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From left, Patrick Darwin Williams as Slim, Penny Arcade as Celeste, and Warren Bub as Maxie in Tennessee Williams' *The Mutilated*.

A Tennessee Williams Christmas, Fear and Self-Loathing in *The Mutilated*



Left, Mink Stole and right, Penny Arcade in Tennessee Williams' *The Mutilated*. Photo Scott Wynn

***The Mutilated* by Tennessee Williams**
 Starring Penny Arcade and Mink Stole
 New Ohio Theatre
 154 Christopher Street
 New York, NY 10014
 November 1-December 1, 2013

By BLAIR SCHULMAN

Penny Arcade and Mink Stole are two pole stars orbiting Williams' 1966 play, *The Mutilated*. It is obvious before the first line is even uttered these women were born to perform Williams, each bringing to the stage their arsenal of survivalist fervor. They grab the audience by the ankles and drag us straight down into a vortex of mildly tragic dilapidation.

Any association to camp should be ignored as Arcade and Stole have earned every scar, bump and bruise. When Meryl Streep is acting,

Left, Mink Stole and right, Penny Arcade in Tennessee Williams' *The Mutilated*. Photo Scott Wynn.



Mink Stole and Penny Arcade in *The Mutilated*. Photo Scott Wynn.



Mink Stole and Penny Arcade in *The Mutilated*. Photo Scott Wynn.



no matter what role she inhabits (or wig she puts on her head), it's still going to be Meryl Streep. But when these gals eat up the scenery, it's with the weight of performers long accustomed to the fringe. Williams' plays, no matter how serious or sensational, are all about dysfunctional people teetering on the edge. Arcade and Stole embody their characters to a tee.

A clammy Depression-era Christmas Eve at New Orleans' Silver Dollar Hotel, where the play takes place, is a melancholic reminder of the fleabags, dumps and tenements that existed in New York City before politics and real estate turned it into a theme park. To see it replicated in abstract at the New Ohio Theatre seems appropriate since New York City itself seems to be a city in some kind of hybridized transition towards sameness. Celeste Delecroix Griffin (Arcade) is dumped at the Silver Dollar, like a foundling, by her exasperated brother after a stay in the pokey for shoplifting. With the promise of a bakery job and another attempt at getting Celeste back on track, both siblings know the efforts are futile. Celeste will never change from grifter and her brother knows it. The Silver Dollar is the sort of place, that writer Truman Capote, a contemporary of Williams, once described in his own unfinished novel *Answered Prayers*, as Father Flanagan's All-Night Nigger Queen Kosher Café. The kind of existential last stop on a bumpy, all-night train to now here. A place where you can unpin your hair because there ain't no one around to care any longer. The Silver Dollar, like Father Flanagan's, is where Celeste attempts to reunite with her best frenemy Trinket Dugan (Stole).

Like Celeste, Trinket has abandoned any future for her survival in the present.

The psychological differences between the two women are vast. Celeste is something of a wastrel clinging to whatever cuteness she once used to undulate through life, now soggy with age and irresponsibility. She taunts her only friend with small-minded blackmail over Trinket's mastectomy (the "Mutilated" of the title) as a way to ooze her way back into Trinket's good graces and cheap wine.

Arcade plays Celeste as a Dickensian wif, someone who would benefit greatly from a bath and a hot meal. She's a smutty, precocious child that will stick her dirty fingers in your jam when you aren't looking. No malevolence on her part, just a simple act of survival.

Trinket, on the other hand, has the financial independence that eludes Celeste, but isn't any happier. Instead of wanting to clean herself up and stand in the sunshine, Trinket would much rather hide her shame beneath layers of makeup, courting havoc from strangers by waving a wad of money in everyone's face. Mostly, she is resigned to accepting her mutilation as a cross to bear. The poor woman wants to wallow over her wounds and scars rather than giving them air to breathe and heal.

In 1936 or 1966, one can only imagine how final a diagnosis like a mastectomy must be. That part of the dialogue doesn't translate as well to a 2013 audience. Today there is a much greater acceptance and dignity in being a cancer survivor. It is the doubt and pain that Trinket carries like a burden while unraveling at the same time that is so riveting to watch.

Both women are conscious of their existence, and in that consciousness, a dingy halo illuminates their aura. Through the haze of cheap white wine lies an uneven future of sameness; the same sad faces, landscape unchanged, each day is the same as the last and the only thing different, aside from the occasional arrival of a naval fleet on shore leave, are embellishments to the same stories told too often.

Drinking oneself to death looks like a viable alternative to facing another day exactly like the one before. The two women recognize as all they have left in this world is each other.

While not the very best of Williams' work, the

Penny Arcade and Mink Stole in *The Mutilated*. Photo Scott Wynn.



Background, Mink Stole and foreground, Penny Arcade in *The Mutilated*. Photo Scott Wynn.



Right Mink Stole and left, Patrick Darwin Williams as Slim.



cast aptly portrays the willing magnolias as he probably intended. Whoever thought to cast these two women in the leads are to be applauded. Seeing Penny Arcade out of context is something damn good to witness.

At 63, Arcade is barreling towards her Louise Bourgeois moment, which came for the painter in her early seventies when her body of work was finally recognized for the scope and intelligence that so few appreciated. Arcade, perhaps finally, is being acknowledged by those in dire need of a few life lessons. For the past several decades,

Arcade has devoted her work to sexuality, censorship, "cultural amnesia" (her words), and the homogenization of individuality, especially in New York City. If it takes a few roles portraying someone other than her own characters to get more people listening, it will only raise her own currency in a society with rapidly diminishing cultural resources.



Mink Stole in *The Mutilated*. Photo Scott Wynn





Penny Arcade in *The Mutilated*. Photo Scott Wynn.



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The cast of Tennessee Williams *The Mutilated* at New Ohio Theater in New York.