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'Streetcar' ambles to Tennessee Williams' point

Review: New Costa Mesa troupe delivers leisurely, fairly chaste version of classic 1947 drama

By ERIC MARCHESE
Special to the Register



CLASSIC: Blanche DuBois (Susan K. Berkompas) tempts her brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski (Cameron Dye) in the American Coast Theater Company's inaugural production of Tennessee Williams' classic, "A Streetcar Named Desire."

'A Streetcar Named Desire'

- **When:** Through Aug. 18. 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m. Saturdays
- **Where:** Lyceum Theater, Vanguard University, 55 Fair Drive, Costa Mesa
- **How much:** \$30 (\$25 for seniors and groups of 10 or more)
- **Length:** 2 hours, 40 minutes
- **Suitability:** Not suitable for children (for content)
- **Call:** 714-619-6424
- **Online:** www.americancoasttheater.org

Tennessee Williams' metier is the clash of opposites: those who face harsh truths and realities and those who refuse to face them, insisting on living in a world of dreams – or lies, as the realists terms it.

In 1947's "A Streetcar Named Desire," Southern belle Blanche DuBois has woven a dream world for herself. Naturally, the play's drama revolves around her inevitable fall from a precarious perch of good old-fashioned, Williams-ian mendacity.

American Coast Theater Company's low-key, naturalistic staging by Karen Lund is studied and measured, allowing the script to breathe through a solid ensemble with a fine feel for the genre.

Williams' florid, languid style is well-represented here. Like "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," this is Deep-South Gothic, loaded with the often-overwrought prose used by those to whom words are a weapon to cut one's enemies to the quick.

If anything, ACT's production, the troupe's inaugural venture, could do with a bit of goosing. It often feels a bit too leisurely for the charged drama that it is.

Blanche (Susan K. Berkompas), a hypocritical, widowed English teacher and secret booze-hound wallowing in false modesty, drops in on sister Stella (Marianne Savell) and her husband, Stanley Kowalski (Cameron Dye) in their shabby New Orleans home.

Berkompas' Blanche is a true belle – fluttery manners and florid speech. "I need kindness now," she tells Stanley's pal Mitch, and it's clear from the start she's living in a world of her own.

Stanley may be "an animal, bestial, ape-like," as Blanche deems, but he's determined to root out her motives in visiting even if it means shattering her carefully chosen illusions. Not that it takes much to do so – Blanche is well aware her looks are fading and time is against her.

Berkompas lets us see Blanche's narcissism and the canny side that calculates where she can gain the advantage, whether flattering Mitch or trying to seduce a teenage newspaper delivery boy. She also captures Blanche's fragile psyche and her habit of rationalizing even the most innocent deeds.

Despite his small stature, slim, wiry build and refined looks, Dye projects Stanley's cockiness, coarse mien and bullying ways – as well as his disgust with his sister-in-law's too-fancy finery. Dye scowls, struts, holds his belt loops and swings his arms for a simian effect with a finely comedic edge.

Although she finds the brutish, dangerous Stanley exciting and attractive, Savell's fresh-scrubbed Stella fiercely defends her sister to her husband until push comes to shove.

Tall, gangly Paul Eggington is older than the actors around him, his Midwestern Mitch more soft-spoken and sincere than Stanley's other poker pals.

ACT's staging uses jazz and classical licks to sketch the lazy feel of the Big Easy and the Kowalskis' neighborhood, Elysian Fields. Eggington's finely detailed, aptly rundown scene design features streetlamps, archways, banister, patio, window planters, distant buildings and trees, all with a New Orleans feel.

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