

Guide

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to arts & entertainment in Fairfield County

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Inside:



BY LANCE RINGEL
WEEKEND EDITOR

On a cool Thursday evening a week before Christmas, 10 women and seven men stand in various attitudes on the stage of the onetime cow barn that is now the Ethel and Sydney Kveskin Theatre in Stamford. Fidgeting. Arms folded. Knees bending. Hands clasped, or jammed in pockets.

They have come from all over the area. They are all shapes and sizes, and complexions. Although *Curtain Call* has chosen a classic play for its spring production — Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire" — the approach taken by this community theater group will be deliberately nontraditional.

Over the next two hours, director Kenn Woodard, producer Lynne Colatrella and their creative team will hear the lines of Blanche DuBois, that quintessential faded flower of white Southern aristocracy, read in a variety of accents, by actresses whose bloodlines trace back to Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, Latin America.

There's a similar openness to the casting of Stella, Blanche's sister; Stella's working-class husband, Stanley Kowalski; and indeed, to every part in the play, large and small.

"You're all extremely talented," Woodard tells the aspiring actors. And it's true: The disparate group has already made it through the first round of auditions. Now it's callback night, and the director adds, "It's all a matter of the right combination." So the hopefuls are

asked to stand together, read together, in twos and threes. "They could be sisters," somebody half-whispers as two of the women stand silently side by side.

Finally, the whole group is lined up onstage one last time, thanked and dismissed. For the next 45 minutes, stickers are placed on resumes and pictures as Woodard and Colatrella, associate producer Deb Rosman and stage manager Pat McCoy move the pictures about, matching them up, reordering them.

Eventually, Marguerite Laurent of Stamford, an attorney and playwright, is cast as Blanche. Jim Slocum of Stamford, a locksmith who has spent two years pursuing the part of Stanley, gets his opportunity. Laurent is black; Slocum is white.

The part of Stella goes to a promising young Latina actress. Within two weeks, she withdraws and is replaced by Keilana Smith — who returns in triumph from the audition to her workplace, only to have a white co-worker ask incredulously, "A black Stella?" Smith has just taken a semester off from her studies to pursue her dream of acting. She is more than happy to commute by train, from Queens, N.Y., to Manhattan to Stamford, to attend rehearsals.

Says director Woodard, "I want to do a lot of psychological work — then I want to just do it." Of the casting process, traditional or not, he adds with a mixture of weariness and good cheer, "It's like adopting orphans."

Four weeks after callbacks, on a snowy January night, the "Streetcar" cast is gathered around three wooden tables under a ceiling strung with theater lights in the more intimate

Dressing Room Theatre across the lane from the Kveskin.

It is the second night of read-through. Laurent arrives with a huge cup of coffee. She and Slocum read aloud the inevitable, tragic confrontation between Stanley and Blanche near the end of the play. It is a tense scene, and as they speak, the actors put escalating tension into their reading. "Good energy," Woodard says as the reading moves on to the final scene, which involves much of the cast. "Keep the energy up."

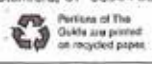
After the reading, the actors break into smaller groups. At this point Woodard is stressing character development. He has asked every member of the cast to create a biography for his or her character — right down to birthdays.

Charles Glaser, who portrays Mitch, Blanche's good-natured, awkward suitor, is paired with Laurent as Blanche. He describes Mitch's ride to work, analyzes his character's relationship with his mother. Laurent recounts a scenario she has figured out for

TURN TO STREETCAR, PAGE 2

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OPK Marguerite Laurent of Stamford will play Blanche DuBois in *Curtain Call*'s production of "A Streetcar Named Desire" by Tennessee Williams. She says, "A black actor doesn't get a role like this very often. . . . The multiethnic character of the show is what makes it interesting. I can't wait to see it evolve."