

CalArts

Reviews of the CalArts School of Theater and the Boston Court Theatre's coproduction of Tennessee Williams' *Camino Real*:

From KCRW

This is Anthony Byrnes Opening the Curtain on LA Theatre for KCRW.

It's not politically correct for a theater person to say that they hate Tennessee Williams. Well "hate" might be a little strong, but I certainly wasn't the first person in line to sit through another gloriously languorous production of "The Glass Menagerie."

I can admit my disdain for this venerated American playwright now because I'm mostly over it. So what happened? Two new productions of his work opened my eyes to the wonder of Williams - first the Wooster Group's radical re-imagining of "Vieux Carre" at RedCat last fall. And now, a jarring production of "Camino Real" presented by Boston Court and CalArts.

Okay, before you call to correct my pronunciation - Tennessee Williams isn't writing about El Camino Real but instead, a place he's imagined. A purgatory at the end of the King's Road he's dubbed the "Camino Real"

The setting for the play is a walled-in square in a nondescript Latin American country. The square is bounded by two hotels - the Siete Mares and the Ritz - Men Only. This little world within a world is ruled by a tyrant of a hotel clerk, vicious armed guards, and a pair of funereal street cleaners. But there's also plenty of life: a taco vender, a kid hawking loteria, a prostitute who regains her virginity. The rest of the characters are a who's who of literary history; there's Cervantes' Don Quixote, Dumas' Dame aux Camelias, Cassanova, Lord Byron. And they're all caught in a complex modern day Dante's "Inferno" for hopeful lovers and trapped romantics.

"Camino Real" was written in 1953 right after "The Rose Tattoo" and "Streetcar Named Desire" and right before "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof". But in form and narrative style, it's in an entirely different universe. It's stunning to think that Williams' experiment happened not at the edges of his career but smack dab in the middle of it. Williams' left the comfort of naturalism for something symbolic, something unknown. The Boston Court production embraces that journey and creates a world where a photo booth, one of those three-pictures-for-a-dollar jobs, can become a portal to the great unknown.

The play is a co-production between Boston Court and CalArts. CalArts provided the design talent, who brought the inspired photo booth to life, and the bulk of the actors. It's an inspired partnership, after all what small LA theater could afford a production with 20 actors in this economic climate? It's a model we don't see enough of in LA, a mix of aspiring

students and seasoned professionals. And while some of the CalArts students have that charming uncertainty of artists who haven't quite found their voices, several others beautifully anchor the show.

Let me end my review with the show's beginning - in the opening moments a protester in the square is gunned down by armed guards. At its heart, "Camino Real" is a show about escaping tyrants both real and imagined. They say history doesn't repeat itself - it rhymes. Perhaps Tennessee Williams' greatest act of poetry was making the "Camino Real" rhyme with Tahrir square, Green square, and the Pearl Roundabout.

From the *Los Angeles Times*, Margaret Gray reviewing:

This collaboration between the Theatre@Boston Court and the CalArts School of Theater, directed by Jessica Kubzansky, approaches the challenge with great brio. Always generous to actors, Williams crammed his play with star turns, and many of the performers here — an ensemble of 21 students and professionals — shine.

Matthew Goodrich embodies the sweet, pugnacious über-Southern boy Kilroy so naturally that the role could have been written for him. Cristina Frias plays the Gypsy as a chatty, good-natured cynic; as her daughter, the prostitute Esmerelda, the stunning Klean Ung is a powerful mixture of innocence and temptation. Brian Tichnell's Gutman has a glib, sinister charm

Kubzansky's efficient staging keeps focus even in crowded scenes. The choreography also provides a visual through-line: Whenever Gutman announces a new "block," the actors jerk through mechanical movements like malfunctioning clockwork figures. The simple, effective set by Dorothy Hoover puts a photo booth at the top of the ladder to the Terra Incognita beyond, where would-be escapees face the flashbulb. Even these innovations lose impact, though, after three hours. Sustaining the spark of hope that Williams all but buried in his relentless vision of how the world crushes and perverts human dreams might be impossible; the moments when this production finds it, as in a fragile love scene between Kilroy and Esmerelda, are rare but radiant.

From *Variety*

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The work's class consciousness is excitingly evoked by designer Dorothy Hoover in environments high and low. At the end of their ropes, echoes of past and future Williams characters stagger past the ritzy Siete Mares Hotel's velvet ropes to the appalling squalor of the "Ritz Men Only." The doomed Camille here, Marguerite Gautier (Marissa Chibas), is like Blanche DuBois in loving neither wisely nor well, while the faded, melancholy Jacques Casanova (Tim Cummings) presages defrocked Shannon in "Night of the Iguana."

The likes of Don Quixote and Proust's Baron Charlus -- impressively doubled by Lenny Von Dohlen -- drift through 16 sequences or "blocks," each offering a snapshot of Williams' world. Some dare the surrounding desert Terra Incognita to "Make voyages! Attempt them! There's nothing else." Others engage in a mindless dance of death before sinister streetcleaners cart them off in the trash.

The youthful cast, predictably, does best when high energy or idealism prevail. Matthew Goodrich brings both to his splendid Kilroy, the wiry ex-boxer with "a heart as big as the head of a baby" (think Mangiacavallo in "Rose Tattoo"). As the play's designated everyman, Goodrich balances innocence and cynicism when he encounters gypsy Esmeralda (lovely Kanean Ung), whose virginity is restored nightly to her johns' delight. Theirs is the most fully realized "block," genuine heat generated by a Rio-tinged Carnavale choreographed by Ameenah Kaplan to Kwan Fai Lam's pulsating score....

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Coarseness and delicacy alike are superbly lit by Ellie Rabinowitz in a myriad of stark and saturated effects, as if everything were actually succeeding as poetry.

Sets, Dorothy Hoover; costumes, Silvanne E.B. Park; lighting, Ellie Rabinowitz; sound, Patrick Janssen; choreography, Ameenah Kaplan; production stage manager, Rebecca L. Trotter. Opened, reviewed Feb. 12, 2011. Runs through March 13. Running time: 3 HOURS.

With: Ashli Amari Adams, Michael Aurelio, Mitchell Colley, Cristina Frias, Jasmine Hughes, Shanna Malcolm, Murphy Martin, Frank Raducz, Jr., Christopher Rivas, Pete Sauber, Zachary Schwartz., Caitlin Teeley, Joseph Thomas, Kanean Ung, Harley Ware.

From *Backstage*

Camino Real

CalArts at and in association with the Theatre @ Boston Court

Reviewed by Les Spindle

February 17, 2011

When Tennessee Williams' three-hour epic—a mix of edgy surrealism and poetic reverie—premiered in 1953, it largely perplexed audiences accustomed to the playwright's more conventional works, but it has subsequently become more widely appreciated. The challenges faced by director Jessica Kubzansky and a 20-member ensemble (mostly faculty, alumni, and students of CalArts) generally pay off in a viscerally stunning and emotionally resonant portrait of longing, suffering, and redemption. Though the rigorous demands of this wildly adventurous vehicle exceed the company's grasp at times, it's a dazzling production, awash with lyrical flourishes that feel like quintessential Williams.

Framed as a dream by Cervantes' deranged knight character, Don Quixote (Lenny Von Dohlen), the script eschews linear plotting in favor of 16 episodes, referred to by the audacious narrator Gutman (Brian Tichnell) as "blocks." Yet the personal journey of former champion boxer Kilroy (Matthew Goodrich) provides a degree of unity to the play's central themes—which explore spiritual disillusionment, the search for salvation through true love, and the repressive forces of a corrupt society. The setting is an unspecified Hispanic community that's a sort of purgatory for trapped souls, run as a terrifying police state. Sharing the harrowing attempts of pure-hearted Kilroy to escape from this virtual prison are historical and literary characters dealing with their individual frustrations. Among them are the Italian libertine Casanova (Tim Cummings), the Romantic poet Lord Byron (Michael Aurelio), and the doomed Dumas heroine Camille (Marissa Chibas). Lowlife characters, such as prostitutes, thieves, and brutal law enforcers, add to the melee.

For the most part, the game actors capture the requisite humor, poignancy, and terror of this unnerving fantasia. The charismatic Goodrich is particularly on-target. His masterful combination of physical dexterity, intelligence, vulnerability, and utmost sincerity give this bizarre piece the recognizable human anchor that it needs. The versatile Von Dohlen is superb as Don Quixote, an effete Baron, and the aristocratic Lord Mulligan. Cristina Frias excels as a duplicitous gypsy and the self-important dowager Lady Mulligan.

The wondrous designs are highlighted by Dorothy Hoover's sprawling set, Silvanne E.B. Park's costumes, Ellie Rabinowitz's lighting, and Patrick Janssen's sound. Kwan Fai Lam provides atmospheric original music

From *LA Weekly*

"Camino Real is a curiosity that you're not likely to see again -- let alone this well."

Told that the rarely performed play was by one of the great 20th-century playwrights, you'd guess the author was Tom Stoppard before Tennessee Williams. The 40-character limbo-land puzzler mashes up Don Quixote (Lenny Von Dohlen), Casanova (Tim Cummings), Lord Byron (Michael Aurelio) and the Hunchback of Notre Dame's gypsy femme fatale Esmeralda (Kalean Ung) in the town of Camino Real (pronounced KA-mino REE-al, à la gringo, so as to distinguish it from the country of CaMIno ReAL just next door). Inside the gates, the hamlet is divided further still between the Haves, who sip brandy with Gutman (Brian Tichnell) at his sumptuous hotel, and the Have-Nots, who lay their heads at the fleabag Ritz Men Only, or worse. Between them, there are enough liars and whores that a chipper innocent like Kilroy (the fantastic Mike Goodrich), a former boxing champ with a heart as big as a baby, is humbled within 10 minutes of hitting town. But this isn't about his escape. It's about his destruction and whether he -- and the rest of the captives -- will be able to face their fate when the murderous cleaners (Frank Raducz Jr. and Murphy Martin) come to sweep them away. The only people not trying to leave town are the people too damaged to try, a motley crew of pawnbrokers, pickpockets and a taco salesman whom director Jessica Kubzansky keeps in motion, each slipping out in time to pop up in another role. Camino Real is most famous for bombing on Broadway in 1953 and temporarily tarnishing the careers of Williams and director Elia Kazan. (There's even a play about the flop, *The Really Big Once*, which opened last fall in New York.) Williams' episodic structure lacks momentum, particularly in the second act during a long scene between Kilroy and Esmeralda (who needs more heat). But the decades have given us a better perspective on the questions Williams, then at the anxious peak of his stage career, was asking himself: Can you still love when you're old and cynical? Can art survive amid crass capitalism? And is being a former talent a source of pride or shame? Kubzansky's ensemble is outstanding, even wringing a knowing chuckle from the faux-naïf line, "Why does disappointment make people unkind?" With all technical contributions including Silvanne E.B. Park's costumes hitting high marks, Camino Real is a curiosity that you're not likely to see again -- let alone this well. Theater @ Boston Court, 70 N. Mentor Ave., Pasadena; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m., Sun., 2 p.m., through March 13. (626) 683-6883, bostoncourt.com. (Amy Nicholson)

From *LAist*

For the centenary of Tennessee Williams' birth year, the Theatre@Boston Court and CalArts School of Theater have collaborated on a production of his rarely produced 1953 work, *Camino Real*. The play is unique in Williams' oeuvre in that it's surreal and heavily symbolic without much in terms of traditional plot. It seems like Williams' take on *No Exit*, albeit set in an unnamed Mexican or South American location.

The play is a mixed bag, quality-wise, both overlong and pretentious but also often funny and moving and lyrical. Frankly, the show is going to mainly appeal to Williams aficionados and lovers of the avant-garde, but it gets a vigorous and assured revival from director Jessica Kubzansky and an excellent ensemble.

The setting is the plaza of the Camino Real, bookended by the high-end Siete Mares hotel on one side and the cheap Ritz Men Only flophouse on the other, a dried-up fountain channel bisecting the stage. Siete Mares proprietor Gutman (Brian Tichnell) serves as narrator and ringmaster over a rabble of "mendicants, prostitutes and thieves," but also several famous fictional or historical characters who have lost their way and ended up here. Casanova (Tim Cummings) is nervously awaiting a letter with money to keep from being evicted from the Siete Mares. He has fallen in love with Marguerite (Marissa Chibas), the "Camille" of La Traviata fame, but all she wants to do is escape. Ex-boxer Kilroy (Matthew Goodrich) is down on his luck but cheerful, but Gutman will do everything he can to turn his optimism into despair.

Goodrich is superb as Kilroy, the representative of young, can-do America of the 1950s being beaten down by the callousness of the world. He's perfectly cast as the typical charismatic hero, all cocky asides to the audience and aw-shucks charm, but his performance deepens into affecting drama as the story darkens. Cummings is effective but almost too gruff as the increasingly desperate Casanova—we don't see Casanova's legendary powers of seduction here. Chibas succeeds at portraying the simultaneously sympathetic and selfish character of Marguerite, who tellingly describes her relationship with Casanova with the phrase "caged birds accept each other, but flight is what they long for."

Tichnell scores as the alternately sardonic and threatening Gutman, but Michael Aurelio is dramatically muted as the departing Lord Byron. Lenny Von Dohlen impresses in multiple roles, specifically as Don Quixote, the single continually positive character in the story, and Baron de Charlus (from Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*), a longtime denizen with a low-key appeal. Cristina Frias brings blunt humor to the role of the Gypsy, and Kalean Ung is outstanding as the Gypsy's daughter, Esmeralda, particularly memorable in a long scene with Goodrich where love tries to overpower commerce. Finally, the entire ensemble is committed and talented, never dropping character, exemplified by Jasmine Hughes, whose lovely and passionate performance as the Blind Mother proves the old maxim that there are no small roles.

Kubzansky stages the action with great vitality, excelling in big set piece moments such the arrival of a passenger plane or the departure of a dead man into the keeping of the sinister street sweepers, and the constant activity of the large ensemble is admirably detailed. A few things don't work, such as the actors flailing about at every "block change," or the unexplained shaking the actors occasionally exhibit, but overall this is an expertly directed production. Dorothy Hoover's set is efficient if a bit bland, but Silvanne E.B. Park's costumes are creative and sumptuous, notably the street sweeper's bloodstained uniforms and Gutman's leather dressing gown with bright red silk lining. Patrick Janssen's sound design adds depth to the reality of the Camino Real, and Kwan Fai Lam's terrific original music accentuates the drama and excitement.