

ETT 25
ENGLISH
TOURING
THEATRE

NST
NUFFIELD
SOUTHAMPTON
THEATRES

Theatr
Clwyd

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS
A STREETCAR
NAMED
DESIRE



Royal Theatrical Support Trust

TEACHERS' RESOURCE PACK

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE – TEACHERS’ RESOURCE PACK – MARCH 2018

Welcome to the teachers’ notes and resource pack for A Streetcar Named Desire, directed by Chelsea Walker and brought to the stage by English Touring Theatre, Nuffield Southampton Theatres and Theatr Clwyd, supported by a grant from The Royal Theatrical Support Trust.

This production of A Streetcar Named Desire opened at Nuffield Southampton Theatres on 23 March 2018 and will play a seven-venue tour, coming full-circle and closing in Southampton on 16 June 2018.

This resource pack touches on some of the themes of the play, and aims to offer you a deeper understanding of this production to help with pre and post show lesson planning. There are a few suggested text-based and drama-based tasks included, but feel free to explore other avenues that you feel may be relevant to the story.

MARKETING COPY

“Every man is a king.” Stanley Kowalski is no exception.

Until one summer, when his sister-in-law Blanche comes to stay. Anxious, seductive and fiercely clever, Blanche is just about keeping it together. But her arrival threatens his entire way of life.

As the temperature soars and passions intensify, a burning desire threatens to tear their world apart.

This bold new revival of Tennessee Williams’ timeless masterpiece is a raging portrayal of what it means to be an outsider, in a society where we’re all desperate to belong.

DIRECTOR’S NOTES

What inspired you to choose this play? What draws you to this story?

“It’s theatrical in content and staging - it’s about stripping away performance and illusion to reveal the honest truth that desire and violence underpins our ‘civilized’ society. It’s sensory theatre – it appeals to its audience on a physical level.

It speaks to me from a feminist perspective. It’s a tragedy about a woman who is rejected by a macho community because they cannot place her, nor can they understand her sexuality.

It speaks to universal themes (desire, class, loss, performance of gender) and yet it also feels extremely relevant to New Orleans today at this point in US history, in terms of its gender politics, its class politics, and its carnival-esque culture.

It treads a fine balance between the realistic and the mythic or the poetical. That’s a huge challenge to a director, but it also gives you the freedom to show what’s happening inside Blanche’s head.

Are there any the key themes/messages within it?

- Desire – its pull and the dangers of thwarted desire.
- Closeness to death – as soon as Blanche arrives in New Orleans, she’s on an inevitable journey to her confinement and death.
- Loneliness / isolation within a community.
- Illusion / reality – Blanche prefers the magic of illusion or make-believe to reality, and we should be unsure what to believe about her.

Whose story is it? And why?

Blanche's. It's only a tragedy if we're on her side. She is the one who's betrayed by Stella, raped by Stanley and rejected by the whole community.

We see inside her head to her memories, and we see what happens as her mental health deteriorates. As an audience, we work the hardest to understand her, and so we invest the most in her as a character.

Are there any particular angles or messages you would be keen to get across in the play?

- It's Blanche's story.
- The claustrophobia and isolation – there is no privacy and any space she carves out for herself is invaded by the men.
- It's a modern take.
- It's about the performances of masculinity and femininity. It's set in a laddy, macho society.
- The play will seduce and then provoke the audience.

Do you have ideas about the aesthetics of the design of the piece - will it be contemporary, traditional, period clothing, minimalist, colour, texture etc

- Contemporary – New Orleans 2018.
- The cast will be young and diverse (Blanche is the oldest at 30-35).
- Sensory – food, drink, movement, contemporary jazz.
- I will work with the designer to find a visual language that has the realism / poeticism within it. That means it will not be a fully naturalistic set but it will also have real objects within it. It might be that we achieve this through hyper realism or through finding moments where the realism is broken.
- We will be staging Blanche's memories (perhaps physically / perhaps through interactions with actors playing multiple roles, forming part of her past and present).
- The aesthetics will play with what the audience sees and doesn't see – illusion and reality."

Chelsea Walker
October 2017

MODEL BOX PICTURES



PRODUCTION PHOTOS



TENNESSEE WILLIAMS AND LOCATION

- Born in Mississippi in 1911.
- Plays associated with the American South.
- Williams started to write the play in 1945, the year WW2 ended and it was first performed in 1947.
- Play influenced by Williams' own life; his mother was a 'Southern belle' and his father an alcoholic travelling salesman.
- His sister Rose was mentally unstable and was eventually given a lobotomy and spent the rest of her life in an institution.
- He was obsessed with death – like Blanche, who is haunted by her husband's suicide.
- Following defeat of Confederate states in the American Civil War (1861-65) an enduring mythology had formed around the 'old South' in its pre-Civil War era: a graceful, civilised society superior to the vulgar, materialistic Northern states.
- However, this myth was based upon the enslavement of millions of black Americans as a source of unpaid labour.
- The legends of the 'old South' play an important role in many of his plays.

MAIN CHARACTERS

BLANCHE DUBOIS

Complex, contradictory – unable to accept reality –the tragic heroine.

Her inner struggles, coupled with the failure of others to understand her, lead to her ultimate downfall.

STELLA

Devoted to Stanley, attracted by his rough, dominant manner; must choose between her husband and her sister.

STANLEY KOWALSKI

Polish descent but born in USA and proud of it; antagonist, smouldering sexuality and self-confidence mixed with chauvinism and capacity for cruelty.

MITCH

Friend and workmate of Stanley's; at first fascinated by Blanche but cannot face the truth about her past.

EUNICE

Stella's friend, neighbour, and landlady. Eunice and her husband, Steve, represent the low-class, carnal life that Stella has chosen for herself.

STEVE

Stanley's poker buddy who lives upstairs with his wife, Eunice. Like Stanley, Steve is a brutish, hot-blooded, physically fit male and an abusive husband.

THEMES EXPLORED**Gender and sexuality**

Sexual desire in the context of post-war America, which still rings true in 2018. Stanley and Stella's relationship is held together by Stanley's belief that women need to be dominated and Stella's willingness to be dominated.

Blanche a promiscuous heterosexual woman, possibly influenced by Williams' status as a gay man, at a time when homosexuality was still illegal in most American states.

Sexual passion as an unstoppable force that (like the streetcar) will carry the victim to a path of self-destruction.

Social class and conflict

Blanche and Stella are members of old-established land-owning aristocracy, a 'plantation' family that became rich from slave labour in the original text.

Blanche is desperate to hold on to the Southern belle illusion whilst Stella is happy to abandon this to enjoy the animal passion with Stanley.

Stanley is a working class Polish immigrant – Blanche often describes him as 'sub-human' or animalistic.

Post-war, class divides shifted; men like Stanley who had fought in WW2 came back with a greater sense of entitlement and were also empowered by the rise of trade unions.

Death, madness and tragedy

Blanche's decline into mental instability is partly a result of her experiences of death; her husband's suicide and tending of dying relatives.

Her breakdown after Stanley rapes her can be seen as a kind of death.

Blanche is a tragic heroine – her downfall is presented as inevitable throughout, but is she a victim of society or of her own passions?

CONSIDERATIONS

Subject matter

What are the characters actually saying? What's the scene about? What does this section add to the play as a whole?

Setting/stage directions

How do stage directions contribute towards your understanding of the events, characters and themes? How do the stage directions contribute towards the atmosphere?

Key quotations

Are there any key words and phrases? Do specific responses stand out in any way? Why are they predominant? How do they link with each other? What do they have in common? Do different characters speak in different ways? Why?

Character

What do you learn about the characters? Are there any contradictions? How are they defined through their relationships with others? What do the stage directions tell you about them?

Scenic structure

Look at the way the scene is divided up, both thematically and between characters. Decide why it is divided in this way. Are there any turning points in the scene? What is the effect of these?

Themes and ideas

What kind of bigger ideas are explored in the scene? Do the characters explore any social or moral issues? Do their opinions differ? Why?

Contextual links

How does your knowledge of the contextual background of the text illuminate your reading? What links can you make? Does the text use any generic conventions?

Interpretations

What different ways might you interpret characters? Can you find any critical or theatrical interpretations to develop your ideas?

The text as a drama

Imagine how it plays on the stage and what effect it will have on the audience. What do the stage directions suggest? Where are the characters placed on the stage and why? How does their positioning give an indication of their relationship? How do they move around?

TASK ONE

Interpret characterisation and setting in the opening scene:

Stanley is set up as “king of the apes” (Robert Bray).

On Blanche: “her consuming need is to make herself and others constantly aware of her self-refinement” (John Gassner).

In scene 1, how does Williams make us aware of the contrast between Stanley and Blanche? You must support your answer with close reference to the text.

TASK TWO

How would you stage a new production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* that makes it relevant for audiences in 2018?

Divide the class into small groups of around 4 and get them to pitch their ideas to the rest of the group. The groups should include commentary on the following key areas:

- Where would the play be set, and in which era?
- Whose eyes would they tell the story through and why? Blanche, Stella, Stanley etc?
- How would the mood be set using lighting, projection and sound?
- What costume would the characters be wearing?
- How would movement be incorporated into the piece to express the physicality?

Once all ideas have been pitched, all groups should vote for the winning concept.

TASK THREE

Find a quote that suggests each of the following:

BLANCHE

Signs of inner conflict

Suggestion that she is struggling with her identity

Desire to present a particular image of herself to others – almost theatrical/self-conscious – ‘self-refinement’ (Gassner)

Evidence of instability

STANLEY

Epitomises masculinity

Presented as savage and dominant– ‘king of the apes’ (Bray)

Different to Blanche and Stella – otherness

Associated with animalistic imagery

TASK FOUR

Essay – 1500-2000 words, including quotes, on:

“Identity is mobile: a process not a thing; a becoming, not a being” (Simon Frith). In light of this quotation, explore ways in which Williams explores issues of identity in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

or

“At the centre of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is conflict – conflict between traditions and values, which is concentrated in battles of character”. In light of this comment, explore Williams’ presentation of ‘battles of character’ in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

or

“I don’t want realism. I want magic.” Tennessee Williams.

How does Williams present the conflict between fantasy and reality to you in *A Streetcar Named Desire*?