

Foreword to the reader

This book, ideally, will be a companion – not a “companion to” in the sense of providing a selection of critical approaches but a “companion for” – a companion for you, in your attempt to widen your own perception of a work of art. The expression “From Pen to Prop” articulates such a goal. This project was born out of our teaching practice and its format reflects our approach. We do not lecture but try, instead, to guide, provide tools.

Our approach is also inspired by Jonathan Culler’s comments about “meaning”:

The meaning of a work is not what the writer had in mind at some moment during the composition of the work, but, rather, what he or she succeeded in embodying in the work. [...] If you come up with an interpretation, you have to persuade others of its pertinence, or else it will be dismissed. No one claims that “anything goes”. As for authors, isn’t it better to honour them for the power of their creations to stimulate endless thought and give rise to a variety of readings than for what we imagine to be a work’s original meaning? [...] [Meaning] is both what we understand and what in the text we try to understand. (62-63)

And insofar as meaning “is simultaneously an experience of a subject and a property of a text”, we will give the author’s interpretation. But it is offered as one element - which need not necessarily be the definitive one – conducive towards our global understanding of the text. We hope, by going further, to enable further meanings to emerge and unfold.

Comparing and contrasting the filmed version with the original play can be placed within this same perspective. As the writer Howard Nemerov once said, “If you really want to see something, look at something else” (quoted in Barnet 152). By submitting a canonical film by a canonical film and stage director as this “something else” we are inviting you to compare, not for the sake of making a list of similarities and differences but for the sake of enriching your understanding of both works of art. At the same time, we are placing ourselves at the intersection of high and popular cultures, and as you re-read the play in the light of the film or vice-versa, you will become familiar with the broad range of issues pivotal in American studies which both film and play cover.

Our project is in fact, an invitation to follow the path of critical thinking and creativity and to try see that the human experiences embodied in literature are not shapeless happenings captured by an unselective camera. Finding relationships after separating the whole into parts, discerning a pattern in what seemed chaotic at first, can be a rewarding experience indeed insofar as it inevitably relates to our own understanding of the world. And in the process we hope to spawn your ability to generate debates and questions of your own.

A final word about the format. We decided to present the data about the writer and his work in the form of a CV. We would like such a format to mirror the “ongoingness” of the process of defining a writer’s life and legacy and the lack of closure of our own search. What we submit speaks for our interests and subjectivity. We invite you to add, complete, qualify the content of the CV, just like you would and do in your own.

The articles included in a final section are meant to broaden your perspective on Tennessee Williams and his world – both personal and artistic. Their goal is to provide additional insights into the playwright’s own journey. They also intend to explore alternative paths about the artist’s canonical work by tuning in to other voices. They can also be read as new engagements with the author’s “cosmos” to use William Faulkner’s image – and invitations to write: from prop to pen, maybe...

The collection *From Pen to Prop* thus proposes an original and creative approach. By focusing on both play and film, it intends to deepen our understanding of both media. Other volumes – other journeys – are planned to revisit the work of such canonical authors and filmmakers as Eugene O’Neill and Sidney Lumet (*Long Day’s Journey into Night*), Lillian Hellman and William Wyler (*The Little Foxes*), Sam Shepard and Robert Altman (*Fool for Love*), David Mamet and James Foley (*Glengarry Glen Ross*).

All aboard! The journey is about to begin.

Introduction

From the world to the stage

Critics have often linked the immediate success of *Streetcar* – its appeal and accessibility to a wide audience – to the different aspects of American life and tradition that it draws upon, as these aspects were popularized in American cinema, namely:

- A nostalgic interest in the American past – the charm and picturesque elegance of the South, in particular, crystallized for a mass audience by *Gone with the Wind*, one of the most successful films of all time; but with, at the same time, the re-assuring knowledge, for urban Americans, that this privileged brilliance was doomed to defeat in the Civil War, and would leave an image of “decorative decay”. Blanche is of course a quintessential representation of this American past.
- The folklore of the Wild West, where heroes stuck together in manly camaraderie against savages and bandits, just as Stanley protects Mitch after their time together in the army.
- The Manichean image of women in films as either child bearers and home-makers or as libidinous whores.
- The world of industry and commerce, a world full of machinery, locomotives, cars, - a “macho urban jungle” – as the productive, dynamic counterpart to the “crumbling grandeur” of the Southern plantations.
- The image of the new immigrant and what it meant to be “American”: Stanley is, indeed, “100% American” – an idea which was equally important to the first or second generation immigrants from Europe as to those who thought of themselves as “real” Americans with a pedigree reaching back to the Pilgrim Fathers. (see Hern xviii-xix)

If the play brought to the stage recognizable subject matter and familiar concepts it was also proposing a re-appraisal of the values of American society: through the victory of Stanley was man left – in the words of one critic – “destitute, in a soulless world, a wasteland”, since the world of elegance and style had been corrupted by materialism?

The play does suggest the end of a particular model of America through the successive confrontations of the two protagonists (see Bigsby bis 31). However, this confrontation, associated as it is with a sexually charged relationship, tempers any instinctive empathy for Blanche and her courage to resist, since the neurotic sexuality that characterizes her associates her with death and self destruction.

Is this questioning of fundamental American myths meaningful within the framework of the paranoia, anxiety and confusion of the times? Pitted against the backdrop of the beginning of the Cold War and the HUAC investigations – when the pressure of conforming to “Americanism” was increasingly felt, when the fear of anything “different” dictated government policies and shaped public attitudes, the success of the play may indeed indicate that the audience was also responding to the underlying dissent the play registered about the way American society was developing.

Its success, however, can also be understood in relation to Broadway in the post World War II years, dominated as it was by revivals of drama classics on the one hand (from Aristophanes to Shakespeare to Synge and others) and by musical comedies on the other. However remarkable the revivals, and despite the undeniable energy and originality of style of the musicals, these productions failed to fully respond to the entertainment expectations of postwar audiences. Indeed, neither the “standard packaging and tidy ending of the ‘well-made play’ ” nor the blithe insouciance of musical comedies which offered, for the most part, little more than escape, suited audiences haunted by the tensions and insecurities fomented by the Cold War. As Harold Clurman, one of the co-founders of the Group Theater, pointed out in 1948, “[*Streetcar’s*] impact at this moment is especially strong, because it is virtually unique as a stage piece that is both personal and social and wholly a product of our life today” (Hardison Londré 48).

Personal, no doubt, as all the characters in the play attempt to adapt to the changing realities of the postwar world. And no less social for, in this interplay *A Streetcar Named Desire* mirrors and reveals “a culture in a state of crisis, its certainties dislocating, its myths collapsing” (Bigsby 16) – thus speaking to and for its audience.

SCENE 9

- Stage directions
 - Opening description: an indication of Blanche’s psychological state? The diagonal lines and the movement of the fan: effect?
 - “music in her mind” (113): how would you convey this information onto the stage?
- The discrepancy between Blanche and Mitch through the language they use. Compare this scene with former scenes between them.
- How does Blanche protect herself from Mitch’s verbal assaults?
- The hotel: what does Blanche mean by Tarantula? Does Mitch understand her? Limited and unimaginative?
- Mitch’s response to Blanche’s story and Stanley’s response to Stella’s defense of her sister in the previous scene: similarities?
- The reasons Blanche has led the life she has led (118): what she has tried to escape; what she is longing for now.
- Is Blanche sincere? What does she mean: “I didn’t lie in my heart” (119)?
- The paper lantern:
 - What is Mitch tearing away?
 - What is really being communicated here?
- Explain her lines (bottom 119-120): the reverie of a drunken woman? a mad woman? A Southern belle remembering the silver dream?
- Death and Desire, Death versus Desire: final statement on the question?
- “Flowers for the dead”:
 - Why is the utterance made in Spanish by a Mexican vendor?
 - A celebration of death? A judgment passed on Blanche’s story?
- Ending: Blanche’s scream: what does she mean? Study the effect of “fire” in relation to her constant bathing.

- “Jungle” (as epitomized by Stanley) has replaced the “garden of Eden” as the South was called. Stanley represents, in Kazan’s words, “the crude forces of violence, insensibility and vulgarity which exist in our South” (Jones 144).
- Loss: see how this notion appears right from the beginning: Eunice to Blanche: “Are you lost?” (15) with metaphoric undertones established from the opening. Belle Reve has also been “lost”, a notion that Stella understands but that cannot be “processed” by Stanley.

What else has been lost?

- Interestingly, what both Eunice and Stanley remember about Belle Reve is “the columns” – a metonymy of the power of the plantation system?
- Re-examine the second scene in light of Robert Bray’s thesis; he sees this transfer of papers and the merging of bloodlines as a “key concept in the evolution of the social system from the old agrarian South, burdened by its past, as represented by Blanche, to the post-war urban industrial society in which Stanley’s class has gained leverage” (Bray 189-190).
- Kazan notes about Blanche: “I recognize her as a social type, an emblem of a dying civilization making its last... romantic exit”.

Southern womanhood

- Blanche as Southern belle: language, expectations, behavior.
 - See Blanche turning to her former admirer for help (scene 4 for example): “To do” something involves asking another man for help.
 - Reconsider the character of Blanche in the light of Kazan’s following statement from his notebook:

“Blanche’s outstanding character is desperation, her chief motivation is the urgent need to find protection. The tradition of the old South says it must be through another person. Her problem arises from this Southern tradition, her notion of what a woman should be... Because the image of herself cannot be accomplished in reality, certainly not in the South of our day, it is her effort and practice to accomplish it in fantasy”.

- Stella: Stella stands for the New south and ushers new paradigms of Southern womanhood.

- Other women in the play?

Truth deferred/lack of closure

- Another important thematic concern is the notion that it is impossible to construct a narrative about the past, or an event. Truth and closure are always deferred, another paradigm central to Faulkner's imagination, as recently analyzed by Edouard Glissant in his *Faulkner, Mississippi*.

Blanche's character and story should be seen in that context : there are different stories about Blanche; Stanley interprets the facts the way he sees them, and he does admit: "All we discussed was recent history" (102); His vision is only partial, as Stella reminds him: "You didn't know Blanche as girl" (111). He is not aware of – nor interested in? - what happened "a pretty long time ago" as Stella underlines (103).

- See Stella: "I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley" (133).
- Blanche's ambiguity figures the ambiguity of the South, a lovable and a hateful land which inspires ambivalent feelings in its inhabitants (again see Williams's quote); as Quentin, Faulkner's character, puts it: "I love it and I hate it". Blanche's complexity enacts this flawed yet fascinating region.

Southern issues conjured up in the play

- Remembering and forgetting:
What is your memory of an event? What are the forms of acting out or working through?
- Re-enacting:
What, for instance, is the function of Blanche's hearing the gunshot and of telling Mitch about the suicide - from her point of view? From our point of view?
- Representing:
The South is often called a representational battlefield: Blanche embodies this conflicted, and conflictual, representation.
- The South as a state of mind.
- The South as the writing of history – personal and collective history.

SCENE 7

- “Get OUT of the BATHROOM!”. The gesture in the film accompanying the order: particularly effective? Will this mark the definite end of the cleansing ritual of Blanche?
- Go back to the stage directions for the ending. What is missing in the film version of the same passage?

SCENE 8

- Notice the beginning and how it is linked with the ending of the previous one.
- Stanley: body language, dialogue, gestures: a “king” defending his “territory”?
- Notice how the scene evolves: comment on the range of emotions Brando gives to the character of Stanley.
- Why do you think Kazan chose to cut Blanche’s final words?

SCENE 9

- Assess Mitch’s performance in particular when he takes a “good and plain look” at her. Are there any conflictual emotions? resentment? anger? bitterness? violence? Traces of a repressed personality? A “macho mamma’s boy?”
- What about Blanche? How do you explain the look of horror, panic and fear as Mitch “exposes” her under the naked lightbulb? How has Kazan dramatized this particular moment in a way that is, to a certain extent, more effective than in the play.

At the visual level, the position of Blanche’s head reminds us of her head at the end of the sixth scene (the embrace and the kiss), stressing how different the relations are. Is something else achieved by this visual juxtaposition?

- Think about Emmanuel Levinas’s notion of the “visage” to shed extra light on this scene.
- Blanche’s last line “fire! fire! fire!” has been omitted by Kazan under pressure from the Breen Office; they feared that the audience might take the line seriously!... as the official reason went. However, what is left out as a result?
- Assess Kazan’s shooting of the ending: the crowd, Blanche locking herself in, the light behind the shutters...

SCENE 10

- In his letter to Joe Breen defending the scene, Williams wrote:

“The rape of Blanche by Stanley is a pivotal, integral truth in the play, without which the play loses its meaning, which is the ravishment of the tender, the sensitive, the delicate, by the savage and brutal forces of modern society. It is a poetic plea for comprehension” (quoted in Bosworth 73).

To what extent did Kazan manage to deal with Breen’s demand that the scene be “done by suggestion and delicacy”? The ending testifies to the compromise. What are the elements that are faithful to the play (that is dramatizing the rape) and the elements that tone down Stanley’s aggression? What about the very last shot (the cracked mirror)? Does it aestheticize the violence too much, or does it suggest it in an effective way?

- From the rhinestone tiara and the song she sings to herself in the beginning of the scene to the cracked mirror at the end: effective images of escape and ultimate destruction?
- The “swine” line: compare the play’s version (126), and the film’s version: meaning and effect? What is Kazan’s intention?

SCENE 11

- A world of cleanliness and renewal? Comment on the images Kazan added to the beginning of the scene. Could they also work as an ironic visual cue to the ending? (Blanche will be swept aside, flushed out in a way...)

Among the “Suggested Scenes and Characters to Study and Work On” are included the following items from *Streetcar*: (Adler 125):

Blanche and Stanley: Act 1, scene 2, Act III, scene 4

Stella and Stanley: Act I, Scene 2, and Act III, scene 1

Blanche and Mitch, Act II, Scene 2, and Act III, Scene 3

What do you think about Adler’s choice? Any further suggestions?

To conclude: Adler wrote that “one of the vital aspects of the actor’s work is to find the universality and epic size of the playwright’s ideas. The pull of the play is always toward some larger theme and the danger we fall into is making it small” (Adler 116).

What would that universality consist of for *Streetcar* and its cast, which was everything for Kazan? What is the larger theme that Brando, Hunter and Leigh have pulled out of the play?

B - Stanley on screen or Streetcar and postwar America

- Gronbeck-Tedesco proposes that the play is an “allegory of post-war America” (115). Marlon Brando’s performance “bodies forth” what the text “leaves incomplete or keeps out of print” (116). The “cultural material” enacted by Brando is the rearticulation of male-female relationships in the aftermath of the war, with men returning from the front and readjusting to civil life. They bring back home violence and authority, whereas women will have to accept a return to a patriarchal order abandoned during the war. Brando’s acting and presentation illustrates a “soldierly persona” that functions as a *lieu de mémoire* by “conjuring up countless journalistic and Hollywood images of World War II American G.I.’s” (118). Stanley’s appearance inscribes his character in the discourse of a new American hegemony where violence has become the norm. The performance thus stages upcoming societal changes in postwar America.
- Consider Brando’s performance in light of the article’s argument. Give your own feeling about the cultural work performed by *Streetcar*.
- On the other hand, Brando’s performance promoted a “transformed image of masculinity” which “achieved cultural importance because of its dominant screen – not stage – presence in the fifties” (Barton Palmer 220). The male body becomes an erotic object arousing desire, a role traditionally associated with the female body.

C - Kazan and Brando at work:

- Here is how Kazan describes the process of working with Brando:

He was on a level apart. There was something miraculous about him, in that I would explain to him what I had in mind, and he would listen, but his listening was so total that it was an amazing experience to talk to him; he would not answer right away, but go away and then do something that often surprised me. You had the feeling of “God, that’s better than what I told him!” You had a feeling “Oh, I’m so grateful to him for doing that!” He was, like, giving you a gift. It was essentially what you’d asked him, but in feeling so true, so re-experienced through his own artistic mechanism. It’s almost like directing a genius animal... He even surprises the other actors. Sometimes you don’t even know that he’s acting: he does something and you say: “Oh yes, he is! He is doing it!” He’s very, very underground – you don’t know how he gets to what he gets. Part of it is intuition, part of it is real intelligence, part of it is ability to be empathic – that he connects with the people. (Ciment 105-106)

Reactions? Remarks?

- Choose a particular sequence in the movie, and imagine a dialogue between Kazan and Stanley about the performance of the scene.

Brando’s following comment sheds new light on Blanche as a character, and her meaning – should we say her “scope”??...

The oldest profession in the world is not whoring, it’s acting. This is not meant to be a pejorative comparison in any way. It is a simple fact that all of us use the techniques of action to achieve whatever ends we seek, whether it is a child pouting for ice cream or a bawling politician bent on stirring the hearts and pocketbooks of potential constituents [...] It is hard to imagine that we could survive in this world without being actors. (Adler 1-2)

Compare with Adler’s definition: “Acting is human behavior assembled in novel and interesting ways” (66). Does this also apply to the persona of Blanche?

D - Blanche on and off the screen

- Blanche’s essential nature, according to Kazan, was her need for protection. How is this need shown in the film? Pay close to Blanche’s body language, her stances – Constantly looking for support? Comfort behind curtains?

- Notice how Blanche is filmed, the angles of the camera that are used. To what extent does the camerawork suggest her psychological breakdown? Does it suggest more? The scene with the Doctor, for example: Blanche as a kind of sacrificial victim?
- Leigh loved the character of Blanche, as much as she had loved to play Scarlett O'Hara, and felt "extremely flattered" that Kazan chose her. She worked on acquiring the Southern accent. But she found the part very demanding: "*Streetcar* is a wonderful play... The role of Blanche is every exhausting" (quoted in Edwards 178). She confided: "Blanche is a woman with everything stripped away. She is a tragic figure and I understand her. But playing her has often tripped me into madness" (quoted in Bosworth 79). Tennessee Williams declared about Vivien Leigh: "Having known madness, she knew how it was to be drawing close to death" (quoted in Edwards 287).
 - Can you see this familiarity with madness in Leigh's performance?
 - If you had to perform Blanche, which aspect would you stress?

E - *The music*

- The music, scene by scene, and particularly in scene 10: How does it reinforce the dramatic tension? For example: the blue piano: expression of solitude, rejection and exclusion? Expression of a need for love and contact with others? Expression of Blanche's inner nature? Kazan says the "vocabulary of the music was all blues", which he defines as "a poetic wedding of the feeling of pain and isolation the blacks had in the community, and the way the pseudo-aristocratic whites felt" (Ciment 70).
- Try to do the same for the other types of music (drums, trumpets, bells...).
- What other instruments would you add? Or soundtrack?

F - *The gothic on screen*

An important element retained by Kazan is the Gothic tonality indebted to the Southerness of the play. Look at the shooting of the street scene in Scene 10 in that light, for example, as well as the staging of Blanche's voices through the echoing effect (end Scene 1). See fifth article in the section *Williams and His World* for further analysis.