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PORTLANDCENTERSTAGE

The Guide

A Theatergoer's Resource

A Streetcar Named Desire

By Tennessee Williams

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From the Director



*The mind sees an object
The mind desires the object
The object is out of reach
Anger arises*

This truth about the fundamental nature of the mind has been articulated by spiritual teachers from the East for a millennia. In Tennessee Williams' world, desire is an elemental force that sweeps away everything in its path.

Blanche and Stanley both contain enormous rivers of desire. Neither has an outlet large enough to fully or safely give expression to that force. Both were born to dominate. And they find themselves thrust together in a two-room apartment, in the sweaty, noisy, over-ripe and un-airconditioned world that is New Orleans in the summer. Maybe things will work out smoothly, but ...

By the time Williams wrote *Streetcar* — sitting in his apartment in the French Quarter — his beloved sister, Rose, had been in a mental institution for over a decade. A girl of delicate sensibilities, she had begun having psychotic episodes of an overtly sexual nature in her late teens. For her mother, the severely puritanical and passive-aggressive Edwina, the episodes felt like a personal assault. For her combustible and deeply frustrated father, C. C., they were a source of complete bafflement.

For Tennessee, Rose's unraveling proved a source of sheer terror. Here, the one person (besides his beloved grandfather) he had most felt a connection to through his youth, the one person he felt actually understood him, had come completely unhinged. Surely that fate lay in store for him.

This terror haunted Williams' steps every moment of his life.

Three years prior to sitting down to write *Streetcar*, after a particularly offensive and violent episode with Rose, Williams' mother approved a frontal lobotomy for his sister. "A head operation," she called it.

Williams' natural restlessness compounded. He drank too much, he couldn't stay in one place for more than a few months, he slept with too many people. The only solace, the only outlet that allowed his demons to find some satisfaction, some form of quiet, was writing. Sitting at the typewriter he entered another world. No matter how late he'd been out the night before, no matter how much he'd had to drink, the fingers hit the keys of the typewriter, and another world emerged. He often didn't exit that world until six or eight hours later.

We revisit a play like *Streetcar* because there is something fundamental about the truth it excavates. Something thrilling about the power it continues to exert.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chris Coleman". The signature is stylized with a large, flowing "C" and a cursive "Coleman".

Chris Coleman

Characters

In order of appearance



Stanley

(played by Demetrius Grosse)*



Mitch

(played by Keith Eric Chappelle)*



Stella

(played by Kristen Adele)*



Blanche

(played by Deidrie Henry)*



Eunice

(played by Dana Millican)*



Creola

(played by Anya Pearson)



Steve

(played by Bobby Bermea)*



Pablo

*(played by
Gilberto Martin del Campo*)*



A Young Man/
A Vendor/Ensemble

(played by Blake Stone)



A Mexican Woman/
A Nurse/Ensemble

(played by Sofia May-Cuxim)



A Doctor / Ensemble

(played by David Bodin)

**Member of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States.*

A Conversation with Dramaturg Barbara Hort, Ph.D

We have a very unique opportunity in the PCS rehearsal room whenever Chris Coleman directs, the benefits and wisdom of Production Dramaturg Barbara Hort, Ph.D. She shares her insight and experiences to help actors “climb into the characters” and provide information to help them explore the realistic beings we later find onstage.

Barbara Hort first joined Chris Coleman in the rehearsal room for his production of *Sweeney Todd*. She sits in on rehearsals, advises in early table work with the cast and designers, and discusses the personalities of the characters assembled in that script. Barbara is present during rehearsals to help advise on how trauma, mental illness, personalities show themselves in realistic beings so the actors and Chris Coleman can take and process that knowledge and research and see how it might apply to their artistic interpretation.

In this particular production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Barbara discussed the character of Blanche and how trauma has influenced the writing and creation of this character. She shared background history of schizophrenia, PTSD, and what they could look like in an adult and how they manifest themselves in times of high emotional stress, such as the plot of *Streetcar*.



Paper Moons and Plastic Theater: the Enduring Vitality of *A Streetcar Named Desire*

By PCS Literary Manager

Benjamin Fainstein

When *A Streetcar Named Desire* premiered in 1947, Americans were working to reestablish normalcy amid the lingering dread of nuclear warfare. Despite burgeoning postwar prosperity, Depression-era economic anxiety persisted. The country was catching its breath and renewing its confidence after decades of tumult and loss. Veterans, like the men of *Streetcar*, were returning to civilian life, hungry for opportunity. Traditional gender roles were slowly shifting as a result of the millions of jobs created for women during the war. In the Deep South, the effete ruling class saw less-affluent citizens gunning to supplant them through hard work and sheer force of will. The poetic bravura and moral incertitude of *Streetcar*, driven by an engine of robust sexuality, theatricalized the evolving American landscape. Williams gave theatergoers an explosion of immediacy unmatched by the musical comedies at other Broadway houses. The pervasive sense of instability rippling through the play hit close to home, and few sparring partners have maintained the legendary status of Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski.

When Blanche first mentions her family's genteel Mississippi plantation Belle Reve (French for "beautiful dream"), her neighbor Eunice remarks that "a place like that must be awful hard to keep up." These words prove ominous, and Blanche's world of romantic illusions begins to crumble. As she vies with Stanley for the affection of her sister Stella, Blanche's secrets are exposed and her identity dismantled. With the name Belle Reve, Tennessee Williams subtly forecasts this gathering storm: In French, the feminine adjective "belle" does not agree with "rêve," a masculine noun. This discrepancy suggests that the plantation was likely christened *Belle Rive* (a feminine noun meaning "shore") before colloquial pronunciation eroded it to "rêve." Scholar Felicia Hardison Londré links this linguistic slippage to the whole of Blanche's tragedy, writing that "what had been a solid shore is now but an evanescent *dream* of lost splendor."^[1]

Before *Streetcar* confirmed him as one of America's most artful playwrights, Tennessee Williams was best known for his elegiac coming-of-age drama *The Glass Menagerie*, an innovative "memory play" structured around flashbacks conjured by its narrator, Tom Wingfield. In his notes on that play, Williams expresses a craving for a theater that is more "atmospheric" than realistic. With *Streetcar*, Williams hit his mark. In *The Glass Menagerie*, the shifts between realistic and expressionistic modes are self-conscious and coolheaded, punctuated by Tom's direct addresses between scenes. The temperature of *Streetcar*, in contrast, is scorching. Williams' dialogue darts from soaring lyricism to gritty slang, and he fuses the planes of poetry and reality. In doing so, he grants symbolic significance to each element of the storytelling, from color and shadow to music, weather and architecture. The play adheres to his goal of a "plastic" theater that does not eschew its "responsibility of dealing with reality," but through consummate theatricality provides a "penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are."

In *Streetcar*, as in other plays, Tennessee Williams scavenged his personal life for dramatic substance. Two of his iconic thematic obsessions are the repercussions of suppressed sexual desire and the challenges faced by people living with mental illness. His relationship with his beloved sister, Rose, was forever altered after she was institutionalized following a frontal lobotomy intended to treat her schizophrenia. Tennessee harbored a lifelong grief over Rose's fate while simultaneously struggling with his own mental health, addictions, and the stigma against homosexuality. Williams conjured Blanche DuBois, a fictional vessel through whom he could explore the potentially catastrophic consequences of these issues. He then plunged Blanche into a New Orleans that is both authentic and mythic, complicating the clash of reality and reverie that rages within and around her. Williams' rendering of the city he knew so well provides a lush backdrop of sweltering heat, cultural fusion, incessant music, and a maddening lack of privacy. The noise and people on the streets of New Orleans sweat and swoon in step with the malevolent *pas de deux* inside the DuBois-Kowalski apartment. And nearly seventy years since its composition, *Streetcar* remains ready for the dance.

[1] Londré, Felicia Hardison. "A streetcar running fifty years." *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*. Ed. Matthew C. Roudané. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 45-66.

Behind the Scenes Facts:

The Desire Line ran from 1920 to 1948, at the height of streetcar use in New Orleans. The route ran down Bourbon, through the Quarter, to Desire Street in the Bywater district, and back up to Canal. Blanche's route in the play— "They told me to take a streetcar named Desire, transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at—Elysian Fields!"—is allegorical, taking advantage of New Orleans's colorful street names.

The character of Blanche is thought to be based on Williams' sister, Rose Williams, who struggled with mental health issues and became incapacitated after a lobotomy.

Theatre critic and former actress Blanche Marvin, a friend of Williams, says the playwright used her name for the character Blanche DuBois, named the character's sister Stella after Marvin's former surname "Zohar" (which means "Star"), and took the play's line "I've always depended on the kindness of strangers" from something she said to him.

Props

- There are 12 beer bottles with period beer labels used per show. – "beer" is filled with either seltzer water or ginger ale.
- There is a moment in the show where a character pretends to break a beer bottle in the show (with some slight-of-hand and a sound-effect). The broken bottle was made with a wax mold and the bottle itself is made of sugar glass, which is much less likely to cause injuries than real glass.
- One ceramic plate is broken per show. The plates are scored so they break just how we want them to and coated white so you can't see the scoring.
- 3 Coke bottles used in show – one is opened and sprays everywhere – to create this effect, the props team fills the coke bottle with seltzer water, caramel color and seals it with a bottle-capper device for every performance.
- We have 2 food-safe 'cakes' made of foam that will get frosted with real frosting every night.
- Functional shower in the bathroom and a functional kitchen sink (both powered by a Hudson sprayer).
- Cast a replica of a period correct radio out of plastic and foam insulation, so it could be thrown out a window every show and not break.
- Props built an exact replica of a rare Mae West chalkware statue out of foam and wood.

Set

- 82 cast iron basters for the railing on the balcony
- Chaos fabric used on the set around windows and some walls which creates beautiful lighting effects– could be seen as an analogy for what happens in the play.
- 68 pieces of molding on the various pillars on the set. It took the folks from the scene shop a day of failures before crafting molding that would work.
- Model is 1/4 inch scale of real set (1/4 inch for every foot)

Costumes

- Built 5 costumes completely from scratch, plus three bowling jackets. Built from scratch: Blanche's Suit in the first scene, Blanche's red robe, Blanche's "Mardi Gras" dress, Sofia's "Matron" Suit, Stella's pregnancy outfit.
- The costume change for Stella and Blanche will be quick changes, 15 seconds, and both happen at the same time in the bathroom. This change will also be Stella putting on the first pregnancy pad. Our wardrobe team will hide backstage to make this magic transition happen on time.
- We purchased a fair amount of real vintage clothes from the 30s and 40s for Blanche, Eunice, Creola, and Stella. We bought clothes in Portland, Wisconsin, LA, Chicago, NYC, London, other stores in Oregon, Connecticut, Florida... thanks to Etsy!
- Stanley has 10 tank undershirts in the show. He's got "clean" ones, "sweaty" ones, "dirty" ones, etc.
- 8 custom-made wigs used in show.

Vision and Craft: a Glance at the Composition of *A Streetcar Named Desire*

By PCS Literary Manager
Benjamin Fainstein

Tennessee Williams divided the action of *A Streetcar Named Desire* into eleven scenes, but he did not specify when—or if—intermissions should be taken. The original production placed two breaks during the performance, a choice which the majority of productions have since adopted that allows the audience to experience the play in three acts. The first intermission is customarily observed after Scene 4, and the second is taken after Scene 6. The choice to partition a performance of *Streetcar* in this way effectively aligns with the progression of seasons in Williams' text. Scenes 1 through 4 occur over a two-day period in May; Scenes 5 and 6 take place on a single, sweltering evening in August; and Scenes 7 through 10 are set over the course of Blanche's birthday, September 15, followed by the final scene, which unfolds "some weeks later" in late October. The play's timeline moves from springtime, often associated with the blossoming of new beginnings, into summer, when passions amplify in step with the scorching temperature. The "third act" occurs in autumn, a season which is typically representative not only of harvest, when seeds buried months earlier (or, in this case, tensions) finally bear fruit, but also of nature's decay in anticipation of winter's frigid solemnity. The changing of the seasons parallels *Streetcar's* dramatic action, and Blanche's arc in particular. Her time in the Kowalski apartment turns from potential rebirth to irrevocable ruin as her hopes wither and rot on the vine. Actor Roxana Stuart, who portrayed Blanche twice, links the play's timeline to the gradual shift in genre and tone. "The first four scenes are comedy," Stuart writes, "then come two scenes of elegy, mood, romance; then five scenes of tragedy."

Beyond dramatic structure, Williams incorporated metaphor into other aspects of stagecraft such as sound and noise; the interplay of light and shadow; the contrast between interiors and exteriors; and his vision for the specificity of color of the objects and clothing in the world of *Streetcar*. This attention to detail deepens the sensory dynamism of the storytelling and illustrates Williams' claim that the play is about "the ravishment of the tender, the sensitive, the delicate, by the savage and brutal forces of modern society." One of the most exquisite aspects of *Streetcar's* construction is its blend of lyrical theatricality with raw realism.

Williams' poetic prowess and keen understanding of the psychological impact of seemingly banal interactions combine to form a landscape rife with conflict. The characters of *Streetcar* are detailed portraits of fully-realized human beings, but they also lend themselves to various interpretations of their symbolic significance. If one of Williams' goals was to stage humanity's battle between ferocious instinct and conditioned civility—most directly observed in the discord between Stanley and Blanche—then it is fitting that the play is replete with animal imagery.

In the stage direction that precedes Blanche's first appearance in the play, Williams writes that "something about her...suggests a moth." Moths hold diverse meanings for multiple cultures. They have been historically heralded as harbingers of change, of death, or of fragility; and, of course, the phrase "like a moth to a flame" expresses the commonly understood vision of moths as creatures consumed by perilous obsession. Like Blanche, moths seem both addicted to and tortured by the spotlight. Later in the play, Blanche will be associated with the butterfly. These two insects delineate a dual nature that Blanche embodies: the butterfly shuffles off its cocoon in an act of self-actualization, flitting through the air on colorful wings, while its lunar cousin the moth obscures itself in half-light, shrouded in greyscale mystery until it is compelled to risk its own life to obtain the object of its desire. Toward the end of the play, Mitch confronts Blanche about her past, leaving her no choice but to dismantle her world of illusion. In this moment, she uses another pair of animals to express the competing forces within her. She rejects being associated with the flamingo, a traditionally feminine symbol of beauty, grace, and stability. Instead, she lashes out by declaring herself a tarantula, an arachnid often cast as a monster consumed by desire to suck the lifeblood from its victims. These images of Blanche are contrasted with ones of Stanley, who Stella labels "a different species" and is continuously referred to as a pig, an ape, and goat-like. Whereas Blanche's animals are small, delicate, fanciful, and mutable, Stanley's totems are customarily thought of as brutish, beastly, and obstinate. Blanche is associated with creatures dappled with imagination; Stanley's are driven by pure appetite. These associations, furthermore, provide poetic amplification to the issues of opposing socioeconomic class, race, heritage, and gender fueling the fire between Stanley and Blanche.

Williams employs direct juxtapositions that function on literal, figurative, political, and even allegorical levels throughout the play, suffusing each moment on stage with potential danger. In the New Orleans pressure cooker of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, every mirror has two sides—and every person, relationship, and perspective must eventually confront its foil.

Additional Links:

Emily Mann on her Broadway production of A Streetcar Named Desire (2012)

<http://www.broadway.com/buzz/161119/emily-mann-on-bringing-the-gumbo-of-new-orleans-and-a-streetcar-named-desire-back-to-broadway/>

“Every single character in Streetcar, even the doctor who has three lines, is a complex, three-dimensional person. I went down to see Cate Blanchett star in Liv Ullmann’s production at the Kennedy Center and interviewed them; little did we know that we would bond on a deep level. They did such gorgeous work. When I told Liv my history with Tennessee, she asked me if I had ever directed the play myself. I said, “I can’t do Streetcar. I don’t have to. You’ve given it to me.” And she said, “No, this is the one you have to do, and Tennessee is waiting up there for you to do it.”

Somehow getting her blessing, and getting the play done in this way, on Broadway, with a cast of color, made it right for me to do now. It was also a way also to dispel the ghosts, because you can’t imitate the geniuses of the past. You have to start fresh.”

Mann, who worked with its playwright, Tennessee Williams, during his final years, has insisted in interviews that Williams entertained the concept of all-black productions of his seamiest and steamiest play as far back as the 1950s (it opened on Broadway in 1947).

<http://www.talkinbroadway.com/page/world/StreetcarDesire2012.html>

On this day in history: December 3, 1947

Video start: 00:32 (a short snippet of the show’s opening and some photos)

<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/a-streetcar-named-desire-opens-on-broadway>

Youtube, Broadway World

Interview with Blair Underwood

Some information on Williams and the process of the production

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JcQ1a4BDVIQ>



Theater Etiquette

Seeing a play is very different than seeing a movie. During live theatre, the audience is as equally important as the actors on stage. Please share the following points with your students, and encourage them to practice good theater etiquette throughout the workshop.

- **Live response is good!** If you tell a story to a friend and notice they aren't responding, it makes you want to tell the story better. A live audience is as critical a component of the theatergoing experience as the actors on stage. The more the audience listens, laughs and responds, the more the actors want to tell the story.
- **The actors can hear you talking.** Have you ever had a conversation with someone and felt that they'd rather be someplace else? This is the exact feeling actors get when people in the audience are talking. If an audience member is not paying attention, the actors know it.

- **The actors can see you.** Imagine telling something to a group of fellow students who are slouching, pretending to be bored, or sitting with their eyes closed in attempt to seem disinterested or "too cool" for what you had to say. Think about it: Even though the actors are pretending to be other characters, it is as much their job to "check in" with the audience as it is to remember their lines. Since stage actors only get one chance to tell the story to each audience, they want to make sure to communicate clearly each and every performance.
- **Cell phones, beepers, candy wrappers, loud gum smacking.** Please turn off all cell phones and do not eat or chew gum inside the theater. These things disturb the people around you as well as the actors. As much as you might be tempted to text a friend how cool the play is that you're watching, please wait until after it is over.

Many thanks to our colleagues at Montana Shakespeare in the Parks, from whom these excellent etiquette suggestions have been adapted.

Education Programs: Stage Door

Our Education Programs provide young people with opportunities to experience the art of theatre, to directly participate in its process, and to apply its collaborative principles elsewhere in their daily lives. Stage Door is an unforgettable opportunity for students to experience professional theatre in a context that supports their education.

The following pages contain activities to help students explore themes found in our production of A Streetcar Named Desire. We encourage you to choose the most appropriate activities for your group and adapt as needed.

GOALS:

- Encourage personal connections between students and the major themes of the play.
- Excite students about the story and theatrical elements in the production.
- Engage students using the actors' tools: body, voice, and imagination.

KEY CONCEPTS:

- The Balance of Conflict
- EmoHack
- Dramatic Tension: Prelude to Crisis

Performance Warm-Up: Repel and Embrace

The goal of this activity is to kinesthetically engage students to consider the balance of negotiation. Main characters are often negotiating a balance of self-power in their lives.

HOW IT WORKS:

- The game is to get your partner to take either a step forward, or a step backward.
- Partners will only make contact palm to palm
- Working in pairs: Partners face each other, about a foot apart, feet shoulder-width apart
- While negotiating balance, partners will push against the other's hands to try and knock them off balance (imagine two people "rocking" over a vending machine – same gestures, just palm to palm).

SAMPLE FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS:

What was your most effective strategy? Were you more successful being forceful or flexible? How quickly did you change strategies? What is the value of stubbornness in the face of stubbornness? Name a time you found victory through surrender.

Activity #1: Stand Together

The goal of this activity is to highlight character alliances and how they affect character choices. Students will engage their identity into imagined, value-based scenarios.

HOW IT WORKS:

- Working in trios; students stand facing each other, in a triangle.
- Silently and secretly, each student mentally assigns the other two (respectively) roles: KIN or LOVE – students will never be asked to reveal their choices.
- With each suggestion, students MUST MOVE to a new point in the triangle
- Standing alone [on a triangle point] will indicate: Me Against the World
- Sharing a point with another student will indicate: Stronger Together
- Suggestions range from emotional states, to climate disasters, high-stakes situations to clarify decision-making: Failing a test, break-up, winning a vacation, earthquake, celebration, etc.

REFLECTION/DISCUSSION:

When did you want to, "Go it alone."? When did you want everyone together? What are some other examples of "only"; Only KIN, or Only LOVE?



Activity #2: Mob Moods

The focus of this activity is the range of shared emotion compared to individual expression. The effects of agreement and support can energize emotional expression, just as other reactions can trigger individual rebellion. Emote expression is shaped by its context.

HOW IT WORKS:

- For 2-5 players/round; students will perform as characters, all embodying the same emotion (picture cheerleaders, but instead of “cheer”, they feel “suspicion”).
- No words until the very end.
- Students should be encouraged to, “let the feeling grow”, “build off of each other”, “adopt each other’s mannerisms and behaviors”.
- When it seems the emotion can grow no larger, one of the students in the scene should put the scene into context with a single line of dialogue, e.g. “Suspicion” can grow to, “Are you sure that lotto ticket is real?”
- The aim is to expand students’ capacity for expression, safely beyond their usual palette.
- Choose Active Emotions, ones which can grow: Joy, Apprehension, Guilt, Irritation, Anticipation, Vengeance, Awe etc.

REFLECTION/DISCUSSION:

When does an emotional reaction help us survive? What’s the difference between emotional reaction and emotional expression?

Activity #3: By a Thread

This activity combines listening, agreement and storytelling skills. Teams collaborate to make heartfelt appeals on given topics.

HOW IT WORKS:

- Seven students/round; two teams of three, one student as the final vote
- Teams will be speaking as one voice, making their case in the first person voice.
- Each team will speak in turn, and will try to convince the audience of their case.
- The aim is for the teams to unify and build their explanations off each other, adding detail without denying, and convincing us that they are A TEAM.
- Example topics: Why you’re home after curfew, Why you’re better off without us, Why you deserve better, Why you never showed up.

TIPS:

Push the students toward agreement by calling out contradictions within the teams’ stories. Everyone should sound like they are speaking from the same page. Let the audience vote for the stories’ believability.

REFLECTION/DISCUSSION:

What is the minimum amount of information we need to begin to believe a story? Does motivation outweigh fact in any case? Are there magic words that can melt our heart and cloud our judgment?

