

Unless you know German, *The Gnädiges Fräulein* is one of the most confounding titles among Tennessee Williams' dozens of one-act plays. The title refers to a "gracious young lady" that appears halfway through the first scene. She is anything but young, and barely recognizable as human. Despite the desperation of her circumstances, the Fräulein manages to persevere with otherworldly grace.

Written in 1965, the play was presented on Broadway in February 1966 on a double-bill called *Slapstick Tragedy*. Zoe Caldwell earned a Tony Award for her performance as Polly, but the show ran for seven performances only, panned by critics as a sign of the author's decline. It is a remarkable play, ahead of its time, and an important signpost on the road to understanding the range of Williams' achievement.

Defying classification, *The Gnädiges Fräulein* is always two things at once. On its surface a comedy, complete with a Vaudevillian duo: self-proclaimed socialites, Molly and Polly. Their pratfalls and slapstick live happily in the imaginary Cocaloony Key, where a colony of giant, pelican-like seabirds nest. The heart of the play, however, lies with its tragic title character, teetering on the brink of extinction, living on memories and thrown-away scraps, "between the dark and the daylight." Williams manages to weave a cruel, existential drama stitch by stitch into the life-affirming and life-effacing fabric of comedy.

Not unlike Shakespeare's subversive skill in employing clowns and fools to point out flaws in society, Williams employs the wisdom of the ignorant: the clownish characters unknowingly poke fun at themselves, provoking our complicit laughter. The details seem eerily prescient. Early on, we find out that Cocaloony Key is the Southernmost land mass in the "Disunited Mistakes," with an ailing economy, a fake news reporter, and transients in low-income housing run by a social-climbing slumlord. As the two clowns describe the Fräulein's plight, their hilarity provides enough distance for

us to laugh at her helplessness, like trolls on an online comment thread.

The Fräulein's daily battles with the giant cocaloony birds have been misunderstood as a metaphor for Williams' struggle against the theater critics of the 1960s, but biographical allusions limit the play's poetic resonance. The Fräulein's struggle for survival is a primal human instinct. Likewise, the character of Indian Joe is not an Indian. He is a symbol, a stand-in. He is Williams' refraction of Hollywood, a place where white people dress up as brown people. He is an erotic fantasy ("with an insincere smile"), he is indolent beauty (with inarticulate grunts).

The Fräulein gives him a fish for supper:

It just landed in my jaws like God had thrown it to me. It is better to receive than to give if you are receiving to give.

This lovely, lunatic play is produced by Texas Tech University, which bravely brought us last year's *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* (*An Outrage for the Stage*). This year's outrage, directed by the Festival's Executive Director Jef Hall-Flavin, pairs two of the Festival's most shameless leading ladies: *Kirche, Küche, Kinder*'s Rachel Hirshorn and *Kingdom of Earth*'s Anthea Thompson (TWfest 2012, 2013).

— Jef Hall-Flavin



THE GNÄDIGES FRÄULEIN

directed by Jef Hall-Flavin
featuring Rachel Hirshorn
and Anthea Thompson

DARK COMEDY

Williams' hilariously bizarre one-act about ragged souls trapped in a cruel, surrealist version of Key West is hard to pronounce – and impossible to forget.

TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY
Lubbock, Texas

PERFORMANCES

Thursday Sept 21, 8:00 pm – 9:15 pm
Friday Sept 22, 8:00 pm – 9:15 pm
Saturday Sept 23, 1:00 pm – 2:15 pm
Saturday Sept 23, 6:00 pm – 7:15 pm
Sunday Sept 24, 3:30 pm – 4:45 pm

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Top: Rachel Hirshorn. Left: Anthea Thompson as Polly and Rachel Hirshorn as Molly, rehearsing *The Gnädiges Fräulein* at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. Photo by Andrea Bilkey.