

Review: ‘Glass Menagerie’ shatteringly good at Bridge Street

Catskill theater finds full force of Tennessee Williams’ poetic disintegration of a family

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The Wingfield family, with the long-departed father looming from a photo in the background, are, from left, Brett Mack as Tom, Leigh Strimbeck at Amanda and Sarah Jayne Rothkopf as Laura in “The Glass Menagerie,” running at Bridge Street Theatre in Catskill through Oct. 15.



CATSKILL — In Bridge Street Theatre’s excellent production of “The Glass Menagerie,” which launched the career of Tennessee Williams in 1944, the deceptive, destructive effects of memory are powerfully demonstrated. The production runs only through Oct. 15, so see it if you can.

The ruinous work of an oft-misremembered past haunts and shapes each of the characters in their own way, especially Amanda, once a Southern belle but now living in a Depression-era St. Louis apartment with two adult children in their 20s. Leigh Strimbeck’s flawless portrayal of Amanda makes her a dynamo of delusion, keeping the present at bay with coquettishness unsuited to her age and shrill demands when reality can’t be ignored.

As directed by Bridge Street co-founder Steven Patterson, disappointment defines the family, who were abandoned by Amanda’s husband when the children were in elementary school — though a large photo of him hangs center stage, looming as large as his absence. Patterson and his cast have clear command of the tricky dynamics of the play, from the overall shape and pace to tiny moments like Amanda examining a tissue after blowing her nose and Tom (Brett Mack) choosing “gosh” over “God” in an exclamation, because he knows the latter would upset his mother. The production illuminates individual relationships within the family as well as

the interplay of their well-worn daily routines; they start with Amanda trilling “Rise and shine, rise and shine!” each morning and end late at night, when Tom stumbles home after a drunken evening at the movies, where, it seems clear, his adventures weren’t found only on the screen.

For Strimbeck’s Amanda, desperation seeps through the leaky dam of her denial. She knows Tom has his father’s restlessness and knows, too, that his departure would be even more devastating. She has few employable skills beyond selling magazine subscriptions over the phone to acquaintances who don’t want to hear from her, and Laura (Sarah Jayne Rothkopf) suffers from unconquerable shyness more crippling than her limp, the result of a childhood illness.

Sensing Tom’s likeliness to leave the family, Amanda recruits him to bring to dinner the only friend from his warehouse job, hoping the young man will become a suitor for Laura. Jim (Russell Sperberg) knew Tom in high school, where Jim was a star as a jock, thespian and debater. He also, although no one realizes this until too late, was a magnet for a quietly besotted Laura.

After the tizzy of the first half, with the whirlwind that is Amanda’s interactions with her children, Patterson sharply slows the action for the long scene between Jim and Laura. With exquisite rhythms and pacing to the scene, the pair sit on the floor by candlelight as Jim, with gentle if misplaced self-confidence, tries to buoy Laura. Rothkopf’s Laura timidly unfurls under his gaze, and Sperberg, aptly cast for his lanky height and intuitive grasp of the character, shapes Jim’s earnest if clumsy intentions.

This will end badly, of course, and should that not be clear, Amanda later actually says, “Things have a way of turning out so badly.” The same sentence is projected at the top of the set, one of more than 20 such legends specified for projection in the script as part of what Patterson and co-founder John Sowle, who designed the set and lighting, have said was a determination to be as faithful as possible to Williams’ original. I’ve never liked the projections -- thinking now, as I did when playing Tom in a production in high school, that they’re unnecessary and melodramatic. For instance, one says “Terror!”; another, “Not Jim!” That fealty extends to the incidental music created for the original production by composer and writer Paul Bowles, which to my ears too often sounds like tinkly intrusion.

On the drive back from Catskill following Friday’s opening, my companion and I mulled over why a company would produce “The Glass Menagerie” again, and why now. Part of it is the dedication by Patterson and Sowle, who usually choose newer or lesser known works, to present one classic a season, as in [2021's magnificent “Long Day’s Journey into Night.”](#) It’s also a commercial consideration. Opening night was almost sold out, which isn’t usually the case for Bridge Street, even with the company’s record of quality productions.

Such musings aside, revisiting an important work for a close examination of human relationships is reason enough. Like an orchestra choosing Beethoven’s Ninth or Barber’s “Adagio for Strings,” another “Glass Menagerie” needs no excusing or explaining if it’s as well done as this one.