Gadg and Tenn's Extraordinary Adventure

BY DAVID HERSKOVITS

Backstage at *Camino Real* in 1953, from left, Eli Wallach, Tennessee Williams, Elia Kazan, Jo Van Fleet and Joseph Anthony. PHOTOFEST

Was 'Camino Real' a wrong turn or fortunate swerve in the path of the American theatre?

FRANCES KAZAN IS A CHARMING, BEAUTIFUL woman who will cheerfully tell you that she doesn't like theatre at all. At least, that's what she told me when we met in 2006, though the more I chatted with her, the more it became clear that she loves theatre—when it's adventurous and challenging, that is. We got to talking about a curious short play by Tennessee Williams that had haunted her husband, the late Elia Kazan; he had worked with Williams for years to develop the one-act into a full-length play, *Camino Real*. "Elia used to say," she mentioned almost in passing, "'The closest I ever got to the avant-garde was *Camino Real*, and I never got it right.'" Frances had some papers she thought were interesting. Now, I like to think I am a curious fellow, but my reading list is long, so I expressed nothing more than a polite willingness to look the material over. A few days later a fat manila enveloped arrived on my desk, and I opened up a magical trove of documents that has inspired my work for the past four years.

The short play was *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real*, and the letters and notebooks all surrounded Kazan's work with Williams as they transformed it into *Camino Real*. That play was an unprecedented artistic adventure and a risk for both men; their collaboration was passionate, tempestuous and loving. "Baby, you know as well as I know, that, first of all, we've got to obey the first commands of our hearts. You know that or we wouldn't be so close to each other in spirit," wrote Tennessee to "Gadg" in January 1952. *Camino* flopped. In fact, it met with a spectacularly bad reception—critical opprobrium and incomprehension. Audiences stayed away in droves, and the show closed in a hurry. But the story doesn't end there. *Camino* has proven one of Williams's most enduring plays, and the dreamlike poetry of the production influenced generations of theatre artists to come.

The subject was irresistible. With my colleagues at Target Margin Theater, I set to work creating a new play, which begins performances April 13 at New York City's Ontological-Hysteric Theater (preceded by a festival this month in Brooklyn, called "TMT Laboratory: The Unknown Williams"). With the permission and support of both the Kazan and Williams estates, we have used letters, notebooks, memoirs, interviews and notes, much of them unpublished, in a series of workshops to build the story of these two giants and how their work together helped to shape American culture. That story has become our own new play: *The Really Big Once*.

> *When most things are called "new" or "difficult" in the Theatre that means there is some little trick there that hasn't been seen before or hasn't been solved before. When I refer to this job as difficult, I mean it's difficult. I mean I don't know whether it will come off or not, but if it does, we will really be breaking new ground. I think we can do it!*
>
> —Elia Kazan to Tennessee Williams, June 1952

Camino Real was an extraordinary experiment for Williams and Kazan. Neither had ever attempted such a surreal play, and the shared sense of artistic risk is palpable in their correspondence. Kazan began his own process of workshopping the play around 1948. Eli Wallach, who created the central role of Kilroy, recalls in his memoir how Kazan said that working on *Camino* "would sharpen his directorial skills for dealing with fantasy." Williams also considered the play

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Wallach and Van Fleet in *Camino Real*.

a new kind of artistic adventure: "There is very deeply and earnestly an affirmative sort of mysticism in this work, and I want that to stand, and I want it also to be a very new and enthralling piece of theatre."

Camino Real is sometimes referred to as the exception in the Williams canon. Think of the linear clarity of *Glass Menagerie* or *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and remember that when they started work on *Camino*, the success of *Streetcar* was fresh for both Williams and Kazan—these are touchstone works of psychological naturalism. But for me, *Camino Real* epitomizes Williams's plays. Here he gives us the poetry, the dreamlike associations and the beauty that distinguish his greatest plays, with no debt whatsoever paid to naturalism. *Camino* is Williams with all the vision and none of the kitchen sink. As Eric Bentley wrote in his 1953 review for the *New Republic*, "*Camino Real* does not even pretend to realism. The unreal which formerly crept up on us here meets us head on."

WITH *CAMINO*, KAZAN AND WILLIAMS were striving to expand their artistry. They attacked the project with passion and wrestled with the work and with one another. Their letters are crammed with pages of argumentation, justification, proposed cuts and additions—all the detailed energy that goes into any good artistic collaboration. Kazan pitches scenes to Williams; Williams worries to his friends that Kazan, "the Terrible Turk," does not get it. Their sensibilities were clearly divergent, yet they needed one another. Kazan was always Williams's preferred director, and Williams sounded like a scorned lover when Kazan rejected a project. When, after much back-and-forth, Kazan finally decided against directing *The Rose Tattoo*, Williams pined to his agent, "I feel as hurt as you must… not resentful, but undeniably hurt!—but I still must acknowledge how badly this play needs him." Kazan (who famously referred to Williams as "Blanche" while working on *Streetcar*) repeatedly calls the writer "Lover," beginning one letter, "Bear with me Lover, here we go again…."

The language of love fills their correspondence: "Gadg Darling," "Tenn Honey," "Baby…." Kazan, the inveterate tomcat preying on ingénues, and Williams, the vulnerable cruiser drifting through anonymous hotels, were soulmates whose lust for work and the flesh was oddly symmetrical. Williams and Kazan's first wife Molly were often at odds, and the director stressed again and again in his letters, "Molly had nothing to do with this," or "Molly has not seen this." "The Really Big Once" is a phrase Kazan used in a letter to Williams, to describe the one great love affair—the early passion that shapes a person's life and that can never be recaptured. Shooting a movie in Germany in the summer of 1952, Kazan gently urges Williams to come visit with him in Munich: "Could you come and spend some time with me there. Weekends will be clear. So will evenings. There's a nice hotel there...and a sordid nightlife, but real interesting!" It is almost as if they were conducting a clandestine affair, sharing a secret passion, which is of course in one sense exactly what they were doing.

If the attraction between them was powerful, it was also an attraction of opposites. Over and over Kazan presses his author to create "clarity" and "dramatic line," while Williams insists on the mystery of his dream logic: "It is a poetic search for a way to live romantically." Here is a characteristic Kazan appeal for linear momentum: "Do you think

the first act is ready to go into rehearsal? I don't. It should have a sequence an audience can and will follow. And above all I think it should come to a climax—a climax of story and a climax of 'meaning,' and one that calls for act two." And here he is reassuring Williams that the poetry won't be lost: "Bear in mind no matter how close to this line you cut, the play will still seem flamboyant and rich and poetic and free. That is the very essence of the material. I just want to make it so that most of the audience can follow it most of the time." But Williams is serving other artistic goals: "If you dissolve the shimmer of mystery over this thing, you lose its fascination."

A central part of our story is the tension between Kazan's conventional assumptions about dramaturgy and the poetic quality of the writing. To put the question bluntly, did Kazan's influence on the development of *Camino Real* disfigure the play or strengthen it? In the end, Kazan himself believed that he failed artistically: "I know that I didn't touch its potential." He felt that the design he developed for the production was too solid and realistic. Jo Mielziner had been in line to do the project, and his preliminary sketches are even published, characteristically dreamy and abstracted. But in the event, Lemuel Ayers created a much more direct representation of a quasi-Mexican town square. Similarly, Kazan regretted the actors he cast, describing them as too limited by the techniques of psychological realism for a play that demanded different skills. "I was 'forcing' the casting of *Camino Real* and distorting my own requirements to declare that the plays must be played by members of the Actors Studio; it was artistically false. They were trained in a more realistic technique. So was I."

YI ZHAO

From left, Satya Bhabha, Dara Seitzman, Purva Bedi, McKenna Kerrigan and Curt Hostetter in *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real*, produced by Target Margin in January 2009.

BOTH MEN WERE HAUNTED BY *Camino* and its failure. Kazan is still turning over his artistic mistakes in his memoir of 1988. In the margins of one of the notebooks I examined in the collection of Kazan's papers at Wesleyan, alongside notes about how to realize the romantic fantasy of the play he has scrawled a later remark: "But I didn't do this." Williams retreated to Florida immediately after the Broadway closing and rewrote the play, dissatisfied with what they had produced and yet driven to keep revising it. He never stopped proclaiming his love for *Camino*. Michael Kahn, artistic director of the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C., wrote to me: "I love the play, and Tennessee would often say it was his favorite. I know if this play had been a success, Tennessee would have continued to be more abstract in his writing. But that was not to be."

The moment marked a turning point in the American theatre. The decades before the war had been an explosion of innovation. O'Neill was reframing Greek myth, stealing from Expressionism and the new European avant-garde, and theatricalizing the depths of the unconscious. Thornton Wilder was reading Gertrude Stein, Susan Glaspell was blowing everyone's mind, and the WPA was sponsoring plays (like the story of "Lynchotopia" in *Liberty Deferred*) that proved too politically explosive to perform. All this was up for grabs when *Camino Real* opened on Broadway in 1953. It was still possible for a community of investors to sink real money into a commercial production of a 36-character fantasia with a reasonable expectation of return. Imagine! This play challenged everyone's traditional notions of what a play is: Where were we? Who were these people? There was no clear story! Perhaps most famously, Walter Kerr called it "the worst play yet written by the best playwright of his generation." The apex had become the end.

After *Camino*, in the '50s, experimental art began to be relegated to Off- and evermore-Off-Broadway. The bold successes of O'Neill and Wilder were forgotten and the lessons of Gertrude Stein pushed to one side as mainstream theatre technique became crystallized as naturalism and the behavior-based internal acting that made so many Actors Studio members movie stars. The impact of these performances, especially on film, cannot be underestimated. This version of psychologically based storytelling (not just acting but storytelling itself) still dominates every mode of American theatre; we feel it in our training programs, in our writers' workshops, in our design. The adventure of *Camino* had failed, and Kazan and Williams became the avatars of naturalism.

BUT THE ADVENTURE DID NOT END. If *Camino* was the moment when Kazan and Williams looked down another road, it is the very road that we at Target Margin (and many others) have chosen. So *The Really Big Once* will also include the history of the American theatre's response to this turning point, especially the experimental theatre community. People who saw the original *Camino* (those admittedly few whom I have been able to interview) say it was terrific. Michael Kahn saw its closing matinee, and then went right back to see the evening show. Richard Foreman, at 15, saw it repeatedly, even dragging his parents in from Scarsdale. "*Camino Real* was one of those rare things; I was just totally blown away—it really did change my life," he now recalls. Sidney Lumet has described it to me as "perhaps the best thing Kazan ever did in the theatre."

One of the side-benefits I have had while working on this project is the opportunity to discuss it with many theatre artists who did not see it but remain under its sway. Our workshops in New York have been hosted and supported by Lincoln Center Theater, New

York Theatre Workshop and the Chocolate Factory; and I have had the chance casually to talk it over with many people from theatres around the country. Directors of large regional theatres say, "Oh yes, we've been talking about doing that for years!" Actors and designers say, "Ah, *Camino*! I did a production in school!" Generations of artists love the play. Yet no one seems to know of a production that exactly *works*. Artists who consider themselves part of an American avant-garde have an especially complex relationship to it; everything we do is understood in terms Kazan established, and yet those are the very terms we are working to change. In considering all this source material, *The Really Big Once* asks: Did *Camino* fail? Did it succeed? What do failure and success mean?

Context is all, and the context for the creation of C*amino Real* was that crisis in our national history brought about by the House Un-American Activities Committee. This was the moment when America sought to institutionalize membership in our culture, to exclude those who were not judged to be "real Americans." The mainstream was not a matter of choice for HUAC, but a matter of loyalty and of law. Salem Ludwig, a member of the original *Camino* cast, wrote to us shortly before he died in 2007: "Elia and Tennessee started working with us at the Actors Studio in 1948 and 1949 on *Ten Blocks*. When and where the decision was made, I don't know, but in 1949 President Truman ordered all government employees to sign a loyalty oath. That was the first crack in the dike."

Kazan used the challenge of the HUAC to certify his membership in the American mainstream. His choice backfired. In the course of work on *Camino Real* he testified as a friendly witness, published his infamous defense in the *Times* and suffered the ostracism of his artistic community. But when everyone turned against him, Williams did not: "Poor Gadg may not be able to work again in New York as he 'informed' about his Communist friends in Hollywood, and most people feel it was a betrayal of old friendships and there is a great hostility toward him.… I take no attitude about it, one way or another, as I am not a political person and human venality is something I always expect and forgive." Still, to save his movie career Kazan had gutted his standing in the theatre, and he was hungry to repair his place in his creative community. When Kazan rehashes his failures in casting the show, he is describing how he used the production to win his way back into that community's good graces—or tried to—and how that sacrificed the production's artistic integrity. He was determined to use Actors Studio actors and regain their esteem. Yet he saw later that, with their Method orientation, they did not have the skills to realize this kind of writing. We are led back again to the question of conventional standards of performance. Here was an opportunity to veer away from those standards, but Kazan did not grasp it.

THE POLITICAL ISSUE REMAINS SEN-sitive to this day: Members of our audience have already written to us declining to attend workshops and challenging us for creating work about Kazan. This past December, I gave a presentation of our work-in-progress and some people in attendance, especially of the generation that remembers HUAC, were incensed. Somehow they seemed to feel that by not making our play *about* HUAC, we were whitewashing Kazan. (It is fair to say that the quality of the conversation was compromised by their passion; one gentleman compared Kazan to Hitler.) Are they right? Should we not even be addressing Kazan's artistic achievement because of his politics? What were Kazan's politics, after all, and how can we judge them?

Kazan's HUAC testimony, however, is not our subject. *The Really Big Once* addresses the creative process shared by playwright and director in risking an especially bold attempt at artistic innovation. The HUAC story is meaningful for us to the extent that it distorted his artistic grasp of *Camino Real*. That was, poignantly, Kazan's own conclusion.

In fact, we hope to examine the very assumptions about "failure" that underpin these politics and aesthetics. For investors in *Camino* on Broadway, success is easily measured: The production folded and they lost their money. Eric Bentley, Walter Kerr and Brooks Atkinson are names to conjure with, thoughtful critics who judged the play harshly—but what about the sophisticated artists who took away such a vibrant impression of it? Wallach maintained it was the best production he was ever in. Young artists today discovering the play for the first time draw inspiration and energy from its artistic challenge. Can we really say that *Camino Real* failed? Perhaps it was successful in ways beyond the imagining of its creators.

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