PETER GOLDBERG

Anthony Goes and Marianna Bassham in "A Streetcar Named Desire."

STAGE REVIEW

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE
Play by Tennessee Williams.
Directed by Tony Estrella.
Presented by Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre,
Pawtucket, R.I., through Oct. 18. Tickets: $41-$49,
401-723-4266,
www.gammtheatre.org

Bassham makes 'Streetcar' a memorable ride

By Don Aucoin
GLOBE STAFF

PAWTUCKET, R.I. — For decades, perceptions of Tennessee Williams's "A Streetcar Named Desire'' have been shaped — one could even say distorted — by the sexual charisma Marlon Brando brought to his legendary, game-changing performance as Stanley Kowalski in the 1951 film version.

To see a Brando-less "Streetcar,'' like the searing and insightful production directed by Tony Estrella at Pawtucket's Gamm Theatre, is to be reminded that the focus of "Streetcar" belongs not on Stanley but on the vulnerable woman he callously, almost casually, destroys: Blanche DuBois.

Of course, it helps when Blanche is portrayed by an actress of the caliber of Marianna Bassham, whose gifts are well known to Boston theatergoers and increasingly to Rhode Island audiences as well. Bassham's wrenching, exquisitely calibrated performance as Blanche represents another triumph at, and for, the Gamm, where she excelled last year in the title role of Henrik Ibsen's "Hedda Gabler."

Bassham captures Blanche's escalating desperation and psychological disintegration so completely that even when she laughs, it half-sounds like a sob. But then this actress has often been at her best when inhabiting characters who are coping with extreme circumstances, such as the woman trying to break free of a loveless, dead-end marriage to a loutish husband in a 2009 production of Ronan Noone's "Little Black Dress."

Circumstances don't come much more extreme than those faced by Blanche in "Streetcar." After suffering through a parade of deaths, the collapse of her reputation, and the loss of the DuBois family home, she pays a visit to her sister Stella in New Orleans in the late 1940s.

Stella (Karen Carpenter, quite good) is living with Stanley — played with commanding vigor and menace by Anthony Goes — in a small, drab apartment. Blanche begins dating Stanley's good-hearted pal Mitch (Steve Kidd), but Stanley cruelly gathers information that will doom that relationship and obliterate Blanche's last chance at happiness or a semblance of sanity.

"Streetcar," which premiered on Broadway in 1947 and won the Pulitzer Prize the following year, is Williams's most fully realized work and one of the very best dramas in all of American theater. "What 'Streetcar's' first production did was to plant the flag of beauty on the shores of commercial theater,'' Arthur Miller once wrote. In his superb 2014 biography "Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh," John Lahr described the impact of the play's success: "From that moment on, for better or worse, Williams was on a first-name basis with the world. Everyone seemed to be at his table."

Today, however, the play's over-the-top emotions and stylized, poetic language can make it veer dangerously close to camp if a director is not careful. I recall a TV interview with Williams not long before he died in 1983 in which he lamented hearing audiences laugh during a production of "Streetcar." And indeed, some spectators at the Gamm chortled at dialogue that wasn't meant to be funny.

On balance, though, they seemed to be riveted. Director Estrella expertly builds the tension by degrees, seeming to understand that if "Streetcar" begins at a fever pitch, the later scenes are not as shattering. His interpretation brings subtle shadings to these familiar characters, so that Blanche is not solely a victim and Stanley is not solely a brute.

For instance, after Stanley adds to Blanche's anguish by snarling at her after she's been stood up by Mitch on her birthday, she points a knife toward Stanley as she screams, "I've said I was sorry *three times*!'' Part anger, part despair, the gesture prefigures the way she will later wield a broken bottle during her final showdown with Stanley. Earlier, when Stanley overhears Blanche denouncing him to Stella (whom he had physically abused the night before) as "sub-human'' and "apelike," a wounded look passes over his face, soon replaced by a hardened mask of resolve.

Taking his cue from the frequent references to music in the dialogue and in Williams's stage directions, Estrella's "Streetcar'' is punctuated by songs from vocalists and musicians located just offstage (they also play minor roles in the play). Though occasionally obtrusive and jarring, the musical interludes are mostly effective.

The first time we see Bassham's Blanche, she is attired in an outfit as white as her name, a broad-brimmed hat, and a pair of sunglasses while projecting the air of someone tremulously ill at ease not just in the world where she finds herself but in the world, period. By contrast, the first time we see Goes's Stanley, he is all swagger and bellow as he literally hurls a wrapped hunk of meat across the stage to Stella.

It's a fitting image: Stanley embodies brute force and a kind of social Darwinism, and his ethos that can be boiled down to: Eat or be eaten. Blanche, meanwhile, in her high-flown and pretentious yet utterly sincere way, embraces and extols the values of art, literature, and music. From the moment they meet in this "Streetcar," the battle is on, and the odds, alas, do not favor Blanche.

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CLASSICAL NOTES | DAVID WEININGER

Open to interpretation

Johnson strikes delicate balances on mixtape-inspired CD

ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Jenny Olivia Johnson, pictured along the Boston waterfront.

Jenny Olivia Johnson's compositional breakthrough came after about a decade of trying to find her voice. Her background provided a welter of inspirations. As a high school student she'd played drums in rock bands and loved '80s pop songs; as an undergraduate at Barnard College she'd had her head turned around by the 20th-century avant-garde. She'd tried to make sense of these competing influences, writing orchestral songs with what she called, in a recent interview, "these really pop-inflected lines, but there was a lot of atonal noise happening in the background."

Her eureka moment came courtesy of the postminimalist styles that were cooking in New York in the early 2000s, which showed her that it was possible to write "serious music" that wasn't shackled to the conventions of the past. One day she dispensed with the supposedly requisite pencil and staff paper, borrowed a little Casio keyboard, went into a studio at New York University, where she was a grad student, and started jamming. Suddenly, everything started to tumble together.

The result was "Dollar Beers (Redondo Beach '96)," a song for amplified soprano, delay pedal, and chamber ensemble. Over a gently pulsating harmonic pattern floats a fragile, shadowy vocal line; the words, which Johnson based on a Young Adult novel, build ominously to a climax whose dark outcome is alluded to, but never stated clearly.

Finally, Johnson had hit on something that "felt really natural to me. I felt like, I am in a context now where this genre is not gonna be laughed off the stage," she said by phone from her Somerville apartment. Just the opposite: Those who heard the first performance at the Bang on a Can Summer Festival in 2006 responded strongly. "For me, that was a cornerstone moment."

"Dollar Beers" is the lead track on "Don't Look Back," an album of Johnson's music issued Friday on the Innova label. The cover, which she designed, shows a green cassette: Johnson is synesthetic, and "Dollar Beers" always conveyed the color green to her. Fittingly, the album feels like a mixtape, simultaneously a record of how Johnson achieved her own style and a series of song-stories that share an elusive yet unmistakable core of tragedy.

"I wanted to make a mix for everybody — like, this is where I've been," Johnson said. "'Dollar Beers' had to be the first track, because that's where the idea for all these songs emerged. What does it mean to write songs as a serious composer — whatever that means?"

Much of the rest of the music on "Don't Look Back" — the songs "Pilot," "Starling," and "Cutter," plus excerpts from an opera-in-progress called "The After Time" – was written in Boston, after Johnson joined the faculty of Wellesley College in 2009. She remembers walking along the North End waterfront every night, listening to Logic Pro files of her works in progress.

The resulting music holds multiple dualities in a distinct kind of balance: pop versus classical singing styles, electric and acoustic instrumentation. It also represents an interplay between her composing life and her academic work, which involves exploring connections between music and traumatic experience. She became fascinated with the topic after picking up Judith Herman's landmark book, "Trauma and Recovery," which led to her doctoral dissertation on the subject at NYU.

Traumatic narratives, Johnson explained, "tend to be atemporal, and also evacuated of a lot of detail — they come in brilliant flashes of emotion that is not able to be corroborated in a highly detailed sense. So the pieces on this album, which are all about different types of traumas, my approach is to write very spare, evocative lyrics" — meant to make the listening experience as open-ended as possible.

The pieces also relate back to Johnson's own life, though in ways that are indirect, oblique, or even imaginary. In her liner notes she calls "Dollar Beers" a "story about many days in my own life that almost went horribly, irrevocably wrong. It's both fiction and memory, exploring various outcomes, emotions, and temporalities within the seemingly simplistic framework of a pop ballad." The seeming paradox is one more way in which Johnson's music holds different valences in a fragile equilibrium.

"People can remember things that didn't happen, but in a way they did, because they had some extreme emotional resonance with what is retained and the trace of what can't necessarily be corroborated," Johnson said. "So a lot of these stories are either meditations on me [or] things that didn't really happen to me, but that kind of blur a boundary between a story I read that resonated with me, and things in my life that almost went in that direction but didn't quite, but I still feel impacted by them.

"One reason that in the liner notes I don't talk so much about the pieces is that I believe strongly in empowering the listener to have their own response," she continued. "If they want to know more about the origin story and my intention as an artist, they can go find it. But I don't want to force that on anybody. The titles already shape the piece so much. They live in the listener; they have to."

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