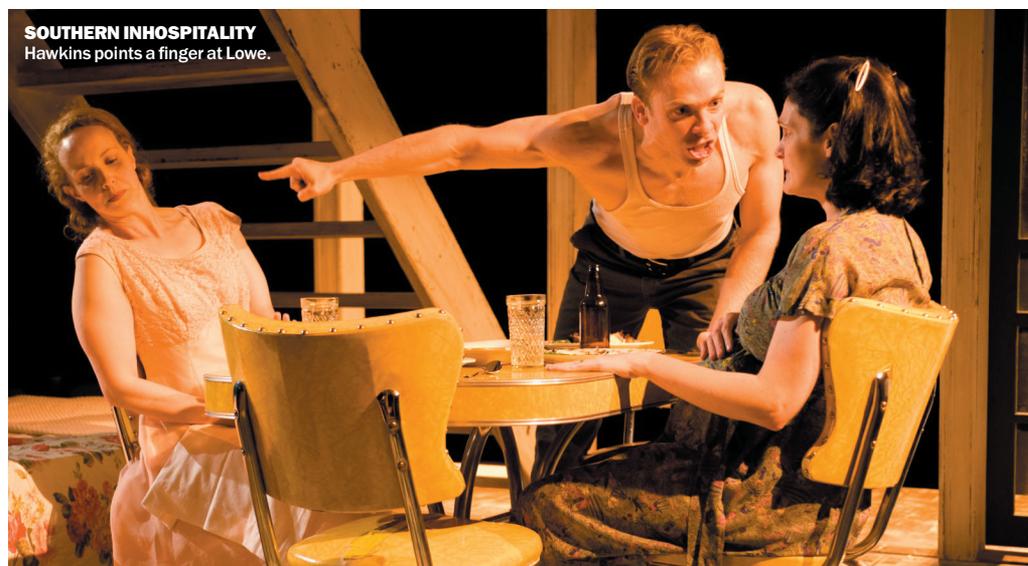


Theater

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Reviews

A Streetcar Named Desire



SOUTHERN INHOSPITALITY
Hawkins points a finger at Lowe.

★★★★★

Writers' Theatre (see Resident companies). By Tennessee Williams. Dir. David Cromer. With Natasha Lowe, Stacy Stoltz, Matt Hawkins, Danny McCarthy.

"A single girl, a girl alone in the world, has got to keep a firm hold on her emotions, or she'll be lost!" So says the onetime Mississippi belle Blanche DuBois to her would-be suitor midway through Williams's classic. By this point, of course, even those of us new to *Streetcar* have begun to suspect that Blanche's disingenuous endorsement of caution is too little, too late; indeed, she's as lost as they come.

Caution, of course, can be one's enemy as well; an overabundance of it can lead to stasis, as is often the case with *Streetcar*. *The New York Times* critic Frank Rich opened his review of the 1992 Broadway revival, which starred Jessica Lange and Alec Baldwin, by writing, "Depending on your feelings about *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is either the greatest or second-greatest play ever written by an American." Such reverence, as well as the lingering shadows of the original leads (Jessica Tandy onstage, Vivien Leigh on film and Marlon Brando in both), renders too many revivals timid copies.

Thank goodness, then, for Cromer. The director's bracingly honest

productions in recent years of American classics by the likes of Inge and Wilder brought him at last to New York's attention. Now, at the end of a season in which he saw both a disappointing Broadway debut and his third consecutive Lortel award for Off Broadway direction, he returns home to cast his gimlet eye upon Williams's postwar New Orleans.

Cromer's sensuous, physical production shines a fresh, revealing (one might say Chinese-lantern-free) light upon Williams's sweltering characters. The approach is one of tearing down walls: both literally, as with Collette Pollard's brilliant row-house set, cramped and claustrophobic but cleverly transparent, and psychologically, with a few smart, light touches giving us glimpses into Blanche's ongoing breakdown.

Lowe's Blanche is neither a delicately fading rose nor a jackal in sheep's clothing. From the moment she arrives, unbidden, at the ramshackle New Orleans home of her sister Stella (Stoltz) and her coarse brother-in-law Stanley (Hawkins), we can see in her haunted eyes and jangly nerves that she knows she won't find here the deliverance she hopes for.

Even in Blanche's most pointed exchanges with the suspicious Stanley or her most casual put-downs of Stella, we sense her desperation, her anxiety that the carefully woven deceptions will fall apart before she finds a solution.

Only when she sees a glimmer of hope in Stanley's friend Mitch (the remarkably genuine McCarthy) does Blanche let her emotional guard down a touch, even as her intellectual self crafts further fibs.

Hawkins's Stanley strikes us as less macho, more posturing than the standard Brando-Xerox. The actor brings out the juvenile and the insecure in his Polish-accented Stanley Kowalski, for whom his sister-in-law's arrival is a vivid reminder that his wife married below her station. Stoltz brings her usual unadulterated, aching honesty to her role, making Stella seem more substantial than she often does.

Outstanding work by sound designer Josh Schmidt (with whom Cromer collaborated on *Adding Machine: A Musical*) and lighting designer Heather Gilbert—who supplies attention-grabbing visuals while subtly shifting focus as needed—helps create an intensely immersive environment.

Cromer elicits from his terrific actors an intense engagement with Williams's poetics. That, along with some organic embellishments—we won't give them away but to say they enhance Williams's coy moments in a similar fashion as Cromer's now-famous treatment of *Our Town*'s culmination—makes his *Streetcar* the most desirable act of the spring season.—Kris Vire

From a Fading Light

★★★★★

Plasticene (see Fringe & storefront). Dir. Dexter Bullard. Created and performed by Mark Comiskey, Hanna Dworkin, Laura T. Fisher, Sharon Göpfert, Sean Kaplan, Brian Shaw.

An uneasy blend of naturalism, abstraction and physical spectacle, *From a Fading Light* is an interesting, engaging, bewildering and ultimately overindulgent experiment. For Plasticene's first new work since 2006, a promenade piece that takes place throughout a former Wicker Park church, the audience is split into three groups and led to various stations indoors and out.

It's unclear from our single viewing whether each group sees the same scenes or if we all get different pieces of the puzzle. Regardless, we're certainly left to fill in the gaps in what seems to be a meditation on faith and death, with glimpses into the betrayals and intrigues among a very small cult on the evening of its Jim Jones-esque culmination.

There's something exhilarating about seeing actors we think of as the grown-ups in the room—such as Famous Door vets Fisher and Dworkin, whom we're most likely to see these days in standards at Victory Gardens or Writers' Theatre—keeping at this sort of exploratory work. But by the second time we're all gathered in the gorgeous sanctuary space—the first instance having been an extended, well-choreographed but empty representation of religious ecstasy—our patience is tried. This last, painstaking candle ceremony seemed to mean more to the performers than the audience.—KV



RED-LIGHT DISTRICT Plasticene's performers get in sync.

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