

SYDNEY
THEATRE
CO
EDUCATION

SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'
SUDDENLY
LAST SUMMER



ON
CUE

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Compiled by Hannah Brown.

The activities and resources contained in this document are designed for educators as the starting point for developing more comprehensive lessons for this production. Hannah Brown is the Education Projects Officers for the Sydney Theatre Company. You can contact Hannah on hbrown@sydneytheatre.com.au

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ABOUT *ON CUE* AND STC

ABOUT *ON CUE*

In 2014, STC Ed is developing a new suite of resources located on our website to enrich and strengthen teaching and learning surrounding the plays in the STC season. Each show will be accompanied by an On Cue e-publication which will feature all the essential information for teachers and students, such as curriculum links, information about the playwright, synopsis, character analysis, thematic analysis and suggested learning experiences. For more in-depth digital resources surrounding the ELEMENTS OF DRAMA, DRAMATIC FORMS, STYLES, CONVENTIONS and TECHNIQUES, visit the STC Ed page on our website.

Such resources include:

- videos
- design sketchbooks
- worksheets
- posters

ABOUT SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY

In 1980, STC's first Artistic Director Richard Wherrett defined STC's mission as to provide "first class theatrical entertainment for the people of Sydney – theatre that is grand, vulgar, intelligent, challenging and fun."

Almost 35 years later, under the leadership of Artistic Director Andrew Upton, that ethos still rings true. STC offers a diverse program of distinctive theatre of vision and scale at its harbourside home venue, The Wharf; Sydney Theatre at Walsh Bay; and Sydney Opera House, as its resident theatre company.

STC has a proud heritage as a creative hub and incubator for Australian theatre and theatre makers, developing and producing eclectic Australian works, interpretations of classic repertoire and great international writing. STC strives to create theatre experiences that reflect Sydney's distinctive personality and engage audiences.

Strongly committed to engagement in the community, STC's Education and Communities programs aim to inspire theatre appreciation and participation not only in theatres but also in schools, community halls; wherever people get together. STC offers an innovative School Drama™ program; partners with groups in metropolitan Sydney, regional centres and rural areas; and reaches

beyond NSW with touring productions throughout Australia. Through these partnerships and initiatives, STC plays a part in ensuring a creative, forward-thinking and sociable future by engaging with young people, students and teachers.

The theatre careers of many of Australia's internationally renowned artists have been launched and fostered at STC, including Mel Gibson, Judy Davis, Hugo Weaving, Geoffrey Rush, Toni Collette, Rose Byrne, Benedict Andrews and Cate Blanchett.

STC often collaborates with international artists and companies and, in recent years, the company's international profile has grown significantly with productions touring extensively to great acclaim.

STC is assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, by its arts funding and advisory body, and by the New South Wales Government through Arts NSW.

sydneytheatre.com.au

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

SUITABLE FOR

Students in Years 11 to 12

SUBJECTS

Drama

DRAMA STAGE 6 (HSC PRELIMINARY)

Outcome P3.1
Outcome P3.2
Outcome P3.3
Outcome P3.4

DRAMA STAGE 6 (HSC)

Outcome H3.1
Outcome H3.2
Outcome H3.3
Outcome H3.4
Outcome H3.5



Susan Prior, Eryn Jean Norvill and Brendan McLelland in STC's *Suddenly Last Summer*, 2015. Image: Brett Boardman ©

SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS

SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER

BY TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

SISTER FELICITY
PAULA ARUNDELL

MISS FOXHILL
MELITA JURISIC

GEORGE
BRANDON MCCLELLAND

MRS VENABLE
ROBYN NEVIN

CATHARINE
ERYN JEAN NORVILL

MRS HOLLY
SUSAN PRIOR

DOCTOR
MARK LEONARD WINTER

DIRECTOR
KIP WILLIAMS

DESIGNER
ALICE BABIDGE

LIGHTING DESIGNER
DAMIEN COOPER

COMPOSER & SOUND DESIGNER
STEFAN GREGORY

AV CONSULTANT
SHANE JOHNSON

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
HARRIET GILLIES

VOICE & TEXT COACH
CHARMIAN GRADWELL

PRODUCTION MANAGER
JOHN COLVIN

STAGE MANAGER
GEORGIA GILBERT

DEPUTY STAGE MANAGER
TODD EICHORN

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER
JAYMII KNIERUM

WIG, MAKE-UP & WARDROBE
SUPERVISOR
LAUREN A. PROIETTI

CAMERA OPERATOR
PHILIP CHARLES

AV OPERATOR
JASON JONES

SOUND OPERATOR
HAYLEY FORWARD

REHEARSAL PHOTOGRAPHER
ROBIN HEARFIELD

PRODUCTION PHOTOGRAPHER
BRETT BOARDMAN

1 HOURS 30 MINUTES, INCLUDING INTERVAL. THIS PRODUCTION PREMIERED AT THE DRAMA THEATRE, SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE, ON 13 FEBRUARY 2015.

ABOUT TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

IMMORTAL BIRD

IN THE JUNE 13, 1985 EDITION OF THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS, IN THE PROCESS OF REVIEWING TWO BIOGRAPHIES, GORE VIDAL WROTE OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS AS ONLY HE COULD.

A great deal has been made of Williams' homosexual adventures; not least, alas, by himself. Since those who write about him are usually more confused about human sexuality than he was, which is saying a lot, some instruction is now in order.

Williams was born, 1911, in the heart of the Bible belt (Columbus, Mississippi); he was brought up in St Louis, Missouri, a town more Southern than not. In 1919, God-fearing Protestants imposed Prohibition on the entire United States. Needless to say, in this world of fierce Christian peasant values anything pleasurable was automatically sin; and to be condemned. Williams may not have believed in God but he certainly believed in sin; he came to sex nervously and relatively late – in his twenties; his first experiences were heterosexual; then he shifted to homosexual relations with numerous people over many years. Although he never doubted that what he liked to do was entirely natural, he was obliged to tote the usual amount of guilt of a man of his time and place and class (lower-middle-class WASP, Southern-airs-and-graces division). In the end, he suffered from a sense of otherness, not unuseful for a writer.

But the guilt took a not-so-useful turn: he became a lifelong hypochondriac, wasting a great deal of psychic energy on imaginary illnesses. He was always about to die of some dread inoperable tumour. When I first met him (1948), he was just out of a Paris hospital; and he spoke with sombre joy of the pancreatic cancer that would soon

cause him to fall from the perch. Years later I discovered that the pancreatic cancer for which he had been hospitalised was nothing more than a half-mile or so of homely tapeworm. When he died (not of “an unwashed grape” but of suffocation caused by the inhaling of a nasal-spray top), an autopsy was performed and the famous heart (“I have suffered a series of cardiac seizures and arrests since my twelfth year”) was found to be in fine condition, and the liver that of a hero.

Just as Williams never really added to his basic repertory company of actors: Cornelius and Edwina [his father and mother], Reverend Dakin and Rose [his maternal grandparents], himself and Rose [his sister], he never picked up much information about the world during his half-century as an adult. He also never tried, consciously at least, to make sense of the society into which he was born. If he had, he might have figured out that there is no such thing as a homosexual or a heterosexual person. There are only homo- or heterosexual acts. Most people are a mixture of impulses if not practices, and what anyone does with a willing partner is of no social or cosmic significance.

So why all the fuss? In order for a ruling class to rule, there must be arbitrary prohibitions. Of all prohibitions, sexual taboo is the most useful because sex involves everyone. To be able to lock up someone or deprive him of employment because of his sex life is a very great power indeed, and one seldom used in civilized societies. But although the United States is the best and most perfect of earth's societies and

ABOUT TENNESSEE WILLIAMS (Cont.)

IMMORTAL BIRD

our huddled masses earth's envy, we have yet to create a civilisation, as opposed to a way of life. That is why we have allowed our governors to divide the population into two teams. One team is good, godly, straight; the other is evil, sick, vicious. Like the good team's sectarian press, Williams believed, until the end of his life, in this wacky division. He even went to an analyst who ordered him to give up both writing and sex so that he could be transformed into a good- team player. Happily, the analyst did not do in the Bird's beak, as Freud's buddy Fliess ruined the nose of a young lady, on the ground that only through an assault on the nose could onanism be stopped in its vile track. Also, happily, the Bird's anarchy triumphed over the analyst. After a troubling session on the couch, he would appear on television and tell Mike Wallace all about the problems of his analysis with one Dr Kubie, who not long after took down his shingle and retired from shrinkage.

Both *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* opened during that brief golden age (1945–1950) when the United States was everywhere not only regnant but at peace, something we have not been for the last thirty-five years. At the beginning, Williams was acclaimed by pretty much everyone; only *Time* magazine was consistently hostile, suspecting that Williams might be “basically negative” and “sterile”, code words of the day for fag. More to the point, *Time*'s founder, Henry Luce, had been born in China, son of a Christian missionary. “The greatest task of the United States in the twentieth century,” he once told me, “will be the Christianisation of China.” With so mad a

proprietor, it is no wonder that Time-Life should have led the press crusade against fags in general and Williams in particular.

Although Williams was able to survive as a playwright because he was supported by the reviewers of *The New York Times* and *Herald Tribune*, the only two newspapers that mattered for a play's success, he was to take a lot of flak over the years, often from Jewish journalists who employed – and employ – the same language in denouncing fags that sick Christians use to denounce Jews. After so much good-team propaganda, it is now widely believed that since Tennessee Williams liked to have sex with men (true), he hated women (untrue); as a result, his women characters are thought to be malicious caricatures, designed to subvert and destroy godly straightness.

But there is no actress on earth who will not testify that Williams created the best women characters in the modern theatre. After all, he never ceased to love Rose and Rose; and his women characters tended to be either one or the other. Faced with contrary evidence, the antifag brigade promptly switch to their fallback position. All right, so he didn't hate women (as real guys do – the ballbreakers!) but, worse, far worse, he thought he was a woman. Needless to say, a biblical hatred of women intertwines with the good team's hatred of fags. But Williams never thought of himself as anything but a man who could, as an artist, inhabit any gender; on the other hand, his sympathies were always with those defeated by “the squares”; or by time, once the

sweet bird of youth is flown. Or by death, “which has never been much in the way of completion.” [...]

Thirty-seven years ago this March, Tennessee Williams and I celebrated his thirty-seventh birthday in Rome, except that he said that it was his thirty-fourth birthday. Years later, when confronted with the fact that he had been born in 1911 not 1914, he said, serenely, “I do not choose to count as part of my life the three years that I spent working for a shoe company.” Actually, he spent ten months not three years in the shoe company, and the reason that he had changed his birth date was to qualify for a play contest open to those twenty-five or under. No matter. I thought him very old in 1948. But I was twenty-two in the spring of *annus mirabilis* when my novel *The City and the Pillar* was a best seller and his play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, was taking the world by storm; as it still does.

I must say I was somewhat awed by Tennessee's success. Of course, he went on and on about the years of poverty but, starting with *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), he had an astonishingly productive and successful fifteen years: *Summer and Smoke* (1947), *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1956), *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958). But even at that high moment in Rome, the Bird's eye was coldly realistic. “Baby, the playwright's working career is a short one. There's always somebody new to take your place.” I said that I didn't believe it would happen in his case, and I still don't. The best of his plays are as permanent as anything can be in the age of Kleenex. [...]

ABOUT TENNESSEE WILLIAMS (Cont.)

IMMORTAL BIRD

To my mind, the short stories, and not his Memoirs, are the true memoir of Tennessee Williams. Whatever happened to him, real or imagined, he turned into prose. Except for occasional excursions into fantasy, he sticks pretty close to life as he experienced or imagined it. No, he is not a great short story writer like Chekhov but he has something rather more rare than mere genius. He has a narrative tone of voice that is wholly convincing. In this, he resembles Mark Twain, a very different sort of writer (to overdo understatement); yet Hannibal, Missouri, is not all that far from St Louis, Missouri. Each is best at comedy and each was always uneasy when not so innocently abroad. Tennessee loved to sprinkle foreign phrases throughout his work, and they are always wrong. As Henry James said of Whitman: "Oh, yes, a great genius; undoubtedly a very great genius! Only one cannot help deploring his too-extensive acquaintance with the foreign languages."

Tennessee worked every morning on whatever was at hand. If there was no play to be finished or new dialogue to be sent round to the theatre, he would open a drawer and take out the draft of a story already written and begin to rewrite it. I once found him revising a short story that had just been published. "Why," I asked, "rewrite what's already in print?" He looked at me, vaguely; then he said, "Well, obviously it's not finished." And went back to his typing.

In Paris, he gave me the story 'Rubio Morena' to read. I didn't like it. So fix it, he said. He knew, of course, that there is no fixing someone else's story (or life) but he was

curious to see what I would do. So I reversed backward-running sentences, removed repetitions, eliminated half those adjectives and adverbs that he always insisted do their work in pairs. I was proud of the result. He was deeply irritated. "What you have done is remove my style, which is all that I have."

Tennessee could not possess his own life until he had written about it. This is common. To start with, there would be, let us say, a sexual desire for someone. Consummated or not, the desire ("something that is made to occupy a larger space than that which is afforded by the individual being") would produce reveries. In turn, the reveries would be written down as a story. But should the desire still remain unfulfilled, he would make a play of the story and then – and this is why he was so compulsive a working playwright – he would have the play produced so that he could, at relative leisure, like God, rearrange his original experience into something that was no longer God's and unpossessable but his. The Bird's frantic lifelong pursuit of – and involvement in – play productions was not just ambition or a need to be busy; it was the only way that he ever had of being entirely alive. The sandy encounters with his first real love, a dancer, on the beach at Provincetown and the dancer's later death ("an awful flower grew in his brain") instead of being forever lost were forever his once they had been translated to the stage where living men and women could act out his text and with their immediate flesh close at last the circle of desire. "For love I make characters in plays," he wrote; and did.



Eryn Jean Norvill in STC's *Suddenly Last Summer*, 2015. Image: Brett Boardman ©

I had long since forgotten why I called him the Glorious Bird until I reread the stories. The image of the bird is everywhere in his work. The bird is flight, poetry, life. The bird is time, death: "Have you ever seen the skeleton of a bird? If you have you will know how completely they are still flying." In 'The Negative' he wrote of a poet who can no longer assemble a poem: "Am I a wingless bird?" he writes; and soars no longer. [...]

I did not see much of him in the last years. I don't recall when he got into the habit of taking barbiturates (later, speed; and worse). He certainly did his mind and body no good; but he was tough as they come, mind and body. The current chroniclers naturally emphasize the horrors of the last years because the genre requires that they produce a Cautionary Tale. Also, since the last years are the closest to us, they give us no sense at all of what he was like for most of his long life. Obviously, he wasn't drunk or drugged all that much because he lived to write; and he wrote, like no one else.

I remember him best one noon in Key West during the early Fifties (exact date can be determined because on every jukebox 'Tennessee Waltz' was being mournfully sung by Patti Page). Each of us had finished work for the day. We met on South Beach, a real beach then. We made our way through sailors on the sand to a terraced restaurant where the Bird sat back in a chair, put his bare feet up on a railing, looked out at the bright blue sea, and, as he drank his first and only martini of the midday, said, with a great smile, "I like my life."

First published in The New York Review of Books, 1985.



Melita Jurisic, Robyn Nevin, Susan Prior, Paula Arundell, Mark Leonard Winter and Eryn Jean Norvill in STC's *Suddenly Last Summer*, 2015. Image: Brett Boardman ©

FROM THE DIRECTOR

KIP WILLIAMS

Tennessee Williams was a theatrical renegade. His writing was marked by a formal inventiveness that called upon theatre makers to reach beyond naturalism for something more heightened, something more poetic – operatic even. The boldness of his theatrical imagination – an imagination that was not limited to language, narrative and character, but also encompassed a masterful sense of space, light and music – often ignited debate amongst his contemporaries. In defence of the music composed for his 1951 play *The Rose Tattoo*, he wrote to the Theatre Musician's Union of New York, who threatened to have the play's score removed, "Modern creative theatre is a synthesis of all the arts, literary, plastic, musical etc. *The Rose Tattoo* is a notable case in point since I think it has gone further than any recent legitimate American drama to demonstrate this fact."

In *Suddenly Last Summer*, Williams takes his synthesis of the arts further to create a world half real, half surreal. In the opening stage directions of the play, Williams offers that the set "may be as unrealistic as the décor of a dramatic ballet". He goes on to describe the interior and exterior as being "blended". He completes his scene setting by orchestrating an animalistic cacophony emerging from a garden that resembles a prehistoric jungle. And all this for a play set in 1930s New Orleans.

In this production of *Suddenly Last Summer*, we have retained Williams' period setting, whilst employing contemporary theatrical devices (most prominently live video

(there is no pre-record))to open up the dreamlike landscape of this play. The social mores of early 20th century America remain a crucial context for the play's plot. They set up an important regulatory binary of watching and being watched. Moreover, Williams' deliberate decision to place his story in the past (*Suddenly* premiered in 1958, two decades after the action of the play takes place) further contributes to the memory-like, or suspended, experience of this play. Williams understood better than any that at its best, watching theatre could be like a waking dream.

He may have been a great admirer of the realism of Anton Chekhov, but Williams believed there were other revelations to be found in inhabiting a heightened reality, a vivid universe – one only a dreamer could believe as being fully real. In a diary entry penned towards the end of 1943, Williams wrote, "I cannot create. I am mentally torpid. And I do not seem to care very much. Perhaps it is the excessive sexual activity. Perhaps I have really burned my daemon out. I must find purity again. A whole undivided heart. Something simple and straight. A passionate calm... Am I still looking for God? No – just for myself. I pray for the strength to be separate, to be austere. That is the best future for me – asceticism and consecrated work. I see now that to grow or even to survive I must practice more discipline with myself and I am resolved to do so."

Suddenly Last Summer is a story shrouded in mystery. Like Dr Cukrowicz, we enter into the strange household of Violet Venable as outsiders and must slowly burrow our



Director Kip Williams in rehearsal for STC's *Suddenly Last Summer*, 2015.
Image: Grant Sparkes-Carroll. ©

FROM THE DIRECTOR (Cont.)

KIP WILLIAMS



FOR QUICK FACTS ON THE SHOW CHECK OUT OUR
PRE-SHOW IN-THE-KNOW FACT SHEET!

way towards the truth of what happened to Sebastian Venable. As director and long-time collaborator Elia Kazan often argued, Williams' plays were deeply personal – confessional even. It is in this sense that *Suddenly Last Summer* places us inside Williams' own personal quest for uncovering truth – the truth of those around us, but most pressingly the truth of that which is within.

Much like Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Williams' characters are plagued by an internal "horror", one they struggle to confront and keep at bay. It is this struggle that generates the tragedy of this work. It is a struggle Williams battled his whole life – between that which we project to those about us and that which is truly within. This battle resonates beyond the thankfully decaying tension of homophobia in this play, making this work of stage poetry eternally pertinent.

Sydney Theatre Company (2015). *Suddenly Last Summer* Program. Drama Theatre, Sydney Theatre Company.



Eryn Jean Norvill in STC's *Suddenly Last Summer*, 2015. Image: Brett Boardman©

CONTEXT

FREEMAN'S ICEPICK - A BRIEF HISTORY OF PSYCHOSURGERY

The word lobotomy entered the English language in 1936 thanks to the pioneering work of American psychiatrist Dr Walter Freeman. But the modern history of psychosurgery can be traced back further to Europe. In the 1880s, research on dogs performed by German physiologist Friedrich Goltz inspired Gottlieb Burkhardt, who ran a small asylum in Switzerland, to cut away at the frontal cortex of six of his patients to calm their auditory hallucinations. Though Burkhardt claimed some of these patients were subsequently easier to manage, the death of one patient and his colleagues' lack of regard for his methods were enough to stop this line of research.

Almost half a century later, in 1935, the Portuguese neuropsychiatrist António Egas Moniz attended a symposium in London where he learned about research carried out at Yale University by two experimental neurologists – Carlyle Jacobsen and John Fulton. They had found that damage to the frontal cortexes of chimpanzees led to a significant reduction in aggression. A few months later, on 12 November 1935, back in Lisbon, Moniz applied this knowledge to humans for the first time.

Moniz's procedure involved injecting pure alcohol around the front of the brain through holes drilled into the skull. The result was the severing of nerve fibres connecting the frontal cortex to the thalamus. It was dubbed a leucotomy (referring to the 'white matter' that was 'cut'). When Walter Freeman advocated for and redesigned the procedure in the United States, he preferred the term

lobotomy (referring more broadly to 'lobes' of the brain being excised).

Freeman's most extraordinary innovation was the icepick lobotomy, also known as the transorbital lobotomy, which he pioneered in 1945. In this version, the patient was rendered unconscious by electroshock before an instrument (very similar to a common icepick) was inserted above each eyeball through the orbit (eye socket) using a hammer. Once inside the brain, the instrument was moved back and forth to sever nerve connections.

Freeman's entire icepick operation could take as little as 10 minutes and was used on patients with relatively minor mental disorders. In one famous case, 12-year-old Howard Dully was lobotomised in 1960 because his stepmother found him defiant. Freeman's patient notes outlined the case for lobotomy, "He [Dully] objects to going to bed but then sleeps well. He does a good deal of daydreaming and when asked about it he says 'I don't know.' He turns the room's lights on when there is broad sunlight outside."

In Europe, Moniz's work would earn him a Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1949. That same year, in the United States, 5074 lobotomies were performed – approximately 14 a day. But the tide was beginning to turn. In 1950, the Soviet Union banned the procedure as "contrary to the principles of humanity" – Germany and Japan followed suit. In the US, psychosurgery had been generally accepted as an uncontroversial procedure. More than half of all public

hospitals employed psychosurgery, including some of the most prestigious psychiatric institutions, and bodies such as the American Psychiatric Association elected presidents who performed lobotomies. It was mainstream practice, though usually only in cases where other forms of psychotherapy were deemed insufficient.

However, 1949 proved to be psychosurgery's apex. As it fell out of fashion, the number of annual procedures dwindled (though they continued into the 1980s) and it became the subject of ridicule. As the poet Dorothy Parker put it, "I'd rather have a bottle in front of me, than a frontal lobotomy."

Walter Freeman performed his final icepick lobotomy in February 1967. The patient, a housewife named Helen Mortensen, was receiving her third lobotomy at his hands. She died from the operation and Freeman's career was over.

Sydney Theatre Company (2015). *Suddenly Last Summer* Program. Drama Theatre, Sydney Theatre Company.

CONTEXT (Cont.)

MOTHER AND MISS ROSE

AN EXTRACT FROM A 1981 INTERVIEW WITH TENNESSEE WILLIAMS BY DOTSON RADER IN THE PARIS REVIEW. WILLIAMS' SISTER, ROSE, WAS LOBOTOMISED IN 1943.

Mother chose to have Rose's lobotomy done. My father didn't want it. In fact, he cried. It's the only time I saw him cry. He was in a state of sorrow when he learned that the operation had been performed.

I was at the University of Iowa, and they just wrote me what happened. I didn't know anything about the operation. I'd never heard of a lobotomy. Mother was saying that it was bound to be a great success. Now, of course, it's been exposed as a very bad procedure that isn't practiced anymore. But it didn't embitter me against my mother. It saddened me a great deal because my sister and I cared for each other. I cared for her more than I did my mother. But it didn't embitter me against Miss Edwina. No, I just thought she was an almost criminally foolish woman.

Why was the operation performed? Well, Miss Rose expressed herself with great eloquence, but she said things that shocked Mother. I remember when I went to visit her at Farmington, where the state sanatorium was. Rose loved to shock Mother. She had great inner resentment towards her, because Mother had imposed this monolithic puritanism on her during adolescence. Rose said, "Mother, you know we girls at All Saints College, we used to abuse ourselves with altar candles we stole from the chapel." And Mother screamed like a peacock! She rushed to the head doctor, and she said, "Do anything, anything to shut her up!" Just like Mrs Venable, you know, except that Mother wasn't as cruel as Mrs Venable, poor bitch. Whatever Mother did, she didn't know what she was doing.

She was terrified of sex. She used to scream every time she had sex with my father. And we children were terrified. We'd run out in the streets and the neighbours would take us in.

The full interview 'Tennessee Williams, The Art of Theatre No.5' is available at theparisreview.org

Sydney Theatre Company (2015). *Suddenly Last Summer* Program. Drama Theatre, Sydney Theatre Company.

ABOUT THE PLAY

SECRETS NOT MEANT TO BE KEPT

Something unspeakable happened last summer. And now the dashing, debonair Sebastian Venable is dead. His young cousin is desperate to tell the truth about what happened, even if it finishes her.

But his mother will stop at nothing - nothing - to protect his reputation.

Renowned American playwright Tennessee Williams (*A Streetcar Named Desire*) has created the ultimate high-stakes battle of wills between Violet Venable (Robyn Nevin), the ruthless matriarch of a prominent New Orleans family, and her niece Catharine (Eryn Jean Norvill) – the sole witness to her cousin’s shocking death.

In the middle is Dr. Cukrowicz (Mark Leonard Winter), a neurosurgeon under pressure to discern torrid memory from grim reality before any more lives are spoiled.

In a new production of this rarely produced classic, STC Resident Director Kip Williams blends the powers of film-making and stage craft to delve into the sharp heart of Tennessee Williams’ darkly poetic drama.

Using live video, the audience will have a cinematic view of the action on stage. Cameras capture and zoom in on the live action to take you closer to these extraordinary characters and inside their story like never before.



Eryn Jean Norvill and Paula Arundell in STC's *Suddenly Last Summer*, 2015. Image: Brett Boardman. ©

SYNOPSIS

SCENE ONE

Suddenly Last Summer is set in Summer and early Autumn in the garden of a New Orleans mansion in the 1930s. The play opens with Mrs. Violet Venable showing her late son Sebastian's garden to Dr. Cukrowicz. It is revealed that Mrs. Venable has today planned to meet her niece, Catharine Holley, whom she believes is responsible for her son's 'mysterious' death in Cabeza de Lobo - a beachside town in Spain. Catharine will be visiting her aunt from the St. Mary's sanatorium after being admitted for her alleged lies about the circumstances of Sebastian's death. Mrs Venable plans to devote the remainder of her life to the defence of her son's reputation as a young man and a poet – "He admitted this vandal and with her tongue for a hatchet she's gone about smashing our legend..." (pg. 248). Mrs. Venable is exceedingly preoccupied with remembrances of her son, the poem he wrote each Summer and his expeditions abroad. She relays the story of Sebastian travelling to the Galapagos Islands and witnessing baby sea turtles being eaten by savage birds, which he believed encapsulated the image of God. She details their life together like a married couple, rather than a mother and son, and describes their exquisite life together. However, during the last summer their relationship changed when Sebastian's cousin Catharine, to whom Mrs. Venable was benefactor, accompanied him on his travels. It is revealed that Mrs. Venable has asked Dr. Cukrowicz to the house today to witness Catharine's insane babblings in order for Catharine to be lobotomised. Dr. Cukrowicz is hesitant to trust Catharine, however performing the operation also comes with the offer of a financially subsidy for his medical research – essentially a bribe. During the negotiation Catharine arrives, along with her nurse Sister Felicity, her mother Mrs. Holly and her brother George.



Melita Jurisic and Robyn Nevin in STC's *Suddenly Last Summer*, 2015.

Image: Brett Boardman. ©

SYNOPSIS (Cont.)

SCENE TWO

Catharine is outside with Sister Felicity. They have a disagreement over Sister Felicity refusing to let Catharine smoke. In retaliation, Catharine pushes a lit cigarette into Sister Felicity's hand. Catharine notices Dr. Cukrowicz in the window and demands to know if he is from the psychiatric facility named Lion's View. She then begins to relay her final days with Sebastian in Cabeza de Lobo and Sebastian's hunger for people who he would describe as "delicious-looking" and "appetising," like items on a menu.

SCENE THREE

Catharine, George and Mrs. Holly are gathered outside. Mrs. Holly requests Catharine not to repeat the same fantastical story of Sebastian's death to her Aunt Violet. If Catharine does tell the story of his death that Aunt Vi doesn't want to hear, she will jeopardise the \$100,000 bequeathed to them in Sebastian's will. However, Catharine insists that if she is given a truth serum by Dr. Cukrowicz, she will have no choice but to tell the truth – "It makes you tell the truth because it shuts something off that might make you able not to and everything comes out, decent or not decent, you have no control, but always, always the truth!" (pg. 258). The three argue about whether Catharine's story is genuine and conclude that even if it is, the story cannot be told in a "...civilised up-to-date country" (pg. 259). Catharine refutes this by saying that it is a true story of the time and world in which they live. George concludes that Catharine isn't crazy but simply perverse.



Susan Prior, Paula Arundell, Eryn Jean Norvill, Robyn Nevin and Mark Leonard Winter in STC's *Suddenly Last Summer*, 2015.

SYNOPSIS (Cont.)

SCENE FOUR

Mrs. Venable enters accompanied by her maid, Miss Foxhill. There is discussion surrounding Catharine's stay at St. Mary's sanatorium, generously funded by Mrs. Venable. Catharine discusses her fear of Dr. Cukrowicz performing a lobotomy on her – "Do you want to bore a hole in my skull and turn a knife in my brain? Everything else was done to me!" (pg. 263). Mrs. Venable discusses the 'slight aneurysm' (that was actually a stroke) she experienced last year that meant Catharine, rather than Mrs. Venable, accompanied Sebastian on his trip. Mrs. Venable claims that Catharine was actually in love with Sebastian, which is why she killed him. Dr. Cukrowicz and Catharine speak alone in the garden and Catharine suggests that Sebastian was somehow 'using' his mother. Catharine also talks about trying to save Sebastian from sacrificing himself to a terrible sort of God. She confesses her brief affair with a married man, which led to a scene at a ball and resulted in her writing her diary about herself in the third person – "What's next for her?" and "Where does she think she is going?" (pg. 268). The doctor gives her an injection of truth serum and asks Catharine to tell him the truth. Catharine pushes herself on the doctor and kisses him fiercely just as George walks in.

The doctor then requests that Catharine tells the story of Sebastian's death, with everyone gathered round. Catharine recounts going to the beach every afternoon in

Cabeza de Lobo. Sebastian had bought Catharine a white swimsuit that when wet would turn transparent. The purpose of this swimsuit was to attract men for him to procure sexual favours from, which she reveals was also the previous job of Mrs. Venable. As the summer went on Sebastian attracted the attention of bands of homeless young people and children who lived on the beach, allowing Catharine to have time to herself. At the end of each day, she met him outside the bathhouse where he would give money to the people that followed behind him. However, one day Sebastian stopped doing this and the homeless people and children called for him viciously as he sat eating lunch at a restaurant. They then began to play music to attract his attention and when Sebastian demanded that they stop, the waiters beat the children away with sticks and clubs. Sebastian and Catharine left the restaurant and headed for the docks, with the music played by a band of naked homeless children chasing them. Catharine ran for help and by the time she had returned to Sebastian the homeless children had eaten him alive. Upon finishing the story, Mrs. Venable tries to hit Catharine and demands that she be sent to Lion's View State Sanatorium. While the doctor reflects, "...I think we ought at least to consider the possibility that the girl's story could be true" (pg. 282).



FOR FAST FACTS ABOUT THE PLAY CHECK OUT THE
PRE-SHOW IN-THE-KNOW!

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

SEBASTIAN

Sebastian is an unseen character in the play and the centre of the apparent 'lies' told by Catharine that Mrs Venable is desperate to remain hidden. Sebastian was a homosexual who died in the beachside town of Cabeza de Lobo in Spain, after being eaten alive by homeless street children he had procured for sexual favours. A poet who wrote one 'Poem of Summer' each year while on holiday abroad, Sebastian believed he found the image of God when he witnessed baby turtles being eaten by birds swooping from the sky – a foreshadowing of his death. Sebastian's death is a "grotesque parody of the Eucharist in his crucifixion and consumption by the street urchins" (Crum, 2006). When Catharine speaks about her relationship with Sebastian, she says she tried to save him from "Completing! – a sort of! – image! – he had of himself as a sort of! – sacrifice to a! – terrible sort of a – [...] God" (pg. 267). Sebastian considers himself a martyr who sacrificed himself for the image he believed God to be. (Hurley, 1965)

CATHARINE

Catharine is the cousin of Sebastian and niece of Mrs. Venable. Last summer she accompanied Sebastian on his fatal trip abroad and tentatively yet knowingly procured street children with whom Sebastian performed sexual acts. Returning to New Orleans with the story of his death, Mrs. Venable sent her to St. Mary's Sanatorium. The doctor gives Catharine a truth serum in order to divulge what really happened to Sebastian. When the serum is administered she tells the story of the cannibal act of the street children. At the end of the play the audience are left to ponder whether Catharine is legitimately insane or whether her story was the truth and she is being placed in the facility to stop the truth being revealed. Prior to going abroad with her cousin, an affair with a married man left Catharine shattered and she found herself instinctively writing about herself in the third person. However, as the play progresses details of Sebastian's true identity are revealed and Catharine's story seems plausible. These details cause Mrs. Venable to launch a fierce combat against Catharine in a bid to ensure Sebastian's integrity is maintained and mask the truth.

Catharine's story compromises her family and herself. By telling her story of Sebastian's death, Catharine jeopardises the \$100,000 bequeathed to her and her brother George in Sebastian's will. Catharine's apparently insane babblings caused Mrs. Venable to probate (the process by which a will is determined valid) the will. Catharine is also threatened with a lobotomy if she tells her story of her cousin's death. The play ends with Mrs. Venable shouting for Catharine to be placed in a state sanatorium and for a lobotomy to be performed on her.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS (Cont.)

MRS. VIOLET VENABLE

Mrs. Venable is the merciless and powerful matriarch of the family. Violet is the colour of power and so her name is fitting. Sitting in her deceased son's Amazonian garden, surrounded by wild jungle sounds, she can be likened to a bird of prey who is preparing to feed on another animal. She is a fearful woman who has threatened to have her niece lobotomised in an attempt to silence her. Mrs Venable is a 'steel magnolia', the name given to strong southern American women who also strive to be feminine and beautiful. She is absorbed by society's perception of her family and therefore is striving to maintain the image of herself and Sebastian as renowned members of high society. Mrs. Venable is opposed to the concept of aging and previously attempted to evade her fading youth by accompanying her son to society parties and events. "Both of us were young, and stayed young, Doctor. [...] It takes character to refuse to grow old" (pg. 246). Mrs. Venable had an unusual fixation with Sebastian that was different to the conventional mother/son relationship. When faced with the choice of returning to her dying husband or staying abroad with Sebastian, she chose to stay with Sebastian. This leads the audience to believe she would do anything for him – perhaps even procuring young men and boys to feed his sexual appetite as Catharine claims. It is revealed that Mrs. Venable suffered a stroke affecting the left side of her face, however she refuses to acknowledge this, saying it was a "slight aneurysm". With age catching up with her and her son dead, ensuring Catharine's story remains hidden also becomes an attempt to maintain society's image of herself and the son she adored.

At the end of the play when Catharine tells her story, Mrs. Venable orders her to be lobotomised – "Lion's View. State Asylum, cut this hideous story out of her brain!" (pg. 282).



Eryn Jean Norvill and Robyn Nevin in
STC's *Suddenly Last Summer*, 2015.
Image: Brett Boardman. ©

CHARACTER ANALYSIS (Cont.)

DR. 'SUGAR' CUKROWICZ

Dr. Cukrowicz is a Polish-American psychologist who has been summoned to Mrs. Venable's home to witness Catharine's apparently insane babblings. Cukrowicz is Polish for 'sugar', which is symbolic as his handsome looks and gentle questioning make him 'sweet.' Mrs. Venable wants Dr. Cukrowicz to administer a truth serum to Catharine so the true circumstances of her son's death can be revealed. He is compromised as Mrs. Venable has offered to subsidise his research if he performs a lobotomy on Catharine. Dr. Cukrowicz is not the villain of the play, although he does believe that a lobotomy is a leap forward in medical innovation. Despite this, he is hesitant to perform a lobotomy on Catharine as he does not feel the procedure is medically suitable. Further to this, the final line of the play belongs to Dr. Cukrowicz, who appears to support Catharine's version of the truth, saying "I think we ought at least to consider the possibility the girl's story could be true..." (pg. 282).

GEORGE

George is Catharine's brother. He has come to Mrs. Venable's home in an attempt to silence his sister from telling the story. If Catharine changes her story they will both receive \$50,000 from Sebastian's will. He begs her, however his attempts are futile and he declares Catharine is not insane - just perverse. After Catharine has divulged the story, George says that he will quit school and get a job. George is wearing Sebastian's old clothes, given to him by Mrs. Venable. However, Mrs Venable detests seeing George in the clothes and describes how distasteful it is for George to wear the clothes in front of her.

MRS. HOLLY

Mrs. Holly is Catharine's mother. She also insists that Catharine not tell the story about Sebastian so that her family can receive their inheritance. Throughout the play she tries hard to soothe and settle Catharine into a less irritable state in order to satisfy Mrs. Venable.

MISS. FOXHILL AND SISTER FELICITY

Miss Foxhill is a servant who is bossed around by the sharp-tongued and particular Mrs. Venable. Sister Felicity is the nun who has been assigned to looking after Catharine at St. Mary's Sanatorium. Their lines in the play are minimal, however their presence is important as they embody the idea that we are all watching and being watched. This concept relates to why Mrs. Venable is desperate for the story of her son's death to remain a secret from New Orleans high society. and perhaps even herself. In the STC production, this idea is also metaphorically portrayed through the use of cameras and live feed. The video projection onto the scrim allows the audience to watch how the characters are also bystanders to the dramatic action.

Like the other characters, Miss. Foxhill and Sister Felicity are compromised in the play as they see and hear things they may not agree with, yet need their jobs from privileged people as sustenance. Their position exemplifies the age-old saying of 'don't bite the hand that feeds you'.

THEMES AND IDEAS

BINARY OF WATCHING AND BEING WATCHED

The live video points to the binary relationships between watching and being watched. The audience members watch much of the action on a screen that the cast act behind. In *Suddenly Last Summer*, Sister Felicity and Miss Foxhill have minor speaking roles, however their presence on stage in Scene Four when Catharine tells of Sebastian's death portrays that there are always people watching what is going on and privy to information that is trying to be hidden. When Catharine tells her story the image on the screen is split to focus on Sister Felicity and Miss Foxhill's facial expressions. Both Sister Felicity and Miss Foxhill have low status in the play and are not in a position to comment or interfere with the events in Sebastian's garden. Miss Foxhill and Sister Felicity also portray how to witness acts of human cruelty can be as terrible as to be a protagonist in the cruelty itself. (See the picture to the right.)



Eryn Jean Norvill and Paula Arundell in STC's *Suddenly Last Summer*, 2015. Image: Brett Boardman. ©

THEMES AND IDEAS (Cont.)

GOD AND CANNIBALISM

Suddenly Last Summer has many references to God that portray God as a divine host who is ambiguous, malicious and powerful. Mrs Venable talks about Sebastian looking for God on the Galapagos Islands and finding God's image in baby sea turtles that were eaten alive by birds as they rushed towards the sea. This image shows a "carnivorous creation in a malevolent God" (Hurley, 1965) as his vision is aligned with creatures devouring each other. Sebastian's death is similar to the death of Christ, who was a martyr and sacrificed himself for his beliefs and violating King Herod's laws. Sebastian was sacrificed because of his homosexual desires and violating "...his proscribed role in the sex/gender system of what was socially acceptable at the time." (Clum, 2006) This is echoed in Catharine's line "I tried to save him[...]Completing a sort of image, he had of himself as a sort of sacrifice to a terrible sort of god." (pg. 273)

Sebastian's image of God foreshadows his death and highlights the allegorical theme of cannibalism in the play. This was expressed by Tennessee Williams who said "we all devour each other, in our fashion." (Saddick, 2004) Mrs Venable can be considered cannibal-like as she tries to metaphorically devour other characters as "human relationships mirror that same cannibalistic hunger to devour those that are a threat or have done wrong by us." (Hurley, 1965) Mrs Venable claims Catharine is a "destroyer" with a "tongue for a hatchet." However in retaliation she aims to devour and destroy Catharine for telling the truth by having her lobotomised. She also has the power to destroy Mrs Holly and George by probating Sebastian's will.

Cannibalism is also echoed in Alice Babidge's set which creates a symbolic landscape. The set is an array of fake plants of varying shapes and sizes that fill the stage to create Sebastian's Amazonian garden. His garden can be described as a "vision of the fallen world filled with carnivorous plants." (Clum, 2006) The garden is similar to a dark and dangerous

jungle where predators find their prey. The venus fly trap in the garden is symbolic of a predator and a prey, rather like Mrs Venable and Catharine. The sound design also aids in the creation of an Amazonian jungle through the sound of a beating drum in Scene Four. The drum beat gradually builds as Catharine's story comes to a climax.



CHECK OUT THE POSTER FOR MORE INFORMATION
ABOUT THE TROPES FOUND IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'
WRITING!

THEMES AND IDEAS (Cont.)

TRUTH AND MASKING OF TRUE IDENTITY

The dramatic action of *Suddenly Last Summer* centres on discovering if Catharine is telling the truth about Sebastian's death and his dealings in Cabeza de Lobo. The fact that Catharine is a patient at St. Mary's asylum casts doubt over the legitimacy of her story. On the contrary, Mrs Venable's offer to bribe Dr. Cukrowicz to lobotomise Catharine portrays a glimmer of truth in the story.

Doctor: - Mrs Venable? I can't guarantee that a lobotomy would stop her - babbling!

Mrs Venable: That may be, maybe not, but after the operation, who would believe her, Doctor?

When Catharine divulges her story Sebastian's sexuality is exposed, along with Mrs Venable's role in procuring young men for him. This admission would be detrimental to Mrs Venable and Sebastian's reputation in New Orleans. Sebastian has also been able to maintain an outward identity of sophistication and artistic ability thanks to his mother who has been the "...policeman of the image, denying the homosexual reality underneath." (Clum, 2006) When Catharine compromises this outward image, Mrs Venable goes to great lengths to silence her.

Sebastian's true identity is hidden from society. This is symbolically portrayed when Dr. Cukrowicz looks at two photos of Sebastian. In one photo he is wearing a mask in a pageboy's costume and in the other photo he is wearing a mask for a masquerade ball. The theme is also symbolised through the use of video feed as for some of the play the actors are hidden behind the screen and that the dramatic action is projected on to.

HOMOSEXUALITY

Sebastian is one of many other closeted homosexuals who can be found in the plays of Tennessee Williams. (Hurley, 1965) Like Blanche Dubois' husband in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Brick's 'friend' Skipper in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, his absence from the dramatic action on stage creates both tension and mystery. In this way, despite the conservative restraints of theatre the 1950s, Tennessee Williams "instantly forged a place for the homosexual on stage." (Hurley, 1965)

Sebastian's homosexuality lies at the centre of the secret in *Suddenly Last Summer* and drives the dramatic tension of the play. Society's knowledge of his sexual orientation and how he fed his homosexual appetite would have been detrimental to the public image of himself and his mother. Mrs. Venable helped procure men for Sebastian on overseas holidays in a bid to satiate his homosexual desires and suppress his hunger while at home in New Orleans. Ultimately, it is Sebastian's desires that drove him to be eaten by the hungry street children who he had paid in return for sexual favours. At the end of the play Catharine says of Sebastian: "He! – accepted! – all! – as – how! – things! – are! – And thought nobody had any right to complain or interfere in any way whatsoever, and even though he knew that what was awful was awful, that what was wrong was wrong, [...] except to go on doing as something in him directed" (pg. 279). This quote suggests that Sebastian knew his sexual orientation was considered indecent in society, yet it was not something he could suppress or control.

THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

CHARACTER

Role and Character are two different elements. Role is one-dimensional and involves representing a point of view and identifying with a particular set of values and beliefs. Character is the complex personality and background of a Character. A Character's complexity is portrayed through interaction and relationships with others and through voice and movement choices.



Paula Arundell and Eryn Jean Norvill in STC's *Suddenly Last Summer*, 2015. Image: Brett Boardman. ©

TAKE YOUR CUE

- How does the live video affect your interpretation of characters in the play?
- Choose a line said by Catharine, Mrs. Venable and Dr. Cukrowicz that best encapsulates their character's point of view.
- What words would you use to describe Dr. Cukrowicz, Catharine and Mrs. Venable? How are these descriptions communicated through voice, movement, facial expression and body language of the actors?
- In the *Suddenly Last Summer* pre-season briefing, Susan Prior (who plays Mrs. Holly) talked about how some interpretations of female characters in Williams' work are played like French Bouffon clowns and tend to be presented as over-the-top and dramatic. However, she believes Williams writes female characters that are much deeper and more complex. How would you describe Susan Prior's portrayal of Mrs. Holly? How is this communicated through voice, movement, body language and facial expression choices?

THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA (Cont.)

SOUND

Sound incorporates many aural devices to enhance performance, establish atmosphere, generate emotion and build dramatic tension. The sound design in *Suddenly Last Summer* is a character in itself and includes soft jungle sounds, the beating of a drum and soft slow instrumental music from a five-piece woodwind band. The placement of certain sounds has been carefully considered by Tennessee Williams and STC creatives in reaching beyond the boundaries of conventional theatre of the time and assisting in the creation of the style of Expressionism. Sound is used to build dramatic tension and symbolise a character recounting a memory. When Catharine recounts the evening at the ball, soft instrumental music plays. This is because, as said by Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* (a character who is said to actually be based on Williams himself), “In memory, everything seems to happen to music.” (pg. 59)

SYMBOL

Symbols provide clues to the Dramatic Meaning for the audience. Symbols are featured in *Suddenly Last Summer* through objects, language and design. Sebastian’s vision of God as the flock of birds devouring the baby sea turtles as they rush towards the sea is symbolic of his death. It also echoes the death of the Ancient Greek playwright Euripides who was attacked and devoured by hounds.

TAKE YOUR CUE

- The jungle sounds are heard every time Catharine begins to talk about Sebastian’s death. What is this symbolic of? How does this affect tension?
- How is the drumming sound used in the final scene? What atmosphere does this create? How do voice, movement and rhythm also work to create atmosphere in this moment?
- Suddenly Last Summer* has moments that are like dreams and moments that are like nightmares. How is sound used to define the two?
- The Mississippi and American accents bring an interesting sonic texture to the play. How do these accents affect the rhythm of the play and create a Surrealist atmosphere?

TAKE YOUR CUE

- Deconstruct the following symbols used in the play:
 - Sebastian’s Amazonian garden and the faint jungle sound effects
 - Sebastian’s empty Blue Jay Notebook (clue: a Blue Jay is a bird that in Native American folklore is said to be a servant of the devil)
 - The Venus fly trap

THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA (Cont.)

TENSION

Tension is the force that drives all drama and moves the Dramatic Action forward. Tension strengthens audience engagement as it motivates the audience to continue watching while influencing them to question the ideas in the play. As tension builds and becomes more complex, the atmosphere of a play is also affected. The Tension in *Suddenly Last Summer* is caused by the contested legitimacy of Catharine's story and is made more complex by the compromised position of each character in relation to Catharine telling the truth.

TAKE YOUR CUE

- How does the Tension at the beginning of the play make you feel as an audience member, compared to the end of the play?
- Deconstruct the Tension that exists between Catharine and George, and Mrs. Venable and Dr. Cukrowicz.
- Other than Catharine's story of Sebastian's death, what other factors contribute to the Tension of the relationship between Catharine and Mrs. Venable?
- Is the main Tension resolved at the end of the play? Why?
- What is your interpretation of Catharine's story? Do you think her story is true? What elements of the plot, characters, dialogue and production techniques have contributed to this conclusion?

LANGUAGE AND RHYTHM

Tennessee Williams' "...use of language liberated the American stage from the constraints of Ibsenesque realism as it suggested other metaphorical possibilities." (Roudane, 1997) His language incorporates many different literary techniques. Literary techniques are used artistically as well as to help the audience understand and appreciate the dialogue. The rhythm of Williams' language also creates atmosphere through specific punctuation while also portraying the subtext of what characters really think. This was achieved through the placement of commas and emphasis on certain words.

TAKE YOUR CUE

With a partner, decipher the meaning of the following quotes from Catharine that act as metaphors for the world of the play:

- "Somebody said once, or wrote once: "We're all of us children in a vast kindergarten trying to spell God's name with / the wrong alphabet blocks!" – Catharine
- "Is that what love is? Using people? And maybe that's what hate is – not being able to use people." – Catharine
- "Truth is the bottom of a bottomless well." – Catharine

With a partner, deconstruct how punctuation is used and how this affects meaning:

- "He! – accepted! – all! – as- how! – things! – are! – And thought nobody had any right to complain or interfere in any way whatsoever..." – Catharine
- "...I don't know why she mentioned the Blue Jay notebook, but I want you to see it. Here it is, here! [She holds up a notebook and leafs swiftly through the pages.] Title? "Poem of Summer", and the date of the summer – 1935. After that: what? Blank pages, blank pages, nothing but nothing – last summer..." – Mrs. Venable
- "Naturally not! He was mine! I knew how to help him, I could! You didn't, you couldn't!" – Mrs. Venable

STYLE

HEIGHTENED NATURALISM

Director Kip Williams says that Tennessee Williams' writing "...was marked by a formal inventiveness that called upon theatre makers to reach beyond Naturalism for something more heightened, something more poetic – operatic even." (Sydney Theatre Company program, 2015) Heightened Naturalism in *Suddenly Last Summer* uses naturalistic acting in conjunction with a masterful sense of space, light and music to create a heightened, less realistic world of the play. In the opening stage notes Tennessee Williams sets the premise for the style of the play by saying it is "as unrealistic as a dramatic ballet." (pg.239) Williams believed that other revelations about people, relationships and the world could be found in a heightened reality and a vivid universe. The Heightened Naturalism also gives way to the style of Expressionism.

EXPRESSIONISM

Expressionist plays express emotional experience rather than physical reality and can often be fragmented and dream-like. (Coward, 2013) Expressionism in *Suddenly Last Summer* is created through the production elements such as lighting, sound and live video. In one moment, a soft hue of light appears around Catharine's face on the screen as she begins to tell the story of Sebastian in Cabeza de Lobo. As the story builds to a climax, the video zooms in on

Catharine's face and eyes, symbolising delving deeper in to the search for truth in the story. In this moment, the action moves from dream-like to being more like a nightmare, as the drums begin to play and the rhythm of Catharine's speech increases. In the final moments of the play when Sebastian's brutal death is detailed the screen goes stark white heightening the nightmarishness of the experience. The set is similarly expressionist as the plants are a scattered representation of a garden.

MEMORY PLAY

Suddenly Last Summer was based on Williams' own family experiences. The play is a Memory Play as the dramatic action is centred around telling a story from the past and deciphering a memory. The Memory Play style is conveyed when Catharine narrates when she was at the restaurant with Sebastian. The dramatic action on stage changes from the present to the past and the actor playing George transforms into Sebastian at a café table. As Catharine narrates the story, Sebastian performs the action on stage. At this point the screen has also changed to stark white, heightening the surrealist atmosphere. The sounds of a soft woodwind orchestra playing or the beating of a drum would not normally be heard in the context of a garden in New Orleans, however their use signposts that the dialogue is from the memory of a character.



CHECK OUT THE WORKSHEET TO DECONSTRUCT
DRAMATIC MEANING IN *SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER!*

STYLE (Cont.)

PERFORMANCE TECHNIQUES

Watch the below video of *Suddenly Last Summer* director Kip Williams speaking about the use of video.

<https://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/magazine/posts/2015/february/video-director-kip-williams-sls>

TAKE YOUR CUE

- How does the video show what people present and what people hide?
- In different moments the live video zooms in on the facial expressions of different characters while the dramatic action plays out on the stage. What does this portray for the audience?
- How does the use of live video assist in burrowing to find the truth of Catharine's story?
- How does the use of live video relate to the binary of watching and being watched?
- What meanings and ideas in the world of the play does Kip aim to convey through the use of live video?
- Why would Kip choose to use live video rather than pre-recording the dramatic action and playing it on the screen like a movie?



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OTHER RESOURCES AVAILABLE FOR SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER

- Pre-Show In-the-Know handout for fast facts and what to look for in the performance.
- Classroom poster and handout about the tropes found in Tennessee Williams' writing.
- A worksheet to decipher Dramatic Meaning in the play