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Fine Ensemble Work Distinguishes this Streetcar

Steve Gottfried · Wednesday, July 3rd, 2019

How many times have you been to the theater to find that your take on a play, or on a particular performance, differs from the person you're with? If you're like most people, that's a common occurrence. What one person finds riveting, another may find "meh." With that in mind, I've decided to undertake an experiment of sorts and treat this review accordingly with another point of view, equally valid, sometimes in agreement, sometimes not. Kind of like the film critics Siskel and Ebert and their television series "At the Movies" which ran from 1986 to 2010.

Let's be honest: *A Streetcar Named Desire* comes with its share of baggage. Whether it's Jessica Lange's breathy southern drawl as Blanche DuBois from the '95 television movie or Marlon Brando's primal scream of "Stellaaaah" from the 1951 film, it can be a challenge to leave that all behind and make room for a fresh take on a familiar classic. Like many great works of theater from a bygone era, there are aspects which can make these time capsules of American theater timeless and there are aspects which can make them seem shopworn and dated. The current production of *Streetcar* serves as a potent reminder why this Pulitzer Prize winning play is as relevant as ever. This fine ensemble, under the helm of director Jack Heller, faithfully recaptures the spirit of the play and essential truths of human relationships, tragically codependent and dysfunctional though they may be. I'd liken this production to a well-preserved jewel box that's been tucked away in the attic and burnished to a brilliant sepia-toned hue.

Certainly, in the #MeToo era, the machismo and the treatment of women can seem terribly out of touch, or at least tone deaf. We can't expect to hold this work of theater to today's standards. But I think it's incumbent upon the theatergoer to actively engage with what they're seeing on stage and reflect on how it informs our own lives today. We need look no further than the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court or the voluminous accusations leveled against Donald J. Trump or the assault against women's reproductive rights to see how far we haven't come. The point I'm trying to make is that *Streetcar* has renewed relevance for a modern audience. And isn't that, after all, the point of great theater? To immerse ourselves in a story and characters whose reality allows us to re-examine our own lives and see things from a new perspective.

While my friend (and co-critic) and I both enjoyed the play and agreed that it stayed

with us (in a good way) in the days and weeks after we saw it, she felt the crown jewel of this production was Susan Priver as Blanche DuBois. She writes: "Ms. Priver crafted a compelling portrayal that rivaled that of Vivien Leigh's in the iconic 1950's film adaptation, illuminating the fragile elegance of her existence with an endearing ballet-like movement, a wardrobe of silk and satin and an improbable musical cadence to her speech. It was nearly impossible to take my eyes (and ears) off her, her sweet and swift southern coos of how life is supposed to be while practically gliding across the stage. She would at once lull us into falling for her charms then unleash a ferocity when it came to battling her sister's brutish husband. At the end of the play she revealed just how deeply tragic her romantic life had been; and even though her sentiments include deep bigotry culturally embedded in the south, we still feel sympathy for all the blows her pathologically romantic heart has taken."

While I found Ms. Priver's performance exceptional, for me the standout performance was Melissa Sullivan in the less showy but more nuanced portrayal of Blanche's sister, Stella. From the moment she appears on stage, the way she laughs, the way she carries herself, Ms. Sullivan fully inhabits Stella, evoking a woman who is trapped in a dysfunctional relationship but seems to revel in it even while she resists. There's a palpable sadness to Sullivan's Stella that she masks with glimpses of hope for a better life. Hers is perhaps the most challenging role as she is caught between the conflicting pulls of loyalty to an abusive husband and a sister she desperately wants to help, each of them exploitive in their own way.



Max E. Williams and Susan Priver get under each other's skin in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Max E. Williams delivers a solid performance as the iconic Stanley Kowalski, immortalized by Marlon Brando. Williams' frenetic energy was reminiscent of a young

Ray Liotta. He brings out the simmering hostility of a man who can't control his rage. My friend and I both agreed that there was something a little disconcerting about Williams' accent. Yes, it conveyed Stanley's working class roots and brutish nature, I suppose, but the dialect felt a bit stilted and cartoonish at times. That being said, Williams brought a visceral anger to the role which was compelling and unsettling, as it should be.

The other member of this ensemble who we both agreed was particularly effective was Christopher Parker as Blanche's lovelorn suitor Mitch. Parker holds up the mirror to Blanche in a way that helps the audience empathize with her. Parker conveys Mitch's insecurity and vulnerability. His inclination to put Blanche on a pedestal helps the audience root for these two lonely souls. Which makes it all the more heartbreaking when Stanley exacts his revenge and exposes the truth behind Blanche's façade, puncturing any hope that these two will find happiness. Parker brings the required grit and spine to a character who was heretofore putty in Blanche's hands as he confronts Blanche with the truth of her tawdry past.

I'd be remiss if I didn't commend the sets and costumes for this production which were very effective in creating an evocative setting and immersing us in the lives of the characters. Blanche's fancy clothes and finery convey the empty façade of her existence while Stella's simpler manner of dress puts the two sisters in sharp contrast. Together with the strong ensemble work, this company does justice to this gem of American theater.

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