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by Doris Nash Wortman

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SATURDAY REVIEW

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SR GOES TO THE MOVIES

Where There's a Williams...

WHAT makes Tennessee Williams if not the best then certainly the best-known of American playwrights is a gift for characterization second to none. Neurotic, erotic, pathetic, sympathetic, off-beat, or square, the people who walk the stage of a Williams play have their own validity and vitality regardless of the strange and sometimes ridiculously trumped-up circumstances into which he forces them. In an age when types and stereotypes abound, Williams's characters emerge as sharply defined individuals; and no small part of the challenge and fascination of his work lies in the discovery that perfectly outrageous ideas can come from the lips of completely acceptable people, or that completely outrageous people can mouth perfectly acceptable ideas. Williams himself speaks frequently of the ambiguity of humans and human relationships. "It's the thing I'm most concerned with," he once said, "the fact that there isn't any absolute in people's feelings for each other." To function as a playwright, Williams also tries to avoid such absolutes. Loving or hating one of his characters he finds not only irrelevant but artistically crippling. The main thing is to understand them.

Perhaps because of this—because he understands his characters and knows how to make them understandable as people—Williams's plays have made the transition from stage to screen more successfully than most. The film adapter is generally handed a fairly explosive central situation, to be sure, one in which the main characters can rub against each other to good dramatic effect. But because the characters themselves have substance and credibility, the skilled screen writer—provided that he, too, has understood them—can extend them far beyond the limits of the proscenium and begin to create with them specifically for the motion picture medium. In the instance of *The Night of the Iguana*, not one of Williams's finest works, the process can actually prove beneficial. Certainly, in restructuring the play for the screen, Anthony Veiller and John Huston have given it a profile and clarity not evident in a reading of the text.

Pruning, for example, has judiciously removed from the premises the Nazi family that served no apparent purpose in the play. On the other hand, the role of the nymphetic teenager, which seemed curiously truncated in the original, has been extended in the screen version so that her seduction of the Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon becomes

less a melodramatic device for getting the defrocked priest fired by the tourist agency for which he works than a vivid illumination of the cross-currents of prudence and carnality that tear his soul. Extended, too, is the role of Shannon—possibly to build it out to the dimensions that would attract a star of Richard Burton's caliber. Nevertheless, by devoting the first few reels to the Reverend Shannon—before the titles, to his crack-up in the church, then to his antics while guiding a busload of Baptist ladies through the byroads of Mexico—the film achieves a firmer focus than the play. In the play, Shannon was the catalyst; in the film, he is its center.

What does remain, however, is Williams's haunting sense of a group of people who have reached the end of the line—figuratively for Shannon, for Maxine, the hot-blooded hotelkeeper who realizes that she has flung away her life in lust, and for Hannah, who knows that hers has been wasted through devotion to her nonogenarian father; and quite literally for the father, who pours his frail remaining strength into the completion of a poem. What remains, also, is Williams's rage against what he terms "man's inhumanity to God"—the needless cruelties and hurts that men inflict on all creatures, themselves included. And finally, there is the core of the play itself, the groping toward love as the path to self-realization and salvation.

John Huston's well-publicized decision to film all of this on location in Mexico rather than on a Hollywood sound stage has added still another dimension. The superlative Mexican cameraman, Gabriel Figueroa, somehow conveys constantly an awareness of the steamy tropical heat that enfevers Maxine and Shannon and rasps the nerves of the American ladies. In this film, temperatures have far more significance than the lush touristic delights of the Costa Verde. Performances are on such a uniformly high level that it would be not only unfair but impossible to single out any of the stars—Burton, Ava Gardner, Deborah Kerr, or Sue Lyon—for special praise, although a word should be said for Grayson Hall's acid-etched portrait of a harassed tour leader. When all performances are so uniformly excellent, however, so uniformly right, the ultimate credit belongs properly to John Huston as the director—and, in this instance, to Tennessee Williams as well for having created characters of such challenging substantiality in the first place.

—ARTHUR KNIGHT.



BOOKED FOR TRAVEL

Weekend in Paris

IN A world that rumbles with political earthquake and shivers with social tremors, it is heartening to be assured every now and then that the pillars that support a way of life are still in place. I mean, if one is saddened that de Gaulle seems to be breaking up the NATO alliance, isn't it reassuring to know that you can still buy an excellent *pâté de canard* with Armagnac at the Maison de la Truffe?

Spending a Saturday afternoon browsing about Paris, as I have recently, certainly helped to restore certain doubts I was beginning to have about the new France *über alles* or France-without-anybody-else credo that has been emanating from the font of government here for some time now. It may not seem like the same Grecian church when you look at the old Madeleine now, for like most public buildings and a good many private ones, it has been scrubbed clean, or as clean as one can make a building that has not been given a good scouring for 150 years. But walking around the Place de la Madeleine on which the church so positively resides, and later promenading along the Faubourg St. Honoré, there was every evidence that in the essentials of French life—good taste and good table—France hasn't changed at all. Whew!

The fine food shops with the fine cars parked outside still line the Place

de la Madeleine, and the Maison de la Truffe, the day I entered its heavenly portals, was pushing giant asparagus and baby artichokes. The artichokes, *poivrades*, as they are called, were to be eaten, so a devotee of them assured me, whole and raw. I appeared so disbelieving that he forthwith purchased a bagful for me, and I tried them later that evening in the apartment of a friend. I can report in all fairness that the hearts can be eaten raw, but anyone who can eat the whole artichoke uncooked has to be part camel.

One needn't be anything but civilized, hungry, and perhaps adventuresome, however, to attack the Maison's other specialties: *terrines* of rabbit; duck loaf with the legs stuck back in for decoration; *jambonneau*, a pork leg to be cooked with lentils; *boudin*, a blood sausage; and half a dozen *pâtés* imported from regions of France. There were fresh *quenelles*, *rilette* of goose, *canard aux olives*, and *canard* with Armagnac; and in cans, an unending selection—stuffed quail, stuffed lark with *foie gras*, and truffles, and also thrush and woodcock. Tinned *foie gras* is running about eight dollars for a tin twice the size of an ordinary can of sardines, but the truffle market is absurd—about four truffles for three dollars. It is not a question of the dogs, which have been trained to hunt truffles, but of the weather. There has been no heavy rain

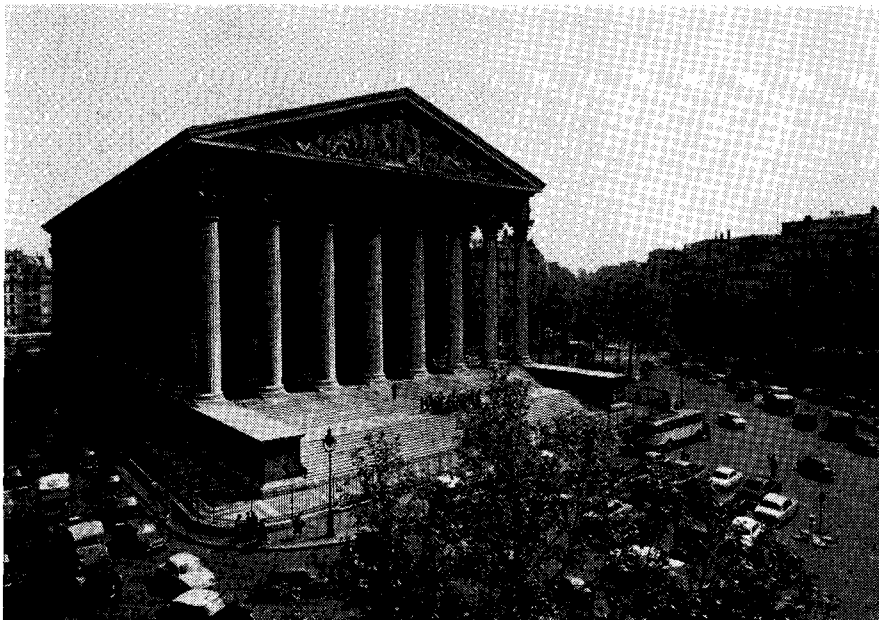
in the Dordogne for two years, and when there is a shortage of rain there is a shortage of truffles.

Paris housewives, as long as the money holds out, hardly have to move off the Place de la Madeleine, for besides the Maison de la Truffe at No. 19, there is also Hediard at No. 21, famous for its gift baskets; Caviar Krespa at No. 17, which has caviar-tasting rooms on the first floor; Creplet Brussel, downstairs at No. 17, which keeps several hundred cheeses in stock and can give you a Brie or a Camembert in almost any stage of disintegration; and Fauchon at No. 26, a fancy grocer dealing in *foie gras* and cheese, but famous above all for its assortment of preserves.

Having mentally ingested enough calories to keep me active until Arbor Day, I turned the front of the Madeleine, walked down the Rue Royale and lost myself on the Faubourg St. Honoré, which in style is rather like the upper reaches of New York's Madison Avenue—handsome shops, art galleries, and expensive boutiques. There, not a hair out of place, was the incredibly fastidious Hotel Bristol, where I had stayed with Marc Connelly half a dozen years ago. We had come in from somewhere or other, dusty and road-weary. Our spirits were considerably buoyed by the bathrooms of the Bristol, which are paved in marble and lighted like Radio City Music Hall. They lacked only one thing—soap, and when I rang for the maid and asked for it, she turned to me as if I were daft indeed and said, "But m'sieu, we sell the soap here." And they did, too, at anywhere up to \$3.75 a cake.

In front of Au Nain Bleu, where I had once bought a small sailboat for a once small son, I ran into Eliot Elisofon back from photographing Nehru's funeral for *Life*, his pockets bulging with fresh lichee nuts, a souvenir of the journey. I found the children's clothing shop called Marina showing fig-leaf bathing suits for boys and girls. At André Ghekière one could buy a white silk bathrobe with royal blue polka dots, and at Louis Ferand's, a white chapeau all of lace with a lone red rose on the side. Ceralene greeted the season by placing six pots of hydrangeas on the sidewalk in front of the store window. I wondered how long the pots might last in New York City.

Then there was the back of the U.S. Embassy and the chancery of the British Embassy and Hermès, which is the Cartier of leather goods, and Lanvin, still a distinguished word in *haute couture*, and by that time my feet were giving out. After a long and fruitless search for a taxi I dragged myself up the Vendôme and surrendered to the doorman of the Ritz, who, in the curious way known only to doormen and genies,



—French Tourist Office.

"The fine food shops . . . still line the Place de la Madeleine."