Welcome to Center Theatre Group and this re-imaging of Tennessee Williams’ classic story The Glass Menagerie.

One of our greatest American plays, it tells the story of a family hanging its hopes on the arrival of a “gentleman caller.” The Glass Menagerie is a deeply personal play and this production further emphasizes its autobiographical nature. Traditionally, the character of Tom serves as a narrator or guide through The Glass Menagerie. In this production, Tom, like Tennessee Williams, is a writer and as an audience we watch him struggle to find the words to bring his family to life onstage.

The Glass Menagerie is about some of most fundamental relationships that a person has: our parents and siblings. The New York Times said that “…the production is suffused with emotion from its first moments to its last, turbulent with the confusions of love and hope and regret and fear that fill any family living room in a time of crisis and stress.” The play explores how deeply families need and love one another and the potential cost of that love. It is a play about the pain of leaving home and the memories that travel with us as we go.

Before we tell you more, take a moment and think about family. How do you balance your individual dreams with your responsibility to your family? What does it take to speak your heart to your family? Do you think that families are the people who know us the best and/or the people who know us the least? How can one family’s story ripple out and help us reflect on our own?

Turn the page to explore The Glass Menagerie. Discover the playwright, Tennessee Williams and how he explored his life through his writing. Learn about the 1930s, the economic challenges of that time period and how they compare to the economic realities of our present day. Meet the characters in this play and imagine their lives; their hopes, dreams, challenges and fears. Is there a character who reminds you of someone in your family? Is there a character that reminds you of yourself?

Theatre raises questions and challenges audience members to discover their own answers. See what questions this information raises for you and what questions and answers the performance provides. Thank you so much for joining us for The Glass Menagerie. We look forward to seeing you at the theatre!

“The long-delayed but always expected something that we live for.” —The Glass Menagerie
What is the value of memory? What is the danger? Do memories keep us rooted in the past or do they help propel us into the future?

In a hotel room in New Orleans we meet Tom, a young writer struggling to write a play about his family. He begins telling us about his mother Amanda, and his sister Laura, with whom he lived in a small tenement apartment in St. Louis, Missouri, in the late 1930s. As he reminisces about his past, the stories and characters come to life.

The Great Depression has ended, but the country is still experiencing a major economic recession. It’s a time of swing music, the golden age of Hollywood and major political changes around the world. Tom is the family breadwinner, working long hours at the Continental Shoemakers warehouse. He dreams of becoming a poet, traveling the world and being free of all of his familial obligations. He escapes by taking nightly excursions to the movie theatre or watching the young couples across the alley at the Paradise Dance Hall from his fire escape.

As a single mother, Amanda is always searching for ways that she and her two children can make a better life for themselves. She reminisces about her youthful days when she was a young Southern belle with many gentleman callers and a future filled with endless possibilities.

She decides that the family’s only salvation lies in finding her daughter a husband. She strikes a deal with Tom: If he can help her find a proper gentleman caller for his sister then he will be free to go.

But Laura lives in her own world. She is disabled due to a childhood illness that left her with one leg shorter than the other. She spends her days at home caring for her glass animals and listening to old phonograph records that her father left behind. Her disability has become an obstacle keeping her from connecting with the outside world. Even though Tom feels opposed to Amanda’s plan, he decides to appease his mother by bringing home Jim O’Connor, his fellow colleague from the warehouse. Jim is a charming and enthusiastic young man whom Laura had a crush on in high school. Amanda tirelessly prepares for the young man’s visit hoping that this will be her chance to secure a financial future for herself and Laura. Jim’s arrival becomes a catalyst for each character’s longing, desires and dreams to surface in unexpected ways.

She strikes a deal with Tom, if he can help her find a proper gentleman caller, he will be free to go.

But Laura lives in her own world. She is disabled due to a childhood illness that left her with one leg shorter than the other. She spends her days at home caring for her glass animals and listening to old phonograph records that her father left behind. Her disability has become an obstacle keeping her from connecting with the outside world. Even though Tom feels opposed to Amanda’s plan, he decides to appease his mother by bringing home Jim O’Connor, his fellow colleague from the warehouse. Jim is a charming and enthusiastic young man whom Laura had a crush on in high school. Amanda tirelessly prepares for the young man’s visit hoping that this will be her chance to secure a financial future for herself and Laura. Jim’s arrival becomes a catalyst for each character’s longing, desires and dreams to surface in unexpected ways.

The Glass Menagerie opened at the Lyric Theatre in Chicago in 1944 and then moved to Broadway the following year. It earned Williams a New York Critics’ Circle Award and established him as an influential voice in the American Theatre. Williams’ other work includes A Streetcar Named Desire (Second New York Critics’ Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, 1948), Summer and Smoke, A Rose Tattoo (Tony Award, 1955), Camino Real, and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof for which he would win his second Tony Award and second Pulitzer Prize in 1955.

“A play does not exist until it is on the stage.”
– Tennessee Williams

She strikes a deal with Tom, if he can help her find a proper gentleman caller, he will be free to go.

But Laura lives in her own world. She is disabled due to a childhood illness that left her with one leg shorter than the other. She spends her days at home caring for her glass animals and listening to old phonograph records that her father left behind. Her disability has become an obstacle keeping her from connecting with the outside world. Even though Tom feels opposed to Amanda’s plan, he decides to appease his mother by bringing home Jim O’Connor, his fellow colleague from the warehouse. Jim is a charming and enthusiastic young man whom Laura had a crush on in high school. Amanda tirelessly prepares for the young man’s visit hoping that this will be her chance to secure a financial future for herself and Laura. Jim’s arrival becomes a catalyst for each character’s longing, desires and dreams to surface in unexpected ways.

Menagerie:
- a collection of wild or unusual animals, esp. for exhibition
- a place where they are kept or exhibited
- an unusual and varied group of people

Based on a short story originally titled Portrait of a Girl in Glass, Tennessee Williams chose to rename his autobiographical play The Glass Menagerie. Why do you think he chose this title?
Tennessee Williams was born Thomas Lanier Williams III on March 26, 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi and was raised in St. Louis, Missouri. He was the second child of Cornelius Coffin Williams, a traveling salesman, and Edwina Dakin Williams, a young Southern belle whose father was an Episcopal Minister. Life at home was quite turbulent for the young Williams who was often caught in the middle of his parents’ explosive arguments over money, the children, and his father’s hard drinking and gambling. He and his older sister Rose were inseparable as children, often clinging to each other for comfort and safety at home. But during her teenage years, Rose began to experience severe bouts of depression and her behavior became increasingly erratic and unmanageable. This created a distance between her and Williams, who was already growing up a shy, awkward young man often taunted by other children. Seeing that her son had an overactive imagination and trouble socializing, Edwina bought him a second hand typewriter at the age of 13. Writing would quickly become both his obsession as well as his escape from a troubled childhood.

In 1938, Williams entered a playwriting contest through the Group Theatre in New York, using the pen name Tennessee Williams to keep his real identity secret. He then left home and traveled to New Orleans where he officially changed his name. The emotional and physical distance between St. Louis and The French Quarter allowed Williams the space to evolve as both a young man and a young artist. It was during this time that he first began to write about his family and his upbringing. For Williams, the farther away he was from home the closer he was to becoming his true self.

During a trip home to St. Louis in 1943, Williams visited his sister Rose shortly after she had undergone a pre-frontal lobotomy. After spending the day with her, Williams said that he was flooded with memories from his childhood. He also began observing his mother’s behavior and created sketches of her and Rose. He fused these with his earlier family writings and began laying the foundation for what would become his most autobiographical play, The Glass Menagerie. Amanda’s relentless storytelling, and her illusions of grandeur, embodied Edwina’s own memories as a young woman as well as her frustrations with the reality of her adult life. Laura’s shy, withdrawn nature captured the innocence that he would forever see in Rose even after her surgery. And the choice to have the father physically absent, served as a metaphor for the vast emotional distance that separated Tennessee from his own father. The character of Tom echoes the dreams and struggles of Williams himself. He too grew up in St. Louis, worked in a shoe factory as a young man, dreamed of becoming a writer, and even shared the same first name. Tom reflects Williams’ own desire to break free of the familial obligations that kept him so tightly bound to his home. By placing himself and his family on the stage, Williams was able to confront his own demons and speak about the pain and the necessity of leaving home in order to become both the artist and the person he was meant to become.

With the commercial success of The Glass Menagerie, Williams became the best known playwright of the 1940s and 50s. His ability to portray the universal human condition inspired audiences. Williams continued to write prolifically until the end of his life, often using his personal experiences as inspiration. He is considered by many to be the greatest American playwright of the 20th century.
**Meet the Characters**

**Tom Wingfield**

“You say there’s so much in your heart that you can’t describe to me. That’s true of me, too. There’s so much in my heart that I can’t describe to you!”

—Tom (Act I, Scene 4)

Tom is caught between pursuing his own dreams and his responsibility to his sister Laura and his mother Amanda. He is an aspiring poet, who works at a shoe warehouse in order to support his family. In the absence of his father, he has become the primary breadwinner. He is frustrated by the predictable routine of his job as well as Amanda’s demanding nature. He sees some of his father’s tendencies within himself, such as his desire to be out on the open road. Tom is struggling with how to share who he is with his family. He senses that in order to become the person he dreams of being, he will have to leave home.

**Amanda Wingfield**

“I’ll tell you what I wished for on the moon. Success and happiness for my precious children. I wish for that whenever there’s a moon, and when there isn’t a moon, I wish for it, too.”

—Amanda (Act I, Scene 6)

A little woman of great but confused vitality clinging frantically to another time and place. Her characterization is to laugh at. Certainly she has endurance and a kind of heroism, and though her foolishness makes her unwittingly paranoiac, but her life is paranoia. There is much to admire in her, and as much to love and pity as there is to laugh at. Certainly she has endurance and a kind of heroism, and though her foolishness makes her unwittingly cruel at times, there is tenderness in her slight person.

—Tennessee Williams

Amanda is a proud, vivacious woman. She likes to relay stories of her past when she was a fixture in her town’s social scene and had many gentlemen callers. She is now a single parent, desperate to find a way to secure a future for her and her children. She nags, pushes, encourages, cajoles. Her tactics don’t always work and sometimes make Laura feel guilty and push Tom away.

**Laura Wingfield**

“ ‘The different people are not like other people, but being different is nothing to be ashamed of. ’ … They’re common as weeds, but — you — well, you’re — Blue Roses.”

—Jim about Laura (Act II, Scene 9)

Laura is the most obviously delicate character in the play. In what ways is she also strong?

Do you think that all human beings are delicate in some way? Why do we feel the need to conceal our vulnerability or fragility from each other?

**Jim O’Connor**

“He was shooting with such velocity through his adolescence that you would logically expect him to arrive at nothing short of the White House by the time he was thirty.”

—Tom about Jim (Act II, Scene 7)

Jim is an acquaintance of Tom and Laura. In high school he was a popular athlete who also starred in the musicals. Everyone expected Jim to become someone important in adulthood because of his reputation in high school. Six years later he finds himself working as a shipping clerk at the shoe warehouse alongside Tom. Even though he may be nostalgic for the glory days of his youth, he is devoted to a path of self-improvement. He takes radio school courses in radio engineering and public speaking because he plans to someday break into the television industry. He describes himself as “disappointed but not discouraged.”

—Tennessee Williams

Where do you see yourself six years after graduating from high school? What are some of the dreams that you hope to pursue? What do you hope to accomplish?

What is the difference between being disappointed and discouraged? Is there a way that disappointment can serve as a catalyst to make you work harder to reach your dreams? How do you personally move forward in your life when you encounter a disappointment or get discouraged?
The 1930s was a time filled with great hardships, promise, and hope for the United States. The Great Depression began when the stock market crashed on October 29, 1929. The national income fell by fifty percent. By the mid 1930s, over 40 million Americans were living in poverty and one out of every three young adults was unemployed. As a result of the scarce job market, the 1930s saw an increase in the high school graduation rates and a surge in enrollment numbers at schools and universities.

Even though the decade was defined by great economic turmoil, it also marked the birth of popular culture. The dance craze swept America, Benny Goodman brought swing music to the radio and “Gone With the Wind” became the first novel to sell one million copies. Hollywood celebrated its technological evolution with movies such as King Kong, The Invisible Man, and The Wizard of Oz. More women entered the work force reshaping the structure of the American family as well as their roles in society. Amelia Earhart flew alone. The Empire State building was built. As it began, the 1930s closed with a momentous occurrence — the German invasion of Poland and the impending threat of war.
Thank you for talking with us, we appreciate that. Can you explain what you do as a director? What a director is hard to define. But I would say a director’s job is to marshal all the forces. The design elements. The sets. The costumes. The lights. The sound. The music. And the actors. And put them all together and put on the play. He or she is responsible for the final product of the play.

When we are at our best, which is not always, but when we are at our best our job is to communicate what kind of play we are producing (or making), what is the nature of the play. In other words, he or she (the director) is the architect. What kind of house are we building? It’s the director’s task to say what kind of house we are building. Then everybody has to do their part to build it.

What does your day look like? There is no such thing as a normal day. Every day is different. That’s the joy of being in the arts. But I understand the spirit of the question.

In a normal rehearsal day, I’ll come in, take my script and put it on the table in front of me or I like to work on a music stand. And investigate, excavate, dig into the play with the actors to try to determine what this moment means. And then how should we present this moment, such that it will support the house that we are building.

And the way I like to work is in a way like a writer. I do several drafts of a show. So in a four week rehearsal process, I’d like to have at least three drafts of the show. Right now, I’m in rehearsal, not for The Glass Menagerie, but for a play called Bones, which we are very much in our first draft. So we are stumbling our way through it. Bumping into furniture and honestly being a little lost. Being lost is not a bad thing, if you are honestly lost but honestly looking. You can sometimes come up with the best solutions.

I think many students look at adults and they imagine that adults just do things “correctly.” So it’s a pretty powerful thing that you say you let yourself “stumble through” a project. It takes confidence and experience to have the courage to be lost. When I was a kid, and I’ve got two kids, you don’t want to admit that you are lost because it seems weak. It seems childish. And when you are 15, or 14 or 13 or 16 or 17, you want to be grown up. You want to be strong. You want to be in control. You want to be in charge of it.

In fact, there’s no shame in not knowing where you are. It’s kind of good to know where you might want to go, but you don’t necessarily have to know how you are going to get there. But I have confidence that I am going to get there.

What drove you to directing versus performing and what was your journey? Fair enough. Well, the first thing that drew me to it was that I was a terrible actor. And so I thought it was a good idea to be on top of it. You want to be tough. You want to be on top of it. And the second thing that drew me to it was that I was a child of the 1960s. The theater was very much a part of the counterculture. And so I thought that was a powerful thing that you say you let yourself “stumble through” a project. It takes confidence and experience to have the courage to be lost. When I was a kid, and I’ve got two kids, you don’t want to admit that you are lost because it seems weak. It seems childish. And when you are 15, or 14 or 13 or 16 or 17, you want to be grown up. You want to be strong. You want to be in control. You want to be in charge of it.

In fact, there’s no shame in not knowing where you are. It’s kind of good to know where you might want to go, but you don’t necessarily have to know how you are going to get there. But I have confidence that I am going to get there.

Please excuse my laughter… It’s too painful [laughing]. I don’t want to talk about that. Like what, do you remember? It’s just funny. I’m laughing too. I just got bad parts. I was getting terrible parts in the school plays.

What did you do in junior high, there were directors of these plays, I understood the plays better than anybody. And I was I wasn’t even good in that! And yet, I was the smartest, a kid.

It’s a fantastic question. It’s a simple, but beautiful image. Yeah, well thank God! Because I’ve had some other ideas that haven’t worked so well! [Laughing]

What is the best thing we can do to prepare students for this production? Reading the play is good. Really good, and then talking to them about family and about how love and obligation and rage can walk together very closely.

The truth is the play was written out of a certain amount of survivor guilt. That is, Tennessee Williams, in leaving home left a sister who was mentally incapacitated. We know from his biography that Williams’ sister Rose, that was her real name—in the play she’s called Laura—she was mentally disturbed and ultimately lobotomized shortly after Tennessee left home. And so in leaving home, he was aware he was leaving her to the four winds. To the elements. He had to leave, because you do. But he was aware of the cost. So the play was partly written out of the guilt that Tennessee felt upon leaving home.

What part of that quest for him to leave home was hampered by his sexuality? In other words, his own quest to find someone to love. Well, we don’t know the answer to that question. Of course, Tennessee Williams was a gay man in the 1940s. When he wrote this play, the word ‘gay’ didn’t mean ‘homosexual.’ It meant ‘happy.’ Tennessee was a closeted gay man.

I think first and foremost, Tennessee was an artist who needed to get away from his mommy and his sister. And St. Louis, where he grew up. He says, ‘There are things in my heart, mother, that I just can’t describe to you.’ It’s a heartbreaking moment. And you know, that is probably not just his sexual orientation, but sexual orientation is included in that line. We honestly don’t know. But it’s always seemed clear to me. And if I was going to do the play, then I wanted to investigate that.

What else drew you to this play? I know the path has been from the Long Wharf Theatre in Connecticut, to the Roundabout Theatre in New York, and now here to Center Theatre Group. What about the play grabbed you initially? The truth is, when I was 17 years old, I saw a production of it. And I thought it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my life. If I saw that production now, it would probably be terrible. But I remember being shattered by it. Devastated by it.

One particular character or the story? The play. As a theatre director, I’m very motivated by the text. I thought it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I was absolutely shattered by it and I have wanted to do it ever since. Way before I even knew I wanted to be a director.

And several years ago, I had an image for the play—a man comes into a hotel room and starts to write. The Glass Menagerie. And I said, okay. I’m going to do this one day.

That’s fantastic. Because it’s a simple, but beautiful image. Yeah, well thank God! Because I’ve had some other ideas that haven’t worked so well! [Laughing]

The characters in the play are like memories, like ghosts, coming to him in the hotel room. And the hotel room transforms into the Wingfield (family) house.

It’s an attempt to unsentimentalize this play and it’s often treated very sentimentally. And it’s an attempt to tell the truth about the author’s relationship to the material. The central story is really about a young man trying to break away from his family and trying to individuate. Everybody has to leave home eventually. And if you don’t, you’re sunk! Sometimes leaving home can be very painful. And this is about the pain of leaving home.
In the 1930s, widespread unemployment and the threat of impending war sent Americans to the movies, radio and dance halls in record numbers. The need to escape reflected the hard truth of everyday life for many Americans during this time period. How is this still true in our world today?

References

Tennessee Williams wrote to escape the realities of the world. He said: “What I am doing is creating imaginary worlds into which I can retreat from the real world because I’ve never made any kind of adjustment to the real world.”

Do you think art is an escape from reality or a reflection of the real world? Have you ever used art or imagination to escape?

Have you ever felt like you needed to escape? How do you escape from the world?

Laura lives in an imaginary world to escape the harshness of reality. Is there a place that you go to mentally or emotionally to retreat from the real world?

Some of the ways that the characters escape are more harmful than others. Amanda worries about Tom’s excessive drinking. Are there ways to escape that aren’t hurtful to yourself or others? How does the art that the characters in The Glass Menagerie escape or avoid the reality of their everyday life?

A fire escape, a structure whose name is a touch of accidental poetic truth.”
—The Glass Menagerie