

THEATER

The actress headed to the South to prepare for Tennessee Williams' 'Glass Menagerie.'



Don Bartlett/Los Angeles Times

AT LAST: "I spent a lot of time longing and dreaming and waiting" to play "great roles" like Amanda, Winningham says.

Mare Winningham explores Tennessee

By ANNE MARIE WELSH
Special to The Times

MARE WINNINGHAM shouldn't say this, but so often during the last 30 years, you're trying to make something better than it is," actress Mare Winningham confides. "You're trying to find richness where there isn't any. You're trying to find complexity where there is none. You're trying to make something more than it is."

Sitting on a sun-splashed bench in a bright, blooming garden near the Old Globe's Balboa Park rehearsal hall, she smiles and concludes, "Here, you don't have to do that. It actually makes it easier that Amanda is so multifaceted. It's a welcome relief."

Winningham assumes the iconic role of Amanda Wingfield in a new production of "The Glass Menagerie" at the Old Globe this week. While Tennessee Williams was writing the play, his first success, he also struggled to free himself from less significant — though better-paid — Hollywood work.

Living across from Muscle Beach in Venice, he confided to his journal that he was working "on something abominable — a script for Lana Turner." That same June day in 1945, he wrote to his agent, Audrey Wood: "I feel like an obstetrician required to successfully deliver a mastodon from a beaver, further deriding the MGM project as an attempt to make 'a celluloid brassiere' for the buxom star."

Nonetheless, he was pleased by his progress on the stage version of "The Gentleman Caller" and a theatrical treatment of a second story, "Portrait of a Girl in Glass." Fused, the two would become "The Glass Menagerie" with, he hoped, "the character of Amanda to sustain it."

Winningham's guileless face is well-known from women-in-jeopardy roles in TV movies, from variants of her level-headed Wendy in the '80s brat-packer "St. Elmo's Fire," and from a recurring role on "Grey's Anatomy." Emmy Awards for "George Wallace" and "Amber Waves," a featured-actress Oscar nomination for "Georgia," and many lesser awards lace her résumé. But she has appeared on-stage only a half-dozen times since agent Meyer Mishkin saw her perform as Maria (opposite Kevin Spacey) in a high school production of "The Sound of Music" and signed her up. Mishkin steered her toward made-for-TV movie leads. She knew then that her career "would not be sex-driven or glamour-driven. I really was the girl-next-door type."

When Winningham began having children, that TV-movie career proved family-friendly — intense spurts of work followed by longer periods of domesticity in Northern California, and few theatrical roles, even after her marriage to television technical advisor William Mapel ended in 1994 and she returned to Los Angeles two years later.

Her most recent stage appearances in the L.A. area were in Warren Light's "Side Man" (2001) at the Pasadena Playhouse and Wendy Graf's "Lessons"

surprise success off-Broadway in the Patti Griffin-scored musical "10 Million Miles" and this month's classic Southern matriarch role, Winningham is poised to realize dreams deferred by the demands of raising her five children. "I spent a lot of time longing and dreaming and waiting to be able to get my mouth and my mind around some great roles," she says, "and finally, the last kid went off to college and I'm getting to do it."

The making of Amanda

WILLIAMS created the characters in "The Glass Menagerie" with such poetic fullness and specificity that all four (writer Tom; his emotionally fragile sister, Laura; their mother, Amanda; and gentleman caller Jim) have become cultural signposts, not to mention subjects of countless high school essays and targets of satiric send-ups.

Still, since the New York premiere in 1945, the actress playing Amanda has commanded top billing. Many have attempted Laurette Taylor's triumphant ascent to the role's crazy emotional peaks — Helen Hayes, Katharine Hepburn, Julie Harris, Maureen Stapleton (twice on Broadway), Jessica Lange. Few — if they returned intact to tell the tale — have had careers boosted by the part.

Taylor was past 60 when she left retirement and alcoholism behind to triumph as Amanda. Julie Hayden, who played the original Laura, was 70 when she returned to Broadway in 1980 in the role. Brown-eyed, sandy-haired Winningham looks younger than her 48 years and knew better about the age thing. When the Globe called, she says, "I bet then and there that I was the right age — that she should be late 40s."

That Globe call came because of outgoing co-artistic director Jerry Patch; his admiration for Winningham's craft and charisma goes way back. Patch first saw her in 1984 in the American premiere of Howard Brenton's "The Genius" at the Mark Taper Forum.

"I think she's one of those actresses — Kathy Bates and Laurie Metcalf are two others — who are so rigorous, intelligent, inspired and daring in their work that they have an authority and drive on stage that audiences respond to," Patch says.

"Menagerie" director Joe Calarco loved Winningham's performance in the multiple singing-actor roles of "10 Million Miles" at the Atlantic Theater. He also knew she would pair well with Michelle

Federer (the original Nessarose in "Wicked"), whom he cast as Laura. Remarkably, Winningham had never worked onstage in New York and, despite three recordings of her own country-inflected music, had never appeared professionally in a musical until she nailed the character-driven songs of "10 Million Miles."

Winningham prepped for Amanda in three stages. She digs through her purse and pulls out a dog-eared book and a half-dozen photographs. "I decided to start nice and easy, with the Depression," she says, describing the Wingfield family's struggles in St. Louis. The survivor pushing for her children is one facet Winningham is polishing. To explore the Southern charmer in Amanda — the "great but confused vitality slinging banter to another time and place" — Winningham took a road trip. She flew to Chattanooga, Tenn., then drove through Alabama and Mississippi. Because the play is Williams' "most personal and most painful," she says, and because Amanda's happiest days (and those of Williams' mother, Edwina) were spent in Port Gibson, Miss., that became the actress' destination: "That's where she saw all the gentleman callers. That's her reference point."

Some experiences proved "crucial," Winningham says, spreading out photos of the rambling house in which Edwina Dukin Williams grew up. "Just what happened to me walking down Church Street in Port Gibson, being under the foliage of the same trees where she stood, knowing that Williams was allowing his mother to express the longing in her heart through Amanda — it just filled me up." Her final prep came in meeting collaborators at the Globe. "I find that group-nurturing effort on a character so moving. You feel how every one of the backstage folk is helping you shape your approach to the character. It's sculptural, and it's touching."

Winningham grew up in the San Fernando Valley, where her father taught at Cal State Northridge. She was obsessed with music and planned "to make money being a recording artist while acting on stage." Instead, she made money acting on television, although she "never stopped doing" her music.

A recent recording project meshed her strong Jewish beliefs (she converted to Judaism in 2003) with her songwriting skills. She says she hadn't fully embraced the country label until she met and jammed with Tim Crouch, a mandolin, fiddle and guitar player. "Tim was just so mind-bogglingly talented, and at the end of a bluegrass weekend in a town near where I was shooting, he told me he thought I was a country singer." She sent him demos of her Jewish-themed folk music and within months recorded "Refuge Rock Shilline" with him and stand-up bass player Doug Driesel. Last year, Crouch joined Winningham for a gig at Joe's Pub at New York's Public Theater.

Strumming her guitar or indulging Amanda's nostalgic monologues, Winningham is one Valley girl who feels "there's something about the South that I get, something that is in my blood."

The Glass Menagerie

Where: Old Globe Theatre, Balboa Park, San Diego

When: Opens Saturday, 7 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 8 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays

Ends: May 18

Price: \$42 to \$59

Old Globe takes a second shot at a Williams' classic

By James Hebert
THEATER CRITIC

There's little indication that, in the summer of 1944, the world was clamoring for Tennessee Williams to stage a new play titled "The Gentleman Caller." Least of all the playwright himself.

"It is not a very exciting business but it keeps me occupied while I wait for the energy to do something more important," Williams wrote of the work in a letter to a friend.

Ten months later, "The Glass Menagerie" — as it since had been renamed — was a major Broadway hit. Six decades later, it remains one of the most beloved and revived plays in American theater.

Not only has "The Glass Menagerie" returned to Broadway five times (placing it near the top among all revivals), but it's faithfully staged year after year across the spectrum of theater, from high schools to the top regional houses.

In its own long history, the Old Globe Theatre has produced "Menagerie" only once, during the 1972-73 season.

This week, the theater finally returns to Williams' breakthrough work, with a production that opens Thursday on the Cassius Carter Centre Stage.

It's not easy to pinpoint any single element that has lent the "The Glass Menagerie" such longevity, when plenty other plays of similar vintage seem dated or are long forgotten.

But Mare Winningham, the stage and screen star (and 1980s Brat Pack alum) who will take on the role of Amanda Wingfield, uses terms that sound out of a Sunday sermon when she talks of the play's lyrical language and the playwright's deep sense of empathy.

"He has such compassion for each of us (characters) that it feels almost like you want to bear witness to that over and over again," Winningham says. "It's wrenching tragedy. And

his writing is so — dare I say — funny. It's a great combination for an audience, I think.

"I guess the simpler answer is that the writing is just so beautiful, and poetic. And the structure of the play — it's just such a lean, perfect play. It feels as though it wouldn't be righteous if it didn't last on and on."

And on and on it has run. Starting in 1955 — 10 years after its premiere — and continuing through 1965, "The Glass Menagerie" traded places with Arthur Miller's "The Crucible" as the top production at U.S. colleges and universities, according to the *Educational Theatre Journal*.

In the mid-1980s, the work was still making the Top 10 list of most-performed plays at the nation's leading regional theaters. And it has appeared on *American Theatre* magazine's annual Top 10 list as recently as 2001-02.

The next-oldest play on the list that season: Yasmina Reza's "Art," which dates from 1994. (The survey omits works by Shakespeare as well as the holiday standby "A Christmas Carol.")

Locally, La Jolla Playhouse mounted a production in 1992 starring Marion Ross (then age 63) as Amanda. In 2000, North Coast Repertory also staged the play, in the most recent production by an established local company.

Part of the play's appeal is certainly the deceptive simplicity of Williams' story, long acknowledged to be patterned after the playwright's own early life. "The Glass Menagerie" is a memory play, a domestic drama as told by Tom Wingfield, Amanda's son.

Tom recounts the difficult days spent at the family home in St. Louis with Amanda, a faded Southern belle who spends her days reliving the past, and with his physically disabled sister Laura, who collects the animal figurines that give the play its title. (The father is long



Mare Winningham (as Amanda), Michelle Federer (as Laura) and Michael Simpson (as Tom) in the Old Globe's production of "The Glass Menagerie." Craig Schwartz

fusion between a time-honored theme and a very uncommon sense of language.

"First of all, the writing is so beautiful — and really revolutionary for its time," says Joe Calarco, whose direction of the Globe production, located the play's magic partly in its

DETAILS

"The Glass Menagerie"

The Old Globe Theatre

When: Tuesdays-Wednesdays, 7 p.m.; Thursdays-Fridays, 8 p.m.; Saturdays, 2 and 8 p.m.; Sundays, 2 and 7 p.m.; through May 18 break.

Where: Cassius Carter Centre Stage, Balboa Park

Tickets: \$42-\$59

Phone: (619) 234-5623

Online: TheOldGlobe.org

everyone has a family. It's just this family that loves each other so desperately, but ends up hurting each other so deeply.

"It's a cliché to say it's universal, but it really is."

Calarco talks of the numerous incarnations the play went through — first as a short story called "Portrait of a Girl In Glass," then as a screenplay for MGM, then as various stage versions. It became Williams' first big theatrical success, setting the stage for such classics as "A Streetcar Named Desire" (1948) and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" (1955).

There've been questions over the years about just how Williams wanted the work to be staged. The directions published with the play — though not followed in the original production — called for superlatives and projections, "very kind of Brechtian" techniques, Calarco says.

Though he has chosen not to follow that template, Calarco says his staging tries to stay faithful to the intensely dramatic feel he believes Williams was striving for.

"It's a very realistic, emotional play," the director says. "But (Williams) seemed to be railing against naturalism and realism, and I think he wanted a kind of heightened theatricality."

"It makes sense, with his language, his poetry — it's not really how people speak, but it sounds as if it is."

Prepping for the role of

Amanda, Winningham picked up several books about Williams and his mother Edwina. (She also picked up a gentle Southern accent, detectable even when the L.A. native is chatting during rehearsal break.)

Then, she took a road trip through Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi, searching out the Williams family's long-gone haunts. She was especially moved by a visit to a church rectory in Port Gibson, Miss., where the family lived when Edwina's father was an Episcopal pastor there.

"That was incredible," she says, in large part because it was "the home in which Edwina entertained her gentleman callers" as a young woman — a memory that looms large in the play through Amanda's wistful recollections.

Winningham, who just earned a Lucille Lortel Award nomination for her role in the off-Broadway play "10 Million Miles" (she also snagged an Oscar nomination for the 1995 film "Georgia"), has never been in a Williams play but has vivid memories of seeing Maureen Stapleton play Amanda during a high school drama-class trip to New York.

She had long dreamed of playing Laura, and then, as she matured, began to consider the idea of portraying Amanda someday.

"(But) I hadn't thought about it of late, because — and this is going to sound funny — I hadn't thought of myself as being that old," says Winningham, whose Globe cast mates include Michael Simpson as Tom, Michelle Federer as Laura and Kevin Isola as Jim.

"But I am. My age corresponds exactly to what Edwina's was at the time."

That still makes her, at age 48, a good 15 years younger than the play itself.

But in a way that Amanda can only dream of, "The Glass Menagerie" never seems to leave its golden days behind.

LA JOLLA VILLAGE NEWS

A NATIONAL AWARD-WINNING NEWSPAPER

Thursday, May 1, 2008



La Jolla Village News > Arts & Entertainment



CRAIG SCHWARTZ

Laura (Michelle Federer, left) with her overbearing mother Amanda (Mare Winningham) in the Old Globe's "The Glass Menagerie."

Mystery 'Menagerie' actor materializes

STAGE PAGE

Charlene Baldrige
May 01, 2008

He might as well be an actor assembled specifically for Joe Colarco's Old Globe production of Tennessee Williams' "The Glass Menagerie." His program biography reveals nothing about Michael Simpson other than to say this is his theatrical debut. Thus, the critic is left to her own devices (even Google was no help) and her opening night experience of the actor, who plays the role of Tom. Had I cloned the handsome lad, his diction would be crisper, his accent a bit more influenced by his Southern belle mother's and his performance less Act One Hamlet and more, say, Prince Hal. His performance is more the manic than the depressed incipient alcoholic/homosexual. However, I am no scientist, only a listener with a

keen ear that missed as much as 30 percent of his emanations, perhaps due to first time on stage, which is even more challenging by playing in the round upon the Cassius Carter Centre Stage.

Mare Winningham is starchy and collected, though much less the scheming Amanda than the more helpless Blanche. Having been deserted by her wastrel husband — "a telephone man who fell in love with long distance" — some years before, the woman has few resources other than wit with which to launch her "different" children. She relies on Tom's small salary to make ends meet. Tom, who "goes to the movies" way too much, is truly in jeopardy of losing his job for lack of sleep. He doesn't care; he has plans to join the merchant marine.

Michelle Federer's portrayal of Tom's sister, the shy, crippled and fragile Laura, is perfect in pitch and tempo, and Kevin Isola's Gentleman Caller looks, moves and sounds like he's fresh from a Dale Carnegie course. His character, Jim O'Connor, is the only voice of truth heard in this tragic 1937 St. Louis family, fraught with denial and fueled by deception. Amanda had hoped to unload Laura on Jim, but he is already engaged to someone else, so everyone's hopes are dashed.

Williams' largely autobiographical work, which played on Broadway in 1945 and was his first major success, allows us to glimpse post-Depression America as it was and frighteningly could be again.

Colarco commences the memory play with Tom, wearing a woolen sailor's cap, returning years later to the deserted apartment to spin the tale. He lifts a dust cover from the table that holds Laura's glass menagerie and the music she used to play on the phonograph emanates from beneath it. Simpson's movements in this scene are those of a ballet dancer, so is his intense silent emotion. Michael Fagin's wood-toned set is extremely effective, Anne Kennedy's period costumes quite entrancing. Both Chris Lee's lighting and Lindsay Jones' sound enhance the tone of the work.

"The Glass Menagerie" continues at 7 p.m. Sundays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, and 2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays through May 18 in the Cassius Carter Centre Theatre, Old Globe, Balboa Park. For tickets and information, visit www.theoldglobe.com or call (619) 23-GLOBE.

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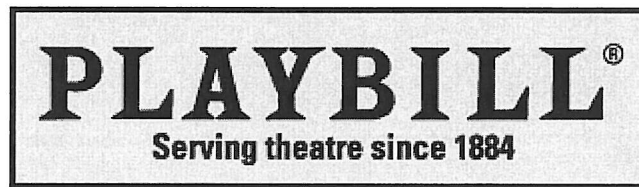


PHOTO CALL: Winningham and Federer Star in Old Globe's *Glass Menagerie*

By Ernio Hernandez
April 16, 2008

The Old Globe Theatre currently presents Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* starring Mare Winningham and Michele Federer.

Joe Calarco stages the Williams play at the San Diego company's Cassius Carter Centre Stage.

Winningham (as Amanda) and Federer (Laura) are joined in the cast by Michael Simpson (Tom) and Kevin Isola (Jim O'Connor).

As show notes reveal, *The Glass Menagerie* "glimpses the Wingfield family's struggle to hold its ground in 1939 St. Louis. Amanda, the matriarch of the family, is trying to maintain her dignity and provide for the future in the midst of the Great Depression. Her son Tom denies his own dreams to become the reluctant breadwinner after his father ran out on the family while his frail sister Laura has retreated to a homebound life where she finds comfort caring for her collection of little glass animals. The arrival of Jim, a 'gentleman caller,' at the Wingfield residence could be a sign of hope or a disturbance that will shatter their fragile home."

Here are some photos from the production:



Mare Winningham

Michele Federer



Michelle Federer and Kevin Isola



Kevin Isola, Mare Winningham and Michael Simpson

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THEATERMANIA

FOR THEATER EVERYWHERE

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TM Theater News

Mare Winningham, Michelle Federer Set for Old Globe's *Glass Menagerie*

By: **Brian Scott Lipton** · Feb 11, 2008 · San Diego

Emmy Award winner Mare Winningham and Michelle Federer will play Amanda and Laura Wingfield in the Old Globe's production of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, April 12-May 18. The production, which will open officially on April 17, will be directed by Joe Calarco. It will also feature Michael Simpson as Tom Wingfield and Kevin Isola as Jim O'Connor.

The show's creative team includes Michael Fagin (sets), Anne Kennedy (costumes), Chris Lee (lighting), and Lindsay Jones (sound). Calarco's many directing credits include *Lincolnesque*, *Shakespeare's R&J*, *Sarah*, *Plain and Tall*, and *Boy*.

Winningham's stage credits include *10 Million Miles*, *Hurlyburly*, *Side Man*, and *Lessons*. She received an Oscar nomination for *Georgia* and won Emmy Awards for *George Wallace* and *Amber Waves*. Her other film and television credits include *St. Elmo's Fire*, *Love Is Never Silent*, *The Boys Next Door*, *Maldonado Miracle*, and *Grey's Anatomy*.

Federer originated the role of Nessarose in the Broadway production of *Wicked* and appeared Off-Broadway in *A Man of No Importance* and *Anon*.

For more information, call 619-23-GLOBE or visit www.theoldglobe.org.

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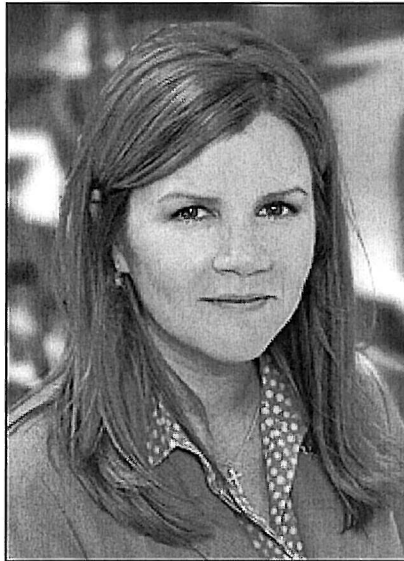


Mare Winningham
(© Joseph Marzullo/Retna)



Federer, Simpson and Isola Will Join Emmy Winner Winningham for Old Globe's *Menagerie*

By Andrew Gans
11 Feb 2008



Mare Winningham
and Kevin Isola as Jim O'Connor.

Emmy Award winner Mare Winningham, who was recently seen on the New York stage in *10 Million Miles*, will head the cast of the Old Globe Theatre's upcoming production of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*.

Directed by Joe Calarco, the Williams classic will play the San Diego venue's Cassius Carter Centre Stage April 12-May 18 with an official opening April 17. Winningham will be joined onstage by Michele Federer as Laura Wingfield, Michael Simpson as Tom Wingfield

The Glass Menagerie, according to press notes, "glimpses the Wingfield family's struggle to hold its ground in 1939 St. Louis. Amanda, the matriarch of the family, is trying to maintain her dignity and provide for the future in the midst of the Great Depression. Her son Tom denies his own dreams to become the reluctant breadwinner after his father ran out on the family while his frail sister Laura has retreated to a homebound life where she finds comfort caring for her collection of little glass animals. The arrival of Jim, a 'gentleman caller,' at the Wingfield residence could be a sign of hope or a disturbance that will shatter their fragile home."

The production will feature scenic design by Michael Fagin, costume design by Anne Kennedy, lighting design by Chris Lee and sound design by Lindsay Jones. Diana Moser is the stage manager.

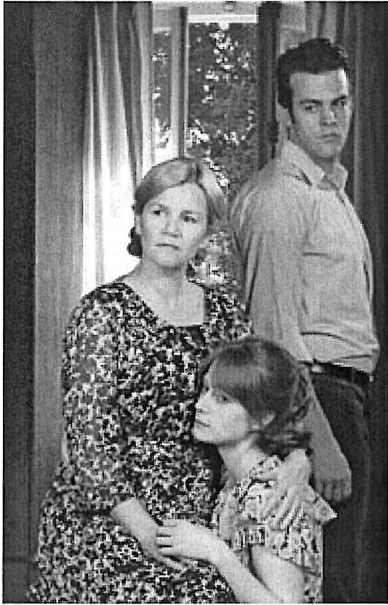
The Glass Menagerie premiered on Broadway at the Playhouse Theatre in 1945. Directed by Eddie Dowling and Margo Jones, the original production featured Laurette Taylor as Amanda, Eddie Dowling as Tom, Julie Haydon as Laura and Anthony Ross as Jim. The most recent Broadway production cast Jessica Lange as Amanda.

Mare Winningham won Emmy Awards for her performances in "George Wallace" and "Amber Waves" and was Emmy-nominated for her work in "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit," "The Boys Next Door" and "Love Is Never Silent." She also received an Academy Award nomination in 1996 for her role in "Georgia." Winningham recently made her New York stage debut in *10 Million Miles*.

Tickets, priced \$42-\$49, are available by calling (619) 23-GLOBE or by visiting www.TheOldGlobe.org.

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By: Brian Scott Lipton · Mar 30, 2008 · New York



Mare Winningham, Michele Federer, and Michael Simpson in *The Glass Menagerie* (© The Old Globe)

MASTER GLASS

Michele Federer got an unusual reaction from her mother when she found out her daughter was playing Laura in the Old Globe Theatre's production of *The Glass Menagerie*, which begins previews on April 12. "She was like, "what, you're playing another cripple," laughs Federer, who first came to many people's attention as the wheelchair-bound Nessarose in *Wicked*. "But I'm really playing Laura with more of a barely noticeable limp. I think her biggest obstacle in life is that she has an extreme social phobia, but she's trying to find out if she can make it in the outside world."

Federer had no familiarity with the work when she was approached to do the part about a year ago, and quickly did research on Williams' sister Rose, on whom the character is based, and even read Williams' short story "Portrait of a Girl in Glass" to help create her own interpretation. "At first, I kept seeing Laura as merely pathetic, and I had to get past that. I couldn't play the role until I found her strength," she says. "But then I realized she's brave enough to spend hours outside exploring the city while she's supposed to be in school, and I think she's determined to prove to her mother Amanda (played by **Mare Winningham**) that she's not as odd as she thinks. I am obsessed with the idea that Laura was the kind of kid who always looks to her parents to see if she's okay."

The actress says the play marks her first time working in regional theater in about seven years, and she's loving the experience. "All you're doing is the play -- there's nothing else to draw your focus -- and it's all about being creative and imaginative. And the weather here is great; it's almost a mini-vacation. Of course, I miss my husband, **Norbert Leo Butz**, but I think this may be harder on him, because he's the one who's left home with the cats and the kids."



April 2008

CENTER STAGE

AIDA

San Diego Opera:

April 12 – 23

Italian Composer Giuseppe Verdi's *AIDA* is an operatic *Romeo and Juliet*. She's an Ethiopian slave and he's an officer in the Egyptian army. Their countries are at war, they secretly fall in love and each betrays his/her homeland. He's captured, tried and condemned, but the passion they share can be extinguished only by death as the lovers are entombed alive, together for eternity. Written more than 130 years ago, the show is always performed with opulent Egyptian costumes and scenery. This production claims no exception and will be sung in Italian with English translations above the stage.

For tickets, log on to www.sdopera.com/ticketinfo

THE GLASS MENAGERIE

The Old Globe/Cassius Carter Center Stage:

April 12 – May 18

The Old Globe's "Classics Up Close" series continues with the play that established Tennessee Williams as one of the most riveting voices in the American theatre. Amanda Wingfield reminisces about a tranquil Southern childhood and wishes for a better life for her grown children Tom and Laura. A change in fortune suddenly seems possible with the arrival of the long-hoped-for "gentleman caller." Directed by Joe Calarco, this melancholy comedy is a truly enjoyable American classic.

For tickets, contact The Old Globe box office at 619.234.5623

CALENDAR

May 2008

Better Hearing & Speech Month
Gifts from the Garden Month
Barbecue Month
Personal History Month

Pet Week: May 5-10
Women's Health Week: May 11-17
New Friends, Old Friends Week: May 18-24
Old Time Piano Playing Week: May 23-26

5 MONDAY Cinco de Mayo

"All Night Strut." A classy, sassy musical celebration of the 1930s and '40s taking audiences on a ride through the Depression, WWII and the post boom. Welk Resorts Theatre, 8860 Lawrence Welk Dr., Escondido. Through May 18. \$44-\$47. 888-802-7469. welktheatre.com.

6 TUESDAY Teacher Day

**9 FRIDAY
Kathy Griffin.** Comic in concert, Humphrey's Concerts by the Bay, 2241 Shelter Island Dr., San Diego. \$70. 619-220-8497. humphreysconcerts.com.

Mother's Day Tea. Share a lovely afternoon of fine teas, delicious treats, delightful company, entertainment, and special opportunity items. The tea is in a garden setting at the quaint and historic Wood House (built in 1885). Woodland Park, Rock Springs Rd. & Woodland Pkwy., San Marcos. The Contemporary Women of North County. \$22 per person/\$36 for two. 760-744-5534.

12 MONDAY Women's Check-Up Day

15 THURSDAY Chocolate Chip Day

Jesse Cook. Stellar guitarist in concert. Humphrey's Concerts by the Bay, 2241 Shelter Island Dr., San Diego. \$36. 619-220-8497. humphreysconcerts.com.

16 FRIDAY Bike to Work Day

**18 SUNDAY
Sicilian Festival (Festa Sicilliana).** Enjoy authentic music, dance, art and cuisine of Sicily. Costumed dancers will perform traditional Sicilian dances as well as swing, polka and the highly anticipated tarantella. Festival visitors will also be able to relax at a wine and beer garden or shop among the many booths offering Little Italy, India St., San Diego. Free. sicilianfesta.com.

22 THURSDAY www.lifeafter50.com



EDITOR'S PICK

"The Glass Menagerie." The classic play by Tennessee Williams. Amanda Wingfield, long abandoned by her once-charismatic husband, reminisces about a tranquil Southern childhood and fights to provide a better life for her grown children, Tom and Laura. A remarkable cast is headed by Mare Winningham as Amanda, who provides a masterful nuanced performance of a mother who has been disappointed by life but soldiers on. Cassius Carter Centre Stage, The Old Globe Theatre, 1363 Old Globe Way, Balboa Park, San Diego. Through May 18. \$42-\$59. 619-234-5623. theoldglobe.org.

"The King & I." East versus West in this dramatic, richly textured uplifting musical tale. Welk Resorts Theatre, 8860 Lawrence Welk Dr., Escondido. Through July 27. \$44-\$47. 888-802-7469. welktheatre.com.

**23 FRIDAY
Sassy Solo: Peter Robberecht: The Prince of Piano.** A one-of-a-kind piano virtuoso, Robberecht is the resident pianist at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas. His performance style is both entertaining and captivating. San Diego International Airport, Terminal 1, Baggage Claim. Free. 619-400-2400. san.org/airport.

26 MONDAY Memorial Day

28 WEDNESDAY Senior Health & Fitness Day

**30 FRIDAY
Wines from Portugal.** Heard of Vinho Verde, Touriga Nacional or white Port? In this tasting, sample seven terrific wines from Portugal. Bacchus Wine Market, 647 G St. San Diego. Also May 31. \$15. 619-236-0005. bacchuswinemarket.com.

JUNE

1 SUNDAY Pen Pal Day

**3 TUESDAY
"Cats."** The Tony-award winning musical, based on T.S. Elliot's Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats is back. Music by Andrew Lloyd Webber. San Diego Civic Theatre, Third and B St., 1100 Third Ave., downtown San Diego. Through June 8. \$19-\$72. 619-570-1100. broadwaysd.com.

Silver Tuesdays: Okapis. Staff member shares tales about the Wild Animal Park. Meet an animal ambassador. Includes lunch. Wild Animal Park, Hunte Nairobi Pavilion, 15500 San Pasqual Valley Rd., Escondido. \$34-\$37. 619-557-3969. 760-740-9383. sandiegozoo.org.

LECTURES/CLASSES/WORKSHOPS 22 THURSDAY

"Help! I'm A Caregiver." Find out about resources for family caregivers, placement options, support groups and more. The class includes a discussion about emotional issues when caring for a loved one. Sharp Senior Resource Center, Grossmont Healthcare District Conference Center, 9001 Wakarusa St., La Mesa. Free. Registration required. 800-827-4277.

Bird Walk at Sweetwater Marsh National Wildlife Refuge. Hosted by Chula Vista Nature Center. Sundays. Free. Call 619-409-5900 for reservations and directions. Rain cancels. chulavistanaturecenter.org.

Fraturdays at the Fleet Film Festival. IMAX the-

atre screening of up to four films. Reuben H. Fleet Science Center, 1875 El Prado, Balboa Park, San Diego. \$7.50. 619-238-1233. rhfleet.org.

Project C.A.R.E: Community Action To Reach The Elderly. Free services are available for Encinitas seniors, 50+, and disabled adults through Project C.A.R.E. Services offered include: Vial of Life, Gatekeeper, Postal Alert, Home Safety Check, You Are Not Alone and "Are You Okay?" Encinitas Senior Center, 1140 Oakcrest Park Drive, Encinitas. For a brochure, call Mon.-Fri. at 760-943-2255.

The San Diego Chorus. Guests are welcome to visit this 100-member women's a cappella chorus during rehearsals. Wednesdays. Casa Del Prado, Room 207, Balboa Park located in downtown San Diego. The Chorus is recruiting new women singers. 619-685-3385. sdchorus.org. info@sdchorus.org.

Nature Walks. Tijuana Estuary, Visitor Center, 301 Caspian Way, Imperial Beach. 2nd Sunday. Fourth Saturday. Free. 619-575-3613. tijuanaestuary.com. *

Get the Word Out. E-mail your calendar of events announcements to Claire Fadden, cfadden@lifeafter50.com. Include a brief description, location, date, time, cost, phone and website. Submission does not guarantee publication. Deadline for the June issue is May 7.

March 27, 2008

Two-time Emmy Award-winner Mare Winningham to star in Old Globe's 'The Glass Menagerie'

Old Globe CEO/Executive Producer Lou Spisto is pleased to announce the cast of The Old Globe's production of *The Glass Menagerie*, by Tennessee Williams, directed by Joe Calarco (*Lincolnesque*), to run in the Cassius Carter Centre Stage April 12 – May 18.

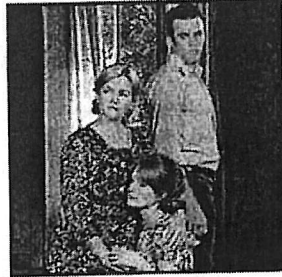
Multiple award-winning actress Mare Winningham will play the role of Amanda Wingfield, Michele Federer will play Laura Wingfield, Michael Simpson will play Tom Wingfield, and Kevin Isola will play Jim O'Connor.

Tickets for *The Glass Menagerie* go on sale March 30 (currently available through subscription) and can be purchased by calling (619) 23-GLOBE, on the Globe Web site at www.TheOldGlobe.org, or by visiting the box office at 1363 Old Globe Way in Balboa Park.



Mare Winningham

April 10, 2008



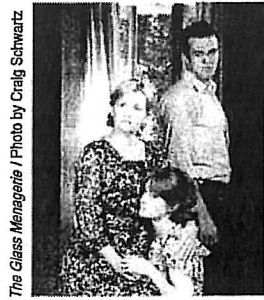
CLASSIC AT GLOBE

"The Glass Menagerie"
opens at The Old Globe's
Cassius Carter Centre Stage
at 8 p.m. Saturday and
continues through May 18.
Balboa Park, San Diego. \$29
to \$59. (619) 234-5623.

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“The Glass Menagerie”
【ガラスの動物園】

貧しい母子3人家族の絆と直面する現実の試練／テネシー・ウィリアムズの出世戯曲



The Glass Menagerie / Photo by Craig Schwartz

⑤ セントルイスの貧民街にある荒れ果てたアパートに船乗りのトム・ウィングフィールドが現れる。彼は昔を振り返りながら、思い出話を語り始める——。大恐慌に見舞われた1930年代。トムはこのアパートに母親アマダと姉ローラと共に暮らしていた。父親は家族を捨てて出奔中。南部の名家出身の母親は過去の栄光にすがりながら、子供たちに現実離れした未来を期待している。倉庫で働くトムは、そんな理想の高い道徳的な母親と常に衝突し、口論を繰り返している。一方、足が悪い姉ローラは極度の内気な性格から、全く人付き合いができず、就職することも覚束ない。部屋に籠り、ガラス製のオモチャの動物たちに触れることを唯一の楽しみとしていた。母親は婚期が遅れている娘の将来を心から案じている。

ある日、トムは母親に懇願されて、ローラのために同僚の青年ジムを家に招待する。ジムは偶然にもローラが高校時代に恋心を抱いていた相手だった。ジムの巧みなリードで頑（かたく）々なローラも打ち解け、再び彼に好意を抱くようになる。食事の後、突然停電となり、灯されたロウソクの下でジムはローラに「劣等感を跳ね返すんだ」と、優しく励ましのキスをするのだが…。

⑥ アメリカを代表する国民的劇作家テネシー・ウィリアムズ(1911-83)の出世作となった戯曲。1945年にブロードウェイでロングランとなる大成功を取めた後、1950年にはウィリアムズ自身とピーター・バーニースが共同で脚色し、アーヴィング・ラバース監督により映画化された。また、1987年にはポール・ニューマンが妻ジョアン・ウッドワードやジョン・マルコヴィッチを起用し、演劇台本をそのまま使って舞台劇として映画化した。自叙伝的な要素を多く含んだこの戯曲は文学作品としても高い評価を得ている。ウィリアムズは1948年の『欲望という名の電車』(“A Streetcar Named Desire”)、1955年の『熱いタン屋根の猫』(“Cat On A Hot Tin Roof”) でピューリッツァー賞を受賞している。

⑦ THE GLOBE THEATRES (Cassius Carter Centre Stage), 1363 Old Globe Way, Balboa Park / 619-239-2255 (T)。期間—5/18(日)迄。上演—火・水曜：7pm、木・金曜：8pm、土曜：2pm & 8pm、日曜：2pm & 7pm。チケット—TBA。http://www.oldglobe.org

"The Glass Menagerie"
「ガラスの動物園」

貧しい母子3人家族の絆と直面する現実の試練



⑤ & ⑥ セントルイスの貧民街に建つ老朽化したアパート。船乗りのトムは母アマンダと姉ローラと共に暮らしていた1930年代を思い出す。父親は家族を捨てて出奔。南部の名家出身の母親は過去の栄光にすがりながら、子供たちに非現実な期待をかけてトムと衝突を繰り返していた。アメリカの国民的劇作家テネシー・ウィリアムズ(1911-83)の出世作となった戯曲。自叙伝的な要素を多く含んだ文学作品としても評価が高い。

① THE GLOBE THEATRES, 1369 Old Globe Way, Balboa Park / 619-239-2255 (T)。期間—5/18(日)迄。上演—火・水曜: 7pm、木・金曜: 8pm、土曜: 2pm & 8pm、日曜: 2pm & 7pm。 <http://www.oldglobe.org>

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THEATERMANIA

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IM Reviews

The Glass Menagerie

Reviewed By: **Rob Stevens** · Apr 21, 2008 · San Diego

Great acting, sensitive direction, and classic writing make for an unforgettable theatrical experience as San Diego's Old Globe Theatre presents Joe Calarco's beautifully nuanced production of Tennessee Williams' autobiographical memory play *The Glass Menagerie* in its intimate Cassius Carter Centre Stage, where no audience member is more than five rows from the stage.

Indeed, one could practically sit down to dinner with the Wingfields if they had a mind to, although whether they would want to break bread with the family's officious matriarch Amanda (played by a commanding Mare Winningham), who attempts to dictate every moment and every movement of her two grown children, is another matter.

As Amanda, who regales her children with tales of her past glories one moment and tries to instill in them the proper technique of masticating their food the next, Winningham runs the gamut of emotions, hitting each one perfectly. She's easily believable as the flirtatious young belle of Blue Mountain, entertaining 17 gentleman callers on one memorable afternoon. But her lifelong bitterness of having chosen the wrong beau -- a telephone man who fell in love with long distance and later abandoned his family, is equally palpable. She now lives through her children, the dreamy Tom (Michael Simpson) and the emotionally and physically damaged daughter Laura (Michele Federer), and their directionless lives leave her sad and disappointed.

Tom (Michael Simpson), the narrator of the piece and Williams' stand-in, is a young man looking for adventures at the movies and in life and in his scribblings of poetry, but oppressed by his lackluster job in a shoe warehouse. His guilt and angst for his eventual abandonment of his family will haunt him forever, and Simpson's portrayal is particularly visceral, as his Tom wrestles with bigger demons than most.

As Laura, Federer essays an ethereal wisp of a shy, damaged young woman. Her crippled leg, really only a slight defect as her mother constantly tells her, has crippled her spirit more than her body, and her shyness, her insecurities, her social awkwardness is beautifully



Michelle Federer and Mare Winningham
in *The Glass Menagerie*
(© Craig Schwartz)

realized in Federer's heartbreaking performance. Kevin Isola lights up the stage and this dour family's existence as Jim, Tom's co-worker and Laura's unwitting "gentleman caller." He plays the role with such gusto and brio that you can easily believe this golden boy will achieve everything he sets his mind to.

The candlelit scene (helped by magical lighting by Chris Lee) between Laura and Jim is always a highpoint of the play, and never more so than it is here. As staged by Calarco on Michael Fagin's central playing area of the Wingfield's apartment, the scene is breathtaking. Isola's charm slowly melts Federer's shyness until Laura brightly glimmers from within. Their chemistry is so spot on that you dearly wish for a happy ending, even as one knows it is not to be.

[close]

THEATER REVIEWS

'Menagerie' is harmoniously triumphant

By James Hebert
THEATER CRITIC

A phonograph needle reaches the end of a pitiful little song, and for a long moment it skips rhythmically against the end of the record, like a knell sounding out in static.

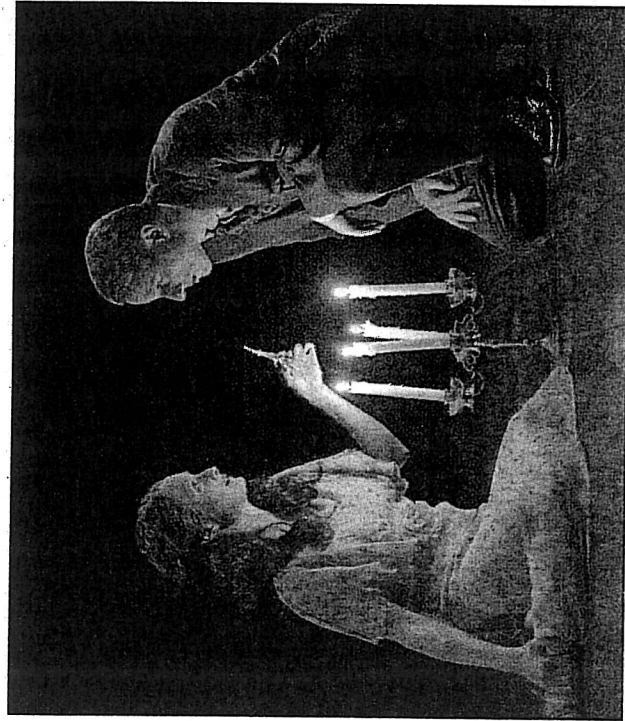
It seems to toll, quietly, for all the things the Wingfield family of "The Glass Menagerie" has let slip away: a sense of contentment, a capacity for warmth, a note of hope.

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

The detail is one of many to savor in the Old Globe Theatre's radiant staging of the Tennessee Williams classic, a thing of such delicate and crystalline beauty that the urge is to somehow squirrel it away in the brain like one of the play's precious figurines.

Director Joe Calarco's production crackles with that elusive theatrical magic conjured when every part of a show feels in harmony: indelible dialogue, deeply committed actors, pitch-perfect tone, a transporting atmosphere of sound, light and scenery.

One of its signal achievements is the way a dreamlike quality constantly plays along the show's edges. It seems achingly in tune with Williams' intentions for this memory play, which Tom Wingfield, our narrator, introduces by pointing out its very artifice ("Being a memory play, it is dimly light-



Michelle Federer is Laura and Kevin Isola her gentleman caller in the Old Globe's "The Glass Menagerie." Craig Schwartz

DETAILS

"The Glass Menagerie"

The Old Globe Theatre

When: Tuesdays-Wednesdays, 7 p.m.; Thursdays-Fridays, 8 p.m.; Saturdays, 2 and 8 p.m.; Sundays, 2 and 7 p.m. Through May 18.

Where: Old Globe's Cassius Carter Centre Stage, Balboa Park

Tickets: \$42-\$59

Phone: (619) 234-5623

Online: TheOldGlobe.org

ed," he notes.)

Those pallid rays fall on a 1930s tenement apartment in St. Louis, home to Tom, his

and whose tales of her glorious Southern youth are repeated as mercilessly as that skipping phonograph.

Always with this play, there's the Amanda factor. Rightly or not, her character has tended to take over the "The Glass Menagerie." Admirably, Calarco has found a way to balance her outsized presence in a way that gives the other characters their full due.

And yet in Mare Winningham this show has a terrific Amanda. The versatile actress (familiar from her film and TV roles) inhabits the faded belle with a kind of steely grace. She seems as familiar with the character as the creases of the old dress she puts on — the one in which, so the fable goes, Amanda once greeted 17 "gentleman callers" in a single evening back in old Blue Mountain.

There's an edgy, tense physicality between Winningham and Michael Simpson, who plays Tom with plenty of wit, charm and a simmering sense of pent-up anger. At one point, it seems the two might actually duke it out — a scene, like many in the play, that's both laced with humor and fraught with conflict.

As Laura, Michelle Federer (an alum of Broadway's "Wicked") is affecting in a very difficult role; she conveys, in her wandering gaze and the way she recoils from the world, a flame of longing that is close to flickering out.

The detail is one of many to savor in the Old Globe Theatre's radiant staging of the Tennessee Williams classic.

Just when these three seem to achieve an uneasy equilibrium, Act 2 brings Laura's own gentleman caller, Tom's pal, Jim, who arrives blissfully unaware of the thematic baggage he's toting.

"He is the long delayed but always expected something that we live for," as the literary-minded Tom puts it.

Garrulous Jim, who likes to call Tom "Shakespeare," is played with an absolutely winning sense of warmth and ease by Kevin Isola, whose long, candlelit scene with Federer is a study in understated, naturalistic acting.

Through it all, Lindsay Jones' sound design envelops the show in sometimes pretty, sometimes eerily dissonant atmosphere, and Michael Fagin's sets — which mimic evocatively the cabinet that holds Laura's figurines — provide a tactile sense of place.

This show deserves a trophy cabinet of its own. It's a keeper.

James Hebert: (619) 293-2040;
jim.hebert@uniontrib.com

Globe's 'Glass Menagerie' hindered by new interpretations

PAM KRAGEN
STAFF WRITER

Playwright Tennessee Williams loved playing with the conventions of theater and his 1945 drama "The Glass Menagerie" was an ambitious experiment in form, using projections, lighting and a sliding fourth wall to heighten the illusions of memory in the play.

In his new staging of "The Glass Menagerie" in the Old Globe's in-the-round Cassius Carter Centre Stage, director Joe Calarco takes Williams' nonrealistic approach a step farther with some fresh interpretations on character and design that deliver mixed results.

The haunting atmosphere of the play endures (thanks in part to Chris Lee's dim, dreamlike lighting) and the acting mostly shines, but an awkward set and a casting choice make the finished product somewhat uneven.

Two-time Emmy Award-winning actress Mare Winningham leads the cast of the Globe production, which will

REVIEW

"The Glass Menagerie"
When: 7 p.m. Sundays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays; 8 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays; 2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays; through May 18
Where: Cassius Carter Centre Stage, Old Globe complex, Balboa Park, San Diego
Tickets: \$42-\$59
Phone: (619) 234-5623
Web: www.theoldglobe.org

be the last in the Carter before it's torn down this summer to make way for a new theater complex. Her lily-soft, layered, needy and ultimately smothering performance as family matriarch Amanda Wingfield is the shining cornerstone of Calarco's production and everything builds (or descends) from there.

"The Glass Menagerie" is a memory play narrated by Amanda's son, Tom, who revisits his family's 1930s St. Louis apartment through the veil of his own guilt-laden recollections. Like his father before him, Tom would soon abandon his mother and crippled sister, Laura, and the play recounts his unsuccessful efforts to recruit a "gentleman



PHOTO COURTESY OF CRAIG SCHWARTZ

Michelle Federer and Mare Winningham in the Old Globe's "The Glass Menagerie."

caller" to marry Laura and support the Wingfield women in his absence.

Amanda's a faded Southern belle who dwells in the past and teeters between affection and searing criticism of her children. Laura's a shy, sensitive shut-in, as emotionally and physically fragile as

the tiny glass animals she collects. And Williams' alter ego, Tom, longs for escape, adventure and freedom beyond the confining walls of the Wingfield apartment.

His deliverance arrives in the form of Jim O'Connor, Tom's ultraconfident co-worker at a shoe factory, who comes for dinner one night and shows a fleeting interest in Laura. But the results of their encounter leave the family as shattered as the glass unicorn from Laura's collection.

For this production, Calarco reinterprets many elements of Williams' script. He softens Amanda's cruel streak and reduces Laura's infirmity to a slight limp. Tom becomes more of an enigma, with no hints to the source of his late-night "movie" excursions or the career he has found beyond St. Louis. Only the optimistic, ambitious gentleman caller, Jim — the family's sole source of hope — seems unchanged by time.

Michael Fagin's sunken apartment set is split in two by a wooden ramp and raised ringmaster-style center ring.

A metal floor grate serves as the metaphorical fire escape from which the older Tom reflects. The set's unconventional design works with the intentional staginess of Williams' script, but it makes for some awkward entrances, exits and blocking. For example, in one scene Jim asks Laura to sit with him on the floor, and she must step up to sit on the raised round platform.

Michelle Federer is particularly affecting in her sad, still and transparent-as-glass performance as Laura. And Kevin Isola is boisterous and upbeat as Jim. His attentions to Laura seem motivated by impulse and ego rather than lust or malice.

Michael Simpson makes his stage debut as Tom and gives a performance that feels too contemporary for the setting and not as complex as it could be. As the conflicted storyteller in this drama, and the gay Williams' alter ego, a more haunted and troubled presence is needed here.

Calarco's direction is gen-

► 'GLASS,' 26

► 'GLASS'

Continued from 24

tly paced, with a focus on creating an atmosphere of dreamlike reverie and visual beauty. This makes the play feel longish in its talky scenes, but always pleasing to the eye. It runs two hours, 45 minutes, with intermission, and feels it.

"The Glass Menagerie" remains one of the true classics of 20th century American theater and in its day, offered groundbreaking style. Reinterpreted for the 21st century, the Globe's "Menagerie" still delivers on atmosphere and acting, but a different set and perhaps a different Tom would have made it better.

Tuesday, April 22, 2008

THEATER REVIEW

This 'Glass' is too gritty

Mare Winningham portrays the mom as a realist, perhaps not the best approach to Tennessee Williams.

By CHARLES McNULTY
Times Theater Critic

SAN DIEGO — When Mare Winningham makes her dimly lighted entrance in the Old Globe's new production of "The Glass Menagerie," one could be forgiven for assuming that the Emmy-winning actress is playing Laura, the emotionally and physically crippled daughter in Tennessee Williams' achingly poetic memory play.

Winningham seems too girlish for the part of Laura's mother, Amanda Wingfield, the Southern matriarch who desperately wants a gentleman caller to rescue her daughter (played here by Michelle Federer) from a fate apparently worse than death — insolvent spinsterhood.

Then, as the light sharpens in Joe Calarco's at best workmanlike staging, Winningham begins to resemble another Williams character — Stella, Blanche DuBois' sane sister in "A Streetcar Named Desire." That is, if you can imagine Stanley Kowalski's wife living in a Midwestern metropolis as a single mom with only her feisty common sense to guide her.

Unfortunately, the grounded naturalism Winningham brought to the role of the country and western star in the 1995 film "Georgia," for which she received an Oscar nomination, doesn't seem quite right for Amanda. After all, this is the figure that set the mold for all those larger-than-life Williams heroines who seek refuge from harsh reality in memory's soothing balm.

But sometimes the right dress can help enormously. For as soon as Winningham's

[See 'Glass,' Page E9]

Return to life in a 'Glass' house

['Glass,' from Page E1] Amanda digs her old summer finery out of her trunk, she becomes something far less prosaic than a St. Louis tenement-dweller worried about the dead-end prospects of her two grown kids. The delicate garment has certainly seen better days, but it provides a window onto a time when Amanda's future seemed replete with suitors pleading for a dance at the governor's ball.

Who could have predicted that her eventual husband would desert his family, leaving them nothing but the face-saving quip that this telephone company man "fell in love with long distances"? Or that the Great Depression would savagely expose them to an economy with little sympathy for a genteel pedigree or a poet's dreams?

It's no secret that Tom (Michael Simpson), Amanda's son, is a surrogate for Williams. Indeed, part of the greatness of "The Glass Menagerie," written in 1944 while the author was still largely unknown, is the way it captures the emotional cost of a writer's journey toward realizing his deepest self. This central struggle between a young man's imagination and his obligations is, like all the rest of the play's conflicts, rooted in love, which only makes the inevitable betrayal more heartbreaking.

Its sepia-tinged poignancy is the reason the work is produced with such sneezing regularity by large and small theaters alike. But because of the frequency of revivals, a standard-issue staging can seem perfunctory.

What's missing from Calarco's production is a unifying directorial vision. His actors provide fresh glosses on their characters, but they rarely seem to belong to the same theatrical household (sketchily designed by Michael Fagin). It's as if they had worked independently on their roles and crossed their fingers that they'd somehow blend into an ensemble.

Performed in the round at the intimate Cassius Carter Centre Stage (which is about to be replaced by a new theater center), the production is further hampered by an unavoidable architectural obstacle — the actors' faces cannot always be seen by the audience. Calarco compounds this frustration



CRAIG SCHWARTZ/The Old Globe

THEN AND NOW: In the Old Globe's "The Glass Menagerie," Mare Winningham portrays an abandoned wife/single mother whose tenement life is a far cry from her genteel upbringing.

'The Glass Menagerie'

Where: Old Globe Theatre, Balboa Park, San Diego

When: 7 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Sundays, 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays

Ends: May 18

Price: \$42 to \$59

Contact: (619) 234-5623 or www.theoldglobe.org

Running time: 2 hours, 40 minutes

in the gentleman caller's scene by staging the blackout dinner party by candlelight so faint that we might just as well be listening to a radio drama.

Still, there are occasional insights to be gleaned from the

individual portrayals. With her limp appearing and disappearing unexpectedly, Federer's Laura seems more mentally ill than physically challenged, which isn't too much of a stretch when you consider that Williams' real-life sister suffered from schizophrenia.

Simpson's Tom is angrier than we're accustomed to. Stuck with a warehouse job to support his family, he's seething with resentment about having to finish poems in the bathroom at work while constantly fending off his mother's criticism at home. Though he doesn't exactly radiate a writer's sensitivity, he allows us to understand the bark and growl of a son who feels derailed.

As the gentleman caller, Kevin Isola stresses the mediocrity and male egotism of Jim O'Connor, whose patronizing tone blunts any notion of romantic fantasy. His paltriness

deepens our awareness of the Wingfields' diminished options — can this really be Laura's last chance at salvation?

Winningham sets out giving us a woman mired in quotidian checkbook emergencies. She's always admirably unfussy, and one can appreciate her refusal to dabble in interpretive clichés. But it takes too long for her to reveal that her character's flamboyant theatricality is one of her most realistic features.

Of course we want the lyricism in Williams to be steeped in human truth, but that doesn't mean it has to be cramped. For all the play's tragic somberness, "The Glass Menagerie" reassures us that even when our lives have been stripped bare, they can still be worthy of the grandeur of fiction.

charles.mcNulty@latimes.com

Misplaced Menagerie

Poor “crippled” Laura scrambles up the southwest steps on all fours, like a frightened cat.

The Old Globe Theatre’s “Classics Up Close” series presents some of the great works of American theater on the small Cassius Carter Centre Stage. The theater-in-the-round offers an intimate look at plays usually seen many rows away. And you’d think Tennessee Williams’s haunted “memory” drama, *The Glass Menagerie*, would be a perfect choice for the series. But in almost every frame, the show gives the distinct impression that it resents close inspection. In fact, I can’t remember a production more obviously uncomfortable with its surroundings.

Joe Calarco ably directed *Lincolnesque* in the Carter two years ago. His cast did restrained, stately work. So Calarco’s familiar with the space, knows the demands of playing to four walls of bleached spectators. But his *Menagerie*’s another matter: it refuses to stand still. Someone makes an abrupt move every five beats. They bounce up or suddenly wheel and go, as if late for an appointment. These mannered movements consistently pull focus from the story. At one point, in possibly one of the strangest choices in the history of *Menagerie* stagings, poor “crippled” Laura scrambles up the southwest steps on all fours, like a frightened cat.

In Tom’s monologues a herky-jerky, overly gestural Michael Simpson makes a quarter-turn, addresses some lines to one side of the audience, then makes another turn, addresses another side, then another. After a while he looks like a lighthouse beam, slowly spinning in place, shining on one-fourth of the room and leaving the rest in the dark (some of Tom’s narrations are done in voice-over, which takes him outside the scene altogether). The actors’ movements would be less irksome if the text motivated them, but many aren’t. They simply reassemble and perform to a different wall.

Michael Fagin’s abstract set contributes to the problem. The round “floor,” a brown mesa centerstage, stands higher than the rooms around it (for reasons unclear, instead of the claustrophobic brick walls that surround the apartment, the floor’s also displayed on three of the Carter’s walls). When actors move from one room to the

next, often they must drop down or rise over an entry runway, or, for the key scene, step up to the floor.

The acting, apart from the steeplechase upstaging it, is surprisingly reined in. Mare

Winningham plays Amanda — the mother given to operatic extremes — in a contained fashion. Her voice rises and falls with musical precision, and her timing is

stopwatch precise, but her emotions rarely flare, her control-urges rarely grasp (even the “girlish frock” she wears, from her “jonquil” days, is muted). Michelle Federer’s Laura, who sometimes forgets to limp, could use more introversion. And Kevin Isola plays the Gentleman Caller almost free from subtexts (his chat with Laura is both actual and a chance to practice what he’s learning in a public speaking class: how to fit in with anyone).

In the play, Tom Wingfield returns, in his imagination, to the scene of his gravest crime: Depression-riddled St. Louis in the late 1930s — a time, he says, “when the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind.” A budding poet working in a shoe factory, he wants to break free — as Tennessee Williams did from his helpless sister Rose. And Tom will, abandoning her in the process; “to escape from a trap,” Williams writes, Tom has “to act without pity.”

In *Our Town*, the deceased Emily wants to return to her family for one day, just to watch. Don’t go on a good one, the narrator warns, it’ll be too much to handle. In *Menagerie*, which has studied every innovative technique of *Our Town*, Tom chooses to revisit the greatest, and worst, day of his sister’s life. Rejected by the Gentleman Caller, she loses forever “the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for” — and shatters like one of her glass figurines.

Laura’s recognition, that the Gentleman Caller’s spoken for, is the key moment in *Menagerie*. American theater has few as devastating. As the scene progresses, she rises toward the sun, then plunges, like an Icarus, into oblivion. In Calarco’s staging, however, candlelit Laura and the Gentleman Caller face southeast, which

REVIEW

JEFF SMITH



Michelle Federer, Kevin Isola in The Glass Menagerie

The Glass Menagerie, by Tennessee Williams

Cassius Carter Centre Stage, Simon Edison Centre for the Performing Arts, Balboa Park

Directed by Joe Calarco; cast: Mare Wingham, Michael Simpson, Michelle Federer, Kevin Isola; scenic design, Michael Fagin; costumes, Anne Kennedy; lighting, Chris Lee; sound, Lindsay Jones

Playing through May 18; Sunday, Tuesday, and Wednesday at 7:00 p.m. Thursday through Saturday at 8:00 p.m. Matinee Saturday and Sunday at 2:00 p.m. 619-234-5623.

blocks her reaction to 80 percent of the audience.

In his production notes, Williams bemoans the state of realistic (he calls it "photographic") theater and asks for fluid, "plastic" representation. But, he adds, "When a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or certainly shouldn't

be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality...but should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are." The Old Globe's fitful, jumping-bean *Menagerie* is unconventional, true, but also unappealing. ■

SAN DIEGO Reader

May 8, 2008

The Glass Menagerie

The Old Globe's "Classics Up Close" series offers an intimate, in-the-round-look at plays usually seen many rows away. And you'd think Tennessee Williams's haunted memory drama would be a perfect choice for the series. But in almost every frame, the Joe Calarco-directed production gives the distinct impression it resents close inspection. I can't remember a staging more obviously uncomfortable with its surroundings. It refuses to stand still. Someone makes an abrupt move every five beats. They bounce up or suddenly address a different wall. These mannered movements consistently pull focus from the story. At one point, in one of the strangest choices of all, poor "crippled" Laura scrambles up the southwest steps of the Cassius Carter *on all fours*, like a frightened cat. The acting, apart from the steeplechase upstaging it, is surprisingly reined in. Mare Winningham plays Amanda — the mother given to operatic extremes — in a contained fashion. Her voice rises and falls with musical precision, and her timing is stopwatch, but her emotions rarely flare (even the "girlish frock" she wears, from her "jonquil" days, is muted). As Tom, Michael Simpson's herky-jerky, overly gestural; Michelle Federer's Laura could use more introversion; and Kevin Isola plays the Gentleman Caller almost free of subtexts. Michael Fagin's abstract set contributes to the problem. The round "floor," a brown mesa center stage, stands higher than the rooms around it. When actors move from one room to the next, they must drop down or rise over an entry runway. In his original production notes, Williams advocated an unconventional staging for *Menagerie*; The Old Globe's fitful, jumping-bean production is unconventional, true, but also unappealing.



The Glass Menagerie

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May 1, 2008

Classic Williams 'Menagerie' comes together at the Globe

By Eileen Sondak

FOR THE EAST COUNTY CALIFORNIAN

The Old Globe's Cassius Carter Stage is the setting for Tennessee Williams' "The Glass Menagerie" – and the intimate theater is the perfect spot to view the unforgettable memory play. This season-closer is part of the Globe's "Classics Up Close" series, and director Joe Calarco uses the theater-in-the-round ambiance of the Carter to offer everyone in the audience an opportunity to experience the brilliant nuances inherent in the work.

There are only four characters in this powerful play, and most of the plot revolves around just one – a hapless mother living in a dream world that has her re-living her youth as a genteel Southern belle surrounded by eligible suitors. Of course, the reality is she married a drifter who left her years ago with two children and no means of support.

Since poor Amanda can't face the truth, she returns to her fantasy world as often as she possibly can. That is a major source of irritation to her long-suffering son Tom – who faces a bleak future in a factory.

Laura – the keeper of a miniature glass menagerie (composed of delicate glass animals that fit into the palm of your hand) has plenty of emotional problems, not to mention

an embarrassing limp. A physical handicap in the 1940s. was reason enough for a young girl to develop an inferiority complex, but Laura's mental state is even more fragile than her menagerie. Amanda's unrealistic expectations for her have made her a pitiful neurotic.

The answer to all their woes (according to this out-of-touch matriarch) is to find a "suitable" husband for Laura. When Tom finally agrees to bring home a friend from the factory, Amanda's hopes soar. The play comes to a dramatic crescendo when the visitor leaves.

Tom (played by Michael Simpson in his theatrical debut) serves as narrator for the story as well as a major player – and he handles the challenging role very well.

Two-time Emmy Award-winner Mare Winningham makes the mother as poignant as she is overbearing. It's a haunting portrait that maintains the delicate balance throughout the performance. Even before Michele Federer (who plays the wistful Laura) opens her mouth to speak, her bird-like appearance and timid manner tells us a lot about the character. Federer inhabits the role completely. Kevin Isola as the gentleman caller is another asset to this solid production.

There's not a wasted word of dialogue in the play, and somehow Williams infused the tragic tale with

enough humor to make "The Glass Menagerie" a totally satisfying theatrical experience. It's nothing short of a masterpiece – from one of the greatest playwrights of the 20th century.

You'll love the attention to detail costume designer Anne Kennedy (whose list of credits is very impressive) gave to all the costumes, especially the dressy frocks in Act II. Chris Lee did wonders with the lighting, which makes Michael Fagin's set design add up to more than the sum of its disjointed parts.

"The Glass Menagerie" will be happily ensconced at the Globe's Cassius Carter Theater through May 18th. Tickets are available for \$42 - \$59 at the Box Office (619) 23-GLOBE.



THEATRE

A Tennessee Williams classic at The Old Globe A14



Photo by Craig Schwartz.

(L-R) Michelle Federer as "Laura Wingfield" and Mare Winningham as "Amanda Wingfield" in The Old Globe's production of *The Glass Menagerie*, by Tennessee Williams, directed by Joe Calarco.

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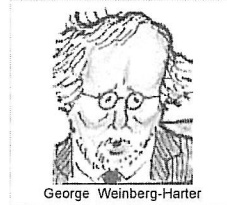
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San Diego Arts

"The Glass Menagerie" at the Old Globe

In a Vitreous Humor
 By George Weinberg-Harter
 Posted on Apr 18 2008
 Last updated Apr 22 2008



Every detail of a great play like Tennessee Williams' first masterpiece "The Glass Menagerie"(1944) eventually grows familiar to a constant theatregoer. And as with great music or poetry, repetition does not dull but only sharpens appreciation and emotional response.

For me the Old Globe's new production of "The Glass Menagerie," excellently directed by Joe Calarco, provoked sharper emotional pangs than any version, stage or screen, I've yet seen. Maybe over the years one grows less callow and more susceptible to pathos and tragedy. Others perhaps less susceptible in the audience, however, continued to chuckle at the play's ironies long past the point where those reactions ought to be muted by the sorrow of the story.

At the show's start, Michael Simpson as Tom – the runaway son and brother of the diminished Wingfield family – returns in his narrative memory to the apartment where years before he had seen his mother and sister for the last time before abruptly abandoning them. The old place is represented in Michael Fagin's spare but sleekly polished arena scenic design as an open plan of vacated rooms with ghostly white dust covers on the furniture. Simpson's Tom, halting and unsure, removes a cover to reveal the case containing his sister Laura's collection of fragile little blown-glass creatures, and the effect on him – the memories it provokes – seems excruciating and devastating. And at that moment the memory of all that is painful in Tom's tale – communicated through Simpson's empathetic performance – came keenly back to me too.

When Tom's initial reverie of narration is at last broken by the recollection of his mother Amanda calling him to dinner, her first words, filtered through Lindsay Jones' sound design, hollowly echo as from a distance. Tom seems then hooked by this, ensnared once more into the emotional trap of pity and self-pity that for a long time prevented his escape from the painful family bonds of his mother's guilt trip and of his helpless love for a physically and mentally disabled sister. And if an audience's mood is the right one, they should be caught up in this as well.

As the entrapping mother Amanda, Mare Winningham's petite person and small features harmonize with the precise and understated dialect she bestows upon this role of a fading but unreconstructed Southern belle. Amanda's airs and graces, her never-ending reminiscences of the many gentleman suitors who once came calling, her iron insistence on imposing the genteel manners of a vanished time upon the shabby present existence of her tiny family drive son Tom to sarcastic guilty rebellion and fire his fervor to flee.

Winningham's eventual transformation of Amanda into a later reincarnation of something like her younger self, in order to the charm the one lone "gentleman caller" that Tom manages to lure over for dinner on behalf of his reclusive sister Laura, makes a surprising contrast. Dressed (by costume designer Anne Kennedy) in her long-

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disused high-waisted ball gown instead of her dowdy everyday house dress and shapeless cardigan, gliding about with poise and carriage rather than her usual slightly stooped trot, her hair released from its tight bun into lush waves, and herself full of captivating chitchat instead of bitter reproaches. Amanda almost seems to turn the trick for Laura as she puts the visiting Jim O'Connor (Kevin Isola) in the most receptive mood possible and steers him towards her shrinking daughter.

Kevin Isola's bright, brash, and goodhearted Jim provides a true sparkle of upbeat American hopefulness amidst the colossal downer that is the interpersonal mess of the Wingfield family. Though temporarily stalled in his career plans by the aftermath of the Depression (the play is set in 1937), Jim's Horatio-Algerian ambition is to hook up to the nascent television industry. Isola captures the dynamic essence of the guy with the help of a wide and forward stance and a sincere and ready grin. But, alas, with other commitments Jim is unavailable to provide little more than his brief moment of light and warmth in the encroaching dimness of poor Laura's constricted destiny.

Laura Wingfield is portrayed with distressing delicateness and a lame grace by Michele Federer. Sometimes as she stretches out along some stairs or huddles on the floor, Federer creates a haunting suggestion of Andrew Wyeth's handicapped and isolated female figure in his painting "[Christina's World](#)." I have often seen Laura correctly played as vulnerable, fragile, and withdrawn, as agonizingly diffident, and yet with a sad sweetness about her. Federer hits all these notes in Laura too, but also evokes to a greater degree than I remember seeing a fey and almost delusional quality besides. When Federer's Laura obsesses over her glass animals, holding them against the light and staring transfixed, she seems to be retreating into a closed interior universe where the figurines possess a reality for her intense enough to be psychosis. When the entirely normal Jim hears her voice these ideas, he only laughs them off – bless him – as her surprisingly vivid imagination. But the audience is allowed to see more deeply and dangerously into her fantasies.

But, mercifully, Laura's fantasies protect her as well as isolate her. And, oddly, this somewhat ameliorates the almost unbearable closing pathos of her situation. When one of her favorite glass creatures is accidentally broken, her reaction is not as dire as one might fear. She immediately weaves a protective fantasy about the breakage. And one can see that this may give her a kind of tragic strength, in that she even preserves an isolation from these sentimental creations of her own imagination. One may hope that this will serve her in some way when she (and her mother) eventually learn that her beloved brother has abandoned them forever. Happily, the playwright exempts the audience from viewing such a potentially racking scene. We (and Tom) can only imagine it.

Chris Lee's gentle lighting design keeps the scenes mostly in shadow. A muted illumination appropriate to memories comes mostly from above so that eyes of the characters are often shaded. When the Wingfield's electricity fails, Lee's lighting mimics the actual candles on stage – candles that at the end Laura extinguishes one by one, to Tom's hugely moving final lines: "Blow out your candles. Laura – and so good-bye"

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THEATER

Laura in the dark, marriage in a muddle and Chekhov in Mexico

by Jean Lowerison

'The Glass Menagerie'

I can think of a few reasons Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* seems a fitting farewell piece for the Cassius Carter Centre Stage, which will be leveled and rebuilt after this show is struck.

It's about Laura Wingfield (Michele Federer), whose slight limp and extreme shyness have destroyed her psyche. Likewise, the Carter's technological and spatial limitations have crippled its usefulness to the Globe. Laura's fate will not change, but the theater will rise again (opening is tentatively set for January, 2010), and visitors can watch a video in the lobby of what will rise in the Carter's space.

Meanwhile, *The Glass Menagerie* plays through May 18 on the Carter stage, directed by Joe Calarco.

Set in St. Louis in 1937, *The Glass Menagerie* was Williams' breakthrough as a playwright, and has rightly claimed a place among the most-revived plays in the literature. Lyrically and movingly written, the play has endeared itself to generations of theatergoers with descriptions like this: "In Spain there was Guernica. But here was only hot swing music and liquor, dance halls, bars and movies, and sex that hung in the gloom like a chandelier and flooded the world with brief, deceptive rainbows."

That's Tom (Michael Simpson) speaking. The 20-something Tom wants lots of things: to write, see the world and have adventures, but mainly to get away from his dead-end job at the warehouse and his mother's constant and repetitive haranguing. Tom's father left years ago — "He was a telephone man who fell in love with long distance" — and Tom has kept food on the family table but enjoyed not a single minute of it.

The reason Tom persists is sister Laura (Michele Federer), with a psychological fragility so out of proportion to her limp that she has withdrawn into a fantasy world of glass figurines, the menagerie of the title.

Mother Amanda (Mare Winningham), the faded Southern belle who lives in the memory of the day she received 17 gentleman callers, is wistful about her own past but a bulldog about her hopes for her children, whether they share them or not. The appearance of Laura's sole gentleman caller, Jim (Kevin Isola),

will finally make Laura's future clear to her mother.

This production suffers from Michael Fagin's confusing and peculiar set which anyone with a real limp would have serious trouble navigating. A large round space serving as an apparent hallway connects to a long rectangular piece ending at the Carter's steps on either end. This apparently is meant to separate the living and dining rooms, but it takes so much playing space that the whole

Michael Simpson, in his first dramatic role as Tom, seems to stride rather than drag through his days, and I didn't get much of his inner rage.

The Glass Menagerie deserves a better setting and better direction, but the Carter could hardly have a better closing line for its last show: "Blow out your candles, Laura."

The Glass Menagerie plays through May 18 at the Old Globe Theatre's Cassius Carter Centre Stage. Shows Sunday, Tuesday and Wednesday at 7



PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ

Michele Federer as "Laura Wingfield" and Kevin Isola as "Jim O'Connor" in The Old Globe's production of *The Glass Menagerie*, by Tennessee Williams, directed by Joe Calarco.

seems obstacle-ridden. Laura's menagerie is covered with a cloth most of the time, and the subdividing structure and excessively dingy lighting make it difficult for many audience members to see what's going on.

Winningham's Amanda is more of a bull than a faded belle, but she does well with the Southern accent acquired in a road trip in preparation for the role. It serves her better than a slightly whiny voice quality which I can justify dramatically but find annoying to listen to.

Federer does what she can in the first act with direction that sometimes has her on the floor by the couch, where much of the audience cannot see what she is doing, and other times sprinting up the Carter steps to make her exit. But she shines in her second-act scene with Isola's "gentleman caller," who turns in easily the best performance of the evening.

p.m.; Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m.; matinees Saturday and Sunday at 2 p.m. For tickets call 619-23-GLOBE or visit www.theoldglobe.org.

CorridorNews

May 8, 2008

Globe's 'Glass Menagerie' full of Southern charm

BY EILEEN SONDAK

The Old Globe is capping its winter season at the Cassius Carter with a masterpiece from the mid-20th century: "The Glass Menagerie" by Tennessee Williams.

This unforgettable memory play, by one of America's greatest playwrights is part of the "Classics Up Close" series, and the Carter's theater-in-the-round ambiance certainly gives audiences the up-

THEATER REVIEW

close feeling t h e series

was designed to evoke.

Credit director Joe Calarco with using the intimate space effectively — allowing everyone in the theater to experience the brilliant nuances inherent in the work.

There are only four characters in this powerful play, and most of the plot revolves around just one — a hapless mother living in a dream world that has her re-living her youth as a genteel Southern belle surrounded by eligible suitors.

Of course, in reality she has married a drifter who left her years ago with two children and no means of support.

Since poor Amanda can't face the truth, she returns to her fantasy world as often as she possibly can. That is a major source of irritation to her long-suffering son Tom, who faces a bleak future in a factory.

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Two-time Emmy Award-winner Mare Winningham makes the mother as poignant as she is overbearing. It's a haunting portrait that maintains the delicate balance throughout the performance. Even before Michele Federer (who plays the wistful Laura) opens her mouth to speak, her bird-like appearance and timid manner tells us a lot about the character. Federer inhabits the role completely. Kevin Isola as the gentleman caller is another asset to this solid production.

There's not a wasted word of dialogue in the play, and somehow Williams infused the tragic tale with enough humor to make "The Glass Menagerie" a totally satisfying theatrical experience.

You'll also love the attention to detail costume designer Anne Kennedy gives to all

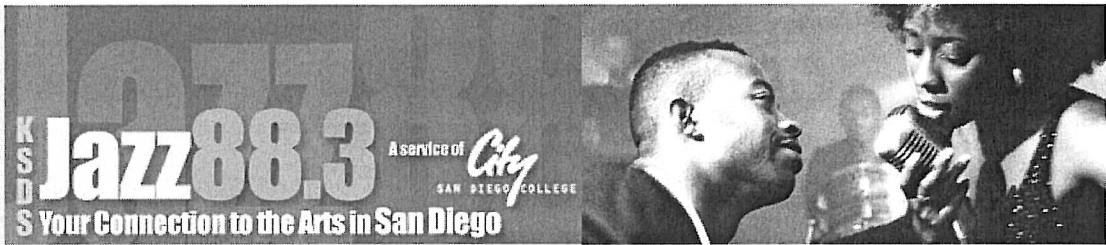
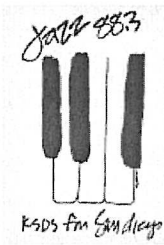
the costumes, especially the dressy frocks in Act II. Chris Lee does wonders with the lighting, which makes Michael Fagin's set design add up to more than the sum of its disjointed parts.

"The Glass Menagerie" will remain at the Globe's Cassius Carter Theater through May 18.

Tickets are available for \$42-\$59 at the Box Office 619-23-GLOBE.



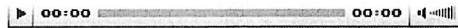
Michelle Federer and Mare Winningham play Laura and Amanda Wingfield in The Old Globe's production of 'The Glass Menagerie' by Tennessee Williams, playing through May 18.



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'THE GLASS MENAGERIE' - The Old Globe



There's a stifling airlessness about "The Glass Menagerie," set in a cramped, shabby St. Louis tenement. But not on the Cassius Carter Centre Stage. The set conveys an airy openness, with its multiple steps and levels, a hazardous environment for a daughter with a lame leg. That's not the only part of the Tennessee Williams masterwork that's ill-conceived at the Old Globe. Director Joe Calarco did a fine job a couple of years ago, with the Globe premiere of the politically cynical "Lincolnesque." But Williams' autobiographical play is as delicate as the animals of the title. This heavy-handed, over-directed production begins gracelessly, at a simultaneously hyperactive and glacial pace. There's a flurry of unnecessary stage business, which slows down the action. Tom, the narrator, normally played as a frustrated depressive, here bounds across the stage like an angry, overanxious puppy. First-time actor Michael Simpson gives him little subtext or complexity, and he lacks the soul or sensibility of a poet. Tom's beautifully lyrical lines, relayed as reminiscence, are often presented as voiceovers, which distances the audience and leaves us staring at the static image of a man writing in a book.

Tom's mother, Amanda Wingfield, is often portrayed as a harridan. The former Southern belle lives in the past, relentlessly recalling her youth of endless suitors. But she made a bad choice, and her charmer of a husband abandoned the family long ago. Now, she smothers her children in overprotective zeal, desperately hoping to shield them from her unhappy fate. But it's too late. Tom is terminally restless, like his father. Laura, here with an inconsistent limp, retreats further into her fantasy world of tiny glass figures. As played by convincingly Southern-sounding Emmy Award-winner Mare Winningham, Amanda is neither vicious nor desperate; she's an earthbound realist misplaced in a dreamy play. She hangs all her hopes on a "gentleman caller" for Laura, and she badgers Tom until he reluctantly brings someone home from his dead-end job at the warehouse. The second-act scene between Laura and Jim is the high point of the evening, though staged in candlelight, it's barely visible. Kevin Isola keeps assuming the spread-leg stance of a policeman, but his attention to Laura brings her alive for one fragile moment, when Michelle Federer, with her fluttering hands and dashed hopes, succeeds in breaking our hearts. It's the single still, aching instant in a sadly misguided production.

But at some of our small, intimate theaters, you can have a more fulfilling experience. Consider the intense drama of "Terra Nova" at 6th @ Penn Theatre, a harrowing tale of heroism, folly and death in the race to the South Pole. Or the modern-day fairy tale, "Prelude to a Kiss," at New Village Arts, a magical romantic comedy about the meaning of true love. Great theater isn't always where you expect it.

"Terra Nova" runs through May 11 at 6th @ Penn Theatre.
 "Prelude to a Kiss" is at New Village Arts through May 18.
 "The Glass Menagerie" continues at the Old Globe through May 18.

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'33 Variations' - La Jolla Playhouse



It's a seductive story. The kind that's irresistible to a lover of history. In 1819, the music publisher Anton Diabelli composed a little waltz tune for piano. And he invited the 50 most prominent composers in Vienna to create a variation of his waltz. Liszt and Schubert, among others, agreed. But Beethoven demurred. Then, Beethoven unexpectedly had a change of heart and mind. In fact, he became obsessed with the little waltz, and spent four years on the assignment, ultimately coming up with not one musical modification, but 33, famously known as the Diabelli Variations.

The story had a magnetic pull on the brilliant theatermaker Moisés Kaufman, best known for creating "The Laramie Project," and for winning a Tony Award for his direction of "I Am My Own Wife." His stock in trade is turning history inside out to plumb the emotional core. But historical fact and conjecture weren't enough for him here. He interwove his Beethoven narrative with the tale of a fictional, modern-day musicologist as obsessed with Beethoven as Beethoven was with the waltz. She travels to Berlin to the Beethoven Archives, shortly after being diagnosed with ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease. Her deterioration parallels the composer's failing hearing, health and sanity. She has conflicts with her daughter. Her nurse becomes her daughter's boyfriend. The Teutonic librarian at the archives softens up and befriends her, morphing into yet another unappreciated caregiver. Across two centuries, the stories interlace, as we watch the Variations evolve, thanks to a wonderful performance as Beethoven and magical projections from his sketchbooks. As the pieces are being conceived, composed and described, we're treated to magnificent snippets of the music, played live by consummate pianist Diane Walsh.

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"33 Variations" premiered last summer at the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. It's been undergoing considerable changes during this West coast premiere. The piece still needs some work. But there is so much here that's emotionally, dramatically and historically satisfying. It's breathtaking to get even the tiniest glimpse into the artistic process and creative obsession, health concerns be damned. Kaufman is a dazzling theatermaker and director. The staging is superb, though the acting is a tad uneven.

The intertwined stories are fascinating. But we get more of the researcher than we need, and less of Beethoven than we want. Much more of the woman's physical degeneration than necessary and less of a mother-daughter resolution than desirable. But the stubborn perseverance and indefatigable spirit of the historical figure and the fictional one are perfectly paralleled. The final minuet, which is, in fact, the final variation, brings the two worlds together. Would that Katherine's post-mortem meeting with Beethoven had given her, or us, some insight or answers. We'll probably never know what drove Beethoven to be consumed by Diabelli's ditty. But the play certainly piques our intellectual and musical curiosity.

"33 Variations" runs through May 4 at the La Jolla Playhouse

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'A Little Night Music' and 'Blue Bonnet Court'



Secret longings and unexpected couplings. Sometimes even dangerous liaisons. Two local productions take an unconventional approach to love - of the cynical and the secretive variety.

The skeptical view of romance and matrimony comes from Stephen Sondheim, the typically-less-than-amorous composer of punishingly difficult melodies with brilliant, tongue-twisting lyrics. His rarely-staged 1973 chamber musical, "A Little Night Music," is trickier than most, since it's completely composed in three-quarter time. Inspired by the 1950s Bergman film, "Smiles of a Summer Night," the wistful musical considers a weekend of wealthy Swedes, lovers of all ages and temperaments, mostly fickle or unfaithful. No one seems particularly Swedish in this production, but the character types and their machinations are universal, and just about everyone gets what he or she wants or deserves by the end. The show is a daunting challenge for most singers and theater groups. So, it's especially impressive for a small, young company like Cygnet Theatre. And it makes for a thrilling start of their newest venture, taking over the Old Town Theatre.

There, amid the spring-break revels and bathtub-sized margaritas, this intimate production flaunts its intelligence and flair. The minimalist set is beautifully lit. The direction is nimble and the costumes are stunning. Though the chorus is at times a tad shrill as it waltzes on and off the stage to comment on the tangle of amorous intrigues, the ensemble is outstanding.

A stellar ensemble is also assembled at Diversionary Theatre, for "Blue Bonnet Court," a joint production with Moxie Theatre. Zsa Zsa Gershick's 2006 dramedy, set in 1940s Texas, tackles thorny themes like homophobia and hidden love, heroism, racism and anti-Semitism. Secrets and lies abound in a double-standard world of closeted Hollywood queens and military he-men. The characters are fascinating and multi-faceted, and under the skillful direction of Delicia Turner Sonnenberg, a wonderful ensemble plumbs their depth and repressed sexuality. Even in wartime, in a ramshackle motel like the Blue Bonnet Court, love can take root between a hard-nosed, New York Jewish, journalistic "sob-sister" and a covertly educated and passionate African American chambermaid. All the yearning is clandestine here, but once someone takes a risk and flouts the norms, the chutzpah can be contagious. Not everyone winds up happy; no neat, tidy resolutions here. In fact, given the challenges ahead for the interracial lesbian couple, Gershick is working on a sequel. But she's already accomplished a great deal: interweaving humor and hypocrisy, placing our societal divides and deceptions under a glaring, hothouse Texas light.

Both productions are eye-openers, for their artistry and their sometimes unsavory revelations. If you haven't been to the small theaters of San Diego, you're missing out on a boatload of provocative ideas and dramatic passions.

The Moxie/Diversionary co-production of "Bluebonnet Court" runs through April 13 at Diversionary Theatre in Hillcrest.

The Cygnet Theatre production of "A Little Night Music" continues at the Old Town Theatre, through May 4.

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