

Learner Resource 4 Critical responses

On the Young Vic production, starring Gillian Anderson, 2013

Andrews [the director] honours Williams in not making it easy to take sides. There is no mistaking Williams's identification with his heroine. Yet there is no totally liking her either. And no denying the dramatist's bedazzlement by the brutal Stanley Kowalski. Gore Vidal thought that the character of Kowalski 'changed the concept of sex in America. Before him, no male was considered erotic.'

Susannah Clapp, *Observer*

Magda Willi's in-the-round design makes it clear that no one has a monopoly on the truth. [...] This is a tipsy arena which no single account can pin down. It is also a place in which the more characters tell, the more they conceal. The rectangular space – an apartment without walls – looks open but is actually made up of hiding places. The audience eavesdrop on characters who are themselves eavesdroppers.

It is part of the brilliance of *A Streetcar Named Desire* that while everyone fibs away, everyone delivers some truth.

Susannah Clapp, *Observer*

However, the real test of any production of Williams's play is whether it allows you to see each character's point of view. If Blanche is simply played as a cracked Southern belle and Stanley as a coarse brute, the play descends into melodrama.

Michael Billington, *Guardian*

The action is set in present day New Orleans, with great blasts of tumultuous rock music by the likes of Jimi Hendrix and Chris Isaak. [...] All this might sound like a tricky directorial ego trip but the effect is to make us see a familiar play with fresh eyes, as if we are experiencing it for the first time. We often stage Shakespeare in modern dress, Andrews seems to be saying. Why not Tennessee Williams too?

Charles Spencer, *Daily Telegraph*

The updating to the present sits oddly with a play that talks of period bandleaders like Xavier Cugat and where the feel is of an America on the verge of postwar economic expansion. In the urge to make the play seem urgent and immediate some of Williams's poetry and humour gets lost.

Michael Billington, *Guardian*

When Stanley is on top her, passed out on the bed, he scrabbles furiously through the multiple layers of skirt in her pink princess-dress like a dog digging for a bone [...] Stanley's cruelty to Blanche is horribly crystallised by the fact that in this production he offers to return her precious Chinese lantern by contemptuously upending the pedal bin in which it has been dumped and dirtily desecrated.

Paul Taylor, *Independent*

The play is written on this borderline between the real and illusion: the fundamentals of theatre. The mythic is one space of theatre, and the tangible is another – and Stanley might represent that more animal presence and Blanche the more illusory presence.

Benedict Andrews, director of Young Vic production, quoted in *Independent*



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On the Donmar Warehouse production, starring Rachel Weisz, 2009

Stunningly, the young boy who comes collecting for charity, whom she kisses full on the mouth, is played by the same actor (Jack Ashton) who materialises as her dead husband. You suddenly realise that in these episodes, Williams is really writing about homosexual promiscuity, and Blanche is much less of a woman than a sexual butterfly with severely clipped wings.

Paul Taylor, *Independent*

Ashford's production over-externalises Blanche's dreams and memories: we see not once but many times the husband whom she discovered with another man and who subsequently shot himself. This strikes me as gratuitous since it spells out Blanche's inner tensions.

Michael Billington, *Guardian*

At the end, each of the characters is differently undone by Blanche's departure – Mitch stares vacantly into what was once her bedroom; Stella, agonised, clutches her baby; Stanley embraces Stella as if he could hug his way to a new start. Blanche has changed them all with her turbulence.

Susannah Clapp, *Observer*

Streetcar is one of those unrelentingly claustrophobic 20th century U.S. plays, so out of keeping with that country's outward optimism yet suggestive of the efforts some Americans have to make simply to stay afloat.

Quentin Letts, *Daily Mail*

Someone once defined tragedy as being when both sides are wrong. And I would say that's absolutely true in this case. There's no good guy; everyone is human and everyone is flawed, but there are some that have more tenderness than others. [...] I have never come across a female character that is written with Blanche's level of complexity, in that she's vulnerable, she's pathetic, she's a monster, she's nasty, she's tender, she's kind – she's so many things that you never know quite what she's going to do next.

Rachel Weisz, quoted in *Daily Telegraph*

