

The First Critical Assessments of *A Streetcar Named Desire*: The *Streetcar* Tryouts and the Reviewers

Philip C. Kolin

The first review of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in a New York City paper was not of the Broadway premiere of Williams's play on December 3, 1947, but of the world premiere in New Haven on October 30, 1947. Writing in *Variety* for November 5, 1947, Bone found *Streetcar* "a mixture of seduction, sordid revelations and incidental perversion which will be revolting to certain playgoers but devoured with avidity by others. Latter category will predominate." Continuing his predictions, he asserted that *Streetcar* was "important theatre" and that it would be one "trolley that should ring up plenty of fares on Broadway" ("Plays Out of Town"). Like Bone, almost everyone else interested in the history of *Streetcar* has looked forward to the play's reception on Broadway. Yet one of the most important chapters in *Streetcar*'s stage history has been neglected, that is, the play's tryouts before that momentous Broadway debut. Oddly enough, bibliographies of Williams fail to include many of the *Streetcar* tryout reviews and surveys of the critical reception of the play commence with the pronouncements found in the *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews* for the week of December 3, 1947. Such neglect is unfortunate. *Streetcar* was performed more than a full month and in three different cities before it ever arrived on Broadway.

Not only was the play new, so was its producer. Making her debut as a producer with *Streetcar*, Irene Selznick was one of the powerhouses behind the play. The daughter of movie mogul Louis B. Mayer and the wife of David O. Selznick, Irene Selznick was a shrewd businesswoman who knew the value of advance publicity. Not only would long tryouts help to perfect the acting of the cast but out-of-town productions would drum up business for *Streetcar*'s big New York arrival. Deeply committed to *Streetcar*, Selznick invested \$25,000

Philip C. Kolin, Professor of English at the University of Southern Mississippi, is the Co-Editor of *Studies in American Drama, 1945-Present*. He has published extensively on *Streetcar* in such journals as *Missouri Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and *Black American Literature Forum*. His recent books include *American Playwrights Since 1945*, *Shakespeare and Feminist Criticism: An Annotated Bibliography* (forthcoming, Garland), and *A Streetcar Named Desire: Essays on Cultural Pluralism* (Greenwood).

of her own money in the \$100,000 production (Williams and Mead 149). Commenting on the enormous risk Selznick took with the play by comparing her work with that of her husband David who had produced *Gone with the Wind*, New York theatre juggernaut Billy Rose pointed to the kinds of problems she would face on Broadway:

The whole production of "Streetcar" won't have cost as much as one of his sets in "Gone With the Wind." There will be no one in the cast who can draw 10 customers a night. Nothing will be riding but talent and know-how. Out front will be the regular assortment of first-night sourpusses and professional runners-down. Irene will be rolling square dice--no Clark Gables or million-dollar advertising campaigns, no buffalo stampedes or bang-up earthquakes. And she'll have to hit her dice up against a brick wall--the New York dramatic critics. ("Pitching Horseshoes with Billy Rose")

So Selznick was wise to have her actors and actresses get in as much practice as possible before the New York critics passed judgment on her and Williams's work.

The reviews *Streetcar* received on its journey to Broadway were a significant indication of how well producer and playwright fared. *Streetcar* was widely, though not always favorably, reviewed during its tryouts. These early critical assessments of *Streetcar*, which have been previously unmined, play a major part in the history of the criticism of Williams's script and in the overall history of how that script was changed and interpreted. As one Philadelphia critic (Edwin H. Schloss) pointed out, the play showed the "symptoms of growing pains," pains which, as subsequent performances proved, led to the triumph of Williams's art. These first critical assessments anticipate the major debates over the play--the issues *Streetcar* raises--and thus shed light on how and possibly why various interpretations were advanced. Moreover, these early reviews of *Streetcar* have tremendous biographical significance providing yet another measure of Williams's growing reputation as America's leading playwright. What I intend to do in this article is to sketch in briefly the historical background of these tryouts and to reprint these tryout reviews, letting the critics speak once again for themselves.

As is customary for Broadway-bound plays, *Streetcar* made its first stop in New Haven, having been listed as "in rehearsal" in *Variety* on October 8, 1947. It premiered at the Shubert Theatre on Thursday, October 30 and ran for three nights through Saturday, November 1st. Symbolic dates, especially those of religious holidays, have a strong pull in Williams's plays as in his own life. Williams was born on Palm Sunday, a propitious day pointing the way to both the glory and the suffering that entered his life. In such a context, *Streetcar*'s world premiere on these dates acquires, if only in retrospect, immense symbolic value. Reflecting the dualities of the flesh and the spirit in

Streetcar, I find it intriguing that in her first appearance on the world (and New Haven) stage Blanche DuBois goes, quite literally, from Halloween Eve and Halloween, suggesting the dark shadows of her nightmare world and Stanley's cruel tricks, to her symbolic departure on November 1st (All Saints Day) to the sound of the clean, cathedral bells ringing in the Quarter, first translocated to this central Connecticut town on Long Island Sound.

However we interpret the dates of *Streetcar's* premiere, the first tryout must have been an exciting moment for New Haven audiences. Among those present was playwright Robert Anderson whose recollections of *Streetcar* inevitably linked it with *Glass Menagerie* which had won Williams's critical acclaim 22 months before in New York. In a recent playwrights' forum on *Streetcar*, Anderson observed:

I first encountered *Streetcar* on its pre-Broadway tour . . . in New Haven in 1947. My wife, Phyllis, and I were guests of Elia Kazan. She had attended Yale Drama School with him and his wife Molly. (Kazan later directed my play, *Tea and Sympathy*, and became one of my closest friends.) At the time I was not 'taken' with *Streetcar* as I had been with *The Glass Menagerie*, which I have always looked on as a small gem. Like all judgments, this was probably a matter of temperament. (Kolin, "*Streetcar: A Playwrights' Forum*" 175)

A matter of temperament indeed, since there are many who favor one of these Williams's masterpieces over the other. The relative merits of both plays was a topic for a number of the tryout critics, too.

Thornton Wilder, too, was probably in the audience at the Shubert on opening night, though he was far less appreciative than any of the tryout critics would be. Wilder was a close friend of Kazan, who had directed *The Skin of Our Teeth*, but was not an admirer of *Streetcar*. As Williams resentfully recalled:

After the New Haven opening night we were invited to the quarters of Mr. Thornton Wilder, who was in residence there. It was like having a papal audience. We all sat about this academic gentleman while he put the play down as if delivering a papal bull. He said that it was based upon a fatally mistaken premise. No female who had ever been a lady (he was referring to Stella) could possibly marry a vulgarian such as Stanley. (*Memoirs* 170)

Williams dismissed Thornton Wilder and his stodgy, unfair criticism with gusto: "I thought privately, 'This character has never had a good lay.'"

From what I have been able to gather, the New Haven *Streetcar* garnered at least two reviews. The first, which I reprint below, ran in the *New Haven Evening Register* for Friday, October 31. Though the review is unsigned, I have

learned that it was written by Robert J. Leeney, then an editorial writer and later the editor of the *Register*.

Williams Play Holds Interest at Shubert Theater

The unhappy fate of a faded Mississippi belle, who strays from her place in society to a psychopathic state and eventually loses her mind, is depicted in Tennessee Williams' new play, "A Streetcar Called Desire"[sic], which premiered last night at the Shubert Theater. Presented by Irene Selznick and directed by Elia Kazan, the vehicle is highly dramatic and accented with the Williams touch of tawdry realism. Set in the shoddy Quarters of New Orleans, the action is unfolded in two long acts with blackouts employed to note the passing of time.

As the beauty who slips into the status of moral outcast, Jessica Tandy, recently of Hollywood, has the intensive job of injecting a convincing note to her role. She is on the stage constantly and employs every feminine whim in her dealings with her younger sister, married to a Polish war veteran from way down on the social ladder, and the assortment of men whose paths cross hers. A confirmed liar, she gets more than casual stimulation from alcohol and amorous affairs. She is aided by a vivid imagination and a gift for putting into words her colorful and often sordid fancies and facts. There is no doubt of the exhausting quality of her part as the lady of culture, breeding and education whose early tragedy in love has sent her spinning on a downward path. Many of her lines are sheer poetry, while others are electrifying in their essence.

Kim Hunter is cast as the younger sister, who seems content with her lot as the wife of an illiterate but crafty factory worker endowed with a capacity for love. She possesses a natural and simple charm that offsets the intensive personality of her frustrated sister. As the shoddy heroine's brother-in-law, Marlon Brando is a lusty young man shrewd enough to realize his rights under Louisiana's "Napoleonic Code," and properly resentful of the patronizing manner of his wife's sister. Karl Malden is introduced as the young man ensnared and almost won by the conniving Miss Tandy.

Mr. Williams does not mince words in his play, nor does he ignore basic human needs and behavior. He is an ultra-realist in every sense. His promising play in its present form suffers from too many long and frequently wearisome speeches. Several casual situations take more than average time to getting about to happening. With these corrected, "A Streetcar Called Desire" should head for Broadway with a confident air! (Reprinted by permission of *The New Haven [Evening] Register*)

Leeney offers a number of insightful observations. He accurately underscores Williams's talents for "tawdry realism" through "electrifying" language, and in commenting on the variations in Blanche's language, Leeney suggests the many roles she plays in *Streetcar*, a topic that has generated much productive criticism of the play (Adler; Bigsby). Moreover, Leeney carefully addresses the sociological dimensions underpinning Blanche's tragedy. Blanche clearly overshadowed Stanley, given the fact that Tandy gets far more attention than does Brando who in playing Stanley is dismissed in Leeney's review as a "lusty young man." Probably most worrisome for director Kazan and producer Selznick was Leeney's charge that *Streetcar* was too long. Such alarms were cautiously heeded, though, for *Streetcar* was streamlined some before it arrived on Broadway. In fact, Williams's brother Dakin recalled that

changes in *Streetcar* were made along the way to New York (Williams and Mead 148).

The second review of the New Haven tryout, reprinted below, appeared in the *Hartford Courant* for Saturday, November 1 and was written by T. H. P. The initials are those of Theodore H. Parker who for over 40 years was an editorial writer and then drama and dance critic for the *Courant*.

‘STREETCAR’ WILLIAMS’S FINEST PLAY
Excellent Cast Stages Brilliant Tragedy at New Haven Theater

Behind the somewhat dismaying title, "A Streetcar Named Desire," Tennessee Williams has written his finest play. Out of a woman's hysterical flight from desperation into madness, he has composed a bizarrely brilliant tragedy. Under the knowing direction of Elia Kazan, an excellent cast is kindling it into a hugely effective performance.

This is the story of a southern girl whom fate destroyed with sure, persistent hewing from the time of her child-marriage to a poetical youth who turned out to be a homosexual. Under the extravagant sins of numerous relatives, the family estate crumbled and vanished, and as the girl supported them on the thin earnings of a schoolmarm, the relatives too died slow, leprous deaths about her. Seeking some glimmer of happiness, comfort, love, the girl went from one desperately foolish affair to another, ending up in the role of prostitute, harried but still somehow hopeful of escaping from the slough, and finding cover and rest. Just when marriage is within saving grasp, it is kicked away by someone seeking to protect his friend from marrying such a woman. But not before he himself has despoiled her.

It is on the tawdry loom of these mischances that Mr. Williams has set about weaving the real substance of his play. As in "The Glass Menagerie," poetry and pity are the stuff with which he weaves. But the result is richer and more variegated than anything he achieved in the thin monochrome mood of "Menagerie."

Vivid Play

Because here, in the first place, he has constructed a vivid play, simply as a play. In rowdy quarter of New Orleans, he has assembled coarse and noisy clowns who live gustily around the center and creature of tragedy. He has written this background with finely imaginative realism, and salt humors, creating a play that is quick with life as well as with death. And against this background, the tragedy of the woman's last desperate stand for decency is only more ironic and poignant.

What in this rehearsing must seem like a combination of melodrama and brisk comedy, is saved from these merecesses by the infinite tenderness, the deep understanding and the ever-present glow of poetry with which Mr. Williams has probed his characters and set out their lives. The qualities which Mr. Williams has already evinced before are here at their most vibrant. "A Streetcar Named Desire" is a deeply touching, deeply moving, superior perception and exhilarating playmaking.

Jessica Tandy is playing the sad role of Blanche with just this same perception, as well as the skill, which Mr. Williams needs if his play is to be real rather than fantastic. She has brought it the exact balance between the tawdry and the beautiful. Marlon Brando, who has done such roles before, does superbly as the coarse brother-in-law, part animal, part tenderness. Kim Hunter, as Blanche's goodhearted but practical young sister, gives a fine realistic performance. Karl Malden plays with a curiously charming blundering naivete ideal to his part.

Mr. Kazan has directed the play into full, pulsing life and vigorous theater. And Jo Mielziner has provided a squalor of scene and mood at one with the tragedy. (Reprinted with kind permission of the *Hartford Courant*.)

A more laudatory review than Leeney's in the *New Haven Evening Register*, T. H. P.'s also praises Williams for his poetry and use of atmosphere. In light of subsequent criticism of *Streetcar*, what is most contemporary about T. H. P.'s analysis, however, is the recognition that Stanley offers tenderness as well as despoilment. T. H. P. captures the essence of *Streetcar*, though, when he mentions the balance it offers between the real and the fantastic, the tawdry and the beautiful. Above all else for T. H. P., *Streetcar* exudes tenderness.

T. H. P.'s assessment should have pleased Williams, yet he leads us to believe he did not see the New Haven reviews when they came out: ". . .and nobody seemed to know what the notices were or to be greatly concerned" (*Memoirs*, 170). However, Audrey Wood, Williams's agent who had a financial interest in the production, was not very enthusiastic about the New Haven reception. In her memoirs *Represented by Audrey Wood*, she recalled: "*Streetcar* opened in New Haven in the fall of 1947 and got good reviews but no great notices. By the time it reached Boston, it was giving off good vibrations" (154).

As Wood pointed out, from New Haven *Streetcar* went to the Wilbur Theatre in Boston where it ran for two weeks, with matinees on Wednesday and Saturday, beginning on Monday, November 3 and closing on Friday, November 15. *Streetcar* was brought to Boston by the Theatre Guild and the American Theatre Society as the third of its six offerings of the year. While the Theatre Guild doubtless held happy memories for Williams, Boston did not. Williams's first professionally produced play, *Battle of Angels*, opened in Boston in 1940, sponsored by the Guild, and closed after only a few performances in the face of devastating reviews. As is well known, numerous difficulties beset this production, most notoriously was flooding the audience with smoke from the fire on stage that destroys Jabe Torrance's store in the last act. With actresses Miriam Hopkins and Doris Dudley, Williams quickly departed Boston after his inauspicious premiere in the city.

The Boston *Streetcar* was far more fortunate. It played to capacity audiences, and because of its strong gross receipts, theatre party agents from New York flocked to Irene Selznick to contract for Broadway showings. Even more important, the Boston success vindicated Wood's and Selznick's faith in the play and in Williams. At first, Elia "Gadge" Kazan refused to direct the play when asked by Wood and Selznick. Yet in Boston, as Wood reports, "Gadge turned to Tennessee one night during a performance and whispered: 'This smells like a hit!' Further events proved that Kazan had delivered the understatement of the decade" (*Represented by Audrey Wood* 154).

Not all was roses in Boston, though. The Boston censors reared their ugly heads, objecting to *Streetcar*'s language and situations, as their brethren

would do when the play opened in London (1949), or for example, when it was made into a film in Hollywood (1951). Strict moralists, the Boston censors wanted all blasphemous phrases struck and the rape, or "attack," scene eliminated altogether. They did not get their way about the rape scene; instead, thanks to the Massachusetts Civil Liberties Union and Professor Bernard De Voto, the Mark Twain scholar at Harvard, the scene was kept in, though considerably toned down for Boston sensibilities (Funke, "News and Gossip of the Rialto").¹ One member of the audience, who does not want her identity revealed, remembers that the rape scene had to be enacted behind a screen so as not to offend or arouse proper Bostonians. A number of the Boston reviews do fastidiously refer to the censorship issue in passing.

Williams himself was very much aware of the controversial nature of *Streetcar*. In an undated letter written to his family from the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, where he was staying while in Boston, Williams summed up the critical reaction to the Boston tryouts and gave his family some advice.

Dear Folks--

We are playing to capacity in Boston. The notices were mostly good, some reviewers a bit shocked by play. Really think you should wait for "Summer and Smoke" as this play is hardly your dish.

Love--Tom²

"Folks" referred to the Rev. and Mrs. Dakin, Williams's maternal grandparents, and his mother, Miss Edwina. Knowing his mother's puritanical views, Williams doubtless thought it best not to add her suspected disapproval of *Streetcar*'s subject matter to that of "some reviewers." *Summer and Smoke*, because of its far less explicit subject matter, would be much better appreciated by his family than would *Streetcar*. *Summer and Smoke* had just had a very successful run at Margo Jones's Theatre '47 in Dallas and there were definite plans to bring the play to New York, where it did premiere on October 6, 1948 at the Music Box Theatre.

Streetcar received at least six reviews in Boston, most of them, as Wood indicated, highly favorable. In his *Memoirs*, Williams recalled: "When *Streetcar* arrived in Boston we began to get good notices. Only one negative one appeared in the papers and business was excellent despite it" (171). Williams did not identify the "negative" notice. But the Boston reviews ranged from short and sweet surveys to more complex and critical assessments. Overall, the Boston critics perceptively recognized that *Streetcar* was a major work of the American theatre, identified its themes and Williams's distinctive dramatic style, and showered producer, cast, and director with praise. Unquestionably,

Blanche dominated the play for the Boston critics; as one of them aptly remarked "the play is largely hers." Yet these critics offered various interpretations of Blanche's tragic dilemma. What is also interesting is their unsympathetic response to Mitch's problems.

The reviews by Elinor Hughes for the *Boston Herald* (for the Nov. 4, 1947 editions) and Helen Eager for the *Boston Traveler*, both of which follow, gave almost unqualified praise to both playwright and production.

Wilbur 'A Streetcar Named Desire'

By Elinor Hughes

Tennessee Williams, winner of all manner of prizes for his play of two years ago, "The Glass Menagerie," is with us again, presenting the most haunting new drama, "A Streetcar Named Desire." To compare him with any current playwright is impossible, for he has a quality completely and uniquely his own—the ability to tell a pitiful, always believable and nakedly honest story in terms of moods, snatches of speech, emotions suggested. Plot in the usual sense there is not too much of, for it is men and women in their moods of hope, despair, pretense, terror and uncertainty with whom he is concerned. Yet the play is purposeful and it held last night's audience tense and silent to the final curtain. Elia Kazan's direction seemed to me evocative and brilliant, and Irene M. Selznick, the producer, is to be congratulated upon bringing to the theater so striking and unusual a script.

Taking his title from the streetcar that runs through the Vieux Carre in New Orleans, a streetcar that bears the name of Desire and connects with another streetcar named Cemetery, the playwright tells the story of Blanche Du Bois, frail, pretty, rather too fine drawn and over-elegant, who arrives suddenly on the doorstep of her young sister, Stella, and Stella's forthright unimpressible husband, Steve [sic] Kowalski. Her arrival brings nothing but clashes and confusion; her talk—about her nerves, her teaching and the old plantations, now lost, where she and Stella had grown up—has a baffling quality about it, as though there were ultimate truths that she could not speak. Soon she has put Stella and Steve [sic] outwardly at odds with one another. She talks of her conquests, she is afraid of bright lights and responds rather desperately to the clumsy, polite advances of Steve's [sic] friend, Mitch, who thinks he would like to marry her.

The hot summer days idle by, but the tension grows: Stella's baby is coming and Steve [sic], frantic to be rid of Blanche, finally unearths the truth about her that, once published abroad, is to destroy her. A tragic early marriage, ending in disaster, had driven her to more and more men, to drink, and to taking refuge in a dream world where what mattered was not truth but what she wanted to be true.

There seem no words adequate to describe the remarkable performance by Jessica Tandy as the tragic Blanche, for this is really superb, imaginative and illuminating acting. With rare skill she suggests a lost, pitiful and confused woman, clinging to the illusion of beauty, clutching at the shadows of happiness, seeking to fly from the terrors of her lost love and family disaster.

The play is largely hers, but the other performances are most excellent: Marlon Brando fulfills his earlier promise with a mature and forceful performance of the angry, boisterous, resentful Steve [sic], seeking to salvage through brutality his resentment of Blanche's condescension. Kim Hunter is appealing and lovable as young Stella, torn between love for her husband and pity for her sister. Karl Malden brings strength and honesty to the role of Mitch.

The lesser roles, those of the quarrelsome but kind-hearted Hubbels, are well taken by Peg Hillias and Rudy Bond; Donald Oenslager's transparent walled setting is imaginatively conceived and lighted and the background music is haunting and effective throughout.³

'A Streetcar Named Desire' Intense New Drama
By Helen Eager

Tennessee Williams has written a deeply engrossing drama of intense dramatic power in "A Streetcar Named Desire," which Irene Selznick is presenting at the Wilbur. Elia Kazan has given it a fascinating production, staging it with brilliance. And the cast, headed by Jessica Tandy, is one of rare perfection.

Miss Tandy's Blanche DuBois lives in a dream-world of the past, as did the heroine of Mr. Williams' "The Glass Menagerie." But Blanche is a much more tragic and affecting figure. Like Iris March of "The Green Hat," an unfortunate marriage in her 'teens has led her to find solace in the arms of any stranger. From a gentle childhood on a Mississippi plantation, she has sunk to a prostitute ordered out of town. In desperation she joins her sister, who has married a Polish-American in New Orleans and who lives in two squalid rooms in a brawling section of the city. (To reach it one takes a streetcar named Desire.)

Her shock at finding her little sister Stella in such surroundings is matched by her distaste of Stella's mad passion for her husky husband, Stanley. And at once a bitter antagonism springs up between Stanley and Blanche. It is Stanley who, distrustful of Blanche's fine manners and professed delicacy, unearths her unsavory past.

Miss Tandy, who has been wasted in movies for the past five years, gives a haunting portrayal of loneliness—a woman who has watched her family die, one by one; who needs to be wanted since the suicide of her husband; who tries desperately to pretend she is a fragile virgin. Her gifted performance is one of the most impressive of the season.

Marlon Brando is splendid as the rough and physical Stanley. Stella is delightfully played by Kim Hunter, who refuses to believe anything bad about her sister. Karl Malden is excellent as Stanley's pal who courts Blanche with awed reverence until he learns the truth.

The play is vastly aided by Jo Mielziner's striking and atmospheric setting, and his wizardry with lighting. Lucinda Ballard has costumed it perfectly. And the music, under the supervision of Lehman Engel, adds to the tragic, bitter mood. (These two reviews are reprinted with the permission of the *Boston Herald*.)

Eager rightfully observes that Blanche's tragedy is deeper than Laura's in *The Glass Menagerie*, in large measure because of Blanche's particularly poignant loneliness. Though we might quarrel with her assessment that Blanche has "sunk to the level of a prostitute," there is no arguing with the importance Eager places on the clash between Stanley and Blanche. Again, as in New Haven, Brando is dismissed in a sentence.

Even more enthusiastically complimentary than Eager, Hughes grants Williams the distinction of being unique among American playwrights. She has a number of memorable things to say about his psychological techniques and regards Williams's lack of plot "in the usual sense" as a virtue. As we shall see, other critics of the *Streetcar* tryouts pointed to Williams's so-called plotlessness as a flaw.

More detailed and less complimentary reviews of the *Boston Streetcar* were written by Peggy Doyle at the *Boston Evening American* and Cyrus Durgin at the *Boston Globe*, both appearing in November 4 editions. Here's Doyle:

Enjoy New Play 'Streetcar'

By Peggy Doyle

The irresistible teaming of a Guild opening and a play by Tennessee Williams, talented young playwright from New Orleans who authored the prize-bedecked drama, "The Glass Menagerie," assembled an eager capacity audience in the Wilbur Theater last night.

The new play, "A Streetcar Named Desire," despite the light-hearted connotation of its title plumbs the depths with even more sordid consequences than did the previous drama which brought the late Laurette Taylor back in a great performance.

It ends on a hopeless, despairing note. And, while it is excellently acted by more than several of the principals, has been staged with skill and produced generously and with imagination, there are times when you believe that Williams has missed this "Streetcar."

But, in the interests of fair coverage, it must be stated that the remarkably responsive first-nighters appeared to be entirely uncritical and completely absorbed by this latest Williams play.

The chief characters in "A Streetcar Named Desire" are a girl who is composite nymphomaniac-alcoholic-neurotic; her sister normal, joyously happy in her marriage and the imminence of motherhood; the latter's uncouth, virile, spade-calling husband, and a sort of gentleman caller character who cancels out marriage plans with the first girl when her brother-in-law tips him as to her lurid past.

Against Jo Mielziner's extraordinarily effective single set (which took 40 hours to hang), which the designer has lighted with rare skill, they set a note of sordidness mixed with a happy-go-lucky quality.

Jessica Tandy, the young London-born actress who was co-starred with John Gielgud in Old Vic productions, and was seen here in "The White Steed" has bleached her dark hair to play the girl who traces her sorry plight to a youthful disillusioning marriage.

Somehow she never becomes three-dimensional. It is a very difficult role to create, for the playwright has written her as a shadowy, never quite plausible creature whose phobia is hogging the bathroom.

Kim Hunter, as her younger married sister, is completely winning, warm, impulsive, forthright and so understanding of her husband's frightening outbursts of temper.

As the husband Marlon Brando, who played one of mama's sons in "I Remember Mama," has an earthy naturalness and ease that made him a standout last night.

Another performance remarkable for its naturalness and rightness was Karl Malden's Gentleman Caller. Gee Gee James' Negro woman, who wanders in and out of the script without much to do, is first-rate as always.

Elia Kazan's direction steers "Streetcar" expertly, but since it has no discernible destination, there was a sense of frustration and being taken for a ride. (Reprinted with the permission of the *Boston Herald*.)

It was fateful for Doyle to label Williams "the talented playwright from New Orleans." Though a Mississippian, Williams would forever be linked with New Orleans, his spiritual home, because of *Streetcar*. Like other tryout critics, Doyle expressed greater appreciation for Williams's art in *Streetcar* than in *Menagerie* and attempted to characterize Williams's blend of styles. While many critics would later echo her sentiments that Blanche was a "composite nymphomaniac-alcoholic-neurotic," Doyle was clearly in the minority in diagnosing the cause of Blanche's phobia. Still, given the symbolic functions

of the Kowalski bathroom, one can understand the reasons for making such a statement. Doyle's final assessment of Blanche as a "shadowy" figure, which she takes as a Williams flaw, subsequent criticism foregrounded as a trait of Blanche's delicate character. After all, a soft person has to shimmer and glow.

Durgin's review, which follows, supplied a detailed cast list:

Wilbur Theatre: "A Street Car Named Desire"
By Cyrus Durgin

"A Street Car Named Desire," drama by Tennessee Williams. Produced by Irene M. Selznick. Staged by Elia Kazan. Setting and lighting by Jo Mielziner. Costumes by Lucinda Ballard. Irving Schneider, assistant to the producer. Third item in the Theatre Guild-American Theatre Society subscription series. First time in Boston. The cast:

Negro Woman	Gee Gee James
Eunice Hubbel	Peg Hillias
Stanley Kowalski	Marlon Brando
Stella Kowalski	Kim Hunter
Steve Hubbel	Rudy Bond
Harold Mitchell (Mitch)	Karl Malden
Mexican Woman	Edna Thomas
Tamale Vendor	Richard Carlyle
Blanche du Bois	Jessica Tandy
Pablo Gonzales	Nick Dennis
A Young Collector	Vito Christi
Nurse	Ann Dere
Doctor	Richard Garrick

Play by play, Tennessee Williams is establishing himself as one of the few powerful young American dramatists with something to say about human nature. "A Street Car Named Desire," which opened at the Wilbur Theatre last night, is a sordid, but brilliant study of the disintegration of a woman, set against a background of low life and poverty in the Old Quarter of New Orleans. Jessica Tandy, an actress infrequently seen here, gave a performance of the leading role that can only be described as magnificent, and it ought to make her a Broadway star.

There is not only overwhelming authority, but dazzling mastery of the technic of acting in her portrayal of Blanche DuBois, a beautiful blonde over-bred young alcoholic who goes insane and has to be taken off to an asylum. With uncanny accuracy, Mr. Williams has caught the character facets of such a woman, and with just as uncanny accuracy Miss Tandy displays them to you.

The feminine cunning, preoccupation with sex, love of attention and flattery, the ultra-refinement that comes from being spoiled when young and terrified when thrown into poverty, the assumption of "feminine weakness" and the consistent egotism that can seem pitiable at a distance, but only unbearable and contemptible at close range—all those qualities are there. So are the evasions, the rose-colored dreams of ease, even the downright lies.

Most of the action is psychological, although there is a secondary line of events to give the play physical vigor. Blanche takes a street car named Desire, changes to one named Cemetary and walks an alley to the street called Elysian Fields, where at No. 362 lives her younger sister Stella, who has married a selfish Polish-American roughneck, Stanley Kowalski. Blanche moves in, attempts to make

Harold Mitchell, a dreary dope, marry her; drinks, preens herself, wrecks the household, proves to have had a scarlet interlude; drinks, drinks, drinks, and finally is taken away.

Mr. Williams has an enviable gift for writing concentrated, characterizing dialogue and the ability to set forth vulgarity and raw passion in high color. Nor does he ever hesitate to depict life as he sees it. "A Street Car Named Desire" may shock, repel, disgust or even frighten you, and it may get the censor busy, but it will not bore you.

In writing, in Elia Kazan's bold direction, the broken-wall and half-stylized setting of Jo Mielziner and his emotional lighting, the background of turbulence in the Old Quarter, and the acting as a whole, this play represents modern theatre craft at its most vivid. A few loose threads of plot detail and passing time need to be tightened and can be, easily.

Marlon Brando contributes realistic acting of 200 proof strength, and Kim Hunter, the unforgettable WAC of "Stairway to Heaven," is superlative as Stella. Karl Malden does well with the least rounded of Mr. Williams' characters. As aforesaid, a powerful play, but don't expect to be amused, and don't take the youngsters. (Reprinted courtesy of *The Boston Globe*.)

Like Doyle, Durgin attests to Williams's major reputation; but the signal importance of his review lies in his emphasis on Blanche's femininity. Much contemporary criticism of *Streetcar* has focused on the play as a feminist tragedy with Blanche as both the victim of Stanley's abusive patriarchy and the heroine of her own authoritative history (Vlasopolos). While feminist critics today would not universally endorse Durgin's reading of Blanche's "feminine cunning," they would beyond doubt applaud his comment that *Streetcar* offers a "brilliant study of the disintegration of a woman. . . ." The discussion of Blanche's femininity, not developed in other tryout reviews, reveals Durgin's keen insights and foreshadows a major critical approach to Williams's play.

Among the Boston critics, Elliot Norton gave *Streetcar* the most attention, even if it was not always glowing. Norton wrote two reviews of *Streetcar*--one entitled "Tennessee Williams Play Opens: 'A Streetcar Named Desire' Here at Wilbur" for the *Boston Post* on November 4, which was reprinted in the *Post* the next day, Wednesday, November 5, and "Plot But No Pity in 'A Streetcar Named Desire': Second Thoughts of a First-Nighter" in the *Boston Sunday Post* for November 9, 1947. These two reviews follow.

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS PLAY OPENS
"A Streetcar Named Desire" Here at Wilbur
By Elliot Norton

"A Streetcar Named Desire" is a play of primitive power and fury, ugly as sin and lunacy can make it, lunging erratically along the line between melodrama and tragedy, grimly humorless, pitiless and sordid, yet as fascinating, much of the time, as the evil it chronicles.

BURDEN ON STAR

If it only had a heart, if it only could stir compassion as it now arouses interest; if its principal actor, Jessica Tandy, could only add one cubit to her professional stature and become for the moment a new Eleonor Duse, it might well

be an overwhelming play. And perhaps, in the next two weeks, she will and it will. The burden rests on Miss Tandy, who is playing a part of almost incredible length and difficulty with tremendous skill yet, except in a single final scene, without the superhuman penetration which is required.

Tennessee Williams, who wrote "The Glass Menagerie," is the author of "A Streetcar Named Desire," which opened last night at the Wilbur Theatre. He has ripped the roof and walls off a shabby two room flat in a dingy quarter of New Orleans, near where a trolley car runs to a street named Desire. In the cramped rooms, he presents a brawling, battling, lusting whirlpool of degraded human life.

SNATCHED FROM LIFE

There is nothing pretty about the people he presents. They are neither edified nor edifying. He has snatched them squirming and bawling out of life itself and set them down on the playhouse stage, to lunge and lust and shout and live, in their own crawling, appalling, combative way.

Miss Tandy is Blanche, the faded, fallen, partly crazed woman who once had an estate in Mississippi and once had a husband whom she loved until she discovered an appalling defect in his character. She has been living wildly since, plagued still by the echoing music and the remembered gunshot of the night he committed suicide. She is faded, jaded, on the verge of mental collapse. Miss Tandy makes her a pretty coquette in some scenes, a giddy drunkard in others. In one sequence, she flares into rage against her supine sister for living with the man-beast whom she loves. In the final scene, she finally cracks your heart when her own mind breaks and they lead her away.

Marlon Brando plays the man Stanley as a bull and a bully; big, burly, slow of wit, devoid of humor, fired into anger by an underlying pride and vanity, terrifying in his moods of rage. A wonderful performance.

As the wife of Stanley, Miss Kim Hunter plays effectively with direct simplicity. Karl Malden is the great booby admirer of Blanche, who erupts in rage when he finds she has told him less than the truth about her past life. Director Elia Kazan has driven this play along at a jerky pace; in full flight, however, it has the driving rush of an evil dream. Mrs. Irene Selznick is the producer. (Reprinted with the kind permission of Mr. Elliot Norton.)

PLOT BUT NO PITY IN "A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE" SECOND THOUGHTS OF A FIRST-NIGHTER

By Elliot Norton

Do not abuse the theatre of the moment for lack of variety. At the Opera House this week, "Show Boat," a stately ancient craft, sails the crest of new applause in a sea of pretty sentiment, while across town, the Shubert jumps and echoes to the jerky rhythms and barbarous songs of the West Indian revue "Calypso." Poet Emily Dickinson's serenely sweet love story is told with quiet charm at the Plymouth almost within earshot of the Wilbur Theatre, where "A Streetcar Named Desire" clangs furiously down a street of sin. In the wings, awaiting the rise of tomorrow evening's curtain at the Colonial, Cornelia Otis Skinner stands, fan in hand, ready to present anew the acid elegances of "Lady Windermere's Fan." You pay your money and you make your way to the playhouse of your choice.

"Show Boat" has been fully reported. "Calypso" was clipped from behind by Warren Storey Smith. A report on "Lady Windermere" must, in the course of due process, wait for Tuesday morning. But another word needs to be said about the other two. By your leave.

"A Streetcar Named Desire" has been blamed for sordidness, a charge, which is, I think, justified. It has been called plotless, but that isn't so. It has a plot, and a relentlessly logical one.

When the neurotic young woman Blanche comes to visit the tenement home of her sister in New Orleans, through the quarter where runs the streetcar named Desire, she comes into almost instant conflict with her sister's husband.

The man Stanley, bulky and bellicose, dim-witted yet crafty, is as colossally proud and vain as most of the world's noisier men. Within him, somewhere hidden, a small voice must suggest at times that other men, or women, see things more clearly, or do them more adeptly. But he roars in rage at such a hit. And when it comes from outside in the form of any criticism, he can arise and strike out with blind power at the critic.

Faded, jaded, sister Blanche, puts on airs when she arrives penniless at the home of Stanley and Stella. She has manners and something of a wardrobe. She would make herself superior. Stanley is stirred at once to suspicious resentment.

BEGINS TO SEEK REVENGE

When he overhears her, a little later, hysterically pointing out to the dumbly placid Stella that this man of hers is less man than ape; a pig at table, a boor, an appalling consort for a girl who was born on an ancient Southern estate, he pretends not to have heard. But he begins slowly to move for revenge.

No one can thwart this primitive man-beast. When his wife challenges him for late hours at poker, he strikes her down in apoplectic fury. When she chides him for breach of etiquette, he sweeps the crockery from the table over which he has sucked up his food like a dog, and hurls the china crashing against the wall. A member of his bowling team dares suggest that they play in an alley whose proprietor Stanley does not like, and the man's rage is maniacal: they will play where he says, he screams: "Ain't I the captain of this team!"

All these are little things. But the charges made by Blanche are different. Like a lunging cobra, he lays in wait to destroy her. She has called him common, cheap, boorish, an animal. He will take terrible revenge. And he does.

BREAKS UP BLANCHE'S ROMANCE

The fumbling, bumbling Blanche, her mind addled and her heart cracked long since by a hideous marital experience, is trying to re-establish herself now, to find refuge, a home, a shoulder to lean on, security, sense, perhaps love. As she works for all this through a huge, slow-minded man friend of Stanley, that evil genius finds the record of her past.

He confronts his wife with it. He reports it all, in ugly detail to the man Mitch, who might have married Blanche. He crushes her chance for marriage, then buys her a bus ticket and coldly orders her out of the house back to the home town from which she had been driven. In terror--and in liquor--she dresses herself in her faded finery, and pretends there is a man waiting to take her away on his yacht. The man Stanley confronts her brutally with the truth: there is no such man, no yacht, nothing left in her life! For the first time, consciousness of his own power over this woman begins to appear. But he has not finished. His trusting wife lies now in the hospital, having just that evening given birth to a baby. At that moment, in his own home, he takes the screaming Blanche in his arms and consummates his revenge as no beast of the forest would.

In the final scene, the man hangs, loose-lipped and cold-eyed, over his poker table, a grunting, laconic, tooth-sucking pig, while a doctor and nurse take Blanche, her mind now cracked, away to the insane asylum, and her sweet, simple sister cries like a child.

The weakness of the play is the failure of Author Tennessee Williams to clarify completely the character of the woman and the failure, as of Monday at any rate, of Actress Jessica Tandy, to wring your heart; and perhaps the one fault bears on the other. There is a single scene late in the play wherein Blanche coolly makes love to a young man who comes to the door to collect a paper subscription, and this creates confusion. You have been led to believe up to this point that although she has been evil, she was not wanton; and that, in any case, she is now trying to expunge the past.

The matter of compassion is important. Unless this play has heart, there is no excuse for it. Tragedy which purges the emotions is one thing; the kind of melodrama which merely shocks and outrages them is something else. Without pity, this play is a scandalous thing despite all the vivid fascination of its graphically drawn people. (Reprinted with the kind permission of Mr. Elliot Norton)

The first "Wilbur" review is mixed, filled with praise and qualification, Norton telling his readers to believe that the judgment was still out on *Streetcar*. The opening sentence of Norton's review, though, is a tour de force, as dazzling as the play he had just seen. The epithets he uses for the content and atmosphere of *Streetcar* look forward to the larger world's response--"brawling, battling, lusty whirlpool of degraded human life." What is most perceptive about this review is Norton's dissecting some of Blanche's roles that Jessica Tandy played almost to perfection--coquette, drunkard, angry sister, mad woman. The pressure on Tandy must have been enormous, and so Norton's leaving the final decision about whether *Streetcar* would be an "overwhelming play" ultimately up to the actress is more than understandable. Blanche always has to carry the show, as Sir Laurence Olivier painfully realized when he directed his wife Vivien Leigh in the London premiere in October 1949 (Kolin, "Sir Laurence Olivier's Letter to Tennessee Williams").

The last tryout production before *Streetcar* went to Broadway was in Philadelphia. The play opened at the Walnut Street Theatre on November 17 and, as one of the Philadelphia critics (Schloss) observed, "stopped for a fortnight," or until November 29th. Though Philadelphia censors may not have given *Streetcar* the trouble their Boston counterparts did, the play nonetheless provoked controversy over its raw subject matter. It is interesting that the only Philadelphia critic to mention Blanche's husband refers to him not as a homosexual but as "a perverted poet" (Sensenderfer), and another critic, in a great understatement, observed that *Streetcar* was not "for those looking for 'light amusement'" and then warned that "Puritans and children had probably better stay back of the ropes" (Schloss). While these two groups may indeed have heeded such a warning and stayed home, other theatregoers did not, for *Streetcar* did a great business in Philadelphia. Helping Irene Selznick promote the play were the Philadelphia critics themselves who gave Williams and *Streetcar* the most favorable reviews thus far on its pre-Broadway circuit. Williams confessed in his *Memoirs* that "I remember buying myself a very expensive tweed overcoat in Philly on the strength of the favorable notices there" (172).

Guardedly optimistic, Edwin H. Schloss's review for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* for November 18, 1947 (and reprinted in the November 19th morning edition) is a perceptive piece of early *Streetcar* criticism.

'A Streetcar Named Desire' Opens on Walnut Theater Stage
By Edwin H. Schloss

In "A Streetcar Named Desire" Tennessee Williams is telling us the moving and absorbing story of a lost soul—a woman struggling in the ground swell of life desperately clinging to illusion and clutching frantically at any passing flotsam for survival.

The theme is essentially the same as that of Mr. Williams' prize-winning "The Glass Menagerie" of two seasons ago.

But the variations are vastly different.

The present case history is of grimmer stuff, and far more murky lit.

REALISTIC WORK

As revealed at the Walnut Street Theater last night where it is stopping for a fortnight before bowing in on Broadway, the new play shows some symptoms of growing pains. But it has authentic magic of the theater, too.

Set in a sordid two-room apartment in the tenement section of New Orleans, it is written with realism that rises to poetry. Compassionate, and subtly wise in the ways of the crippled heart and mind, "Streetcar" travels from the gutter to the stars and tells us with tenderness and bitterness how close the two can be.

Blanche Du Bois, decayed relic of a wealthy Southern family, is a refugee from life and a school teacher's job in a small Mississippi town. She arrives, penniless but proudly bearing remnants of her old finery at her sister's home in the slums. Blanche comes literally (and symbolically) on a streetcar named "Desire"—it seems that they really have rolling stock with such fanciful titles in New Orleans.

Sister Stella is happily if turbulently married to Stanley Kowalski, a tough and brutally ardent Polish boy "beneath her station." A subtle animal attraction mingled with hatred develops between Stanley and Blanche.

Stanley's contempt of his sister-in-law's attempts to nourish the illusions of her past gentility leads to a horror-wracked climax.

Her last pretense of gentility and her final citadel of feminine inviolability brutally torn apart, Blanche collapses over the border of fantasy into insanity. At the curtain she is being led to an asylum while Stanley and his friends continue their weekly poker game in the next room. And—a wonderful and pathetic touch—Blanche is beginning to coquet with the doctor who has come to take her away to the shadows.

Impersonating Blanche's pitiful gallantries and pathetic struggles, Jessica Tandy last night gave an arresting and infinitely skillful though at times uneven performance. Marlon Brando was superb as Stanley; Karl Malden not many steps behind as Mitch, Blanche's hulking, adolescent suitor. Kim Hunter was excellent as Stella. And the supporting parts were exceptionally well sustained.

DIRECTION GOOD

Elia Kazan's direction has sensitivity, thrust, poetry and an almost savage sincerity. "A Streetcar Named Desire" is not for those looking for light "amusement" in the playhouse. And Puritans and children had probably better stay back of the ropes. But in its ugliness is life; a deep wisdom and a moving tenderness. Blanche Du Bois is a symbol of the brutality of the world to its

misfits; the horrible dependence of decency on money, the lack of understanding for the weak and tortured.

Partly for technical reasons (the lighting was not working too smoothly) and for reasons of emphasis and clarity of writing and performance, all its values did not cross the footlights last night. But put "Streetcar" down as an absorbing play and an important event in this season. And perhaps by the time it reaches the Broadway tracks, as an event for next season, too. (Reprinted with permission of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.)

As the critics in New Haven and Boston had done, Schloss compares *Streetcar* with Williams's earlier hit, *Glass Menagerie*. But to this critic's credit he recognizes that though different in technique and "case history" the two plays have the same theme. Schloss's observations on Williams's suffering types ("symbols of the brutality of the world to its misfits") and the playwright's "moving tenderness" are well informed and in retrospect provide capsule histories of Williams's criticism. It is interesting to note that amid Schloss's comments on Williams's magic and poetry that he feels compelled to tell his Philadelphia readers that such fanciful names as "Desire" actually existed in New Orleans. Agreeing with other tryout reviewers, Schloss left no doubt that *Streetcar* would be an "event" on Broadway, provided the director and cast could correct a few problems.

R. E. P. Sensesenderfer's review for the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* for November 18, 1947, reprinted below, may have been the highest tribute Williams received during the *Streetcar* tryouts. No one among the Wood-Selznick-Williams camp would dare to quarrel with Sensesenderfer's first paragraph or his overall appreciation of the staging of *Streetcar*.

Streetcar Named Desire
By R. E. P. Sensesenderfer

Among our living playwrights none has a keener sense of those dramaturgic elements that go to make "good theater" than Tennessee Williams. Whether he is telling a simple story of family life as in "The Glass Menagerie," writing a comedy of contrasts as in "You Touched Me," or stripping life to its stark realities as in "A Streetcar Named Desire," his views are fresh and his method daringly original.

The latter, his latest play, which came to the Walnut last night, is an intricate combination of unwashed realism, sensitiveness and, strange as it may seem, great beauty. That is because the dramatist always has compassion for his characters, understanding and forgiving their degradation while fearlessly scraping off the veneer of respectability.

For the premise to his play he has taken two sisters, last of a once well-to-do Mississippi family. One has married a rough and virile Polish-American who has for her a physical attraction that compensates for a sordid existence in a scrubby tenement in the down-at-heel French Quarter of New Orleans. The other, after a tragic marital experience with a perverted poet, finds neurotic relief in amorous excesses and seeks refuge with her sister when she is expelled from the town in which she taught school. Her arrival on a streetcar appropriately named "Desire" opens the play.

ADMIRABLY STAGED AND ACTED

It is not a pretty picture, and what follows is not for the finical but it does make for powerful drama, as grossly frank and as searchingly true as Frank Norris' great story of "McTeague," which nearly a half century hasn't diminished.

Tennessee Williams has been doubly fortunate in the presentation of his play. Elia Kazan has staged it with dynamic insight and an inspired company of actors headed by Jessica Tandy and Marlon Brando play it for all its subtlest values.

Miss Tandy, a young English actress seen here only twice before (in Vincent Carroll's "The White Steed" and with Paul Muni in "Yesterday's Magic"), not only has studied and mastered the intricacies of neurosis but is able to project her findings with startling vividness. One thinks that Clara Morris' Cora in "L'Article 47" must have been something like this: a terrific exposition of the gradual development of insanity.

Mr. Brando's role as the sister's husband is much less complicated yet it has its facets. His transitions from animal brutality to a sort of crude affection are flowing, convincing, never jerked. Admirable, too, are Kim Hunter's quiet intensity as the wife; Karl Malden's naive love making as a timid suitor of the sister until her past transpires, and the periodic outbursts of Peg Hillias and Rudy Bond as the couple upstairs.

MASTERPIECE OF REALISM

As background to the drama of these principals, Elia Kazan has done his most-inspired work. Half a dozen casual characters—a Negro woman neighbor, an old woman selling flowers, a Mexican tamale vendor, poker players—and a conglomeration of street noises even to passing railroad trains, all enhance the sense of reality to the scene; never intruding but ever palpable.

Jo Mielziner's setting is another asset. The Kowalski first-floor flat with its two squalid rooms merely curtained apart; an open spiral stairway leading upstairs, and an occasional glimpse of the street by lighting through the scrim back-drop are perfect accompaniments to the action. Scenes change by black-outs, a movie trick, but surprisingly effective. And Lucinda Ballard has put everybody in just the right dress to round out the picture.

Tennessee Williams not only can evolve a plot, but he can fit his dialogue to it like people talk, not as many writers think people talk. There are flashes of humor which the actors understand how to toss away without losing. And every character means something—there are no puppets, routine fillers, in the whole cast.

"A Streetcar Named Desire" is heady brew, but it is fine theater. It is often coarsely frank, but it is honest writing and honest playing, something none too common on the stage. (Reprinted with the permission of The Bulletin Company, Jacksonville, Florida.)

It would be difficult to find a more appreciative analysis of Williams up to that time than what Sensenderfer wrote in his second paragraph. He obviously was in tune with Williams's intentions. Sensenderfer's assessment of Tandy (she "mastered the intricacies of neurosis") beautifully captured the way Tandy played Blanche as opposed to the more physical and strong-willed way Uta Hagen would interpret the role as Tandy's successor. Sensenderfer also recognized, as Theodore H. Parker did in the *Hartford Courant*, that Stanley is not a portrait in villainy but that there are a number of "facets" to his role. What is most memorable, however, about this review is that Sensenderfer is the only tryout critic to mention and perceptively decipher the significance of

Williams's "casual characters," a brilliant analysis. Sensesenderfer also deserves praise for understanding and appreciating the transparent walls in Jo Mielziner's stage design. Unlike Boston's Elliot Norton, Sensesenderfer admired Williams's evolving plot. Sensesenderfer's must have been a wonderful review to cap the tryouts before *Streetcar* went off to Broadway.

The last Philadelphia review was by Linton Martin for his column "The Call Boy's Chat" in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* for November 23, 1947. Filled with admiration, Martin reminds his readers that Williams's text and its performance are inseparable.

‘Streetcar Named Desire’ Is Strong Dramatic Meat
By Linton Martin

Any season in the theater could not conceivably bring to our dramatic doorstep a pair of plays presenting more acute contrasts than "A Streetcar Named Desire" and "I Remember Mama," which came to town the same night last week—the former almost insupportably haunting and harrowing in its mental and emotional tragedy, the latter heart-warming and wholesome in its gentle and genial humor and homespun humanity.

Geographically, or as the crow flies, only a few city blocks separate the new Tennessee Williams play, pausing at the Walnut before its Broadway bow, and John van D's quiet little comedy, which arrived at the Locust intriguingly tagged as a Broadway hit of three seasons ago. But in their dynamic and dramatic differences, these productions are playhouse poles apart, with no comparisons possible in people, plots and appeal.

It isn't going out on a limb, or taking any chance at all, to predict that the new Tennessee Williams play is certain to be the sensation of this season in New York. Or, more specifically and particularly, the play AND performance, for the two are inseparable. If the text or script is the author's original and creative contribution, what brings it to vivid and unforgettable footlight life is the combination of Elia Kazan's direction and Jessica Tandy's acting.

TRIUMPH FOR MISS TANDY

On her only two previous appearances here, in "The White Steed" and "Yesterday's Magic," Miss Tandy's acting held hardly a hint, if even that, of her present and compelling performance as the neurotically tortured and twisted heroine—and using that word in a technical sense—of the somewhat symbolically titled "A Streetcar Named Desire." For any kind of comparison, though not, of course of the play and its plot, memory harks back to the impression produced by the late Jeanne Eagels in the premiere of "Rain" right here at the Garrick Theater, a quarter of a century ago last month, and also before Broadway.

As our senior playgoers of this city may recall, that occasion turned out to be a memorable milepost in the history of play productions and performances. Before the first week was out, the word went around like wildfire. The box office boom was on, and the Broadway boys took their cues from the customers here.

It would not be so surprising if that record were repeated. For, as a soiled and sordid, forlorn and frustrated figure of pity-compelling pathos and appeal, struggling for survival with everything against her, Miss Tandy's Blanche Du Bois is, in a certain sense and significance, the Sadie Thompson of Miss Eagels brought down to date, in the world of today.

SORDID AND SEAMY STORY

This is not to say or to suggest that the performance of "A Streetcar Named Desire" is a one-woman show. Far from it. For, though Mr. Williams as playwright and Miss Tandy as his provocative protagonist, to say nothing of Mr. Kazan as director, display greater mastery of their mediums and eloquence of artistry than ever before, there are other footlight facets of fascination, and all the characters carry conviction in this pitiful and sometimes poetic story.

By the time the eventful evening is over, the playgoer understands intimately the mind, emotions, and motives of this southern girl whose family was once well-to-do on their Mississippi estate. Driven from her home town because of her scarred and scarlet record and reputation, and seeking refuge with her married sister in the latter's New Orleans home, where she is in the way and isn't wanted, Blanche finds that misfortune still pursues her.

Her past has included marriage to a boy who shot himself when his personal perversions were discovered, and unsavory amatory adventures of her own. In her sister's home, she desperately clutches at respectability in the hope of marrying an amiable and inarticulate neighboring youth, but is sexually assaulted by her hulking brother-in-law while her sister is in the hospital having a baby, and at the end is taken to an insane asylum.

CONTROVERSIAL QUALITY

If that summary suggests that "A Streetcar Named Desire" is strong dramatic meat, it is. Some sensitive playhouse palates may, indeed, even deem that description unduly euphemistic or inadequate, and rate it downright rancid. Nobody can deny that it is a depressing play, and already some serious playgoers have raised the question of what useful purpose its production can possibly serve. In any case it is provocative and controversial, and evidently that was the intention of the playwright in writing it.

But for those very reasons, this play is bound to linger long in the memory, vividly and vitally, after most of the facile and ephemeral footlight offerings that predominate in every theater season have been forgotten. That is undeniable, whatever the future fortunes and fate may happen to be. It is not a pretty or prepossessing playhouse picture, but it is adult drama, marked by adult acting on the part of Miss Tandy and her associates in the cast, as well as the adult direction, that has already been emphasized.

No apparent point or purpose, however, is served by the device of making the walls transparent, so that outside action may be seen. If such incidental outside action played any integral part or was dramatically significant, it might have meaning. (Reprinted with permission from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.)

Linton could not have chosen a more dissimilar work with which to compare *Streetcar* than *I Remember Mama*, a nostalgic drama of domestic charm and unity. Ironically enough, Marlon Brando got his start in the theatre by playing one of Mama's sons. We can only surmise how Brando responded to Linton's opening paragraph. Some of Linton's comments now seem amusing or quaint--that *Streetcar* was "somewhat symbolically titled" or that Mitch was an "inarticulate neighboring youth." But no one could dispute his prediction that *Streetcar*, which indeed offered "strong meat," would be the sensation of the season. Unlike SENDERFER, Linton failed to appreciate JO MIELZINER's transparent walls. No doubt these critics' traditionalism blocked

such appreciation. We must not forget, though, that in 1947 such impressionistic, plastic staging was indeed novel.

The eleven reviews of the *Streetcar* tryouts in New Haven, Boston, and Philadelphia reprinted here are valuable documents in theatre and cultural history. The first record of one of the most important performance events in American and world theatre, these reviews document what the earliest and most demanding audiences (the critics) thought of *Streetcar's* characters, setting, symbols, themes, and stagecraft. Though varying in complexity and detail, the reviews all recognized *Streetcar's* unarguable importance and thus foreshadowed the acclaim that awaited the play on the Broadway and the world stage. Clearly the reviewers' assessments of the play, as we have seen, look forward to later critical approaches. Even in their fault finding, the tryout critics help us chart the evolution of the charges that were frequently leveled against Williams for his subject matter and his style. These tryout reviews also attest to Tennessee Williams's growing reputation and to the achievements of Kazan, Selznick, and the young actors and actresses who helped make *Streetcar* the phenomenal success it was. Finally, these reviews reveal the critical climate of opinion in the late 1940s, helping us to understand why some features of *Streetcar* were hailed as invigorating and others too novel for acceptance. Above all else, these reviews disproved what that old man of the theatre Thornton Wilder said about *Streetcar* in his New Haven residence on the evening of October 30, 1947.⁴

Hattiesburg, Mississippi

Notes

1. Bernard De Voto was a stalwart foe of censorship in Boston. For a careful explanation of his reasons, see his "Easy Chair" column in *Harper's*, 194, no. 1164 (May 1947): 408-11.

2. I thank the Trustees of the Estate of Tennessee Williams, and their agents Rosenstone/Wender in New York, for their kind permission to print Tennessee Williams's letter. I am also grateful to the Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas where this letter can be found.

3. Hughes's review was reprinted in Jordan Miller's anthology on *Streetcar--Twentieth-Century Interpretations of A Streetcar Named Desire* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972). It is the only tryout review Miller included. Aside from anthologizing the review, though, Miller does not discuss the *Streetcar* tryouts.

4. I am deeply grateful to Robert Fleming, Archivist at Emerson College, and Gerry Duclow, Theatre Librarian at the Philadelphia Free Library, for their invaluable help in assisting me locate reviews of the Boston and Philadelphia tryouts.

Works Cited

- Adler, Thomas P. *A Streetcar Named Desire: The Moth and the Lantern*. Boston: Twayne: Twayne Masterwork Studies, No. 47, 1990.
- Bigsby, C. W. E. "The Absent Voice: Drama and the Critic." *Studies in American Drama, 1945-Present* 3 (1988): 9-21.
- Bone. "Plays Out of Town." *Variety* 5 Nov. 1947: 60.
- De Voto, Bernard. "The Easy Chair." *Harper's* 194, no. 1164 (May 1947): 408-411.
- Doyle, Peggy. "Enjoy New Play 'Streetcar.'" *Boston Evening American* 4 Nov. 1947: 23.
- Durgin, Cyrus. "Wilbur Theatre: 'A Street Car Named Desire.'" *Boston Globe* 4 Nov. 1947: 46.
- Eager, Helen. "'A Streetcar Named Desire' Intense New Drama." *Boston Traveler* 4 Nov. 1947: 59.
- Funke, Lewis. "News and Gossip of the Rialto." *New York Times* 23 Nov. 1947: Sec 2, 1.
- Hughes, Elinor. "Wilbur: 'A Streetcar Named Desire.'" *Boston Herald* 4 Nov. 1947: 10.
- Kolin, Philip C. "A Streetcar Named Desire: A Playwrights' Forum." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 39, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 173-203.
- Kolin, Philip C. "'Affectionate and mighty regards from Vivien and from me': Sir Laurence Oliver's Letter to Tennessee Williams on the London premiere of *A Streetcar Named Desire*." *Missouri Review* 13, no. 3 (1991): 143-57.
- Leeney, Robert J. "Williams Play Holds Interest at Shubert Theater." *New Haven Evening Register* 31 Oct. 1947: 24.
- Martin, Linton. "The Call Boy's Chat: 'Streetcar Named Desire' Is Strong Dramatic Meat!" *Philadelphia Inquirer* 23 Nov. 1947: 23.
- Miller, Jorday Y., ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of A Streetcar Named Desire*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972.
- Norton, Elliot. "'A Streetcar Named Desire' Here at Wilbur." *Boston Post* 4 Nov. 1947: 6.
- Norton, Elliot. "Plot But No Pity in 'A Streetcar Named Desire': Second Thoughts of A First-Nighter." *Boston Sunday Post* 9 Nov. 1947: A9.
- T. H. P. [Parker, Theodore H.] "'Streetcar' Williams's Finest Play." *Hartford Courant* 1 Nov. 1947: 15.
- Rose, Billy. "Pitching Horseshoes With Billy Rose." *New York Times* 2 Dec. 1947.
- Schloss, Edwin H. "'A Streetcar Named Desire' Opens on Walnut Theater Stage." *Philadelphia Inquirer* 18 Nov. 1947: 42.
- Sensenderfer, R. E. P. "Streetcar Named Desire." *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* 18 Nov. 1947.

- Vlasopolos, Anca. "Authorizing History: Victimization in *A Streetcar Named Desire*." *Theatre Journal* 38 (Oct. 1986): 322-38.
- Williams, Dakin and Shepherd Mead. *Tennessee Williams: An Intimate Biography*. New York: Anchor, 1983.
- Wood, Audrey, with Max Wilk. *Represented by Audrey Wood*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981.

Now published by the Ohio State University Press



Studies in American Drama, 1945–Present . . .

A bi-annual journal that publishes scholarly articles on theatre history, dramatic influence, and technique, as well as original interviews, theatre documents, and bibliographies. Each issue also carries theatre reviews.

Editors: Philip C. Kolin, University of Southern Mississippi, and Colby H. Kullman, University of Mississippi.

RECENT AND FORTHCOMING ARTICLES:

- "The Poetry of a Moment": Politics and the Open Form in the Drama of Ntozake Shange. By John Timpane
- *The Love Death*. By William Inge
- Tennessee Williams and Lanford Wilson at the Missouri Crossroads. By Gary Konas
- *Anybody Is As Their Land and Air Is*. By Megan Terry
- David Mamet in German-Speaking Countries:
A Classified Bibliography. By Jürgen C. Wolter

INTERVIEWS

Ntozake Shange, Robert Anderson, Adrienne Kennedy, Charles Gordone, Tina Howe, Jean-Claude van Itallie, Megan Terry, Romulus Linney, Joan Schenkar, Albert Innaurato, Constance Congdon, David Mamet, Arthur Miller, Jose Rivera, and Horton Foote.

PLUS THEATRE REVIEWS FROM AROUND THE WORLD



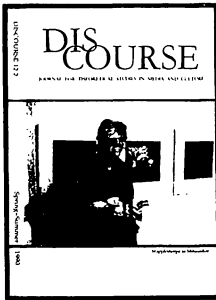
Published bi-annually by the Ohio State University Press
1070 Carmack Road, Columbus, Ohio U.S.A. 43210

One-year subscription:
\$32 Library/Institution \$16 Individual

Discourse

THEORETICAL STUDIES IN MEDIA AND CULTURE

Edited by Roswitha Mueller and Kathleen Woodward



Volume 14, Number 1

Jean-François Lyotard "Voices of a Voice" (trans. George Van Den Abbeele) ♦ **Meaghan Morris** "Ecstasy and Economics" ♦ **Kathryn Milun** "(En)countering Imperialist Nostalgia: The Indian Reburial Issue" ♦ **Christina von Braun** "Strategies of Disappearance" ♦ **Gloria-Jean Masciarotte** "The Madonna with Child, and Another Child, and Still Another Child . . . : Sensationalism and the Dysfunction of Emotions" ♦ **Tara McPherson and Gareth Evans** "Watch This Space: An Interview with Edward Soja"

BOOK REVIEWS: **Susan Willis** *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* by Mike Featherstone ♦ **James Schwoch** *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context* by Mark Poster ♦ **Tara McPherson** *Feminism and Youth Culture: From Jackie to Just Seventeen* by Angela McRobbie ♦ **Mark Rose** *Contested Culture: The Image, the Voice, and the Law* by Jane Gaines ♦ **Elizabeth Francis** *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* by Susan Rubin Suleiman ♦ **Marilyn Edelstein** *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* by Elizabeth Grosz

Volume 13, Number 2

Lynne Kirby "Gender and Advertising in American Silent Film: From Early Cinema to the Crowd" ♦ **Maureen Turim** "Viewing/Reading *Born to be Sold: Martha Rosler Reads the Strange Case of Baby SIM* or Motherhood in the Age of Technological Reproduction" ♦ **Roswitha Mueller** "Screen Embodiments: Valie Export's *Syntagma*" ♦ **Robert J. Corber** "Reconstructing Homosexuality: Hitchcock and the Homoerotics of Spectatorial Pleasure" ♦ **Virginia Carmichael** "Death by Text: The Word on Ethel Rosenberg" ♦ **Susan Jeffords** "Performative Masculinities, or 'After a Few Times You Won't Be Afraid of Rape at All'"

BOOK REVIEWS: **Bethany Hicok and Pamela Lougheed** *Visual and Other Pleasures* by Laura Mulvey ♦ **Andrew Martin** *The Remasculinization of America* by Susan Jeffords ♦ **Linda Mizejewski** *The Women Who Knew Too Much* by Tania Modleski ♦ **Robin Pickering-Iazzi** *Sexual Difference* by The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective ♦ **Linda Schulte-Sasse** *Joyless Streets* by Patrice Petro

Subscription Information

	<i>Single</i>	<i>Yearly</i> (3 issues)
<i>Individual</i>	\$10.00	\$25.00
<i>Institution</i>	\$20.00	\$50.00
<i>Foreign surface post</i>		\$10.00

Available from Indiana University Press, Journals Division,
601 N. Morton, Bloomington, IN 47404. Credit card orders
call 812-855-9449 or fax information to 812-855-7931.