

DON'T EXPECT TOO MUCH OF "STREETCAR"

BEFORE trying to explain to would-be theatregoers anxious to see Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* at the National Theatre, Nairobi, let me give them a warning — don't expect too much.

The Nairobi City Players, through no real fault of their own, have bitten off a bit more than they can chew this time. Only Nancy Roe as a pitiful, tormented Blanche DuBois does anything to save a complex play that proved as time went on to become more and more a strain on the cast.

For Nancy Roe the play was a triumph. She alone held together a cast that faltered, not through signs of inexperience, but something of a failure to get to grips with the emotional tenor of the play. There was insufficient contrast between the brute-force shouting and screaming of an easily-provoked Stanley Kowalski (Sbish Trzebinski) and the more tender mother-loving "Mitch" (Jeremy Woods.)

The direction also did not impress on its supporting cast the vital need in this play to appear normal even when the tormented Miss DuBois was going through an emotional scene. Williams meant in his play to make Blanche's apparent madness to be a singular almost introverted type of neurosis; only a casual nonchalance on the part of those caught up with the tormented time in the Kowalski household could have helped the audience really value the lead actress's performance and fully interpret the nuances behind her words — this was not forthcoming.

One fact that hampered the cast was maintaining an American accent. I would have thought that if the cast insisted on American accents, which are possibly vital, then a little research would have disclosed to them that people from Mississippi — the deep South and New Orleans — drawl rather languidly. The accent used by the majority of the cast was definitely of a Brooklyn, New York, flavour, and three young American girls sitting behind me were quick to point out this discrepancy.

Although this was the first night, it was disappointing to see sloppy production. Cues were not synchronised, sound effects dragged, and I would strongly suggest the inter-scene lulls be kept to an absolute minimum. Moreover, the lighting effects left much to be desired.

Blanche DuBois' sister Stella, married to Kowalski, is played by Anita Day. The part calls for a rather bewildered approach of a woman in love with a violent man, loving a sister who had dominated

her, torn between the two, and unable to equate the facts, and evaluate the circumstances and results of her sister living in a two-room flat with her husband and herself.

Anita Day tries hard to make the part come alive, but while her acting is quite competent, her real anguish lacked emphasis, and this important factor led to the end of the first act and a considerable part of the second act falling a little flat.

The upstairs "friends", Steve and Eunice Hubbel, were adequate. Howard G. Clarke and Lorelei Tomko provided the comedy relief and can be satisfied with their performances.

Pablo Gonzales — a minor part — played by Lester Rogers bears little mention, as does a young collector, played by Michael Cary — whom Miss DuBois attempts to seduce through a fleeting kiss — although his brief almost wordless part was accomplished with a conviction of complete bafflement — one of the best short scenes in the production.

In the male leading role — Stanley Kowalski — Sbish Trzebinski — tries hard, unfortunately without success, to play the foil to the meek Miss DuBois as the uncouth, bullying, ever-beastly brother-in-law.

WASTED SCENE

Sbish Trzebinski must remember that while at certain times he is expected to shout, there are other lines in the script that need speaking with some feeling. The scene when at Blanche's birthday party he presents a bus ticket for her journey whence she had come, was ruined from the point of a climax. The time the audience had been waiting for — how long before she is kicked out, and how — was tossed aside as briefly as a "yes" or "no."

Williams' theme of intolerance, however, is born out clearly by Mr. Trzebinski's loudness and violent gesticulations. His American accent, though, is appalling.

The man in the middle — "Mitch" played by Jeremy Woods was for me the biggest disappointment of the production. While one expects a somewhat slow-thinking, mother-loving "boy" to appear rather "soft" on stage, there must, however, be some substance to the performance.

The production, directed by Jack Dunbar, assisted by Ellen Mloszewski, ends today. I hope to see it again before then to see if it has been tightened up.

A. S.

Rich pickings for the psychologist

One of the things I like best about Tennessee Williams is that he cheerfully admits he is neurotic. This is, of course, obvious from his plays, but the fact that he is fully aware of it and, as a writer, sets out to exploit it makes his work that much more acceptable.

Those who like to delve into such things can find, in *A Streetcar Named Desire* now at the Kenya National Theatre in a production by the Nairobi City Players, a veritable forest of symbolism offering rich pickings for the amateur psychologist.

It is arguable whether one wants to see a play by a neurotic about neurosis — and worse. Is it reasonable to expect an audience to watch the total destruction of an already pitiable ruin?

This must be left to the audience to decide, but out of an initial mixture of seemingly unlikely ingredients Tennessee Williams has created what is a highly credible play of considerable strength.

It can be taken on several levels. It can be taken at the purely personal level of the struggle between Stanley Kowalski and his sister-in-law, Blanche, or they can be taken as the representatives of two different worlds — the old world, gracious but crumbling under its own weaknesses, giving place to the uncouth vigour of an emergent society. Or it can be taken on a purely abstract level — symbolic of destruction. At any level it is still convincing.

Two sisters, from the Deep South, brought up in the opulent, leisurely atmosphere of a plantation home, embark on very different lives.

Stella, caught up emotionally in the tide of war, meets and marries a soldier, Stanley, of a very different background from herself and ends up enjoying an unexpectedly happy marriage in two rooms in a sleazy New Orleans suburb.

The other, Blanche, superficially the stronger of the two, clings to the old life despite the fact that it is obviously slipping away. Starting from a disastrous marriage, she gradually loses her grip on all that was once her whole life until she is left without home, money or friends.

Clutching at the veritable last straw, she descends on her sister, and it is here the play opens.

Blanche is doubly horrified at the conditions in which Stella lives and at her obvious success in her marriage to a — to Blanche — totally impossible husband. She is completely incapable of accepting the situation, and Stanley, who is as confident in his own world as she was once in hers, is incapable of accepting Blanche.

The battle between them is stormy and cruel but, even allowing for a brief moment when escape for Blanche seems possible, the outcome is never in doubt.

This is strong stuff and needs strong treatment. The characteristic of this play is tension — sometimes strained to breaking-point, but always there, a sinister, tangible, restless thing that cannot be ignored.

To put it bluntly, this produc-

tion — directed by Jack Dunbar with Ellen Mioszewski as his assistant — is just not tense enough.

Mr. Williams, driven by whatever dark force impelled him to write this play, drives his characters with unremitting fury. Almost every line is a nail hammered relentlessly into Blanche's coffin. There is no relaxation in the writing and there should be none for either cast or audience. I regret to say that I relaxed, particularly during the first of the two acts.

One person who does not relax is Nancy Roe, as Blanche. This is a strong performance in which she maintains the constant undercurrent of disaster which is so much a feature of Blanche's character.

It is also — and this is where the rest of the production falls short of the mark — a constantly varied performance. Mrs. Roe plays Blanche not only at several different pitches but in several different keys, so that her character remains alive and interesting throughout. It is probably not her fault that occasionally these variations seem too obviously deliberate, against the background on which she has to work.

More probably it lies with Mr. Dunbar, who has paid more attention to the letter than to the spirit of the play. The impression is of a great volume of words, too often devoid of feeling — then suddenly the need for some action to bolster the situation is felt and manifests itself in something that appears irrelevant. Actors are allowed to remain static while tension should be building up then, when it should be becoming unbearable, are galvanised into movement merely, it seems, for the sake of movement.

One cannot accuse Sbish Trzebinski, as Stanley, of being relaxed, but the trouble is that he hits his top note from the first moment on stage and holds it virtually without pause until the final curtain. This is unfortunate because when he is persuaded to modulate his performance he shows that he has every bit as much power several decibels below his maximum as he has at full stretch.

In kinder vein, I should like to add a word of appreciation for Anita Day, as Stella. Left alone and static too frequently she nevertheless manages to convey that she was genuinely the stronger of the two sisters, and is unobtrusively sincere.

The setting is well in keeping with the dark world of Tennessee Williams, but is unimaginatively lit. So much could have been done to build up the vital tension through the use of light, particularly through contrasting harsh and soft tones and a more intelligent use of colour.

One last quibble that would probably have gone unnoticed had I not been allowed time to think about it. This play is about the Southern States, but to my non-American ear it seemed that all the characters were speaking in Yankee accents.

P. B. M.

Streetcar: Competent but lacks depth

ONE of the features of this production at the Kenya National Theatre has been the publicity.

It seems that Bryan Epsom, the Players' business manager and co-publicist, fears that audiences will not interpret the play in the way that he, producer Jack Dunbar, and the cast would like them to.

He has gone to considerable trouble, both in last week's SUNDAY NATION and in the programme, to explain in detail why the play is NOT the story of the fall of a prostitute but the tragedy of a woman whose unfortunate early marriage led to her seeking release from her loneliness in nymphomania.

His fears, I think, are unfounded. Doubtless there was misunderstanding and controversy when the play was presented in London in 1949. But since then, audiences have become hardened to seeing uncountable permutations of lust on the stage, and can distinguish for themselves the niceties of degrees of difference between them.

Quite apart from this, these apologies smack of uncertainty as to the ability of cast and producer to get across to the audience the meaning they intend — which is hardly complimentary to either side.

As it happens, there are certain aspects of performance and production which are not quite what I think Tennessee Williams intended. He deliberately set his play in New Orleans to create a particular atmosphere, almost of no-man's-land . . . a place where the Europe of yesterday and the America of today meet and mingle in the steamy Louisiana heat, and where the life and customs derived from both continents are now typical of neither.

A city to which eccentrics, misfits and failures turn their steps in the belief that here they will find either the sympathy or the anonymity which other places deny them.



SBISH TRZEBINSKI . . . touching flashes of simplicity as Stanley Kowalski.

breakdown, making it the more heartbreaking because it seems almost as if it were happening to an innocent child.

Nancy Roe has none of the Southern belle about her. She gives more an impression of Manhattan secretarial training, and this practical air makes less incredible her early misfortune, her amorous middle life and her future mental unbalance.

She is not, in any case, "mutton-dressed-as-lamb" enough; and her genuinely attractive

appearance weakens one's sympathy with her desperation — which is born not only of shock and loneliness, but quite as much of the fact that Blanche is now a very faded beauty at whose door opportunity knocks but seldom.

This is not to say that Nancy Roe doesn't give an excellent performance. She does. It is deeply thought out, intelligent, and very human; but the woman she plays is someone who has read about Blanche Dubois, not Blanche herself.

Her foil, (as Stanley Kowalski, the first-generation American of Polish family), is Sbish Trzebinski who, according to Mr. Epsom's calculations, should impress us first as a simple man who later becomes a brutal one. Mr. Trzebinski does indeed have some touching flashes of simplicity in his moments with Blanche's sister, his wife Stella (played nice and simply by Anita Day).

Irritable

But, in the main, the impression he gives is of an irritable bully throughout, with the disadvantage of being unintelligible when he bawls, and near-inaudible when he doesn't. However, in the context of this production he is a believable person even if he lacks the range of character the author envisaged.

Producer Jack Dunbar has presented his idea of *A Streetcar Named Desire* very competently, although, for my taste, he has only pricked the surface of it and has not set in motion the feeling of the tidal wave of inevitable disaster which should start gathering momentum early on and sweep all before it to the final moments of tragedy.

However, despite the lack of emotional impact apparent on the first night, this is a play tremendously worth seeing, and one which should give grounds for not a little discussion.

Subtlety

While this unique atmosphere is well conveyed by the setting and lighting, it is defeated by the contrasting atmosphere, created by producer and players, of New York's West Side.

Basically, this is because of the accents — or lack of them. The Southern accent is very difficult to convey, I admit. But without it, a lot of Williams' subtlety — particularly in his characterisation of Blanche Dubois — is lost. So, too, is much of the dreamy unreality of New Orleans.

It is not enough to claim that the author is telling the story of an unhappy woman which might be true in any setting. He is telling the story of a particular woman, in particular surroundings, in a particularly individual way. And to really make his point, the game must be played his way.

Blanche is a relic — a latter-day relic — of the Old South. Her very accent points her would-be gentility in the early stages of the play, and covers with a sort of whimsy her transition to mental

performances at the Little

Sunday Post 10/3/68

ROUND THE THEATRES

The current production at the DM, "A Severed Head" has been very well received by the public with "House Full" notices up some nights and performances have been extended until March 16th.

also to have attracted reasonable audiences.

Last Sunday's performance of "Son et Lumiere", up in the Ngong Hills, was cancelled because of bad weather, but it was hoped that the rains would dry up for at least a couple of weeks to let the lights and music go on again in "African Night".

★ ★ ★

OVER at the National Theatre the dreadful production of "A Streetcar Named Desire" seems

— M.

Mike Cliff

Somebody read it

If my critical colleague, **Peter Macdonald**, is seen around town muttering about the "power of the Press" it is not because he is getting delusions of grandeur but just that, after years of

fulminating against the strange habits of Nairobi theatre audiences, he feels he has made a minor breakthrough.

On Friday he was lamenting the apparent inability of theatregoers to book early for shows, and on Saturday night the Nairobi City Players, presenting *A Streetcar Named Desire*, at the National Theatre notched up what is believed to be a record box-office taking for one day's performances.

So maybe the Nairobi audience is getting the message at last and getting in before it is too late.

Incidentally any other intending spectators are warned that this play will definitely not run beyond this Saturday.

On the first night of "Streetcar" members of the City Players were surprised to find an ex-member in their midst. He was **Alan Simmance**, now working in Zambia, who flew into Nairobi only an hour before curtain up, but as soon as he heard that the group was having a first night he was on his way to the theatre.



At the National Theatre where there were early complaints about the lack of public interest — as shown by advance bookings — in the Nairobi City Players' production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* things have definitely improved.

Here the box-office has definitely spotted quite a number of unfamiliar faces amid the crowd of spectators.

I understand that it will be fairly difficult to obtain a seat for this show tomorrow — its last day — but there are still a number of seats available today.

This show was subjected to such varied criticism, of both the pro and con types, that the only real answer for any theatregoer is to go and see it for himself.

The City Players are now getting down to work on *Guys and Dolls*, and Damon Runyon fans who aspire to go on stage should look out for the auditions which will be held within the next week or two.

The Big Yawn

SORRY to have to say it, but for many of the audience who sat out Thursday's "First Night" performance of the Nairobi City Players' latest offering, it was a "Streetcar to Sleepyville."

In fairness, I admit that this is the third time I have seen Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as well as having seen the film starring Marlon Brando and Vivien Leigh.

However, this production was certainly slow-motion and heavy going most of the time.

The story goes something like this: Blanche Du Bois arrives in New Orleans to stay with her married sister, Stella Kowalski, whose husband, Stanley, is of Polish extraction, working-class and has a passion for poker. Blanche and her sister are the only two survivors of a wealthy plantation family from the Deep South.

Blanche has had a lifetime of tragedy; an early marriage to a young poet, who shot himself when she found out he was a degenerate, the deaths of her parents and finally the loss of the family mansion through the family's past debts. In melancholy solitude, she starts to enjoy intimacies with strangers, and ends up a nymphomaniac. Finally, she is exposed and hounded out of town, and, when the play opens, she has arrived in New Orleans.

LOGGERHEADS

Immediately Blanche and Stanley are at loggerheads and only in Mitch, poker-playing friend of the Kowalski's, does she find the comfort and affection she craves. Stanley, however, hates Blanche and with the nose of bloodhound and the persistence of a bull-terrier he unravels her past, exposes her and, on her birthday, presents her with a return bus ticket to the town from whence she had been driven. This is practically the final blow; Blanche cracks mentally and the play moves on to its tragic conclusion.

Tennessee Williams is quoted as having meant this to be a "moral" play. His aim was to show that tolerance by others would have prevented Blanche becoming a victim of circumstances, had they taken the trouble to discover the root of her troubles. Isn't it strange, in terms of more recent plays, like *Whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, that when this play was put on in London in 1949, many labelled it shocking and sordid?

Half-way through this particular production I got the distinct im-

pression that it had been put on rather to show off Miss Roe's acting talent than for audience attraction. One had the impression that, with one exception, all the other players were merely puppets, stiff and uninvolved.

Nancy Roe, as Blanche, put up a technically good performance, but it was just that — it lacked depth and any sincere portrayal of mental torture and tragedy. When Blanche walked off the stage at the end of the play bound for a mental home one felt untouched and indifferent.

Contrast this to the role that really stole the show — Sbish Trzebinski's portrayal of Stanley Kowalski, which brought the only life and warmth and real feeling to an otherwise dead piece of floatsam sinking in a slough of boredom. One minute he was the loud-mouthed, coarse, sexually animal Polish-American from the wrong side of the tracks and the next a snivelling, drunken "mamma's loving boy who did not mean to do no harm" Sbish Trzebinski saved the day and put up one of his best-ever performances.

THROWN AWAY

From the production side, what a shame the climax scene of the whole play, Stanley's rape of Blanche, was thrown away. In the film, this scene set the mood and had the audience writhing in horror and disgust at what was happening and what was about to happen as the film cut to the next scene. Producer Jack Bunbar had Stanley lock Blanche in an embrace, which finally forced her to drop the bottle, with which she was going to fend him off, and with both of them standing.

So the curtain closed. Audience reaction to this still-life rape scene was merely a titter when the bottle hit the floor and broke the silence with a "thunk". The scene fizzled out like a damp squib and, whatever emotions or reactions the audience were expected to have, had been negatived.

The set, the lighting and sound effects were extremely well done and set the mood and temper of down-town New Orleans. Particularly laurels should go out to set designer, Ted Sessinger. But why, oh why, did Stella and Eunice have to be like models in a mail-order catalogue, living in such circumstances, one would have expected them to be sloppy, to the point of being almost sleazy in their appearance, and in direct contrast to Blanche's mania for smart clothes.

As I started so I must end, sorry but this production could honestly be labelled "The Big Yawn". It lacks vitality most of the time and has a disembodied air about it. Admittedly, the play and the film have been received enthusiastically in other climes, yet this production — certainly for me — was a cold, unmovable, unconvincing exercise in play acting.