CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

AN M.A. THESIS-PROJECT IN DIRECTING

A thesis-project submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Theatre

by

Dennis Stephen McGraw

June, 1977
The Thesis-Project of Dennis Stephen McGraw is approved:

Helen Backlin

William Bellman

John Bioc, Chairman

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ABSTRACT

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE: AN M.A. THESIS-PROJECT IN DIRECTING

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The decision for an M.A. thesis-project in directing was made in October, 1976. Because directing is an integral part of my professional objectives, I desired the academic sanction of my directing skills through my M.A. program at California State University at Northridge. I wanted to make my course work applicable to the project but at the same time attempt a directing approach I had never taken before. I was a member of Dr. James Brock's seminar on Tennessee Williams in 1976 and thus satisfied my first intention by selecting A Streetcar Named Desire. I deemed it more exciting if staged arena or in-the-round style than the "fourth-wall" staging for which it was written and thereby satisfied my second intention. By December 1, the thesis committee was formed, a thesis-project proposal formulated, a production staff organized, successful screening by the Acting-Directing Area Committee at-
tained, and a LAB Theatre slot for May 11-15, 1977, awarded.

The thesis-project proposal contains a brief statement of my general directorial approach as well as an initial production concept. My general approach is stated as follows:

"As a director I consider the ensemble approach the most successful for most productions. I generally initiate my artistic interpretation only as a point of departure in the pre-production and rehearsal period. Thereafter, I encourage an open dialogue between each member of the cast and crew in order to share, develop, and ultimately agree upon a mutual and integrated art work. I become more arbitrary as the director during the final weeks prior to opening to ensure a coherent production. I have found this method to be the most effective for the attainment of the spontaneity necessary to "live" theatre. It is hoped that each production member, cast and crew alike, realizes the advantages to all concerned of a production founded upon reciprocal contributions rather than individual efforts. The production process can best be summed up as a mutual period of research, interpretation, exploration, contradiction, and finally, re-interpretation."

Later in the proposal I describe a production concept as,

"...an organic set of ideas whose form is first suggested by the director and then coordinated with the creative members of the cast and crew. Its final realization is most strongly in evidence in the late stages of the rehearsal period and then embel-lished throughout the duration of the performances."

The initial production concept is also described in the proposal. Briefly, no radical deviation from Williams' original script was to be attempted, and the 1947 New Orleans setting was to be retained. However, any stereotype interpretations of character intended to repeat those in the famous film version by Elia Kazan were to be avoided. The emphasis was to be on strong character interaction with each other and the environment. No specific image or vision was to be forced upon the interpretation; rather, an organic framework, in this case Williams' lyricism, was to be provided. Within that framework the musical concept of consonance/dissonance was elicited as a parallel to the drama-
tic sense of harmony/disturbance.

This initial concept was communicated in early production meetings which were initiated in November and resumed in March prior to production. A consistent communication was achieved in these meetings with satisfactory designs resulting. The only exception was that some original music intended for the production was inconsistent with the concept and ultimately not used. Recordings from the period were utilized instead. The concept was also modified by the thesis committee in two important areas: The concept would more accurately be defined as environmental theatre because the audience was to feel as if they were almost neighbors to the Kowalskis; in-the-round implies that the environment is mostly contained within the encircled space with the audience a little more removed. Also, an educational theatre approach was to be taken, meaning that if all the roles could not be cast with the director's expectations, an allowance for actor development would be taken into consideration in the final outcome.

After a week of open auditions with no pre-casting, the educational theatre approach seemed advisable. The role of Stanley, in particular, was in question. Casting consultation in terms of recommendations for roles and personal knowledge of the actors' attitudes was conducted with members of the committee and LAB Theatre faculty advisors. They stipulated that LAB shows were to be cast from the students first, the faculty only if necessary, and outside the campus as a last resort. Several advisors concurred that a student actor that could portray Stanley's qualities may not have read. However, several excellent actors read for the role, and I elected to choose one who I was con-
vinced had the talent to achieve an effective portrayal. I felt no justification for casting a non-student based on the strong talent available.

A talented, cooperative and enthusiastic cast was chosen, and a highly productive rehearsal period was maintained. The major difficulties in the production period occurred during tech week when we finally gained access to the Studio Theatre itself. The added burden of having to strike the set and re-set each night, the lack of crew volunteers, and a directorial oversight relative to the lack of realization of the numerous props and lengthy prop and costume changes between scenes all contributed to several sluggish performances. However, most of the problems were solved as well as they could be by the remaining three performances.

By closing night I was satisfied that the production had achieved with consistency the original objectives outlined in the proposal. I thought that credible acting performances had been universally achieved, and that the underlying humor in Williams' script had emerged as a refreshing modification of the declared intentions of the original concept. Though there some technical inconsistencies in performance, I thought the stage space, lighting, sound, costumes, and props were all effective. I felt that the lyrical rhythms of the play were properly emphasized. The production has convinced me that the environmental staging is effective for this show.
of its diversity, the theatre is reacting to the creative and exciting potential.

WON'T

LAB BOARD MEMBERS

to create and explore
STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE
LABORATORY THEATRE
presents
A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

by Tennessee Williams

Directed by DENNIS McGRAW

Original Music by JEFF MARR

and Lighting Design by JOHN SHIPLEY

CAST
(order of appearance)

..................Nerissa Tedesco
..................Kitty Ruth
..................John Lizzi
..................Tom Yates

PRODUCTION STAFF

Stage Manager.................................Joel George
Sound...........................................Bob Dugger
Properties.................................Lisa Lazarus

PRODUCTION CREWS

Lights............................................Ted Peterson
Sound...........................................Laurie Wolf
Make-up........................................Jill Seifer

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Direction by Dennis McGraw as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts Degree in Theatre Arts.

GRADUATE THESIS COMMITTEE

John D. Biroc, Chairman
Dr. Willard F. Bellman
Helen M. Backlin