

Theatre Review: “Confessions of a Nightingale” at 14th St. Playhouse | Atlanta INtown Paper

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The 14th Street Playhouse and LRS Productions have chosen a perfect time to present actor Sid Shier (pictured) as Tennessee Williams in “Confessions of a Nightingale,” by Ray Stricklyn and Charlotte Chandler, now running through April 24 at the Playhouse.

You see, it’s the centennial birthday of Tennessee Williams; America’s greatest playwright (in my not so humble opinion) would have been 100 years old on March 26, and that very evening Mr. Shier was performing, saying words that Tennessee (those of us who are huge fans of the playwright call him that) actually spoke. I’m sure that Tennessee was smiling on Mr. Shier, especially that evening!

The play was written by Ray Stricklyn, who performed it himself in New York in 1986, and Charlotte Chandler; it is based in large part on Ms. Chandler’s interviews with the playwright for her book “The Ultimate Seduction.” I suppose the attribution is somewhat tricky here because some of the lines in the play are in Williams’ “Memoirs,” and have been quoted in various places. In addition, Tennessee was quite fond of quoting himself: A perfect example is his magnificent interview in “Playboy” in 1973.

The play is structured like an interview with a reporter whose questions are unheard; so Tennessee just responds to the audience, as he does in the introduction to “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof”: “Meanwhile! I want to go on talking to you as freely and intimately about what we live and die for as if I knew you better than anyone else whom you know.” (I don’t believe this line is in “Nightingale.”)

The setting seems to be the study in the playwright’s Key West house, which he loved and kept for a number of years. There’s a typewriter, books, fully stacked bar, and a wine glass—which is never empty in the course of the evening. The time is 1983, in the last few months of his life.

Rex Reed once observed that if a swamp crocodile could talk, he would sound like Tennessee Williams. Let’s just say that Tennessee, born in Columbus, Mississippi, but a true cosmopolite, sounded like no one else. Mr. Shier wisely does not try to imitate him as much as suggest his sensibility, and in this Mr. Shier is quite successful. He captures superbly the playwright’s gentleness, his sly wit, his vulnerability, and his hard-earned wisdom, dispensed with that poetic turn of speech which so distinguished his writing.

Mr. Shier comments in program notes that Williams “was an openly gay man in an era when the closet door was shut tight. That took courage.” And there’s a line in the play when he says something like “Among the unsophisticated, there still exists a conspiracy to destroy the sensitive of the earth.” There are so many eminently quotable lines in the play: “When so many are lonely as seem to be lonely, it would be inexcusable to be lonely alone.” “All cruel people describe themselves as paragons of frankness.” “Make voyages. Attempt them. There’s nothing else.” And these are, trust me, only the tip of the iceberg.

Mr. Shier handles with grace and ease Tennessee’s description of the death Frank Merlo, his most beloved companion; the playwright’s friendships with many famous people, from Brando to Tallulah Bankhead; and his musings on life, death, fame, and immortality. “Confessions” is a lovely, contemplative, gently amusing evening, performed under 90 minutes in a very intimate theatre.

It is directed by Patrick McColery, with lighting by Jessica Coale. If you’re at all a fan of Tennessee

Williams, "Confessions of a Nightingale" is must-see theatre.

For more information and tickets, visit www.woodruffcenter.org.