A Streetcar Named Desire
A Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse Production
Reviewed by Jane Turner February 2012

Kicking off its 2012 season with the Tennessee Williams' classic A Streetcar Named Desire, the Liverpool Playhouse brilliantly re-create the hustle, bustle, whirl and wonder of New Orleans City. The street sounds and soul are brought to mesmerizing life in this historic and intimate Liverpool theatre by a superb Peter Coyte arrangement.

The stage (meticulously designed by Gideon Davey and Paul Keogan) is set in the cramped and claustrophobic two-roomed city apartment where the audience can feel the cloying heat with each mop of the brow and whirr of the overhead fan and feel the tension as it grows and ferments.

The bright city lights beam enticingly through the large window of the apartment that also serves as an entrance and exit for droppers-by, and which carries through it the evocative and endless street sounds from the immediate vicinity of this poor, culturally mixed neighbourhood - cats howling, bins crashing, jazz music playing, streetcars passing, and families making love and
war. It certainly made me feel part of and in the heart of a pulsating and vibrant city; just a pity that outside the doors of this theatre, Liverpool itself remains economically stagnant despite the hopeful gusto of the Liverpool One shopping precinct.

Written in 1947, and now regarded as a classic of the American stage, *Streetcar* was adapted for cinema and was a big hit at the movies partly due to the moody, macho and memorable portrayal of Stanley Kowalski by Marlon Brando dressed in little more than a muscle-stretched T-shirt throughout, and also because of the ethereal and anachronistic performance by Vivien Leigh as Blanche DuBois. Brilliant casting maybe, but the real talent of course lies in the wonderfully poetic, observant and elaborate vocabulary of the Williams script and his portrayal of the characters whose relationships are full of passion, intensity and sexual tensions, a characteristic of many of his works - which makes watching it an intense and absorbing experience, especially as this performance is over three hours long.

Any new production of this play is bound to be burdened by the ghosts of Brando and Leigh as they have come to be immortalised in these roles. I remember watching the film and loving the Marlon Brando character, despite the fact that he was a cruel and chauvinistic pig. Somehow because it was Brando, he managed to get away with being a right bastard because of his unique star quality, charming persona and his smooth and easy portrayal of such a cold and destructive character. I must say I found little to like in Sam Troughtons portrayal of Stanley, he really is a bastard is Sam. He doesn’t and couldn’t live up to Brando (his T-shirt just didn’t make the grade) but in all fairness, who could? Short on charisma as well as stature he gives an unflinchingly aggressive performance throughout and with each wag of his finger I felt truly threatened.
As well as a tale of clashing class and culture, it is a well-observed account of one woman's personal struggle against solitude and the gender conventions of the era. An educated and fidgeting she gives an exhausting and authentic performance of a lost and unhappy woman on a wave of superiority.

This production is long, intense and benefits enormously from the wonderful Hollywood-like performance of Amanda Drew as Blanche, is well supported by a small cast of local actors, and categorising and cataloguing other human beings into collections and likes sounds so glamorous.

There is also a collection of slutty women and the resultant reaction of a repressed woman restricted by the moral code of the times who has suffered rejection, humiliation and cruelty, and who is unable to find the love and desire she so craves. Buffeted by the blows of moral and financial ruin and the insensitivity of others, she becomes raw and exposed; she loses her spirit and trembles perceptibly as she loses strength.

When she can no longer distinguish between what is real and what is fantasy, she becomes distorted somewhat by Stella's subordination to Stanley, even though she is of a higher social class.

Blanche and Stanley clash constantly – Blanche is sniffy about Stanley, calls him primitive, reasons he treats her cruelly and humiliates her. He mocks the fake furs, fine feathers, “solid dinner, cleaning, and raising children. The relationship is incomparable to modern day long term heterosexual coupledom, where improvements in equality have long since prevailed, and is also spelt love or hate Blanche for her prejudices, coquettish and wilful character, it is hard not to admire her resilience in the face of such lack of compassion and understanding. It is her valiant battle against chauvinistic men, and would more sound so glamorous.

Ironic as it may seem given that women now have more choices, equality and independence, the way the two different plantations in Mississippi, now lost due to financial mis-management. The way the two different modern era be treated for addiction and advised to see a counsellor, therapist or invited to treatable addiction. She wasn't ill, Blanche was just a “slut”. When Blanche arrives at the apartment of her put-upon sister Stella (played with meek and gentle and verdant countryside being somehow more virtuous – is a description many opponents of modern development might be happy with, and one that has restricted growth and expansion in many areas of the UK.

As with a man's cruelty and the stuff of real human tragedy.