

TRAVEL

Williams festival fills desire for drama, delights

BY VICTORIA DIAZ
SPECIAL WRITER

Strolling the streets of New Orleans' famous French Quarter can be like going back in time, or stepping inside a movie, or finding yourself suddenly transported to another land.

This dreamy aura perfectly enhances the memorable spirit of the Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival, scheduled each spring to closely coincide with Williams' birth date of March 26.

Set this year for Wednesday-Sunday, March 20-24, the crowded Fest (average attendance is 8,000) will be headquartered, as always, at Le Petit Theatre du Vieux Carre, 616 Saint Peter Street.

If you are into stretching your legs, almost every part of the celebration can be accessed on foot. One main exception: play performances at the Contemporary Arts Center, 900 Camp Street,

within the Warehouse Arts District.

During its 15-year history, the event has played host to such literary luminaries as Wally Lamb, Philip Caputo, Snatcha Feinstein and Barry Unsworth.

This time around, attendees will be treated to classes and panel discussions featuring Pulitzer Prize winners Jonathan Yardley and Rick Bragg.

Award recipient Melissa Bank, and best-selling biographer David Maraniss, plus dozens of other guests may pick and choose among the dozen or so 75-minute master classes offered at \$35 per session. Or, if you prefer, buy a pass to all for \$375. This pass will get you into panel discussions and a Wednesday evening reception at the Crescent City's Historic Collection, 529 Royal

Street, too.

A Tennessee Williams Festival would be nothing without drama, of course, and this one offers participants a dazzling variety from which to choose.

At 7 p.m. March 21, Oscar winner Patricia Neal will kick things off via a staged reading of Williams' *Portrait of a Madonna* at Le Petit Theatre.

Subsequent productions scheduled throughout the festival

include *Sweet Bird of Youth* at Le Petit Theatre, *Suddenly Last Summer* at the Contemporary Arts Center, and Le Petit Theatre's premiere performance of *Fertile Ground*, by Philip Field, winner of the Festival's 2001 playwriting contest. Ticket prices for play performances vary.

Ready for a slight shifting of gears? If so, drop in at O'Flaherty's Irish Channel Pub, 514 Toulouse Street, where a Poetry

Slam will be on tap March 22 and 23.

Or you might head on over to the very heart of the Quarter where a film, *Le Diable le Bleu* (focusing on Williams), and many other events are scheduled at the Cabildo in historic Jackson Square.

Finally, what's a visit to New Orleans without tasty treats and memorable music? As a guest at the Fest, you might want to attend Cooks and Books, set for the Omni Royal Orleans Hotel (see related story) March 24. At Cooks and Books, you'll get to meet celebrity chefs who have authored cookbooks, and you may also have the opportunity to do some taste-testing.

Other gustatory events include a panel discussion centering around cocktails, two guided tours of French Quarter bars, and a wine tasting at Brennan's Restaurant, 417 Bourbon Street.

For music lovers, check out A Conversation with Allen Toussaint, composer, pianist and singer, at The House of Blues (225 Decatur Street), 2:30 p.m. March 23.

To unwind after the serious stuff, don't miss the all-important Stanley and Stella Shouting Contest. Competition begins at the Pontalba Apartments in Jackson Square 4 p.m. March



Featured actress: Academy Award-winning actress Patricia Neal, headlines this year's festival.

24, and proceeds to the main stage at Le Petit Theatre for finals at 5:30 p.m.

According to Festival publicist Ellen Johnson, prizes will be awarded to the top six entrants who give the best interpretation of the angst-ridden character(s) in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

"Think you might qualify? If so, feel free to join in the fun. Victoria Diaz is a *Litonia* resident and writes about travel, books, theater and movies for the *Observer & Eccentric* newspaper.

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