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Tennessee Williams Festival St. Louis Announces
"The Night of the Iguana" as the 2019 Main Stage Production
May 9-19, also featuring "A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur" and
Bryan Batt in "Dear Mr. Williams"

ST. LOUIS (Feb. 12, 2019) – The Tennessee Williams Festival St. Louis—named the “Arts Startup of the Year” for 2019 by the Arts & Education Council—will present Tennessee Williams’ steamy and startling “The Night of the Iguana” as its main stage production at the Grandel Theatre on May 9-19. Jim Butz, Lavonne Byers, Nisi Sturgis, Elizabeth Townsend, and Harry Weber headline as Americans who are hiding—or seeking—or both—at a seedy Mexican hotel during the run-up to World War II. Tim Ocel will once again direct, having guided last year’s “A Streetcar Named Desire” to a record 11 award nominations by the St. Louis Theater Circle.

The Festival will also feature the Williams comedy that inspired TV’s “The Golden Girls.” Set in the Central West End and featuring an all-female cast, “A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur” will be directed by Kari Ely at Grand Hall, upstairs from the Grandel Theatre.

Bryan Batt, the SAG Award winner (“Mad Men”) and Drama Desk Award nominee (Broadway’s “Sunset Boulevard, “Cats”), will round out the theatrical productions at the Curtain Call Lounge with “Dear Mr. Williams.” The tumultuous—and sometimes treacherous—journey from adolescence to adulthood is one we all must take, but Batt’s one-man tour de force proves that it’s oh so much more fascinating and fun with Tennessee Williams as your guide.

The Festival will also feature panel discussions curated by renowned Williams expert Thomas Mitchell, a bus tour of important Williams sites around St. Louis, a Mother’s Day Sunday jazz brunch, and a tribute featuring curated readings by an array of local actors.

Carrie Houk, founder and artistic director of the Tennessee Williams Festival St. Louis, said, “In a letter from the Hotel Costa Verde in Mexico, Williams writes, ‘The people here are of two classes, those who are waiting for something to happen or those who believe that everything has happened already.’ Here is the common thread for this year’s festival,” Houk continued. “As we approach

our fourth annual festival, I thank all who have helped us to become a solid piece of the St Louis cultural fiber.”

“Iguana” is one of the most richly textured and dramatically satisfying plays written by Williams. At its center is Shannon, a pastor who has lost his flock, has lost his religion, and has—at the very least—misplaced his sanity and sense of decency. He takes refuge at a rundown resort owned by the lusty and busty Maxine, where they are soon joined by the beautifully refined but repressed Hannah, in the company of Nonno, her nonagenarian grandfather. These two may be scam artists, but they are artists all the same; as such, they offer some brief hope of redemption.

Director Tim Ocel counts “Iguana” as his favorite Williams play. “It allows for the possibility of compassion and the restoration of the spirit,” said Ocel. “It expands on that brief moment of compassion the doctor shows towards Blanche at the end of ‘Streetcar,’ upholding her dignity as a human being. It stands up for, even *fights* for, human dignity and respect. When Hannah chastises Shannon with, ‘Stop it! Stop being childishly cruel! I can’t stand for a person I respect to talk and behave like a small, cruel boy,’ she is fighting for his humanity, demanding that he respect himself with the act of respecting others.” Houk agrees, adding, “This is by far my favorite play by Tennessee Williams. I have strong, loving ties to Mexico, and, for better or worse, I also have a loving understanding of the main characters of the play. I am thrilled to have such a strong cast and team of designers led again by Tim Ocel, a director who I could collaborate with till the end of time.” Ocel is in demand as a director of theater and opera around the country. He has directed locally at New Jewish Theatre, Shakespeare Festival St. Louis, Opera Theatre of St. Louis, Union Avenue Opera, and Metro Theatre Company. The play will open at 7:30 PM on Thursday, May 9, at the Grandel Theatre.

Tennessee Williams believed that growing up in St. Louis was essential to the shape of his work. “Creve Coeur” is one of the few plays that he actually set here. Four eccentric and unforgettable women fry chicken, plan a picnic to Creve Coeur Lake, and cope with loneliness and lost dreams in an efficiency apartment on Enright. Williams gives us more laughs than usual, but no less poetry or poignancy. “Williams often likened himself to a bird, forever in flight,” said Houk. “The desire to fly away (if only to Creve Coeur Park one Sunday afternoon) comes out of the pores of the women of this play.” Kari Ely, one of the most celebrated actresses in St. Louis, made her critically acclaimed directorial debut with “The Weir” in 2016. She will be directing a cast of Maggie Wininger, Kelley Weber, Julie Layton, and Ellie Schwetye. “In these four characters,” said Ely, “Williams creates the outrageous extremes of four disparate personalities, and reminds us how important it is to make real human connections on this unpredictably fragile, bumpy, and hilarious journey to find happiness.” Adds Houk, “I’m delighted to have festival favorites back in the cast, and to have Kari Ely at the helm after her stellar turn as director of ‘The Weir.’” It will open on Saturday, May 11 in the Grandel’s Grand Hall.

“Dear Mr. Williams,” will be directed by award-winning Broadway director Michael Wilson. The blue devils of sex, alcohol, and mendacity take center stage in this tender and funny coming of age story of a young gay artist. With the great American playwright as his compass, Bryan Batt takes us on a thrilling and very personal journey out of the shadows into a bright light of self-discovery. Friday and Saturday, May 10-11 only, at the Curtain Call Lounge. Conceived, written, and performed by Bryan Batt.

The rest of the Festival will include:

- Panel discussions, May 11, from 9AM—noon, at the Grandel Theatre
- Tennessee Williams Tribute, May 12, at the Dark Room
- Bus Tour, May 19, to area locations relevant to Tennessee William’s life, led by Brian Welch and Dan McGuire

Leadership support for the Tennessee Williams Festival St. Louis is generously provided by Mary Strauss and Nancy and Ken Kranzberg. The Festival is also funded in part by the Missouri Arts Council, the Missouri Humanities Council, the Regional Arts Commission, and the Arts & Education Council.

The 2019 Festival runs May 9-19. Tickets go on sale March 1 at [MetroTix.com](https://www.metrotix.com). Visit www.twstl.org or call 314-517-5253 for additional event information.

About the Tennessee Williams Festival St. Louis

Since its inception in 2016, the Tennessee Williams Festival St. Louis has celebrated the artistry of the legendary writer who is widely considered to be America’s greatest playwright. His works have won multiple Pulitzer Prizes, Tony Awards, and Academy Awards. Some of the most iconic are “The Glass Menagerie,” “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,” “Suddenly Last Summer,” “Camino Real,” and “A Streetcar Named Desire.” Williams’ work is profoundly informed by the two decades he lived in St. Louis, after his family moved here when he was seven. His creations range from the famed classics, to adaptations for film and opera, to dozens of newly discovered plays and writings that are being documented, performed, and studied around the world. The Festival, founded and directed by St. Louis native Carrie Houk, has attracted thousands to the readings, panel discussions, concerts, exhibitions, and productions that make up the annual event. For more information, please visit www.twstl.org, or email info@twstl.org.

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