, Frau Fahrenkopf

Setting

Summer of 1940, on the veranda of a rustic, seaside hotel, the Costa Verde in Puerto Barrio, Mexico

About the Play **Synopsis**



THE REV. LAWRENCE SHANNON arrives at the decaying hotel in the brink of a nervous breakdown, seeking counsel and help from an old friend. Since Shannon's last visit, the friend has died and his earthy widow, Maxine is the host of the hotel. Shannon has a group of angry female American tourists in tow, which he has led astray in order to reach this particular resort. Also staying at the hotel are Hannah Jelkes, a penniless, spiritual, spinster artist, her grandfather, Nonno a poet and a group of German tourists.

Despite their differences, there is an attraction between Hannah and Shannon, but as the night wears on, it becomes deeper and more complex than could ever be imagined. ❖

About the Play *The Night of the Iguana* – the Final Masterpiece

DURING A TRIP TO MEXICO in 1940, Tennessee Williams wrote several poems. “How Still the Lemon Branch” would evolve into the short story “The Night of the Iguana.” On the manuscript for this poem he made the note: “Written on the veranda of the hotel Costa Verde, over the Pacific Ocean, as I watched the daylight fading on a tree of big golden lemons.”



How Still the Lemon Branch

How still the lemon branch
observes the sky begin to blanch

Without a cry, without a prayer,
with no expression of despair!

Sometime while night obscures the tree
the zenith of her life will be

Gone past forever, and from thence
a second history will commence,

A chronicle no longer gold,
a bargaining with mist and mold,

And finally the broken stem,
the plummeting to earth, and then

An intercourse not well-designed
for creatures of the golden kind

Whose native green mists arch above
the earth's obscure, corrupting love

And still the lemon on the branch
observes the sky begin to blanch

Without a cry, without a prayer,
with no expression of despair.

O courage will you not as well
select a second place to dwell,

Not only in the lemon tree
but in the frightened heart of me?



Williams very often used the form of short fiction as a storyboard for his plays. *The Night of the Iguana* began as a short story of the same name, *Summer and Smoke* began as “The Yellow Bird”, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* began as “Three Players of a Summer Game” and *The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore* began as “Man Bring This up the Road.”

The short story “The Night of the Iguana” was drafted in 1946 and revised and expanded for publication in 1948. *Harper’s Bazaar* deemed the story too risqué and turned it down but it was finally published in *One Arm*, a “New Directions” anthology of Williams’ stories, and was reprinted in his *Collected Stories*, published posthumously.

The story is closer to Williams’ actual experience on a trip to Mexico in 1940 than the play. The character of Hannah Jelkes began as Edith Jelkes, an art teacher from Mississippi who is trying to get over a nervous breakdown. Seeking companionship, she makes advances to two homosexual American writers and tries to get them to help her rescue a trapped iguana. One of the writers turns against her and sexually assaults her during a tropical rainstorm.

“*The Night of the Iguana* is rooted in the atmosphere and experiences of the summer of 1940, which I remember more vividly, on the emotional level, than any summer I have gone through before or after — since it was then, that summer, that I not only discovered that it was life that I truly longed for, but that all which is most valuable in life is escaping from the narrow cubicle of one’s self to a sort of veranda between the sky and the still water beach (allegorically speaking) and to a hammock beside another beleaguered being, someone else who is in exile from the place and time of his heart’s fulfilment.”

Williams worked on a play version of *Iguana* through the summer of 1960 and on into 1961. He assured his friend and producer Cheryl Crawford, founder of the Group Theatre, the American Repertory Theatre and the Actor’s Studio in a letter dated January 8 that *The Night of the Iguana* would be his last play. Williams was convinced (unfoundedly) that Crawford was not interested in producing *Iguana* and this saddened him, as the play was “a dramatic poem of great personal value and one of his clearest autobiographical



statements.” The play was ultimately produced by Charles Bowden.

During a trip to Italy in the spring of 1961, Williams worked on various scenes of the play. When he returned to New York in early summer, the character of Rev. Shannon had evolved into a shadow of Williams himself: “ ‘a man haunted by blue devils’ who takes refuge in the oblivion of drink and the quick affirmations of sex with young people.”

At this juncture in his life, Williams was falling further and further into depression. He was more addicted to pills and drink than ever. Part of this growing unhappiness was the belief that his creativity was waning. “My kind of literary or pseudo-literary style of writing for the theatre is on its way out,” he said. You see, they’re (the new playwrights like Beckett and Pinter) exploring the subtleties of human relations that haven’t been explored... It’s something that drives me crazy with jealousy.... I’m enthralled by it and I say ‘Oh God, if I could write like that. If only I were twenty-five and just starting out, what these boys could have given me.’”

Iguana had a stormy journey to the stage. The play actually had its world premiere in Spoleto, Italy in the summer of 1959, but rehearsals for a Broadway production began in October of 1961 with a cast which included Bette Davis, Margaret Leighton, Patrick O’Neal, Alan

Webb and James Farantino under the direction of Frank Corsaro. Much to the discomfort of the cast and creative team, Williams was constantly re-writing and delivering a new script daily.

During the company’s last week of rehearsal in New York before a disastrous week-long try-out in Rochester, N.Y., Williams said, “I create imaginary worlds into which I can retreat from the real world because I’ve never made any kind of adjustment to the real world.”

From Rochester, *Iguana* went on to a two-week run in Detroit. Daily revisions were still being delivered to the cast. It was while in Detroit that Williams was bitten in the ankle by a dog and an infection had set in. He was hospitalised and had to be sedated as he was not only in pain, but extremely irrational. Williams was however, resilient and returned to work on *Iguana* complete with bandaged ankles. It was during this period that his relationship with his long-time companion Frank Merlo reached an all-time low mostly through Williams’ own depression and paranoia.

The Night of the Iguana opened at the Royale Theatre in New York on December 28, 1961. The great and the good were in the first night audience including Judy Garland, Helen Hayes, Lillian Gish, Eleanor Roosevelt and Tennessee’s mother and several family



members. Williams, however, made no appearance inside the theatre. He spent the evening pacing outside and commiserating with Carson McCullers on their declining careers.

The initial response to *Iguana* was uneven. Reviewers were confused over its overt yearning and religious overtones. *Time* magazine's reviewer said it was, "the wisest play he has ever written." Despite its difficult birth, *Iguana* was nominated for a Tony Award for Best Play and Margaret Leighton won the Tony for Best Actress in a Play.

Harold Taubman of the *New York Times* wrote, "For Mr. Williams, *The Night of the Iguana* marks a turning point. When compared with the best of the preceding plays, this work of subtle vibrations reflects a profound change. It goes beyond the elimination of the explosive and shocking gestures, which have given some of the other works the fillip of being sensational and scandalous, and reaches into the playwright's attitude toward life."

On March 9, 1962, *Time* magazine put Williams on the cover and devoted six pages to his life's struggles and achievements. "*The Night of the Iguana*...is a box-office sellout and much the best new American play on the season. The fact is that Tennessee Williams... is a consummate master of theatre." The play was chosen best play of the year by the New

York Drama Critics Circle on April 10 — a week after Bette Davis had left the cast to be replaced by Shelley Winters.

"Bette Davis has quit the show and Shelley Winters went in. It is hard to say which was worse but at least La Davis drew cash and La Winters seems only to sell the upper gallery. To make matters worse, La Leighton (Maggie the kitten) is threatening to give her notice which will mean the demise of the play. La Winters has a fifth of Jack Daniel's Tennessee sour mash whiskey in her dressing-room and nips all through the show. She never enters on cue, sometimes she will cue Maggie on or off stage a page before an exit or entrance is required by the script."

—From a letter to Maria St. Just in April of 1962

No one could have foreseen that this would be considered Williams' last great play. *The Night of the Iguana* was followed by *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* which opened on Broadway in January of 1963 and closed two months later.

In September 1963 Williams' long time companion and the love of his life, Frank Merlo died of heart failure. Although the last years of their relationship were stormy,



they were truly devoted to each other and Tennessee felt a profound regret and suffered a complete breakdown. This was exacerbated by treatment prescribed by a doctor who was subsequently barred from practice. This treatment involved patients injecting themselves with a cocktail of speed and other dangerous drugs of the doctor's own invention.

“The Sixties were the worst time for me. At the beginning of one play, *Camino Real*, I quoted Dante: “In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself in a dark wood where the straight way was lost.” I didn’t know then what a prophet I was. The Sixties were no good for me even from the beginning, from *Night of the Iguana* on; everything went to pieces for me...First Frank was taken sick and I didn’t know it...My professional decline began after *Iguana*. As a matter of fact, I never got a good review after 1961. I suppose it might make an interesting story to say that my breakdown was related to one person's death, but it's not true. I was broken as much by repeated failures in the theatre as by Frank's death. Everything went wrong. My life – private and professional – and ultimately my mind broke. But it came back – I trust it's partly back.”

—From an interview for *Playboy* in 1973

Tennessee eventually recovered enough to travel to Mexico for the filming of *The Night of the Iguana* (released in 1964) which was directed by John Huston and starred Richard Burton as Shannon, Ava Gardner as Maxine and Deborah Kerr as Hannah. The film won an Oscar for Best Costume Design and was nominated for its cinematography and art direction. The film version removed the Nazi tourist characters, which appeared in the original play.

The play has had numerous revivals including a 1976 Broadway production at the Circle in the Square theatre and featured Richard Chamberlain as Shannon, Dorothy McGuire as Hannah and Sylvia Miles as Maxine. In 1996 another Broadway revival featured William Petersen as Shannon, Marsha Mason as Maxine and Cherry Jones as Hannah. In London, a 1992 production at the Royal National Theatre directed by Richard Eyre featured Alfred Molina as Shannon and Eileen Atkins as Hannah. In 2006 a production on London's West End featured Woody Harrelson as Shannon and Clare Higgins as Maxine.

Although Williams continued to write, he would never again achieve the success of his earlier plays like *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass Menagerie* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. ❖

About the Play

Allegory and Autobiography in *The Night of the Iguana*



THE NIGHT OF THE IGUANA has been described by some scholars as Williams' confession drama. Citing that the play is a series of monologues: Shannon on the nature of God, Hannah on art and Maxine on sex, Foster Hirsch in his book, *A Portrait of the Artist: The Plays of Tennessee Williams*, claims that this play above all others "dramatizes Williams' belief in the transforming and healing powers of art and confession, for Nonno's poem like the confessions of the other characters, is therapeutic."

During the writing of the play version of *Iguana*, Williams had been reading the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke and this greatly influenced the tone and sheer poetry of the play. Like much of Rilke's poetry, *The Night of the Iguana* idealizes women. The most spiritual character, Hannah Jelkes, is described as "a Gothic cathedral image of a medieval saint." Williams writes *Iguana* using highly religious terms, but the God sought in this play is not a god of organized religion, but an "incomplete sentence, a tendency of the heart." Even the names of the three main characters, which were changed late in revisions, are similar and serve to demonstrate how they are spiritually linked: "Shannon. Hannah. Nonno."

Iguana corrects what is morbid in *Sweet Bird of Youth*. In both plays, Williams deals with attraction to youth and beauty — not only to satisfy carnal desires, but because the main characters of Alexandra in *Sweet Bird of Youth* and Shannon in *The Night of the Iguana* identify with youth and the ambitions of the young. "Because the two characters identify with the young, they also could over-identify with the less appealing aspects of that energy — the youth's unawareness of the passage of time, of the value of sacrifice; with its preoccupation with self and with the demon of fashion. In *Sweet Bird of Youth*, the refuge is the accident of a temporary restoration to work; but in *Iguana*, there may not even be a refuge anywhere in the world."



Redemption is another main theme in *The Night of the Iguana*. To be redeemed for meaning is to find a way through the jungle, and this we can do only the company of one another. The primitive garden in *Suddenly Last Summer* has become a garden full of promise for the future in *Iguana*.

The setting of Maxine's hotel reflects a civilized oasis surrounded by violence. The world at large is in turmoil, but in this tranquil, tropical setting, Williams can allow his characters to explore the relationship between God and mankind. Shannon can reflect on the choices that drive him mad: his desire to return to the church, his carnal desire for an underage girl, his intellectual attraction to Hannah, and his inclination to fall into a relationship as described by Maxine.

Scholars have described the hill on which the hotel is situated as Golgotha, below the "hill" is the trapped iguana being fattened and prepared for the slaughter and above the hill is God.

Shannon, like Williams, wrestles with demons and many consider Shannon to be one of the most autobiographical sketches in all of his plays. Like Williams, Shannon harbours a rage for his domineering mother and God. Jungian scholar Lindy Levin discusses the character and psychology of Shannon thusly: "his socialization is focused on the principles of sin, punishment and confession. The model of goodness held up for him to emulate is so idealistic that any action or thought that does not fit is forcefully repressed into the unconscious." Jungian theory goes on to explain that although the disgraceful impulse

is denied and forgotten, it does not disappear but is a demon that Shannon will continue to battle all his life.

Williams modelled Nonno on his grandfather Dakin who lived to be ninety-nine years old. Dr. Walter Edwin Dakin was the teaching head of a private girls' school in Tennessee and entered the Episcopalian ministry. Williams revered his grandfather, but interestingly never depicted a minister in a sympathetic light in any of his plays.

There are shades of Williams' sister Rose in Hannah. Hannah functions as the compassionate listener — a sort of confessor. She represents the possibility for Shannon's redemption and gives him hope in the form of human contact.

Maxine represents a sort of sexual healing and in her own way offers Shannon the first step to salvation by offering him Fred's old bedroom. Some critics see Shannon's relationship with Maxine as healthy and positive, while others find it troublesome and abrupt. In Maxine, Shannon has permission to pursue a relationship in a healthy atmosphere.

Colleagues recognized the connection between *Iguana* and Williams. Arthur Miller said, "His theme, is perhaps the most pervasive in American literature, where people live greatly in the very shadow of the mountain from whose peak they might have had a clear view of God. It is the romance of the lost yet sacred misfits, who exist in order to remind us of our trampled instincts, our forsaken tenderness, the holiness of the spirit of man." ❖

About the Play

Tennessee Williams on *The Night of the Iguana*



“I started working on another long play today: just the opening shot.

But I shall not push hard until after “Streetcar” is in. I call it *Quebrada*, meaning The Cliff. The scene is a hotel at Acapulco built on a cliff over the Pacific which will be used symbolically as the social and moral precipice of our times, the characters some intellectual derelicts: will be able to use Mexican music!”

—From a letter to Margo Jones dated 15 August 1947

“I am trying out a new play in Miami the 20th of this month which is the only long one I’ve done that I like since *Cat*. It is called *Night of the Iguana* but has no other connection, except a Mexican background, to the short story called that. Actors Studio players are doing it under a brilliant young director, Frank Corsaro. I know you would like it but there is no certainty that a Miami audience will.”

—From a letter to Maria St. Just August 10, 1960

“The people here are of two classes, those who are waiting for something to happen or those who believe that everything has happened already. That is, the Americans and other outsiders. Their life is lying about beaches usually in a hypnosis induced by strong drink and hot sunlight and lack of any exertion... I am in a bad humor tonight. There is a hard tropical downpour which has driven all the guests onto the back veranda and me into my room to escape them. They are predominantly pro-Nazi Germans, coarse, loud, overwhelmingly arrogant, descended on the hotel in a swarm the last few days. I tried to speak to one of the girls yesterday and she said, “Excuse me, I don’t speak Yiddish.” Apparently she thought I was Jewish or else regarded all Americans as Jews — anyway the remark struck me as incredibly revolting in its racial nastiness and smugness.”

—From a letter to Joe Hazan, an older writer



“Where this play is concerned, the influence of Chekhov is much stronger. I call this a dramatic poem, this play, more a dramatic poem than a play...in the sense that it’s composed rather like a poem. It’s not constructed very well as a play, but it has more the atmosphere of a poem, I think.”

—From an interview with Studs Terkel, 1961

“I came in kind of resentful. Not resentful, that’s not the word. I mean I came in with great trepidation because when you come into rehearsal with a script that says all you want to say – and it has already been pruned down quite a bit – and, you know, I think the cutting should come mostly when you reach the point of the run-throughs — well, I thought this was all a little premature for cutting. I had just come from the dentist’s office and I still had a lot of novocaine and I wasn’t...you know, it was very difficult for me. I knew the third act needed pruning, but it is always a traumatic experience to do that. But toward the end of the evening I suddenly saw the light — that there were enough long speeches, which is my specialty, unfortunately, and that at least five or six pages earlier in the act could be reduced to sort of a dynamic, you know — rather than talk — it would be more effective that way. I realized there was too much talk. I mean there were speeches of five lines where half a line could have done it. Right now I’m engaged in trying to say — trying to express a play more in terms of action. Not in terms of physical action; I mean, in sort of a gun-fire dialogue instead of the long speeches that I’ve always relied on before. Let me say that I depended too much on language — on words.

—From an interview with Lewis Funke and John Booth for Theatre Arts, 1962

On Rev. Lawrence Shannon

“In the portrait of Shannon I think I was drawing a male equivalent almost of a Blanche DuBois...Of course, there are many important differences, such as the fact that Shannon is a man who is very much concerned with what is going on in society. If you listen carefully to certain parts of the play, you realize this is a person whose great redeeming virtue is that he has a true and social conscience... Even though at this point at which we see him exposed, he is in a state of extremely personal disturbance. But still, through that personal disturbance, you see the presence of a deep awareness of social inequities, the starvation and the misery. You know of the places he’s conducted tours through. He says there’s a great deal that ‘lies under the public surface of cities.’”

—From an interview with Studs Terkel for WFMT-FM in 1961

“He has not achieved his quest. He will never finish it. He will never accept himself except through drink. He will work out a compromise with the widow Faulk and will become reasonable. But he will always be “Black Irish,” a victim of drink and sex. He will have to immerse himself in these to resolve the conflicts.”

—From an interview with Jeanne Fayard in 1971

“Shannon, in Iguana, was certainly not a morally admirable person, yet you understood him and felt compassion for him.”

—From an interview for New York Theatre Review, 1979



On Hannah Jelkes

“She has come to terms, of a kind, with life, yes. She’s a very, very modest person, Hannah, and in that sense, to me, a very beautiful person. I meant Hannah, the part of Hannah Jelkes in *The Night of the Iguana*, almost as a definition of what I think is most beautiful spiritually in a person and still believable. I’m still exploring the character of Hannah and thank heavens I have a great artist like Margaret Leighton to help me.”

—From an interview with Studs Terkel for WFMT-FM in 1961

“She had to pass through the tunnel of despair. She is a Blanche purified of confusion and sensuality. She is nearly detached from life. She feels for others. She accepts everything from others...Hannah is right. One should attain her level...But I don’t think that I can. She is alone, but she says that she is prepared to face it.”

—From an interview with Jeanne Fayard in 1971



“The drama in my plays, I think, is nearly always people trying to reach each other. In *Night of the Iguana* each one has his separate cubicle but they meet on the veranda outside the cubicles, at least Hannah and Larry Shannon meet on the veranda outside their cubicles, which is of course an allegorical touch of what people must try to do. It’s true they’re confined inside their own skins, or their own cubicles, but they must try to get out as much as — they must try to find a common ground on which they can meet because the only truly satisfying moments in life are those in which you are in contact, and I don’t mean just physical contact, I mean in deep, a deeper contact than physical, with some other human being.”

—From an interview with Studs Terkel for WFMT-FM in 1961

On the Character of Maxine

Dear Bette:

I was over-joyed with Chuck told me last night you have decided to revert to the blue shirt in Scene One. It is much more in character for Maxine and it does so much more to establish the locale and the atmosphere. Maxine was the wife of the great game-fisherman, the Costa Verde is a place for people to “rough-it.” Everything about her should have the openness and freedom of the sea. I can imagine she even smells like the sea. Time doesn’t exist for her except in changes of weather and season. Death, life, it’s all one to Maxine, she’s a living definition of nature: lusty, rapacious, guileless, unsentimental. I think this creation of Maxine will be enormously helped when all the “externals” have been set right....She moves with the clouds and the tides, her attitudes are free and relaxed. There’s a touch of primitive poetry in her: hence, the shouting and the echo. These two “echo” bits are moments when a touch of this primitive poetry can be pointed up more. The poetry here is simple, folk poetry –natural, undevised, but lyric...If there is only one thing for the cast to remember it is that the primary aim of the play; the making of “poetic reality” in which everything occurs with the ease and spontaneity of occurrences in life, no matter how long and carefully the play has been planned and written with that objective in mind.

—From a letter to Bette Davis in 1962 ❖

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About Theatre Arts



Being an Audience Member

Today, movies and television take audiences away from what was once the number one form of entertainment: going to the theatre. But attending a live performance is still one of the most thrilling and active forms of spending time. In a theatre, observers are catapulted into the action, especially at an intimate venue like *A Noise Within*, whose thrust stage reaches out into the audience and whose actors can see, hear, and feel the response of the crowd. Although in the past playhouses could sometimes be rowdy, today participating in the performance by giving respect and attention to the actors is the most appropriate behavior at a theatrical performance. Shouting out or even whispering can be heard throughout the auditorium, as can rustling paper or ringing phones.

After *A Noise Within*'s performance of *Henry IV, Part I*, you will have the opportunity to discuss the play's content and style with the performing artists and directors. You may wish to remind students to observe the performance carefully or to compile questions ahead of time so they are prepared to participate in the discussion.

Theatre Vocabulary

These terms will be included in pre- and post-performance discussions at *A Noise Within*.

blocking: The instructions a director gives his actors that tell them how and where to move in relation to each other or to the set in a particular scene.

character: The personality or part portrayed by an actor on stage.

conflict: The opposition of people or forces which causes the play's rising action.

dramatic irony: A dramatic technique used by a writer in which a character is unaware of something the audience knows.

genre: Literally, "kind" or "type." In literary terms, genre refers to the main types of literary form, principally comedy and tragedy. It can also refer to forms that are more specific to a given historical era, such as the revenge tragedy, or to more specific sub-genres of tragedy and comedy such as the comedy of manners, farce or social drama.

motivation: The situation or mood which initiates an action. Actors often look for their "motivation" when they try to dissect how a character thinks or acts.

props: Items carried on stage by an actor to represent objects mentioned in or implied by the script. Sometimes the props are actual, sometimes they

are manufactured in the theatre shop.
proscenium stage: There is usually a front curtain on a proscenium stage. The audience views the play from the front through a "frame" called the proscenium arch. In this scenario, all audience members have the same view of the actors.

set: The physical world created on stage in which the action of the play takes place.

setting: The environment in which a play takes place. It may include the historical period as well as the physical space.

stage areas: The stage is divided into areas to help the director to note where action will take place. Upstage is the area furthest from the audience. Downstage is the area closest to the audience. Center stage defines the middle of the playing space. Stage left is the actor's left as he faces the audience. Stage right is the actor's right as he faces the audience.

theme: The overarching message or main idea of a literary or dramatic work. A recurring idea in a play or story.

thrust stage: A stage that juts out into the audience seating area so that patrons are seated on three sides. In this scenario, audience members see the play from varying viewpoints. *A Noise Within* features a thrust stage.

Theatre Lore

Why do actors say “break a leg”?

Perhaps the saying comes—in a complicated way—from the use of “leg.” In theatre, a “leg” is a part of the mechanics that open and close the curtain. To break a leg is to earn so many curtain calls that opening and closing the curtain over and over during final applause causes the curtain mechanics to break. At the outset of theatre tradition, players acted outdoors, where there were no stages or curtains. Applause came in the form of foot stomping, which could indicate another origin of this phrase.

Why is it bad luck to say “Macbeth” inside the theatre?

There are many origins for this superstition. Old actors believe the witches’ song in *Macbeth* to possess the uncanny power of casting evil spells. The reasons for this fear usually bring tales of accidents and ill-fortunes that have plagued productions of the play throughout the world.

An alternative is that the superstition began in the days of stock companies, which would struggle to remain in business. Frequently, near the end of a season, a company would realize it was not going to break even, and, in an attempt to boost ticket sales, would announce the production of a crowd favorite: *Macbeth*. If times were particularly bad, the play would frequently be a portent of the company’s demise.

What is a ghost light?

There is a superstition that if an emptied theater is ever left completely dark, a ghost will take up residence. In other versions of the same superstition the ghosts of past performances return to the stage to live out their glory moments. To prevent this, a single light called a ghost light is left burning at center stage after the audience and all of the actors and musicians have gone.

Now, those in the world of theatre know that a “dark” theatre is one without a play. There is nothing sadder to a dramatic artist than an empty house and a playless stage. Therefore, a light is left burning center stage so that the theatre is never “dark;” it is simply awaiting the next production.

What is a raked stage? Where do the terms upstage and downstage originate?

Historically, stages were built on inclines, with the backs of the stages slightly higher than the fronts. The incline was called a rake and helped those in the back of the audience see the action onstage. Eventually, theatres started placing seats on inclines instead of stages, but the terminology stuck. Downstage is the front of the stage, closest to the audience, and upstage is the back of the stage. Some theatres, like A Noise Within, still participate in the tradition of using raked stages.

Why are actors called thespians?

In the sixth century B.C., a Greek chorus performer named Thespis was the first person in history to step away from the chorus and speak by himself, exchanging dialogue with the group and impersonating a character instead of simply reciting a story as the chorus had done before then. ❖

About A Noise Within

A Noise Within's mission is to produce the great works of world drama in rotating repertory, with a company of professional, classically-trained actors. *A Noise Within* educates the public through comprehensive outreach efforts and conservatory training programs that foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of history's greatest plays and playwrights.

As the only company in southern California working in the repertory tradition (rotating productions using a resident ensemble of professional, trained artists), *A Noise Within* is dedicated solely to producing classical literature from authors such as Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen, Shaw, and Euripedes.

The company was formed in 1991 by founders Geoff Elliott and Julia Rodriguez-Elliott, both of whom were classically trained at the acclaimed American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco. They envisioned *A Noise Within* after recognizing a lack of professional, classical productions and education in Southern California and sought out and assembled their own company of actors to meet the need. All of *A Noise Within's* resident artists have been classically

trained, and many hold Master of Fine Arts degrees from some of the nation's most respected institutions, such as Juilliard, Yale, and the American Conservatory Theatre. In its fourteen-year history, *A Noise Within* has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle's revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

In 2004, *A Noise Within* accepted an invitation to collaborate with the Los Angeles Philharmonic for a tandem performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Hollywood Bowl.

More than 25,000 individuals attend productions at *A Noise Within*, annually, and between performances at the theatre and touring productions, the company draws 13,000 student participants to its arts education programs every year. Students benefit from in-school workshops, conservatory training, and an internship program, as well as subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, discussions with artists, and state standards-compliant study guides.

A Noise Within Study Guide

Written by Dawn Kellogg
Production Photography by Craig Schwartz
Graphic Design by Christopher Komuro

**A Noise Within**
California's Classical Theatre Company

Geoff Elliott & Julia Rodriguez-Elliott, Artistic Directors
Administrative Office: 234 S. Brand Blvd., Glendale, CA 91204
Administration: Tel (818) 240-0910 / FAX (818) 240-0826
Website: www.anoisewithin.org
Box Office: (818) 240-0910 ext.1