



# Handling the 'Glass Menagerie' with care

UA rep group stages Williams' classic, seeking to bring out its 'truest voice'

By Anthony Victor Reyes

SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR

People can be like glass: delicate, fragile, beautiful.

Tennessee Williams' semi-autobiographical play, "The Glass Menagerie," explores this concept with wit and gorgeous language. It has captivated audiences since 1945.

The University of Arizona's theater school's Arizona Repertory Theatre is staging the Tony- and Pulitzer-prize-winning play, regarded by many as one of the great American plays.

Tom Wingfield, a relentless dreamer, is our narrator. He takes us back to his younger days when he was living with his mother, Amanda, a fading Southern belle, and his disabled sister, Laura, who has an impressive collection of glass figurines. Amanda desperately wants Laura to have a suitor. The story centers on the family's encounter with a "gentleman caller," Jim O'Connor.

"If you breathe, it breaks," Laura says to Jim about her glass menagerie, though it's just as

## IF YOU GO

- **What:** UA Arizona Repertory Theatre's "The Glass Menagerie."
- **Playwright:** Tennessee Williams.
- **Director:** Brent Gibbs.
- **When:** Previews at 1:30 p.m. Sunday and 7:30 p.m. Tuesday. Regular performances: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday (opening) and next Thursday. Continues through March 2.
- **Where:** Tornabene Theatre in the UA Fine Arts Complex, at North Park Avenue and East Speedway.
- **Cost:** Preview, \$17; regular performances, \$28, with discounts available.
- **Reservations, information:** 621-1162.
- **Running time:** About 2 hours, with one intermission.
- **Cast:** Maedell Dixon, Paul Thomson, Kathleen Cannon and Joey Rudman.

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"The Glass Menagerie" features actors, front, Maedell Dixon and Joey Rudman, and behind, Paul Thomson and Kathleen Cannon.

easily said about human frailties.

**Brent Gibbs**, who is directing the cast of four, sat down to talk about his approach and feelings about the classic.

**What is the pressure like when re-creating a well-known and popular piece such as this one?**

"It's funny because it is a double-edge sword. It is a classic because it is a well-structured and well-written play. Because of that, it relieves the pressure. In some scripts you have to fill in some holes, but there are certainly no holes in 'The Glass Menagerie' ... So what you try to find is the truest voice for the piece."

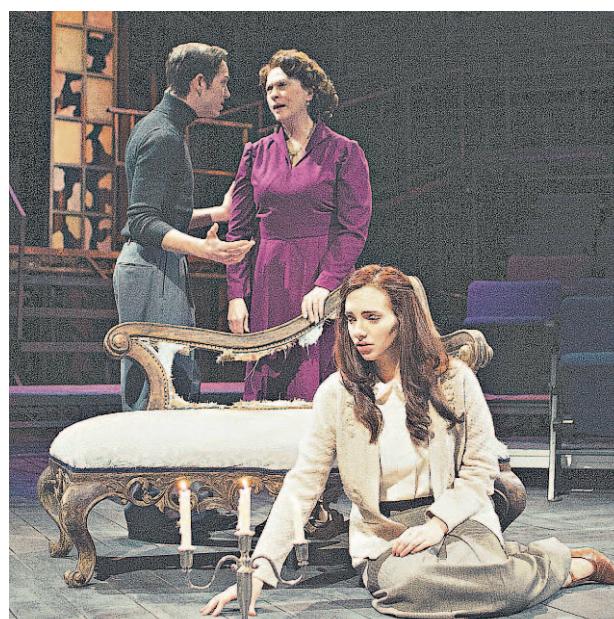
**What makes a play written by Tennessee Williams unique or more enjoyable to direct or act?**

"His heart. I don't know of many other writers that have an understanding of human nature and human longing that is so astute (as) Tennessee Williams. A lot of it comes from his personal past, and this is a very autobiographical play. I think that one of the strengths we found is that it is trying to tell Tennessee Williams' story. ... What I like most about our production is the realization that it is a ghost story."

**Did the many other film and stage productions of this play influence your approach?**

"No. I actually try to avoid looking at other productions; that way, any brilliant successes or tragic failures are my own. There are so many good artists out there, and sometimes you inadvertently steal from them or borrow from them. I don't think there is anything that I am doing that anyone else hasn't thought of, but it is the first time I thought of it. It sort of gives you a fresh perspective."

**What is your approach**



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Laura Wingfield (Kathleen Cannon), front, tries to ignore her quarreling mother (Maedell Dixon) and brother (Paul Thomson).

**to the play?**

"I think that it is a very simple, stripped-down version, which hopefully puts the focus squarely on the actors, and it is fortunate we have strong actors. ... We are fortunate we have a local guest artist, **Maedell Dixon**, who is playing **Amanda**. She has illuminated innumerable sections of the play that I have never seen before. I think **Paul Thomson**, who is playing **Tom**, has a great affinity for the struggles that **Tom** and Tennessee experienced.

Therefore he brings some wonderful revelations. (The actors do that for) **Jim** and **Laura** as well. Everybody in this cast was born to play these roles. It really makes it a profound experience to work on and for people to watch."

**It sounds as though there are many joys in directing this play. What's the most rewarding?**

"I think it is when you see the audience's reaction. It is the final component because they are participants and they do add (to the performance). Audiences are our philosopher's

stone. They are that ingredient. Without them, the play does not live. You can get so close, but they are an absolute vital component to the process. That is the moment you start to realize what you really truly have. It is one thing if it is in the rehearsal hall and it's really really good, but it doesn't matter if the audience doesn't participate."

**The arts often struggle for funds, and sometimes for audiences. Why are they important?**

"We are emotionally bankrupt if we don't have the arts. There is a strong human impulse to create. Being an audience member is participating in that process of creation. The arts enrich us and inform us. ... To create beauty and to experience beauty — and that is what the arts provide. (People who experience theater) become more. They grow. They add another dimension to themselves that was not present before they did that."

Anthony Victor Reyes is a University of Arizona journalism student apprenticeship at the Star.

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PHOTO OF DANIELLE WADE BY CYLLA VON TIEDemann

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