

Professor David Peimer | Tennessee Williams' Theatre of Desire

- [Host] David, go on. I think over to you.

- [David] Yeah.

- Thanks. It's five past 12. Thanks.

- Okay, thank you.

- Thanks. Over to you. Bye.

*Visual slides are displayed throughout the presentation.*

- Okay, well thank you so much to Judy and to Wendy and hi to everybody. Hope everybody is well, and we'll be able to get vaccine soon. So, okay, we're going to finish the, just looking at a couple of the American playwrights before we go into the, we go back to Germany and Europe, as I'm sure you know, towards the end of February. So, going to look at Tennessee Williams today and Eugene O'Neill next week. And because the amount of work this guy did, he wrote over 70 plays, short stories, novels, other pieces. He wrote so much that it's impossible to do justice. So, I decided I'm going to primarily focus on the one that I'm sure everybody has seen and knows well, *Streetcar Named Desire*, with just some ideas which perhaps may resonate with everybody, because I'm sure this, everybody has studied and knows this play so so well. But nevertheless, it's testament to the enduring rich resonance of how much is actually inside the play that I think we can endlessly explore it from so many different angles. So, briefly to start with, biography of Tennessee Williams is, he lived 1911 to 1983. He died in his early seventies. This picture on the left is him at the age of five.

Then the picture in the top right corner, the small picture of him looking formal and serious is him arriving for the funeral of the Welsh poet, that everybody I'm sure knows, Dylan Thomas. So again, I'm trying to just give a context of how Tennessee Williams was so connected to the writers and the artists, musicians of his time, Tennessee, obviously, Arthur Miller, and the ones previous to that, Clifford Odets and the others. And then in his own time, Arthur Miller, and, you know, just before him, Eugene O'Neill. And those three, as everybody knows, are regarded as amongst the giants of 20th century theatre, Williams, O'Neill, and Arthur Miller. And it's *Streetcar*, I think, *Death of a Salesman*, perhaps *The Crucible* from Arthur Miller and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, obviously from Eugene O'Neill, remarkable in their own individual way, capturing something incredible for me of the 20th century, obviously, of America and American culture, of their era. But so much goes so beyond it in terms of the human condition and saying so much about the 20th century pre and post war.

So, then the pictures at the bottom of Tennessee Williams, obviously at an older age, and I wanted to put this in because these two pictures show the charm and the humanity, the

intelligence, the wit, you know, another side perhaps to the Tennessee Williams that one knows about later who succumb to alcoholism and serious depression. Okay. So, a couple of these phrases here. Nobody sees anything, nobody sees anybody truly, but through the flaws of their own egos, Tennessee Williams used that phrase often, and he was trying to show how do we really see, how do we really perceive, you know, we often talk about reality as perception. How do we, how does he and his characters really perceive life? And that for him, it's the way we see truly is through the flaws of our own egos. It's a fascinating comment for me, because that's how, for me, he draws his characters. It's through the flaws of their egos.

There's aspiration, there's reality, there's illusion, there's desire, there's despising, there's love, there's hate. Everything is ambivalence. Everything is contradiction. And for me, Tennessee Williams, the essence of what he captures, and perhaps O'Neill comes the closest to it in terms of the Great American writers, is the absolute contradictions in the human characters. We are all, and what he strikes, what he strikes in me is, you know, the sense of the extraordinary possibilities of human nature and the extraordinary cruelty and brutalities of human nature. That he's not scared for a second to go into the depths of both. And that's why it's hard to pin down, thank heavens. Like O'Neill and, for me, to a large degree Arthur Miller as well. It's so hard because he's constantly shifting character from one extreme to the other and in an unpredictable way. And that makes it endlessly fascinating to watch, endlessly fascinating to perform and direct, I believe, and endlessly true to the reality of human nature, you know, of the sense of living embodiments of contradictions, which can switch, which can turn on a dime if you write a character that isn't ambiguous, you're writing a false character, not a true one.

And by his word, ambiguous, I think it also means ambivalent, contradictory, full of non-logical, non-rational contradictions. It's the other thing I want to talk about a little bit later. I want to include a fascinating contemporary psychoanalyst with contemporary ideas about feminism. Who, and I love her work, Jessica Benjamin on desire and a brilliant book of hers. She used to teach at Cornell, and I think she's now at NYU. Anyway, Jessica Benjamin, who booked *The Bonds of Love*. And then like subjects, like objects, an extraordinary contemporary approach, I think, to understanding something of which I feel we can connect to enrich our sense of Tennessee Williams' vision of human nature. Okay, I want you just before getting into his bio, just the key plays, which everybody knows, I'm sure many of these and the movies that were made from them, *Glass Menagerie*, for me it's interesting the dates. And he wrote *Streetcar* in 1947, and that's amazing. It's two years after the war, you know, all the soldiers have come back, you know, hundreds of thousands of Americans have died.

And obviously globally the war, it's two years after. Stanley Kowalski is a Polish immigrant, you know, who comes, who's living in New York, in New Orleans. Fascinating time that he's writing, but it's two years after the war. Then *Camino Real*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, *Night, et cetera*. So, and a lot of these are made into films, obviously many of them, quite a few directed by Elia Kazan which I'll talk a bit about as well. We're going to, I'm going to focus today on *Streetcar*, because I think there's just too much in all his plays. And rather just focus on one in a bit of depth. This is Tennessee Williams in his early thirties meeting Brando for the first time.

Brando here is 23 and he's just been cast in *Streetcar*.

This is a 23 year old guy. And this is the play that obviously makes his name, is the breakthrough which launches Brando's remarkable career and remarkable talent and sheer hard work and guts as an actor. I want you to put this together with an image of James Dean because Elia Kazan was absolutely crucial in discovering both. And I'm going to talk a bit about Kazan during today, and Kazan is fascinating because he unearths these brilliant young talents. You know, there was Lee Remick, there just so many of them. I don't want to go into them now, just focus on two of them for the moment. James Dean, early twenties, Brando 23 in this picture. And they're found, nurtured and unearthed as total unknown, obscure, young, would be actors, you know, coming out of the method acting school, Kazan is connected to the group, et cetera, group theatre. But, you know, developed so much, I believe, not only in their learning with Lee Strasberg, but of method acting and so on.

But also in their being directed by Kazan and what he saw and how he approached very much an actors director, how he approached them. There's a fascinating comment by James Dean about Brando, and he said that Brando acts with the fist of defiance, and at any moment he can switch it to tender vulnerability. It's James Dean at the age of 21 insight onto Brando. And he said that he, James Dean, wanted to take from Brando and learn from him, and he wanted to make all his acting walk the knife's edge between vulnerability and defiance. And you would never know which would come when. And if we think of James Dean's acting in *East of Eden* and other things, this is an image from *East of Eden* directed by Kazan, always moving between vulnerability and defiance, rebellion and inner fear, inner anxiety. And that he would plan and plot the character journey with those two ideas in mind, together with obviously the character and what the character's going through.

But it's a remarkably powerful way for an actor to think, to create a duality which is so unpredictable. The audience never knows which is coming when. And for him to have the insight into Brando that he can move between tenderness what he called tenderness or vulnerability and defiance, or I guess what has become in our jargon would be brutality with violence, psychological or physical, primarily psychological is what's really interesting. So, that James Dean modelled himself on Brando, who was just a little bit older, that's all. And that they both had, that they both had such a vision on how to use their talents in such a, in a way which makes a performance endlessly dangerous because it's so unpredictable and that danger is thrilling to watch and exciting to watch, and I believe influenced so many of the actors after them. Okay, so, this is Tennessee Williams in his early thirties. He's written *Glass Menagerie*, which is a fair success, but then it comes *Streetcar*, which is the play which heralds his greatness. Over here, Tennessee Williams. This is the age of five in a small town called Clarksdale in Mississippi. That's where Tennessee Williams is born of English, Welsh, and Huguenot ancestry.

His father was a travelling shoe salesman. So interesting how with Arthur Miller, it's the salesman, Tennessee Williams, his own father was a salesman and obviously capturing

something in the late forties, going into the fifties of the fathers as salesman. You know, Mamet picks up on that in Glengarry Glen Ross, and so on. And how the image of the salesman has changed hugely in American culture and globally. But these are guys, these fathers are going out to try and make a buck by selling shoes or whatever. And that's what his father was doing. His father became an alcoholic and frequently away from home, his mother Edwina was the daughter of a music teacher. As a young child, Tennessee Williams nearly died from diphtheria, which left him weak and it took over a year to recuperate. It had a profound effect on his health and sense of inner fragility and physical fragility. His father regarded what he thought was his son's fragility and health vulnerability as effeminate. And his father looked at him always with utter disdain. And this is pretty well documented.

His mother felt she was in an unhappy marriage and focused her attention almost entirely on the frail son as he was called in the family. So, he was pushed as this image because he had suffered from diphtheria. He's growing up in Mississippi in a small town, but, you know, undeserved misfortune, he has an illness and the father has as a certain attitude and the mother the opposite. I guess fairly classic and certainly of the times, perhaps. He goes to University of Missouri, he does some work. He doesn't finish studying, he does some menial jobs. He worked on chicken farms and other things. And Elia Kazan, who directed him in Williams' greatest successful plays, said that everything in his life is in his plays. The other important aspect of his life obviously, is obviously his homosexuality. And one can imagine it in the late forties, not only in America, but in the West, still totally banned in England as one knows, but his homosexuality and how his expression of that in terms of himself and trying to understand it in terms of his culture and his writing. So, *Streetcar* is written in 1947.

By 1959, Tennessee Williams had earned two Pulitzer Prizes, three New York Drama Critic Circle Awards, and a Tony Award. His work really reached a global western audience by the early fifties with *Glass Menagerie* and *Streetcar*. And they were adapted into films as we know. And then later on, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and others, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, et cetera, were adapted to movies as well. But then the sixties and the seventies were for him, decades of theatrical failure. But he continued to write every day unceasingly. But the quality of his work suffered because of increasing alcohol and drug addiction. Not uncommon to many artists throughout any era, any century. But in particular, it hit him, perhaps, success, you know, he got so much success in his thirties and then afterwards could never recapture that in terms of popular success with audience, theatre, or film. During his life, he had his sister, Rose, and he was very close to his sister, Rose. And I think that's an important relationship. She was diagnosed as schizophrenic in 1943, whatever that meant in 1943. And we would obviously have different perceptions now, I imagine, I hope. But she was diagnosed and in 43 she was forced to have a lobotomy. In 1945, Tennessee Williams goes to New Mexico and he meets a guy, Pancho Rodriguez Gonzalez, who's a hotel clerk.

And they lived and travelled together until 1947. An important relationship for Tennessee Williams coming out in terms of his homosexuality at a young age. And not afraid in these times in these days, post-war, post a sense of masculinity in America. You know, obviously we see

masculinity in Mamet, we see masculinity in O'Neill next week, you know, we see masculinity in Arthur Miller, and so on. And this is what makes, I think Tennessee Williams' fascination with masculinity different in a way to the other writers. Then in 1948, he goes to Rome and he meets an Italian teenager who we know is called Raphaelo, but the actual name is, I'm not sure. And Tennessee Williams writes about him in his memoirs and he gave him money, helped him financially, and they were lovers. Then Tennessee Williams returns to New York, where he met and fell in love with Frank Merlo, who was probably the great love of his life, I think. But Frank Merlo dies of cancer at a fairly young age.

So, the picture I'm trying to draw is a sense of loss, of adversity, of post-war, coming out as homosexual, trying to be a writer, having huge success in his thirties, not really being able to recapture it off the Streetcar and perhaps Sweet Bird of Youth, and some others, and the sense of loss and aloneness and I guess some despair from his own childhood and upbringing. Then after Frank Merlo's death, Williams goes into a whole long period of almost catatonic depression, what we would call that today, maybe, hugely increasing drug use. He was in, he was hospitalised often. He was committed to mental health institutions subjected to injections by a Dr. Max Jacobson, who was popularly known as Dr. Feelgood, who gave huge amounts of amphetamines to overcome his depression. When he was in his own sixties, Williams has a, I guess, the last important relationship of his life with a guy called Robert Carroll, who's a Vietnam veteran, and he was an aspiring writer in his twenties and Tennessee Williams in his sixties. What I'm trying to draw is a sense of he's not scared, his homosexuality, he's not scared, he's travelled the world, Rome, Italy, elsewhere. He goes to Dylan Thomas's funeral.

He's not scared to express his own individual voice as much as he can in his life and in his writing. And I think he's obsessed, as Kazan said, with everything in his life of living of the extremes. As he says in one of the later plays, all there is is the voyage. That's it, you know, and either you treat life as a voyage or what else? And because of being forced by society to be in the margins, I think pushes him towards the margins of so-called inverted commerce, proper norms and conventional ways of existing, not only in America, but in the west of his times, the forties and the fifties, late forties and the fifties in particular. He's really pushing boundaries early on. The same time, of course, we've got the big generation with, you know, with Kerouac writing on the road, with Ginsburg starting some of the poetry. This is all before the sixties, obviously. So, at the same time, another whole development is happening, which James Dean encapsulates, you know, Rebel Without a Cause, East of Eden.

Brando encapsulates in his acting to a degree, but he's finding his own individual voice within this world of the so-called beat generation, which I guess is the dominant ethos of the time, but he's not part of a group. He's finding his own individual voice. So, he wrote over 70 plays, a lot of one actor stories, et cetera that I mentioned. The other thing to say is just a couple of quotes that I'd like to share as well, before going on to Streetcar. If I got rid of my demons, I'd lose my angels. I've got the guts to die. What I want to know is if you've got the guts to live. And that's what the character, main character says in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. In Streetcar, What is straight? A line can be straight or a street, but the human heart, oh no, it's curved like a road through

mountains, never ending. Also from streetcar, which a phrase everybody knows I'm sure from Blanche. I don't want realism, I want magic. Yes, yes, magic. I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth. I tell what ought to be the truth. And if that's sinful, well, let me be damned for it. I'm a bad actor and I apologise, but I think this is Tennessee Williams speaking through the character of Blanche.

I will show you the truth, but I will also show you magic. I will show you despair and I will show you desire. I will show you thrill, and I will show you despondency. I will show, you know, sexual energy and I will show repression. I will show intelligence of many kinds of an animal, instinctive kind, of a more cerebral kind. I will show cloth in the south in the distinction between Blanche and Stanley, which we'll come onto, I don't think he's scared of going to the extremes for any of his main characters. And that's what is for me, is enduringly alluring, and so absorbing. A prayer for the wild at heart, which is kept in cages. Some of us may know the phrase from Tennessee Williams. And there's a theory that David Lynch took his, the name of his play, the name of his film, sorry, Wild at Heart from this.

And then of course, the great line that everybody knows inside out and backwards. I have always depended on the kindness of strangers. There's so much meaning for me, resonant and ambiguity in that, going back to what Tennessee Williams says, the character that is ambiguous. For me, almost all the lines are dripping and riddled with ambiguity of possible meanings, which makes it amazing to read, to watch, to come back to again and again, to postage again and again. 70 years, almost 70 years later now. Still, they're not only being studied and read everywhere in the world in translations, but staged and performed endlessly, like *The Crucible* and like *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Make voyages, attempt them. There's nothing else. That's from *Camino Real*. So it's, I don't think he's scared to go into at all what we would call, perhaps, in the jargon of today, complexity. But I prefer the phrase what we might see as to hell with the norms of society, to hell with the hypocrisy of society, which kind of give us mental policemen of how to live or not to live.

Some of the morals are crucial and the laws, it's not about those, it's about the inner workings of the human heart. And I can only go back to that, you know, when I think of really good writers, they transcend the, the fashion fashionable labels of their times. As a psychologist once said to me, childhood is just internalised propaganda. And if we have maybe a sense of something of that, we can start to see the unravelling, the unpacking, and what is really inside the human heart that is common to many or certainly in his drawing of his ambiguous, ambivalent characters who the, where the essence is contradiction, the essence is not a singular path. Then I want to just, if I may just talk a little bit about Brando. I'm going to show you some pictures here of *Streetcar*. And this is from Tennessee Williams here. I found it easier to identify with the characters who verge upon hysteria. And we need to remember he's meaning hysteria in the late 1940s with a Freudian influence of the term, not how we would interpret it. That word today. People who are frightened of life, who are desperate to reach out to another person just to have human touch, human contact, human connection. But these seemingly fragile people are the strong people.

Why? Because they're honest to their fragility. They're honest that they're frightened, they're honest that they're desperate. And if they have the brutal rage of Stanley, of Brando, if they have the tendered despair of Brando, if they have the romantic dream of Blanche, of the despair, of the loss of the plantation house, of the south, brought up as a southern belle, a white woman, the south, and the history of the south and the ancestry and the assumed superiority of that, the pain of that loss and the suffering because it's all gone. Dream over, gone. History changed. Move on, deal with the new guide. Who is this Polish guy called the Pollack in the play, Stanley Kowalski. Polish name. You know, he represents the new America to come. The immigrant, the young, post-war, possibly fought in the war, come back and takes command in his own way, in a male way. Post-war. Blanche is nostalgic, romantic about the past and why not? That is her reality. The loss is painful and suffering because of massive historical changes in the south and in America and in the West as a whole. And why not have the romance of love that she has? Why not the desire that she needs and lives by in her imagination, which becomes a doomed fantasy.

The undeserved misfortune of both, in a way, which throws them together. So they clash as the poetic line goes. They clash almost like armies in the night. Just to give you Kazan on Brando, he was a genius at the age of 23. His preparation for a scene, his personality, his memories, desires were so deep there was very little any director needed to do, all you had to do was just tell him what the scene was about in a few sentences. And that's all I did. All I did was go for walks with Brando for the, this is, he's talking about the rehearsing the play, not the film. With Jessica Tandy. With Jessica Tandy, he worked line by line. He would sit in the rehearsal room, line by line readings with Brando. He would just go for walks and they would talk about the meaning of the scene and that was it. And then Claire would come together in rehearsals. There's a great story when Brando was studying, and with Stella Adler, one of the fantastic, you know, members of the group theatre and the method acting, the actor studio of Lee Strasberg's in New York, based on the Russian, the grandfather of all acting theories, Stanislavski. Anyway, she said this exercise and said, okay, you're all chickens and you all know that an atomic bomb is about to hit New York in the next two minutes, you've got this rehearsal space to move in, move and vocalise. Brando at the age of 19 or 20, we're not sure.

He just goes and sits in the middle of the rehearsal space and calmly smokes a cigarette. All the other training actors run around crazy, making chicken noises, et cetera, et cetera. Stella Adler gets crossed and she goes up and says, what are you doing? And Brando looks up at her, smokes a cigarette calmly with that slightly contemptuous, slightly sneering, but charismatic look of Brando's. And he says, a chicken has, doesn't have a clue what an atomic bomb is, and carries on smoking a cigarette. And Stella Adler, right, said at that moment, she realised the pupil is genius way beyond her as a teacher and was going to go so far. That's a true story apparently. Okay, so it just shows how the intelligence of Brando, so early on. Kazan talks about he would act always as improvising, like jazz. He'd know the lines, but improvise them and jazz them up, knowing the basic through line and the riff. And he almost would ride the, would ride the lines and let them take his emotions wherever.

And Brando said that when he had a writer so good as Tennessee Williams, that's all he needed to do. So the witty, the charming, the wounded, the cruel, the brutal, the tender, the vicious, you know, character all comes out. Tennessee Williams, again in a letter to Kazan, you know, good or bad people, everybody is flawed. Everybody is a mixture of the two extremes of good and bad. We are capable of extraordinary behaviour and we're capable of the most despicable behaviour. That's Tennessee Williams. When he was cast in the role, Kazan took a chance, gave him 20 bucks, and Brando hitchhiked up to see Tennessee Williams in Provincetown. And he got there and the draining wasn't working, the drainage wasn't working, the lights needed fixing and Brando just got into fixing it. And Tennessee, William was stunned because he saw this guy just come and fix these things as if we as brand, as Tennessee Williams said, as if he'd been doing it for ages. So it's, he read for 10 minutes and Tennessee Williams got on the phone, called Kazan and said, that's it. Done, nothing more.

Brando then insisted on going for a walk with Tennessee Williams the next day, 23, they walked the whole morning, not saying a single word, Brando just walks with him somewhere and then walks back and Tennessee Williams writes, he doesn't have a clue what's going on in this kid actor's head, that's all. So, it was a shot in the dark and he almost, then Brando went back, went back to New York, hitchhiked back. But he was so intimidated by the script and so scared that he phoned Tennessee Williams to say, it's too much. I can't, I won't, I'm scared. But he couldn't get through, the phone, this is a true story. the phone was engaged for half an hour. And finally, finally, Williams answers and he says, okay, right, so you're going to do it, you know, that's it. Obviously. That's what we discussed, we decided, and by then, you know, Brando's going to do it. He's changed his mind. And he said, Brando said, my whole career would've been totally different if ever happened. If I hadn't, if that phone hadn't been engaged.

As John Lennon said, life is what happens while we are busy making other plans. Okay. So, they go on about, you know, the end of stuff about Brando's acting and his brilliance. What's interesting is that Brando in an interview in really seriously and honesty said I was the antithesis of the character, Stanley Kowalski. I am not him. I was at that age sensitive by nature. Stanley was coarse, a man with unearthing animal instincts and intuition. He was a compendium of my imagination, not my reality. And based on the lines of the play, I created him from Tennessee's words. I think it's an amazing insight from such a young actor to understand himself and what was essential for the play, what he, the work he needed to do for the play. Okay, I'm going to go on now just with a little bit now, directly into the play, which for me is about the contradictory themes of what is romance, what is desire, what is the play of domination, submission, and power. To an extreme, metaphorically the master slave in a possible desire relationship. What is desire? Is it romantic? Blanche has the romantic dream that is lost of the ancestral, you know, the southern house that she's lost.

And more than that, her superior assumed white woman superiority or just white superiority that she belongs to a certain class. The image, the dream that is gone. And for anybody to lose their childhood dream, their childhood dream and aspiration, which becomes a doomed fantasy is



painful, is sore, I think for anyone. And when we see this, when we see it in performing on the theatre, in the film, I think, you know, Vivien catches it. She's not as crazy this, that, all over the place at all. As Tennessee Williams said, for God's sake, in a play, can I say for once and for all, you wrote this letter, 1950, Blanche is not crazy. She is upset, she has loss, she is disturbed, she's lost everything she's lived for. Find the sympathy, find the empathy. That's in a letter that Tennessee Williams wrote in 1950. Of course she's been promiscuous. What choice did she have? This is William's writing. That's the story of the play for Christ's sake. She pays and pays and pays for that. What more do you want her to do?

What more do you want to see her suffer? She pays plenty for the loss that she suffered. And he writes, he carries on writing. Ask anyone who suffered severe loss, he carries on writing, Tennessee Williams, Stanley doggedly hunts her down. Yes, he takes her against her will. She acts to bring it on, but he does it. And in those two sentences for me, Tennessee Williams in that letter captures such an amazing sense of these extreme contradictions in the human nature that I'm talking about. Obviously, Brando embodies masculinity of the times, a loud, a violent, and intensely sexual given to rages, a primal quality, but an intelligence that is no different to Blanche or anybody else's in the play. Or Stella. He knows that he is Polish American. He knows it's after the war. He knows he's working class. He knows what she is and she knows what he is because even through the fantasy she lives in her imagination, I'm convinced she knows obviously the truth. She knows she doesn't want to be in the light during the play until the light is forced unto her. Which I'll show a later image, you know, and metaphorically obviously, you know, the light of her illusions and be to be taken, forced out of denial.

Stanley is in, he knows and he can't bear denial from his own pain and suffering of his own life. He's Polish, he's called a polack. You can imagine being the so-called polack in these times in America, anywhere he's the immigrant. I don't know if it's so different to now, not only in America, but anywhere in the world perhaps. So, we have the class distinction. We have the Southern, the Southerner, and who is brought up to believe she is superior. We have the immigrant who comes in after the war trying to make good, but is working class labourer. Can he ever really be accepted by the culture? Can't he be accepted? Are they both victims of the society and the history of the times? If we understand that, we understand a lot, I think, and Elia Kazan writes in his diary that he spoke a lot to them about their social cultural context, not only to get mannerisms and accents and so on, right, you know, set in New Orleans, but to show that to give these very young actors, extraordinary young actors, both of them, to give them a sense of a social understanding, historical understanding.

And he spent, Kazan says he spent most of his time on that so that they could get a bigger sense of the meaning of Tennessee Williams's play. And I think that's where the social, the cultural rub up against and hit human nature so powerfully, all in these questions of desire. Everybody in the, every character is filled with desire, Blanche's desire to recapture the loss of her past. Not only the death of a husband, but the loss of her, of her cultural milieu. Brando's desire to be accepted as an American, not just as a so-called polack, a desire to be part of this world. Stella is maybe the more pragmatic because she accepts, she will give up the loss and

the fantasy that the southern belle has become, it's gone. Gone. And she goes and moves in with Stanley to live another life. Is this the life of the future of America or isn't it, or the culture of the West Post Second World War. It's a question mark.

So, desire comes through everybody and obviously New Orleans and the steeliness, and so on of the city. Going back to Kazan, he says, what do I do with the actors? I take them for dinner, I talk to them, I meet their wives, I try to meet their families if they have them. I find out what the hell the human material is that I'm dealing with. So, then unknown becomes totally known to me. I did it with James Dean, I did it with Brando, Warren Beatty, Lee Remick, et cetera, et cetera. And he understood the essence of the Stanislavski approach. In the method acting and in acting for the times was how to translate psychology of character into behaviour and action. And that's such an important distinction because what we see is behaviour, which suggests psychology to us and in working on the characters with psychology and the social manure of these characters. But he's trying to show us through behaviour all the time. And that's what I think a superb director understands in terms of working certainly with these actors of his time.

The other fascinating thing, which I want to come to in a moment when I show you some clips from the performance from the film, is he absorbs, Kazan said, I worked with Brando at his mouth. His eyes are fairly still, but his mouth never stops moving. He's chewing something, he's eating, he's doing. And that creates an extraordinary tension between the stillness of his eyes and the laser beam focus and the mouth moving. This is the level of detail that Kazan and Brando are working at in the stage direction, in the staging of it. And in the film, they're both super aware of the choreography of the body in this. His mouth, so to speak, gave all the restless energy to that body of Brando's. So, when he explodes into violent rage, this is Kazan, after I've seen one or two of them, you know, it's simmering all the time and it comes through the mouth. Brando said, I worked with many actors, some good, some terrible. Kazan was the best. He was the only director who stimulated my intellect. And he allowed us to improvise and improvise. He gave us freedom and he trusted our intelligences.

This is a young Brando writing, talking, you know, interviewed shortly after the players, a huge success. Streetcar goes on to win four Oscars. And then three years later, Kazan directs Brando in *On the Waterfront*, which wins eight Oscars. In 1955, he directed Steinbeck's *East of Eden* with James Dean, et cetera. Okay, so here I just wanted to show, this is the early picture of Blanche arriving. This is from the first film. This is Brando and her, you see the first one at the bottom here, meeting each other is for me, if one imagines this on stage or on film, on the stage in front, so much obviously sexual and desire, tension, you know, it's sexual obviously, but I like, I used, I like the word desire. You know, there's love, there's hate, there's despising, there's desiring, there's unsure, there's sure, there's, it's almost like they're laying out scent for each other because they are both animals.

As Christopher Hitchens said, well, we are primates with a bit of intelligence perhaps, you know, and Williams is not scared to go into and he uses so much animal imagery, anyway, it's way over the top for me now as a contemporary reader. But you know, the prime animal imagery is

all there and it's overdone, but they're laying down scent for each other. They are compelled, they can't help it. When we are compelled, can we help it in life? We are pulled on a certain, as I guess the, you know, the ancient Greeks would say it's a certain path of fate and we have minimal choice over. Coming back to Jessica Benjamin, Jessica Benjamin, in the book, *The Bonds of Love*. She asks the really important question of what is romance?

What is the submission to authority in a love relationship where pleasure comes in? Or even a relationship with so-called leaders or buses or anybody who has authority apparent, what is the appeal of domination submission? So prevalent in desire, are they so prevalent in desire? Jessica Benjamin asks, why is it so difficult for men and women to meet as equals? Why indeed do they constantly recapitulate the positions metaphorically of the master and the slaves? And the brilliance in Jessica Benjamin's books is she talks about, for me, the brilliant German philosopher Hegel and just, I'm reducing him to such an essence here. And I apologise to philosophers, but Hegel believed that the primary drive in human life is the drive for recognition. In contemporary jargon, we might use the word validation.

And the drive for recognition, for Hegel, was the strongest human drive. Once the basic needs were taken care of, obviously food, water, shelter, et cetera. And the drive for recognition and what one will do for that is almost unlimited. And in that, and, Jessica Benjamin links that the Hegel idea of the drive for recognition with the phrase of hers, the bonds of love or the bonds of desire. And she uses that word bond because she's trying to tease out, well, where is romantic love when aggression plays a part, when desire and aggression somehow meet each other where there's no choice and pushes and pulls characters together. Where's the desire? How does it play out when it's in contemporary jargon, domination, submission, these are her words, Jessica Benjamin's words. And only an equal mature relationship is possible when there is equal mutual recognition of each other. In Jessica Benjamin's phrase, when there is an equal mutual recognition where compromise, where understanding, other things can happen, then one can have a mature adult relationship, but until then it's going to be a battle of wills. It's going to be war. And for me, Tennessee Williams is touching this.

And I find her understanding so helpful in trying to tease out what he means, by what Williams means by desire other than just imagining, you know, pure animals out in the bush, sort of with savage desires, which is the absolute cliché of some people's naive interpretation of the play, I think. And together with that of the desire and the despising comes the power of illusion. Because if we are caught up on that role, without that mutual recognition that she speaks of illusion has to come in, it has to come in because it cannot be sustained, it cannot be maintained. Such intense, extreme passion. It's extraordinary and we all know it from when we young or whenever or in any age in our lives. But how do we maintain it, which Jessica Benjamin talks about. And it becomes, you know, unless it moves into mutual recognition, it's going to be, it's going to have an almost unelectable break.

So, with these two, Brando, and with the Stanley and the Blanche character, we have perception, delusions, illusions, withdrawal from realities like happens at the end of the play for

both of them are taken out of their reality. They're taken out of their illusion. And I think they're pushed into another world of desire because they're just, they're despising of each other so strong that it triggers their desire of each other so strong. And the ironic play of that, it for me is a very profound depth of human nature. You know, when one looks really to understand, you know, how could some of these fascists be so cruel and evil and you know, the old cliché question and yet be such loving daddies and mummies to their kids, and then go and kill and torture and do whatever, and then come back and be so nice. You know, all these extreme contradictions in humans. Look at Eichmann, you know, you see him as this bureaucrat in the trial in 1960 and what he was before. Y

You know, so all these contradictions we know only too well. And I'm not saying this has got anything to do with the Nazis at all, or the fascists. All I'm trying to say is an understanding of the extremities of human nature of what, you know, what the extraordinary range of extreme that human beings will go to and can go to under the label, the broad label of desire, not only sexual desire, for me it's about denial and illusion and desire for that. And live that come hell or high water, rather live in denial because reality is too painful, too hard where you live in illusion until it gets smashed. That's another desire, desire to be, to live fantasy not reality. Which I believe the Stanley character does as well, because they press each other's buttons so much. Truth is painful, easier to live in illusion until it becomes fantasy which gets shattered and then the denial kicks in. But it doesn't really help much. So, I've spoken also about the distinction between Brando and between the two of their class and culture. And that's enough.

There's an interesting movie with Matt Damon and De Niro, a fairly recent one, I think about 15 years ago anyway, where Matt Damon, it's about the founding of the CIA. Anyway, Matt Damon goes to the one, the Joe Montana character and he said, and then Joe Montana is a mafia boss. He said, how can we help you? You know, because the CIA wants some of his help, nevermind the details. And he says, you know what have you guys got? You guys are empty. The Joe Montana character says to the Matt Damon, the CIA character, you know, the Jews have got tradition. This is the quote from, from the speech. The blacks have got their music. Italians, we Italians, Irish, we've got our homeland, what do you guys got? And the Matt Damon, CIA, classic almost George Smiley version of American character, coldly looks at him, pause and says, you all are just visitors in our land. And it's to such chilling effectiveness, efficacy, that phrase, whether we believe it or not, I believe it's a deep myth in any culture, not only American western culture, but in western culture and the sense of creeping fascism happening all over, you know, and the illusion of so called purity, you know, of whether it's white nationalism or whatever the phrase you want to use now.

So, desire and hate, all of these things are close together as we know. Contemptuous brutality, the feeling of superiority and inferiority are played between these two in terms of class and character. In writing about the south, this is Tennessee Williams again in another letter of his. Yes, I'm writing about the south partly, but I'm no sociologist. What I am writing about is human nature. Human relations are terrifyingly ambiguous. My characters are full of uncertainties, mysteries and darts. And then Arthur Miller read that and Arthur Miller added in, in an essay of

his own. That Tennessee Williams might not portray social reality directly, but the intensity with which he feels whatever he does feel is so deep, is so great that the audience glimpse another kind of extreme emotional reality. That's Arthur Williams. Another kind of perception of human nature. Sorry, that's Arthur Miller on Tennessee Williams. Yes, there are victims of history. There are, but there's so much more than that. Okay, I want to also just show some short clips from the film. And the first one here, sorry, this is also here. They're very short. They're one and a half minutes clips. This is Stanley at the end here with Stella on the top left, you know, after the rape, and the story's been told, and he begs forgiveness. This is, and then on the right is Blanche being taken away. This is the, you know, I've always depended on the kindness of strangers, with five resonant meanings for me at the end where she's been taken away to the psychiatric institution. It's a reference to her, her past, the nostalgia, the romantic nostalgia of growing up as a southern belle, you know, in the mansion.

The kindness of strangers, the kindness of people, and yet also being a prostitute of also being these other meanings you can all imagine in that phrase, which has come down to us I guess with a lot of wit. This is from one of the pictures from the poster, almost the two very young characters of Stanley and Blanche at the bottom there. Okay, this is one other picture. This is Blanche in the light. When Mitch, the other character finally forces her where she, because she refuses to be seen in the light and in that face I see everything, brilliant actress, the pain, the suffering, the loss, the stripping away of fantasy, illusion, denial, desire, despite all of the things that her life has gone through. I think it's just captured without melodrama in such a believable way. Okay. These are some short scenes to share. It's their first scene of meeting.

#### *Video plays.*

- You must be Stanley. I'm Blanche.

- Oh, you're Stella's sister?

- Yes.

- Oh, hi. Yeah. Where's little woman.

- In the bathroom.

- Oh. Well, where you from, Blanche?

- Well, I live in Laurel.

- Laurel. Laurel, huh? Oh yeah, that's right Laurel. That's not my territory. Man. Look, it goes fast in the hot weather. You want a shot?

- No, I rarely touch it.

- Well there's some people rarely touch it, but it touches them often. Hey you mind if I make myself comfortable? My shirt is sticking.

- Please. Please do.

- Be comfortable. That's my motto where I come from.

- It's mine too. It's hard to stay looking fresh and hot weather. Well I haven't washed or eaten in here you are.

- Well you know you got to be careful sitting around the damn thing catch a cold. Especially when you've been exercising hard like balling is, well you're the teacher aren't you?

- Yes.

- What do you teach?

- English.

- Oh, I never was a very good English student. How long you here for?

- Well, I don't know yet.

- You, you going to shack up here?

- I thought I would. If it's not inconvenient for you all. Travelling wears me out.

- Well take it easy. Ignore those cats. Hey, Stella. What'd you, what'd you do fall asleep in there?

- [David] Okay. That's the opening scene of them meeting. You can see Brando with his mouth and Vivien Lee with her eyes.

- [Blanche] Stanley, tell, tell us a joke. Tell us a funny little story to make us all laugh. I don't know what's the matter? Were all so solemn. Is it because I've been stood up by my beau? It's the first time my entire experience with men and I've had a good deal of all sides that I've actually been stood up by anyone. I don't know how to take it. Tell us a funny little story, Stanley, something to help us out.

- I didn't think you liked my stories, Blanche.

- I like them when they're amusing but not indecent.

- I don't know any refined enough for your taste.
- Well then, let me tell one.
- Yes you tell one Blanche. You used to know a lot of good stories.
- Ah, let me see, I can run through my repertoire. Oh yes. I love parrot stories. Do you all like parrot stories? Well this one's about the old maid and the parrot. This old maid, she had a parrot that cursed a blue tweet and knew more vulgar expressions than Mr. Kowalski, the only way to hush the parrot up was to put the cover- must be upstairs. Well the only way to hush the parrot up was to put,
- Go on, Blanche.
- I don't think Mr. Kowalski will be amused.
- Mr. Kowalski is too busy making a pig of himself to think of anything else. The face and your fingers are disgustingly greasy. Go wash up and then help me clear the table.
- Now that's how I'm going to clear the table. Don't you ever talk that way to me. Pig, polack, disgusting, vulgar, greasy. Those kind of words have been on your tongue and your sister's tongue is too much around here. Who do you think you are? Pair of queens? I just remember what Huey Long said, that every man's a king and I'm the king around here. And don't you forget it, my place is all cleared up now you want me to clear yours?
- [David] And then the last one to show you, which is one of the great scenes after the rape.
- [Stanley] Hey, Stella!
- You put that howling down there and go to bed.
- Eunice, I want my clothes down here.
- You shut up. You going to get the law.
- Hey, Stella!
- You can't beat on a woman and then call her back cause she ain't going to come, her going to have a baby.
- Listen.
- I hope they haul you in and turn a fire hose on you like they done the last time.

- I want my clothes down here.

- You stinker.

- Hey, Stella! Hey, Stella!

- [Eunice] I wouldn't mix in this.

- [Stanley] Don't ever leave me baby.

*Video ends.*

- [David] Just to end it here and say, as Tennessee Williams, what I'm writing about is human nature. Human relations are terrifyingly ambiguous. Desire, domination, submission, denial, despising, romance, loss, all the contradictions in the characters for me come out so brilliantly in the acting, the tenderness, the brutality, the fantasy, the shattered dreams, the losses, so many of these things we've been talking about. But I think driven by desire all the way through, whether it's desire for illusion, desire for fantasy. Blanche, a desire for nostalgia, and the terrible loss she's had in many ways. Desire for Stanley to be accepted as an immigrant Polish guy. Desire for Stella to have recognition that her love is real for him. And that final scene for me, it's trying to show so much of, I suppose, the potential sensitivity of another kind of desire. Thanks very much.

- [Host] David, do you have time for some questions?

- Yeah, sure.

- [Wendy] David, I'm going to have to jump off. I just want to say thank you for an outstanding presentation. That was absolutely wonderful. Thank you.

- Thank you so much, Wendy. Take care.

- [Jude] Wendy, I'll stay on and do questions.

- [Wendy] Thanks Jude. Thank you very much. Bye-bye everybody and thank you, David. Enjoy the rest of your evening. Bye.

- Okay, thank you Jude. Thank you Wendy.

- [Host] David, there are a few questions if you want, if you want to read them out and then just answer them, that would be great.



Q&A and Comments:

Q: Sure. You said James Joyce was anti-Semitic, from Cheryl.

A: No, I didn't say he was anti-Semitic at all. The opposite. James Joyce was totally, I believe, pro Jewish and believed in Jewish culture, Jewish history, and the character of Bloom is fascinatingly chosen as the main character in Ulysses. He was one I set up in opposition to T.S. Elliot, who was anti-Semitic in his poetry.

Linda, totally agree with your comments, ambiguity and characters, just so much part to Tennessee Williams, thank you. Do you agree that ambiguity comes partly from concealment of truth from others and that they're lying to themselves? Absolutely, agree completely, Linda.

Q: Betty, where would you place Edward Albee in the cannon of American playwrights?

A: Brilliant. I think Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolff and Zoo Story, are right up there. You know, Virginia Wolf is almost, for me, almost as powerful as Streetcar, Long Day's Journey, and The Crucible, or Death of a Salesman. Absolutely brilliant.

Q: Tom, was he called up in World War II, Brando?

A: No, he was too young.

Q: Yolandi, was he a religious man, were his parents or Tennessee Williams?

A: No. Oh, was Tennessee Williams called up? No. I don't think he was religious, but he was definitely imbued with the southern world of his upbringing, which also makes him different to Arthur Miller and others.

Janet, one cannot ignore the toll of Vivien Lee's mental health, which she showed her on her enormous playing Blanche. She suffered acutely. Absolutely. I can imagine, Janet, thank you. But I think it's an extraordinary performance. She matches Brando and he matches her step for step. This is, and 70 years later, I personally find as riveting even when I watch just a minute or two of these clips.

Q: From Dion, can you tell us about Brando and method acting?

A: It's a great idea. Perhaps for another lecture. That'd be great.

Thank you. Marcia, thank you. Hope you well.

Blanche also lost her first love, her gay husband. Exactly. And witnesses his suicide. The loss of her husband, the loss of the ancestral family home. Absolutely. Thanks.

Carol, your lecture series a service room. Thank you, Carol.

Q: Monty, did Williams ever undergo psychoanalysis?

A: Interesting question. Not as far as I know. Monty, thank you. He had medical treatment with amphetamines and depression by this doctor, but I don't, I haven't read of actual therapy.

Q: Last question, Sandra, the young director of the production in Toronto Streetcar commented that this play is relevant today because it's about racism. What's your reaction?

A: I think there's an element of racism in it without a doubt because he's the Polish immigrant and she represents the Old South, which is gone and the nostalgia and the loss for the Old South. And in that last clip, the second last clip, sorry, the one where they're eating at the table Stella calls him a polack, you know, because he's got such bad table manners eating with his fingers. So, it's played within the play. I don't think it's a primary theme, but it's intentional by Tennessee Williams. Definitely. That he's the immigrant Polish guy and he chooses Poland. He doesn't choose England or France or even Germany, you know, for the perception of the inferiority of Eastern Europe of the time.

Okay. Monty, did Williams ever. Sorry, asked that.

Q: How much, Yolandi, how much appeal did Tennessee Williams have outside of America?

A: Huge. Absolutely huge. And in fact, Harold Pinter directed one of the really good productions in one of the main theatres in London and many, many others all over the world. Absolutely huge and global. Streetcar in particular. And Glass Menagerie as well.

Romain, thanks for the psychoanalytic vibe, Jessica Benjamin. Absolutely.

Q: Was Brando an advocate of psychoanalysis?

A: I don't think so, but his whole instinct, instinctive approach was so psychologically attuned with his instinct, I think.

Q: Ronnie, if written, how would Stanley be better done as a black man?

A: Very interesting question. I don't know, that'd involve a whole lot of other conceptual and thematic questions, I think. Thanks. Interesting question.

Betty, this reminded me of Peter Shaffer's play, Lettice and Lovage. Okay. Thank you. Yeah, the facts leave a vacuum.

Penny, recently watched Jillian Anderson's Blanche. That will take a long time, but great. Interesting.

Thank you, Linda. Thanks, Sue. Vivian. Thank you.

Donna, what is the name of the movie, you're all just visitors in our land, it's just slipped my mind. I'm sorry, I'll get it again to remember the name of that movie. It was a movie I watched a short while ago. It just suddenly struck me as, it's so contemporary. I think it was made 15 years ago by De Niro. I think De Niro was one of the producers of it as well. But how contemporary it felt and yet how somehow links to this. With Jessica Tandy. No, the film I know was with Vivien Lee.

Thanks Diya.

Thanks Rob. The Provincetown, Rob is about the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival. Yeah, it's great. In Massachusetts. Norma, Cate Blanchett, the remake of Streetcar. Yeah. Fantastic.

Q: Barbara, why Streetcar?

A: She arrives and she takes a street car to the station called Desire, and so it's a street car to the street station. The street name is Desire. Street Car, 1947, that's what was used in New Orleans.

Heather, thank you. Okay. Hello from Ontario, London, Ontario. Thank you. Andrew, polack, Polish Jew not merely Polish outsider. Yep. Okay. Those are some of the questions I think that I have here. I'm not sure if there are others.

- [Judi] Let's have a quick look David, we can finish off there cause it is coming on.

- Oh, there. Okay. Sorry. Ah, the Good Shepherd. Thank you so much, Amy. That's the movie with Matt Damon and De Niro with that line. You're just visitors here. Thank you. It's The Good Shepherd. Okay. Thank you. Okay, I think that's all the questions I have.

- Well, thank you so much, David, it was super interesting and well done.

- Okay.

- And Thank you to everybody that joined us and we'll see everybody again tomorrow.

- Right. Thank you so much, Judi, for all your help. Always.

- Always a pleasure, David. And we'll see you soon. Thanks everybody

- Take care.

- Bye-Bye.

- Ciao, ciao.