

Palo Alto Online Palo Alto Weekly: A kinder, gentler 'Streetcar' (August 5, 2011)

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A kinder, gentler 'Streetcar'

Dragon production could use some true turbulence

by Kevin Kirby

Imagine this: You're traveling from San Francisco to L.A. You board a plane at SFO and buckle your seat belt in case of turbulence. As you sit there expectantly, waiting for that little adrenaline rush that comes with takeoff, the plane backs away from the gate, rolls across the tarmac and onto the freeway, and taxis all the way to Los Angeles.

This is equivalent to the audience's experience last Friday at the opening performance of Dragon Productions' "A Streetcar Named Desire": The show moved steadily from point A to point B, but without ever getting off the ground. Those hoping for an adrenaline shot from this, one of Tennessee Williams' most turbulent plays, were likely surprised by the placidity of the trip.

First produced in 1947, "A Streetcar Named Desire" cemented Williams' reputation as one of the most provocative playwrights of post-war Broadway. With its raw sexuality, its gritty language and locale, and its unflinching look at the sordid recesses of the central characters' psyches, "Streetcar" was truly a groundbreaking show. At its crux was the clash of wills between Williams' two most iconic characters: Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski.

Blanche is a Southern flower past her prime, trading heavily on her genteel charm and dubious respectability. Having lost the family estate to debt collectors and her school-teaching job to a personal scandal, she has fled to New Orleans, seeking shelter with her younger sister, Stella. But Blanche's cloying aura of pretense and self-delusion rankles Stella's husband, Stanley, a blue-collar, alcoholic, poker-playing brute who refuses to observe the social niceties that buoy up Blanche's facade.

The pressure cooker in which these personalities collide is Stanley and Stella's down-

scale digs in the French Quarter. It's a small, slightly squalid apartment: two rooms separated by a drape. Williams calls for a set that presents both the apartment and the street outside; his walls are permeable membranes that let the seaminess of the surroundings infiltrate everything. His stage directions specify lowbrow jazz from a nearby bar drifting through the apartment at all hours.

The shortcomings of Dragon's production begin with the technical elements. Set designer David Ferlauto has filled the stage with all the furniture it can hold. The problems with his set are several. It looks unfinished, it boxes the actors into untenable playing spaces, and, by omitting the room-dividing drapery, it leaves the audience guessing about "who can see what when." On top of that, it lacks specificity; you could stare at the stage all night and not detect a single clue to the play's setting.

Sound designer Gordon Smith could have alleviated the scenic deficit with some ambient noise beneath the scenes — distant music, nearby voices, sounds of traffic or insects: anything to create a sense of place — but he does not. His isolated sound effects are generally acceptable, but they're not enough.

Into this environment come the combatants: Meredith Hagedorn as Blanche and Andrew Harkins as Stanley. Both are accomplished performers with respectable resumes behind them, but both seem unable (or unwilling) to tackle the complexity of their characters.

Hagedorn (Dragon's founder and artistic director) gives us Blanche's facade but very little hint of the turmoil beneath it. Desperate, deluded and given to drink, Blanche should be volatile. In order for the play's conclusion to be believable, we need to see hysterical outbursts early on — indeed, Williams' very first stage direction for Stella is "with faintly hysterical humor" — as well as willful manipulation and flashes of anger. But Hagedorn gives the performance that Blanche only wishes she could give: restrained, placid and nearly always in control.

Harkins, on the other hand, seems to focus solely on Stanley's loutishness. He is surly, arrogant and cruel. But the audience needs no help in recognizing that Kowalski is a beast. What we might miss — what we *do* miss in Harkins's portrayal — are his other qualities: his intelligence, his charm, his genuine love for Stella. Williams describes him

as "a richly feathered male bird" with "animal joy in his being." We need to see it, but we don't.

Also missing from the lead performances is the requisite sexuality. Dragon veteran Katie Anderson gives a respectable performance as Stella, though it would be nice to see an occasional crack in her cheery facade as well. She and Harkins both seem to understand, intellectually, that Stella and Stanley's relationship is based on a rough — sometimes violent — animal passion, but that understanding does not show in their bodies. Their moments of physical intimacy are embarrassing to watch, not because they are so graphic, but because they are so unconvincing.

Similarly, Troy Johnson provides the evening's best performance as Stanley's pal and Blanche's overmatched beau, Mitch. But when it comes time for him to lay his hands on Blanche in their final private scene, he is just not physically believable.

Over and over, the impression is that the actors are somehow intimidated by the material before them. Maybe they find the characters too distasteful to fully embrace; maybe they are inhibited by the physical proximity of the audience; maybe all of their mental efforts are concentrated on maintaining their accents and not tripping over each other on stage. Whatever the explanation, the results are disappointing.

The weakness of the production is even more surprising given its director. In her 2005 staging of "The Night of the Iguana" at the Pear Avenue Theatre, Jeanie K. Smith proved herself more than capable of handling the sultry, sordid side of Tennessee Williams. One is left to wonder whether she set out to create a kinder, gentler "Streetcar," or whether she was simply unable to coax the necessary passions from her lead actors.

Smith's supporting cast consists of Monica Colletti and Charles McKeithan as the Kowalskis' upstairs neighbors, Eunice and Steve, and Mary Lou Torre and Phillip Raupach in a variety of small roles. (Smith has compressed the cast from the original dozen to a bare-bones eight.)

Of the bunch, Colletti makes the strongest impression, though perhaps this is simply because she has more dialogue than the others. And Raupach, in the role of the paperboy, is the most miscast, trying with limited success to capture the mannerisms of a kid half his age. All four are competent performers, but their minor characters are merely pas-

sengers on this "Streetcar," and their best efforts have little effect on the overall show.

What: "A Streetcar Named Desire," presented by Dragon Productions

Where: Dragon Theatre, 535 Alma St., Palo Alto

When: Thursday-Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m., through Aug. 21.

Cost: Tickets are \$25 general, \$18 for seniors and \$16 for students.

Info: Go to dragonproductions.net or call 800-838-3006.