



HELLO STANLEY, GOOD-BYE BLANCHE The Brutal Asymmetries of *Desire* in Production

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Staging *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Staging in the theater. Staging in film. Staging in theatrical histories, literary histories, memoirs. Staged by reviewers, literary critics, teachers and students, publishers and readers. Each one of us has personally staged *Streetcar* in the past, and will no doubt do so again. Our various stagings will merge, collide, fragment and metamorphose. Our stagings will inevitably be partial and informed by personal experience. Let me begin with my staging, and then move on to others.'

When I received Professor Guilbert's kind invitation by e-mail to present a paper at this conference, my first response was on a level of hysteria, that easily rivaled Blanche. "No!" I thought, my heart racing. "There must be some mistake! I can't talk about *that* play! I'm the last person on earth who should talk about *that* play!" Yes, it seemed impossible to me, for, though I have published articles on plays by Tennessee Williams, edited a volume of essays on Williams, and directed productions of three of his plays, I have done my best to avoid any involvement with what is his most celebrated play, teaching it in the classroom only once, avoiding the Kazan film until I reached age 47, and never once having seen a live production of the play. While Philip C. Kolin has edited a fine volume of essays entitled, *Confronting 'A Streetcar Named Desire'*, I could write the book on avoiding it. I stand before you as an anomalous creature—a person who *some* would call a "Williams scholar", who has actually spent over thirty years anxiously avoiding *A Streetcar Named Desire* until Professor Guilbert's e-mail invitation arrived, seemingly out of nowhere, challenging me to put an end to my flight, turn around, and look the play bravely in the eye.

When had I begun to flee? With my first reading. A queer adolescent in a small town in rural Wisconsin in the mid-1960s (long before "queer" was anything but a term of contempt), I was enthusiastically working his way through every drama anthology in the high school and public libraries. *A Streetcar Named Desire* was the next play in the anthology, and so I read *Streetcar*. And I wasn't at all prepared for it. I was shocked and deeply disturbed. I don't think I'd ever read a work as sexually aggressive as *Streetcar*, and it elicited both desire and aversion. Panic at feelings I did not understand. Panic at sexual excitement mixed with a fear of violence, ostracism, annihilation. Revulsion at it, too. Strong revulsion. And there was no one I dared speak to about it.

And so I turned my back on *Streetcar*. Turned my back on Williams altogether for years—an act of evasiveness that is quite a feat in the American theater, given his ubiquity—and not looking at *Streetcar*. Later,

after I came out, I started to explore Williams tentatively and suspiciously, but mostly the late plays, the non-canonical plays—and certainly not *Streetcar*. One thing led to another, and here I am, improbably, speaking on *Streetcar*, after some months of studying and trying to understand this play whose power brought about decades of flight. But I am still not comfortable with it.

I have never believed that my experience was representative. It was clear to me that *someone* had to be attending all those productions of *Streetcar* that I had been avoiding. So, after I calmed down a bit, consulted with my friends and psychotherapist, and decided to accept Professor Guilbert's kind invitation, I began to talk to American theatergoers, asking them about *their* experiences with *A Streetcar Named Desire*. And what I discovered surprised me. Thinking I would hear nostalgic appreciations of various Blanche DuBois, I was surprised to find that most theatergoers would remember the Stanleys they saw. "He was great. He had a great body." Or "The Stanley was very sexual." Or "What I remember is that the Stanley was weak. He wasn't buff enough." When I'd try to turn the conversation to Blanche, the response became lukewarm. "Oh yeah," they'd say, as if trying to call a bit player to mind, "She was o.k."

As a relative newcomer to *Streetcar* production, I was taken off guard by this phenomenon. How could this be? Blanche is the larger role, the more varied role. Her emotional journey through the play is more complex, and the structure of the play begins with her entering the space and ends with her leaving it. She is the character who suffers, who is destroyed. How could this be? I looked at the well-known American paperback edition, with Marlon Brando stripped to the waist as Stanley on its cover. Even the American publishers of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, I realized, staged it as Stanley's play.

I had wondered if my casual critical sampling was somehow skewed, but my research in the library suggested that this was representative. Back in 1973, theater critic Harold Clurman, who had directed a noted production of the play decades earlier, observed that many people assumed that Stanley was the play's hero.¹ In 1987 Roger Boxill had suggested a dichotomy, that readers tended to side with Blanche and audiences with Stanley.² So perhaps my surprise came from the fact that I had not experienced it in the theater. It was clear that I needed to see *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

There were no live performances in my part of the U.S. this summer, so I visited the video collection at the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center. There I viewed a video-recording of a 1997 production of *Streetcar* at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theater, directed by Terry Kinney, and featuring a fine cast, led by Laila Robins as Blanche DuBois and Gary Sinise as Stanley.³ Or rather, led by Gary Sinise—for in the recording of this June 21st performance, the audience is firmly on the side of Stanley Kowalski. As

¹ Harold CLURMAN, "Theater," *The Nation*, 216.20 (14 May 1973), 635.

² Roger BOXILL, *Tennessee Williams*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987, 80.

³ Tennessee WILLIAMS, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, perf. Steppenwolf Theater, directed by Terry Kinney, video-recording (21 June 1997), New York Performing Arts Library, Lincoln Center.

early as the first scene, he dominates the production. His relaxed, coarse manner gets solid laughs from the audience, and every time he scores off Blanche or Stella, the crowd is with him. In the first scene, when Blanche explains, "Traveling wears me out," Sinise's response, "Well, take it easy," already seems suggestive [267].⁴ Stripped to waist and displaying a muscular torso, he stands confidently stage center, one foot on a chair, brazenly sizing Blanche up, fixing her with his gaze. When, at the end of the scene, he asks Blanche about her late husband, Laila Robins says, "I'm going to be sick" and doubles over, following the text [268], but Sinise's Stanley has been so overpowering, that it is not clear if she is giving way at the memory of Alan, or the presence of Stanley.

The laughs increase in the following scene. Stanley's loud indignation at the prospect of having been *swindled* by Blanche [273] gets big laughs, and his ransacking of Blanche's luggage is elaborated into comic business, with no sense that this is an indication of a capacity for violence or violation. "A solid-gold dress," he barks [274]—and the audience laughs. He pulls multiple ropes of pearls out of the trunk with incredulity and exasperation, and the audience laughs again. When Blanche comes on and fishes for a compliment, Sinise faces downstage and snarls, "Your looks are o.k." [278], the audience laughs delightedly. When he tells about the woman who said she was the glamorous type, he ends the story with a loud, emphatic, "So what" [278] and the laughter grows even louder. When Blanche later tells Stanley that her astrological sign is Virgo, "the virgin" [329], Sinise's sarcastic "Hah!" wins not only laughter but applause from the delighted audience.

The result of forging this comic complicity between Stanley and the spectators is to render Blanche and her struggle with Stanley comic. When Laila Robins delivers Blanche's tirade, in which she characterizes Stanley as an ape, it is not, as it was for director and critic Harold Clurman, a heartfelt declaration of the play's central theme [134], but a hyperbolic display of scorn—performed with high vocal energy, big gestures, heavy emphasis and broad sarcasm. This time the audience laughs at Blanche's lines—this is her turn to put down her adversary, but the laughter seems less at Stanley's brutishness than at Blanche's extremities of thought and expression.

In this overall climate of ridicule, even Blanche's less histrionic moments make the audience laugh. When the Young Man comes to the door, and she asks, "What can I do for *you*?" [336], Robins's quiet suggestiveness becomes read by the audience as a comic testimony to Blanche's sexual voracity, as does her final line in the scene, "I've got to be good—and keep my hands off children" [339]. Bereft of delicacy or pathos, the audience reads Blanche's sexual desire as a comic characteristic.

Similarly, the courtship between Mitch and Blanche is mined for its comic potential. This Mitch, played by John C. Reilly, is vague and slow-witted. When Blanche observes to Stella, "This one seems—superior to the others" [292], the audience laughs at the discrepancy between this crude, awkward man and Blanche's description of him. He is genuinely surprised

⁴ All quotations from *A Streetcar Named Desire* are taken from *The Theater of Tennessee Williams*, vol. I, New York: New Directions, 1971, 239-419.

that Blanche recognizes the quotation from Elizabeth Barrett Browning on his cigarette case. Indeed, it seems that he would be surprised that anyone knew it. He seems less touched by the memory of the girl who gave him the cigarette case than befuddled. When he refers to her as “a very strange girl, very sweet” [298], the emphasis is definitely on “strange.” Mentally slow, his astonishment at realizing that the exotic Blanche is Stella’s sister elicits laughter from the audience. Less a meeting of kindred souls, Mitch’s courtship of Blanche becomes a desperate, canny woman’s manipulation of a dolt in pursuit of some stability.

Watching Sinise’s aggressively comic performance in the early scenes of the Steppenwolf production, it is clear that his Stanley, winning the audience through masculine aggression, is a familiar type to a contemporary American audience. His blustering, put-down humor is familiar to any viewer of American situation comedies. This Stanley comes on as a younger, trimmer and more muscular version of Ralph Cramden, Jackie Gleason’s character on *The Honeymooners* or Archie Bunker, Carroll O’Connor’s character on *All In The Family*. On the contemporary American stage, Sinise’s Stanley is kin to the hypermasculine males of Sam Shepherd, David Mamet and David Rabe. The audience is familiar with the type, and knows what to make of him, while Blanche, despite Laila Robins’ assured and insightful playing, is exotic. From the vantage point of 2003, it seems that Williams’s invention of Stanley in 1947 looked forward to Mamet and sitcom, while Blanche looked back. Blanche is a belated instance of the fallen woman—a successor to Marguerite Gautier, Paula Tanqueray, Anna Christie and Sadie Thompson. We do not see her on today American television and we do not see her on the contemporary American stage. Just as Stanley brutally triumphs over Blanche in *Streetcar*, so too the type of Stanley has triumphed over the type of Blanche in the contemporary American imagination. Combining a fetishized body with an aggressive sensibility that encourages audience identification, Stanley can easily win out over Blanche.

The Steppenwolf production, which generates delight at Blanche’s expense, might provide the occasion for a self-righteous jeremiad on the increased callousness and lack of compassion in contemporary American society—if it were not clear that the 1947 Broadway premiere, directed by Elia Kazan, did not already generate similar responses.

Take, as evidence, *Time* magazine’s anonymous reviewer’s punchy plot summary, based on the original production, “Stanley sees through Blanche’s yarns and posturings at once. When he finds her snootily trying to wreck his marriage and slyly trying to hook his pal, he gets the goods on her and lets fly.”⁵ Or Harold Clurman’s judgment that, “The play becomes the triumph of Stanley Kowalski with the collusion of the audience, which is no longer on the side of the angels.”⁶ Or Signi Falk’s report that the rape scene evoked “waves of titillated laughter” on opening night.⁷ Or, most

⁵ “New Play in Manhattan: *A Streetcar Named Desire*,” *Time*, 50.24 (15 Dec. 1947), 85.

⁶ Harold CLURMAN, *Streetcar*, *The Collected Works of Harold Clurman: Six Decades of Commentary on Theater, Dance, Music, Film, Arts and Letters*, Marjorie LOGGUA & Glenn YOUNG (eds.), New York: Applause, 1994, 134.

⁷ Signi FALK, “The Profitable World of Tennessee Williams,” *Modern Drama*, 1.3 (Dec. 1958), 175.

importantly, Elia Kazan's troubled discussion of the production in his memoir, nearly forty years later. In his famous published notes on the production, he stresses the need to balance Blanche and Stanley, but his autobiographical account of the rehearsal process reveals how that balance eluded him. With both Kazan and Williams enraptured with Marlon Brando, Jessica Tandy's husband felt the need to urge Kazan not to "give up on her,"⁸ but it is clear from his account that Kazan was unsure what to do for Jessica Tandy. In the New Haven tryouts, Kazan recollects, "the audiences adored Brando. When he derided Blanche, they responded with approving laughter" [Kazan, 345]. The problem resurfaced when he directed the film: when it was previewed in Santa Barbara, the audience laughed at Blanche too much, and Kazan needed to do some re-editing [Kazan, 416-417]. Even years later, Kazan admits, he kept "puzzling" over the play, since "it was certainly not what it seemed to be, a moral fable of the brutalization of a sensitive soul by a sadistic bully" [Kazan, 347].

It may have been more than ambiguity that led the first production of *Streetcar* to favor Stanley. Perhaps not only did Kazan ignore Jessica Tandy's potential in playing the role, but enjoyed Stanley's subjugation of Blanche as well. An avid seducer of women, a man who reveled in his professional success and the power it brought him, Kazan, was as much the "gaudy seed-bearer"—to use Williams's description of Stanley [265]—as Stanley himself. In his memoirs, Kazan posits himself as the masculine director to the feminine playwright. After his success with S. N. Behrman's adaptation of Franz Werfel's *Jacobowsky and the Colonel*, Kazan observes, "Sam's feeling for me I can only describe as the feeling a woman may have for the man who first brings her to orgasm, a temporary conviction that no one can do it for her" [Kazan, 297].

Kazan's account of an interaction with producer Irene Selznick during rehearsals suggests a parallel with Stanley and Blanche in the early scenes of the play:

She'd sit directly behind me and, as I watched rehearsal, lean forward to whisper her reactions deep into my ear. [...] One day, fed up with her buzzing, I turned on her and barked, "For chrissake, Irene, will you stay the hell out of my ear?" I certainly could have found a nice way to ask this. She forgave me—but never trusted me to be "civilized." [Kazan, 344]

This aggressive, "uncivilized" putdown of a presumptuous woman placed above him could as easily be as Kowalski as Kazan.

Kazan's aggressive tendencies in his approach to this play are further elaborated in his "Notebook" on the play, in which he presents Mitch as the timid and exhausted "end product of patriarchy," who fundamentally hates his mother, and whose "tragedy" is that he returns to her absolute sovereignty in the end.⁹ The invalid mother of Williams's text becomes a tyrant in Kazan's notes. The violence that breaks out in the play against

⁸ Elia KAZAN, *A Life*, New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1988, 343.

⁹ Elia KAZAN, "Notebook for *Streetcar*," in *Directors on Directing*, Toby COLE & Helen CHINOY (eds.), Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963, 379.

Eunice, Stella and Blanche seems to have its sources in a pervasive misogyny that Kazan developed throughout the production.

But the reasons for Kazan's tendency to identify with Stanley may have had other sources as well. Born to Greek parents in Istanbul, and immigrating to the United States at the age of four, Kazan experienced the status of an ethnic outsider, especially as a college student at the then Anglo-American dominated Williams College. When he tried to join a fraternity and was rejected, he was devastated by this proof of his alien status. In his memoir, he writes, "From that week in 1926 on, I knew what I was. An outsider. An Anatolian, not an American." [Kazan, *A Life*, 41] To what extent was Blanche, proud of her French Huguenot background and pretensions to refinement, cruel and insensitive in her reaction to Stanley and his Polish ethnicity, a stand-in for the people who had wounded Kazan? Years after he worked with him, actor Uta Hagen recollected Kazan saying to her, "Well, I'll tell you frankly, I hate Blanche."¹⁰ How much of that hatred found its way to the stage, I wonder, despite Kazan's protestations of balance? When Stanley throws his plate off the table, in response to Blanche and Stella's *hauteur*, shouting, "Don't ever talk that way to me! Pig—Polack—disgusting—vulgar—greasy!"—them kind of words have been on your tongue and your sister's too much around here. What do you think you are? A pair of queens?" [371], how strongly did that resonate off of the prejudices from which Kazan had suffered as an immigrant Greek? For Kazan, achieving balance in a production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* was, first and foremost, making sure that Stanley would not be seen as a villain [231]. There is no doubt that Kazan was an astute interpreter of dramatic texts, and, perhaps in 1947, it was necessary for a director to work very hard to help a Broadway audience see Stanley's side of the story. (After all, despite Kazan's efforts, *The New Yorker's* reviewer, Wolcott Gibbs, was still unable to see any justification for Stanley's actions, seeing him not only as "almost wholly subhuman" and virtually "pure ape" but sexually unappealing as well).¹¹ And it is important to remember that he was directing the play at a time when no one had heard of Blanche and Stanley, when neither of them had entered into the pantheon of American popular culture. But directors are not pure intellects, and their desires, wounds, and aversions have a way of finding their way to the stage. For Kazan, as for all good directors, the production was both the result of careful analysis, personal investment, and psychological projection. His *Streetcar* was, in part, informed by a fantasy of self-assertion, perhaps even of revenge. Would Kazan have been able to see forward to the *Steppenwolf* production, in which the audience rooted so enthusiastically for Stanley?

From Marlon Brando and Elia Kazan to Gary Sinise and Terry Kinney, there is an ugliness to this tendency to side with Stanley in productions of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, in which the arrogance of male heterosexual power is unleashed against a struggling, desperate creature who, as Nicholas Pagan has astutely pointed out, is neither simply a woman nor a homosexual man

¹⁰ Qtd. in Susan SPECTOR, "Alternative Versions of Blanche DuBois: Uta Hagen and Jessica Tandy in *A Streetcar Named Desire*," *Modern Drama* 23.2 (1989), 550.

¹¹ Wolcott GIBBS, "Lower Depths, Southern Style," *The New Yorker* 23.43 (13 Dec. 1947), 50.

in drag, but a character who is constructed through references both to femininity in both forms of womanliness and male homosexuality, making it impossible to confine Blanche within a single gender or sexuality.¹² As such, it was easy for *Streetcar* to be put at the service of post-World War II American normative masculinity, asserting the primacy of men over women, and heteronormative families over “perverts.”

Just as these values continue to be asserted in the 1997 Steppenwolf production, they are also restaged in 1990s criticism. When Mark Royden Winchell analyzes the powerful allure of Stella coming down from Eunice’s apartment to the sobbing Stanley below, he explains, “For men, it is a fantasy of complete domination; for women, one of complete submission.”¹³ For Winchell, identifications must be pure and carefully delineated. Men must identify with men, and women with women. Men must enjoy power, and women, submission. Together they create a contained system that has no place for creatures of gender and sexual anomaly like Blanche DuBois. Applauding its “power” [Winchell, *Myth*, 142-143] as an “aggressively heterosexual play,” Winchell’s analysis reveals how the play can be harnessed to an extremely repressive sexual and gender politics, with an aggressive heteronormativity violently triumphing over and containing queerness. What the tape of the Steppenwolf *Streetcar* performance shows, with men and women both laughing along with Stanley’s putdowns of Blanche, and what Winchell ignores, is that the audience identification with Stanley over Blanche is less one of gender identification than an identification with the powerful over the disempowered.

Was this ultimately what so repelled me as a queer teenager so many years ago? Was the triumph of Stanley too immediate a threat, expressed in too immediate a form? Did it disturb and frighten me by suggesting that an outsider’s desire for sexual pleasure from men could prove both humiliating and annihilating? Did it bring home the fact that the very men who were most sexually attractive to me could also be the most dangerous? Perhaps. If Kazan read *Streetcar* from the point of view of an ostracized, male heterosexual ethnic American, I read it from the point of view of an ostracized queer. And the resultant stagings were very different. Is one’s personal staging of *Streetcar* always a response to one’s own wounds?

On the basis of the research I had done thus far, it looked as if *Streetcar*, regardless of whatever Williams’s conscious intentions had been in writing it, had been easily turned into a play that favored Stanley and denigrated Blanche, a reading that can easily be put to repressive and vicious ends. Turning back from my research on the production history of the play, to Williams’s text, I began to see why this could so easily be done.

The opposition between Stanley and Blanche is not simply one of two characters, but of two dramaturgies. David Savran has eloquently described Williams’s dramaturgy as one that never succeeds in being *one* but, rather

¹² Nicholas PAGAN, *Rethinking Literary Biography: A Postmodern Approach to Tennessee Williams*, Rutherford, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1993, 65-67.

¹³ Mark ROYDEN WINCHELL, “The Myth is in the Message: Or Why *Streetcar* Keeps Running,” *Confronting Tennessee Williams’s ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’: Essays in Cultural Pluralism*, Philip C. KOLIN (ed.), Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993, 142.

exists “at the impossible intersection of two impossible and contradictory forms: the one linear, liberal, and realist, and the other episodic, protosocialist, and hallucinatory,”¹⁴ and that this description suggests a way of considering the opposition of Stanley and Blanche. Stanley exists comfortably within the *Streetcar* that is a realistic play. His character has no need for translucent scenery, theatrical lighting effects, or choruses of the *Varsouviana* erupting out of the past. His realistically conceived character exists in total ease with the brawling neighbors upstairs, the bowling alley, the *machismo* of the poker game, and the lust and violence of the Vieux Carré. No one ever suggests that this character does not fit in perfectly with the play’s milieu: character and setting become virtually indistinguishable. And just as the setting of the play never changes, Stanley is a character who undergoes no transformation in the course of the drama. Existing completely and coherently within the setting, Stanley requires no exposition to explain him; his actions exist totally congruently with each other and with the statements characters make about him. He exists totally at ease within a realistic style that continues to dominate most American theater practice.

Blanche is a different story altogether. The product of Savran’s “episodic, protosocialist, and hallucinatory” dramaturgy, she is less a coherent character than an incoherent figure marked by excesses and disruptions. Stella, who, besides Blanche, is the only character who might provide a sense of coherence to Blanche’s incoherences, proves unable to do so. Hinting obscurely at “things about my sister I don’t approve of—things that caused sorrow at home,” [364] she never explains what those “things” were or what “sorrows” they caused, merely labeling her as “flighty,” [364] an adjective that connotes random or unanticipated movements, and points toward the very incoherence that marks Blanche. Stella then refers to the fact that Blanche married a “degenerate” [364] as a possible explanation for Blanche’s behavior, but never fully articulates (it?) causally.

What Stanley learns about Blanche’s past, and what she later confirms, is a history of sexual excess that it marked not only as illicit, but as so dangerous that it renders her a pariah. Declared off-limits by the United States Army as too dangerous for its men, expelled from the Flamingo Arms as beyond even its own, sullied limits of respectability, fired from the local high school for her sexual activity with a minor, and finally ostracized from the town of Laurel altogether, the past of unbridled sexual license that comes back to haunt Blanche constructs a Blanche DuBois who is altogether different from the one we see onstage. The Blanche that is presented through exposition is less a realistic character than a nomadic trajectory of pure drive, once again detonating the “epic fornications” [284] of her forbearers in the institutions of the present—a series of catastrophic, hyperbolic sexually disruptive events that carry her further and further from the ancestral Belle Reve into a pariah existence.

We do not see this Blanche onstage. What is presented as exposition for Blanche as sexual excess is presented as onstage action for Blanche as

¹⁴ David SAVRAN, *Communists, Cowboys and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992, 91.

aesthetic excess. She easily keeps Mitch at bay and has no trouble turning the Young Man out before things get out of hand. What takes the place of sexual excess is Chinese lanterns, singing, Richard Tauber on the radio, endless pretensions to refinement and flights of fancy. It is revealing that Blanche's life of sexual excess in Laurel is not brought into the play by Blanche, but through the agency of Stanley, who using the assumptions of a realistic dramaturgy, can only conceive of the discrepancy between the Blanche he has heard of and the Blanche he sees as the result of hypocrisy and conscious dissimulation: "There isn't a goddamn thing but imagination! [...] And lies and conceits and tricks!" he shouts at her [398]. The Steppenwolf *Streetcar*, proceeding from a set of realistic assumptions, came to a similar conclusion, making Blanche the affected manipulator who the audience delighted in, seeing unmasked. The realistic assumptions that underlie much of American theatrical practice, tend to encourage the audience to think like Stanley; that the figure of sexual excess must somehow lurk, poorly disguised, behind the facade of aesthetic excess. When the Steppenwolf audience laughed at Blanche with the Young Man, they were laughing at seeing the "authentic," "bad," sexually perverse and predatory Blanche emerge from behind her lady-like exterior. Such a frame of mind is Stanley's, not Blanche's. It is the result of *his* dramaturgy, not *hers*.

And if there is one violent disjunction between the expository, narrative Blanche in Laurel and dramatic Blanche in the Vieux Carré, there is another dramatic fissure between the final, "insane," Blanche in the final scene from the Blanche we have seen before. While realistic dramaturgy, predicated upon creating plots and characters out of a series of causal links, winds up asking the question of *when* Blanche's so-called "descent into madness" begins, leading to a variety of acting choices, from Blanche's first entrance to after the rape,¹⁵ Blanche's own dramaturgy makes such questions superfluous. For criteria of causal inevitability are not a part of Blanche's dramaturgy. For, if the suicide of her husband, for which she blames herself, the loss of her home, years of taking care of dying relatives, increasing poverty, sexual excess and possibly sexual exploitation, a scandal leading to her losing her job, and social ostracism have not pushed her over the brink, why should Stanley's assault? The dramatic caesura between scenes ten and eleven, marked not only by the rape, but by Stella's refusal to believe Blanche's accusations, create another fissure as resistant to realistic reincorporation as the caesura that separates Blanche's life in Laurel from that of her first entrance on stage.

For Laila Robins in the Steppenwolf production, alcohol becomes an important device to create realistic continuities between the earlier and later Blanche. Drinking not only often, as noted in the stage directions, but in large quantities, Robins showed the debilitating effects of Blanche's alcohol consumption as the play progressed. By scene nine, lurching about drunkenly, her assertion of her self-worth in the face of defeat seemed grotesquely maudlin, self-pitying and deluded. Her inebriated state undercut her proclamation, "How strange that I could be called a destitute

¹⁵ For descriptions of acting choices made in relation to Blanche's "madness" in production, and critical responses to them, see Philip C. KOLIN, *Williams: A Streetcar Named Desire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 34-36, 113, 115, 163.

woman! When I have all these treasures locked in my heart" [396]. Watching the production it seems that director Kinney and actor Robins used alcohol to forge a realistic link between an abject Blanche in New Orleans and an abject Blanche in Laurel, suggesting, perhaps, that Stanley's assaults on her merely return her to what she had been all along—a figure of abjection. As a result, Stanley and his dramaturgy emerge triumphant.

Thus far, my foray into the world of *A Streetcar Named Desire* has been largely a dispiriting one. A youthful exposure to the work leading to a somewhat panicked aversion, which has given way to a study of the play that reveals aggression, cruel humor and a delight in seeing a character reduced to abjection. Not only can Blanche not seem to hold her own against Stanley, but the very practices of the American theater and the values of contemporary American culture seem to be stacked against her. A play that is famous for its reference to "the kindness of strangers" [418] becomes a place to stage anger and resentment. But I would like to turn for a moment to a production that handled these brutal asymmetries in another way, and created its own partialities.

Ellis Rabb's 1973 production with the New York Repertory Company at Lincoln Center, provides an interesting contrast to the productions I have considered so far.¹⁶ With Rosemary Harris as Blanche DuBois, James Farentino as Stanley Kowalski, Patricia Connolly as Stella and Philip Bosco as Mitch, the production worked to assert the essential worth of Blanche, despite her flawed nature. By consistently making choices that minimized aggression and comedy at the characters' expense, Rabb worked to put Blanche center stage. While Kazan saw his challenge in 1947 as one of making a case for Stanley, Rabb in 1973 obviously felt the need to work hard to make the case for Blanche.

Working from the maddeningly fragmentary information provided by reviews and press clippings, a generally consistent sense of the production begins to emerge, one in which Blanche DuBois' qualities of dignity, self-knowledge and transformative imagination were foregrounded. Fortunately for scholars (and all enthusiasts of *Streetcar*—and all admirers of the remarkable Rosemary Harris), the evidence of the reviews are enormously supplemented this production by a Caedmon long-playing album based on the production.¹⁷ Although it necessarily disembodies the characters, a serious limitation in any documentation of a production of *Streetcar*, and does not record audience response, it does give us unusually detailed knowledge of the character choices and dramaturgical strategy.

The New Yorker's Brendan Gill praised Rosemary Harris, whose interpretation of Blanche "resists the temptation to be any dottier than she ought to be."¹⁸ Walter Kerr gave Harris special praise for her emotional openness on some of Blanche's major arias, including the speeches about the suicide of her husband Alan and the "Tarantula Arms" Hotel, but also faulted her for minimizing her affectations, and thus reducing the

¹⁶ For a very different reconstruction of this production, see KOLIN, *Williams*, 93-97.

¹⁷ Tennessee WILLIAMS, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, perf. Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center, directed by Ellis Rabb, LP, Caedmon, 1973.

¹⁸ Brendan GILL, "Happy Birthday," *The New Yorker*, 49.11 (5 May 1973), 81.

comedy—at her expense.¹⁹ *Cue* magazine’s Marilyn Stasio pointed at the same qualities, though less favorably, when she judged Harris’ Blanche as overly self-aware and strong,²⁰ as did the *New York Daily News*’s Douglas Watt, who called attention to Harris’ “cool seductiveness” and lack of vulnerability.²¹ Similarly, the *Wall Street Journal*’s Edwin Wilson wanted more vulnerability from Harris, but wrote that she portrayed Blanche’s “dignity and inner grace convincingly.”²²

The critical presuppositions here are revealing. What is coded positively as dignity, coolness and lack of dottiness in response to Harris’ performance by some reviewers becomes coded negatively as too strong, self-aware and insufficiently comic by others. Clearly, for those who wanted to participate vicariously in Stanley’s bashing of Blanche, there was little here to recommend the evening. James Farentino’s performance, as we hear on the recording, minimizes Stanley’s aggressiveness, using it only in direct response to putdowns from Stella or Blanche. Where Sines unpacked Blanche’s trunk with an outrage that provoked laughter, Farentino plays a husband who believes his wife has been defrauded. He’s more tough-minded than indignant, emphasizing with the line, “Where are your pearls” [274], the word “your,” as if he believes his wife would enjoy, and has a legal right to, the same luxuries her sister possesses. While Sines rants as he exults in pulling Stella down off her pedestal, Farentino plays it gently, as if to reawaken in his wife an intimate memory. Where Sines gets a laugh from the audience by sarcastically referring to Blanche’s tiara as diamond, Farentino plays it as a man in a good mood at his wife’s imminent delivery of a child, who is ebullient enough to go along with his sister-in-law’s bizarre fantasies and affectations, despite her arrogant attitude toward him. When he suggests they have a drink together and “bury the hatchet” [395], he seems to mean it sincerely. Only when Blanche denigrates him with her reference to “pearls before swine” [396] does his mood begin to grow ominous.

But not only did this production soften Stanley’s potential aggressiveness and minimize Blanche’s potential ludicrousness through the actors’ choices, it used the *mise-en-scène* to place Blanche squarely at the center of the play. *Village Voice*’s Julius Novick gave the most vivid visual description of the production, saying that it was one in which Blanche was stage center, often in “an island of crepuscular light, her eyes fixed on vacancy, feverishly remembering or inventing or justifying her life, while some auditor or other, Stella or Mitch, or perhaps even Stanley, sits half-forgotten in the dimness.”²³ Opposing the tendency to have the audience side with Stanley, Rabb’s production led the *New York Post*’s Richard Watts to conclude from this production that we *inevitably* side with Blanche, despite the fact that Stanley’s accusations against her are true.²⁴ Watt’s

¹⁹ Walter KERR, “Of Blanche the Victim—and Other Women,” *New York Times* (6 May 1973), D10.

²⁰ Marilyn STASIO, “A Streetcar Named Desire,” *Cue* (7 May 1973), 7.

²¹ Douglas WATT, “Rep Ends Era with ‘Streetcar,’” *New York Daily News* (27 Apr. 1973), 66.

²² Edwin WILSON, “Two Revivals that Succeed,” *Wall Street Journal* (14 May 1973), 12.

²³ Julius NOVICK, “A Token of Love for Blanche,” *Village Voice* 3 (May 1973), sec.3: 68.

²⁴ Richard WATTS, “The Doom of Blanche DuBois,” *New York Post* (27 Apr. 1973), 27.

conclusion clearly runs counter to how sympathies have run in other productions of the play, and testifies to the strength of Rabb's production, which reversed the asymmetries that Kazan had introduced.

While Steppenwolf's John C. Reilly portrayed Mitch as a slow-witted, comic figure who probably needed protection from Blanche's wiles, Philip Bosco's Mitch was a figure of sad sensitivity, explaining that he did not enjoy playing poker while his mother lay sick at home with a hint of depression in his voice. The memory of the dead girl who gave him the cigarette case touched rather than perplexed him, and the overall impression was that Mitch and Blanche would have been a deeply compatible couple, had things worked out differently. Similarly, the scene with the Young Man does not become a scene about Blanche's degeneracy, because Harris' slow, almost hypnotic pacing and careful coloring of each phrase, makes it clear that this is as much about Blanche's powers of imagination as lust. She repeats "young, young, *young* man," as a gently intense build, as if summing up her very awe at the beauty of youth. In the Lincoln Center production, Harold Clurman reported, the Young Man stood in the street, gazing up at the apartment of the strange but fascinating woman who had kissed him [Clurman, 636]. Mitch's interactions with Blanche, quiet and filled with wonder, further underscore her ability to create a world, however vulnerable. Finally, while Robins's affirmation of "the treasures locked in my heart" [396] was drunken and abject, Harris' is exultant, an act of momentary regeneration in the wake of Mitch's brutal repudiation of her and before the prospect of an uncertain future. Harris gives the speech strength by playing against Blanche's experience of abjection. Unfortunately, of course, this self-assertion includes a denigration of Stanley, and soon reverses the dramatic field for her, catastrophically.

The Rabb production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* may have its weaknesses. Perhaps it finesses some of the unpleasantness of the play. Perhaps it engages its lyricism naively and unproblematically. Perhaps it too flees the raw power that made me flee the play for years. Maybe it works out an understanding of Blanche's dramaturgy at the expense of Stanley's. Perhaps Rabb has his *own* asymmetrical allegiances at work. Ellis Rabb's production may also suggest that productions of *A Streetcar Named Desire* need not pander to the resentment and anger of its audiences, that they need not be sadistic and misogynistic, and that perhaps it is only that some of the stagings of the play have been far less admirable than Williams's text. But a comparison of *Streetcar* productions suggests that balance between its lead characters is difficult, perhaps impossible, to achieve, and the resultant asymmetrical stagings reveal as much about directors, actors and audiences, as about Tennessee Williams.