



POETRY IN THE PLUMBING
Stylistic Clash and Reconciliation in Recent American
Stagings of *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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Perhaps nothing suggests gritty naturalism quite so graphically as plumbing problems. Broken pipes and overflowing toilets are unpleasant realities that never had a place on stage before Emile Zola and André Antoine began reconfiguring audiences' perceptions and expanding the bounds of what could be tolerated in art—that is, exposing bourgeois playgoers to the lower-class or seamy side of life.

While today's Broadway has embraced a musical titled *Urinetown*, we must remember that early twentieth-century American theatre audiences were slow to accept naturalism. Rarely was a sordid milieu depicted on the Broadway stage, nor was profane language heard there before the 1920s when Eugene O'Neill gave his sailors realistically salty dialogue and when *What Price Glory* portrayed soldiers swearing like soldiers. It was not until 1947, when Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* opened, that Broadway saw a play in which the bathroom figured so prominently in the setting, in the plot, and in the dialogue (including vocabulary like Stanley's crude reference to his "kidneys").

While the plumbing that undergirds *A Streetcar Named Desire* may well be viewed as naturalistic, the play at the same time epitomizes Jacques Copeau's concept of a *poésie de théâtre*; that is, it deploys a visual poetry of scenic metaphor, alongside the verbal *poésie au théâtre*. For example, the clouds of steam that emanate from the bathroom whenever Blanche takes a refreshing bath are realistic, but the haze on stage also creates an atmospheric softening effect. In symbolist terms, the added humidity in the small apartment reifies the discomfort caused by Blanche's presence there. Williams's dramaturgical genius is evident in his making the Kowalski apartment's bathroom a source of signifiers for bodily functions that are the domain of naturalism while also exploiting it for all its potential symbolism and poetic overtones.

A third theatrical style, expressionism, manifests itself in the episodic structure of *A Streetcar Named Desire* as well as in the distortions of reality that scenically and sonically reflect Blanche's mental state. Some of those elements also have a basis in realism—the cat screeching in the alley, the clackety-clack of a passing train, the Mexican street vendors—but their juxtaposition with a precise emotional spike in Blanche's sensibility makes for a powerfully theatrical (virtually expressionistic) heightening of the moment. Most importantly, the polka music of the Varsouviana must be considered a clear departure from realism in that it is heard only by Blanche and by the audience. In productions that follow the stage directions in

Williams's published text, the polka music underscores Blanche's monologue to Mitch about her young husband Allan Grey. She begins with the analogy of a blinding light that exposes something mysterious, and when she reaches the point in her narrative at which she unexpectedly walked in on the boy she married in a compromising situation with his older male friend, a locomotive thunders past and casts the glare of its headlight into the room. The polka music is heard in a minor key when Blanche recalls dancing with her husband as if nothing had been discovered. The music cuts off with her recollection of his dashing away from the dance floor followed by a gunshot. Then the polka resumes in a major key, increasing in volume with the confession of her cruelty toward him. Only when Mitch takes Blanche in his arms and kisses her does the polka tune fade out. Thus has external reality been distorted in order to bring to the fore the inner reality of Blanche's memory.

Directly or indirectly, the published text of the play in its didascalia calls for elements of naturalism, symbolism or poetic impressionism, and expressionism.¹ Any play that must juggle or synthesize three quite distinct theatrical stylistic conventions as does *A Streetcar Named Desire* poses a challenge for its director, designers, and actors. How realistic or theatricalized is the overall work in which these three aesthetic approaches are embedded? Should there be a clear break between styles or should they blend seamlessly? How far should one push the stylized unreality of the lurid projections of Blanche's mind? Are the different styles tied to specific characters or should the various sound and lighting effects be orchestrated as elements within a larger dramatic poem?

The idea of polarizing the two dominant styles by tying Stanley Kowalski to brutal naturalism and Blanche DuBois to delicately poetic symbolism appeals to some directors. This approach reinforces stylistically the drastic incompatibilities of character, language, and thought between Stanley and Blanche.

It is sometimes said that the hardest part of staging *A Streetcar Named Desire* falls to the actor cast as Stanley Kowalski: how to bring the character out of the shadow of Marlon Brando. Even before the film version of the play was released, Stanley Kowalski had become virtually synonymous with Marlon Brando on the basis of Brando's galvanizing stage presence and bellowing animal energy. With his muscles rippling beneath a grease-stained tee-shirt, his exuberant guzzling of beer, and the searing passion of his cry for "Stell-lahhhhh!", Brando's Kowalski was naturalism incarnate. How fitting that young Marlon Brando's audition for Tennessee Williams actually involved repairing the playwright's plumbing! Brando recalls in his autobiography that he hitchhiked to Provincetown to read for the role: "When I found Tennessee's house, he apologized because the toilet was overflowing, so I volunteered to fix it" [119]. Williams wrote about it in a letter to his agent Audrey Wood, telling how the electric wiring had failed, leaving him with no lights, and meanwhile the kitchen was flooded: "Marlon arrived in the middle of this domestic cataclysm and set everything

¹ This is true of the 1947 first edition text republished by the Library of America as well as the 1950 revision published by New Directions.

straight. That, however, is not what determined me to give him the part” [quoted in Brando, 120].

Brando described the Stanley Kowalski that he portrayed as:

Insensitive, brutish [...] muscled, inarticulate, [an] aggressive [animal who goes] through life responding to nothing but [his] urges and never doubting [himself], [...] brawny in body and manner of speech who [acts] only on instinct, with little awareness of [himself], [...] coarse, a man with unerring animal instincts and intuition. [Brando, 121]

So what is an actor to do? Play Stanley in that kind of no-holds-barred naturalist manner and be dismissed by the critics as “imitation Brando?” Or develop an equally viable, more stylistically complex approach to the role and risk disappointing audiences that cannot help remembering the movie Kowalski as the gold standard against which all other Kowalskis must fall short?

At **Studio Arena Theatre in Buffalo, New York** [8 Sept. to 13 Oct. 2002], director Jane Page went for the complexity, even allowing her Stanley Kowalski a heroic quality. She wrote in her program essay: “Stanley is the quintessential American hero of detective fiction and Westerns, a rough self-made man who claims his own domain.” Ted Koch, who played Stanley at Studio Arena, told an interviewer that this “dream role for an actor [...] comes with its problems” [Huntington, 1 Sept. 2002]. Koch was tempted to watch the movie version, but decided not to: “I already have all those famous images of Brando floating around in my head that are hard to shake.” So Koch tried to dismiss those images, and remember that now it was his turn to put his own stamp on the role. In his interpretation, Stanley is not just “a coarse brute in a T-shirt wallowing in animal sexuality.” Stanley is a moderately successful salesman. In Koch’s view: “He’s not always going to sit around with his pants undone and belly hanging out. This Stanley can dress for success.” Stanley is jealous and resentful of anyone who interferes with his wife or friends. Like any human being, he has a multi-faceted personality: “He can be cruel or jokey. He can make Stella laugh, like when he reaches in Blanche’s trunk and pulls out pearls and says, “What is this sister of yours, a deep-sea diver?” He has a certain charm. But then with every scene another layer is added and by the end where this terrible thing happens you can see how he is so drawn to do it that he believes that he is—somehow—justified” [Huntington, 1 Sept. 2002].

Interpreting Stanley with a slightly more contemporary masculine sensibility did not mean that the Studio Arena production avoided naturalism entirely. Indeed, the dominant visual element when Stanley called up to “Stell-ahhhhh!” was two big ugly garbage cans. Page’s major concession to naturalism was the rape itself, which she describes as “down and dirty.” The sequence culminated with Stanley throwing Blanche against the poker table and “attacking her from behind, lifting her skirt and pinning her arms down,” thus taking it to a degree of violence considerably beyond the usual pulling back her head by the hair [Page email].

The Studio Arena production also avoided making Blanche “a fragile thing that flutters in from another universe.” One reviewer observed that

“Susan Wands gave a fascinating, *strong* interpretation of Blanche. Insanity is clearly closing in on this woman, but unlike the traditional fragile interpretation, Miss Wands’ Blanche is going down fighting” [Plyler]. Another critic found Susan Wands’s performance as Blanche

Taut with the psychological complexity and ambiguity that Williams wrote into a part that is, some say (and this includes Williams), based on the playwright’s own unfathomable personality. She slowly, gently and affectingly dismantles the thin veneer of reality that props up Blanche’s world, always keeping one step ahead of our perceptions. It is a moving interpretation, far and away superior to the usual fluttery Blanche [...]. Wands conveys the redemptive idea that here is a woman once made of solid human stuff still clinging to her self-awareness. The slight quavers in her voice, the startled screams, an excessive gesture, the decorative laughs—by these things Wands gradually reveals a lapsing mind. She knows she is doomed, but she wants to be sane enough to observe her fall. In the end, she isn’t. That’s her tragedy. [Huntington, 15 Sept. 2002]

In general, the critics concurred that “audiences will find it easier to relate to Susan Wands’ less-fragile Blanche” [Huntington, 15 Sept. 2002].

Director Jane Page summarized her approach to the play: “Tell the tale; make the characters real people; let the images, language, and conflict speak.” Thus, she avoided polarizing Stanley and Blanche as exemplars of naturalism versus poetic impressionism, instead moving both characters into the realm of psychological realism. To underscore the validity of her interpretation of the characters, she quoted in her program essay a letter that Tennessee Williams wrote to Elia Kazan during rehearsals for the original Broadway production: “There are no good or bad people. Some are a little better or a little worse, but all are activated more by misunderstanding than malice—a blindness to what is going on in each other’s hearts” [15].

That approach must have come across in the Studio Arena production, for one review noted that Koch “takes the sound middle road, making his Stanley appealing, but not too appealing, and brutish, but not too brutish. He mixes an animal nastiness with marvelous touches of wit and ordinariness.” [Huntington, 15 Sept. 2002]. On the production style, that critic wrote: “Other than stylized atmospheric vignettes that happen around the edges of the main action (including an attempted murder), director Jane Page sticks with conventional realist treatment of a play that can inspire flamboyant directorial outbursts.” None of the critics mentioned the expressionistic touches in Hugh Landwehr’s setting. Picking up on the “meat” imagery in the text, director Page and designer Landwehr conceptualized the cramped apartment as evocative of a meat locker. “The floor of the set was gently raked and Blanche’s corner, down right, was designed with a ‘crack’ in the floor, as if that corner of the room was about to fall off” [Page email]. It’s interesting that those “stylized atmospheric vignettes” that Huntington saw as the production’s only departures from realism were actually planned to serve a psychologically realistic motive. Page had wondered why Blanche doesn’t just leave while Stanley is in the bathroom changing into his red pajamas, and thus she staged a gritty, sexually violent confrontation with switchblades in the street just outside the door when Blanche tries to escape, forcing her to choose, so to speak,

between “the devil you know versus the devil you don’t know” [Page email].

Taking issue with a non-realistic visual effect, one critic wrote: “But she [Page] makes one miscue: Each time Wands delivers a soliloquy about Blanche’s past, misty clouds drift across the set accompanied by interpretive music. Why? Wands is fabulous enough sans two-penny effects. Let her guide our feelings.” [Huntington, 15 Sept. 2002] It sounds as if this reviewer wanted to stay with visual realism to match the realistic complexities of character in the performances of the principal roles. If the polka music signals that the past has taken possession of Blanche’s mental state and is insinuating itself into the present moment, then the misty clouds would seem to be a visual reification of that detachment from the narrative present tense, analogous to the scrim effect in *The Glass Menagerie*. It is an intelligent directorial choice that shows an artistic openness to experimenting with departures from literal realism. However, other reviewers also expressed discomfort with the effect. One noted that “the production is underscored by a distracting mime show on the upstage street; expressionistic elements like extreme lighting, sounds, and even a veritable London fog emerging from Blanche’s steam bath—routinely dropped from productions of Williams’s plays—are employed to jarring and chaotic effect” [Artvoice]. Another felt that

at times the lighting of Blanche’s memory scenes becomes distracting. Otherwise, the separation of the areas of action, which highlight different locations while enabling silhouetted figures to copulate or dance in the background, brings the atmosphere of New Orleans in as a distinct factor in the lives of each character [Brody].

Clearly, what impressed most of those reviewers was design elements that created effects of literal realism. They appreciated “the care taken with environmental effects such as actual rain pouring down ‘outside’ the Kowalski apartment” [Brody] and “steam rising from a rainy sidewalk” [Comerford]. On the other hand, it is odd that no reviewer mentioned the wonderful expressionistic device of having the Mexican flower vendor—who comes to the door in Scene Nine, offering “flores para los muertos”—appear to the audience as the panicked Blanche sees her: wearing a death mask.

There is no question that stylistic departures from realism are integral to Tennessee Williams’s artistic intention. The question is whether modern audiences (as represented by these critics) are more limited in their willing suspension of disbelief than audiences were two generations ago. That is, have audiences lost their tolerance for theatricality, “staginess,” or heightened effects within a play that employs a recognizably realistic storyline and character motivations? Is it possible that by moving Stanley’s character away from naturalism toward a more complex psychological realism while moving Blanche in the opposite direction, away from poetic symbolism toward a more complex psychological realism—thus putting the two characters on the same stylistic plane—do the expressionistic effects become more dissonant than they would be if the performances were more polarized?

Using the Studio Arena production as a benchmark, I would like to look at several other recent American productions of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in terms of how they have dealt with the issues I have raised. The salient points are: first, whether the actor playing Stanley embraces Brando-like qualities or anything else that might be called naturalism, or whether he incorporates more contemporary masculine sensibilities; second, whether the feminist movement has forever stomped out the possibility of showing Blanche as a fragile flower; third, whether the contemporized approaches to those characters can admit eruptions of extreme stylization or expressionism in the sound score and in the visual design.

Among the productions to be examined here, the one in which the characterizations of Stanley and Blanche were most strongly polarized between naturalism and symbolism was that of the **Pioneer Theatre Company in Salt Lake City, Utah** [11-28 Feb. 1998]. Mark Elliot Wilson's seriously brutish Stanley was "suitably coarse and low" [Johnston] and so unrelenting in his tough-guy forcefulness that he seems to have imposed Stanley's side of the stylistic equation on the production as a whole. Reviewers used phrases like "the brutal realism" [Hofer] and "the difficult reality," "brutal reality in the character of Stanley," "Wilson storms onto the stage [...]. His reality will not be denied," "Stanley's raw energy [...] this imposing mountain of reality," and "Stanley's harsh realism" [Mallery]. The words "reality" and "realism" as used by those reviewers in tandem with words like "brutal" suggest artistic choices that might be more precisely labeled naturalism. Another observed that the emphasis on Stanley's loud bullying made it difficult to understand Stella's sexual attraction to him: Stanley possessed all "the animal magnetism of dirty laundry" [Bannon]. That sounds a lot like naturalism to me!

Another critic surmised that characterizing Stanley as a "one-dimensional bully" may have served the purpose of throwing the subtlety and complexity of both Blanche and Stella into relief, making the delicate, quasi-mysterious Blanche "the soul" of the production [Melich], while another found Stella to be the "heart of this production" [Johnston]. Both actresses projected "truthfulness" in their relationship to each other [Melich]. Blanche was described as "an icon of romanticism" [Mallery], "fragile," "refined," "physically delicate" [Melich], showing "frailty and despair" in her big scenes and "in smaller moments a flighty, precocious quality" [Johnston]. Thus the performance approaches in the Pioneer Theatre Company production were polarized to a degree, and this approach by director Charles Morey seemed to give the critics permission to appreciate anti-realist elements in the visual design.

A "lavish" multi-level setting designed by James Wolk and "provocative lighting" [Johnston] by Mary Louise Geiger evoked the "pressure cooker" atmosphere of the "inner city" [Johnston] and took a great deal of focus:

James Wolk's split-level set, with its invisible walls, serpentine wrought-iron staircases, old-fashioned furnishings, hanging neon signs and laundry lines, and backdrop of sky and clouds, captures the cluttered, slightly decadent air of the French Quarter. [...] James

Prigmore's earthy jazz music is poignantly counterpointed by Blanche's delicate music-box theme. [Bannon]

Clearly, the production benefited from a directorial sensibility that did not flinch from the juxtaposition of extremes. The reviews suggest that naturalism and poetic impressionism enhanced each other by contrast. Interestingly, one critic actually invoked expressionism: "Charles Morey's direction perfectly melds the realistic and expressionistic notes of the play into a single atmospheric melody."

The play began and ended with Blanche in a pinpoint of light on the grid above the stage. Thus her first entrance was a descent from a higher plane, and her departure at the end could be seen as a transcending of crass reality. At the end, Blanche took the doctor's arm to "walk past the poker players in the kitchen, past the entwined bodies of Stanley and Stella on the porch. The neon signs of the Latin Quarter give way to an expansive scarlet sunset. The noble Blanche is indifferent to the colorful horizon. She has entered another world" [Melich]. One might say that she was entering a mental reality of her own creation, and conveying that subjective reality to an audience is the essence of expressionism. The Pioneer Theatre production could be said to exemplify a successful blending of naturalism, symbolism, and expressionism.

Steppenwolf Theatre Company's 1997 production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (for the play's fiftieth anniversary) generated numerous comments from the Chicago critics about aspects of character and social analysis that now seem dated. For example, the *Chicago Reader* critic noted that "the plot and characters are shaped by cultural assumptions that time has long since overturned—for example, the notion of goddess-women in a world sexually and economically dominated by men," and he further observed that the revelation of Blanche's husband's homosexuality "now seems much ado about little" [Williams]. Sid Smith of the *Chicago Tribune* wrote: "The muscular male as emblem of animal lust and danger—somewhat novel in its day—is as familiar and reassuring as the latest Calvin Klein ad; the idea of a woman too refined for employment but driven—and fatally destroyed—by secret sex is so pre-feminist as to seem laughable." Similarly, the *Chicago Sun-Times* critic commented: "The sexual politics of this fable, in which repression rages against release, seem dated, to say the least" [Emerick]. A feature story added that

It can be difficult for audiences of the 1990s, who are accustomed to seeing women in independent roles, to accept the subservient condition of the women of 'Streetcar.' Stella is a particularly difficult character to accept because she opts to stay with Stanley, who beats her and sexually abuses Blanche [Voedisch].

Those views provide a context for the somewhat tentative critical reception of Gary Sinise's Stanley and Laila Robins as Blanche. The consensus was that although Sinise was cast against type, he brought a lot of "crash-bang-boom energy" [Christiansen] as well as "animalistic tendencies" [Lazare] to the role, which he tempered with a surprising amount of humor in his line readings and with moments of emotional intensity. "Fifty years after Brando we don't need another tower-of-power Stanley; we do need one with a soul, and Sinise delivers," noted another

reviewer [Williams, 40]. Sinise avoided the “feral allure” [Christiansen] and the menace associated with Brando’s more savage interpretation, while eliciting the most critical interest for his “very powerful moment when, after drunkenly slugging Stella, he cries for her to return from the upstairs apartment where she has run, and his anguished cries turn at first juvenile and then childlike, like a toddler screaming for his mother. He even falls into a foetal position as he hugs her dress when she returns to him” [Burghardt]. According to the *Tribune’s* Richard Christiansen, he crawled up the staircase, “bawling like a hurt little boy.” Another critic wrote that he made “Stanley’s pain ... not just plausible but deeply disturbing. Watching him is like watching an animal that has been injured in a trap” [Valeo].

Blanche came on strong. In the early scenes, she engaged in “aggressive” jousting with Stanley, displaying “none of the fragility and mental imbalance one might expect” [Lazare]. Another critic saw her as “at once ethereal and earthy,” an interpretation aided by “a remarkable voice that ranges from singsongy elements to the howl of a cornered beast chewing off its own foot to escape a trap” [Williams]. Several reviews praised the nuanced complexity that Laila Robins found in Blanche’s “shattered psyche” [Burghardt]. Tom Valeo described the portrayal as

a complex human full of contradictions and annoying behavior. She is charming but self-absorbed, brave but anxious, intelligent but given to illusions of grandeur [...] painfully vulnerable, [...] suffering unjustly for violating the ‘rules’ of a male-dominated society.

Interestingly, her physical appearance evolved in counterpoint to her mental state: in her early scenes of strength she was “all powdered and pink,” but after Stanley triumphed over her and the victimized Blanche was led away to the asylum, she had become “a white, stonefaced figure in a purple saint’s hood” [Christiansen].

The *Steppenwolf’s* setting did not elicit a great deal of critical notice. The sound design, by default, became the site for heightened theatricality if not full-fledged expressionism. As Richard Christiansen described it:

Director Terry Kinney opens his production with a high-volume roar of the cranking and groaning of the symbolic streetcar, followed by an ear-splitting burst of loud New Orleans jazz, and then a bit of stillness as Blanche DuBois, all in white, wanders unwittingly into the street called Elysian Fields. Throughout the next 3-1/2 hours, the cacophony of the streetcar is repeated at key points in the plot. Whenever the harsh realities of the world begin to entrap the fragile Blanche, you may be sure that the noise of Desire will come closer and closer to crushing her. And as each scene opens, the wail of New Orleans jazz is introduced, providing a further assault on Blanche’s frayed sanity.

The point is reiterated in Lewis Lazare’s review: “Kinney overindulges a fondness for symbolic sound effects, most notably a screeching streetcar that repeatedly rumbles by on cue to dramatically underscore key points in the script. The production also might have benefited from less of the excessively shrill jazz music that fills the moments between scenes.” Kinney and his design team were commended in another review for having “escalated the aural and physical stakes to emphasize the play’s undercurrent of violence. Instead of the melancholy “blues piano” the

text calls for, we have composer Kimo Williams's jagged, rasping horns shredding the air. And the periodic roar of a passenger train—Williams's symbol of sex and death on a collision course [...] is here a deafeningly tangible fact of life in the French Quarter, as nerve-grindingly loud as it must seem to Blanche's unraveling mind" [Williams]. In a similar vein, another wrote: "The sounds and shadows of a passing streetcar named Desire clunking along are very effective, though they come at a few too frequent moments in the play" [Burghardt]. While such comments imply that Blanche was driven mad as much by urban stress as by anything that Stanley did to her, the reader attempting to reconstruct an impression of the production on the basis of the reviews can appreciate the director's effort to honor Tennessee Williams's artistic intention by stylistically punching up the sound design.

Two final productions that I wish to mention were interesting primarily for the fresh ways in which they theatricalized certain elements to communicate Blanche's mental state. Whether or not these devices can be called expressionist in the strictest sense of that aesthetic, they did achieve the goal of expressionism: to convey a character's subjective reality through a distortion of external reality

Deaf West Theatre is a professional sign-language theatre in North Hollywood. In their production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 2000, director Deborah LaVine emphasized Blanche's status as an "outsider" when she visits her sister Stella by making Blanche a hearing person who comes into a neighborhood of deaf persons—including Stanley, Stella, Mitch, and others—all of whom communicate amongst themselves by signing. Suddenly Blanche's "verbal charms" have no value, and so the misunderstandings pile up [Oppenheim].

Coastal Repertory Theatre of Half Moon Bay, California, produced *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 2003. In this stage interpretation, according to director Paul G. Smith, the *Varsouviana* and the polka that Blanche hears in her head were *not* heard by the audience. Nor was the Mexican Woman ("Flores para los muertos") heard by the audience. Thus the audience saw Blanche reacting to her inner visions and sounds, but did not themselves see or hear Blanche's hallucinations. By telling the story from everyone else's point of view rather than seeing it through Blanche's "tortured eyes," Smith said, "it presents her sliding into not-quite-so-sane areas a little more visually" [Trevenon, 4 June 2003]. As a result, "the audience then became less a participant in Blanche's descent and more of an observer" [Smith].

Blanche was described by reviewers as "having an edge" [Trevenon, 11 June 2003], as a "combative figure at the opening of the play" [Kreitman], and this fulfilled Paul Smith's directorial intention. He wanted a Blanche who was "dark haired, strong, and who had a long way to go before the doctor showed up." He directed a Stanley who was "restrained and darkly mysterious," or as described by a reviewer: "more Mediterranean glowering, sinister and scheming than the excessive mindless crudeness" of traditional interpretations [Kreitman].

Although these characterizations cannot be tied to either naturalism or symbolism/poetic impressionism, we can read something of those

aesthetics in the production's visual design. Notably, the walls, doors, and dressing table mirror were suggested by a construction of steel pipes, which allowed an unimpeded view of the painted backdrop, a "surreal cityscape in dour, dark purples" [Trevenon, 11 June 2003]. And that combination of atmospheric, moody blues and purples with the solid pipes in workmanlike configurations brings us full circle, back to my title "poetry in the plumbing."

As suggested by the reviews and photographs of productions of *A Streetcar Named Desire* at Studio Arena, Pioneer Theatre Company, Steppenwolf, Deaf West, and Coastal Repertory Theatre, one present-day tendency (although by no means universal) is to soften Stanley and harden Blanche. Whether or not feminism is the impetus behind this altered understanding of the characters, the result is a toning down or eschewing of identification of Stanley with naturalism and Blanche with symbolism or delicate poetic impressionism. We might note further that giving both characterizations a psychological make-up that is understood as realistic in our own time (late 1990s to early 2000s) seems to set up expectations in audiences (as represented by the critics) that literal realism should condition all aspects of production. Yet directors and their designers are less reticent about stylizing the visual and aural landscape in which those psychologically motivated characters find themselves. It is in the design elements that today's theatre artists most fully realize the anti-realist component of Williams's artistic intention.

Even if we no longer admit a polarity between Stanley as ape and Blanche as delicate moth, Williams's experiments with drawing upon a range of stylistically varied elements are clear in his text on the page and thus deserve to be conveyed in some manner in the staging. Whether or not we apply the terminology of aesthetic movements—naturalism, symbolism, surrealism, expressionism—we can always find polarities in his dramatic writing, beginning with the poetry of his dialogue and atmosphere flowing through the plumbing that structures his plot even as it symbolizes the seamy side of human existence.

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