

A Streetcar Named



A Streetcar Named Desire
directed by Elia Kazan
at the Film Forum

According to at least one mass-media publication, Tennessee Williams is the greatest living Western playwright. Among his most successful works is *A Streetcar Named Desire*, a play which has been seen even more widely, including a recent broadcast on network television. According to an ad on the paperback edition, *Streetcar* is "the haunting story of a beautiful girl who was betrayed by love." Blanche DuBois is a "haggard and fragile Southern beauty . . . tormented by the memory of her tragic marriage and the scandal she had precipitated in the small Southern town of her birth. She flees to New Orleans to find refuge with her sister" and there she meets Stanley Kowalski, "her sensual, crude brother-in-law," who "resents her presence, and in a violent, passionate rage, exposes her past and cuts off her last chance of escape from the squalid misery of her life."

But Tennessee Williams is also a publicly identified homosexual, and to homosexual audiences this description of *Streetcar* is nonsense. Actually what we have in this play is something that can be called "closet drama," the result of a self-destructive process described by Kate Millett (in *Sexual Politics*) in her discussion of Oscar Wilde's play *Salome*. Millett tells how Wilde responded to the new fervor of the women's movement by translating "an open act of rebellion in the clear daylight of action" into a "secret dream of guilt." She states that the character Salome ". . . is not a woman anyway, but the product of Wilde's homosexual guilt and desire. . . . The revolutionary energy of Wilde's assertion of homosexuality, which sheer circumstances years later forced him to enact in the martyrdom of his trial and imprisonment, is, in his writing itself, diverted into reactionary fantasy which still parades the fatal woman of misogynous myth, the feminine evil." Millett contrasts *Salome* with *A Doll's House* which "represented the actuality of the sexual revolution," and Wilde's drag heroine with Ibsen's Nora Helmer, "the actual woman responding to her circumstances."

Like Oscar Wilde, Tennessee Williams is a successful homosexual artist in whose works homosexuality rarely ever surfaces and whose own personal reality of oppression as a homosexual is almost always disguised and presented indirectly in decadent fantasy terms which bourgeois critics and audiences are only too happy to reward. In fact, like most successful homosexual artists (Edward Albee is another example), Tennessee Williams has produced some of the most profoundly anti-homosexual art to be found anywhere. Characters who are identified as homosexuals are usually dead when the play begins (*Streetcar*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Suddenly Last Summer*), and they are always degenerates. (For contrast, see the militantly homosexual poems of Walt Whitman.)

But the greatest crime committed by such artists is the sin of omission. Throughout a career that spans 30 years of plays, films, novels, stories, and poems, Tennessee Williams has channeled his artistry into a reworking of the same theme, that of dividing his own homosexual experience into opposite male and female characters who are neither real men nor real women—thus giving bourgeois audiences what

they will reward, but denying to homosexuals the revolutionary energy that could come from an assertion of his own homosexuality. Nowhere in Williams' repertoire does the drag show reveal itself more clearly than in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and at the same time nowhere else does Williams' unconscious militance come closer to formulating a political analysis.

So obvious is the drag in *Streetcar* and so powerful has been the underground homosexual response to the play and the character of Blanche DuBois that the playwright himself has felt it necessary to defend himself against "accusations" about their true identity: "I've read things that say Blanche was a drag queen, Blanche DuBois, ya know," he told interviewer Rex Reed in *Esquire* magazine, "that George and Martha in *Virginia Woolf* were a pair of homosexuals—well, these charges are ridiculous! . . . If I am writing a female character, goddamnit, I'm gonna write a female character, I'm not gonna write a drag queen! If I wanna write a drag queen, I'll write a drag queen. . . ." Mentally the playwright doth protest too much.

Just as Salome is Oscar Wilde in drag, Blanche



DuBois is Tennessee Williams in drag; and for all the misguided praise this work has received from the decadent bourgeois literary establishment, appreciation of the poetic genius of Tennessee Williams, which no one disagrees with, is actually enhanced when his most famous "heroine" is recognized as an embodiment of the experience of the playwright himself. Strip off the disguise, peel off the makeup, and what shines through is a brilliantly conceived, if aborted, militant tract of radical feminism in which an archetypal drag queen performs a vanguard role in revealing the contradictions within a working-class nuclear family. Once we understand and appreciate the unconscious homosexual context of his art, we can recognize Tennessee Williams as a precursor in the struggle to give birth to a revolutionary homosexual perspective.

In a scene between Blanche and her "sister" Stella, Tennessee Williams presents us with a metaphorical view of the political and social institution of heterosexuality from the perspective of homosexuals:

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STELLA: But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant. (Pause)

BLANCHE: What you are talking about is brutal desire—just—Desire!—the name of that rattle-trap street-car that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another . . .

STELLA: Haven't you ridden on that street-car?

BLANCHE: It brought me here. —Where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be . . .

The "streetcar named desire" is Williams' Freudian metaphor for heterosexuality. From our perspective the metaphor expands to include the nuclear family, male supremacy, women's oppression, and the isolation of the homosexual (of both sexes) in a capitalist society constructed around these institutions.

To understand both the success and failure of the analysis of sexism contained in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, we should look to its conclusion. In the original stage version, the radical feminist position articulated by Blanche DuBois is defeated by the more powerful brute force of her opposite—Stella's husband Stanley

Kowalski. Blanche is taken away to a mental institution while her "sister" stays on with Stanley, drugged by sex and imprisoned by the social demands of her new role as the mother of a son.

In the film, the despair and tragedy of the play are raised to a higher level of hope: Stella takes the baby and leaves Stanley howling and crying. But Blanche DuBois still must be sacrificed as a result of the isolation involved in her vanguard action of raising Stella's consciousness as a woman.

This pessimism and despair, essential to both play and film, are a direct result of Tennessee Williams' failure to go beyond a middle-class analysis that begins with an awareness of sexism and his inability to create a revolutionary socialist consciousness based on an assertion of his own experience as a homosexual. Because Williams does not question the middle-class expression of what it means to be defined as a homosexual, he is unable to create a successful revolutionary homosexual character. When the class identity of Blanche DuBois is destroyed, she must be destroyed, too. She must be romanticized, a femme fatale whose beauty is born of tragic illusion; in the end, she must be raped, martyred, and isolated in a personal destruction by Stanley Kowalski that is at the same time her own self-destruction.

The subliminal feminism of Tennessee Williams is based on an uncritical acceptance of values traditionally assigned by Western culture to the "feminine" polarity—gentleness, passivity, and tolerance—rather than a total re-distribution of polarity in general and abolition of its extremes, i.e., the concrete liberation of real-life women and men from capitalist institutions. As a result, Williams identifies with the "feminine" Blanche DuBois and her sister Stella, and sees not only Stanley but also the "masculine" woman (represented by the nurse from the mental institution) as part of the problem. An awareness of the vanguard role of the lesbian is missed altogether in the character of Blanche DuBois as written, and the lesbian overtones that emerge in the performance of an actress in the role are left undeveloped.

Potentially, *A Streetcar Named Desire* could have perceived a materialist connection between male supremacy and capitalism (see accompanying box on page 28). The first draft of the play was entitled "The Poker Night," and Nixon's favorite game is used throughout as a metaphor for capitalism. But this revolutionary connection lies dormant, and the militant feminism of Blanche, having nowhere to go, evolves into schizophrenia. Her impending madness, which radical therapy has redefined as the demystification of experience, is presented in concrete form as proletarianization of the world she lives in—Blanche's "fall" from the family plantation to a teaching job and finally to begging space in a two-room apartment in a working-class district of New Orleans.

But the playwright cannot bring himself to identify with this setting in a progressive way. Stanley Kowalski actually embodies perfectly the characteristics of what George Jackson calls "the new pig class"—"that sector of the working class which is backward enough to be affected by nationalistic trappings and the loyalty syndrome that sociologists have termed the 'authoritarian personality,' " a tool with which fascism can "degenerate and diffuse working-class consciousness with a psycho-social appeal to man's herd instincts." (*Blood in My Eye*).

In *Streetcar*, however, this is the only representation of the working class we are given. Because Stanley is used to represent the ruthless values of capitalism in a graphic, crude, physical form, Blanche cannot distinguish between his personal power and the political power of the ruling class itself which is wielded on a global scale in the form of imperialism. What could have been an anti-capitalist conception is twisted into a position that is actually anti-working class. There is a world of difference between defining a character like Stanley as the enemy, and presenting such a character's male supremacist attitudes and behavior as obstacles to working-class unity against a common oppressor. Unable to make these dialectical connections, Blanche DuBois/Tennessee Williams is forced to retreat into a world of illusion and myth; she must either reach back to memories of the Old South (the name which Williams gives to the family plantation is *Belle Reve*, which means "beautiful dream") or embrace a future of madness and meaningless death.

We can no longer walk despairingly into this trap laid for us by capitalism. Because we follow Tennessee Williams historically, and move in space beyond the confines of the world into which he was born, we must learn from his experience and from his art how to move forward into the new world, and how to expand his perceptions to serve the needs of our higher level of struggle.

—miller francis

