

A Streetcar named Desire (1951) Kazan

P Michell, June 2019

A Streetcar Named Desire is a [play](#) written by [Tennessee Williams](#) that opened on [Broadway](#) on December 3, 1947. The play dramatises the life of [Blanche DuBois](#), a [southern belle](#) who, after encountering a series of personal losses, leaves her aristocratic background seeking refuge with her sister and brother-in-law in a dilapidated [New Orleans](#) tenement.

A Streetcar Named Desire is Williams' most popular play, is considered among the finest plays of the 20th century, and is considered by many to be Williams' greatest work. It still ranks among his most performed plays, and has inspired many adaptations in other forms, notably producing a [critically acclaimed film](#) that was released in 1951. (Wikipedia)

“I have always depended on the kindness of strangers ...”

For those who've never seen this film this will appear rather stagey. This is very deliberate by the director. See Trivia for the reason. Is one of two films this year showcasing Great American Theatre (the other being *Of Mice and Men*) and its cinematic portrayal. One thing is promised. You will never forget the performances! The film was made before Brando became a major cinema star – because this is the film that did it.

Significantly influential regarding: acting / music / dialogue (delivery & script) / censorship.

Williams called the streetcar the “ideal metaphor for the human condition.” The play’s title refers not only to a real streetcar line in New Orleans but also symbolically to the power of desire as the driving force behind the characters’ actions. Blanche’s journey on *Desire* through Cemeteries to Elysian Fields is both literal and allegorical. Desire is a controlling force: when it takes over, characters must submit to its power, and they are carried along to the end of the line.

Elia Kazan – Director

Described by *The New York Times* as “one of the most honored and influential directors in Broadway and Hollywood history”. Noted for drawing out the best dramatic performances from his actors, he directed 21 actors to Oscar nominations, resulting in nine wins. He directed a string of successful films, including *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), *On the Waterfront* (1954), and *East of Eden* (1955). During his career, he won two Oscars as Best Director, three Tony Awards, and four Golden Globes. He also received an Honorary Oscar.

In 1947, he founded the [Actors Studio](#), a non-profit workshop, with actors [Robert Lewis](#) and [Cheryl Crawford](#). In 1951, [Lee Strasberg](#) became its director after Kazan left for Hollywood to focus on his career as a movie director. It remained a non-profit

enterprise. Strasberg introduced the "Method" to the Actors Studio, an umbrella term for a constellation of systemizations of Konstantin Stanislavski's teachings. The "Method" school of acting became the predominant system of post-World War II Hollywood.

Among Strasberg's students were Montgomery Clift, Mildred Dunnock, Julie Harris, Karl Malden, Patricia Neal, Maureen Stapleton, Eli Wallach, and James Whitmore. Kazan directed two of the Studio's protégés, Karl Malden and Marlon Brando, in the Tennessee Williams play *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

The turning point in Kazan's career came with his testimony as a witness before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1952 at the time of the Hollywood blacklist, which brought him strong negative reactions from many liberal friends and colleagues. His testimony helped end the careers of former acting colleagues Morris Carnovsky and Art Smith, along with basically the work of playwright Clifford Odets.

Senses of Cinema Link:

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2016/great-directors/elia-kazan/>

Music - **Ray Heindorf** (arranger and conductor) collaborator with **Alex North** (composer).

It is highly likely that despite Alex North's name on credits – it was the collaboration with Heindorf that produced the famous score for this film. Hugely influential – one of the first jazz based film scores. Many films soon after used jazz scores.

Albert Jonhson (UCLA film professor), related to me in the late 1970s that Ray Heindorf (Warner's musical arranger for nearly 40 years) was a serious jazz afficiando. A significant musical talent in Hollywood. Was not afraid to use black performers in his orchestras when this was frowned upon. Played regularly with Art Tatum. Was gay, living with bandleader Arthur Lange. . Heindorf's legacy has recently been acknowledged in Wikipedia's entry for him. 18 academy award nominations. Winning three. Johnson said that Heindorf actually orchestrated many of the musical numbers in the Warner's Busby Berkley 1930s films rather than the nominated Leo Forbestein.

(Useless trivia – Berkley was one of those amazing Hollywood talents – coming from Broadway. Influential over three decades – from 1930s to 1950s. Directed most of the Mickey Rooney / Judy Garland films, as well as the musical numbers for Esther Williams in the 1950s. Not only pioneering the 'camera above' portrayal of the 1930s kaleidoscopic musical numbers he is credited for inventing 'playback'. Pre-recorded numbers are performed in mime so that filming can be more inventive. Synchronised Swimming sport popularity can be traced back to him.)

Link to the Script of the play:

<http://www.metropolitancollege.com/Streetcar.pdf>

Trivia:

Nine members of the original Broadway cast ([Marlon Brando](#), [Kim Hunter](#), [Karl Malden](#), [Rudy Bond](#), [Nick Dennis](#), [Peg Hillias](#), [Richard Garrick](#), [Ann Dere](#) and [Edna Thomas](#)) repeated their roles in the film, a highly unusual decision at the time and even today, when original casts of plays are often completely replaced for the film versions. However, [Vivien Leigh](#), who had played Scarlett O'Hara in [Gone with the Wind](#) (1939), was selected to play Blanche DuBois over [Jessica Tandy](#) to add "star power" to the picture ([Marlon Brando](#) had not yet achieved full stardom in films; he would be billed under Leigh in the film's credits).

As the film progresses, the set of the Kowalski apartment actually gets smaller to heighten the suggestion of Blanche's increasing claustrophobia.

[Vivien Leigh](#), who suffered from bipolar disorder in real life, later had difficulties in distinguishing her real life from that of Blanche DuBois.

Composer [Alex North](#) wrote and recorded the first ever jazz-orientated film score for a dramatic picture. The score served to colour the sound of the film's steamy New Orleans setting. It has become a well-deserved landmark in the history of film music and paved the way for numerous movie jazz scores. See Paul's comments above – Ray Heindorf.

That Marlon Brando was passed over for an Academy Award in the one performance that almost singlehandedly started the Method Acting movement and is considered one of the best performances ever on film is considered one of the great travesties in the history of Hollywood.

Although [Vivien Leigh](#) initially thought [Marlon Brando](#) to be affected, and he thought her to be impossibly stuffy and prim, both soon became friends and the cast worked together smoothly.

The Production Code censors demanded 68 script changes from the Broadway staging, while the interference of the Catholic Legion of Decency led to even further cuts, most of them having to do with references to homosexuality and rape. In his memoirs, [Tennessee Williams](#) wrote that he liked the film but felt it was "slightly marred by the Hollywood ending."

[Elia Kazan](#) originally resisted the idea of directing the film adaptation, as he felt that he had achieved everything he wanted with the stage version. It was only after [Tennessee Williams](#) implored him to take on the assignment that Kazan signed on.

Della Robbia blue is a color used in the Italian Majolica bas reliefs of Luca Della Robbia (1400-1482), whose famous gates of the Sacristy of the Cathedral were said by Michelangelo to be worthy of being the Gates of Heaven.

Fun Fun Trivia: When the film was previewed in Santa Barbara in 1951, the director [Elia Kazan](#)'s date was a then obscure contract starlet, [Marilyn Monroe](#), whom he introduced to [Arthur Miller](#). (And the rest is history ...)

For more detailed analysis:

The script follows the [Tennessee Williams](#) play closely with several small changes. However, there are three notably large alterations of the original plot. The first is the exclusion of Blanche's late young husband's homosexuality, which is referred to explicitly in the play, but only obliquely referred to in the movie. In the play, Blanche caught him in bed with another man and she screamed at him, calling him weak, and he killed himself; she blames herself for not understanding his feelings and for his resulting suicide. In the movie, the fact that her husband committed suicide is masked with a line from Blanche that says that "she killed him herself" by leading him to suicide.

The second large difference is the rape scene. It is not explicitly shown/described in the play, but it is more obviously alluded to than in the movie. Two of Stanley's key lines in the scene were omitted from the theatrical release: "Tiger, tiger, drop that bottle top," which has since been added back to the movie, and "We've had this date with each other since the beginning!", after which Stanley grabs Blanche and hauls her off to the bed. Both of these changes were made for censorship reasons, but they've changed the story in some basic ways and led to some confusion, especially about the rape scene, which is key to understanding Stanley's final breaking of Blanche. The last change from the play is the ending. In the play, Stella stays with Stanley at the end: "He kneels beside her and his fingers find the opening of her blouse." The reason she left him in the film was that the punishment of the rapist was demanded by the Hollywood moral code.

Reviews:

Roger Ebert

Marlon Brando didn't win the Academy Award in 1951 for his acting in "A Streetcar Named Desire." The Oscar went to Humphrey Bogart, for "The African Queen." But you could make a good case that no performance had more influence on modern film acting styles than Brando's work as Stanley Kowalski, Tennessee Williams' rough, smelly, sexually charged hero. Before this role, there was usually a certain restraint in American movie performances. Actors would portray violent emotions, but you could always sense to some degree a certain modesty that prevented them from displaying their feelings in raw nakedness.

Brando held nothing back, and within a few years his was the style that dominated Hollywood movie acting. This movie led directly to work by Brando's heirs such as

Montgomery Clift, James Dean, Jack Nicholson and Sean Penn.

The film itself, hailed as realistic in 1951, now seems claustrophobic and mannered - and all the more effective for that.

The Method actors, Brando foremost, always claimed their style was a way to reach realism in a performance, but the Method led to super-realism, to a heightened emotional content that few "real" people would be able to sustain for long, or convincingly.

Look at the way Brando, as Kowalski, stalks through his little apartment in the French Quarter. He is, the dialogue often reminds us, an animal. He wears a torn T-shirt that reveals muscles and sweat. He smokes and drinks in a greedy way; he doesn't have the good manners that 1951 performances often assumed. (As a contrast, look at Bogart's grimy riverboat captain in "The African Queen." He's also meant to be rude and crude, but beneath the oil and sweat you can glimpse Bogart's own natural elegance.) At the same time, there is a feline grace in Brando's movements: He's a man, but not a clod, and in one scene, while he's sweet-talking his wife, Stella (Kim Hunter), he absent-mindedly picks a tiny piece of lint from her sweater. If you can take that moment and hold it in your mind with the famous scene where he assaults Stella's sister, Blanche DuBois (Vivien Leigh), you can see the freedom Brando is giving to Stanley Kowalski - and the range.

When "A Streetcar Named Desire" was first released, it created a firestorm of controversy. It was immoral, decadent, vulgar and sinful, its critics cried. And that was after substantial cuts had already been made in the picture, at the insistence of Warner Bros., driven on by the industry's own censors. Elia Kazan, who directed the film, fought the cuts and lost. For years the missing footage - only about five minutes in length, but crucial - was thought lost. But this 1993 restoration splices together Kazan's original cut, and we can see how daring the film really was.

The 1951 cuts took out dialogue that suggested Blanche DuBois was promiscuous, perhaps a nymphomaniac attracted to young boys. It also cut much of the intensity from Stanley's final assault of Blanche. Other cuts were more subtle. Look at the early scene, for example, where Stanley plants himself on the street outside his apartment and screams, "Stella!" In the censored version, she stands up inside, pauses, starts down the stairs, looks at him, continues down the stairs, and they embrace. In the uncut version, only a

couple of shots are different - but what a difference they make! Stella's whole demeanor seems different, seems charged with lust. In the apartment, she responds more visibly to his voice. On the stairs, there are closeups as she descends, showing her face almost blank with desire. And the closing embrace, which looks in the cut version as if she is consoling him, looks in the uncut version as if she has abandoned herself to him.

Another scene lost crucial dialogue. Stella tells her sister, "Stanley's always smashed things. Why, on our wedding night, as soon as we came in here, he snatched off one of my slippers and rushed about the place smashing the light bulbs with it." After Blanche is suitably shocked, Stella, leaning back with a funny smile, says "I was sort of thrilled by it." All that dialogue was trimmed, perhaps because it provided a glimpse into psychic realms the censors were not prepared to acknowledge.

The 1993 version of the film extends the conversation that Blanche has with a visiting newspaper boy, making it clear she is strongly attracted to him. It also adds details from Blanche's description of the suicide of her young husband; it is now more clear, although still somewhat oblique, that he was a homosexual, and she killed him with her taunts. Despite the overwhelming power of Brando's performance, "Streetcar" is one of the great ensemble pieces in the movies. Kim Hunter's Stella can be seen in this version as less of an enigma; we can see more easily why she was attracted to Stanley. Vivien Leigh's Blanche is a sexually hungry woman posing as a sad, wilting flower; the earlier version covered up some of the hunger. And Karl Malden's Mitch - Blanche's hapless gentleman caller - is more of a sap, now that we understand more fully who he is really courting, and why.

The movie was shot, of course, in black and white. Dramas made in 1951 nearly always were. Color would have been fatal to the special tone. It would have made the characters seem too real, when we need them exactly like this, black and gray and silver, shadows projected on the screens of their own dreams and needs. Watching the film is like watching a Shakespearean tragedy. Of course the outcome is predestined, but everything is in the style by which the characters arrive there. Watch Brando absently scratching himself on his first entrance. Look at the way he occupies the little apartment as if it were a pair of dirty shorts. Then watch him flick that piece of lint.

Bob the Moo (2014)

Blanche Dubois arrives in the French Quarter of New Orleans suffering from a mental tiredness brought on by a series of financial problems that have ended in the family losing their plantation. She has come to stay with her sister, Stella and her husband Stanley Kowalski in their serviceable little apartment. The aggressive and animalistic Stanley immediately marks himself as the opposite of the feminine and refined Blanche and Stella finds herself pulled between the two of them. Stanley suspects all is not as it seems and begins to pry into Blanche's colourful past, even as Blanche spots a way out in the arms of the Mitch, a man captivated by her. However it doesn't take long before the cracks begin to show in the relationships and in Blanche herself.

It almost goes without saying that the writing here is of top-notch quality. The story is a relatively simple character piece that can be summed up in a couple of sentences, however this would do a great injustice to the depth of development and the convincing manner in which the characters are all written and the story told. It is not so much the depth that some of the characters go to, but the complexity that is effortlessly written into them – we can see it writ large on them, but not to the point where it seems obvious or uninteresting. Blanche is of course the focus and she is a mess of neurosis barely hidden behind a front of respectability that clearly doesn't convince her anymore than it does Stanley. Mitch is also really well written – at first it is comic that he tries to be such a gentleman while having the brute just under the surface, but later his frustration is heavy on his face along with his anger. The overall story is surprisingly, well, "seedy" is the best word that comes to mind. It is in the gutter and no matter what Blanche wants to believe, that is where it stays and the film is right there the whole time.

How Kazan managed it in the early fifties is beyond me, because even now the film is pretty graphic in its violence to women, subject matter and rippling sexuality across pictures and characters. It is a compelling story due to the characters and the manner in which they are delivered – Kazan's atmospheric direction really helps; the film feels humid and close, and he has done it all with a basic set and a camera. The lighting throughout is wonderful both in the general atmosphere but also specific touches such as the way Blanche manages to visibly age due to lighting changes when the film has slight changes of tone.

Of course the main reason I keep coming back to this wonderful film is the actors, who take the opportunity and, in many cases, make it so that it is hard to see anyone else playing their roles. Leigh is perfect for the role and gets everything absolutely spot on; she is vulnerable yet self-seeking, confident yet needy, proper yet unstable. Even visually Leigh is convincing in terms of body language but also the fact that she looks the right mix of ages, looking beautiful one moment but worn and defeated the next – totally, totally deserved her Oscar. Brando made his name here and even now his performance is electrifying and memorable. He has his big scenes where he gets to play to the back row but he also has moments where he does nothing other than be a presence on screen; no

matter what is going on we are watching him because we are as in awe and yet as afraid of his power as Blanche is herself. Together Leigh and Brando dominate the screen and whenever either of them are on screen it is hard to look away. As a result, Kim Hunter sort of gets lost in the background although her performance is still good. Karl Madden is great but again only holds a supporting role and deserved his Oscar for a convincing performance of a well-written character. Of course it is easier to give good performances with great material than with bad material but there have been enough versions of this play around for us to see how lesser actors can fail where this cast soared.

Overall this is a great film that sees so many critical aspects all coming together as one final product. A superb play has undergone a great adaptation that has been seized upon a great cast who deliver a collection of performances that deserve all the praise heaped on them, all directed with a real sense of atmosphere that really delivers a seedy and erotic film both for its time and today. I cannot think of an excuse for people not having seen this film.