



A Complex Evening – A Complex Playwright: William Inge

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The 2009 compilation, *A Complex Evening: Six short plays by William Inge* is the result of the 2009 Inge Festival production of several of Inge's lesser-known and largely unpublished short plays. The six plays are published in the order in which they appeared at the Inge Festival, and the multiple phone calls that constitute *The Love Death* are interspersed throughout the other five plays, as they were in the 2009 production. Written in a variety of styles and genres, these plays are quite unlike anything the general public would consider to be standard "Inge" fare. Inge was most known for his romantic dramas and insightful observations about small-town American life. The early full-length plays from the 1950s, *Come Back, Little Sheba*; *Picnic*; *Bus Stop*; and *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, and their film counterparts, all share Inge's notable idealistic hope—or at least the appearance of hope—even in the midst of seeming despair. Five of the six selected plays compiled in *A Complex Evening*, by contrast, deal with everything from existential examinations of life, to suicide, to racism, and other challenging subjects. The plays in this collection also represent his adventuresome foray into different styles, such as farce, satire, mystery, and even an experiment with absurdism, which supports Harold Clurman's observation in a 1975 article in *The Nation*, that in his later plays, Inge "ventured to write more boldly in unsparing truthfulness" (157). These plays by Inge display a breadth of literary and dramatic skill that seems to have been heretofore unacknowledged by the general public. This paper will examine the six plays individually, with *The Love Death* looked at in its entirety, as a separate short play.

As the compilation begins with *The Love Death*, so will this examination. *The Love Death* is a series of five phone calls that the protagonist, Byron Todd, makes as he prepares and announces his suicide. He begins with a call to his psychiatrist with a ruse to get information on how many pills one would take to actually kill oneself, and he continues with farewell calls to his

mother, his friend, his agent, and finally, the critic who lambasted his most recent collection of short stories.

One need not know much about Inge to recognize Todd as being a close representation of Inge. The opening stage directions tell us that Todd is an “*effete*” writer, dressed in a “*luxurious silk Japanese robe and gold sandals...[and] colorful pajamas*” (s.d. 7). The choice of the adjective “*effete*” conjures many images and ideas, in particular the idea that the word was a euphemism for a gay man—especially at the presumed time of the writing of the play. While the play’s exact date of writing is not specified, given the information provided in Ralph Voss’ biography of Inge, *A Life of William Inge; The Strains of Triumph*, it can be safely assumed that this play—and indeed, perhaps all of these plays—were written some time during the late 1960s. Voss acknowledges that between 1966 and 1969, “Inge created or revised from earlier forms several more plays,” and he later includes *The Love Death* in a list of plays categorized as “late and largely unpublished” (237). Interestingly, while the term “*effete*” was readily associated with effeminacy, or a stereotypical fastidious gay man—in particular in the 1950s and 1960s—other definitions of the word, such as “no longer fertile,” “soft or delicate” and “having lost character, vitality or strength,” also bring to mind someone who was struggling with a loss—perhaps a loss of acceptance, prominence, self-esteem, or even success (Merriam-Webster.com). Taking into account these definitions, one can easily connect this simple character description to Inge, and upon reading the rest of the play, the connection is further solidified. Voss’ biography of Inge paints a picture of a very similar person: sensitive, and having lost success, strength, and self-esteem. It is no surprise, then, that Voss described *The Love Death* as Inge’s “suicide note”—even though it appears to have been written some four to seven years prior to Inge’s own suicide (267).

Todd's subsequent calls further reflect a man who has suffered much, given much thought to whether his existence is worth continuing, and feels literarily unappreciated and isolated. In the final call to the critic, Todd hauntingly and somewhat pathetically reveals what must have been Inge's secret desire to say to critic Robert Brustein, who excoriated Inge with his brutal assessment of Inge's work in a 1958 *Harper's* magazine article that was ostensibly a feature article about Inge (Voss 180). Voss notes that John Connolly, Inge's former secretary, attributes Brustein's "calculated ambush" (180) as "'the beginning of the end' for Inge" (182). One can only surmise, given Inge's eventual suicide, that Connolly was correct. During this final call to the critic, Todd states:

You have not hurt me, Mr. Parker. That is why I am calling you. My death will not be related in any way to the vicious review you wrote of my book, a review in which you didn't even come to grips with my central themes, in which you showed only the most callow understanding of my characters and their motives, in which you showed only a sophomoric understanding of my most sensitive profundities. ... I consider it a compliment that you did not like my book, Mr. Parker. ... So, do not for a moment feel guilty. ... I'm proud that you hated my book, Mr. Parker. I'm proud (97-98).

One cannot help but perceive that Todd's protestation is really Inge's own. *The Love Death* has an elegiac quality, combined, surprisingly, with an almost triumphant characteristic, in that Todd is able to, ultimately, control something in his life: his death. Perhaps this was Inge's secret hope as well, since he was unable to control critical or commercial reactions to his own work. The stage directions following this final phone call show Todd swallowing a handful of pills, turning up "Love Dance" from *Tristan and Isolde* on the record player, and lying down on the sofa, as the superintendent and residents of the apartment building yell at him to turn down

the music. The final stage directions read: “*BYRON quietly thumbs his nose at the angry world these voices represent, and peacefully dies as the music continues with the hollering voices*” (99). This appears to be Todd’s triumph, and perhaps Inge’s, as well: he will play his music as loudly as he pleases, and control these final moments of his life, literally and figuratively “thumb[ing] his nose” at critics, society, and even his own personal demons (99). Indeed, Harold Clurman’s 1975 review described the play as “an open confession of the author’s anguish” (157).

Director Karen Carpenter deliberately did not conclude the evening of short plays with this particular doleful—although to Todd—triumphant, event. She admits that she wanted “to end on an uplifting note,” and chose to end the evening with a piece that seems to embody the quintessence of Inge’s most recognizable theatrical and literary characteristics: hope (Notes, *A Complex Evening*, Inge: Complex). This final play in the collection is titled, *Morning on the Beach*, and it appears to have many similarities to other classic Inge works. The conflicts in this short play may initially seem to be surface, but upon closer examination, we see thematic elements within characters and their relationships that are classic Inge: hope—even in the face of despair, finding one’s place in the world, the struggle for identity, worth, and even companionship.

This short play begins with Helen, the wealthy sun-bather and swimmer, rejoicing in the gorgeous summer weather (103). Connecting to Inge’s theatrical leitmotif, she declares that the day is “glorious...miraculous,” reveling in the fact that the beautiful day has emerged after “a long succession of drab, damp days,” which makes the beautiful day all the more appreciated. These few lines of Helen’s are the epitome of hope. Without the previous gloomy days, today’s shining weather would not seem nearly as bright, just as hope without previous despair would not be as cherished.

The play is, however, more than simply an ode to a beautiful day at the beach. Like many of Inge's characters, the potential couple, Helen and Martin, struggle with the parameters and definition of their relationship. Helen prefers their friendship, while Martin wishes for a more romantic and physical involvement, and both characters have something deeper going on that is not overtly revealed. Helen has already explained to Zelma that she and Martin are "not in love," and when asked why, she simply replies, "We're just not" (109). Underneath Helen's poetic vitality regarding the stunning day is someone who doesn't quite seem to know how to go beyond her surface contentment. Helen seems to envy Martin's "deep feeling of peace," and Martin assures her that it is "the lull after the storm," implying that there have been dark days in his past, a parallel to Helen's opening celebration of the beautiful day in the wake of darker, gloomier days (115). Even though Helen rejects Martin's overture for a more physical relationship, their exchange is concluded with a mutual agreement for a driving date that evening. Both seem appeased, yet we sense something is lurking underneath both of their content exteriors.

This exchange is quickly interrupted by the boisterous escapades of the young lifeguards and their female companions. The Professor, another regular presence at the beach, merely tosses off the rambunctious playfulness with a sigh, "Ah, youth!" (116). The juxtaposition of these events and characters culminates in a romantic, yet simple final moment. After Tom, one of the virile lifeguards, has cut his foot, young Nora insists on bandaging it for him. As they realize they won't be able to dance that evening due to Tom's injury, Tom urges the Professor to read some poetry to the group. The Professor's response to that request, and the final line of the play is simply, "Why? I'm surrounded by it" (119). Inge has brought this short play back full circle to

the opening wonder, joy, and delight in simple pleasures: a “glorious day,” and the beauty of young love (103).

In contrast to the seemingly simple optimism of *Morning*, the remaining plays in the collection are decided departures in style for Inge. *A Silent Call* and *Moved In* are two of a collection of plays Inge called “*Complex*,” in which each short play took place in a different apartment in the same apartment complex in New York City (Voss 236). According to Voss, Inge was trying “to generate something new, something that would ‘click’ with the audiences of the time,” in particular, the 1960s (236-237). Voss’ take on many of these plays is that they “reflect Inge’s sense of a world gone bad, in which basically good individuals can barely hope to cope” (237). Indeed, in *A Silent Call*, two roommate teachers are the victims of what appears to be a student stalker, and are left to fend for themselves. In the rather melodramatic end, the play is ultimately about fears, suspicions, and prejudices, and how our own perceptions can influence our lives.

The teachers, Emma and Louise, suspect that one of Emma’s students is repeatedly calling their apartment, and either hanging up when Louise answers, or staying on the line, not speaking, when Emma answers. Emma is particularly unnerved by these calls. They hear sand thrown at their window, and doorbell buzzes at their door—which are met with an empty hallway, so the women finally call the police. In the course of the play, we learn that Emma suspects “one of [her] senior students, a Negro boy” of all of these intrusive actions (15). Stereotyped assumptions about blacks and whites are tossed about, and even a suggestion that the young Emma is attracted to the young student. Inge has infused this short drama with issues of race, potential inappropriate relations between a student and teacher, and finally, a woman’s own fears and paranoia contributing to her demise.

The play is compelling, creating suspense along the way as the calls, noise on the window, and anonymous door buzzing continues. The ending, however, is difficult to gauge from simply reading. The closing moments of the play show Emma settling down with a drink in the living room (after taking at least two Seconals), only to suddenly hear a soft tapping at the door. Emma presses her head against the door, listening to the taps, and the final stage directions read, “*Suddenly, Emma grabs at her heart. A horrible pain has gripped her. She drops to her knees and then falls to the floor. She is dead. The taps at the door continue ever so softly as the curtain comes down*” (s.d. 32). While this melodramatic description must be handled carefully in production, the effect on this reader was one of initial shock, and then disbelief. Regardless, it is clear that this particular play was an experiment for Inge, and he was attempting to investigate some unexplored subject matter.

The other “*Complex*” play in the collection is titled, *Moved-In*. The departure for this particular play appears to be primarily in the conscious choice of the race of the two main characters: Carlton and Alfreida Oates are a black couple living in the apartment complex. Inge’s descriptions of the couple and their apartment are quite detailed, highlighting a unique individualism not only in their attire, but in their apartment décor. Carlton is described as wearing “*a bright magenta silk robe...most of his chest exposed showing a bright gold, primitive necklace. On one wrist is a gold bracelet, the same on one ankle*” (s.d. 37). Alfreida’s dress is described as “*almost like a sari leaving her shoulders exposed,*” and she is characterized as “*a high-born jungle queen*” (s.d. 37). Inge details their apartment as “*brilliantly colorful and handsome...the walls are all a brilliant red, and there are pieces of black African sculpture ornamenting tables and walls*” (s.d. 37). These descriptions not only contrast with the simple décor of Emma and Louise’s apartment, but they clearly establish the couple and their home as

being highly individualized. This is not to say that other Inge characters and settings aren't individualized, but rather, that Inge seems to have gone to certain lengths to make sure that the Oates' apartment is clearly one of their own style.

The situation of *Moved-In* revolves around the superintendent (Mr. Flicker, from *A Silent Call*) offering Mr. Oates his job. According to Alfreida, this is a welcome job, although Carlton's reservations about taking the job center on his own distasteful feelings towards many of the tenants. Much like the characters in *Morning on the Beach*, there is more than meets the eye with Carlton and Alfreida. Carlton's struggle also involves a sense of dignity and integrity, though we are not given a clear reason as to why he ultimately accepts the job offer. After Alfreida congratulates him on taking the job, telling him how proud she is of him, Carlton simply responds with, "I dunno, doll. Gimme time. I don't know how I feel. Gimme time" (44). This lack of specificity of motive can be seen as a failing of the play, and indeed, Voss comments that with many of the experiments with Inge's later plays, it is "as though the modern world he was seeking to portray in socially relevant drama was just too confounding for him to capture" (243). However, it can also be viewed as a successful enterprise in illustrating the ambiguities and inner turmoil that existed in human interactions, in particular within the world of race relations in the 1960s. Carlton obviously has made a point to be "individualistic," as Mr. Flicker notes, but Carlton also hints at his own inner turmoil at having struggled to become his own person: "No putting-on the whitey's ways, not trying to sound like Whitey, or act like him. But to make ol' Whitey accept me as I am, not as he thinks I should be" (40). If he takes the job, he confides to Alfreida, "That means I gotta deal with all the miserable freaks in this whole building... It means I gotta treat 'em all fair, even the ones I hate most 'n that hate me. And I gotta be fair, 'n do a good job, or that board'll say, 'Well, we never shoulda hired a nigger'" (41). The use of such a

volatile pejorative in and of itself is risky, and here it appears Inge is going out on a limb, not only with the subject matter, but also with the choice of language. And while the writing in this play may not have the finesse of Inge's previously successful work, this particular character exploration does reveal "the tightly wound repression and frustration coiled within the characters in the plays of the 1950s" (Voss 243).

In contrast to these minor literary risks with the "*Complex*" plays, the two most striking departures in style for Inge in this collection are *Bad Breath* and *A Murder*. In his introductory notes to the collection, Peter Ellenstein states that "the plays were chosen to represent the breadth of Inge's work," and Karen Carpenter recognizes that both of these plays "show a range unlike any other of his plays" (A Complex Evening; Notes and Inge Complex). *Bad Breath* is essentially a combination of farce and satire, clearly a radical shift in style for him. Carpenter further notes that the play is about "America's obsession with advertising and brand identity: our belief that the right product can cure all our ills" (A Complex Evening; Inge Complex). While this play was most likely written in the late 1960s, it appears that Inge was quite prescient: in 2012, our culture is equally obsessed (if not more so) with acquiring products that can provide quick fixes to our problems. Inge takes complete liberty and abandon at lampooning and satirizing the advertising trends from the early-to-mid 20th century, and makes the claims of his products seem ludicrous in their over-the-top solutions to the characters' various problems.

Bad Breath presents no fewer than eighteen miracle products in the course of two short scenes within a twenty page span. The products range from "Formula 316" that can cure bad breath, thus facilitating a move up the corporate ladder for John, to "Velvetone," a hand lotion which can help Mary find "complete marital happiness" (49, 67). Each character enters with either a trivial problem that needs to be solved, only to be presented with the miracle product to

solve said problem, or they tout an already successful product that has made their lives amazingly happy. John's bad breath is solved by "Formula 316," which not only allows him to invite his boss to dinner, it also results in a promotion; Mary and John's two youngest children sing the praises of "Sugar Crisp Oats," which not only provide tremendous vitamins and health benefits, they actually make you smarter (49, 51). Mary is so horrified by her husband's disappointment at her inability to make a decent cup of coffee that she actually attempts to kill herself by slitting her wrist, only to be rescued just in time by neighbor, Mrs. Goodman, who clearly mirrors Mrs. Olson, of the popular Folger's coffee commercials of the 1960s and 1970s. As if to top the absurdity of that situation, Inge follows Mrs. Goodman's presence with the entrance of Ernestine, "*a robust young woman dressed in overalls,*" who appears with a container of "new Capo" cleanser, which will readily remove the blood stains left in Mary's sink by her suicide attempt (53). With these "mini" commercials for the invented products, Inge clearly is satirizing not only specific products (from Mrs. Olson's miracle coffee, to teenagers touting the dating benefits of using a certain hair product), he is also satirizing the culture's gullibility and desire to have something outside ourselves solve our problems for us. The fact that he dares to satirize a suicide attempt over something as trivial as the quality of coffee, not to mention a product that can readily clean up the spilled blood from said suicide attempt, is an enterprise into a bleak, almost nihilistic tone that went far beyond anything Inge had explored in his previous successes.

In this satire, Inge ventures even further beyond his stylistic comfort zone with excessive sexual overtones. Once John's boss and his wife have arrived for dinner in scene 2, the play takes on even more overt sexual overtones when G.R. (John's boss) and Mary reveal that they have been involved in an ongoing affair. The situation is made even more ridiculous when Mary

exclaims, “Poor John! If only he knew what a thrill it is for a woman to make love to a man who shaves with Keenedge,” which is met with G.R.’s response, “Oh, if Peg only knew how a man’s blood tingles when he makes love to a woman who uses Voodoo Oil in her bath water” (62). Of course, on the very next page we learn that John and Peg have been involved in an ongoing physical relationship, only theirs is revealed to be even more passionate, and as the stage directions note, ludicrous: Peg “*kisses him passionately,*” and declares, “Oh, you are a tiger, John,” which is followed by the stage direction: “*A tiger head descends upon JOHN’s head*” (63, s.d.). This rather bizarre event is the result of John’s use of the product, “Jungle Beast shaving lotion,” which “brings out the savage passion in every woman” (63). The ensuing stage directions state, “*Another tiger head and skin descends upon PEG, and she grabs JOHN to her and kisses him devouringly, with a guttural growl. Now they go into a spasm of growling, clawing, and uninhibited love-making. This spasm lasts for several moments, leaving them both panting*” (s.d. 64). Each situation’s desperation builds upon the previous scene’s ridiculousness, and as the short play progresses, the extreme and ridiculous nature of the products’ quick-fixes also escalates. Inge was not only poking fun at the culture’s “obsession with advertising and brand identity,” as Carpenter states, but also with the culture’s desire and obsession for immediate gratification (Notes, *A Complex Evening*, Inge: Complex).

Bad Breath concludes Act I of “*A Complex Evening*,” and in stark contrast, Act II begins with Inge’s existential experiment, *A Murder*, which is the only play in this collection that had been previously published. It appears in a volume published by Dramatists Plays Service, Inc., titled, *Two Short Plays by William Inge*, which includes another short play, *The Call*. *A Murder* is another distinct departure in style for Inge – in this case, rather than comic satire, it is bleak,

mysterious, and absurdist, with much left unexplained. Even the characters are simply given epithets: The Man, The Landlady, and The Houseman, rather than specific names.

The premise of the play seems simple on the surface: A man is looking to rent a room. As he begins to inspect the room, the Landlady is unusually reluctant to provide a lock for the closet. He persists with his request, only to be met with the Landlady's cryptic comment, "Don't you see? Locks are something we must provide for ourselves. . . . I might even be doing you a disservice to provide a lock for you" (75). Within the first few pages, it is clear that something is amiss and unusual with this rental procedure, yet the Man continues with the process of renting the room, eventually—and rather unusually—succumbing to each atypical hindrance that he is presented with.

The unorthodox nature of the process is exemplified when the subject of money is presented. Both the cost of the rent and the cost of the lock are exorbitant. The Man is understandably outraged when the Landlady reveals the unrealistic rent charge of \$100 a day (steep even by today's standards), to which the Landlady calmly counters with enigmatic statements such as, "Rent is never as high as it seems," and "We always pay more than we expect to, don't we?" (73, 74). Equally enigmatic, the Man comments to himself, "One never realizes the prices one is going to have to pay," further intriguing the audience, making one wonder what lies beneath these seemingly innocuous, yet duplicitous comments. After the Houseman mysteriously appears and installs the lock for the Man, he calmly tells the Man that the charge is "Five hundred dollars, including labor" (87), at which the Man, yet again, understandably balks. As with the Landlady, the Houseman's explanations are philosophical: "But you see, we don't pay for things what they're worth in that sense. . . . We pay for things according to how important they are" (87). Of course, the Man argues that the Houseman's logic

is “absurd,” and the Houseman concludes with “But everything is absurd. . . . When we consider that the things we think are absurd are just as true as the things we don’t think are absurd, then you have to believe that everything is absurd, or nothing is absurd. . . . I just want to help you look at things philosophically. It’ll help you pay my price with understanding. You see, sir, the prices are fixed. They’re eternal. I can’t change them. They’ll always be” (88, 89). It is at this point that we see Inge’s direct attempt “to work his way into a new creative vein for his drama,” as friend and colleague, Jack Garfein, claimed (245). Baird Shuman, in *William Inge, Revised Edition*, also noted that with this particular play, Inge was “trying new techniques as he made a despairing attempt to continue writing despite the hostile reception of his plays from *Loss* [*A Loss of Roses*] onward” (130). One can argue that this passage is a bit heavy-handed, and perhaps Inge’s attempt at experimentation was a bit clumsy, however, the mysterious exchange, along with the ultimate acquiescence of the Man to the circumstances, nonetheless underscore the absurdist quality of the piece, as well as the metaphysical musings that the audience is left to ponder.

In the midst of the rental process, the Landlady proceeds to fill out the requisite forms with the Man. Yet again, the process begins simple enough, asking for “[t]he essential things,” but once we get past the man’s name (“John Miller Mull,” described by the Landlady as “unusual”), the questions, as well as the answers, become rather unconventional (76). The subsequent questions call for the “happiest day, or moment, in your life,” followed by “the most unhappy day,” and culminate in what the Landlady refers to as “the painful question,”—“What is your crime?” (77, 78, 80). The fact that these unorthodox questions are on a rental application does not seem to faze the Man, which, oddly enough, enables the audience to acquiesce alongside him. Although he is unable to clearly answer the “painful question” about his “crime,”

he speculates, “I suppose I must have committed a crime at some time in my life, but I can’t remember what it was. . . . I grieve about something I can’t remember. . . . If I did commit a crime, I know it was something unpremeditated” (80, 81). At this point, the title of the play enters one’s mind, leaving audience members (and readers) to speculate, as well.

These peculiar exchanges culminate in the mysterious and bizarre discovery of a dead child in the dresser drawer in the Man’s newly rented room. The Man is understandably horrified by what he discovers, and while the Landlady is initially shocked, she quickly dismisses the horrid presence of the dead child by saying, “Maybe it will eventually disappear. . . . The same way it got there” (91). This mysterious event is laden with metaphor, as the Man laments the loss of the child: “Oh God, why do we kill all that is most precious in us?” (92). He wonders, “maybe it was something I could have prevented,” and then concludes, “I’ll never rest” (92). Whatever precious treasures the Man wanted to lock securely away must be carried with him, as he moves on to find another room to rent, probably for even more money. After being fleeced for more money by the Landlady and coerced into leaving a tip for the Houseman, the Man leaves, dissatisfied, still wondering who killed the boy. After the Man’s departure, the Houseman discovers that the boy’s body has mysteriously disappeared, and in latent answer to the Man’s departing question, the Houseman declares, “it’s better if they don’t find out, ain’t it?” (95).

Throughout the play, we are presented with seemingly simple tasks (renting a room; procuring a lock; filling out forms) that are all met with unusual, even bizarre, complications. While the story may not have clear-cut causal structure, Inge still is able to create suspense and intrigue, keeping the audience in the dark just as much as the Man. Shuman notes that “Inge was well aware of the absurdist movement,” and that *A Murder* “projects a life that is irrational,

illogical, inchoate, and contradictory” (130). In short, Inge managed to create a textbook absurdist drama within the framework of a realistic drama.

Both *A Murder* and *Bad Breath* reveal a writer who was interested in stepping outside his comfort zone, while *The Love Death* reveals a writer who felt he was admonished and unappreciated by society and critics for doing just that. While *A Silent Call*, *Moved In*, and *Morning on the Beach*, all possess some classic Inge characteristics—such as characters struggling to find their place in the world—they do so with a different level of investigation and depth. These condensed, yet in-depth character and societal investigations manage to dig deeper into character and thematic elements, much more so than is sometimes possible in a long-play format. It appears the short-play format almost forces a more concentrated examination of character, theme, and content. Further, within the collection, there are notable instances where Inge’s presence is deeply felt; one can often hear Inge speaking through one or more of his characters, and given the purported time-frame when these plays were written, it seems clear that Inge was trying to stretch his literary and theatrical muscles, and perhaps inadvertently (and sometimes deliberately) comment on his own life struggles.

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