

*Unlocking Desire* a Play by Barbara Neri  
Artist Statement

I know all the people in this play. I met many of them while visiting my brother Jim while he was in a Rehab facility. Ozzie and Jim are modeled after Brenda and Ron, a couple who sat with Jim at meals. Brenda had suffered too many strokes and was almost blind. Ron survived a suicide attempt but the gunshot wound to his head caused seizures. To spite their tragic circumstances they found love and shared a room in the facility. My brother Jim died there and his wife Rose died a few months later. Raoul is a fusion of many friends, in particular David who died in the 1980s of a then mysterious illness. Hank is named after my father, a WWII Paratrooper. Blanche embodies the despair of so many people I know it would be difficult to list them all. Violante has many of the wise and strange qualities of my elderly mother-in-law. But as with the other characters her name evokes another, in this case Violante do Ceo an old forgotten poet as well as the old strong women in Lorca's *Trilogy*. Williams loved Lorca's work and I believe the small but important role of the Mexican woman in *ASND* is likewise an homage to Lorca.

As a writer I am interested in how we tell our love stories: Who is & isn't entitled to love's redemption? I am (among other things) asking the audience if the abandoned characters in *Unlocking Desire* are entitled to Love. This discourse on Love has gone on for millennia and it is played out largely in love poetry: Petrarch, Dante, and Barrett Browning, among others. Unrequited love or failure is usually the topic but in the case of Barrett Browning love triumphs and spirit and flesh are not in conflict but rather become one. The poetic discourse intersects with, and is fleshed out in, the theater. It certainly intersected thusly for Williams, for he was a poet (first) and he knew what he was doing when he alluded to Barrett Browning in Scene 3 of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

What was he doing? It has been easy, it seems, for scholars to ignore this allusion although he made a point of directing our attention to the final lyric of EBB's love Sonnet (and by association her and Robert Browning's love story) twice in *Streetcar's* pivotal Scene 3:

"And if God choose, I shall but love thee better – after – death!"

I am an artist first and my scholarly enquiries spring from my artistic process. This research is a fertile layer out of which my play emerges. Establishing Williams' engagement with the poetic discourse on Love is important (for him and for us). The Browning's (heterosexual) romance became part of the cultural consciousness via the theater in the very popular Rudolph Besier play *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1930). Williams reported it was the first play he ever saw in St Louis during the depression (1934). This play is an important part of theater history involving Catherine 'Kit' Cornell and Guthrie McClintock. Though it is generally accepted now that both were gay, they were a devoted couple whose legendary and fruitful professional partnership made theater history. Williams admired them both and was at first writing the role of Blanche DuBois for Cornell. When *Streetcar* premiered on Broadway (1947) TW's mother came to NY and he took her to see Kit Cornell in *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*. How this play intersects with *ASND* is a complex dynamic that was personal, poetic and aesthetic for Williams. And his use of the darker final lyric of Sonnet XLIII is of course very telling.\*

One of the love stories evoked in my play is that of Blanche DuBois and Alan Grey. Alan was Blanche's first love and they ran off together to marry at age 16. I've always wondered why this

was allowed to happen. Blanche's family was affluent and she was educated so why did her family allow her to run off and marry at 16? And why did Alan's family look the other way and allow this? When I literally did the math I arrived at a very interesting answer that is relevant to us today in light of the depression / recession we are living through.

It is 'Ozzie' that tells Blanche that she has to 'deal with that Grey boy once and for all.' Ozzie is named after and evokes TW's childhood nursemaid. Ozzie was African American and a storyteller. Williams mentioned her often but her impact on him as a writer has never been factored. Thus it became important to give her a presence and voice in my play. Ozzie and Blanche dialogue in Scene 5 "Hydrotherapy" and Blanche both speaks for the character 'Blanche DuBois' but also as her creator Tennessee Williams. This layering of the biographical and fictional is embedded into the text throughout the play. The layering of fact and fiction is always an important dynamic of Art.

Alan does not actually appear in my play but he is present via another character named 'Raoul.' And of course Alan's story is still with us today and thus it is realistic and relevant that Raoul would be in the institution, placed by his wife after he attempted suicide when his wife discovered his homosexuality and confronted him. Blanche is unable to move on until she can talk to Alan again and via Raoul she is able to do so. Blanche serves a similar purpose for Raoul in that he must look at her and see the impact his actions may have had on his wife and the impact his suicide may have had on her had he succeeded. That said, there is another romance in 'Unlocking Desire' that attempts to emerge and this ray of hope is initiated by 'Hank.' But Blanche is blind to the love around her, as if cursed.

Historically, certain plays and their characters become iconic and inform our consciousness and exploring their back-stories becomes necessary and relevant. Can we write a new story into existence, change consciousness, without bringing those characters with us? Often when I talk to lay people about Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* it is apparent that if they know the play, it is via the Kazan film. Thus they do not know the play because the film was censored. It is my desire to not only infuse my writing with such censored & critical ideas but also unlock the secrets still in play today that underpin the beliefs that continue to hold us hostage.

Research for *Unlocking Desire* was also conducted in *The Historic New Orleans Collection* and in the city of New Orleans at large during August 2008. Among other things, I took part in a Vodou ceremony. I had many talks with people on the streets about Blanche and some of their thoughts are integrated into the play. The *Convergence Art Center* hosted a discussion group during which I viewed the Kazan film of *A Streetcar Named Desire* with young artist members. Interestingly, the young women in attendance had little sympathy for Blanche DuBois. They thought she was just crazy and hysterical until I told them what was censored from the movie: the Allan Grey story. After learning how Allan had betrayed Blanche and his tragic end, they could sympathize with her and feel the tragedy and the ongoing relevance of Williams' play in our homophobic society. The importance of finding a way to explore this ongoing tragedy in my play became pertinent.

Also, while I was in *The Historic New Orleans Collection* I looked at Vivienne Leigh's collection of photos from the Kazan film set. Many of them were obviously of a film set: with boom mics and other film equipment exposed as the actors performed. It suddenly became glaringly apparent

to me that, though Blanche DuBois is powerfully iconic she is not real. I wanted the audience to experience this revelation and see Blanche as a real woman of today, traumatized and mysteriously lost in the world of Williams' play. Thus the inmates she meets in the asylum remind her of characters in the play and the inmates, unbeknownst to them, in turn 'play' their parts.

Finally, plays emerge from an accumulation of experiences that reach a critical mass. When I think back to the moment that this play may have hatched in my consciousness, I recall the 2003 shotgun murder of Nikki Nicholas, a young transvestite, in a farmhouse on Old US 23 near where I live:

<http://atranspt.blogspot.com/2007/02/four-years-later-nikki-murder-still.html>

I was sickened by this and wanted somehow to reach out. I called Jeff Montgomery at the Triangle Foundation and met him there when he was the director. We talked about Love and what I was trying to accomplish with my work as a writer and scholar. We talked about the idea that change has to happen on a deep level and this must involve our consciousness. The literary cannon and how works are read, explained and taught in schools inform that. This is in essence the ground water that feeds the public tap. Writers and artists of all stripes are beckoned to engage in this and correct, revise history. This is challenging but necessary work. And it is part of a long process I have been involved in and that *Unlocking Desire* is part of.

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\*This research was presented in a 2005 paper at the Victorian Institute Conference at UNC, Durham NC.