# Tennessee Williams and Erwin Piscator: influences, divergences and the Dramatic Workshop collaboration[1]

## Tennessee Williams e Erwin Piscator: influências, divergências e a colaboração no Dramatic Workshop

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**Abstract**
In the early 1940s, Tennessee Williams had a learning and working experience at the Dramatic Workshop, a theatre school directed by the political theatre exponent Erwin Piscator in New York. This article intends to briefly explore the relationship and debates between the two artists and, by analyzing the dropped staging project for the *Battle of angels* in the Dramatic Workshop's Studio Theatre and the stylistic procedures originated in the epic theatre used in *The glass menagerie*, reflect on the influences of Piscator's theatrical thinking and practice on William's work, as well as how those were appropriated and reshaped by him.

**Keywords:** Epic theatre; Plastic theatre; *Battle of angels*; *The glass menagerie*; North American drama.

**Resumo**
No início da década de 1940, Tennessee Williams passou por uma experiência de aprendizagem e trabalho no Dramatic Workshop, escola teatral dirigida pelo expoente do teatro político Erwin Piscator em Nova York. O artigo pretende explorar brevemente a relação e os debates entre os dois artistas e, a partir do projeto de encenação não efetivado de *Battle of angels* (*Batalha dos anjos*) no Studio Theatre ligado ao Dramatic Workshop e da análise de procedimentos estilísticos provenientes do teatro épico em *The glass menagerie* (*À margem da vida*), refletir sobre as influências do pensamento e da prática teatral de Piscator sobre Williams, bem como a forma como estas são apropriadas e ressignificadas por este.

**Palavras-chave**: Teatro épico; Teatro plástico; *Battle of angels*; *The glass menagerie*; Dramaturgia estadunidense.

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**The meaning of art and the first political and non-realistic influences**

Tennessee Williams, one of the most renowned playwrights of our time, and Erwin Piscator, precursor of political and epic theatre, are two of the most relevant names in world theatre in the 20th century. Their lives crossed paths during the American exile of Piscator, who, fleeing the Nazi regime in his native Germany, first migrated to the USSR in 1931—from where he fled to France in 1936 to escape the persecution of artists by Stalin—and finally, in 1939, to the United States, where he would live until his return to West Germany in 1951, fleeing the hunt for communists led by the House Un-American Activities Committee of the American Congress.

While living in the United States, Piscator directed the Dramatic Workshop and its Studio Theatre—a school and professional theatre linked to the New School for Social Research—until 1949, when they became independent organizations. It was there that Tennessee Williams met Piscator and was granted a scholarship at the Playwright's Seminar coordinated by John Gassner and Theresa Helburn.

At that time, Williams had already dedicated a few years to dramaturgy and was determined to pursue a career in it, along the lines of American professional theatre (for example, he had an agent, Audrey Wood, since 1939).

Between 1937 and 1938, Williams attended the playwriting program of the University of Iowa, directed by E. C. Mabie, a veteran of the Federal Theatre Project,[4] who had brought to Iowa the forms of political theatre proposed by the government project run by Hallie Flanagan – like the *agitprops* (theatre of agitation and propaganda) and the Living Newspapers. In this program, Williams wrote a one-act play called *Quit eating!*, about a hunger strike among prison inmates, for one of the Living Newspapers. The play was inspired by the prison strike of Statesville, Illinois, against the decrease in the number of paroles from 1,300 to 240 (Murphy, 2014, p. 20).

In the beginning of his career as a playwright, a substantial part of Williams' plays had a strong social appeal, like *Candles to the sun*, from 1937, about a coal miners' strike; *Fugitive kind*, from the same year, about the guests of a decaying bar; and *Not about nightingales*, from the following year, about abuses in the prison system (based

[4] The program was under the New Deal initiative of the Roosevelt administration and represented the largest public theatrical financing initiative to date in American history. It was discontinued in 1939 after pressure from the HUAC, which accused the program of being "communist" due to its left-wing themes and aesthetic inspirations. Williams himself tried to join the program (Costa, 2001, p. 133).

on his previous *Quit eating!*). All these plays were performed by the Mummers of Saint Louis, directed by Willard Holland (Murphy, 2014, p. 9).

These political themes could have brought Williams and Piscator together, since the latter saw theatre as a means of political education. In fact, since the 1920s, his entire epic theatre in Germany aimed at encouraging political action. In his own words, "our art was created from our awareness of reality and inspired by the will to destroy this reality. We founded political theatre (not out of love for politics, precisely) to contribute, as far as we could, to the great struggle for the new configuration of our world" (Piscator, 2013, p. 89).

However, the momentum of this politically charged dramaturgy faded in Williams' writing after the 1930s and the end of that historical moment in which political activism and theatrical renewal had gone hand in hand in the USA. In a letter to Piscator from August 13, 1942, written during a time of distress and major financial hardships, after he had sent his agent a comedy with *the very inglorious aim* of making money, the author speculates on the purpose of art in a very different fashion:

> It is sort of a last, desperate throw of the literary dice in the direction of Broadway, and so I wait for something to happen and make a religion of simple endurance. That, Mr. Piscator, is what I call the poor man's (or artist's) religion—Simple Endurance! It is not the *opium* of the people, it is their *bread* and *wine*.[5] It is what they live on, poor damned sheep, and don't know *it*. This great blast of lightning, the *war*—I wonder if it will not stretch endurance too far—and force the human sheep to look for a new faith that is more rewarding!
> What are we doing, we people who put words together, who project our shadows on stages—but trying to create a new and solid myth—or *faith*—or *religion*—in place of the old and desiccated and *fruitless one* of 'simple endurance'? (Williams, 2000, p. 393, emphasis in original).

Ironically, Piscator saw his political theatre as a legacy forged in the fire of World War I, during which he served on the front. However, the differences between them did not prevent the relationship between Williams and Piscator from leaving its mark on the young author. But how would the veteran of epic and political theatre influence the playwright who was looking for a vital space to establish his theatre?

[5] Here Williams alludes to Marx's famous passage "*Religious* misery is, at one and the same time, the *expression* of real misery and a *protest* against real misery. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people." (Marx, 2010, p. 145, emphasis in original), a topic that was probably addressed in his conversations with Piscator.

**The Dramatic Workshop: from dramaturgy seminar to influence on *The glass menagerie*[6]**

Discussing the influences imprinted on the work of any author is always a challenging task, particularly because documents and testimonials can give us clues and evidence to corroborate our analyses, but there is always room for speculation. In the case of the influence that Erwin Piscator may have had on Tennessee Williams, particularly at the time he was on the threshold of fame, there are some revealing signs that, nonetheless, are often misjudged by researchers. This is the case of the article "Plastic theatre and selective realism of Tennessee Williams", by Nudžejma Durmišević, in which all the marks of epic elements detected in Williams' work are attributed to the influence of Bertolt Brecht, and not Piscator, who the article describes as "primarily an expressionist" (Durmišević, 2018, p. 104).[7] Or even in the work of Brenda Murphy (2014, p. 37), who cites Gassner and Helburn's seminar only in relation to the New School for Social Research, without any reference to the Dramatic Workshop or Piscator.

Concealing Piscator's importance for the development of epic theatre under Brecht's shadow is common, but particularly striking in the case of studies that deal with Tennessee Williams, someone who worked with Piscator directly—but never with Brecht.

In a letter to David Staub from 1948, Gassner states that he believes he granted the playwriting seminar scholarship to Williams in 1941. There, having caught the attention of the two professors, both linked to the Theatre Guild, the play *Battle of angels* was taken to the group, who decided to produce it.

However, Gerhart Probst draws attention to the fact that Williams himself, in the preface to the book edition of *Orpheus descending* and *Battle of angels*, states that he had written the play as early as 1939, in Saint Louis (the year before the opening of the Dramatic Workshop). Probst suggests that a reformulated version of the play was discussed at the Dramatic Workshop with a view to producing it at the Studio Theatre

[6] In Portuguese, we find translations with the following titles: *À margem da vida* (*In the fringe of life*), *Algemas de cristal* (*Crystal handcuffs*).

[7] The author's confusion regarding Piscator as "primarily an expressionist" may derive from the choice of expressionistic authors like Ernst Toller for the director's productions. Nonetheless, he was always the first to say that those texts did not fully match his conception of epic, and that is why he made substantial changes to them. His appreciation of expressionism shines through in this excerpt written in 1966, for example, "The expressionists had overcome late romanticism and naturalism, but were unable to break away from them completely. […] It was the biggest obstacle to epic-political theatre, with its pathetic and uncommitted generalizations and its inevitable imprecision: Toller's entire dramatic work is as an example of this fight against oneself" (Piscator, 2013, p. 293).

(Probst, 1991, p. 78-79).

Richard Kramer says that Williams participated in dramaturgy seminars in 1940, and that the commercial production of *Battle of angels* in Boston was a consequence of his contact with Gassner and Helburn, as described in Gassner's letter (Kramer, 2002, p. 4). This version is confirmed by Williams' own letters. In March 1940, he writes to his mother saying that "The Theatre Guild has taken a sudden, unexpected interest in my new play" and that Gassner was "tremendously enthusiastic over it", having said that it was "the best play he had read in a year" and that he intended to produce it in the fall if the other two readers approved it (Williams, 2000, p. 240). The following month, he reports in another letter: "The Guild had a meeting at the class this afternoon, the play was thoroughly dissected and many changes were suggested" (Williams, 2000, p. 241).

The play's season in Boston was a fiasco. It ran between December 30, 1940 and January 11, 1941, but never made it to New York stages—the version revised by the author was not approved by the group. Later, in 1942, Piscator and Williams discussed the possibility of staging a production at the Dramatic Workshop's Studio Theatre during a difficult financial situation, after the institution denied a scholarship application made by Williams. Piscator then offered Williams a job in advertising at the Studio Theatre, but he eventually withdrew the proposal after "not hearing from" Williams. However, he claimed to be looking for a private funder for a scholarship (Williams, 2000, p. 394).

The discussion about the staging plans for *Battle of angels* at the Studio Theatre, from which only a few fragments are left, is emblematic of the irreconcilable differences between the conceptions of Piscator and Williams. In two letters from February 1942, Williams alludes to a new scene, an interlude that would be between acts II and III of *Battle of angels* and whose function would be to explain "the transition of Val, the lover, to Val, the evangelist":

> The Black preacher is, of course, a rather figurative than actual apparition. He is the 'truth that cries out in the streets and no man hears'. His visitation marks the turning point, the ascension to the third level, and in Act Three which follows this interlude, I can tie it up with suitable allusions. Our methods may differ, but our meanings are identical. I think you will see there is only a difference of method and every artist has to show his own (Williams, 1957, p. vi[8] *apud* Probst, 1991,

[8] WILLIAMS, Tennessee. Preface. In: WILLIAMS, Tennessee. **Orpheus descending and Battle of angels**. New York: New Directions, 1957.

p. 73).

In addition to expressing the limits imposed by the author for the changes suggested by the director, the other letter explains the function of this scene, in an attempt to reconcile the conceptions of Piscator and Williams:

> I am working on a dream-scene between Acts two and three in which Jonathan West, the negro preacher, appears to Val who has fallen asleep in the store, and in ~~long and~~ passionate exhortation impels him to carry on 'the torch' for the oppressed peoples. This will be done in poetry and with a background of choral singing (negro voices) and bells in the church tower. (Voices offstage)
> I think if we use this we must do without a prologue—it would be unnecessary and I doubt more and more of the artistic worth of the prologue.
> This is *positively* the last and only *major* change which I am going to make in the script. I will be out of the hospital (Deo Volente) by Wednesday night or Thursday morning and I hope that you will have come to your final decision by that time as I will then either remain on account of a definite play production or return South at once—I cannot afford to stay longer and waiting and uncertainty are always so agonizing to me—they discourage me profoundly and drain my energies away. If you wish to go ahead with casting while I am in the hospital you may do that without me. Audrey Wood, my agent, can represent me in casting as she is an excellent judge of actors and knows the play from long experience with it. I could also interview actors here at St. Luke's. Then I have complete confidence in your theatre in such matters. (Williams, 2000, p. 372, emphasis in original).[13]

The change made by Williams seeks to respond to Piscator's demands in an epic-political sense, placing social issues at the forefront and subjecting the characters and the plot to this aim. Proof that the change did not please Williams is the fact that this scene was never included in the publications he made of the play, nor in its later version, *Orpheus descending*. In a letter from July, Williams reports to Audrey Wood a conversation with Piscator—perhaps with some exaggeration, heightened by his frustration with the failure of negotiations—which indicates the heart of the matter:

> He looked at me mournfully and said, 'Mr. Williams, you have written a Fascist play—all of your characters are selfishly pursuing their little personal ends and aims in life with a ruthless disregard for the wrongs and sufferings of the world about them.' A man that lacking in humor is not for me to deal with! (Williams, 2000, p. 387-388).

However, as the conversations between them demonstrate, this was not about any difference in method with the intent of achieving an identical end, as Williams

had stated—perhaps with the vain hope of using this argument to sensitize the director to accept changes that fell short of what was required. For Williams, atmosphere, feeling and emotions were fundamental; for Piscator, the political meaning subordinated all methods, as he made clear countless times, like in this passage:

> If theatre has any meaning at all in our time its purpose should be to teach us—of human relation, human behavior, human capacities. It is to this task, consciously, suggestively and descriptively, that Epic Theatre is best suited. It sacrifices atmosphere, emotion, characterization, poetry and, above all, magic for the sake of a mutual exchange of problems and experiences with the audience. In other words: the purpose of Epic Theatre is to learn how to think rather than to feel—moving above the stream rather losing oneself in it (Ley-Piscator, 1967, p. 13).

If, according to Williams, doubts about its artistic value should rule out the prologue, for Piscator it could add an explicit political meaning to the play. It was for this reason that Piscator urged Williams to accept modifications that could change the general meaning of the play, similarly to what he had done with Ernst Toller and other authors. This habit of reshaping the script according to the demands of epic theatre earned him, according to himself, the reputation of an author slayer (Piscator, 2013, p. 250).

Piscator stated that "reshaping the works, for which I was criticized so many times, was not due to any particular sadism against the authors, but rather to the need to *deepen* the social, economic and political side of these works, whose problem was, at best, psychologizing" (Piscator, 2013, p. 95, emphasis in original). Although Piscator wrote this passage in 1929, it could fittingly apply to Williams' work. The criticism regarding the play's scope being focused on the characters' individual goals, ignoring the world around them, portrays this.

It is no wonder that Williams and Piscator did not find common ground and that the staging of *Battle of angels* at the Dramatic Workshop never came about, leaving an unsigned agreement as its only testimony (Probst, 1991, p. 109).

The process, however, was not in vain for Williams: having been Piscator's production assistant in editing his adaptation of the novel *War and peace*, by Leo Tolstoy, which ran from March 20 to 31, 1942, at the Studio Theatre, Williams learned firsthand how Piscator conceived a play. From this experience probably derive the

veteran's most noticeable influences on the young playwright. These would be particularly noticeable in the long dramaturgy work that Williams carried out from what was initially a one-act play called *Spinning song*, which he describes as "a play suggested by my sister's tragedy" (Murphy, 2014, p. 53). The script was deeply reshaped and gave rise to a short story called *Portrait of a girl in glass*, a film script under the name *The gentleman caller*, which was rejected by MGM Studios during the short period in which Williams was hired as a screenwriter, as well as the one-act play *The pretty trap*. It finally became the play we know as *The glass menagerie*, which would mark the author's career as his first commercial success (Murphy, 2014, p. 54).

In a letter to Margo Jones from March 1944, Williams says, "I did a complete re-write of the nauseous thing I read you in Pasadena, *The gentleman caller*. I was afraid to leave anything in that condition, so I did it over." (Murphy, 2014, p. 55). In October, he sent an almost finished version of the same text, now called *The fiddle in the wings*, about which he says, "All done but the *first* scene, which is a very tricky one, as it must establish all the non-realistic conventions used in the play—I call it 'a play with music'." (Murphy, 2014, p. 55, emphasis in original).

A thorough analysis of this long, tortuous process ("writing it was *hell*!", he told Wood) would not be possible here, but the change from a "nauseous thing" to a play with "non-realistic conventions" strongly suggests Piscator's influence, which would be noticeable in the final version of the text.

The author's notes for the production that precede the script of *The glass menagerie* work as a manifesto, in which not only does William make notes regarding the production of the play, but also considerations about the conceptions that he had developed in relation to theatre and staging:

> These remarks are not meant as a preface only to this particular play. They have to do with a conception of a new, plastic theatre which must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions if the theatre is to resume vitality as part of our culture (Williams, 199, p. xix).

Thus, Williams places himself in an antagonistic position to the realism that had been hegemonic in the American theatrical tradition. Having participated in the Living Newspapers experiments, part of the armamentarium of *agitprop* theatre that prevailed in the workers' and left-wing theatre of the previous decade, the author already had some experience with theatrical forms that went beyond the limits of

realism.

It is true that Williams goes so far as to warrant the break with such conventions because the play was centered on memories, "Being a 'memory play', *The glass menagerie* can be presented with unusual freedom of convention." (Williams, 1999, p. xix). However, he also supports the extrapolation of such conventions from the idea of search for authenticity:

> Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to truth. When a play employs unconventional technique, it is not, or certainly shouldn't be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually or should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are (Williams, 1999, p. xix).

This passage is very similar to Piscator's considerations about technique, as in this 1928 text:

> Our starting point is precisely this excessively real reality, and we use all possible resources to express it. What are cinema, moving sets, machines or lubricating oil to us? They are just resources. Our goal is located in reality (Piscator, 2013, p. 89).

Nevertheless, if there is some agreement between them about the idea that diverse techniques must be used with the aim of getting closer to the truth, or reality, there is undoubtedly a distinction between what such terms mean. For Piscator, it is about social, economic, political reality; for Williams, truth is related to the subjective nature of the characters, an emotional reality linked to the personal perceptions of Laura, Amanda, Tom and Jim, characters who deal with concrete situations mediated by their own hopes, anxieties, fears and dreams.

In order to express these subjective truths, Williams taps into his learning from Piscator and seeks to employ the same techniques that the director used to emphasize economic, historical and social aspects, but with the narrative purpose of bringing out aspects of atmosphere and subjectivity. The epic function, in the sense of a narrative, is suitable for this purpose. It causes the dramatic (dialogical) quality of the play to decrease or change based on the techniques employed in a scope that goes beyond "the straight realistic play, with its genuine Frigidaire and authentic ice-cubes" (Williams, 1999, p. xix). For Williams, in this type of play, "its characters that speak

exactly as its audience speaks correspond to the academic landscape and have the same virtue of a photographic likeness", a sterile likeness, since

> truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance. (Williams, 1999, p. xix).

To this end, the author adopts features that are typical of epic theatre, like structuring the play into episodic scenes instead of acts with unity of time and action; introducing a narrator character; using projection images and subtitles; using lights with a narrative role.

Regarding the screen device, Williams warns that it is the only important difference between the original and the staged version of the play, by choice of director Eddie Dowling, who decided not to use the screen. Although Williams states that he does not "regret the omission of this device from the present Broadway production" (1999, p. xx), he discusses its function in the notes and suggests it has primarily a structuring role in the play:

> In an episodic play, such as this, the basic structure or narrative line may be obscured from the audience. The effect may seem fragmentary rather than architectural. This may not be the fault of the play so much as a lack of attention in the audience. The legend or image upon the screen will strengthen the effect of what is merely allusion in the writing and allow the primary point to be made more simply and lightly than if the entire responsibility were on the spoken lines (Williams, 1999, p. xx).

Therefore, a narrative role is assigned, which comments on the action and guides the audience's attention. The difference between the role assigned by Williams and that used by Piscator is that, in the case of the latter, the narrative role assigned to the projection intended to extrapolate the situation on stage, adding historical and social context to the representation and thus providing a broader sense in which the dramatic situation can be understood. Williams presents another function for projections that relate directly to the sensitive, and not narrative, aspect: "Aside from this structural value, I think the screen will have a definite emotional appeal, less definable but just as important" (Williams, 1999, p. xx).

In relation to the music, also commented on by the author in his notes, there is a more prominently emotional role, in line with the nostalgic atmosphere of the play,

but he also assigns a cohesive, structuring element to it, similar to what he does to projections:

> […] it is the lightest, most delicate music in the world and perhaps the saddest. […] It serves as a thread of connection between the narrator with his separate point in time and space and the subject of his story. Between each episode it returns as reference to the emotion, nostalgia, which is the first condition of the play (Williams, 1999, p. xxi).

The same type of combination of functions can be found in his comments on lighting: in part, its role is to create an ambiance (albeit not realistic, but rather closer to an expressionistic perspective): "In keeping with the atmosphere of memory, the stage is dim"; or: "The light upon Laura should be distinct from the others, having a peculiar pristine clarity, such as light used in early religious portraits of female saints or madonnas", and compares the lighting to be used with that of paintings by El Greco (Williams, 1999, p. xx-xxi).

However, this also has a clear narrative function of juxtaposition and arrangement, which alludes to the epic function of lighting: "Shafts of light are focused on selected areas or actors, sometimes in contradistinction to what is the apparent center" (Williams, 1999, p. xx). An example of this type of narrative function fulfilled by lighting occurs when Tom says, in scene 4, "You know it don't take much intelligence to get yourself into a nailed-up coffin, Laura. But who in hell ever got himself out of one without removing one nail?", and then the light falls on the portrait of the father who abandoned them, as if answering the question (Williams, 1999, p. 27-28).

Finally, Tom, the character who is also a narrator and a typical element of Piscator's epic theatre, bears a remarkable resemblance to the type of narrator used in the production of *War and peace* in which Williams had participated in 1942: In the adaptation written by Piscator and Alfred Neumann, Pierre Besuchov is also a narrator-character who interrupts the scene to address the audience. Williams does not make any reference to him in the notes, but rather in the first stage direction of the play, stating that "The narrator is an undisguised convention of the play. He takes whatever license with dramatic convention as is convenient to his purposes." (Williams, 1999, p. 4).

In his first line, the narrator says he will give the audience "truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion", and presents the "social background of the play" mentioning the

Civil War in Spain, the bombing of the town of Guernica, and protests and riots in cities like Chicago, Cleveland and Saint Louis (Williams, 1999, p. 5). This brief presentation of a social and political context promptly refers to Piscator's approach to the narrator, however, it is accessory within the scope of the play. It does not play any role of its own in the story and basically serves to show that the action takes place in the past. If for Piscator the story around the characters helps illustrate and discuss social questions, in Williams' play the emphasis is on individuals, and this political context is what the narrator had already said: a backdrop.

And it is the narrator himself who then explains the intention of placing the play on a plane far from reality: "it is sentimental, not realistic". Alluding to the character of Jim, the visitor that the family would like to unite with Laura, he states:

> He is the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from a world of reality that we were somehow set apart from. But since I have a poet's weakness for symbols, I am using this character also as a symbol; he is the long delayed but always expected something that we live for" (Williams, 1999, p. 5).

**A non-realistic theatre in which "all influences served a learning purpose"**

It is clear that from *The glass menagerie* onward, Williams' writing begins to consistently include factors that go beyond dramatic dialogue and realistic conventions, and this intention is declared in his notes on the production. Richard Kramer points out how the evolution of the author's theatrical conception in this direction began when he was at the Dramatic Workshop, after his participation in dramaturgy seminars and during his work as an assistant in Piscator's production of *War and peace* (Kramer, 2002). Between January and April 1942, his diary entries refer to the idea of a sculptural drama: "I visualize it as a reduced mobility on the stage, the forming of statuesque attitudes or tableaux, something resembling a restrained type of dance, with motions honed down to only the essential or significant" (Williams, 1999, p. ix). Kramer sees a continuum between these formulations and the notion of plastic theatre that is presented on the notes for *The glass menagerie*: "[…] he describes a theatre that is, by definition, expressionistic—where the emotions of the play are rendered visually or aurally on the stage […]" (Kramer, 2002).

Although this expressionistic notion is radically different from Piscator's epic theatre, the evidence suggests that the work experience he had with the director was important to encourage him to think about the scenic resources available and mobilize them around his own conception of a non-realistic theatre. Kramer, who attributes the conception of the term "plastic theatre" to inspiration from the painter Hans Hofmann, states that Williams "[…] surely put the concept together from several sources over his early years, including the University of Iowa, Erwin Piscator's Dramatic Workshop at the New School for Social Research, and other influences" (Kramer, 2002).

Williams selects and uses elements and resources that set his dramaturgy apart from what one can see in his works that have already been assimilated and pasteurized by the cultural industry, like the adaptations of his plays to cinematographic scripts. As Maria Silvia Betti says, Williams' rise to the status of "an internationally recognized theatrical celebrity" pushed him into "a dizzying circle of contractual commitments with publishers, on Broadway and in Hollywood", which expanded the reach of his work, but, at the same time, "contributed decisively to spreading the idea that there [in the cinematographic circuit] was the true compositional core of his dramaturgy" (Betti, 2017, p. 214). Betti also points out that

> The lyricism found in Tennessee Williams' work, usually seen as the exclusive result of the figuration of the subjective processes of the individual's memory, is inseparable from the representation of the Southern United States and its social and economic questions. Southern American is historically pervaded by tensions and contradictions built up over time and which are a direct result from significant changes in structures of work, coexistence and thought in the United States in the first half of the 20th century. By using the effects of these changes as material for his dramaturgy, Tennessee engenders situations that are both representative and critical of various constitutive facets of Southern society and the dominant ideology of the country (Betti, 2017, p. 207).

This aspect is visible in *The glass menagerie* and the social themes that are fundamental to the play, like the idealization of supposed suitors from Amanda's past, linked to the traditional slave-owning landlords from which her own family originated; the exploitation and misery imposed on workers like Tom; or even the ideology of the *self-made man* embodied by Jim.

These social concerns can also be found in *Battle of angels*. As a harsh social denunciation, "the drama exposes the repression, cruelty, hatred, hypocrisy, and

brutality that lie beneath the surface of a small, upstanding Southern community" (Smith-Howard; Heintzelman, 2005, p. 38), in addition to questions like racism and police violence. For this reason, Piscator saw in the play both the potential to serve as raw material for an epic staging and the need to transform it to make this possible (like he did with the expressionistic plays of his friend and collaborator Ernst Toller in Germany). It was not, however, the wish of an author imbued with a remarkable lyrical verve like Williams to submit the rich subjective emotional world of his creations to the intentions of a theatre aimed at putting class conflicts and political and social matters in the foreground.

Even without agreeing on the staging of the play, Piscator showed that he valued Williams' work when, as a result of the institutional separation between the Dramatic Workshop and the New School for Social Research in 1949, he invited Williams to join the Board of the Dramatic Workshop and Technical Institute (Probst, 1991, p. 82). In his letter accepting the position, Williams says that he "is proud to be a Board member" and that he is "as interested as ever in what the Dramatic Workshop is doing and continually more impressed and admiring of its accomplishments and its endurance in the face of so much that is adverse in our present circumstances". He also says he hopes to see the staging of *The process*, by Kafka, directed by Piscator at the Studio Theatre, claiming to have heard "nothing but fine and exciting things about it. I feel it is one of the most significant works of our time" (Williams, 2000a, p. 361).

Williams' letter is dated December 1, 1950. A few months earlier, according to the testimony of Judith Malina, who was part of the Dramatic Workshop's student body at the time, Piscator had mentioned the playwright during a meeting with students:

> On February 19, 1950, Piscator called a meeting of all Dramatic Workshop students at the President Theatre. I wrote in my diary: Piscator talks. Some flame… revives. Among all the small voices, his clear, strong voice is alive with inner excitement. He speaks of his disappointment that the Dramatic Workshop has not produced a vanguard army of political theatres across America. He speaks derisively of certain alumni who have ignored his political inspiration. Tennessee Williams is cited. Piscator says, 'I wish to make of every actor a thinker and of every playwright a fighter' (Malina, 2012, p. 169).

Years later, in a text about American theatre from 1955, Piscator mentions Williams again, referring both to how playwrights from that country assimilate techniques from

several sources (he mentions Stanislavski) and the influence he himself considered to have had on the writing of *The glass menagerie*. For Piscator, several American authors

> learned Stanislavski's method and came to their own style alongside Russian authors like Chekhov, as is the case, for example, with Arthur Miller and T. Williams, among others. This explanation should be an example that, in the United States, all influences were sources of learning.

And he concludes:

> When T. Williams, for example, was at my school, I performed my and Alfred Neumann's staging of *War and Peace.* Shortly before, T. Williams had failed with his *The Battle of angels*. It was written in a naturalistic style and had three acts. T. Williams then saw the work staged epically, with a narrator and no division between acts, but rather sequences of scenes, and his next work, *The glass menagerie,* primarily adopts this epic style (Piscator, 2013, p. 191).

When he wrote to Piscator about *Battle of angels*, Williams argued that they used different methods for identical meanings, now in *The glass menagerie* we could say that they used similar methods for different meanings. As Probst states, "In Tennessee Williams' hands, the epic style of theatre, whenever he used it, became an instrument better to convey the sometimes gentle and poetic, often violent emotions of his plays" (Probst, 1991, p. 82). About *The glass menagerie*, Maria Ley-Piscator says that "The rational overtones in Tennessee Williams' play did not change its poetic beauty, but clarified the content" (Ley-Piscator, 1967, p. 237). Iná Camargo Costa has a more scathing opinion and states that "with so much material for a most tear-jerking melodrama […] the technique—capable of providing historical dimension to the four figures of *Menagerie*—and perhaps knowledge of *Mother Courage,* by Brecht, may have saved Tennessee Williams from utter disaster" (Costa, 2001, p. 138). This opinion seems to be corroborated by Williams himself, when he told Margo Jones he had completely redone that "nauseous thing" (maybe because it was melodramatic).

Piscator and Williams did not work together again, and, as it is clear, they have different theatrical styles. However, it does not seem to be an overstatement to say that important steps in Williams's break with realistic conventions—which would be an important part of his work, and perhaps the most neglected by critics—were encouraged by his experience working with the German playwright and director.

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