

**A FRESH, RELEVANT 'MENAGERIE'**  
*THEATER REVIEW*

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Having suffered through too many *The Glass Menagerie* performances dated by flowery language and gloomy Depression-era struggles, I was pleasantly surprised to find that Bay Theatre's new production invests freshness and an emotional relevance to connect the audience to the characters, all on an amazingly authentic set.

Every role is so well cast that we recognize aspects of ourselves in this family from 70 years ago. Some mothers still want their children to conform to social dictates and may fantasize that they excel, while some sons and daughters, afraid to disappoint them, may help foster such illusions while longing for freedom to establish their own lives.

Tennessee Williams' first major success, *The Glass Menagerie* premiered on Broadway in 1945 and is set in 1930s St. Louis. Tom Wingfield relates through flashbacks the lives of his mother - Southern belle Amanda, abandoned by her husband years before and now existing in her idealized genteel past - and his crippled, shy sister Laura, who shrinks from the real world and fills her imaginary one with glass animals and music from old phonograph records.

The family struggles to survive on Tom's meager \$60-a-month warehouse salary. Amanda sells magazine subscriptions to fellow Daughters of the American Revolution members, while Laura has secretly quit business school.

The play has autobiographical touches: Tom is a writer who, like Williams, worked a menial job in a shoe factory. Laura might have represented Williams' mentally ill sister, Rose.

Here Bay Theatre's co-founder and artistic director, Lucinda Merry-Browne, defines anew the role of Amanda Wingfield. So immersed - and transformed - is Merry-Browne in the role that my husband, Bud, commented, "That woman can really act," unaware that this was a woman he'd photographed several times.

Not only does she look and sound different with her Southern drawl, but she has become a multi-dimensional Amanda who clings to her illusions as tightly as to her beloved jonquils. She badgers her children because she knows they are moving away from her - Tom escaping through the movies and Laura embracing the fantasy of a gentleman caller.

Ben Russo as Tom Wingfield opens the play with a passionate poetic soliloquy that sets a high standard for what follows. Russo is always believable as he communicates Tom's frustration and longing to flee the warehouse and his mother's badgering. Russo also interjects unsuspected humor and conveys a protective sense of duty to Laura.

Kristen Calgaro makes a memorable Bay debut as Laura. Her singing "There are smiles that make us happy" is potent in expressing her contentment in her imaginary world - a joy that Amanda shatters with inquiries about her whereabouts when she was presumably attending business school. Calgaro conveys the intense pain of an awkward young woman who had a high-school crush on the man soon to arrive as her Gentleman Caller.

Judson Davis completes the perfect four-person cast as the likable Gentleman Caller, who refuses to be discouraged by his menial warehouse job, happy to be remembered by Laura as a fine debater and singer. Davis' Caller treats Laura with the sensitivity he'd use in handling one of her fragile glass animals. But he also sweeps Laura into his arms for a dance that seems as close as she'll ever get to dreamed-for romance and happiness.

Perfection doesn't end with the cast - it is seen in the work of director Nancy Robillard and in the set design of Dave Buckler and costumes by Eric Langmeyer with effective lighting by John Burkland, all who together evoke the era and the family's shabby gentility.

The set, on the tiny confines of the stage, is a particular delight. It incorporates a realistic, subtly lit fire escape strewn with ticket stubs and cigarette butts inside the gratings to become an ideal exit and entry point, complete with sound effects. Not only does it heighten drama, but it also serves as a porch setting for important explanatory soliloquies.

*The Glass Menagerie* continues on weekends through March 29 at Bay Theatre, 275 West St. in Annapolis. Ticket information is available at 410-268-1333 or [www.baytheatre.org](http://www.baytheatre.org).

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