

# stage

THE FAMILIAR NEWSLETTER, OFTEN FOUND IN THEATRE LOBBIES OR THE HANDS OF ACTORS & THEATRE DEVOTEES.

## SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER: Best Classic Theatre!

BY JACK SHAW – OCTOBER 22, 2011

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I never felt more inclined to shout, "CLASSIC THEATRE ROCKS!" It certainly did tonight. Tennessee Williams' poetic words, his drama, lived on the South Camden Theatre Company stage! Tonight was an experience theatre goers don't have all the time. When you are so moved, you forget where you are, you live and breathe with the characters.

If you are passionate about theatre, this is a moment you have waited for. Not that you haven't seen performances and productions you raved about (and, in my case, written about), but this is one that will stay with you for an incredibly long time...perhaps forever.

Director Connie Norwood did more than do the great playwright justice; she brought out the extreme emotion with the heart-felt reality of every character, and breathed life into Tennessee Williams' poetry of life—and into a show that doesn't get performed all that often. It's a challenge and a half for a director to get the performances you need to make it work. That's not the case here. Norwood got the performances—big time.

Performances were off the chart amazing beginning with Lee Kiszonas' "Mrs. Venable". Rob Hargraves' slick "Dr. Sugar" couldn't have been more perfect – clothed with a perfect measure of potential larceny set against the truth. I was mesmerized by their early exchanges that built on each other with so much realism... Later, the change and intensity in their characters is totally believable.

Emily Letts as "Catharine" gave an award-winning, send-the-girl-to-Broadway performance. She is the mysterious black sheep family member, repressed and damaged by the likes of the people who surround her, by those people who care more about themselves than a family member who has been mauled and mangled by their society.

Her "people" don't really want the truth, but what they think they deserve; they want their own miserable life of lies back.

She has the job of revealing the truth bit by bit in as natural a way as possible, and she does it beautifully, giving a performance that leaves the audience caring for her deeply.



Emily Letts as Catharine Holly in SCTC's SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER running in Camden NJ through November 6. (Photo credit: Robert Bingaman)



Lee Kiszonas and Rob Hargraves in a scene from South Camden Theatre Company's SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER, running through November 6.

At first Catharine is closed, rebellious, led by others, falling victim by her own admission by the high lofty dreamlike life where she imagines she has some control. She is the first to know the truth and it unhinges her. But in the end she gets the hearing and tells the truth no one wants to believe—a truth so stark and real, so filled with the seamy side of life no one of their social and financial stature wants to admit it even exists. We, humans, have to blame someone and, of course, it can't be those who are invisible to us; we must blame ourselves for making it so. This is Williams' hard truth, but a truth nonetheless. Letts' portrayal is eerily mature for such a young actor; she makes us gasp and feel ashamed. Bravo!

Susan Dewey gave us a “Mrs Holly” that was earthy and crass—exactly as the part requires, and she shines. I loved listening to her. I know her, I thought. John Nagy who played her son, the assertive and greedy, “George,” I wanted to punch out. He’s the character you hate and love it that you hate him because you have experienced a character so real. It’s a reaction every actor wants and hopes to have some time in a career.

Not to slight any of the fine actors, I have to say, even those with lesser roles in terms of lines and confrontations on stage, made the most of their parts and deserve accolades, too. Helen O’Rourke made a fine “Sister Felicity,” knowing when to observe and when to interject herself. Gina Vitolo-Stevens likewise should be proud of her performance. As a sometime actor and director myself, I felt proud to be associated in any way with these actors who made the genius himself, Tennessee Williams, look good, or should I say realize his “dream” were he alive today.

The set was striking, too, a southern garden, painstakingly drawn not only to give the maximum emphasis to the actors, but also to the world Williams has drawn for us. The sound and lighting, although not used in a bombastic way to highlight the scenes, was what the play called for.

The playwright’s insight into human nature is evident in his words—but we already knew that; his gift for writing poetically about life is legendary, and actors who make his view live on the stage should get equal billing.

This production should be legendary, too. The South Camden Theatre Company opened its seventh season titled “Tenn X Ten” featuring works written by and inspired by Tennessee Williams in celebration of the centennial of his birth. SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER probably would not be my first choice to kick off the season, but apparently I would be wrong. This excellent production deserves kudos everywhere. I couldn’t stop myself after the show. All the things I never do...like hang around and talk to audience, cast and director, I did tonight. I was moved to a standing ovation like the entire audience, and I can tell you it was deserved.

The South Camden Theatre Company hit all the right notes with this production. I hope they can keep it up. It does sound as if the company has an interesting season planned around Williams’ work and other original works about Williams’ himself that serious theatre goers should not miss.

## SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER

By Tennessee Williams

Directed by Connie Norwood

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### Starring:

Lee Kiszonas

Emily Letts

Rob Hargraves

Susan Dewey

John Nagy

Helen O’Rourke

Gina Vitolo-Stevens

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October 21-November 6

Fridays and Saturdays at 8:00 PM

Sunday Matinees at 2:00 PM



### About Jack Shaw

He has directed such plays as HARVEY, LOVERS AND OTHER STRANGERS, ROMANTIC COMEDY, BLITHE SPIRIT, CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF, and CREATION OF THE WORLD AND OTHER BUSINESS; and acted in various Regional theaters throughout the country. His professional musical theater experience includes such roles as Nathan in GUYS AND DOLLS, Perchik in FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, Mordred in CAMELOT, and Ice in WEST SIDE STORY. His broadcasting experience includes being on-air radio personality, news director and talk show host. He was also a TV news and public affairs director, and staff commercial announcer. Today he is the founder of Acting Smarts where he offers private coaching and training for public speakers and presenters as well as actors. Always an actor, you can still find him on stage, in a commercial, performing in a training film, or narrating an audio book. In addition writing reviews for STAGE Magazine, he also writes articles on the Performing Arts for the Wilmington Examiner, on Training and Development, and Communication topics for the Free Management Library, and on Theatre and related communication subjects at [actingsmarts.wordpress.com](http://actingsmarts.wordpress.com). His soon-to-be-published science fiction novel, In Makr’s Shadow, is about what happens when people stop talking face-to-face and the devices take over. Jack received BA (cum laude) degrees in both Psychology and English from Missouri Western State University, a dual MA degree in Speech and Dramatic Art, and English, focusing on Performance Criticism, from the University of Missouri in Columbia. He also holds an MA in Social Psychology from the University of Missouri in Kansas City. Contact Jack at [jshaw2040@yahoo.com](mailto:jshaw2040@yahoo.com).

