

# Cultural Daily

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## Rare Tennessee Williams Sunday Flawed but Moving

David Sheward · Wednesday, October 10th, 2018

Even in his minor works, Tennessee Williams tenderly exposed the desperate longings of life's dreamers and poets. In the age of Trump, they might be called losers because they fall between the cracks and do not possess the steely aggression to pull themselves out of their tiny tenements or expand their narrowly-defined lives. But this greatest of all American playwrights had compassion for these lost people and gave voice to their need for fulfillment and companionship. La Femme Theater Productions offers a glimpse of the dramatists' fading but still moving storytelling power with a sturdy production of the delicate, rarely-seen *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur*, presented Off-Broadway in 1979 and one of the last of Williams' works to premiere in New York before his death in 1983.



Kristine Nielsen and Jean Lichty in *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

This extended one-act contains numerous themes and characters evocative of earlier, stronger Williams classics, but director Austin Pendleton and his small cast gave the piece a life of its own. Set in a Depression-era St. Louis, the city and era of the author's young manhood, *Creve Couer* concerns four women dealing with the specter of loneliness, each in her own unique manner. Dorothea (or Dotty) is a variation on Blanche DuBois of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, a faded Southern belle eking out a living as a schoolteacher and deluding herself with romantic fantasies pinned on her lecherous principal. Like Blanche, she shares tiny quarters—a flat with Bodie, a single 40-ish office worker, more pragmatic than Dotty and bent on hitching her roommate with her twin brother Buddy, despite his obesity and penchant for cigars. The title refers to Bodie's matchmaking weekend plans for a picnic with Dotty and Buddy at a local park, ironically named "broken heart" in French.

Dropping in are Helena, Dotty's catty fellow teacher, and Miss Gluck, the pathetic upstairs neighbor grieving over the recent death of her elderly mother. The main action, such as it is, is the battle between Bodie and Helena over Dotty. Bodie is determined to make her roommate her sister-in-law while Helena wants to recruit her co-worker to share an apartment on the more exclusive side of town.



Jean Lichty, Annette O'Toole, Kristine Nielsen, and Polly Mckie in *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

That conflict feels drawn-out in order to fill an entire evening's two hours. Thankfully a pair of superb actresses, Kristine Nielsen and Annette O'Toole, are here to do the stretching and filling in. Bodie and Helena could have easily been reduced to caricatures of earthy hausfrau and frustrated spinster. But Nielsen, one of New York theater's most reliable comic performers, endows Bodie with a deep compassion and a vast maternal urge in need of an object. When Bodie explains her desire for nieces and nephews because she cannot have children of her own, Nielsen makes it a painful secret and the heartbreaking center of her being. O'Toole captures the painful ache of isolation beneath Helena's stylish exterior. (Beth Goldenberg created the eye-catching 1930s costumes.) Her emptiness is as big as Bodie's and this makes their battle an equally matched and fascinating one.

Jean Lichty skillfully charts Dotty's course from neurotic illusion to a sad acceptance of the less-than-beautiful realities of life. Polly McKie gives deep subtext to the small role of Miss Gluck, a pitiable creature attired in a bathrobe, moaning like an abandoned child. Harry Feiner's homey set captures the crowded confines of these women's desperate lives as does this insightful production of a rare flawed, but charming Williams gem.

Sept. 23—Oct. 21. La Femme Theater Productions at Theater at St. Clements, 423 W. 46th St., NYC. Wed—Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: one hour on 45 mins. with no intermission. \$55—\$99. (866) 811-4111 [www.lafemmetheatreproductions.org](http://www.lafemmetheatreproductions.org).

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