

# Theatre Review: 'Women of Williams County' at the Midtown International Theatre Festival

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Sara Hymes (Stella Kowalski) and Gwendolyn Kelso (Blanche DuBois) in "Women of Williams County." Photo Credit: Somie Pak

The Hedgepig Ensemble presents 'Women of Williams County' at the Midtown International Theatre Festival, and it is a glorious riff on the female characters in three of Tennessee Williams plays.

| ...a perfect short, sharp shock!

Playwright Karly Thomas throws Laura and Amanda Winfield of “The Glass Menagerie,” Blanche DuBois and Stella Kowalski from “A Street Car Named Desire,” and Maggie, Mae, and Big Mama Pollitt from “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” into a big pot and stirs. The women are forcefully extracted from their original settings, have their archetypes deconstructed, and their roles analyzed. Thomas weaves dialogue from the original play with scene directions, character descriptions, contemporary references, and nods to the male film actors that these female iconic characters once “played” opposite. The complex layering of worlds is deeply satisfying.

What emerges is a sense that Tennessee Williams was not writing well-rounded, powerful female characters but rather outlines and stereotypes – the mother, the w\*\*\*e, the schemer, the cripple, the stoic sister, who are all waiting for the male character to complete the drama. It’s a divine feminist take on how the characters in the different plays self-actualize and find their voice past the “metaphor” they are portraying. We know these characters so well within the context of the story they usually live in, but when removed, standing naked without the masculine presence, they are revealed as cardboard cutouts in search of some beefing up.

Director Emily Lyon has amplified the essence of each of these recognizable female forces so that they bump up against each other in interesting ways, revealing their subtext and vulnerabilities. Each moment is electrified with the intensity of the character wanting dominance in the new story, and Lyon keeps the tension high and the pace galloping.

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All seven actresses on stage are perfectly cast, portraying these unforgettable women with charm and skill. Kathryn Neville-Brown as Amanda Wingfield is lovely, languid, and lost, looking for a lifestyle she wishes she could have. A faux gentility hiding an overbearing maternal stranglehold. Danielle Cohn as Laura Wingfield is an exquisite clown and vital energy on stage, driving the action forward with vigor and intelligence. She was a powerful anchor in the group.

Gwendolyn Kelso as Blanche DuBois was a gorgeous, lush, loon floating about the stage in whisky-soaked dementia, wearing her vulnerability delicately like her frayed, white nightgown. Sara Hymes as Stella Kowalski is an elegant spirit who exuded grace with her engaged and focused performance. She is an extraordinary talent with an ability to find meaning and nuance in every phrase. Her range of emotions, repressed and released, were beautiful to watch.

Olivia Williamson as Maggie Pollitt is totally, completely sensational. When she entered the stage there seemed to be a paradigm shift or a feeling we had arrived in a different reality. She has a big, bold presence with an enormous voice and the ability to characterize brilliantly – playing superb comic moments. Tamara Jackson-Morris as Mae Pollitt bounded on stage like a missile full of focused firepower and a clear trajectory. She whipped up the air with gusto. Mary Jo McConnell as Big Mama is a massive force on stage. She commands instantaneous respect and delivers the feminist messaging like a cowhand roping a calf.

Costume designer Somie Pak really managed to capture the defining elements of each character in her striking and specific costume design.

There is a lot going for this short and sweet (35 minute) production, but it still needs to find its other half. It was too neatly and sweetly sewn up at the end. This is a great concept and is the start of a very interesting full-length play. For now, it’s a perfect short, sharp shock!

Running Time: 35 minutes with no intermission.

“Women of Williams County” plays through November 11, 2016 at the WorkShop Theater’s Jewel Box Theater as part of the Midtown International Theatre Festival. For tickets, click [here](#).