

Culture Shock: Forget Brando – this is the true heart of *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Ethan McSweeney's excellent production of the Tennessee Williams play, at the Gate Theatre in Dublin, recognises that its tragedy lies almost entirely with Stella and Blanche

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Emotional: Catherine Walker and Garrett Lombard as Stella and Stanley Kowalski

It's a fair bet that, if you asked a random punter about *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the image that would come to mind would be Marlon Brando plaintively roaring "STELL-LLAHHHHH!!!" It is one of those moments so ingrained in popular culture that it can be parodied everywhere from *Seinfeld* to *The Simpsons*. And yet it is highly misleading. Elia Kazan's 1951 film version of Tennessee Williams's play was Brando's sensational announcement of his status as the greatest movie actor of his time, and his mesmerising performance as Stanley Kowalski burned itself into the collective consciousness. Actually, though, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is not about Stanley or even about Stanley and Stella. It is a tragedy of sisterly love: the mutual dependency between Stella and her fragile and fantastical older sister, Blanche.

Indeed, one of the many admirable things about Ethan McSweeney's excellent current production at the Gate Theatre in Dublin is the intelligent manner in which Garrett Lombard as Stanley stays out of the way. He is, as Stanley must be, a powerful physical presence and a domineering bully. But his performance sets its own proper limits. Lombard does not seek to occupy too much psychological or emotional space. Stanley is what he is: an almost parodic expression of primitive maleness.

Actors seldom get credit for what they do not do, but Lombard's restraint is crucial to the success of the relationship between Catherine Walker's Stella and Lia Williams's Blanche. Stanley, for all his animal force, is a plot device, a figment of exaggerated masculinity to balance (and ultimately to unbalance) Blanche's exaggerated femininity. *Streetcar's* life as a genuine tragedy lies almost entirely with the sisters. (It has a touching but minor counterpoint in the loss of hope of Blanche's would-be lover Mitch, beautifully played by Denis Conway.)

The standard way of seeing these sisters is as a sharply contrasted pair: Stella's reality versus Blanche's fantasy, present versus past, resignation versus illusion. It's not wrong: these are indeed the crude outlines of the characters. But there's little point in simply playing out these contrasts for the umpteenth time. The Gate production is intriguing chiefly for the way in which Walker and Williams complicate the received images and soften the contrasts. The drama they create is not one of stark opposites but one of intertwined and interdependent personalities.

Blanche is the star role, of course. She is hard to act because she is an act: most of the time she's playing out an absurd parody of Scarlett O'Hara. With the Southern Belle shtick comes that sense of feminine fragility, of physical and psychological vulnerability for which she has become a byword. The parting line – "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" – is by now proverbial.

What makes Lia Williams's performance so captivating, though, is that she simultaneously plays up and undercuts this version of Blanche. The fluttering-belle act is exaggerated to a degree that would be laughable if Williams did not lace it with irony and self-awareness. She understands that weak people deploy their weakness as a kind of strength, becoming experts at manipulating others to get what they need. Williams's Blanche shines with intelligence and insight. She reminds us how brilliantly bitchy this supposedly fragile creature can be: her early line about how Stanley is Polish – "They're something like Irish, aren't they? Only not so – highbrow?" – manages to insult two whole ethnic groups in one superbly dismissive sweep.

Indeed, Williams allows us to see Blanche not as a mere fantasist but as a woman so brutally realistic that she knows she has nothing but a threadbare fantasy to deploy. And just as Williams brings out the realistic side of Blanche, Walker develops the fantastical side of Stella. Blanche's implosion into madness may be the top note of the play, but playing just beneath it is Stella's subtler tragedy. Walker allows us to ask an obvious question that often gets buried beneath Blanche's high-flown melodramatics: why does Stella put up with her? She's living in a cramped two-roomed apartment with a burly, volatile husband and has a baby on the way. Shouldn't she turf out her constantly demanding, high-maintenance sister long before Stanley snaps?

Walker gives us a clear answer: Stella needs Blanche as much as Blanche needs Stella. She indulges and humours her, not with passive, brow-beaten resentment but with vivid enthusiasm. Why? Because Stella needs the fantasy of a grand past and the myth of precious femininity Blanche embodies. Without it, what has she got? Nothing except the brutish Stanley.

Walker's articulation of this complexity is the reason why the culmination of the play is so electrifying. Blanche's hauling off to the asylum makes a great set piece, and Williams carries it wonderfully. But it is Stella who is left on the stage in an ending so horribly disturbing that it was distorted in the movie version. Kazan had Stella leave the vile Stanley. Williams has her stay, and Walker's performance has built to a point where we feel the full tragedy of her situation. In destroying Blanche, Stanley has also destroyed the part of Stella that made her capable of escape.