

Theater Review

## Not Quite Laverne and Shirley

# ‘The Mutilated,’ by Tennessee Williams, at New Ohio Theater



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

Mink Stole, left, and Penny Arcade in "The Mutilated."

By [CHARLES ISHERWOOD](#)

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Celeste Delacroix Griffin is having a lousy day. True, she's been sprung from the slammer just in time for Christmas Eve, after that little shoplifting incident. But it's been a quick roll downhill from there for this seedy vagabond from "The Mutilated," a rarely seen [Tennessee Williams](#) comedy being boisterously revived at the [New Ohio Theater](#) in a production starring the quirky team of [Penny Arcade](#) and [Mink Stole](#).



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

Penny Arcade in “The Mutilated,” a 1966 play by Tennessee Williams.

After bailing out Celeste, her brother abandons her quickly and without a dime with this merry parting salvo: “I never want to see you again in my life, so bum your Christmas dinner off somebody else!” Celeste (Penny Arcade) doesn’t get a warmer welcome when she returns home to the Silver Dollar Hotel, whose caretaker informs her that her belongings have been confiscated for nonpayment of back rent.

Any chance that she can return to cadging from her erstwhile best friend, Trinket Dugan (Mink Stole), is quickly scuttled: “We can’t bury the hatchet,” Trinket shouts through the door to her room. “We hit each other too hard.”

These humiliations might batter a weaker spirit, but Celeste flicks them away like flies. “Give up is something I never even think of,” she muses, when told to do just that. “I’ll go on.” As portrayed with blazing vitality and a kind of childish glee by Penny Arcade, Celeste’s avowals are impossible to doubt. Armed with a canny resourcefulness — not to mention an ample bosom she aims at the world like guns defending a fortified bunker — Celeste will make her way forward as she always has, with a hearty laugh and no backward glances. If you’re stuck at the bottom of the barrel, her thinking might go, you may as well have a high old time rolling around in it.

There is something pleasingly fitting in having Williams’s exotically named, fringe-dwelling characters played by two performers who themselves have floridly funny names and who have made their careers largely on the outer margins of show business: Penny Arcade in the New York performance art scene, Mink Stole as a contract player in the informal movie studio run by the renegade [John Waters](#).

My fears that this would prove to be an unprofitable bit of stunt casting quickly evaporated once the director Cosmin Chivu’s production roared into life, with the happily tooting horns of a live Dixieland jazz band. Neither actress has much experience in traditional theater, but these two inhabit the scarred souls of their contrasting characters with an intuitive confidence, bringing these comic grotesques to scabrously funny life.

“The Mutilated” was widely reviled when it was first produced (unfathomably) on Broadway in 1966, along with Williams’s play “The Gnädiges Fräulein,” on a double bill called [“Slapstick Tragedy.”](#) It closed just seven performances after opening, one in a string of flops that marked the later, grim stages of Williams’s career.

Stylistically, Williams's expressionistic late plays have little in common with the fundamentally naturalistic dramas that made his reputation. But as this scrappy revival proves, when handled with funky exuberance, "The Mutilated" can cast a spell. Williams here treats in a burlesque manner some of the same themes — the sad, solitary nature of life, the cruelty that vulnerability can paradoxically inspire — that he explores in more delicate hues elsewhere.

The tattered wafer of plot concerns Celeste's dogged attempts to worm her way back into the good graces of the comfortably moneyed Trinket, on whose kindness she has depended for some time. Like an injured animal that has crawled into a dark hole to lick its wounds, Trinket has ensconced herself in a seedy hotel in New Orleans, consorting with the vulgar likes of Celeste, from a feeling of harrowing shame; she has never emotionally recovered from losing a breast to cancer. Although Celeste has sworn never to reveal this secret, she is not above using it to blackmail her friend.

Dressed in a flashy floral dress that suggests a sausage casing in a pattern by Arcimboldo, with her marcelled red hair beginning to come un-marcelled, Celeste sneaks around after Trinket like a mangy cat on the trail of a mouse. Although she maliciously threatens to broadcast her secret to the world and throws a cranky tantrum when all her efforts seem to be going nowhere, Celeste nevertheless possesses a big-hearted humanity that makes her impossible to dislike. Her appetites are what keep her going ("As long as you have longings, satisfaction is possible," she philosophizes), and Penny Arcade's big, bold performance radiates a lusty hunger that perfectly captures the character's essence.

Mink Stole is equally fine as the more genteel Trinket. Keeping her arm curled upward reflexively, to camouflage what she sees as the glaring fact of her "mutilation," Trinket treads gingerly through the seamy French Quarter streets, trailing an air of apology. Her frightened eyes search like floodlights for an answering compassion, but when, in desperation for company, she picks up a sailor, Trinket's fluttery attempts at drawing him out bring only humiliation. The actress invests this embattled, fragile woman with a moving dignity.

Although the supporting performances are uneven, the effect is negligible, since the war of wills between Trinket and Celeste dominates the play, which is performed on a colorfully skeletal set by Anka Lupes and features excellent jazz music by Jesse Selengut. (Williams wrote a series of crackpot pseudo-Christmas carols to fill in scene changes.)

There's never really any question as to who's going to come out on top in this battle of wills; Trinket is no match for the indomitable Celeste. In the desperate, darkling world of this macabre comedy, shame, betrayal and poverty can be endured. The unbearable wound — the one insupportable mutilation — is loneliness.

### **The Mutilated**

By Tennessee Williams; directed by Cosmin Chivu; lighting by Graham Kindred; sets by Anka Lupes; costumes by Angela Wendt; music by Jesse Selengut; movement by Lauren

Gaul; production stage manager, Laura Malseed. Presented by Beth Bartley Productions, Thomas Keith and the New Ohio Theater. At the New Ohio Theater, 154 Christopher Street, West Village, 888-596-1027, newohiotheatre.org. Through Dec. 1. Running time: 1 hour 30 minutes.

WITH: Penny Arcade (Celeste Delacroix Griffin), Mink Stole (Trinket Dugan), Niko Papastefanou (Henry/Bruno/Caroler), Tom Drummer (Bernie/Pious Queen), Warren Bub (Maxie/Bartender), Patrick Darwin Williams (Slim), Jonelle Rheubottom (Caroler/Bird Girl), Alec Funciello (Caroler/Cop/Shore Police), Randall Holloway and Alex Nicholson (Carolers/Gents), Jon Wayne Martin (Caroler/Drunk/Shore Police), Amanda Salazar (Caroler/Woman at the Bar), Ashley Burroughs (Caroler/Funeral Singer), Kennebrew Taylor (Caroler/Homeless Child) and Jesse Selengut (Band Leader/Jack in Black).

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