

# Williams again battling writer's block

by Scott Fosdick

*Herald theater critic*

The inescapable first reaction to meeting Tennessee Williams is one of relief that, despite years of abuse inflicted both by critics and himself, America's great playwright hasn't begun to lose his sense of humor.

Gregory Mosher, artistic director of the Goodman Theatre, steps into the room before the interview starts to offer refreshment.

"Yes," Williams says, drawing out the word with anticipatory pleasure. "I'd just like a glass of white wine."

After a pause, he adds: "And then some heroin. The usual."

Williams laughs warmly, a living advertisement for his current production, "Tennessee Laughs," three one-act comedies (one a premiere) playing at the Goodman Studio through Nov. 23.

**THE SECOND** most striking, and certainly the most tantalizing, impression emerges at the end of the interview. Williams has been trying to classify his plays, eventually coming to the conclusion that he isn't the man for the job.

"Each play seems to find its own form," he says. "I'm not any good at theater of the absurd, you know. Some people have compared certain plays of mine to theater of the absurd, but I don't think they fit that category.

"Sometimes they'll be wildly allegorical, but they won't be theater of the absurd. One is not always the best judge of his own work."

And then, just as this interviewer is rising to go out the door, he says, "I certainly felt that I was crossing into another type of theater altogether when I was writing in Vancouver."

But that was earlier this fall, when he was working on a play he has yet to finish and, therefore, thinks unwise to discuss. And, anyway, he hasn't the time. He wants to get down to the rehearsal.

"IT DOESN'T start until 3," his traveling companion, Vernon, assures him. It is now 2:30 p.m. on the day of the opening.

"That's the official rehearsal," Williams says. "I'm worried about what they're doing to my plays in the unofficial rehearsal that's going on right now."

So we will have to wait for him to finish the play before we find out what this Vancouver breakthrough is all about. Meanwhile, we can comfort ourselves with the knowledge that Williams is healthy once more and writing. And, for Williams, that means he is, as usual, doing battle with writer's block.

"William Inge once asked me — he was suffering from it himself, I believe; we were having lunch at the Algonquin (about 20 years ago) — he had this very long face, and he said, 'Tennessee, don't you feel that you have writer's block?'"

"WELL, I'D been writing continually. And I said, yes, of course I think every writer is blocked to some extent. I said, 'If you love to write, you just go on. You don't stop.'"

For Williams, that block is rooted in fear, primarily a fear that he will knock on the door to inspiration and get no answer, but also a fear that he will get an answer but nobody else will want to hear it.

"I always approach the typewriter with a certain diffidence. You know, there's always the attitude — it was especially strong when I was younger — that, well, I just won't be able to produce anything. You know? But I always do."

Another impression: Some people say "you know," and it's meaningless, just put in for punctuation. When Williams says "you know," it becomes a legitimate question. Even when placed in the middle of a sentence, it rises in pitch through the "know." He says it softly, at times plaintively, yet always casually.

It's as though, even with a stranger, he is looking constantly for a connection, some sort of assurance that he is being understood.

**IN THE MIDDLE** of the interview, he quotes (with essential accuracy) Chance's last line in "Sweet Bird of Youth."

"I don't ask for your pity. I don't even ask for your, ah,



"I'M EXCESSIVELY CANDID," admits playwright Tennessee Williams at an interview just before the

recent opening of three of his one-act plays at the Goodman Theater.

for your understanding. I only ask for your recognition of me in you, and the enemy, time, in us all."

That line and that play weren't met with total understanding from all, Williams says.

"Some people said, 'Why should I recognize anything of this, this f—ing gigolo, in me?' You know? Nevertheless, the play was successful."

Part of Williams now seems to assume that he will get only negative reactions, that he won't make that hoped-for connection. He was genuinely surprised by the warm response a packed Goodman mainstage house gave him three weeks ago when he spent an hour reading some of his poems and stories. He lent the stories great warmth of inflection, if not great clarity, and the audience responded in kind.

"I JUST DIDN'T think my voice was any good for reading anymore," he says. "I thought they might throw things."

If he's a bit gun-shy, that's to be expected. His most recent full-length play, last spring's "Clothes for a Summer Hotel," a fantastical presentation of the last days of Zelda Fitzgerald, drew everything but kindness from the Broadway critics.

"Of course, I never really knew Mr. Fitzgerald, nor did I know Zelda. But I read all the books about them. And I had gone through parallel problems, you know, as they had."

"I think it was reading 'Save Me the Waltz' by Zelda Fitzgerald that moved me to write 'Clothes for a Summer Hotel,' he says. "I realized that it was a mistake to do it because there were too many people, the critics especially,

who resented my writing about legends."

The critics assumed everybody already knew all about the Fitzgeralds, Williams contends, although he believes 80 percent of the audience didn't know that Zelda died in an asylum fire.

**HE'S REWRITTEN** the play, shortening and simplifying it and hopes to get it staged in London.

Part of the problem, he believes, is that many audiences are unwilling to let him branch out into less realistic styles.

"They get accustomed to associating you with a certain kind of writing. If you have a restless nature, you don't want to keep on doing that over and over again. You embark upon some experiment, you know. They don't always want to go along."

"The critics are less likely to go along than the audience, actually. What you should do is try it in some other theater, you know, not to face the same critics," Williams says.

This is why he's in Chicago now and why he hopes to take his new "Clothes" to London, where the critics are much more to his liking than those in New York.

"I just won't work there anymore. I won't bring a new play ever to New York again. If you don't get the New York Times, you can't run a serious play in New York. And I know that I can't ever get a good notice out of the New York Times."

**HE BLAMES** the inhibiting influence of the Times's management more than the critics themselves for their reviews.

"On opening night, the critic for the New York Times finds himself totally surrounded by the brass, I mean the owners of the newspaper."

That, he says, explains the rapid turnover of critics at the Times since the end of Brooks Atkinson's tenure two decades ago.

Williams slightly reopens the door to Broadway when asked about Frank Rich, the Times's young new critic.

"Now he's a question. He writes very brilliantly, and he's made the statement that he will not be influenced by the top brass, as the others were."

The door to working again at the Goodman remains wide open.

"I'll wait and see," he says. "You know, I'm not their playwright-in-residence. David Mamet occupies that position here. Whose work I admire very much. I imagine it will be up to them if they want to do more plays or not."

That's assuming, of course, that he continues to keep writer's block at bay.

"ONE DOESN'T know what sets it off. Right after the first big success, 'Menagerie,' I couldn't write for about a month. The circumstances of my life were so terribly altered. I felt so conspicuous all of a sudden. I didn't feel the privacy that a writer seems to need to do his best work."

He admits he never has guarded that privacy very closely.

"I'm excessively candid, I think. I think more candid than the interviewer would like sometimes."

Doesn't he find it painful to have his private life revealed?

"Not at all. It's a release for me."

Williams still remembers something director Margaret Webster told him after the failure of his first professionally produced play, "Battle of Angels," in Boston:

"She said, 'You must not wear your heart on your sleeve for days to peck at.'"

Tennessee laughs.

Doesn't he mind the pecking?

"YOU GET used to it... You always know that you're putting yourself on the line with every play, even these little comedies here. But, as your chosen profession, actually, it's the only thing I could do. I write. I'm an amateur painter. I've never had much success at it. But writing is the only thing I can do seriously. It's the only profession that would seem to be open for me..."

"Aging is inevitable. And mortality is inevitable. The thing is to keep going as long as you can."

In his current state of evident good health, Williams seems robust enough to survive a dozen Vancouver breakthroughs. It is the rest of us who may die of curiosity.

# Gilbert looks for challenges beyond 'Little House' role

by Diane Merrigas

*Herald TV/radio critic*

Melissa Gilbert is one 16-year-old who isn't taking any chances.

If her current run of luck suddenly goes sour, the spirited actress says she simply will "get rich quick" by getting an M.B.A. at the University of Southern California. If she had her druthers, she would become an obstetrician "because I love children."

"I love to work, and this is such an uncertain profession that I don't know what will happen one day to the next. I want something more solid for myself, which is why 50 percent of everything I make goes into a trust fund until I'm 18 and ready to go to college," she said.

Such prudence and casualness about success are uncommon among most show business adults, much less youngsters. But then, Melissa Gilbert isn't your average television star.

Her "Sweet 16" birthday party last May was a gala luncheon at the Beverly Hills Hotel, attended by hundreds, including fellow cast members of "Little House on the Prairie."

**HER PARENTS** granted her only

birthday wish in buying her a most unlikely gift — a Chrysler LeBaron station wagon. "I really didn't want a sports car because I need a lot of room. I have a lot of passengers every time I leave the house with my younger brother and sister and our dog," she said.

"It's a great car for going out in. I took seven other girls to see the movie 'Friday the 13th' at a drive-in, and we were screaming and getting hysterical and having a great time."

For a moment, Melissa sounds like any other teen-ager who has been awed by the wonder of first cars and first dates. She is limited to a weekly \$10 allowance, is required to make her own bed each morning and only recently was allowed to begin dating, but she has no steady boyfriends.

"My mother keeps me humble. We have pretty much the same tastes, so we talk about scripts that are offered to me. She still manages to punish me for things I do that aren't right, but not often," Melissa said.

"I don't consider myself different from any of my friends. I have a job just like many of them have jobs. It's just that a lot more people see what I do," she said.

**MELISSA'S FRECKLED** face beams as she speaks in an energetic, unpredictable manner. Although she is wise beyond her years, a lot of the little girl sulk can be seen in her congenial words and gestures.

Her curious blend of innocence and maturity, sensitivity and spunk is as captivating off camera as it is on.

The straight "A" high school senior is tutored between "takes" at MGM's Stage 15 during long days of filming NBC's most popular and enduring TV series, "Little House on the Prairie."

Spearing her own Half-Pint Productions, Melissa commands a reported \$200,000 as co-producer of such fine television dramas as last season's remake of "The Miracle Worker." She receives a reported \$30,000 per hour episode of "Little House" and at least \$50,000 for her starring roles in dramatic specials.

But it's the quality of television projects rather than money that most concerns Melissa, her dotting stage mother, Barbara (herself a former actress), and her personal manager, Ray Katz.

Katz, one of the shrewdest "minds behind young talent" in Hollywood, is a regular visitor to NBC's ivory tower where he fights for television roles that will challenge and showcase Melissa's talent.

"IT'S THAT KIND of persistence that has made all the difference in my career," Melissa said. "Growing from braids and buck teeth into adulthood in front of millions of people has quickly ended the careers of some actors like Shirley Temple and Margaret O'Brien. I wasn't about to let that happen to me. The idea is not to wait for projects to come along. You have to do some thing; for yourself," she said.

Because contemporary works rarely cater to teen-age stars who are serious about their craft, Melissa has turned to classic works like "The Miracle Worker." She portrayed Helen Keller opposite Patty Duke Astin as Annie Sullivan, Helen's nurse and mentor, in the touching NBC-TV drama that aired last spring.

"Helen was a girl of incredible strength and will who reached inside of

herself to discover qualities and abilities that made her a better person. Her life provides a model for the rest of us. There's a lot of satisfaction in playing roles that demand more of you than being just a sarcastic or belligerent teen," Melissa said.

For the same reasons, Melissa has tackled the title role in "The Diary of Anne Frank," which airs Monday at 8 p.m. on Channel 5. The two-hour drama (to be reviewed in Monday's TV column) is a riveting cut above the 1959 film based on the true story of a young Jewish girl and her family who hid more than two years in a small garret in Amsterdam during the Nazi occupation of Holland during World War II.

**OSCAR-WINNER** Boris Sagal directs a cast that includes Maximilian Schell, Joan Plowright and James Coco.

"The story has a lot of personal meaning because many of my relatives got away back in concentration camps. It was very special for me to work with such experienced actors. You learn so much by observing and talking with them," she said.

The poignant relationship between Anne and her father became a melancholy remembrance for Melissa of her late father, comedian Paul Gilbert.

Although already slender, Melissa and other cast members were placed on a strict diet to achieve a "lean look" for the production. Her light hair was dyed a darker shade of brown.

But try as she might to break out of the moppet mold, Melissa still is best-known to and loved by her fans as the free-spirited Laura Ingalls. In the minds of many, she still is the pigtailed little girl running through a field of daisies at the close of every "Little House" episode, she said.

Michael Landon, star and producer of the seventh-season series, cast Melissa as Laura when she was 9. She already was a veteran of television commercials.

"ALL MY MOTHER'S friends kept encouraging her to have me do commercials because I was so cute,"



Melissa Gilbert will always be the little girl in pigtails who won TV viewers' hearts in "Little House." She seems unspoiled by her fame, preferring a station wagon to a sports car.

Melissa blushing explained. Before long she was a familiar TV purveyor of Carter's baby clothes, McDonald's hamburgers and Crest toothpaste. Minor roles in TV series such as "Gunsmoke" followed.

But in seven years, "Half Pint," as Melissa affectionately is called by family and friends, has become a national TV treasure.

Landon describes her as "unfalteringly cheerful" and "a model of professionalism and politeness" on the set. The strongly opinionated actress, whose trademark is her boundless energy, has a glowing reputation among her peers for always giving more than 100 percent. The only exception may be the blossoming love scenes a grown-up Laura engages in these days with her

new "husband," Almanzo Wilder.

"I'm not thrilled with romantic scenes. Kissing I can (Butler) is more like kissing my brother because we're such good friends. But I do like being married on the show because it gives me the chance to explore situations and emotions that a younger Laura couldn't," she said.

Although Laura and Almanzo are getting off to a rocky start this season, Melissa said Laura eventually will have a baby and become an influential force in Walnut Grove as the town's school teacher.

"Sometimes I wonder what I'm going to do for an encore," Melissa said perkily. "Maybe Saint Joan or Scarlett O'Hara. Just think. I have all those adult heroines to look forward to."

First there was "Little House on the Prairie," then "The Miracle Worker," and now Melissa Gilbert is tackling the tough role of Anne Frank in the TV production based on the diary of the Jewish girl who died in World War II.

