

# EXPLORING

## *The Glass Menagerie* BY TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

MARCH 16-APRIL 17, 1999

IRT MAINSTAGE

### AN IRT STUDY GUIDE

#### *The Story of the Play*

**F**rom the vantage point of middle age, Tom Wingfield looks back on his youth, recalling the grand attempt by his mother, Amanda, to match his shy sister Laura with a "gentleman caller." The three live in an apartment in 1930s St. Louis, long abandoned by the father of the family, "a telephone man who fell in love with long distance." Amanda is a fading Southern belle who repeatedly recounts the social successes of her girlhood to her children, including one afternoon when she allegedly received 17 gentleman callers. She has high hopes for her children similar to her own teenage wishes—marriage for Laura and a traditional, successful career for Tom—but the chance of her children fulfilling her diverted dreams grows less promising every day.

Laura, whose leg is in a brace from a childhood illness, suffers from a debilitating shyness that has caused her to retreat completely from the outside world, taking comfort only in her collection of glass animals and the family's Victrola. Tom works in a warehouse but wants to be a writer, is often in trouble at work due to his lack of enthusiasm for the job, and spends late hours out drinking and at the movies. Weary of Amanda's constant urging to help his sister find a beau, he finally gives in and arranges to bring home a friend from the warehouse. The arrival of this long-awaited gentleman caller is an occasion of both celebration and heartache, leading to the play's poignant, poetic resolution. ★

#### *The IRT Production*

BY ARTISTIC DIRECTOR JANET ALLEN

**W**hy *The Glass Menagerie*? Yes, we ask ourselves that question every time—and many times—when we put a play on our season bill. After all, with nine precious opportunities a year to create a dialogue over a play, we want to make sure that each one is there to further a discovery of human existence in some particular manner that counts.

In the case of *The Glass Menagerie*, several forces converged at once: toward the end of a century, it seems only natural to look back at the playwrights who made this century distinctive, and the voice of Tennessee Williams certainly figures prominently in any discussion of the drama of this American century. Second, as an American classic, *The Glass Menagerie* allows us to galvanize our adult and student audiences because it is a play that provokes both teaching opportunities and opportunities for comparative discussion with other productions one has seen onstage or on television or film. Laurette Taylor, Gertrude Lawrence, Katherine Hepburn, Jessica Tandy, Joanne Woodward, and Julie Harris have all assayed the role of Amanda, making it among the great roles for women in the American canon.

And, of course, we have our own great actress to add to these illustrious ranks: our associate artist and veteran of 25 IRT seasons, Priscilla Lindsay. When I first met Priscilla almost 20 years ago, she was playing ingenue roles (such as Ophelia in *Hamlet*) and what a thrill it has been for all of us to watch her progress through these years as she became a leading lady through Joan of Arc (in *Joan and Charles with Angels*), Olga (in *The Three Sisters*), and the title roles in *Shirley Valentine* and *Molly*

*Sweeney*.

Priscilla is at a perfect moment for Amanda. While frequently the role is played by women much too old and much too bitter, Priscilla's age (appropriate to a story about a mother with two children in their early twenties) and particularly her largesse of spirit couldn't be better. Priscilla's buoyant charm will bring a subtlety to a role that too frequently dwindles into simple parental nagging.

Along with the idea to put the play on the bill to feature Priscilla came another idea: to split the role of Tom into two actors: a 22-year-old Tom to play the scenes and an older Tom to narrate. Happily, we were granted the right to produce the play in this manner by the Williams estate in London, and we have hired Frank Raiter, another IRT favorite, to play the narrator Tom. As many of you are aware, *The Glass Menagerie* is an autobiographical play, dramatizing Williams's own young adulthood as a frustrated poet. Using Frank to narrate these scenes, which take place in the 1930s, will give the production a deeper autobiographical context, as if the middle-aged Tom were looking back (literally) on his youthful self in conflict over his future.

There seems to be something in the air about *The Glass Menagerie*; it is among the top three most-produced plays across the regional theatre circuit this year. Perhaps it is our collective yearning to look back over the past from our end-of-the-century pinnacle, or our desire to re-examine the works of art that have been most precious to us. In any case, we venture into it with a humility for its illustrious past and a hopefulness for what it can illuminate for us in this moment, in Indianapolis, in 1999. ★

# Tennessee

## His Life

### Major Plays

**BATTLE OF ANGELS**  
1940

**THE GLASS MENAGERIE**  
1944

**A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE**  
1947

**SUMMER AND SMOKE**  
1947

**THE ROSE TATTOO**  
1951

**CAMINO REAL**  
1953

**CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF**  
1955

**ORPHIUS DESCENDING**  
(A REWORKING OF BATTLE OF ANGELS)  
1957

**SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER**  
&  
**SOMETHING UNSPOKEN**  
(TWO ONE-ACTS PRODUCED AS  
CARDIN DISTRICT)  
1958

**SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH**  
1959

**PERIOD OF ADJUSTMENT**  
1960

**THE NIGHT OF THE IGUANA**  
1961

**THE MILK TRAIN DOESN'T STOP HERE  
ANYMORE**  
1962

**SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS**  
1972



(above right) Family portrait from earlier, happier, days: Rose, Edwina, and Tom.

(below, left to right)

Tom (Tennessee) Williams in his twenties;  
Edwina Dakin Williams, his mother, 1937;  
Rose, his sister, as a young lady.



produced at the University of Iowa, and in 1939 he won a \$1,000 writing fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation and moved to New York City. There the Theatre Guild, an organization which produced new American and European dramas, agreed to produce his play *Battle of Angels*. The play failed at its tryout in Boston in late 1940, and Williams took a job as a writer for Metro-Goldwin-Mayer in California. While grateful for his impressive salary of \$250 a week, he was dismayed with the Hollywood producers who wanted to control his writing. He continued to write plays, including *The Glass Menagerie*, which was based on an earlier short story called "Portrait of a Girl in Glass."

The tragically shy girl of the story is modeled on his own sister, Rose. Williams was very close to his sister as they were growing up, and while they lived in their St. Louis apartment, Rose had a precious collection of glass animals. (After the play was famously successful, Tennessee would speak of this time, saying, "The glass menagerie came to represent all the softest emotions that belong to recollection of things past.") As the two siblings grew into their 20s, Rose began to show increasing signs of mental illness that had begun to surface when she was a teenager. In 1937, she was one of the first patients to undergo a frontal lobotomy, but Williams did not know about it. Rose was then confined to an institution for the rest of her life. When Williams was told of the operation, he was completely devastated, and his grief affected his writing for years to come. (The use of a frontal lobotomy to treat mental health patients was later discontinued in favor of the successful use of therapy and medication.)

*The Glass Menagerie* opened to critical acclaim in Chicago in December 1944, and the production moved to New York in March 1945, where it ran for 561 performances and won the New York Critics Circle Award for Best American Play. Tennessee Williams was now an established playwright and quickly became even more successful with the premiere of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1947, which earned him his first Pulitzer Prize. (He won the second for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1955.) By his death in 1983, his body of work included sixty-three produced or published plays, four books of short stories, two volumes of poetry, two novels, a collection of essays, and 15 films adapted from his works, seven of which he wrote or co-wrote. ★

# Williams

**W**illiams's first published works were written in the late 1930s and early 1940s, when realism was still the most common style of performance in American theatre. Innovations in Europe had begun to influence American playwrights such as Elmer Rice, whose expressionistic *The Adding Machine* appeared in 1922. Williams championed the growing move away from absolute realism, and his writing is often described as "poetic," referring not only to his use of imagery but also to the heightened sense of reality in his language. His writing was also exceptional due to his commitment to creating vivid, compelling characters while experimenting with form and language. Amanda from *The Glass Menagerie* and Blanche DuBois from *A Streetcar Named Desire* are some of the most memorable women characters to walk the American stage and screen.

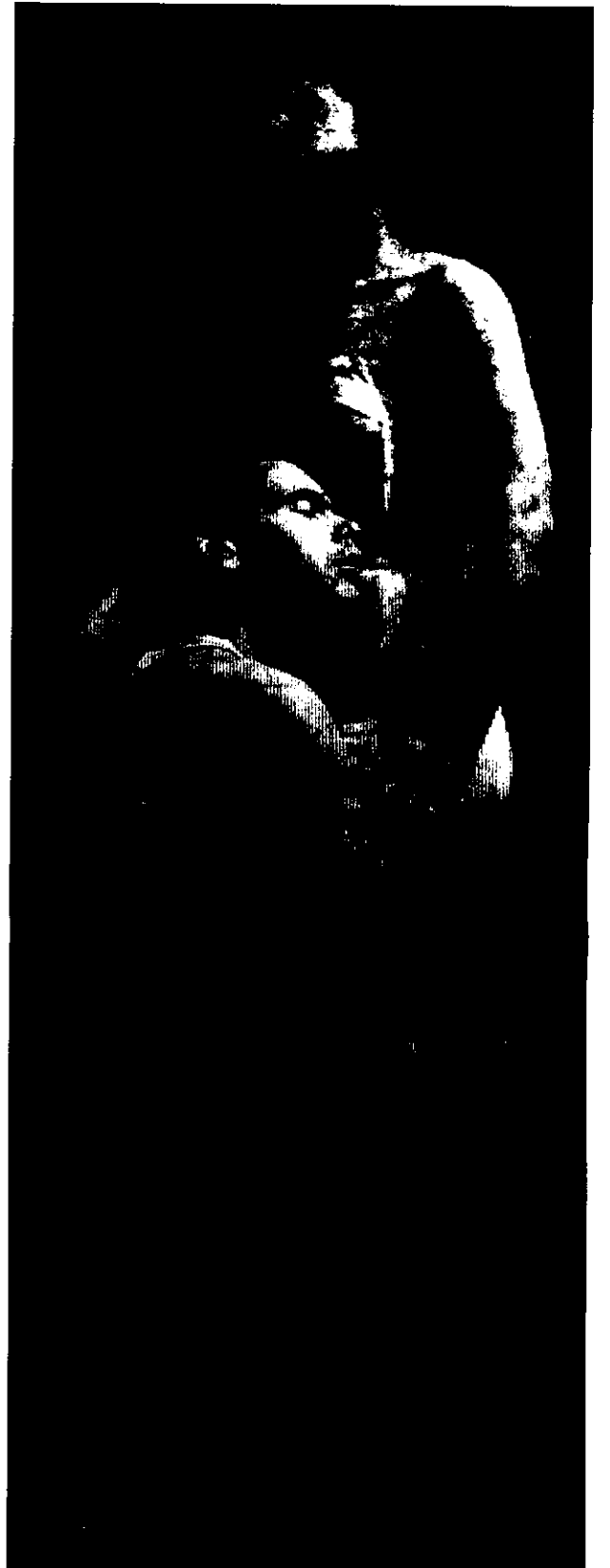
*The Glass Menagerie* experimented with dramatic form by being a "memory play." The character of Tom Wingfield, who appears in the story, also narrates the play, as if he is describing to the audience years later the events of his youth. Through his narration, the audience sees fragments of the lives of his family—events colored by how Tom chooses to remember and represent them. Therefore, the audience experiences past and present simultaneously, instead of a linear story whose events are presented chronologically. Williams expressed his reasons for this structure in his writing, and his desire for more innovations by others, in his introduction to the published script:

Being a memory play, *The Glass Menagerie* can be presented with unusual freedom of convention. Because of its considerably delicate or tenuous

## His Work

material, atmospheric touches and subtleties of direction play a particularly important part. Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to truth. When a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or certainly shouldn't be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually or should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are. The straight realistic play with its genuine Fridgidaire and authentic ice-cubes, its characters who speak exactly as its audience speaks, corresponds to the academic landscape and has the same virtue of a photographic likeness. Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: that truth, life or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance.

In addition to poetic language and strong characters, Williams' works are known for their Southern settings. His upbringing in different parts of the American South provided material, characters, and images for his work. ★

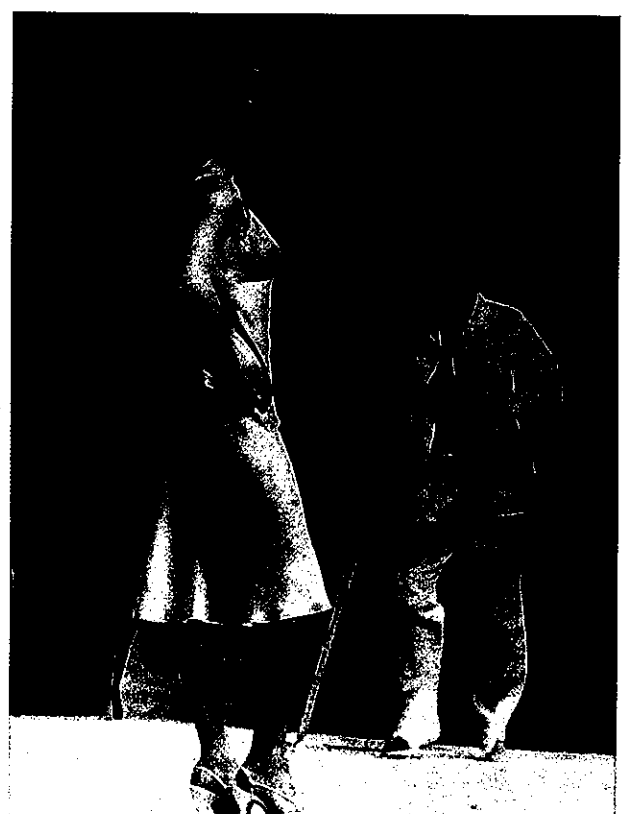


(left) The original 1944 production of *The Glass Menagerie*, with Laurette Taylor (rear, center) as Amanda Wingfield.



(right above) The Indiana Repertory Theatre's 1988 production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* featured Susan Wands as Stella and Burke Moses as Stanley.

(right below) The 1974 Broadway revival of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* starred Elizabeth Ashley as Maggie and Keir Dullea as Brick.



# Themes

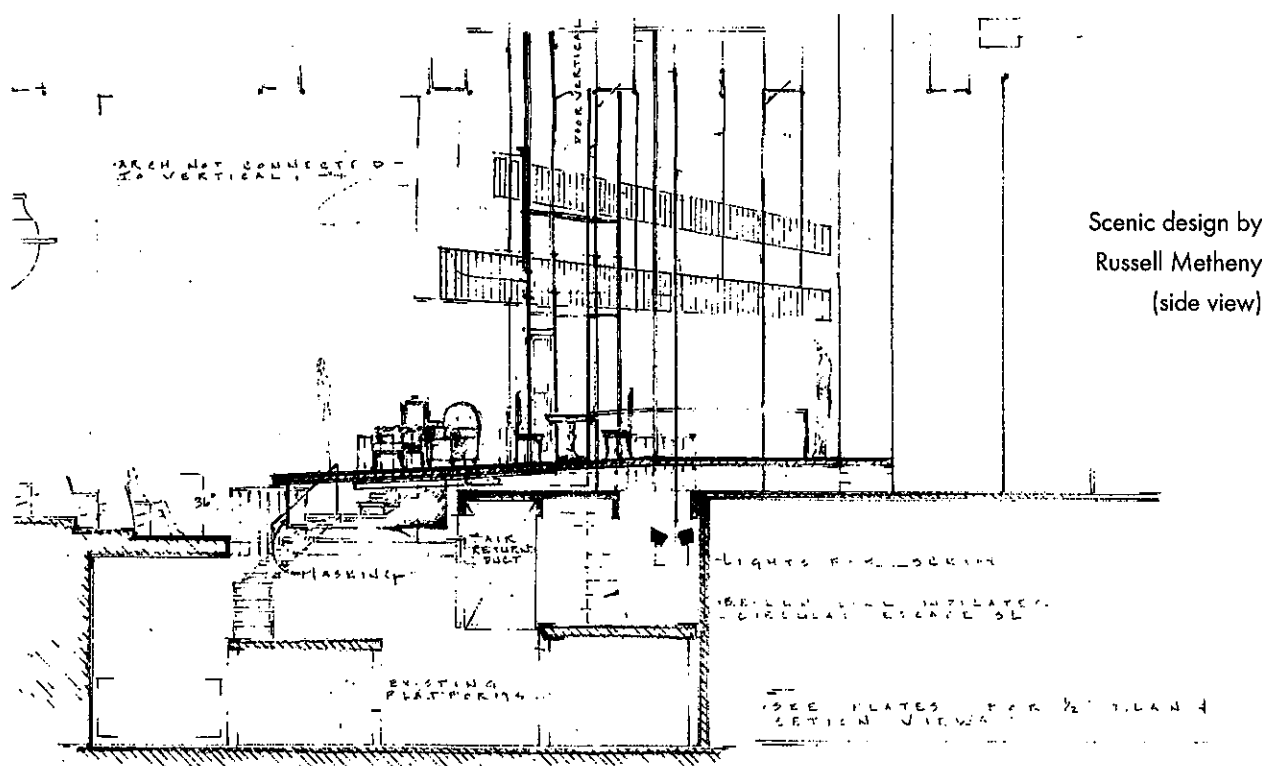
I have tricks in my pocket—I have things up my sleeve—but I am the opposite of the stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion. I take you back to an alley in St. Louis. The time, that quaint period when the huge middle 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. In Spain there was a revolution. Here there was only shouting and confusion and labor disturbances, sometimes violent, in otherwise peaceful cities such as Cleveland—Chicago—Detroit.. That is the social background of this play....

**T**he *Glass Menagerie* takes place in the 1930s, the period when the United States was experiencing the Great Depression, Hitler was rising in Germany and Mussolini in Italy, and Spain was experiencing a bloody revolution. Other than the poverty that lurks a little too closely outside the door, these troubles seem far beyond the walls of the Wingfield home, where Amanda is obsessed with restoring the decorum and traditions of the Old South for her children. While Tennessee Williams has Tom provide the social framework for the play (in the speech reprinted above), the story is of family and relationships.

Amanda's life has not turned out as she had planned—her husband has left forever, and she is forced

alone to support her children and teach them how to make their ways in the world. They too destroy her dreams, refusing to follow the paths she wishes for them. Tom realizes that to be true to himself he must leave the stifling environment, even though he feels guilty for leaving Laura behind.

Williams explained that the Wingfields are not to be viewed as tragic characters, but as testimonies to the spirit of human endurance. Each character must continue the search to survive; as Amanda tells Jim O'Connor, "I wasn't prepared for what the future brought me but what am I going on for about my—tribulations? Tell me yours." Whatever her tribulations, she struggles to persevere and tries to help her family do the same. ★



Scenic design by  
Russell Metheny  
(side view)

## Questions for Discussion

- Williams designates that atmosphere plays an important part in the setting of the play. How do lighting, set, and costume design contribute to the play's atmosphere? How does music? What is the significance in the choice of realistic props? What objects are realistic and why?
- Discuss the use of metaphor and imagery in the language of the play. Examples:  
"America was matriculating in a school for the blind."  
Laura's nickname, "Blue Roses"  
"He was a telephone man who fell in love with long distance."  
"Like some archetype of the universal unconscious, the image of the gentleman caller haunted our apartment...."  
The recurring image of the moon
- Discuss how Williams uses humor and irony in the play. How does he combine comedy with tragic and serious situations? (Ex.: Tom's monologue "They call me Killer, Killer Wingfield")
- Which characters face life most realistically? Defend your choice.
- What is the significance of Laura's unicorn? Why does she give it to Jim?
- How does the fire escape function as a symbol to reveal something about each character's personality?
- Critics have different views about the main character of the play. Some say it is Amanda, some say Tom. Who do you think it is and why?

Materials for this study guide written and researched  
by Elizabeth Whitaker for the Alliance Theatre



IRT Education Department: 635-5277, ext. 430 or 431  
140 West Washington Street Indianapolis, Indiana 46204-3465  
Janet Allen, Artistic Director • Brian Payne, Managing Director

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Study Guide edited and designed by Richard J Roberts.

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E-Mail: indianarep@indianarep.com

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*The Glass Menagerie* WRITING CONTEST

- Student winners receive a \$50 prize and the winner's school is awarded \$450 for use in a theatre-related activity.
- High school students should submit the following project: Write a story, scene, or essay about another situation in which there is conflict between an individual's right to be happy and his responsibility to others.
- Can there be a resolution to this problem?
- For more details about the contest, call the IRT Education Department at 635-5277, ext. 430.