

CHAPTER VII

ORPHEUS DESCENDING

Of Orpheus Descending, a play on which he worked for seventeen years, Williams himself wrote:

On its surface it was and still is the tale of a wild-spirited boy who wanders into a conventional community of the South and creates the commotion of a fox in a chicken coop.

But beneath that now familiar surface it is a play about unanswered questions that haunt the hearts of people and the difference between continuing to ask them, a difference represented by the four major protagonists of the play, and the acceptance of prescribed answers that are not answers at all, but expedient adaptations or surrender to a state of quandary.⁷²

Orpheus is Val Xavier, who descends into the hell of a small Southern town to rescue the dead Eurydice, or Lady, from Pluto, or Jabe Torrance, the cruel husband who snatched her away from the romantic life she dreamed about. Val is a handsome fellow with an intimate, soft voice; his trademark of wild freedom is a snakeskin jacket. When the play begins, he is a man of thirty who is no longer sure that his sex appeal will always help him when he is in trouble. The guitar which he carries, covered with the names of famous singers, is a symbol of his art and his purity. His art, he says, affords a purification after he

has been contaminated by the world. He belongs to neither of two classes, the buyers or the bought, but to those who are always free and proud, "The kind that's never been branded."⁷³ He is healthy and attractive to woman.

Val gets into trouble when he seeks to exchange his freedom for a job in a mercantile store and becomes involved with the love-starved wife of the owner. It is his poetic description of freedom and purity that seems to win her sympathy.

Val: You know they's a kind of bird that don't have legs so it can't light on nothing but has to stay all its life on its wings in the sky? That's true. I seen one once, it had died and fallen to earth and it was light-blue coloured and its body was tiny as your little finger, that's the truth, it had a body as tiny as your little finger and so light on the palm of your hand it didn't weigh more than a feather, but its wings spread out this wide but they was transparent, the colour of the sky and you could see through them. That's what they call protection colouring. Camouflage, they call it. You can't tell those birds from the sky and that's why the hawks don't catch them, don't see them up there in the high blue sky near the sun!

Lady: How about in grey weather?

Val: They fly so high in grey weather the goddam hawks would get dizzy. But those little birds, they don't have no legs at all and they live their whole lives on the wind, that's how they sleep at night, they just spread their wings and go to sleep on the wind like other birds fold their wings and go to sleep on a tree. . . . They sleep on the wind and . . . - never light on this earth but one time when they die.

Lady: I'd like to be one of those birds.

Val: So'd I like to be one of those birds;
they's lots of people would like to be one
of those birds and never be - corrupted.⁷⁴

Lady, bought by her husband when she was broken hearted, having been jilted by her lover, David Cutrere, and her father having been burnt alive with his vine orchard, was desperate and lonely. After she gave up David's child by abortion, she felt she had given up everything. When she meets David, who has married a rich woman, she says:

. . . you know now I carried your child in my body the summer you quit me but I had it cut out of my body, and they cut my heart out with it!

David: - I didn't - didn't know.

Lady: I wanted death after that, but death don't come when you want it! I wanted death, then, but I took the next best thing. You sold yourself. I sold my self. You was bought. I was bought. You made whores of us both!⁷⁵



A misfit in society, Lady was ostracized because she was the dark-skinned daughter of an Italian bootlegger. She tells Val of the loneliness the Italians felt in a foreign land.

My mother's mother's sister - come here from Monte Cassino, to die, with relations! - but I think people always die alone . . . with or without relations. I was a little girl then and I remember it took her such a long, long time to die we almost forgot her. - And she was so quiet . . . in a corner. . . . And I remember asking her one time, Zia Teresa, how

does it feel to die? - Only a little girl would ask such a question, ha ha! Oh, and I remember her answer. She said - 'It's a lonely feeling.' I think she wished she had stayed in Italy and died in a place that she knew. . . .⁷⁶

Lady has never found happiness with her husband, who was one of the men responsible for her father's terrible death. She lives with Jabe, but all the time it seems as if she lives alone. She has remained aloof from her gossiping neighbours. She provides an example of one of Williams' theories about human relationships: Love and understanding depend upon physical contact. Val might be said to speak for all the lonely people, and for Williams himself, when he says:

. . . Nobody ever gets to know no body! We're all of us sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins, for life! You understand me, Lady? - I'm tellin' you it's the truth, we got to face it, we're under a life-long sentence to solitary confinement inside our own lonely skins for as long as we live on this earth!⁷⁷

When Lady expresses the belief that the answer to loneliness is love, Val answers that it is a delusion that has fooled many people. He tells of his own loneliness:

Val: . . . When I was a kid on Witches Bayou. After my folks all scattered away like loose chicken's feathers blown around by the wind. - I stayed there alone on the bayou, hunted and trapped out of season and hid from the

law! - Listen! - All that time, all that lonely time, I felt I was - waiting for something!

Lady: What for?

Val: What does anyone wait for? For something to happen, for anything to happen, to make things make more sense. . . . It's hard to remember what that feeling was like because I've lost it now, but I was waiting for something like if you ask a question you wait for someone to answer, but you ask the wrong question or you ask the wrong person and the answer don't come. . . . And then You get the make believe answer.

Lady: What answer is that?

Val: Don't pretend you don't know because you do!

Lady: - Love?

Val: . . . That's the make-believe answer. It's fooled many a fool besides you an'me, that's the God's truth, Lady, and you had better believe it.⁷⁸

Lady feels she needs Val to go on living. His descriptions of her are nasty; he calls her an aging, unsatisfied woman who wants to hire a clerk by day and a lover at night without paying extra. In this respect she is a little like Carol Cutrere, an old companion of Val's before he had begun his corrupted life. Carol is the poor little rich girl, disgusted by her own society, grown up to be an exhibitionist and a reformer. Frustrated in her humanitarian ventures, she turns to sex. "The act of love-making is almost unbearably painful, and yet, of course, I do bear it, because to be not alone, even for a few moments, is worth the pain and the danger."⁷⁹ She makes her usual

proposition to Val, who refuses, saying that heavy drinking and "shacking up" with strangers is for youngsters. The two exchange confidences with an air of two lonely children, according to the playwright's direction.

Vee Talbot is another lonely character in the play. Her husband does not understand her. He is an ignorant and brutal sheriff and she is a religious fanatic who paints her visions. Val treats her kindly, and in return she tries to help Val by bringing him to Lady's shop to ask for a job. In the end, even she cannot save Val from her husband and the drunken mob. The sheriff is suspicious of Val's attentions to his wife, and the crowd responds to Jabe's false charges that Val is his wife's murderer. Holding Val's snakeskin jacket, Carol pays the last tribute to Val, whose off-stage cries of anguish are heard during her speech:

" - Wild things leave skins behind them, they leave clean skins and teeth and white bones behind them, and these are tokens passed from one to another, so that the fugitive kind can always follow their kind. . . ."80

Two years after Orpheus Descending opened on Broadway, the play was made into a motion picture with the title, The Fugitive Kind. Bosley Crowther, film critic for the New York Times, termed it a

. . . surprisingly decent account of two lonely and sad, but normal persons, trying hard to get

a little out of life against the adversities compounded by the meannesses and weaknesses of man. It is, indeed, the simplest and the straightest Williams drama yet done upon the screen; and it is certainly the most credible and poetic since A Streetcar Named Desire.⁸¹