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# Opera Theatre of Saint Louis Review: From 'Streetcar' to Shakespeare

The highlight of the company's season is a production of André Previn's 'A Streetcar Named Desire'; also being presented are Adam Guettel's musical 'The Light in the Piazza' and Gounod's 'Romeo and Juliet.'

By Heidi Waleson

June 15, 2026 5:03 pm ET



Sara Gartland in 'A Streetcar Named Desire.' ERIC WOOLSEY

*Webster Groves, Mo.*

Patricia Racette launched her first season as artistic director of Opera Theatre of Saint Louis with a winner: She and the company's music director, Daniela Candillari, breathed new life into André Previn's "A Streetcar Named Desire" (1998). Its wordy libretto, faithfully adapted by Philip Littell from the Tennessee Williams play, is a bit too long. Yet unlike many operas that closely mirror their sources, Previn's music

adds serious depth and dimension to the characters and story in the tradition of Poulenc's "Dialogues des Carmélites" or Debussy's "Pelléas et Mélisande."

Previn's complex, inventive orchestral palette, carefully shaped by Ms. Candillari, deploys jazz-tinged New Orleans brass and sinuous woodwinds along with subtle dissonances to map the tragedy of the fading Southern belle Blanche DuBois, destroyed by Stanley Kowalski, her sister Stella's brutal, working-class husband. The vocal writing, even in the conversational sections, is distinctive, and Sara Gartland was revelatory in the punishing role of Blanche. Beneath the character's flirtatious wiles, her powerful soprano brought steel to Blanche's determination to live in her fantasy—a lost world of wealth and graciousness. The music seesaws brilliantly between Blanche's dreaming arias, when time seems to stop, and her impoverished reality. Finally, the two states can no longer coexist, and she retreats permanently into delusion, murmuring "Whoever you are" to the doctor escorting her off to an asylum.

Andrew Boyce's unit set evoked the French Quarter of New Orleans. The kitchen and bedroom of the Kowalskis' claustrophobic two-room apartment were set against a rear wall of louvered shutters with a second-story wrought-iron balcony reached by a spiral staircase; a streetlamp marked the outdoor scenes. Kylee Loera's mostly black-and-white projections strategically added atmospheric images, including the eponymous streetcar; Eric Southern's lighting zeroed in on Blanche—in different colors—whenever she slipped into reverie. Amanda Gladu's handsome costumes underlined the contrast between Blanche's finery and the everyday wear of the other characters.

Ms. Racette's sharply detailed direction kept the focus on Blanche and her gradual disintegration through tiny details—in Act 3, Blanche starts nervously playing with her hair—and bold statements. Stanley's rape of Blanche was violent and explicit for a few seconds. Then the singers

froze in place, the lighting changed, and the screaming orchestra and Ms. Loera's projections of Blanche's agonized face told the rest.

Soprano Lauren Snouffer was a sensual Stella, in thrall to her husband; David Adam Moore was all aggression and fierce cunning as Stanley, determined not to let anyone get the better of him. As Mitch, Stanley's poker buddy who is attracted to Blanche, Bille Bruley's high tenor poignantly embodied a weak man trying to be strong.



A scene from 'The Light in the Piazza.' ERIC WOOLSEY

Ms. Racette is also experimenting with Broadway musicals, beginning this season with Adam Guettel's alluring "**The Light in the Piazza**" (2005). The book, adapted by Craig Lucas from a novella by Elizabeth Spencer and set in the 1950s, is the tender story of Clara and Margaret, her very protective mother, who are visiting Florence, where Clara and Fabrizio, a young Italian, fall instantly in love. Clara is developmentally disabled due to a childhood accident; Margaret's efforts to keep her safe gradually give way to a fuller understanding of her daughter's awakening, and the lovelessness of her own marriage. Mr. Guettel's twining, urgent vocal music captures the complexity of the situation, encompassing the innocent, sincere mutual recognition of the lovers and Margaret's sadness and guilt.

Broadway actress Kate Baldwin missed Margaret’s profound emotional intensity; an intermittent Southern accent did not help. With her high, bright soprano, Katrina Galka was a persuasive Clara—you believed in her emotional blossoming; tenor Roy Hage needed to be more of a crooner as Fabrizio. Crossover expert Paulo Szot was stylish as Signor Naccarelli, Fabrizio’s father, and Kelly Guerra had a fine Sondheim-esque number as Franca, Fabrizio’s embittered sister-in-law. Rob Berman was the capable conductor. The bare-bones production, designed by Cameron Anderson with costumes by Ulises Alcala, was efficiently directed by Crystal Manich.



Emma Marhefka and Leonardo Sánchez in ‘Romeo and Juliet.’ ERIC WOOLSEY

The season’s only classic opera title, Gounod’s **“Romeo and Juliet,”** fared the least well. This feast of gorgeous tunes fell prey to a clunky English translation by Edmund Tracey and unidiomatic conducting by Ramón Tebar, making it dull rather than sublime. As Juliet, Emma Marhefka’s lyric soprano was best in dramatic moments, such as Act 4’s poison aria; as Romeo, Leonardo Sánchez tended to overcook his tenor. Benjamin Taylor had some trouble with the many words of Mercutio’s “Queen Mab” aria; he was stronger in the duel scene. Bass-baritone Nicholas Newton was a solid, affecting Friar Lawrence. The chorus had good diction, which was not necessarily a plus, given the words.

Like “Piazza,” the very basic production—designed by Liliana Duque Piñeiro—had a decorative back wall and some columns that were moved around by costumed figures for scene changes. The appearance of an actual bed for the Act 4 wedding night was a surprise. Robert Perdziola’s period costumes, repurposed from OTSL’s 2005 staging, conveniently put the Capulets in red and the Montagues in blue, which was awkward when some of Romeo’s interloper friends had to briefly join in the Capulet ball to make up the numbers in the chorus. Keturah Stickann supplied the serviceable direction.

*—Ms. Waleson writes about opera for the Journal and is the author of “Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of the New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America” (Metropolitan).*

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