Williams Tennessee: A Streetcar Named Desire Blanche's Story. Exploring Streetcar on stage and film

Richard Jacobs explores changes made in the film version of A Streetcar Named Desire to throw light on the original playscript.

Let's take a look at two sections of Streetcar, in the middle and at the end, by thinking about two contexts for the play. The first context is formal and historical; the second is institutional. We'll see that the contexts coincide in the treatment of the story at the play's centre.

There's a group of American plays from the late 1940s and early 1950s which share a particular formal device. In them a crucial sequence of events happens not on stage, but before the curtain goes up. The play's protagonists have to undergo a recognition or rediscovery of this story. It has to be re-presented or re-narrated. The effects of the original events, and the consequent effects of revisiting them, are what drive the play's emotional intensities.

This technique has its roots in classical tragedy. It seems designed to give theatre something of the illusory three-dimensional qualities and inwardness which we associate with nineteenth century novels. By shifting the balance of narrative so that the most crucial material is in the past, to be recovered during stage-time, the playwright increases the illusion of the character's depth, of the kind that we tend to associate with novel-reading, perhaps because we read internally and privately

This is, anyway, what we find in Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman and The Crucible. We'll look at one painfully buried story in Streetcar and see what happens when it moves from the stage to the screen

Blanche is 30 and wants to be younger. She's an alcoholic. She obsessively bathes. She has problems with truth and with the past. But one man falls happily into her embroidered version of herself and it is to the sympathetic Mitch that she unburdens herself of the crucial story of the events that changed everything. She married young and, as is revealed in the first scene, 'the boy died'. On the whole the 1951 film, for which Williams had screenplay responsibility, sticks pretty closely to the playscript, but let's look at the significantly different treatment of Blanche's story. Here's the story as told in the film.

> *Blanche: He was a boy, just a boy, when I was a very young girl. When I was 16, I made the discovery - love. All at once and much, much too completely. It was like you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow, that's how it struck the world for me. But I was unlucky. Deluded. There was something about the boy, a nervousness, a tenderness, an uncertainty, and I didn't understand. I didn't understand why this boy, who wrote poetry, didn't seem to be able to do anything else. He lost every job. He came to me for help. I*

> *didn't know that. I didn't know anything. I didn't know anything except I loved him unendurably. At night I pretended to sleep. I heard him crying, crying, crying the way a lost child cries.*
>
> *Mitch: I don't understand.*
>
> *Blanche: No, no, neither did I. And that's why ... [pause] I killed him.*
>
> *Mitch: You ...*
>
> *Blanche: One night we drove out to a place called Moon Lake Casino. We danced the Varsouviana. Suddenly in the middle of the dance the boy I had married broke away from me and ran out of the casino. A few moments later - a shot! I ran out - all did - all ran and gathered about the terrible thing at the edge of the lake. He'd stuck the revolver into his mouth, and fired. It was because - on the dance-floor - unable to stop myself - I'd said: 'You're weak. I've lost respect for you. I despise you.' And then the searchlight which had been turned on the world was turned off again and never for one moment since has there been any light that's stronger than this.*

And that, for cinema audiences, presumably leaves a big black hole. This key moment, offered by Blanche as a way of understanding her present self, has at its centre an absence, an inexplicable gap. Expecting an explanation to a secret narrative - her young husband's suicide - we meet instead incomprehension. Is this because suicide in 'real' life is often incomprehensible? Or is it that there's something missing here, something suppressed?

Here you need to take another look at the playscript version of Blanche's 'he was a boy' speech in Scene 6 (Penguin edition p.182; Methuen edition p. 56).

In the playscript we get a name - the 'Grey' boy, neither one thing or the other. And there was something missing. The boy's tenderness 'wasn't like a man's' and Blanche's response to him is 'you disgust me', not (as in the film) 'I despise you'. It's the story of a gay boy who, as elsewhere in Williams's work, failed to prove the heterosexual lie in bed. Blanche, in rather veiled language, calls it her not being 'able to give him the help he needed'. There's a veil on these words too: 'a room that I thought was empty ... but had two people in it'. That's presumably two young men in a bed. Allan had a secret and illicit sex-life; the boy in the filmscript 'didn't seem to be able to do anything' apart from, possibly, want his mother - or want Blanche to be his mother.

Despite the veiling, Blanche's guilty sense of failure and inadequacy (overplayed in the filmscript's 'I killed him') are clear as the source of her own vulnerability. In the playscript Williams has to veil the language in order to avoid the moral and legal problems surrounding the representation of homosexuality in the media, but it is quite clearly there under the surface. But the process of veiling becomes critical in the filmscript. There the gay issue vanishes completely. Forbidden sexuality is the root problem of the secret narrative, but institutional pressures on the filmmakers mean it has to be erased from the film.

Now let's go to the rape scene (Scene 10) and see what the film does here. Stanley's playscript lines 'maybe you wouldn't be bad to - interfere with ...' and 'we've had this date with each other from the beginning' are cut from the film, again, presumably, for institutional reasons. The result is that the fact

of the rape is momentarily obscured - but, in a brilliant bit of film-making, the next shot is of the street outside being hosed down. This poignantly smuggles the fact of the rape back into the film at the level of imagery. The filmscript later adds extra stage-business and an extra line when Mitch and Stanley fight. The other men stare at Stanley in silent accusation for a long held moment until he says, 'What are you looking at? I never once touched her'. This defensive lying again makes the rape certain and further isolates Stanley.

But it's the last moments of playscript and filmscript that differ most startlingly. Blanche is taken away to an asylum. Her sister knows what's happened but can't - or won't - let herself believe it, instead submitting to 'luxurious sobbing' and Stanley's embrace. That's the playscript's last stage-picture.

The end of the film is best described. Stanley reaches to Stella who says 'You touch me! Don't you ever touch me again.' She picks up the baby, starts to go in, changes her mind, says to herself 'I'm not going back in there again, not this time, never going back, never' and - accompanied by Stanley's off-camera shouts of 'Hey, Stella!'- she leaves, running to the flat upstairs with Eunice standing to let her in, in a pose suggesting a protective guard. And that pose is the last shot.

'Not this time'? After an earlier scene of violence at Stanley's hands (Scene 3), Stella leaves for Eunice's but then returns. The filmscript seems to end ambiguously. Either Stella's left for good; Stanley's punishment is proper and appropriate; Blanche has, in effect, at last been believed, or Stella will return as she did before, eventually. She's a woman who puts up with, even seems to thrive on, Stanley's violence. These two readings of the end of the film clearly come from different sexual-political positions, as well as suggesting different approaches to ending texts. But the film-ending does seem to betray a squeamishness in the face of the challenge presented to the audience by the playscript, in which Stanley secures everything, unreservedly, and is in 'voluptuously' sensual control at the end.

As with films like Channels 4's 1996 Gulliver's Travels, on which NBC TV, the American co-funders, forced a happy ending (see The English and Media Centre edition, 1997), we're looking at studio pressures, the institution's fear of losing the big money. In the case of Streetcar (as with Miller's Salesman) the playscript, in its ending, is calculated to shock with the impact of classical tragedy. It's Blanche's defeat we're left with in the theatre, Stella's victory in the cinema. When texts of this kind collide with the pressures of big money, the market place and the perceived needs of mass audiences, difficult issues and uncomfortable truths will be glossed over.

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