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# THE GLASS MENAGERIE: A Memory Play



THE GLASS MENAGERIE: A Fragile Classic

*A Theater Review by Julinda D. Lewis*

5<sup>th</sup> Wall Theatre

At: TheatreLAB The Basement, 300 E. Broad St. RVA 23219

**Performances:** January 17 – February 8, 2020

**Ticket Prices:** \$32 General Admission; \$20 RVATA Cardholders; \$20 Students

**Info:** (804) 359-2003 or 5thwalltheatre.org

5<sup>th</sup> Wall Theatre’s production of *The Glass Menagerie*, is a tender rendering of the Tennessee Williams classic, described as a “memory play” about a dysfunctional family. Told by a narrator who is also one of the four actors in this five-character play, the story of an aging southern belle and her attempts to marry off her shy and mentally fragile daughter and to direct her restless son into adulthood holds both universal truths and uniquely American appeal. Keep reading for a few more comments on this perspective.

I don’t recall reading *The Glass Menagerie* in high school (many decades ago) but I do remember seeing the 2013 production by the Sycamore Rouge Theatre (a great loss to Petersburg and the Richmond theater community). Where kb saine took the unusual route of having two men play the role of the narrator and the younger Tom Wingfield, Carol Piersol chose the more traditional route of using a single actor. Matt Bloch, who played both the older Tom, who is the author narrator and the younger Tom, was the gentleman caller in that earlier production. And I do believe I saw Dean Knight, who shared the role of Tom Wingfield in that earlier production with DeeJay Gray (who is now the artistic director of TheatreLAB The Basement) sitting unobtrusively in the audience at The Basement watching the show. But enough small world reminiscing – the memory play was not meant to remind me of previous productions.



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Morrie Piersol's direction made Williams' characters seem very believable, and even slightly humorous – and that's no small feat when you've got a mother (Lian-Marie Holmes) who vacillates between longing for the past (i.e., the “Old South” of debutantes and gentleman callers being served lemonade by vast numbers of servants) and screeching at her adult children to make something of themselves and save them all from destitution. But this was the 1940s and today I'm sure someone would recommend therapy and perhaps a prescription for her. Lian-Marie Holmes, who I first remember seeing in 5<sup>th</sup> Wall's recent production of *Lost Boy Found in Whole Foods* is once again playing someone's mother, but this role is meatier and juicier and has more dimension. And Holmes, who appears to be quite petite in stature, has an enormous presence that commands the stage, even when she is speaking quietly.

Louise Keeton, in the role of the daughter, Laura, seems to try to physically transform herself in the opposite direction. You see, Laura, if she could, would not just make herself appear smaller, but would try to disappear entirely. Lost in her own world of glass animal figurines and scratchy Victrola recordings left by the father who abandoned them (the fifth character who appears as a gigantic portrait on one wall of the family's shabby apartment), Laura nearly succeeds in disappearing. Her mother refuses to acknowledge her physical or mental challenges – a limp resulting from a childhood illness and low self-esteem resulting in part from overestimating the impact of the limp. Laura walks with her head down, avoids eye contact, speaks softly, and seems to shrink before our very eyes. The sadness on her face is heart-breaking.

Matt Bloch navigates a delicate balancing act: Tom is a poet, stuck in a monotonous warehouse job; he's a single guy saddled with the responsibility of caring for a family; he's been raised as a southern gentleman, but longs for adventure; he bears both the burden and the legacy of his father who is euphemistically described as a telephone man who “fell in love with long distance.” I think Piersol has guided Bloch well; his character could so easily go over the edge and seem selfish and

uncaring or wimpy and brow-beaten, but there is clearly humanity in all the members of this family.



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In the second act, we get to meet Jim O'Connor, the Gentleman Caller, played by Cooper Sved. Sved is lively and energetic and the only one who seems to really see Laura. But I just didn't find him trustworthy. Perhaps it was because Tom made such a point of telling us about Jim's public speaking classes, maybe that made him seem, perhaps, just a bit fake. Or maybe it was the way he brought Laura out of her shell, only to drop the bomb that he was already engaged to someone else. Was he, really? Or was this part of his smooth-talking persona? Good acting, Sved – you made me not like you (no small feat after *Girlfriend*, *Huck and Tom*, and *Atlantis*).

I said I would address those universal truths. So, *The Glass Menagerie* speaks longingly of the “Old South,” and Amanda is a card-carrying member of the DAR, who speaks warmly, if somewhat vaguely, of a youth filled with servants and “planters” and sons of planters, and acres of land and – well, you get the picture. So why doesn't that bother me? Because those questions have already been addressed by the Howard University Players who performed the play as early as 1947 and even further by the legendary actress Ruby Dee, who played Amanda in 1989. Dee replaced membership in the DAR with membership in DST sorority and updated the play's historical perspective on several fronts.

Back to the present. . .



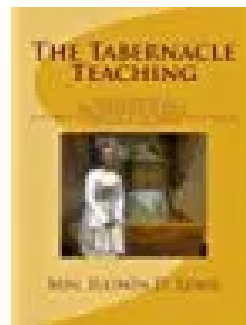
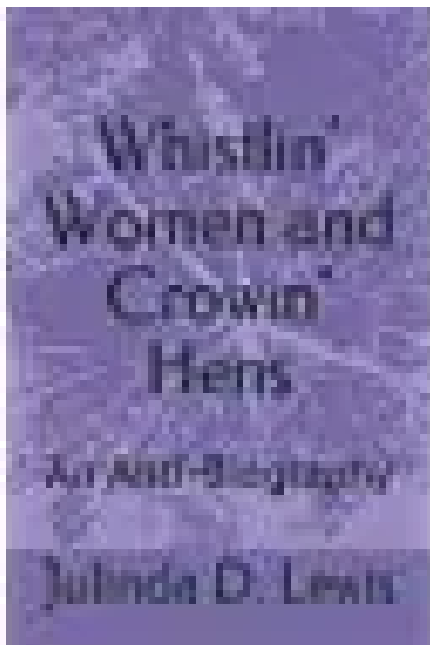
Tennessee Dixon designed the set and projections. The set, quite shabby throughout the first act – I was particularly repulsed by the bare mattress or cushion of the sofa – got spruced up for the Gentleman Caller in the second act with cushions and curtains, a tablecloth, a new lamp, and a cover for that awful sofa! The projections, which are part of the script, include pictures such as blue roses when Laura’s high school nickname is explained, as well as words and phrases, some from songs or poems, some taken from the character’s own words. I found the pictorial projections pretty, interesting, and helpful, but some of the verbal ones were distracting. I wanted to translate the French and when the words appeared before the characters spoke them, I temporarily lost the flow of the dialogue. Ryan Dygert’s sound design was mostly subtle and soothing, a panacea for Laura’s internal stress and Michael Jarett’s lighting was dark and moody. I’m not sure if the candlelight counts as lighting or direction or both, but when Laura blew out that final candle, we were sure this story had no happy ending. But, as promised in 5th Wall’s mission, it does provide us insight into the human condition.

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Julinda D. Lewis is a dancer, teacher, and writer who was born in Brooklyn, NY and now lives in Eastern Henrico County.

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Julinda D. Lewis is a dancer, teacher, and writer, born and raised in Brooklyn, NY and transplanted to Richmond, VA. A retiree from both the New York City and Richmond City Public School systems, she is currently an Adjunct Instructor for the Department of Dance and Choreography at Virginia Commonwealth University, and holds the degrees of BS and MA in Dance and Dance Education (New York University), MEd in Early Childhood Education (Brooklyn College, CUNY), and is currently working on her dissertation in Educational Leadership (Regent University). Julinda is the Richmond Site Leader for TEN/The Eagles Network and the East Region Coordinator for the International Dance Commission and has worked in dance ministry all over the US and abroad (Bahamas, Barbados, Haiti, Jamaica, Kenya, Puerto Rico). She is licensed in dance ministry by the Eagles International Training Institute (2012), and was ordained in dance ministry through Calvary Bible Institute and Seminary, Martinez, GA (2009). [View all posts by jldances](#)



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