

Deconstructing (A Streetcar Named) Desire: gender re-citation in Belle Reprise.

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This essay begins with three intertextual moments of citing/"sighting" Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The first, which closes the main narrative portion of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *A Handmaid's Tale*, has Offred, the handmaid, speaking the following words as she is delivered to an unknown destiny: "I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped" (378). In Atwood's novel, Offred's fate runs parallel to that of Moira, the lesbian character. Guilty of what the dystopian regime of Gilead calls "gender treachery," Moira is captured and forced to work at a whorehouse called Jezebel's, where the women can have sex with one another as long as they service men, so that they, too, are perpetually in strangers' hands--or at least until they, like Blanche in *Streetcar*, are driven over the edge and banished from the narrative.

The second, Rosalyn Drexler's 1984 play *Lobby*, is a sequel to *Streetcar* that finds Blanche taking up residence in the Chelsea Hotel with Oscar Wilde as her neighbor and closest confidant. Drexler's Blanche has forsaken the pretensions toward elegance, the histrionics of her past, though she seems to admire these qualities in the equally battle-scarred Oscar; at the point that we see her, after her release from the mental institution, her greatest struggle is to reconcile with and forgive Stella, her sister.

In the third, Tony Kushner's 1993-1994 epic play *Angels in America*, bits from *Streetcar* (and other texts) whiz through the air, tempered by the awareness that an AIDS-dominated world affects even the potential for camp inspiration. Belize in Part One, *Millennium Approaches*, scrutinizes Prior in the hospital, telling him, "Stella for star. Let me see. You look like shit, why yes indeed, *comme la merde*" (59). And when an even more ill Prior in Part Two, *Perestroika*, tells Hannah, the sensible Mormon who has brought him to the emergency room, "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers," she replies, "Well that's a stupid thing to do" (141).

What is striking is not simply how often Williams's play (and the subsequent Elia Kazan film) of *A Streetcar Named Desire* has been recycled, so that it has taken on the status of a cultural artifact, but also how deeply these re-citings of Williams's text are caught up in issues of gender and sexuality, as well as issues of performance and the

performative. Of queerness and the attachment to cultural objects, Eve Sedgwick writes in *Tendencies*, "We needed for there to be sites where the meanings didn't line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love" (3). Perhaps some of the "fascination" of *Streetcar* is the number of these sites--masculinity, femininity, madness, desire--where these slippages of meanings, what Sedgwick would term excesses, tend to occur: where the lines don't fall neatly into place. The trajectory of desire supposedly ends, as Blanche knows, in death (a trope that takes on new significance in the age of AIDS): but do the revisited texts extend this trajectory? Do they make it a circular one? Or do they reject it altogether? And what of the audience, the "desiring bodies"--those strangers upon whose kindness the performers depend, even when that's a "stupid thing to do"? These are some of the questions taken up by an explicitly queer, decidedly deconstructive re-vision of *Streetcar* that is my fourth intertext and the focus of this discussion, *Bloodlips's* and *Split Britches's* collaborative play entitled *Belle Reprieve*.

First presented at London's Drill Hall in January 1991 and then a month later at LaMama in New York, *Belle Reprieve* is a work Co-written and performed by Bette Bourne and Paul Shaw of the gay British group *Bloodlips*, and Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver of *Split Britches*, a lesbian-identified off-off Broadway group. By altering and reversing the gender roles in *Streetcar* (Blanche is played by Bette Bourne, as "a man in a dress"; Stanley is played by Peggy Shaw, as "a butch lesbian"; Mitch is played by Paul Shaw, as "a fairy disguised as a man"; and Stella by Lois Weaver as "a woman disguised as a woman" [4]), this theatrical piece creates a Brechtian commentary on the sexual roles and games in Williams's text. *Belle Reprieve's* intertexts (which include the film version of *Streetcar*), its moments of vaudeville, and the characters' own self-conscious attention to theatricality extend the gendered role-playing into a deconstruction of dramatic role-playing itself. Like Heiner Muller's *Hamletmachine* or like many of Charles Ludlam's works for the *Ridiculous Theater* (*Big Hotel*, *Bluebeard*, etc.), *Belle Reprieve's* response to the past, to its theatrical antecedents, is a complex one. Ultimately, the work is less of a parody or an adaptation of *Streetcar* than it is a postmodern refashioning and a "queering" of a play that is already, as C. W. E. Bigsby puts it, about "a culture in a state of crisis, its certainties dislocating, its myths collapsing" (16).

Throughout *Belle Reprieve*, the characters/performers comment on the relationships between the roles of gender and sexuality they play (both in this piece and in "real life"), and the gender/sexuality of Williams's characters. Williams hints throughout *Streetcar*, for instance, at Stella's sensuality: the morning after the "poker night" fight (and tempestuous sexual reconciliation) with Stanley, we are told that as she lies on the bed with a comic book in her hand, "[h]er eyes and lips have that almost narcotized tranquility that is [on] the faces of Eastern idols" (62). The writers of *Belle Reprieve* go one step further and play with the image of Stella's sexual drive as overdetermined and narcissistic. In her opening speech--directed partially at herself, partially at the audience--she asks:

Is there something you want? What can I do for you? Do you know who I am, what I feel, how I think? You want my body. My soul, my food, my bed, my skin, my hands? You want to touch me, hold me, lick me, smell me, eat me, have me? You think you need a little

mote time to decide? Well, you've got a little over an hour to have your fill. (5)

As the object of Stanley's desire, Stella here has embraced (and refigured) her own role as commodity; moreover, her words call attention to the audience's status as consumers, as hungry to possess the performer, to get their "fill" of her--at least until the (performance) time is up. As if she were aware of Williams's stage directions, Belle Reprieve's Stella explains to Mitch, "Look, I'm supposed to wander around in a state of narcotized sexuality. That's my part" (6). Blanche's visit brings out Stella's quasi-incestuous revelations of her attraction to her sister, as the two don matching cheerleaders' outfits and sing about exploring one another's bodies "under the covers" (14). But we also see the "colored lights" of *Streetcar* enacted in the moments of passion between Stella and Stanley (doubled in Brechtian fashion by the awareness of many audience members in the original performance that Lois Weaver [Stella] and Peggy Shaw [Stanley] were real-life lovers)--particularly when Stella pulls off Stanley's ripped T-shirt as Stanley carries her offstage, thus evoking Marlon Brando's Stanley in the very moment that the audience's attention is called to Peggy Shaw's body. As Elm Diamond puts it, in an often-cited essay on Brechtianism and feminism that has, I think, interesting applications for discussions of queer theater as well, "Brechtian theory imagines a polyvalence to the body's representation, for the performer's body is also historicized, loaded with its own history and that of the character, and these histories ruffle the smooth edges of representation" (89).

In a monologue that *Split Britches* member Deb Margolin wrote for the play, Stella talks to Cassandra, the seer, asking her for advice on love, and poses and sings "Running Wild" like Marilyn Monroe, after she says to the imaginary Cassandra, "Come sweet prophetsess, what is going to happen? Tell me, I'm nailed to this story. Cut me down. I'm in here. Can't you see me?" (22). In this sense, Stella is portrayed as a woman who is entrapped in the limited "part" that has been written for her, yet who makes the best of it by immersing herself in her own desires. She tells Stanley, "I know that your tension is sexual, and it's a desire I share in, but not for your pleasure, for my own" (24). Her words mock Williams's image of Stella as a woman who is willing to sacrifice everything for Stanley's needs (here, even when Blanche is trying to argue Stella out of her attraction to Stanley ["I think he's a fag," she says (27)], Stella is more interested in the taste of the Coke she is drinking, which she conflates with her orgasmic satisfaction: "Pure sugar, liquid sex" [27]). Elizabeth Grosz, in an important essay on "Refiguring Lesbian Desire," argues that the traditional psychoanalytic interpretation of desire as based on "lack" should be replaced with an account of lesbian desire that is full, productive, predicated on presences rather than absences--more, she says, like Gilles Deleuze's characterization of "practices and action" than the Freudian view that links the female with objects, receptacles, emptinesses (75). Belle Reprieve's Stella is caught between her role as desired object (thus her evocation of Marilyn Monroe), and desiring subject; whereas Williams implies that the characters in *Streetcar* are motivated by desire, by lack--again, the end (or satisfaction) of which is death--the characters in Belle Reprieve parody and multiply their desires, making them what Grosz would call "energies, excitations [and] impulses" (78).

It is difficult not to bring Allan--Blanche's first lover in *Streetcar*, who killed himself after

Blanche discovered his homosexuality--to mind as we see Mitch in *Belle Reprieve* flirt alternately with Blanche (the drag queen) and with the very butch Stanley. If Mitch, portrayed as a "mama's boy" in Williams's play, is implicitly another Allan, then *Belle Reprieve*'s Mitch is correspondingly only part of the way out of the closet. After he delivers a long speech describing (in intricate detail) a vision of a man with "large bedroom eyes" on a blue feathered throne (16), he engages in a frenzied dialogue of erotic machismo with Stanley (which also evokes some of the homoeroticism of Williams's "poker night" scene). When Mitch gets carried away after he and Stanley arm wrestle--"Bite me! Bite me! Suck on me..." (17)--he has to pretend he is talking about mosquitoes, but the sequence culminates in Stanley's song, "I'm a Man" ("spelled M ... A ... N" [19]). Mitch woos Blanche by appearing to her above the bathtub, wearing a fairy costume and playing the ukelele; later, in another one of the piece's tableaulike monologues that seems to be directed out into the audience, he says:

I think it all started to go wrong when I wasn't allowed to be a boy scout. There were more important things to be done. Vacuuming, clearing up at home, putting the garbage out... Then one day I fell in love with a beautiful young man. He came like a messenger from another world bearing a message of simple physical desire. But it was already too late, for me everything about the body was bound up with pain and boredom. I even used to ear fast because I found it so boring. Soon the boy left. ... Then I was alone. At night I would lie awake on my bed, and imagine I could hear things. (33)

The newsboy in *Streetcar*, referred to by Blanche as the "young man," here becomes the "messenger" of desire for Mitch instead-- but again, the invitation is not mutually reciprocal. If Mitch in *Streetcar* is self-conscious about his body (he tells Blanche that he's ashamed of the way he perspires [88], and that he's afraid his "heavy build" makes him look clumsy), then Mitch in *Belle Reprieve* is, like Stella, both the same and the opposite: he is slight rather than heavy, "bored" with his body, but the effect is to underscore the loneliness and marginalization that both Mitches feel. Williams's Mitch looks on helplessly from the sidelines at the end of *Streetcar* as Blanche is carted off to the asylum--but in *Belle Reprieve*, Mitch and Stella join one another in singing that they're not quite the "pushovers" (36) that Williams's text would make them out to be.

In *Streetcar*, when Blanche and Mitch return from their date at the amusement park on Lake Pontchartrain (notably bearing, the stage directions say, "a plaster statuette of Mae West" [85]), Blanche remarks to Mitch, "I don't think I've ever tried so hard to be gay and made such a dismal mess of it." She adds, echoing the language of the carnival they have just attended, "I get ten points for trying!" (85). Much, of course, has already been made of the original Blanche as a "coded" gay character. John Clum calls her "in many ways the quintessential gay character in American closet drama" (150), while David Savran points out that original impulses to see Blanche as "only" a "female impersonator" have risked creating what he sees as reductive or homophobic interpretations of the play, though not necessarily so (115). More recently, Anne Fleche has suggested that it might be more useful to see Blanche's character as an example of "the performative, constrained enactment of gender"; Blanche, Fleche argues,

can be viewed as the representation of a woman who finally doesn't pass as a subject, because she does her gender incorrectly, and because her hyperbolic theatricality challenges the masculine/feminine heterosexual codes that enable and constrain gender performativity. (266)

Blanche's identity in *Belle Reprieve* is triply (or perhaps quadruply) embedded: "she" is a woman played by a man who imagines herself not just as Williams's Blanche DuBois, but as Vivien Leigh (like Bette Bourne, a Brit) playing the role of Blanche in Kazan's movie. These multiple visible "texts" of Blanche depend in part on being hyperbolic: just as the "original" Blanche embodies her sexuality through the near-caricatured imagery of the Southern Belle, *Belle Reprieve*'s Blanche has an identity composed of surfaces, of costumes, of performances, such that when Stanley says he is going to look through the contents of her trunk to determine who she is, she tells the audience, "And so it was that I set out to prove to the world that I was indeed myself." Stella says, "She threw herself at the feet of an unforgiving world to prove her identity," and Mitch adds, "The answer was somewhere in that trunk" (9). In other words, in a postmodern theatrical universe, "Blanche" is inseparable from the costumes, the odds and ends, the fragments that make up the performance of her "identity." Williams's Blanche, herself, is a consummate actress and role-player; Bigsby, among other critics, has characterized her as "construct[ing] her own drama, costuming herself with care, arranging the set, enacting a series of roles, developing her own scenario" (61). And if Bette Bourne as Blanche in drag is a comment on what Clum and others would see as the original 'drag act' of Williams's Blanche, it is worth keeping in mind Judith Butler's argument in *Bodies that Matter* that drag is predicated in part on an awareness of the performance of difference: "What is 'performed' in drag is, of course, the sign of gender, a sign that is not the same as the body it figures, but that cannot be read without it" (237). In *Belle Reprieve*, Blanche describes herself as feeling like "an old hotel. Beautiful bits of dereliction in need of massive renovation" (28). As a 'renovation' of the text of *Streetcar*, *Belle Reprieve* itself reassembles the fragments of Blanche into what are still fragments, but ones that allow us to read them (and hence her) differently. Stanley says to Blanche in what replaces the "rape scene,"

We're in this together, me and you. We've known that from the start. We're the extremes, the stereotypes. We are as far as we can go. We have no choice, me and you. We've tried it all, haven't we? We've rejected ourselves, not trusted ourselves, mirrored ourselves, and we always come back to ourselves. We're the warriors. (35)

His words reflect Michel Foucault's sense that power and desire are "linked in a more complex and primary way than through the interplay of a primitive, natural, and living energy welling up from below, and a higher order seeking to stand in its way" (81). In *Streetcar*, the same binarism exists when Blanche attempts to convince Stella that Stanley's an "animal" and that we've advanced since the time of the "brute" (72). Blanche says this, no doubt, in her effort to ward off the acknowledgment of her own sexuality, her own desiring body.

If Williams's Blanche is rejected by society because her sexual drive is incommensurate with her status both as a woman and as a "spinster," though, the sexuality of Belle Reprieve's Blanche has been affected by another factor. Her song "Beautiful Dream" transforms the first Blanche's pleasure in bathing into a lament for the disappearance of the steam baths in the age of AIDS:

Thought we'd party 'til the end of time
But it's over, seems so long ago now
Down the long parade, see them slowly fade
As they all leave one by one
Running out of steam, now the beautiful dream
Has gone. (29)

"I'll always choose applause over death" (29), she adds, though--and Blanche's role-playing as Blanche and as drag queen is laced, continually, with her comments on her desire, yet inability, to resemble Vivien Leigh, for when she hears that music that repeats itself inside her head, she sees "a dark burgundy curtain opening on the stage, and there we are, just me and Vivien" (28). Her constant commentary on her role reflects Belle Reprieve's more general interweaving of its critique of Streetcar's gender roles with the queer appropriation of Brechtian metadrama. The set and props, which consist mostly of exaggerations of selected elements from the set Williams envisioned (at one point, the actors tap dance on stage costumed as giant paper lanterns), underscore the relationship between the theatrical and historical "past" of Streetcar and the deconstructive "present" of Belle Reprieve. Indeed, in the grand tradition of camp and/or of Ludlam's Ridiculous Theater, the outright tackiness of the many slapstick and vaudeville numbers throughout the piece (even including a pie-in-the-face routine) provides the pleasure of acknowledging artifice at the same time that it reminds the spectators of how artifice is clearly a part of Williams's play itself.

By the time the rape scene in Belle Reprieve transpires, Blanche--who has just complained that she wants to be in a "real play" ("This is the most confusing show I've ever been in," she says [33])--tries to resist the apparent inevitability of succumbing to what Williams has dictated for her character: when Stanley says, "If you want to play a woman, the woman in this play gets raped and goes crazy in the end," she responds, "I don't want to get raped and go crazy, I just wanted to wear a nice frock, and look at the shit they've given me!" (35).

Blanche's resistance is part of the play's larger resistance to narrative closure; Stella taunts the audience, asking, "Did you figure it out yet? who's who, what's what, who gets what, where the toaster is plugged in? Did you get what you wanted?" (36). The spectators' desires are, like those of the characters, mocked, mimicked, brought to the surface and rendered both familiar and strange. Blanche's closing words in Streetcar form the basis of her opening words in Belle Reprieve: she says, from inside of the box she climbs out of at the beginning, "I've always depended on the strangeness of strangers" (6). "Strange" in this case is also a mock-synonym for "queer," but as I remarked in my own

opening, the strangers are also the spectators, who may or may not (in these terms) be "strange." In the end, the actors sing, in a vaudevillian encore, "I am madly in love with my art, I love to play my part" (37). The actors/characters of *Belle Reprieve* have managed to show the connections between desire and performance that were always there in *Streetcar*, but here are made wildly, parodically, sensually, and madly evident.

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