

**Cleveland Opera Theater to present
André Previn's *A Streetcar Named Desire***

by Mike Telin



Steeped in desire, passion, and deceit, it's no wonder that Tennessee Williams' Pulitzer Prize-winning play *A Streetcar Named Desire* eventually found its place on the opera stage. On Friday, December 4 at 7:30 pm in Masonic Auditorium, Cleveland Opera Theater will present the Ohio premiere of composer André Previn's and librettist Philip Littell's 1995 opera based on Williams' iconic play. The production will be repeated on Sunday, December 6 at 3:00 pm. (Left, Previn conducting the L.A. Philharmonic in 1986).

COT's artistic director Scott Skiba recalled his first experience with the work, which was premiered at San Francisco Opera in 1998. "I remember sitting in the Oberlin Conservatory library watching it on a LaserDisc," he told me over breakfast at a popular Ohio City café. "At first I wasn't sure what to think of it, but nevertheless I found it interesting."

The idea of producing *Streetcar* has been in discussion at [COT](#) for a few years, but when a reduction of the orchestra score was completed, taking the number of players down from 70 to 40, it suddenly became realistic to mount a production. Conductor Domenico Boyagian will lead a cast that will feature Andrea Anelli as Blanche DuBois, Rebecca Freshwater and Benjamin Czarnota as Stella and Stanley Kowalski, Timothy Culver as Harold "Mitch" Miller, and Sandra Ross and Jerry Tucker as Eunice and Steve Hubbell.

"We're thrilled to be producing *Streetcar*," Skiba said. "As a stage director with a background as an actor and a dancer, theater is important to me, and since Cleveland is a strong theater town, people will at least be familiar with the play or the movie, if not

both.” The three-act opera will be sung in English with English subtitles and has a running time of approximately 3½ hours including two intermissions.

Skiba pointed out that although Previn has provided some specific stage directions in the score, those may have been based on the set design that was used during the premiere. “In the play there are specific references to music that Previn didn’t carry through on in the opera. But what we have discovered is that the movie is not the play, and that the opera is not the play *or* the movie.”



In order to be true to the play and to the opera’s libretto, Skiba and the cast read them both and discussed the differences between them. “In many instances we’re highlighting those differences during the musical interludes that Previn has provided, so people who know the play will be able to find those details.”

Skiba added that while he is trying to be as true to the libretto as possible, if something isn’t working during rehearsal, he will examine the same place in the play, and he has often discovered that a change has been made in the libretto. As an example, he pulled out the score and the script from his bag and leafed through the pages. “See?” he said, pointing to a spot in the score. “The two stage directions are different. ‘Intertwining arms and walking away’ is a lot different from saying, ‘get away from me!’ It’s been an interesting process finding those places and then figuring out a way to honor them.”

Describing Previn's score as rhythmically complex, Skiba thinks that the composer's experience and skill at film scoring definitely come through in the opera. "With the right tempo, all of the natural pauses in the language are there, and there are musical punctuations for the action as well. It's all in the score and I think that really speaks to the actor/dancer in me."

In order to get the cast as close to the audience as possible, Skiba is taking profit of Masonic Auditorium's arena-like feel. "The stage will be thrust into the auditorium in front of the main curtain, which means that we've had to find creative ways for the cast to enter and leave. Projections will depict the time and place of 1940s New Orleans, and these will change as Blanche begins to unravel. Portraying the passage of time is also important, so we're treating Previn's musical interludes in a stylized manner, almost like fast forward on the DVD player. During those moments you'll catch Stanley and Stella in an embrace in the kitchen, or Blanche looking at Stanley a little bit too long."

Skiba said that costuming is pivotal to the success of the production. "You could produce *Streetcar* on a bare stage with some furniture as long as the costumes are right. Designer Esther Haberen did her master's thesis on *Streetcar*, and it's been wonderful to work with her because so much of the show is rooted in the costumes." COT's production will feature set designs by Val Kozkenko, lighting design by Rob Wachala, and projection design by Brittany Merenda.

I asked Skiba why Tennessee Williams' play has remained so popular since its premiere in December of 1947. "It's about humans at their most animalistic," he answered quickly. "What's great about opera is that it's never a story about what *happened*, but rather a story about what *happens* in human relationships. I feel like you could update *Streetcar* with little issue — Stanley could pick up his cell phone and text Blanche — but it is a period piece, and a period we still feel connected to. The characters could be in our own families. Blanche is very much the colored paper lantern that she puts on the light, and Stanley is very much the naked light bulb on the pull chain. There is no artifice with him, whereas Blanche is all about façade. He is about unvarnished truth and she is about truth the way it ought to be told. But there's no malicious intent on either of their parts."

Skiba is also certain that if it were written today, *A Streetcar Named Desire* would be regarded as a great work. "It's about the universal theme of disrupted happiness and the willingness to restore that happiness through whatever means necessary. So yes, I think it would be just as popular."

Rounding out our conversation, I asked about the scream made famous by Marlon Brando. “Yes, the Stella scream is in there,” Skiba said with a laugh. “But it is much more compressed in the opera.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 1, 2015.

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