



WE'VE HAD THIS DATE WITH EACH OTHER FROM THE BEGINNING: (left to right) Blair Underwood as Stanley, Nicole Ari Parker as Blanche DuBois & Daphne Rubin Vega as Stella in latest revival of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Photo: Ken Howard



Theater Review

Underwood's Stanley, Ari Parker's Blanche & poor direction derail latest *Streetcar* revival

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

By Tennessee Williams

Music composed by Terence Blanchard

Directed by Emily Mann

Broadhurst Theatre

235 West 44th Street

(212) 239-6200, <http://streetcaronbroadway.com>

By Scott Harrah

Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* is one of the best American plays of all time, but it is also a tricky one to revive, as this current, deeply flawed and cumbersome production, starring Blair Underwood and newcomer Nicole Ari Parker, attests.

From a writer's viewpoint, it is a beautiful and poetically written drama. Nearly every line of dialogue, from "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" to "Hey, Stella!" has become part the American vernacular and our sensibility. For American actors, playing Stanley Kowalski or Blanche DuBois is the ultimate test of proverbial acting chops because they are both so iconic in the original Broadway production with Marlon Brando and Jessica Tandy; and the blockbuster Hollywood adaptation with Mr. Brando and Vivien Leigh. Anyone who ever studied drama and dramatic American literature in school was taught that *Streetcar* is such a complex play that it must be properly cast, performed and carefully directed to truly make Williams' tragic saga come to life.

Most people think of Marlon Brando's legendary Stanley in the 1951 film, directed by Elia Kazan and also starring Vivien Leigh as Blanche, when *Streetcar* is mentioned. However, any true aficionado of the play knows it is ultimately Blanche's story and not her brutish brother-in-law's. To do poetic justice to *Streetcar*, the casting of Blanche DuBois is crucial, for she must be played by a fragile, delicate actress with patrician features, a sense of vulnerability, and a smoldering undercurrent of seduction and sexuality. Blanche is a woman clinging desperately to the pretensions and gentility of her long-gone, aristocratic, antebellum Southern heritage, and the glory of the family plantation, Belle Reve, which has been lost in a foreclosure. She is a faded rose in an ashcan, her nerves are shot, she has lost her teaching job, and she is out of money and desperately craving alcohol and attention. She is forced to live in a squalid, dilapidated apartment in the sordid French Quarter of New Orleans with her little sister Stella (played in this production by Daphne Rubin Vega) and her taunting in-law, Stanley (Underwood).

When we heard a "multiethnic" revival of *Streetcar* was coming to Broadway, with Blair Underwood as Stanley, many fans of the play were initially excited. Unlike the ill-fated 2008, all-African-American *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, which was shoddily directed by Debbie Allen, Williams purists like this reviewer felt *Streetcar* might work with a multicultural cast. Why? The original script featured "negro" characters because, even in the 1940s when the story was written, the French Quarter of New Orleans was somewhat integrated (more so than anywhere in the Deep South before civil rights). In fact, in 1955, an all-black production of *Streetcar* was mounted in Los Angeles, with the approval of Mr. Williams himself.

So, exactly what is wrong in this 2012 revival? For starters, Emily Mann's bizarre, haphazard directing. Ms. Mann has, for some reason, moved the story from 1947 to 1952. Why? It is anyone's guess. She has added in such silly filler as a jazz funeral procession at the beginning of Act Two. *Streetcar* is already a long and complicated play, and it does not need anything added for a supposed new "spin." In addition, all references to Stanley being Polish have been deleted, yet Blanche is still a French Huguenot. Certainly there are multiracial people here in America with both African and Polish blood, so why can't Stanley remain Polish? To Williams fans, this is as blasphemous as making Shylock a gentile in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. One does not tamper with the classics to suit the ego of a director, producer or actor.

Eugene Lee's incredible set certainly captures the seediness of the Quarter, but we know this revival is in trouble the moment Nicole Ari Parker enters the stage as Blanche.

Ms. Ari Parker is statuesque, elegant, and glamorous, looking more like a young Whitney Houston in the late 1980s than one of the American theater's most famous female heroines.

It is impossible to believe that Ms. Rubin Vega's Stella is related to her at all, let alone younger. In addition, Rubin Vega comes across as squawky, shrill, and awkward instead of the sympathetic sister who sticks up for Blanche whenever Stanley verbally abuses her. Ms. Ari Parker's take on Blanche is certainly ambitious, if not valiant. She has the most difficult job of anyone in the cast, but she is too physically imposing and lacks the tortured delivery of Williams' florid dialogue to make Blanche believable as a onetime Southern belle who has hit now rock bottom. She comes across as strong and calculating, and she does not sell Blanche as a woman descending into madness and succumbing to self-destruction, as Mr. Williams originally

wrote the character.

For the true sparks to ignite in any *Streetcar* revival, there must be the sexual tension and chemistry present between Blanche and Stanley, but here it is totally nonexistent. Although Mr. Underwood has bulked up and looks buff when he takes off his shirt, he is no match for Ms. Ari Parker. His verbal assaults on her, from the Napoleonic Code soliloquy to their infamous final altercation, are implausible. Mr. Underwood's performance lacks the menace and malevolence necessary to make Stanley a despicable villain. Ms. Ari Parker gives the role everything she has, but unfortunately she is too much of a "glamazon," and could overpower Underwood's Stanley in any of their onstage clashes.

Even Wood Harris, as Mitch, the man who takes a romantic interest in Blanche, has no chemistry with Ari Parker. The casting and Emily Mann's deplorable direction derail and bastardize this *Streetcar*.

There have been many questionably cast revivals of *Streetcar*. In 2005, the late Natasha Richardson gave one of the most incandescent portrayals of Blanche ever.

However, the 2005 production was also a dud because John C. Reilly played Stanley and just was not sexy, handsome or menacing enough.

In the future, this reviewer suggests that whenever *Streetcar* is revived again (and one knows it will be), the producers and director really need to carefully study the work of Tennessee Williams and specifically the somber nature of the narrative, and cast and direct it properly. Otherwise, why bother?

Published April 22, 2012

Reviewed at press preview performance on April 21, 2012

Copyright © April 22, 2012, StageZine.com