

A Good Reed Review



Andrew Harkins as Stanley & Meredith Hagedorn* as Blanche (member of Actors' Equity Association)

Tennessee Williams is acclaimed by critics and his colleagues alike as one of America's greatest playwrights with works including "The Glass Menagerie", "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof", and his groundbreaking 1948 Pulitzer Prize winner, "A Streetcar Named Desire", which is Dragon Productions' current show. Arthur Miller wrote in Regarding Streetcar, his 2004 introduction to New Directions Books' edition of "Streetcar", that it was Williams' "writing itself that left one excited and elevated" as he described his own experience when first seeing the play in 1947.

"Streetcar" is a trailblazing work that broaches a difficult intersection of violence, sex, delusion, and harsh reality. Williams' writing examines the psychological factors driving his characters as he follows Blanche DuBois (played by Meredith Hagedorn), an aging Southern Belle who moves to New Orleans to stay with her sister and brother-in-law, Stella (Katie Anderson) and Stanley Kowalski (Andrew Harkins). Blanche is running away from a sordid past driven by a severe trauma relatively early in adult life, the effects of which have been hidden even from her sister.

Stanley's poker buddies Harold "Mitch" Mitchell (Troy Johnson), Steve Hubbell (the Kowalski's upstairs neighbor) played by Charles McKeithan, and Pablo Gonzales played by Phillip Raupach. Rounding out the cast of characters are Eunice Hubbell (Steve's wife) played by Monica Colletti, and the Neighbor/Blind Flower Vender/Nurse played by Mary Lou Torre.

Blanche is shocked by and clashes with Stanley over his savage manner and lowly station in life as a member of the urban working class, and she doesn't understand why Stella stays with him given the abusive nature of their marriage. Stella loves Stanley, and while their life together is far different from the life she knew before leaving home, she not only accepts it, but seems to thrive in it.

Both Blanche and Stanley drink heavily throughout the play, Blanche in secret to escape, Stanley socially, and in celebration, although it causes both varying degrees of difficulty.

Of Stanley's poker buddies, Mitch is different – kind, sensitive, and gentle – when compared with the rest of his blue collar crowd. He and Blanche develop an attachment to one another, but being a tragedy, one might guess this can't end well.

Blanche eschews the harsh light of day by staying in the shadows. She uses willful deception to hide her age and her past in dealing with the loss of the DuBois family plantation and worse. In addition to her drinking, she also bathes frequently throughout the story to “calm her nerves” as she slowly loses her grip on reality. The real tragedy is that because her obfuscation of her past is discovered, she isn't believed when she tells the truth about an unspeakable act of violence.

Director Jeanie K. Smith has embraced a worthy challenge taking on such a distinguished play. Using David Ferlauto's unit set in Dragon's black box theatre, she stages a solid production though the limited headroom and real estate constrain the physical depth of the scenes. The two rooms in the apartment are evident with a kitchen and two beds, one slightly elevated to indicate the bedroom, the other on the same level as the kitchen. The “exterior” action is a little contrived as actors need to run down the street on occasion, but their skill and agility make that mostly believable as they cross downstage of the set, or at times enter from the house left stairs. Even the Hubbell's “upstairs” apartment works, and is seen only in shadow from behind a scrim hanging upstage, on the same level as the Kowalski's apartment. That scrim also comes into play later during some of Blanche's delusions. The final stage dressings include the porch bench “outside” the building entrance amid some representative bushes, a small portable dressing screen, and portieres across the bathroom entry.

Jeanie Smith also employs Gordon Smith's sound design and Jocelyn Squires' lighting design to full advantage. Critically timed train whistles and cat screeches are heard, and big band era jazz recordings cover the scene changes. The “Varsouviana” polka theme is used to take us into Blanche's head, and her memories. Accentuating Blanche's descent into madness, eerie shadows appear on the upstage scrim, and “Varsouviana” is heard more often. A fantasy-reality duality is created simultaneously throwing Blanche

into her mind's eye while those around her remain firmly entrenched in reality.

Hagedorn captures the essence that is Blanche. In keeping with the tone, tempo, and locale of the piece, which starts in the languid New Orleans spring and runs through summer and into fall, her delivery is measured, and her speech is deliberate carrying the air of superiority that Blanche needs to exude. Later, she flawlessly delivers one of the most famous lines in stage and film: "Whoever you are, I have always depended on the kindness of strangers."

Harkins' Stanley is believable, and at times is rather amusing, although as drawn, we don't completely trust him. He has good chemistry with Anderson, and their scenes together are heartfelt; their "good times" are fluid and tight, and their fights are startling. His delivery of another of the most famous lines from stage and screen is a money shot. Having been thrown in the shower by his poker buddies to calm him down, his shirt is wet as he runs outside and calls out, "Stella!" He's transformed from the angry, violent wife beater, to a remorseful man trying desperately to get his wife to come back. Harkins and Hagedorn are also authentic. They dance around each other, Blanche parrying Stanley's attempts to learn the truth, but in their later physical struggle, Harkins' attack isn't strong enough to warrant Hagedorn's severe reaction.

Anderson's Stella floats between loyalties, and her inner conflict trying to do right by both her husband and her sister is a tough line to walk, but she handles it well.

Johnson's Mitch captures the gentleness intended. Even in despair; he maintains an air of decency although he flounders just a bit too much in his early interactions with Hagedorn. His character's embarrassment over his profuse sweating early in Act 2 doesn't read well. When he removes his jacket, his shirt is crisp and bone dry, although in a later scene when he shows up in his work clothes, he's appropriately disheveled and dirty.

As Gonzales, Raupach isn't quite believable, the accent is wrong, but when he later shows up as the newsboy, his reactions are perfect.

McKeithan and Colletti work well together as the feuding Hubbells. They have good chemistry and run from "hating" one another, to a more humorous married bliss.

Torre's blind flower vender appears during a particularly poignant moment, and she

plays the role well, her character oblivious to the torment going on around her, merely trying to survive.

Given the time in which the story takes place, the 1940s, smoking is a commonplace activity, and many of the actors do smoke on stage during this production. Patrons are in no danger though as they are using E-cigarettes, so only harmless water vapor is expelled.

A powerful play, this Dragon production is worth seeing. "A Streetcar Named Desire" continues Thursdays-Sundays through 21 August 2011 at the 42-seat Dragon Theatre located at 535 Alma Street, Palo Alto, CA 94301. See <http://www.dragonproductions.net> or call 650-493-2006 for more information.

(Photo credit: James Kasyan)

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