



English Studies in Latin America

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Source: *White Rabbit: English Studies in Latin America*, No. 7 (July 2014)

ISSN: 0719-0921

Published by: Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

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Review of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*¹

Introduction by

Rodrigo Navarrete²

Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* is one of the most widespread and memorable plays of American modern theatre; its influence - not merely on the realistic dramatic tradition - is unquestionable and made visible by the countless adaptations of William's play, transforming it into a classic literary work of the 20th century. During the "Drama" course (LET1745), at the Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (Prof. Carola Oyarzún), students were given the opportunity to read the original play and analyze its most outstanding topics and formal aspects, an exercise not many students have the chance to do in our country. Fortunately for us, this year we had the privilege of witnessing an intriguing adaptation of Tennessee Williams' play by the hand of

¹Special thanks to Professor and Vice Dean Carola Oyarzun for encouraging her students to take part in this review.

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no other than Alfredo Castro, one of the most respectable Chilean theatre directors of our time, who decided, together with Roberto Contador who worked as dramaturgist, to adapt the play to a more familiar context, thus blending Williams' vision of modern America with our own Latin American reality.

The rewriting process of a dramatic text is probably one of the hardest creative tasks. It demands a thorough examination of the nature of the play and the immense variety of linguistic, cultural, and even political factors to be considered in order to produce a new and fair work, maintaining both the essence of the original and adding an inventive feature to the play. In this particular case, the play underwent several changes that the performance clearly displayed.

The following paragraphs are a selection of different passages that the students wrote as an attempt of a theatre review after attending to Centro Cultural Gabriela Mistral (GAM) and witnessing Castro and Contador's new version of the American classic. In general terms, the students focused on different aspects, such as writing, acting, scenery and symbolism, sometimes praising the results and other times criticizing the overall production. Regardless of their approval or disapproval, the important thing to bear in mind is how this exercise helped students to critically view the work of an English speaking playwright through a different lens, reminding us that language does not always represent a limit, but sometimes it stands as a door to a familiar landscape, bringing far away experiences to our own native floor. Furthermore, students had the possibility to confirm the fact that a play is not only meant to be read but also to be performed. The stage then, where all the theatre elements combine such as actors, voices, movements, gestures, costumes, scenery, lighting, sounds and rhythm, among many others, offers a new dimension to the text. Of course, the spectator will be the one who produces the final meaning.

REVIEW FRAGMENTS

“Concerning the realism that distinguishes the original play, this adaptation struggled to make a balance between the realism and the humorous version that the actors were intended to perform. Taking into account that Castro’s intention was never to present the exact original version, there were some moments where humor surpassed reality, which somewhat twisted the particular essence of Williams’ work”. (Florencia Roncone)

“Overall, the play is detached completely from the original. It follows the general theme and lines of narrative but it fails to represent the reality of the original. The struggles of the characters are reduced to over simplifications and exaggerations that fail to do justice to the classic. In general, it is an enjoyable play if you see it as a piece that has no relation to the original”. (Tamara Cubillos)

“The setting of the play is perhaps the most praise-worthy aspect. The stage was designed to imitate a train wagon, with light bulbs all around that provided just the right illumination. The adaptation of the script, however, is a different story. Castro and Contador - the writers of the script - attempted to adapt the story to a Chilean context which meant using a Chilean vernacular but at the same time, it meant having to decontextualize the story so it could take place in Santiago just as well as in New Orleans. And in some ways it worked. The audience was able to relate to the story and understand it better because of the use of familiar language. And for the most part, the writers were faithful to the original story. But there were other times when they took too much freedom in their interpretation. One example of this would be the fact that Blanche used curse words; being an English teacher and a self-proclaimed lady, Williams’ Blanche would never use impolite language like Castro’s did”. (Natalia Cabezas and Constanza Fález)

“Finally, the play as a whole was adapted considering the Chilean culture and reality, which was successfully accomplished; however the last two scenes were quite disappointing. The tenth scene, the rape scene, was an encounter between Stanley and Blanche, but as it was stated before it did not look like Blanche was uncomfortable or intimidated by Stanley’s presence. It seemed like she was, in fact, expecting it and there was no actual fight between the two characters. The violation itself was also too explicit, too graphic, and even sickening and offensive for the audience. The last scene was really abstract and hard to understand if the play was not read before the representation. It had plenty of symbols which might have represented the original idea but the whole concept could have been lost. The ending did not fulfill all the expectations generated by the play itself and there is no actual reference to the fact that Blanche is going to be locked away because her family believes she has lost her mind”. (Paula Fuentealba and Kimmy Muñoz).

“Amparo Noguera portrays an overacted Blanche that completely destroys the subtle and slow progression of the character towards a psychotic breakdown, instead becoming excessively deranged, vulgar and overly sexualized from the very beginning, turning the character’s depth and evolution throughout the play into a flat, linear experience. Similarly, Marcelo Alonso nails the primal and aggressive over-masculinity of Stanley remarkably well, however, he also fails to portray its occasionally more youthful, vain, immature and playful side, also becoming a rather linear character with little more than his anger to be remembered. Paloma Moreno, in turn, does a decent enough job of portraying Stella in her role as a simple and plain trophy wife to Stanley, easily blending with the background while the more important characters do their parts; however, this same blandness in turn permeates most of her moments even when it’s not actually called for, particularly through her interactions with Blanche, which are frigid and devoid of the sisterly care

that she should be portraying. Finally, Alvaro Morales does a remarkable job as Mitch, effortlessly showcasing his role as a respectful and gentlemanly, but also timid and indecisive foil to Stanley”.

(Diego Torres)

"For Tennessee Williams, the setting of *A Street Car Named Desire* is a very essential aspect for its construction and development, and thus music, noises and the city life of New Orleans are portrayed in a very realistic style. However, the Chilean adaptation made by Alfredo Castro tries to readjust the play in a Chilean cultural setting, though it is not wholly achieved. On the one hand, the adaptation does not reflect the Chilean culture in a painstakingly way as the original script reflects the American, and so the result is a mixture of both settings, something in between the American and Chilean. This can be seen in terms of language, as well as with the sheer amount of swearing and Chilean slang." (Javiera Sepúlveda and Maite Bugueño)