



'The Glass Menagerie'

Shakespeare '70 has a touching version of Tennessee Williams' classic drama.

By Stuart Duncan

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When scholars discuss Tennessee Williams, they most often begin (and sometimes end) with *A Streetcar Named Desire*. But almost all will agree that *The Glass Menagerie*

is Williams' most autobiographical. He was 7 when his father moved the family to St. Louis. The shift from rural to city was traumatic. For young Tom it was painful; for his 9-year-old sister, Rose, however, it was tragic. She began to slip into a make-believe world, cut off from the outside.

All of this is chronicled in *Menagerie*, now being presented by Shakespeare '70 at Kendall Hall on the campus of The College of New Jersey. He wrote the piece while a writer at MGM Studios in Hollywood, submitted the manuscript, was turned down and rewrote it slightly for the stage. He also re-titled the work (originally it was called *The Gentleman Caller*). It became Williams' first hit.

Rather than refer to the play as "autobiographical," the playwright preferred to use the term "memory play." And in very precise stage directions, he suggests that "being a memory play 'The Glass Menagerie' can be presented with unusual freedom." He then continues: "Even if this play was unconventional to audiences, the goal is a closer approach to truth through poetic interpretation."

In his first version, Williams even used lantern slides projected on a screen with titles or images. He also suggested music to underscore nuances and at one point suggested the lighting used in early religious pictures. Shakespeare '70 director Janet Quartarone, a fine actress here making her debut as a director for this group, has wisely tempered some of these suggestions, but indeed allows the freedom that the playwright felt was important to the work. The result is an evening of exquisite theater, with surprisingly fresh insights and moments that scald the mind and sear the soul.

She has cast the play superbly — Brady Dunbar Niederer plays Tom Wingfield, our narrator, and, of course, the playwright in the thinnest of guises. He opens and closes the play, bookending the tragic story with poetry rather than venom. Kathy Garofano plays Amanda Wingfield as if born to the role. Of course, we have seen that quality many times over the three decades she has acted in the area. Here she lays such cloyed sweetness into every speech that audiences actually cringe by the second act.

Meredith McLeod plays Tom's sister, here called Laura. It is her debut with the troupe and she makes it a towering triumph. She is particularly effective in her scenes with Patrick Albanus who plays Jim O'Connor, the gentleman caller. She rises slowly but charmingly to his blandishments, responds eagerly to his kindness and is thus the more devastated by the letdown when it arrives, as it must. Albanus is wonderfully confident and clumsy. The brief moment when Laura offers him her broken unicorn ("now he can be just like the other horses") is as touching a moment as Williams ever wrote.

Williams, we are told, quickly tired of the sudden fame that *Menagerie* gave him. He went to Mexico to work on a new play (which turned out to be *Streetcar*). He would continue to use his family as references for his plays, and he would take care of his mother by giving her one half of the assets of *Menagerie*. He also would state firmly that he could be with his mother only for about 15 minutes at a time.

The Glass Menagerie continues at the Don Evans Black Box Theater, Kendall Hall, The College of New Jersey, Route 31, Ewing, through Sept. 29. Performances: Thurs.-Sat. 8 p.m. Tickets cost \$12, \$10 seniors, \$6 students; (609) 882-5979; www.shakespeare70.org

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