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Somewhat Informed: Zodrow's Performing Arts Column; "A Streetcar Named Digital."

Andru Zodrow, News Editor

The National Theatre in London is an internationally renowned venue that produces both contemporary and classic works. For the past several years, it has reliably crafted superb renditions of everything from the writings of Shakespeare to innovative modern plays.

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, the National Theatre has chosen to stream pre-recorded versions of many of their shows online for free. This week, that play was "A Streetcar Named Desire" by Tennessee Williams.

The play's plot is simple. The refined southern woman Blanche DuBois is forced to move in with her sister Stella, who has married Stanley, a rough and unaccomplished figure who lives in a one-bedroom apartment. Stanley and Blanche quickly come to hate each other, and the two personalities go to war, with Stella caught in the middle.

The reputation of Williams' most popular play is embedded in the American cultural memory. The 1951 film (which preserves the original cast from the 1947 Broadway debut) wowed audiences with its rawness. Marlon Brando's performance of the line "Stella" while caught in the rain, is still one of the most memorable moments in film history.

The National Theatre production, which was recorded during its 2014 run, makes a point of ensuring that audiences are aware that it will not be attempting to reproduce the 1947 show or 1951 film. Instead, the new version starring Gillian Anderson as the eccentric and mysterious Blanche DuBois feels refreshingly innovative.

Not unlike the ACT's Allen Theatre in Seattle, the stage is in the round, meaning the audience is surrounding the performers. This staging is not typical for most plays, especially classics that originated in a less experimental time for drama. The set is bare-bones and rotates, there are washed of fluorescent light, and loud, pulsating music stings to transition between scenes. This is not Brando's "Streetcar."

What makes this rendition of the play work well is that these new flourishes do not feel forced. Too often, old material is dressed up as modern in a tacky or garish manner. Unfortunately, this often happens to Shakespeare's works. Too many directors think that Hamlet wearing jeans and a t-shirt rather than tights somehow makes their production interesting. In the case of "Streetcar," director Benedict Andrews clearly understands Tennessee Williams' intent. Andrews is not stapling new additions onto a classic work but rather allowing a contemporary audience to appreciate what Williams was attempting to achieve.

This is the beauty of theatre. Unlike film, plays do not have to expire. If their core message transcends the momentary, then new actors, set-designers, and directors can bring their audience into the script regardless of its age.



Photo Courtesy of The Daily Record.

This new streetcar puts on full display Tennessee Williams' most prominent qualities as a playwright. Preoccupied with powerful women, degenerate men and cultural taboos around homosexuality, the National Theatre production nails the source material down forcefully.

Gillian Anderson, and her co-stars Ben Foster as Stanley and Vanessa Kirby as Stella, are all perfect castings. They each hone in on the essential traits of their characters and bring these qualities out in subtle ways throughout the course of the performance. Stella is scared, tired, and submissive. Stanley is on-edge, arrogant, and dangerous. Blanche is aloof, flakey, and regal. The main cast is perfect, and all feel as if they are living through their roles rather than acting out the motions of pre-written dialogue.

This is where some viewers may hit an unusual barrier. While many have watched Americans perform in British accents onstage, few have seen the opposite. I will admit that in my review of the Seattle Rep's production of "The Children," a British play, I did not spend long criticizing the accents because I am not often exposed to UK speakers. It was much easier for me to identify slips in the southern accents that the characters are attempting. With this said, the fact that all three main characters pull-off moving performances while simulating verbal mannerisms they do not possess is worthy of praise.

If there is one issue with 2014's "Streetcar," it is that the show is not sure of what time period it takes place in. DuBois wears a 40's style sundress and speaks with an utterly cartoonish southern belle tone, while Stanley and Stella are both 21st-century impoverished southern people, with the Coors cans and cheap shoes to prove it. While there are plays that successfully blend the past and present, this concept could have used more sharpening.

However, this criticism is leveled at a recording rather than a live performance. It is hard to imagine just how impactful the brilliant performances spotlighted in this production would be if the viewer was sitting just feet away from the actors. Minor annoyances are often buffed-over by the magic of live performance, and for this reason, petty issues like the inconsistency of wardrobe are utterly unimportant when assessing the National Theatre production.

Most importantly, the National Theatre production packs a punch. Tennessee Williams, when performed and directed well, knows how to wrench the heart in a manner that few other writers can. He is a classic modern American playwright for a reason: the consistency of his works—which often pit feminine empathy against masculine cruelty—speak to the failures of men and the horrors of the prevailing patriarchal culture. The cast of the National Theatre's production of "Streetcar" is not American, it is not Southern and it isn't desperate for cash—but for the two and a half hours that they are on the stage, they convince the audience that they are, and force us to reflect upon our own critical flaws.

Theater fans desperately need material to get them through the coming months, and the National Theatre is supplying it. If you have yet to watch a play while in quarantine, it is well worth the time to begin with "A Streetcar Named Desire."