Cultural Daily

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A Different Age Breeds a Different Streetcar

Sylvie · Thursday, March 15th, 2018

Acknowledged: The production now on Pasadena's Boston Court Performing Arts Center's stage has been widely advertised and accepted as "a reimagined modern take of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*."

No question about it. But what does that mean exactly? Many things, as you might imagine. Some intriguing, some exciting, some questionable. We'll get to that. What is not questionable is that there is enough "exciting" in it to keep you in your seat for the three hours it takes to perform (something of a questionable length). There also is as much to debate, reject and absorb in that time as there is to admire.

Starting with the unconventional and talented cast — powerful, subtle, overt, astonishing and sometimes overwhelming. The wondrous Jaimi Paige heads this strong company in every way. She is the iconic Blanche in much more than name, because she also is the only "white" member of this very diverse cast. That everyone else on stage is "a person of color" speaks to more than just championing diversity. It's a willful and deliberate attack on old and persistent barriers.

l-r, Jaimi Paige & Maya Lynne Robinson in *A Streetcar Named Desire* at Pasadena's Boston Court.

A piece in the program that speaks to the goals behind the diversity decision wants us to believe that a black Stella and a white Blanche can be accepted as sisters. Questionable? Very much so. But it's a production that *insists* on making this a *Streetcar* for a very different time. If it tinges the play as a War of the Races in addition to a War of the Classes and Sexes, so be it. It's a choice. And it took someone with Michael Michetti's wide-ranging imagination to embrace this direction. If Michetti could give us Andrew Posner's potent reinvention of Chekhov's *Seagull* retitled *Stupid, F* Bird*, and a refreshingly brash *King Charles III* (recently at The Pasadena Playhouse), why not shake up this mid-20th century Tennessee Williams classic in this particular way, risks and all?

It is important, however, to stick to the givens here. The first thing we get as we enter the theatre is sound designer Sam Sewell, positioned downstage left as a DJ at a console of sorts. He delivers some pre-show rock music to greet the audience as it files in, supports a solitary singer-with-attitude before the play begins, and later creates incidental rock accompaniment throughout the event itself. New Orleans jazz? Nowhere to be found, but plenty of restless, disturbing industrial noise with sirens and screeches and streetcars between and sometimes during the scenes.

Questionable? Well… debatable. It certainly tells us that we're not in Kansas any more. Or even in 1947. What's not debatable is that there is more of this preamble than we deserve, to say nothing of the way it needlessly slows things down.

(Conversely, a little more attention could have been be paid to sound in general. The Boston Court stage is not huge, but the depth of Efren Delgadillo Jr's modularly transparent cramped-apartment set often puts the actors in remote playing areas, making them harder to hear.)

l-r, Desean Kevin Terry, Joma Saenz, Luis Kelly-Duarte & Chris Ramirez in *A Streetcar Named Desire* at Pasadena's Boston Court.

All of these things aside, what of the play and the production? And here is where the excitement really begins. Inevitably, it starts with Paige's Blanche, from the moment she arrives at Stella's apartment, a willowy pretty woman in dated elegance and an outwardly classy demeanor she hopes will help conceal her insecurities and lead her to find the respite she so desperately seeks.

But we watch as her increasingly unquiet flutterings, like those of a panicked bird, are helpless to settle on anything other than a glass of whiskey to steady those fraying nerves. It is a startlingly affecting portrait and performance that carries you and the play on diaphanous wings of unspeakable pain. Her many costume changes speak to a withered age and a faded past. (Much credit goes to designer Dominique Fawn Hill and wig maker Klint Flowers). It's a performance at once fragile and brave, capable of making you set aside all of the production's debatable points and focus on the only one that matters: the terrible humanity of this play.

Hot baths and whiskey notwithstanding, Paige doesn't do it alone. Nor should she. Maya Lynne Robinson delivers a masterfully nuanced Stella, mostly by watching and waiting, as she takes in the waves of disruption rapidly swirling around her: Stanley's growing irritation with Blanche, her own bewilderment at her sister's mounting instability, the balance she has to strike between Stanley and Blanche, and the pressure of coping with it all.

Desean Kevin Terry is an extremely fine Stanley, even as he cannot entirely suppress an innate sensitivity that keeps him from delivering a Stanley — as Brando famously did — who is nothing but a mass of brute force. We are talking subtle degrees of behavior here. Watching Terry makes it easy to see the attraction for Stella and affirms the underlying passion that binds them. Right or wrong for the play? *Wrong*, if all you want to see in Stanley is the animal. *Right*, when it helps us understand why Stella's primal instincts are mad about this man (and, in the case of this production, why the so-called rape scene with Blanche comes off — by choice? — as a moment of quasi consensual transport).

Luis Kelly-Duarte's Mitch, as one of theatre's fatefully sorrowful characters, gives the perfect timid and lumbering performance that lends credibility to the play's tragic end. He's the sad sack who's suckered into this mesmerizing but fumbling attempt at a relationship with Blanche. Duarte teeters between pathetic and profoundly moving, a man as lost on his wrong road as Blanche is on hers.

Jaimi Paige & Luis Kelly-Duarte in *A Streetcar Named Desire* at Pasadena's Boston Court.

But this, above all, is Michetti's play, even more than it is Tennessee's. And there will be the

purists who will have trouble with the liberties so brashly taken. Yet it is largely thanks to the very questions this production raises, that this *Streetcar* remains a daring and arresting enterprise, full of as many small shocks as of unscripted rewards not easily dismissed.

Michetti's capable actors, down to the ones in the most peripheral roles, were chosen with obvious care, so that the energy of the event remains at all times on full alert and its final resolution is as chilling as it needs to be, even when we all know what's coming. Michetti's staging of the final moments as a *tableau vivant*. positioning the cast, numb and motionless, around the stage as Blanche and her attendants walk out the door, is breathtaking. It gets a slow fade, when what it really deserves is a sudden blackout. It's not just that the play is over by then, but that we, in the audience, all need to be able to breathe again.

Top image: Jaimi Paige and Desean Kevin Terry as Blanche and Stanley in Michael Michetti's reimangined staging of Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire *at Pasadena's Boston Court.*

Photos by Jeff Lorch

WHAT: ***A Streetcar Named Desire***

WHERE: Boston Court Performing Arts Center, 70 No. Mentor Ave, Pasadena, CA 91106

WHEN: Thursdays-Saturdays, 8pm; Sundays, 2pm. Ends April 1.

HOW: Tickets, $20-$39 available at www.BostonCourt.com or 626.683.6801.

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