

MENAGERIE

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“not being seen, being pigeonholed into what you are. I teach kids in high school in New York, and kids like it when I say, ‘You know what, you’re more than what people think you are. Do what the hell you want to do. Don’t listen to all those people.’ They like it. Kids like it. They love to hear that. They get excited by it.”

“And I think they’ll get (this play.) I think they’ll get that Tom wants to get the hell out. His mother is driving him crazy, and his sister can’t function in the world, she’s so wrapped up with self-consciousness. High school kids? Self-conscious? God, they’ll get that. And they’ll get the failed romance. Everybody wants to have their first kiss. Whether they admit it or not.”

The production, Florida Rep’s first offering of the season, is their 2008 World Classic Initiative, which offers free performances to Lee County high school students. (“The Glass Menagerie” is also required reading for them.)

The play is also this year’s “One Community One Book” reading project, chosen by the Lee County Library System. People in the county are urged to read the play, participate in a discussion about it, and also see it performed on-stage at the Florida Rep in downtown Fort Myers.

The cast (Rachel Burttram, Sara Morsey, Brendan Powers and John Warren) and director will participate in discussions scheduled at various libraries around the county. They’ll talk about the rehearsal process, how they approached the text, mounting a classic production, and will also answer questions.

“The reason why we do this is first, to foster that sense of community,” says library development specialist Karen Sloan. “We want people to read this play, then see at Florida Rep. It should generate conversation at the dinner table, with friends, with co-workers.”

“The more people participate, the more possibility of creating bonds with people in your community, the more opportunity for discussion and creating bonds with people in your community.”

The play, with its universal themes and complexity, speaks to all ages, say Sloan and Clavelli.

Sloan recalls reading the classic when she was in high school.

“But when you go back and examine these works, these classics, as an adult, it just sheds a whole new light on them,” she says. “I almost never go back and re-read old classics, but this project has compelled me to go back and do this and it’s been a great experience.”

Clavelli performed in a production of “The Glass Menagerie” when he was in high school.

“I loved it,” he says. “I got it. I remember my relationship with my mom was so bad. I think a lot of kids have that feeling Tom has when he says, ‘There’s so many things in my heart I can’t describe to you.’ And God, that’s so beautiful and true. Let’s just respect each other. If a kid could be that poetic, he might want to say that. Just: you don’t get me. And that’s powerful stuff.”

Originally written as a short story, this highly autobiographical play, now more than 60 years old, was Williams’ first critical success. It won the New York Drama Critics Award for Best Play and brought fame to the playwright. It’s since been revived on Broadway six times, with actors such as Maureen Stapleton, Julie Harris, Jessica Tandy and Jessica Lange playing Amanda. It



Tennessee Williams’ classic “The Glass Menagerie” is set in a St. Louis apartment, circa 1930.

also generated at least two movie versions, as well as TV versions.

Clavelli says it’s Williams’ saddest play, but also calls it “funny and wacky. It is wacky in its own way,” he says. “It’s a crazy family... the family is so dysfunctional that they’re really funny. And Williams is dealing with this dysfunctional family. I laugh a lot in rehearsal, thinking, ‘God, I think people are going to recognize just how crazy we all are, how nuts this family is.’”

Clavelli says he can’t watch the play without weeping.

“It’s crushingly sad,” he says, “because the people in the family just love each other so much.”

But they can’t connect.

Tom, Clavelli says, “doesn’t hate his mother. He loves his mother, and she adores him. They just don’t know how to take care of each other. ‘I don’t know how to love you.’ How many relationships have broken up because of that?”

“It’s just so incredibly sad, it’s just heartbreaking. And then Laura comes so close to being really in love, and having a real love in her life, and it just crushes her. Oh my God. Anybody who has thought they were in love with someone, and then just sees it not happening. How many of us hasn’t loved somebody that doesn’t love us back? Williams is touching on these themes that are so universal, and so crushing.”

“I wanted it to be about a family that was trying to love each other, and then not being able to. I really wanted that.

That was the domestic drama I wanted to tell. The audience is responding to four energies on stage trying to make connections, connecting, breaking apart. Real people having experiences, real experiences with their hearts opening and breaking, and we get that, we understand it.”

The play is a memory play, the retelling of past events by Tom, the narrator. Brendan Powers, who played the priest in Florida Rep’s highly successful “Doubt” last season, portrays Tom. The role is a dual one: Tom, the adult narrator, and a younger Tom, interacting with his family.

“Roles like that are rare, but they’re wonderful, because you do have, in a way, two different personas, depending on what the play is,” Powers says. “You have the older Tom — I don’t think he’s that much older, but certainly he’s gone out on his own and lived a little, and you get the feeling that he’s lived a little rough, you know? And so the narrator is someone who’s done some hard living and carries with him a lot of pain inside. And then to shut that off, he goes back to the more sort of volatile 22-year-old who’s wrestling with his mother. So I’m enjoying it, I’m enjoying trying to find the differences between those two.”

One of the more challenging things for the cast, he says, was the dialect. Although the play is set in St. Louis, the mother, Amanda, is from Tennessee.

“Sara Morsey, who plays Amanda,

if you go

>> **What:** “The Glass Menagerie”

>> **When:** Oct. 3-12

>> **Where:** Florida Repertory Theatre, 2267 bay St., Fort Myers

>> **Cost:** \$20, \$34 and \$38. Ask about \$10 student prices, and check with your local library about a One Book, One Community free bookmark that can be redeemed for discounted tickets to “The Glass Menagerie.”

>> **Information:** Call 332-4488, visit the box office or go online at www.floridarep.org.

One Book, One Community Events

The director and cast of “The Glass Menagerie” will give behind-the-scenes discussions of the rehearsal process, approaching the text, and mounting a production, as well as answer questions from attendees. Registration is required. Discussions will take place at the following locations:

South County Regional Library, 21100 Three Oaks Parkway, Estero - 3 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 1

East County Regional Library, 881 Gunner Road, Lehigh Acres - 11 a.m. Friday, Oct. 3

Lakes Regional Library, 15290 Bass Road, Fort Myers - 2 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 7

North Fort Myers Public Library, 2001 N. Tamiami Trail NE, North Fort Myers - 4 p.m.

Thursday, Oct. 9

sort of set the tone with her cadences,” Powers says. “And we just sort of followed that. But the thing is, as you know, you almost can’t help but speak with a Tennessee accent in that. It’s just so beautifully written, you just fall into that cadence, whether you know it or not.”

Powers thinks the production will be well received by high school students.

“It has an energy and a momentum and a colorfulness to it that I think they’ll stick with,” he says. “It’s family. I think the kids out there will be able to relate in some capacity. It may be something as simple as: well, I don’t have a dad at home either. Or: oh, my mother dotes on this, or my mother dotes on that. Or the feeling of the young son just wanting to get out, not that he wants to leave (his family) in the dust.”

“At one point in the argument scene, he says, ‘Mother, I haven’t got a single thing in this house that I can call my own. You’re going through my books, you’re taking this.’ I’m just trying. I just need my own space, and they’re in a home where that’s impossible, except out on the fire escape, and that’s where he always goes to get out. So I think there are so many elements that kids can relate to.”

And, he adds, “Anything Williams writes is just inherently dramatic, it has a movement to it, it has a life force to it, that I think is very compelling. And so that’s why I’m excited about getting the itchy students in there, in hopes that maybe they’ll put down their phones or their texting, or whatever they do, and suddenly say, ‘Wait a minute, I’m following this here.’”

Powers is pleased the Lee County Library System selected the play for this year’s selection for “One Book, One Community.”

“It’s a terrific idea,” he says. “Sara Morsey and I were chatting about the play, and she said, a good number of people will probably say, ‘Oh, “Glass Menagerie,” I read that in high school.’ And they may think, ‘Well, I’ve read it, so I know it, I don’t have to see it,’ or ‘I’ve seen it already.’”

“But putting live actors and voice to those words creates a whole different experience. So anybody who might say, ‘Oh, “Menagerie,” yeah, I know that.’ Rethink it, rethink it. Because you can come and experience it again, and it can have a totally different resonance.” ■