A Streetcar Named Desire at Liverpool Everyman Playhouse

Kicking off its 2012 season with the Tennessee Williams classic, A Streetcar Named Desire, the Liverpool Playhouse brilliantly re-create the hustle, bustle, whirl and wonder of New Orleans City. The street sounds and soul are brought to mesmerizing life in this historic and intimate Liverpool theatre by a superb Peter Coyte arrangement. The stage (meticulously designed by Gideon Davey and Paul Keogan) is set in the cramped and claustrophobic two-roomed city apartment where the audience can feel the cloying heat with each mop of the brow and whirr of the overhead fan and feel the tension as it grows and ferments. The bright city lights beam enticingly through the large window of the apartment that also serves as an entrance and exit for droppers-by, and which carries through it the evocative and endless street sounds from the immediate vicinity of this poor, culturally mixed neighbourhood - cats howling, bins crashing, jazz music playing, streetcars passing, and families making love and war. It certainly made me feel part of and in the heart of a pulsating and vibrant city; just a pity that outside the doors of this theatre, Liverpool itself remains economically stagnant despite the hopeful gusto of the Liverpool One shopping precinct.

Written in 1947, and now regarded as a classic of the American stage, Streetcar was adapted for cinema and was a big hit at the movies partly due to the moody, macho and memorable portrayal of Stanley Kowalski by Marlon Brando dressed in little more than a muscle-stretched T-shirt throughout, and also because of the ethereal and anachronistic performance by Vivien Leigh as Blanche DuBois. Brilliant casting maybe, but the real talent of course lies in the wonderfully poetic, observant and elaborate vocabulary of the Williams script and his portrayal of the characters whose relationships are full of passion, intensity and sexual tensions, a characteristic of many of his works - which makes watching it an intense and absorbing experience, especially as this performance is over three hours long. Any new production of this play is bound to be burdened by the ghosts of Brando and Leigh as they have come to be immortalised in these roles. I remember watching the film and loving the Marlon Brando character, despite the fact that he was a cruel and chauvinistic pig. Somehow because it was Brando, he managed to get away with being a right bastard because of his unique star quality, charming persona and his smooth and easy portrayal of such a cold and destructive character. I must say I found little to like in Sam Troughtons portrayal of Stanley, he really is a bastard is Sam. He doesn’t and couldn’t live up to Brando (his T-shirt just didn’t make the grade) but in all fairness, who could? Short on charisma as well as stature he gives an unflinchingly aggressive performance throughout and with each wag of his finger I felt truly threatened.

I had every intention of not making comparisons, but found it hard not to and whilst for me Troughton’s angry portrayal couldn’t lay to rest the spirit of Brando. Amanda Drew as Blanche DuBois. Photo by Stephen Vaughan.
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Drew was mesmerising as Blanche and equally good if not better than Leigh - a truly astounding performance, that was full of life enhancing vivacity and evocative vocabulary. I was spellbound!
The reference to the streetcar named Desire is symbolic. Blanche not only has to travel on an actual streetcar named "Desire" to reach her sisters' home at the start of the play but her desire also acts as an irrepressible force throughout the story. The title is a metaphor for the desire that takes Blanche on a fateful journey and is expressed in the sexual escapades that ruin her reputation and drive her from her home town and eventually out of her mind. Condemned and sneered at for showing passion and lust, and bringing shame on herself, she would in the modern era be treated for addiction and advised to see a counsellor, therapist or invited to divulge all the lurid details on a chat show to loud and empathetic condemnation from the audience. But this story is set in New Orleans in the 1940's when lustful and passionate women were bound by social convention to behave in particular and restrictive ways, and when such action was seen as un-womanly and unbecoming in a lady of her class, rather than as a treatable addiction. She wasn't ill, Blanche was just a slut.

When Blanche arrives at the apartment of her put-upon sister Stella (played with meek and touching sweetness by the well-cast Leanne Best) and brother-in-law Stanley, she is shocked by the steamy, urban and macho environment in which her sister lives as they have both originally come from what Blanche considers to be the more refined circumstanes of a large plantation in Mississippi, now lost due to financial mis-management. The way the two different homelands are illustrated - the urban sprawl of the city being rough and tough vs the green, gentle and verdant countryside being somehow more virtuous - is a description many opponents of modern development might be happy with, and one that has restricted growth and expansion in many areas of the UK.

The play addresses the culture clash between city and country, and the affected upper and debauched lower classes as represented by the two main characters. Blanche DuBois (Amanda Drew), a fading relic of a Southern belle and symbol of the old class-ridden society that considers itself a cut above the rest of us, dressed in furs and pearls, and Stanley Kowalski (Sam Troughton), whose shirt was more often off than on to show him and his type in his raw and primitive state - representative of the new immigrants and the industrial urban working class crammed uncomfortably close in the burgeoning cities of America.

In true stereotypical style, Blanche is depicted as cultured and virtuous whereas Stanley is shown as primal, rough, coarse, brutal, abusive and rooted in harsh reality. As their two worlds collide, what follows is in Williams' own words a tragedy of misunderstandings and insensitivity to others. Blanche's pretensions swathed in illusion turn out to be a thin mask for alcoholism, delusions of grandeur and a retreat from reality and Stanley's brutality is a bit of a machismo front for someone who is rather child-like, wife-dependant and uncertain of his own identity in the face of an educated and autonomous woman. Blanche tells Stella that she is taking time off from her job as an English teacher due to upset nerves (a then popular label for un-feminine behaviour), when in fact she has been sacked for having an affair with a student - one of many interactions she has been involved in since her marriage ended when she discovered her husband having a homosexual tryst. Blanche and her affairs would by today's standards make somewhat dull reading, or be given an airing on The Jeremy Kyle Show but in the 1940's her behaviour was met with shock and disgust due to social and moral conventions that curtailed such expressive fervour, especially from women.
Stella adores her husband and is aroused by his animal-like primal behaviour which she finds thrilling. In this marriage we witness the traditional gender roles of a dominant husband who brings home the money and pays the bills, and the doting housewife who is responsible for making dinner, cleaning, and raising children. The relationship is incomparable to modern day long term heterosexual coupledom, where improvements in equality have long since prevailed, and is also distorted somewhat by Stella's subordination to Stanley, even though she is of a higher social class.

Blanche and Stanley clash constantly. Blanche is snippy about Stanley, calls him primitive, makes constant digs, refers to him as a Polack (an ethnic slur which today might get her hauled up before the magistrate) says thousands of years have passed him by and describes him as not the sort to go for jasmine perfume. Blanche is a woman with a love of the poetic and a big thesaurus to hand! Stanley may not have Blanche's vocabulary, but he quickly sees through her pretensions and when he discovers that she has lied about her past, misunderstanding her reasons he treats her cruelly and humiliates her. He mocks the fake furs, fine feathers, solid gold dresses, costume jewellery and excessive drinking and sneers at her pretensions and air of superiority.

As well as a tale of clashing class and culture, it is a well-observed account of one woman's personal struggle against solitude and the gender conventions of the era. An educated and once passionate and poetic woman, Blanche is so shaken by her experiences that her nerves become raw and exposed; she loses her spirit and trembles perceptibly as she loses strength and heart. Drew plays this part so well, talking constantly and at increasing speed, itching and fidgeting she gives an exhausting and authentic performance of a lost and unhappy woman on the edge of despair.

When she can no longer distinguish between what is real and what is fantasy, she becomes unable to fend off her final descent into what appears to be madness, but what is really just the resultant reaction of a repressed woman restricted by the moral code of the times who has suffered rejection, humiliation and cruelty, and who is unable to find the love and desire she so craves. Buffeted by the blows of moral and financial ruin and the insensitivity of others, she finally has no strength left with which to wrestle.

When her sister turns against her and remains loyal to Stanley, she collapses and suffers what appears to be a mental breakdown and is whisked off to an institution (described as a holiday in the countryside to avoid embarrassment, and before re-hab became so fashionable), to be put back together in the right order by moral arbiters - a victim of society's stifling conventions, one man's cruelty and the stuff of real human tragedy.

But she doesn't play the victim card or cry foul play against chauvinistic men, and would more than likely run a mile from a SlutWalk. She fights back in her own way and is up and down like a see-saw, flirting and then skirting, though managing to stay upright and sane for longer than most. Unlike her modern day sisters who wave the feminist flag and point the finger of blame at men rather than society (aren't men too bound by social norms?), she is not fearful.
of men or of being intimate with them. Love or hate Blanche for her prejudices, coquettish and wilful character, it is hard not to admire her resilience in the face of such lack of compassion and understanding. It is her valiant battle against solitude and convention along with her desire for passion that makes Blanche seem more humane and therefore more admirable than many modern female characters and lends this story poignancy.

Streetcar prompts many questions about society, class, race, relationships, equality, gender roles and tolerance. It is evident that in the 21st century a modern Blanche would have more freedom in the kind of intimate relationships she has and how she conducts them. She would most likely network-socially and connect with thousands, expressing her likes or otherwise. Or along with an increasing number, be registered with an on-line dating agency in search of happiness and fulfilment. She may have cohabited, married and divorced thrice over without stigma and denouncement as sinner. However, due to the popular myth of human powerlessness that diminishes the human capacity for self-determination and the increasing tendency to turn to professionals for help with problems she might also be a regular on the couch of a therapist, labelled an addict and be dependent on a regular therapy session and disability benefits. Although many things have changed for the better in the lives and choices of women and men, relationships these days seem to be one area that is far more complicated than back in the 1940s. We now live in a risk averse society where from the comfort of our own homes we can log on and seek out Mr or Ms Right and search for and sift out the wheat from the chafe, categorising and cataloguing other human beings into collections and avoiding the risk and unpredictability of meeting someone in person. Instead of getting out there and having a real face-to-face encounter, jumping in feet first Blanche style, we have transformed love from an emotion to be experienced with abandonment into a risk we need to be wary of and a problem we have to manage. Alongside the decline in traditional marriage we have a range of carefully calculated options; pre-nuptial agreements, cohabitation contracts, civil partnerships and contractual protection from every possible risk - you can even sue someone for giving you a STD and have the right to ask them to get tested before signing up to commitment of some type. It's enough to drive any Blanche into the arms of a professional therapist or a month in re-hab. The passionate abandonment of the likes of Blanche DuBois has been replaced by documented and dismally designed strategies for managing a lawful, healthy and productive relationship - how did it all get so complicated and pre-meditated, and when did it all become so anti-social?

Ironic as it may seem given that women now have more choices, equality and independence, and a wider range of acceptable couplings, we seem to be less tolerant of any behaviour we can't control, regulate, medicalise or counsel. A Streetcar Named Desire sounds so glamorous compared to its modern day equivalent of a Cab to a Counsellor! Gimme Bonkers Blanche and Manly-man-Stan any time - at least they were straight-forward, impulsive and interesting, or have I just been deluded by the memory of Brando in that T-shirt?

This production is long, intense and benefits enormously from the wonderful Hollywood-like performance of Amanda Drew as Blanche, is well supported by a small cast of local actors, and a sparse but well thought out set and complimentary soundtrack. I was left with a different kind of desire; a desire to read the original play, as so much of the script was poetic, observant and noteworthy. I hope the Playhouse don't let it for 30 more years before staging another of Williams's many brilliant plays. So, if in Blanche's words you don't want realism you want magic, then get
yourself a ride on a streetcar to The Liverpool Playhouse and allow yourself time to wallow in this excellent production.</p>