



Smashing! Actors Theatre of Alabama doesn't shy away from 'The Glass Menagerie' (video)

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By **Mary Colurso -- The Birmingham News**

Review rating: Four out of five stars.



Amanda Wingfield (played by Birmingham's Celeste Burnum) shoulders disappointment and moves on in "The Glass Menagerie." (The Birmingham News/Hal Yeager)

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama -- Some theater companies approach the classics gingerly, but **Actors Theatre of Alabama** has a much more confident approach.

Its inaugural show here, a production of Tennessee Williams' "**The Glass Menagerie**," grabs the 1944 drama by the throat and takes its family tension to a high pitch.

Good for director Will York, formerly head of the theater department at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. And good for his talented team of actors, led by local theater diva Celeste Burnum.

While respectful of the source material, they're not afraid to attack its complexities with passion. Others who've staged this particular work have leaned to an overly languid dreaminess, perhaps deferring to the narrator's initial remarks to the audience, telling them they're about to see "a memory play."

But memories don't have to be as delicate and dainty; they can be strong and vigorous.

That's the tone set by a new company in Birmingham, and their "Glass Menagerie" seems all the better for it.

Burnum stars as the main character, Amanda Wingfield, one of Williams' formidable-yet-damaged Southern belles. She's been

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disappointed in life and marriage, deserted by an ultra-charming "telephone man who fell in love with long distance."

Now, in 1930s St. Louis, Amanda struggles to reconcile her family's reduced circumstances -- poverty, isolation, a shabby apartment -- with her shining memories of the past and her hopes for two adult children. They're Tom (Jonathan Miles), a warehouse worker who longs for adventure; and Laura (Amanda Maddox), a painfully shy young woman who tends a collection of glass figurines.

The setting is claustrophobic. Amanda hovers over her children: planning and scheming, obsessing and worrying, dithering and dominating. But in her dragon-lady way, she does mean well. As portrayed by Burnum, this is the ultimate Williams heroine: a tragic figure who's admirable for her stubborn perseverance.

When the Wingfield family clashes, as they often do in "The Glass Menagerie," director York makes sure these are not wimpy quibbles. Faces get red. Voices get raised. Tears get shed. Anger simmers and boils, threatening a full-scale explosion.



Will York directs Actors Theatre of Alabama's first production, "The Glass Menagerie" by Tennessee Williams. (The Birmingham News/Hal Yeager)

Actors Miles (moody and frustrated) and Maddox (fearful yet loving) are up to the challenge, providing two essential links in the four-character play. The same goes for Trey York, in the smaller role of Jim O'Connor, the "gentleman caller" who comes to dinner, unwittingly entering the family's turmoil.

Don't imagine for a second, however, that Actors Theatre lets its "Glass Menagerie" run wild. Illusions may get shattered on stage (along with a symbolic glass figurine), but the production never strays into parody or goes over the top.

The cast is nicely balanced, even with Burnum's star turn. The play retains its poetic language, but seems grounded in reality. The set, lighting, sound and costume design are appropriate and effective.

One interesting choice here: York (or maybe Maddox) has decided to downplay an aspect of Laura's character. She's usually portrayed with a pronounced limp, the result of childhood illness and a source of great embarrassment for her. Basically, it causes her to withdraw from the rest of the world.

Maddox's Laura moves rather stiffly, but hardly limps at all. In this "Glass Menagerie," the emphasis is placed on her emotional drawbacks. It gives the story a different resonance, as the audience considers Laura's place in the family, her pain and her plight.

What: "The Glass Menagerie," presented by Actors Theatre of Alabama

Where: Birmingham Festival Theatre, 1901 1/2 11th Ave. South

When: Through Aug. 5; Thursdays through Saturdays, 7:30 p.m.; Sundays, 2:30 p.m.

Tickets: \$25; 205-777-5857

With "The Glass Menagerie," Actors Theatre of Alabama has made a powerful debut. And this production is sturdy enough to travel well; it moves to Provincetown, Mass., in September for the **Tennessee Williams Theater Festival**.

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