

A Streetcar Named Desire

By Kris Vire

Writers' Theatre. By Tennessee Williams. Dir. David Cromer. With Natasha Lowe, Stacy Stoltz, Matt Hawkins, Danny McCarthy.



SOUTHERN INHOSPITALITY Hawkins points a finger at Lowe.
Photo: Michael Brosilow

"A single girl, a girl alone in the world, has got to keep a firm hold on her emotions, or she'll be lost!" So says the onetime Mississippi belle Blanche DuBois to her would-be suitor midway through Williams's classic. By this point, of course, even those of us new to *Streetcar* have begun to suspect that Blanche's disingenuous endorsement of caution is too little, too late; indeed, she's as lost as they come.

Caution, of course, can be one's enemy as well; an overabundance of it can lead to stasis, as is often the case with *Streetcar*. *The New York Times* critic Frank Rich opened his review of the 1992 Broadway revival, which starred Jessica Lange and Alec Baldwin, by writing, "Depending on your feelings about *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is either the greatest or second-greatest play ever written by an American." Such reverence, as well as the lingering shadows of the original leads (Jessica Tandy onstage, Vivien Leigh on film and Marlon Brando in both), renders too many revivals timid copies.

Thank goodness, then, for Cromer. The director's bracingly honest productions in recent years of American classics by the likes of Inge and Wilder brought him at last to New York's attention. Now, at the end of a season in which he saw both a disappointing Broadway debut and his third consecutive Lortel award for Off Broadway direction, he returns home to cast his gimlet eye upon Williams's postwar New Orleans.

Cromer's sensuous, physical production shines a fresh, revealing (one might say Chinese-lantern-free) light upon Williams's sweltering characters. The approach is one of tearing down walls: both literally, as with Collette Pollard's brilliant row-house set, cramped and claustrophobic but cleverly transparent, and psychologically, with a few smart, light touches giving us glimpses into Blanche's ongoing breakdown.

Lowe's Blanche is neither a delicately fading rose nor a jackal in sheep's clothing. From the moment she arrives, unbidden, at the ramshackle New Orleans home of her sister Stella (Stoltz) and her coarse brother-in-law Stanley (Hawkins), we can see in her haunted eyes and jangly nerves that she knows she won't find here the deliverance she hopes for.

Even in Blanche's most pointed exchanges with the suspicious Stanley or her most casual put-downs of Stella, we sense her desperation, her anxiety that the carefully woven deceptions will fall apart before she finds a solution. Only when she sees a glimmer of hope in Stanley's friend Mitch (the remarkably genuine McCarthy) does Blanche let her emotional guard down a touch, even as her intellectual self crafts further fibs.

Hawkins's Stanley strikes us as less macho, more posturing than the standard Brando-Xerox. The actor brings out the juvenile and the insecure in his Polish-accented Stanley Kowalski, for whom his sister-in-law's arrival is a vivid reminder that his wife married below her station. Stoltz brings her usual unadulterated, aching honesty to her role, making Stella seem more substantial than she often does.

Outstanding work by sound designer Josh Schmidt (with whom Cromer collaborated on *Adding Machine: A Musical*) and lighting designer Heather Gilbert—who supplies attention-grabbing visuals while subtly shifting focus as needed—helps create an intensely immersive environment.

Cromer elicits from his terrific actors an intense engagement with Williams's poetics. That, along with some organic embellishments—we won't give them away but to say they enhance Williams's coy moments in a similar fashion as Cromer's now-famous treatment of *Our Town*'s culmination—makes his *Streetcar* the most desirable act of the spring season.