

Tennessee Williams Gets Taken to the Dance

Jane Comfort revives her take on *The Glass Menagerie*

By **Deborah Jowitz** Wednesday, Nov 3 2010



Johan ElbersMark Dendy as Amanda Wingfield in Comfort's original 1993 version

In [Tennessee Williams's](#) 1944 play *The Glass Menagerie*, the characters' dreams intersect and collide—shattering the way the horn of Laura's glass unicorn breaks off when reality, in the form of the Gentleman Caller, obtrudes into the Wingfield household. In *Faith Healing*, Jane Comfort's marvelous 1993 interpretation of the play (just revived at the [Joyce Soho](#)), those dreams are expanded through choreography into a shimmering underlay for Williams's words.

In the text, the faded Southern belle Amanda, whose husband has run off, drifts into memories of her many suitors and imagines that her lame, excruciatingly shy daughter, [Laura](#), can master business college and get a job as a secretary. Either that, or get prettied up and find a husband. Amanda's son, [Tom](#), a surrogate for the playwright, dreams of escaping his humdrum job and his mother's daily chiding, and becoming a writer. Laura plays with her menagerie of little glass animals and, perhaps, wishes herself prettier and bolder.

Comfort's performers speak a great deal of Williams's dialogue, but add subtext through dance or stylized movement—sometimes poetically and indirectly, sometimes with repressed passion, sometimes hilariously. They also morph into other characters mentioned in the text. The casting is crucial. In this production, the role of Amanda is again performed by Mark Dendy. [Dendy](#) may be marginally less athletic than he was 17 years ago, but his startling rendition of Amanda has only grown in depth. His voice coaxes, rages, caresses sweet memories, and flattens bravely when the fantasies crumble around Amanda. The new members of the cast (Heather Christian as Laura, Sean Donovan as Tom, [Matthew Hardy](#) as the Gentleman Caller, and [Leslie Cuyjet](#) as the Woman in the Movies) inhabit their characters in ways subtly different from the original performers'

interpretations (Christian's Laura, for example, seems far more fidgety and mentally disturbed than Nancy Alfaro's was), and all are wonderful.

The characters slide into each other's visions. All of them at times echo Laura's fluttery little gestures that evoke her glass animals. Tom stars himself in movies (not necessarily of the play's period) that express his sexual fantasies (Hardy caresses Donovan from behind, while they mouth the dialogue of the prison seduction scene from *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*). But a dream of *Superman* (with the performers lip-synching the movie's soundtrack) features Laura as [Lois Lane](#) and the Gentleman Caller (a friend of Tom's from work) as [Clark Kent](#). To see Superman and his girl racing around the space and—lying on their bellies on neighboring stools, their arms spread—is to envision a Laura that Tom would love to see, liberated from her crippled body and introversion.

Many of Comfort's choices are surprising, but all are apt. When Amanda excoriates Laura for secretly dropping out of the secretarial course, Laura then imagines reversing the roles, just as she "imagines" ripping off the fluffy gingham dress her mother has dolled her up in to reveal a red-sequined sheath. The awkward scene between Laura and the Gentleman Caller underscores the confidence his apparent approval of her engenders; they both wear roller skates, and he gently induces her to take bigger steps until they're flying giddily around the room. An argument between Tom and his mother escalates into a furious wrestling match, no holds barred.

With the help of music by [Richard Landry](#) and [Brooks Williams](#), Comfort's whole production floats beautifully along, exposing the darkness beneath the play's currents. Written during a World War, summoning up the leas of a bygone South, and memorializing the playwright's sister (crippled by serious schizophrenia and eventually lobotomized), *The Glass Menagerie* script has its own powerful magic. Comfort's tactful humor and her glosses on the text do not diminish that, but can make it even more poignant. In his final speech, Tom says, "I left Saint Louis. I descended the steps of this fire escape for a last time and followed, from then on, in my father's footsteps, attempting to find in motion what was lost in space." I think that Comfort has given a new kind of motion to this beautiful lost-in-space-and-time play.