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THEATER: "A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE" LACKS DRIVE

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A Streetcar Named Desire ** out of ****

The Harvey at Brooklyn Academy of Music

Nothing is wrong with this revival of *Streetcar*, except that it doesn't work.

Director Rebecca Frecknall (on Broadway with the hit revival of *Cabaret*) has a clear vision of Stanley as a brutish, unredeemable abuser. The cast is talented, if unconventionally cast. The setting strips away any romanticism of the French Quarter in New Orleans by staging the show on a bare, square platform. The score ignores jazzy allure for a doom-laden, percussive underlining of emotions. The modern dress insists on a modern take. We've also got interpretative dancing; the entire cast always present, observing the action when not taking part in it; and lots of rain. All perfectly reasonable choices. And all for nought.

Frecknall enjoyed acclaim in London for her take on the iffier Tennessee Williams drama Summer and Smoke. Streetcar in contrast is an unqualified classic, though like any classic it needs to be held up to the light, seen from a different angle and rethought to stay alive. (Or simply staged on a constantly rotating platform, which is how I saw it last.)

In it, the fading Blanche arrives in New Orleans, penniless and at loose ends. She inserts herself into the life of a happily (?) married sister, upsetting the domesticity of Stella and Stanley. Blanche and Stanley warily circle each other, with Blanche arousing his confused desire when not mocking and belittling him as little better than an animal.

Stanley is confused by her, angry with her and dangerous when digging into the facts around Blanche fleeing her last job as schoolteacher. Blanche seizes on a dull friend of Stanley's as a potential spouse, a last chance to keep from drowning. But it's too late. The truth about her past crushes that ploy and Blanche sinks into madness, sent away by a reluctant Stella at the end.

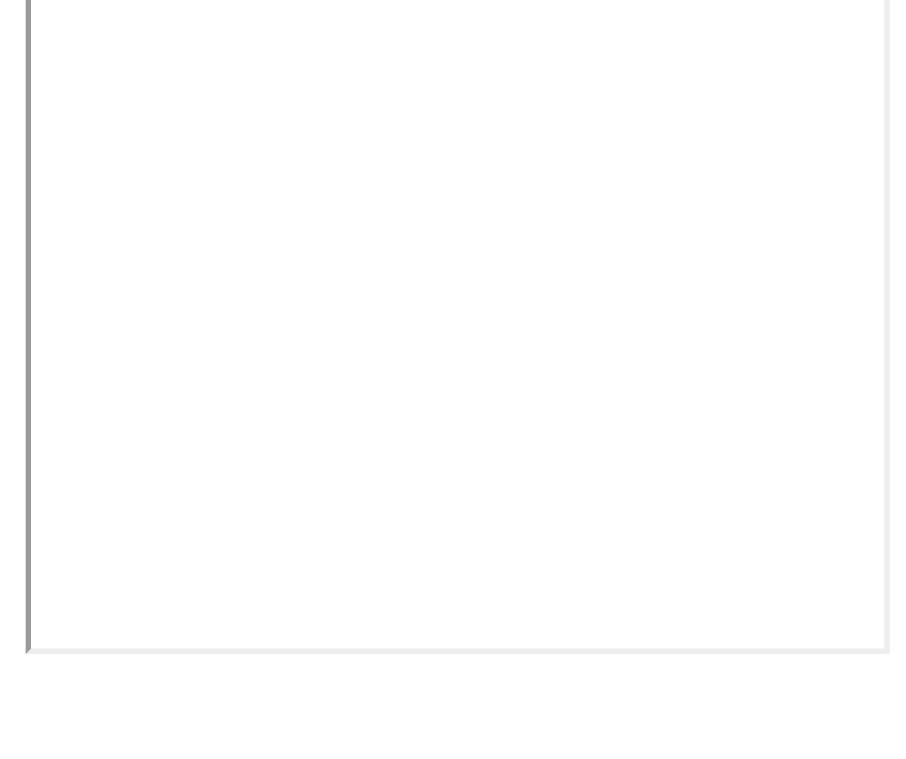
Well, that's one way to summarize the story.

What we see here is quite different. As embodied by Patsy Ferran, Blanche arrives mid-nervous breakdown, fluttering and silly and spinsterish. She and Paul Mescal as Stanley have no sexual chemistry, though as conceived here, it's hard to imagine anyone drawn to this Blanche. This is not the Blanche who proved so wanton and desirable to the soldiers in her last town that she was declared off limits by military brass. Plus, she's all but mad in the first scene, exhausting and exhausted.

Stanley, played as asked by Paul Mescal (an excellent film

actor I'm seeing on stage for the first time), is an irredeemable brute. She's no match for him and certainly no temptress. Stanley beats his wife, rapes his sister-inlaw and destroys the mild hope of companionship for his friend. In this production, he and Blanche are not sparring. Stanley is a sleek cat, toying with a wounded bird for fun before he shakes it by the neck and kills his prey. So the drama has nowhere to go. Blanche is already mad.

Stanley is clearly the dominant force from start to finish. Indeed, Blanche lost the moment she entered the ring. Her fall at the end barely registers.



notably older than Stanley. They might well have made something of this, echoing Blanche's predilection for boys, but it's a lost opportunity. Yet when a play is this good, even a revival that doesn't work can offer new ways of thinking about it. Vasan and Ferran have the best chemistry in the show. This bond between two sisters feels like the natural arc of

Stella, played ably by Anjana Vasan (best known here for

the TV shows We Are Lady Parts and Killing Eve) is

the show. Stella doesn't put up with her sister: she loves her and is (mostly) happy to cater to her whims, as Vasan makes clear. They meet at the beginning and part at the end, with Stella broken and weeping, encircled (or entrapped, really) by Stanley. He's an abuser and Stanley's earlier cry of "Stella" is less the demanding howl of the master of the house and more the bleating appeal of the wife beater who knows it's time to pretend he's sorry before doing it all over again. Stella sides with an abuser and knows it, deep down; she's dimly aware that of course the man who beats her would

physically assault her sister. But she ignores her sister, she refuses to believe it, *can't* believe it because that would upend her life. It's easier to pretend Blanche is lying. Stella's cry of despair, however, speaks the truth. This angle is the strongest element of the show; I wish it had more impact for me. I'm not sure the text would support it, but this hints that Streetcar might be seen as a battle for Stella. What if she came on stage at the start with a black eye or a bloody lip,

the abuse she endures obvious to the audience, shocking Blanche and showing us the real stakes here? Blanche is right about Stanley, after all, even if he's right about her past. And while we've no illusions about the misery of mental institutions in the 1940s, maybe at the end Blanche is *escaping* a nightmare. Maybe it's Stella who is really doomed. Frecknall gets closer to this, but not satisfyingly so. Another useful insight is the role of Mitch. Usually he's a sad sack, the runt of Stanley's gang a la Karl Malden, who originated the part. Blanche latches onto Mitch and

dazzles the poor schlub with her grand ways. She's toying with him, the way she toys with Stanley, until he breaks her. No one imagines Mitch as anything but a sad, boring, desperate measure, even for her. Not here. Actor Dwane Walcott doesn't betray the essential nature of Mitch: he's still a momma's boy and the least alpha male around. But he has an appealing nature and certainly a sex appeal. Blanche isn't pulling the wool over his eyes: they are co-conspirators in her

fantasy of knights and ladies and courtship. By god, Blanche would be lucky to have him. And with his mother dying and facing life alone, Mitch would be lucky to have her. They make sense here, which reveals Stanley's takedown of their twinned hopes as all the crueler. He's not saving Mitch, he's destroying him. So score one for casting and Frecknall's vision. But there are further problems. Most of the secondary roles don't register at all (the landlady, the poker buddies, the doctor). The lithe, excellent dancer Jabez Sykes who doubles as the newspaper boy is too tall and adult for the

part. This robs his one scene with Blanche of its inappropriate nature. And the dancing and performative moments are extraneous, except for one moment when Blanche has her back to the audience and Stanley confronts her, mirrored frighteningly by the wolf pack of the cast arrayed behind him, ready to pounce. A bare set is fine. But for most of the show, the staging is vague and lacks impact, with people scattered about to no effect. Whether sort of playing poker or sort of squaring

off or sort of enjoying a moment of intimacy, I rarely saw the tension and excitement of actors arrayed with precision and clarity. And if rain can feel perfunctory, it does here. I'd rather love or hate a production than feel indifferent to it, as I did this time. Yet, I see the play a little differently now, and that's certainly saying something. I'm sorry to

have missed Frecknall and Ferran's Summer and Smoke. Dwane Walcott is worth keeping an eye on. And Paul Mescal is solid in one of theater's iconic roles, even if this production makes the part static and less interesting than it should be, just as it does with the role of Blanche. He's a brute from start to finish, but Mescal gives him a brutish appeal. Some lines are whispered rather than shouted, some smiles reveal a grin and others teeth that can bite. That's the usual way when someone

tackles a part like this. We enjoy the variations they make on it or the pleasure of delivering a classic approach with aplomb. But without the excitement of two worthies facing off, without the struggle for sex or power or dominance, without desire, this Streetcar lacks drive.

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Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in NYC and can be reached at mgiltz@pipeline.com

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