

GIBSON A RIVETING BLANCHE IN FAITHFUL PRODUCTION

A Streetcar Named Desire

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Theatreview

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Memo to self: Hard to be dispassionate about play that is part of our collective consciousness. Fortunately may rely on the kindness of possibly strange but surely gentle readers...

This is however a production to sweep away preconceptions and carry all with it, thanks largely to a virtuoso performance by Jude Gibson in one of the most demanding roles in the theatrical canon. Although her Blanche Dubois is infuriating, the heart bleeds for her, identifying all too well with her desperate desire to live life as it should be and not as it is. Tennessee Williams once said the quality he most admired was valour, and Gibson's Blanche is nothing if not valiant.



What a brilliant playwright Williams is, mining his own tortured life for episodes and characters that really breathe. Blanche contains elements of both his faded Southern belle mother and his mentally fragile sister. She has lost the beautiful family home, Belle Reve, and sought sanctuary in New Orleans with Stella, the younger sister who has married Polish Stanley Kowalski, who is a bit of rough trade if ever there was one. ("What such a man has to offer is animal force.")

Initially we tend to sympathise with common Stanley, condescended to and made to feel inadequate in his own home, while refined Blanche is as irritating as possible. But if her pretensions and fantasising enrage Stanley, this relationship provides the tension that propels the plot. Blanche, though terrifyingly genteel, has earned a reputation for promiscuity through her desire to find someone who will offer comfort and protection, and her relations with Stanley are sexually dynamic.

Her guilt over the suicide of her adored young husband - homosexual, like Williams - has left Blanche with a pathological need for self-delusion, but she strives to bring magic into the lives of others as well as herself. "It wouldn't be make-believe, if you believed in me," sings Blanche during one of her interminable sessions in the Kowalski's bathroom. Jude Gibson gives a riveting portrayal of her as a survivor who is in many ways admirable. Hideously disappointed in her youthful hope of happiness, desperately fearful of the future, Blanche still holds fast to the dream that life can be gracious and beautiful.

As macho Stanley, Jarod Rawiri makes a creditable effort to match her impact on stage, and generally succeeds when his frustration explodes into violence, forming a striking contrast to his tender moments with Stella. He makes it clear that Stanley, well aware of his shortcomings, is as much threatened by Blanche as angered by her.

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Jacqueline Nairn is a warm and appealing Stella, vacillating between neurotic sister and bullying husband, her slow sexy descent of the stairs into Stanley's arms in response to his famous bellowed "Stella!" presaging her eventual betrayal of Blanche. She is a true daughter of Belle Reve after all, determinedly denying truths she cannot tolerate.

Blanche's one hope of redemption is Stanley's friend Mitch, given sincerity and a tentative kindness by Errol Shand. But he too will betray her, succumbing to Stanley's poisonous gossip and deciding she is worth no more than a clumsy grope.

The rest of the very competent cast, especially Carol Smith as an irrepressible Eunice, do their utmost to create the steamy atmosphere of the American South. The intense clashes within the cramped apartment are framed by a lively parade of prostitutes, drunks, Mexicans, Negroes, even a tamale vendor, and the Kowalskis aren't the only passionately explosive couple on the block.

Jef Hall-Flavin's production is remarkably faithful to Williams' own stage directions, even to the gothic horror touches of spooky echoing voices, ghostly polka music, and wonderfully lurid lighting when trains rattle and scream across the stage. The set is splendid, reflecting the exterior / interior themes, with the revolve smoothly revealing both outside and inside worlds, while walls become transparent as outer reality breaks through inner fantasy and boundaries dissolve. Somehow the Kowalski's shabby apartment fits into a partly revealed two-storey house, while the pulsating life of sultry New Orleans eddies around it. The faded colours are a lovely background for Blanche's floaty white dresses and the occasional startling splash of brilliant red.

Production values are excellent, and Hall-Flavin is blessed with an extraordinarily proficient team in Peter King (set), Maryanne Wright Smyth (costume), Alan Surgener (lighting), and David Good (sound), with polished stage management by Brendan van den Berg. The enthusiastic audience response on opening night surely heralds a successful season of a fine production in which the Fortune can take justifiable pride.

But what lingers is Gibson's powerful interpretation of a truly great role. Claire Bloom, whom I saw as Blanche in a memorable West End production, had the temerity to ask Williams what would have happened to Blanche after the last act. Rather surprisingly, she got an answer. Blanche, said her creator, would eventually 'rise from the ashes' like a phoenix. Gibson's gutsy performance makes us believe it possible