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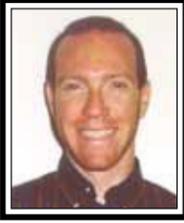
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## trodding the boards

by Brian Sands  
Email: [bsnola2@hotmail.com](mailto:bsnola2@hotmail.com)

### The Tennessee Williams Festival

Under skies both dramatically stormy and lustrously sunny, **The Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival** celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year with celebrities, writers, actors, plays, panel discussions, interviews, walking tours, dinners and much more. As always, it would be impossible to experience all of the Fest but with offerings dealing with everything from literature and music to food and sports, there was something for everyone.

One of the Fest's best interviews I've ever seen took place on Saturday afternoon when Foster Hirsch spoke with Academy Award-winner **Estelle Parsons**. Looking about two decades younger than her 88 years, throughout the hour+ chat, she was gracious, down-to-earth and fascinating.

When Hirsch first asked Parsons about her lead role in Williams' **The Seven Descents of Myrtle** on Broadway, she replied "That's so long ago." But with Hirsch gently prodding her, Parsons recalled all sorts of revealing memories.

Parsons claimed "When I first read a play, I never quite get it, but I thought Myrtle was an interesting character." However, she "thought it was an unproduceable play" because of the flood that is called for at its end.

Still it was produced by David Merrick, co-starring Brian Bedford and Harry Guardino as half-brothers. Director José Quintero yelled at Williams during rehearsals for daring to offer his opinion directly to the actors. Quintero was also, according to Parsons, inebriated a good deal of the time, but she explained "From my point of view, a drunk director is a great director 'cause I don't like people telling me what to do."

If I wasn't quite sure what Parsons meant when she said "Harry [Guardino] was Italian in every sense of the word", as his character is supposed to be part-African-American, I certainly appreciated it when she continued with "If you have a very Italian man playing that part, you lose the sense of the play."

I would've killed to have been with Parsons and Williams in 1968 when the show was trying out in Philadelphia and, after one performance, the two of them went to a club which was decorated with coffins. "I was in one, Tennessee was in another," she said, adding with a wink, "People were very convivial in the '60's."

Speaking more broadly about Williams, he was "always writing about desperate people having to live by their wits," Parsons observed keenly. "All his characters have spunk."

The audience also heard of her experiences in Los Angeles when she went out there for the Oscars, winning Best Supporting Actress for **Bonnie and Clyde**; how Warren Beatty paid for her airplane ticket, how Merrick tricked her into giving **Myrtle** a plug on national TV, and what Sammy Davis, Jr. said to her in the airport the next day.

A self-described "tragic comedienne," Parsons has never been interested in doing movies "at all. I always preferred to be in theater...I like a few hours at night entertaining real life people." Her singular career has included a seven-month off-Broadway



Ambush Columnist Brian Sands & Estelle Parsons

run of Kurt Weill/Bertolt Brecht's **Mahagonny** (her agent wasn't thrilled about that) and playing Roseanne's mother and Shelley Winters' daughter on **Roseanne**, though she was only seven years younger than Winters.

(Parsons and Winters had talked of starring in **Waiting for Godot** and Parsons even wrote a note to Beckett about such a production. He replied "Women should not do **Waiting for Godot**." Sigh...)

As she shared tales involving Barbra Streisand, Al Pacino, Gene Hackman, Jackie Gleason and Ethel Merman, among others, Parsons was a delight to listen to. "I just follow my own path to be happy in my life day to day and I have a good career sense."

Having appeared in four Broadway productions in the last eight years—a record for someone in their 80s—and getting ready to debut a new play off-Broadway in June, she certainly has and does.

If Parsons was a Fest highlight, **Reed's** interview of **Dick Cavett** was, well, I'm not sure what. Yes, it was fun listening to these two raconteurs dish about Frank Sinatra, Bette Davis, Truman Capote, Tallulah Bankhead, Little Richard, Katherine Hepburn, etc., etc. But these anecdotes, as well as others about glitterati only the gray-haired set might recall (Miriam Hopkins or George Jessel, anyone? Or even Mort Sahl), seemed chewed over, their expiration date about 30 years ago.

There were a few barbs aimed at Donald Trump, but it was as though they didn't want to dirty their tongues with his name. Besides some put-downs, admittedly well-deserved, of current talk show hosts, that was about it for comments about anyone of note in the last 25 years.

No, I didn't mind Cavett plugging his DVDs. And I'm happy neither sustained any injuries from patting themselves and each other on the back. But when Reed's self-infatuation prevented him from realizing that he's repeating the story about Doris Day and Johnny Carson he told a few moments earlier, something's not right.

And when the Festival program states "And they both knew Tennessee Williams,

so expect to hear about our Festival namesake as well!" and they don't mention him at all—not even once—something's wrong.

Cavett and Reed are certainly two very bright guys, and I hope the Festival invites them back. But next time, please make sure there's a moderator who can draw out truly insightful comments from these accomplished men.

Much, much better was the **Tribute Reading to Tennessee Williams, The Poet at The Jaxson**, a chic new event space in Jax Brewery, for which a full house was treated to Fest panelists reading from various works by Williams.

Playwright Beth (**Crimes of the Heart**) Henley read from Williams' memoirs about a bicycle trip to a Mexican border town in which he called Los Angeles "a lot of little villages looking for a city." David Hoover of UNO, filling in for an indisposed Austin Pendleton, gave us a fascinating 1947 letter to director Elia Kazan about how **Streetcar** both is and isn't realistic.

Author Jewelle Gomez's selection from a 1943 autobiographical short story, gloriously written with detailed perceptiveness, memorably described a landlady as a "hopelessly unregenerate prostitute of the capitalist class." Novelist Dorothy Allison brought to zippy life the loony opening passage of **The Gnädiges Fräulein**.

Cavett beautifully delivered three of Williams' comic poems; actress Mary (**To Kill a Mockingbird's** Scout) Badham acted out the last section of **Streetcar**, and Parsons offered a droll rendering of Williams interviewing himself: "Question: You think that the world's going mad? Answer: Going? It's nearly gone." What would he say today?

Unlike some years, there was a full slate of theater offerings as you would expect at a Tennessee Williams Festival. My write-up of **Le Petit's Glass Menagerie** appeared in our last issue. **Southern Rep** offered **Orpheus Descending** at UNO; despite certain shortcomings, I admired the chances Jef Hall-Flavin took with his imaginative direction.

**Something Unspoken** at **Gallier House** explored lesbian desire in the Garden District with sharp dialog if somewhat creaky dramaturgy. Before the performance, Brenda Currin distinguished between "reading" a role and "playing" it, but even if she did read the part of a Southern grande dame with those "unspoken tendencies", she played it fully. I can understand Director Paul J. Willis' reuniting Currin with her **Suddenly, Last Summer** co-star Beth Bartley, but Bartley, while good, was simply 15-20 years too young for the secretary's role.

**He Knew He Would Say It—But Could He Believe it Again?** was created (and performed) by Zachary Clause and Fest-regular Jeremy Lawrence from Williams' writings and examined the search for love between men. Rob Kendt's tangy music, scored for piano and cello, was jazzy with hints of classical & pop, and a touch of Sondheim. Though interesting and well-done, this 40-minute chamber musical needs a little more shaping; its current form lacks drama and its *dramatis personæ* are more archetypes than fully flesh'n'blood characters.

Due to an overabundance of Fest activities, I was unable to catch **Tennessee Williams: Weird Tales**, with its world premieres of **The Strange Play** and **Ivan's Widow**, by my deadline but will have attended the production at the **Metropolitan**

**Community Church** by the time you're reading this.

And so, with the annual **STELLAAAAA!!!! Shouting Contest**, another Tennessee Williams Festival came to an end. I hope future iterations will take a more worldly view of this great playwright. Directors in Europe, among other places, are interpreting Williams in new and breathtakingly inventive ways. We need to be exposed to more of that here. Surely budgetary constraints may be a challenge for bringing in trans-Atlantic guests, but as the generation of those who knew and worked with Williams begins to fade away, the Festival must embrace the next generation of artists who are bringing Williams into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Here's to the next 30 years!

### My Way: A Musical Tribute to Frank Sinatra at the WWII Museum's Stage Door Canteen through May 1

[*My Way* has returned to the WWII Museum's Stage Door Canteen; the following is an edited version of my review which ran in our April 16, 2013 issue.]

The World War II Museum's Stage Door Canteen has another hit on its hands with **My Way: A Musical Tribute to Frank Sinatra**. Though I have nothing against Ol' Blue Eyes, I never considered myself a huge fan of his. **My Way** just might make me change my mind.

More purely musical and less biographical than previous Canteen shows about Glenn Miller and Louis Prima, **My Way** is grouped into seven sections of 5-6 songs, each having a general theme—*Cities (I Love Paris, My Kind of Town (Chicago Is), and, of course, New York, New York)*, *Moons (Moonlight Serenade, Fly Me to the Moon)*, *Survivor Songs (The Best is Yet To Come, That's Life)*, etc.

Co-creators David Grapes II and Todd Olson have sprinkled in just enough factoids (Frank recorded over 1,300 songs) and memorable quotes to give the show a varied feel and display a broader dimension to Sinatra's personality. The Chairman of the Board summed up the secret to being a success in three words: "Sing good songs." And that he did.

Somehow, forty songs are stuffed into 65 minutes yet while Director Victoria Reed has paced the show with nimble speed, each song is given its due; the result is that there's a pleasing fullness to **My Way** even though it seems to fly by.

Grapes & Olson give us a wide range of numbers—not just the usual suspects—and all are phenomenally arranged. And a trio led by Musical Director Tom Hook played them flawlessly with a swinging panache.

Reed makes the most of the Canteen's stage and audience area, and varies the "stand at the mic and sing" approach with nice touches like tap-dancing hands and other comic bits. Meliah Henry's period-appropriate choreography is classy and stylish.

Alex Quinby's mood-enhancing lighting and Jordan Ross' fantastic silver/platinum gowns add to **My Way's** success. If you're looking for sheer, wonderful entertainment, make sure to go *All the Way* to the Stage Door Canteen.

[*Original cast members Clint Johnson and Courtney Boe, both of whom I greatly admired, are now joined by Emily Gyan and Adair Watkins.*]

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## under the gaydar

by Tony Leggio  
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Photo by: Larry Graham

### Book of the Month

My book of the month for April has a title that is near and dear to my heart and I also love the author. I am talking about the book by Chelsea Handler "Are You There Vodka, It's me Chelsea". Chelsea is an accomplished stand-up comic, talk show host, best-selling author and television star. She pokes fun at everyone but mostly herself in this novel. Nothing is off limits in this hysterical read that will have you laughing out loud at the outrageous situation Chelsea ends up involved in.

Whether she is babysitting a friend's goldfish or dating two men at the same time, Chelsea tackles each situation with grace, poise and lots of alcohol. She tells stories from her formidable years when she tried to convince classmates she was playing Goldie Hawn's daughter in an upcoming movie or the time she was arrested for a DUI. Each little tale endears you to the comic. She adds sincerity to her writing like she is talking to a friend. And by the time you finish this book that is what you feel like. I highly recommend this to not just her fans but anyone who needs a little escapist laughter in their life.

### Hot Happenings

Easter done; now we move onto our fabulous Festival season where there is a little something for everyone. Here are just some of my top picks of things to do.

#### Wednesday, April 13, 2016

Live Nation presents the Divas of Drag at the House of Blues (225 Decatur Street) starting at 8pm. For tickets go to <http://www.houseofblues.com/neworleans>.

#### Friday, April 15, 2016

Johnny Passion is proud to present his very special guest stars this month for The LaFamilia Variety Drag show taking place at the Four Seasons Bar (3229 N. Causeway Blvd.) starting at 11pm. Bringing sexiness and their "huge" talents to the stage are Poseidon S Davenport, Eros S Guillen, Tittie Toulouse and Alexis Daniels.

#### Friday, April 15, 2016

Summer is approaching, and that means it's time for "Sippin' in Seersucker," an evening of Southern art, cocktails, live music, delicious cuisine, fashion and shopping. A benefit for the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, Sippin' is in its twelfth year of collaboration between the Museum and the Shops at Canal Place. Attendees are encouraged to don seersucker and celebrate the start of the summer social season in style. Enjoy an evening of light bites, Southern cocktails, shopping specials, entertainment from some of the city's best performers, and deluxe raffles. The evening will culminate in a seersucker sartorial contest judged by L. Kasimu Harris and Tracee Dundas! The event is from 6 - 9pm at The Shops at Canal Place (333 Canal St.). Dress: Southern cocktail; Seersucker, preferred! Entertainment: Live music from Luke Winslow King & Smoking Time Jazz

Band. Contest: Best seersucker ensembles—the winners get a special prize!

Raffle: Gift packages ranging from handmade craft items from the Center for Southern Craft & Design, to beer and wine packages that will satiate your cravings for months. Food: Refreshments will be provided by some of the city's best restaurants! Libations: Open bar included with ticket. Shop: The Shops at Canal Place will have special sales promotions; Parking: Complimentary provided by the Berger and Ogden Families.

Tickets: Advance tickets: \$30 members and \$50 non-members. Tickets at the door: \$40 members and \$60 non-members. Information and to order tickets: [www.ogdenmuseum.org/events/sippin](http://www.ogdenmuseum.org/events/sippin) or call 504.539.9650.

#### Saturday, April 16, 2016

The Krewe of Armeinius cordially invites you to the 2016 Glitter and Be Gay at 433 N. Broad Street welcoming all krewes and gay organizations, specifically encouraging all royalty and officers to wear their crowns, pins, sashes and mantles of authority. All guests are requested to wear dress attire. Music and beautiful decorations and fabulous pieces of art will make this a night to remember and an event not to miss. They are asking for a \$25 donation to attend. An amazing array of gifts will be auctioned by silent auction that will start closing at 9:30pm. The event time is 7 - 10pm.

#### Saturday, April 16, 2016

Shining A Light on Anna's Place NOLA: The 6th Annual Dodwell House Extravaganza will be from 7 - 10pm at St. Paul's Episcopal School (6249 Canal Boulevard). The evening will feature local cuisine and beverages, The Tom Cats, The Tremé Choir, Live and Silent Auctions, Original Artwork by Nurhan Gokturk and the event is hosted by Tony Leggio and Elizabeth Bouvier. Tickets start at \$50 and can be purchased at [www.dodwellhouse.org](http://www.dodwellhouse.org).

#### Saturday, April 16, 2016

Johnny Passion presents a tribute fundraiser to honor the memory of Allen Miller at the Four Seasons (3229 N. Causeway Blvd.) starting at 8pm. Both Allen Miller and his wife, Ellen has shown support to the gay community throughout the years with their generous donations to many of our own countless fundraisers. There will be an entertaining drag show starring some of Allen's favorites performing songs he loved from Broadway. Performances include Princesse Stephaney, Big Momma, Clorox Bleachman, Countess C. Alice, Taze-ya Ballz and Coca Mesa. There will be a \$5 donation at the door, also, bring canned goods and you will receive a ticket for a special drawing. All tips, monies from door, auction and canned foods will be donated in Allen's name to his favorite charity, Food For Friends. Your \$5 donation at door will also include food to enjoy at the event and a toast from all of us to Allen!

#### Sunday, April 17, 2016

Join the Krewe of Amon-Ra for their Drunk as a Skunk Scavenger Hunt. Participants get to explore the French Quarter, get special drink prices, challenges and prizes! It all starts and ends at Voodoo Lounge (718 N Rampart St). The event is from 2-5pm with the Hunt leaving promptly at 2:30pm. Food will be provided. There is a \$10 donation to the krewe at the door.

#### Sunday, April 24, 2016

Come out to the NOLA Cherry Blossom Festival, a celebration of springtime in New Orleans blended with our love for cute Japanese culture! The event will take place at Kawaii NOLA (3512 Magazine Street) from noon to 2pm. Hosted by Midori and Eureka Starfish, this mini-festival will include performances by LibeRaunchy the BeauxQueen, Eureka Starfish, Chelsea Chavis and Sora with tunes mixed by DJ BELLA. Visit the 3 pop-up shops with handmade accessories by local shops Dozidotes, MintyMix, and T-Baby's Cute n' Fuzzies. Come dressed to impress & enter the J-Fashion Show Contest for a chance to win prizes from local merchants. There will also be a NOLA Lolitas Meet & Greet & special Fashion Show. A Sakura Petal Drop will conclude the event at 2pm, but Kawaii NOLA will stay open until 4 pm for more kawaii fun & shopping!

### Party Down

Easter may be over but the memories still linger. Let's review my crazy Easter week and beyond starting on Monday when I attended the Let's Have a Kiki drag show at the House of Blues hosted by Nicole Lynn Foxx. The show is held in Big Mama's Lounge right off Decatur Street. This night Nicole was joined by some Burlesque performers. The audience was made up almost of tourists, but it was packed. It is so good to see the support from tourists for the drag shows in our city. Nicole put on a great show and I can't think of a better way to spend a Monday night. Her shows take place every other Monday starting at 7:30pm.

The Krewe of Petronius, the oldest gay Carnival krewe in the city, hosted a fundraising dinner entitled Gout De Petronius at Chef Ron's Gumbo Stop in Metairie. Chef Ron's is one of the most popular eateries in Jefferson Parish. Humbly located in a quiet little strip complex off Causeway Boulevard, Chef Ron's opened in 2012. Chef Ron lafrate was also named 2010 Chef of the Year by his peers at the American Culinary Federation. The evening was fabulous and the food was superb. I cannot tell people enough to try this restaurant out, their gumbos are divine.

Wednesday was a networking event at the newly renovated Maison Dupuy Hotel for Biz Magazine. The magazine hosted a party at one of the prettiest courtyards in the French Quarter. There was music and passed appetizers made by their exceptional chef. If you have not had a chance to check out the hotel, it definitely should be on your list for brunch and cocktails in the courtyard. It is a great way to pass the time.

On Thursday, I attended a good old fashioned house party in my neighborhood. It was actually right next door to me to be exact, which made it easy to stumble home. My neighbor Mery held a little soiree for the neighborhood and friends at her newly renovated home. Her house is an architects dream and beautifully decorated.

I got to reconnect with people in my hood and meet some fabulous new people while sipping wine. I love these laid back parties where you go in only knowing a few people and come out with new acquaintances; those are always the best.

Friday just shined and I cannot thank everyone enough who supported Bunnies in the Big Easy at the House of Blues. This year was one of the best so far. The event was held in the Voodoo Garden at the House of Blues which donated the location. There was an open wine, beer, vodka and champagne bar, food, music, sexy bunny boys and "girls" and live auctions. The entertainment for the night consisted of live (and very sexy) singers Gary Vandeventer, James Miller (an American Idol contestant) and Trey Ming. But no event would be anything without our drag queens. Performing that night was Grand Marshals Monica Synclair-Kennedy and Ken GrandPre (in his boy drag), and Nicole Lynn Foxx and Kitty D'Litter. The auctions went for high prices and the weather was just spectacular. The staff at the House of Blues all dressed in bunny ears and glitter. We sold out all the tickets and it was just a magical way to kick off the Easter Weekend. We definitely put the good back into Good Friday at this event.

Saturday we hopped to it at the Marigny Bunny Hop. Gary Vandeventer from Lords of Leather fame was the Bunny Marshal helping lead the large mass of people through the Marigny to several bars and venues. It was a great crowd this year and they went all out on their bonnets. I helped Jeff Mallon and Marty Curtin (the organizers) with the 50/50 raffle which we raised funds for Gay Easter Parade benefiting Food for Friends. I even played another part this year giving out the Tony Leggio Life of the Hop Award for the person or group that exhibited a great attitude and had fun from start to finish. This year it went to three guys (all friends) visiting from out of town, two from Mobile and one from Ft. Lauderdale. They had a blast and I had fun presenting it to them. After a few final cocktails at the Phoenix, I decided to call it an early night to get ready for the big day tomorrow.

Easter Sunday was a just a memorable day from beginning to end. I was up at 4am getting my house ready for my Grand Brunch that I host every year. My house was transformed into a Easter wonderland for guests who enjoyed the candy bar and champagne and vodka craft cocktails served by the hottest bunny this side of the Mason Dixon Line Drew from the Country Club. There was food, drag queens, sexy men and a gaggle of Sisters, who could ask for more in a party. Then I had a bus shuttle guests to the parade site where we all boarded our appropriate carriages for the parade. I had a 16 passenger trolley that I shared with some of my best friends and clients. This is one of the most worthwhile events that I look forward to participating in all year. The parade was packed with people and no rain! The crowds were gracious and very excited about being there. Their enthusiasm always feeds the people on the carriages, so we had a pumped up and festive ride. After the parade, we enjoyed a few minutes at the post party at GrandPre's before a group of us went to House of Blues. Now that is pretty much where the night gets fuzzy. All that I know is that a very dapper Peter Cottontail named

[continued on 23]