

Soul Talk

Finding Miss Alma

BY JOANNA ROTTÉ

CASTING IS A CURIOUS AFFAIR. That's an apt word, affair, because what directors ultimately want is to fall in love with the actors they cast, or more accurately, the director wants to fall in love with the actor in the role, as in, "I love you in this role." I was able to say exactly that quite recently when directing Tennessee Williams'



Tennessee Williams
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"Summer and Smoke" at Villanova Theatre, especially regarding the actress in the role of Miss Alma, the female lead. For months prior to auditions, I had thought to cast a different woman as Miss Alma. I was, in fact, set on a different woman, but then Elizabeth Pool came to the audition and instantly there emerged a sense of, "Oh, Miss Alma has arrived," or, "An actress with the sensibility of a Tennessee Williams neurotic, somehow Victorian but covertly sensual, Southern heroine has arrived." Still, I tried to cast the original woman, so ingrained was my predisposition and fealty to her (we had worked together before), but it became apparent to everyone at the call-backs – the producer, the dramaturge, the costume designer, the production manager, and me – that Elizabeth was nailing the affect of Miss Alma, and so I cast her. But an audition is not the performance. Over the course of rehearsals, Elizabeth struggled with the role, and why not? Our milieu was after all the world of Tennessee Williams, which came to reveal itself as fairly bottomless in terms of mining the script. Nevertheless what Elizabeth was struggling with was not so much the depth of the play as the fragility of Miss Alma. Elizabeth is a tall woman who takes long and vigorous strides and swings her arms. The

JOANNA ROTTÉ – is a director, actor, writer and teacher. Her books include *Scene Change* and *Acting With Adler*. Professor of Theatre in the graduate program of Villanova University in Pennsylvania, she specializes in Script Analysis. She appeared in Marina Carr's "By the Bog of Cats..." and directed "Summer and Smoke" at the Villanova Theatre. Ms. Rotté regularly directs for the Philadelphia Fringe Festival, most recently a music adaptation of *Prajna* by the late Tibetan meditation master, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and *True West* at Villanova University. Her Comments on Acting are available at: www.homepage.villanova.edu/joanna.rotté

way she tends to use her body was distorting the interpretation, making Miss Alma seem staunch and robust, as if she were a survivor, which she isn't. Miss Alma is in the tradition of Amanda, Laura, Blanche, Lady, and many more in the panoply of Williams' characters that have spiritual and creative strengths but are less than stalwart physically and psychologically. These non-robust Williams women (and sometimes men) are repressed in body and fragile in psychology. They are aesthetic and somehow delicate. They espouse fading ideals that sound out of touch with the contemporary world. Generally, they go under. Elizabeth did not find the quality of "I am capable of going under" until the final dress rehearsal, two nights before opening (which became of course the night I fell in love with her in the role). Prior to that she had been giving an intelligent performance but it wasn't precisely Tennessee Williams. I had been working so hard over the weeks and so had she, and I was about to settle for what she was delivering, but then my set designer, Hiroshi Iwasaki, who always pushes me at the eleventh hour, insisted that I could get Elizabeth to get the real performance.

On opening night I worried that in finding Miss Alma, Elizabeth may have taken on the character's ultra-sensitivity. It's a dilemma for the actor, isn't it? There is the need to become pervious but then one walks around with an open heart. But never mind, because a sad and tender heart is good for working in the theatre. Also good is not resisting the slings and arrows that permeate one's sad and tender heart.

Isn't this the very crux and lesson of Tennessee Williams? Isn't he devoted to revealing the lives of ultra-sensitive people – the unconventional, the outcasts, the fugitives, the lost, the confused, and the creative – who reach out and get hurt? Do you recall the very first words said to Blanche DuBois in "A Streetcar named Desire:" "What's the matter, honey? Are you lost?" Life is terribly difficult for Tennessee Williams' ultra-sensitive characters. The very first line said by Miss Alma in "Summer and Smoke" is, "Open my bag, Father. My fingers have frozen stiff," and that on the 4th of July in Mississippi! How they deal with their difficulties makes us laugh at these characters. Miss Alma is aquiver with affectations and idealizations. They are extreme people and they try to contend with characters that are their antitheses in extremity: sexual

powerhouses like John Buchanan of "Summer" and Smoke or Stanley Kowalski of "Streetcar" who are on the move and on the rise. The ultra-sensitive of Williams end up defeated, and then they don't seem so funny anymore. Or, as Stella Adler put it, "They run from the monster of brute America, commercial America, and they get leveled."

Arthur Miller has located and defined the drama in Tennessee Williams: "People lose greatly in the very shadow of the mountain from whose peak they might have had a clear view of God. [His theme] is the romance of the

lost yet sacred misfits, who exist in order to remind us of our trampled instincts, our forsaken tenderness, the holiness of the spirit of man."

Williams' intention is not ideological but evocative, to evoke compassion. Harold Clurman has written, "It is the 'peculiar people,' the unprotected, the innocently sincere, the injured, the estranged, the queer, the defenseless, the abandoned, and the maimed who Williams redeems for us by his compassion." That is the entire view and point of Williams: because of their suffering, all human beings, misfits included, perhaps misfits most of all, warrant our compassion.

Looking back, I can see that what had been inhibiting Elizabeth from capturing the fullness of Miss Alma was a hesitancy to acknowledge, and identify with, the



Emile Stevens, Gloria Scott Backé, Bill Goodwin, Stuart Lyons, Lee Richard & Geraldine Page in "Summer and Smoke"
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continued on page 26

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Mr. Anthony has been teaching in New York for the last 23 years. He has studied with Lee Strasberg, and with John Sarno; Mr. Strasberg's protégé (who received the halo award for teacher of the year in Los Angeles in 2000). Mr. Anthony was also associated with Ned Mandanno, author of the *Transpersonal Actor*. Mr. Mandarino was one of the first people invited to the Director's Unit of the Actors Studio by Elia Kazan. Mr. Anthony also studied with Vera Solvia, who was an original member of the Moscow Art Theater.

Mr. Anthony appeared in various movies and TV shows and was associated with the 18th Street Theater, where he directed numerous off Broadway plays.

A Julie Harris Tribute at The Players

A very special tribute for Julie Harris was presented in March at The Players in New York City, celebrating the extraordinary actress' accomplishments in the theatre, on film and in television. Speaking before a packed house in the Great Hall, John Martello, Executive Director of The Players, greeted everyone by saying: "We're here to honor the 'First Lady of the American Theatre' — Julie Harris, and whom many consider, the finest actress America has produced in the twentieth century."

Mr. Martello then introduced Foster Hirsch, celebrated writer/educator, and currently in the midst of a new biography on Otto Preminger, who regaled all those present not only with the incomparable list of some of Ms. Harris' roles, but also added: "Happily for us and for prosperity she has had not only had an amazing career on stage, the only actress to win 6 Tony Awards, but she also has had just as an amazing career in film and television. We're very lucky a talent like hers came along during our lifetime. He then told of a question he once asked Celeste Holm if actors have to be intelligent. Ms. Holm thought a moment and replied, "No, but they have to be smart." He continued by adding: "For 60 years, Julie Harris has been one of the smartest working actresses in the business. And what she knows about the complex secrets of human life is humbling. She remains a true student of human behavior."

Mr. Hirsch then led us through some of Ms. Harris' finest achievements, as we watched scenes from her acting in such films as "East of Eden" opposite James Dean and Raymond Massey, directed by Elia Kazan; "I Am a Camera" opposite Laurence Harvey; "The Haunting" opposite Claire Bloom; "The Last of Mrs. Lincoln"; "Reflections in a Golden Eye" opposite Marlon Brando and Elizabeth Taylor; "The Belle of Amherst," (as Emily Dickinson — her signature role); "A Doll's House" opposite Christopher Plummer; and "A Member of the Wedding," a celebrated role which she had first created on the Broadway stage opposite Ethel Waters and Brandon de Wilde, directed by Harold Clurman in 1949, and then recreated on film.

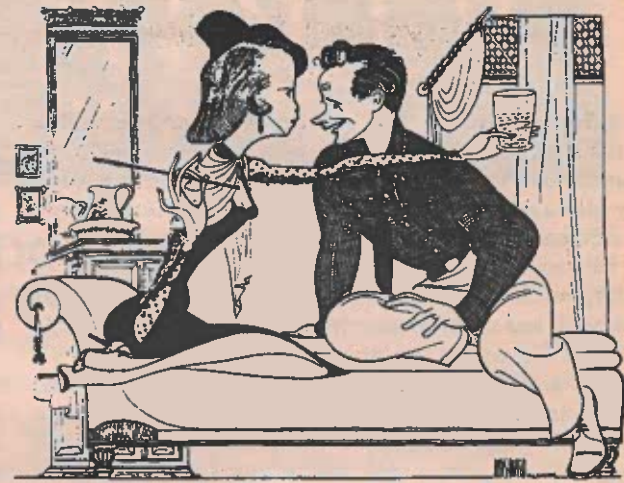
Julie Harris then took the stage and Mr. Hirsch asked her questions about her life, working in the theatre, and in Hollywood. He began by asking her if she had improvised at all in the scenes opposite James Dean in "East of Eden," and what

Elia Kazan was like as a director. "It was wonderful to work with Jimmy," Ms. Harris replied. "I think we may have improvised a little. I loved him very much and Kazan was always on our side. He loved actors and was happy in their company. Gadge (Kazan's nickname) was wonderful about whispering 'secrets' to you that would help you in the scene."

"Did you have to change your performance when you worked on your first film as Frankie in "A Member of the Wedding?" Mr. Hirsch asked. "What I did had to be much simpler, I had to tone it down. Fred Zinnerman, our director, was different than Clurman. God, working with Harold (Clurman) was so wonderful! He was so excited to see what the actors would come up with, and he was so excited about this play and the playwright, Carson McCullers. Fred was quite a bit more timid." "You also worked opposite the great actress, Ethel Waters," Mr. Hirsch then asked. "She was a goddess to me," Ms. Harris replied. "She was beautiful and so much fun to be with. I loved her very much. We were like a family in the play, her, I, and Brandon. I had seen Ethel when I was 14 years old, on Broadway in "Mambo's Daughter" and she was so powerful. It changed my life."

Mr. Hirsch's next asked how difficult it was doing "A Doll's House" on live television. "Fortunately we had three weeks to rehearse before we did it live," Ms. Harris answered, "and I had also done three plays right before that, so I felt I could do it." "What is your reaction to seeing your work this afternoon?" "As an actor," Ms. Harris replied, "I feel I got better as I went along. I also feel like it's not me, that it was 'another time.' Still it was wonderful to make all those movies." She then stood up and said: "I love actors! It's also so wonderful to see new actors work. That's what keeps me going!"

Ms. Harris was then joined on stage by Rita Gam, Betsy von Furstenberg, Anne Jackson, Eli Wallach, John Berman, and Alvin Epstein, who each shared their own special experiences of working with Ms. Harris. Rex Reed was the last to speak, and in his remarks, he told how the first play he had seen in New York in 1960 was with Ms. Harris in "The Warm Peninsula," and what a great affect it had on him. He also adamantly declared that it was time Julie Harris was honored with the Kennedy Center Honors — a sentiment that was quickly and loudly echoed by the immense applause from all those present.



Julie Harris & William Prince in "I Am a Camera."
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We also feel there is certainly no question that Ms. Harris should receive the Kennedy Center Honors recognition and that it is long overdue, especially owing to the lasting contributions she has made to the cultural life of this country, and to its citizens. And I can attest to the fact that all those who have been fortunate and blessed to have experienced Ms. Harris' artistry on stage have departed from the theatre a richer and wiser human being, and there is no greater testament than that. ♦Ronald Rand

"On a deep level, an actor is someone who remembers the primitive primordial impulses that inhabited his body before he was "civilized" and "educated." He remembers what it feels like to experience intense hunger and profound thirst, irrational loathing and sublime contentment. He recalls the earliest sensations of light and heat, the invasion of infernal forces and the coming of celestial light... He remembers the world before it became his world and himself before he became his self. To be without memory and to be an actor is inconceivable. An actor is someone who remembers." — Charles Marowitz

Soul Talk

continued from page 26

fractured aspect of her character. By the end of the play, Miss Alma is regularly taking pills to get by. On the day before the final dress rehearsal, Elizabeth wanted me to change the line, "Do you remember those little white tablets you gave me? I've used them all up and I'd like to have some more." She wanted simply to ask for a prescription refill or for pills, so that Miss Alma wouldn't seem so much of a druggie. My answer was that the playwright, who became addicted to medication, knew what he was doing and knew what he wanted when he wrote, "little white tablets." There is no way around it: Miss Alma has succumbed to pain-relief. She says, in the last scene, concerning the prescription number of her tablets, "I think of it as the telephone number of God!" When I explained to Elizabeth why I wouldn't change the line, something shifted in her — she accepted Miss Alma, drugs and all — and the result was that her performance changed. (I would say that she let Miss Alma's suffering touch her own sad and tender heart.) On the next night, one night short of opening, Elizabeth resisted the temptation to cross the stage with alacrity. She slowed her body down and reigned in her gestures and she vivified her speech entirely. She aspired to something delicate and utterly eccentric in the role. Outside and in, she found a Williams' wounded woman.

Tennessee Williams wrote that Miss Alma was his favorite character because both he and she came out late. He came out in his twenties in the French Quarter of New Orleans. She comes out before our eyes in the last scene of "Summer and Smoke," meeting a traveling salesman, with whom she will go to Moon Lake Casino and with whom she will undoubtedly lose her virginity. But afterwards, what then? With New Orleans, Thomas Lanier Williams became Tennessee Williams, playwright, and forever we are grateful. For Alma Winemiller, the time is 1916 in Glorious Hill, Mississippi, she is a minister's daughter, is without a career, is perhaps 28 years old, has just been unequivocally rejected by John Buchanan whom she's lived next door to and loved all her life, and she depends upon little white tablets. What's next for her? Nothing more or less, it would seem, than our compassion. ♦2004

Written Expressly for "The Soul of the American Actor."

The Association of Performing Arts Presenters

This past January The **Association of Performing Arts Presenters (Arts Presenters)** held their 47th Annual Members Conference in New York City. Over 3500 performing arts professionals from around the United States and the world were able to view over a thousand performances in four days, as well as attend professional development sessions, and view presentations.

Tony Kushner delivered the keynote address to a standing room-only audience. He challenged all those present by saying: "Artists and people who love the arts are by nature, curious and inquisitive people — people who need to keep an open mind and an open heart. Change is still accessible if we don't give up and if we keep fighting!" Arts Presenters President and CEO Sandra L. Gibson reaffirmed the commitment of the Arts Conference by saying: "We are at a critical time for the arts and for each of us... we have a responsibility to engage our audiences and our communities."

Arts Presenters is a national service and advocacy organization with more than 1,600 members worldwide dedicated to bringing artists and audiences together. Dedicated to the belief that all people should experience the transformative power of live performance, **Arts Presenters** believes it is crucial to the economic well-being of communities, and indispensable to the mind and spirit of all people. They feel strongly for the performing arts to flourish, there must exist a diversity and inclusiveness in our audiences — that by embracing all human experience and bridging differences among individuals, communities, and cultures — all of us can strengthen both art and society.

Arts Presenters' membership includes organizations and individuals from all 50 states and from more than 15 countries across the globe. Since 1957 **Arts Presenters** has been creating new programs as well as providing continuing education programs, such as their 'Business of Presenting' held in locations throughout the country. It is a three-day intensive seminar dedicated to exploring each aspect of presenting performances. Their next location is in Chicago, May 26-28.

This summer **Arts Presenters** and Theater Communications Group (TCG) will convene 'Maximizing Partnerships: New Systems for Creating and Touring Theater' providing an opportunity for artists, theaters, presenters and artist managers. Among their other programs are their 'Winter Institute,' a two-day professional development seminar; a bi-annual conference, hosted by **Arts Presenters** and its sister service organizations, 'Crossing Paths' focuses on K-12 Arts Education. In 2004, this group along with Dance/USA and Theatre Communications Group (TCG) will assemble in Pittsburgh for the National Performing Arts Convention, 'For the Record: Documenting and Evaluating the Performing Arts' explores

documentation and evaluation, giving arts professionals further tools they need to demonstrate the effectiveness of their work in audience development and education. Their 'Classical Connections Seminar' (5 days) offers in-depth advice on the presentation of classical music from artists, agents, managers, presenters, audiences and scholars; 'Young Performers Career Advancement' (YPCA) is dedicated to helping young professionals take an informed step forward in their careers; and 'Emerging Leadership Institute' addresses several of the most pressing issues in the field and provides participants with many of the critical leadership skills they need now and in the future.

Arts Presenters also recently completed a national assessment of the key issues and opportunities facing the performing arts presenting field, "Toward Cultural Interdependence," a year-long exploration of the challenges that lie ahead for the performing arts in the areas of leadership, diversity, globalization, technology, sustainability and audience development.

Arts Presenters' government affairs program, through their own efforts and their unique partnership with the work of the American Arts Alliance since 1989, has been serving as a principal advocate for professional presenting organizations (Founded in 1977, the American Arts Alliance is the principal advocate for America's professional non-profit performing arts organizations and their audiences in representing arts interests and advancing arts support before the U.S. Congress, the White House, and federal agencies.) Recently the American Arts Alliance launched the Pledge for the Arts, a campaign asking major Presidential candidates to show their support for arts programs across the country. Among **Arts Presenters'** legislative priorities remain: advocating for the increase for funding for the National Endowment for the Arts; easing delays for visas for foreign artists, including a new website just developed — www.ArtistsfromAbroad.com; seeking funding for the Arts in Education programs of the Department of Education, and supporting legislation that would expand the deduction for charitable gifts from taxpayers to non-profit art organizations.

Committed to increasing community participation, **Arts Presenters** continues to promote global cultural exchange in working to foster an environment for the performing art to thrive in, providing visionary thinking, professional development, resource sharing, and advocacy, in support of its members and all those who create and participate in the performing arts. For info: **Association of Performing Arts Presenters** 1112 16th St. NW, #400, Washington, D.C. 20035 (888)-820-2787 www.artspresenters.org. ♦Ronald Rand