

Menagerie Reimagined

Jane Comfort brings *Faith Healing* back to Joyce Soho

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By SARAH CARLSON

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Memory, regret and yearning take on religious significance for the main character of Jane Comfort's *Faith Healing*, a dance theater work based on Tennessee Williams's classic *The Glass Menagerie*. Tom, expertly played by Sean Donavon, starts the show as an exuberant faith healer, sparkly sequins filling in for fire and brimstone. He is larger than life as he calls forth his fellow performers from the audience: his disabled sister, Laura (Heather Christian) and his overbearing mother, Amanda (Mark Dendy), both presumably in need of healing. This brilliant fantasy opening segues inevitably into mundane existence. Tom is not a preacher but a factory worker; his sister and mother make his life feel like a disappointment.



Photo by Johan Elbers

Mark Dendy, mother

JANE COMFORT: FAITH HEALING

Choreography by: **Jane Comfort and Company.**

Directed by: **Jane Comfort.**

Dancers: **Heather Christian, Leslie Cuyjet, Mark Dendy, Sean Donavon .**

Music by: **Richard Landry, Brooks Williams.**

Set design by: **Liz Prince.**

Costumes by: **Liz Prince.**

Lighting design by: **David Ferri.**

Text: **Tennessee Williams; additional text by Jane Comfort.**

SCHEDULE

Joyce Soho

October 27-31, 2010

Comfort's rendition of *The Glass Menagerie*, like other recent modern dance adaptations (Elkin's *Fraülein Maria*, Leichter's *The Wiz*), is spare in its conception. Movement is emphasized and featured as a communicator of subtext. As Amanda speaks to her daughter about her hopes for the future, Laura contorts. Her discomfort at the thought of being set up on a date is displayed physically and evokes the socially crippling shyness that binds her. A fight between Tom and his mother, primarily verbal in the original play, becomes a knock-down, roll-'em-out battle. The fury is real, not satire, providing a stark view of disturbingly violent family dysfunction.

Tom deals with his depressing reality by immersing himself in cinematic escapism. Comfort runs with this idea, deftly weaving excerpts of film into the fabric of her story. In a steamy seduction scene from *The Big Easy*, Tom embraces the "Woman in the Movies" — the gorgeous Leslie Cuyjet — burying his head in her bosom all the while his mother chats with him from offstage. The tension builds as we sense Tom's temptation to leave gritty reality behind for good. But Tom is not alone in his guilty pleasure. Each character achieves a

similar moment of transcendence. Indeed, who amongst us hasn't flown with Superman or fallen out the humdrum into the arms of Rhett Butler? But what happens when possibilities offered onscreen seem more enticing than the ones in real life?

The Glass Menagerie is a story of regret told in retrospect. Richard Landry's eerily beautiful saxophone permeates much of the action, suggesting a past that haunts. First premiered in 1993, *Faith Healing* brings its own history full circle with Mark Dendy reprising his original role as the Southern matriarch Amanda. Seventeen years older and wiser, Dendy is no doubt even better suited to the nagging nostalgic gravitas required for this role. His masterful performance rides effortlessly from humorous and relatable, to long-suffering and pitiable.

Sean Donavon and Heather Christian also shine as Tom and Laura. Both infuse their characters with a vibrancy and depth that go beyond Tennessee Williams' original script. Jane Comfort unveils irreverent aspects of Tom and Laura that make them seem more human and in doing so reinvigorates William's classic for the 21st century.

