



With Arms Wide Open

Eugene Yiga caught up with Cape Town actor and designer Marcel Meyer, who spoke about working with his partner, staging "queer aesthetic" productions, and preparing for one of his most erotic roles to date.

PAST

What sparked your decision to go into a career in the arts?

From my first visit to the circus when I was three, I've wanted to be in the performing arts. I initially wanted to be a clown, but by the age of about six or seven, the passion for being a clown morphed into an ambition to be a Shakespearean actor.

If you had to choose between being an actor and being a designer, which would you say is your 'true love'?

Both disciplines are creatively satisfying in very different ways – and I'm very blessed to have the opportunity to work as both actor and designer. If I really had to choose, I suppose I would choose acting. Something very special happens between actors and an audience during a live performance.

How did you and Fred Abrahamse come together to create your production company?

I met Fred in 2004 when I played Don John for him in the Maynardville production of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. We became very good friends and discovered we had very similar ideas about theatre and decided to collaborate and form our own production company.

And what's it like working with your partner and at times being under his direction on stage?

Any actor who has worked with Fred will tell you he is the definitive "actor's director". He has a very gentle way of working with actors, creating a safe space to work in, while always challenging his actors for ultimate truth in their performance.

Would you say that it's more or less challenging to have a professional and personal relationship at the same time?

It's great to work with a creative partner who is totally in sync with you.

You've staged a lot of gay-themed plays and musicals over the years, including your reinterpretation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in 2011 and your recent European debut with an all-male production of *Richard III*. Is there a common thread you're aiming for as a production company?

A principal aim of our company is to keep the classics alive in innovative interpretations, which is why we are drawn to playwrights like William Shakespeare, Tennessee Williams, Noël Coward and Stephen Sondheim. Thematically the plays we produce often deal with "the other". Our work always includes a strong design and visual element and, for want of a better term, our work can be defined as having a "queer aesthetic".



And do you have any plans to go back to the more light-hearted productions like *Bangbroek Mountain* and *In Briefs*?

Both Fred and I love comedy and would love to do more. Our most recent comedy was the 2012/13 staging of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in collaboration with Artscape, the National Arts Festival and Maynardville. We are also looking at potential revivals of both *Bangbroek Mountain* and *In Briefs*. We are also very keen to produce another one of Sir Noël Coward's comedies.

PRESENT

Following the success of *Kingdom of Earth* in 2012 and *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* in 2013, *One Arm* is your third Tennessee Williams play in the last three years. What draws you to his work?

Tennessee Williams is, in my opinion, after Shakespeare the greatest poet for the stage. Williams has the incredible ability to present the human condition, in all its complexity, in the most visceral yet poetic and profound way. Respected British playwright, Peter Shaffer, said of Tennessee Williams: "He was a born dramatist as few are ever born. Whatever he put on paper, superb or superfluous, glorious or gaudy, could not fail to be electrifyingly actable. He could not write a dull scene... Tennessee Williams will live as long as drama itself." I couldn't agree more!

Your international debut at the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theatre Festival in 2012 was enthusiastically received. Why do you think audiences have responded so well to your productions?

Because both *Kingdom of Earth* and *Milk Train* are brilliant plays – but had sadly been neglected. So when audiences finally got the chance to see these rarely produced plays, it just re-affirmed Williams's genius.

In 1972 Williams wrote that he conceived *One Arm* "as a dark poem whose theme is the prevalence of mutilations among us all, and their possible transcendence". What drew you to *One Arm* specifically?

In his short stories Williams could explore subjects that might have been considered too controversial to present on stage. In *One Arm* Williams created a vivid picture of the homosexual underworld during the late 1930s early 1940s. *One Arm* is Williams at his most hard-hitting and direct as he explores his classic theme of sex as salvation. In *One Arm*, as in all Williams's work, the profane and the profound become inseparable, quasi-pornographic eroticism and deep spiritual reflection co-exist within the same sentence creating drama that simultaneously titillates and enlightens an audience.

The Tennessee Williams Estate granted you special permission to adapt this short story for the stage. How have you done so?

Tennessee Williams wrote every day of his life – whether it was a poem, a short story, a one-act play or a full length drama. Williams also continually re-worked ideas. Many of his plays started out as short stories. Both *Kingdom of Earth*





and *Milk Train* grew out of earlier short stories as did *The Glass Menagerie*, *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof*, *The Night of the Iguana* and many more. Williams himself adapted *One Arm* for the screen, although the film was never produced. We have adapted *One Arm* as a tour-de-force for two actors. The premise for our adaptation focuses on the central relationship between Oliver and a young Lutheran Minister who visits him on death-row. As Oliver recounts his life story the young priest voyeuristically images himself as the various characters in Oliver's life.

You're playing the role of boxer turned hustler Oliver Winemiller. How do you relate to the character you're playing? And how are you preparing for the role?

Often in Williams, physical mutilation is a metaphor for emotional disfigurement and that is very much the case with Oliver. With the loss of his right arm Oliver loses his sense of self and sets out "looking for destruction". He plummets to the depths of despair and self-loathing, but he has this wonderful arch when, by the end of the play, he realises that his life had meaning after all and he feels this bizarre spiritual connection with all his former clients. In terms of prep for the role, when you work with a writer as brilliant as Williams, you just need to really know and trust the text – because Williams gives you everything in the text. There is the physical prep though: training to convincingly look like a former light-heavyweight boxing champion. So there will be some blood, sweat and tears in the gym before we open!



You'll be starring opposite Nicholas Dallas, as you did in your other two Tennessee Williams plays. What's it been like working together over the years?

Nicholas is a wonderfully dedicated, intense, committed and generous actor and working with him is always a pleasure.

FUTURE

What's next for you as a production company?

Immediately after *One Arm* closes we leave for the USA to present a production of Yukio Mishima's modern Noh play, *The Lady Aoi*, at the 9th Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theatre Festival. We then stay on in the States to direct and design a new American production of Tennessee Williams's *Stairs to The Roof* in St. Louis. This is quite a historic occasion as it will be the inaugural production of the newly restored original theatre where Tennessee Williams worked as a young man. On the strength of our previous Williams productions in the USA we were invited to create this landmark revival of this early Williams classic.

And are any dream roles you'd most like to play?

Tennessee Williams dream roles: Val Xavier in *Orpheus Descending*, Chance Wayne in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Brick Pollitt in *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof* and John Buchanan in *Summer and Smoke*; Shakespearean dream roles: *Richard II*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Brutus* and *Cleopatra*; Musical Theatre Dream roles: Franklin Shepard in Sondheim's *Merrily We Roll Along*, Leo Frank in *Parade* and Billy Bigelow in *Carousel*. © *One Arm* (PG-13) is at Cape Town's Artscape Theatre from 28 August to 14 September. Book at Computicket.