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Smoke gets in your aisles

Like 'Jersey Boys,' some plays just need their cigarettes

July 15, 2008 **BY HEDY WEISS** Theater
Critic/hweiss@suntimes.com

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Playwright Tennessee Williams had his vices. He smoked, he drank and he downed no small number of pharmaceuticals. He also wrote plays capable of burning a hole in your heart -- plays filled with characters who frequently engaged in similarly bad habits that made them all the more real, and all the more true to the time and place in which they lived. He was a writer who made it clear that the theater was an ideal place for both transgression and redemption.

Just think about Tom Wingfield, that dream-strangled young poet, standing on the fire escape of his family's apartment in "The Glass Menagerie," and setting the play into motion as he lights a cigarette and riffs on the nature of illusion. Or conjure up Big Daddy, in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," who lives up to his role as the relentlessly controlling patriarch by puffing on that emblematic symbol of power, the fat cigar. Or imagine the men who gather for a poker game in Stanley Kowalski's apartment on a sultry New Orleans night in "A Streetcar Named Desire." Would you really want to see them sipping Fiji Water instead of beer, and applying nicotine patches to their upper arms?

And then there is Violet Weston, the principal character in Tracy Letts' recent Pulitzer- and Tony Award-winning play "August: Osage County." She may be suffering from mouth cancer but she is "unreformed." And actress Deanna Dunagan spent a yearlong run puffing away (as minimally as possible) on herbal cigarettes to capture the full self-destructiveness of her character.

Would live theater be the same without the subtle choreography involved in lighting up and breathing in what everyone knows is toxic? That is a recent question raised by the city's ban on smoking, which includes Chicago stages, that went into full force following complaints lodged by a "Jersey Boys" theatergoer. And it's a question now being pondered by playwrights, directors and actors.

For example, Shattered Globe Theatre will be remounting its superb production of Williams' play "Suddenly, Last Summer" July 30 through Aug. 3 at Theater on the Lake. Smoking is specifically written into several scenes.

"We do a great many plays from the 1950s," said Shattered Globe's artistic director, Kevin Hagan. "And we have been thinking about this issue since the ban on smoking in a public place began. Because we perform in a very intimate space [the Victory Gardens Greenhouse studio], we are hypersensitive to this matter and try to create the least smoke possible. There is a scene in 'Suddenly, Last Summer' where the wealthy Mrs. Venable quite seductively asks a young doctor to light her cigarette, so we found the actor intention that would make it possible for her to light it, but then immediately snub it out. Of course smoking was certainly an aspect of American life at the time of this play, so we want to be honest without being gratuitous."

Two productions involving smoking also are planned for Shattered Globe's 2008-09 season -- "The Glass Menagerie" and Sam Shepard's "Buried Child."

"In 'Glass Menagerie,' Tom's mother even chides him about smoking too much," Hagan noted. "In 'Buried Child,' the patriarch, Dodge, is a total chain smoker, and I've already talked to Maury Cooper, the actor playing him, about letting the behavior be established. But since his character is in la-la land anyway, we'll also just let the cigarettes get quickly stubbed out."

As for using herbal "substitutes," Shattered Globe actress Linda Reiter, a moderate smoker in real life, who has taken some crucial stage puffs in "Suddenly, Last Summer" and Edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?," confessed, "Those things are weird and nasty, and their smell is so pungent they

tend to be more offensive than the real thing."

Sometimes a playwright will solve the whole smoking issue before it ever arises.

The new musical "Million Dollar Quartet" (at the Goodman's Owen Theatre, Sept. 26-Oct. 26) is about a legendary 1956 recording session that included Johnny Cash. According to its director, Eric Schaeffer (of Virginia's Signature Theatre), when Cash reaches for his cigarette pack, record producer Sam Phillips says flatly, "There's no smoking in the studio."

"But as a director I've never excised smoking from a production," said Schaeffer, who notes that Virginia municipalities have yet to enact any anti-smoking ordinances. "Earlier this year, in our revival of 'The Visit,' the Kander and Ebb musical, Chita Rivera lit up a cigar three times, and kept it lit throughout an entire song. We do post signs in the lobby warning of smoke, and we call subscribers and tell them if we know it will be in any significant quantity."

At Chicago's TimeLine Theatre, where the musical "Fiorello!" (about Depression-era New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia) continues to sell out, the mayor himself, a well-known cigar-smoker, never lights up, and his political operative Ben Marino (played by Terry Hamilton) often chews on an unlit stogie.

"We decided to make it just a prop long before the controversy because our space is far too small for heavy cigar smoke," said the theater's press director, Lara Goetsch.

In certain cases you might expect a whole lot of lighting up, yet there is none to be found. Consider Keith Huff's recent hit play "A Steady Rain," about Chicago cops in a period of extreme stress.

"I would never write smoking into a play because I've seen too many cancer deaths in my family," said Huff.

For actor-director David Cromer ("Our Town," "Adding Machine"), it all comes down to a matter of censorship.

"I think the whole 'Jersey Boys' furor is a horrible overreaction," Cromer said. "I'm an ex-smoker and I've walked around the stage on many occasions -- as when I played the physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer -- with a lit but unsmoked cigarette. And there are plays I've directed, in which smoking has been crucial. I think this whole controversy will come down to someone getting really pissed off enough to force the issue and go to court on censorship grounds."

A recent statement from the Dramatists Guild of America, the advocacy organization for playwrights, outlined what might well be the legal argument, explaining: "States can claim a legitimate public interest in protecting its citizens from exposure to known carcinogens. As a result, smoking bans are constitutional when limited to regulating such behavior in public places, like restaurants and office buildings. But when a government goes beyond regulating behavior to regulating the content of expressive speech, such laws are subject to the much stricter scrutiny required of limitations on the First Amendment."

NOTE: Last week Ald. Brendan Reilly (42nd) filed a motion in the City Council to exempt live theater from Chicago's smoking ban. It will come up, at the earliest, at the July 28 meeting of the Special Events and Cultural Affairs committee, but might be delayed for a month because, as Reilly noted, he also is working on lining up bipartisan sponsorship in the state Legislature.

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From The Rest of the Story: Tobacco News Analysis and C

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cranky wrote:

Ridiculous legislation. The anti-smoking laws were not intended to limit artistic expression on the stage. Give us a break! The only reason Mayor Daley didn't say it was ridiculous was because he's mad at the Alderman for fighting him on the Children's museum.

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