



[Orpheus Descending](#)
[Royal Exchange](#) , Manchester

Reviewed by [Dave Porter](#) October 2012

Gore Vidal's nickname for Tennessee Williams was 'the Bird' because so many of his plays were based around the idea of flight: characters in flight from reality or each other.

In **Orpheus Descending**, which receives a sumptuous revival at Manchester's Royal Exchange, the motif is a central and recurring one. When handsome drifter Valentine Xavier wanders into a Deep South merchandise store he tells the owner – Lady – of a mythical bird which never sets foot on earth and sleeps on the wing.

Williams was never afraid to overload his plays with symbolism – often at the expense of plot and tautness of dialogue – and **Orpheus Descending** proves no exception. It contains many of his trademark touches: spinster sisters, brutish men, vulnerable middle-aged women and a southern Gothic streak bordering on the lunatic.

The play charts the arrival of nightclub singer Xavier at the store who is determined to put his playboy days behind him. He holds on tightly to his prized guitar containing the signatures of all the greats: Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, Bessie Smith, all free spirits in the way he imagines himself to be.

His good looks cause great comment among the locals. At one point in the play he has a run-in with a gnarled sheriff who asks him whether he is wanted by the authorities. When he replies no, the sheriff answers: “A boy like you is always wanted”.

He soon falls in with Lady Torrance, the owner of the store whose husband lies dying upstairs in his bed of some unnamed malady. Her father was killed by local rednecks in an arson attack in revenge for “serving liquor to niggers” and she dreams of honouring his memory by recreating

the wine orchard he had lovingly built up and which he died in trying to protect.



Lady is brilliantly played by Imogen Stubbs with an undercurrent of nervous eroticism. Her Italian accent is not the dulcet velvet of Hollywood screen goddesses but dagger-like, befitting a “dego wop”. She has already lost one baby to a treacherous lover and when she conceives another with Val, she revels in the fact that “this old tree has burst forth with new fruit”.

For all of Williams’ empathies with his southern ladies, he shows a remarkable talent for portraying brutish male violence (tellingly Vidal argued that one’s sympathises actually lie with

Stanley Kowalski in *Streetcar Named Desire*, not with Vivienne Leigh's neurotic Blanche Du Bois). Sadistic sheriffs, murderous chain gangs and redneck vigilantes roam the play like bloodhounds on the scent of their next prey.

All this would be the stuff of cliché if Williams did not possess the talent to bring his plays alive. Yes he overwrites, yes his plays are often baggy and confused, yes his plots meander like a lazy southern river, but he will always hold our attention with his poetic depiction of lives clinging on to any shard of hope which comes their way.

The stifling heat of a bayou county is brilliantly brought out in this production which boasts many outstanding performances. Luke Norris plays Val as an affecting mix of rock and roll swagger and hunted little boy whose own childhood visions mirror those of the sheriff's wife who goes blind precisely at the point of divine revelation.

Stubbs' surprisingly slight frame proves no hindrance to delivering a memorable performance as Lady, all brittle and bone one minute, and ardent desire the next.

Pursued like Orpheus through the underworld, Val is eventually hunted down and has no means of escape. Williams shows, too, that there is no escape from desire and its consequences.

At *Royal Exchange Theatre*, until 24 November