

By Kellie Mecleary, Artistic & Dramaturgy Senior Fellow

Something Like a Home

*“Mebbe I don’t know what love is.
Mebbe I’m expectin’ it t’be somethin’
it ain’t.”*

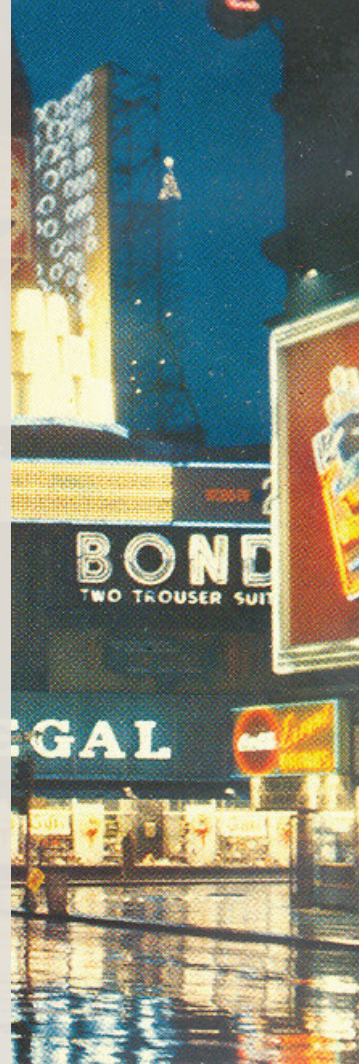
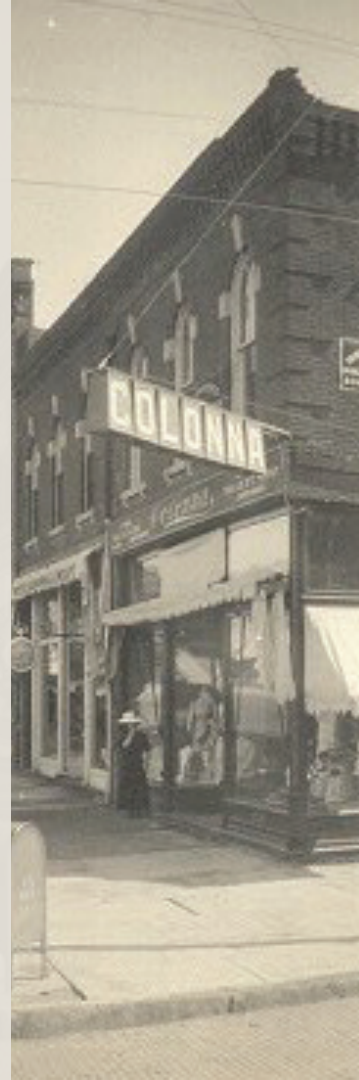
—Bus Stop

*“This nice well-bred next-door neighbor,
with the accent that belongs to no region
except the region of good manners, has
begun to uncover a world within a
world and it is not the world that his
welcome prepared you to meet...”*

—Tennessee Williams, “Williams about Inge: The Writing is Honest”

William Inge’s life was not a life he was prepared to live. Known as “Billy” as a kid, he was born on May 13, 1913 to Luther—a travelling salesman—and Maude Inge, in Independence, Kansas. The youngest of five, Billy was introverted and teased as a ‘mama’s boy’ when young. At age seven, he recited a poem for his classmates to great acclaim, which sparked a dream that would last into his adult life: to become a famous actor. Kansas, he knew, was not for him. He felt he had “nothing in common” with Kansas: it was “boring as hell” and he “wanted out,” as he told interviewer Digby Diehl. So he planned to move to New York—city of bright lights and big dreams.

Delayed by the economic realities of the 1930s, it was not until Inge took a job as a drama critic in St. Louis in 1943 that his career as a dramatist really began to take shape. Here, Inge met Tennessee Williams, and followed the playwright to Chicago one weekend to see the pre-Broadway “break-in run” of *The Glass Menagerie*. He recalls, “It was so beautiful when I saw it there...it was the finest thing I’d seen in the theatre in years. I went back to St. Louis and felt, ‘Well, I’ve got to write a play.’” Inge got to work directly on early drafts of plays that would later become his greatest hits. The first piece to garner the attention of Williams’ agent, Audrey Wood, was *Come Back, Little Sheba*. She set the play on the road to Broadway, which propelled Inge to move to New York and begin the successful, glamorous life he had been yearning for.



In the move East, Inge, now known as Bill, sought to leave his Midwestern past behind, but quickly realized the impossibility of that goal. In fact, it was Inge's Midwestern upbringing that defined him in New York. As he told Diehl, "It wasn't until I got to New York that I became a Kansan. Everyone there kept reminding me that they were Jewish or Irish, or whatever, so I kept reminding them that I was Midwestern. Before I knew it, I actually began to brag about being from Kansas! I discovered I had something unique, but it was the nature of New York that forced me to claim my past." The Midwest was one of the main ingredients for all of Inge's most successful plays; *Sheba*, *Picnic*, *Bus Stop*, and *Dark at the Top of the Stairs* were all produced in succession, all hits, and all set in the Midwest.

Along with stories, Inge brought to New York a Midwestern sensibility and perspective. The picture friends and biographers drew of Bill is that of someone sweet but shy. He opened up to few and spent a good deal of time alone. At parties, he was known to find a quiet corner and pass the evening sipping ginger ale and watching the other guests. There was much that many did not know about Bill. He had secrets, and felt the need to keep them—a habit that was also a product of his background. Inge was an alcoholic and a closeted homosexual, and was deeply ashamed to be so. Upon moving to New York, Inge's secrets did not disappear—nor did his shame diminish.

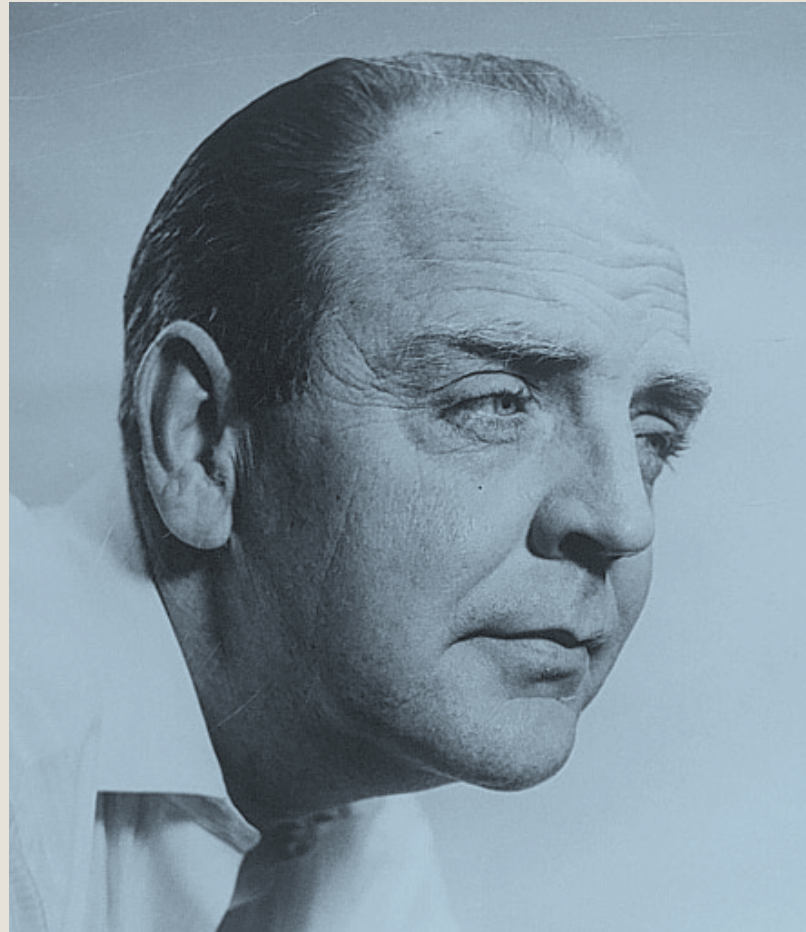
Further, the success Inge craved and found proved to be very different from what he thought it would be: the pressure to continue succeeding crippled him at times. And the home he hoped to find in New York proved elusive: the city too cramped, too stressful, too big. A "hostile place," as he put it. But he could not bring himself to go back to Kansas, even briefly. Twice he planned trips and began the trek west, only to turn back mid-journey. It was not until after his father died that he made it back to Kansas, to visit his ailing mother. He stayed for only 24 hours.

Amid all of this, Inge wrote *Bus Stop*, which opened on March 2, 1955, and ran for 478 performances—his third hit in a row. *Bus Stop*, a play filled with lonely, wandering souls who find momentary rest and warmth in a congenial Kansas diner, was born out of a short play written in St. Louis called *People in the Wind*.

For Inge, *Bus Stop* was an exploration of several different kinds of love. He countered the central romantic storyline of Bo and Cherie with other, less conventional relations between the professor and the young waitress, the bus driver and the diner proprietor, and the two cowboys. "They all kind of play into a pattern..." said Inge.

Around this time, Inge had several close friends. Tennessee Williams was both confidant and competitor—their relationship at times rocky but ultimately enduring. He was also getting to know the actress Barbara Baxley, who described Inge as a "kindred soul." Finally, there was the intermittent presence of eccentric George Faricy—although little is known about the man and their relationship.

While writing *Bus Stop*, Inge was effectively without a place he could call home: he could not go back to Kansas, and New York just wasn't right. Nor had he found a person with whom he could openly, comfortably spend the rest of his life. But with his friends he was finding a kind of love—not love that looked like Bo and Cherie's, but love, nonetheless. And perhaps, with that love, a kind of belonging. Love as a kind of home.



Inge's life didn't end well. He met a great deal of criticism and failure in the years that followed his 1950s hits. In 1965, he bought a house in the hills of LA, and as he met more and more rejection and disappointment, became more and more of a recluse—quitting prestigious teaching positions, ignoring friends, and rarely leaving his isolated home. Inge took his own life on June 10, 1973.

But his work lives on. Inge's most successful plays have been turned into films, are produced regularly in regional and local theaters, and frequently enjoy Broadway and Off-Broadway revivals. They deal, above all, with love and its necessity in life, inviting us to accept and understand the different forms love takes. An understanding and acceptance Inge could not find for himself, but invites us to witness in a little Kansas diner in the middle of a snowstorm.





A: THE OZARKS

"I lived there till the floods come, three years ago this spring and washed us all away."

In July of 1951, a five-day rainstorm inundated Kansas and Missouri, flooding millions upon millions of acres throughout the southern Midwest. Newspapermen found the big story in Kansas City, where stockyards disappeared and rising rivers washed away bridges and the trains they carried. But devastation reigned across the region and people getting by in the low-lying lands were among the hardest hit.

In *Bus Stop*, Cherie tells the story of how her family split apart when the flood-waters came to her hometown of River Gulch. A fictional place that is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere in the Ozarks, Inge's imagination made River Gulch a hometown in the soggy river bottom landscape of southern Missouri. It is a rural land of big families and broken dreams. If the flood washed away Cherie's home, it also gave her the chance to escape to the big city where she just might become a star.



B: JOPLIN

"Anyway, second prize was good enough to get me to Kanaz City I enter the contest there."

Amateur talent contests (like the one Cherie competed in) had their heyday in post-war America. *Amateur Night at the Apollo* and *Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts* were among the most famous, but small towns and cities throughout the country frequently hosted their own competitions. These events did not want for contestants as neighbors lined up for their chance at a big break. That well-known recording artists such as Tony Bennett and Rosemary Clooney made it big through such competitions only fueled the fire.

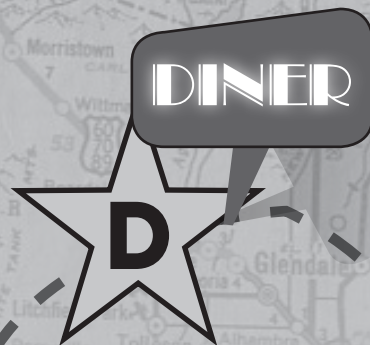


C: KANSAS CITY

"I jest came back from a rodeo where I won 'bout ev'ry prize there was."

In 1899, Kansas City hosted the first nationwide event for the sale and exhibition of livestock. In a city where, as Rodgers and Hammerstein would tell us, "everything's up to date," it didn't take long for this annual livestock fair to outgrow its origins and become the "American Royal," so named with a nod to England's Royal Agricultural Society. The fair added a horse show in 1907 and the rodeo arrived in 1949. To this day, more than 50,000 people gather to trade livestock, discover new agricultural techniques, and participate in competitions ranging from barrel racing to bronco busting.

But the American Royal offered more than just an opportunity to show off. Throughout the Twentieth Century, farmers and ranchers travelled to the fair where they could indeed get up to date on all the goings on in town. Making their first journey to Kansas City, Bo and Virgil would have hoped to display their skills, to learn new ones and—of course—to win prizes and admirers. More than that, they would have looked forward to meeting a community larger than the one they had back home.



D: TONGANOXIE

"This is just a country town."

We don't know much about the time Inge spent in Tonganoxie, but we do know that a legend has grown up around his visits to the town. Indeed, the Myers Hotel, at the corner of 3rd and Main, claims that it is that restaurant with a bus stop where Inge met his Grace. We do know that the town has a hotel, a police station, a few churches, a school where a girl like Elma can dream of the day that someone will see past her glasses, and a restaurant like Grace's where an independent woman can offer coffee and donuts to folks seeking shelter from a storm. A self-described "grass-widow," Grace wouldn't have been a total anomaly in the Midwest of the 1950s, but she certainly wouldn't have been the norm. She lives on her own, happily estranged from her husband, running a business that welcomes strangers to town. In the character of Grace, Inge combined the traditional archetype of the hard-working farmwife with the figure of the independent woman that started to penetrate American culture following the Second World War.

Inge would have met women like Grace in Tonganoxie, the town about 30 miles west of Kansas City where he is said to have found inspiration for his play. While teaching at Stephens College, Inge often rode the bus into town. These travels introduced him to many of the characters he later wrote into his play and it brought him to restaurants like Grace's, where he would have seen firsthand many of the scenarios he created.

SCENIC TRAVELS

By Susanna Gellert, Production Dramaturg

E: TOPEKA

“Didn’t you say there was a university in Topeka? ... Washburn University, of course! You know, it just occurs to me that I should stop there to check some references on a piece of research I’m engaged in.”

Growing up in the small town of Independence in the 1930s, William Inge looked forward to the day when he would go to the University of Kansas to study drama. For Inge, as for many looking to move beyond

small town life of the early Twentieth Century, college provided the bridge to the fulfillment of big ambitions. With his move to New York City and eventual success as a playwright, Inge would ultimately succeed in transforming his college dreams into grown-up reality. Before arriving in New York, however, he would spend some years fostering the dreams of others at Stephens University, a small women’s college in northern Missouri.

Unlike Dr. Lyman, Inge never thought himself a very good teacher even though he devoted himself to his students. What he and Lyman might have had in common, however, was the notion that their talents were being squandered in these small college towns.

F: WYOMING

“That’s all I ever get on my bus, drunks and hoodlums.”

During the Second World War, when the government rationed gasoline and manufacturers all but halted car production to supply the combat effort, inter-city bus travel in the USA hit its peak. The largest companies, Greyhound and Trailways, served diverse communities of riders, from troops making their way across the country to

independent travelers looking for work in growing cities. As the war and rationing ended, and people started buying cars and travelling by plane, buses found themselves an outmoded form of transportation. Riders now were those who couldn’t afford to travel by other means and so-called “oldsters” habituated to long-distance bus rides.

Carl’s bus would have made the journey from Kansas City to Montana on slow-moving state roads and local byways. Only after the passage of the Federal Highway Act of 1956, when the construction of the Interstate Highway system began, could buses travel on quick-paced roads. With the highways came sleek, new bus stops and futuristic buses whose speedy routes would have bypassed quiet diners like Grace’s.

G: TIMBER HILL, MT

“I got a herd a fine Hereford cattle and a dozen horses, and the finest sheep and hogs anywhere in the country.”

Four-lane highways, television reaching from coast to coast, phone lines crisscrossing the land, electric light warming town and country this was the landscape of modernity in America after the war. In a country that was flying headlong into the future, rural Montana would have looked for all the world like a place caught in time. It wasn’t until the 1970s that telephone service and power lines reached the state’s rural communities. In *Breaking Clean*, a memoir of growing up on a big sky ranch in the late ‘50s, Judy Blunt looks at a family photograph taken in 1958 and writes that “a stranger guessing the date of the photo would likely place it in the Great Depression rather than some 30 years later.”

Given what we know about Bo Decker—he’s got \$6,000 in the bank and a color TV—we can guess that his ranch on Timber Hill Mountain in Montana would have been somewhat more up to date than the one in that photograph. Young, ambitious, and in charge of his own place since the age of 10, Bo would have put his energy into growing his herd, expanding his acreage, and bolstering his reputation as a prime rancher. Still, however many tractors he owned and however new his John Deere might be, his life on the ranch would have been a hard and solitary one. With the nearest town over an hour away and a home full of cowboys and ranch hands, a bus trip to Kansas City would have seemed like a journey into a new world and another time.