An Interview of Michael Wilson, Artistic Director, The Hartford Stage, Hartford, Connecticut, USA

Sheila HICKEY GARVEY

Michael Wilson is in his Sixth Season serving as the Artistic Director of the Hartford Stage. He was nominated for the prestigious Tony Award in 2003 for his direction of the Broadway production of Horton Foote's Enchanted April which premiered at Hartford Stage. He has received awards from New York's Lincoln Center, the Princess Grace Foundation (2001 Statue Award) and a 1992 fellowship from the Edward Albee Foundation.

Sheila Hickey Garvey is a Professor of Theater at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, Connecticut where teaches acting and directs productions. Dr. Garvey is currently the President of the Eugene O'Neill Society and is a Co-Editor and contributor to the book Jason Robards Remembered published in 2001 by McFarland & Company.

-------------

Sheila Hickey Garvey - You have a slight Southern accent. Are you from the south like Tennessee Williams?

Michael Wilson - I was born in 1964 and raised in the vicinity of Winston Salem, North Carolina where the North Carolina School of the Arts is located. Winston Salem is a rather small southern city but it had the benefit of the Reynolds Tobacco Co and Haines Hosiery. The Reynolds and Haines families and companies caused a renaissance of the arts in Winston Salem and so there were professional theaters and professional dance companies there while I was growing up.

SHG - What about your own family?

MW - My family was a very rural family in that they were from a railroad town, a very small southern town. They were not involved in the arts. They were mostly involved in sports. My mother was a telephone operator. My father was a tax collector. So, I was a bit of a changeling child.

SHG - What about your education?

MW - I went to school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I was a playmaker there. Then, I went to study
playwriting at Harvard for a summer session and from there I got a job with The American Repertory Theater (ART). This was when Robert Brustein was still its Artistic Director. It was a very auteur kind of theater company meaning that it was the kind of company that held to the notion that it the text is not necessarily to be revered. That any given production is only one of many productions of a play. While at ART I encountered, worked with and observed artists like Robert Wilson, Anne Bogart, Andre Serban, and Richard Foreman who are to me are some of the foremost directors of our times who are working in avant-garde ways. And from them I learned a visual vocabulary that I enhanced watching television and films. A couple of years later, I was hired to be the casting directing at the Alley Theater, in Houston, Texas. Eventually I became an Associate Director at the Alley and I was directing and writing there. Then I went to New York and freelanced. I had just directed my first commercial play off-Broadway when this opportunity came up. And so I came to Hartford Stage in 1998.

SHG - When you were hired at Hartford Stage, did you already know that you were going to be staging so many of Williams' plays?

MW - Yes, that was what I said I wanted to do with this Artistic Directorship. The Board of Directors here at Hartford Stage hired me knowing that I wanted to commit this theater to what I called a Tennessee Williams Marathon, meaning that over ten years we have set the goal of examining the complete Williams canon, through productions, reading, screenings, and symposia. The idea is to present, for the first time, a clear and comprehensive understanding of Tennessee's true legacy. You see, I wanted to try to right a wrong. Tennessee was neglected terribly for the last 25 years of his career after The Night of the Iguana. He was, in some ways, a critical joke. Yet, I believe he was still writing brilliant plays. They may not have been quite on the level of some of the early artistic masterpieces but they had some amazing writing and ideas and I thought that it was unfair that no theater in America was trying to take a look at his plays and his work as a whole and try to examine what was this great man's contribution to American Theater. I though Great Britain and London especially was doing much more about Tennessee and his work than we Americans were. The idea of the Tennessee Williams marathon was not only to do very immediate, visceral revivals of William's masterpieces but
also to explore some of the Williams plays that had never been
done before or that had been neglected for many years.

SHG - What is it in particular that has drawn you to Williams?

MW - Tennessee William is the reason I came into the
theater. It's the subject matter that he chose, "the Fugitive Kind".
Williams was able to give the people that live in the shadows and
exist on the margins of our society such heroic status. Arthur
Miller is often the playwright associated with giving the common
man heroic statue in his plays but I think that Tennessee was
exploring an even more extraordinary common man, if you will,
the common man that was a misfit in our society, one that was not
even welcomed, one that didn't even have Willy Lowman's job to
lose. So, there has always been something about William's plays
that has spoken to me - his use of language and his use of mise en
scene. I've always thought about Tennessee as someone that was
about total theater through his use of language and his use of
design elements. There's a kind of musicality to his plays. I studied
piano while I was growing up. I think you feel and hear the life
and the presence of music in his plays. That kind of scoring is
really important. I also think his plays were really funny and also
really terrifying. In the best of his plays you can go on this really
wild ride with him. Having seen some of the later Broadway
revivals that, I thought, were tired and musty, I really wanted to
explore some of what I thought were the expressionistic elements
of his plays.

SHG - That brings the discussion to A Streetcar Named
Desire, the first William's revival you directed at Hartford Stage.
Likely the most familiar Williams production of that play is Elia
Kazan's. Yours was so radically different, and as you already
alluded to, it was quite Expressionistic in style. Could you speak
to that idea and talk about your artistic choices for that
production as you implemented them in the staging, lighting, and
sound design?

MW - "Streetcar", like any Shakespeare plays, is in the
cannon now and will be for hundreds of years to come. And you
have to find the most lively, real and honest way of penetrating that
material for today's times to be able to speak to an audience today.
Quite honestly, I took most of my clues from Williams own stage
directions. All I did was really explore those fully. Knowing what
William's own life experience was in the quarter and having lived in
New Orleans myself for a time, I took it probably to a theatrical extreme that had not been seen in many productions of the play. We did that through a mix of expressionistic elements and also through very realistic playing. So, it wasn't as if we though acting out the window at all. It was full of blood, sweat and tears. But, it also had an intense use of light and sound, an unexpected use of light and sound. As a result, the production was rather operatic and epic and strange. But, I think that's what Blanche's experience is too at that point. Blanche is living on the edge at that point. Blanche is living quite dangerously and I think in order for that to work the audience has to feel her pain, her hope, her joy, and her desire. And that's what we tried to.

SHG - Your production helped the audience to feel an empathy with Blanche. You are saying that was the result you wanted. Years after his early success with "Streetcar" Williams himself often said that he had been disappointed with that first famous production in 1947 because Marlon Brando's performance had managed to turn Stanley into a cult hero. The result was an overshadowing and diminishing of sympathy for Blanche and the fragility of her circumstances. In Kazan's production it seems as if Blanche is, in some ways, "asking for it". In your production, Blanche was a victim.

MW - Well, she was the center. The way we accomplished that, or we tried to, was by playing her as the opposite of a victim, in many way. We played her as a survivor. She was tough and hard and crafty and wily and she was going to get out of that situation. And so we avoided her feeling sorry for herself and we avoided her bringing "it" down upon herself as much as possible.

SHG - And by doing that you achieved the result you wanted, because the culture you created in the world of your production, was so brutal, especially the male culture.

MW - A lot of people in our society today are brutal. It's not a very kind world we live in right now. There are moments of kindness. You can find kindness on a very one-on-one situation and I think people who go to church or the theater are seeking some kind of solace or compassion but ultimately it's a horrible world that we live in right now. It's gotten uglier in the last few years especially. And there's a lot of hate and brutality. And I think that Tennessee was in touch with that and he was trying to put forth a human outcry for a more gentle treatment of others. He asked people to be more tolerant, and understanding. He asked for
sensitivity. And people just roll their eyes at that because they are so cynical.

SHG - Could we talk about Camino Real? You directed a stellar production of it in 1999 with Rip Torn, another famous Kazan era Tennessee Williams actor (Broadway and film versions of Sweet Bird of Youth) with a cast that also included the Tony Award winning actress Betty Buckley (Cats). There have been numerous famous New York production of Camino Real. Jose Quintero directed a revival of it off Broadway in the early 1960's reviving it with some success after Kazan's rather unsuccessful 1953 Broadway version of it. Al Pacino played Kilroy in a production at Lincoln Center in 1970 with Jessica Tandy. And there was a revival of it on Broadway in the 1980's with Vanessa Redgrave. Most of these productions, I believe, received mixed reviews.

MW - It's easy to go wrong with Camino Real. It's a difficult play. It's somewhat abstract too. We don't know where we are. We find out later we're in some kind of purgatory waiting to jump off into the Terra Incognita. We don't know if that's going to be an ascendancy or a decadency. Yet, it's not as abstract or as silly and as absurdist as Williams' one-act, The Gnadiges Fraulein. In Camino Real, you have a lot of Tennessee's more famous romantic passages and romantic characters. Instead of fictional characters in some cases he's taken characters from other people's creations and in some cases he's put some real people on stage like Lord Byron. It's Tennessee's homage to some of the great writers that have influenced him.

SHG - In your production of Camino Real, Betty Buckley seemed to be crying throughout most of the performance. Clearly she was grieving. Clearly she was in mourning. She carried a certain tone and feeling of spiritual pain in the production that was riveting. Her sorrow rooted the production.

MW - Actually, what I think worked was that we musicalized some of the play for her special talents. She sang a couple of songs. Robert Brustein's review in the New Republic said that what made it work was the use of music. He said that he thought that the play was always more an opera than a play.

SHG - You seem to have found an outstanding group of actresses, like Annalee Jefferies who was your Blanche, woman that have a special affinity for Williams's characters. Annalee
Jeffries seems to be the newest actress in this group. She has a compelling soul that is there that comes forth that carries an essence that is so powerful.

MW - Annalee and I have done many Williams plays together. A Streetcar Named Desire was the first Williams I directed at Hartford Stage but I had actually directed it before with Annalee at Chapel Hill in August of 1994 and then two years later we were invited by the Alley Theater in Houston to revive that production there in the spring of 1996. And so once I was appointed here I chose to open my tenure with that production. Then we restaged it again here in Hartford in the summer of 1999. So Anna Lee and I have actually done "Streetcar" four times now. And since then, she has played Hannah Jelkes in my production of The Night of the Iguana and she is also playing multiple roles in our current retrospective of Williams' one acts that we are calling 8 BY TENN. Of course, I've been very fortunate to have worked with many wonderful actresses like Amanda Plummer, Betty Buckley, and Elizabeth Ashley. Not only are these actresses Tony Award winning and Academy Award winning performers, they are all terrific talents that can get into the hearts and minds of Tennessee's characters and sing his poetry.

SHG - In your current production of 8 BY TENN, you have a very famous Tennessee Williams actress, Elizabeth Ashley playing in the one act The Lady of Larkspur Lotion. This is the same actress who played Maggie in a highly praised production of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof on Broadway in the 1970's. Back then, she was a beautiful and seductive young woman dressed, as called for, in a slip. In that Broadway production, she was positioned to sit preening herself before a dressing table that faced forward toward the audience while seeming to look at herself through an imaginary mirror. In your present production of The Lady of Larkspur Lotion you have the same actress thirty years later sitting looking at herself in an imaginary mirror at a similar dressing table once again facing forward toward the audience. But this time she is older. She replay of this moment is quite startling, even shocking.

MW - I think Elizabeth Ashley is the actress alive today that is most associated with the plays of Tennessee Williams. I've done five Williams plays with her. I love the resonance of seeing her in front of "the mirror" again and also on "the bed" again thirty years later. I've seen her on "the bed" in Sweet Bird of Youth, I directed her on "the bed" in Red Devil Battery Sign. She wasn't on the "the
bed" when she played Amanda in my production of The Glass Menagerie but she was on the sofa. Elizabeth is a power of nature and really understands Tennessee's writing. She worked very closely with him when she did the production of Cat on the Hot Tin Roof in the 1970's. They kind of crafted that version of "Cat" together and then they lived together in the Caribbean for a while.

SHG - Then, in your acting company, you have a mix of an old and new Tennessee Williams artistic generation.

MW - Yes, I love having the mix of the old and the new with Elizabeth as a bridge to the past. I first saw Liz in a Tennessee Williams when she did The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore with Amanda Plummer. This is their first reunion since then. Before that they did Agnes of God on Broadway for many years. They work so well together fulfilling that kind of repertory ideal.

SHG - You've started a repertory company with artists, and writers and even directors that are doing Beckett, Albee, Horton Foote and Williams here at Hartford Stage. Regularly staging the works of these particular playwright is giving Hartford Stage a unique identity for doing abstract, poetic plays.

MW - Like many of America's regional repertory theaters Hartford Stage was originally founded to have a resident company of artists. Hartford Stage dropped the word company from its name somewhere in the 1980s. Even The Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis doesn't have a resident company anymore. But my training in North Carolina, at ART and at the Alley Theater was with a company. I like working with the same artists over and over again because you work harder and faster and deeper. And, I think that people will take more risks because they feel safer with each other. And that's why 8 BY TENN makes my heart sore like a hawk because we've been building to this point to be able to do some of this work that, albeit, is not very easy for our audiences.

SHG - Could you explain what 8 BY TENN is and why you have chosen to present it as a double bill titled ROSE and BLUE.

MW - 8 By TENN is the current Tennessee Williams production that we are presenting on our main stage. It is a retrospective look through select Tennessee Williams one-act plays that spans early, middle and late portions of his playwriting career. There are two bills of five plays each playing on separate nights, one called ROSE and the other called BLUE. The reason for the
two subtitles is that Williams used to say that he was afraid of getting the Blue Devils, meaning depressions. And then he also later would take Blue Devils which were a kind of speed, I think. And then, of course, in The Glass Menagerie Tennessee refers to "Blue Roses". And, of course, ROSE is the name of Tennessee Williams schizophrenic sister.

**SHG - What do you mean when you say that 8 BY TENN is "not very easy for our audiences"?**

**MW -** Quite frankly some of them would rather have Cat on a Hot Tin Roof or Sweet Bird of Youth or some of the other. The reason audiences came to love Tennessee early on is that he is a great storyteller. And one of the things that is frustrating about some of his later work is that either he's not decidedly giving us the story in a linear fashion or the stories aren't as compelling or pleasing as they once were. I don't think the current bill of 8 BY TENN is going to be the top seller that our production of The Glass Menagerie was but that's not our intention. To me, Hartford Stage is a non profit theater. We're supposed to be like a research University involved in that kind of work.

**SHG - Leading, not following.**

**MW -** Exactly. The theatrical newspaper Variety said today that one of our Williams premiers, The One Exception, is quite a find. That's the one-act play that Amanda Plummer does with Annalee Jeffries. To think that some of the plays that Tennessee wrote might be discovered and play in repertoire is quite exciting to me.

**SHG - Could you speak about the three Williams premiere one-act that are incorporated into the double bill?**

**MW -** There are three world premieres playing in 8 BY TENN, The Palooka, The One Exception, and Now The Cats With Jewelled Claws. Those are the first productions. When I directed the cast for Now The Cats With Jewelled Claws I called on a lot of the ideas that I used in Camino Real. The character of Helmar is there as the manager/narrator like Gutman is there in "Camino" and when Helman sings the title song at the end of the play, there a real feeling there that we have reentered Block Ten on the Camino Real. Another interesting aspect of 8 BY TENN is the fact that The Gnadiges Fraulein hasn't been done since the original production with Zoe Caldwell and Margaret Layton. It's one I wish I had more time with to shape. I love what we've got out there and I think it's
very representative of the play. I think it's funny and I also think it says what happens to artists in America whether you be Tennessee Williams or Jose Quintero and even Eugene O'Neill to somewhat of a lesser extent. Even O'Neill went out of favor in the later years of his life and career.

**SHG - O'Neill was trying to bring classical stature to American playwriting. What would you say Tennessee William's had as a goal?**

**MW - O'Neill was working very much like Arthur Miller still is by going back to the Greeks. I think Tennessee was a bit more modern in his choices I think he's looking more towards Chekhov as his guide. O'Neill and Miller were looking towards Aristotelian ideals and that's why they give you the sense that their plays are more classic. Tennessee did look towards those Aristotelian ideals as in The Night of the Iguana where he used theunities of time and place and action. Those conventions are pleasing to an audience. But I think Tennessee was a great experimenter of form. He studied with Irwin Piscator at the New School for Social Research after Piscator left Germany. Even in The Glass Menagerie he's playing with slides, subtitles and the plastic theater. In his later plays, you see that he's responding to Pinter and Albee as much as anything else. I think that Tennessee was constantly playing with and experimenting with form. Tennessee wanted, as we all do, to be an artist who is vital for today. He didn't just want to exist on what was great five years ago. He wanted to be exciting and illuminating for now.

**SHG - The recent production of Edward Albee's Seascape that played here at Hartford Stage brought the realization that many of the plays of Albee, and certainly of Samuel Beckett and even of Tennessee Williams are plays that are really meant to be contemplated as religious. When you read them and then see them, it seems that audiences are supposed to be experiencing them as vehicles for mediation. When you go into the abstract world established by the playwright you are not supposed to be trying to understand that world literally. You are supposed to philosophize.**

**MW - I think that we live in a very conservative time right now. Our current President is leading us on a very conservative agenda. I feel that audiences are becoming more conservative. Audiences seem to want their meat and potatoes story with a beginning, middle and end. The idea that one would free oneself
up to think abstractly and have an abstract experience that would have some kind of meditative quality to it, is the power of some of William's more abstract plays like - say for instance - The Gnädiges Fraulein. There is a story there. On the surface, a woman is trying to get a write up in the Cockaluny Gazette because she can't pay for advertising for her rental property. And this artist is going to give her a good write up but in the process becomes used. In the midst all of this hilarity with someone coming out in a bird costume there is something very serious being explored. The artist in Tennessee's eyes was a part of The Fugitive Kind, the strange, the queer, the mutilated, the bum, the one that is outside of mainstream society. I think that anyone that has had an independent fire or spark, particularly if they have any kind of sexual danger to them, aberrant or otherwise, is a person that society wants to destroy. Why, because that person threatening to the status quo. I think artists are very threatening to the status quo today. I think Bush is terrified of what artists are saying or writing about his administration. In The Gnädiges Fraulein shows how artists will be destroyed by society but it also shows how the fighting spirit of the artist will keep that person going. Williams voices the fact there is a certain resiliency in artists. And also there is a certain kind of honor in the fight the artist will have to carry on even when the odds are stacked against them. They are going to be literally cannibalized. It's interesting in this play

SHG - Canniblization is in another Williams play.

MW - It's off stage in Suddenly Last Summer but it's on stage in The Gnädiges Fraulein. Even people who see the Beckett parallels are disturbed by the state of the Fraulein at the end of the play. I think that it's probably hard to enjoy The Gnädiges Fraulein as much as I do or perhaps Williams did when he wrote it, because of the bloody bandage and the bloody scalp at the end. It's not something you can dismiss lightly. I think we should be awed by the presence of a human being who has been reduced and objectified. In the instance of The Gnädiges Fraulein that human being is an artist that has been reduced to catch raw fish to sustain her existence. Sing for her supper. That's what I do. I sing for my supper here.

SHG - We should see suffering and pain and be hurt by it and not become indifferent to it.

MW - Yes. And I think maybe Williams wants us to have a bit more understanding. We should not try to tear up and destroy our
heroes like we often do with move stars, these icons, who we tear
down when they disappoint us, like they did to Tennessee. It's such
a consumer culture now, one that turns on whatever is hot. I find
going into the world of Tennessee Williams a relief because there is
some kind of sanity in his insanity. For instance, look at one of the
other one-acts in 8 BY TENN, Portrait of a Madonna. It was written
in 1940 at a time when there were far more insane people than the
play's mentally fragile heroine that were governing in Europe and
putting away millions of people and killing them. I mean who gets
to write the rules in such societies? It's really the owners. And, the
artists aren't the owners. That's why they hate Hollywood when
artists get vocal in campaigns.

SHG - Many great playwrights have been given a poor
reception because they did not present a new work that fit into
the expectations of their admirers. Sean O'Casey was pretty
much ousted by the Abbey Theater when he turned away from
the epics he had been writing and began to experiment with
Expressionism.

MW - Your audience feels betrayed by you. Because they
thought they knew who you were and some people have built a
career saying who you were and you turned out not to be that and
"how dare you change".

SHG - Could we return to the mourning and grieving of
Margueritte in Camino Real and go back to the guilt and grief
Blanche is experiencing in "Streetcar" because of her young
husband's suicide and then I would go to Hannah Jelkes in The
Night of the Iguana. Hannah helps her grandfather die with
dignity while also helping Shannon to face and grieve his
demons. I'm looking for something in Williams later plays that
roots the purpose of the play through a significant character as
in these earlier Williams works.

MW - What about The One Exception where the woman
comes in to ask for
money from her emotionally shattered school chum.

SHG - Yes, that was rooted. The sense of grieving was
there.

MW - Well, The One Exception is the play that Tennessee
was working on three weeks before he died. What's amazing is that
Tennessee continued to work every day until he died no matter
what he was going, no matter what kind of horror or drug and
alcohol problem he was having. He did write every day just like he swam every day and it was those two disciplines that kept him alive. Shortly before he died, about three weeks before he died, he stopped being able to work. I think that when that happened, he was looking for a way out. I think Kyra in The One Exception is a lot like Tennessee and is feeling like, "I'm on the verge of not being able to continue within this world the way it's like and so I'm either going to be committed or I'm going to take myself out".

SHG - What if any impact do you think Williams' alcoholism had on the quality of his playwriting.

MW - It impacted yes. But then there is the reality of his one-act play The One Exception which has such a clarity to the writing. So, as much as doctors and AA groups would us like to say that you can't create and be drugged, I think that Tennessee was a great artist and I think he was continuing to pour out of his soul. And, even if it came sometimes in a drug induced haze I think there is still language and ideas and situations in his plays that is compelling, less and more to the eyes of the beholder. But I think he was still a vital artist to the end. I'm sorry his life was what it was. I wish he could have been less reliant on those substances.

SHG - What was the origin of the production that you did at Hartford Stage that you called An Evening with Tennessee.

MW - That was the one time that we didn't mount a full main stage production of a Williams plays but we instead did an evening of his letters that had been edited by Albert Devlin and Nancy Tischler. It may be of interest that Devlin and Tischler are about to put out a second volume of Tennessee's letters which is a wonderful and very revealing book. Anyway, we did an evening of those letters, one that traced Tennessee's life all the way up to the opening of The Glass Menagerie. Richard Thomas, John Michael Higgins, Andrew McCarthy, Jim Colby, Campbell Scott each individually read on different nights from the letters. Richard Thomas is going to do that evening at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. in the spring of 2004.

SHG - You have also staged readings of selected Williams plays such as The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore read by Olympia Dukakis (Academy Award) and Marion Seldes (Tony Award) and Vieux Carre with Estelle Parsons (Academy Award) and Harvey Feirstein (Tony Award). What are some of
the ways Hartford Stage reaches out to the immediate Hartford community.

MW - Every year during the Marathon we have a screening of a film version of one of Tennessee Williams' works at the Wadsworth Antheneum which is a very fine local art museum. During that event, we have a guest speaking about Williams in relation to the work being viewed. We also have the University of Hartford's help and we bring in scholars and the editor of the Tennessee Williams journal to speak. We have scholarly components to the marathon and entertainment components such as dinners.

SHG - What Tennessee Williams will you be doing next?
MW - I'm looking at rapping up the Marathon over the next four years, so we are looking at what major Williams plays we want to do during those three years. Sweet Bird of Youth is a play that is on my mind. I've always wanted to do that. There are some early plays I'm looking at and some later plays. I think that we'll stop doing Williams every year after we finish our commitment in the next four years. I've, at least, made a ten-year commitment myself to it personally. We'll probably still do Williams but not necessarily every year.

SHG - Joseph Papp committed The New York Shakespeare Festival to doing all of Williams Shakespeare's plays, something that the Festival accomplished even though Papp died before the cycle was completed. Do you know of any other major professional American Theaters that are committed to a major endeavor or a project such as your Williams marathon?
MW - No I don't. I just thought that it was time that someone in American Theater devoted themselves to a reexamining Tennessee Williams, who is unquestionably one of America's greatest playwrights.

Sheila HICKEY GARVEY
Southern Connecticut State University