

STUDY GUIDE FOR COURT THEATRE'S 2006 PRODUCTION OF

Tennessee Williams' THE GLASS MENAGERIE

CONTENTS:

- 1 Bio of Tennessee Williams
- 2 History and Synopsis of "The Glass Menagerie"
- 3 Study Guide Topics
 - a. Themes
 - b. Motifs
 - c. Symbols
- 4 The Production – Thoughts from designer John Culbert

(created and edited by Ben Calvert)



(playwright Tennessee Williams)

BIO OF PLAYWRIGHT TENNESSEE WILLIAMS (from wikipedia, edited by Ben Calvert)

Thomas Lanier Williams III (March 26, 1911 – February 25, 1983), better known by the pen name Tennessee Williams, was a major American playwright and one of the prominent playwrights in the twentieth century. The name "Tennessee" was a name given to him by college friends because of his southern accent and his father's background in Tennessee. He won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1948 and for *Cat On a Hot Tin Roof* in 1955. In addition to those two plays, *The Glass Menagerie* in 1944 and *The Night of the Iguana* in 1961 received the New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards. His 1952 play *The Rose Tattoo* received the Tony Award for best play.

Tennessee Williams's family life was a troubled one that provided inspiration for much of his writings. He was born in Columbus, Mississippi, and his family moved to Clarksdale, Mississippi by the time he was 3. In 1918, the family moved again to St. Louis, Missouri. His father, Cornelius Williams, was a travelling shoe salesman who became increasingly abusive as his children grew older. Edwina Williams, Tennessee's mother, was a descendant of genteel southern life, and was somewhat smothering. Dakin Williams, Tennessee's brother, was often favored over Tennessee by their father. Williams wrote his first publicly performed play, "*Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay!*" in 1935.

Williams lived in the French Quarter of New Orleans, Louisiana. He first moved there in 1939 to write for the WPA and lived first at 722 Toulouse Street (now a bed and breakfast). He wrote *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) while living at 632 St. Peter Street.

Tennessee was close to his sister, Rose Williams, who had perhaps the greatest influence on him. She was an elegant, slim beauty who was diagnosed with schizophrenia, and spent most of her adult life in mental hospitals. After various unsuccessful attempts at therapy, her parents eventually allowed a prefrontal lobotomy in an effort to treat her. The operation, performed in 1943, in Washington, D.C., went badly, and Rose remained incapacitated for the rest of her life.

Rose's failed lobotomy was a hard blow to Tennessee, who never forgave his parents for allowing the operation. It may have been one of the factors that drove him to alcoholism. The common "mad heroine" theme that appears in many of his plays may have been influenced by his sister.

Characters in his plays are often seen to be direct representations of his family members. Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* is understood to be modelled on Rose. Some biographers say that the character of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is based on her as well. The motif of lobotomy also arises in *Suddenly*, *Last Summer*. Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*

can easily be seen to represent Williams's mother. Many of his characters are considered autobiographical, including Tom Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* and Sebastian in *Suddenly, Last Summer*. Actress Anne Meacham was a close personal friend of Tennessee Williams and played the lead in many of his plays, including but not limited to *Suddenly, Last Summer*.

In his memoirs, the playwright claims he became sexually active as a teenager. His biographer, Lyle Leverich, maintained this actually occurred later, in his late 20s. His physical and emotional relationship with his secretary, Frank Merlo, lasted from 1947 until Merlo's death from cancer in 1961, and provided stability when Williams produced his most enduring works. Merlo provided balance to many of Williams's frequent bouts with depression, especially the fear that like his sister, Rose, he would become insane. The death of his lover drove Williams into a deep, decade-long episode of depression.

Tennessee Williams died at the age of 71 after he choked on a bottle cap. However, some (among them his brother, Dakin) believe Williams was murdered. Alternately, the police report from his death seems to indicate that drugs were involved, as it states that pills were found under his body.

Williams was interred in the Calvary Cemetery, St. Louis, Missouri, despite his stated desire to be buried at sea at approximately the same place as the poet Hart Crane, whom he considered one of his most significant influences. He left his literary rights to Sewanee: The University of the South in honor of his grandfather, Walter Dakin, an alumnus of the university located in Sewanee, Tennessee. The funds today support a creative writing program. In 1989 Williams was inducted into the St. Louis Walk of Fame.

SYNOPSIS OF "THE GLASS MENAGERIE"

Set in St. Louis in 1937, *The Glass Menagerie* is a memory play, recalled by the character of Tom Wingfield. Tom lives in an apartment with his sister Laura and his mother Amanda. Mr. Wingfield, Tom and Laura's father, does not appear in the play except for a picture hung prominently in the living room. Mr. Wingfield, as we find out in the play, has abandoned his family and is never heard from except for one postcard with no return address. The action of the play is driven by the three family members, headed by Amanda. In wishing for her children to be happy she pushes Tom to get a better job, and hopes for Laura to find a suitable husband, or at least entertain men who she refers to as "gentlemen callers". She also has enrolled Laura in a business college to acquire a family fortune. Tom works at a shoe distributor warehouse, a job which he loathes; he frequently loses himself in movies, drinking, and literature – a fact which has earned him the nickname "Shakespeare" at his job.

As the play begins Tom and Amanda discuss Laura's prospects for a suitor, and Tom selects his coworker Jim, a man as it turns out that Laura remembers fondly from her shy days in high school. Preparations are made for his arrival as Amanda interrogates Tom about the young man, who she is pleased to find out is driven with his sights set on career advancement.

The day arrives, and Amanda is a flutter with preparation as Laura cowers in fear and shyness. The men arrive and dinner is served. After dinner Amanda and Tom excuse themselves so Laura and Jim can have a moment to chat and catch up on old times. Laura tells Jim she remembers how kind he was to her in high school, and recalls an incident in which Jim asked her why she was wearing a leg brace, when she tells him it was because of "pleurosis" he mishears and thinks she said "Blue Roses" which soon becomes his nickname for her. After a moment of dancing and music, Jim lets slip that he is engaged to be married, a fact which does not go over well on Laura. Amanda and Tom enter the room in good spirits and Jim excuses himself, telling Amanda that he must go home to visit his fiancé. Amanda, full of charm but seething underneath, bids Jim farewell. Turning to face the room she confronts Tom for his incompetence, and Tom storms out of the house. In his closing monologue we see Amanda comforting Laura. The play ends.

STUDY GUIDE TOPICS – Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

Themes

The Difficulty Accepting Reality

- Which characters have difficulty accepting the reality of their situation?
- Is there more than one character who has this conflict?
- How do the characters remain in this

The Impossibility of True Escape

- How do characters dream of escape in the play?
- How do they find little ways of escaping that effect their relationships with the outside world and the other family members?

The Unrelenting Power of Memory

- Not only is the play a memory play from Tom's perspective, but other characters deal with their memories throughout. Which character's memories are the strongest?
- Which character relies on their memories the most?
- Do Laura's memories effect her the way Amanda's do, even though she doesn't recollect them the way her mother does?

Motifs

Abandonment

- How has abandonment effected the main characters in the play *before* the play starts?
- How does abandonment occur *during* the play?
- Are there ways of abandoning that do not necessarily mean "walking out on someone" – can abandonment occur in other ways?

The Words and Images on the Screen

- Is there a character to the words projected on the screen?
- How might the images effect the mood of the play?
- How do the images and words effect the audiences memory and sense of realism?

Music

- How is music used in the play?
- Does it heighten or distract from the scenes?
- Which character needs music the most and how does it effect them?

Symbols

Laura's Glass Menagerie

- In the stage directions of the play, Laura's glass menagerie becomes a key component of her inner world, they even describe her as "becoming a part of the menagerie" by the end of the play. How is this realized on the stage?

The Glass Unicorn

- What does a Unicorn represent to Laura?
- When it breaks, what is Laura's justification that it doesn't matter?

"Blue Roses"

- Either projected on the screen or spoken in the play, what is the significance of the nickname "Blue Roses"?
- How is this symbol similar to that of the Glass Unicorn?

The Fire Escape

- An historically accurate description of the setting of St. Louis, how is this setting used in the production?
- How does it work as a symbol, considering the theme of escape?

THE PRODUCTION – Thoughts from Designer John Culbert
Returning to Williams' Original by Marin Kirby, Executive Assistant

When Tennessee Williams wrote *The Glass Menagerie*, he was overwhelmingly frustrated by what he called “the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions” and was determined to introduce a new theatrical form. Although most productions of *The Glass Menagerie* employ a naturalistic tone and setting, Williams was interested in exploring expressionistic elements with this play. In his production notes, which preface the script, Williams writes, “Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one aim, and that is a closer approach to truth.” The Court Theatre production of *The Glass Menagerie* is propelled by a desire to return to this truth. Williams’ original script called for the use of a screen on which magic-lantern slides were projected, bearing images or titles. A controversial idea in theatre at the time, this screen device was omitted from the original Broadway production and therefore overlooked in subsequent productions. This use of projections was intended to remove the audience from the level of reality most theatre had at that time; it was a new way to present theatre. Achieving this same impact on Court’s stage today is more difficult, as the use of projections and multi-media have become familiar to modern audiences. John Culbert, scenic designer, commented, “Projected images would not have the same impact on our current sensibilities. As a theatre device they do not carry the same meaning as they would have when *The Glass Menagerie* was first produced.” However, Court’s design team was keenly interested in expressing this removal from reality that Williams originally intended. Culbert and the design team began by examining the images Williams used for the projections. Williams wrote, “Each scene contains a particular point (or several) which is structurally the most important.” The images he chose highlighted these points metaphorically and the projections created an expressionistic tone that is essential to the story. In designing this production, Court’s artistic team focused on the fact that nothing in this play is real; everything is a product of Tom’s memory. This is ultimately symbolized by very deliberate choices regarding the objects that are used as part of the world of the play. Only objects that have emotional value to the characters and relationships are used in the scenic and prop design. “This related to the idea that the entire play is a memory, a dream, and that what we remember is not every detail of the clutter that inhabits our lives, but the things that have specific meaning,” Culbert explained.

Williams said that *The Glass Menagerie* is “the saddest play I have ever written. It is full of pain.” Through a long process beginning with research on Williams’ own home in St. Louis, Culbert tried to understand and capture the desperate quality of Williams’ life at that time. Additionally, the design team noted how haunted Tom is by his memory and how he has to tell this story over and over again. Eventually Culbert focused on the fire escape, which was the entrance to the Williams’ family apartment in St. Louis. Metaphorically, the entire play takes place on this cage-like fire escape, creating a forced intimacy between the

characters in the claustrophobic one-room space. To achieve the desired emotional tone, a color was chosen that conveys Tom's feelings of anxiety and discomfort. The searing yellow also was suggestive of the jonquils to which Amanda refers in the play.

As Culbert comments, "there are probably a lot of people who have an image of this play from the original production—a poetic presentation of a tenement apartment in St. Louis with all the stuff—a fire escape and an alley—all poetically rendered. In our exploration of the material, that was a great way to present it in its own time, but we're not living then. Today's sensibility is different and our challenge becomes to find the image that captures the essence of this play in our world." In accepting this challenge, Court Theatre strives to bring the audience closer to the original emotional content of this timeless classic.