

Tennessee waltzes on

Hawke says every effort to bring the critically acclaimed town production director, named to the New York in the mountains. Michael in his own production of ing Hawke, left Tom, an at Connecticut. Stage Company actor, 10, but ty's midyear of Williams's. Photo and style. Camera



TREND WATCH

Sixteen years after his death, playwright and gay trailblazer Tennessee Williams continues to bask in a nationwide obsession with his work

By Gerard Raymond

THE BETTMANN ARCHIVE

Tennessee Williams's best-loved plays still dominate the American repertory, half a century after thrilling audiences for the first time. Now, on the cusp of a new century, it's not only *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* that are winning over audiences but also Williams's lesser-known works. Case in point: Two major new revivals of *Camino Real*—one starring Ethan Hawke and another with Betty Buckley—signal a remarkable renaissance for this strangely beautiful surrealist fantasy, which flopped in its original run in 1953.

"Anybody who works on one of his plays finds themselves in love with Tennessee Williams," Hawke says admiringly.

Indeed, in the wake of last season's belated and immensely successful New York City premiere of Williams's 1938 apprentice work, *Not About Nightingales*, the American theater's fascination with its great gay poet-playwright seems only to grow stronger.

"Williams speaks in a way that just rattles through time," comments Frank Rich, op-ed columnist and former chief drama critic

for *The New York Times*. "What keeps him fresh is the vast humanity of his characters and the way he looks at them. Throw into that the wonderful writing, the humor, the poetry, and the instincts of drama, and it's pretty irresistible."

In addition to *Camino Real*, the current season offers director Ivo van Hove's bold new take on *A Streetcar Named Desire*, now running at the New York Theater Workshop—in which the avant-garde Dutch artist strips away the trappings of naturalism to stage an all-out war between Stanley and Blanche. On the opposite coast, *Rent*'s Michael Greif is directing a revival of *Sweet Bird of Youth* at San Diego's La Jolla Playhouse, beginning in October.

"Williams wasn't afraid to write about gay characters or about his experience, but he never limited himself or had an agenda," says Hawke, who marked a personal triumph this summer in the *Camino Real* revival at Massachusetts's Williamstown Theater Festival. "He had this great ability to write high and low at the same time—it's base, bawdy, exciting, and fun, and at the same time it's full of metaphor and poetry. Now that's great writing!" ▶

Hawke says every effort is being made to bring the critically acclaimed Williams-town production, directed by Nicholas Martin, to the New York stage this season. In the meantime, Michael Wilson is directing his own production of the play, featuring Buckley, Rip Torn, and James Colby,

at Connecticut's Hartford Stage Company (through October 10), part of the company's multiyear retrospective of Williams's work.

Poetic and absurdist in style, *Camino Real* focuses

Streetcar. As Buckley notes, "Marguerite is trying to come to some kind of inner peace of the deeper self, to a new perception about relationships and intimacy and how to best express the remaining embers of her passion."

One of Williams's most personal works, *Camino* also offers a fascinating snapshot of gay life in the 1950s. One of the characters in the play, the S/M Baron de Charlus (from Proust) even makes a reference to the Bird Circuit, the term for a cluster of New York gay bars of the period.

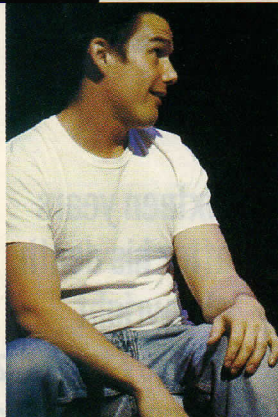
Wilson, who is gay (as are Van Hove,

ing it with his plays." Rich, however, cautions that Williams's homosexuality is only one of many biographical variables. "In the end there is genius that cannot be attributed to [any one factor]," he argues. "There are so many gay figures in the American theater, it is almost demeaning to say that they are all of the same school of writing. It implies that gay people are monochromatic."

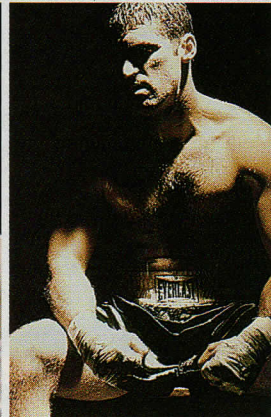
Regardless of the lens through which one chooses to view his work, there is no doubt that Williams strikes a universal chord. As the lost souls in *Camino Real*



HAWKE: RICHARD FELDMAN; BACON, MCKENZIE: JOAN MARCUS; COLBY: FRANK MARCHESI



Dueling revivals: Ethan Hawke in the Williamstown *Camino Real* (left); James Colby in the Hartford *Camino* (far right); Jenny Bacon as Stella and Bruce McKenzie as Stanley in New York's *Streetcar*



on a group of desperate romantics—some of them real and fictional cultural icons like Lord Byron, Marguerite Gautier (Camille), and Casanova—who find themselves stranded in a kind of purgatory. Buckley, who plays Camille, calls it "a way station where people are trying to reconcile themselves to themselves. I have spent a lifetime trying to do that!" The tragic beauty Marguerite, made famous by Greta Garbo's *Camille*, is in many ways a precursor to Blanche DuBois: Williams even borrowed several lines from an early draft of *Camino Real* to give to Blanche in

Greif, and Martin), describes the play as a "rallying cry—whether you are an artist or queer—to be yourself, to be adventurous and shake things up, realizing that it's dangerous. I know I would not be doing what I am doing without the example of [Williams's] writing or his life." In Wilson's view it was Williams who paved the way for Edward Albee and enabled the gay theater of the '80s and '90s, "making it possible for *Angels in America* to happen."

Adds Greif: "I think Tennessee Williams felt at odds with mainstream culture, even if in many ways he was defin-

discover that the "violets in the mountains can break the rocks," Williams's soaring faith and bravery in the face of adversity is his greatest legacy. As Wilson puts it, "If you are alone or scared, Williams gives you the courage to be different, and celebrate that difference." ■

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CRUCIAL QUESTION

From runway to toast of Broadway?

ISAAC MIZRAHI TRADES IN PUMPS FOR THE OLD SOFT SHOE

Let's face it: We've always wanted Isaac Mizrahi to entertain us. In fact, when the outrageously witty fashion designer was forced to fold his clothing line in 1998, some pundits suggested that the paying public had been so bedazzled by his charms, they'd forgotten to buy the dresses. But can we reimagine Mizrahi as... a song-and-dance man?

We're about to find out. At this moment the ex-couturier is somewhere in New York City, polishing a one-man show, with music, to be directed by Joe Mantello and presented off-Broadway. And why not? Mizrahi is truly multitalented. Two years ago, he appeared as leading man in his own superhip comic book, *The Adventures of Sandee the Supermodel*. Before that, he introduced us to his flawless Eartha Kitt imitation (and his unsparing creative process) in the 1995 documentary *Unzipped*. With a track record like that, why shouldn't Mizrahi burst into song? ■



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