

REVIEW: Bridge Street Theatre's 'The Glass Menagerie' is a 'clear, lucid, insightful rendering' of Williams' intentions

[Jeffrey Borak](#)



CATSKILL, N.Y. — Watching director Steven Patterson’s evocative production of “The Glass Menagerie” at Bridge Street Theatre, it’s not difficult to understand why Tennessee Williams’ “memory” play is high among the icons of classical American theater.

The play premiered in 1944; its narrative looks back to “that quaint period, the thirties, when the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind,” the play’s narrator, Tom Wingfield, says in his opening monologue.

The setting is the St. Louis apartment Tom (Brett Mack) shared with his mother, Amanda Wingfield (Leigh Strimbeck) and his sister, Laura (Sarah Jayne Rothkopf). They’ve been doing the best they can to survive since his father (who is seen in a large photograph that has its place of prominence in the apartment) walked out on the family 16 years earlier. “A telephone man who fell in love with long distance,” Tom says and Amanda echoes later in the play with a blend of bitter regret and blithe dismissal.

The family’s economic lifeline is Tom’s salary from his low level job at a shoe warehouse. Amanda contributes by selling magazine subscriptions by phone.

These are lives marked by hope, dreams, expectations — realistic or not — and the consequences of lives that fall short of those hopes and dreams.

Tom (as played by Mack with wry wit and defensive detachment) is restless; driven by an urgent sense that life has more to offer than a job in a warehouse. He drinks, smokes, finds his own reality at the movies. He’s a wannabe writer who feels held back at every turn by a mother whose sense of abandonment drives her to push Tom and Laura to make up for her own failures in life. Her expectation was a high life of wealth and comfort as the wife of one of the dozens of gentlemen — sons of wealthy plantation owners — who she said came calling by the dozens. Her reality is a broken marriage to a telephone company employee, two children she is doing the

best to love in her own, overly protective way. While she is given to seeming flights of exaggeration and illusion about her past and bemoaning the bad hands she has been dealt, Amanda, especially as played by Strimbeck, is a survivor — wily, resourceful, pragmatic; at the same time intrusive, unyielding; protective of her own vulnerabilities.

Chief among Tom's reasons for not leaving sooner than he does is Laura, his 24-year-old sister, who, due to a childhood illness, walks with a slight limp. She finds refuge from the world outside in a world of her own marked by old phonograph records and particularly her precious collection of glass animals, chief among them a unicorn.

Amanda's effort to make Laura independent and better prepared for life by enrolling her in business college is a disaster. She pressures Tom into bringing home someone from the warehouse as a gentleman caller for Laura — someone who, fate willing, will become permanent in Laura's life.

That the gentleman turns out to be someone Laura had a crush on in high school is a shamelessly manipulative device that, in the hands of a lesser playwright, would backfire mightily. In Williams' hands, however, the extended second act scene between Laura and the dinner guest, Jim O'Connor (Russell Sperberg) is the play's dramatic and emotional payoff, especially as played here with a compassion, delicacy and nuance I've rarely seen in the many experiences I've had of this play.

Sperberg's Jim is a decent, sincere, well-intentioned young man. Extremely popular, and successful, in high school, he seemed destined for achievement and accomplishment. Now, six years out of high school, at the age of 23, he is a shipping clerk at the warehouse. He acknowledges to Laura that while he may be "disappointed," he is not discouraged. He is studying public speaking and taking a night class in radio engineering in the expectation that those skills will prepare him for a career in television. Sperberg's remarkably insightful, subtly crafted portrayal conveys a sense that Jim's bravado and optimism are as much a barrier against his own fear of failure — a weapon against becoming discouraged — as it is conviction.

Rothkopf responds accordingly. Laura's delicacy and fragility shines; hope glimmers ever so slightly, especially in a deeply affecting, exquisite moment when Jim, moved by Laura, kisses her. Breathtaking ... literally and figuratively.

Together with his cast and his remarkable designers — Michelle Rogers, costumes and particularly John Sowles' haunting lighting and set design — and his use of the music composed by Paul Bowles for the play's original production, Patterson has delivered a clear, lucid, insightful rendering that makes good on his hope to, as he said in a recent interview in *The Berkshire Eagle*, "illuminate as best we can what Williams had in mind."