

9 JUL—  
17 AUG 2024

# MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY

ARTS CENTRE  
MELBOURNE



## A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

BY TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

DIRECTED BY ANNE-LOUISE SARKS

EDUCATION PACK – PART A

# Contents

- 3 Melbourne Theatre Company
- 4 About the play
- 6 Cast and creatives
- 7 Context and setting
- 10 Characters
- 12 Challenging content
- 13 Theatre styles
- 14 Elements of theatre composition
- 15 Design preview
- 17 Learn more

Throughout these notes, look out for these icons for opportunities to learn more:



Activity



Discuss



Read



Video

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**Editor** Krystalla Pearce

**Graphic designers** Helena Turinski, Sarah Ridgway-Cross

**Rehearsal photographer** Joshua Scott

**Cover photographer** Jo Duck

Melbourne Theatre Company acknowledges the Boon Wurrung and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which we work, create and gather. We pay our respects to all First Nations people, their Elders past and present, and their enduring connections to Country, knowledge and stories. As a Company we remain committed to the invitation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and its call for voice, truth and treaty.

# Melbourne Theatre Company

**At Melbourne Theatre Company we believe theatre is for everyone. We are Melbourne's home of live storytelling, producing an annual season of plays created for and about the world today.**



## **SOUTHBANK THEATRE**

Beyond the stage, we run a range of initiatives that support artist development, champion new writing, invest in future audiences and address underrepresentation across the industry.

## **OUR VISION**

To be recognised as one of the world's preeminent theatre companies, leading the cultural conversation and chosen as a favourite destination for Australians.

## **OUR PURPOSE**

To share remarkable stories that enable people to better understand the world around them.

## **Melbourne Theatre Company Headquarters Virtual Tour**

Walk the halls of Melbourne Theatre Company Headquarters in this virtual tour and explore the spaces where plays are rehearsed, sets are built, costumes are sewn and wigs are created one strand of hair at a time: [mtc.com.au/eduhub](http://mtc.com.au/eduhub)

# About the play



Director Anne-Louise Sarks and Nikki Shiels



## First thoughts

What sparks your curiosity after reading this introduction?

What are your predictions about the production?

What questions do you have?

*A Streetcar Named Desire* is one of the most critically acclaimed plays of the twentieth century. First produced and published in 1947, and set against the backdrop of post-war New Orleans, it is a timeless exploration of aggression, desire and deception.

Southern belle Blanche DuBois grapples with her shattered dreams and inner demons as she seeks refuge in the cramped apartment of her sister Stella and her volatile brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski. The delicate balance of power within the household teeters on the brink of collapse, exposing the vulnerability of the human condition.

*A Streetcar Named Desire* has been adapted into multiple film and television productions, from the 1951 film directed by Elia Kazan starring Vivien Leigh as Blanche and Marlon Brando as Stanley, to numerous pop culture references, such as *The Simpsons* episode “A Streetcar Named Marge”. The enduring relevance of the play lies in its exploration of universal themes and its iconic characters that continue to resonate with audiences today.

**[Tennessee] Williams created characters so large that they have become part of American folklore, transcending their stories and haunting us with their fierce, flawed lives.**

JOHN LAHR, *TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: MAD PILGRIMAGE OF THE FLESH*

## SCRIPT USE

Any version of the published script can be used for VCE Theatre Studies. Please note that there are small variations between published versions, but these variations will not impact your ability to analyse and respond to the text.

Melbourne Theatre Company's production uses the New Directions published version, Eighth Printing.

Please note that the original script contains language and references in dialogue, stage directions, and role descriptions, written at a time in history that do not reflect acceptable language and terminology today.

In consultation with the playwright's Estate, the Melbourne Theatre Company production utilises the following character names and references in lieu of what is originally scripted: "Gee Gee", "Flower Seller", and the "Entertainers".

## ATTENDANCE INFORMATION

This production contains theatrical haze effects, coarse language, mature themes, depictions of domestic abuse and sexual violence. For detailed information about the production's content, visit our production content guide.

## DURATION

Approximately 2 hours and 50 minutes including a 20-minute interval.



## Read the programme

Explore the digital programme for this production to read about the cast and creative team, and see more photos from the rehearsal room:  
[mtc.com.au/programmes](http://mtc.com.au/programmes)

***A Streetcar Named Desire* is an incredible play that is genuinely flooring. When I re-read the script, I was struck by the complex characters. I wanted to tell that story ... and understand what it would be like to put a female lens onto that play, because I have personally never seen a version of it directed by a woman.**

ANNE-LOUISE SARKS  
DIRECTOR



*A Streetcar Named Desire* in rehearsal

# Cast and creatives



**Gabriella Barbagallo**  
Neighbour / Nurse



**Kaya Byrne**  
Young Collector / Doctor



**Michelle Lim Davidson**  
Stella



## Read their bios

Explore the digital programme to read the biographies of the cast and creatives working on this production:  
[mtc.com.au/programmes](https://mtc.com.au/programmes)



**Stephen Lopez**  
Pablo



**Steve Mouzakis**  
Mitch



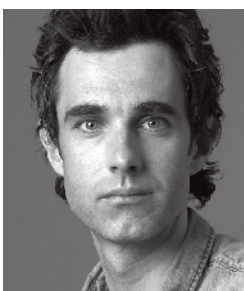
**Veronica Pena Negrette**  
Flower Seller



**Nikki Shiels**  
Blanche



**Katherine Tonkin**  
Eunice



**Mark Leonard Winter**  
Stanley



**Gareth Yuen**  
Steve



**Anne-Louise Sarks**  
Director



**Mel Page**  
Set & Costume Designer



**Niklas Pajanti**  
Lighting Designer



**Stefan Gregory**  
Music



**Amy Cater**  
Intimacy Coordinator



**Geraldine Cook-Dafner**  
Voice & Dialect Coach



**Nigel Poulton**  
Fight Director



**Joe Paradise Lui**  
Assistant Director



**Bianca Pardo**  
Assistant Set & Costume Designer

# Context and setting

## TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Thomas Lanier Williams was born in Columbus, Mississippi in 1911. His classmates at the University of Missouri started calling him Tennessee due to his Southern accent and his father's home state.

While he described his childhood in Mississippi as happy and carefree, this changed when his family moved to St. Louis, Missouri and his father began drinking heavily and his mother struggled with mental illness. His family moved 16 times in ten years and the young Williams began to look inward and write.

After attending three universities and a short stint working for his father, Williams moved to New Orleans. He fell in love with the city and it is the setting for *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

When *A Streetcar Named Desire* opened, Williams already had recognition as a playwright from his play *The Glass Menagerie*.

Described as 'the most autobiographical of American playwrights', many characters from Williams's own life appear in his plays.

There are elements of Williams's mother and sister in the character of Blanche and her struggles with mental illness. Williams was very close to his sister Rose who lived with schizophrenia, was institutionalised and ultimately underwent a lobotomy.

The character of Stanley has been connected to Williams's father as well as many of his romantic partners. These include the dancer Kip Kiernan as well as the boxer Pancho Rodriguez y Gonzalez. Pancho, like Stanley, was a jealous, possessive, alcoholic who struggled to control his emotions. Like Stella and Stanley, Tennessee and Pancho had a rocky relationship full of conflicting emotions.

Later in life, Williams continued to write depending more and more on drugs and alcohol, and living with mental illness. Williams died at 71 in a New York City hotel from an alcohol-related incident.



Tennessee Williams

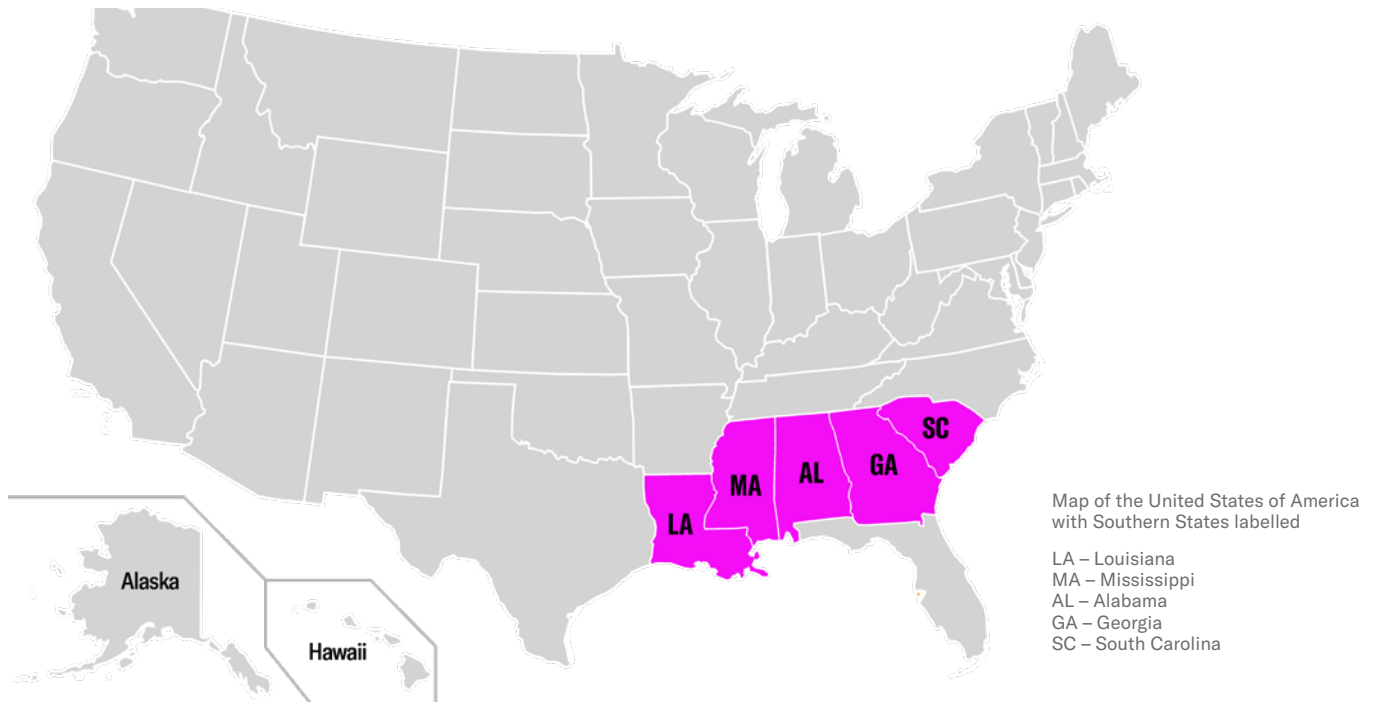
**Q. But surely you'll admit that there's been a disturbing note of harshness and coldness and violence and anger in your more recent works?**

**A. I think, without planning to do so, I have followed the developing tension and anger and violence of the world and time that I live in through my own steadily increasing tension as a writer and a person.**

**'THE WORLD I LIVE IN', TENNESSEE WILLIAMS INTERVIEWS HIMSELF**



Tennessee Williams, Burt Lancaster, Anna Magnani's secretary and Anna Magnani in Key West for filming of *The Rose Tattoo*. 11 April 1955.



## THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE PLAY

The United States of America, commonly known as the United States or US, is a country primarily located in the continent of North America. The US is a federation of 50 states, including Alaska (located in the northwest of the North American continent, next to Canada) and Hawaii (located in the Pacific Ocean, about 3,200km southwest of the USA mainland).

### Deep South

The Deep South is a cultural and geographic sub-region of the Southern United States. The term was first used to describe the states which were most economically dependent on plantations and slavery.

At the time of the play, the following states were considered the Deep South: Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina.

### New Orleans, Louisiana

*A Streetcar Named Desire* is set in New Orleans on Elysian Fields Avenue. There was an actual streetcar named Desire that ended at Desire Street in the Ninth Ward.

### Laurel, Mississippi

This is Blanche and Stella's hometown. They grew up on a 20-acre plantation home called Belle Reve, which means 'beautiful dream' and represents their upper-class status throughout the play.

Plantations are agricultural estates that grow crops like cotton. They were developed by British colonists and, at the time of the play, often used enslaved labour. The term plantation today still holds heavy connotations of America's slave trade, segregation, and the oppression of African American people.

### Columbus, Mississippi

Tennessee Williams's birthplace. The cultural and political context of the Deep South is present throughout Williams's writing.

### St Louis, Missouri

Tennessee Williams moved further north with his family when he was 8 years old. He was born Thomas Williams but was given the name Tennessee later in life due to his Southern accent and his father's birthplace.





1940s New Orleans

## 1940s NEW ORLEANS

*A Streetcar Named Desire* is set in New Orleans, Louisiana. Known as ‘the metropolis of the South’, New Orleans is one of the most unique cultural centres in the United States, with a distinct identity influenced by the city’s intertwining Afro-Caribbean and French heritages. It’s a progressive city known for its music, food, night life and iconic Mardi Gras celebrations.

The post-war New Orleans depicted in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is striving for economic recovery and growth. The men who have returned from war are re-establishing themselves and taking back the jobs that were being carried out by women and people of colour.

The particular neighbourhood depicted in Williams’s script is multicultural and working class. It is densely populated and hot, so the windows are always open and there’s not much sense of privacy. One can see and hear their neighbour’s business; and there’s a constant soundtrack from the piano bar down the road.



*A Streetcar Named Desire* in rehearsal



### Conveying context

After reading the information about 1940s New Orleans (and doing your own research to find out more), split into small groups and brainstorm how you might convey time and place in your own production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Prepare and present a 2-minute design presentation outlining your key design elements. You are welcome to incorporate sketches and/or image inspiration.



### Analysing text

Read through the first pages of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In groups, assign character. Research/seek guidance for any lines that are unclear.

Reflect upon the cultural context depicted and the racial signifiers within the stage directions and text. Are there any changes you would make to this scene as contemporary artists and for contemporary audiences? Rehearse, perform the scene, and then discuss your choices as a class.

# Characters



## BLANCHE

Stella's older sister and an English schoolteacher from Laurel, Mississippi. She arrives in New Orleans at the beginning of the play and shares with her sister that their family estate is gone.

Played by Nikki Shiels.



## Stella

Blanche's younger sister and Stanley's wife, about 25. She and her sister have an upper class heritage. She has moved to New Orleans and married a man from a lower class and is living in more humble conditions.

Played by Michelle Lim Davidson.



## Stanley

Stella's husband, about 30. He fought in World War II and is now an auto-parts salesman. He is passionately loving and violent towards his wife and suspect and harsh towards his sister-in-law.

Played by Mark Leonard Winter.



## Mitch

Stanley's friend and Blanche's love interest, about 30. He lives with his mother who is dying and is softer than Stanley and the other male characters.

Played by Steve Mouzakis



## EUNICE

Stella's friend, upstairs neighbour and landlady. Like Stella, Eunice accepts her husband Steve's affections despite his physical abuse of her.

Played by Katherine Tonkin.



## Acting skills

How might you embody the characters using voice, movement, facial expression and gesture?

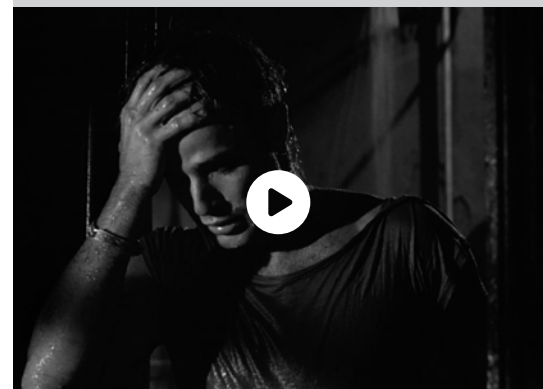


## Hear from the cast

Learn more about the characters in interviews with the cast at [mtc.com.au/eduhub](https://mtc.com.au/eduhub)



## A Streetcar Named Desire on screen



A scene from the 1951 film, directed by Elia Kazan when Blanche (Vivien Leigh) encounters Stanley (Marlon Brando) for the first time.

Describe Blanche and Stanley's movements and gestures.

What techniques does the film employ to depict Blanche's inner world?

Name something in this scene that surprised you and/or sparked your curiosity.



### STEVE

Eunice's husband and Stanley's poker buddy. He lives with his wife above Stella and Stanley and they are Stella and Stanley's landlords.

Played by Gareth Yuen.



### Pablo

Another poker buddy. He is Hispanic and his friendship with Stanley, Steve and Mitch represents their culturally diverse neighbourhood.

Played by Stephen Lopez.



### Young Collector/Doctor

The Young Collector is teenager who comes to the Kowalskis's door to collect for the newspaper when Blanche is home alone.

The Doctor appears at the end of the play to take Blanche to the asylum.

Played by Kaya Byrne.



### Gee Gee/Nurse

Gee Gee is a local woman who represents local street life. She observes Blanche's arrival at the beginning of the play and is also there at the end, when Blanche is losing her sense of reality and agency.

The Nurse accompanies the doctor at the end of the play.

Played by Gabriella Barbagallo.



### Flower Seller

A vendor who frightens Blanche towards the end of the play by issuing the plaintive call 'flores para los muertos', which means 'flowers for the dead'.

Played by Veronica Pena Negrette.



### Nikki Shiels interview



Watch the video above, then answer these questions about the play:

Nikki Shiels shares Blanche's line from the play 'I don't want realism, I want magic'. What does this suggest to you about Blanche's character?

From this brief introduction, can you connect this production to something that you have already seen?

What is a moment in the past that you find personally relevant today?

# Challenging content

***A Streetcar Named Desire* explores themes such as: romance, loneliness and depression, fantasy and delusion, gender and class. These themes include some challenging content outlined below.**



Rehearsal room set for *A Streetcar Named Desire*

## DOMESTIC & GENDERED VIOLENCE

Domestic violence occurs when one person in a family relationship uses violence or abuse to maintain power and control over the other person. Domestic violence includes behaviour that is physically, sexually, emotionally, psychologically or economically abusive, threatening, coercive or aimed at controlling or dominating another person through fear. Family violence is incredibly damaging and can be very upsetting to witness, both in reality and depicted dramatically.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire* we see moments of gendered domestic violence in that they are all inflicted on women by men, and usually by men towards their romantic partners. We witness this violence from Stanley towards Stella as well from Steve towards Eunice. At the end of the scene 10, we also witness a violent scene between Stanley and Blanche. The script suggests that there is a moment of sexual assault after the scene ends.

## MENTAL ILLNESS

Mental illness encompasses a wide range of health conditions that affect mood, thinking, and behaviour. For some people with mental illness, their symptoms make it difficult for them to function in social, public, work or family environments.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, we see mental illness manifest in numerous characters and in diverse ways. Blanche uses fantasy to escape her past traumas (e.g. the death of her husband, for which she blames herself, as well as the loss of her family wealth and the status associated with that wealth). An explanation for Stanley's violence is post-traumatic stress disorder from his time at war.

Tennessee Williams's writing often explores the troubles within his characters. It provides reasons for their behaviours without judging or excusing them.



### Safe and ethical work practices

Considering this challenging content, what are some safe and ethical work practices that the cast and creative team might consider during the rehearsal process? Visit the Melbourne Theatre Company website to see what other creative roles are contributing to this production.

# Theatre styles



Anne-Louise Sarks in rehearsal



## Naturalism

Using your scripts, identify three moments that you think clearly demonstrate naturalism. Look out for these moments when you are watching the play and note the conventions used.



## Social realism

Can you think of examples of social realism from other artforms, such as music, visual art, and literature?

## NATURALISM

Naturalism attempts to create the experience of real life on stage. Using all available theatrical elements (acting, narrative, design, and theatre technologies), its ultimate aim is to create an empathetic and emotional response in the audience.

Mel Page's set design has real elements and gives the audience access to spaces that are historically not seen in other productions of the play. It focuses on the interior life of the two apartments and less so on the street life surrounding them. Page's design includes a range of set practicals, such as plumbing, lighting as well as spot speakers to allow those spaces to become more realistic for both the actors on stage and audience.

The production is also stripped back in its period detailing. This is to heighten the audiences' focus on the characters and their relationships to each other. It also creates a distilled world that allows a lot of space for Williams's muscular and lyrical language to exist.

Anne-Louise Sarks' direction satisfies the offer of this twentieth-century classic while bringing it into this contemporary moment. The stripped-back nature of the design, the theatricality of the production and the casting choices all ensure that Sarks's production highlights the cyclical nature of the themes and issues explored in the play. The use of sound and lighting will further heighten the contemporary energy of the work and the female lens of the production.

## SOCIAL REALISM

Social realist theatre is set in actual places and recognisable environments. Alongside realistic and relatable plots, settings and characters, it often uses expressionistic theatrical devices, such as flashbacks or juxtaposed actions.

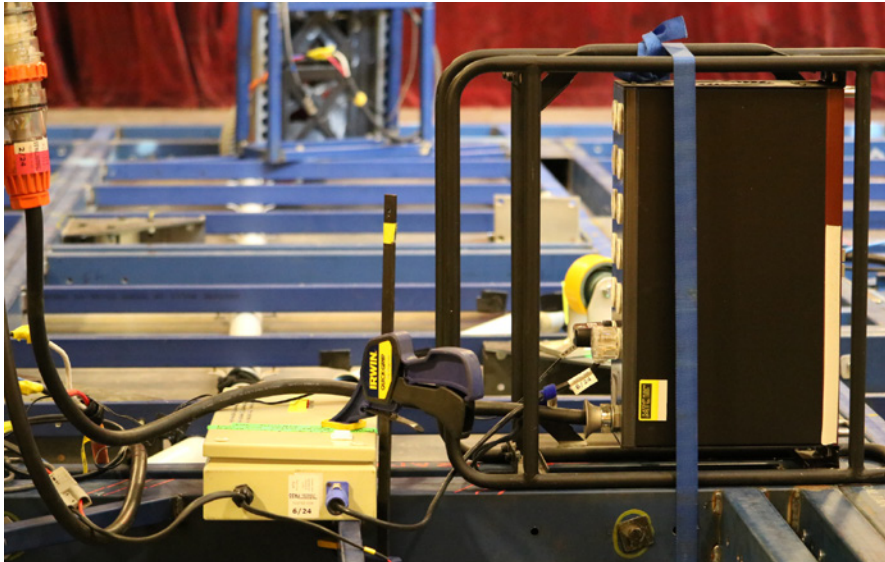
Inspired by the renowned playwrights Anton Chekhov and Henrik Ibsen, Tennessee Williams used social realism to tell stories of the mentally unwell and the lower classes. Alongside her realistic dialogue, Blanche's deteriorating mental state is depicted by changes in the soundtrack from realistic jazz to incoherent sounds that only she hears. The symbolic use of colour in Stanley's bright shirts and pyjamas further highlight his brutish and garish persona.



Thomas Hart Benton, *Poker Night* (from *A Streetcar Named Desire*) (1948), The Whitney Museum

# Elements of theatre composition

The following questions are intended to help you consider how *A Streetcar Named Desire* might be interpreted onstage through the lens of VCE Theatre Studies. Refresh your memory of the definitions with our elements of theatre composition flashcards.



Revolving set automation

**Much like all the work I try to make, this design is really testing the lines between the real and the theatrical.**

**ANNE-LOUISE SARKS  
DIRECTOR**

## COHESION

The set for *A Streetcar Named Desire* is on a revolve. How might this create cohesion across the scenes? Look at the design preview photos below for clues.

## MOTION

How might movement be used in Scene 3 (The Poker Night) to show the relationships between characters?

How do you think the revolve will inform motion within this production?

## RHYTHM

How do you expect the rhythm to be different in the opening and closing scenes of the play?

How does rhythm function in Williams's script? What are some specific directorial considerations for this play?

## EMPHASIS

How might the creative team emphasise the connections between the play's post war setting and contemporary society using direction and design?

## CONTRAST

Identify contrasting characters in the script and think about how their opposing qualities will be realised in acting, direction and design.

## VARIATION

How might moments of tension be created and broken in the play? Think about scenes with Blanche and Stanley in particular.

Think about how actors will manipulate energy and the use of space in moments of conflict, while maintaining safe and ethical work practices.

# Design preview



Michelle Lim Davidson, Nikki Shiels, Katherine Tonkin, Gabriella Barbagallo and Director Anne-Louise Sarkis



Rehearsal room set for *A Streetcar Named Desire*



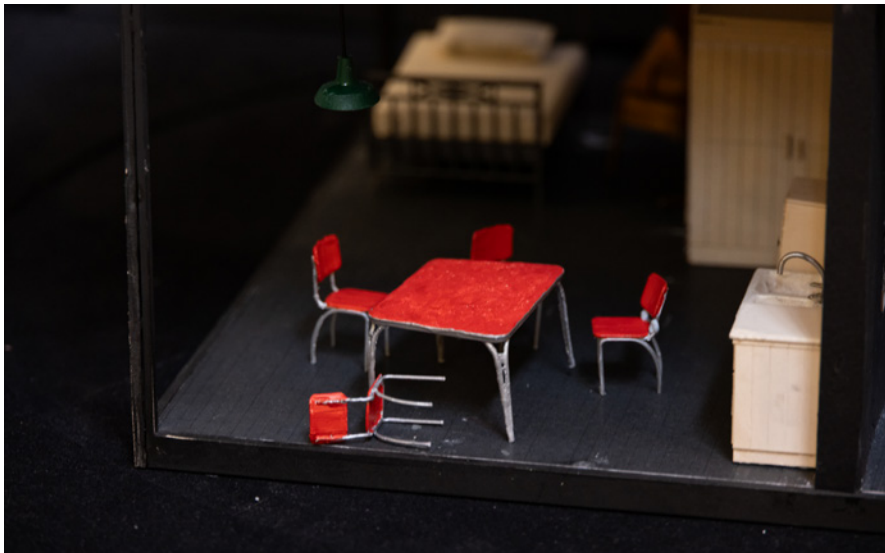
Stanley costume render by Set & Costume Designer Mel Page



## New Orleans and mood boards

Collect images of New Orleans architecture and fashion from around the period that *A Streetcar Named Desire* is set. You might do this digitally using Milanote (software used by many designers at Melbourne Theatre Company) or as a collage in your journal or on your classroom wall (as we do in the rehearsal room at Melbourne Theatre Company HQ).

Annotate each image to explain its connection to the play. Consider how the play depicts interior and exterior spaces and how the images you've collected might inform set, prop and costume designs for *A Streetcar Named Desire*.



Model box kitchen for *A Streetcar Named Desire*



Model box for *A Streetcar Named Desire*



Vincent van Gogh, *The Night Cafe* (1888). Tennessee Williams begins scene 3 of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 'The Poker Night' with vivid stage directions referencing this painting.



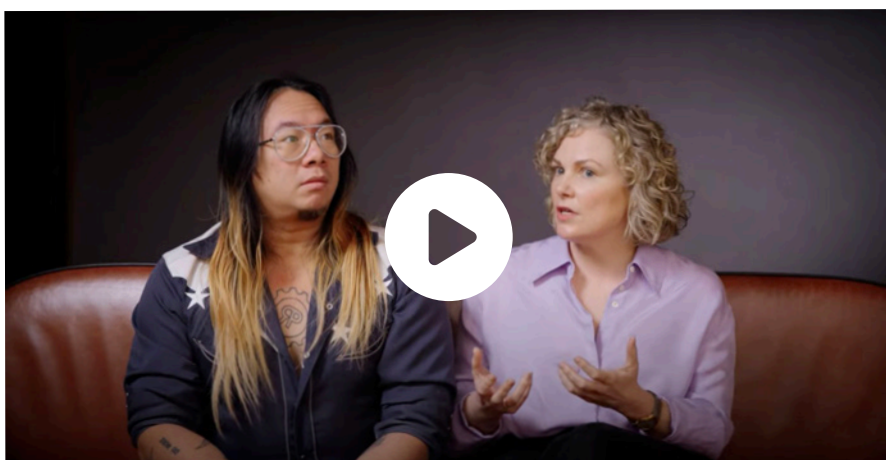
# Learn more



## Watch the trailer

Watch the video trailer for *A Streetcar Named Desire* and make predictions about how the team will bring this story to life onstage.

Watch the video at [mtc.com.au/eduhub](https://mtc.com.au/eduhub)



## Hear from the creative team

Hear from Director Anne-Louise Sarks and the team on why Tennessee Williams's masterpiece has lost none of its power to provoke and beguile.

Watch the video at [mtc.com.au/eduhub](https://mtc.com.au/eduhub)



## Download Part B

After you've seen *A Streetcar Named Desire*, download Part B of this Education Pack at [mtc.com.au/eduhub](https://mtc.com.au/eduhub) to read more from the cast and creative team, see production photos, and respond to analysis questions.

## SOURCES

Steven Ambrose, (2017) 'New Orleans in the Second World War', National WW2 Museum (<https://www.nationalww2museum.org>); William Archambeault, 'Tennessee Williams' Early Days in New Orleans,' New Orleans Historical, (<https://neworleanshistorical.org/items/show/957>); Cate Gory, *Vincent Van Gogh's The Night Cafe & Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire* ([deardigitaldramaturg.wordpress.com](https://deardigitaldramaturg.wordpress.com)); John Lahr, (2014) *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh*; MGM Documentary *New Orleans in 1940 – A Brief New Orleans History Lesson* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-0iKYQBUB8>); PBS *American Masters* (1994) 'Tennessee Williams: Orpheus of the American Stage' ([pbs.org](https://www.pbs.org)); Tennessee Williams, (1957) 'The World I Live In', The University of the South, New Directions Publishing Corporation.

## IMAGES

New York World-Telegram and the Sun staff photographer: Albertin, Walter, photographer; Tennessee Williams, Burt Lancaster, Anna Magnani's secretary and Anna Magnani in Key West for filming of *The Rose Tattoo*. 11 April 1955. The DeWolfe and Wood Collection. Florida Keys – Public Libraries, CC BY 2.0; *Canal Street New Orleans Traffic*, 1926, Keystone View Company, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons; Thomas Hart Benton, *Poker Night (from A Streetcar Named Desire)* (1948), The Whitney Museum; Vincent van Gogh, *The Night Cafe* (1888), Yale University Art Gallery.

Rehearsal photography by Joshua Scott and additional photography by Emily Doyle.