

The Roman Spring of Tennessee Williams

In the 1950s Americans flocked to the ageless city, drawn by the promise of sun, sex, glamour, freedom and history. Cathy Lomax looks at the resulting transformations, disillusion and the drifting mind of artistic inspiration.

'Train now pulling out for the Italian border - I am on my way to Rome. The sun - glorious sun - is on my face, in my eyes, and I love it'

27 or 28 January 1948, *Tennessee Williams Notebooks*

'Life that winter in Rome: a golden dream, and I don't mean just Raffaello and the mimosa and the total freedom of life. Stop there: What I do mean is the total freedom of life and Raffaello and the mimosa, and the letto matrimoniale and the Frascati when morning work was over.'

*Tennessee Williams, Memoirs*¹

In early 1948, American playwright Tennessee Williams arrived in Rome in need of a change of scenery. Post-war Rome was nicknamed Hollywood on the Tiber and was populated by an endless supply of starry actors who were either working at Cinecittà or hanging out on the Via Veneto hoping to be photographed by the paparazzi. Alongside these were the writers, directors, producers, artists and numerous other non-native

Romans, drawn in by the heady glamour and favourable dollar to lire exchange rate,² of the born-again Eternal City. Williams thought that Rome was the new Parnassus, the Paris of its age, somewhere that he could work, somewhere that had the romance that America lacked. *'Rome spells peace, which is what I want above all. But it spells it without isolation, which I don't want. I want to have peace in the middle of many people, and here I find it.'*³

Williams spent a good chunk of his most prolific years in the city but work was not the city's only attraction. Like Mrs Stone, the ageing, Negroni drinking American, heroine of his novella *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone*, he also took an interest in the impoverished young men who hung around looking for rich Americans. Williams thought that Italians were 'raised without any of the puritanical reserves about sex' that other nations have, 'in Rome', he noted, 'you rarely see a young man on the street who does not have a slight erection.'⁴



Belladonna

Williams named Mrs Stone for her stony exterior; a protective shell that takes a while to crack. When she does finally give up on what other people think, she downs a tablet of belladonna⁵ and succumbs to Paolo, the handsome, possibly aristocratic, gigolo. With her newfound, away-from-home freedom she decides to update her appearance, 'she had her hair tinted a darker shade, almost auburn' and bought, 'gowns and jewellery that seemed inspired by the baroque facades of Bernini'.⁶ In the 1961 film of the novella she cuts her hair and buys new clothes that drape around her body like gowns on a classical statue. Another Rome-based film, *Roman Holiday* (William Wyler, 1953), features Audrey Hepburn's uptight Princess Ann set free in the city as the anonymous Anya Smith. Her first symbolic acts of freedom are to get her long princess hair, cut into a short elfin bob and to buy a pair of espadrilles. Rome offers the opportunity to change, adopt a new character and start again. The Time Out guide to Rome⁷ flags up Ava Gardner's favourite beauty salon *Femme Sistina* as part of its Rome on Film itinerary - the inference being that you too can become someone else. This focus on transformation initially seems at odds with Rome as the birthplace of Neo-realist cinema - a style built on its closeness to reality. The fiery Roman actress, Anna Magnani, who starred in one of the first Neo-realist films, *Rome Open City* (Rossellini, 1945), was greatly admired by Williams.⁸ Although not a Hollywood beauty Magnani had a remarkably expressive face and according to film critic Robin Wood, her persona as a great actress was 'built, not on transformation, but on emotional authenticity... [she] doesn't portray characters but expresses "genuine" emotions',⁹ representing 'what Hollywood had consistently failed to produce: "reality"'.¹⁰ The holidaying/ex-pat foreigners Karen Stone, Anya Smith, Ava Gardner and Tennessee Williams are it seems transforming to escape the fakeness of their lives and hoping to become part of Rome's realness.

The Real Mrs Stone

Although often seen as autobiographical (as were many of his characters¹¹) Mrs Stone was closely based on the American painter and writer Elizabeth Eyre de Lanux whom Williams met in Rome in 1949 when she was in her mid-fifties and having an affair with a young Italian writer called Paolo (a 'great beauty'¹²). Despite Williams' catty letter to a friend where he explained that she 'was a great beauty... I think that she has recently had her face lifted while she was mysteriously away...'¹³ Eyre de Lanux and Williams were good friends and in 1948 she started painting his portrait, making the following notes in her diary: "Tennessee - mix burnt sienna (light) with the mixture / one grey blue eye? a white scarf?" In 1950 *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone* was published, Eyre de Lanux destroyed the portrait and the friendship ended.

The film of *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone* (Jose Quintero, 1961) stars Vivien Leigh, fresh from a messy divorce¹⁴ from fellow actor Sir Laurence Olivier and some serious mental health issues. Some think that fading beauty Mrs Stone was written with Leigh in mind but even before the novella was published Williams imagined Greta Garbo¹⁵ as his on-screen Mrs Stone with De Sica, fresh from Neo-realist classic *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), as the film's director. By 1960 though Williams was adamant that Leigh was cast as he greatly admired her performance as Blanche in the film of his play *A Streetcar Named Desire*,¹⁶ a part she had won an Oscar for. Unlike Mrs Stone, Leigh was not afraid of looking her age, in her notes for playing Blanche she wrote, 'When I said the way I look - I meant right not good' and for Mrs Stone she wore added crows feet to age her beyond her years. Leigh's acting roles throughout the 1950s and 60s seemed to mirror her personal life and it was widely thought to be a 'brave part' for an ageing superstar actress to take on. The numerous scenes where she stares at her ageing but still delicate features in the mirror have a stark reality, and her treatment by the childish Paolo (played by Warren Beatty) who is happy to spend her money but is disgusted by being with her is heart-breaking. Critic Bosley Crowther wrote that, 'no one can sit on a banquet in a swank restaurant and watch a churlish lover walk away with another woman more knowingly and poignantly than she.'¹⁷

Drifting and Drugs

'Drove round Trastevere in a cab and was outrageously over charged. Walked feebly around the Borghese gardens and when the sun had lost its vigor, as I had mine, returned to the Albergo Ambasciatori, removed my clothes & collapsed onto my bed again. Ah, me. Of what interest is all this! Only for a brief interval do I live like a light bulb turned on for a few minutes'
Sunday 15 February 1948, *Tennessee Williams Notebooks*¹⁸

Mrs Stone, was 'leading an almost posthumous existence' in Rome, 'the most comfortable place to lead that kind of existence, perhaps because so much of it seemed to exist in the past.'¹⁹ She was able to insulate herself from her own past, adopt a stony exterior and drift. 'The drift was everything that you did without having a reason. But what reason was there for anything at all?'²⁰

Tennessee Williams in a 1948 letter to Carson McCullers said 'I cannot write very coherently about Rome as I love it so much.'²¹ This heady love for the city combined with a lack of cohesion and Williams' paranoia ('the fire is missing in almost everything I try to do now. Is it Italy? Is it age?'²²) eventually developed into a block, 'the ennui and the inertia continue and no work seems worth doing.'²³

Williams returned to Rome many times over many years, searching for the initial magic he had felt in the city. 'Maybe this time the old spell will work. It didn't earlier.'²⁴ His growing disappointment and reoccurring paranoia meant that the occasional popping of his favourite pill, the 'pinkie'²⁵ eventually spiralled into a serious addiction.

Freud said that 'Rome is not a place where people live, but a physical entity with a similarly long, rich past, in which nothing that ever took shape has passed away, and in which all previous phases of development exist beside the most recent.'²⁶ It is this weight of history that can ultimately stifle and confound the creative inhabitants of the city.

Caravaggio was run out of Rome, Fellini became introspective, Antonioni's ennui was reflected in his soulless protagonists, *The Great Beauty's*²⁷ Jep Gambardella wasted his life, Pasolini's beautifully tortured output ended in his senseless murder on a beach and Mrs Stone drifted.

Only small sections of *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone* were filmed in the city, instead art director Roger Furse recreated Rome at Elstree Studios on the outskirts of London.²⁸ It has been reported that this was because of Italian censors objecting to the content of the film²⁹ and indeed Williams had encountered problems in Rome because of the themes of the novella.³⁰ But just maybe a fake Rome was more forgiving. The actual Rome was and is somehow just too real and too cruel.

© Cathy Lomax / Arty



1. Tennessee Williams, *Memoirs*, (UK, W H Allen, 1976), page 144
2. 'This was soon after World War II, and the dollar was very high.' Tennessee Williams, *Memoirs*, (UK, W H Allen, 1976), page 142
3. Tennessee Williams, 'A Writer's Quest for a Parnassus' in *Where I Live: Selected Essays*, edited by Christine R Day & Bob Woods, (New York, New Directions, 1978), page 33
4. Tennessee Williams, *Memoirs*, (UK, W H Allen, 1976), page 141
5. Belladonna has a long history of use as a medicine, cosmetic, and poison. Drops prepared from the belladonna plant were used to dilate women's pupils, an effect considered to be attractive and seductive it is also used in herbal medicine as a pain reliever, muscle relaxer, and anti-inflammatory.
6. Tennessee Williams, *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone*, (UK, Vintage, 1999), page 92-3
7. Time Out Shortlist: Rome, (UK, Time Out Guides, Ltd, 2011), page 45
8. Magnani inspired Williams to write *The Rose Tattoo* and *Orpheus Descending* (she went on to star in the film versions of the plays: *The Rose Tattoo* (Daniel Mann, 1955) and *The Fugitive Kind* (Sidney Lumet, 1960) which was the name that *Orpheus Descending* was filmed as.
9. *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers - 3: Actors and Actresses*, (St. James Press, 1997)
10. *ibid*
11. 'the accepted line is that Williams always wrote about Williams' Hugo Vickers, *Vivien Leigh*, (UK, Pan Books, 1990), page 313
12. This was in a letter to James 'Jay' Laughlin written 3.6.49. *The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams, Volume II. 1945-1957*, editor Albert J Devlin, co-editor Nancy M Tischer, (New Directions, 2004), page 252
13. *ibid*
14. She had been reluctant to grant a divorce. In court she was cited by Olivier and admitted adultery with unnamed men in Ceylon, London, New York and elsewhere.
15. In a letter to his agent Audrey Wood dated April 1949, Williams says: 'It is a possible script for Garbo if she would be willing to play a woman of fifty still clinging to romance.' *The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams, Volume II. 1945-1957*, editor Albert J Devlin, co-editor Nancy M Tischer, (New Directions, 2004), page 243
16. *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Elia Kazan, 1951)
17. As reported in *Vivien Leigh: An Intimate Portrait*, Kendra Bean, (UK, Running Press, 2013), page 218
18. *Tennessee Williams Notebooks*, edited by Margaret Bradham Thornton, (USA, Yale University Press, 2006), page 475
19. Tennessee Williams, *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone*, (UK, Vintage, 1999), page 37
20. *ibid*, page 21
21. *The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams, Volume II. 1945-1957*, editor Albert J Devlin, co-editor Nancy M Tischer, (New Directions, 2004), page 160
22. *Tennessee Williams Notebooks*, edited by Margaret Bradham Thornton, (USA, Yale University Press, 2006), Entry for Friday 27 May 1949, page 501
23. *Tennessee Williams Notebooks*, edited by Margaret Bradham Thornton, (USA, Yale University Press, 2006), Entry for Thursday 2 August 1951, page 529
24. This was in a letter to Cheryl Crawford written 8.9.53. *The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams, Volume II. 1945-1957*, editor Albert J Devlin, co-editor Nancy M Tischer, (New Directions, 2004), page 402
25. 'Pinkie' was Williams' nickname for Seconal, a form of barbiturate.
26. Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930)
27. *The Great Beauty* (Paolo Sorrentino, 2013)
28. Hugo Vickers, *Vivien Leigh*, (UK, Pan Books, 1990), page 314
29. Anne Edwards, *Vivien Leigh: A Biography*, (UK, Taylor Trade Publishing, 1977), page 241
30. Williams refers to a problem with his country club membership because the upper class Romans objected to the novella. *The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams, Volume II. 1945-1957*, editor Albert J Devlin, co-editor Nancy M Tischer, (New Directions, 2004), page 448