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'The Glass Menagerie' — Not To Be Missed

By WALTER LAZENBY
(A Review)

CHARLESTON — Those who do not like Tennessee Williams's modern classic, "The Glass Menagerie," usually fault its apparently sentimental story of a girl who, painfully aware of a "slight defect," so magnifies its importance that she becomes a psychological cripple.

Her concerned mother and brother try to give her an opportunity to emerge from her cocoon of shyness, but because her brother introduces her to the wrong man the "resurrection" does not take place. "Things have a way of turning out so badly."

I for one like the play and maintain that the script as originally intended to be performed uses several means to counterbalance this pathos: equal development of the mother's and brother's stories, flashes of the saving grace of humor, a narrative framework which gives esthetic distance to the events (they are happenings haunting the mind of a guilty narrator, not being suffered in the present), and cinematic devices to represent the way memory actually functions (an isolated incident can be viewed with hindsight about subsequent events superimposed on it or ironically commenting on it).

No production that I know of has ever used the latter devices (legends and images projected

on a screen), and the result has often been productions more realistic in style than Williams intended. The more realistic, the more pathetic.

In this respect the Charleston Community Theatre's version showing at the Fine Arts Center's Playroom through Monday night is not new. But in other respects it embodies meticulous fidelity to the author's aims: with solid acting it gives almost equal weight to the three major roles; with lavish attention to details it creates an atmosphere both authentic and symbolically appropriate; and with loving appreciation of the text the actors bring out much of the poetry embedded in Williams's prose.

Key responsibility for this achievement must rest on the shoulders of Director Clarence Blanchette, whose directorial expertise has not been on view for area audiences before.

He seems to have exercised rigorous control over all facets of the show. His set shows careful research or thorough familiarity with some of Williams's favorite atmospheric details: shuttered doors reminiscent of New Orleans, a ceiling fan, the reduplicated fire escape motif which emphasizes Williams's symbolic implication that most people live in smouldering desperation, waiting for release. He has chosen actors with well matched voices and

brought them to apparent peaks of their capabilities.

In filling every moment with well-sustained gestures and reactions that are intended to legitimize rather lengthy pauses, he has occasionally come close to the borderline which separates interest from inattention. And at times the techniques of the actors become too obvious, so that their acting does not seem like effortless art.

Having lived in the South myself, I feel that I can recognize an authentic Amanda Wingfield when I see one; and I have high expectations of the actress who takes this challenging role.

Having been disappointed by

Maureen Stapleton, Shirley Booth, and even Katherine Hepburn in their portrayals because they were not "Southern" enough, I am pleased to report that in this respect Donna Rice came surprisingly close to meeting my expectation.

She has melody in her delivery, variety in moods and gestures, and almost enough restraint in the shriller moments. A measure of her subtlety is this: thinking back over the play I pinpointed one passage in which her acting seemed a little artificial. On consulting the script, I found that at that point Williams had specified that Amanda must seem to be play-acting, venting

her anger in an overly dramatic way. It is a tribute to Miss Rice that she was able to set this sequence apart from the general tenor of her portrayal.

Jim Kleckner handles the almost dual role of Tom the Narrator and Tom the character in his own story commendably, with credibility, though I did not detect any sharp distinction between the two characterizations.

He gives effective readings of many of the lines (notably, "Blow out your candles, Laura ...") and plays especially well in the scene in which Tom announces that a Gentleman Caller is coming to the Wingfield home, where

lightness of tone and subtle timing are absolutely necessary, and again when he teases and torments his mother with an account of his pretended exploits as El Diablo.

In the role of Laura, Joan Allen shows absolutely no trace of the broad style of playing she exhibited in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" last fall, instead displaying remarkable restraint in the rendition of the girl's quiet sufferings. And she looks exquisitely delicate, as she should.

Her scene with Jim, played subtly by David Little, effectively suggests her potential rescue from neurotic shyness.

TIP: Not to be missed.