

Bc-us-clothes

Tennessee Williams' 'Fitzgerald Play' is revived

By FREDERICK M. WINSHIP

NEW YORK, Feb. 8 (UPI) – The White Horse Theater Company is staging Tennessee Williams' seldom revived last play, "Clothes for a Summer Hotel", bringing to the Off-Broadway Hudson Guild Theater the ghosts of F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife, Zelda, in a moving production that no Williams fan should miss.

The play, Williams' last, opened on Broadway in 1980 but failed to find an audience and closed after 15 performances, to be revived only once and briefly Off-Broadway in 1985. Williams died in 1983.

It is known in the business as the playwright's "ghost play" because it depicts a post-mortem meeting of the Fitzgerald, the famed novelist, and Zelda, his crazed wife, and skips back in time to their Jazz Age society life as international celebrities on the French Riviera. It could just as well be known as Williams' "Fitzgerald play".

Although the time line is somewhat difficult for the audience to follow, the characters are familiar.

In addition to Fitzgerald, an alcoholic who died of a heart attack at age 44 in 1940, and his wife, who died in a fire in 1948, there is novelist Ernest Hemingway and his first wife, Hadley, Gerald and Sarah Murphy, rich expatriate Americans who presided over a literary salon on the Riviera, and even Mrs. Patrick Campbell, an English actress who was a member of the Murphy clique.

Williams had a life-long fascination with the Fitzgeralds that led him to imagine their ethereal meeting at the mental asylum in Asheville, N. C., where Zelda had been institutionalized for many years. Fitzgerald makes one final attempt at reconciliation with his wife who blames his possessiveness for her failed writing career. But he finds her unreceptive, obsessed with ballet dancing and a handsome young French asylum intern.

"I'm not your book anymore!" Zelda screams at Fitzgerald at the end of the play, referring to his fictional portraits of her. "I can't be your book anymore! Write yourself a new book!"

Fitzgerald, depressed by his separation from Zelda, actually wrote this in the 1930s: "I left my capacity for hoping on the little roads that led to Zelda's sanitarium. Life ended for me when Zelda and I crashed. If she could get well, I would be happy again. Otherwise, never ..."

The White Horse Theater cast, deftly directed by the company's producing artistic director, Cyndy A. Marion, is headed by Peter J. Crosby as Fitzgerald and Kristen Vaughan as Zelda, widely experienced actors in Off-Broadway and regional theater.

Crosby brings the handsome novelist to believable life without making him particularly charismatic, but Vaughan endows Zelda with all her reputed charm and effusiveness and gives the play needed impact. She is truly, as Zelda once wrote, a woman "determined to find an impersonal escape, a world in which I could express myself and walk without the help of somebody who was always far from me".

Tom Cleary and Lisa Riegel bring expected glamour to the roles of Gerald and Sarah Murphy, a golden couple basking in the company of the famous friends they entertain at

the Cote d'Azur villa. The party scene peopled with Murphy guests in flapper era finery, most of them puffing on cigarettes in long holders, is one of the fun episodes in the two-and-a-half hour play.

Rod Sweitzer seems the living image of Hemingway as remembered from early photographs, with a moustache but before the beard. Williams has written into the play hints about the Fitzgerald-Hemingway relationship but Sweitzer doesn't press this enigmatic aspect of the play through his acting, which is always suitable macho. Montgomery Sutton is delightful as the impressionable young asylum aide who is smitten with Zelda and also, in a second role, as an ace French Air Force flyer.

Others in the cast are Christopher Johnson as Zelda's doctor, Mary Goggin as Mrs. Patrick Campbell, Sarah Levine as Hadley Hemingway, and Julie Kelderman, Ambien Mitchell, and Kyle Lamar Mitchell.

John C. Sheffler's set design evokes the façade of the hilltop asylum as seen through veil-like effects suggesting autumn foliage that, by means of rearrangement and clever lighting by Debra Leigh Siegel, also evokes several other scenes. Adam Coffia's period costumes are rich and stylish, even the habits worn by the two nun-guardians of the asylum entrance, and Joe Gianono's incidental music is delightful without being intrusive.