



NT Education Workpack

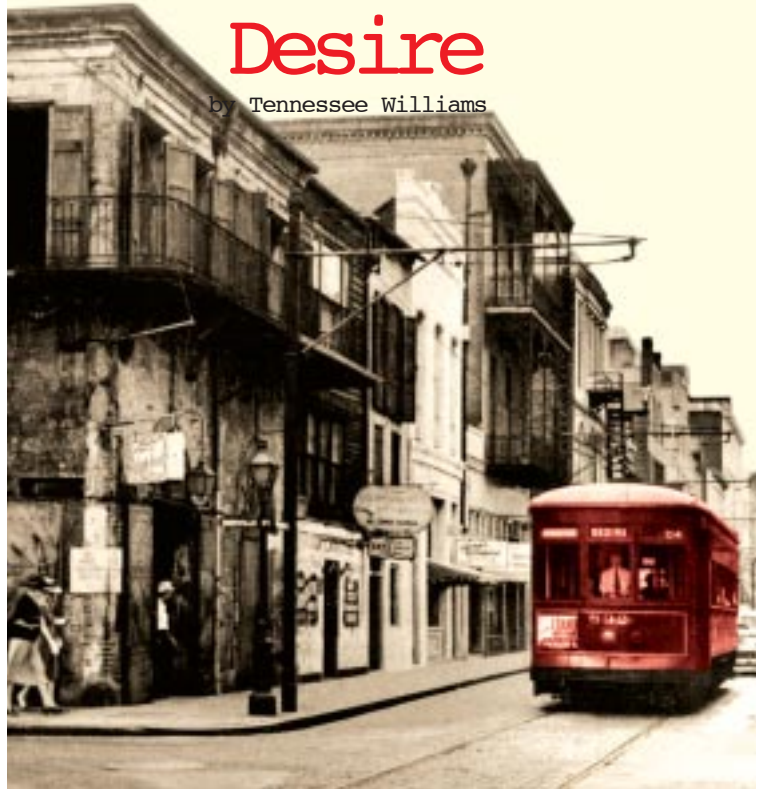
A Streetcar Named Desire

Contents

The writer	2
Introduction	2
Style	3
The play	4
Introduction	4
Structure	4
Synopsis	4
Themes	5
The production	7
The Set	7
Interview with Bunny Christie	7
Music and Sound	8
Lighting	8
Atmosphere	8
Exercises	9
Discussion and written exercises	9
Practical exercises	9
Related reading	10
Appendix	11

A Streetcar Named Desire

by Tennessee Williams



A Streetcar Named Desire
by Tennessee Williams

Further production details:
www.nationaltheatre.org.uk

Director
Trevor Nunn

Designer
Bunny Christie

Lighting Designer
Paul Pyant

Music Supervisor & Arranger
Neil McArthur

Fight Arranger
Malcolm Ranson

Sound Designer
Paul Groothuis

NT Education
National Theatre
South Bank
London SE1 9PX

T 020 7452 3388
F 020 7452 3380
E education@nationaltheatre.org.uk

Workpack written by
Gari Jones

Editor
Dinah Wood

Design
Alexis Bailey
Patrick Eley

The writer

Introduction to Tennessee Williams

"He was a born dramatist as few are ever born. Whatever he put on paper, superb or superfluous, glorious or gaudy, could not fail to be electrifyingly actable. He could not write a dull scene... He will live as long as drama itself." Peter Shaffer

Tennessee Williams was born Thomas Lanier Williams III in 1911 to humble beginnings in Mississippi. His grandfather was a clergyman and his father, a travelling salesman, was away more often than not. Tom and his sister, Rose, were inseparable. An early move to St Louis when Tom was seven was the beginning of a difficult time, during which he found it impossible to settle down as he watched his parents grow further apart. He began writing at twelve, his poems and short stories winning him prizes and recognition.

Tennessee (he took the name in 1939 when his first short story was published) Williams enrolled at the University of Missouri, but lack of funds forced him to leave before graduating and to take a job in a shoe factory alongside his father. He spent his spare time writing: *"When I came home from work I would tank up on black coffee so I could remain awake writing. Gradually my health broke down. One day I collapsed and was removed to the hospital. The doctor said I couldn't go back to the shoe company"*. He was sent to live with his grandparents in Memphis where, as he recovered, he continued to write.

He returned to university, and in 1938 at the age of 27, he received his BA from the University of Iowa, where his *Spring Storm* was produced. He produced an enormous number of poems, sketches and plays, as he nurtured his style under the exposure to theory, deadlines, stagecraft, as well as the influence of tutors and fellow students. Meanwhile, he was holding down several part-time jobs to make a living for himself and his family. Even through this, the *need* to write, to purge, was unsurpassed and irrepressible.

The struggle for recognition took many years. He experienced many failures, let-downs, times of depression and 'wandering'. He pawned his typewriter, slept rough, worked as a lift operator (but was sacked when he forgot to close the door to the shaft), as a waiter, a cashier, an usher. Episodic adventures came and went and towns 'swept around him like dead leaves'. *"All the while I*

kept on writing, writing", he recalled, *"not with any hope of making a living at it but because I found no other means of expressing things that seemed to demand expression. There was never a moment when I did not find life to be immeasurably exciting to experience and to witness, however difficult it was to sustain"*.

Ultimately, he produced some of the landmark plays of the century, receiving huge acclaim and recognition, including two Pulitzer Prizes in 1948 and 1955. Among his most recognised plays are *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), *Camino Real* (1953), *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Baby Doll* (1957), *Orpheus Descending* (1957) and, of course, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). Many of his plays have also become legendary films. *"I don't believe all this has happened to me"*, he once said.

In 1981 Williams and Harold Pinter shared the Commonwealth Award 'for excellence and outstanding achievement in various fields of human endeavour'. Williams told Pinter *"Harold, take care of your health – I could have done a lot more if I'd taken care of my health"*.

He died in 1983 but his work continues to receive revivals worldwide, to great acclaim. Pinter directed *Sweet Bird Of Youth* in 1985, describing Williams as *"The greatest American playwright"*.

New audiences continue to discover the unique world of Tennessee Williams. Directors, designers and actors are still excitedly drawn to his work time and time again.

The writer

Style

Williams became renowned for his unmistakable characterisation, accomplished through impeccably observed dialogue. Once his characters speak, they are completely identifiable and unforgettable. The rhythms and patterns of speech draw us into new and unfamiliar worlds.

A second trait is his mixture of realism and fantasy. His work defies labelling and moves easily and seamlessly from realism to surrealism, from truth to fantasy.

In his tribute after Williams' death, Arthur Miller said he *"broke new ground by opening up the stage to sheer sensibility, and not by abandoning dramatic structure but transforming it. He made form serve his utterance. He did not turn his back on dramatic rules but created new ones. He has a long reach and a genuinely dramatic imagination... he is constantly pressing his own limits. He creates shows, but possesses the restless inconsolability with his solutions, which is inevitable with a genuine writer"*.

Williams had a unique and individual voice, dramatically, socially and politically. He was not afraid of showing profoundly personal themes in his writing, nor those which society might see as alarming.

Williams developed a style that was precise and poetic, but always truthful. His beautiful and imaginative imagery was unusual within the constraints of traditional theatre and, while being grounded in reality, in places his plays were almost

surreal. His work carries the audience inside the minds of the characters, rather than just dealing with the external façade. We are not being simply entertained or told; rather we are encouraged to use our imaginations and delve deeper, where we are emotionally charged and affected. This is where Williams is exceptional. He described it as *"the incontinent blaze of live theatre, a theatre meant for seeing and for feeling"*.

Williams' grandmother was a music teacher, and his mother was a singer. Music to Williams was a major source of inspiration. His foreword to *Camino Real* talks of jazz experiments which are *"a new sensation of release, as if I could ride out like a tenor sax, taking the breaks in a Dixieland combo or a piano in a bop session"*. Overlaying music, sound, light, and textures, Williams was able to blur the line between realism and subjective expressionism.

Iain Glen, Glenn Close, Essie Davis
photo Catherine Ashmore



The play

Introduction to *A Streetcar Named Desire*

A Streetcar Named Desire is undoubtedly the play most closely identified with its writer and it has certainly provoked the most critical commentary.

Williams began working on *A Streetcar Named Desire* in January 1945, only settling on this title once the final manuscript was submitted to his agent. For two years he had been working through revisions and drafts, variously titled *The Passion Of the Moth*, *Blanche's Chair In the Moon*, etc. He had also considered various epigraphs of blind hope, delicate moths in a world of mammoth figures, flight from reality. He finally chose a verse from Hart Crane's poem, *The Broken Tower*:

*And so it was I entered the broken world
To trace the visionary company of love, its voice
An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)
But not for long to hold each desperate choice.*

During this time, Williams also had his premiere openings on Broadway of *The Glass Menagerie* and *You Touched Me!*, whilst also starting to write *Summer and Smoke*, which opened a year later, and *Camino Real*.

Streetcar opened on 3 December 1947 at the Ethel Barrymore Theater in New York. It starred Jessica Tandy as Blanche, Marlon Brando as Stanley, Karl Malden as Mitch and Kim Stanley as Stella. It catapulted Williams to the forefront of American playwrights. *Streetcar* won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the Donaldson and New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards – the first play to win all three.

Glenn Close, Iain Glen
photo Catherine Ashmore



The 1951 film version with the same cast but this time with Vivien Leigh as Blanche (she had played the part in the London production two years earlier), won the New York Film Critics' Circle Award.

Structure

Whilst at Missouri University, Williams was heavily influenced by his tutor, Robert Ramsay, who used the *ouroboros* symbol – the snake with tail in mouth – to describe the perfect plot, the end being implicit in the beginning: opening situation, complicating circumstances, apparent success, flaw discovered, thickening clouds, sudden catastrophe, aftermath. It describes accurately the plotline of *Streetcar*.

Roxana Stuart, who played Blanche in two productions, described "*the first four scenes are comedy; then come two scenes of elegy, mood, romance; then five scenes of tragedy*".

Divided into eleven scenes, the play has no act divisions. The original production used the breaks marked by the seasonal divisions for its intervals, after scenes four and six.

Synopsis

The play opens in the oppressive summer heat of New Orleans, right after World War II. Blanche DuBois arrives unexpectedly with a suitcase at the apartment of her sister, Stella, who lives with her husband, Stanley Kowalski.

They seem out of touch, and Blanche brings the news that their ancestral home, Belle Reve, has been lost. Blanche had stayed behind to care for their elderly and dying family, whilst Stella had left to make a new life. Blanche tells Stella that she has been given a leave of absence from her teaching position because of bad nerves.

Blanche is disdainful of her sister's cramped flat and the working-class neighbourhood. Her social condescension wins her the animosity of Stanley, who distrusts her, believing that she's swindled them out of Stella's and his share of the family inheritance.

One night Stanley hosts a drunken poker game with three friends. Blanche gets under Stanley's skin, particularly as she begins to win the affection of his friend Mitch. Stanley erupts when Mitch leaves the poker game and spends time talking with

The play

Blanche in the bedroom. He storms in and throws the radio out of the window. When Stella attempts to defend Blanche, Stanley hits Stella. She and Blanche retreat to the neighbours' apartment but Stella, much to Blanche's alarm, returns to Stanley when she hears his remorseful cries.

The following day, Blanche tries to persuade Stella to leave her husband. Stanley overhears much of their conversation and later hints to Blanche that he has heard rumours of her disreputable past.

One evening while Blanche waits for Mitch to pick her up for a date, a teenage boy comes by to collect money for the newspaper and Blanche attempts to seduce him. Later, Blanche reveals to Mitch that many years ago her husband committed suicide after she had discovered his homosexuality. Mitch too has lost a former love; they need each other.

It is Blanche's birthday. Stanley reveals to Stella, Blanche's sordid past, claiming she was evicted from her previous hotel because of her numerous sexual liaisons. Mitch, hearing the news, fails to appear at the birthday meal. For a birthday present, Stanley gives Blanche a bus ticket back to Laurel.

The onset of Stella's labour cuts short the ensuing argument between Stella and Stanley.

Later that night, Blanche, drunk and alone in the flat, is confronted by Mitch. She admits that the stories are not untrue and Mitch tries to have sex with her. She says that she will not sleep with him unless they marry, to which he responds that it is

no longer possible — she is not fit to live in the same house as his mother.

When Stanley returns from the hospital, Blanche tells him that she will soon be leaving to join her former millionaire suitor, Shep Huntleigh. Stanley laughs at her and they fight. He carries her to the bed. "We've had this date with each other from the beginning!"

Weeks later, Stanley hosts another poker game. Blanche believes she is leaving her sister in order to join her millionaire. In fact, Stella and Stanley are waiting for a doctor and nurse to arrive, who are going to take her to an asylum. Stella confesses to her neighbour Eunice, that she cannot allow herself to believe Blanche's story that Stanley raped her.

After an initial struggle, Blanche leaves on the doctor's arm without a backward glance. Stella sobs with her child in her arms while Stanley comforts her.

Themes

Many of Williams' plays show a world that is dictated by forms of fascism and bigotry. Michael Billington observed:

"Williams' whole career can be seen as an attack on a society that elevates crude energy and muscular materialism above delicacy of feeling."

Williams himself said:

"If there is any truth in the Aristotelian idea that violence is purged by its poetic representation on stage, then it may be that my cycle of violent plays have had a moral justification after all."

"I have no acquaintance with political and social dialectics. If you ask what my politics are, I am a humanitarian. That is the social background of my life."

Williams grew up during the Depression, flirting with radical politics and regarding himself as something of a 'revolutionary'. He was drawn to theatre that addressed the concerns of the world. Theatre was no longer a place to be simply entertained, when on the streets people were homeless and starving. He debated political corruption, rarely voted, denounced America's war involvements and, as a homosexual, found himself harassed and threatened in a brutal world. A world without freedom to speak one's mind and to be the person one wants to be.

Robert Pastorelli, Glenn Close
photo Catherine Ashmore



The play

"Since I am a member of the human race, when I attack its behaviour toward fellow members I am obviously including myself in the attack, unless I regard myself as not human but superior to humanity. I don't. In fact, I can't expose a human weakness on stage unless I know it through having it myself. I have exposed a good many human weaknesses and brutalities and consequently I have them. I don't even think that I am more conscious of mine than any of you are of yours. Guilt is universal. I mean a strong sense of guilt. If there exists any area in which a man can rise above his moral condition, imposed upon him at birth, and long before birth, by the nature of his breed, then I think it is only a willingness to know it, to face its existence in him, and I think that, at least below the conscious level, we all face it. Hence guilty feelings, and hence defiant aggressions, and hence the deep dark of despair that haunts our dreams, our creative work, and makes us distrust each other".
Tennessee Williams (1959)

Streetcar was premiered at a time when Broadway was dominated by musicals, comedies and revivals of the classics. Few new writers of the 20s and 30s

continued to write in the 40s. *Streetcar* mirrored society; it caught a moment in time, a mood that was apparent in the wake of the war and the Depression. Williams' characters are reeling, desperately trying to find an identity, to re-evaluate themselves. Their own struggles are met by those of others, causing tension and conflict.

It was also the first play to truly tackle sexuality. Sexuality is at the core of the main characters; it can redeem or destroy.

Critic, Harold Clurman described Stanley Kowalski as *"The unwitting antichrist of our time. His mentality provides the soil for fascism"*.

Nothing had prepared the audience for the searing and complex adult themes of the play. One critic called it the product of an *"almost desperately morbid turn of mind"*. In contrast, another described it as *"a revelation. A lyrical work of genuine originality and disturbing power"*. Such were and continue to be the extreme reactions to the play.

Glenn Close
photo Catherine Ashmore



The production

Trevor Nunn directs this major revival, following in the footsteps of such people as Ingmar Bergman, Jean Cocteau and Laurence Olivier. He has assembled an impressive cast who produce impeccable performances, including Glenn Close, from America, to play Blanche, Iain Glen who plays Stanley, Essie Davis, from Australia, who plays Stella and Robert Pastorelli, also over from America, as Mitch.

The Set

Williams describes his vision as *“the exterior of a two-storey corner building on a street in New Orleans which is named Elysian Fields and runs between the L & N tracks and the river. The section is poor but unlike corresponding sections in other American cities, it has a raffish charm. The houses are mostly white frame, weathered grey, with rickety outside stairs and galleries and quaintly ornamented gables. This building contains two flats, upstairs and down.”*

This production is designed by Bunny Christie, who also designed the Birmingham Rep/National Theatre production of Williams’ *Baby Doll* in 1999/2000.

Interview with Bunny Christie, before rehearsals began:

Gari Jones: *What’s your starting point for a play like Streetcar and how much can you veer from what Williams described?*

Bunny Christie: He writes in a really visual way. His stage directions are incredibly poetic and I do pay real attention to them. He’s one of the few writers where this is the case. It’s almost a shame that the audience doesn’t get to hear them. It’s so much the sense of the way he sees something happening, the feel of it. It must be great for the actors and, certainly, for a designer it’s lovely to work on. He often describes a particular colour or tone, of the sky for example. Although we won’t have a sky, as such, I will have the resonance of what he describes elsewhere. He talks of these acidic colours which you can take elements of and which we’ll show in the costumes. I will use the essence of how he saw it. He describes a red robe that Blanche wears, but almost every time he describes it he uses a different tone, scarlet or crimson, which reflects how she’s feeling in that scene, which is really beautiful.

We are setting the play in 1947 and in New Orleans, as he set it. I’m also using the delicacy and dilapidation he describes. But he is a writer you can do almost anything with.

There are lots of references to light and mood in the text. How much does this influence you, and how do you incorporate that with what the rest of the creative team are doing?

I always work very closely with the lighting designer. I met very early on with Paul Pyant, who’s designing the lighting on this production. The lighting is integral to the way I see the design. It’s vital to the atmosphere and to the play working. There is a mood in Williams’ work, a languid, hazy, almost druggy atmosphere. How you approach that as a designer, can be as different as any writer.

And how is that in Streetcar?

We’ve set the house on a revolve, so we can follow the action, almost filmically, from the yard, through one room into another. Wherever we are in the play we can move that scene downstage centre. Originally it would have been done with gauzes, and that was an exciting development in theatrical terms at the time. But Trevor and I felt that something would always be missed or sacrificed in trying to make the whole world work.

The house becomes an oasis. we’re stripping the space right back around it, and there’s a much more expressionistic, abstract suggestion of the dark, scary outside that occasionally encroaches on the building. We’re having a lot of large, overhead fans, slowly turning. One thing like that and you know you’re somewhere hot, and you’re in the city. We’re also building out from the stage slightly into the audience so that it doesn’t feel like a separate world. It’s delicate because his writing is so delicate.

Christie’s set follows the action as the characters travel from room to room or outside. It also allows intimacy and atmosphere created in a scene to continue, as the action moves.

There are a huge number of fans, slowly rotating, in the void areas surrounding the ‘island’ of the building. Delicately used, they are illuminated, glowing as they turn, with great effect and resonance.

The production

Music & Sound

Williams describes an almost continuous soundscape during the play; 'Blue piano', voices and noise from the street, dissonant brass and piano, trains passing, polka music, and the 'Varsouviana'. Alongside this there are very descriptive atmospheric indications; 'lurid reflections', 'the night is filled with inhuman voices like cries in a jungle', 'lurid nocturnal brilliance, the raw colours of childhood's spectrum', 'you can almost feel the warm breath of the brown river'.

Neil McArthur's detailed score of jazz and blues sings out during transitions, and underscores some of the action, often highlighting Blanche's state of mind.

Paul Groothuis' soundscape suggests a world of trams, trains and people, beyond the confines of the apartment. It also suggests mood, as tensions rise and Blanche's paranoia begins to take hold.

Lighting

Paul Pyant's lighting creates a complimentary atmosphere to the sound and design. It is not always naturalistic and allows elements to be highlighted, moments to resonate. Much of the action is lit as if through slatted blinds, whether moonlight or the daylight sunshine, cutting across the walls and the actors' faces and bodies.

Atmosphere

The presence of the outside world is felt from the opening, as vendors and street-sellers advertise their wares, prostitutes search for trade, drunkards sing and shout, people come and go. The atmosphere is needy, but also fun and lighthearted. These characters reappear during the transitions from one scene to another.

In Act 2 the atmosphere gets darker. Street characters get angrier, until they encroach, in Blanche's mind at least, into the apartment itself and as faces at the window, haunting and grotesque.

Choices

Nunn and his company have made clear choices. We witness Stanley pinning Blanche to the bed and the audience is left in no doubt that the rape, ambiguous in Williams' text, actually takes place.

The play and film suggest different endings. The film version of *Streetcar* shows Stella going to the neighbours with her baby after Blanche leaves, with Stanley shouting after her. The implication is that all is not going to be well – that Stella has learned the truth about her husband.

In the stage play, Stanley approaches a sobbing Stella, who sits halfway up an exterior staircase between the flats. She clings to her baby as Blanche leaves without a look. The stage directions state *"He kneels beside her and his fingers find the opening of her blouse."*

Exercises

Discussion & Written Exercises

Desire is used throughout the play, both literally and figuratively. Discuss where and how it's used, and its meaning in that context.

Williams uses textures of light and sound as stage directions throughout the play. Find particular instances and discuss their purpose and effect.

How does the play reveal violent and antagonistic behaviour? Who is affected by it and in what ways? How does it progress and change the course of action throughout the play?

Williams uses astrology to further define Stanley and Blanche. Research their birth signs and discuss what they reveal. Discuss the significance of their names? What does this tell you about them?

Williams used an epigraph for the play: Hart Crane's poem, *The Broken Tower*, printed earlier in this pack. Why this poem? Discuss the themes it raises, and how it relates to the action, themes and story of the play.

Essie Davis, Glenn Close

photo Catherine Ashmore



Practical Exercises

Music is integral to the play, almost a second dialogue. Try working on a scene with different types of music as an underscore and see how the scene is affected. Use your favourite music. Don't be afraid of setting it in a modern environment.

Madness is a theme of the play. What defines madness? Try showing varying degrees of madness through improvisation, but ensure that it's realistic. Use only sources and information that you know to be true and honest. Do not stereotype or caricature. Think about things that affect your mood or perspective.

Working on a scene from the play, ask two people to read the dialogue and, at the end of each line, ask a second pair to voice the subtext, what the character is really feeling, what they really want to say.

Blanche makes references to being 'trapped'. How can we be trapped, mentally and/or physically? Show different ways we can be trapped, either physically or mentally. Work alone for a while, and then allow people to observe what you are doing, like an installation.

There are sequences in the play when characters are alone. Work on a scene of your own where you are totally alone. Using only emotion and action, try and reveal a situation. Keep it simple; this works best. Then try adding music of your choice and seeing how this affects it.

As discussed, the film version of *Streetcar* shows Stella going upstairs to the neighbours, with her baby, after Blanche leaves, with Stanley shouting after her. Try improvising this version of the end of the play. Improve other endings. What if the doctors had not been called? What if Stella wanted to leave with Blanche?

Subtext is extremely important in Williams' writing. Improve a scene from the play and try *showing* the opposite of what you are *saying*. If you are being blatantly horrible do it with a smile on your face! Say things that are essentially banal but play them with a different meaning.

Related reading

For further details about the NT production of *Streetcar*, and background information about the play:

The National Theatre programme, with articles by Christopher Bigsby and Dave Gelly

For further information about Williams, including biographical and critical essays and published works

www.olemiss.edu/depts/english/ms-writers/dir/williams_tenn

Analysis of *Streetcar*, including poetic references, characters, setting, as well as in-depth study of Williams

www.hippogator.net/scarplaywright.html

Analysis of *Streetcar* from diverse critical and cultural stances and methods. Essays in confrontation of the play

www.info.greenwood.com/books/0313266/0313266816.html

Classic Notes on Williams and *Streetcar* by Harvard students

www.classicnote.com/ClassicNotes/Authors/about_tennessee_w

The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams (Edited by Matthew Roudane, 1997)

Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams by Lyle Leverich

The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams by Donald Spoto

Plays In Production: A Streetcar Named Desire by Philip C Kolin

The NT Bookshop stocks a wide range of theatre-related books including the playscript for *A Streetcar Named Desire* in two editions and other work by and about Tennessee Williams in book and video formats.

Tel: 020 7452 3456

Fax: 020 7452 345

E: bookshop@nationaltheatre.org.uk

Glenn Close
photo Catherine Ashmore



Appendix

Breaking down taboos

On the eve of directing *A Streetcar Named Desire* Trevor Nunn reflects on the genius of Tennessee Williams, and the magnetic allure of Glenn Close, who plays Blanche DuBois

As Falstaff says, “instinct is a great matter”. I have never fully understood why I choose the plays and musical shows I direct, because the process is often rather like osmosis, an instinctive kinship with a piece of material rather than a rational dialectical process. The idea of a play, or a particular way of approaching a play, will often arrive in my mind as part of a dream, or a reverie, rather than as a direct result of academic enquiry, or a careful scholarly adjudication of the pros and cons. And I am very happy to keep things this way.

I have now directed all the plays of Shakespeare. I am gratified that this aforementioned inexplicable magnetism has led me to works by his contemporaries, to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English comedies of manners, to Chekhov, Ibsen and Shaw, to twentieth-century writers as various as Coward, Kaufman, Pinter, Miller and Stoppard. But I cannot for the life of me understand why, admiring his plays so enormously as I have since I first read *The Glass Menagerie* when I was twenty, I had never chosen to direct Tennessee Williams until five years ago. But then, very little instinct was involved.

Vanessa Redgrave, whose greatness is inextricable from her ceaseless energy as an activist, placed a manuscript of an early play by Tennessee Williams in front of me, with an explanatory note describing how she had sleuthed and sniffed her way to discovering it in a Texas university library, and how it had never been performed by anyone anywhere ever. I finished reading it an hour and a half later, clear that this gift horse would get not so much as a glance in the mouth from me.

The play was *Not About Nightingales*. Directing it at the National was a rare and humbling experience, working with a young and untried writer who happened to have died as a world-famous theatrical genius many years before. Young Tom Williams seemed often to be in the room as we rehearsed, so potent was our biographical sense of him and our feeling of responsibility towards him. It was during that immensely invigorating investigation of this apprentice piece (and long before we knew that *Nightingales* would become an enormous success, adding another accepted title to his oeuvre) that I

realised I was building up a need to convert my sense of proximity to Tennessee Williams into a production of one of his masterpieces.

A Streetcar Named Desire is a play of mythological centrality, redefining American Theatre with its indelible heightened poetic naturalism, breaking down the taboo that sexual obsession and sexual violence could not be shown on stage, and creating characters who seemed to take on representative status reflecting postwar American life.

As with the small number of other indisputably great roles, there are as many ways of playing Blanche DuBois as there have been productions of the play. But the prerequisite would seem to be magnetic allure – in appearance, in timbre, in manner, in aura, and in mystery. This woman must delight, attract, disturb and repel with a consuming seductiveness that makes us long for more of her company.

I suppose that is another way of saying that the need is for a great actress. When I worked with Glenn Close in *Sunset Boulevard*, it was instantly apparent from the first rehearsals that all the ingredients of greatness were present in her. As we became almost telepathically understanding as colleagues and friends, I realised that I wanted to nominate the next great challenge that we could take on together. So two streams became a confluence, and that need for us to work together conjoining with my passion to present a Williams masterpiece became a river that has taken us all the way to post-war New Orleans, and to a streetcar heading for a district called Desire.

A play as great as *Streetcar* doesn't need a reason linked to topicality or the mood of the times to justify a revival, any more than we would seek in such ways to discover what had prompted a revival of *The Cherry Orchard* or *Hamlet*. *Streetcar* takes place at a particular time, in a particular place, but its insights – into the instinctive battle of the sexes, into the life of the mind in conflict with the urges of the body, into class and inverted snobbery, into the choices we humans make that lie beyond reason and which decide the shape of our lives – require only commitment and passionate identity to be again as relevant as when Tennessee felt his pen was being guided across the page.

© Trevor Nunn, September 2002

This article was first published in *Stagewrite*