

CHAPTER VI

CAMINO REAL

Camino Real is Williams' most ambitious play, if not his most successful one, either artistically or financially. Explaining his intentions in writing it in the New York Times of March 15, 1953, just before the play opened, he said:

My desire was to give these audiences my own sense of something wild and unrestricted that ran like water in the mountains, or clouds changing shape in a gale, or the continually dissolving and transforming images of a dream. This sort of freedom is not chaos nor anarchy. On the contrary, it is the result of painstaking design, and in this work I have given more conscious attention to form and construction than I have in any work before. Freedom is not achieved simply by working freely.

Most critics and many members of the audience missed the point and saw the play only as monstrous in its fantasy. They characterized it as presenting a "malign world . . . of corruption, cruelty, disease and death" where the characters are "doomed by the viciousness of human beings; too weak and indolent to escape from the contaminations of their kind. . . ."59 A typical reaction to the play was that of Harold Clurman, who called it an immature work:

This play shows that Williams hankered for an unfettered theater, one free of the bonds of workaday naturalism where the poet in him can speak more personally and with a greater

degree of self-revelation than the usual proxy play permits. Thus, Camino Real discards the routine props of logic, exposition, and straight story line.

What is less fortunate is that this play, instead of being the surrealist phantasmagoria it intends to be, is far too literal. To say, "We're all of us guinea pigs in the laboratory of God" or to have street cleaners represent death or an airplane named Fugitivo stand for escape is far less imaginative than to have Blanche DuBois go to an insane asylum depending on the kindness of strangers. In other words, Williams is less suggestive and poignant when he aims point-blank at his aesthetic, poetic or symbolic target than when he employs the concrete means of a real situation. Poetry cannot be captured by direct assault; beauty cannot be won unless we woo it first through the beast.⁶⁰

Thinking back on the original writing of Camino Real, Williams recalled:

I wrote this play in a time of desolation: I thought, . . . that my good work was done. . . . So it was written to combat or to purify a despair that only another writer is likely to understand fully. . . . And even though it was my most spectacular and expensive failure on Broadway, 'Camino Real' served for me, and I think for a number of others who saw it during its brief run in 1953, as a spiritual purgation of that abyss of confusion, and lost sense of reality that I, and those others, had somehow wandered into. . . . What the play says through this unashamed old romanticist, Don Quixote, is just this: 'Life is an unanswered question, but let's still believe in the dignity and the importance of the question.'⁶¹

For the play reader, the form is not very clear. It

is divided into 16 blocks which are "stations of the cross" in man's progression toward annihilation. The plaza, the last of these way stations, may be described as an "absurd universe," for there appears no cohesive force within it. It is merely a place of entry and departure, "with no permanent guests." The play represents a road from life to death. Its ambiguous host, Gutman, defines the nature of human existence on the Camino Real:

My guests are confused and exhausted but at this hour they pull themselves together, and drift downstairs on the wings of gin and the lift, they drift into public rooms and exchange notes again on fashionable couturiers and custom tailors, restaurants, vintages of wine, hairdressers, plastic surgeons, girls and young men susceptible to offers. . . . 62

Anxiety and despair are universal:

When the big wheels crack on this street it's like the fall of a capital city, the destruction of Carthage, the sack of Rome by the white-eyed giants from the North! I've seen them fall! I've seen the destruction of them! Adventurers suddenly frightened of a dark room! Gamblers unable to choose between odd and even! Con men and pitchmen and plume-hatted cavaliers turned baby-soft at one note of the Streetcleaners' pipes! When I observe this change, I say to myself: "Could it happen to ME?" - The answer is "YES!" and that's what curdles my blood like milk on the doorstep of someone gone for the summer! 63

It is possible to point out theme and characters familiar to most of Williams' work. There are the recurrent theme of

man's fundamental loneliness in the modern world and his frustration at being unable to escape from his fellow human beings. And the characters are also similar to those in other Williams plays: desperate, neurotic women terrified at the loss of youth, innocent young men confronted with the danger of corruption, and greedy "normal" people who prey on the sensitive of the world.

The setting of the play is deliberately symbolic - a plaza in "a tropical seaport that bears a confusing, but somehow harmonious, resemblance to such widely scattered ports as Tangiers, Havana, Vera Cruz, Casablanca, Shanghai, New Orleans," on the Camino Real, the "royal" road or the "real" road, the word "Real" offering this ambiguous interpretation. An introductory quotation from Dante's Inferno, Canto I, sets the mood: In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself in a dark wood where the straight way was lost.

The various characters who converge in the nameless plaza can be seen as representations of various kinds of people whose struggles are - at least in Williams' view - symbolic of the human condition. As in most of Williams' plays, the characters are divided into two distinct, warring groups: the well-adjusted, respectable, unimaginative "ordinary"

people, and their opposites, the romantic misfits, "the fugitive kind." To express his theme, Williams has found examples of misfits not only in his own imagination but also in the works of others, and historical and literary figures mix freely with his characters on the plaza. One finds there Marguerite Gautier, of the Dumas romance, "the courtesan who made the mistake of love"; Jacques Casanova, "the greatest of lovers crowned with the longest horns"; the exquisitely mad Don Quixote, "with the rusty armour and soiled white plumes"; and even Lord Byron, "far from his heart's green country" and searching for the way home. All these familiar characters, as well as Williams' own inventions - particularly Kilroy, the former champion boxer with his "heart as big as the head of a baby" and his symbolic golden gloves - have two significant things in common. They are all decidedly out of place in the ruthless world symbolized by Mr. Gutman's luxurious Siete Mares Hotel, and they are all groping, each in his own way, for some sort of understanding, some sort of contact, in a world that is clearly useless for their kind.

The world is, in fact, actively hostile to their romantic aspirations. Marguerite is humiliated and robbed by the cold young gigolo on whom she bestows her legendary charms; Casanova is crudely driven away from the Siete Mares

for non-payment, his shabby portmanteau of "fragile mementoes" hurled to the street by Gutman; Don Quixote is called "an old desert rat" and made to sleep in the street; and the once-proud Kilroy is made to dress up in a Patsy outfit with a fright wig, an electric nose that lights up, horn-rimmed glasses, and a pair of clown pants that have a huge footprint on the seat, and forced to degrade himself for the pleasure of the hotel guests.

The reason for the world's hostility is fear-- fear that these unconventional, desperate, lonely misfits will join together and upset orderly, respectable society. This fear is expressed in an early scene where the Dreamer, a nameless character who walks about in the plaza, utters the forbidden word Hermano, meaning "brother." The cry is repeated like springing fire and a loud murmur sweeps the crowd. They push forward with cupped hands extended and the gasping cries of starving people at the sight of bread. Only strong action by the guards prevents them from storming the hotel, and Gutman calmly explains:

Yes, the most dangerous word in any human tongue is the word for brother. It's inflammatory. - I don't suppose it can be struck out of the language altogether but it must be reserved for strictly private usage in back of soundproof walls. Otherwise it disturbs the population. . . . The word is said in pulpits and at tables of

council where its volatile essence can be contained. But on the lips of these creatures, what is it? A wanton incitement to riot, without understanding. For what is a brother to them but someone to get ahead of, to cheat, to lie to, to undersell in the market. Brother, you say to a man whose wife you sleep with! - But now, you see, the word has disturbed the people and made it necessary to invoke martial law!⁶⁴

The play expresses a familiar Williams situation, in spite of the profusion of literary and symbolic decorations, and in spite of the unconventional form of the play. One recalls misfits in other Williams plays - Blanche DuBois and Alma Winemiller and Val Xavier, to mention only three among many - and one sees their close kinship to Kilroy, Marguerite, Casanova, and Don Quixote. They are all alone, all seeking something against hopeless odds. Their philosophy might be summed up in the words of old Quixote when he enters the plaza, speaks the word "Lonely," and to his surprise hears it echoed by hidden figures around him:

- When so many are lonely as seem to be lonely, it would be inexcusable selfish to be lonely alone. . . . I'll sleet for a while, . . .
- And my dream will be a pageant and when I wake from this sleep and this disturbing pageant of a dream, I'll choose one among its shadows to take along with me in the place of Sancho. . .
- For new companions are not as familiar as old ones but all the same - they're old ones with only slight differences of face and figure, which may or may not be improvements, and it would be selfish of me to be lonely alone. . . .⁶⁵

What makes Camino Real different from most of Williams' other plays on this theme is that in it he allows his frustrated searchers to find some relief at the end, a relief more acceptable than Blanche's madness and Val's murder. Kilroy faces three problems. "One: I'm hungry. Two: I'm lonely. Three: I'm in a place where I don't know what it is or how I got there!"⁶⁶

He does not list his fourth problem: Fear of death. Kilroy asks how one gets off the Camino Real, and Casanova points out the archway that leads to the "Terra Incognita," described in the Prologue as a wasteland between the walled town and the distant perimeter of snow-capped mountains. When Casanova asks him if he is ready to cross the wasteland, Kilroy says he is afraid of being alone. "Maybe sometime with someone but not right now and alone!"⁶⁷

Near the end of the play, Kilroy talks to Marguerite about his wife:

Kilroy: Y'know what it is you miss most? When you're separated. From someone. You lived. With. And loved? It's waking up in the night! With that - warmness beside you!

Marguerite: Yes, that warmness beside you!

Kilroy: Once you get used to that. Warmness! It's a hell of a lonely feeling to wake up without it! Specially in some dollar-a-night hotel room on Skid! A hot-water bottle won't do. And a stranger. Won't do. ~~It has to be~~ some one you're used to. And that you. KNOW LOVES you!⁶⁸

The fear of loneliness is repeatedly stated in dialogue between Marguerite and Casanova.

Marguerite: Lost! Lost! Lost! Lost! . . .

Jacques: . . . we are together, breathing quietly together, leaning together, quietly, quietly together, completely, sweetly together, not frightened, now, not alone, but completely quietly together. . . .
All of us have a desperate bird in our hearts, a memory of - some distant mother with - wings. . . .

Marguerite: Each of us is very much alone.

Jacques: Only if we distrust each other.

Marguerite: Oh, Jacques, we're used to each other, we're a pair of captive hawks caught in the same cage, and so we've grown used to each other. That's what passes for love at this dim, shadowy end of the Camino Real. . . . 69

Williams ends the play somewhat optimistically with the symbolic line of Don Quixote: "The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks!" This speech is in answer to Marguerite's statement in Block Ten that the violets in the mountains cannot break the rocks. Marguerite voices Williams' view of the human condition:

So now and then, although we've wounded each other time and again - we stretch out hands to each other in the dark that we can't escape from - we huddle together for some dim-communal comfort - and that's what passes for love on this terminal stretch of the road that used to be royal. What is it, this feeling between us? When you feel my exhausted weight against your shoulder - when I clasp your anxious old hawk's head to my breast, what is it we feel in whatever is left of our hearts? Something, yes, something - delicate, unreal, bloodless! The sort of violets that could grow on the moon, or in the crevices

of those far away mountains, . . . But
tenderness, the violets in the mountains -
can't break the rocks!

Jacques: The violets in the mountains can break the
rocks if you believe in them and allow them to
grow.⁷⁰

Though they have to endure each other's cruelty
and betrayal, it is better for the two of them to be
together and not alone. Jacques says:

You've hit upon the truth. I'm terrified of
the unknown country inside or outside this
wall or any place on earth without you with
me! The only country, known or unknown that
I can breathe in, or care to, is the country
in which we breathe together, . . .⁷¹

In Camino Real, Williams uses the word "lonely"
more times than in any other of his plays. In addition,
there are repeated uses of words that have similar meaning,
such as "alone," "lost," and "desperate."