

The Glass Menagerie

By Tennessee Williams

Performances
September 7th-November 2nd 2008

Study Guide

Produced by:

SHATTERED
GLOBE ★★★★★
THEATRE

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By Tennessee Williams

Directed by Kevin Hagan

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Artistic Director

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A Study Guide published by the Shattered Globe Theatre

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CHRONOLOGY

Personal Timeline¹

1911 – Born Thomas Lanier Williams III March 26th.

1914 – Family moves to Clarksdale Mississippi.

1916 – Diagnosed with a paralytic disease at age 5, Williams’ legs were paralyzed for nearly two years.

1918 – Family moves to St. Louis, Missouri.

1924 – Williams’ Mother gives him his own typewriter at 13 years old.

1927 – Wins third prize (five dollars) for a published short story at 16 years old.

1937 – Rose, Tennessee’s sister who had been diagnosed with schizophrenia at an early age, undergoes a radical perirfrontal lobotomy, approved by their parents. The surgery is a failure and she is rendered incapacitated for the rest of her life.

1938 – After transferring from two different colleges, Williams finally earns his college degree at the University of Iowa. It was in a college fraternity that he gained the nickname “Tennessee,” due to his southern drawl.

1939 – Tennessee moves to New Orleans, specifically, to the French Quarter.

1947 – Moved to Key West, Florida.

1961 – His lover Frank Merlo dies of Cancer. Merlo was Tennessee’s most stable long-term relationship.

1983 – Williams dies at the age of 71 on February 25th.

1989 - The City of St. Louis inducts Tennessee Williams into its St. Louis Walk of Fame.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tennessee_Williams

Artistic Timeline²

- 1939 – Plays –one-act plays *American Blues*
- 1940 – Play – *The Parade, or Approaching the End of a Summer*
- 1944 – Play – *The Glass Menagerie*
- 1947 – Play – *A Streetcar Named Desire*
- 1948 – Award – Pulitzer Prize, *A Streetcar Named Desire*
- 1950 – Play – *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*
- 1950 – Novel – *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*
- 1950 – Film – *The Glass Menagerie*, starring Kirk Douglas
- 1951 – Film - *A Streetcar Named Desire*, starring Vivien Leigh & Marlon Brando.
- 1951 – Play – *The Rose Tattoo*
- 1951 – Nomination – Academy Award (Oscar), Best Writing, *A Streetcar Named Desire*
- 1952 – Award – Tony Award, Best Play, *The Rose Tattoo*
- 1953 – Play – *Camino Real*
- 1955 – Film – *The Rose Tattoo*
- 1955 – Play – *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*
- 1955 – Award – Pulitzer Prize, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*
- 1956 – Film – *Baby Doll*
- 1956 – Nomination - Academy Award (Oscar), Best Writing, *Baby Doll*
- 1958 – Play – *Suddenly Last Summer*
- 1958 – Film - *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, starring Elizabeth Taylor and Paul Newman.
- 1959 – Film – *Suddenly Last Summer*
- 1961 – Film – *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*
- 1961 – Play – *The Night of the Iguana*
- 1964 – Film – *The Night of the Iguana*
- 2006 – Play – *The Parade, or Approaching the End of a Summer* is performed for the first time.

Short stories by Tennessee Williams³

- ❖ 1928 - *The Vengeance of Nitocris*
- ❖ 1939 - *The Field of Blue Children*
- ❖ 1951 - *The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin*
- ❖ 1954 - *Hard Candy: a Book of Stories*
- ❖ 1960 - *Three Players of a Summer Game and Other Stories*
- ❖ 1966 - *The Knightly Quest: a Novella and Four Short Stories*
- ❖ 1967 - *One Arm and Other Stories*
- ❖ 1974 - *Eight Mortal Ladies Possessed: a Book of Stories*
- ❖ 1980 - *Tent Worms*
- ❖ 1981 - *It Happened the day the Sun Rose, and Other Stories*

² The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition. Copyright 2008 Columbia University Press

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tennessee_Williams

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION⁴

Troubled but brilliant, Tennessee Williams is one of the most well known playwrights in American history.

Williams came from a troubled home, and this tumultuous background provided scores of inspiration for his later works. Williams's father, Cornelius Williams, was a salesman by trade, and while his abuse was initially mild, it grew in severity as Williams aged. Williams's mother was accused of being an overly protective, if not smothering, woman. There is also speculation she suffered from an untreated mood disorder.

After a two year bout with diphtheria, leaving him unable to do much of anything, his mother decided he had been idle too long and gave him a typewriter. She encouraged him to utilize his imagination and be productive. With this typewriter, Williams increasingly retreated into his literary worlds.

Williams was extremely close to his sister Rose, and it was thus a hard blow when she was diagnosed as schizophrenic and subsequently institutionalized. When her condition worsened, Williams's parents agreed to a prefrontal lobotomy for Rose. It left her incapacitated for the remainder of her life, and it is rumored Williams never forgave his parents. Many of his works revolve around a mad heroine, which many literary scholars equate to a rough equivalent of his ill sister. They also generally agree this contributed in large part to his lifelong struggle with alcoholism.

With the onset of the conservative 1950s, Williams became a common target under McCarthyism for his homosexual lifestyle. Additionally, Williams battled with depression his entire life and lived under constant fear of going insane like his sister Rose. When his longtime partner, Frank Merlo, died, Williams sunk into a ten-year depressive spell.

Williams died February 25, 1983, in New York, New York. Although the cause of his death is somewhat contentious, Williams is said to have choked on a bottle cap. Many prescription drugs, however, were found in the hotel room, spurring the belief that excessive alcohol and drug consumption contributed to the accident.

He left behind a legacy of literary genius and a slew of now-classic plays. The most famous found translation into film. Williams earned an immense amount of praise and accolades, including a Pulitzer Prize in 1948 and again in 1955. His 1952 play, *The Rose Tattoo*, won the Tony Award for best play. He was also nominated for two Best Writing Oscars—1951's *Streetcar Named Desire* and 1956's *Baby Doll*.

⁴ www.yuddy.com/newYuddy/celebrity/tennessee-williams/bio

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

THE PLAYWRIGHT⁵

Trademarks of William's Plays : Family, Disability &

The "mad heroine" theme that appeared in many of his plays seemed clearly influenced by the life of Williams' sister Rose. Characters in his plays are often seen as representations of his family members. Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* was understood to be modeled on Rose. Some biographers believed that the character of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is also based on her, as well as Williams himself. When Williams wrote *A Streetcar Named Desire*, he believed he was going to die and that this play would be his swan song.

Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* was generally seen to represent Williams' mother. Characters such as Tom Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* and Sebastian in *Suddenly, Last Summer* were understood to represent Williams himself. In addition, he used a lobotomy operation as a motif in *Suddenly, Last Summer*.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and *A Streetcar named Desire* both included references to elements of Williams' life such as homosexuality, mental instability and alcoholism.

Williams wrote *The Parade, or Approaching the End of a Summer* when he was 29 and worked on it through his life. It seemed an autobiographical depiction of an early romance in Provincetown, Massachusetts. This play was produced for the first time on 1 October 2006 in Provincetown by the Shakespeare on the Cape production company, as part of the First Annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival.

The Parade, or Approaching the End of a Summer was published by New Directions in the spring of 2008, in a collection of previously unpublished experimental plays titled *The Traveling Companion and Other Plays*, edited by Williams scholar Annette J. Saddik.

Williams' last play *A House Not Meant to Stand* is a gothic comedy published in 2008 by New Directions with a foreword by Gregory Mosher and an introduction by Thomas Keith. Williams called his last play a "Southern gothic spook sonata."

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tennessee_Williams

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS QUOTED AND QUOTABLE⁶

**I have found it easier to identify with the characters who verge upon hysteria, who were frightened of life, who were desperate to reach out to another person. But these seemingly fragile people are the strong people really.*

**If the writing is honest it cannot be separated from the man who wrote it.
Life is all memory except for the one present moment that goes by you so quick you hardly catch it going.*

**Mendacity is a system that we live in. Liquor is one way out and death's the other.*

**Some mystery should be left in the revelation of character in a play, just as a great deal of mystery is always left in the revelation of character in life, even in one's own character to himself.*

**The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks.*

**There is a time for departure even when there's no certain place to go.*

**We all live in a house on fire, no fire department to call; no way out, just the upstairs window to look out of while the fire burns the house down with us trapped, locked in it.*

**We have to distrust each other. It is our only defense against betrayal.*

⁶ http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/t/tennessee_williams.html

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

I. The Play

- A. In the previous section titled “Tennessee Williams: Quoted and Quotable,” several personal quotes and some from Williams’ plays are listed. Choose a quote which feels particularly applicable to the play for you. In your opinion, to what degree is this quote applicable to Amanda, Tom, Laura and Jim (individually or in connection with each other)?
- B. In Shattered Globe’s production, how did the lights, costume and set design contribute to your overall impression of the play?
- C. Director Kevin Hagan chose a rare early version of *The Glass Menagerie* script for this production. In it, Tennessee Williams had written that certain images were to be projected somewhere on the stage for the audience’s benefit. Williams called the projected quotes and images the “Legend,” to be used the same way as a legend on a map. Why do you think Tennessee desired this for his audience? How did the Legend’s projections impact your experience of the play?

II. Tom

- A. In the play, Tom calls himself “the bastard son of a bastard.” Why does he say that? How does that reflect on his father’s impact on Tom’s life?
- B. In the Shattered Globe production, there are tender moments between Tom and his sister as well as with his mother. Yet, Tom ultimately abandons them. Why?
- C. Laura, Amanda and Jim each talk about someone they love or feel romantically toward during the play. Tom is the exception. The closest he gets to addressing a romantic relationship is when he states that sex “...hung like a chandelier in the gloom and flooded the world with brief, deceptive rainbows.” Later in the show Tom only admits a filial love for his sister whom he abandoned. Why do you think Tom’s character only vaguely addresses his own relationships in the play?

III. Amanda

- A. In the beginning of the play, Amanda seems almost painfully optimistic about Laura having “gentleman callers.” Would you describe this as maternal behavior? Why or why not?
- B. Education (or lack thereof) is a sore spot with Amanda. Explore her point of view when it comes to Tom, to Laura and to Jim. What about how it applies to herself?
- C. Do you agree with the statement below?

Amanda’s desperate need to relive her former glory all but eclipses her Maternal Instincts, if she ever had any.

IV. Laura

- A. In what way does Laura's glass collection stand as a metaphor for each of the characters?
- B. Laura is treated very differently by Jim, Tom and Amanda respectively. How do those characters' individual needs play into the way they treat her? What do they want from Laura?
- C. The entire play is a memory as told by an "older" Tom. Tennessee could have chosen to tell the story from an objective point of view, but instead shows us only what Tom remembers. What does Tom's depiction of Laura say about her?

V. Jim

- A. Why do you think Jim comes to dinner? Are his motives what he says they are?
- B. Jim seems to have everything going for him. Why would he talk to Laura?
- C. Although he does not have a lot of time on stage, Tom introduces Jim at the top of the play as a necessary addition to the story. Why would Jim be an essential character in the play? What dynamic does he bring to the story by virtue of his existence?

VI. The Absent Father

- A. Tom states that his father is also a character in the play, even though he is not played by an actor. Why would Tom bother to bring this up?
- B. In the script, a portrait of the father is supposed to be hanging on one of the apartment walls. Director Kevin Hagan chose not to have a physical portrait hung on the set, but rather had the characters reference an empty space as though it were hanging there. What does this choice say about Hagan's interpretation of the father's influence on the family?
- C. Tom's father walked out on the family almost sixteen years prior to when the story takes place. Why do you think the family still has a portrait of him in the house?