

'Glass Menagerie' works its magic

This past weekend, Eastern Illinois University Theatre presented five performances of Tennessee Williams' "The Glass Menagerie" at the Village Theatre.

Williams (1911-83) was born in Columbus, Miss., the second child of a traveling shoe salesman and the daughter of a clergyman. When the boy was 8, the family moved to St. Louis, where he spent his formative years. His father was a caustic, overbearing man who constantly belittled his son, calling him "Miss Nancy." His mother was a Southern lady full of social gambits and irrelevant conversation.

His older sister was beset by mental problems that eventually necessitated a pre-frontal lobotomy and institutionalization. After Tennessee had studied at the University of Missouri and Washington University, his father ordered him to go to work as a clerk in a shoe factory. The work was monotonous, and life at home unbearable. Finally he fled from both.

"The Glass Menagerie" is a semi-autobiographical "memory play" set in St. Louis in the mid-1930s. Its central character, Amanda, unable to cope with the realities of her life, takes refuge in illusions of gentility. Her crippled daughter, Laura, also retreats into a private world of her own, centered on a collection of tiny glass animals. The action of the play arises from the confrontation with reality that Amanda unwittingly brings on herself and Laura by having her son, Tom, bring home a friend, "a gentleman caller," to meet Laura.

The play, which opened in Chicago in 1944 and on Broadway in 1945, was Williams' first great success and placed him in the front ranks of contemporary dramatists. Laurette Taylor's performance as Amanda was considered one of the memorable acting gems of the time. It was staged with dim lighting and transparent scenery. Areas of the stage were illuminated from time to time with shafts



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of light, not always focusing on the chief action, but used symbolically.

It is an enchanting work of sheer beauty which, if done right, works its marvelous magic. And, happily, it was done right at Eastern under the loving, sensitive direction of Jerry Eisenhour. David Wolski's splendid lighting helped create the mood, and the fine cast took it from there.

Amanda is a difficult, complex character – a former Southern belle who has become a frowzy but fiercely ambitious mother. Her anxiety to marry off her crippled daughter and set aright her discontented son leads her to nag them both incessantly, ultimately destroying every vestige of hope and beauty and joy in each of them. It is a role for a mature, seasoned actress, but this was a student production, and Eastern's Amanda, Jeni Passig, worked hard and did very nicely indeed. And she would have been even better if she had slowed down a bit and displayed greater variety in her delivery.

Amber Wagner was sweet and touching as Laura, and Timothy Travous Jr. and Luke Gerdes gave strong performances as Tom and the "gentleman caller," respectively.

Clarence Blanchette's set was spacious and elegantly furnished. The costumes were by Karen Eisenhour, and the sound by Christopher Yonke.

All in all, a marvelous, memorable evening of Williams.

Coming up in April: Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

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