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Plain Speaking:
The Voices of William Inge

by Philip Middleton Williams, Ph.D.

Presented at the William Inge Theatre Festival.

April 15, 2011

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Plain Speaking

The Voices of William Inge

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The William Inge Theatre Festival Scholars' Conference
Independence Community College
Independence, Kansas
April 15, 2011

In the fall of 2001 I directed a production of *Picnic* at a private high school in Miami. Thanks to the multicultural nature of Miami and the school, the students came from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds ranging from Latin America, Asia, and Europe as well as from different parts of the country, including the East Coast. Even so, I had no trouble casting the play. A handsome and muscular senior of Columbian ancestry was perfect as Hal, the handsome and muscular stranger who shows up to woo the town beauty. Eduardo had the classic Latin features that made him both exotic enough to attract the ladies but different enough to be an outsider. He also made a nice contrast to the slim and well-dressed David who was never without his Oxford shirt and loafers; he was the perfect Alan, the town rich kid. The role of Madge went to Samantha, the school's blonde prom queen, and the role of Millie, the tomboy little sister, went to Melissa, who fit the role perfectly; she never wore a dress to school, and despite being seventeen, she still looked as if she as on the verge of adolescence. Even casting the adult roles was easy; the girl auditioning for Mrs. Potts wrote on her casting card that she "loved to play frumps." So filling a cast of a play set in the heartland of America from the melting pot of Miami has not as hard as you think.

It became a different matter, however, when we sat down around the table at the first rehearsal and read through the play. Even with the experience most of these students had from doing drama all through their high school years – and most of them had been in plays since grade school and some had professional and community theatre on their resumes – they stumbled and flubbed their way through the dialogue, and at one point the girl playing Madge said to everyone, "I can't believe people really talk like this."

It was not the first time I had heard that critique of Inge's dialogue. In doing research on previous papers for this conference, I'd read reviews that called the dialogue both "stagey" and "mundane", and in seeing previous productions of his works, I've heard the actors reciting the lines with either exaggerated accents that tried – unsuccessfully – to lend a homey touch to the words, or going to the other extreme where the actors spoke the lines without any feeling at all, almost as if they did not truly understand what they were saying.

In the case with my students in Miami, I realized two things. First, none of them were familiar with the Midwestern part of the country, and their exposure to what they thought was a Midwestern accent was based on stereotypes that they'd culled from television and film. In other words, they thought that it was somewhere between "The Beverly Hillbillies" and "Fargo." A colleague noted that if you're doing a production of a Tennessee Williams play such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* or Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, you would hire a dialect coach to teach the actors how to speak the lines with the Southern rhythms or the New England twang. But no one thinks of teaching dialect for an Inge play. It took a bit of practice to teach them that not all people from the Midwest – including myself – sound like Granny Clampett or Marge Gunderson, and that the dialogue in *Picnic*, including the rhythms, the slang, and the dropped g's at the end of words were an integral part of the play. If anything, the plainness of the words brought a sense of naturalism to the story that brought out the characters in ways that could not be conveyed by just actions or appearance.

The second realization was that for these students, this was their first exposure to post-war drama and the works of playwrights such as Inge or his contemporaries. In fact,

these students, most of whom planned to study theatre in college, had never heard of Inge. That wasn't a surprise, but I also discovered that they had never read the works of Tennessee Williams or Arthur Miller or Eugene O'Neill, and when I rattled off the list of Inge Festival honorees and asked for a show of hands for each name, I got mostly blank stares, even with Neil Simon. (They knew of Stephen Sondheim, but that was because they had done *Into the Woods* as their spring musical the year before.) But rather than see this as disappointing lack of education, I took it as an opportunity, and together we began to explore the plain-spoken language of the play, focusing on the simple and yet expressive dialogue.

As we read through the script again and began to block the action, we focused on the words and the choices that Inge made for his characters. It was clear that each spoke with a different voice. One of the acting exercises we used was taking random lines from the script, tossing them into a hat, and trying to guess who said it based solely on the words. It was not too hard to ascertain which character was speaking.

Of course, this is Playwriting 101; the first lesson you learn is to distinguish the characters from one another so that they do not sound all the same, or worse, sound like you the playwright. But unlike some of his contemporaries, most notably his one-time mentor Tennessee Williams, Inge seems to have made a conscious choice to use the plain language and speech patterns he grew up with in Independence for his characters. While Williams's work is poetic – think of Tom's opening soliloquy in *The Glass Menagerie*: "Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have magic up my sleeve," – and the stage is filled with images and projections, Inge foregoes all of that stagecraft. He never breaks the fourth wall; we are eavesdroppers, not invited guests. There are no soliloquies in *Picnic*,

and rarely in his plays at all. The closest he comes is in his one-act *The Boy in the Basement*, and that play was kept in the closet, so to speak, for ten years. It is as if he – and therefore his characters – is afraid to let us know what they are truly thinking but must hold back due to social custom and modesty. And when the truth is finally spoken, or cried out, as with Rosemary's plaintive "Marry me, Howard!" or Doc's violent outburst against Lola, it is either out of sheer desperation or repression that loosens the inhibitions. In both cases, they are clumsy and awkward, the words a poor substitute for the feelings within. But that is what makes them so powerful.

This was a challenge for my actors. These students, who had heretofore expressed themselves through the poetry of Sondheim and, to their previous teachers' credit, mastered some Shakespeare, found it hard to express themselves in such plain terms and dated slang from fifty years before. It actually required them to act; to become the character, and to understand what lay beneath the simple words and outward expressions.

It also took a while for the actors to become comfortable with the silences that are inherent in Inge's works. His lines are not the rapid-fire and overlapping dialogues of Lanford Wilson, sometimes spoken so quickly that he leaves the audience a beat behind. Rather, his characters speak in measured paces, forming thoughts as they speak, sometimes stumbling for the right word, and often not finding exactly what they mean. It's not necessarily a slower speech; there are times when the pace is a quick back-and-forth, but more often than not he gives the characters – and the audience – time to react to the words. Inge seemed very aware of this; his stage directions are detailed in pointing out pauses and moments of silence or contemplation.

Sometimes the silence plays an integral part in defining the dynamics between the characters that no lines could do. There are such moments in his plays, most significantly in *Come Back, Little Sheba*. Lola is so desperate for companionship that she cannot bear silence. Left alone in the house she desperately reaches out for any human contact, filling the ears of the postman, the milkman, her neighbor Mrs. Coffman, even a soap opera on the radio; anything to keep the dreadful silence at bay. And how does Doc, her husband respond? With monosyllabic grunts or as few words as possible, never encouraging Lola to go on and tell him more. It is as if he longs for the silence to descend, to envelope him, and take him away from the monotony of "Do you want an egg for breakfast" or the constant retelling of the tale of the lost Little Sheba to a blissful world of peace and solitude; no more Lola, no more Sheba, anything to take him away from the dream world he used to achieve at the bottom of a liquor bottle.

For Doc, the escape of alcohol has been replaced by his fantasy crush on his young boarder, Marie. In silence he dreams of her, worships her as the symbol of feminine purity and beauty, his "Ave Maria," but never able to express what he truly feels for her.

It is in silence that Doc's delusion is destroyed. In the beginning of Act Two, it is early morning, and after he effectively silences Lola with his non-answers, he begins to leave the house in blessed silence. He spots Marie's scarf on the chair. He picks it up and fondles it, a clear sign of his deep crush on the young woman. He finally puts it down and goes to leave. But as he passes by the door to Marie's bedroom, he hears something, and if Inge is accused of writing clunky dialogue by critics, he more than makes up for it in his stage directions: "Then there is the sound of TURK'S laughter, soft

and barely audible. It sounds like the laugh of a sated Bacchus. DOC'S body stiffens. It is the sickening fact that he must face and it has been revealed to him in its ugliest light. The lyrical grace, the spiritual ideal of Ave Maria is shattered. He has been fighting the truth, maybe suspecting all along that he was deceiving himself. Now he looks as though he might vomit. All his blind confusion is inside him. With an immobile expression of blankness of his face, he stumbles into the table above the sofa."

That is just one example of the beauty of the failure of words in Inge's plays. He trusts the moments of silence to convey his thoughts and leaves it to the characters to fill in where words cannot. Sometimes the silence is dreadful, haunting, and perilous, such as the moment in *Picnic* when Hal and Madge return in the early morning light and the realization of what they've done becomes clear. Or there are moments when the silence brings a wistful close to the story as in *Bus Stop* when everyone is gone and the stage is empty, waiting for the next bus to roll up with its share of stories, hopes, and fugitives.

Inge knew how powerful simple words could be, and he chose plain people to speak them. He often wrote how close he felt to the people and place that he wrote about, choosing to make Independence his home on the stage even if he felt like an outsider and even if the affection was not returned by the people he grew up with. But he treats them fairly. He neither elevates them beyond their human-ness, nor does he denigrate them into caricature or stereotype.

The last lines of his works he has chosen very carefully to say nearly everything he meant in the story, and do it in a simple and matter-of-fact way. *Picnic* ends with the weak voice of Mrs. Potts' invalid mother crying out, and Helen telling her "Be patient, Mama," a sentiment – if not a pun – that applies to almost everyone in the play. *Bus Stop*

leaves Virgil out in the cold, alone after Bo and Cherie have left and Grace closing the diner, with the wistful observation, "Well… that's what happens to some people." *Come Back, Little Sheba* leaves us with Doc and Lola at the table, both realizing that their dream children – Little Sheba and Ave Maria – are gone.

LOLA: I don't think Little Sheba's ever coming back, Doc. I'm not going to call her any more.

DOC: Not much point in it, Baby. I guess she's gone for good.

LOLA: I'll fix your eggs.

It cannot be any simpler – or more powerful – than that.

As the rehearsals for the high school production progressed, I found that the actors were becoming more comfortable with the rhythms and the simplicity of the dialogue. They began to find that they had more in common with the people of Independence, Kansas, than they realized; that young people have dreams that surpass their own limitations; that expression of thought through words often fails to match the intention, and that what is left unsaid sometimes makes the most powerful statement. And they began to listen to each other. They overcame their "acting" to actually pay attention to what was being said to them and formed their reaction, breaking through to the meaning of the words. It may be surprising to some, but it is rare to find playwrights who have mastered the technique of writing dialogue in a way that elicits not just a response from the audience but from the person they are speaking to. The real beauty of Inge's words is that they demand that you pay attention to what is said, and your response, true to the written word, will be all that much more meaningful.

Or, to paraphrase Yogi Berra, you can hear a lot by just listening.

Bibliography

1. William Inge, Four Plays (New York: Random House 1958; rpt. New York: Grove Weidenfeld 1979)