

## Small Space, Big Egos: Something Will Explode

By Charles Isherwood



GLENCOE, Ill. — If you've ever wondered, with either fascination or revulsion, just what it might be like to get in bed with Stanley Kowalski, consider a trip to this Chicago suburb forthwith. The Writers' Theater production of "A Streetcar Named Desire" directed by David Cromer takes you within a millimeter or two of this carnal knowledge. If you happen to be seated in the right spot — the easily unnerved might call it the wrong spot — you can practically see those "colored lights" going yourself when Stanley and Stella engage in a fraught bout of lovemaking after that poker game ends in violence and tears.

Mr. Cromer, the gifted director best known in New York for his small, spare and emotionally resonant Off Broadway revival of "Our Town," has brought a similar sharp focus to Tennessee Williams's masterpiece, at the same theater where he staged William Inge's "Picnic" to acclaim a few years ago. An audience of about 100 is ranged closely around the two small rooms in which Stanley and his sister-in-law, Blanche DuBois, engage in their battle of wills, uncomfortably immediate witnesses to each flare-up of his bellowing irritation, each of her slips into fearful hysteria.

Natasha Lowe plays Blanche in "A Streetcar Named Desire" at the Writers' Theater. Photo by Michael Brosilow.

It becomes clear early on that Blanche's emotional disintegration may owe as much to the problem of real estate as it does to her psychological state. This confined space — realized in rich detail but no kitschy atmospheric excesses by the set designer Collette Pollard — cannot house both the damaged, delicate Blanche and the insensitive, egoistic Stanley without a decisive conflagration. Squirming as we are under the same eaves, with the screech of the streetcar lines in our ears (the terrific sound design by Josh Schmidt, the composer of "Adding Machine," is like an ancillary character), it is easy to understand how the small aggravations of cohabitation — Blanche's daily monopolizing of that bathroom, for instance — could bring out the brute in even a gentler man than Stanley.

The revelation of Mr. Cromer's meticulously detailed "Streetcar" — the most uniformly well-acted production I've yet seen, right down to the smallest roles — is in presenting the play not as a hyper-intense lyric tragedy or a vehicle for a dominant star turn but as an intimate domestic drama that achieves its power through the exposure of the complicated and conflicting humanity of all its characters.

Matt Hawkins's Stanley is particularly freshly conceived. Mr. Hawkins accentuates the sly smarts in Stanley's humor, and has a boyish face with a wide, lopsided smile. But cutting through Stanley's surface geniality and healthy physical vigor is a menacing distrust of — and contempt for — hypocrisy. Mr. Hawkins's Stanley knows just what he is and what he isn't, and is wise enough to know the same about Blanche. He can't stomach the idea that she thinks he's too dumb to figure her out.

Seeing their interaction up close, you come to realize how much Stanley and Blanche actually have in common: intelligence and wit and a healthy appetite for sex and for drink. But the South of the 1940s cannot accommodate a woman who expresses these aptitudes overtly. Blanche's needs have become corrupted and furtive, a cause for shame that eats away at her self-image and undermines her life-battered strength of spirit,

requiring ever more desperate and deluded attempts to assert the other aspects of her character, her tenderness and gentility, until the truth and the illusions have become confused.

Blanche and Stanley also share a profound need for understanding and companionship. I've never been more moved by Stanley's anguished remorse after his drunken outburst of abuse after the poker game. His burning tears and raw need are hard to watch; for all his tough talk, Stanley also needs Stella as a "cleft in the rock of the world" to climb into, as Blanche so mournfully puts it, which is why he'll fight dirty to keep her to himself.

Natasha Lowe, who portrays Blanche, bears a slight resemblance to Jessica Tandy, who created the role in the original 1947 production.



She has large, piercing eyes, a high, aristocratic forehead and alabaster skin. (Blanche might observe that she resembles a faded Botticelli Venus.) Stella's description of Blanche's reaction to her humble home as "a little intense" is a bit of an understatement, since Ms. Lowe's Blanche moves with unnerving suddenness from a schoolmarmish primness to a nearly deranged fury when her stewardship of Belle Reve is casually questioned. (The Southern accent is only slight, as might be appropriate for a teacher of proper English.)

From left, Natasha Lowe, Matt Hawkins and Stacy Stoltz in "A Streetcar Named Desire" at the Writers' Theater in Glencoe, Ill. Photo by Michael Brosilow.

Ms. Lowe may not have the translucent depths and lyricism of the most heart-wrenching Blanches — or, obviously, the sheer wattage of a Cate Blanchett— but it's an effective, truthful and nuanced interpretation. Ms. Lowe performs the crucial scene in which Blanche reveals to Mitch the tragic details of her early marriage with a hushed, moving simplicity. Our being in such close proximity to this confession brings home the beauty and bravery of Blanche's self-exposure, and the quiet desperation of her need for Mitch's love and compassion.

Performed in dim candlelight — Heather Gilbert's lighting design is extraordinary throughout — the scene includes a third character, the ghost of Blanche's early love, who rises in her vision as she recalls the fateful night by the lake. The boyish ghost reappears later, at one point literally occupying Stanley's bed as another young man crouches naked beside it, Blanche apparently having stumbled upon them in sexual congress. These and other attempts to dramatize the tormenting images of Blanche's imagination are staged eloquently, but they still strike me as unnecessary and obvious.

They are perhaps the more gratuitous given the unstudied truth of the performances Mr. Cromer draws from the entire cast. Danny McCarthy is perfect as Mitch, bashful and a little uncouth but with a sensitive and sympathetic heart, destined to be exploited by Stanley for his own selfish ends. Stacy Stoltz's Stella is likewise a model of clear, honest and humane interpretation. As Stella's divided loyalties gradually scrape away at her nerves, you sense her slowly withdrawing into a protective neutrality, weary of both Stanley's antagonism and Blanche's smothering need, and utterly at a loss as to how to reconcile them.

Even the smaller roles are acted with precision and care. Jenn Engstrom is funny and idiomatic as Eunice Hubbell, the neighbor upstairs whose caustic arguments with her husband form part of the production's detailed soundscape. And Ryan Hallahan plays the boy collecting for the Evening Star with a buoyant ease. He's clearly a post-pubescent kid, and for once there is also the suggestion that this teenager might actually be interested in taking Blanche up on something more than a tender kiss.

Although you might imagine that this enforced intimacy with Williams's harrowing story of a violent rape and a woman's descent into madness would be excruciating or discomfiting, that's not really the case. Mr. Cromer's production underscores the humanity of Williams's vision, dark though it may be, allowing us to feel our way deeply into the play's painful beauty. The pulse of its poetry almost comes to seem our own.

*A Streetcar Named Desire*

*By Tennessee Williams; directed by David Cromer; sets by Collette Pollard; costumes by Janice Pytel; lighting by Heather Gilbert; sound by Josh Schmidt; fight director, David Woolley; dialect coach, Claudia Anderson; stage manager, David Castellanos. Presented by Writers' Theater, Michael Halberstam, artistic director; Kathryn M. Lipuma, executive director. At the Writers' Theater, 376 Park Avenue, Glencoe, Illinois; (847) 242-6000. Through July 11. Running time: 2 hours 54 minutes.*

*WITH: Esteban Andres Cruz (Pablo Gonzalez), Jenn Engstrom (Eunice Hubbell), Ryan Hallahan (a Young Collector), Derek Hasenstab (Doctor), Matt Hawkins (Stanley Kowalski), Loren Lazerine (Steve Hubbell), Natasha Lowe (Blanche DuBois), Danny McCarthy (Harold Mitchell), Carolyn E. Nelson (Colored Woman/Matron), Stacy Stoltz (Stella Kowalski) and Rosario Vargas (Mexican Woman).*