



Uncloseting Drama:
Tennessee Williams, William Inge, and Gay
Identity in Terry Teachout's *Billy and Me*

by Chris McCoy, PhD

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I want to begin with a personal story about the circumstances that led me to write this paper for presentation at the Inge festival. Terry Teachout was the lead drama critic for the *Wall Street Journal* from 2003 until his untimely death in January of this year. He was also a graduate of William Jewell College where I serve as Associate Professor of Theatre. A few years ago, Terry was honored by the college as part of our Achievement Day celebrations and in a symposium with students, he talked about turning to playwriting late in his career describing his work *Satchmo at the Waldorf*, a one-actor-two-character play about Louis Armstrong and his manager as well as his play, *Billy and Me*, which explores two fictional encounters based upon the real-life friendship between Tennessee Williams and William Inge. I found the Midwest connections of these three writers to be serendipitous to the purposes of the Inge Festival: Teachout was from Cape Girardeau, MO and began his career as a music critic in Kansas City, Tennessee Williams spent much of his childhood in Saint Louis, and William Inge is, obviously, from Independence, Kansas. Despite -- or because of -- being from the Midwest, each of these three writers went on to illustrious careers shaping the tenor of the American theatre, although by different means. As a director, I thought it would be ideal to present Teachout's play at the Inge Festival or at least in the Kansas City area, so I contacted him to receive the script since it has not yet been published. We were in communication about the possibility of a regional production until his untimely passing in January of 2022.

The play, *Billy and Me*, received its world premiere at Palm Beach Dramaworks in West Palm Beach, Florida in December of 2017 and it is interesting to surmise how the play might

have developed with further performances or readings had Teachout lived long enough to continue the work. The script that I received from Teachout was labeled Draft #100-A 11/12/17. Whether or how much Teachout intended to keep working on the play is unknown, but he seemed very eager for future performances and was quite intrigued by bringing the work to Inge's hometown or the Kansas City area. The tragic circumstances surrounding his death make these suppositions unforeseen and unknowable, one of those stories left to the imagination of theatre historians. And in this way, the potentialities surrounding the possible production history of this play are similar to its content: Teachout wrote two fictional encounters between Tennessee Williams and William Inge at two distinctive moments in their careers, imagining what the playwrights might have thought about, felt, and discussed – or not – in these moments in their own lives. Indeed, the play begins with an epigraph stating, “This is a work of fiction, freely based on fact” (3).

I would describe the work as a postmodern memory play fluidly blending time and location, melding fictional encounters with biographical fact, and loosely borrowing characters, scenarios, and style from mostly Williams', but also Inge's work. In the opening scene, Williams says, “The play is ... memory” quoting an exact line from Tom's opening speech in *The Glass Menagerie*. Williams goes on to describe this work as “A memory play about a memory play. *The Glass Menagerie*. Perhaps you can't remember it” speaking to the audience with a stage directed “twinkle” in his eye. The play portends to have very realistic, even specific encounters that were alluded to in Williams' memoir as well as the suppositions of theatre historians and theatrical gossip, but Teachout's script uses non-realistic theatricalism to create a palimpsest of history about the playwrights' lives, careers, and most importantly personal relationship. This queering of time and space, fact and imagination, biography and fiction, and

stylistic psychological realism with expressionism creates a multiplicitous consciousness in the work akin to W.E.B. DuBois' "double consciousness," serving the same purpose in presenting two gay playwrights whose identities, lives, and work were confined by their historical era. The work of Williams has been described as "Closet Drama" by David Savran in his monograph, *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, and the same could be said about Inge. Whereas the literary definition of "closet drama" is a play that is intended to be read rather than performed, Savran adopts the term to describe the work of midcentury writers who were not able to depict homosexuality overtly on stage and, therefore, coded their language, characters, and situations that spoke to the gay experience and desire through "closeted" innuendoes. Savran wrote, these writers "were able to safeguard homosexual identities and facilitate an almost wild proliferation of queer desires only by keeping the homosexual perpetually out of sight, invisible, elsewhere" (157). Writing this play in 2017, I think Teachout's purpose was to create an "Uncloseted Drama" about the lives of Williams and Inge by enfolding their own work and careers into an open discourse of gay identity in the American Theatre of the midcentury.

The play begins with a disembodied woman's voice calling, "Tom? Thomas? Tom? Tom!" (5). The first word of which is also Amanda's first line in *The Glass Menagerie*. But the second word, "Thomas" references Tennessee's actual name, Thomas Lanier Williams III. Even in the opening iteration, we see a blending of biography and fiction: a reference to Williams' first success d'estime as well the presumed voice of his mother calling him by his given name rather than nom de plume. A spotlight rises on a 71-year-old Tennessee Williams presumably on the night that he dies, although this is never directly addressed in the text. In this opening monologue, Tennessee variegates between yelling at his nonpresent mother, castigating a pinstriped Inge with the line, "You wouldn't have had a life without me," and taking "little red

devil” pills, a reference to his Seconal addiction and one of the possible reasons for his death. In the first paragraph of this monologue, Williams addresses his mother about his sister, Rose, whose schizophrenia was treated with a prefrontal lobotomy in the 1930s and the subsequent family dynamic that inspired *The Glass Menagerie*. Next, Williams “sees” William Inge, who he calls “Billy” and says “No! No! Didn’t do it to you, either – you did it to yourself! Never wrote one line in your whole life anybody’s going to remember ten years from now. Five years from now” (5). These are pretty harsh words for a play that is ostensibly about the relationship between these two men, but it points to the fragility of ego surrounding the issue of success that becomes a major theme later in the work. By the end of the play, Inge is monetarily and popularly successful whereas Tennessee was coming off a string of flops, which explains the vitriol in this opening monologue. But this also raises the question of Inge’s popular success versus Williams’ critical success, which the playwright/critic Teachout seems to be grappling with in his own way. By giving Williams’ voice solo la primera at the beginning of the play, he undermines Inge’s own contributions and perspectives. This makes one wonder if these are Williams’ perceptions and attitudes or mainly Teachout’s? Finally, Williams’ monologue settles into apologizing to Inge and retiring to his “little red pill” with stage directions that focus our attention on the pill bottle, a symbolic gesture given that Williams’ cause of death was choking on the cap of his medication. Williams hears “the applause and cheers of an unseen audience” and addresses them before becoming completely disoriented and calling for assistance from off stage. A “Stage Manager” enters to assist Williams and he says, “Dear boy... I seem to be a bit addled. Exactly where am I?” To which the Stage Manager eventually responds, “...you have one more story to tell. [...] You know the one. Billy.” (7). And we are propelled into the main narrative of the play.

The presence of a Stage Manager as character is interesting as it alludes to Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, which is also referenced later in the play. Logistically, the presence of a third actor allows for the introduction of additional characters as we shall see, but in this moment the third actor serves to turn the narrative direction toward the central story. This narrative device demonstrates one of the formalistic contrivances utilized by both Inge and Williams: that of the outsider, for example, Hal Carter in *Picnic*, the arrival of the characters in *Bus Stop*, Blanche's arrival in *Streetcar Named Desire*, and the Gentleman Caller in *Glass Menagerie*. The appearance of an outside character who throws imbalance into the status quo of a community or relationships or environment are basic tenants in midcentury playwriting recalling the isolationist tendencies of community formation during the era, particularly in small towns and the midwest.

The next scene jumps to New Year's Eve 1944, the night *The Glass Menagerie* premiered in Chicago. The setting is described as "a bar in Chicago, not too far from the Civic Theatre", but the implications of this space are that it is a secluded gay bar long before Stonewall normalized and eventually legalized such institutions. The scene begins with a decorative monologue by Tennessee describing the scenery, which is similar to Williams' notoriously specific and decorative stage directions in works such as *The Glass Menagerie*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Streetcar Named Desire*. Central to the setting is a table at which now a much younger (aged 33) Tennessee Williams sits and drinks. There is an offstage room where we hear the "lost souls [...] boozing", referring to the gay denizens of this bar who are never seen but periodically heard singing showtunes or songs from the hit parade of the American songbook. Tennessee uses the dramatic power to transform the actor playing the Stage Manager into a waiter in the bar, now called Leo. While there is no reference if Leo represents an actual person, Tennessee Williams was friends with James Leo Herlihy, a younger writer most remembered for his novels

and subsequent film adaptations *Midnight Cowboy* and *All Fall Down*, the latter of which was adapted to the screen by William Inge and both the film adaptation of *All Fall Down* as well as the Broadway debut of Inge's *A Loss of Roses* starred Warren Beatty. While this scene is set in Chicago and there is no indication that Herlihy spent time there, there are rumors of a tryst between Williams and Herlihy, so the waiter Leo may be an homage to this relationship. However, Teachout dispels any indication of a direct reference with Williams' line, "There were so many charming young things – I can't keep them straight anymore" (9).

As mentioned, central to this setting is a table at which Tennessee sits to drink. The alcoholism of both Williams and Inge is well documented and plays a significant theme in the work. The intoxicating self-medication of alcohol for gay men in this era when their identities were marginalized and lives at risk for expressing their desire is synecdochic to Williams' and Inge's lives and explored in their plays *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Come Back, Little Sheba*. Teachout introduces the theme of alcoholism in an exchange between Williams and Leo about Laurette Taylor, the actress who originated the role of Amanda, and her own struggle with alcoholism. Williams reports to Leo: "She was plastered [...] She's got a flask hidden on the set. I just know it. She can't remember her damn lines!" (11). Teachout makes alcohol one of the driving conflicts of the play, which is significant since the later gay rights movement itself began in bars, most notably the Stonewall Inn in New York. Pre-1969 it was illegal in the state of New York to serve an openly homosexual customer at a bar, just one of the many injustices and oppressions placed upon LGBT individuals. This law was one of the first that the Mattachine Society decided to chip away at through legal recourse before the Stonewall Riots literally and figuratively burst the doors open to the burgeoning gay liberation front. Thus, the connection

between the characters' alcoholism with the space of a prototypical gay bar serves as an adumbration for the future Gay Rights Movement further uncloseting the history of this drama.

Before Inge arrives in the scene, Williams explains to the audience how they first met in St. Louis by quoting his memoirs: "Bill came to our suburban home to interview me. He was embarrassingly 'impressed' by my burgeoning career as a playwright... He made my homecoming an exceptional pleasure. When I returned to *Menagerie* in Chicago, Bill shortly arrived to attend and cover the play" (14). Inge was sent to review the opening of *The Glass Menagerie* by The Saint Louis Star-Times, where he worked as theatre critic and arts reporter. One can see why Teachout as a critic himself was drawn to tell this particular story. The stage directions describe Inge's entrance: "He is pale, sickly-looking, and completely straight-acting" (16), the latter description being of prime importance. Inge seems to be struggling with self-composure: he asks Williams if they can go to a different bar, he orders ginger ale rather than liquor, and evades the waiter's obvious flirtation. Despite this behavior, Williams prattles on protesting, "You are acting like a deacon in a whorehouse", "We were knocking down hooch by the barrel in St. Louis", and "I'm not asking you to strip buck naked and dance on the bar. Yet" (17-18). The contrapuntal dialogue between the two characters is reminiscent of Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* where Maggie monologues to her husband for much of Act I while Brick attempts to deny and disguise his presumed homosexuality in avoiding conflict about their relationship. Teachout seems to take this narrative device as inspiration and homage to Williams' style. Later critics suggest that Williams' strong female characters are the dissimulated persona of a gay man or drag queen and presenting Tennessee as the loquacious protagonist against Inge's restrained and staid demeanor seems to reflect this critique. Williams attempts to persuade Inge to let loose by quoting a line from his one-act *And Tell Sad Stories of*

the Death of Queens: “I think in places known as gay, in secret clubs and private bars, the damned will serenade the damned with frantic drums and wild guitars” (21).

Since Inge is reluctant to take the gay bait, his closet still firmly intact, the conversation turns to Inge’s visit to Chicago. While he was sent to the city to review *The Glass Menagerie*, he is not allowed to speak of his impressions of the play despite Williams’ prodding. Instead, they talk about Inge the tourist, which was relegated to visiting the Chicago Art Institute.

Interestingly, the only artwork that Inge discusses is George Seurat’s “A Sunday on La Grand Jatte,” the painting that is the inspiration for Stephen Sondheim’s Pulitzer Prize-winning musical *Sunday in the Park with George*. One wonders if this exchange is a theatre trivialists’ easter egg hidden by Teachout alluding to the fact that both Williams and Inge were gay playwrights who received Pulitzer Prizes for their dramatic work as was Stephen Sondheim, whose musicals may also be categorized as closet dramas?

Once the conversation turns back to the play, Inge prods Williams to admit that *The Glass Menagerie* is biographical and they connect over their shared experiences of growing up in the Midwest within dysfunctional family structures. While the post-World War II generation is viewed retroactively as the era of the nuclear family, it is interesting to note that most of this generation’s greatest playwrights actually explored the toxicity of family relations and the myth of traditional family values. Eugene O’Neill, Arthur Miller, Lorraine Hansberry, Lillian Hellman, Williams, and Inge all wrote plays skewering the family dynamic providing a dramatic voice to the otherwise white-washed, patriarchal, and heteronormative conception of the midcentury nuclear family. For Williams and Inge, this debasement may have stemmed from the fact that their gay identities were not recognized within cultural norms. Teachout succinctly explores this topic in a brief exchange where Inge says, “Lots of stories in small towns.”

Williams responds, “And not many secrets.” To which Inge agrees: “You always know what everybody’s thinking. And if you don’t think the same – well, you get to wondering if there’s something wrong with you” (31). This exchange delivers a turn in the dialogue; no longer are we concerned with the outside world or setting; at this moment, we focus on the internal tension of the two characters and their conception of their own identities as well as their relationship with each other.

This connection over their small-town Americana upbringing in the Bible belted Midwest leads to an interesting exchange about their mothers. One of the many tropes in gay literature is the overbearing mother and absent father and Williams and Inge seem to hint around this narrative device with their own stories of being outsiders in their homes. Inge says, “Maude [his mother...] called me her ‘speckled egg.’ Said ‘I wonder how you ever got into my nest’” (32). Williams responds: “A speckled egg. Lots of writers are like that. I was. So was Rose. Pair of eggs in the wrong damn nest.” To which Inge replies, “Like Tom and Laura” bringing the conversation back to *The Glass Menagerie*. In this moment, the concept of naming surfaces as a theme important to the uncloseting purposes of the play. Tom and Laura are the character names in *Glass Menagerie* standing in for Tennessee (nee Tom) and Rose, Inge asks Williams not to call him “Billy” presumably because of its diminutive and, thereby, feminine connotation, and Tennessee explains that his given name is Thomas, but his father called him “Miss Nancy” (33). Embedded in this exchange is the fact that the two characters cannot name the central identification that connects them: the fact that they are gay in a world where this cannot be openly discussed. Prior to this exchange about names, Inge has insisted that he is not gay and Williams fends off the waiter’s advances on his behalf, although we can tell that he is not entirely convinced. The encoded conversation about names and naming leads to a connection

between the two over a quote from Baudelaire's poem, "To the Reader", which Williams begins and Inge completes: "Hypocrite reader... my double. My brother" (33). The poem is a scathing critique of what it means to be a tortured writer, but also what it meant to be gay in historically oppressive times. While Inge denies his homosexuality, this shared bit of dialogue seems to imply otherwise and creates the first real moments of connection we see between the two characters.

After this exchange, the two characters share stories from their past. Inge opens up with a childhood story about playing *The Count of Monte Cristo* in his home in Independence as inspiration for his love of theatre and the movies. He also regales his experience of working as a teacher, which Williams says is better than being a starving writer in the Vieux Carré, the title and subject of one of his later plays. And this leads to Inge's admission that he, too, wants to be a playwright: "Traveling salesmen... spinster schoolteachers... All that loneliness – I could make it mean something! Like you did with Rose!" (39). *Picnic* and *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* are alluded to in this dialogue, but Williams points out that he "seems to have too many secrets" and asks, "Isn't it time you opened up the bag?" (41). The implication is that until Inge can be truthful about himself – his alcoholism, his homosexuality – he can never be a great playwright. The climax of this act occurs when Williams shares writing advice to his newfound friend: "Be who you are. Whoever you are. Drunk or sober, good or bad – or in between. Write the truth, live the truth. No more secrets. Because human ideals are hats too big for the human head! [...] You got to look in that mirror every morning and say, 'goddamn it, that's me!'" (44). In this intimate moment, Williams attempts to kiss Inge, but he pushes him away. Then, Williams launches into a monologue that summarizes the purpose of this uncloseting drama:

Don't try to tell me you've never been in a joint like this. You knew where we were as soon as you walked through the door. I never saw anybody look so scared. Sweating

like a whore in church. And don't go telling me about that imaginary girlfriend of yours, either. Heard that one a thousand times. [...]. You know what you are and so does everybody else, and you hate it... because you know you can't change it. Hell, I couldn't change if I wanted to—and I don't want to! I got plenty of things to feel guilty about, baby, but that's not one of them. I am what I am! That's my wisdom. Wisdom of the flesh. Empty your loneliness into ripe young male flesh, then write about it. Maybe you can't say so straight out, but there are ways to write it so people know. Our people. Tom, he's me! And he's queer! Anybody with half a brain knows that. It's all part of the truth, baby. The truth you've got to tell if you want to write plays about your little jerkwater town [...]. You've got to write about sissy little Billy Inge. You go to be him! [...] No more secrets! No more shame! Live your life! (45)

With this speech, Williams, and thereby Teachout, intends to teach a lesson in playwriting via criticism: write the truth. Sanford Meisner, one of the great acting teachers of the American Method that emerged contemporaneously with midcentury psychological realism wrote, "Acting is the ability to behave absolutely truthfully under the imaginary circumstances" (Meisner, 15). Williams' screed gets to this point: that theatre of this era – or any era – must unearth secrets, must speak truthfully to status quo, must disassemble the master narratives, and, ultimately, must unclose the drama.

In the interest of time, I'll briefly delineate the events of Act II. The time is now 1959 and the setting is Inge's New York apartment. Detritus of his success in the theatre and film are apparent from the Willem de Kooning painting on his wall to framed posters of his Broadway successes (*Come Back, Little Sheba, Picnic, Bus Stop, and The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*) to a copy of the November 1958 issue of Harper's magazine, which included an article by Robert Brustein titled, "The men-taming women of William Inge." The event is the Broadway premiere of Inge's play, *A Loss of Roses*, which began his critical demise just as Williams was experiencing a tempering of the critical reception and popular appeal of his plays that never quite matched his early output. Whereas Act I introduces the two playwrights at the beginning of their careers full of potential and unknown success, Act II delivers aging playwrights at the denouement of their careers heady with success, but questioning what this means when a

playwright is only as good as his or her latest hit. Much of the act dwells on the bad reviews of *A Loss of Roses* and how the two playwrights struggle with their own identities now that their time in the limelight seems to be fading. There is an interesting exchange about the new playwrights that have taken American drama by storm. Williams says, “Mr. Beckett, Mr. Pinter, Miss Edwina Albee, all the new kiddies in town, they’re onto something. Something we can’t do. In fact, I do believe they’re making us look just the least bit old-fashioned” (61).

Admittedly the action for Act II is far less dramatic until Inge admits that he put up his own money to back *A Loss of Roses* on Broadway, a slight that Williams admonishes and thereby reproduces many arguments from Act I about Inge closeting his identity due to Broadway and Hollywood demands. After a heated discussion about the merits of their work – Williams calling *Picnic* unpoetic and *A Loss of Roses* phony, Inge calling Williams’ *Camino Real* a “pretentious piece of shit” (64) – Williams storms out of the apartment in reaction to Inge’s mention of his sister, Rose, as the ultimate betrayal. In a melodramatic scene, Inge attempts suicide by swallowing a bottle of pills, a foreshadowing of Inge’s psychological demise. Williams reenters the scene ostensibly to retrieve his bag – a rather weak dramatic device given the heat of their last exchange – and he calls a doctor (played by the third actor) and nurses him back to life.

Admittedly, Act II feels as contrived as the critics’ reception of both playwrights’ later works and maybe that is the intention. As we have seen, Teachout borrows freely from the style and situations of Williams and Inge in telling this story and the well-made play/psychological realism effect of this final act may be an homage to their own faltering innovation. The one shining difference in Act II is Teachout’s epilogue, though it is not titled in the script as such. After Inge is nursed back to health, Williams pontificates in monologue form a final message that conveys the sense of truth in being a playwright:

You wouldn't be human if it didn't make you feel good to know one of your plays changed somebody's life. But that's not why folks like us write. Not to change anybody's life, not to change the world—none of that bullshit. The real reason we write, Bill, is because we have to. We can't help ourselves. We pull all the guilt and the shame out of our guts and string it across the stage, over and over again. Good or bad, makes no difference. [...] You're a writer like you're a queer—it's in your blood. It's who you are. (88)

With these words Teachout unclosets the work of Tennessee Williams and William Inge allowing their true voices and identities to be acknowledged and understood as gay midcentury playwrights who were so marginalized and limited in their era. Teachout's play unclosets the drama of gay, midcentury American playwrights by exploiting the tropes of their own work, such as alcoholism and addiction, overbearing mothers and absent fathers, anonymous sexual encounters and queer spaces, coded language and behavior, the double entendre of music and theatre, connection with other marginalized groups such as women and African-Americans, and the Midwesterners who escape the confines of small-town life for the liberation of a big city. Teachout's play, *Billy and Me*, unclosets the lives and oeuvre of Tennessee Williams and William Inge liberating their artistic output through a LGBTQIA lens and reclaiming their theatrical legacies for a 21st century audience.

Works Cited

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