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Vivid 'Streetcar' production keeps passion aflame

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HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Through July 11, Writers' Theatre, 325 Tudor Court, Glencoe, Tickets: \$40-65, Phone: (847) 242-6000, www.writerstheatre.org

With a play as deep and potent and poetic and cruel and acidly funny and altogether haunting as Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire," there can be no definitive production. There is only a long and intriguing series of interpretations set into motion by the fabled 1947 stage original that starred Marlon Brando and Jessica Tandy, and the subsequent film featuring Brando and Vivien Leigh.

And truly there is no point in attempting to rank David Cromer's eye-opening take on the play that opened Thursday at Glencoe's Writers' Theatre. Suffice it to say that the director — a pure product of Chicago theater, who in recent seasons has become one of the hottest talents on and off Broadway — has devised a number of wholly startling yet utterly appropriate and brilliant innovations for his production. And it is a good bet that you will never be able to see this play again in quite the same way as a result of those choices.



Natasha Lowe stars as Blanche in "A Streetcar Named Desire" at Writers' Theatre.

To begin with, there is the total environment in which the play is now situated. Collette Pollard's utterly transformative, incestuously intimate "in-the-square" set all but turns the audience into fellow inhabitants of the crowded, shabby New Orleans apartment where Blanche DuBois (Natasha Lowe), that desperate, fantasy-spinning refugee from the death-plagued plantation world of Mississippi, comes in search of refuge. It puts us within touching distance of the bed where Blanche's younger sister, Stella (Stacy Stoltz), copulates wildly with her animalistic, volatile, "Polack" husband, Stanley Kowalski (Matt Hawkins). And from the moment Blanche steps off the thunderously rattling streetcar of the play's title, it is clear she has been deposited in her own sweaty, nerve-shattering, formica-and-linoleum version of Hades.

There is intriguing casting here, too: Lowe, with her pale, blond, cameolike delicacy and the fleshy arms of a woman past her youthful prime; Stoltz, dark and natural-looking, with a demure quality that gives way to real sexual heat and a highly nuanced balance with Stanley; and Hawkins, with his small, tight, muscular build, light hair and a face (and comic edginess) that seem ideally in synch with Blanche's description of him as almost cavemanlike.

Lowe's performance, at once vulnerable and steely, builds to a shattering climax, but it will linger in memory forever for her delivery of the long monologue about what it means for a beautiful woman to age, and to understand how her possibilities in life shrivel as well. Heart-stopping.

The vividly enacted, bed-rocking sex scene between Stella and Stanley is not simply real but crucial here. Even more breathtaking is Cromer's in-the-flesh rendering of Blanche's memory of her closeted young homosexual husband's tryst with another man which is hallucinatory in just the right way. (Other ghosts arrive in the flesh later on.)

Finally, there is a fiercely brutal final encounter when a doctor and his assistant arrive to take Blanche off to a mental hospital. The Matron (Carolyn E. Mason), is a strong, sullen black woman who lunges on top of Blanche with the unleashed fury of a former slave having her revenge. It is altogether horrifying and eye-opening.

Danny McCarthy's portrayal of Mitch, who considers marrying Blanche, is played with just the right mixture of neediness and anger. And Jenn Engstrom brings a wild exuberance to Eunice, the Kowlaskis' upstairs neighbor.

Josh Schmidt's musical scoring blasts away any lingering hint of sentimentality. Though of course the real music here is by way of Williams' language. All hail Tennessee, now and forever.