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Back story: Bill English on holiday fun from Tennessee Williams

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Bill English, artistic director of SF Playhouse. (Photo Courtesy SF Playhouse)

A glittering Christmas Eve comedy involving newlyweds doesn't exactly scream Tennessee Williams. The great playwright is, instead, known for portraits of the damned and the lost, from "A Streetcar Named Desire" to "The Glass Menagerie."

He wrote his yuletide comedy, "Period of Adjustment," in 1960, and critics eviscerated it. The piece has remained relatively obscure ever since -- which makes it perfect for a revival (through Jan. 14) at SF Playhouse, the edgy little troupe that takes audiences to unexpected places. Artistic director Bill English, who runs the company with his wife, Susi Damilano, chatted via email about unwrapping this bittersweet treat.



Q: Why is this play so little known?

A: Williams was ahead of his time satirizing the spiritual poverty of suburbia. It took most of us another decade to be appalled by the mediocrity and conformity associated with suburbs. "Period" seems truly prophetic. It went right over the heads of its audience.

Q: Aren't Williams and comedy strange bedfellows?

A: A couple decades ago, I played Shannon in a production of "Night of the Iguana" and was amazed by how funny I found the play. "Period" is very funny, and it still embodies Williams' soulful, sad side -- a very sweet balance without the melodrama and hand-wringing of some of his work.

Q: Is it a risk doing Williams as your holiday show?

A: For SF Playhouse, it was a no-brainer. It takes place Christmas Eve and yet, being a Williams play, helps us avoid the lowest common denominators like "Christmas Carol" and the "Nutcracker." It fits our mission of bringing our audience unique perspectives and prophetic voices and yet is still a classic and a holiday play. Bull's-eye!

Q: What is the secret to SF Playhouse's success?

A: SF Playhouse is most distinguished by the plays we choose to present. We try to bring new voices to the Bay Area, playwrights no one here has seen before. Also, I think the very unusual combination of Susi's business brilliance and my skill in technical theater helped us rise more quickly than some other very talented theater companies.

Q: What's it like running a theater with your wife?

A: SF Playhouse is like our baby, our joy. I suppose we have our share of disagreements and need to run away together regularly, but the theater often gives us a sense of purpose and mutual satisfaction. We like to call ourselves the other's "secret weapon!"

Q: Is this a fun time of year to work near Union Square?

A: Oh, it's the best. I love the big tree in Union Square, the music, the shopping and the goodwill. I occasionally go down there and pass out a handful of fliers because it makes me feel connected.

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