A Streetcar Named Desire

UPSTAGE
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THIS ISSUE OF UPSTAGE IS MADE POSSIBLE BY

JPMorganChase
Director, Edward Hall on book for a rehearsal of "A Streetcar Named Desire."
What attracted you to this play, and to the opportunity to direct it?
I think what attracts me to this particular play, at this particular moment in time, is that Tennessee Williams teaches us so clearly not to judge a book by its cover. He reveals his characters in this play as people who look at each other through their own flawed ego. That is the biggest human weakness; it's something we all share. We look at each other through the lenses of our own personality. We project things onto each other, and we misunderstand each other. Issues are complicated between people, and this play reminds us in a sort of ferociously uncompromising way not to do that. The reason that people discuss this play endlessly and argue about it is because there is no ultimate truth. There are different truths for each character, depending on which perspective you’re coming from. You cannot define exactly what the end of the play means, you can only describe the state that the characters arrive at. This is its genius, and at its center is a lady with such enormous courage, who is such a survivor.

Do you feel a personal connection to the work?
Reading about Tennessee, and learning about him and his life, you can never quite explain who he is because the moment someone does, it seems to me, he says something contradictory, deliberately. I think that’s part of the greatness of his work, is that he can’t quite explain himself; he can’t quite explain the people he writes. He’s never really explained any of his plays in detail, in the way he’s written about himself. In fact he’s said, “Let the plays speak for themselves.” I have a great difficulty describing myself, describing how I direct a play, why I direct a play, and what the whole process is. All I know is somewhere inside I enjoy investigating theatre because to me it’s investigating the human condition. That’s unendingly fascinating to me. This play, like all great works, you can’t put your finger on it, you can’t pin it down, you can’t pin him down. I think that’s also why I feel a closeness to it.

Are loneliness and death important themes in this play?
The crucial moment of the play is when Blanche says, “The opposite of death is desire,” and she describes her life at Belle Reve and this house dripping with death. She’s just realized that the funeral is some kind of way of masking or disguising the truth about what death is. It’s a horrifically graphic description of her experiences, which do, I think of course, connect psychologically with people. The opposite of death is desire. Desire is the thing you need to escape, to take you away from there. Which of course goes hand in hand with loneliness. Understanding the irony of her comment “The opposite of death is desire,” is an important part of it.
Is the world you created in the play, in 1947, very far removed from our present day reality?
No, not at all. We’re just moving into the McCarthy years; we’ve just finished a World War. We’ve got a lot of people coming back into society after serving in the army. They’re looking for jobs, looking to filter back in. I think if you look at where we are now, we’re just coming to the end of a big war, overall it seems to be a pretty similar time. So there are similarities for me, in the two moments in time. That’s not been lost on me. But I think what that’s done is made me more alive to the social and economic time that Tennessee was capturing. A new America begins, with many immigrants who were ferociously proud about being American.

How are you working with the design team to create the world of this play?
The set designer and I were thrown together very late in the day and he had a very good knowledge of the play. We had a small amount of very intense meetings, and I articulated to him what I thought the challenges of the design were and how I wanted a sense of the street, a sense of the public arena, while still somehow creating the claustrophobia of the apartment. Those two are in opposition to each other. He’s come up with a wonderful solution to that in the way he’s bridged walkways above the apartment, which lowers the ceiling height. We’ve got a design that’s practical in terms of the room and the objects in it. It feels lived in, but at the same time it goes with the psychological reality and naturalism of the writing. Because there are no walls in the apartment and because there’s a more surreal idea of the public landscape in the Quarter outside the apartment, I think I’m going to be able to embrace the more surreal aspects that Tennessee writes about — the things that he calls his “plastic theatre” (using all means non-verbal to express the subtext of the play). I think Robert Brill has done that wonderfully in the design — not forgetting the heat of that place. These are all obvious things, but they’re very important because they have to be there. It’s cramped and it’s hot. That in itself would strain the relationships between any three people, whoever they were, let alone these three. I want to try to flow one scene into another. We don’t need lights down, lights up to change the scene. You stay with a character or an action, and you don’t let go of the action or the drama. That’s what I’m going to attempt to do.

Do you find that Williams’s use of language has been important to you in terms of understanding who these people are?
Yes. They’re written from very different perspectives. There’s wonderful word play. It is like Shakespeare. There are four or five tricks I use when directing Shakespeare. One of them, if you’re an actor, is listening to the word or idea in the line or speech before or after you make it. It might change the idea. Tennessee does that. It’s a very similar technique. I hear a word and I change it to mean something else and then it’s changed to mean something else. It’s sort of like a chain of DNA that runs through the scene that gives the
dialogue such fluidity and movement. Stanley is very direct and doesn’t like ambiguity. He’s not into giving women compliments, he’s not into any of that stuff—none of the things that might be described as socially gracious. Blanche has a fantastic artist’s sensibility. She’s a teacher, she loves literature and poetry. She’s the complete opposite in all sorts of ways. She sees the poetic meaning in everything around her in a way that Stanley doesn’t. Then you’ve got Stella who’s got a little bit of both. She’s dealing with a lot of guilt throughout the play—guilt for having deserted her sister. It’s clear that she never told Stanley what happened to her sister. So, she’s kept quite quiet about her past. Then you have Mitch who’s interesting, because he’s much stronger than people give him credit for. He’s often a kind of "Mommy’s boy" victim. He’s a man of tremendous sensitivity. There’s a side of him that he’s not allowed to show in the male company he keeps.

**How did you become a director and what advice do you have for a young person who may want to direct?**

Well, the best piece of advice I give to anyone who wants to be a director is the only way to learn, is to direct. You’ve got to get the play, the actors and some people to come see it, even if it’s a room with four or five people in it. That’s what I did. I got a job as an assistant director at the Edinburgh Festival and that was my take-off point, but you’ve got to just keep directing. The more I do, the less I know. You can’t be too humble to do this. The technical side, anyone can learn. What you’re really getting in touch with is how you feel about the writing, the work, yourself and the relationship to the environment you live in. It’s like an extension of your daily life.

**Have you gained any new insights while working on this production?**

I think the thing I realized after rehearsing for a week is that there isn’t a single thing that’s been written about this play that’s been helpful in the direction of it. We’re in the business of finding out what the pulse is, what the heart is, the emotional heartbeat—moment to moment to moment.

**What do you hope the audience walks away with after seeing this production?**

I don’t know what they will take with them and that’s not for me to judge or control. I think the play asks that when you walk out of the theatre and you look back out into the world, and you observe somebody who seems to be somehow morally corrupt, that you look beyond that. You look a little harder into each other’s hearts to understand each other and see what makes us tick. You try to remove yourself from the way you judge other people and understand a little bit more about them by being selfless. Sometimes that’s a very hard thing to do, but it’s the definition of civilization. I think when we lose that and boil things down to the lowest common denominator—that’s when we end up with dictatorships and fascism. That’s when we get into trouble as a species.
An early pencil sketch of the set by Robert Brill -- the result of day 3 in the design process.
Why did you want to do this play?
I worked on a production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* seven years ago, and I learned that it’s an incredibly difficult play to design. Because the play has such a rich theatrical history, everyone seems to have an opinion about how it should be done—how it should be cast, how it should be directed, and how it should be designed. The biggest challenge is finding your own contemporary equivalent to Williams’s visual poetry.

When I was asked to design this production for Studio 54, I immediately felt that there was an opportunity to utilize the environment of Studio 54 and its own character—it’s own decaying decadence. It seems to be a perfect framework to capture the French Quarter’s sense of former grandeur. It afforded me a more site-specific quality to the design, and blurs the traditional distinction between where the audience ends and the stage begins.

How have you collaborated with the director and how do you plan to approach the design for this production?
I think the direction that we’ve taken allows us to enter into Blanche’s imagination—to create a kind of visual poetry by use of light, through the architecture.

The ground plan of the apartment was our first assignment. It sounds mundane, but the floor plan to this play is very complicated in terms of staging. If you look at almost any production of this play, you’ll probably find that it’s plan is derived from the original. It’s a tough assignment to reinvent—not too many people have broken it open. So Ed and I just had to hash through, scene-by-scene, discovering the complexities and logic of the apartment. Its very interesting to try and reinvent it, not just for the sake of reinventing it, but to allow the staging that’s inherent in the text work within our particular theatre space.

One of Ed’s key interests was how to incorporate
street life into the production. Like New York, it’s hard to escape the life of the French Quarter. It’s present everywhere, and offers very little privacy. That notion prompted us to merge both interior and exterior elements of the design, and ultimately ask the larger question, “Can this particular production withstand eliminating the walls of the apartment?”

How do we suggest the architecture without actual walls? This was a critical benchmark in the design because it allowed us to make choices that unified the architecture of both the theater and the set. The structural and architectural elements typical to the French Quarter--cast iron posts and balconies, shuttered windows--even ceiling fans would become the defining members of both interior and exterior, merging private and public space.

The original production was groundbreaking in its time. The real challenge is to interpret it in our own vocabulary, in our own terms, in our own times, which is true for any play or for that matter any form of design.

I was inspired by an incredible book of photographs called “Shadows of New Orleans.” It captures the way in which light plays across the many surfaces and architectural details of the French Quarter. Many are beautiful, and yet some are haunting. This too would become a central element of the design--approaching the surfaces of the set in the same manner that a painter approaches a canvas; allowing us to use shadow and texture to underscore the emotions and tone of Williams’ text. It’s all very rich--and definitely a world that is filled with both beauty and a mystery.

How will you capture the world of New Orleans in your design?
In my meetings with Ed, we talked about the heat of the...
The final 1/2" scale model of the Streetcar set --as seen from balcony.

Quarter and the compression of space. The lighting designer, Don Holder, will help us by creating the effect of shuttered light streaking across the space, especially when we enter into Blanche's imagination.

We also used fans as a way to breathe life into the design. There's one over each of the house boxes and two in the middle of the set. We also placed two or three off stage at various heights that don't relate to rooms in particular, but help to underscore the ambiance of the Quarter. It will help make the Quarter alive as opposed to static. It's a space that's full of life.

What are the architectural influences of the French Quarter?

The Quarter is an interesting hodge-podge in design, because it's a collage of both French and Spanish influence. The buildings were not originally designed with the cast iron galleries and the filigree ironwork that we commonly associate with the French Quarter. They were added many years later. Now you could hardly escape a room without feeling their presence.

Will you be incorporating a balcony into this set?

We've incorporated an exterior balcony that suggests a path to the other apartments upstairs. More importantly, it helps to contain the top of the apartment and serves to bring some of the exterior world into the interior of the apartment.

What suggestions do you have for a young person who might be interested in being a set designer?

To be quite honest, in college I was not a great student, but I think it's important not to underestimate the benefit of a really solid education, whether traditional or not. An education in theatre is important, but being an articulate designer with 'ideas' is ultimately more important. My comment to young designers is to realize your stake in the artistic community -- what do you have to contribute as contemporary artists? So my advice is to not stop learning. Explore everything, especially things that are going to make you really good thinkers. •
Can you start by telling us what a sound designer does nowadays, because it’s not just what we hear in the production. Right, well the first thing you should know is that I’m sort of acting as composer and sound designer for this production. In fact, that’s what I do generally. I’m a composer. I’m a hybrid composer/sound designer and there are only a handful of us in the art working, so the sound design and the music is seamlessly integrated and that’s the idea. I’m responsible for everything you hear in the production: the sound effects, the music (either finding or composing) and how the actors sound. I’ll be ‘miking’ the actors, for audibility and to stylize their voices, if we decide to do that. So, I’m responsible for all of those things. I’m acting as a music consultant, composer and sound artist.

That’s a great way for us to talk about what your work is going to be. In what way might you augment the actors’ voices? Well, for instance, much of the sound for this show is heard from Blanche’s perspective. So a lot of the sound is amplified unnaturally, or with a reverb to give an idea of what Blanche is experiencing psychologically. Also, the ambiance of street sounds in the Latin Quarter is such a large part of this production. I want to be able to have the recorded sounds married to some of the vocal sounds. By ‘miking’ some actors I’ll be able to stylistically blend them together better.

This script calls for so much sound. Wasn’t there a jazz band in the original? Right, I think in the original there was a live jazz band on stage. Tennessee really saw this as an opportunity to use sound in a way that wasn’t done on Broadway before, certainly in a psychological way and not in a realistic way – to really paint a portrait of what’s happening inside of Blanche. It was used in film more during that day, but it hadn’t been used in theatre.

How will you go about researching the jazz compositions? Ed Hall and I decided that we’d like an authentic sound that I could produce myself. There’s a certain style of
piano player I'm looking for. There was this man Jimmy Yancey who played this sort of unsophisticated blues piano in the forties; he's one of the 'boogie woogie' pioneers. Although his work wasn't as technically sophisticated as his contemporaries, there was an emotional sophistication to his work. In the transitions, I'll take some of that music and I'll make collages of it, by looping it and doing some electronic processing to it. Then I will combine them with street sounds to create an abstract collage to reflect the Latin Quarter and how it overtakes Blanche.

**What are those ambient sounds? Obviously, there's the streetcar, traffic and people's voices, but it sounds like the rough part of town.**

One of the things I'm going to do in the second week of rehearsal is assemble at least part of the cast into the studio and we're going to do an improvisation where I have them play the parts of street vendors and I'll have them do some arguments and various vocal sounds - yelling, whistling, etc. - in order to get some raw material. Ed also wants to give a sense of the river. So, we'll probably use some steamboat or barge sounds. Tennessee talks about the L and M tracks being an important presence in the apartment. That they live close to the train tracks says something about their social level. Tennessee is pretty specific about these sounds and what they symbolize. Trains are associated with Stanley and his sexuality and so often when Stanley enters we hear a big train sound. So, the train, the river, vendor sounds, cats and the sounds of the animals are all elements. One of the things I'm going to try to do in this production is have a progression in the sound score, so we start with more realistic, fun general street ambiances of New Orleans' Latin Quarter and then somehow manipulate it over the course of the production so it becomes the threatening sounds of the jungle that she hears in her head that overtake her. The whole play is a dialectic between the jungle and raw sexuality and Blanche's sense of decorum and manners.

**What kind of research do you have to do on a streetcar from 1947? The sound must be really arcane. How do you find it?**

There are libraries of sound. Sometimes I go out and record my own sounds. I have a variety of streetcar sounds that I got from Amsterdam. I think I'll probably use those for this production. I work partly with sound effects libraries and if I can't find something myself, I'll record it, or I'll do improv with actors. Now there are these great online databases where you
can search multiple sound effects libraries and find the best streetcar noises and listen to them online before you purchase them.

Can you talk a little bit about how you found yourself doing sound?
Well, I was always interested in music and I was an improvisational pianist plus, I acted in high school and was interested in theatre. When I went to college I got really interested in how I could marry my love of music with theatre. I had a great professor at Duke who told me about this field of sound design. From there, I started composing music for the productions and I was writing all of these Shakespeare scores and designing sound for all of these different productions using the technology available to me at the time, which was a four track tape deck. I was interested in electronic music and more abstract use of technology. And my senior year, Manny Eisenberg brought in the first of a series of Pre-Broadway tryouts to Duke University. One was a production of Long Day's Journey Into Night that Jonathan Miller directed with Jack Lemmon, Kevin Spacey and Peter Gallagher in 1986. Jonathan Miller needed transition music prior to coming down to Duke. So they were directed to me and I composed a little score of sounds and music for the transitions that they took with them to New York. So, as a 22 year old, I was already doing music for Broadway.

I was wondering if you had any advice for a young person who might be interested in composing for the theatre or designing sound landscapes?
Well, it’s interesting, because there’s been an explosion in technology and the way that music performers are using technology and I think that has lead to greater interest in sound and sound design as a field. People are able to very cheaply acquire the means to be able to do interesting sound work. Then you find the people’s work you admire and you try to contact them and see how they work. That’s one of the things I did when I got to New York. I was really interested in the work of this guy named David Tudor who wrote a lot of different scores for Merce Cunningham. I wrote him a letter after a performance and told him how I was so moved by his music and wanted to study with him. So, he called me and we met and talked about his music and what he was doing, and basically, he and other people I contacted said I already had the tools and the imagination to start a career, and I should just start to do it. So, with some great credits behind me, I just kept repeatedly knocking on doors and kept on bugging people until they would hire me.
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

THE LIFE OF AN AMERICAN MASTER

The author of twenty-five full length plays, Tennessee Williams is considered by many to be one of the greatest artists of the American Theatre. Williams produced dozens of short plays and screenplays, two novels, a novella, sixty short stories, over one-hundred poems and an autobiography. As a successful playwright, his career was greatly influenced by the events in his life. Using his own family and experiences as inspiration, Williams was able to develop some of the richest, most well known characters of the American Theatre.

Tennessee Williams was born Thomas Lanier Williams in Columbus, Mississippi, on March 26, 1911. His family life was marked by consistent tension and despair. His father, Cornelius, was a businessman who was known for his gambling and drinking habits. His mother, Edwina, considered a 'southern belle' was the daughter of a Southern Episcopal minister. The family lived for several years in Clarksdale, Mississippi, before moving to St. Louis in 1918. Tennessee had an older sister named Rose and a younger brother named Walter.

Growing up, Williams was close with his sister, Rose, who was an emotionally and mentally unstable child. By her early twenties, she was classified as a schizophrenic and was later institutionalized. Eventually she was given a lobotomy. Williams cared for his sister for much of her adult life, and his sister's condition devastated him. Throughout his life he was afraid that he would succumb to madness as well. Williams's play, The Glass Menagerie features a character, Laura, who is clearly modeled after his sister, Rose. Laura is crippled, shy, socially inept, and constantly under pressure from her oppressive mother to find a suitable husband.

While many of Williams' characters seems to represent members of his family, one family member in particular seems to be the obvious source for a reoccurring character in his plays. The oppressive mother from The Glass Menagerie, Amanda, and Blanche DuBois, from A Streetcar Named Desire both portray a hypersensitive and lonely Southern woman who is reminiscent of Williams' own mother. His mother, Edwina, was the epitome of a southern belle; she spent the fondest five years of her life in Mississippi enjoying card parties, dances, elaborate dinners, and the attention of her gentlemen friends. Her family was wealthy enough to allow Edwina to maintain an extensive social calendar, and she became very popular among the young men of her town. In A Streetcar Named Desire, this Southern belle character is Blanche, a sad woman clutching at life, holding on to her memories of a grand past that no longer exists.

Williams enjoyed an acclaimed career, winning two Pulitzer Prizes and four New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards among many other awards. Despite his professional success, William personal life was marked with a ten-year battle with depression. Towards the end of his life, he struggled with an addiction to prescription drugs and alcohol. On February 24, 1983, Tennessee Williams choked to death on a bottle cap at his New York City residence at the Hotel Elysee.

Works Consulted
Leverich, Lyle. Tom The Unknown Tennessee Williams.
Activities

BEFORE YOU GO TO THE THEATRE:

• Define perception. Define Truth.
• How does a person's perception of himself or herself affect their actions?
• As you watch the news or read your local paper, identify people whose perception of themselves is being contradicted.
• What do they believe to be the truth?
• What are the perceptions others have of them?
• What are some of the truths you identify about yourself?
• What are some common perceptions others have about you?

AS YOU WATCH THE SHOW:

• Notice when the truth of Blanche's character is called into question.
• How do the perceptions and misperceptions about the truth of her character affect her relationships with other characters?
• What examples in the play communicate the truth of each character: Blanche, Stanley, Stella and Mitch?
• Notice how the elements of theatre production (lights, set, sound, costume) explore a sense of truth vs. fantasy

AFTER THE SHOW:

• Write two short monologues, the first exploring the truths of how you see yourself. As in the play, A Streetcar Named Desire, there are questions regarding where truth ends and fantasy begins.
• In your second monologue, explore truths as you wish they were. Identify the setting, the type of music that would play in the background, and what the costume would look like.

Send your work to Roundabout, and we'll share it with the artists who created A Streetcar Named Desire.

Mail it to: Education Department
Roundabout Theatre Company, 231 W. 39th St., Suite 1200,
New York, NY 10018
Or email to: lindsaye@roundabouttheatre.org

The Plays of Tennessee Williams

Fugitive Kind (1937)
Spring Storm (1937)
Not About Nightingales (1938)
Stairs to the Roof (1941)
The Glass Menagerie (1945)
A Streetcar Named Desire (1947)
The Rose Tattoo (1951)
Camino Real (1953)
Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955)
In the Winter of Cities (1956)
Orpheus Descending (1957)
Sweet Bird of Youth (1959)
The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore (1962)
The Night of the Iguana (1962)
A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur (1978)
Vieux Carré (1978)
Clothes for a Summer Hotel (1980)
When you get to the theatre...

Below are some helpful tips for making your theatre-going experience more enjoyable.

**Ticket Policy**
As a student participant in Page To Stage or Theatre Access, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

**Programs**
All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films, perhaps some you have already seen.

**Ticket Price**

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**Ticket Price**

- **SOLD OUT**
- **FULL**
- **ORCH**

**Programs**

- **STUDIO 51**
- **254 WEST 3TH STREET**

**Curtain**

**Thank you for your cooperation. ENJOY THE SHOW!**

**Audience Etiquette**
As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the restroom for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.

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