Stanley’s Story? Streetcar from Stage to Screen

Susan BLATTÈS

A Streetcar Named Desire has proved to be so successful on both stage and screen that it comes as no surprise to find countless essays, articles and even whole works devoted to it. Tennessee Williams’s play has also inspired other versions: an opera, a ballet and a teleplay to mention those described by Philip C. Kolin in A Streetcar Named Desire: Plays in Production. Although there are many examples of successful plays being turned into films, sometimes even successful films, rarely has a film adaptation had so many repercussions on the way critics and scholars approach the original play text with the result that we are unlikely to come across studies of the play which do not contain references to Kazan’s film. The film, in fact, reinforced the significance of something that was already apparent in the first Broadway production: the role of Stanley, as played by Marlon Brando. Study of the reviews of the first staging of the play highlights how Brando’s performance affected the audience. His impact in the film version, however, not only reinforced his hold on the role, leading Philip Kolin to refer to critics “frozen in a Brando warp” (11), but also contributed to a “radical transformation of what Americans had previously valued as ideal, male qualities (220)” according to R. Barton Palmer. The latter argues that “this transformed image of masculinity, though enhanced by the essentially theatrical techniques of Method performance, achieved cultural importance because of its dominant screen - not stage - presence in the fifties” (220).

Fascination or even obsession with Brando-Kowalski did not begin with the film since already in the stage production, Kazan apparently planned to have the audience “switch allegiance from Stanley and then, as the play progressed, back to Blanche.” (Kolin 24). According to Kazan: “The audiences adored Brando. When he derided Blanche, they responded with approving laughter.” This point is also made by Harold Clurman: “The play becomes the triumph of Stanley Kowalski with the collusion of the audience, which is no longer on the side of the angels” (Kolin 12). Although not all critics agreed that the battle for dominance was won by Stanley, they all seemed to suggest implicitly that the play essentially boiled down to a struggle for supremacy between the two characters.
Readers of the play text, however, may well disagree with this interpretation. Interestingly enough, André Previn saw the opera version as an attempt to set the record straight by making it "Blanche’s show" (Kolin 168). If he is right, how is it that Blanche’s story turned into Stanley’s story in the hands of Kazan? Roger Boxill seems to suggest the answer lies in the move from the page to the stage: “Audiences favour Stanley, at least in the beginning, while readers favour Blanche” (80). What has happened to transform the play text in this way? Ideally, to answer this question we would deal first with the Broadway production and then with the 1951 film before studying other productions, but for the sake of brevity we will confront the play text of the Penguin edition with the 1951 (1993) film version directed by Elia Kazan, trying to distinguish between changes that were inevitable, due to the change in medium, from other changes. A comparison of the two seems particularly apt since both the play and the film achieved critical acclaim within a very short space of each other. Furthermore, Kazan’s collaboration with Williams, which dates from this period, covers both stage and screen. It is, of course, Brando who played the role of Stanley in both the stage and film versions. Our aim is to distinguish between the play as it was written by Tennessee Williams from the film version as far as the focus on Stanley is concerned. In our attempt to account for the shift from Blanche to Stanley, we will first examine the case that can be made for reading the text as Blanche’s story, before showing to what extent the film gives more attention to Stanley and how.

For the reader, it is hard to avoid the impression that the play is Blanche’s story. It is her arrival that sets it off and her departure that brings it to an end and this impression is even reinforced in the film since she is the first of the important characters to appear. However, something is also lost here since the play allows us to discover Blanche and the Kowalski flat at the same time, colouring our response to both and linking them together. It should be noted that Blanche makes her presence felt by spending almost all her time there, an impression reinforced in the play text which never shows her anywhere else. Even when she is not actually visible to the other characters, as in the first half of scene 2, when we are told she is in the bathroom, her presence can be felt, through her singing (132) and Stanley and Stella are aware that she may well be listening in to their conversation. Although this does not seem to worry Stanley, Stella reminds him twice to lower his voice (132, 134) since Blanche is, of course, the object of their discussion. The
weight of her presence is likewise felt in a parallel scene, scene 7, when the conversation (still about Blanche) between Stanley and Stella is constantly being interrupted by snatches of song (187, 188, 191) which threaten to undermine the seriousness Stanley is trying to give to his denunciation of Blanche’s scandalous behaviour. Even invisible, Blanche is present, due to the fact that the other characters talk about her. It is not surprising that Laurence Olivier cut the text for the London première of the play to ease some of the pressure on Vivien Leigh in this most demanding of roles (see Kolin 67).

If we can prove that the character of Blanche dominates the dialogue in terms of the number of lines spoken by or about her, it is also possible to demonstrate the variety of her linguistic skills compared with the other characters. This is not simply due to her cultural superiority over them. More important is the wide range of motives behind the different encounters we witness and the fact that in her position, as an English teacher, a woman, and, of course, an outsider, language plays a vital role in all her schemes. Whereas Stanley’s motives are all too painfully clear (restoring his position of dominance over wife, friends and household), Blanche’s ambitions are altogether more complex, varying over the course of the play as the situation evolves and according to the character she is dealing with. We see Blanche in many more different situations than Stanley: with Stella there are recriminations, justifications, confessions and shared plans; with Stanley, she exchanges information and insults etc. If Blanche is placed in so many different situations, leading to multiple styles of dialogue, it is also because she is constantly trying out different roles. With Stanley she can be playfully seductive or more down-to-earth, flattering his image of himself as a man who cannot be taken in by words (136-137). As for Mitch, he is treated to a whole repertory of roles in her efforts to attract and maintain his interest: the compassionate listener, the prim and proper school teacher, the lonely woman in need of protection, the penitent sinner etc. Note that one of her more interesting performances, that of the French speaking femme fatale or vamp, is given, not for the benefit of Mitch who does not understand but, it seems, for the sheer pleasure of performing to a receptive, though ignorant spectator.

A linguistic study of the speech acts accomplished by Blanche, with a corresponding analysis of their effectiveness would, I think, further demonstrate the range of verbal interaction in which she is involved. Her ability to switch roles and therefore linguistic codes can likewise be noted. Language use is frequently
foregrounded in discussions where she is involved and it is sometimes hard to decide whether it is her revelations or the language they are couched in which strikes us most. The line between telling the truth and arranging the truth is a fine one as she discovers to her cost with Mitch. However, we should not forget that Blanche is also able to move from the gently poetic to the outright crude within a few lines (196). It is perhaps this switch of register from the refined literary language of the English teacher to the plain sordid description of her encounters with soldiers from the local barracks which outraged some critics at the time since Blanche could not be easily catalogued as a lady or a whore.

As an English teacher, Blanche knows the power of words. Language is her tool to protect herself and win the support of others, for, unlike Stanley and Mitch, she does not have the option of using physical intimidation to gain what she wants. In the play text, however, since all the character interaction is presented through the medium of language, Blanche does not seem ill-equipped to hold her own. This is not the case in performance.

In the film version of Streetcar, Kazan has narrowed the range of Blanche’s verbal skills in a number of ways. Obviously, the cuts in the text, due to pressure from the Production Code Agency have taken their toll in the sequence where Blanche describes the circumstances of her husband’s death (183-184) and in her account of her life in Laurel (206). However, it could also be argued that it is the other, less obvious, cuts in the dialogue which imperceptibly alter the audience’s perception of the characters. While it is not at all surprising that it is Blanche’s speeches that bear the brunt of the cuts, since she has more lines than the others, the choice of cuts is revealing. Some have little effect since they simply shorten the speeches and need not concern us. What, however, are we to make of the sweeping cuts made to scene 4? This is not one of the longest scenes in the play text, but neither is it amongst the shortest (scenes 7, 8, 9, 10 are all shorter). The corresponding scene in the film has been considerably shortened however.

In the play, it is the morning after the poker game and Blanche returns to the Kowalski flat, anxious to see what has happened between Stella and Stanley. The dialogue in the play has two separate strands. On the one hand, there is a discussion between the two sisters about Stanley’s behaviour and its effect on Stella. This part of the scene remains, although certain more explicit references to their wedding night were cut in the 1951 film version and then restored in 1993. Alongside this evocation of
Stanley’s antics, there is a parallel discourse in which Blanche speaks of a recent chance encounter with an old admirer of hers, Shep Huntleigh, to whom she would like to turn for help. This second strand has been removed. In the film, whole chunks of text on page 158 and then virtually all of the next four pages have disappeared. These cuts slightly distort our vision of Blanche since the allusions to the old admirer here link up to other allusions in scenes 10 and 11. When Blanche refers to a telegram from a Texan millionaire in scene 10, the reader notes a certain coherence in Blanche’s discourse, the film goer, however, just sees this as the effect of too much alcohol and a powerful imagination, a further sign of her mental disintegration and inability to face reality. The same is also true of scene 11 when the film again reinforces Blanche’s confusion through the reference to Shep Huntleigh, reduced to a figment of her tortured imagination. The play, on the other hand, is more subtle. It is never quite clear at what point, if at all, Blanche loses touch with reality. As Felicia Hardison Londré has pointed out “Although most critics seem to accept the premise that Blanche goes mad, it is possible to interpret the action otherwise”(61). The allusions in scene 4 to Shep Huntleigh, whom she may or may not have met in Florida, recall Amanda Wingsfield in The Glass Menagerie and the rich gentlemen callers she might have married and who might have provided her with the type of life to which she feels entitled. The rich and successful planters’ sons are a far cry from the man she actually married. Likewise in Streetcar, the real or imaginary Huntleigh stands in stark contrast with Stanley.

Repeated mention of Shep Huntleigh also reinforces Blanche’s position in the dialogue. Instead of just playing the role of the protective elder sister, bemoaning her younger sister’s inappropriate choice of husband, she can play a more active role and speak of her own experiences with men. Instead of simply emphasizing the hopelessness of the situation, Blanche’s remarks in the play suggest her resourcefulness. After all, she has been living by her wits for some time. Most important of all, however, in the missing lines, we see Blanche’s self-deprecating humour. To Stella’s candid question about Shep : “He’s married?”, she answers wittily: “Honey, would I be here if the man weren’t married?” (161), leaving the reader in little doubt about where her priorities lie. She does not conceal this from her sister. Nor does she hide the pleasure she takes in inventing stories to arouse Shep’s sympathy, both in this scene and at the beginning of scene
5 (164). Her powers of imagination at this stage are a source of empowerment not vulnerability.

In short, the missing lines all highlight the complexity of the character, a range of attitudes and forms of discourse that only gradually begin to converge towards the figure we see at the end, rather more helpless than resourceful, confused rather than coherent, passive rather than active. In the film, it seems that the conversation between the two sisters is only about her disapproval of Stanley, while in the play, Stanley is not the only subject discussed.

Had the changes from page to screen stopped here, Blanche could still have held sway over the audience because of her way with words, but the move from text to performance entails other shifts of focus. The words that held our attention on the page now compete with other signs, oral and visual. Although Blanche has considerable verbal skills, there are other means of arousing interest and in some of these she is no match for Stanley. On several occasions, Stanley imposes his authority simply by having a much louder voice, in the poker game for example or during the birthday dinner. In the rape scene, we can see how sophisticated arguments are no match for sheer volume when Stanley screams in Blanche’s face “Ha - Ha!” (213). Williams does not indicate how this should be spoken in the stage directions. Kazan in the film creates a chilling effect of brute strength.

Of course, it is not just Marlon Brando’s lung power which attracts our attention. Even when another character is speaking, he imposes his presence physically. It is hard for the reader of the text to imagine what can be achieved on stage or screen by simply having the characters move. The “Ha - Ha!” we have just mentioned is a good example of how the film changes the focus of interest. Not only does it show how relatively ineffective words can be, it also shows how sound and action present a powerful combination since at the same time as he demonstrates his power by silencing Blanche, Stanley also pushes her down on the bed in a kind of rehearsal of the rape. It is here, too, that the camera plays its role to perfection.

On stage, of course, the actor can use his voice and body to catch the spectator’s attention. This already seems to have been the case in the first Broadway production. Critics all noted how Brando used his body on stage and his distinctive delivery. Kolin explains how Kazan made the character’s sexuality visible to the audience by introducing “the rhetorical power of orality into the role through a host of gustatory and phallic gestures” (28). Once
transferred to the screen, these effects can be literally magnified. In the theatre, the eye of the spectator is free to wander across the set, dwelling on whatever he chooses. In the cinema, however, these choices are made for him by the camera, focusing at times on one rather than another character, highlighting specific details, influencing our perception of the situation in a host of ways. Many critics have shown how the camera repeatedly dwells on Brando's body, filling up the screen to the exclusion of almost all else. His body is turned into an erotic object, "set off by the famous white T-shirt that quite self-consciously revealed rippling biceps and powerful forearms" (Barton Palmer, 221). This is not to say that the camera ignores Blanche. On the contrary, there are many close-up shots of Vivien Leigh. The actress herself emphasized that "the camera, in bringing the characters so close to the audience, was able to highlight nuances in expressions on the actors' faces and to reveal subtleties of feeling that were lost in their passage over the footlights" (Gene D. Philips 228-229). However, as far as Blanche is concerned, the close ups are often used to reinforce the impact made by Brando's body. In fact Brando/Stanley is the object of a double gaze: we watch Blanche watching him. This is especially clear the first time he removes his shirt in Blanche's presence. The close-up invites the viewer to look in admiration at Brando's impressive physique, just as Blanche does.

Kazan does not just want us to share Blanche's admiration, we are also expected to share her fear of his violence. This point is raised by Marie Liénard (213-214). Furthermore, the act of showing Stanley to be equally dominant outside his home, in the bowling alley sequence or the short factory scene for example, contributes to our sense of his power. On the one hand then, Kazan's film renders Stanley more threatening than the Stanley of the play text. On the other hand, Kazan does not want to turn Stanley into a monster. Exaggeration of Stanley's vices would turn Streetcar into a melodrama. To avoid this, Kazan goes to some lengths to soften this impression. His relationship with Stella is, therefore, given considerable attention, notably in what could be considered the most famous sequence of the film, the staircase scene, analyzed in detail by Patricia Kruth (161-162). It is significant, I think, that the film is often remembered because of this sequence, and its use of body, voice, camera angles, close ups and music. Only one word is spoken ("Stella!") and Blanche is completely forgotten. Stanley's cruelty is likewise attenuated at the end of the birthday dinner, when he is given extra lines to show both remorse and tenderness towards Stella as he leads her off to

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the hospital. The close-ups on Blanche which are not designed to show the effect of Stanley/Brando’s physique, tend to concentrate on her fragility. In the second most famous sequence, the light-bulb scene, Blanche arouses the viewer’s pity, in line with Kazan’s emphasis on her need for protection.

One final example may be considered to support the idea that Kazan’s interpretation of the character of Blanche tends to idealize her. In the play text it is clearly indicated that Blanche is seen several times in a “red satin robe” (135), called a “red kimono” (148) and a “scarlet robe” (200). Williams thereby establishes a contrast with the white skirts and flowery dresses she wears outdoors, emphasizing Blanche’s ability to assume a wide range of roles. Furthermore, the use of this colour suggests that, despite her genteel appearance, she has something in common with Stanley, who wears bold, primary colours, and his poker playing companions (see description 143). Blanche states as much in scene 2: “I don’t like pinks and creams and I never cared for wishy-washy people. That was why, when you walked in here last night, I said to myself - ‘My sister has married a man!’” (137). The film goer is likely to take this as Blanche lying to win over Stanley, but the spectator might well conclude that Blanche’s statement also contains some degree of truth. The decision to make the film in black and white prevented Kazan from exploiting the way colour provides a link between Blanche and Stanley. It also prevents Kazan from revealing the stronger, more assertive side of Blanche’s personality. It should also be noted that the stage production also avoided bold reds (Costa de Beauregard 252).

It is here perhaps that we may want to disagree with Kazan’s vision of Blanche.

Critics have pointed out that Blanche in the film is certainly not the brazen creature, she has sometimes become in more recent productions. As Marie Liénard puts it: “In a way, willingly or not, Kazan put her back on her pedestal, and constructed a myth of Blanche as pure and faithful, consumed by guilt and haunted by memory - all ingredients necessary to construct white Southern womanhood” (212). This approach fails to do justice to the complexity of the character as constructed by Tennessee Williams. For if Kazan took care to avoid turning Stanley into a monster, he seems to have paid less attention to the risk of presenting Blanche simply as a victim. In the play text, Blanche is both predator and victim, as can be seen in the way she knowingly manipulates Mitch and the newspaper boy and the way she plans to manipulate Shep Huntleigh, the way she attempts and fails to twist Stanley round her
little finger. It is because she is not only a victim that she can use the role of victim to good effect. The film sometimes does not make this sufficiently clear. Perhaps the medium does not allow the viewers the distance necessary to take full advantage of Blanche’s displays of theatricality. It is significant that discussion of the way the film ends focuses primarily on the question whether Stanley and Stella will be reunited or not as though this was the main centre of interest. This probably because the film has encouraged us to ask such questions. The play text, by juxtaposing the reconciliation of Stella and Stanley with Steve’s remark on cards, surely sets Blanche apart and gives her a tragic dignity, confirming that the play is really her story. Perhaps the film industry was simply not ready for this type of woman character even though it was apparently prepared to reconsider its ideas about the male hero, thanks to Kazan’s reading of Streetcar as Stanley’s story.

Susan BLATTÈS
Université Stendhal Grenoble 3
Works cited:


Blanche en pleine lumière : une scène où Kazan pousse la cruauté du film plus loin que celle de la pièce.