“Lower Depths, Southern Style”

Tennessee Williams’s “A Streetcar Named Desire.”

Streetcar Named Desire,” by Tennessee Williams, is a fine and deeply disturbing play, almost faultless in the physical details of its production and the quality of its acting. It is hard to define it very satisfactorily for those who haven’t seen it. Most of us at one time or another have come on some incident in the street, some scene of senseless brutality or intolerable humiliation, that struck us inescapably as the last act in a life. Usually, of course, we were mistaken, since the real climaxes are almost never identifiable, but still it gave the imagination, especially if literary, something to wrestle with, and often we got home with quite a story worked out in our heads. Mr. Williams’ play might easily be the triumphant product of just such an experience. The last scene shows a woman being led away from a crumbling house in a nightmare street. She is not young, being in her middle thirties, but she is still handsome and she has a certain amount of style—Old South, as it happens, but still style—both in her manner and her dress. It would not be necessary to identify the two people with her as a doctor and an asylum attendant for anyone to see that she is quite mad. Obviously, any explanation for such a moment, for such a coincidence of smiling insanity—she is clearly delighted with her companions—and ruined elegance and unspeakable squalor, is faced with the danger of seeming either hopelessly inadequate or absurdly melodramatic. All I can say is that Mr. Williams has written a strong, wholly believable play that, starting in a low key, mounts slowly and inexorably to its shocking climax. I think it is an imperfect play, for reasons that I’ll get around to in a minute, but it is certainly the most impressive one that has turned up this season, and I wouldn’t be surprised if it was a sounder and more mature work than “The Glass Menagerie,” the author’s previous compliment to Southern womanhood.

Mr. Williams has placed “A Streetcar Named Desire” in the Vieux Carré in New Orleans, where it seems there is or was just such a car, as well as one labelled “Cemetery” and a neighborhood known as the Elysian

Fields, life in this case being singularly obliging to art. The set represents the two-room apartment occupied by Stanley Kowalski, a young Pole somehow cryptically connected with the automobile business, and his pregnant bride, Stella, a fine, highly sexed girl, though the daughter of that most exhausted of all aristocracies, an old Southern family. It is possible that some scenic artist somewhere has contrived a more gruesome interior than the decaying horror that Jo Mielziner has executed for the Kowalskis, but I doubt it. It is on the ground floor (outside, a circular iron staircase winds up to another apartment, containing perhaps the least inhibited married couple ever offered on the stage); there is no door between the two rooms, only a curtain; the furnishings are sparse and dreadful; the desolate street outside can be seen through the windows, or, rather, through the walls, since Mr. Mielziner's design is by no means literal. It is a wonderful effect and, as the evening wears along, oppressive almost beyond words.

One spring morning, Stella's older sister, Blanche, turns up at this hovel. She is a strange girl, but at first there is nothing visibly wrong with her except a slight hysteria, which she tries to fight down with frequent surreptitious drinks of whiskey, and that grotesque and terrible refinement that Mr. Williams has carried over from his portrait of the mother in "The Glass Menagerie." She is fashionably appalled by the Kowalski apartment and the goings on in it, which include an incredibly seedy, brawling poker game, but this is nothing compared with the dismay she experiences at her first sight of her sister's husband. This is understandable, since, thanks to a peculiar combination of script and casting, this character emerges as almost wholly subhuman—illiterate, dirty, violent, and even somehow with a suggestion of physical deformity, an apelike quality, about him. In addition to the personal disgust he inspires in her, Blanche is slowly forced to realize that her desperate pretending is no good with him; from the moment she comes in, he suspects the unbearable truth about her, and when she seems to be infecting her sister with her stylish ways, he drags it out into the light, with contemptuous brutality.

Laughing in the Face of Dying Young, in “Cherry”

It is something of a tribute to Mr. Williams’ talent that the story of Blanche’s past can seem even momentarily credible. The two girls were brought up in an old house, apparently the conventional “decaying mansion,” which he has chosen to call Belle Rêve, though they pronounce It “Belle Reeve.” Like Stella, Blanche married, but it was a brief and tragic escape, since the boy was a homosexual who shot himself after his seventeen-year-old bride had discovered him in a situation that could hardly be misinterpreted. She went back to Belle Rêve, where she watched the awful, lingering deaths of three old women, and then, when the creditors had taken the house, went on to a town called Laurel, where she taught school and gradually, in a sick—or quite possibly, by this time, an insane—revulsion against death, took up with many men. The Laurel episode ended with her seduction of an adolescent boy (youth plus love, I gather, seemed to her the absolute antithesis of death, though, of course, some authorities might have diagnosed simple nymphomania) and with her expulsion from the town, where, in her brother-in-law’s sardonic phrase, she was getting to be somewhat better known than the President of the United States.

By the time Blanche comes to her sister’s apartment, she has manufactured a gaudy and pathetic substitute past for herself, full of rich and handsome suitors, who respectfully admire her mind, but Kowalski tears that down ruthlessly, without any special moral indignation but with a savage, obscene humor that is infinitely more torturing. He also gives her secret away to the one man—a poor specimen, but kind and honest—who might conceivably have saved her and then takes her, casually and contemptuously, himself. The end comes when she tries to tell this to her sister, who, unable to believe it and still go on with her marriage, consents to having her committed to an asylum. This is, I’m afraid, a pretty poor synopsis—there is no way, for instance, to convey

the effect Mr. Williams achieves in his last act of a mind desperately retreating into the beautiful, crazy world it has built for itself—but perhaps it is enough to give you the general idea.

The reservations I have may easily be captious. Principally, it seems to me that in the emotional surge of writing his play Mr. Williams has been guilty of establishing a too facile and romantic connection between Belle Rêve and the Vieux Carré. Not knowing much about the South, old or new, it was hard for me to visualize the girls' ancestral home, except as something vaguely resembling the House of Usher, but Stella is written and played as a pretty, reasonably cultivated girl, in no sense unbalanced, and her abrupt and cheerful descent into the lower depths of New Orleans seems rather incredible. Mr. Williams attempts, though the evidence on the stage is against him, to portray Kowalski as a man of enormous sexual attraction, so that the very sight of him causes her to see colored pinwheels, but even that is scarcely enough. It is the same, to some extent, with Blanche; whatever the forces working against her may have been, her degradation is much too rapid and complete, her fall from whatever position she may have occupied in a top level of society to the bottom of the last level a good deal more picturesque than probable. As I say, it is conceivable that these transitions do occur in the South, but it is my suspicion that Mr. Williams has adjusted life fairly drastically to fit his special theme. The only other thing I might complain about (Blanche's arrival from Laurel, where apparently she had just been tossed out of a cheap hotel, with a trunkful of pretty expensive-looking jewelry and clothes perplexed me *some*, but I'm willing to let it go) is the somewhat sustained and literary analogy that keeps turning up between the streetcars named for passion and death and the tragic conflict in the heroine's mind. Mr. Williams seems to me much too good a playwright now to bother his head with these ladies'-club mystifications. "A Streetcar Named Desire" is a brilliant, implacable play about the disintegration of a woman, or, if you like, of a society; it has no possible need for the kind of pseudo-poetic decoration that more vacant authors so often employ to disguise their fundamental lack of thought.

After all that, I'm sorry to say there isn't much room left for the compliments to the cast, though God knows they and, of course, Elia Kazan, their director, deserve all I can offer them. Briefly, Jessica Tandy gives a superb, steadily rising performance as Blanche; Marlon Brando, as Kowalski, is, as hinted previously, almost pure ape (his sister-in-law's description of him as "common" entertained me quite a lot, there in the dark), and though he undoubtedly emphasizes the horrors of the Vieux Carré as opposed to Belle Rêve, it is a brutally effective characterization; Karl Malden, as Blanche's unhappy suitor, gets a queer, touching blend of dignity and pathos into what you might call one of those difficult, *listening* parts; and Kim Hunter, as Stella, is sympathetic and restrained and very decorative indeed. The others, representing the inhabitants of that abandoned district, all seemed admirable and awful to me. ♦