

ARTS COMMENTARY

'The Glass Menagerie' weaves its magic at the Florida Rep



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Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion."

— Tom in "The Glass Menagerie"

Sixty-four years after its debut, "The Glass Menagerie" still possesses magic.

Yes, it contains, if you will, two disappearing tricks — or three, depending upon how you want to count them — and at least two failed transformations.

But it also contains that mysterious magic that moves audiences deeply.

The current production, which kicks off the Florida Repertory Theatre's 11th season, deftly demonstrates just why the classic holds an ever-fresh appeal for each new generation.

Its themes are timeless, universal: a young person's desire for independence, the longing for true love, struggling with alienation, pushing away those you love by clinging too tightly.

Even in its specificity the work can be universal. In his opening monologue, Tom (Brandan Powers) says to the audience: "To begin with, I turn back time. I reverse it to that quaint period, the 30s, when the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind. Their eyes had failed them, or they had failed their eyes, and so they were having their fingers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy."

An audience member seated near me, obviously thinking of our current economy, grunted with the shock of recognition.

Though highly autobiographical, this Tennessee Williams play possesses much to relate to: the desire for a better life, the shame of failed love.

It's a self-described "memory play," with Tom/Tennessee looking back at a pivotal time in his life, when he abandoned his family and set off on his own.

Director Chris Clavelli presents us with a family that loves each other, but doesn't know how to live together. The mother, Amanda (Sara Morsey), mourns the popularity of her youth and the disappearance of her husband, who

deserted them. She wants better for her children, but neither of them seem to know how to fit in this world.

Her son Tom is a dreamer, a writer, his head filled with words and books and notions of adventure. Her daughter, Laura (Rachel Burttram), is pathologically shy and self-conscious because of her slight limp.

In many ways, all three are at odds with the world in which they live. They each feel alienated, in one way or another.

While some productions present this play as non-stop psychological torture, a family that cannot help tormenting each other, Florida Rep's production is much more nuanced. While it contains pathos, it is not the grim, tortured experience you might expect.

In fact, I was surprised at how often I laughed during the performance. Under Clavelli's direction, his quartet of highly talented actors reveal the humor of certain dialogue and interactions.

For example, there's the bantering between Tom and his mother, when he reveals to her that he's invited a co-worker home for dinner. Or the interaction between Tom and his sister when he comes home drunk, late one night. Or the scene where Laura places a magician's scarf over her sleeping brother and whips it off, to see whether it will transform him.

Clavelli also keeps the pace moving, but the dialogue never feels rushed.

Morsey plays the role of the matriarch with dignity. It's obvious she loves her children, but she can't stop herself from hounding them with constant advice. Morsey is a skilled actress; she's naturally girlish while bantering with her son on the fire escape, but transforms into a caricature of her younger self when flirting with Act II's "gentleman caller," Jim (John Warren).

Burttram, as Laura, seems to have the most challenging role, as her character is an extremely internal creature. She's so shy she hesitates to speak, but her emotions can be read on her face. One highlight is the scene where her mother hems a new dress, in anticipation of the gentleman caller's visit. When her mother leaves the room, Laura appraises herself in the mirror, her face shifting from self-doubt and shyness to self-curiosity, then amazement at her own beauty.

Burttram and Warren's scenes together are also gold, a kind of innocent flirtation. Laura, initially shy, blossoms with Jim's attention. Warren strikes the

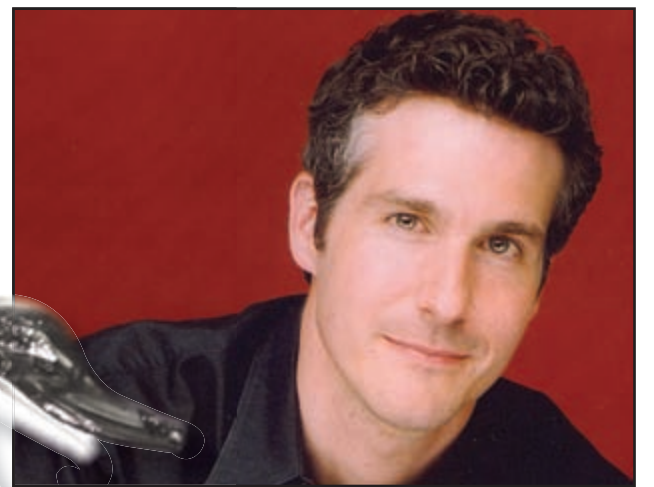
right balance in portraying his character. Though optimistic and forward-thinking, he's not slick. The two tentatively resume their high school friendship, which temporarily sparks into something more. Their scenes together are both endearing and heartbreaking.

Tom, as the narrator, is the anchor of the play; his monologues bookend the play, and it's his memories that we see take place on stage. Powers is a strong actor, well capable of the dual roles of narrator and Tom's younger self. He somehow has the ability to convey his character's restlessness and pent-up frustration, presenting Tom as someone who's somewhat rough-hewn, yet also romantic and poetic.

Roberta Malcolm provides the costumes; especially of note is Amanda's over-the-top "southern belle" dress she wears in Act II, complete with fan.

And Jim Hunter's set and lighting add much to this play's magical spell. The walls no longer exist; instead, Hunter provides the mere suggestion of walls: outlines with metal pipes, upon which hang family portraits and translucent curtains as flimsy and ephemeral as memories. This gauzy, atmospheric set is as poetic and creative as Tennessee Williams's words.

"The Glass Menagerie" is required reading for local high school students, and is also the county's current "One Book, One Community" selection. Those who have read the play or seen a prior



Brendan Powers plays Tom in "The Glass Menagerie"



Rachel Burttram stars as Laura

production may be surprised upon reintroduction; "The Glass Menagerie" is so rich it rewards multiple visitations.

Those who expect they'll have to grit their teeth for an evening of unending grimness will be pleasantly surprised; Williams mines the humor among the pain.

Florida Rep's "Glass Menagerie" is a tender, heartbreaking portrait of a struggling family, a production for the 21st century. It pierces the heart. ■

If you go

- >>What: The Glass Menagerie
- >>When: through Oct. 12
- >>Where: The Florida Repertory Theatre, 2267 Bay Street
- >>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."
- >>Info: Call 332-4488, visit the box office, or go to www.floridarep.org

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