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## ***The Rose Tattoo*: Tennessee Williams's 'Love Play to the World' on Film**

**Mary F. Brewer**

Tennessee Williams's *The Rose Tattoo* premiered on December 29, 1950, in Chicago, and opened on Broadway on February 3, 1951. The Broadway production, directed by Daniel Mann, enjoyed a respectable run of 308 performances and won the 1951 Tony Award for Best Play. Both lead actors, Maureen Stapleton and Eli Wallach, were awarded the Tony for their performances as Serafina Delle Rose and Alvaro Mangiacavallo. The film producer Hal Wallis, who was in the audience on opening night in Chicago, stated in his autobiography that he knew at once that he had to buy it, feeling certain that *The Rose Tattoo* would be a "great success," because "[a]udiences would identify with its earthiness, its sexuality, its deeply felt emotions and naturalistic dialogue" (127).

The playwright, however, felt less enthusiastic about the production. *The Rose Tattoo* was not a financial success on Broadway, and Williams regarded it as one of his failures as a commercial playwright (Paller 109). In a 1955 interview published in *Theatre Arts*, he attributes its relative lack of success to Mann's direction, believing that "if [Elia] Kazan had staged *The Rose Tattoo*, it would have been the smash hit it just missed being" (qtd. in Waters 36). Kazan had directed the highly successful production of Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as well as the popular film version for Warner Brothers, in 1951. In a letter to his agent, Audrey Wood, in 1953, Williams admits writing *Rose Tattoo* with Kazan in mind, and he expresses his fear about the possibility of Mann, with whom he lacked "any" rapport, adapting the play to film (498). When Kazan was approached to direct, he rejected the offer. Consequently, despite Williams's reservations, Mann, noted for his work on stage and literary adaptations, was brought in as director. After the *Theatre Arts* interview was published, however, Williams attempted to distance himself from his earlier statement: in a

letter to the editor, he insists that it was “unfair and unkind” to suggest that he blamed the play’s relative lack of success on its direction, and he stated that “Mann did a beautiful job on the stage version . . . and a still more beautiful job on the film” (590). Given that Williams’s public statements and private correspondence offer conflicting views, it seems safe to assume that the playwright’s attitude toward Mann’s involvement was at least ambivalent.

Despite their undisputed superb performances, neither Stapleton nor Wallach appears in the film. The renowned Italian actress Anna Magnani plays Serafina on screen, while Burt Lancaster is cast as Alvaro. Magnani had been Williams’s first choice to play Serafina on stage; indeed, he wrote the part for her, but scheduling conflicts combined with her limited English at the time made it impossible. Lancaster replaced Wallach because the producers felt they needed a high-profile American actor to secure the US box office (Yacowar 25). The film, released by Paramount in 1955, like the play received mixed critical reviews, and yet it was nominated for several Oscars, including Best Picture, and earned awards for Art Direction and Cinematography.<sup>1</sup> The film also won the New York Critics Circle Award for Best Film of 1955. Helped by awards publicity, the strength of Magnani’s performance, Lancaster’s popular allure, and Williams’s growing eminence as a playwright, the film was a commercial hit. *Variety* listed it as the sixteenth highest grossing film of 1956, with box-office earnings of \$4,200,000 (“Top Film Grossers” 1).

*The Rose Tattoo* tells the story of a Sicilian-American woman, Serafina Delle Rose, the widow of Rosario Delle Rose, who after his death works as a seamstress in order to support herself and her teenaged daughter, Rosa. Grief over the loss of Rosario, whom Serafina idolized, precipitates her mental and physical decline. The plot follows Serafina’s awakening to the truth about her marriage; far from the ideal man she imagined, Rosario was in fact an adulterer. The “sexuality” that Wallis presumes would attract cinema viewers refers to Serafina’s passionate nature and the keen pleasure she takes from her physical

relationship with Rosario—a passion that is reawakened when she later meets another Sicilian immigrant, Alvaro Mangiacavallo.

Williams allows the widow a happy ending, for her eventual acceptance of Alvaro marks her transition to a more realistic view of men and love, and therefore the possibility of a more genuine union. For this reason, Ben Brantley classifies *The Rose Tattoo* as “singular in the Williams Canon: While its theme of the self-deluding woman versus the man who is Id incarnate abounds in the writer’s work, the clash typically ends in disaster.” But here, Williams suspends his “romantic fatalism, allowing “passion to redeem rather than destroy,” making *The Rose Tattoo* a “flip side of *Streetcar*” (C11).

Williams began writing his “love play to the world”, as he referred to *The Rose Tattoo* in his *Memoirs* (162), roughly three years after meeting Frank Merlo, his first-generation Sicilian lover, to whom the play is dedicated. He claimed that his inspirations came from Merlo’s world of Sicilian immigrants in New Orleans, as well as the “vital humanity and love of life expressed by Italian people” (qtd. in Donahue 51) that he encountered through his travels in Italy, but he sets his story in the more familiar territory of the Deep South, specifically a village on the Gulf Coast somewhere between New Orleans and Mobile, Alabama. In contrast to Williams’s other Southern plays, Jacob Adler argues that *The Rose Tattoo*’s Sicilian characters seem, on the surface, inconsistent with this setting, and yet, beneath “a tremendously foreign exterior, Serafina . . . has characteristics quite familiar to the South [or at least Williams’s version of it]: religion and superstition, honor and courage and awe of rank . . . and, when reality becomes unbearable, a tendency to violence or to an almost psychotic withdrawal” (365). Charles S. Watson also perceives the duality of spirituality and corruption in Serafina’s Sicilian immigrant culture to be in keeping with the playwright’s view of the South (175).<sup>2</sup>

Williams, with input from Hal Kanter, wrote the screenplay, which borrows many of the stage play's key tropes, but presents them with very distinct emphases. There are enough radical departures from the source text to render the film largely an independent work in narrative, visual, and generic terms. Judging from contemporary reviews of the stage production, *The Rose Tattoo* had the power both to shock and offend. To offer but one example from a review in the *New York Daily Mirror*, Robert Coleman condemns the play as “a study of sex-mad Sicilians” and concludes with this assessment:

In the last act . . . a lecher drops an unmentionable article on the stage. And there are episodes that can be construed as sacrilegious. Personally, we were revolted. We do not think these dubious elements add anything to a confused play. Rather, we believe they are going to antagonize decent playgoers (35–36).<sup>3</sup>

Mann's adaptation, however, studiously avoids antagonizing anyone. Williams's concerns that Mann would not be able to engender “the poetry and wildness” at the heart of his play were not unfounded (“Letter to Audrey Wood” 499).

This essay offers a focused consideration of the motivations for Mann's adaptation and foregrounds the ways that the film Hollywood-izes the characters and themes of Williams's *Rose Tattoo* in order to appeal more to a 1950s mass cinema audience. I explore how revisions to the play's sexual and religious narratives, character, imagery, and symbolism often create problems of meaning, introducing new inconsistencies and contradictions that are not present in the play. I hope to demonstrate why the screen version of *The Rose Tattoo* ultimately proves a less than satisfactory work, both aesthetically and in terms of its narrative content.

In what may be the film's finest review, *The New York Times*' Bosley Crowther wrote that “Miss Magnani sweeps most everything before her. And what she misses Mr. Lancaster

picks up.” Magnani’s performance is impressive, and it earned her the Academy Award for Best Actress in 1956. Crowther’s assessment of Lancaster is more surprising, however, as he appears woefully miscast. His comedic skills are used to good effect in a number of scenes, particularly in his encounter with the goat in Serafina’s yard. However, his looks are in stark contrast to those actors who comprise his Sicilian film family. In contrast to Wallach, whose facility with an Italian-American accent may be heard in the 1953 radio adaptation available as a sound archive, Lancaster’s speech patterns prove unconvincing as those of a first-generation Sicilian immigrant—even though most of the Italian that peppers the play’s dialogue is excluded from the film script, and especially when Lancaster’s performance is set against Magnani’s.<sup>4</sup>

Casting Magnani as Serafina was potentially an inspired choice. The *Times*’ (London) reviewer wrote:

The talents of Anna Magnani and Tennessee Williams are allied. Both are at home in extremes of emotional temperature. Both have a natural feeling for the colourful, the uninhibited, the unashamed, the one expressing herself through a selfless extravagance of voice and gesture, a devoted flinging of her entire tempestuous personality into the part, the other by a choice of themes and a use of dialogue which aim at breaking down the safe dramatic conventions (“Gaumont Cinema” n. pag.).

Moreover, the publicity surrounding Magnani’s personal life tallied closely with the unconventional behavior of Williams’s protagonist, at least as conceived for the stage. In his *Memoirs*, Williams describes Magnani as an eccentric character: “She was as unconventional a woman as I have known in or out of my professional world, and if you understand me at all, you must know that in this statement I am making my personal estimate of her honesty,

which I feel was complete. She never exhibited any lack of self-assurance, any timidity in her relations with that society outside of whose conventions she quite publicly existed” (162).

Magnani openly lived her life in a way that violated feminine sexual mores, especially as practiced in 1950s America. In an American context, “La Lupa,” as she was known in Italy, could be viewed as a radical protofeminist figure, but, as I discuss below, the film does not successfully integrate Magnani’s public image as female transgressor. Although Paramount marketed *The Rose Tattoo* as “the boldest story of love you’ve ever been permitted to see” (Geraghty 86), the way in which the screenplay refashions the stage play’s sexual narrative makes Magnani a problematic fit with Williams’s original, sexually adventurous, character. Given that Williams enjoyed a good deal of latitude in crafting the script, he shares accountability for this misfit with Mann as director: as Williams admitted, “Danny was willing to take a chance on the script submitted” (“Letter To the Editor” 590).

Of course, Magnani was renowned also for her tremendous acting skills, being celebrated primarily for her work in a number of neorealist films, such as Roberto Rossellini’s *Rome, Open City* (Minerva Film 1945). The postwar school of Italian neorealism was characterized by an explicit oppositional politics, especially a concern for the social problems of working-class and poor Italians. Classic neorealism of the 1940s aimed to show unvarnished social reality, and directors sought to embody this idea of authenticity via, for example, un-staged location shooting, improvisation, and mixed casts of professional and amateur performers.

Drawing upon Richard Dyer’s foundational research in *Stars* (1979) and *Heavenly Bodies* (1986), L. Bailey McDaniel explores how intertextuality is key to understanding the range of meanings that may attach to Magnani’s performance in *The Rose Tattoo*. She outlines how a 1950s American spectator might have created associations between Magnani as star performer, neorealist values, and Serafina: Magnani comes marked as “a verbal and

ideologically astute, rogue agent;” her textual celebrity encompasses above all “authenticity,” “reality,” and “non-glamour” (281).” Her alignment with the neorealist brand of authenticity means that the viewer must contend with interpretive uncertainties in the film, for instance, how to read its setting in a lower-class, Sicilian immigrant community—and the power of the Catholic Church within this community.

Leland Starnes posits that “by staging his dramas in a realm just so much apart from ‘average’ American life as the Deep South and by having his characters speak in the distinctive language of that realm apart, Williams succeeds in distancing his plays from the purely realistic mode to a degree sufficient to justify and disguise a certain characteristic exaggeration and distortion of reality” (94). These distortions, he contends, are “for the purposes of vivid theatrical examination of her [Serafina’s] being” (98). This is not to say that Williams is an apolitical writer, but his drama does not offer a left-leaning critique of *realpolitik*; rather, as Paul Hurley’s early study of social values in Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) reveals, Williams was interested in the “relationship between the individual and the group, the person and his [sic] society,” as well as “the ability of the individual to defend his [sic] personal values in the face of a society which demands adherence to group values” (126). Magnani’s presence, though, creates alternative ideological expectations rooted in the social concerns of immigrant communities and the social reform of economic and religious structures, and although this implied narrative is complemented by the look of the film, its plot lines develop in incompatible directions.

Although Williams wrote the role of Serafina with Magnani in mind, paradoxically, her close association with the neorealist school aligns oddly with the epic quality that Williams sought to invest in the character. In his preface to the play, Williams speaks of being haunted by a “truly awful sense of impermanence” and a “[h]orror of insincerity, of *not meaning*” (“Timeless World” 261). For Williams, the power of drama resides in its ability to

**Comment [JAD1]:** Robert – kill the sic here and elsewhere?

Older, gendered language sounds odd to our ears – but should we save “sic” for obvious ERRORS or also use for political incorrectness?



show a world where characters act as if they are not subject to the “the corrupting rush of time;” dramatic characters could perform, with sublime dignity, the “great magic trick of human existence” by snatching “the eternal out of the desperately fleeting” (“Timeless World” 262). More often than not, Magnani’s Serafina appears immured in the mundane. No cosmic overtones or sublime ideas are evoked when she brandishes the watch that she has bought for Rosa. On film, the symbol is reduced to a concrete time-keeping device that Serafina forgets to pass on because of her emotionally overwrought state of mind.

Rather than write plays revolving around quotidian anxieties, as Henry I. Schvey recognizes, Williams’s “poetics of tragedy” sought to imitate the elemental power of classical tragedy (74–75). Williams did not consider modern realism suited to communicating either the quintessence of human life or what made it of consequence. Compared to modern tragedy as conceived by Williams, “the characters and occurrences” typical of neorealist drama “become equally pointless, equally trivial, as corresponding meetings and happenings in life” (“Timeless World” 260). *The Rose Tattoo* on film is similarly impoverished not only because Magnani imports a sense of the authentic associated with modern realism, but also because the film suffers from wider generic problems.

Maurice Yarcowa points out that Mann was noted for his skill as a director of domestic realist dramas (3), as illustrated by films such as *Come Back Little Sheba* (Paramount, 1952) and *About Mrs. Leslie* (Paramount, 1954). The encounter between Serafina and Estelle, Rosario’s mistress, at the Mardi Gras Club shows how elements of *The Rose Tattoo* resemble the distinctly realist look and feel of Mann’s other films. When we watch Serafina verbally and physically abuse Estelle, the gritty tenor of this scene stands in stark contrast to Williams’s intensely vivid but decidedly non-realist play. Christine Geraghty observes that the location filming of Serafina’s house and its surroundings had the aim of

creating “an authentically realistic look” rather than confirming the work’s status as a filmed play (87). This realistic look was amplified by the choice to film in black and white.

The film was shot in the Florida Keys using VistaVision, a technique developed by Paramount in 1954 that offered a much higher-resolution wide-screen image. The resultant visual quality is largely dependent on the film being processed using Technicolor. *The Rose Tattoo* is one of the few VistaVision productions to be filmed in black and white; hence, stylistically, it does not benefit fully from this pioneering process. There are moments when the deeper lines and shadows created by black-and-white film meaningfully amplify the mood of a scene; when the priest and the women approach Serafina with the news of Rosario’s death, the more dramatic tones used to frame her convey the depth of her emotional devastation with heightened intensity. Overall, though, the lack of color impoverishes Mann’s *Rose Tattoo*.

Black-and-white film works against the way in which Williams adds depth in the play—that is, by using vibrant color to stress connections between character, theme, imagery, and environment. Williams’s “Production Notes” describe the interior of Serafina’s house “as colorful as a booth at a carnival”:

There are many religious articles and pictures of ruby and gilt, the brass cage of a gaudy parrot, . . . rose-patterned wallpaper and a rose-colored carpet; everything is exclamatory in its brightness like the projection of a woman’s heart passionately in love (269–70).

The film captures the cluttered atmospheres of the stage set, but without color, Serafina’s surroundings are denuded of their extravagant sensuousness. The striking effect of the color rose—which works so well in the stage version to convey Serafina’s excessive love through the symbol of the stained pink slip, or Estelle’s illicit passion as illustrated by the rose silk shirt—is significantly abridged in the film.

Theatre and film are frequently distinguished by virtue of the former being a medium in which language predominates, the latter a medium that privileges image. In Williams's *Rose Tattoo*, however, image vies with language, and sometimes outstrips it, as the primary mode of communicating meaning to the spectator. Williams maintained that "We all have in our conscious and unconscious minds a great vocabulary of images, and . . . all human communication is based on these images as are our dreams." He considered symbols, "when used respectfully," to be "the purest language of plays," able to replace "tedious exposition" with "an object or a gesture on the lighted stage" (qtd. in Jackson 26).

Tracy Letts, speaking about adapting his play *August: Osage County* to film (Smokehouse Pictures 2013), describes the biggest difficulty as "condensing the material" so that the story could be told with "a picture instead of words" (qtd. in Marrin). In contrast, because *The Rose Tattoo* already relies on images to impart mood, characters' states of mind, etc., it requires a less fundamental reworking for film than most stage plays. It seems odd, then, that the film substantially reduces instances of the play's most significant symbols—the rose, and the goat, as well as the Catholic iconography, all of which saturate Williams's stage set.

The rose is the key symbol of Serafina's hybrid sexual and religious passions. The paranormal imprint of the rose on Serafina's chest, which matches the tattoos worn by Rosario, Estelle, and Alvaro, represents on one level debased lust. At the same time, the rose symbolizes her spiritual love, her feelings both for Rosario and toward the divine. Jack Barbera explains the significance of the rose as a sign of the Catholic Madonna: "Mary is the Mystical Rose," and as such is celebrated in rose windows throughout cathedrals in Europe (148). Where the rose does appear as part of the film set—on the wallpaper and on Serafina's bathrobe—it does so in diminished form due to the grainy appearance of the film. Just as the

goat, symbol of earthy passion, is emasculated and turned into an object of humor, the rose loses many of the myriad religious and sexual connotations it bears on stage.

The streamlined symbolism, in conjunction with the use of black-and-white film, substantially diminishes Serafina's character, offering a muted version of Williams's obsessively passionate creation. In his stage directions, Williams offers the same precise, vivid color descriptions of costume as he does for the set. In Act 1, scene 1, the audience sees Serafina for the first time, seated in the parlor awaiting her husband Rosario's return. She is said to resemble "*a plump little Italian opera singer in the role of Madame Butterfly.*" She is "*sheathed in pale rose silk,*" wears "*dainty slippers with glittering buckles and French heels,*" and holds a yellow fan with a painted rose that matches the rose pinned in her black pompadour (Williams, *RT* 274).

In contrast, the first glimpse of Serafina on film shows her in the mundane surroundings of a small grocery store, wearing close-fitting but ordinary street dress. Here, she is not concerned about meeting her husband's conjugal needs, but rather with acquiring the best eggs to cook for his breakfast, just like the other village housewives by whom she is surrounded. Compared to her lush, sensual appearance on stage, Mann's Serafina is deprived of much of her sexual power. The absence of the rose—as signifier of carnal appetite—is another indicator of how the film downplays her active sexuality, although the opening scene gestures toward her procreative faculties when Magnani pats her stomach after refusing to discuss with the priest the secret of her pregnancy.

Magnani's unspectacular appearance limits the emotional range of Serafina's character and undercuts the extremity of her descent into depression over the loss of Rosario. At the beginning of Act 2, scene 1, she stands on her porch, "*barefooted, wearing a rayon slip*": "*Great shadows have appeared beneath her eyes; her face and throat gleam with sweat. There are dark stains of wine on the rayon slip*" (Williams, *RT* 337). Father De Leo

compares her slovenly state to her once almost ethereal beauty: “I remember you dressed in pale blue silk at Mass one Easter morning, yes, like a lady wearing a—piece of the—weather” (Williams, *RT* 341).

The film offers no glimpse of Serafina’s dazzling yet gentle style of femininity. The old adage about the body being the shell of the soul and the dress the husk of the shell, but the husk often revealing the nature of that soul aptly summarizes how costume signifies in Williams’s *Rose Tattoo*. For the spectator is meant to understand that Serafina embodies a tempestuous mix of strength, aggressiveness, immodesty, passion, and more stereotypical feminine manners of gentleness, tenderness, dependence, and submissiveness, the latter set of qualities symbolized by her well-groomed feminine appearance. Consequently, the film viewer enjoys a limited sense of character progression compared to the theatre spectator, for whom Serafina’s animalistic appearance represents an extreme psychological deterioration, represented by her altered performance of femininity. In addition, a more one-dimensional portrait of Serafina removes the basis of much of the play’s humor. As Roberta F. Weldon discusses, humor in the play “arises from the incompatibility of Serafina’s two natures: ‘una bestia, una bestia feroce!’ and a high-minded woman trying to live up to her own ideals” (73).

Williams immediately locates Serafina as central to the story, and Mann’s camerawork privileges Magnani’s performance throughout most of the film—with the notable exception of the opening scene. In place of Williams’s first scene, Mann substitutes an external scene that focuses on Rosario’s mistress Estelle Hohengarten. As the film opens, the camera pulls back from a close-up of a tattoo parlour. Two boys peer through its doors, and as Estelle exits, they ask her about the tattoo she got and where she had it put, to which she rather brazenly responds: “right over my heart.” Otherwise, she too is presented in a sexually muted form compared to her appearance in the stage version.

The first time the audience sees Estelle, Williams garbs her in a dress of Egyptian design, and her moral laxity is signalled by her bleached blonde hair, described as having “an unnatural gloss in the clear, greenish dusk” (Williams, *RT* 281). In the film, she wears a staid turtleneck sweater paired with a plain long skirt, and her appearance is remarkable mainly for its ordinariness, lacking any exotic qualities that could make her convincing as a “man-trap” for Serafina’s husband. Esther M. Jackson locates *The Rose Tattoo*’s appeal “in the romantic quality with which the playwright invested the setting” (200). Elements of domestic realism introduced by Mann no more accord with the romanticized aims of Williams’s drama than do the generic principles of neorealism.

The theatrical framework of Williams’s *Rose Tattoo* borrows from a range of genres and styles. Williams notes in his *Memoirs* how Irene Selznick rejected *The Rose Tattoo* because she thought “that it was material for an opera, not for a play” (161). Selznick recognised how the heightened physical, emotional, and material excess displayed on stage gestures toward grand operatic style. However, Serafina’s inordinate, flawed obsession with Rosario, along with the chorus of village women that frames the play, borrows from Greek tragedy. Alvaro’s clownishness and unpolished courtship add elements of bawdy comedy, whereas the dialogue, particularly the religious language, is marked by Williams’s unique form of poetic naturalism. The film lacks this generic complexity, offering instead a tangled blend of domestic realism punctuated with melodramatic clashes and ludicrous farce. It tends toward the oversimplification of the drama’s mixed-genre formula in an attempt to produce a more even storyline that would be accessible to viewers of mainstream films; and, yet, contemporary reviews call attention to the film’s numerous perplexities.

A review in the 1956 *Monthly Film Bulletin* complains that the film does not “add up to a satisfactory whole because the basis of the play seems false. At first one imagines that Williams intends a sardonic comment on the illusions of sexual passion as an exclusive

motive for living, and to reveal Serafina's 'religion' as a deception. Then, apparently, he shares precisely this illusion" (G.L. 30). While the reviewer faults the play for the same reasons, these contradictions stem largely from Mann's direction and James Wong Howe's cinematography, which I discuss later in more detail. With reference to Mann's "striving after realism," Edward Goring concludes that the film "boomerangs with strangely unrealistic effect." He dismisses it as lightweight fare: "A soul it seems is being bared before your eyes; then you notice that there is really very little to see. By the end of this film I had almost forgotten what he was trying to find" (n.pag.).

Goring measures the effectiveness of Mann's film against the success of the film version of *Streetcar*, which he styles as "the bell" rung by Williams "as he clanged his way through convention" (n. pag.). For Goring, *The Rose Tattoo*'s main shortfall seems to be its failure to portray honestly the psycho-sexual subject matter of Williams's play. R. Barton Palmer considers screen versions of Williams's plays in the late 1940s and '50s as among the first in "the development of an 'adult' form of cinematic entertainment" in America (209–10). He elucidates how Williams films differed from standard 1950s Hollywood material by being "unabashedly literary and unconcerned with glamour, glitz and action and no longer carried along by a simplistic and easily readable narrative; they were also striking in being less afraid of offending traditional pieties, even as they were not interested in the kind of obvious sexiness (oriented particularly around the arousing display of the female form) that Hollywood had been selling for years (123–24).

While Magnani's unembellished appearance departs from Hollywood's usual oversexualized representations of women, *The Rose Tattoo* stands out among the many screen adaptations of Williams's work in the 1950s and '60s mainly by virtue of not breaching social decorum. For example, in comparison to *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof* (MGM 1958) or *Suddenly Last Summer* (Columbia Pictures 1959), prime examples of Williams's adult genre

Comment [JAD2]: British spelling ok?

Comment [MB3]: British spelling is used in the original source.

films, *The Rose Tattoo* proves disappointingly tame. Williams was aware of the film's deficiencies: in a letter to Audrey Wood in 1956, he observes with some chagrin that "'Rose Tattoo' was nominated for almost every reward but for script."

I don't want that repeated. Craven submission to censorship . . . a deep-rooted fear of risking off-beat distinction, playing it dully safe, all conspired to turn a very hastily written but ~~highly~~-original and moving script into the closest possible approximation of a regular Hollywood property, raised above its level by one artist, Magnani. . . . When people mention the picture, nobody praises the film itself." (606)

The letter reveals how Williams faced pressure to depart from the original text. Shifts in social mores in 1950s America meant that the Motion Picture Production Code (Hays Code) was much looser than it had been in the preceding decade, but it was still a force that Hollywood could not ignore. Palmer and William Robert Bray record that the Production Code Administration (PCA), which enforced the Hays Code, considered *The Rose Tattoo* basically unacceptable because it seemed "absorbed from beginning to end with questions of love and gross sex"; added to this, the PCA objected to its representation of religion "in a rather ridiculous light" (109–10). According to the *New York Times*, Wallis asked Williams to "temper the play's sexual aspects and make a clear distinction between Roman Catholic beliefs and Serafina's superstitions." (TCM).

Mann attempts to exploit the censor's relative tolerance in 1955, but with limited success. The invented bedroom scene between Rosario and Serafina illustrates how the film often miscarries in its attempt to translate how, for Serafina, love is inseparable from sexual pleasure. Fully clothed, Serafina sits on the bed and clasps Rosario's body, apparently naked beneath the sheets. Palmer and Bray point out the radical aspects of this scene in terms of displaying "a woman in barely restrained heat" for "a thoroughly objectified male body"



(120), and yet the scene lacks an erotic quality. Rosario appears sullen and unresponsive to his wife, demonstrating neither physical nor emotive signs of arousal. There is certainly nothing in this scene that might “stimulate the lower and baser element” and thereby offend the censors (Leff and Simmons 284–85), but the result of this compliance is the creation of doubt in the viewer’s mind about a central premise of Serafina’s character—the validity of her claim to a “glorious” relationship with Rosario, especially as his mistress is positioned in the next room waiting to ask the unwitting Serafina to make a silk shirt for him.

Rosario’s appearance, itself, further works against the erotic overtones of the play, as explained by Williams in a 1951 interview in *Vogue*:

*The Rose Tattoo* is the Dionysian element in human life, its mystery, its beauty, its significance . . . . It may seem curious that I have chosen a woman to be the main protagonist of a play on such a theme. But in the blind and frenzied efforts of the widow, Serafina, to comprehend the mysteries of her dead husband, we sense and learn more about him that would have been possible through direct observation of the living man, the Dionysus himself.

Dionysus, being mystery, is never seen clearly (Arnott 34).

Thus, by stripping *The Rose Tattoo* of its erotic mystery, the film avoids directly challenging the Code’s main requirement to promote traditional values, but at the same time recasts Serafina’s lust for her husband as the kind of safe sex that may be contained within the state of marriage.

Serafina’s momentous decision to have sex with Alvaro in response to her husband’s infidelity would have directly contravened the Code’s general principle against a picture lowering the “moral standards of those who see it” by presenting “wrong-doing, evil, or sin” in a sympathetic manner (Leff and Simmons 284). In Act 3, Alvaro’s animalistic grin and Serafina’s erratic breathing and tremulous voice clearly preface their lovemaking. Serafina’s

line: “Now we can go on with our—conversation” (read sex) reinforces what she is about to do (Williams, *RT* 101). The screenplay relocates the dialogue about their “conversation,” making it the last line of the film, by which point it no longer carries the same double meaning as Williams’s line in the play, because the film allows for the possibility that the couple will go on to legitimize their relationship before consummation, underscored by the chorus of pious village women who publicly celebrate Serafina and Alvaro’s reconciliation.

The line is also flattened because, unlike in the play, it is not prefaced by a series of key passages that overtly point to the carnal attraction between the pair. In Act 2, scene 1, Alvaro openly confesses his sexual yearnings and frustrations, which he accentuates by touching his genitalia. In the film, his hand touches only the side of his thigh, and the gesture is further rendered sexually innocuous when Serafina’s reaction is changed from one of embarrassment to amusement, as she calmly goes on with her sewing (Williams, *RT* 367). Also, the film omits Alvaro’s references to masturbation in Act 3, scene 1—“I live with my hands in my pockets!” he tells Serafina (Williams, *RT* 385). Finally, all reference to the condom he carries, and the nonprocreative sex it implies (a sin according to Catholic doctrine), is cut from the film. The viewer sees no “small cellophane-wrapped disk” fall from Alvaro’s pocket; instead, Alvaro’s “poetry,” to which Serafina reacts angrily, is transformed into a clumsy kiss, during which her hair comb is knocked to the ground. By these omissions, the film precludes the emotional climax of the play, which ends with Serafina joyously announcing to Assunta that she feels on her breast “the burning again of the rose.” The burning sensation denotes Serafina’s reawakening to the world through sexual communion with Alvaro, which is symbolized by her new pregnancy: “two lives again, two!” (Williams, *RT* 414), she triumphantly declares.

Sylvia E. Bowman comments on the way that Serafina considers physical love to be more spiritual than religion (77). That the film treats sexuality with far less reverence as well

as candor than the play is illustrated most clearly in the farcical scene Mann creates when Alvaro returns to Serafina's house. We watch as he makes his way through the backyards of Serafina's neighbours, where he falls over fences, stumbles into chicken coops, accompanied by the sounds of barking dogs, and even has to dodge bullets fired at him by an irate neighbor. Whereas the critic Brooks Atkinson praised Wallach for his "light, buoyant style," which honored Alvaro's "humorous, naïve, frustrated" character, Lancaster's role was assessed by *Variety's* reviewer as "bordering on the absurd" ("Review"). When he finally arrives at Serafina's house, he is too drunk to perform sexually, and the film stresses how he passes out, alone, in the sewing room, while Serafina retreats to her bedroom. The film also tames Rosa's sexual nature. Although she displays her desire for Jack Hunter, it remains contained—like her mother's—within the approved state of marriage. In Williams's play, Rosa runs off to New Orleans to spend the night with her sailor, but in the film, she goes to be married.

By sanitizing the play's sexual themes, the film establishes a connection between sexual transgression and punishment—an idea that is absent from the play. In one invented scene, we witness a police chase that results in the adulterous Rosario's death when his truck, which he uses to smuggle drugs, comes off the road and explodes. Mann also repeats the usual melodramatic treatment of the "fallen woman," whose forbidden desire must be seen to be expressly punished. In the play, we mainly get the sense that Estelle suffers an emotional loss, and the only social consequence she experiences occurs when she dares to intrude upon Serafina's grief. Her attempt to view Rosario's body is repelled by the priest and the village women, who physically stop her from entering Serafina's house. However, the screenplay adds another scene of physical violence, in which Estelle is publicly exposed and punished for her adultery.

On stage, Serafina learns the truth about Rosario's unfaithfulness in a telephone call. In the film, this revelation occurs outside of the home. Alvaro accompanies Serafina to the dingy gambling and strip joint where Estelle works in order to confront her about rumors of the affair. Their encounter ends with a clichéd "cat fight," provoked by Estelle ripping open her blouse to display the rose tattoo on her chest that matches Rosario's. This disclosure provokes Serafina's frenzied attack, during which she slaps Estelle and beats her with a handbag. None of the club's male patrons come to Estelle's defence; instead they prevent her from effectively resisting Serafina's assault by holding her back. This scene illustrates how, as Palmer suggests, *The Rose Tattoo* "simplifies the intellectual scheme of Williams's play by melodramatizing all the dramatic encounters in the Hollywood fashion" (224), and it illustrates, too, the truth of Williams's misgivings about how playing it safe resulted in a mediocre film.

Just as the film waters down the transgressive force of the play's narrative of desire, it shies away from representing the more challenging aspects of Williams's treatment of God and religion. The script retains Williams's code word for sexual euphoria, "Glory," which Serafina uses to compare the unique physical qualities of her marriage to the conventional, passionless relationships endured by the other village women; there is one instance when the religious sense of the term is heightened by moving the scene in which Serafina describes the glory of her marriage from her front yard to the interior of the village church. Relocating the scene enables Mann to reveal Serafina's steady drift away from the Church and to subtly convey the peculiar aspects of her faith.

In the New Testament, glory or *gloria* refers to the splendor of God; therefore, when Serafina speaks the word in a house of God before the priest, no less than ten times, this signifies her idolatrous worship of Rosario, as well as the blasphemous way that she mixes manifestations of the holy and the profane. In addition to having Rosario cremated, we learn

that Serafina has violated other Catholic standards by refraining from attending Mass, and the film retains her plea to Father De Leo that he violate the confessional by telling her whether Rosario admitted sins of a sexual nature. In general, though, *The Rose Tattoo* on film is a far more conventional and decorous work concerning religion than Williams's play.

In the play, after Serafina learns of Rosario's betrayal, she angrily rejects her Catholic faith. "Moving with great violence, gasping and panting" (Williams, *RT* 395), she "rushes up to the Madonna and addresses her passionately with explosive gestures, leaning over so that her face is level with the statue's":

You hold in the cup of your hand this little house and you smash it! . . .  
because you have hate Serafina?—Serafina that *loved* you!—No, no, no, you  
don't speak! I don't believe in you, Lady! You're just a poor little doll with  
the paint peeling off, and now I blow out the light and I forget you the way  
you forget Serafina! [*She blows out the vigil light.*] (Williams, *RT* 395–96)

Rose De Angelis describes Serafina as a Christian-pagan. Citing sociological studies of the particular type of Catholicism practiced in Sicily, De Angelis explains Serafina's faith as a folk religion that blends "Christian and pre-Christian elements of animism, polytheism and sorcery along with the sacraments described by the Church" (n. pag.). The logic of Serafina's faith requires that one negotiate with God for certain bounties via a host of intermediaries, principally here the Virgin Mary, in exchange for practices and tokens of veneration; this, De Angelis argues, accounts for her outburst of anger toward the Madonna when her prayers go unanswered (n. pag.).

Williams's play clearly allows for a reading of Catholicism as a form of primitivism, as indicated also through the dramatic effects that surround Serafina's rejection of the Madonna, and concomitantly of God.

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*She gasps a little and backs away from the shrine, her eyes rolling apprehensively this way and that. The parrot squawks at her. The goat bleats. The night is full of sinister noises, harsh bird cries, the sudden flapping of wings in the cane-brake, a distant shriek of Negro [sic] laughter . . . Serafina catches her breath and moves as though for protection behind the dummy of the bride* (Williams, RT 396).

Here, nature seems invested with malevolent power, and her response to the cacophony of sound reveals Serafina's belief in the power of the supernatural. These uncanny sound effects also function to render the tenets of Serafina's Catholic faith indistinguishable from a highly imaginative superstition in dark, otherworldly powers. Such a view of Catholicism was anathema in terms of the Production Code, which was after all largely the product of the Catholic Church. The Code itself had been written in 1930 by a Catholic priest, Father Daniel Lord, and the PCA was run by a lay Catholic, Joseph I. Breen (Black, *Hollywood Censored* 1–2). The PCA worked in tandem with the Legion of Decency, a Catholic pressure group that would mount furious propaganda campaigns against any studio or cinema that dared to screen what it deemed immoral fare.

According to Gregory D. Black, adaptations of Williams's plays ranked among the most controversial material considered by the PCA, and served to illuminate the deepest divisions among the PCA, the Legion, and the wider Catholic community about what constituted suitable entertainment for adults in 1950s America (*Catholic Crusade* 105–6). The particular difficulties posed by *The Rose Tattoo* result from the way in which religion intersects with sexuality, something that was brilliantly captured in Nicholas Hytner's 2007 production of *The Rose Tattoo* at the National Theatre, London. Michael Billington's review praised Zoe Wanamaker for giving "us a woman in whom passion is always at war with

Catholicism and observation of the social niceties,” emphasised throughout by a stage design that prominently displayed a large statue of the Virgin Mary.

Considering Serafina’s irreverent war with Catholicism, the only way the filmmakers in the 1950s could negotiate the demands of the PCA that “ceremonies of any definite religion should be carefully and respectfully handled” (Leff and Simmons 285) was to remove many of its religious elements and/or to substantially refashion Serafina’s relationship to her Catholic faith. Accordingly, the film offers a streamlined narrative of religion, beginning with the reduction of religious articles. The Madonna’s shrine is foregrounded in the play; for example, Act 1, scene 6 opens with a spotlight on the shrine: the audience sees the “*starry blue robe of Our Lady above the flickering candle of the ruby glass cup* (Williams, *RT* 317). Where it appears in the film, this central religious image is downplayed—the shrine consists of a small, plain, unlit statue in an alcove placed to the side of Serafina’s living room, while the array of ruby and gilt religious pictures and icons mentioned in Williams’s production notes are absent.

In keeping with the producer’s demands, the film also downplays Serafina’s superstitions. Although she mentions the Strega, the witch figure does not feature prominently in the film. However, the rationale for lessening this character’s importance may also be due to the fact that in the play she is the principal voice of a crude and racist stereotype of Italian Americans, and it is to the film’s credit that it does not reproduce the Strega’s depiction of Italian-Americans as “wops.” Actions that underscore the quasi-Christian nature of Serafina’s faith are left out of the screenplay as well. When Jack swears to respect Rosa’s innocence he does so upon the “Blessed Blood of . . . Jesus” (Williams, *RT* 334)—but this reference, with its connotation of pagan blood oaths, is omitted from the film. Similarly, events that might call into question Catholic religious truths are cut. In Act 2, scene 1, Serafina calls upon the Madonna, but ironically a travelling salesman responds:

Oh, Lady, Lady, Lady, give me a sign!

[As if in mocking answer, a novelty salesman appears and approaches the porch . . . His entrance is accompanied by a brief, satiric strain of music.]

(Williams, *RT* 347)

Most important, though, is the omission of Serafina's outburst against the Madonna, and how this precipitates the consummation of her relationship with Alvaro that follows immediately upon her rejection of the Church. When Serafina extinguishes the vigil light it signifies that she will no longer be guided by the Church's moral compass; henceforth, she will be guided solely by the desire to please herself. In the film, Serafina never decisively throws off the constraints of a repressive Catholic morality. By not allowing her to rail against God, the Church or its saints, the screenplay eviscerates Williams' hotheaded, impious rebel.

Given the intersection of the religious and the sexual narrative strands, adulterating the story in this way alters how the viewer reads the film's ending. At the end of the play, Serafina has been liberated from the mental shackles of a primitive religious doctrine and empowered by surmounting her grief through the successful pursuit of Alvaro; thus, she can celebrate the conception of a child who religious and social convention would consider illegitimate. The film is more ambiguous about whether Serafina's end will be a happy one. Mann's representation of Serafina is more in line with 1950s Hollywood family melodrama, specifically those belonging to what Thomas Schatz terms the "widow-lover" category, typified by Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (Universal Pictures 1955). As defined by Schatz, widow-lover melodramas end with the central female character merely exchanging one trap for another. *The Rose Tattoo* allows the possibility that Serafina's life will remain determined by Alvaro. Despite his buffoonery, his propensity to tears, and his intention to trade his "love and affection" for a woman's "well-furnished house" and profitable little



business” earnings (Williams *RT* 365), Alvaro retains the privileges attendant on masculinity in the society of Sicilian-Americans. Consequently, his union with Serafina could result in her individual destiny being determined “by the values of her new lover,” another scenario common to Hollywood melodrama (Schatz 232–33). Conversely, the play does not allow for the possibility that Serafina is merely replacing one situation of domestic entrapment for another one; instead, she successfully defies both Church and patriarchy

Time has not been kind to Williams and Mann’s film. The subject matter, though radical in its day, appears dated now. The screenplay’s watered-down version of Serafina’s story would likely hold little appeal for most contemporary viewers. The sum total of changes contained in the screenplay, combined with Mann’s cinematic techniques, makes *The Rose Tattoo* a difficult film to watch today. It lacks the operatic intensity of emotion that lends the play so much of its dynamism, and it fails to justly represent either Serafina’s bacchanalian delight in sexual pleasure or the paganism and superstition of Sicilian Catholicism that inform her emotional landscape. By ineffectually addressing the key elements that might predominate in a stage production, Williams’s “love play to the world” on film offers a rather banal glimpse into the melodramatic and stereotyped domestic life of an Italian immigrant woman in the Deep South.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Rose Tattoo* was globally distributed by Paramount, with various release dates between 1956 and 1958. Since 2004, it has been available on DVD and may also be viewed via streaming on a range of devices.

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<sup>2</sup> See also King's "Tennessee Williams: A Southern Writer" for a discussion of the connection between character, plot and setting.

<sup>3</sup> Published February 5, 1951

<sup>4</sup> Wallach and Stapleton reprised their roles for a one-hour radio adaptation broadcast on NBC's "Best Plays." This recording is available via <https://archive.org/details/BestPlays1952-1953>.