



## The Rose Tattoo

*Tennessee Williams*

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*Tennessee Williams*

## **The Rose Tattoo** Tennessee Williams

A tender idyll about a Sicilian woman who must get over the death of her husband. "Forget the unevenness of the story," said Brooks Atkinson of The New York Times, it's "an original and imaginative play."

## **The Rose Tattoo Details**

Date : Published January 1st 1951 by Dramatist's Play Service

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Author : Tennessee Williams

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## From Reader Review The Rose Tattoo for online ebook

### Barbora says

I wouldn't call this book perfect, even though it satisfied me with the style and genre. I was quite stunned how Mr. Williams could identify with Serafina's feeling and describe them like his own. The reader can see both sides of the generation gap, which arose between Serafina and her daughter Rosa, therefore he could be the judge knowing and comprehending the problems of each side.

This piece of work is also an advisable insight into the times (the book was published in 1951), when a lot of immigrants moved into US and struggled with their lives trying to adapt to the different and fast way of life.

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### Marina Schulz says

I'm underwhelmed; a big William's fan, I found "The Rose Tattoo" to be little more than a collage of a lot other elements that the author integrates into almost every one of his works.

Serafina Del Rose is a woman highly infatuated and in love with her husband Rosario, and when he dies her passion for him doesn't -- his manly, rugged body marked by a rose tattoo is the one she still dreams of five years past, to the embarrassment of her community and especially of her daughter, who wishes they could both move on with their lives.

The thing is, with Williams, you can still see the intensity dripping from the pages; though it is one of his weaker plots. He doesn't say anything here he has not said before. Infatuation with body? Covered by Stella in "Streetcar Named Desire". Death, aging, inability to move on, all of it felt rehashed and unsurprising. The Rose Tattoo led nowhere, and read like a copy paste of the author's previous works, giving the impression Tennessee Williams had no new themes to address or points to make.

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### Samir Rawas Sarayji says

This one is really different from the other plays I've read so far. The problem for me is the caricature of Italians here... I honestly don't know if Italians are the way depicted by non-Italians in literature and film, but it always feels like stereotyping a culture when we focus on just their most noticeable aspect only, here passion. I would have had more respect if the play was set with Americans rather than stereotyped Italians. The plot and action are entertaining enough but there is nothing like emotional depth or complexity. Instead, it read at times like slapstick.

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### Alyssa says

I don't know any Italian, so this play was a challenge to read. I like the idea that Serafina's ability to love was sealed inside the urn with her husband's ashes, only released when the urn was broken. The side story with her daughter, Rosa, was boring.

## Duffy Pratt says

This one was a real clunker. I thought the structure was clumsy, the characters both ugly and uninteresting, and the plot veered on silliness. This is one I'm actually glad that I didn't see on stage, because I'm afraid that it would tend to be even worse when performed. I've never read a play that has as much business described as this one does, and I didn't really see the point of much of it. Not T. Williams at his best, or even close.

**Elizabeth says**

Tennessee Williams' play, *The Rose Tattoo*, stemmed from the fragilities of the heart. It was perhaps his most emotional play regarding relationships. Every beat had a throbbing pulse of turbulent passion. His protagonist, the rambunctious widow and seamstress, Serafina Delle Rose, was on a fervent trajectory of discovering the truth of her relationship with her late husband, Rosario upon his death. The metaphor of the rose, a perfect flower, was her illusion she held for Rosario, a man she worshiped throughout their marriage. Rosario, who wore a painted rose tattoo on his chest, in all likelihood, detested being put on such a high pedestal. Serafina despairingly coped with the grief and suffering. Estelle Hohengarten, Rosario's mistress, paid Serafina a visit before the death to hire her to sew a pink silk shirt in a day for her man who was "wild like a gypsy." The adulterous affair is meticulously revealed to Serafina through the town gossip. A devout Catholic, Serafina, put together a shrine to worship Rosario in death and superstitiously asked the Madonna for an affirming sign. Tennessee Williams gave her an answer in Alvaro, a truck driver without a cent to his name as her savior. Serafina started laughing and opened her heart to allow Alvaro to be with her. The subplot of her daughter, Rosa, and her first love Jack provided the additional drama of a family facing the death of a loved one. The young couple brought hope, and a willingness to move on and let go of the past.

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## Ivana Books Are Magic says

I have this thing about Tennessee. I had read all of his plays (and a few of his biographies as well). I suppose it could be said that somewhere along the way I just fell in love with his style of writing. He is, possibly, one of my favourite playwrights of all time and surely my favourite when it comes to American dramatists. There is something in me that resonates with his preferred subjects of isolation, love, despair and loneliness. Moreover, there is something quite magical about the way he employs words. His plays are incredibly poetic and lyrical. This play is no exception. Perhaps it could be said that he used dreamy words to create a safe haven where his overly fragile heroines can truly shine. He shows us a world within a world, he takes us into a journey into the human soul and I love him for it.

The Rose Tattoo is a hidden gem. It may not be one of his best known works, but it is a great play. Beautifully written (has ever a playwright been more lyrical?) and profoundly touching. Its exploration of daughter and mother relationship, is just as ingenious and skilful as the one in the better known The Glass Menagerie. As is often the case with Williams, it is a female character that is in the centre of the play. This time the tragic heroine is Serafina Delle Rose. Serafina is portrayed tenderly but with great precision. Serafina, is shown to us, as a woman, as a human being with faults and virtues. Like Blanche from Streetcar she has her shortcomings and the way she behaves is sometimes quite absurd. Nevertheless, Serafina, like Blanche, possesses a great inner strength. Is Serafina a strong woman? That she certainly is. She doesn't give up easily, she defends her choices with all she has got and in the process takes us on a road of soul-searching with her.

The play opens with Serafina sitting on the sofa waiting for her husband Rosario's return. Serafina is a Sicilian woman living in USA. She absolutely worships her husband and makes him the very purpose of her life. She makes a religion out of her love, as her adoration of her husband is enforced by her Roman-Catholicism. Having found a complete physical, emotional and spiritual fulfilment in her relationship, it could be said that she is perfectly content. Well, it's not a drama if two people fall in love, get married and live happily ever after, is it? I don't think it is a spoiler if I let you know that Serafina's marriage isn't as perfect as she believes it to be. She might utterly and absolutely adore her husband, but does he feel the same? This play raises many interesting questions about love and explores this subject from different points of view. What is love? Is romantic love an end in itself? What is parental love about? Is romantic love a kind of religion? What is the link between body and soul? Can love go on forever? Is love eternal? Can love between two human beings ever be perfect? The Rose Tattoo is a play that bravely and boldly explores a great number of themes: love, sexuality, loneliness, motherhood etc...

The majority of characters in this play are Sicilians. I think that T.W. once said that Italians were his kind of people. Perhaps there was something in their temper that reminded him of Southern Americans and their French influenced ways. I would say that the writer does manage to capture something of Sicilian culture in this one. Williams doesn't stereotype Sicilians, nor does he turn them into caricatures, which is obviously, a good thing. Another thing that deserves to be mentioned is the complex characterization. Serafina and her daughter are the main characters of this play. Similarly, to The Glass Menagerie, their portrayal is often highlighted by contrasting them one to another. There is a clash of generations but also of desires, as Serafina's daughter grows up she wants a life (and love) of her own. Serafina loves her daughter, but haunted

by the tragedy of her lost love, she struggles to connect to her daughter, the very product of that love that consumes her so. Loneliness and isolation are something that can be felt in this play. I admire the way that cultures clash in Williams' plays, he has a unique gift for portraying that. The cultural distance created in his plays often deepens that sense of loneliness and this play is no exception. Serafina belongs to another culture, she is an Italian immigrant, isolated and alone, trying to make sense of the world she finds herself in. In Williams' play it is often the clash between the South and the West of USA that creates trouble and tension, so in that sense this play is only slightly different.

A must read for all fans of Tennessee Williams!

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### **Ivana says**

The Rose Tattoo is a great play. It is a play with many relevant and important themes: love, sexuality, loneliness, motherhood etc... The majority of characters are Sicilians. I think that T.W manages to capture something of their culture and at any rate he doesn't stereotype them. Moreover, the characters are complex and this is especially the case with Serafina. As often with T. Williams, it is a female character that is in the centre of the play. This time the heroin is Serafina Delle Rose. The other characters are complex, but not that developed as she is. Now when I think of it, they are in a way shadowed by Serafina.

The play begins with Serafina sitting on the sofa waiting for her husband Rosario's return. Serafina worships her 'wild as a gypsy' husband and finds physical and spiritual fulfillment in her marriage. In addition, marriage is sacred to Serafina and being a Roman-Catholic makes her see marriage as a sacrament. In a way, she makes religion out of her love. There are many questions about love that can be drawn from this play. Is love a kind of religion? What is the link between body and soul? Can love go on forever? etc...

Well, it's not a drama if two people fall in love, get married and live happily ever after, is it? I don't think it is a spoiler if I say there is trouble in paradise i.e. Serafina's marriage. Serafina is portrayed as a human being that is with faults and virtues. Like Blanche from Streetcar she has her weaknesses. Nevertheless, Serafina is like Blanche in her own way a strong woman. She doesn't give up easily, she defends her love. Serafina's tragic fate is just the kind that takes us on a road of soul-searching.

Loneliness and isolation are something that can be felt in this play. I always like the way that cultures clash in Williams' plays. The cultural distance created in his plays deepens that sense of loneliness. Serafina belongs to another culture, she is an Italian immigrant. In Williams' play it is usually the clash between the south and the west of USA that creates trouble, so in that sense this play is a bit different.

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I'm trying to remember if there ever was a play by T.Williams that I did not like. I don't think there was. I guess I just like his style of writing and there is something in me that resonances with his main themes of isolation, love, despair and loneliness. There is also something poetic about his language and this play is no exception.

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## **Franc says**

Reading this play, I see for the first time a range in Tennessee Williams I didn't know existed. Up until now I'd pretty much thought he wrote repeated variations on a the same play: scouring 4-handed Chekhovian family dramas set along the lower Mississippi Watershed and updated with spicy plot denouements like rape, repressed homosexuality, and castration. Instead, *The Rose Tattoo*, which is like a libretto for an opera waiting to be written, features poor immigrants, broad comedy, and a hopeful life-affirming ending. Written at the peak of his powers between *Streetcar* and *Cat*, things must have been going well for Williams, and it shows in his outlook in this play. While it doesn't quite reach the heights of those works, it's still Top-5 Tennessee. I hope to see this on the stage one day. Until then, we have the 1955 film version starring Burt Lancaster and Anna Magnani, who originated the role on Broadway and won an Academy Award for Best Actress. It's breezily-filmed on location in Key West back when it was still shabby.

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## **Ryan Brady says**

I want to take this play out to dinner and then cuddle with it on the couch afterwards.

Three well-deserved stars.

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## **Katherine says**

Very funny (also tragic). Williams uses warmth, imagination and humor to tackle serious issues (poverty, mourning/melancholia, crime, adultery). The actor playing Serafina needs some serious comic timing skills—I was thinking of the woman who plays Fanny's mother in *\*Funny Girl\**—that lady would have been PERFECT. The end of the final scene is more visual/artistic than naturalistic, but it fits the mood and is cool. My take-away line:

“Don’t be ashame of nothing, the world is too crazy for people to be ashame in it. I’m not ashame and I had two fights on the street and my daughter called me ‘disgusting.’” Yes!

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## **Sketchbook says**

Highway signs: "Slippery When Wet." ~~ "Truck Drivers in Rear."

You may know a lot or a little about Blanche, Alma, Maggie, Maxine, Laura, Stella, Amanda, The Princess and Myrtle...but few can recall the big Sicilian peasant, Serafina Delle Rose -- the first 10 Williams heroine who isn't repressed in any way. Living off the Gulf Coast in this lusty-busty romance (1951), she's a monumental babe -- an emotional, impulsive, simple-minded creature who misses her truck-driving husband who was killed while smuggling narcotics in his truckload of bananas. He had a rose tattooed on his chest.

How she deals with this traumatic loss and unborn baby shape the action : hearing that husby had a mistress she prays to the virgin for a sign to confirm or deny the rumors. Ow, her anguish, her passion (the role was allegedly written for Anna Magnani who did the forgotten film). Husby was *perfection* and, you realize, his

perfection was his sexual prowess.

In this folkloric comedy - seldom produced today - she meets a not very bright beau (another trucker) and redefines her dream, though it centers on her sexual neediness. We must always Make Do, as grandmum would say. 10 is in a compassionate mood : Serafina faces this and that truth, and her suitor soon has a rose tattoo on *his* chest. "Oh, Lady!" she cries to the virgin, "give me a sign." Rose is a rose.

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### **Ahmad Sharabiani says**

?The Rose tattoo, Tennessee Williams

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### **Eileen says**

*The Rose Tattoo* concerns one Serafina delle Rosa, a first-generation Sicilian-American who lives somewhere on the Gulf Coast with her 15-year-old daughter Rosa. Her husband Rosario, a small-time drug smuggler, was murdered and Serafina lost the baby she was carrying shortly thereafter. Since then, she has sequestered herself and her daughter from their small Italian community and spends her listless days in a worn shift, sewing gowns and fine clothes for other people's special events. Three years have passed and it is now Rosa's high school graduation, signaling her movement out from under her mother's authority and into adulthood and her own self-realization. This terrifies Serafina, who wants Rosa suspended in time with her and her late husband's memory. Even worse is that sailor Rosa has fallen for! But then Alvaro Mangiacavallo ("eat-a-horse" in Italian), a goofy truck driver with a sexy body, arrives that afternoon and - *oh Dio!* He reminds Serafina of Rosario and has even gotten his very own rose tattoo!

According to editor Shanley, "The Rose Tattoo is over the top. It is a lurid play, redolent of the smell of goats, the cries of ragged children and squawking birds. Its perimeters are defined by women, hairy-legged women, gossiping, clownish women, whores, and witches." I actually had a feeling of *déjà vu*. The oppressive tropical ambiance; the voluptuous, larger-than-life widow; the emotional stagnation and pervasive carnality - *The Rose Tattoo* and *The Night of the Iguana* feel like two versions of the same story. Written about a decade later, *Iguana* comes across as a more mature work, with its themes of sexuality, religion, mental illness, and human nature. It also lacks the neat resolution of *The Rose Tattoo* and the cast of characters is more diverse, ranging from pure and detached (Hannah) to Serafina-like (Maxine) to falling apart as we speak (Shannon).

Which isn't to say that *The Rose Tattoo* is a mediocre play or not worth it if you've already read/seen *Iguana*. It's a comedy starring a tacky, ridiculous woman who lives surrounded by dress dummies and Catholic kitsch. Alvaro is a love-struck doofus. The Italian accents are preposterously exaggerated and the overall setting is clearly a satire of the close-knit, gossipy immigrant community. Serafine tries so hard to be

spiritual she simply ends up ironic.

SERAFINA: Oh, Lady, Lady, Lady, give me a sign!

[As if in mocking answer, a novelty salesman appears and approaches the porch. He is a fat man in a seersucker suit and a straw hat with a yellow, red and purple band. His face is beet-red and great moons of sweat have soared through the armpits of his jacket. His shirt is lavender, and his tie, pale blue with great yellow polka dots, is a butterfly bow. His entrance is accompanied by a brief, satiric strain of music.]

*Iguana* certainly has comic relief but *Tattoo* is such a self-parody that it borders on metatheater. It knows its atmosphere is overheated and blatantly sexual and populated by caricatures. The humor comes from its own premise and execution. If anything, *The Rose Tattoo*, despite being the earlier of the two, is also a parody of *The Night of the Iguana*, which has many of the same elements but asks to be taken seriously. It's like *Iguana* reflected in a funhouse mirror.

This new edition of *The Rose Tattoo* also includes *The Dog Enchanted by the Divine View*, an earlier one-act piece by Williams that became the genesis for *Tattoo*. I haven't read anything else by Williams so I wouldn't know if his other plays are more differentiated, but I found *The Rose Tattoo* to be a great companion piece and counterpoint for *The Night of the Iguana*. I enjoyed reading them and would love to see both onstage.

## Original Review

## Mitra Nazem says

## Christobird says

I fell in love with Serafina Delle Rose. She makes a wish, she takes a risk, she opens up her door... God exists if you just stop worshipping some arbitrary "Him".

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## **Selena says**

Not a fan, though, I should preface that by saying that I'm not really a fan of Tennessee Williams in general (what kind of name is that anyway? Who names their kid after a state?). I don't share his fascination with abusive relationships, nor do I find the tragic romance in them that he does (call me a prude, but I am offended at the idea that anyone could find redeeming romantic qualities in an abusive relationship, especially a male writer).

Anyway, slipping off now to allow my high horse to stretch his legs and get some water.

It is another dark sketch of the tragic life of an "everyman" character, having been pushed to despiration by life itself. Its a bit self-indulgent for my taste, but I've read/seen worse.

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## **Robin Friedman says**

### **The Rose Tattoo**

Tennessee Williams is most often remembered as a lyrical writer of tragedy and lurid violence and as the author of three classic plays: "The Glass Menagerie", "A Streetcar Named Desire", and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof". Williams wrote many other plays in different styles. Among the best of his works is this romance, "The Rose Tattoo", a play which is too-little known today. Cheryl Crawford directed the play when it opened on Broadway in 1951 starring Maureen Stapleton and Eli Wallach. The play, Stapleton, and Wallach each won Tony Awards. In 1955, Williams wrote the screenplay for the film version of "The Rose Tattoo" which became famous for the Academy Award winning performance of Anna Magnani. Williams wrote an introduction, "The Timeless World of a Play" to "The Rose Tattoo" in which he said: "Whether or not we admit it to ourselves, we are all haunted by a tragic sense of impermanence." He argued that a play gave the opportunity to suspend time by allowing its audience to share in human emotion and change as spectators and so to understand oneself and one another better, if only for a moment. This short, difficult essay is an apt introduction to the play.

The three-act play is set around 1950 in an unnamed town on the Gulf Coast between New Orleans and Mobile with a large population of Sicilian immigrants. The play tells the story of a middle-aged Sicilian immigrant woman, Serafina Delle Rose who passes from grief and despair to love and sexuality and to a second chance at life. In the opening scenes, Serafina is pregnant and married to a man named Rosario and the couple have a 12-year old daughter, Rosa. Rosario never appears in the play. He is killed almost immediately when he is smuggling contraband for the underworld under a truckload of bananas. Serafina, who works as a seamstress, is shaken to the extent that she loses the baby. She lives solely with the memory of Rosario and of his sexual prowess, symbolized by the rose tattoo on his chest. She comes to idealize her dead husband and fights fiercely to repress compelling evidence of his long-term infidelity.

Most of the play is set in a single day three years after Rosario's death. Serafina continues to mourn his passing and loses interest in her friends and in other people. She becomes over-protective of Rosa, who is now an adolescent graduating from high school who has fallen in love with Jack, a young sailor. Serafina meets an uncouth but magnetically attractive young man, Alvaro, who also drives a truck for a living and

who reminds her of her late husband. The sexual attraction is immediate. In long scenes between Rosa and Alvaro, Williams develops their relationship. Serafina comes to terms with the frailties of her husband and with love and romance. She is able to love herself and to release her daughter to her own life.

The play is lengthy and takes concentration to read. It is full of symbolism, including the rose tattoo, religious icons, a watch, a randy goat, a flamboyant pink shirt and more. The Sicilian immigrant community is vividly drawn with eccentric characters including a herbal doctor and a witch. The play includes some Italian dialogue which is best read over quickly as its meaning is generally clear from the context. I found it helpful to watch the film version between readings of the play to help visualize the action. Magnani's portrayal of Serafina brings the character to life more than any reading could do. Although the film version is bowdlerized, the spirit of Williams' play comes through.

John Lahr's biography "Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh" (2014) devotes substantial space to Williams' writing of "The Rose Tattoo" and to its biographical significance. Williams wrote several early drafts which were critiqued by Elia Kazan, who had already directed several of Williams' plays. Williams wrote and rewrote to adopt Kazan's suggestions into the final version of the play. When he had completed the final draft, Kazan, after hesitation, declined to direct the work, to Williams' great disappointment. In this instance, Williams was right to have faith in the worth of his play, as suggested by the Tony Award. Years later, in 1959, Kazan would back out from directing another Williams comedy, the far less successful play, "Period of Adjustment". Williams and Kazan never worked together again.

"The Rose Tattoo" is a beautiful play about disappointment and grief and about the power of love and sexuality to redeem life. In addition to this individual version, the play is available in the first of the two Library of America volumes devoted to the plays of Tennessee Williams.

Robin Friedman

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## **Dolors says**

Snippets of a Friday night spent in the theatre:

*Paralyzed by sorrow she is.*

*Serafina.*

*A woman in her stationary world.*

*The house as a nest, the house as source of life in constant motion, spinning around following the still flow of time.*

*Three hours and all the little lights refracted in a boundless second.*

*An entire universe resonating in the public life that palpitates within the transparent walls of this house.*

*With fury, with passion, with devotion.*

*With hysteria?*

*Or with yearning?*

*Yearning to hear the star-noises.*

*The electrifying sparks crackling in the air.*

*A man's love tattooed with fire on the woman's bosom, just beneath her translucent skin.*

*A Rose. Symbol of mystery and beauty, of the secret of life implanted in what is most intimate, in moist petal-*

*heartbeats, in the throbbing red blood.*

*A daughter and a mirror.*

*Her mother's reflection.*

*Rebelling against her own image.*

*A tender and scented Rose.*

*Her father's reincarnation.*

*The abyss of pain and the serendipitous power that comes from abandonment, from betrayal.*

*Serafina's soul, shielded.*

*Her body, barren.*

*Her house, locked.*

*Her Rose Tattooed heart, bleeding.*

*The acrid smell of deception and the indomitable courage that derive from lucidity. The impulse, the rampant need to glue back together the broken pieces of shattered fate through sexual healing.*

*A journey towards the light wherein life is rekindled in incandescent Roses beating with two hearts full of future.*

In “*The Rose Tattoo*” Tennessee Williams surprises the spectator in blending together the grotesquely comical, the mystic symbolism and the unhinged dramatism that surround the recently widowed *Serafina Della Rosa*, a plump middle-aged Sicilian seamstress who is equally hilarious and unstable, and her teenage daughter Rosa, whose lust for a local sailor represents the tensions between the Sicilian and the American communities at the beginning of the 20thC.

The virtue of pure love and the almost deranged religious devotion that impregnate Serafina's soul and her frantic attempts to disclose the enigmas of her deceased husband Rosario, whose idealized presence is constantly invoked yet never materialized, tinges the story with visual and auditive effects that make of this play a multisensorial experience. A bleating goat, a sinister witch whose *malocchio* plagues Serafina, the voices of children in chorus of premonitory passion, every detail pumps meaning into the pulsating heart of the story.

Rosario resists being locked in romanticized memories or reduced to ashes in a funeral urn or tamed by marital convention, but Serafina's obstinate resentment and debasing sloppiness corrodes her daughter's full bloom and their reputation in the Sicilian community. Only the well-dressed and faceless mannequins remain Serafina's faithful confidants until a clownish man with a Dionysian body crosses her path and liberates her from a self-made prison of grief and delusion.

I was fortunate enough to see “*The Rose Tattoo*” on the stage in the *Teatre Nacional de Catalunya*\* last January and to experience Tennessee Williams' uncanny talent as a visual writer.

I don't think I would have appreciated this play half as much as I did hadn't I seen it performed in live. One can't escape from the intensity of Williams' plays, which exult the spectator with their aural rythms, stimulating light effects and spiritual symbolism, or from his multifaceted and hot-blooded characters, whom Williams considered family. Maybe it was not a coincidence after all that his beloved sister's name was Rose.

I can't help but admire Tennessee Williams, a poetic realist, a man who set himself free through the act of writing and then liberated the rest of us shaping his words into living stage-pictures made of flesh-and-bone characters, whose realities will permeate our consciousness long after they have vanished into nothingness, long after the curtains have been drawn, long after the stage goes pitch-black. There will always remain the eternal glow of having witnessed something truly magic.

\*<http://www.tnc.cat/ca/la-rosa-tatuada...>

I saw the play in Catalan performed by superb Clara Segura playing as Serafina but reading William's original choice of words completed the circle.

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