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A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

By Terry Teachout

Glencoe, Ill.

David Cromer, the foremost stage director of his generation, has outdone himself with Writers' Theatre's revelatory new production of Tennessee Williams's "A Streetcar Named Desire." You'd think that all there is to say about so popular a play would have been said long ago, but it is Mr. Cromer's special gift to make old plays seem new without rendering them unrecognizable. His "Streetcar," like the productions of "Our Town," "The Glass Menagerie" and "Picnic" that came before it, strips the accumulated layers of convention and preconception off the surface of a classic and brings the viewer face to face with the play itself.

Mr. Cromer and his set designer, Collette Pollard, have reconfigured Writers' Theatre's 108-seat performance space as a theater in the round and placed the two-room railroad flat of Stanley and Stella Kowalski (Matt Hawkins and Stacy Stoltz) in the center of the house, putting the members of the audience as close to the action as it is possible to get. (I was seated eight feet from the Kowalskis' bed.) The intimacy of this setup makes you feel as though you're eavesdropping on "Streetcar" rather than merely watching it. It also makes it possible for the members of Mr. Cromer's ensemble cast to underplay a show that is almost always overplayed. As a result, the impact of even the smallest of gestures is amplified, and when Stanley yells "Stella!" or pushes Blanche DuBois (Natasha Lowe) onto the bed to have his way with her, the effect is immeasurably startling.

Even so, what Mr. Cromer and his cast do with Ms. Pollard's cheap-linoleum-and-naked-bulbs set matters far more than the set itself, evocative though it is. All of the play's now-iconic roles have been rethought from the ground up, starting with Ms. Lowe's Blanche, who is not a fluttery caricature of Southern womanhood but a tough, vinegary spinster who is overwhelmed by the coarsely vital world into which she has been thrust by the force of circumstance. Stanley, by contrast, is a deceptively ingratiating glad-hander who is obsessed with the fleshy charms of his adoring wife and who rapes Blanche out of rage and confusion, not lust. Each character in the play is as true to life as an old friend—but one whom you suddenly see in a new light, just as you unexpectedly find yourself hearing lines in Williams's script that old acquaintance had caused you to forget.

No matter where you live or what you're doing this summer, I urge you to go to Chicago and see Writers' Theatre's "Streetcar." Every aspect of this production, from Josh Schmidt's raucously jazzy incidental music to the delicately sensitive lighting of Heather Gilbert, is as good as it can be. So is every member of the cast. Never before have I seen a staging of "A Streetcar Named Desire" in which truth and poetry were so perfectly balanced. If, like me, you have always found it hard to believe without reservation in the play's underlying plausibility, rest assured that David Cromer is going to change your mind.

—Mr. Teachout, the Journal's drama critic, is the author of "Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong." Write to him at tteachout@wsj.com.

DETAILS

A Streetcar Named Desire

Writers' Theatre, 325 Tudor Court, Glencoe, Ill.

(\$65), 847-242-6000, closes July 11