

A Streetcar Named Desire: The Bakehouse Theatre

by [Julia Wakefield – Weekend Notes](#)

Society's misfits revealed in replay of a classic



Melanie Munt as Blanche, Justina Ward as Stella

The Bakehouse's production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is an eminently suitable choice for the theatre's farewell performance. A classic of its time (it was first performed on Broadway in 1947), this play continues to enthrall and intrigue audiences with its raw portrayal of domestic violence, revealing at the same time the circumstances that compel the characters to behave the way they do.

The play created public outcry when it was made into a film in 1951, starring Marlon Brando and Vivien Leigh. Even so, much of the most potentially shocking dialogue was cut from the film. As far as I can tell, there have been no cuts in this production. It might seem mild by modern standards, but unlike other plays of its time and also many present-day stories, it has no obvious heroes or villains. Tennessee Williams deeply empathised with society's misfits, as he was one himself. His father was an alcoholic, his sister ended her life in a mental asylum, and he constantly had to deal with the violent prejudice directed towards his own homosexuality. This play raises uncomfortable issues that still remain hidden within contemporary society. Like all good writing, it asks questions rather than gives answers.



Matthew Adams as Young Man, Melanie Munt as Blanche

'Desire' and 'Cemetery' are the names of the streetcars that take Blanche Dubois to her sister's New Orleans lodging in 'Elysian fields', a name that contrasts ironically with the misery that resides there. Blanche has had to give up the family plantation, 'Belle Reve' (French for 'beautiful dream' and pronounced in the play as 'Belle Reeve'), having nursed her father and mother until they died, leaving her nothing to live on. She claims to have left her teaching job on account of her nerves, but we are soon to learn that there is a darker side to Blanche's history that she is not prepared to reveal.

Melanie Munt as Blanche, Marc Clement as Mitch



Blanche is superbly portrayed by Melanie Munt. Her nervous demeanour verges on the comical when she attempts to attract Mitch (Marc Clement), one of Stanley's buddies. Munt retains perfect control of her character as she descends into alcohol-fuelled desperation, never losing the pathos that underlies Blanche's farcical behaviour.

Blanche's younger sister Stella (Justina Ward) left home years before to marry Stanley, apparently only returning for her parents' funerals. Blanche is deeply critical of her sister for abandoning the family, and is even less impressed by Stanley (Paul Westbrook). There is immediate palpable friction when Blanche and Stanley meet, and the play circles around the tension that builds up between these two characters.



Melanie Munt as Blanche, Paul Westbrook as Stanley

Both Stanley and Blanche are victims of their times. Stanley is highly sensitive about his migrant background and lack of education. He has just come home from fighting in the second world war, and spends his spare time with buddies from the same regiment, all mentally scarred from taking part in the conflict. Blanche considers herself a superior being, descended from French plantation owners and obsessed with 'genteel' living, but we soon discover that she shares the same darker impulses that Stanley is not afraid to exhibit. The 'brutal desire' that she sees as her sister's love for Stanley is something that she herself has been unable to control. Although we are repelled by the attitudes of both Blanche and Stanley, we are also drawn towards empathising with them.



Marc Clement as Mitch, Paul Westbrook as Stanley, Nathan Brown as Steve

Paul Westbrook plays a convincing Stanley, combining cocksure strutting with dangerous unpredictability. Justina Ward shows how Stella's apparent vulnerability is tempered by an instinctive understanding of her husband's frail psyche, which allows her to forgive his behaviour – for now, at least. Marc Clement's Mitch is perhaps the most sympathetic character of all, hopelessly taken in by Blanche's deceptions, but still feeling for her after her true history is revealed.



Stanley (Paul Westbrook) yelling for Stella