

Sweet Bird of Youth

*Relentless caper for all those who step
The legend of their youth into the noon*

—Hart Crane

The American poet Hart Crane was Tennessee Williams's spiritual and literary mentor. Williams traveled with a picture of Crane and a volume of his poetry. Central to Crane's work was the notion of a "usable past," the idea of using one's own personal history as metaphor and material for art. Williams began his play *Sweet Bird of Youth* with the above quote from Crane, which suggests that Williams may have been drawing heavily on his own personal history when writing the play.

The inability to change one's past is a central theme of *Sweet Bird of Youth*. In the play, Chance Wayne, having caused Heavenly, the love of his life, to contract a venereal disease, becomes the companion of an aging actress, Alexandra del Lago (called Princess), hoping that she can help him establish an acting career.

Chance returns to his hometown, St. Cloud, to attempt a reconciliation with Heavenly, but in the end he is unable to recapture the love that they shared. He is abandoned by Princess when her career takes a better turn, and in the end he submits to castration in retribution for his corruption of Heavenly.

The items in this exhibition are selections from the Fred W. Todd Tennessee Williams Collection, which is now housed at the Williams Research Center. The Todd Collection is currently being processed; sections of the collection will be made available to the public as they are completed.

1 *Cover of first American edition of Sweet Bird of Youth*

New York: New Directions, 1959

digital reproduction of original

Cover of Spanish translation of Sweet Bird of Youth

translation by Roberto Bixio

Buenos Aires: Sur, 1962

digital reproduction of original

Cover of first British edition of Sweet Bird of Youth

London: Secker and Warburg, 1961

digital reproduction of original

Although the play was performed as early as 1956, it did not appear in published form until 1959; the play was subsequently translated into nine different languages.

2 *Heavenly (Shirley Knight) and Chance (Paul Newman)*

promotional photoprint; 1962

Heavenly (Shirley Knight) and Chance (Paul Newman)
promotional photoprint; 1962

- 3 *Heavenly (Shirley Knight) comes to the aid of Chance (Paul Newman)*
promotional photoprint; 1962

Heavenly functions primarily as a symbol of Chance's lost innocence. Her corruption was softened by Richard Brooks for his 1962 film version of the play. Instead of contracting a venereal disease she becomes pregnant. And in the end of the film it is implied that there is still hope for Chance to recapture his lost innocence, when he and Heavenly are reunited.

- 4 *Crew preparing Princess (Geraldine Page) for her role as an actress*
promotional photoprint; 1962

- 5 *Paul Newman (Chance) comforts a dissolute Geraldine Page (Princess)...*
lobby card; 1962

Chance (Paul Newman) and Princess (Geraldine Page)
promotional photoprint; 1962

The character of Princess runs parallel to that of Chance. She is a "monster" just like Chance but is able to endure this reality and does not give herself up to martyrdom as Chance does. Problems in stitching together her plot line with that of Chance and Heavenly have been noted as the play's greatest weakness by critics and by Williams himself. Although Williams had problems with the thematic changes caused by the ending of Richard Brooks's film version of the play, he does give Brooks credit for improving some of the play's structural problems, such as fusing Princess's story line more tightly with that of Chance and Heavenly.

- 6 *Movie poster for the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer production of Sweet Bird of Youth*
1962

- 7 *Ed Begley (Boss Findley), the powerful but corrupt political boss, rides to a rally in his honor accompanied by his daughter, Shirley Knight (Heavenly)*
lobby card; 1962

Promotional photograph showing Boss Findley's (Ed Begley) political rally
1962

Boss Findley, Heavenly's father, orders the castration of Chance as retribution for the corruption of his daughter. Findley represents someone who has given himself entirely to ambition at the expense of his own humanity. He suffers the same sickness of soul that Chance does but without the same desire for redemption.

- 8 ***Rip Torn (Tom Junior)...tells Geraldine Page (Princess) that it is dangerous for her and her lover to remain in town***
lobby card; 1962

Autographed promotional photoprint showing Princess (Geraldine Page) and Tom Junior (Rip Torn)
1962

- 9 ***Pages from the typescript screenplay of Sweet Bird of Youth***
1962

- 10 ***Pages from the typescript draft of The Enemy: Time***
spring 1956

- 11 ***Studio M Playhouse Presents Sweet Bird of Youth***
playbill; 1956

Because Williams continually reworked his plays, tracing the origins of his works can present a challenge for scholars. The origins of *Sweet Bird of Youth* can be seen in an assortment of one-act plays and fragments dating back to 1948, including most notably *The Enemy: Time*.

In January of 1956, Williams sent *The Enemy: Time* to George Keathley, the director of the Studio M Playhouse in Coral Gables, Florida, as a possibility for an April opening. Keathley assembled a cast, and Williams, who took a hotel room in Miami, sent the cast revisions to the script on a daily basis. *Sweet Bird of Youth* emerged from this process. The play opened on April 16, 1956, and in the playbill Williams remarks: "All the while this work has been in rehearsal, it has also been undergoing continual changes in dialogue and structure, even in basic theme and interpretation of character. At times Studio M has looked more like a printing press than a theatre, with stacks of re-writes, newly mimeographed, covering the stage and actors looking like a group of dazed proof-readers."

- 12 ***"Kazan Rehearses Williams' 'Sweet Bird of Youth'"***
by Jack Balch
March 1959
from *The Theatre: A Magazine of Drama, Comedy and Music*

- 13 ***Playbill: A Weekly Magazine for Theatergoers featuring Sweet Bird of Youth at the Martin Beck Theatre***
March 9, 1959

Geraldine Page and Paul Newman in the original Cheryl Crawford production of Sweet Bird of Youth
photoprint; 1959
credit: George Karger/Pix/N.Y. Public Library

Broadway producer Cheryl Crawford saw the Studio M performance twice and was anxious for the opportunity to produce *Sweet Bird of Youth* after having missed an opportunity to produce *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Crawford had already produced two Williams plays, *The Rose Tattoo* and *Camino Real*.

Williams spent two years reworking the script, and in 1958 with Elia Kazan as director, they began to assemble the cast. Paul Newman was selected to play Chance and Geraldine Page to play the role of Princess, although Cheryl Crawford initially thought she was too young for the role.

The play opened at the Martin Beck Theatre in New York on March 10, 1959. Reviews were mixed. Critics found problems with the construction and thought that Williams went too far in his attempt to be shocking. Despite the reviews, the play was tremendously popular. Even before the Broadway premiere, Williams sold the film rights for *Sweet Bird of Youth* to MGM for \$400,000 plus a percentage of the profits.

14 *Movie poster for the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer production of Sweet Bird of Youth*
1962

15 *Shirley Knight being taught to drive a speed boat*
promotional photoprint; 1962

Heavenly (Shirley Knight) and Chance (Paul Newman)
promotional photoprint; 1962

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer press book for Sweet Bird of Youth
1962

Cover of Signet paperback edition of Sweet Bird of Youth
New York: New American Library, 1962
digital reproduction of original

For more information about the Fred W. Todd Tennessee Williams Collection, please contact Mark Cave at markc@hnoc.org or 504-598-7132.