

Sex and magnolias

Peter Craven applauds Opera Australia's suitably steamy production of André Previn's *A Streetcar Named Desire*

It was an odd coincidence that Bruce Beresford's production of André Previn's opera of *A Streetcar Named Desire* should get its first Melbourne outing in the same week that Liv Ullmann's Sydney Theatre Company production of the original Tennessee Williams play, with Cate Blanchett as Blanche DuBois should open at the Brooklyn Academy of Arts and Music in New York. I was not an unqualified admirer of Blanchett's performance when the Ullmann *Streetcar* opened at the Sydney Theatre Company on 5 September (*The Spectator Australia*, 9 September) but Yvonne Kenny, the operatic Blanche, opposite that sumptuous bull of a baritone Teddy Tahu Rhodes as Stanley, is full of concentrated poignancy in Beresford's production, with its pinpoint precision and its easy mastery of Southern sprawl and steam, all that sensuality and aching nostalgia.

It was a hot summer's first night, and Melbourne was full of the premonition of bushfires to come in this conflagration of a political week in which Malcolm Turnbull had fallen by one vote and Tony Abbott was reshaping the Liberal party with a scorched earth intensity. I didn't notice the lions of politics in the throng at the State Theatre on Wednesday night. Lynn Williams was there, that passionate opera fan whose husband Fred reconfigured the way the nation's landscape could be perceived, and John Wood, synonymous with the bush morality of *Blue Heelers*, there to see the work of the director of *Breaker Morant* and *Don's Party*. So too was Sigrid Thornton who is playing a different kind of police officer, a bisexual one, in the third series of *Underbelly*.

It's funny to think how many Australian milestones, from Bazza McKenzie to *The Getting of Wisdom*, have been etched into our collective consciousness by Bruce Beresford. One of his greatest successes, of course, was *Driving Miss Daisy*, with the great Jessica Tandy, who had been Marlon Brando's original stage Blanche before the film, and Vivien Leigh, at the other end of her career.

The opera *Streetcar* shows the ease with which Beresford can bring to life the South, both in its remembered stately mansions (black and white projections onto the stage) and the simmer and singleted heat of downtown New Orleans.

The production is unashamedly grand, cinematic, spacious. Beresford uses a revolve to get the greatest variety of perspective shifts, and John Stoddart's set has a density and architectural grandeur that effortlessly connects with the memory of 1940s America, the fuzz and the residual stylishness amid the slatternliness that we remember

from Elia Kazan's film of *Streetcar*.

Previn's opera is not a work of art of the same magnitude as Tennessee Williams' dramatic original, though the strictures of the Williams trustees ensured Previn's somewhat symphonic interpretation fits around a cogently tight edit of the original text — one that compares well with the very full text Ullmann and Blanchett used. However, the opera still comes in at three-and-a-half hours, with two intervals.

It's a dark and brooding musical meditation on Williams' drama about the dodgy Southern Belle and the dangerous rutting thug. You can hear Previn's lifelong filiation to Hollywood in its quiet menace and in the tact and sense of drama with which the score underlines the portent of the words and action.

There is an insistent understatement of jazz influence, but never the full explosion of the sort of Gershwin or more particularly Bernstein influence you might expect. The dominant influence throughout *Streetcar*, with its long gliding lines of recitative, is Benjamin Britten, and it is Britten's sense of the excruciations of memory, desire and stabbing anger and pain that dominate in this operatic moodscape.

It is done with the richest possible sense of Previn's encapsulation of the dramatic material. Yvonne Kenny is on the mature side for Blanche (a role originally played by Renée Fleming) but the grand magnificent stretch of her career — all the exquisiteness of her work in Strauss and Mozart and Handel — gives an extraordinary recapitulative richness to her Blanche so that the fading star

quality in combination with the maturity and sophistication of the technique come to seem exactly right for the role.

Teddy Tahu Rhodes is a matinée idol of a baritone, with the looks and physique to match the resonance and brightness of his vocal equipment. Bruce Beresford ensures that his acting as Stanley has enough bludgeoning threat to stop the performance from lapsing into a cute stud act. Teddy Tahu Rhodes is, in any case, a fine actor, and this is a tough, credible performance, commanding and magnetic, even if his blonde handsomeness could be a bit more soiled.

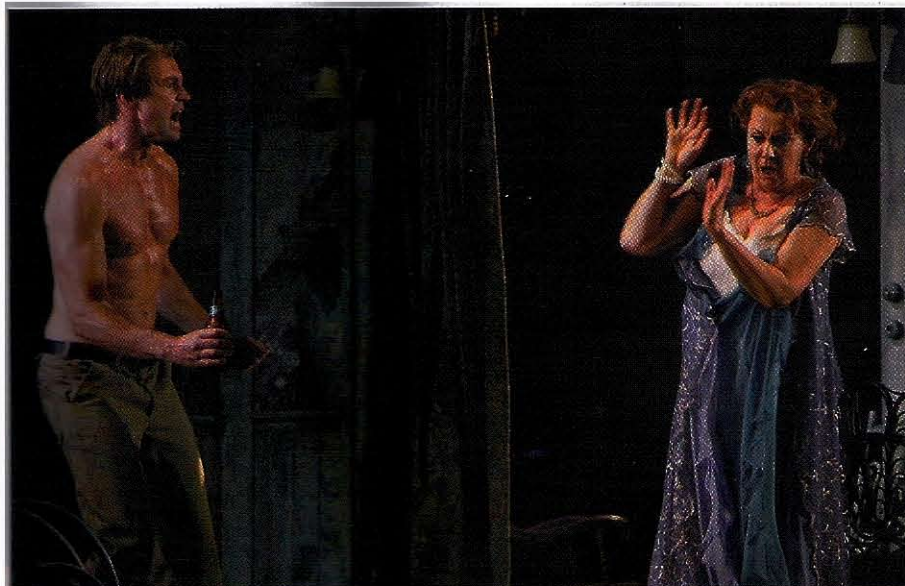
Tom Woods conducts Orchestra Victoria with plenty of feeling for the light and dark of Previn's score, and the production has an authority that grows and grows. Antoinette Halloran has the right kind of sexiness and purity of line as Stella, and Stuart Skelton's Mitch is strong and credible.

It's all credible because Beresford has found, with a touch that looks effortless, precisely the style for this Southern massacre of pity and terror up close and personal.

He directs with an absolutely unashamed sense of the magnitude of the operatic medium and the way the very size of opera, its histrionic scale, requires an appropriate sense of illusionism and pictorial variety. His *Streetcar* is beautifully lit (by Simon Lefort) and with a cinematic sense of gradation of mood, a constantly vigilant subtlety and sense of how to specify the curve of the opera's apprehension of catastrophe.

It's a traditional production, as spacious and self-confident as something by Zeffirelli or Visconti. It is in its way a monument to the Hickox period of Opera Australia, and it shows, with the greatest clarity, how much we need to give Bruce Beresford his head and allow him to direct whatever classic or modern opera he fancies.

Because of lateness I saw the first part of *Streetcar* from the back of the gods, then the bulk of it from front stalls. In either spot it worked like a dream.



Downtown heat: Teddy Tahu Rhodes as Stanley and Yvonne Kenny as Blanche

Photo: Jeff Busby