

Tennessee Williams Festival

Groundwork laid for grand event

Panny Mayfield
Special to The Press Register

CLARKSDALE - Historians agree that grande events are like cognac, cheese, and balsamic vinegar – are enriched by aging and the magic combination of exciting ingredients.

An informal lunch in Clarksdale between representatives of Southwest Tennessee and Coahoma Community College this past weekend offered the promise of cultural greatness through a grande event.

Its centerpiece was Tennessee Williams and its location was the historic district where America's great playwright spent his childhood later recalled in his legendary Mississippi Delta plays.

Although Memphis playwright Levi Frazier, theatre director at Southwest Tennessee, formerly Shelby State, and CCC's Tennessee Williams Festival officials had talked earlier by phone, this was their first face-to-face meeting.

The connection began months earlier in a search to locate Greg Boyd, one of three National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant consultants who organized

the first Mississippi Delta Tennessee Williams Festival in 1992.

Two of the consultants: Dr. Ann Abadie, associate director of the Southern Studies Center at Ole Miss, and Williams scholar Dr. Kenneth Holditch of New Orleans, were well-known. But Boyd was no longer at Shelby State, the Memphis college now named Southwest Tennessee CC.

However, the Memphis administrative staff was polite, patient, stubborn and intrigued. Discovering that Boyd was deceased, they referred CCC to its present theatre director Levi Frazier.

It turns out Frazier was equally intrigued. An enthusiastic Tennessee Williams admirer, Frazier himself is a talented playwright encouraged and mentored by the innovative and renowned theatre director/ McArthur scholar Lee Breuer.

In 1992 when CCC's Williams Festival founder was invited to speak and show slides about Clarksdale's ties to Tennessee Williams at an International Williams Conference in Nantes, France, Frazier with his wife Deborah were in Paris



COURTESY PHOTO

Jen Waller (far right) director of the Coahoma County Higher Education Center and co-director of the Mississippi Delta Tennessee Williams Festival, welcomes (from left) Deborah Frazier, Levi Frazier Jr., and his sister Forestine Frazier, to a front porch in Clarksdale's historic district where playwright Tennessee Williams often visited as a child.

directing his own play encouraged by Breuer.

In 1993 when CCC's first festival showcased Emmy Award winner Ruby Dee performing as Amanda

Wingfield in scenes from *The Glass Menagerie* in the Pinnacle, Frazier showcased Dee and Ozzie Davis in Memphis on their same trip.

When *The Help's* movie actress Flo Roach was a featured speaker at CCC's Williams Festival in Whiteside Lecture Hall at CCC, she was an important

component with Frazier's theatrical pursuits in Memphis.

Not only were the handwriting and future connections between Southwest Tennessee and Coahoma Community College definitely on the wall, July's lunch cemented the bond.

Frazier, his wife Deborah, and his sister, Forestine Frazier broke bread and conversations with top CCC official Karen Done -- delegated by President Valmadge Towner -- and Coahoma Higher Education Center director and Tennessee Williams Festival co-director Jen Waller. They talked about coordinating programs for students between the colleges starting in October

Afterward they toured CCC's Cutrer Mansion, discussed its importance as a community- educational center and its future development as a Tennessee Williams Interpretive Center and the St. George's Episcopal Rectory Museum with docent Nancy Foley.

They will be back in town with theatre students in October.