
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Streaming Streetcar and Mad Forest

David Sheward · Sunday, May 24th, 2020

There is one upside to all the theaters being closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through streaming, YouTube, Zoom and other digital platforms, we get a chance to catch up with intriguing productions we may have missed. One such is the Young Vic's innovative 2014 revival of *A Streetcar Named Desire* which was shown in cinemas through HD Live and played a limited engagement at Brooklyn's St. Ann's Warehouse in 2016 following an extended run in London. NT Live at Home will play the production for free on YouTube through May 28. Though Tennessee Williams' classic clash between the faded Southern belle Blanche DuBois and her brutish brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski has been interpreted numerous times for stage and screen since its 1947 premiere, director Benedict Andrews has found new insights as well as invigorating the essential conflict and message.



Gillian Anderson in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.
Credit: Johan Persson

In Andrews' intense and immediate staging, nothing is hidden and nothing is stable. Magda Willi's deceptively spare, all-white set in a blackbox space has no walls and only a flimsy sheer curtain separates the two rooms in the Kowalskis' New Orleans tenement. When Gillian Anderson as a battered, neurotic Blanche DuBois arrives and takes her first surreptitious sip of whiskey, the set begins to slowly revolve, mirroring Blanche's unmoored psyche. She has nowhere to hide and cannot rely on anything.



Ben Foster and Gillian Anderson in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.
Credit: Johan Persson

Willi's set design and Victoria Behr's costumes place Tennessee Williams' immortal drama of clashing values on sexuality and class in the present day. The juxtaposition of 2020 telephones and 1947 sensibilities jar at times. The physical abuse of Stella and upstairs neighbor Eunice at the hands of their spouses—graphically depicted here complete with bloody noses—would not be so stoically accepted in the era of #MeToo. But the ambiguities of human relations, are as complex today as they were 70 years ago.



Ben Foster in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Credit: Johan Persson

Though this staging leans towards Blanche, it doesn't shortchange Stanley. Many productions make the mistake of portraying Blanche as an innocent, deluded flower crushed by an unfeeling, ape-like Stanley. Fortunately, Ben Foster's Kowalski is not just an insensitive lout. Covered with obscene tattoos, Foster also conveys Stanley's insecurities which he masks with macho swagger and violence. Similarly, Anderson's Blanche is multidimensional. She clearly delineates the fallen lady's hungry lust and desperate loneliness as well as the deep wound from her past (Blanche's guilt over her closeted gay husband's suicide) which caused these neuroses. Vanessa Kirby beautifully balances Stella's divided loyalties between her husband and her sister while Corey Johnson conveys the tender anguish of Mitch, Blanche's simple, sensitive suitor.

While NT Live and other venues have offered archival productions, there have been a scattering of plays adapted to the new normal of digital presentations. Most companies have given readings for benefit fundraisers, but Bard College's theater department attempted something different with its Zoom-based staging of Caryl Churchill's 1990 "play from Romania," *Mad Forest*. Director Ashley Tata and her student cast had begun rehearsals when the pandemic struck. Rather than scrap their collaboration, the company formed their production via Zoom meetings, with sets, lights, and props in the individual homes of the actors and projections and live editing from the tech crew, creating a hybrid of live theater and video. After one virtual performance, Theater for a New Audience has joined as a co-producer for a limited run of broadcasts.



Bard College and Theater for a New Audience's production of *Mad Forest*.

Credit: Fisher Center at Bard

The result is rough and raw with technical glitches occasionally causing screen freezes during the performance viewed. Churchill's splintered script combines realism and fantasy to chronicle the journey of two fractious families during the 1989 Romanian revolution. Spirits, vampires, angels, and talking dogs comment on the clans' varied reactions to the fall of a dictatorial government and an uncertain future. The acting is unpolished but earnest. The intentions are there, but unfocused. With the multitude of screens and the cast doubling up in many roles, it was difficult to follow the connections of the characters and their stories. But the young actors infused their characterizations with intensity and the fascinating editing of blue screens and fractured settings added a layer of alienation to this tale of an alienated people, unmoored by disrupted politics and history. In one haunting moment, the video images of a nurse and the ghost of a dead patient merge in a dance of life and death, perfectly capturing the disjointed state of the Romanians in 1989 and the whole world in 2020. Blanche DuBois, the Romanians families and all of us don't know where we're headed and these disorienting productions reflect that disturbing uncertainty.

A Streetcar Named Desire: Available on NT Live at Home's YouTube channel through May 28.

Mad Forest: Remaining performance: May 27 at 3pm at www.tfana.org.

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