

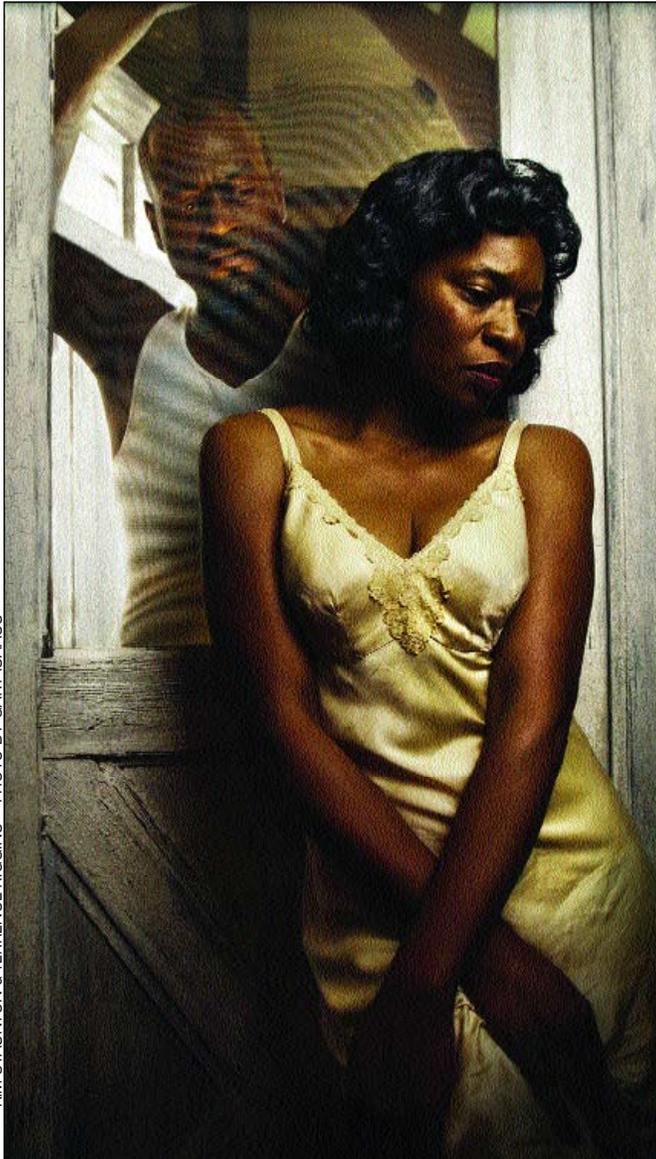


Denver Center
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KIM STALUNTON & TERENCE RIGGINS • PHOTO BY GARY ISAACS

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

Jan. 8 - Feb. 14 • The Space Theatre

The DuBois sisters are the last members of an impoverished Southern plantation family of Beaufort, South Carolina. Stella long ago left the home, Belle Rive, and married an Army Sargent, Stanley, who after World War II, reveals that he is less a leader of men and more of a lout. Stella is in a kind of narcotized bliss from their intense sexual relationship and happily serves him and his sweaty, swearing poker-playing friends. Into their small, heat-oppressed apartment in New Orleans comes Stella's sister Blanche, who claims to have taken a leave of absence from her school-teacher's position but actually is fleeing from her past. Putting on airs of refinement and Southern gentility, Blanche tries to impress her brother-in-law but, most of all, his gentle good-natured friend, Mitch. Blanche seeks safety and escape from reality, but the harshness and brutality of post World War II is too much for her spiritual, sensitive soul. As an emblem of a lost traditional South, she must be sacrificed for the pragmatic present.

All my life I have been haunted by the obsession that to desire a thing or to love a thing intensely is to place yourself in a vulnerable position, to be a possible if not a probable loser of what you want the most.

– Tennessee Williams

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Highlights in the LIFE of Tennessee WILLIAMS

1911 – Thomas Lanier Williams was born on March 26 in Columbia, Mississippi to Cornelius Coffin and Edwina Dakin Williams.

1911-1918 – Because his father was on the road as a traveling salesman, Tom and his sister Rose lived with their mother and her parents, the Reverend and Mrs. Walter Dakin, in the Episcopal rectories of various Southern towns. When he was five, Tom had diphtheria with complications that left him an invalid for two years.

1918 – The family moved to St. Louis, Missouri to live with his father who had been made branch manager of the International Shoe Co. Tom's father taunts and terrifies him, calling him "Miss Nancy."

1919-1929 – Tom writes various short stories and articles for school newspapers and magazines.

1929 – Tom enters the University of Missouri in September, joins a fraternity and receives honorable mention in a playwriting contest.

1932 – His father withdraws him from the university, presumably for failing ROTC. Tom goes to work for the International Shoe Co. and spends his nights writing.

1935 – Tom claims he has a heart attack and recuperates at his grandparents' home in Memphis.

1937 – His first full-length plays, *Candles to the Sun* and *The Fugitive Kind*, are produced by the amateur group, The Mummies, in St. Louis. The director, Willard Holland, becomes an influence on Tom. Tom transfers to the University of Iowa where he studies playwriting and production and graduates in 1938.

1939 – Tom lives briefly in several places in the Midwest, South and West, including the French Quarter in New Orleans. It may have been here that he had his first homosexual experiences. First use of the name "Tennessee" in a publication.

1940 – In January Tom moved to New York to enroll in a playwriting seminar taught by John Gassner at the New School for Social Research.

1943 – He returns to St. Louis where his sister Rose is institutionalized for schizophrenia and undergoes a prefrontal lobotomy. He works on a play called *The Gentleman Caller* that will become *The Glass Menagerie*. Tom accepts a job in

Hollywood as a script-writer for MGM but is fired in October.

1945 – He begins work on *A Streetcar Named Desire*, originally titled *The Poker Night*. *The Glass Menagerie* opens on Broadway and wins the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play.

1947 – *A Streetcar Named Desire* opens in New York starring Jessica Tandy, Marlon Brando, Karl Malden and Kim Stanley. It wins the Pulitzer Prize for Drama as well as the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, the Donaldson Award and the Sidney Howard Memorial Award. That same year, Tom meets Frank Merlo and begins a 14-year relationship.

1948 – *Summer and Smoke* opens in New York.

1951 – *The Rose Tattoo* opens in New York and wins a Tony award.

1955 – *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* opens in New York and wins the Pulitzer Prize, his second one.

1956 – The film *Baby Doll* is released. Tom's relationship with Frank Merlo is deteriorating and the playwright is close to a nervous breakdown.

1958-59 – The film version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* opens, starring Elizabeth Taylor and Paul Newman. *Sweet Bird of Youth* opens in New York.

1961 – *The Night of the Iguana* premieres and wins the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play.

1963 – Frank Merlo dies of cancer and Tom enters a lengthy period of depression.

1966-1974 – Production of various plays by Tom, including *Slapstick Tragedy*, *Kingdom of Earth*, *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*, *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale* and *Small Craft Warnings*.

1975 – Successful revivals of *Summer and Smoke*, *Sweet Bird of Youth* and *The Glass Menagerie* are mounted.

1979 – Tom is honored at the Kennedy Center by President Carter.

1981 – *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* opens. It is his last play to be produced in New York during his lifetime.

1983 – Tennessee (Tom) Williams dies at the Hotel Elysée in New York City, after choking on the cap from a medicine bottle. He is buried in St. Louis.

Tennessee New Orleans WILLIAMS'

New Orleans – land of dreams
You'll never miss them rice and beans
Way down south in New Orleans...
– Spencer Williams,
"Basin Street Blues."

New Orleans is a unique city in the United States and at its heart is the French Quarter. The most historic area in the city, it occupies the same six-by-13-block site laid out in 1722 as the original city of New Orleans and remains the only French Colonial and Spanish settlement in this country. The Quarter is the blending of people, architecture and the soul of the city that is home to about 4,000 artists, musicians and professionals of all ages. From the sounds of jazz floating on the sultry air down Bourbon Street to the sights of lush and serene hidden courtyards behind wrought iron gates, from the scents of magnolia and jasmine perfuming the air to the tastes of some of the world's finest restaurants, the city beckons to multitudes of tourists each year.

Tennessee (Tom) Williams left St. Louis and his oppressive family life in 1938 to travel and discover a sanctuary. He settled in New Orleans in the shabby but genteel French Quarter populated at the time by Italians, Sicilians and Blacks. He felt free in this city and was able to write and enjoy a leisurely existence. Living first in a rooming house at 722 Toulouse Street, he reveled in the Bohemian life style that was foreign to his Puritan Calvinistic upbringing. The Toulouse Street house was renovated in the 1970s but nothing was left to indicate Tennessee Williams had ever lived there.

Williams saw New Orleans as a "vagabond paradise. In New York eccentrics are ignored; in LA they're arrested, but in New Orleans [they're] allowed to develop their eccentricities into art."¹ In 1940, he rented an apartment on St. Peter Street, close to the St. Louis Cathedral with its statue of Christ that Blanche described as the "only clean thing in the Quarter." From his place Williams could hear the streetcar named Desire rumble on its tracks on Royal Street and the one named Cemeteries running along Canal Street. The St.

Peter Street building now bears a plaque identifying it as the spot where *A Streetcar Named Desire* was created.

In 1962 the playwright bought a house at 1014 Dumaine Street. From this domicile he could visit his favorite restaurants, Martis on Rampart Street, Galatoire's, Antoine's, Arnaud's and Maylies. He indulged in seafood so the restaurants catered to his whims.

The streetcar known as Desire discontinued its route in 1948 and was replaced with Bus #82. However, in 1997, the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority received a 1.9 million dollar federal grant to study the possibility of restoring streetcar service to the historic Desire line. The trolley would run through the French Quarter, Faubourg Marigny and Bywater, three of New Orleans' oldest neighborhoods.

New Orleans has a smell –
an intoxicating brew of rotting and
generating, a feeling of death and life
simultaneously occurring and
inextricably linked.

– Andrei Corescu.
Introduction to New Orleans Stories.

The Historical CONTEXT of A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

World War II was the last government program that really worked.
– George Will, columnist

Though the play takes place in the late 1940s, Robert Bray discusses the changes that had taken place in the South before that decade. In his essay, “*A Streetcar Named Desire: the Political and Historical Subtext*,” Bray focuses on the once-agrarian economy that was dramatically changed into an industrial one by the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Though the antebellum South was beautiful, Bray shows the futility of romanticizing cotton fields and cavaliers and how a plantation, in Blanche’s case, can carry a curse. Blanche, too dependent on the patriarchy in her life, was not prepared as a woman for a world of commerce; the old system may have been sensitive but certainly not practical. When Blanche moves into her sisters flat, she finds Stanley is a fan of Huey Long and his credo “Every man a King.” Long, a corrupt Louisiana governor, appealed to the downtrodden and working class and their hatred of the wealthy. When Stanley tells Stella he pulled her off the columns, he is showing contempt for the landed aristocracy. As Blanche parades her Southern manners and gentility before him and his poker-playing friends, she reminds them of the society they despise.

Thomas P. Adler in his book, *A Streetcar Named Desire: the Moth and the Lantern*, analyzes the mood of the 1940s as one of “fear, terror, uncertainty and violence.”¹ These feelings were aggravated by a fear of the atomic bomb unleashed by the United States, its possession by other countries and the bickering governments of nations. The Bomb had demonstrated death while the governments produced paranoia in the face of a Communist threat.

People also felt a sense of dislocation and alien-

ation caused by the shifts in social class and status that resulted from the war. Jobs and a quest for financial security split extended families, and feelings of unity were displaced by nostalgia for the stability of the past. Blanche is an example of this condition. The play also looks at returning soldiers/officers who had to be reintegrated into the work force and society. Many of them, like Stanley, faced jobs that were just as unrewarding and dehumanizing as the military they had left. Thus, if Stanley were not going to be the boss in his workplace, he would be king in his home.

Soldiers who wish to be a hero
Are practically zero;
But those who wish to be civilians,
Zooks, they run into the millions.
– Norman Rosten. *The Big Road*.

Themes of the PLAY

And so it was that I entered the
broken world
To trace the visionary company
of love, its voice
An instant in the wind (I know not
whither hurled)
But not for long to hold each
desperate choice.
– Hart Crane, *The Broken Tower*

Williams chose these lines as an epigraph to *Streetcar* and their appropriateness is apparent. Williams felt Blanche found herself in a “broken world” because the passage of time and social change meant that the present can never recapture the past. She is caught between a lost world she loved and a present she cannot cope with. Thus, in a world devoid of sensitivity, a person of her nature is battered down.

This was the playwright’s theme but there are other interpretations. The play demonstrates a need for compassion among human beings because there is a deficit of empathy for the desperate, the lonely and the misfits of the world. Blanche’s rejection of her young husband, Allan, is an example of such behavior and has caused her spiritual desolation, sexual longing and psychological conflict. Overwhelmed by feelings of guilt, she cannot recognize the good in her life. While some have too little guilt, Blanche has so much that she succumbs to despair and becomes unreachable.

Another theme explored is the ravages of time that destroy the physical and remind us of encroaching mortality. When Blanche looks in the mirror, she sees an image that repulses her so much that she slams down the mirror and cracks it. She is not strong enough to rely on her spiritual strengths and, in a world of Stanleys, appearances are all that count. Williams expressed this in an essay: “the continual rush of time, so violent that it appears to be screaming....deprives our actual lives of so much dignity and meaning....”¹

Vera Katz, drama director at Howard University, emphasizes the misunderstandings that permeate

the play. Blanche puts on fancy clothes and uppity airs while she puts down Stanley. He does not know of her tragic background and perceives her as part of the society he detests. Likewise, Blanche only knows Stanley was in the military and, like the audience, realizes little of his past. Stella tries to explain Blanche to her husband, but he is not listening; when she tries to express to Blanche her feelings for Stanley, Blanche can’t dismiss the hulking, bestial figure she first saw. Thus, the tragedy is allowed to happen “through their mistrust, fear, need for power and ignorance of each other’s heritage and ways.”²

To Williams, the only thing that rescues mankind is art and so Blanche escapes into illusions. Afraid of the Stanleys taking over the world, she creates her own myths and magic that she feels make life enduring. The problem with this “art” is that it becomes insufficient and the pain returns even more intensely.

As Williams himself remarked, *Streetcar* is finally about this “ravishment of the tender, the sensitive, the delicate by the savage and brutal forces of modern society.”³

ELIA KAZAN'S Notes

The late Elia Kazan, director of both the Broadway play and the movie of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, kept a notebook packed with thoughts on the play and its characters. Here are some of his insights.

“This is a poetic tragedy. We are shown the final dissolution of a person of worth who once had great potential and who, even as she goes down, has worth exceeding that of the healthy, coarse-grained figures who kill her....”

On Blanche: “Her problem has to do with her tradition. Her notion of what a woman should be. She is stuck with this ‘ideal’.... Unless she lives by it, she cannot live; in fact her whole life has been for nothing.... Because this image of herself cannot be accomplished in reality, it is her effort and practice to accomplish it in fantasy.... So, in fact, reality becomes fantasy, too. She makes it so!

“The variety essential to the play... demands that she be a ‘heavy’ at the beginning.... The audience at the beginning should see her bad effect on Stella and want Stanley to tell her off.

“What is the tragic flaw? In the Aristotelian sense, the flaw is the need to be superior, special, her tradition. This creates an apartness so intense, a loneliness so gnawing that only a complete breakdown.... can break through the walls of her tradition.”

On Stella: “Stella would have been Blanche except for Stanley. She now knows what, how much Stanley means to her health. So.... no matter what Stanley does, she must cling to him.... To return to Blanche would be a return to the subjugation of the tradition.... She has an unconscious hostility toward Blanche because Blanche is so patronizing, demanding and superior toward her.... makes her so useless, old-fashioned and helpless.

“Stella is doomed, too. She has sold herself out for a temporary solution. She’s given up all hope, everything, just to live for Stanley’s pleasures. But this can last only as long as Stanley wants her.... Her only hope is her children and, like so many

women, she will begin to live more and more for her children.”

On Stanley: “Why does Blanche get so completely under his skin? Why does he want to bring Blanche and, before her, Stella down to his level?... It’s the hoodlum aristocrat. He’s deeply dissatisfied, deeply hopeless, deeply cynical.... the physical, immediate pleasure (eating, drinking, sex), if they come in a steady enough stream quiet this as long as no one gets more.

“The one thing that Stanley can’t bear is someone who thinks that he or she is better than he. His only way of explaining himself—he thinks, he stinks—is that everyone else stinks. This is symbolic. True to our National State of Cynicism. No values. There is nothing to command his loyalty.... Blanche can’t come down to his level so he levels her with his sex. He brings her right down to his level, beneath him.

But Stanley loves Stella. It is rough, embarrassed and he rather, truculently, won’t show it. But it is there. He’s proud of her. When he’s not on guard and looking at her, his eyes suddenly shine. He is grateful, too, proud and satisfied.”

NAMES and Terms in the PLAY

Elysian Fields: the home for the blessed after death. From Greek mythology.

Napoleonic Code: part of the Civil Code adopted by Napoleon in 1804. It compromised ideas of the French Revolution and traditional France, including the laws of inheritance and marriage.

ACTIVITIES

Colorado Model Content Standard for Reading and Writing – 1. Students read and understand a variety of materials. 2. Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing.

1. In classical terms, a comedy is classified as a comedy not because it is funny but because the protagonist (hero) solves his or her problem the way she or he wants it to be solved. If not, a play is a tragedy. Who is the protagonist in *A Streetcar Named Desire*? Is her or his problem solved to his or her satisfaction? Taking into consideration these definitions of comedy and tragedy, which category does *A Streetcar Named Desire* fall into? Defend your answer.

2. *A Streetcar Named Desire* is said to present a conflict between the romantic and ideal against the brutal forces of the naturalistic and material world. How does the play reflect these conflicts? In a dehumanized and aggressive brutal world, how are idealism and sensitivity to survive? Be practical and specific in your solutions.

3. Theatre often uses symbols as shorthand to make statements without having to use time and dialogue to accomplish it. How did Tennessee Williams make use of symbols in this play? If Stanley is a symbol of the “macho male,” is this a desirable thing to be? Is Stella a symbol of “the

Earth Mother?” What does Mitch represent? What are some other symbols in the play?

4. Most critics and readers view Stanley and Blanche as antagonists, yet there are striking similarities between the two characters. What are some of the similarities? How do they strengthen the conflict between Stanley and Blanche?

5. How do the so-called “minor” characters contribute to the fabric of the play? How does Steve and Eunice’s relationship reflect the play’s central relationships? What are the roles of the flower seller, the Nurse, and the poker players in the overall scheme of the play?

6. Our need for self-worth is central to our being. Our self-image is the basis for our behavior. How is her need to feel self-worth a reason for Blanche’s self-deception? Notice how Blanche often speaks of literature and fantasy, how she often lapses into “Let’s pretend” situations. What does Blanche find so appealing in fiction? Why is fiction preferable to fact? How is the need for self-worth present in the actions for Stanley? Stella? Mitch?

7. There is a great deal of talk in the early part of the play about “The Napoleonic Code” of law as

ACTIVITIES

C O N T I N U E D

the basis of shared property rights of husbands and wives. Stanley suspects that Blanche has cheated her sister by buying things that she could not afford and improperly exploiting the foreclosure of the mortgage of the family plantation, thereby having cheated him. (“And I don’t like being swindled.”) Is this charge true? Has Belle Reve been squandered by Blanche? Support your opinion.

8. Why do you think Stella stays with Stanley? Why do you think that Stella is characterized as being in a hypnotic state? If she has any suspicions about his treatment of Blanche, could she agree to stay with a man who has raped with her sister?

9. Contrast Stanley’s dealing with Blanche with those of Mitch. Why doesn’t Mitch’s proposal of marriage work?

10. Rather than consider whether or not Blanche is good enough for Mitch, determine whether Mitch is worthy of Blanche.

11. Must Blanche be condemned as a promiscuous, lying, and dishonest madwoman or might she be cherished as a romantic who tries heroically to have beauty and loveliness survive? Of course, there are no absolutes here, but determine how conflicting images are a part of Blanche’s being.

12. Why do you think that Stella allows her sister to be taken to a mental hospital? Why must Stella believe that Blanche has become mentally deranged?

13. What are the clues that foreshadow the ending of the play? Do you consider the ending of *A Streetcar Named Desire* inevitable? Support your opinion.

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