

Welcome to A Deep Dive, I'm Reggie.

In this episode Three works by Tennessee Williams that continue to offer poetry and a depth of insight into the human condition in a way only Williams can.

Join me for 27 Wagons full of Tennessee Williams.

In addition to the larger more well-known works of Tennessee Williams, three other works of his have continued to give me enormous pleasure.

They are the collection of short stories One Arm first published under another name in 1948 then collected into the book that I own published in 1954.

27 Wagons of Cotton a collection of 13 one-act plays. The collection contains characters who are down and out living on the fringes of society many of them in grinding poverty.

The title story 27 wagons, is a tense, nasty powerplay between Jake, the owner of a cotton-gin mill and Silva Vaccaro the Sicilian superintendent of a rival cotton-gin mill.

Vaccaro comes to Jake and Flora's house attempting to get a confession from Jake or Flora for the explosion at his company's mill. Jake leaves Flora with Vaccaro to entertain him while Jake gins the cotton Vaccaro's company can't because of the explosion that Jake has engineered. What ensues is a form of sexual coercion with sadomasochistic overtones.

When Jake returns home he finds a battered bruised and sexually assaulted Flora waiting for him and we the audience discover that this is precisely the course Jake hoped Vaccaro would take. Nasty stuff.

For some reason, this play is loved by lots of people. Meryl Streep was nominated for a Tony early in her career for her role as Flora.

There was a good production of the play done on A&E starring Leslie Ann Warren, Peter Boyle, and Ray Sharkie.

One note about this story. In 1956 the film Baby Doll was released. based on 27 wagons it was condemned by the Catholic Legion of Decency they said it was "grievously offensive to Christian and traditional standards of morality and decency."

They succeeded in having the film withdrawn from release in most U.S. theaters because of their objections over its sexual themes. Yet it managed to be one of the top-grossing films of 1956. My favorite story on the collection is called Auto-de-fe.

An auto-de-fé was the ritual of public penance of condemned heretics and apostates that took place during the Spanish Inquisition.

The story is about a man in his thirties who lives with his mother and their boarders in New Orleans' Vieux Carre.

Read the stage descriptions Mother and son find themselves in the sort of conversation racked with the tension of two adults who should probably not be living together.

The son is tense and paranoid that one of their boarders is spying on him.

The son tells his mother that he intercepted a blackmail letter while sorting mail at his post office job. The unsealed letter contained a photograph of two naked people along with money demand or else disclosure.

Ell-wah knows it sent it and has visited the 19 college student. When his mother asks whom the letter addresses the son says, "One of those opulent antique dealers on Royal..."

The end of this story is so startling, full of tension and the abruptness of a disturbed mind. I think it is one of the finest glimpses into the mind of a male person completely undone by sexual repression that I've ever read.

The other story of fond of her is Talking to me like the rain and let me listen. A story of two people living together existing together. The man speaks of mundane things and a dream then the woman does a long monologue about her life somewhere else away from him. She repeats, "I want to go away, I want to go away"

I had a great acting pal who asked me to be the man in this play to her woman. I'm no actor but I consented. I got through it somehow but what I remember most is lying there in bad next to her sat up giving the monologue a devastating reading. When she finished she ran off stage in floods of tears to thunderous applause. I asked her later was she driven to give such a powerful reading to make up for my terrible performance. In the best Theresa fashion, she said, you were ok but, I was fantastic.

Opening passage from One Arm.

That was the opening paragraph from the short story One Arm. Included in a collection of short stories first published in 1948 under the name of another story included here Malediction then again with newer work under the title One Arm in 1954.

One Arm tells the story of a man sentenced to death for killing one of his johns. Because of Williams compassion and a deep interest in the human condition he gives us a complex, sometimes impenetrable man who survived the loss of his limb and the end of a boxing career to become an implacable street hustler who moves among well-paying wealthy businessmen until he murders one them without any supplied rationale.

Much of the story is the boxer looking back, pouring through letters from Johns who remember him even though their encounters were quick exchanges and conversations with a priest who own lust and need for salvation are meted out in equal measure.

The other story here that knocks me out is Desire and the Black Masseur which is the story of an invisible man.

Read the first paragraph of the short story.

I am inclined to not describe this story to you. Tennessee Williams and many of his gay contemporaries are often criticized for not being more explicit in their work about homosexuality, well these stories don't shy away from homosexuality at all.

In fact, he uses the attitudes and emotionally crushing effects of being treated as a pariah, not as a protest but he makes the effect deeply personal and holds up the destruction of the self for all of us to see.

The last in this group is *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* written in 1980 it was the last new play of Williams' to be performed on Broadway. Closing after only 14 performances. A crushing blow for the playwright.

*Clothes for a Summer Hotel* is about Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald he already dead and she confined to the mental institution where she would die. They quarrel over her lost creativity laid at the altar of his talent only to be squandered by his alcoholism.

It does not matter in the final stages and in some ways that's the problem with the play. It's not a great play but the poetry of Williams is there and I think even a lesser play by Tennessee Williams is worth reading over a good play by almost anyone else.

As an aside, I saw *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* at the Kennedy Center where I worked, before it went to Broadway maybe four or five times.

The play starts with these two giant doors and two nuns, in long amazing habits on either side of the door. As the curtain went up that matinee the fog that rolled off the stage was a little too foggy and the coughing in the audience started one then three until there was a chorus and the joint had to be evacuated.

So there you have it three strange and beautiful works by one of the world's greatest playwrights. There is something there for nearly everyone poetry and lives stretched out that will haunt your dreams and provoke your imagination.

And that's worth a read ain't it?

27 Wagons of Tennessee Williams was researched and written by me, Reggie.

Thanks for joining me, see ya next time.