

Glass Menagerie made fresh again

Sharply realistic portraits steer clear of clichés

Jerry Wasserman, *The Province*

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One of the most perfect plays ever written, *The Glass Menagerie* gets a near-perfect production from the Arts Club.

Director James Fagan Tait clearly understands the delicate balance of fragile beauty, cruel reality and comic resilience in Tennessee Williams' world. The designers provide an exquisitely lit, semi-transparent canvas of memory on which the excellent cast, anchored by Gabrielle Rose's magnificent Amanda, paints Williams' deceptively complex tale.

Premiered in 1944, Williams' thinly disguised autobiography is narrated by Tom Wingfield (Robert Moloney), who offers the audience his nostalgic, guilt-ridden memories of his family during a few days in their St. Louis tenement in the late 1930s. The Depression grinds on and war drums beat ominously in the distance as the Wingfields play out their painful drama.

Deserted by her husband, whose grinning portrait oversees the apartment, former Mississippi debutante Amanda struggles to hold the family together and launch her grown children into the world. Tom, who works at a shoe warehouse and aspires to be a poet, resents her nagging. Shy, "crippled" Laura (Cherise Clarke) hides in her collection of miniature glass animals that mirror her own condition.

Gentleman caller Jim (Craig Erickson) provides a spark of hope for Laura and matchmaking Amanda. But the heartbreaking ending leaves them hanging in the dark.

There's not an extraneous moment in the script, and Tom has some of the most beautiful lines Williams ever wrote. His elegiac memories shape the scenes, reflected in Robert Gardiner's cutaway living room set framed by fire escapes, Marsha Sibthorpe's fractured chiaroscuro lighting and Joelysa Pankanea's melancholy melodies.

None of this gets saccharine or precious. Tait avoids the obvious -- no spotlights on the menagerie -- and keeps the pace brisk. His cast offers sharply realistic portraits, steering clear of the clichés that have accumulated around these characters.

Here, Amanda is neither manipulative monster nor grotesque faded Southern belle. She's a single mother, desperate for her kids to do well, trying to keep up a certain

appearance but mostly for the sake of family morale. Never unaware of how she looks and sounds, Rose's Amanda does what she has to, sometimes cold-bloodedly but often with great good humour.

Similarly, Clarke avoids the easy pathos that can make Laura one-dimensional. Her Laura seems chronically depressed -- with good reason. She's numbed herself but comes alive beautifully for a few moments in the scene with Jim.

Erickson gives Jim the perfect mixture of positive energy, sympathy and self-involvement. Moloney, too, hits all the right notes with Tom, avoiding the excessive self-dramatization that Tom, like his mother, invites.

He's our ideal guide through the familiar world of this classic, made fresh again in a great production.

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THEATRE REVIEW

The Glass Menagerie

Where: Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage, 2750 Granville St.

When: To Nov. 25

Tickets: \$30-\$57 at 604-687-1644

Grade: A