



Photo of Tennessee Williams by Frederic Ohringer

# Looking Back at The Glass Menagerie

By HELEN NESTOR

LIVE PERFORMANCE IS EPHEMERAL and lives only in each individual audience member's memory. It is very rare for an actor or director to have the chance to re-live a production. This season at CanStage we have been given the extremely rare and precious gift of resurrection. On the CanStage playbill this season is a production of *The Glass Menagerie* which had its premiere at the Saidye Bronfman Centre for the Arts in the fall of 2002. This production is being remounted with its original director, original cast and original creative team. This event can only be described as a rare treat for Toronto audiences as it gives us the chance to see a production that has been brewing for two years in the subconscious of its creators, giving its artists the chance to wear their characters longer while allowing their complexities to emerge in a subtle manner.

CanStage Artistic Producer Martin Bragg, when approached by director Chris Abraham about the possibility of a remount in Toronto, was intrigued by this "young, smart and very

passionate theatre director, whose idea was to bring a modern interpretation of this classic to the stage." When asked to discuss the point of remounting this production Mr. Abraham says that each actor has "cultivated a precious and private relationship with their character that is very personal, their own little secret." He gleefully looks forward to once again working with the talented group of actors that mounted the show the first time in Montreal. "For me the process of the play is so much influenced by the casting and the constellation of personalities I'm working with," says Mr. Abraham. He intrinsically knows that much of the magic created on stage is due to the actors' relationship with him as the director and how he translates to his cast his understanding of the writing.

*The Glass Menagerie* has been called one of the greatest plays of the twentieth century. This memory play is on the surface a simple story yet it ultimately examines extremely complicated themes. This dichotomy, according to Mr. Abraham, exists because

"it is so true. I've been looking for the heart of the play, the simple, truthful, personal expression that makes it so special." The action takes place in memory – Tom Wingfield's memory – as he tells us about his mother Amanda, his sister Laura and their life together in a meagre apartment in St. Louis in the 1930s. Actress Rosemary Dunsmore, who plays matriarch Amanda, recalls feeling as if she was "living inside Tom's imagination as he is sorting stuff out. Tom has created Amanda," she insists, "and pulls her out as he needs her. Amanda is a part of his journey." Mr. Abraham agrees that this is Tom's story and his recollection of past events, adding that the story is a combination of fiction and autobiography as Tennessee Williams himself has so often been compared to the Tom character. Mr. Abraham is fascinated by the action of remembering and knows that "sometimes you are the master of your memory and sometimes your memory is the master of you." Although we are in Tom's head for the entire play it in no way makes the events less real for the characters or the audience experiencing it.

Amanda suffers with the basic day to day survival of her family while balancing her emotional relationship with her children. The universal struggle between a parent and their child as they try to become an adult is omnipresent here. In order for Tom to grow up and to fully become himself he must cut the cord between himself and his mother. Breaking those ties is not an easy feat when you are dealing with a parent that does not want to let go and with a child who knows they will be alone if they do. The alternative, Tom fears, would be to get swallowed up by his mother's possessiveness. Ms. Dunsmore recalls the young audience members in Montreal "just got it. They understand Amanda and Tom's struggle. They understand that in

order to grow up you've got to kill your mom, figuratively." "In retrospect," she thoughtfully says, "this is a play about forgiveness." "Yes," pipes in Mr. Abraham, "as you get older, your relationship to your parents changes, you feel differently about their attitudes and prejudices, not threatened any more but understanding." "We are fragile beings," Ms. Dunsmore continues, "trapped in our own lives like a piece of glass in our own glass menagerie."

Mr. Abraham goes on to muse on the character of Laura. "She's found a way to live life," says Mr. Abraham, "she has made peace with her limitations and has found a way to have pleasure in her life." She is the most elusive of all the characters perhaps because she is somewhat ethereal. She has a kind of transparency to her, like a piece of glass. "There is something very pure about Laura," Mr. Abraham reflects, "Laura is there to be a kind of imponderable item of transference. Everyone's anxieties and fears are transferred onto Laura." At the end of the play Laura "virtually disappears in front of our eyes," says Mr. Abraham. "She becomes a part of the glass menagerie, she transforms into a piece of glass as she is transfixed by them." Tom's memory of Laura is one of perfection. "This is what gives the play a spiritual quality. Laura is an angel," says Mr. Abraham. He emphasizes that, "there is an unreality about her in the play that is the product of a totally doting, loving and guilt-ridden brother."

Suddenly Ms. Dunsmore bursts into laughter as she recalls the production in Montreal as "extremely funny, painfully funny. Williams writes big behaviour and so many of us behave in this way with our families. They are big people, they have big fights, they talk big, they go over the top." Mr. Abraham agrees and emphasizes that "laughter and tears are side by side."