



Kelsey Brennan and Hollis Resnik star in "The Glass Menagerie" at The Rep. (PHOTO: Michael Brosilow)

An aggressive and unadorned production drives The Rep's "Glass Menagerie"



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When you decide to stage one of the most iconic and widely produced American dramas, a play that almost everyone has seen, there are traps awaiting around every corner.

In The Rep's production of "The Glass Menagerie" that opened Friday night, the traps are set but are evaded with a kind of painful aggressiveness that led to an exciting evening of classic theater.

The Tennessee Williams classic, now seven decades old, is familiar ground for the legions of admirers who understand that Williams is one of the greatest playwrights this country has ever known.

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The play is made up of familiar Williams characters, and it is that very familiarity that is a huge trap for anyone brave enough to stage this production. And Williams has always been about words. His characters use their words to create a look into their character.

There is Amanda Winfield (Hollis Resnik), the flamboyant Southern belle gone to seed and longing for the life she used to have before she married and then was deserted. She is a woman whose life is out of control, a dilemma she meets by trying to exert control over her two children.

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Think of the words Amanda uses at various times: "I wasn't prepared for what the future brought me;" "Things have a way of turning out so badly;" "My devotion to my children has made me a witch;" and finally, "What is going to become of us." Listen to her and there is not question about Amanda that is unanswered.

There is Laura (Kelsey Brennan), the daughter who is crippled physically but far more crippled emotionally by her mother's overbearance and the inherent shyness that has all but removed her from any kind of normal life. Her only passion is the collection of tiny glass animals, the glass menagerie.

And her fragile menagerie is a metaphor for the fragility of the Winfield family, all seemingly just a moment away from shattering on the floor around us.

There is Tom (Ryan Imhoff), the son, two years younger than Laura and a man tortured by his mother, by his inability to write the poetry he has in his heart and who is torn between caring for and protecting his sister and finding a way to escape into a world that will grant him his wanderlust.

Taking refuge in the movies he is expressly saddened by those things that he thinks are missing in his life. "Movies are for people who have stopped moving," he bemoans just as he hopes to not be one of those people.

It is a gathering of three souls, each one tormented and bedeviled, and each one seeking escape, one to the future, one to the past and one who wants nothing more than to live without pain or disruption in the present.

Director Mark Clements has avoided the traps of stereotype by letting this play loose to snuggle next to the extremes of Williams' sorrows.

This Amanda is fierce in her memory and in her passionate determination to find a husband for her daughter. She is overwhelmingly demanding and demeaning with Tom and overwhelmingly gentle and duplicitous with Laura. There is nothing subtle about this Amanda.

The Laura we see in this production seems about to collapse into a heap of dust before our very eyes, so immobilized is she by the demons her mother has excused. Some productions of this play allow Laura to have some disobedient frustration with her mother, but not here. There are no strengths apparent in Laura; she is even more fragile than her tiny glass animals, and her shattering seems to be an imminent catastrophe.

And Tom, who is also the narrator, is virtually torn apart by his loyalty to his sister and his driven longing to escape what he views as a hateful trap. There is no love between son and mother. Instead, in the moments of

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civility, it's clear here that Tom is not truly being civil, rather he has decided to disarm briefly for the sake of peace for Laura.

The inexorable passage of this production is like the constant beating of a hammer against a huge gong outside your bedroom window. There is no relief, and it is in that rush to judgement that Clements has found the strength of this play. Nobody in this version has complex lives. They are all simple and powerful in their simplicity.

Because there is such a single plane upon which these characters stand, the sense of realism is sometimes elusive. Watching this family, it's easy to look in the mirror and mumble that "nobody can be that crazy." Of course, they can be that crazy because, well, they are.

One of the most interesting aspects of this production is the set design by Philip Witcomb and the lighting by Thomas C. Hase.

The set is surrounded by a panel of transparent mirrored panes allowing the audience to see what's taking place behind the panes, like the dining table, and providing a mirror to evoke the sense of reflective gore that surrounds each of these lost hearts.

"The Glass Menagerie" runs through April 9 and information on tickets and showtimes is available at [The Rep website](#).

Production credits: Director, Mark Clements' Scenic Designer, Philip Witcomb; Costume Designer, Rachel Laritz; Lighting Designer, Thomas C. Hase; Sound Designer Joe Cerqua; Fight Director, Jamie Cheatham; Dialect Coach, Jill Walmsley Zager; Casting Director, JC Clementz, Frank Honts; Stage Manager, Anne M. Jude.