“Blanche or Stanley?: A Decisive Scene in Elia Kazan’s Streetcars”

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In his autobiography, Elia Kazan quotes extensively from a letter that Tennessee Williams wrote to him early in the process of conceptualizing the original production of A Streetcar Named Desire which, he said, became his “key to the production.” Concerned that Kazan was at that time considered the kind of director who preferred a thesis or “message” play, Williams noted, “I am sure that you must have had reservations about the script.” In the long letter that was intended to clarify his intentions in the play, Williams wrote:

I think its best quality is its authenticity or its fidelity to life. There are no ‘good’ or ‘bad’ people. Some are a little better or a little worse but all are activated more by misunderstanding than malice. A blindness to what is going on in each other’s hearts. Stanley sees Blanche not as a desperate, driven creature backed into a last corner to make a last desperate stand—but as a calculating bitch with ‘round heels.’ ... I remember you asked what should an audience feel for Blanche. Certainly pity. It is a tragedy with the classic aim of producing a catharsis of pity and terror and in order to do that, Blanche must finally have the understanding and compassion of the audience. This without creating a black-dyed villain in Stanley. It is a thing (Misunderstanding) not a person (Stanley) that destroys her in the end. In the end you should feel—‘If only they all had known about each other.’ (Kazan, A Life 329-30)

In this letter, Williams was writing to a director who was known to seek clear moral oppositions in his productions and urging him toward a more relativistic view of the moral universe, which would result in a more ambiguous play than he was used to dealing with. Kazan struggled with Williams’s conception of morality in the play as well as its dynamic of conflict between the characters. By contemporary standards, the Kazan Streetcars, both stage production and film, are melodramatic in style, with their polarization of Blanche and Stanley and their characteristically explosive emotional climaxes, emphasized by Alex North’s intense
musical score. One of the elements that makes Kazan’s *Streetcars* compelling, however, is the fundamental ambiguity about the characters that Williams had planted in Kazan’s mind at the beginning and that remains in the film for contemporary audiences.

Kazan explained his ambivalent response to the play in terms of Blanche’s character: “Blanche is attracted by the man who is going to destroy her” (Kazan, *A Life* 351), or more specifically, as he told Michel Ciment in an interview, “I saw Blanche as Williams, an ambivalent figure who is attracted to the harshness and vulgarity around him at the same time that he fears it, because it threatens his life” (Ciment 71). This approach made Blanche the protagonist of the play, but not necessarily the focus of the audience’s sympathy. In choosing it, Kazan was rejecting the more straightforward melodramatic approach of opposing a victimized Blanche against a brutal Stanley. This was the approach taken by Kazan’s erstwhile mentor Harold Clurman, who directed the touring company of the play. In his review of Kazan’s production, Clurman had complained of an “ambiguity and confusion” (Clurman 74), contending that Kazan had made Brando’s character too sympathetic and that there were “thematically disruptive” scenes that were “not integrated with that attribute of the play which requires that Kowalski at all times be somewhat vile” (Clurman 79). A number of reviewers agreed with Clurman that “the play (with Brando playing the role) becomes the triumph of Stanley Kowalski: with the collusion of the audience which is no longer on the side of the angels” (Clurman 78).

This was precisely not what Kazan had intended. In the notes that he wrote as he prepared to direct the play, Kazan had described a trajectory in which Blanche would be the “heavy” at the beginning of the play, as the audience was made aware of the effects of her domineering yet helplessly dependent attitude toward Stella. He thought the audience should be on Stanley’s side at the beginning, but “gradually, as they see how genuinely in pain, how actually desperate she is, how warm, tender and loving she can be (the Mitch story), how frightened with need she is—then they begin to go with her. They begin to realize that they are sitting in at the death of something extraordinary … colorful, varied, passionate, lost, witty, imaginative, or her own integrity … and then they feel the tragedy” (Kazan, *Notebook* 299).

Kazan’s anger at Clurman resulted partly from the fact that Clurman had hit on a weakness in the production that had been worrying the director before it opened in New York. At the trial
run in New Haven, Kazan noted, audiences had “adored Brando. When he derided Blanche, they responded with approving laughter.” The play was in danger of becoming “The Marlon Brando Show” (Kazan, A Life 345). A crucial barometer of the audience response was the reaction of movie producer Louis B. Mayer, who urged Kazan to have Williams rewrite the ending to make sure that “once that ‘awful woman’ who’d come to break up that ‘fine young couple’s happy home’ was packed off to an institution, the audience would believe that the young couple would live happily ever after” (Kazan, A Life 345). Kazan was convinced that this response by a movie man who was keenly tuned to the American popular audience presaged a dangerous misperception of the play that was skewed toward Stanley’s point of view, and this proved prophetic.

Kazan was afforded a rare second chance to realize his conception of A Streetcar Named Desire when he was asked to direct the film by Warner Brothers in 1951. He has explained several times that he first wrote a screenplay that “opened up” the play to include scenes in Mississippi that depicted Blanche’s life before she arrives in New Orleans, designed to “show that she was sort of a refugee in the New Orleans scene” (Ciment 66), but that he ultimately decided that opening up the play had destroyed it: “The force of the play had come precisely from its compression, from the fact that Blanche was trapped in those two small rooms, where she’d be constantly aware that she was dangerously irritating Stanley and couldn’t escape if she needed to.” He decided to “photograph what we’d had on stage, simply that” (Kazan, A Life 384). He used a few cinematic tricks with the set of the Kowalski apartment, such as having it built in small sections that would gradually be removed as the filming went on, so that the walls of the apartment literally closed in on Blanche as her situation became more desperate. There were also substantial changes in the dialogue, mostly intended to satisfy the demands of the official Hollywood censors, the Breen Office, and the Catholic Church’s Legion of Decency. The major changes that were demanded by the censors—the elimination of the rape scene and any reference to Allan Grey’s homosexuality, and the altered ending that had Stella running upstairs to Eunice’s apartment—have been closely analyzed, as has the “sanitized” language which eliminated all “obscene language” from the script.

The most significant change from play to film, however, was the substitution of Vivien Leigh for Jessica Tandy in the role of Blanche. Kazan has said that the substitution was required by the
film’s producer Charles Feldman, who wanted at least one movie star in the film (Brando was as yet unknown in Hollywood), but he has admitted: “To confess the hard truth, I’m not certain, looking back, that I didn’t want a different actress for Blanche” (Kazan, *A Life* 385). He put this down to feeling “stale on the play,” but it was probably also an effect of the lingering feeling that he had not accomplished what he had intended with the play, that it had remained Marlon Brando’s show and he and Tandy had been unable to deepen the audience’s understanding of Blanche enough to move its sympathy from Stanley to her in the course of the play. Here was another chance to do that.

Was Kazan able to achieve in the film what he had just missed in the play? The crucial scene for the shifting of sympathy toward Blanche is scene 5 in the play, in which, as Williams wrote in the stage directions for the acting version, “*the important values are the ones that characterize Blanche: [the scene’s] function is to give her dimension as a character and to suggest the intense inner life which makes her a person of greater magnitude than she appears on the surface*” (*Streetcar Acting Edition* 52). At the end of scene 4, Stanley wins a victory over Blanche in their battle for Stella. Blanche’s longest speech, her plea for Stella not to “hang back with the brutes,” ended in Kazan’s stage production with Blanche sitting with her arm around Stella while she pleaded for art, poetry, music, and “tenderer feelings” against “Stanley Kowalski—survivor of the stone age” (*Streetcar* 83). Stanley, who had been listening outside, licked his lips and entered the apartment, slamming the front door, a sound from which Blanche recoiled. Taking a beer from the ice box, Stanley opened it and drank, while a look passed between the sisters. This was clearly a moment of decision for Stella. Blanche whispered agitatedly to Stella, and then tried to restrain her as she got up, went to the door between the two rooms, and opened the curtains. When Stanley asked if Blanche was back, she got up and went to the door between the rooms, placing herself between Stanley and Stella, and looking apprehensively at Stanley. Stella looked straight at Stanley, and then moved slowly around Blanche toward Stanley, and then, with a quick little run, threw herself into his arms, Stanley swinging her up with his body.4

This scene clearly establishes the values that are at stake in the battle between Blanche and Stanley for Stella’s loyalty: Stanley’s “animal” attraction versus Blanche’s plea for the beauty and the things of the spirit. It also establishes that Stanley is winning at the end of scene 4. In Scene 5, Stanley’s threat to the
shelter Blanche has found with her sister and with Mitch is established with his questioning of Blanche about the Hotel Flamingo, which is "not the sort of establishment [she] would dare to be seen in" (*Streetcar* 89). After Stanley leaves, Williams establishes Blanche’s vulnerability and Stella’s protectiveness in the scene between the sisters. Blanche admits that she has not been “so good” in the last two years, after Belle Reve started to slip through her fingers, and she makes the speech that is Williams’s major statement of her vulnerability:

I never was hard or self-sufficient enough. When people are soft—soft people have got to shimmer and glow—they’ve got to put on soft colors, the colors of butterfly wings, and put a—paper lantern over the light ... It isn’t enough to be soft. You’ve got to be soft *and* attractive. And I—I’m fading now! I don’t know how much longer I can turn the trick. (*Streetcar* 92)

In Kazan’s stage production, Stella put her arm around Blanche during this speech, and she embraced Blanche three more times during the scene: when Blanche screamed hysterically after she spilled Coke on herself; when she said she was sensitive about her age because “of the hard knocks my vanity’s been given”; and when Blanche says in response to Stella’s question about whether she wants Mitch, “I want to *rest!* I want to breathe quietly again! Yes—I *want* Mitch...very badly! Just think! If it happens! I can leave here and not be anyone’s problem” (*Streetcar* 95). Signaling the audience’s response through Stella’s, Kazan was shifting the view of Blanche from Stanley’s perception of the intrusive sister-in-law with a dubious past, who is turning his wife and his best friend against him, to Stella’s perception of the delicate and vulnerable sister who needs her protection.

The second half of Scene 5, the encounter between Blanche and the collector for the newspaper, is a tricky one to play as a means of enlisting audience sympathy for Blanche. Played in one way, her flirtation with this “young, young, young man” (*Streetcar* 99) can simply be more evidence for Stanley’s case against her, an illustration of the way she was behaving in Laurel when she had an affair with a 17-year-old boy. Williams meant it, however, as a sympathetic scene in which the audience could come to see how this could happen within Blanche’s world, where fantasy was so mixed with reality. In the production, Blanche first approached the Young Man with her automatic Southern Belle
flirtation, a manifestation of her need to attract every man she 
meets in order, as Kazan said, to seek “protection.” When the 
Young Man started to leave, she restrained him by asking him to 
light her cigarette, touching his hand, and blocking his way as she 
asked him about his afternoon. In Kazan’s production, the element 
of fantasy entered when she draped her gossamer scarf around 
herself and told him that he looked like “a young Prince out of 
the Arabian Nights” (Streetcar 99). When she said, “come here. I 
want to kiss you, just once, softly and sweetly on your mouth” 
(Streetcar 99), rather than having Blanche cross quickly to the 
Young Man and press her lips to his as the stage directions in the 
published text suggest, Kazan had the Young Man obey her like a 
child and come to her. When she told him to “run along now,” 
she gripped his arms, looking into his face with an expression of 
effnable sweetness, and he went “rather dazed” to the door, like a 
child who has had a happy dream.5

Blanche’s encounter with Mitch at the end of the scene, in 
which she calls him her “Rosenkavalier” and gets him to bow to 
her as he presents his bouquet of flowers, came as a further 
element of fantasy in Blanche’s romantic life. The two encounters 
with her “Arabian Prince” and her “Rosenkavalier” provided 
illustrations of the intensity of her need to cloak the mundane, 
even sordid, reality of her life with romantic illusions from 
literature. In her literature classes, Blanche attempts “to instill a 
bunch of bobby-soxers and drug-store Romes with reverence for 
Hawthorne and Whitman and Poe” (Streetcar 62). In her own life, 
Blanche uses fantastic scenarios from literature as a means of 
creating a world in which she can live. As she tells Mitch, she never 
lies “in [her] heart” (Streetcar 147), no matter how many untruths 
she tells, because in her heart she needs to believe the fantasies she 
creates in order to survive.

In the sequence corresponding to scene 4 in Kazan’s film, 
Blanche (Vivien Leigh) is kneeling in front of Stella (Kim Hunter) 
when she says “Don’t hang back with the brutes!” She puts her 
arms around Stella’s neck and they embrace in a moment of 
complete sympathy, until both sisters are startled when Stanley is 
heard banging the kitchen door and Stella pulls away from 
Blanche. They exchange a long look during which Stella is 
struggling between the pull of Blanche and the pull of Stanley 
(Marlon Brando), seen in deep focus as he bangs around the 
kitchen. After he calls her twice, Stella gets up and comes around 
Blanche to face Stanley across the room. When Stanley asks if 
Blanche is back, she gets up and stand slightly behind Stella, rather
than blocking the way as she did in the stage production. Stanley grins at Stella in a boyish way as he says that the mechanic from Fritz’s “doesn’t know his axle grease from third base.” Stella, smiling at him and brushing at her hair, is clearly won over by now. Blanche, still slightly behind her, puts her hand on Stella’s shoulder, watching her face with growing dismay until Stella runs into Stanley’s arms. Stanley grins at Blanche over Stella’s head and the scene ends with a close-up on a visibly shaken Blanche. In this cinematic version, combining tight two-shots and long deep focus shots to direct the spectator’s response, Kazan is able to present the struggle for Stella’s loyalty with more nuance than he could on stage. Blanche is less aggressive in her confrontation with Stanley and more vulnerable in her relation to Stella, a good preparation for the shift in audience sympathy in the crucial scene that follows.

The cinematic treatment of Scene 5 begins with several beats that establish Stanley’s resentment of Blanche. As he comes into the apartment, he glances at the material Blanche has spread over the table, and Stella says apologetically that Blanche is making them new slip covers. He tells Stella that he can’t find his shoes, and Stella says she and Blanche have “cleaned” in the bedroom. Stanley bangs the dresser drawers, complaining that he can’t find anything in the apartment anymore. All of these are small signs of Blanche’s challenge to Stanley’s hegemony over his and Stella’s life together, which add to his growing agitation. The point when he turns to aggression comes when Blanche says that his sign is Capricorn, the Goat, pointing at him and laughing. Stella giggles a little at first, but subsides and turns away after a glowering look from Stanley. It is then that Stanley goes on the attack, interrogating Blanche about the Hotel Flamingo, and threatening her with further damaging disclosures from Shaw. When he leaves for the Four Deuces, refusing to kiss Stella in front of her sister, he is not an unsympathetic figure to the audience. It is clear that Blanche has invaded his home and is undermining him with his wife.

In the key scene that follows, Blanche is not embraced by Stella as she makes her speech about the need to shimmer and glow. Instead, Kazan places her next to the window. With the light shining through them, the filmy curtains, echoed in the filmy net fichu of Blanche’s dress, have the appearance of a spider web in which Blanche is caught—a visual subtext that conveys Williams’s image of Blanche as a delicate moth. When Blanche promises to leave soon, she kneels on the floor in front of Stella. Blanche gives
her lines about the “hard knocks” her vanity’s been given and her hopes for Mitch while kneeling tearfully on the floor beside Stella. Kazan goes into a tight two-shot and the voices of the actors fall to a whisper as Stella asks whether Blanche wants Mitch. Alex North’s music surges romantically, and Blanche sinks back on the couch, closing her eyes and saying she wants to be able to breathe again, to go away and not be anyone’s problem. Stella leans over her, promising that it “will happen,” and the sisters embrace and kiss until they are startled by Stanley, calling to Steve. In contrast to her decisive choice of Stanley at the end of Scene 4 and her desire for a kiss before Stanley left the apartment a few minutes earlier, this time, Stella pushes Stanley away when he tries to grab and kiss her, a signal to the spectators of a change in her loyalties, and presumably in theirs.

The scene with the Young Man begins with a curious choice on Kazan’s part. Leonard Leff has analyzed a sequence that had been edited out by the censors for the 1951 film, but restored in the director’s cut released in 1993, and now the version that is universally available on DVD and VHS. As Leff notes, there is a moment of aut eroticism in Vivien Leigh’s shifting around in the chair and moaning slightly as she says Blanche’s lines “Ah, me ... ah, me ... ah, me.”6 This ends with the entrance of the Young Man, with whom Blanche immediately begins flirting by offering him a drink. As Vivien Leigh plays the scene, it begins at a rather casual sexual level, with Blanche’s off-hand offer of a drink delivered in a deeper vocal register than Blanche usually uses. This changes, however, when she looks into the Young Man’s boyishly handsome face and the “Varsouviana” begins to play, evoking the specter of Allan Grey. Her manner changes to that of a flirtatious Southern Belle and her voice lilts upward as she searches unsuccessfully for a coin in her purse, picks up her filmy scarf and holds it in various poses, and keeps the Young Man from leaving by asking for a light for her cigarette. Vivien Leigh’s delivery of the remark when the lighter fails, “It’s temperamental” is a reprise of her Scarlett O’Hara. Blanche is clearly playing a fantasy role as she poses with her scarf and tells the Young Man he looks like a prince from the Arabian Nights. When she tells him to come to her, the camera shows only the back of the Young Man’s head, not revealing his response until she kisses him, as she says, “softly and sweetly.” The Young Man makes a tentative move to kiss her again, showing that he is a willing participant in Blanche’s scene, and it is she who pulls away. Her line about being good and keeping her “hands off children” was cut from the 1951 version,
making this a completely innocent moment, but its restoration in
the director’s cut shows that Kazan intended to have both this
reference and the earlier reminder of Blanche’s sexuality in the
scene. This remark is followed by a very romantic gesture, as
Blanche holds the gossamer scarf before her and says “adios.”
The Young Man’s rather dazed departure, with his hand raised in
farewell, is juxtaposed in the frame with Mitch’s appearance, as he
bounces up to Blanche with his flowers and she begins her
“Rosenkavalier” act.

Is this scene successful at giving Blanche “dimension as a
character” and suggesting “the intense inner life which makes her
a person of greater magnitude than she appears on the surface,” as
Williams suggests it should? The scene with Stella certainly does
show a softer, more vulnerable aspect of Blanche than has been
revealed up to this point, and Stella’s new-found sympathy for
Blanche and resistance to Stanley signals to the spectator that she
needs protection from her brutally aggressive antagonist.
Blanche’s fantasy that she has entered a scene from the Arabian
Nights is strong enough to bewitch the Young Man, and perhaps
the spectator as well. Kazan succeeds in making an innocently
romantic scene out of what could be a disturbing encounter. Is this
strong enough to shake the spectator’s revulsion to Blanche’s past,
in which she has apparently allowed her desire to get the best of
her in a similar situation? Some of the “dimension” that is
revealed in her character would tend to undermine the spectator’s
sympathy, especially in the cultural context of 1951, when the
frank cinematic portrayal of a woman who experienced sexual
desire was still shocking in itself. In alluding to the taboo outlets
for Blanche’s desire, in masturbation and pedophilia, Kazan would
seem to be undermining the sympathy with Blanche that the scene
creates. Similarly, he insists on the reminders at the beginning of
the scene that Blanche is invading Stanley’s home, through the
remarks about the slipcovers, the shoes, and the rearrangement of
the apartment, none of which are in the play. Furthermore, no
matter how poetically it is cast by Blanche and Stella, the scene
makes it clear that Blanche’s desire for Mitch is exploitative. It is
focused on her own needs, just as her sexuality in the scene is
autoerotic.

In view of the disagreement with Clurman, it is a little ironic
that Kazan is often criticized for having a melodramatic sensibility.
The task that he accepted here was to show that there are no
“good” or “bad” people. Williams wanted Blanche to have the
understanding and compassion of the audience without creating a
“black-dyed villain” in Stanley. The work of the scene was to shift the center of gravity from Stanley to Blanche without making either one into a “good” or “bad” character. What Kazan does is in fact to highlight the ambiguities and contradictions in Blanche’s character that have already emerged prior to the scene and create a sympathy for her that exists as much in spite of as because of her character, a sympathy that almost catches the audience unawares. He offers the spectator a self-centered, domineering, exploitative, sexual woman as the subject of this scene and he succeeds in evoking understanding for her values and desires and compassion for her vulnerability. In this sense, he fulfills Williams’s hopes for the scene and realizes his own interpretation of what Williams was saying. In a conversation he reports in his autobiography, Williams told Kazan not to worry about the production’s moral ambiguity: “Blanche is not an angel without a flaw ... and Stanley’s not evil. I know you’re used to clearly stated themes, but this play should not be loaded one way or the other. Don’t try to simplify things” (Kazan, A Life 346). In this pivotal scene, at least, he did not, and the result is a complicated, vaguely disturbing, but compelling cinematic version of the complex human dynamics in Williams’s play.

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Works Cited:

NOTES

1 As Susanne Schnathmeier’s careful analysis of the scenes shows, Kazan’s film was not quite so restricted to the single set as he claimed. Of the film’s 1 hour and 55 minutes, “a little more than 18 minutes of the films’ action, viz., one sixth, is not situated in the cramped flat” (Schnathmeier 89).

2 Thomas Pauly has noted 68 “major and minor changes from the Broadway version” (Pauly 131).


4 The description of this scene is based on Robert Downing’s Stage Manager’s Script, December 1947, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

5 Notes from Downing, cited in n. 2.

6 See Leff, 32-33.