In A Streetcar Named Desire Tennessee Williams uses many elements to convey the characterization of the protagonists, but none more important than use of language. Through the way they speak we see the characters' class, feelings and tensions.

Tennessee Williams wrote mainly for naturalistic theatre; the characters never speak comfortably outside their apparent range. Blanche being a schoolteacher allowed Williams to give her an enormous expressive range without trespassing the boundaries of naturalism.

Stanley's use of colloquial speech such as “Them dishes” reflects his class and brings to light his character who “lays his cards on the table”. Largely reflected through the language, Stanley nearly always conveys his point in a very understandable manner.

Blanche's manner of speaking serves as a stark contrast. She hides herself behind a literary wall, using metaphors and similes to reinforce it. She insults others through false praise, showing false respect and politeness, such as when she calls Stanley “Mr Kowalski.” Although at first it seems that she does this to be manipulative, we later find that she hides truths because she is “telling what ought to be truth.”

Tension is created by the clear differences in language, representing the tension between classes. Stanley's use of language when explaining the Napoleonic Code to Blanche using “sophisticated” language allows Blanche to take this as a chance to mock him by saying “My, you have an impressive judicial air”. This represents the contempt the upper classes had for middle classed Americans at the time.

In this play, much is communicated non-verbally. We rehearsed the poker scene with this in mind. We did various drama activities on this scene such as leading ourselves by different parts of our bodies in different takes (arms, legs), or performing the scene with no dialogue. This allowed us to explore more of how the characters carried themselves and how different feelings made them use their bodies in different ways.

We looked at territory and how each character reacted each side of said territory. We looked at how different characters acted in each part of the territory. We drew a line on the floor and noted how Stanley's physical gestures and movements changed on either side of it, being more strong and upright in his own whilst more timid and bashful in Blanche's (represented also through the text, where he can't do up the buttons.)

By looking at how each character communicated non-verbally we were able to better appreciate their subtext.

Vocalisation is an important part of the play so we spent a lot of time on related activities. We worked on dynamics and pitch and sentence stress and intonations to develop the lines better, which allowed us to uncover traits the characters might have in their vocalisation: conversely, we looked at the characters and how the given circumstances affected vocalisation, such as Stanley's dry, no holds barred delivery, and Blanche's breathy, dreamy delivery.
One exercise we did was to stand apart (about three metres) and deliver the lines, and also face to face. We noted how vocalisation changed in relation to proximity: Stanley being louder and more abrasive farther away but quieter and more threatening close up. This allowed for us to see the relationship between physicality and vocalisation, and the differences in characters (Blanche’s playfulness and Stanley’s detachment). Another activity was saying lines in gibberish to show vocalisation with no semantic restrictions, and later analysed the subtext to see how it could be expressed in the vocalisation.

A Streetcar Named Desire has been a famous play since it was first released in 1947 and is so rich that one does not require knowledge of its background to understand it, but by discovering the inspiration for the themes and motifs a greater appreciation for the play can be acquired.

Much of the play comes from the author's own life. Tennessee was born in 1911 in Mississippi, to a heavily drinking father a mother prone to hysterical attacks. When young he was always shy and fragile, and was ostracised and taunted at school. During these years he grew extremely close to his sister, Rose, and his grandparents. Many characters from the play came from people in his life; Stanley being based on the bullies and his own father and Blanche borrowing elements from himself, his mother and sister. Many themes are taken from his life: alcoholism, depression, thwarted desire, loneliness and insanity (his sister was lobotomised because of mental illness in the thirties.)

Stanley has returned from the war a decorated soldier: he has proven his manhood on the battlefield and now he is ready to assert it in the home, providing the “raw, savage masculinity that is so ripe” in the play.

Meanwhile the South was decaying along with the aristocratic families as we are shown by the loss of Belle Rêve. Williams said “I write out of love for the south... once a way of life that I am just able to remember – not a society based on money... I write about the south because I think the war between romanticism and the hostility to it is very sharp there.” He saw it as a broken and damaged place, somehow charming.

During the 30’s and 40’s the entire nation suffered high unemployment and interest rates, with many Americans finding themselves in debt. The upper classes were scorned by the impoverished masses, as they cared only for themselves. The men in the play represent the everyday American championed after the depression – i”cool” blue-collar workers.

This mirrors the struggle between Stanley and Blanche. These two characters portray the conflict between old Southern Values and new industrial efficiency, by which they cannot coexist, and therefore, one of them ultimately loses. One sees Blanche as the decline and fall of the south: the way she falls from grace, the differences between the way she acts and the way she wished to be perceived and ultimately her departure.

Williams’ plays feature vivid, descriptive stage directions, containing many visual, aural and spatial elements important to the play. They often contain descriptions of the feel of the set as opposed to how to build it, but give significant descriptions such as the “blues music” and “raffish crude charm”.
The blues music emphasizes Blanche's subtext. To apply this, we acted part of the scene where Blanche is seducing a young man with and without the music. We found it was much easier for the actress when the music was playing, reflecting the importance of this aural element.

The beginning of scene 5 contains important visual elements (everything happening in a small space) that create a sense of claustrophobia inside the flat. Unsurprisingly, most elements revolve around Blanche; the dim lights (which represent her hiding her true self), the Varsouviana Polka (which represents her past pain) and the curtain.

The curtain is arguably the most important part of the flat. It divides the territory in the apartment and creates private space (between the men and women at the poker game). The fact that a curtain is used instead of, for example, a door, represents the fragility of the territory due to Blanche's manner but also more suggestive of sexuality, desire and eroticism. It is probable, then, that Stanley's bursting through the curtain in the poker scene is a precursor to the rape scene.

We looked at three different practitioners: Stanislavski, Strasberg and Brecht. We analysed and compared their methods to see which would have been the most effective for the original performance. We decided to look more deeply into Stanislavski’s and Starseberg’s methods, as Strasberg’s Actors’ Workshop was in full flow at the time, and Stanislavskian theatre was the basis for most of Stasberg’s methods.

We focused on the idea of “given circumstances” and how they affect the characters and change in different scenes. We acted out a scene from the play before considering the given circumstances, then looked at the given circumstances and noted the differences in performance. We did this in two groups so that all students could see the changes. We also learnt from it the subtext of the lines; what the lines really meant, by exploring the thoughts of the characters and seeing what affects them.

In another activity we planned a rehearsal of a scene using rehearsal exercises from Strasberg’s method and Stanislavski’s system. We created a detailed rehearsal using methods like “the magic if” and “emotion memory” to place ourselves within the character, and “MPA” to better our feel of them. We also analysed the characters’ units and objectives to define the super-objectives of the characters.

We did various activities to interpret the text. First we discussed and analysed the play, looking at the context and the motives and methods of the characters. We took a scene from the play and split the class up into three groups. The teacher asked questions about each group’s interpretation of certain key elements; the motivation of the character in the scene and a possibility of what might happen next. We also located the play within theatre history, by which we found out about two different styles of theatre at the time.

We looked in particular at Lee Strasberg and the Actor’s Workshop, which Marlon Brando was a part of, and the play was originally performed within naturalistic conventions. Doing us allowed us to explore “the given circumstances”, which once identified influenced our interpretation of the scene: we performed the scene in regard to them.