



After this season of *A Streetcar Named Desire* ends, the Bakehouse will be no more.

An institution for Adelaide's theatre world since the 1970s, the theatre on Angas Street will be repurposed by its owners and the distinctive performance spaces will be gone.

Against the blank canvas of the black-painted walls of the main theatre, the New Orleans of Tennessee Williams' 1947 play is economically evoked with a simple set. Those who've seen the play, or the famous original film starring Marlon Brando and Vivien Leigh, will know that the action takes place in and around a shabby and tiny flat, next door to the Four Deuces bar.

A pro-am cast under the direction of Michael Baldwin makes a good fist of the well-known drama: southern belle Blanche DuBois moves in with her sister-in-law Stella and her volcanic, vulgar husband Stanley Kowalski. Blanche puts on airs of a proper and wealthy woman but is clearly also deeply insecure, traumatised and destitute. The famously animalistic character of Stanley shakes her until she breaks, ending her hopes of a new beginning with the violent man's kinder friend, Mitch.

It's not a complex plot, but the layers of social commentary are many and disturbingly current: sexual hypocrisy, shame and bigotry, domestic violence and class divides are all brought to light with Williams' deft writing.

The accents and diction here are a challenge at times and the more chaotic scenes could be better controlled, but these are not insurmountable issues, due to some fine central performances.



As Stan, Paul Westbrook delivers a Brando-esque, physical turn, down to the strange, tortured vocalising of the brutal man of the house, who insists on schooling the women on the “Napoleonic Code”. Marc Clement deals well with the subtler character of Mitch, described appropriately in the original *New Yorker* review of the play as a “touching blend of dignity and pathos”. Justina Ward is suitably restrained in the role of Stella, pulled in all directions by her awful husband and demanding sister – convincingly pulling off the character that is, perhaps, the only truly kind person in the play.

“Stella!”: Paul Westbrook as Stanley Kowalski. Photo: Michael Errey

As expected, though, Melanie Munt’s Blanche is the heart of the enterprise, and she brings deftness to the role. Blanche’s unravelling can enter the realm of melodrama, but Munt’s delivery of the character’s vulnerable side, her remembrances of falling in love, her tragic marriage, her justification of her lies as hope for something better rather than an acceptance of bleak reality, are very moving. Her seduction of the young newspaper collector (Matthew Adams) is a disturbingly good and awkward moment.

Bakehouse stalwarts Pamela Munt and Peter Green, who both did so much to make the theatre an important place, have brief cameos at the end, as the nurse and the doctor who lead away the now completely broken Blanche.

Fittingly, the production makes a hero of the space itself. The walls are bare; the idiosyncratic arrangements of doors at stage right are key to the action; and the door to the foyer remains open, from which the tinkling, gentle jazz of Walter Barbieri on piano adds the ambience of New Orleans to the sweaty interior action.

The Bakehouse has seen all kinds of productions – as Samela Harris pointed out in [this lovely eulogy](#) – but it’s also seen its share of classics.

Go and see this one – celebrate and lament.

*A Streetcar Named Desire* plays at the Bakehouse until May 7.

*Indaily* by David Washington