

# Pure passion

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## **MSU's 'Streetcar' takes you on a thrilling ride through a masterpiece**

By UTE VON DER HEYDEN

"A Streetcar Named Desire?" Yeah, saw the movie. Marlon Brando and Vivian Leigh were great.

Think I saw the play, too — maybe in high school. That's where Stanley does that "Stella" thing and there's the bit about that crazy Blanche and the "kindness of strangers," right?

Right. What do you do with a 64-year-old play that almost everyone knows something about? A play that's been described as the best play of the 20th century, that's won every award imaginable and that's had countless adaptations in film, opera, television and ballet?

Not to mention that when it first opened on Broadway on Dec. 3, 1947, the audience sat in stunned silence before breaking into a full 30 minutes of applause.

Yes, what do you do?

Well, if you're the Michigan State University Department of Theatre and if you're the brilliant director Rob Roznowski, you make it more physical — spectacularly more physical.

You also turn up the volume on the raw emotion, sex and violence and you use the very youth of your talented student actors to breathe new life into this story of death, desire and insanity while never compromising the power and beauty of Tennessee Williams' words.

You also throw in a spectacular set authentically featuring that famous New Orleans apartment, the bathtub, the neighbors' apartment, the street and houses below and a catwalk where appear the ghosts of Blanche's past — all this visible to the audience at all times.

You also add gorgeous, attention-to-detail costumes, lighting and sound that enhance the story line, and a stunning New Orleans "jazz funeral" procession that adds splendor and drama to a production already rich in both of those elements.

Christina Traister, an MSU assistant professor of acting and voice, plays Blanche with more strength and anger than one might expect in such a fragile and delusional character. Blanche is desperate and destitute, hiding a sordid past and living in a fantasy world, but Traister gives her a seemingly inexhaustible will to survive.

In the end, however, she makes it clear that Blanche has lost her grip on reality.

In a new theater department experiment, Traister is the first MSU faculty member to be cast in a student production. This could easily have failed, but here teacher and students work seamlessly together.

This is particularly true of Traister's scenes with Curran Jacobs as Stanley.

Their conflict is at the center of this play and their interactions are nerve-shattering to watch. Jacobs looks the part. He is handsome, he is muscular, he has animal magnetism. Rosnowski has his Stanley almost constantly in motion, and Jacobs leaps about like a gold medal gymnast.

His characterization of Stanley is believably sex-driven, brutish and violent. In the end, the totality of his "deliberate cruelty" to others is not forgivable. And Jacobs can be assured that his agonized version of the famous "S-t-e-l-l-a" scene is no imitation of Brando or anybody else. It's all his own, and memorably so.

Traister and Jacobs are also the fight directors for this production. Choreographed with the precision of professional modern dance, the fight scenes are both frightening and beautiful to watch.



Photo by G. "Max" Maxi

**Under Rob Roznowski's direction, Christina Traister and Curran Jacobs ignite a highly physical version of "A Streetcar Named Desire."**

the ghosts of Blanche's past — all this visible to the audience

Graduate student Emily Young, an accomplished actor, gives a consistently natural performance as Stella, Blanche's younger sister. Despite her compassion for Blanche, Stella's lust and love for Stanley ultimately prevent her from helping her sister and escaping her own hard life.

Nicholas Dressel is appealing as the awkward Mitch, Stanley's poker buddy and Blanche's would-be suitor. His theatrical affect of holding his arms stiffly close to the body tells the story: He is as lost and lonely as Blanche.

In smaller roles, the always fabulous Leslie Hull is once again excellent as the neighbor Eunice, careful not to steal scenes from actor partner Mieko the cat.

And when she's on stage, you can't take your eyes off Carmen Zavala, menacing as the Mexican Woman delivering her message of death ("flores para los muertos") in the guise of flowers.

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