

The relevance of portraying Tennessee William's women in South Africa

Fiona Ramsay

Performing the role of Blanche DuBois in Tennessee William's *'A Streetcar Named Desire'* is the third in a triptych of female characters in his work I have portrayed. [Others being Princess Kosmonopolis in *'Sweetbird of Youth'* and Amanda Wingfield in *'The Glass Menagerie'*.] Where previous roles have explored gender, intersectionality, interrogated the role of accent or dialect in language as the primary signifier of character, identity, narrative and context this production examined the effect of the experience in both rehearsal process and performance, formed part of an interrogation of performative aspects of the intense psychological fragmentation of the character in relation to her descent into mental despair due to prior abuse.

The performances deconstructed concepts of gender and sex and inquired 'are norms of sexual perception just the norms of people in power?' and examined what properties may be gender forming and gender changing, such as clothes, colours, gesture, vocal range, gait, behaviour, attitudes, etc. The objective was also to test the 'stability' of gender in terms of the effect of 'drag' where males dressed as and playing female roles and contrast this with a woman playing a strong and dominant female role, having being described by arts critics as essentially a 'masculine' woman.

My research for the roles was firmly based in the concept of self-knowledge as used by Carl Gustav Jung in his psychoanalytic theory of archetypes. Jung considers the 'collective unconscious' as a mental process in human mind from which he/she/they is/are not aware. It is the immortal part and the unknown psyche of him/she/them which is shaped by archetypes and the images, motifs or thematic patterns that occur regularly in history and literature. I applied Jung's archetypes to the characters' psyche in order to find the causes of their different kinds of disintegration, and the root of their lack of self-realization and unbalanced psyche that leads to the failure of an individuation process identifiable in some abnormal behaviours in the characters. I explored the traces of the 'animus' in all three female roles as the archetypes of masculine, which emerged as psychic representation of sexual instinct or a manly side of the woman [Abrams, 1999]. This animus or unconscious masculine element in a woman, is revealed in her conscious femininity which cohabits psychologically with the figure of a violent hoodlum. Almost everybody falls in love or experiences sexual desire, but few people are capable of the object of their desire desirable in the first place.

The paper takes the form of a performance interspersed with observations and discussion on the research and discoveries made in respect of the role and spaces women inhabit in South Africa. Excerpts from each text underpin these reflections and frame the examination of the female psyche in a gender complex and diverse society.

Biography

FIONA RAMSAY [BA Hons. [UCT] MA [Wits] is a renowned actress and vocal coach, currently a senior lecturer and Head of the Theatre and Performance Department at the Wits School of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. She has extensive experience in theatre, film and television as an actress and dialogue, vocal and acting coach, with accent and dialect vocal pedagogy her core interest. She is currently researching her PhD on the archive of her work spanning 40 years examining the process of preparing for and performing and the role liminal spaces play in that process.