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Entertainment

THEATER REVIEW: Theater debuts with powerful "Streetcar"

By Tom Titus

All too infrequently, local theater raises the bar and reaches for what Don Quixote would call "that long unattainable star." We've had two such occasions this year — UC Irvine's immaculate production of "Sunday in the Park With George" and South Coast Repertory's majestic "Hamlet."

Now a third such production may be added to the list, the introductory offering from a newly created troupe known as the American Coast Theater Company — a brilliant and powerful revival of Tennessee Williams' masterpiece, "A Streetcar Named Desire."

Based at Costa Mesa's Vanguard University and featuring professional actors in the central roles, this "Streetcar" rattles with the jangled nerves of its visitor and rumbles with the steely resolve of its host. The intimacy of Vanguard's small Lyceum Theater draws the audience into the desperation of Williams' 1940s-era characters.

Guest director Karen Lund, recruited from Seattle, endows her production with a visceral immediacy that transcends mere stage acting. Her performers enrich their characters with an untheatrical honesty and compelling magnetism that renders this 60-year-old classic new and revitalized.

At the heart of any "Streetcar" is the relationship between Blanche and Stanley, the theater's original odd couple. Blanche DuBois, frail and jittery, has arrived at the downbeat New Orleans home of her sister, Stella Kowalski, and her brutally macho husband, Stanley, who represent a last resort for this emotionally distraught woman.

Susan K. Berkompas delivers a magnificent performance as Blanche, the fluttering, self-styled grand lady of the South, whose cheery surface bravado masks a frightening desperation. Berkompas captures Blanche's lilting, mocking cadence perfectly, rendering the playwright's often-purple prose with the smoothness of a mint julep.

Her adversary, Stanley, is dynamically interpreted by Cameron Dye, who modulates his interpretation skillfully, flaring up only when necessary for dramatic effect.

Dye is physically and vocally an ideal Stanley, smarter perhaps than the Polish character Williams created, yet every bit as cold and menacing when his territory is threatened.

Marianne Savell as Stella, his pregnant wife, acts as a buffer between the two opposites, soothing both her sister and her husband with calming reassurances of her love for each.

Paul Eggington as Mitch, who vainly woos Blanche, transitions effectively from shy bumpkin to enraged suitor, delivering one of the play's most powerful moments late in the second act.

Tim Larson and Deborah Marley lend staunch support as the squabbling but loving couple in the upstairs apartment. Carlos Fernandez, Mark Parker and Cecie McClelland complete the cast in multiple roles.

"Streetcar" is the introductory production of the American Coast Theater Company and its lone offering this year. Next summer's plans include two ACTC shows, one a musical, in the soon-to-be-expanded Lyceum Theater.

Classic American dramas such as "A Streetcar Named Desire" don't come around often, and when they are revived with this much power and passion, they demand to be seen.

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- **TOM TITUS** reviews local theater for the *Daily Pilot*.

IF YOU GO:

WHAT: "A Streetcar Named Desire"

WHO: American Coast Theater Company

WHERE: Vanguard University, 55 Fair Drive, Costa Mesa

WHEN: Fridays at 8 p.m., Saturdays at 2 and 8 p.m. through Aug. 18

COST: \$30 - \$25

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