

WILLIAMS
A Streetcar Named Desire

*

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CHAPTER ONE

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE – THE BROADWAY PREMIERE AND BEYOND

After highly successful tryouts in Boston, New Haven, and Philadelphia, *Streetcar* opened on 3 December 1947 at the Barrymore Theatre and almost immediately entered the world of mimesis and memory. Thomas P. Adler claimed that Williams's play "may arguably be the finest play ever written for the American stage."¹ Running for 855 performances over two years, *Streetcar* was the first play to capture the Pulitzer, Donaldson, and New York Drama Critics' Circle awards. Williams received a thirty-minute ovation on opening night, and was greeted by Howard Barnes "as the Eugene O'Neill of the present period."² Louis Kronenberger hailed *Streetcar* as "the most creative new play . . . the one that reveals the most talent, the one that attempts the most truth." Not surprisingly, *Streetcar* quickly became a staple on the world stage, one of the major theatrical experiences and experiments of the twentieth century. In a Public Broadcasting Service interview, Richard Seyd of San Francisco's American Conservatory Theatre estimated that in its first fifty years (1947–97) *Streetcar* received at least 20,000 performances, doubtless an understatement.³ More accurately, playwright Robert E. Lee (*Inherit the Wind*) affirmed that "There are very few nearly perfect plays. *Streetcar* is one of them. It is indigenous to the speaking theatre."⁴ Another playwright, William Hauptman, explained why: "Everything about *Streetcar* is beautifully, uniquely theatrical – right down to the title."⁵ Williams's play powerfully influenced the way theatre has been performed in the United States and the world, ushering in new performance styles, launching acting careers, and foregrounding the psychic life of its self-fashioning creator. In an interview on 2 May 1958, Williams told Robert Rice "*Streetcar* said

everything I had to say. It has an epic quality that the others [Williams's plays] don't have."⁶

Certainly *Streetcar's* subject matter partook of epic daring. The play invited and has rewarded risk, testing and teasing a host of mythologies and ideologies – sexual, political, critical. Tenaciously, *Streetcar* is a play of sexual politics. Its language, both blunt and luminous, courted taboo subjects – nymphomania, homosexuality, polysemous desire. *Streetcar* defined desire in 1947 and refines it with each succeeding decade of performance. According to C. W. E. Bigsby, "Sexuality was potently at the core of the lives of all its principal characters, a sexuality with the power to redeem or to destroy."⁷ Through *Streetcar* Williams scripted androgyny for generations, celebrating the male form as sexual icon while boldly interrogating female desire, and rejoicing simultaneously in the seduction of both genders. *Streetcar* flaunted censorship, and still does in the theatre and in the academy, defying any boundaries around intimacy or gender valorization. Megan Terry, who wrote the first rock musical, *Viet Rock*, honored *Streetcar* as a "feminist play"⁸ while John Clum and David Savran read it in terms of the literature of masculinization.⁹

If *Streetcar* was bold sexually, it was never tame politically. In 1947, Harold Clurman emphasized that *Streetcar's* "impact at this moment is especially strong, because it is virtually unique as a stage piece that is both personal and social."¹⁰ For Williams the one was inscribed in the other. In many ways, *Streetcar* has been a radical work, challenging status-quo thinking. As Rochelle Owens notes, "What Williams does is to stunningly dissect the psychological habits and fantasies that the American middle class has about itself."¹¹ Marxist interpretations and performances in Communist-sympathizing societies have released *Streetcar's* subversive message and mechanisms of revolt. In a production of *Streetcar* by Seattle's General Company in July 1991, Blanche was contextualized for the 1990s. As the playbill proclaimed, Blanche is "anyone who has ever suffered unjustly from a world suddenly gone wrong. She is the bag lady you scurry past on your way to work. She is every AIDS patient abandoned by a misunderstanding

society. Blanche is you. Leave here tonight elated, enraged and informed.”¹²

Unquestionably, Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski have taken up residence in world theatre and culture. They are Williams’s most colorful, memorable yet indeterminate creations. In fact, Blanche, according to Nancy Tischler, may well be Williams’s “finest creation.”¹³ Yet in performance and criticism Blanche has been embroiled in contradictions, ambiguities. On the positive side, she has been enshrined as the guardian of the arts, a hallowed representative of the Old South, a secular saint. Dan Isaac, for example, canonizes her as a “sexual Joan of Arc, who listens to the voices of her body, she is a prophet, and poet, morally superior to her adversaries.”¹⁴ Negatively, she has been branded a nymphomaniac, a liar, an infectious source of destructive feminine desire. According to Walter Davis, Blanche plays hardball in a game of sexual politics to gain control.¹⁵ Stanley, too, has been fixed in *Streetcar* dichotomies by directors and critics alike. He vacillates from absolutes to contradictions as the jubilant and “gaudy seed bearer” and keeper and the interpreter of Law to the apelike proponent of a cruel industrial age, the fiery destroyer of the beautiful things of this world. Praising the “*gaudy seed bearer*,” Joseph Wood Krutch, for instance, claimed that Stanley’s “virility, even orgiastic virility, is the proper answer to decadence.”¹⁶

Challenging Blanche-and-Stanley dichotomies, critics have valorized the contradictions that Williams himself had sewn into the roles. Blanche is both moth (spirit) and tiger (flesh). Like Stanley, she can be aggressive, wily, controlling. Thomas P. Adler stresses that there is “a Blanche side to Stanley,” too.¹⁷ Kowalski lays claim to the contraries of his representation – brutishness as well as tenderness; he carries his own set of metaphors and illusions – colored lights and a flag of red pajamas. If Blanche is both Madonna and Venus, Stanley is Pan-Dionysus¹⁸ and protector of the hearth. Inescapably, these two characters embody Williams’s androgyny incarnated in the *Streetcar* script. Not surprisingly, the playwright intentionally invited comparisons between himself and Blanche, asserting “I can identify completely

with Blanche . . . we are both hysterics,”¹⁹ yet in a letter to his agent Audrey Wood, he subsequently, and more fully, confessed: “I was and still am Blanche . . . [but] I have a Stanley side in me, too.”²⁰ Ironically enough, Georges-Michel Sarotte claimed that “Stanley Kowalski is the Other; he is what Williams is not but would like to be.”²¹

Streetcar's magic resides not only in Williams's social/political ideas and in his characters but also in the provocative, new dramaturgy that he had introduced two years earlier through *Glass Menagerie*. Labeled “Williams plastic theatre,” “stylized realism,” or “psychological realism,” *Streetcar*'s dramaturgy departed from conventional realism (though not from its Chekhovian heritage and subtleties) with its traditional, unfolding linear plots assuring neat, comfortable closure. Unfamiliar with and unfriendly to such a theatre, early critics misguidedly catalogued Williams's drama as “episodic,” “disjointed,” “loose.” These reviewers failed to see that *Streetcar* innovatively presented a theatre of interiority, converting Blanche's fluctuating mental states into stage action. *Streetcar* staged the disintegration of Blanche's mind and its impact on those around her, including the audience. As Brenda Murphy put it, “The basis . . . for the production was the objectification of . . . subjective reality . . . encoding Blanche's memories, inner life, and emotions [into] stage language.”²² *Streetcar* looked back to Elmer Rice's *Adding Machine* (1923), Pirandellian fantasy, and O'Neillian myth and forward to Brechtian disruptions and Adrienne Kennedy's surrealist nightmares of the 1960s and 1970s. Williams's dramaturgy reflects the fascination with introspection shaped by the times – the disruption of American society by great social and political upheavals, Freudian theories, and Kinsey's sexual data.

Yet even though Williams was intimately invested in Blanche's hallucinatory stages, his expressionism was mediated through realism. One of *Streetcar*'s great paradoxes is that it subverted realistic theatre and at the same time was rooted in the behaviorism of Kazan's Group Theatre techniques. In Williams's theatre, then, realism, expressionism, and naturalism coalesce to (re)present Blanche's illusions, thus

accounting for the overwhelming anxiety in the plot. As Ronald Hayman rightly admitted, “None [of Williams’s plays] had more tension released into them than *Streetcar*.”²³ The ultimate source of that tension can be attributable to what Anne Fleche calls the “restless discourse of desire, that uncontainable movement between inside and outside, soul and body.”²⁴ Like his characters, Williams’s dramaturgy of desire remains indeterminate.

STREETCAR – A COLLABORATION IN THE ARTS

Streetcar became the success it did because of the almost unprecedented (in American or for that matter world theatre) blending of diverse talent and extraordinary cooperation among playwright, producer, director, designer, composer, and cast. The contribution of each individual made the Broadway premiere possible and evolutionary. No one artist functioned autonomously. The working methods behind such collaborations were tried and tested in over three months of rehearsals and in tryouts in Boston, New Haven, and Philadelphia. During these months of establishing a performance style *Streetcar* became the most widely admired work ever done on the American stage up to that time.

The producer – Irene Selznick

Making her Broadway debut as a producer with *Streetcar*, 40-year-old Irene Selznick – the daughter of movie mogul Louis B. Mayer of MGM and the wife of David O. Selznick – was one of the powerhouses behind the play. *Streetcar* was only her second attempt at producing; her first play, *Heartsong*, was a flop. She had the honor of being the “first woman to produce a play winning both the coveted Pulitzer Prize and the Drama Critics’ Circle Award.”²⁵ A shrewd businesswoman, Selznick knew the value of a hot commodity presented to her by Williams’s agent Audrey Wood. Deeply committed to

Streetcar, Selznick invested \$25,000 of her own money in the \$100,000 production,²⁶ with Cary Grant and three other investors supplying the remainder.²⁷ Commenting on the enormous risk Selznick took with the play by comparing her work with that of her husband David, who had produced *Gone with the Wind*, New York theatre juggernaut Billy Rose pointed to the problems she would face on Broadway:

The whole production of *Streetcar* won't have cost as much as one of his sets in *Gone with the Wind*. There will be no one in the cast who can draw 10 customers a night. Nothing will be riding but talent and know-how. Out front will be the regular assortment of first-night sourpusses and professional runners-down. Irene will be rolling square dice – no Clark Gables or million-dollar advertising campaigns, no buffalo stampedes or bang-up earthquakes. And she'll have to hit her dice up against a brick wall – the New York dramatic critics.²⁸

Nonetheless, Selznick and the other investors were amply rewarded. *Streetcar* paid for itself in three months, with nearly two years of unencumbered profits afterwards. Selznick, moreover, sold the movie rights to Warner Brothers for a considerable profit. Responsible for negotiating terms with director Elia Kazan, Selznick may have given in too much, being new to the job of producer, but she thereby ensured the stunning success of the production.

Selznick took an active role in every facet of production. She hired designer Jo Mielziner and costumer Lucinda Ballard, and approved the sketches these two artists provided as well as the revisions Williams did for Kazan. Jean Melgan complimented Selznick for achieving “a feat that seasoned old-timers dream about. Her show is a perfect artistic integration of setting, acting, and script.”²⁹

The director – Elia Kazan

Like many playwrights of the 1940s and 1950s, Williams wanted Elia Kazan to direct his play. At first Kazan was unwilling, yet after much

persuasion Wood and Selznick convinced the 38-year-old director to sign on. Kazan shrewdly negotiated one of the best deals “any New York director ever received,”³⁰ earning 20 percent of the take for a play that was “a million dollar property” and getting star billing: “Irene Selznick Presents Elia Kazan’s Production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.” Kazan was one of the most influential directors (of stage and film) in the 1940s and 1950s with such credits as *Death of a Salesman* and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. During the Boston tryouts, Kazan recognized the enormous earning power of the play. As Wood reports, “Gadge turned to Tennessee one night during a performance and whispered: ‘This smells like a hit!’ Further events proved that Kazan had delivered the understatement of the decade.”³¹ Williams regarded Kazan as the guardian angel behind the script: “I don’t think any of my plays are complete without a supernatural talent.” In *Streetcar* it was Kazan’s direction that was supernatural.³² Kazan truly had extraordinary skills. He was intimately immersed in every phase of *Streetcar* from casting and directing to designing sets, planning light cues, choosing music and colors for costumes. In fact, after Williams approved Marlon Brando to play Stanley, he left the rest of the casting to Kazan, or to Selznick.³³ As the playwright gratefully admitted, Kazan was the “one-man theatre that brought *Streetcar* before the widest audience possible.”³⁴

Kazan’s background prepared him for his diverse contributions. In the 1930s he was a member of the Group Theatre where he directed as well as acted, working closely with Lee Strasberg and Harold Clurman (who directed *Streetcar* after Kazan left the play in 1949). Like the founders of the Group, Kazan had an unshakable sense of theatre as a social agency, a powerful medium to foreground ethical and moral problems. Kazan’s sociology of theatre was right for the time – late 1947 – since it evolved from the great domestic and global conflicts (the Depression and World War II) that shaped the hopes and fears of Americans. Yet Kazan successfully modified his strong sense of realism to accommodate the intensely psychological fabric of Williams’s play. In 1947 Kazan co-founded, with Cheryl Crawford

and Robert Lewis, the Actors Studio, which, like the Group Theatre, taught a Stanislavskian naturalistic style of acting “turning psychological events into behavior.”³⁵ Out of the Actors Studio came such stars as Marlon Brando, Geraldine Page, and James Dean. Kazan was highly and justly regarded as an actor’s best mentor.

Brenda Murphy has claimed that “the relentless and climactic pace Kazan maintained . . . was considered the strongest element of his signature on Broadway during the late forties and early fifties.”³⁶ It was Kazan’s forcefulness that Williams valued most. When Williams learned that Kazan wanted to revise the *Streetcar* script, the playwright wrote him: “I’m sure a lot of good will come out of consultation between us . . . The cloudy dreamy type, which I admit to being, needs the complementary eye of the more objective and dynamic worker. I believe you are also a dreamer. There are dreamy touches in your direction which are vastly provocative but you have the dynamism my work needs.”³⁷ In consulting with Kazan on *Streetcar*, Williams sent the following letter, excerpted from Kazan’s *Life*, on how the director needed to approach the play and the characters. Of all the exchanges between playwright and director, this letter is undoubtedly key to the performance of *Streetcar*:

It [*Streetcar*] is a tragedy with the classic aim of producing a catharsis of pity and terror and in order to do that, Blanche must finally have the understanding and compassion of the audience. This without creating a black-dyed villain in Stanley. It is a thing (Misunderstanding) not a person (Stanley) that destroys her in the end. In the end you should feel – If only they had known about each other.³⁸

The “consultation” between Williams and Kazan begun with *Streetcar* lasted more than twenty years, with Kazan directing four other Williams works – *Camino Real*, *Baby Doll*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth*.

Reviewers lavishly praised Kazan’s achievement in *Streetcar*. John Mason Brown exclaimed that Kazan’s direction was “brilliantly creative . . . an achievement of unusual and exciting distinction” while

Edwin H. Schloss of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* asserted: “Elia Kazan’s direction has sensitivity, thrust, poetry and an almost savage sincerity” – just the admixture of dreaminess and dynamism Williams sought. Jack O’Brian heralded Kazan as a “wonder lad” whose “job was to establish the mood of Williams’ writings, understand his pace, characterization, and put all the components into a single dramatic piece . . . and he more than any other person except the author is to be credited with the play’s compassionate commotion.”

Kazan’s impact on the production was more than dynamic; it was sweepingly profound. He encouraged Williams to make more than 100 changes in the script, including cuts, altering the opening (in an earlier version Blanche meets the blind Mexican woman in Scene 1), and emphasizing more naturalistic details. Kazan changed Blanche’s Della Robbia blue dress for a plain white one. The differences between Kazan’s *Streetcar* and Williams’s are the differences between the acting copy of the play published by Dramatist Play Service and the reading copy published in vol. III of *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*. Owing to Kazan’s influence on the script, Murphy bestows on him the title of Williams’s collaborator – “the Williams–Kazan relationship was central to some of the best work that either man did.”³⁹ As Thomas Pauly admits, “Williams created the characters and Kazan brought them to life.”⁴⁰

Kazan’s concept of *Streetcar* was shaped by the manifestoes of the Group Theatre and most carefully articulated in the *Notebook* that he kept before and during rehearsals (August 1947).⁴¹ A series of working notes, Kazan’s *Notebook* (hereafter *N*) was never intended for publication, but is the most valuable window to his ideas about the themes and characters of *Streetcar*. In directing *Streetcar* Kazan foregrounded the idea of social conflict energized through mighty opponents. Stella, for example, becomes the field of battle over which Stanley and Blanche fight. While Kazan labeled *Streetcar* “a poetic tragedy,” he also linked it to “classical tragedy,” as Williams did, with Blanche as the protagonist. Nevertheless, Kazan read any Aristotelean notion of tragedy through his Stanislavskian, naturalistic perspective.

Privileging the swelling undercurrents of naturalism he detected in *Streetcar*, Kazan portrayed Williams's characters in behavioral terms as social types translated for the stage. For each major character, therefore, Kazan identified his/her "spine," or motivational force, that the actor was to use as a yardstick of his/her performance. His behavioral analyses tacitly dovetailed with Williams's own creative process: "My characters make my play . . . I always start with them."⁴²

As Williams did, Kazan read *Streetcar* as a play about Blanche. Accordingly, Blanche is "an emblem of a dying civilization, making its last curlicued and romantic exit" (*N* 365); she is "the last relic of the last century now adrift in our unfriendly day" (*N* 368). Trapped by and in the romantic "Tradition" (Kazan's most definitive word) of the antebellum South, Blanche is true to the "Tradition" she enshrines, seeing protection (her spine) through a man. "All her behavior patterns are those of the dying civilization she represents." But, Kazan argued, she is insecure and looks in vain everywhere for a male protector. Believing she is "special," "superior" – her tragic flaw – Blanche confronts a cruel world that forces her to justify her special existence "in fantasy." Kazan contended that Blanche must be eleven "different people," all of them "self-dramatized and romantic." Yet Blanche's "quest for an accommodation, refuge, is futile, and because she senses this, an incipient madness informs all her actions." Consequently, Kazan instructed Tandy to play Blanche as "heavy at the beginning" – "domineering," displaying her "bad effect on Stella" – but as Stanley "gradually exposes her," the audience needed to see "how warm, tender, loving she can be" and then realize "that they are sitting in at the death of something . . . colorful, varied, passionate, lost, witty, imaginative . . . and then they feel the tragedy" (*N* 367).

While Kazan honored Blanche ("she is better than Stella"; her love of art and beauty is noble), he clearly found Stanley more intriguing. According to Susan Spector, Kazan's "basic sympathies and his most powerful and imaginative descriptions" were reserved for Stanley and even went so far as to justify Stanley's position domestically, socially.⁴³ In Kazan's reasoning, Stanley fears that Blanche "would wreck his