

EVERYBODY'S GOT ONE

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A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE



Photo by Michael Lamont

Odyssey Theatre

Three years ago, after writing what I believed to be a thoughtful but not always complimentary review of a play produced and starring a close friend, someone who emphatically asked me to give her my “honest count” about her work, the result was a long and difficult 90-minute phone conversation trying to comfort her tears and convince her my words should not signal her early retirement from acting and end her desire to present plays.

“I know I’m being too sensitive,” she said through her sobs, attempting to apologize for putting me in such an uncomfortable position. “It’s just so hard... there’s so much work and heart that goes into doing this.”

I vowed then and there to never again write a review of a close friend unless, of course, I knew them to be a person who would understand my criticism and hopefully benefit from it. Or ignore it... that would be okay, too, since mine is only one person's opinion. There are those rare people who know how this works for me considering my own training from mentors who never minced words named Uta and Stella and Kenneth. There are even those who have called or text or wrote to thank me for my honesty and told me how what I wrote improved their production.

I had decided I would attend the current mounting of Tennessee Williams' 1948 Pulitzer Prize-winning masterpiece *A Streetcar Named Desire* only as a TicketHolders Award voter and not to review, not only because it starred a close but not always confident friend, but because it would also be featuring two other pals in the play's equally demanding other two leading roles.

This reluctance was exacerbated by my own passion for all things Williams. Aside from developing a serious case of hero-worship while working with Tennessee himself in 1960 at age 14 in the original pre-Broadway production of *The Night of the Iguana*, I have played many of his characters over the years since then, including Mitch in *Streetcar*. I have also for the last decade-plus taught BFA and MFA classes examining the work of the man and his life, as well as analyzing this particular play in depth in my Great 20th Century Playwrights class.

All critics strive for objectivity—and I hope I am not only speaking for myself when I say that it isn't always easy. The light at the end of the tunnel for me with this beautifully-appointed revival of *Streetcar* at the Odyssey, however, was the unique and inimitable talents of my friends involved and the fact that this time out, it would be presented under the guidance of Jack Heller, a gifted veteran director with whom I have worked personally and for whom I have extreme respect.

Although I told the publicist of this *Streetcar* I would not be reviewing, here I am doing just that. I am not going to go into great depth this time out, mainly because I don't want my druthers to be either misunderstood or become a *cause celebre*, but I do want to state that, as a Williamsophile, it would be a terrible loss to miss this fascinating return to New Orleans' Elysian Fields at the end of WWII when all the troubles really began for lower-class Americans.

While most of my problems with this *Streetcar* are in the direction, it would not be because Heller didn't do a masterful job but instead because, as such an exacting student and lover of this particular play, I would have often personally gone in a different... well... direction to tell Tennessee's most notorious tale. See, it's that objectivity thing.

Still, on Joel Daavid's incredibly evocative multi-leveled set, the Kowalskis and their troubled sister-in-law come to incredible life once again with an unearthly commitment to the material and a tremendous passion to tell the story.

I recently mentioned Dianne Wiest believes Winnie, the character she is assaying so splendidly right now in Beckett's *Happy Days* at the Taper, is the role she considers the female equivalent of Hamlet—meaning it takes some massive *cojones* to put yourself out there and attempt to play it.

I immediately thought Blanche DuBois would instead be my choice to earn that distinction. Since Williams wrote so many traps inherent in the role into which anyone brave enough to play her can easily fall into—and often do—I wonder what it takes to decide to crash headfirst into such a major challenge.

Susan Priver does a yoeman's job doing just that, bringing a courageously quirky and heartbreaking vulnerability to her terminally insecure and majorly fucked-up Blanche, exhibiting a fresh new approach to the fading southern belle's familiar downward spiral. Max E. Williams takes all the brutish behavior of Stanley and, like Priver, pulls out all the stops to create a vivid, highly individual take on the classic role.

As Stella, Melissa Sullivan provides the heart of this wonderfully idiosyncratic production, offering an indelible portrait of someone raised to be a victim, someone who learned to be quiet since her sister has kept her at her beck and call since childhood and never let her get a word past her continuous rants. Sullivan grounds this *Streetcar*, providing the perfect buffer between the shrill insanity of Blanche and her limitless desire to please her husband whatever it takes.

I have seen more productions of this play than any other I can think of, as well as performing in it and directing scenes from it many times in my classes over the years. Although this incarnation of Williams' best-known work may not be my quintessential choice to praise above any other, it still without a doubt offers an extremely worthwhile and fascinatingly evocative trip back into the wondrous world of Tennessee.

This *Streetcar* once again conjures a magical, dreamlike place where, seven decades ago, the world reeled as the greatest playwright of the last century bestowed on us all his lyrical, poetic dialogue and an uncanny ability to honor and to elevate to heroic stature the lost and less desirable denizens of our mess of a society.

It was a groundbreaking moment in the history of theatre that changed the future of dramatic literature for all time to come and, for that reason if no other, this heartfelt presentation of *A Streetcar Named Desire* deserves our appreciation and attention.

THROUGH JULY 7: Odyssey Theatre, 2055 N. Sepulveda Blvd., West LA. [310.477.2055](tel:310.477.2055) or www.OdysseyTheatre.com
