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A Streetcar Named Desire

by Winnie McCroy
EDGE Editor
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In the shadows of the Brooklyn Bridge, the newly-renovated St. Ann's Warehouse sizzles with the Tennessee Williams classic, "**A Streetcar Named Desire**," transferred from London's Young Vic Theatre. The acclaimed production by director Benedict Andrews is very tight, despite its three-hour run time, and presents a raw, brutal new staging.

From the moment she stumbles into Elysian Fields trembling like a flower, Gillian Anderson steals the show as Blanche DuBois. She's on the verge of a breakdown, but still manages to add a strut to her step that shows she's not "the plain sort" her sister Stella may be. Anderson fits the bill perfectly as a woman

who might be reaching the end of her saleable days. But she preens and flirts like a debutante at her coming out -- part of the artifice that Stanley abhors.

As the poker game begins, Blanche quips to Stanley, "I can't imagine any witch of a woman casting a spell on you" while smoothing lotion onto her legs. One look at these exquisite getaway sticks is enough to evoke his brutal desire, "like the rattletrap streetcar" that brought her here.

But it's Blanche's sexual indiscretions with men that led to her to this place, dismissed from her teaching job and run out of Laurel for her appetites. Sex becomes her solace after her first husband's suicide, when Blanche catches him with another man.

Anderson's Southern accent is flawless, which can't always be said about her co-star Vanessa Kirby as Stella, who sometimes presents her clipped English inflection rather than the buttery Southern drawl the role demands. Besides these minor slip-ups, Kirby does a fine job as a woman inflamed with love for her hotheaded husband, especially in the closing scene, where she howls in pain as her sister is being taken away.

Powerhouse Ben Foster plays her antagonist Stanley Kowalski with an everyman violence that almost surpasses Marlon Brando in the role. His intensity is bullish, right down to the broken china. But it's his vulnerability, especially in the scene where he cries and howls for Stella, that elevates him from mere caricature.

As Mitch, Corey Johnson is a big, burly guy whose fascination with Blanche turns to scorn upon hearing of her sordid past. When he finally pushes her to the bed saying, "You're not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother," you know that her last chance at salvation by marriage is gone. At this point, she is akin to the Lily Bart character Anderson played in "The House of Mirth."

Sarah-Jane Potts shines in the small role of upstairs neighbor Eunice Hubbel, saddled with her own abusive husband, Steve (Mark Letheren), who has the manner of a young George Carlin. Here's hoping this leads to

the tiny cot in the kitchen where Blanche sleeps. Interestingly, the set includes a bathroom, which gets a lot of use -- something you rarely see on stage.

Scenic designer Magda Willi must have a huge budget for replacing props, because just about everything that enters the Kowalski household ends up smashed to pieces. It's messy and unpredictable and dangerous -- a lot like life.

Big kudos to costume designer Victoria Behr for her selections here, especially where Blanche is concerned. The collection of sequined dresses and furs that spills out of Blanche's suitcase throughout the show epitomizes the character -- a jangled, bespangled thing, a little dated, and not very well-suited to the steamy climate of New Orleans.

From Blanche's lacy undergarments to her bold red kimono, from her gold heels and purse to her bright yellow dress with black polka-dots, from the monstrosity of a red tulle full-length number she dons in Act Two to her dated pink cotillion frock, we can see the decline of an upper-crust Southern belle into a woman grasping at any intimacy she can find. Behr even surprises with some of Stanley's choices, among them the brightly-patterned Hawaiian shirts that he wears with khaki cargo pants.

The action leads up to the brutal scene where Stanley rapes Blanche, while Stella is in the hospital having his baby. Broken down and completely at loose ends, Blanche is blindsided by the arrival of the doctor and matron from the asylum that the Kowalskis are sending her to. She has cast the last of her pearls before swine, and suffers the utter breakdown of the human spirit.

Anderson ends up prone on the floor in this excellent, famed "descent into madness" scene, with a beefy matron holding her down. Her final redemption comes when she begs the doctor to let her walk out on her own accord, uttering that famous last line, "Whoever you are, I have always depended upon the kindness of strangers." As she walks off the platform with her keepers, she circles the audience and exhorts one last final measure of sympathy, pity and kindness from us strangers, as well.

"A Streetcar Named Desire" has been extended through June 4 at St. Ann's Warehouse, 45 Water Street in Brooklyn. For tickets or information, call 718-254-8779 or visit <http://stannswarehouse.org/current-season/>

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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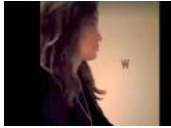
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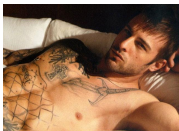


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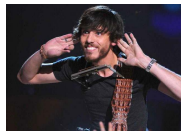
Solange Knowles, Beyonce's younger sister, is always good for some Met Gala drama.

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