# THE GENTLEMAN CALLER

BY PHILIP DAWKINS

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THE GENTLEMAN CALLER was originally produced in New York City by Abingdon Theatre Company (Tony Speciale, Artistic Director; Denise Dickens, Producing Director) at the Cherry Lane Theater on May 10, 2018. It was directed by Tony Speciale, the scenic design was by Sara C. Walsh, the costume design was by Hunter Kaczorowski, the lighting design was by Zach Blane, the sound design was by Christian Frederickson, the fight direction was by Ryan Bourque, and the production stage manager was Lily Perlmutter. The cast was as follows:

WILLIAM INGE ..... Daniel K. Isaac
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS ..... Juan Francisco Villa

THE GENTLEMAN CALLER was commissioned, developed, and first produced by Raven Theatre Company (Cody Estle, Artistic Director) in Chicago, Illinois, opening on April 6, 2018. It was directed by Cody Estle, the scenic design was by Jeffrey D. Kmiec, the costume design was by Melissa Ng, the lighting design was by Michelle Benda, the sound design was by Kevin O'Donnell, the fight choreography was by David Woolley, and the production stage manager was Tara Malpass. The cast was as follows:

WILLIAM INGE ..... Curtis Edward Jackson
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS ..... Rudy Galvan

THE GENTLEMAN CALLER was developed with support from the Playwrights' Center PlayLabs program, Minneapolis, MN.

## CHARACTERS

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

WILLIAM "BILL" INGE

## NOTE ON THE TEXT

A / indicates an interruption and the start of the other character's next line.

*I wounded a man I knew*
*For I hated and loved him, too.*
*His wound was fresh and it bled a lot*
*And the blood of his body was red and hot.*

—Tennessee Williams, 1942

*HAL. I've always had the feeling if I just had the chance, I could set the world on fire.*

—William Inge, *Picnic*

*I don't know my future after this weekend*
*And I don't want to.*
*It takes courage to enjoy it,*
*The hardcore and the gentle.*
*Big time sensuality.*
*Sensuality.*

—Björk

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## ACT ONE

*The stage is set sparsely to resemble the room which is about to be described in perspicacious detail for us by one of our two players. The layout of the stage in Act One (a garden apartment in St. Louis) is meant to be nearly identical to the layout in Act Two (a hotel suite in Chicago), only the essentials need be present (in this play, of course, the "essentials" in both locales begin and end—almost—with a wet bar), with small furniture additions or subtractions to make the successful transformation from living room to hotel room. The rest we may conjure in our minds. There should be some sort of perimeter—whether physical or emotional—outside of which the actor playing Tenn may exit the current action of the play to observe or comment on it. This perimeter may be an actual physical boundary which the players may/must cross in order to live outside of the action of their own lives, or possibly it is merely a change in movement, lighting, behavior, or presentation that signifies an exit for the character from his current state. In any case, this exiting of the current story will be indicated in the script by the stage direction (To us.) and must always be quick and seamless diversions. Interpret that as you will. The only thing more I'll write about this device is that Tenn retains his character when he "steps out of the story." He is still Tennessee Williams but is commenting on the happenings of his life from a different space, a place of more objectivity, like a writer looking back on his life and*

*recounting it for us.*

*Tennessee Williams, 33, addresses us "outside of the story" while Bill Inge readies the apartment for his guest. It is early November, 1944, and both men have found themselves in St. Louis. Tennessee speaks in the languid, affected Southern drawl which he purposely acquired from his mother. He is gentile and colonial in manner, often affecting an air of upper-class civility, though his appearance is haphazard, his sport coat shiny at the elbows, his pants untailored and too baggy, shoes scuffy, hair and mustache less maintained than they ought to be. All about him is the aura of a man who just rolled out of bed—likely not his own—and who could not be bothered with the effort required to disguise this fact.*

*Bill Inge, 31, is fastidious in his appearance, though he is the type of well dressed that goes out of its way to call zero attention to itself. He is remarkable in his ability to disappear into the background, an impressive feat considering he is a tall man, regal, with a severely stern visage, deep, resonant voice, and suave, pain-laden eyes. There is about him, always, a heaviness, a weight pulling him downward, despite his slender frame. At this point in his life, he is only just beginning to show the cultivated tummy paunch that comes from too much drink, and he takes great pains to suck it in as often as possible to avoid calling attention to his self-destructive alcoholism, though the crow's feet branching out from the sad, swampy delta of his eyes give him pretty well away.*

*As Tenn speaks to us, Bill, unaware of Tenn, goes about readying his apartment. Stocking the bar—pouring a quick shot for himself (this in addition to the gin rickey he's already drinking), refilling the cigarette box, toying with putting on a record, playing a few measures, then deciding that's too much and taking the record off. Tenn can notice these actions and check in with us about them, but Bill remains unaware of Tenn until otherwise specified.*

*Alright. Shall we?*

TENN. I'll describe the room as I remember it, not necessarily as it appears in our play. It is the living room of a garden apartment of one of those not-so-old, not-so-new tenements in a semi-respectable neighborhood in a city in the Middle West. In this case, the city is St. Louis. The not-so-not-so garden apartment—and here I must request that you engage your imaginations, that most endangered of American qualities—is well furnished, well kept, and well stocked with every kind of alcohol. The shades of every street-facing window are pulled thoroughly down, and the slats of every shutter flipped all the way heavenward. Consequently, what might be an impossibly bright not-so-not-so sub-level is instead plunged into a complete state of dungeon, the burden of brightness, then, falling entirely on the room's only occupant.

*A look to Bill, who is doing something dire or uncertain.*

God help us.

The gentleman lives alone in the not-so-not-so garden apartment with only a black Scottie dog named Lula-Bell for company. The gentleman is uncharacteristically proud of informing the rare visitor to his sub-level abode that Miss Lula-Bell is, *en fait*, his very best friend.

*In the apartment, Inge whistles for Lula-Bell and pats his thighs in a "come here, girl" manner. Beat. The dog does not arrive.*

The black Scottie dog will *not* make an appearance in our play, however, since one should never work with children or animals. Or Bette Davis, who is both.

As the gentleman readies the room for his eminent caller—*c'est moi*—he pours himself a drink, or more correctly, *another*. He checks his watch. His eminent caller is—I can tell you from experience—running late. The gentleman tries not to mind.

He drinks.

The gentleman is William Inge, 31 years old and looking…well, looking like *that*.

The gentleman is a writer, though he is, *en fait*, not quite a gentleman, and not *quite* a writer. He has just left a dissatisfied life of teaching university in favor of the slightly less dissatisfying life of Arts Critic for the *St. Louis Star-Times*. Arts Critic. *All* the arts. Music, visual art, dance, the alderman's niece's tap recital, and most importantly and closest to the hearts of both players in [tonight's/today's] performance,

the The-ay-ter.
The gentleman will be…*someone* to me.

My name is Mr. Williams, Tom. Tennessee for short. It's possible you've heard of me. I've done a few things, some of which I'll even admit to. Though at *this* point in my career I can scarcely imagine anyone having heard of me outside the St. Louis County register of drunken offenders. Alas.

I am *in* St. Louis biding time at my childhood home, awaiting *trial* by firing squad. My newest play is scheduled to premiere at the Civic The-ay-ter in Chicago at the end of this year—that is, 1944, by the way—and I, penniless and terrified, have retreated to the home of my progenitor before setting off to provide inspiration for the executioner's song that is the Chicago Literati. The play is *The Glass Menagerie*, and it will be such a raging success that it will forever alter the direction of both the American The-ay-ter and my life. But I have no way of knowing this now. The play is not yet good, and not yet called *The Glass Menagerie*. At this point, it's still going by one of its many earlier incarnations, *The Gentleman Caller*, which so happens to be the title of this very play in which I appear before you. *Quelle coïncidence!*

Mr. Inge, the not-quite-gentleman-not-quite-writer, has received word from his editor that a homegrown playwright has returned while awaiting his out-of-town Chicago tryout and the gentleman wishes to interview this prodigal playwright. I do not particularly care for interviews for the simple reason that they remind me of things I have apparently said. But I am promised this interview will include a cocktail—or two—homemade by a not-quite-writer, *quite*-confirmed-bachelor, and what can I say? I'm a giver.

It is 10 November, 1944. And it is a Friday, or as I like to call it… "whatever."

> *Tenn pulls a snuffbox of pastilles from his pants pocket and pops a pastille, at the same time that Inge breathes into his cupped hand and does a breath-check.*

*En avant!*

BILL. Mr. Williams?

TENN. Guilty.

BILL. Bill Inge. I've been expecting you.

TENN. *(To us.)* See?

BILL. Please, make yourself at home.

TENN. Thank you. A million apologies, I had every intention of being punctual, but then…wasn't.

BILL. Oh, that's fine, fine. You're the only thing I have to do this afternoon.

*Tenn gives us a "look" and Bill, realizing how that came out, takes a gulp of his drink. Beat.*

Thank you, by the way, for agreeing to meet me at mine. I would have gladly met at your place, but—well, frankly, I'm a terrible driver.

TENN. What d'ya fancy?

BILL. I'm sorry?

TENN. What are you having?

BILL. Oh! Forgive me, *I* should offer *you* a drink—!

TENN. Well if you insist.

BILL. I do. I do insist. Where are my manners?

TENN. Oh, it's quite alright. It's only I hate to see a grown man drink alone. It's so sad, so familiar.

BILL. Shall I pour you what I'm having? I know it's a bit late in the year for a gin rickey, but I find a nice cold drink always warms me right up.

TENN. Young man, you read my mind.

BILL. *(Preparing the drink.)* Well, if it's mind-reading you're after, I should warn you, I'm terrible at guessing people's thoughts. You'll have to be explicit with me, I'm afraid. I'm always the last person to know what another man's thinking. I figure it's none of my business, I guess.

TENN. Don't bother with the lime.

BILL. With the—? Oh. Sure.
Anyway, if I'm meant to read your mind tonight, we may be looking at a rather short interview. At least, not an accurate one.

TENN. Accuracy is overrated, don't you think? I'm much more fascinated by Honesty.

# THE GENTLEMAN CALLER
## by Philip Dawkins

2 men

Tennessee Williams and William Inge today are recognized as two of the greatest American playwrights, whose work irrevocably altered the theatrical and social landscapes. In 1944, however, neither had achieved anything like genuine success. As flamboyant genius Williams prepares for the world premiere of his play *The Gentleman Caller*—to become *The Glass Menagerie*—self-loathing Inge struggles through his job as a theater critic, denying his true wish to be writing plays. Based on real-life but closed-door encounters, reconstructed from troves of comments (and elisions) by each man about their relationship, Philip Dawkins gorgeously envisions what might have taken place during those early-career meetings.

*"Tennessee Williams and William Inge make a tragic duo for the ages. …It's a beautiful play, equal parts Williams, Inge, and Dawkins himself—a stiff, intoxicating cocktail that knocks you flat on your back and leaves you there. …it is utter, tragic perfection."*
**—Time Out Chicago**

*"THE GENTLEMAN CALLER is a beautiful piece of work. Its examination of two of America's most lyrical playwrights is itself poetic and artful; one can hear echoes of both real men's plays… Knowing the playwrights does help, but it isn't by any means necessary; Dawkins provides all of the needed background within the script. But he doesn't allow the play to become bogged down by the elegance of its lines; rather, he couches everything in (often dark) humor… It's a remarkable work about remarkable classic playwrights from a pretty remarkable Chicago playwright."*
**—ChicagoOnStage.com**

*"…[a] richly evocative play… Dawkins, whose previous work includes such memorable plays as CHARM…has a terrifically acerbic, winningly naughty sense of humor that comes paired with a deceptive passion, and this makes him ideal for channeling Williams. His insights into the differences between the celebrant and the spectator, the artist and the critic (with one who is 'a maker of dreams' and the other who 'destroys by describing'), are cutting but not entirely off target."*
**—WTTW News**

**Also by Philip Dawkins**
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