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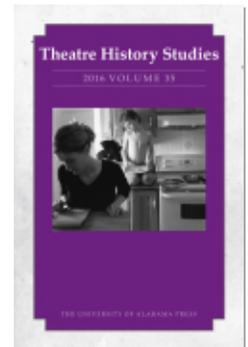
*Tennessee Williams: A Literary Life* by John S. Bak (review)

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from comparing and contrasting the physicality of published early modern dramatic texts. While this catalog does have its faults on a stylistic level, its overall project is to be commended for opening new areas of investigation with regard to how we understand and relate to the world of the Renaissance stage and page.

—PATRICK J. MURRAY

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*Tennessee Williams: A Literary Life.* By John S. Bak. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 341 pp. \$100.00 hardcover.

As Jon S. Bak makes clear in his preface, “any new biography of [Tennessee Williams] is likely to tread on well-beaten ground” (viii), and the mission undertaken in writing the book, as he states, echoing a turn of phrase from Strindberg’s preface to *Miss Julie*, is “new wine, as it were, in old bottles” (viii). What Bak has written is a thoroughly researched, engaging, but at times exasperating portrait of Tennessee Williams the writer. To be clear, it is Tennessee Williams that is exasperating and not Bak’s book, for the book is a meticulous and rewarding exploration of a “literary life.” It is a biography that is provocative and illuminating and is especially valuable in challenging the reader to reconsider the post-*Night of the Iguana* years as a time that was productive, creative, and artistically (if not commercially) rewarding for Williams and not simply two decades of personal and literary decline.

Williams’s restless—some might argue neurotic—energy permeates the book, so much so that although it is organized chronologically, the chapter titles reference travel patterns and destinations but not time—the first chapter, “Columbus to Columbia (via St Louis): Separating Fact from Fiction,” begins the narrative in 1918, when Tennessee is already seven years old; the fifth chapter, “Hollywood to Rome (via Chicago): The ‘Catastrophe’ of His Success,” chronicles the months leading up to the Broadway premiere of *The Glass Menagerie*; and the last chapter, “Chicago to St Louis (via Vancouver): ‘Right (Write) On!’” covers the last few months of his life. It proves to be a useful framing device that captures the nomadic wanderings/haunted wanderlust of Williams. Bak suggests that while Williams’s constant motion stemmed in large part from his inability to escape ever-present low spirits and depression, what Williams

called the “blue devils,” this restlessness was essential to how he worked as a writer. Bak suggests that despite the overwhelming movement in his life and travels, much of it, at least in terms of enjoying the exotic or escaping his depression, was unsuccessful. As a tourist, Williams found travel unrewarding, but he was constantly writing, and his inability to “stay put” was mirrored in a work ethic that often saw him working on four or five projects at any one time. Williams could not let his work sit any more than he himself could sit. Working on several pieces at once was a method of combating writer’s block, but it was also Williams’s way of keeping at bay the mental illness he so feared.

Bak’s narrative conceives Williams’s literary career through tropes of endurance and tenacity. This is perhaps not surprising from someone whose motto was *en avant*, but Bak makes it clear that when Williams was committed to a notion, good or bad, he refused to surrender. Williams spent more than eight years working on *The Glass Menagerie*, and Bak traces the development of earlier and shorter works like “Portrait of a Girl in Glass,” “Blue Roses and the Polar Star,” and “If You Breathe, It Breaks,” arguing that they “were essentially steps in the achievement of his first masterpiece” (109). One of the delights of this book lies in gaining an understanding of how Williams would develop ideas, characters, and situations into a variety of narrative forms and then slowly collage those elements into a long-form play. As one might expect, this is a painstakingly slow way of working, and there was no prescribed gestation period: *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* took months to write, *Sweet Bird of Youth* took years, and *Orpheus Descending* took decades. This said, Bak does observe that “the more [time] Williams spent writing a play, the less likely were its chances of success” (149). Nothing, however, demonstrates Williams’s tenacity better than how he endured the ongoing personal attacks levelled against him and his work by a misunderstanding and often homophobic press. He and his work had been vilified since *The Glass Menagerie* opened, and Bak demonstrates the emotional toll these attacks took on the already fragile playwright, but he also celebrates Williams’s resolve not to be destroyed by the attacks as well as his desire to demonstrate through his essays and other published nonfiction works how wrong the critics were in their attacks against him. Even though he knew the war was unwinnable, Williams was unable to retreat despite the physical, emotional, and artistic toll that waging the war cost him.

Throughout the book, Bak champions a rereading and reassessment of Williams’ large and, thanks to a number of unpublished writings that have been contested by the estate and the publisher, possibly still growing oeuvre. He argues that in 1940, during Williams’s brief residency in New York City, when he witnessed Clifford Odets’s experimental *Night Music* fail miserably, Williams

became concerned that his theory of the “plastic theatre” was at odds with the economic realities of Broadway (78). His theory of the plastic theatre, also referred to as “sculptural theatre,” was a rejection of “the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions” (110). Inspired by the stream of consciousness writings of Joyce, “Williams made use of numerous devices outside of speech to help disrupt the linear representation of human thought patterns” (111) and was key to Williams’s commitment to finding and presenting “the truth” onstage.

The traditional narrative suggests that after the success of *Night of the Iguana* (1961), Williams fell into two decades of moral decline and a literary abyss culminating in his death in 1983. Bak argues that while it is true that Williams never had the Cinderella comeback he always dreamed of, his artistic and creative output then more than equaled his pre-1961 output, and the dramatic texts of this period are complex, multilayered experimentations in postmodern writing and should be understood as extensions of the plastic theatre. Bak suggests that in the academy, if not in the world of professional theatre, there is a growing assessment that Williams was tragically ahead of his time. Seeming failures such as *Two Character Play*, *Vieux Carré*, *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, and even *Small Craft Warnings* (which in 1972 enjoyed modest Off-Broadway success) are recontextualized, reanalyzed, and presented as radical yet natural developments of a playwright doing what he had always done—pushing the theatrical form in order to uncover human truths. The inability of audiences and critics to understand that his new works were simply a logical extension of his early (also radical) work proved especially difficult for Williams. Bak argues that “in particular the mountains of draft fragments that he left of his work . . . show how conscious Williams was of his struggle not to write a better play but to convince his public that indeed he already had” (211).

It should be noted that this is not an introductory biography insofar as it assumes that the reader has, at times, more than a passing familiarity with the Williams narrative, and Bak often skims well-known biographical details in order to more fully explore the literary implications of lesser-known events. The nonjudgmental candor with which Bak treats Williams’s voracious sexual appetite is also refreshing, and those looking for scandalous exposés will be disappointed. If the book has a weakness, however, it is that the portrait that emerges of Tennessee Williams is rather unlikable. In the preface Bak writes, “There was enough pleasurable love, sex, and success in his life . . . that also allowed him to laugh. . . . It is *that* Williams that I wish to capture more extensively in these pages” (ix). Yet Bak seems unable to capture *that* Tennessee Williams at all and instead presents Williams as a man who could be variously petty, loyal, neurotic, paranoid, and full of regret. Even so, throughout the book, Bak presents his

subject as a man who was always committed to his art. It is a pity that Bak could not have captured at least a glimpse of *that* other, laughing, Tennessee Williams.

This, however, is a small concern that in no way detracts from the valuable contributions that this book makes to furthering the scholarship around Tennessee Williams. Importantly, the reanalysis and reassessment of the post-*Iguana* years will do much in terms of reclaiming aspects of Tennessee Williams's literary reputation. Bak's book will be invaluable to Tennessee Williams scholars but will also be of interest to a variety of academics working in a range of fields including modern American theatre aesthetics, literary theory, and cultural studies as well as, of course, anyone with more than a passing interest in understanding the artistry of this iconic playwright.

—WES D. PEARCE

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*Ira Aldridge: The Early Years, 1807–1833*. By Bernth Lindfors. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2011. 387 pp. \$49.50 cloth.

*Ira Aldridge: The Vagabond Years, 1833–1852*. By Bernth Lindfors. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2011. 244 pp. \$55.00 cloth.

*Ira Aldridge: Performing Shakespeare in Europe, 1852–1855*. By Bernth Lindfors. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013. 350 pp. \$55.00 cloth.

Being dead for almost 150 years hasn't stopped Ira Aldridge from making yet another comeback. This nineteenth-century black actor is the subject of a three-volume biography by Bernth Lindfors with a possible fourth volume on the way. Aldridge is also the subject of the 2012 play *Red Velvet*, by Lolita Chakabariti; a production of *Red Velvet* starring Adrian Lester transferred from London to New York for a brief run in 2014 and reopened in London in 2016. Perhaps the fortuitous timing of these works will finally lift this fascinating actor out of semi-obscurity, giving him the respect and fame he has so long deserved.

Bernth Lindfors, professor emeritus of English and African literatures at the University of Texas, Austin, has been a leading Aldridge scholar for many years and is perhaps best known for editing and contributing to the 2007 book *Ira Aldridge: The African Roscius* as well as other articles offering new insights into Aldridge's career and personal biography. In this new multivolume biography,