



**THE GLASS
MENAGERIE**
BY TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

**EDUCATION
PACK**



“THE PLAY IS MEMORY. BEING A MEMORY PLAY, IT IS DIMLY

STAGING THE PLAY

In the production notes that accompany the play, Tennessee Williams describes THE GLASS MENAGERIE as a ‘memory play’¹, a definition which is re-iterated by Tom’s opening narration. What might this definition mean to a Director? How might it affect the style and atmosphere of a production? And how will the Creative Team realise these ideas? In the weeks before rehearsals we caught up with Director Braham Murray to discuss these questions...

THE ROYAL EXCHANGE: A MEMORY THEATRE

Williams describes ‘a new, plastic theatre which must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions’². Braham Murray explains that ‘Tennessee Williams was obviously very fed up with the tyranny of the proscenium arch and wanted somehow to break it down and move away from naturalism. As a result, he talks about THE GLASS MENAGERIE being a memory play and he writes all kinds of stage directions in to achieve this – he wants music, projections of images, and ‘legends’ (or subtitles) to talk about the essence of the scenes. What’s fascinating is that when I read the play I thought yes, but, if Tennessee Williams had known the play was being done at the Royal Exchange he wouldn’t have put all those directions in, because the Royal Exchange is a memory theatre – a theatre where you can conjure up magic.’

In his opening speech Tom tells us, ‘I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion’³. Braham describes how in the Royal Exchange, ‘we are like Tom’s magician with his sleeves rolled up – everything is on show, you can see how the magic is being created, and so you and your imagination become a part of it – you are included in it.’

WHY NOT?

Stage the first scene from THE GLASS MENAGERIE, first with the audience sitting ‘end-on’ (as in a traditional proscenium arch theatre) and then in the round. How does this change the experience for actors and audience? How else might you seat the audience, and what impact might this have on the scene?

Theatre in the round allows an intimate relationship between actor and audience. It also allows actors to move more freely and naturally because, unlike in Proscenium Arch theatres, they don’t have to worry about always facing the audience. By not disguising the fact that you are in a theatre, putting on a play, you are in fact able to get in some way closer to reality – to find a kind of ‘story truth’, or as Williams puts it, ‘a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are.’⁴

DESIGN CHALLENGES

Despite the fact that the Royal Exchange Theatre is in many ways suited to the style and atmosphere of THE GLASS MENAGERIE, there are practical problems to staging the play in the space. One challenge was deciding the positioning for the fire escape, a crucial location in the play. In the round, great care has to be taken that built structures do not obstruct any of the audience’s view.



THE GLASS MENAGERIE Model Box by Designer Simon Higlett

Also, in the script, the apartment is divided into separate rooms. In his stage directions Williams specified gauze scenery should be used to do this – when lit from the front the gauze creates the illusion of a solid wall, but it becomes transparent when lit from behind. Williams’ intention was for scenes behind the gauze to appear and disappear magically – just as they do in memory. Dividing the space in this way

would be problematic in the round. Braham explains, ‘In our theatre, if you divide the stage, then for a lot of the time a large part of the audience is looking over a kind of ravine at the other thing.’

WHY NOT?

Look through this pack at the images taken from the production scrapbook of Designer Simon Higlett. These are just a few of his many images of fire escapes, signage and washing lines, all sourced and collected to inspire and inform the look of the set for THE GLASS MENAGERIE. Why not choose another aspect of the set (e.g. the furniture or the glass menagerie itself) and produce a scrapbook of reference material.

DESIGN SOLUTIONS

In order to solve these potential problems, Braham worked with Designer Simon Higlett, for what he describes as ‘the longest time I can remember working on a design.’

In the final design the fire escape is built out in a central position and made from a very fine mesh so everyone can see the action – even those sitting underneath. The apartment is no longer broken up into different rooms. Instead, there are different objects in the space, each of which is crucial to the different characters on the stage. These objects include Tom’s writing desk, Laura’s glass menagerie and Amanda’s dinner table. So, when the scene

LY LIGHTED, IT IS SENTIMENTAL, IT IS NOT REALISTIC.” (Tom, Scene One)

changes, the action simply moves to the object which is at the centre of it. The objects are sunken into the floor almost as if they are no longer really there – this has a similar effect to Williams’ gauze scenery – creating the dream-like, otherworldly quality of memory.

This design concept also keys in to Williams’ opening stage direction, where he states, ‘Memory takes a lot of poetic licenses. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the articles it touches.’⁵ Staging the play in this way means that the Creative Team are working with what Braham describes as ‘a completely different language’ – they are not in any way tied to realism – the lighting for example can be very fluid, with objects or actors illuminated depending on what is being remembered. Braham sums up what they are aiming for as, ‘creating a tapestry of how one remembers, how one dreams.’

WHY NOT?

Draw a map from memory of a place that was important to you in childhood – your bedroom, your Grandparents’ house, the walk to school. Use a scale which shows not how big things actually were, but how large they are in your imagination – so a barking dog might look larger than the house it lived in for example.

WHY NOT?

Make a list of all the physical locations mentioned in the play, and then draw a map showing where each of these locations are in relation to each other. How far away, for example, do you imagine the movies are from the apartment? Use your map to explore where each character goes each day – Tom’s journey might take him from the warehouse, to the apartment to the movies, for example. Add to your map with quotations describing each place.

THE WORLD OUTSIDE THE APARTMENT

The action of the play takes place entirely in the Wingfield family’s apartment. There are however numerous other locations which play a key part in the story, and the vivid sense of a world outside adds to the feeling of claustrophobia within the household. As well as the key objects which make up the apartment, all around the space there are other objects from the past – jonquils or the sign from the Paradise Dance Hall for example. These conjure the world of the character’s memories, and can be used when needed to counter point the action. The sense of an outside world which the family are somehow separate from is also very well suited to the Royal Exchange, because the Theatre is a space within a space.

‘IN MEMORY EVERYTHING SEEMS TO HAPPEN TO MUSIC.’⁶

The jazz music from the Paradise Dance Hall across the alley frequently spills into the Wingfield apartment – creating a sense of the time and place in which the play is set, and also reiterating the sense of a world which the family are not part of. Coupled with the records that Laura plays on Victrola, this is the ‘real’ music in the play. There is also what Composer Akintayo Akinbode describes as ‘emotional music’, which he will be composing for this

production. He explains, ‘Using music can intensify a scene, charging the atmosphere.’ He adds ‘The Royal Exchange is a very special auditorium. Because you don’t have the actors in one place and the audience in one place, achieving a stereo image with sound is tricky. What you do have is the ability to produce music from in front, behind, above, and below the audience, as well as outside of the module. This creates endless wonderful possibilities.’



WHY NOT?

Work with a group and gather a pile of objects. Sit in a circle with the objects in the middle. Take turns to pick up an object. Imagine you are a character who owns that object. Speak to the group as your character and explain why that object is important to you – why you have kept it, or why you remember it.

“I WAS FIRED FOR WRITING A POEM ON THE LID OF A SHO

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' LIFE AND

The advice offered to aspiring writers searching for storylines usually includes, 'write about what you know'. Thomas Lanier Williams the third – known to us as Tennessee Williams – spent his whole career doing just that. Unfortunately, even though his family was a rich source of inspiration, it was also a sad drama in its own right.

Thomas was born on 26 March 1911 in Mississippi, in the southern states of America. His father Cornelius was a travelling salesman who spent long periods away from home, and when he was at home he became increasingly abusive. So Thomas, his sister Rose and his brother Dakin spent a lot of time with their mother Edwina. She was an unusual lady, a smothering parent, obsessed by fantasies of living the perfect 'Southern Belle' life. However, it was probably Edwina that gave the future writer the inspiration and passion for story telling. At the age of five, Thomas developed a paralytic disease that left him unable to walk for almost two years. Worried by this inactivity, his mother encouraged him to read and use his imagination to break free from his confinement. It was also during those early years that Thomas became very close to his sister Rose. Rose suffered from serious mental illness and wasn't properly treated due to the ineffective diagnosis and medicines of the early 1900s. It was probably due to the illness of both Thomas and Rose that their father constantly shunned the pair in favour of their brother Dakin.

Imagine being paralysed, confined in a house during the long hot American Summers with a lonely mother, an abusive father and a vulnerable, ill sister. This stifling atmosphere, the sadness and the strong and tragic female characters, run through almost all of Williams' work.

WHY NOT?

Take a look at some of Williams' other works and see how they mirror his real life experiences. For example, look out for evidence of Tennessee's mistrust of the society treatment of 'ill' women as portrayed through Blanche Dubois in *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE* or Catherine in *SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER*, and the references to homosexuality, alcoholism and mental illness in *CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF*.



THE GLASS MENAGERIE Model Box by Designer Simon Higlett

In fact the majority of his female characters are dramatic recreations of either his mother or his sister.

It wasn't until he escaped his problematic family environment that Thomas started to creatively reflect on his life. In fact it was at Missouri-Columbia University that he became the man we know. His College friends nicknamed him 'Tennessee' because of his rich southern accent. It stuck.

Williams went through bouts of depression throughout his life, believed to have been triggered by his parents' radical treatment of his sister. In 1937 after many years in hospital, they agreed to let the doctors perform a lobotomy, removing part of the front of her brain.

The operation failed and Rose was incapacitated for the rest of her life. Tennessee never forgave his parents and he turned to alcohol and prescription drugs in an attempt to relieve his depression.

Williams believed that his life didn't achieve any emotional stability until he met and fell in love with Frank Merlo in 1947. Frank was an Italian American who gave Tennessee the strength and passion to write some of his most famous pieces. They stayed together until Frank's death in 1961 when once again Tennessee was plunged into a ten year depression – a period he would later describe as his 'stoned age'.

This is a story of a troubled man who felt isolated from his own family, and outcast from society and religion because of his sexuality. Yet he was able to turn all these demons and lifelong sadness into a powerful theatrical voice. He won world wide critical acclaim and numerous literary and theatrical awards, including 2 Pulitzer prizes.

WHY NOT?

Write down fifty of your own memories – be specific. You don't need to share them with anyone else, instead keep them as a reference to inspire your own creative writing.

“TOEBOX”

(Tom, Scene Seven)

HOW DID IT HAVE ITS INFLUENCE ON HIS WORK

Tennessee Williams' death was as much of a drama as his life. In 1983 at the age of 71 he died whilst putting eye drops into his eyes. As a matter of routine Williams would put the eye drop bottle lid in his mouth and lean back to administer the drops. It is believed that his gag reflex was suppressed due to alcohol and drugs and he choked on the lid. In the words of biographer Donald Spoto, Tennessee Williams was “a man more disturbing, more dramatic, richer and more wonderful than any character he created.”⁷

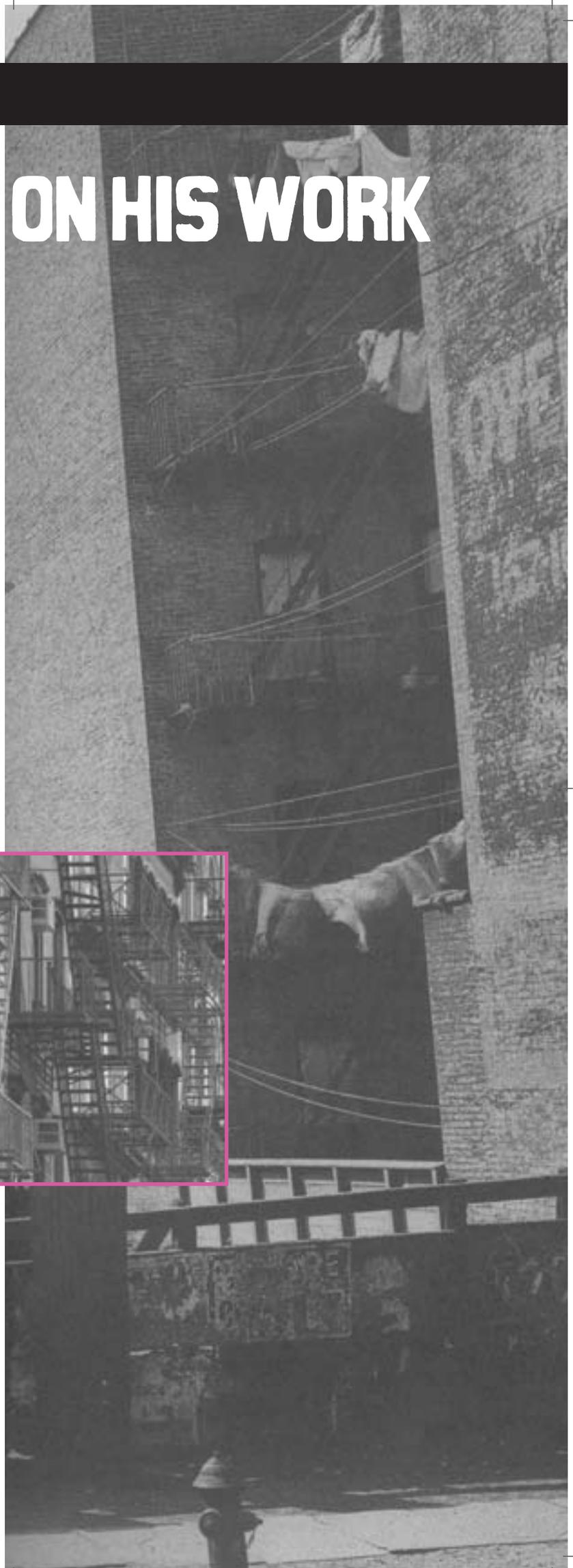
WHY NOT?

If you are interested in finding out more about Tennessee Williams' life, why not read *THE UNKNOWN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS* by his biographer Lyle Leverich? It gives a rich insight into the unknown years of his life.

Like Tom, Tennessee Williams worked for a period for the Continental Shoe company. His workmates there included Stanley Kowalski – a name which Williams went on to immortalise in *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE*. He borrowed other details from his surroundings to use in his work too. The story of the word ‘pleurosis’ being misheard as ‘blue roses’ came from a childhood friend (whose father was a Surgeon), whose foreign-speaking patients misunderstood his English. Williams takes these everyday details from his and his acquaintances' lives and gives them a poetic resonance.

**WHY NOT?**

Work with a group, and in pairs tell each other a true story – something that has happened to you. Once you have listened to your partner's story, swap pairs – but this time instead of telling your new partner your true story tell them the story you have just heard. Continue round the group in this way – always telling the last story you heard. With each re-telling, stories about everyday incidents will develop and grow. Listen back to the stories, and discuss how they have changed.



“AND I COULD HAVE BEEN MRS DUNCAN J. FITZHUGH, MINNIE AMANDA WINGFIELD: A COMPLEX CHARACTER”

As a girl growing up in Blue Mountain, Amanda had her pick of eligible bachelors, but she picked the wrong one and has ended up living a life very different from that which she imagined for herself. The difference between where Amanda would like to be, and where she is in reality is one of the many contrasts in this complex and contradictory character. She is fiercely protective of her children and at the same time very critical of them. Director Braham Murray describes the fundamental conflict which often exists between a mother and her son, ‘the Mother desperately wants her son to succeed, but at the same time, she wants to keep him with her.’ Amanda’s relationship with Laura is also complicated. Amanda says to Laura ‘I’ve told you never, never to use that word. Why, you’re not crippled, you just have a little defect – hardly noticeable, even!’⁸ but in her final, terrible argument with Tom she speaks of Laura as, ‘an un-married sister who’s crippled and has no job!’⁹ Asked about Amanda’s relationship with her children, Brenda Blethyn says ‘Children are often embarrassed by their parents, but it doesn’t mean that parents aren’t doing what they do with the best intentions. She is a mother in difficult times’.

WHY NOT?

Write a letter from Amanda to one of her friends in Blue Mountain describing her home and life in St Louis. How honest might she be?

In his character notes, Tennessee Williams describes Amanda like this:

AMANDA WINGFIELD (the mother)

A little woman of great but confused vitality clinging frantically to another time and place. Her characterization must be carefully created, not copied from type. She is not paranoiac, but her life is paranoia. There is much to admire in Amanda, and as much to love and pity as there is to laugh at. Certainly she has endurance and a kind of heroism, and though her foolishness makes her unwittingly cruel at times, there is tenderness in her slight person.

This description not only demonstrates the contradictions in Amanda, it also shows how important she is to the play. The way that Williams refers to her as ‘the mother’, is significant. Tom and Laura are described as *her* son and *her* daughter. This suggests the extent to which they are defined by her. Amanda is central to the family – and to the story.

WHY NOT?

Write a detailed biography, telling Amanda’s life story. Find evidence in the play, and then use your imagination to build on it. What, for example, might Amanda’s relationship with her own family have been like? You might also want to use ideas from your improvised scenes (see below) to help you.

Casting Brenda Blethyn as Amanda has made the Royal Exchange production possible. Braham Murray explains: ‘It’s a play which has been done quite often but very rarely has the right actress played Amanda. A lot of people say that it hasn’t been played really well since the very first production. I thought that to have Brenda play it would be perfect.’

The first actress to take on the role was Laurette Taylor in 1944. She was one of the great stars of the American theatre, known for her eccentricity and larger than life personality as well as her performances. For some years she had been out of favour with theatre producers because of her unreliability due to alcoholism, and *THE GLASS MENAGERIE* was seen as a glorious comeback. Her performance received rapturous acclaim and Tennessee Williams’ himself described ‘the extraordinary power’ of the performance. Actresses including Jessica Tandy (New York, 1983), Zoe Wannamaker (London, 1995) and Katherine Hepburn (1973 television version) have tackled the role since, but no performance has been so universally acclaimed. For Brenda, ‘It’s really exciting to play such a wonderfully complex character’.

WHY NOT?

Explore the character of Amanda further by improvising key moments from her life. For example improvise a scene showing:

- Amanda as a girl, receiving her ‘gentlemen callers’
- The first meeting between Amanda and Laura and Tom’s father
- The moment Amanda first moved into their St Louis apartment.
- The conversation with Laura’s teacher, where Amanda discovers that Laura dropped out of Rubicam’s Business College.

These scenes will help you to give Amanda a back history – and a life beyond the play itself.

IND YOU! BUT – I PICKED YOUR FATHER!”

(Amanda, Scene One)

EX CHARACTER

BUILDING A CHARACTER

A playwright gives us three key ways to explore and examine characters. We can look at what that character says, at what that character does, and at what other characters say about them. Copy and complete this table, picking out key examples for each category. Think about what each example tells us about Amanda.

WHAT AMANDA SAYS:

“One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain – your mother received – seventeen! – gentlemen callers!” (Scene 1)

WHAT AMANDA DOES:

Stops off at Rubicam’s Business College to speak to Laura’s teachers about Laura having a cold, and to ask about her progress. (Scene 1)

WHAT OTHERS SAY ABOUT HER:

“I haven’t enjoyed one bite of this dinner because of your constant directions on how to eat it.” (Tom, Scene 1)

The dashes here suggest pauses – a kind of giddy, breathless excitement. The way she sets the scene, ‘one Sunday afternoon’, is reminiscent of a fairy tale – showing how Amanda has romanticised her own past. It is interesting she says, ‘your mother’ and not ‘I’ here...

WHY NOT?

Look at your table and find examples that contradict each other. Does how Amanda describes herself contrast with what Tom says about her, for example? Discuss what these contradictions tell us about Amanda. What potential challenges do they give an actress and how might she be able to overcome them?

Use evidence from your grid to hold a debate analysing the character of Amanda. One group should argue that Amanda is a selfless mother who always put her children first, another that she is extremely shallow and doesn’t care about anything except for appearances, and another that she is extremely lonely and that this motivates all her actions.

Discuss what might be wrong with a production which chose to portray Amanda simply according to one of the above descriptions. If for example, Amanda was played as entirely selfless and always acting in the best interests of her children, how might this change the way that we view Tom?

Brenda Bleythn says ‘Amanda is so often vilified, but it is important as an actor to play the reality and not the effect of the character. For instance, I need to ask myself what makes her get up in the morning?’



‘THIS LARGER-THAN-LIFE-SIZE PHOTOGRAPH OVER THE MANTEL’ 10

On the first day of rehearsals, when the acting company and Creative Team come together for the first time and the Director explains some of the ideas behind their production, Braham Murray described how the fifth character in the play – Tom and Laura’s father – is at once absent and very present.

WHY NOT?

Write three memories of Tom and Laura’s father – one each from the perspective of his daughter, his son and his wife. Try to be as detailed and as specific as possible.

AND WHY NOT?

If you liked *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*, why not look at some of the works which inspired Tennessee Williams, and also at some writers and artists who have been inspired by him? You could also explore the themes and backgrounds from the play through films, music and further reading. Directors, Designers, Composers and Actors often explore a play in this way...

THE SEAGULL, Anton Chekhov

Director Braham Murray suggests that, 'Tennessee Williams was very much under the spell of Chekhov, and you can feel that in the play.' Look out in particular for Konstantin's description of a new kind of theatre which shows life, 'the way it comes to you in dreams'.

LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT, Eugene O'Neill

Like *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*, this is a deeply autobiographical play. Unlike Tennessee Williams, O'Neill only managed to write his own story at the very end of his career and then said the play couldn't be performed until after his death.

THE DEATH OF A SALESMAN, Arthur Miller

Miller was a contemporary of Williams and acknowledged his influence over some of the ideas in this play.

ANGELS IN AMERICA: MILLENIUM APPROACHES, Tony Kushner

First performed in 1990 this play explores homosexual experience in America, in a style described by *Variety* magazine as an 'epic theatrical fever-dream.' Of Williams, Kushner said, 'Tennessee wasn't out, but he sorted of outed sexuality in general.'

THE GREAT GATSBY, F. Scott Fitzgerald

A novel, exploring the darker side of the American Dream.

JEALOUSY

A film, starring Bette Davis, showing the kind of Southern living Amanda dreams of.

How many film adaptations of Williams' work you can find? How does his theatrical style translate on to the screen?



Credits

Edited and produced by Exchange Education, with contributions from Braham Murray, Akintayo Akinbode and Brenda Blethyn. With special thanks to Designer Simon Higlett whose design resources are reproduced with his kind permission.

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- 1 Production Notes; Williams, T., 1945. *The Glass Menagerie*. London: Methuen Student Edition
- 2 Production Notes; Williams, T., 1945. *The Glass Menagerie*. London: Methuen Student Edition
- 3 Tom, Scene 1; Williams, T., 1945. *The Glass Menagerie*. London: Methuen Student Edition
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