



A Life of William Inge: The Strains of Triumph

By Ralph F. Voss

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In the spring of 1973 one of the country's most successful dramatists, William Inge, ran out of reasons to think he was any good. He went into his garage one night and shut the door, seated himself behind the wheel of his new car, and turned the key. By morning he was dead. "Death makes us all innocent," Inge had written, "and weaves all our private hurts and griefs and wrongs into the fabric of time, and makes them a part of eternity."

But William Inge had it made, or so it seemed in 1962. He had written an unprecedented string of Broadway hits: *Picnic*, *Bus Stop*, *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, and *Come Back, Little Sheba*. All four plays had become successful films featuring top Hollywood stars. Inge had received a Pulitzer Prize for *Picnic* and an Academy Award for his screenplay, *Splendor in the Grass*. Even his longtime friend and mentor, Tennessee Williams, was envious of his success.

Privately, Inge was miserable. His long struggle with alcoholism and profound shame over his homosexuality plagued him before, during, and after his decade of great success. As criticism of his work intensified, Inge responded with increasingly frantic attempts to please by "modernizing" his writing. He abandoned the small-town characters and settings he knew in favor of more lurid, urban subject matter. In the end, his characters lost their authentic voices, and neither critics nor audiences found his later work believable.

In this first book-length literary biography of Inge, Ralph Voss peels back the veneer of public success and lays bare the private pain and isolation of the man who was called America's first authentic midwestern playwright. He draws upon interviews, memoirs, and unpublished manuscripts, letters, and papers to show how Inge's unhappy life fueled the struggles his plays depict.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The troubled life of William Inge (1913-73), America's most celebrated playwright of the 1950s, is sympathetically examined in this biography by a fellow Kansan who teaches at the University of Alabama. In his four famous plays-- Come Back Little Sheba , Picnic (for which he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize), Bus Stop and The Dark at the Top of the Stairs (all of which were successfully filmed)--Inge explored themes of loneliness, frustration, loss, despair and the need for love within the family, themes rooted in his own unhappiness. Despite his many friendships, Inge was an angry, lonely man who struggled with homosexuality and alcoholism until his death by suicide. After an attack by Robert Brustein in Harper's in 1958, audiences, too, rejected his plays. As his career declined, he made desperate, unsuccessful attempts to restore his equilibrium--a flirtation with the occult and a half-hearted conversion to Catholicism. In the end, "Inge showed that rural Midwesterners could be as vulnerable to life's upsets as the most committed of city dwellers." Photos.

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Review

"A grand job, extremely readable. . . . Voss uses his sources brilliantly, weaving them through the narrative seamlessly."—**Jackson Bryer**, editor of *The Theatre We Worked For* "This book is a biographical work of art. It is insightful and compassionate yet revealing. It is a great tribute to a great talent."—**R. M. Seaton**, syndicated columnist

From the Back Cover

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