The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

The Study Guide is published by the Utah Shakespeare Festival, 351 West Center Street; Cedar City, UT 84720. Bruce C. Lee, communications director and editor; Phil Hermansen, art director.

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Cover photo: Kate Fuglei in A Streetcar Named Desire, 1994
A Streetcar Named Desire

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Synopsis:  *A Streetcar Named Desire*

With her family’s Laurel, Mississippi, estate lost to creditors, Blanche DuBois arrives at the New Orleans tenement home of her sister and brother-in-law, Stella and Stanley Kowalski, where she is shocked by the disreputable looks of the place and frankly criticizes both Stella and Stanley. Blanche’s faded gentility violently clashes with Stanley’s animal vitality, setting up a contest of wills between the two, with Blanche vying with Stanley for Stella’s allegiance. However, through the course of the play, she finds herself no match for Stanley’s sexual hold over her sister.

The following evening, Blanche and Stella go out to dinner and a movie while Stanley and his friends play poker; but when the women return the men are still in the kitchen playing, and Blanche notices that one of the players, Mitch, seems to be more sensitive than the others. Thus, she begins to charm him with the idea of eventually marrying him. However, the momentary peace is broken when Stanley becomes angry over a series of minor incidents, throws the radio out the window, hits Stella when she tries to intervene, and has to be held back by the other men to be kept from doing more damage. To protect her, Stella takes Blanche upstairs to a friend’s apartment. Yet, when Stanley recovers, he calls for Stella, and she returns to spend the night with him.

The next morning, Blanche is angry that Stella would return to a “madman.” However, Stella assures her that everything is fine and that “there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant.”

Through the next couple of months Blanche and Mitch’s romance blossoms. Blanche confides some of her past to Mitch, including the fact that she had once been married to a young man who, when she learned he was homosexual, committed suicide. Mitch confesses that he fears that once his ailing mother dies he, too, will be lonely—and he proposes marriage.

Stanley, however, has other plans. He has learned all of Blanche’s past, which he shares with Stella and Mitch: It seems that she lived such a wild life of drunkenness and promiscuity back in Mississippi that she was asked to leave town. Even the army had referred to Blanche as being out-of-bounds. Later that evening Blanche cannot understand why Mitch does not come over to her small birthday party. However, she begins to see the light when Stanley presents her with her birthday present: a one-way bus ticket back to Laurel. Everyone’s anger comes to a head just as Stella announces that she is having labor pains and that their first child is about to be born.

With Stella and Stanley gone to the hospital, Blanche begins to drink heavily; and Mitch arrives to confront her with her past. At first she tries to deny it, but then confesses that after the death of her young husband, nothing but intimacies with strangers seemed to have any meaning for her. Mitch then tries to get her to sleep with him, they argue, and he leaves, telling her she is not good enough for him.

The hospital soon sends Stanley home, telling him the baby won’t be born until morning. At home he finds Blanche dressed in bits of outlandish finery and fantasizing about an invitation to join a cruise. He confronts her with all the lies she has told; then his animosity and anger quickly explode into sexual violence, and he rapes her.

Three weeks later, Stella is home and packing Blanche’s clothes and getting her ready for a doctor and a nurse to come and take her to the state mental institution. Blanche, her mind completely unhinged now, thinks that an old boyfriend is coming to take her on a cruise. When the nurse arrives, Blanche recoils in fear, but Stanley helps trap her. The doctor, however, is able to alleviate her fears, and, eventually Blanche is quite willing to go with him, saying “I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.”

The play ends with Stella sobbing, with Stanley trying to soothe her through words and sexuality, and the poker players starting another game, the last line of the play being spoken by one of the players: “This game is seven-card stud.”
**Characters: A Streetcar Named Desire**

**Blanche DuBois:** A sensitive, delicate, moth-like member of the fading Southern aristocracy, about thirty years old, she has just lost her teaching position in Laurel, Mississippi, because of her promiscuity. She, therefore, left Mississippi and as the play opens arrives at the home of her sister and brother-in-law, Stella and Stanley Kowalski.

**Stella Kowalski:** Blanche’s younger sister, about twenty-five years old, she is married to Stanley and lives in the French Quarter of New Orleans. As the play opens we learn that she is pregnant with their first child. She is happy in her marriage and her home; however, much to the consternation of Blanche, she has forgotten her genteel upbringing in order to enjoy a more common existence.

**Stanley Kowalski:** A rather common working man, about twenty-eight to thirty years old, his main drive in life is sexual. He is a former master sergeant in the engineer corps and faces everything and everybody in his life with a brutal realism.

**Harold Mitchell (Mitch):** Stanley’s friend who went through the war with him, he is unmarried and has a dying mother for whom he feels a great devotion. He is one of a group of men who gather regularly at the Kowalski home for poker. He, however, is a bit gentler than the others and even plans to marry Blanche until he learns of her unsavory past.

**Steve Hubell:** A neighbor of the Kowalskis, he is one of the men who gather to play poker.

**Eunice Hubell:** The wife of Steve, she is a good friend to Stella.

**Pablo:** Another of Stanley’s poker-playing buddies.

**A Negro Woman**

**A Doctor:** An employee at the state mental institution, he comes to commit Blanche and is able to comfort her.

**A Nurse:** An assistant to the doctor.

**A Young Man:** A subscription collector for the newspaper.

**A Mexican Woman**
About the Playwright:
Tennessee Williams
By Kelli Frost
From Insights, 1994
"If I did not write, I'd go mad."
—Tennessee Williams

Born on March 26, 1911 in Columbus, Missouri, Thomas Lanier “Tennessee” Williams is considered one of the foremost American playwrights of the twentieth century. He is best known for The Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desire, and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. He was the son of pioneer Tennesseans, mostly military men and politicians. Most of the biographical information available on Tennessee Williams came from Williams himself. He wrote his own history in the form of essays and introductions to his plays, and helped others write it through numerous interviews which he gave. Some sources list Williams’s birth date as 1914, but Williams purposely confused the year—not out of vanity, but out of necessity: early in his life he entered a play-writing contest in which he had to knock three years off his age to qualify. He won the contest, but never corrected the erroneous date of birth.

Williams wrote about loneliness, frustration, and the desperate need for communication by people who are society’s misfits. At least parts of this had to reflect his own life. Sometimes a misfit himself, Williams left home for good at an early age. His mother was overprotective, and he did not like his father. During his childhood, his sister, Rose, was his only friend. Later she was confined to an institution after an emotional breakdown from which she never recovered. His father was a traveling salesman who spent very little time with his family and made no permanent home for them as they moved among various Mississippi towns. When his father took a job managing sales for a shoe company, the family moved to St. Louis in 1918. A year later a younger brother, Dakin, was born. The family struggled to survive life with a father who was stingy, crude, and often drunk. The family was marked with anger, tensions, and separateness.

Williams recalled being teased by gangs of boys when he began to go to school. Nevertheless, he graduated from high school in January 1929, and went on to the University of Missouri that fall. In 1932, during the Great Depression, he dropped out of college in order to take a full-time job in a shoe company. His three years there were, he said, “a living death.” After suffering a physical breakdown, Williams went to live with grandparents in Memphis, where he enrolled at Washington University in St. Louis. There his interest in writers such as D. H. Lawrence, Hart Crane, and Herman Melville intensified. In 1938, he graduated from the University of Iowa and began writing and wandering, both of which continued throughout his life, in spite of his later affluence.

Williams’s career as a playwright began in earnest in 1935, when his first play was produced. (This play has never been printed.) The next year, he became associated with the Mummers, a lively St. Louis theatre group. By 1939, he had dropped the Thomas Lanier and ceased to be simply a local playwright. This was the year he lied about his age and submitted a series of plays to the Group Theater. The most important result of the Group Theatre prize was that Williams got himself an agent, Audrey Wood, who had faith in him and worked hard for him. She immediately procured Williams a Rockefeller Fellowship, which gave him money enough to work comfortably. His first published plays appeared in The Best Plays in 1940, 1941, 1942, 1944, and 1945.

He achieved his greatest acclaim as a playwright during the 1940s and ‘50s. Though
he spent six months writing screenplays in Hollywood, The Glass Menagerie opened in Chicago on December 26, 1944, and in New York on March 31, 1945. The play ran for more than a year, and Williams had arrived. From that time on, his career is a matter of public record. For the rest of his life, he averaged more than a play every two years.

If we take 100 performances as a respectable run for a play in New York, Williams had only two failures before 1963. His greatest commercial and critical successes were The Glass Menagerie, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, A Streetcar Named Desire, and The Night of the Iguana. These plays not only had the longest runs, but all received the Drama Critics Circle Award, and both A Streetcar Named Desire and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof were given the Pulitzer Prize. Williams took comfort in the knowledge that he had gained a reputation as one of the handful of American playwrights who could be considered serious dramatists.

During the 1970s, Williams became depressed and went into a decline. He spent two months in a psychiatric hospital in St. Louis, dealing with personal and professional pressures. He later told interviewers that he would stick with off-Broadway, where tensions were less stressful for him. He published three collections of short plays, and Hollywood has made over fourteen films from his plays and short stories.

Williams’s plays contain themes aplenty, though he said of them: “I have never been able to say what was the theme of my play, and I don’t think I have ever been conscious of writing with a theme in mind. . . . Usually when asked about a theme, I look vague and say, ‘It’s a play about life’” (American Writers [St. Paul: University of Minnesota, 1974], 384).

Williams wrote about both victims and victimizers, such as Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski, but some of his best-written characters are his versions of society’s misfits: artists, madmen, cripples, foreigners, and perverts. Williams invariably explores the relationships his characters have with God and the universe, yet his themes imply that there is no God and that most of society fits into one or more of the above categories of misfits. His characters try to escape this godless universe by running away from it (like Tom in The Glass Menagerie) or by retreating into themselves (like Blanche in A Streetcar Named Desire).

From the beginning of his career, Williams tried to tell the real truth about human beings, but he never wanted to do that as a realist. He made constant use of both literary and theatrical devices of nonrealistic sort, ranging from the subtle to the shockingly obvious, from organic machine to pure gimmick, from the mythic to the popular. Mythic and significant names were Williams’s way of stressing the nonrealistic elements in characters. As though pushing his characters toward caricature and his plots toward myth and decorating both with symbols were not enough, Williams made use of every possible tool of the theatre—sets, props, lights, sound—to emphasize that his plays were not realistic. Clearly Williams was a playwright with a sharp eye for nuances of speech and gesture which have always been of great importance to the realistic dramatist; yet, he consistently chose to work in the nonrealistic tradition.

Williams died in 1983, at the age of 72. He will always be revered as a troubled soul who was able to describe that torment better than any American dramatist before or since.

(The introductory quotation is from Harold Clurman, Tennessee Williams: Eight Plays [New York: Doubleday, 1979], ix.)
Tennessee Williams’s A Streetcar Named Desire, in its first year of production in New York (1947) received the Pulitzer Prize, the Donaldson Award, and the New York Drama Critics Award. It won praise not only for Williams and director Elia Kazan, but for Marlon Brando as Stanley, Jessica Tandy as Blanche, Kim Hunter as Stella, and Karl Malden as Mitch. The 1951 film reunion featured the original director, as well as the entire cast except Jessica Tandy who was replaced with Vivien Leigh, and continued to pile up praise and awards, including Oscars for Vivien Leigh, Kim Hunter, and Karl Malden. Marlon Brando’s stage and screen performances as Stanley Kowalski were nothing less than epochal, and any actor who has played the role since has inevitably been compared to Brando.

Such a strong role is balanced, of course, by the character of Blanche Dubois who has been portrayed on stage and screen by such actresses as Jessica Tandy, Vivien Leigh, Uta Hagen, Tallulah Bankhead, Claire Bloom, Faye Dunaway, Ann Margaret, and Blyth Danner. The role is perhaps the most well known and memorable of all the roles in the play—and “the visionary company of love” (A Streetcar Named Desire [New York: Penguin Books, 1974], epigraph) which Blanche hoped for from Stella and then from Mitch is “visionary” only because these two people are too broken and self-centered and unable to reach out to one so desperate and lonely and displaced.

Blanche, having lost her family home, Belle Reve, and her husband, has come to her sister Stella, a woman of about twenty-five, and Stella’s husband, Stanley Kowalski, an ex-soldier of about thirty from a working class background.

In Williams’s stage directions, Blanche is described as being about thirty. We are told that “her delicate beauty must avoid a strong light. There is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth” (15).

One of the problems with this play has been that Marlon Brando’s portrayal of Stanley Kowalski—one of the most famous renditions ever by an American actor in any role—has tended to make audiences see the play as primarily Stanley’s, and not Blanche’s, which seems to run counter to the author’s intentions. Her final line of the play, “I have always depended on the kindness of strangers” (142), has become a permanent addition to modern cultural mythology.

Blanche is among the last vestiges of a failed southern aristocracy, having lost everything, including a marriage to a young homosexual who commits suicide, and has come, literally, in a streetcar named Desire through the cemeteries to the Elysian Fields, once the Greek city of the dead, but now located between the railroad tracks and the river in a shabby part of New Orleans.

As an epigraph to the play, Williams chose four lines from Hart Crane’s poem, “The Broken Tower”: “And so it was I entered the broken world / To trace the visionary company of love, it voice / An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled) / But not for long to hold each desperate choice.”

Blanche finds herself in such a “broken world.” As Williams himself remarks, the play is about “the ravishment of the tender, the sensitive, the delicate, by the savage and brutal forces of modern society” (Charles Highan, Brando: The Unauthorized Biography [New York: New American Library, 1987], 58).
Those who insist upon seeing Stanley as some sort of Lawrentian pagan naturalist who attains a kind of religious communion through a lust for life and love are grossly misreading the play. Stanley’s “union” with Stella is mere pleasure and release and nothing at all sacramental. He has no qualms about not only betraying Stella but brutally violating her sister on the very night that the symbol of their “union” is born.

The tragedy of the play is partly Blanche’s: the tragedy of the disparity between dream and reality. But the tragedy is also ours, insofar as we allow our own guilts, insecurities, fears, and self-centeredness to prevent us from reaching out to those even more fragile than we. This is especially so if they are among those close to us, who look to us for succor—if we force them “to depend upon the kindness of strangers.” To see this as Stanley’s tragedy is clearly counter to the author’s intention, as expressed in verbal and visual codes in the text.

Furthermore, the original director, Elia Kazan, a close personal friend of Williams, in his director’s notebook envisions each of the scenes in the play as a step in Blanche’s progression from hope to expulsion. Blanche first comes to Stella as her last chance for acceptance. Searching to find a place where she can belong, she is once more excluded as an outsider (scenes 1 3). Her brother-in-law Stanley sees her as both a bother and as potential prey for his lust. Then Blanche thinks she had found in his card-playing friend Mitch a match for her (scenes 4 6). But Mitch deserts her (scene 7). She then believes that revealing everything about her past might save her, but she is rejected and escapes into a world of illusion. Then Stanley jolts her back into reality and brutally rapes her (scenes 8 10). Finally, Blanche is disposed of, sent to an insane asylum, and expelled from the world she had so desperately looked to for help.

She says, finally, “I have always depended upon the kindness of strangers” (142) and poignantly expresses her tragic condition in a world where the supposedly sane people are crazy and the sensitive and delicate are driven mad.
A Streetcar Named Desire:
Williams’s “Swan Song”

By Jerry L. Crawford

From Midsummer Magazine, 1994

Of all his plays, Tennessee Williams believed the only fully deserved success was A Streetcar Named Desire. Although most critics agree that this is his best piece of work, they are not aware of Williams's private reasons for cherishing it: when he wrote it in 1947, he was certain it was going to be his last play; he expected to die immediately. And so he felt it was his “swan song.”

In New Orleans, Williams lived near a main thoroughfare called Royal. Up and down the avenue, running on the same track, were two streetcars, one named Desire, the other Cemetery. As he watched the cars go back and forth, Williams was impressed by the symbolic significance of these names and their bearing upon life everywhere. They gave him the title for the story of Blanche DuBois, a sensitive woman driven beyond the brink of sanity by her brutish brother-in-law. The playwright has stated the theme of this play as “the apes shall inherit the earth.” It is thus quite obvious that Williams regarded most men as savages. His sympathies lay with the fine-grained individual who is lacerated by the coarseness of life. Therefore, A Streetcar Named Desire may be read as an allegorical representation of the author’s view of the world he lived in--and thought he was about to depart.

The plot of the play is rich in suggestions and overtones; it moves forward through eleven scenes at a furious pace. At the beginning there is the suggestion of tragedy hovering over the action, but as the work develops it slowly veers toward melodrama and culminates in the insanity of the protagonist, which may be a questionable solution. Interweaving special humor and pathos as it does, the story has the richness and variety of a good novel.

The characterization is strong and interesting. Blanche and Stanley are full-length portraits; one a study in abnormal, the other in normal, psychology. Despite his social consciousness, Williams was more concerned with the psychological than the sociological situations of his characters. Without passing moral judgments on them, Williams was ruthless in his exposure of the people in the play. His use of symbolism helps immeasurably to make them vivid; Blanche’s horror of unshaded light bulbs expresses her inability to face reality--she is a creature of delicate lace and fragile sensibilities. Stanley’s devotion to poker games and undershirts announces his virility. Stella is commonplace and finds complete gratification in marriage. Mitch is a ray of promise to Blanche, but, ultimately, weak and ineffectual. The other characters are a mix of small, mean, frustrated, and violent people. It is an exciting and colorful gallery.

Williams’s dialogue not only characterizes carefully but always carries action forward; his language has an aura of poetry and a certainty based on a kind of interior syntax. Blanche speaks in complex and periodic sentences which are full of imagery; Stanley’s explosive and staccato speeches also contain imagery but on a coarser level. The speech of the other characters is colloquial, slipshod, and typical. Humor and poetry raise Williams’s dialogue to levels much more unique than the journalese written by the average realistic and naturalistic playwrights of his time. Probably only Arthur Miller rivaled Williams in the 1940s and ’50s.

Discounting the author’s own statement, the theme of the play may better be described as the break-up of a social order and its effect on the women, bearers of life, who survive. Stella is able to renew the cycle of life because she joins forces with a man who represents fresh and virile stock; Blanche is the symbol and the victim of the old order which faces decay and death.

The play is an example of “poetic naturalism”; the speeches have the rhythms and images of ordinary life, subtly combined and contrasted with a verse-like elegance of phrase. It has the surprising effect of seeming more real, more life-like than the clipped banalities of the more prosaic realists. The
The title of the play itself may seem like fantasy or symbolism, but it has that rational explanation, as noted above.

The original production of this play was an excellent example of the element of “spectacle”-lighting, music, unusual stage effects, street cries, church bells, the thousand sounds of activity which heighten the sense of palpitating urban life, of brutal intimacies, and close-packed, crowded living; all these were called for by the playwright and realized through the efforts of the great American director, Elia Kazan, his actors, designers, and technicians.

On April 7, 1957, Williams was interviewed by the Observer in London; he spoke of his life, work, and A Streetcar Named Desire. Again, when Williams and I were both members of Circle Repertory in New York in 1975-76, he spoke to the playwrights there about this great play. My notes from these occasions include his following comments:

“It is not true that I write for money and that my primary appeal is to brutal and ugly instincts. . . . I have followed a developing tension as a writer and person. . . . I guess my work has always been a kind of psychotherapy for me. . . . As the gypsy said in Camino Real, the world is a funny paper read backwards. And that way it isn’t so funny. . .

“I’m not going to change my ways. It’s hard enough for me to write what I want to write without me trying to write what people want me to write which I don’t want to write. . .

“Indeed I do think I have a positive message—the crying, almost screaming, need of a great worldwide human effort to know ourselves and each other a great deal better, well enough to concede that no man has a monopoly on right or virtue any more than any man has a corner on duplicity and evil and so forth. If people, and races and nations, would start with that self-manifest truth, then I think that the world could sidestep the sort of corruption which I have involuntarily chosen as the basic, allegorical theme of my plays as a whole. . .

“I have never written about any kind of vice which I can’t observe in myself. . . . I’m inclined to think that most writers, and most other artists, too, are primarily motivated in their desperate vocation by a desire to find and to separate truth from the complex of lies and evasions they live in, and I think that this impulse is what makes their work not so much a profession as a vocation, a true ‘calling’. . .

“I don’t believe in ‘original sin.’ I don’t believe in ‘guilt.’ I don’t believe in villains or heroes—Blanche and Stanley are neither— I only believe in right or wrong ways that individuals have taken, not by choice but by necessity or by certain still-uncomprehended influences in themselves, their circumstances, and their antecedents. This is so simple I’m ashamed to say it, but I’m sure it’s true. In fact, I would bet my life on it! And that’s why I don’t understand why our propaganda machines are always trying to teach us, to persuade us, to hate and fear other people on the same little world that we live in. Why don’t we meet these people and get to know them as I try to meet and know people in my plays? This sounds terribly vain and egotistical.

“I don’t want to end on such a note. Then what shall I say? That I know that I am a minor artist who has happened to write one or two major works? I can’t even say which they are. It doesn’t matter. I have said my say. I may still say it again, or I may shut up now. It doesn’t depend on anyone else; it depends entirely on me, and the operation of chance or providence in my life.”

Thomas Lanier Williams closed his comments, but went on living, writing, and trying to connect with us all until chance or providence caused him to swallow the cap from a small bottle of eyewash as he stood in a New York hotel room. He partially swallowed the cap, choked, and like so many of the women and men in his plays, suffocated, but resisted and struggled to the final moment. The great director Jose Quintero once told me that it was the only, if ironical, way for Tennessee Williams to leave this world. What remains is his art and it is ours to cherish with wonderment and respect. He believed that A Streetcar Named Desire was fully realized; that seems as apparent in 1994 as it did in 1947.