A play is limited by the verbal and physical constraints of the stage. Physically the audience can see only what goes on in the one or two rooms that have been created. Verbal constraints are exemplified by the limited methods of communicating new information in a play, the audience learns new information in the context of character’s lines, because unlike a novel there is not a narrator to supply the reader with background information. Transitioning a play from stage to screen and taking advantage of the benefits that stem from the dissolution of verbal and physical constraints unleashes the creative freedoms of film production. The medium of film allows for increased creative control, as well as the ability to expand scenes by moving outside of the confines of the stage set. Beyond the aforementioned physical changes that the screen can introduce, additional adaptations can be made in the presentation of characters themselves. Observing an actor’s expressions reveals more about his or her character (internally) than dialogue ever could, therefore the nearness provided by a camera allows for these telling facial expressions to be seen; a viewer in the last row of a movie theater will still have a better view of a character’s face than one sitting in the front row at a stage production. Capitalizing on opportunities for creative expansion (moving from stage to screen) enhance the plot by filling in background and supplementary information, strengthening the bond that the audience feels with the characters.

Exemplifying the potential for physical changes made possible by moving from the confines of the stage to the limitless screen, the opening scene of Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire* travels to the train station in New Orleans. The ability to move from one location to another is not possible on a stage with a single set, and this opportunity that film provides makes the world that the characters occupy more realistic. It is at the train station that the film audience is first introduced to Blanche DuBois. The initial image of Blanche speaks to the portrayal of her character throughout the film: she is overwhelmed, and forced to rely on the kindness of strangers as she asks a sailor for directions. Lost in the chaos of a train station in an unfamiliar city, Blanche is bewildered and the audience therefore sympathizes with her. Additionally, the scene specifies that it be shot at night. A stage production is incapable of dictating true night, while film has the luxury of shooting day or night and capturing the desired lighting. The specification that the scene be filmed at night heightens the uneasiness of Blanche’s arrival and vulnerability. Were Blanche to arrive in the late morning or early afternoon, the daylight would change the atmosphere of the entire scene. The darkness amplifies everything that Blanche is feeling and experiencing: a woman alone in the relative darkness represents not only her physical state, but her emotional state as well, she is running away from her dark and troubled past. In contrast to the play’s opening outside of Stella’s apartment, the film expansion with it’s physical and personal magnifications brings the viewer physically closer to the train station, and emotionally closer to Blanche.

Stella and Stanley’s apartment, the interior of which is the setting of the stage production, is physically expanded in the film: the audience can experience what is both in and around the apartment as opposed to the stage production in which the audience is privy to only the two interior rooms of the apartment. This physical change takes the viewers into Stella and Stanley’s
world compared to the audience at a stage production who is limited to watching the couple from an outside perspective. The relative squalor in which Stanley and Stella are living is presented to the audience through the detail that the camera can capture in contrast to a viewer’s distance from the stage. The house itself is noted as “unclean,” specifically the kitchen, and Blanche exudes a feeling of “uncomfortable distaste” (F59, 5). Blanche’s reaction, which can also be seen clearly by a film viewer, serves to contrast Stella’s current living situation with the more refined lifestyle that Blanche presents herself as enjoying. As a result of the proximity of the camera in comparison to the distance of a theater seat from the stage, the film is capable of capturing a fleeting look of distaste as it moves across Blanche’s face. In this capacity it can be understood that a physical change from stage to screen can elicit or promote a subsequent emotional character development that plays to the camera.

In addition to providing relative nearness to the characters and capturing thought-inspiring facial expressions, the camera is a tool in and of itself. Although there is not a narrator through which the viewer is experiencing the story, the camera is capable of presenting the audience with a view from the perspective of a character in the film. This is clearly not a technique that can be exploited on stage, therefore the film harnesses this stylistic choice to present the viewer with a glimpse of how Blanche sees the world, or more specifically, how she sees Stanley for the first time. Outside the confines of the apartment walls, Blanche initially lays eyes on Stanley at the bowling alley where she has gone to find her sister. Notes on the screenplay itself indicate that at this moment there should be, “shot Full from Blanche’s perspective -- assessing Stanley” (F59, 4). The assessing gaze of a woman on a man is an intimate look to capture, therefore the camera’s ability to see this scene through Blanche’s eyes is more than advantageous given that it lets the viewer personally assess Stanley at the same time that Blanche is sizing him up. Indicative of his character as a whole, the first image that both Blanche and the viewer see of Stanley Kowalski (on screen) is of him yelling at a fellow bowler, an early sign of the rage that Stanley possesses and an indicator of his generally violent personality. This first impression of Stanley is made possible by the camera’s ability to move outside of the apartment and follow the characters to the bowling alley. The film provides the viewer with a physical glimpse of Stanley as opposed to the play, in which he is initially described to the audience (and Blanche) by Stella -- the difference, meaning the unbiased look at Stanley rather than the bias of hearing about him through Stella, creates a more judgmental opinion of Stanley from the onset of the film.

Learning about Stanley for the first time from Stella is like hearing about a child from the perspective of his or her mother: the listener is being presented with a biased account of the individual (as a result of the emotional relationship) rather than an objective analysis that could be performed by an outsider. Unlike the film, in which Blanche assesses Stanley outside of the apartment and with her own two eyes, the play precedes Stanley and Blanche’s initial encounter with a lengthy conversation between Blanche and Stella during which Stella provides a detailed description of her husband. On the stage, the only way information can be explained is through dialogue, therefore Stella’s explanation of Stanley is required to provide the audience with information about Stanley’s character and history. What a theater-goer learns about Stanley in contrast to what is perceived by a movie-goer leaves room for interpretation rather than the straightforward one-sided exposition revealed through Blanche and Stella’s conversation.
Handwritten commentary added to the screenplay did not call for many physical changes to be made to the set, rather they noted the addition of endearing terms used by Blanche when she is in conversation with Stella. Individually, these small additions of “honey” do not make a larger impact on the film. However, by having Blanche refer to Stella as “honey” or “baby sister” whenever she is asking for something, the audience can judge her character as feigning sincerity and toeing the line of attempted manipulation. There was not an absence of endearing terms from Blanche in the play, and they are not any more significant on screen than on stage, but their value is illustrated by Williams’ insistence that they permeate the screenplay. Changes such as this one, made to the early parts of the plot, are important because they influence how the audience will interpret the rest of the play. Equally if not more important are the changes made to the conclusion of the play, which impacts the the viewer’s final thoughts upon leaving the theater and later reflection on the experience as a result of more intimate character development.

Focusing on the changes that can be observed in Stanley and Blanche when the play evolves into the film, the endings that these characters meet have a resounding impact on the audience. Blanche meets the same fate on both stage and screen: becoming Stanley’s victim and inevitably being taken away by a doctor. Stanley’s physical behavior, which was not addressed in the play, inhibits Stanley from the same end that he meets in the play -- a film audience demands that he be punished. Returning to Blanche, her journey towards the conclusion of the film is a downward slope that begins to accelerate when Mitch removes the shroud from the lamp, and simultaneously removes the shroud behind which Blanche had been hiding her true age.

As Blanches’s character evolves throughout the play and film, her sophisticated facade decays and what remains at the conclusion is the empty shell of a once lovely woman who has been brought down by financial misfortune and inevitable aging. In both the play and screenplay Blanche prefers the absence of light, both natural and artificial, to protect her from critical eyes that could discover her true age. When Blanche’s relationship with Mitch becomes unsteady, he begins to question her appearance and the frequency of their meeting in the dark. After commenting on the lack of light in the room in which they are standing, Mitch makes the statement that: “I don’t think I ever seen you in the light. [Blanche laughs breathlessly] That’s a fact!” (Williams, 143). What follows this exchange, on both stage and screen, is Mitch’s tearing off of the paper lantern that shrouded the lightbulb. In the play, the stage directions note how Blanche reacts to the lights: “She cries out and covers her face. He turns the light off again” (145). For a theater audience, this reaction conveys Blanche’s fear of having her face, and the age that it indicates, revealed to anyone, especially a man with whom she is involved. The emphasis on her audible reaction makes sure that the entirety of the theater will understand her panic. The choice to have the light turned off again is one of relatively little consequence -- were the light to have been left on, it is doubtful that an audience member would have a view the would allow them to see the details of her face that reveal her advanced age. In a film, on the other hand, the scene can be and was handled differently, taking advantage of the close proximity of the camera to the actress’s face, and detail it provides a viewer.

The details that enhance a film as a result of the camera’s mobility contrast the exaggerations that are required to convey subtle messages to a theater-going audience. Blanche’s cry when the light is turned on in the play exemplifies this difference. It is specified as a cry
because by nature a cry is a loud and dramatic reaction. In the film, on the other hand, when Mitch tears the lantern away from the lightbulb, Blanche “utters a frightened gasp” (F59, 103) which would be inaudible on stage unless it were to be hugely exaggerated. Similarly, whereas the play left the extent of Blanche’s age to the audience’s imagination, the film is capable of providing a detailed image of Blanche’s face as if the viewer were standing right in front of her. At this moment in the film, the screenplay specifies “Close Shot Blanche” and the description of how Blanche ought to appear includes: “her eyes closed, her head thrown back. Hair somewhat disheveled. Makeup is in disrepair” and goes on to include the following explanation: “A once lovely girl, now in her middle thirties, has gone through an agonizingly tortured day. Skin is lusterless. The lines of fatigue pull deep around her mouth and eyes” (F59, 105). This close up of Blanche provides moviegoers with a concrete image of how Blanche presents herself in contrast with the reality of her aging features, a detail that audience members at a performance of the play would be forced to imagine. Seeing Blanche’s face is a crucial moment in the plot, given that it is the point at which Blanche can no longer hold herself together, and the significance of this moment is enhanced by the capture of both Blanche and Mitch’s reactions to the revelation in the light.

As opposed to his nasty verbal reaction in the play, on screen Mitch reacts to seeing the true Blanche in a physical way: “Mitch releases Blanche. He shakes his head slowly in puzzlement as he looks at her” (F59, 105). In this instance, actions truly speak louder than words -- one can combat a verbal attack, a disappointed shake of the head on the other hand, is something that take root in a person’s self-confidence and spread like a virus. In the play, this moment marks the end of Blanche and Mitch’s relationship, but a moviegoer would be horribly dissatisfied with Mitch casting Blanche off so quickly and never giving her a second look. Therefore the film expands on this scene and as the two are at the height of their emotional fragility, “he reaches for her. She throws herself into his arms” (citation). Unlike the play, this added moment gives rise to the possibility that Mitch can look beyond Blanche’s deceit and the pair will be able to find happiness. A couple that does manage to find relative happiness at the conclusion of the play, Stanley and Stella to not achieve the same ending in the film as a result of Stanley’s immoral and aggressive behavior and a film audience’s wish to seem him punished.

Although the audience is permitted to have individual opinions of Stanley Kowalski, his aggressive nature is accentuated in the film, especially as it nears the conclusion. In both the play and the film Stanley and Stella have a heated conversation regarding their first encounter and obvious class differences, but the film takes the moment further and includes the direction that Stanley “seizes her roughly” (F59, 99). The addition of physical aggression to this scene promotes the audience’s negative attitude toward Stanley. Understood as a man with a hot temper, physical violence is not outside of Stanley’s range of reactions to unpleasant conversations or conclusions. Physical violence toward his pregnant wife, however, is an action that an audience will be unable to forgive. When this display of physical domination prompts Stella to go into labor, Stanley attempts to rectify the situation by showering his wife with reassurance of his affection as he places his arm around her for support. This act of caring is not enough to salvage the audience’s opinion of Stanley, the damage has been done.

The escalation of Stanley’s physical nature is the first step towards his eventual fall from grace and subsequent unhappy ending in the film. In both the film and play Stella returns to
Stanley after he initially struck her, sauntering down the stairs and into his waiting arms. However, unlike the play, the film will not permit Stella to endure this unhealthy relationship indefinitely -- understanding Stanley as an unsavory character, a film audience yearns for moral justice which dictates that he receive the punishment that he deserves. A moviegoer would not wish to leave the theater with the lingering thought of a wife-beating rapist living out his life and repeating his violent behaviors, the viewer wants good to triumph over evil, allowing him of herself to leave the theater knowing that Stanley is not above the (moral) law.

Having lost the audience’s favor when he physically abused Stella, on multiple occasions, Stanley truly condemns himself when he rapes Blanche. Although neither the play nor the film provide any visual of Stanley forcing himself on his sister-in-law, as a modern film likely would, the audience understands the situation through body language and dialogue. In the film, the tension of the scene is heightened by additional violence, the bottle that Blanche breaks and uses to threaten Stanley is snatched away from her by Stanley: “He throws it... It smashes into the mirror and the glass shatters... And the tortured face of Blanche, which was big, with it” (F59, 120). In terms of plot significance, this small addition makes very little difference; in terms of artistic choice and escalating anxiety, this small addition provides the audience with a physical presentation of Blanche’s trauma, and the final shattering of her sanity.

Blanche’s institutionalization marks the end of both the play and film, but the fate of Stella and Stanley’s relationship is not so consistent. The play leaves the audience with the thought of Blanche being sent away while Stanley carries on living his life without so much as a slap on the wrist. On both the stage and the screen Stella is riddled with guilt at having sent her sister away, but whereas she found comfort in Stanley’s arms in the play, Stella seeks Eunice’s support in the film when she is shown alone on the verandah, “her eyes full of tears. She is guilt-ridden and miserable. She is sobbing” (F59, 130). Although the audience is left wondering if or when Stella will once again descend the stairs and return to Stanley, by separating the couple at the conclusion of the film, viewers feel that Stanley has been punished for his offenses and is deservedly unhappy.

Taking *A Streetcar Named Desire* from the stage to the screen allowed Elia Kazan the freedom to set the plot in the real world that can be explored and exposed by the camera, transcending the confines of the stage. More than enhancing the physical setting of the film, Kazan gave the play additional depth by including personal nuances that a camera’s proximity capitalizes on, such as a woman’s gasp, or a fleeting facial expression. Characters that were once figures on a distant stage are transformed into relatable people with whom the audience form a relationship.
Citations:

*A Streetcar Named Desire*
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