



Evasions and ambiguities in

A Streetcar Named Desire

Jackie Shead argues that changes made for the play's 1951 screen version not only highlight the controversial nature of *A Streetcar Named Desire* at the time, but still illuminate the text for us today

It's over 50 years since Elia Kazan's film of *A Streetcar Named Desire* was first screened. The Brando and Leigh performances make it still well worth viewing, but is there any point in exploring alterations made half a century ago, especially when the 1984 film version has restored the original script to the big screen? Though this subject is not new to *THE ENGLISH REVIEW*, I think there is more to say about the screenplay changes. They not only illuminate the controversial nature of the play in its time, but also highlight Williams's original intentions.

Condemned

Two censoring forces influenced the 1951 film. Both had sufficient clout to make a significant difference to box office takings, and no film studio would ignore either. Warner Brothers panicked when it heard the Catholic Legion of Decency (CLD) was about to award the film a 'C' rating (that's C for condemned, not caution). This meant Catholics would be instructed not to view it and, as a result of the number of immigrants to the USA from Eastern Europe and Ireland, Catholics comprised a hefty slice of the cinema-going public. Besides this, it was thought the rating would have a wider influence.

Once the CLD's precise objections were ascertained, Kazan was ordered to make strategic cuts. These included footage making explicit both Blanche's sexual attraction to the Young Man and the sexual bond between the Kowalskis. Warner Brothers asked the CLD to review the film again after these cuts had been made, and the film avoided a C rating. Later, those cuts were reinstated. If you have seen Kazan's movie, it is almost certainly the uncut version. The matter, therefore, is now of historical interest only, revealing certain contemporary responses to Tennessee Williams's theme. Apparently, the depiction of desire as an amoral force was disturbing not only when presented in a single woman's attraction to a younger man, but even between a married couple.

The other source of pressure, whose imprints remain, came to bear as the movie was being shot. The film encountered resistance from the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), and its code of practice. The producers were advised to make changes to two areas: Allan's homosexuality and the rape. In the first instance, concessions were prompt, and all traces of the topic were obscured. The wording 'effeminate' and 'not like a man', was replaced with 'uncertainty' and 'couldn't hold down a job'. Blanche's discovery of Allan with another man was omitted, and her final words on the dance floor were no longer about her disgust, instead she said: 'You're weak. I've lost respect for you. I despise you.' Likewise, Stella's description of Blanche's marriage in Scene 7 was deleted, along with the word 'degenerate'. This explains why the CLD, which had objected to the play's heterosexual lust, did not worry about the homosexuality; the subject simply wasn't there by the time the CLD viewed the film. Had it been, the CLD would, without doubt, have objected as strongly as the MPAA. Censorship in the USA has its roots in religion — Puritan and Catholic.

A moral play?

On the second matter, Williams was adamant. He refused to remove the rape:

Streetcar is an extremely and peculiarly moral play, in the deepest and truest sense of the term. The rape of Blanche by Stanley is a pivotal, integral truth in the play without which the

play loses its meaning, which is the ravishment of the tender, the sensitive, the delicate, by the savage and brutal forces of modern society

A compromise was struck. The scene was cinematically softened, but symbolism tries to make it clear what happens behind the gauzy curtains — through the phallic connotations of the street being hosed down. More crucial to the MPAA, in any case, was the deletion of words suggesting Stanley's action is deliberated and chosen, such as: 'Come to think of it — maybe you wouldn't be too bad to — interfere with.' Kazan was at a loss to know how this made the rape less disturbing. The film does blunt what the MPAA presumably found objectionable: Williams's suggestion that Stanley's rape is callous opportunism. Presumably the hope was to make it look spontaneous, fuelled by drink and anger. In effect, the cuts risk making it look *premeditated*, especially as Brando's performance captures a degree of calculating menace.

These changes to Scene 11 were not the only, nor chief, price demanded by the MPAA for accepting a rape scene. The overriding condition was that Stanley *must* be punished. So, in Kazan's film, as Stanley hollers to Stella from within the Kowalski flat, she decides to take her baby upstairs, vowing 'I'm not going back in again. Not this time. I'm *never* going back in there.' The closing moments focus on Stella, alone, defiant, protecting her child from being reared with a rapist. A moral viewpoint was thus created *within* the drama, from which Stanley is judged and condemned. Only thus did the MPAA find the inclusion of a rape justified: an immoral action could be shown, *provided* it furthered the message that evil will be punished.

'Interfering'

While Williams's editing for screen reveals what the guardians of public morality thought was indecent or immoral, closer scrutiny reveals more. Unpicked, the changes throw the text's meanings into sharper relief. For example, let us look at Mitch's second moment of friction with Stanley in Scene 11. (The first is 'You...you...brag...bull...bull', as Stanley cockily sweeps up his poker takings.) This comes as Mitch moves towards the bedroom, where Blanche has retreated in panic. In the play, Mitch accuses Stanley: 'You! You done this, all o' your God damn interfering with things you —'. 'Interfering' has a resonance for the theatre audience. It reminds us of Stanley's decision to 'interfere' with Blanche in Scene 11 and his role in her insanity. Mitch cannot, of course, intentionally allude to Stanley's earlier words (he wasn't there), so his remark produces a touch of dramatic irony — he says more than he knows. 'Interfering' is not an echo the film could capitalise on, because it had already had to cut Stanley's line about Blanche being worth interfering with from the rape scene. Instead, the accusation becomes much less ambiguous: 'You did this to her. He did this to her.'

This change gives a misleading impression that Mitch is conscious of Stanley's rape. In fact, he cannot know anything

about it. Stella's discussion with Eunice early in the scene makes that clear. She listened to Blanche's 'story', talked it over with Eunice, then decided to have Blanche committed: *her* decision, though she is still agonising over it. Nowhere in Scene 11 can we find any suggestion that Blanche's story has become more widely known.

Altered intentions?

The film not only imputes more insight to Mitch than he can have, but encourages us to focus on his actions as appropriate moral indignation. The screenplay shows Mitch leaping up to attack Stanley. He delivers a decisive blow as he shouts 'You did this to her'. Yet this seems to alter Williams's original intentions. There is no sign in the text that he meant to give Mitch any moral high ground. Mitch gets up to go to Blanche, distraught in the bedroom, not to fight. Stanley blocks him and pushes him aside dismissively with 'Quit the blubber', whereupon Mitch lunges and 'strikes at' him in frustration. These stage directions carry the meaning: Stanley blocks Mitch's route to Blanche, literally, as he does psychologically. And this is what Mitch means by 'interfering'.

In the 'some weeks' between Scenes 10 and 11, Blanche has retreated into a private world and the territory of bathroom and bedroom, startled even by the sound of the men's voices. It's impossible to imagine there has been any further contact between Mitch and Blanche since the moment he fled the Kowalski flat as she screamed 'Fire'. In that scene he cast her as a prostitute, simultaneously fumbling at her and calling her 'not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother'. Surely, then, Mitch attributes Blanche's mental imbalance to his *own* drunken behaviour. His anger at Stanley is displaced anger at himself, and his accusations are an evasion of responsibility.

The 'things' Stanley has interfered with are Mitch and Blanche's relationship, but, above all, the inside of Mitch's head. The play has been described as a battle between two versions of reality — Stanley's and Blanche's. Both characters try to impose their ideas about life, and particularly about each other, on Stella and Mitch, who are pawns in their hostilities. By the close of the play, Stanley has 'captured' both Stella and Mitch in entirely different ways. Mitch's anger comes from his guilt and shame. He has been used in Stanley's end-game, and Blanche is the sacrifice.

Losing control

It is also worth looking at the film's changes to the moments following Mitch's accusation. In the text Stanley responds scornfully: 'Quit the blubber' is followed by 'Hold this bone-head cry-baby'. Clearly the play reveals not just Stanley's lack of remorse, but his contempt for Mitch's. Nor has he lost his authority and sway over the other men. Steve and Pablo oblige when told to hold Mitch back. Williams's dialogue then moves to the Matron in the bedroom. In the film, the lines containing 'blubber' and 'cry-baby' are cut, and replaced by

'You must be nuts' (which counters Mitch's accusation rather than mocking his feelings). Steven and Pablo are not instructed to restrain Mitch, but do so spontaneously. Brando's Stanley therefore appears less cocky, less in control and more isolated, especially since Steven and Pablo stanc staring at Stanley, pondering the meaning of Mitch's 'He dic it'. There follows a line no poker player of Stanley's calibre would ever let slip: 'What are you looking at? I never once touched her.'

Already, the film is preparing viewers for its changed ending. In doing so it parts company with the play's disturbing proposition: that Stanley can do what he has done and get of scot free — free from guilt, from suspicion, from punishment. To quote Francis Gilbert: 'The play shows that ordinary handsome, family men like Stanley can be rapists and that while their behaviour is sickening, too often they get away with it.'

Changed ending

Kazan's ending shows us the false comfort of Stanley *no* 'getting away with it'. It is punishment indeed for Stanley whose chief motivation has been protection of his territory and determination to hold on to his marriage. But this obscures what is perhaps Williams's most unsettling insight of all: the revered institution of matrimony continues, regardless of evasions, buried secrets and self-deceit. For Stella makes it clear why she has chosen not to believe Blanche: 'I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley.'

Blanche's 'story' is not weighed against Stella's faith in Stanley, but against the costs of believing it. In the film she picks up her baby, but in the text Eunice 'places the child in her arms', indicating Stella's future is already 'mapped out for her', just as Blanche's is. If we try to see Stella simply a miserably trapped, Stanley's fingers finding the opening of her blouse remind us this is a play where the 'things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark...sort of make everything else seem — unimportant'.

Williams's final line 'The game is seven-card stud' is cut from the film, which focuses on Stella's vital moment of decision. This means that we miss that sense of life already resuming, and Williams's tragic, yet brutal, view of Blanche as a casualty, moved aside like a run-over cat so that the streetcars can continue. For Mitch and Stella, who seek to evade self-scrutiny, such an unflinching gaze at human survival strategies is too difficult. It seems the same went for the movie industry of the time.

Further reading

- Holland, C. (2003) 'Stanley Kowalski: from page to performance', *THE ENGLISH REVIEW*, Vol. 13, No. 4.
Miller, J. (1971) *Twentieth Century Interpretations of A Streetcar Named Desire*, Prentice-Hall.

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