

Bridge Street Theatre, Catskill, NY

The Glass Menagerie, by Tennessee Williams. Directed by Stephen Patterson.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“She lives in a world of her own - a world of - little glass ornaments, Mother.”

From 1936 until 1992 composer Paul Bowles composed incidental music and settings of poetry and prose, but the theatrical achievement of note was his work with Tennessee Williams on several projects beginning in 1944 with “The Glass Menagerie.” I have seen many productions of this play over the years but this is the first time that Bowles’ score had made such an impact. Perhaps it is the music itself, or perhaps it is the combination of dialogue, silences and music, but the current production of the play at the Bridge Street Theatre in Catskill, New York seems to live in the combination and Bowles emerges as the second star of the evening. Pulling the play back to its origins in Chicago in 1944 and then Broadway in 1945 his incidental score combined with Williams’ filmic inspiration of projections on the set of words spoken on stage, hold the play together in ways that seem altogether new and exciting.



Leigh Strimbeck as Amanda, Brett Mack as Tom;
Photo: John Sowle

Combined with an inspired cast, the set visuals designed by John Sowle and the direction by Stephen Patterson, this “menagerie” seems to be more meaningful and frank than most of the previous editions I’ve seen. And while the “glass menagerie” may be the focus of Act Two, it is the glassy menagerie that is the family of Tom Wingfield that is the true focus of the play. Williams based the plot on his own mother and sister in St. Louis. Each fragile in a different way, Amanda and Laura play off one another as intelligent animals might if they could speak. Words are hurled into the atmosphere and the music they inspire sings in

Paul Bowles’ haunting and exquisite score. Tom (Tennessee’s real name) narrates the dramatic tale of his decision to remove himself from the family environment in order to protect his own sanity, which is beautifully rendered in this company’s choice of actor Brett Mack for Tom Wingfield.

Mack gives us a sensitive Tom who cannot endure the pain of his homelife but cannot remove himself completely from it and certainly not from his mentally unstable sister who is being tormented by their mother's desire for a better life for her children. As his mother is haunted by her past, Tom is haunted by his own present past, deserted by his father sixteen years earlier, compelled to work in a dismal shoe factory warehouse (*just like Stanley Kowalski would be a few years later in Williams' career*), a poet who writes seated on a public toilet. Mack gives us all of this without ever being maudlin. He seems the perfect choice for this role.



Brett Mack as Tom, Sarah Jayne Rothkopf as Laura;
Photo: John Sowle

Russel Sperberg plays his only friend, a co-worker names Jim, who becomes Tom's answer to his mother's constant appeal for a "gentleman caller" for Laura. Sperberg's tender Jim



Russell Sperberg as Jim; Photo: John Sowle

O'Connor finally brings genuine beauty into the play as he moves from Tom's friend and Amanda's guest to Laura's confidante and her swain. She responds to him in ways she has not anticipated and, as played by Sarah Jayne Rothkopf, the transition is both delicate and transforming. Rothkopf and Sperberg seem to be an ideal pairing and I would love to see them in another play sometime where their natural unique magnetism could be displayed differently. I don't know how they were cast but Patterson is to be congratulated for bringing them together.

For all this magic, the play itself is driven by the wonderful performance of Leigh Strimbeck as Amanda Wingfield. The character is completely unaware of her lack of charm. She believes that her southern upbringing is sufficient, making her the ideal parent for her two difficult children. She uses her charmless personality to

entice a magazine subscription out of a helpless victim and flirts outrageously with Jim when he becomes her daughter's gentleman caller, turning him into one of her own. At these moments



Leigh Strimbeck; Photo: John Sowle

Strimbeck outshines the stage lights designed by John Sowle. At her darker, more demanding moments she gives us the southern virago she was born to become. That Strimbeck can move between these two images of Amanda without missing a beat makes her a true miracle-worker. It is as though Williams wrote the play with her in mind.

Sowle's set works very nicely for this production, stylishly shabby yet reminiscent of Amanda's earlier existence. Michelle Rogers' costumes are perfect for the place, the time and people of the late 1930s. And, to return to the top, Paul Bowles score keeps reminding us that this is a memory play, a soliloquy with speaking roles, a vision of the past, the recent past and the present's journey to the future. Williams would love this show; I know I did.

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The Glass Menagerie plays at Bridge Street Theater, 44 W. Bridge Street, Catskill, NY through October 15. For information and tickets go to bridgest.org or call 518-943-3818.