

oReview: A Streetcar Named Desire at The Bakehouse Theatre



It's a sad day when Adelaide institution, The Bakehouse Theatre, must close to make way for a carpark, but completing its tenure with Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, is to go out with a bang!

Williams' most popular work, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is one of the most critically acclaimed plays of the 20th century.

There is so much to digest, interpret and analyse with this classic piece; the text directions, the naturalistic language, the overarching symbolism, the expressionism concepts, and the functions of the characters, to name but a few. This is why *Streetcar* is a firm favourite of dramaturgs all across the world!

Set in the French Quarter of New Orleans during the restless years following World War Two, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is the story of Blanche DuBois, a fragile and neurotic woman on a desperate prowl for someplace in the world to call her own.

After being exiled from her hometown for seducing a seventeen-year-old boy at the school where she taught English, Blanche explains her unexpected appearance on Stanley Kowalski and Stella's (Blanche's younger, married sister) doorstep as nervous exhaustion. This, she claims, is the result of a series of financial catastrophes which have recently claimed the family plantation, Belle Reve.

Suspicious, Stanley points out that "under Louisiana's Napoleonic code what belongs to the wife belongs to the husband." Stanley, a brawny and brutish man, is as territorial as a panther. He tells Blanche he doesn't like to be swindled and demands to see the bill of sale. This encounter defines Stanley and Blanche's relationship. They are warring sides and Stella is caught in the middle. But Stanley and Stella are deeply in love and lust.

Blanche's efforts to impose herself between them only enrages the beast inside Stanley. When Mitch — a card-playing friend of Stanley's — arrives on the scene, Blanche begins to see a way out of her predicament. Mitch, himself alone in the world, reverses

Blanche as a beautiful and refined woman. Yet, as rumours of Blanche's past in Auriol begin to catch up to her, her circumstances become unbearable.

Michael Baldwin's direction of this work is exploratory but true to the original naturalist and expressionist theories and that is what makes it so good.

He has closely followed the stage instructions as they give great insight into character emotions, reactions and the use of colour, sound, music, props and setting.

Resident lighting and sound designer Stephen Dean really understood the assignment – from the chaos of offstage, to the sound of the trains and streetcars and recurring themes of the Varsouviana polka.

Having a live pianist, Walter Barbieri, playing from the foyer, marks the change of mood and the underlying tragic development of Blanche.

The supporting cast are brilliant, including Nathan Brown as Steve and Susan Cilento as Eunice, the quarrelling upstairs neighbours and the sensational Marc Clement as Mitch, Stanley's clumsy, sweaty and more gentlemanly buddy who courts Blanche until he discovers her deceitful past.

Justina Ward as Stella is frail and sensitive, grounded and tolerant but retains some traces of her Southern Belle persona, enough to set the contrast between the two worlds – her Southern, educated past and her life with Stanley in the run-down New America.

British born Paul Westbrook took the character of Stanley Kowalski right off the page and onto the stage with an animalistic, physical, and exaggerated vigour that was hard to turn away from.

The archetypal antagonist, his mix of inarticulate expression and hulking actions, Westbrook's Stanley represents the new, heterogeneous America [at that time], while still needing his wife to enforce his masculinity. While he is potentially seen as the hero at the play's start, he ends as a remorseless, harmful, and degenerate man.

The unforgettable Melanie Munt plays the role of the fallen, insecure and desolate protagonist Blanche Du Bois. No stranger to hard hitting theatre, Munt portrays the social pariah with indiscrete sexual behaviour and a drinking problem just impeccably.

The vulnerability in Munt's voice and mannerisms coupled with such symbolic language, carefully crafted by Williams in content and intent, is to be admired. Her character is believable as she unfolds and descends into insanity, like a delicate moth to a flame.

This cast is incredibly talented and experienced, and this production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is one not to be missed.

Vale The Bakehouse.

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