

The Glass Menagerie



UPSTAGE

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How can you transform your life story into art?

“I have tricks in my pocket-I have things up my sleeve-but I am the opposite of the stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth.

I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion”

-Tom, The Glass Menagerie



The Glass Menagerie



4

Interview with the Director:
Gordon Edelstein 4



6

Interview with Actor:
Judith Ivey 6

The World of the Play:
Tennessee Williams 9

Interview with the Actor:
Patch Darragh 12



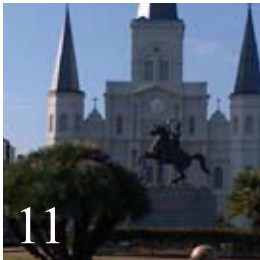
9

Interview with the
Set Designer:
Michael Yeargan 16

Vocabulary 19

Activities 20

Resources 20



11



12



16



19



20

INTERVIEW WITH

The Director: GORDON EDELSTEIN

UPSTAGE RECENTLY SAT DOWN WITH DIRECTOR GORDON EDELSTEIN, WHO SERVES AS ARTISTIC DIRECTOR FOR THE LONG WHARF THEATRE COMPANY WHERE THIS PRODUCTION OF *THE GLASS MENAGERIE* WAS FIRST PRODUCED.

Why did you want to direct *The Glass Menagerie*?

It's a play I have been thinking about since I was a teenager, and it's one of the great plays of all time. I've always loved it and it's always haunted me since I first encountered it. So in many ways I've wanted to direct it for 30 years.

Did you do any sort of research to prepare?

Yes. I had a notion of how I wanted to do the play for some time, and I read *Tom* a biography of Williams by Lyle Leverich. There was a paragraph in the biography which gave the notion of how I wanted to do the show, its grounding. I read his letters. I read everything I could find about his earlier years and anything he wrote while he was thinking about writing this play. Williams' idea for this play was kicked around for many years and took many forms.

It's certainly the most autobiographical of Williams' plays. Do you agree?

Yes, but I believe his father was more of a tormentor than his mother.

Tell us a little bit about your concept for the play.

This is one of the greatest plays in the American canon. The impulse to direct a play, for me anyway, is to share my love of the play with the audience. I'm not really a concept director. Part of the challenge is getting the audience to see the play with fresh eyes. It occurred to me that a large part of this play is the eternal desire of young people to break the chains of home and start afresh. Nearly everybody leaves home. So I started to think, what did Tom take with him when he left home? What was the struggle for him leaving home? How do we recreate ourselves? I started to imagine a place where Tom actually wrote the play. The play has two realities—there are the scenes and the monologues, and the monologues have been problematic in productions of the play I've seen. The monologues are very poetic; it's as if the artist, Tennessee Williams, was searching for his own voice. So I started to think, "What if we actually saw Tom/

Tennessee writing the play? He leaves home and he winds up in this hotel and begins to write the play." When I read the Leverich biography he describes in detail Tennessee Williams leaving home and going to a hotel in New Orleans and what he had with him. So when Tom enters in this production of the play he has with him those exact objects. I have him bring in that which Leverich describes that Tennessee had with him. I imagine Tom writing the play and Amanda and Laura entering his mind, as memory does. Memory enters your mind in the place where you are. As Tom tries to struggle to understand his past, he turns it into art.

How did you work with your design team?

This group of designers are all people I've worked with many, many times. So when I was talking to Michael Yeargan, the set designer, I wanted to see if we could use the furniture in the hotel room and not bring on furniture. Can the hotel table double as the dining room table? We struggled to find a way to do it and we did it. And with Jennifer Tipton, the lighting designer, what she was most interested in was the candlelight. Of course Laura and the gentleman caller fall in love, in a sense, in the candlelight.

What were you looking for in the actors?

I offered Judy Ivey the part of Amanda a year before we did it. I've known Judy a long time. Our children go to the same school and I kept saying "I want to find a play for you." I knew that casting Amanda was key, but of course Tom and Laura are just as important. I wanted someone to play Amanda who was not too old and still had a sensuality about her, a very attractive woman, which, of course, is Judy. I wanted someone with both warmth and humor. I did not want a bad mother, which is sometimes how she is erroneously played. Then I cast the other three parts in auditions. In the case of Tom, I wanted to create a family that was visually credible and I wanted to find actor that was credibly gay, but in no way effeminate. I needed someone charismatic who could bring trouble to stage because the character of Tom is in torment. I auditioned and I found Patch Darragh. For Laura, who is played by Kiera Keeley,

I needed someone who was damaged. I wanted to really show what Tom, by leaving home, was abandoning and how desperately Laura needed Tom. Michael Mosley is playing the gentleman caller in this production of the play. These are good people; they do what they need to do. The gentleman caller is often played as an arrogant, shallow character and there may be some elements like that that are true, but the reality is that this character has had his own struggles since high school. He hasn't lived up to his potential.

Can you talk to me a little about how you evoke the South?

I didn't spend a lot of time on that. I didn't want to get lost in Southern manners. I was not worried about regional authenticity.

I sense from reading about the production that you found a lot of humor in the play?

Yes, that's true. The play is filled with humor. Williams was a very funny man; he was hilarious. Tom and Amanda are both very smart and they're funny.

How did this play affect you working on it? Did you learn something new?

That's a very good question. I would say this: I guess I became more deeply aware of how families need each other. Of course I was aware of it before. Tom and Amanda know each other and love each other very much. I suppose the revelation for me was how deeply some families love each other and the cost of that.

Has working on this production inspired you to direct more Williams?

I approach the great plays with a great deal of respect and fear. I've been around for a while, but it's only been in the last years or so as a director that I have felt comfortable enough to take on the great plays. I spent a lot of my career directing new work. It's only in the last ten years as a director and as a human being that I have felt ready to take on the masterpieces of writers like Williams. I was not an impetuous young person. I was not someone who felt like I could do Ibsen and Chekhov and Miller. I was aware that I wasn't ready to take on



the great works, and at a certain point in my life I slowly became ready. *Glass Menagerie* is part of a personal project of mine—to take on the plays I have loved my entire life. This play has been one of the great joys and privileges of my life, and I have been generally pleased with the results. I am thrilled that Todd Haimes, the artistic director of the Roundabout, liked it well enough to want to bring it to New York. I am working on *A Doll's House* right now—my own adaptation, and that's a play I have been thinking about for many years. I hope to do it at Long Wharf in the Spring. So, we'll see...

What advice would you give a young person who wants to direct?

My first piece of advice would be to respect the play. You are virtually never smarter than the play. Find your personal connection to anything you are going to direct. What does the play mean to you in your most private thoughts? Try to see what the intersection is between yourself and the play. Where is the place where you and the play meet? That could be your source of inspiration. **UP**

INTERVIEW WITH

The Actor: JUDITH IVEY

WE RECENTLY SPOKE WITH TWO-TIME TONY AWARD-WINNING ACTRESS JUDITH IVEY ABOUT HER ROLE AS THE MATRIARCH OF THE WINGFIELD FAMILY, AMANDA, IN *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*.

How did this revival of *The Glass Menagerie* come about? Who approached whom first?

Gordon Edelstein called my agent with the offer. It made me giggle; the offer had a proviso saying, “Please tell her she is not old enough to play this part. But I want to stage the play with a younger Amanda.” I said yes immediately. I said, “Don’t worry about how old I am, because I am old enough to play that part.” He just made me feel good about myself.

This production unfolds in a dingy hotel room in New Orleans; Amanda and Laura walk into this space and take over Tom’s memories. Who came up with this conceit during the production process?

Gordon did a lot of research and read many books about Tennessee Williams, which he passed on to all of us. It was his concept to place *The Glass Menagerie* in a hotel room. Viewing the play from the vantage point of the present, we have the luxury of knowing a great deal about Williams—that, for example, his real name is Thomas, and that Tom the narrator was the playwright. Many elements make this play autobiographical. Gordon felt, “Why are we going to tiptoe around this fact? Gordon wanted to embrace the concept that Tennessee Williams was *writing* about his life. That’s why this production places the setting in his hotel room while he is struggling to write this play, instead of showing us a man who reflects on the past and talks about it to the audience. This Tom is a writer struggling to put together his story.

How does that shift in setting affect your own approach as an actor?

Gordon’s interpretation doesn’t really change my interpretation of Amanda, nor does it impact it emotionally. If we had done the play exactly as written, I would have approached her exactly the way I approached her in Gordon’s revival. I have wanted to play this part since I was 18 years old. I read it in English class. The teacher, who happened to be my real mother, had everybody read *Glass Menagerie* out loud. I read the part of Amanda. I thought then that if I do become an actress (I had just started to act when I was 17), I had to play this role one day. I had thought about how I would portray Amanda longer than I care to confess.

What was it about Amanda that spoke to you?

I love Amanda because of her sense of joy, her devotion to her children, her passion. She’s very passionate about everything. She’s passionate about selling the magazines, for example, mostly because they’re going to be the pennies that may make the difference in paying the light bills. There are productions I’ve seen where she’s played as a victim. I don’t see her as a victim at all. If she is a victim, she doesn’t know she’s a victim. There’s a kind of happiness about Amanda I like.

Amanda is frequently seen as the first of a long line of faded Southern belles written for the stage; how do you confront the history of a character coming from such a background?

I think Southern belles take on certain qualities in order to get what they want. These are very strong, determined women — and, once again, passionate. They might use fragility to make you give them something. They send the double message of “I can’t do it myself. I need it,” but indeed they could get up and do it by themselves. Florence King, a wonderful writer [the author of *Southern Ladies and Gentlemen* and *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady*], has written extensively about what it is like to be a Southern man and a Southern woman; I have gone back to her and read her works, which have been very helpful, because in the end Amanda really is much more about strength than weakness. Someone mentioned to me “Did you read the book his mother wrote about being Tennessee Williams’s mother?” so I read that book [Edwina Estelle Dakin Williams’s *Remember Me to Tom*, published in 1963] as well. It has been a great good fortune for me that there is a long line of actresses that have played Amanda. I haven’t seen all of them, god knows, but the ones I’ve seen give you the advantage of learning from somebody else’s mistakes — or knowing exactly what you are going to steal from that performance, because it was such a brilliant choice. I am not intimidated by the history of this role — not at all. I see it as to my advantage that other people have gone before me. I have created a lot of roles in my career; I’ve been the original interpreter of new roles in many new plays. That latter process is, for me, more intimidating than roles that have a past.



How have you made the part of Amanda your own?

I keep going back to the joy of it. Amanda is always telling stories. She's always got a monologue; she's not a person who speaks in monosyllabic responses. She is poetic. She is funny. She makes jokes. She shows off. She wants to be the center of attention and was. The text is so familiar to me; so recognizable as out-of-the-mouths-of-other-women-and-their-behaviors. To create Amanda, I drew from my grandmother and my own mother, Dorothy Lewis Ivey. My mother very much has that flavor of Amanda; she, too, loves to tell stories. I always used to say to her, "Take a breath, mom." She'll dazzle you with one long story, if you let her go with it. It's part of that culture to tell stories, to entertain and to make you feel comfortable. Part of making you feel comfortable is to never let there be a silence.

Is Amanda a monster?

No, but she handles things monstrously. I don't think she's a monster at all. She is maybe overzealous. I think she lives in a state of fear that she could be out on the streets, without a home, very easily. The lights go out in the play, at one point, and it is not because of the thunderstorms. Amanda has no perspective. If she had perspective and she behaves the way she behaves in the play, then she would be a monster. But she has none. She lives with that passion, the desire to help and her will to survive. She cares deeply about her children. I have two children myself, and they are much younger than Laura and Tom at this time. I totally identify with the notion of living in fear that your children won't be good citizens in the world and that they won't be able to live without your constant presence. Hopefully

I don't handle that parental problem monstrously; hopefully, I don't panic. *The Glass Menagerie* is very complicated. It's easy to make Amanda a monster, and if you do make her so, that means you haven't understood her. You haven't fully gone into the other side of her. All the characters in *The Glass Menagerie* are 4D, not just 3D.

I'm curious to hear your thoughts about the mother-daughter dynamic in *The Glass Menagerie*.

What is most obvious in the play is that Amanda sees Laura as a failure. The second scene of the play involves Laura dropping out of business school and Amanda discovering it in a terrible and humiliating way. Being Amanda, she absolutely cannot believe Laura is not enrolled, and Amanda insists that the school is at fault. When she discovers that indeed Laura has not been going to classes and that all that money for school has been wasted (money they don't have), all of Amanda's dreams and her hopes for the future for some kind of protection dissolve. This woman, Laura, clearly was never going to be the belle of the ball; she was never going to put the party dress on and have 17 gentlemen callers sitting around her on folding chairs. This horrible, horrible need to overcome this problem lifts Amanda up and raises her resolve to give Laura some positive thrust. The gentleman caller is the Second Coming in their lives.

Does Amanda see herself in Laura?

No, I don't think Amanda sees herself in Laura at all. There probably was a great deal of Laura in Amanda, but she overcame those issues. And Amanda wasn't afflicted with this bum leg. If anything, Amanda *was* the belle of the ball; she was a huge success. She made a stupid mistake when she married Mr. Charm; he was not the right guy for her. I do think she sees her husband in her son, and she thinks the same thing is going to happen there. If Amanda had real perspective, if she had understood human frailty, she would respond differently, because she is a good person. But she doesn't have that perspective, and so the disappointment in her is enormous. What I did not realize until I was in the thick of playing Amanda was how she struggles to overcome that disappointment. She struggles to find the positive, and the play is beautifully written to express that struggle. Once that gentleman caller becomes the focus, there's a blossoming of hope in the middle of the play; that hope takes us all to the point where you *feel* that when the gentleman caller arrives, life is going to be great. And indeed it looks like life might be that. Another element that Gordon confronts in this play is that everybody is a good person, especially the gentleman caller. It's

just that the characters don't necessarily deal with things in the best way, and they're caught in horrible circumstances. So *The Glass Menagerie* is really a play about: What survives? Who survives? And how do they survive?

In Gordon's revival a kind of reversal happens: Amanda and Laura leave Tom behind at the end of the play to stew both in his memories and in the act of creation.

Well, the exit did come from just us doing improvisations. I picked up the vase, I ran out the door, and I threw it at him. Tom did actually leave when we were first playing with the scene: he left, and the vase of flowers went after him, and I ran back in the room. And then as rehearsals evolved, Gordon said, no, no, I think you Amanda and Laura are the ones who leave. Of course, there's this wonderful scrim wall, and we could just disappear. And when in the farewell scene Tom talks about what happens to his mother and sister while sitting in the candlelight, it's almost like another scene that is separate from what was originally written. What Roundabout audiences will see comes from our playing with those last scenes. The wonderful thing that happens because the play takes place in a hotel room and we are all Tom's memories is that he controls the entire storytelling. He never leaves the stage. Gordon's vision to place it in the hotel and embrace Tom as Tennessee Williams just made this production so much more exciting.

Are there other roles in the Williams canon that you long to portray?

I would love to play Alexandra del Lago, the aging movie star in *Sweet Bird of Youth*. I would have liked to play Maggie "the Cat" in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, but Big Mama is all that's left there for me now. I have to say that I never understood Blanche DuBois from *A Streetcar Named Desire*. I think I'm just not crazy enough to tap into her; that one never attracted me. I always wanted to play Amanda — always, always, always. I'd say that I've pulled *The Glass Menagerie* down the shelf three or four times a year and sit and read it.

If Tennessee Williams were alive today and you could ask him a question, what would it be?

Oh, gosh. Directors often kicked Tennessee out of rehearsals because he laughed so much and often at

odd intervals during actual performances. When I read that information about Williams in the books, I thought to myself, "This is why I am supposed to play this role: Because I think she's hilarious." So if Tennessee could come to rehearsals; I would ask him, "Where can I find more jokes?"

You have also been directing as well as acting. What is it about directing that appeals to you?

I was told years ago that I should be a director. I just felt they were complimenting my acting. But directing finally happened. I love actors. I love watching them find a story. During rehearsals for *The Glass Menagerie*, I loved sitting and watching the gentleman-caller scene. I love making a piece of literature come alive, whether I'm in it as an actor or as a director.



Judith Ivey and Keira Keeley in *The Glass Menagerie*

The World of the Play:

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT



Tennessee Williams
Photo: The New York Public Library

Thomas Williams was born in Mississippi in 1911 to a traveling salesman father who never understood his artistic son and to a ceaselessly driven mother with strong Southern roots. When Williams was a teenager, his father found a steady job and moved the family north to St. Louis; Williams hated it there and used writing as an escape from the city he disliked so intensely. He had two siblings but was closest to his older sister Rose, until, as a teenager, she started showing signs of mental illness and was institutionalized.

Williams eventually traveled to New York to write and also went to Hollywood where he was a contract script writer and wrote a short story called “The Girl in the Glass.” Around this time Tom shed his birth name and took a new first name, Tennessee, most likely in homage to his ancestors who had settled in that state generations earlier. Soon after, Williams came back to New York and turned the short story he had written in L.A. into his first Broadway hit, *The Glass Menagerie*.

After winning adoration from the critics for his debut on the Great White Way, Williams left for New Orleans, the city he felt was most conducive to writing. There Williams would dream up some of his most indelible stories and characters, as well as use the city as a setting for the Pulitzer Prize-winning masterpiece, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, titled after a real streetcar that ran by Williams’ window in the French Quarter.

Williams would go on to write a series of hits, including *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Sweet Bird of Youth*. However, after his last success, *The Night of the Iguana*, the critics turned on Williams, savaging every new work he wrote and dismissing his writing altogether. The pain caused by a near-split with Frank Merlo, brought on partially by paranoia and substance abuse, and an increasingly vicious press, thrust Williams into a downward spiral from which he would never really escape. He died, under mysterious circumstances, in a New York hotel in 1983 at the age of 71.



Louis Adams House where Tennessee Williams wrote *The Glass Menagerie*
Photo: Patch Darragh

[Click here to read the official obituary of Tennessee Williams that appeared in the New York Times, February 26th, 1983.](#)

Tennessee Williams

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL INFLUENCES

Tennessee Williams drew extensively from his experiences with his family when penning his theatrical masterpieces. Stanley Kowalski from *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Big Daddy from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* are both modeled on Williams' own father; *Streetcar*'s fragile Southern belle, Blanche Dubois, is said to be at least partially inspired by the playwright himself. *The Glass Menagerie*, however, was Williams' first and most autobiographical work for the stage—he wrote the play during a time when he was still in the process of transforming himself from Tom Williams into the playwright Tennessee Williams.



Louis Adams House Photo: Patch Darragh



Rue St. Louis Photo: Patch Darragh

The Glass Menagerie is deeply personal, and this new revival's framework emphasizes the autobiographical nature of the play even further. The play centers around a family with Southern roots that is now living in a slightly squalid St. Louis apartment, just as the Williams family did in real life. The narrator and possibly writer of the play is named Tom, just like the playwright himself. Usually Tom is depicted as narrating from some unknown location or perhaps from somewhere in the reaches of his own mind; in this production, he is seen writing in a New Orleans hotel room, further suggesting that he is a stand-in for Williams.

The fictional Tom struggles with a domineering mother, a frail, disabled sister, and an absent father figure who echo much of the dynamic of the real-life Williams family. The vulnerable but overpowering Amanda Wingfield is a dramatized version of Williams' driven mother. Most significantly, Laura is a representation of, and perhaps also a tribute to, Williams' sister, Rose. Tom's troubled but affectionate relationship with his sister, the girl's crippling disabilities, and even her nickname, "blue roses," are all drawn from the closest and most painful relationship in Williams' life.



Keira Keeley and Judith Ivey, Patch Darragh and Judith Ivey in *The Glass Menagerie* Photos: T. Charles Erickson

*"My plays are pleas for the understanding
of the delicate people."
—Tennessee Williams*

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS AND SOUTHERN GOTHIC WRITING



St. Louis Cathedral Photo: Patch Darragh

The plays of Tennessee Williams are a prime example of Southern Gothic literature. In this type of writing, the action often unfolds in a state of heightened reality and romanticized memory. Unlike most literary styles, this one was applied to the people and concerns of a specific geographical region—the American South. In many of Williams’ dramas that are set in the South, characters, places, and even objects are both themselves and representatives of bigger ideas or archetypes. Williams’ indelible characters are drawn from and inspired by real life and then poetically exaggerated or distorted.

For example, in *Glass Menagerie* Amanda and Laura are real, human characters and, at the same time, twisted (or “grotesque,” as it is often described) versions of the well known Damsel in Distress stock character drawn from Medieval storytelling. The cramped St. Louis Wingfield apartment and fire escape is both the physical setting and a constantly-lurking ghostly symbol of Tom’s feelings of confinement and his nagging desire to break free of his stifling family.

In addition to, Williams, Carson McCullers (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*), William Faulkner (*Light in August*) and Truman Capote (whose *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* is a classic example of Southern Gothic sensibility) are among the authors whose work is also part of this literary movement. Williams, however, is perhaps the most famous name associated with Southern Gothic writing, and the one who brought poetically exaggerated versions of real, vulnerable characters onto American stages.



*“It is dimly lighted, it is sentimental,
it is not realistic—in memory
everything seems to happen to music.”
—Tom, The Glass Menagerie*

INTERVIEW WITH

The Actor: PATCH DARRAGH

UPSTAGE DISCUSSED *THE GLASS MENAGERIE* WITH ACTOR PATCH DARRAGH ON PLAYING TOM AND HIS TAKE ON THIS VERY PERSONAL CHARACTER.



Why did you choose acting as your profession?

Well, I can't really say that I chose acting because I didn't really give it much thought. I was always interested in performing, and it was something I did from when I was a kid. I had a supportive family and really great teachers in my high school. My drama teacher worked on a scene from *The Glass Menagerie* with me and then she directed me in *A View from the Bridge*. About that time I realized I didn't want to do anything else. Then at 17, I applied to colleges, again not really thinking about any other options. I was accepted at Julliard and I came to New York and I've been here ever since.

Where did you come from?

I'm from Toronto, but my family moved to Michigan when I was two, and I lived there until I was 18.

When you say you were performing as a kid, do you mean as a musician?

No, I mean that as a kid I was always performing for the family, or friends would come over and I would be putting on skits. So I always wanted to act and to make people laugh. But I didn't start taking it seriously until I was exposed to Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller when I was older.

Where do you find your inspiration as an actor?

A get a lot of inspiration from music. Some people make fun of me when I work because I almost

always have music on. I feel that music is the real key into my imagination and the life of my character. I also am really blessed to have some friends and colleagues in the theatre industry that I am inspired by. In terms of this role, my friend Dallas Roberts has definitely been an inspiration for me. And I have friends who are older than me and who have been in the business longer and have been very encouraging, taking me under their wing. I am also inspired by a lot of the young playwrights. So I would say I am inspired by people in the community.

Do you find that when you have friends who are actors who aren't necessarily in competition with you that you can have a constructive conversation about the role you are playing?

Yes. I think there is always a healthy competition between actors; it helps everyone push themselves and work harder, to share more of themselves. I have a couple of friends who I am close enough to that we can talk about the work. It's very helpful. One of my friends, Marin Ireland, who I have worked with several times, is doing Sam Shepard's *Lie of the Mind* right now; we have been talking about that and *Glass Menagerie*. It's wonderful to have each other as a sounding board. It helps me to talk things out. One of the things Gordon Edelstein, the director, and I really connected on is that he's a director who doesn't mind talking about things.

You alluded to the fact that you were introduced to the role of Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* in high school. What made you want to play it at this time your career? Was it a no-brainer?

It wasn't a hard decision for me to take the role, given what a break it is, especially being able to do it with the Roundabout. In terms of what made me want to play this role, I can say being a kid from the Midwest who left home to go to the big city to be an artist is a lot of what *The Glass Menagerie* is about, so sometimes a the story of a play lives within you. Tennessee Williams was talking about the pull to go forth on his own and experience life away from his family. But he was haunted by, particularly, the memory of his sister and some of the tremendous guilt he had about leaving her. I am actually getting to express something I have been working on for a long time in my life. So when this role came along,

it was a time when I was moving into a new phase of my own life, saying goodbye to certain things and certain people.

Tell me about how you went about preparing to play Tom. Did you read any biographies of Tennessee Williams?

We didn't have a long time between when I got cast and the time I got to New Haven where we first presented the play at The Long Wharf Theatre. In between, I was shooting a TV pilot, so it was sort of a busy time leading up to rehearsal, and then we only had three weeks of rehearsals. I delved into the autobiography, biographies and letters of Williams; there is just a treasure trove of material about the plays he wrote and then tons of letters. At some point, I had to just focus on the play. The research is all fun to read, but you have to have a balance between what is essential and what is not.

It's been about six months since hearing word from Todd Haines that we were going to do the show again here in New York and during that time I really had a chance to go further with the research. You start to see how choices can be made from the little gems Williams took from his own life. The other thing that I have done is I took a trip to St. Louis last month for a weekend and got to see his high school and the elementary school, the football field where Jim would have played, the apartment where he set the play, the fire escape, the alley, the grey winter. The weekend before we start rehearsals for *Roundabout*, I am doing a solo trip down to New Orleans because Gordon set our production in New Orleans in a hotel. Tom feels that the distance between New Orleans and his family in St. Louis is longer than the distance to the moon. Tennessee traveled all over the country, but it wasn't until Tennessee was the age I am now that he wrote *The Glass Menagerie* and broke through to become a success. New Orleans was instrumental in Tennessee's development, and most of his plays after *The Glass Menagerie* were set there. *Menagerie* is almost its own unique piece. It has qualities that we associate with Williams, but it is also this very personal play and it sort of precedes most of Williams' artistic growth. It's the play he wrote when he was still Tom Williams and not Tennessee Williams yet. I feel like it will be useful for me to take that trip to New Orleans. I don't know what I'm going to do down there; I don't

know anybody there. I'll hang out for the weekend and I think it will be a nice way for me to arrive at rehearsal.

I don't know if you are familiar with Stella Adler's book on Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov, but in it she talks about how an actor can't really approach a play until he understands the life of the playwright who wrote it.

I think that is never more true than with a play like this, which is so autobiographical. Gordon's take on our production is very much Tennessee in New Orleans writing the play and the play coming to him. It's a different lens to look through, and I think it illuminates the play and especially the monologues because those monologues can be a little flowery. It's nice because there is the added dimension of me the writer trying it out for an imaginary audience in my hotel that slowly through the course the evening comes alive.

I spoke to Gordon yesterday and he explained the concept to me—it sounds amazing and I can't wait to see it.

A lot of our collaboration was figuring out how to make it work. We changed a lot even in previews. We used to start the first couple of previews with just me in the dark, drunk, and then it shifted into the hotel, but we saw that it was putting too much distance between me and the audience. It was too dark too quickly. Now, I go out and get a bottle of liquor and come back with the intent of writing this play.

What do you look for in a director?

I have been very fortunate to have worked with some great directors over the years, Gordon being one of them. We have similar taste, which is helpful, but we also have a similar way of working especially at the beginning of the day. It would be Gordon and our wonderful stage manager and we would just find our way in. We would just talk about the scene we were about to work on and maybe at 10:30 we'll give it a try and do it a few times. He lets the performance happen to the actors. Before you know it the play is working on everybody. I prefer to work that way. The creative process and it can't be rushed or pushed. Gordon wants to put it all on the table and share a lot of really wonderful insights about the play and his ideas about the characters. He doesn't want to block the show. You

know I've seen a lot of modern dance and I've seen a lot of work by Mark Morris, who I think is an incredible artist, and the stories that his company can tell without words, that's what we can strive for in a narrative play—to tell the story physically but with freedom. So we'll eventually have the blocking, or the choreography as I like to call it, but it has to flow rather than be dictated. And that's what I love about working with Gordon, the freedom and the trust he puts in the actors that we are going to find things and come up with exciting work.

It sounds like Gordon really gave you an opportunity to own your performance.

He really did. He said to me: “You know you do a lot of things that I don't think most people would do with Tom, but I want to give you a chance to do that.” And I was thinking, “I'm just doing what I think anyone would do with Tom. I'm not trying to be brazenly original with choices.” Setting the play in the hotel room altered everything. It allowed us to make choices people hadn't seen before. The door was really swung open by Gordon to a new way of looking at it and to get out from under the pressure of playing these iconic roles. I played Romeo before, and it's the same thing where you think, “Now I'm going to come to that part,” and you think how you are going to make it original. Gordon was very helpful in encouraging that kind of bravery and originality.

I noticed that in the script a lot of the stage directions have been crossed out. Was that helpful to not have to follow them?

I'm not an actor who goes through the script and crosses out the stage directions like some actors do. *Glass Menagerie* has a lot of different versions, and we looked through them, maybe all of them, and considered different word choices Williams made. He kept re-writing it for years and years; he kept refining all his plays really. As far as stage directions, it doesn't bother me to say, “Okay, that's what that actor did. Maybe Tennessee wrote those and maybe it was a stage manager taking notes.” It doesn't really matter. Is it useful? Is it helpful? Usually the stage directions take care of themselves if the actors know what they are doing and have a confident director.

I just read in the *Wall Street Journal* that *The Glass Menagerie* is one of the ten most produced plays of the past decade. Do you have a sense of what makes this play so popular with audiences?

I think it is really simple. I think it is a play about the most fundamental relationships that a person has: father-son, mother-son, mother-daughter, brother-sister. I say in the opening speech that although the father isn't there, he is present and he affects every single thing that goes on—that relationship is paramount to what the play is about. We all have parents, whether they die when we're in childhood or not. If we have adoptive parents, that's another relationship, but we all have parents and siblings and they are the most meaningful and complex relationships we have. The play is certainly unique, but there are many things about it that are universal. There is a lot of love in this family and these relationships are the most meaningful ones you can have. We can never solve these family relationships, but we can keep working on them and making them better. That's why people keep coming back to see this play.

Is the portrait of the father in the room?

Yes, it is in the room, but we don't follow some of the directions about the slides and other stuff. We are a little free about those, but the father definitely drives certain moments. The father informs and drives a lot of what Tom does. In the beginning, it's “I don't want to turn into this guy,” and at the end, it's “I've followed in my father's footsteps.” That's what he ends up doing; it's kind of a curse. It allows for a lot of opportunities for the father in Tom—the man of the house, the reckless drinker—to come out. Cornelius Williams didn't leave the family as he does in the play, but he was very absent and he drank a lot and gambled a lot, which was really not fair for the family and for the kids.

Did Tom hate his mother?

One of the things people mention about our production is that Judy Ivey plays Amanda with so much compassion. People think Amanda is often played as a monster. Judy is scary at some moments, but there is such a beautiful spirit beneath that woman in her performance. William was incredibly poor all through his twenties, and then he wrote this play that is an overnight sensation and follows

it up with *Streetcar*. He gave 50% of his *Glass Menagerie* earnings to his sister, who was already in an institution, and 50% of his *Streetcar* earnings to his mother so she could get out from underneath the burden of his father. So, wow, I'm sure a lot of that was, "Hey dad, look what I'm doing. Your boy, who you really didn't like, is now providing for the family in a way that you didn't." It's also out of love.


I wanted to end this with what advice you might have for young people who want to be actors. What most actors usually say is, "Don't do it if you don't have to." Do you feel the same way?

If acting is something you enjoy but you could do it as a hobby, then you should do it as a hobby. A lot of young actors complain about not being given a career, but just because you enjoy acting doesn't mean that you are going to be able to make a living doing it. There are a lot of people who have this dream and it takes a lot of luck and tenacity. A friend from college told me, "My uncle was an actor, you know, but he never really made it. He had an apartment in the village and he had a really big house upstate and he put three kids through college." And I said, "It sounds like your uncle did make it." Of course, in our world we sometimes think you didn't make it unless you are a household name, unless you are famous, which is not true.

It was very helpful to me to train. Not everyone feels that way, and certainly Julliard has gotten a lot of flack over the years because certain students are deemed too technical, but I learned a tremendous amount there. I didn't really know what I was doing in terms of acting or understanding a text or sharing something of yourself. And then there's vocal and physical work. I'm actually going to meet my Alexander teacher this afternoon and do a session with her. You continue to build on your training as a working artist.

You really should also see other people's work, hear readings, participate in readings. I've done 1000 readings in my life, and hopefully I'll do 1000 more—anything you can do to be involved—do it. I did a lot of regional plays, and my first real role in New York City was a play at the Rattlestick called *Where We're Born*. I think it's very important for your work to be seen. It's a long journey and there is no one way to do it. I know some actors who have gone to

the finest schools who have a hard time getting work and other actors who have had no training who became movie stars.

There is a great book people should read that is called *Acting is a Job*. It reminds you of the realities—the financial reality and other realities of doing this as a career versus doing Community Theater and working at another job. That was never really an option for me. 



The Glass Menagerie Photos: T. Charles Erickson

INTERVIEW WITH *The Set Designer:* MICHAEL YEARGAN

UPSTAGE RECENTLY INTERVIEWED SET DESIGNER MICHAEL YEARGAN ABOUT CREATING THE WORLD OF *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*.

Why did you choose to design theatre sets for a career?

Growing up in Dallas, Texas, in the '50s, I was privileged to have a great music teacher who took us to the Met when they came through on tour. Later, the Dallas Opera was started. So I really came to set design through opera. I remember the first thing I was taken to was a Met production on tour of *La Boheme* in the late '50s. I was blown away. I thought it was the greatest magic trick I had ever seen. I loved the music and was taken in by the whole thing, but it was mainly the sets that drew me in. At that time I read this magazine that was published weekly that had pictures of all the sets, and I would religiously copy them. That's how I got started.

Where did you get your education?

My dad thought I was a terrible student except in art, theatre, and English. I was terrible in math. I wanted to go to a small university. I wanted to get out of Dallas. My dad traveled for his job, and we discovered that there was a very small university in Florida called Stetson University that John D. Stetson had endowed. They had a small theatre program. It was a good liberal arts school, so I went there for undergrad. I loved it and was very active in the theatre department there. Then they had a junior year abroad program, so I spent my junior year at the University of Madrid and did a lot of traveling around that summer. When I came back, I finished up at Stetson. I taught high school for a year out of college because I was sick of going to school. If you were interested in set design, you really had to go to the Yale School of Drama, which at that time was the only game in town. So I applied to Yale. I was accepted and went. After I graduated, I came back and taught and was a resident designer at Yale starting in 1973. I am still teaching there now.

It sounds like the opera was an influence or inspiration; can you tell me about other influences?

I got into ushering—I ushered for anything that came through Dallas or anything that I could get to. In the summers there were the Dallas Summer Musicals, which were fully mounted, huge productions. They ran for two weeks each, and I would watch

every performance. I learned so much about basic stagecraft and about how things shifted, especially when things went wrong and I got to see them cope with that. Then the Dallas Theatre Center was also cranking up, and I remember seeing a production of Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* in a very small 75-seat experimental theatre, which completely scared the hell out of me. I thought it was one of the scariest plays I had ever seen and I was disturbed by it. When I was traveling and seeing things in Europe, I saw *Servant of Two Masters*. I went to everything I could get into in Madrid at the time. I went to Germany. I went to La Scala in Italy. I saw *Mother Courage* and *Waiting for Godot*. These were extraordinary performances. This was very exciting stuff. Those productions were a huge influence. Another influence was when I was at Yale as a designer and Andrej Wajda, the great Polish film director, came.

As I understand it, the set you designed for *The Glass Menagerie* is not traditional. Is this true?

No, it's not traditional in terms of what is usually done for *The Glass Menagerie*. There's hardly any set at all, actually. What's usually done is that it starts on the fire escape outside. It was originally designed by Jo Mielziner, who designed practically everything in that period. Jo was kind of a 19th century romanticist in that his sketches were just unbelievably beautiful. He lit his own shows and was very interested in the atmosphere of the piece. He designed *Streetcar* later, and he loved scrims, that atmospheric feeling you get when you look through gauzy material. *Menagerie* was very impressionistically set in Tom's memory, which put it in an apartment in St. Louis. Our director, Gordon Edelstein, said, "I want to do *The Glass Menagerie*, and I have this idea that instead of being in that apartment, really Tom walks into a hotel room with a bottle and a typewriter, sits down, starts writing the play, and says, 'I have tricks up my sleeve.' It all happens in the hotel." I said, "That's a fantastic idea. Let's do it that way." And we did. But it is not a very realistic hotel room; it is a psychologically empty room. By putting it in the hotel room, and having it all happening around him, the characters come into the story. You don't question it because it



is all in that one space. I think it was revelatory for us to realize how beautifully the play is written and how it doesn't depend on an elaborate set to convey it. It puts more focus on the performances.

What kind of research did you have to do?

I looked at a lot of pictures of hotel rooms. We were very specific about wanting to set it in the '30s, so the hotel room in the film *Barton Fink* that the Cohen Brothers made was very influential for us. Because of the small space we were in, we really needed to deal with one wall of the hotel room. It was open on the sides, because there was audience there at the Long Wharf Theatre where we first produced it. Moving it to the Roundabout, we had to complete the sides, but not do it in such a realistic way. Ninety-nine percent of this production is Jennifer Tipton's lighting, which is really magical. So, we have an impressionistic view of a hotel room. The furniture is all extremely real. It is all based on bad art deco hotel furniture from the period that I saw pictures of.

It sounds like the challenge was to figure out how the scenes in the house could happen in the hotel room.

The biggest challenge at Long Wharf was that we were using the downstage entrances as, I think, the entrance and exit to the kitchen. It was a little far, so we needed to make adjustments in the timing. Here the entrances and exits are stage right and stage left; it's not a thrust stage like at Long Wharf, it is a proscenium. It is almost more challenging to try to design the set as it is written, with the apartment, the fire escape and exteriors and all of that, than what we came up with. I think what we came up with liberates the play a bit.

What do you look for from a director at the beginning of your process?

I don't think there is anything specific, but I loathe when a director says, "I think the room should be green and it should have shag carpets." I'm not real happy when it becomes: "The wall paper should be this or that." I like the director to have a sense of

the play, to discuss what the play means and who the characters are. I'm contradicting myself because Gordon came to me with a very specific idea. With Gordon, we have worked on several projects together, so we have a common vocabulary, and he brought this idea up to me when we were working on something else. When you have these meetings with directors, ninety percent of the meeting is gossip and talking about the politics of the day. Then you get down to doing what you are supposed to be doing, which is the play. So in one of those sessions, Gordon told me he had this great idea for *The Glass Menagerie*. That's when he first mentioned it. With *Menagerie* we both knew the play. Sometimes you work on a play that's a new work that you don't know very well and you must talk about the play. When you say, "A hotel in New Orleans," everyone has an image of what that might be. As a designer, you try and take that image and get it down on paper or communicate it to the director to see if that's what they were thinking. They may say, "Well, no, it wasn't what I was thinking, but I love this." Or "This isn't at all what I thought. I think it should be this." It's starting from the general and working to the very specific, which I like.

Do you have a sense of why this play gets produced so often?

It is a little like *Our Town* in that it means something different to you at different points in your life. I think that the other thing that strikes you when you read it is that it is so beautifully written. Tom's descriptions of the scenes and Laura's pain are poetic. It's a very universal play. *The Glass Menagerie* deals with this pain among Tom, Amanda and Laura. Amanda wanted everything perfect for her daughter and was not able to achieve that because her daughter is unconventional. Everyone has experienced, no matter how pretty or how ugly they are, rejection. It's just so devastating. You can usually hear an audible sob at the end when Tom says, "Blow out your candles, Laura."

Do you have any advice for a young person who might want to design sets?

When I started out I was fanatic about making theater models. I wanted to go directly from high school to some school where I could go right into set design. At the time, the Goodman Theatre was not affiliated with the University of Chicago, but it had its own theatre school, and you could go there and study set design. I was convinced that that was the

thing to do. My father actually made an appointment with the designer of all those musicals that I was in such awe of in Dallas. I went to see him, and he said that the thing you should do is not go right into a specialty school, but go get a good liberal arts education. Study English, study art history, study architecture. Then if you are still interested in theatre, go to the Yale School of Drama, which is where he had gone. So that's what I did. I find that some students want to go right into Yale after they graduate and we tell them not to. Theatre is about life, theatre is about understanding characters. The more you can become a well-rounded human being, the better. Have a knowledge of art history or architecture, travel to London or see the Mona Lisa or the Leaning Tower of Pisa or St. Peter's Square. Study drawing, study figure drawing. All of that stuff feeds into your visual vocabulary. The director is always going to gravitate first toward the set designer to start talking about the play. In a way, a set designer is also a really good dramaturge, and that's why when you first start talking about the play, you should bring something to the table, rather than just saying, "Uh huh, uh huh." That's why you should get a good liberal arts undergraduate education. People should keep sketch books. Live a little, analyze. Then go to a good graduate school where your mind is stimulated and you are with people who are all interested in the same thing; hopefully then you'll become a great theatre artist.

It sounds like your father was supportive of your decision to be a set designer.

He was a military man, and he had never come across this before. And he didn't really have a college education, so he was puzzled as to what to do. But he was very proud and very happy that it all worked out. **UP**

Vocabulary

BUSINESS COLLEGE: A training program that taught young women secretarial skills

D.H. LAWRENCE: An early 20th century novelist who was known at the time for the sexually explicit content of his work

EPISCOPALIAN CHURCH: A branch of Protestantism

FLASHBACK: A scene that takes place earlier in time than the scene before it

GAY DECEIVERS: Padding put in a bra to make the chest appear bigger

GENTLEMAN CALLER: A young man who comes to the house to formally court a young woman

LADIES HOME JOURNAL: A magazine for women that discussed topics such as beauty and cooking tips

MENAGERIE: A collection of exotic animals, usually for display

MARTYR: One who endures pain or death for the greater good or the betterment of others

PIRATES OF PENZANCE: An early British operetta by Gilbert & Sullivan about the comic and romantic entanglements of a band of pirates

PLEUROSIS: An inflammation of the lungs that causes it to be painful when one breathes

UNICORN: A mythical horse-like creature with a single horn in the center of its forehead

VICTROLA: A type of phonograph player, which was an early version of the record player/ turntable

VELOCITY: Velocity: The speed and direction of an object



Keira Keeley and Judith Ivey in *The Glass Menagerie*
Photos: T. Charles Erickson

Activities

Pre Show Activities:

- 1.) *The Glass Menagerie* is the story of a family in St. Louis, Missouri being told from the perspective of Tom. If you were going to tell your life story to a group of people, how does your environment influence who you are and what you become? ([click here for activity](#))
- 2.) Tom, the narrator in *The Glass Menagerie* is recalling memories from his past to tell a story. How can we use memory to create a piece of theatre? ([click here for activity](#))
- 3.) In *The Glass Menagerie*, Laura calls herself “crippled” and places limits on herself and her future. How do real or perceived limitations affect your choices in life? ([click here for activity](#))



Post Show Activities:

- 4.) Prior to seeing *The Glass Menagerie*, you used environmental clues to tell your life story. Now that you have given thought to how environment affects your life, start thinking about how the environment of *The Glass Menagerie* affects the lives of the characters in the play. ([click here for activity](#))
- 5.) Having seen *The Glass Menagerie*, you know more about the various theatrical devices Tennessee Williams used in the show. Refer to the scenes you wrote in [Pre Show Activity 2](#) and identify the various theatrical devices you used in your scenes. ([click here for activity](#)).
- 6.) Before you saw *The Glass Menagerie*, you identified some of your own personal limitations. Now, write about the limitations of the play's four characters. ([click here for activity](#))

Resources

[The Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival](#)

[PBS-American Masters: Tennessee Williams](#)

[Long Wharf Theatre](#)

Biography–Tennessee Williams: Wounded Genius. New York: A&E, 2005

Great Writers: Tennessee Williams. New York: Kultur Video, 2006

Leverich, Lyle, *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 1997

Roudane, Matthew C., *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998

Williams, Tennessee. *Memoirs*. New York: New Directions, 2006

[The Guthrie Theatre’s Study Guide of *The Glass Menagerie*](#)

[Official website for the Roundabout Theatre Company production of *The Glass Menagerie*](#)



Tennessee Williams Photo: NY Public Library

When you get to the theatre...

BELOW ARE SOME HELPFUL TIPS FOR MAKING YOUR THEATRE-GOING EXPERIENCE MORE ENJOYABLE.

TICKET POLICY

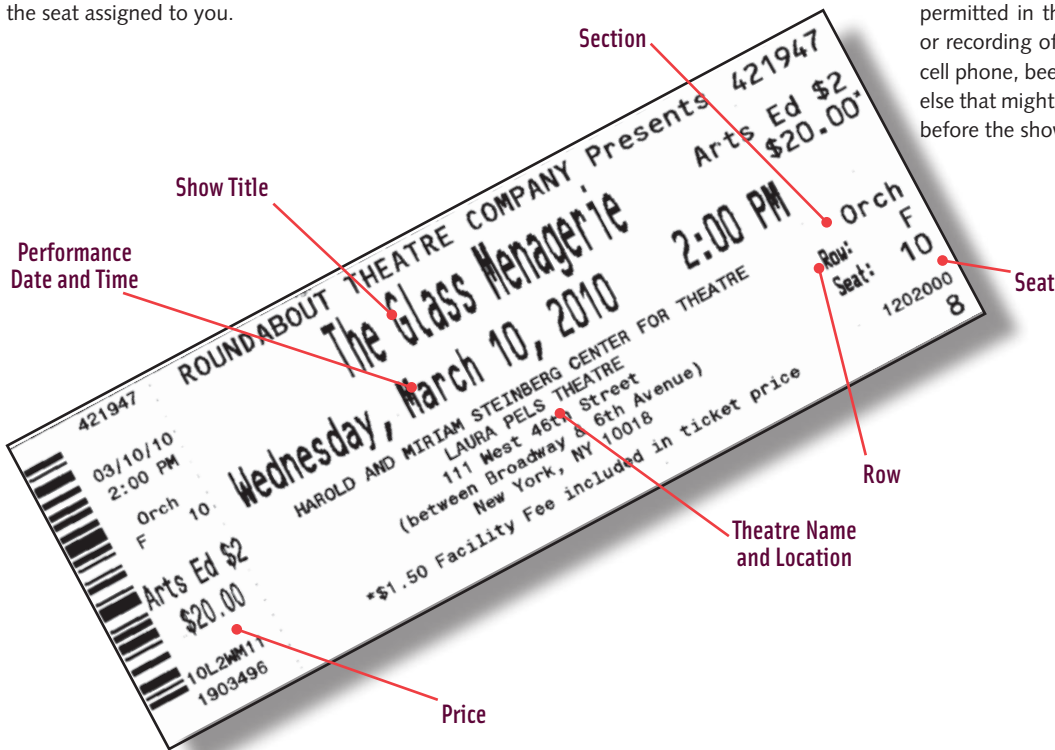
As a student participant in Producing Partners, Page To Stage or Theatre Access, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

PROGRAMS

All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films, perhaps some you have already seen.

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.



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