

Summer and Smoke

Director's Concept
Monty Downs

Summer and Smoke is a beautifully written piece about a mid-20-year-old woman, Alma, living in a small southern US town and her desire to have something more in 1916. She is the daughter of a minister and living under his strong religious hand when John Buchanan, Jr. returns after having finished medical school to take over his aging father's practice. He ignites feelings within Alma that can only be satisfied when something else must give way.

While this is not one of Tennessee Williams wider known pieces, it is still a masterpiece. The dialogue has a wonderful juxtaposition between the natural feel of the local southerners and Alma's attempt of a more refined sound. The story has fantastic arcs for many characters and brilliant 3-dimensional depth to all.



Mr. Williams gives us some magnificent hints in his notes preceding the play. He first talks about the importance of the sky by writing, "...the sky should be a pure and intense blue (like the sky of Italy as it is so faithfully represented in the religious paintings of the Renaissance) ..."

I found this image of Giovanni Bellini's *Madonna and Child* on Britannica.com. We can see what Mr. Williams meant by the color of the sky contrasted with the brilliance of color in the Madonna's clothing and both subjects' skin tones (the contrast is also discussed in his notes). In the picture we feel the calm before the storm that is to be the life and death of Jesus Christ, after which nothing will be the same.

I believe this represents so well the contrast between what is expected of Alma and what she wants. She is expected to live within the restrictions of her older, conservative father at a time when the world is changing so rapidly in 1916 – women's rights, worker's rights, and the beginning of a sexual revolution, all which will last for decades to follow. And John, Jr. is that catalyst that will change her life forever. The painting also gives us splendid guidance on the rest of the technical, acting, directorial aspects of *Summer and Smoke*.

I want our production to be faithful to Tennessee Williams' notes. In the set design I want to see a marvelous sky with fragmented scenery in front of it. I want to see the costumes contrast with that sky and yet stay loyal to the period. Lighting will be very important to this production as it will help define location and blend the settings and characters into the beautiful paintings Mr. Williams describes. Lighting may want to consider projections of stars since Mr. Williams also talks about those being present in the night sky. The properties for the show will need to be specifically chosen not only for economy of space and time but also for meaning to the scene. And sound will need to find ways to add to the paintings of each scene. When we look at the Bellini painting, we each hear sounds that feel appropriate for the scene.

Hopefully, as a team we can make a faithful 3-dimensional, living painting of Tennessee Williams' *Summer and Smoke* to present to our patrons.