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Philip C. Kolin

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Williams: A Streetcar Named Desire

One of the most important plays of the twentieth century, *A Streetcar Named Desire* revolutionized the modern stage. This book offers the first continuous history of the play in production from 1947 to 1998 with an emphasis on the collaborative achievement of Tennessee Williams, Elia Kazan, and Jo Mielziner in the Broadway premiere. From there chapters survey major national premieres by the world's leading directors including those by Seki Sano (Mexico), Luchino Visconti (Italy), Ingmar Bergman (Sweden), Jean Cocteau (France), and Laurence Olivier (England). Philip Kolin also evaluates key English-language revivals and assesses how the script evolved and adapted to cultural changes. Interpretations by black and gay theatre companies also receive analyses, and transformations into other media, such as ballet, film, television, and opera (premiered in 1998), form an important part of the overall study.

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WILLIAMS
A Streetcar Named Desire

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PHILIP C. KOLIN
University of Southern Mississippi



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with love and prayers
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GENERAL PREFACE

Volumes in the series *Plays in Production* take major dramatic texts and examine their transposition, firstly on to the stage and, secondly, where appropriate, into other media. Each book includes concise but informed studies of individual dramatic texts, focusing on the original theatrical and historical context of a play in relation to its initial performance and reception followed by subsequent major interpretations on stage, both under the impact of changing social, political and cultural values, and in response to developments in the theatre generally.

Many of the plays also have been transposed into other media – film, opera, television, ballet – which may well be the form in which they are first encountered by a contemporary audience. Thus, a substantial study of the play-text and the issues it raises for theatrical realization is supplemented by an assessment of such adaptations as well as the production history, where the emphasis is on the development of a performance tradition for each work, including staging and acting styles, rather than simply the archaeological reconstruction of past performances.

Plays included in the series are all likely to receive regular performance and individual volumes will be of interest to the informed reader as well as to students of theatre history and literature. Each book also contains an annotated production chronology as well as numerous photographs from key performances.

Michael Robinson
University of East Anglia

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PREFACE

A Streetcar Named Desire is one of the most influential plays of the twentieth century. In this volume I have attempted to provide a history of major productions of Williams's play on the world stage since 1947 as well as to offer an assessment of how the play has been translated or adapted for ballet, film, teleplay, and opera. Consistent with the goals of the Plays in Performance Series, I have emphasized the ways in which the script has been validated and transformed through production and how audiences have responded to the changing performance styles through which *Streetcar* has been represented.

This book begins appropriately with, and places greatest emphasis on, the Broadway premiere of 1947 which catapulted Williams to international fame. The premiere saw one of the most powerful and collaborative teams in theatre – director-mentor Elia Kazan, producer Irene Selznick, designer Jo Mielziner, costumer Lucinda Ballard, composer Alex North, and a cast of young actors shaped Williams's script to create a production that directors and actors for decades esteemed as the standard by which *Streetcars* should be enacted. This opening chapter relies heavily on Kazan's *Streetcar Notebook*, William's letters, Jo Mielziner's sketches, and stage manager notes to reflect accurately what audiences saw on stage. Additionally, actors' memoirs and biographies contribute significantly to our understanding of how Williams's characters talked, moved, dressed, and related to props. One of my aims in this chapter was to show *Streetcar's* indebtedness to the dynamics of collaboration. Moreover, as this beginning and later chapters show, *Streetcar* established the careers of many actors who played in it. The young cast of

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Streetcar in 1947 – as well as those actors who starred in the road company productions in 1948–49 – revealed that there was magic in the web of Williams's script.

Chapter 2 focuses on six selective, but in many ways representative, national premieres of *Streetcar* from Mexico City to Tokyo (1948–53). Historically, many of the world's most prominent directors and scenographers reinforced *Streetcar's* acclaim as a masterpiece of world theatre while they simultaneously reinterpreted the scenography, props, music, and characterization for their particular culture and audience. This chapter explores the performance work of Seki Sano (who directed one of the first premieres outside the US) in Mexico City; Luchino Visconti and Franco Zeffirelli (the designer) in Rome; Ingmar Bergman (who read the script through a cinematic prism) in Sweden; Jean Cocteau, whose sensual adaptation in Paris, 1949 proleptically foregrounded the dark desire that became the focus of later productions; Sir Laurence Olivier, who shortened the script in London; and the Bungakuza Dramatic Company, whose Tokyo premiere helped to westernize Japanese theatre. Seen as an icon of American culture, *Streetcar* quickly acquired an international ethos.

In Chapter 3, the revivals of *Streetcar* (1956–98) on the English-speaking stage illustrate how later decades and tastes renegotiated the performance of the script and how that script consequently evolved through such productions. One major change involved the ways in which Williams's characters were transformed from the social models Kazan envisioned and enshrined in the 1940s: Blanche became far less willowy and more assertive in the 1980s and 1990s and Stanley was more sly, subtle, not nearly as much in control. In revivals, Mielziner's expressionistic scrims were exchanged for much more realistic and provocative sets, including the experience of *Streetcar* in theatres in the round.

Chapter 4 documents alternative *Streetcars* by concentrating on productions by black and gay theatre companies. These non-Eurocentric and cross-gendered productions destabilized the tradi-

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tional ideologies upon which the Broadway and many national premieres were based. They radicalized and enlarged Williams's script by freeing it from expectations based upon conventional valorizations of ethnicity, race, and gender. Viewed in light of a long, neglected history of black productions, *Streetcar* in performance encodes racial and social messages impossible in all-white productions. The black synesthesia of *Streetcar* reifies the power of transformable characterization and the representation of a different set of cultural anxieties signified in word and action. Black *Streetcars* also successfully challenged the (false) claims of a seminal Blanche being white in language, gesture, or costume. The last third of the chapter examines *Belle Reprieve*, the queer/camp adaptation of *Streetcar* that realigned the gender roles of woman and man both in the traditional script and in the famous 1951 Warner Brothers film.

In the last chapter, I turn to *Streetcar* in other media, with emphasis falling upon the process through which the script has been expanded, cut, literalized, choreographed and contemporized. As director of the 1951 film, Kazan had to struggle against the imposition of censorship on the script that he did not face on stage, and he invented a cinematic code to represent the psychological effects that stage productions presented more directly. The 1984 *Streetcar* teleplay directed by John Erman intensified the violence and eroticism in the script, making them far more explicit than Kazan or any stage production (from 1947 to 1983) ever could. Various ballet versions of Williams's play also receive meritorious attention as visual representations of jazz and fury inherent in the script. The last section of this chapter offers one of the first assessments of the transformation of *Streetcar* into opera – André Previn's score for the San Francisco Opera – and stresses the ways in which Previn challenged Kazan's valorization of Stanley over Blanche. Previn's opera had to adopt a new performance language to accommodate a *Streetcar* in song. The inevitable conclusion of this chapter, and the book as a whole, is that *Streetcar* succeeds precisely because performance verifies its non-static, protean power.

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“On a Trolley to the Cinema: Ingmar Bergman and the First Swedish Production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*,” *South Carolina Review* 27, nos. 1 and 2 (Fall 1994/Spring 1995): 97–128.

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P. C. K.