Movie Review: "A Streetcar Named Desire"

Rating: PG

Length: 122 minutes

Release Date: December 1, 1951

Directed by: Elia Kazan

Genre: Drama

Cast: Vivien Leigh, Marlon Brando, Kim Hunter, and Karl Malden

"A Streetcar Named Desire" is a story brimming with the primal instinct for survival. It appeals to our most basic impulses of lust, hate, and to claim what is ours in an unforgiving world. The setting is in a seedy section of the French Quarter in New Orleans, post-World War II, where we meet tough-guy laborer Stanley Kowalski (Marlon Brando) and his down-trodden, dependent, pregnant wife Stella (Kim Hunter) when Stella's crazed sister, Blanche DuBois (Vivien Leigh), comes for a visit and true insanity prevails. There is a love interest for Blanche in the sensitive character of Harold "Mitch" Mitchell (Karl Malden), but the main conflict lies in the relationship between Stanley and his sister-in-law, Blanche. Stanley is characterized by Blanche as an animalistic and crude brute, whereas Stanley feels Blanche is an opportunistic fake who parades around as a demure southern belle drinking all his liquor. Much to the dismay of a fearful Stella, the two tear each other down with insults at every opportunity in the belief that the other is the only thing standing in the way of their own happiness. Stanley's distrust of Blanche drives him to seek the truth about her, while Blanche does all she can to keep a veil of secrecy between him and her past. There are rumors and possible truths about thievery, promiscuity, homosexuality, pedophilia and rape. There are glimpses of hope trampled by anger, violence, lies, and loathing. This is "A Streetcar Named Desire".

The actors in "A Streetcar Named Desire" taunt one another with incredible zeal. Marlon Brando epitomizes the tough, animalistic, working-class aggressor that thrives on telling it like it is, while Vivien Leigh shines as a perfect example of a delicate, southern belle dripping with flirtatiousness and neuroticism. Rounding out the cast in this crazed foursome are Kim Hunter and Karl Malden. Each portrays their character as a perfect accompaniment to their counterparts: Kim with desperate lust, and Karl with a hopeful love.

Broadway play director, Elia Kazan, invited his original stage actors Marlon Brando, Kim Hunter and Karl Malden to be in the cast for the film remake of "A Streetcar Named Desire" whereas Vivian Leigh reprised her role from London's West End theatre production of what became simply referred to as "Streetcar". This definitive American movie was based on the Pulitzer Prize winning play by Tennessee Williams who also collaborated on the movie with screenwriter Oscar Saul.

Despite an overpowering performance by Marlon Brando who was nominated for an Academy Award in the best actor category, it was his co-performers who set a winning record for three out of four of the academy awards categories: best actress went to Vivian Leigh, best supporting actor for Karl Malden, and best supporting actress for Kim Hunter. The fourth win, out of twelve nominations, went for art direction where the sultry setting was an extremely effective element in the film's appeal, success and longevity.

The dynamics of the character portrayals put forth in "A Streetcar Named Desire" were infused with exceptional dialogue offering up some of the most memorable cinematic quotes in existence to this day. It is doubtful that anyone will not recall Marlon Brando's excruciating plea for his wife to return to him with his one word cry of "Stella" or Vivian Leigh's softly spoken, with an extreme southern charm, line: "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers". These words alone will more than likely trigger a sense of recall to anyone who has experienced "Streetcar" as well as for those who have not seen this quintessential movie, and that alone should be an impetus for those to see what most have already voraciously devoured in the original play, the ensuing Broadway play, and the eventual cinematic production of "A Streetcar Named Desire".

If you have not had the opportunity to see "Streetcar" then stop what you are doing, and go watch it now. It is an amazing movie that showcases the insanity, frailty and toughness of life. It defines what a classic movie is, and without a doubt will be one that you will remember. This black and white film presents itself as the true grit of American life; it exhibits the struggle to survive in a desperate, unforgiving, and savage world. It offers fleeting glimpses of hope only to tragically rip them away. It shines a looking glass on the American psyche of days gone by, yet is as current a picture today as it ever was. This is "A Streetcar Named Desire".

Rating 4 out of 5