

## THEATRE IN LONDON JOURNALS

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*The Glass Menagerie*

Prior to this performance of *The Glass Menagerie*, I had read the play, watched the movie, and seen another production of it in Philadelphia. I had fallen in love with all three and had extremely high expectations coming into this production. But surprisingly, they were all met and on some occasions even exceeded. The theatrical space was very unique. The way the curtain was raised and lowered, the use of the balcony level, and the depth of the stage were features of a stage I was not used to seeing. But throughout the show, I found that the stage was utilized quite well. The details at the very back of the stage created a lot of depth in the set and really gave the illusion of a lived-in house. The height of the space, the stairs and ladder, and the steel beams of the second level added really great contrast between the cramped and cluttered home and the industrial vastness that existed outside of that.

For the first time in all my experience with *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom's opening monologue truly came alive for me. The actor who played Tom took the character in a very different direction than I had imagined or seen, but he was so committed and so precise that I was very quickly drawn to his interpretation. I had imagined Tom as a dreamer, someone who feels very stuck. Stifled by his mother, he becomes angry and resentful. This Tom seemed to take this reaction to an extreme. He seemed neurotic and psychologically damaged. His mannerisms were jumpy and nervous as if he was always itching to be somewhere else doing something else. I appreciated Tom's consistency and the risk the actor took in portraying him in this way.

Tom's narration tied the performance together and added a lot of depth to the show as a whole. This was, as Tom points out in his very first appearance, a memory play. And the director and designers did an absolutely unbelievable job of capturing this crucial aspect of *The Glass Menagerie*. The lighting, especially during the candlelit scene between Laura and Jim, was perfect. I loved the live musicians who stayed on the balcony for the entirety of the show and their beautiful music that captured every moment and emotion in a way that few things could. I also noted small details such as the absence of real food when the characters sat down to eat or drink. Because *The Glass Menagerie* is a memory play, it reflects the way the mind recalls things. In one's memory of an event, small details such as what one was eating is irrelevant. The choice not to include real food can be nicely contrasted with the oversized picture of Tom and Laura's father. The significance of this photo for Tom is reflected in the way he remembers it—extremely large and high above as if it is always watching over everything.

I think a lot of the respect I had for the piece can be attributed to the brilliance of the actual play and to Tennessee Williams' literary genius. The performance really dug into the text and pulled a lot more out of it than previous versions of *The Glass Menagerie* to which I had been exposed. The theme of light and the way it was incorporated throughout the play was magnificent. The disco ball and the light that shone through Laura's glass collection as well as the real firelight and candelabra added such beautiful significance to a motif that could be easily overlooked.

In this version, it was made obvious that Tom was an alcoholic. In the first stage rendition of the play I saw, this was made much less apparent. They left it much more ambiguous whether Tom goes drinking or goes to the movies. But I did note the dozens of ticket stubs that fell from Tom's pocket in one scene on the fire escape, which I really appreciated.

1/1/11

*A Flea in Her Ear*

I do not think that I fully understood what a farce was until seeing *A Flea in Her Ear* and being able to determine similarities between it and *Once Bitten*. Both seemed to deal with themes like miscommunication, marital issues, affairs, distrust, misunderstandings, and confusion in a rather comical way. Both had many characters and many doors. And both seemed relatively dramatic and not realistic, yet ridiculously entertaining.

One major difference I noted, however, was *A Flea in Her Ear*'s focus on different stereotypes and relying on these for a source of humor. Examples include the German who continually tried to get various women to sleep with him, the Spaniard with a ridiculous accent and a dangerously passionate temper, the simple-minded and very sexualized maid, and the utterly stupid and poorly-dressed alcoholic Poche who represented the lower class. Beneath the enormous amounts of laughter brought about by these ridiculous characters was a serious consideration of the way people form representations of others who are seemingly very different.

I do not think a single person in the theatre was not amazed and impressed by the main character's ability to change both his clothes and his character so quickly. I found myself accepting that he was two different people because the actor who played both Poche and Victor Emmanuel was so flawless in his ability to change characters. I was also surprised when I was genuinely touched by the relationship between Raymonde and Victor Emmanuel at the conclusion of the play. Although the happy ending was expected from a farce, this somehow seemed unexpectedly happier. I was able to get a true sense of the love between the two as evidenced by Raymonde's inability to actually cheat on her husband and Victor Emmanuel's willingness to seek help for his embarrassing condition in order to appease his wife.

The sets for *A Flea in Her Ear* were quite interesting. The sheer height of the sitting room was a feast for the eyes, but the intriguing choice of décor for the hotel set was even more striking. The entire thing was gold and luscious purple and seemed almost dream-like, giving off a whimsical, ethereal, and magical feel. The hotel scene was sandwiched by the sitting room scenes. The middle section of the play is when most of the confusion occurred, which all had to be eventually settled back at the house. The dreaminess and twirling confusion of the middle portion of *A Flea in Her Ear* was reflected in the hotel set, which I found to be very interesting. It seemed very unrealistic compared to the geometric, clean, polished, and realistic sitting room set.

1/3/11

*Beauty and the Beast*

I was very, very pleasantly surprised by this production. This version of *Beauty and the Beast* was extremely layered and definitely had much more to it than the label of a children's theatre production would lead one to believe. It was both genuinely entertaining—I found myself literally laughing aloud along with the children multiple times—and deeply moving. The double plot kept me thoroughly interested, and I really appreciated the mature jokes involving the play on the word fairy and the bit about wand-fondling.

The entire show was extremely inventive and creative. The audience participation made the entire experience very fun and also effectively managed to draw me into the magic of the performance. The audience was very active and openly reacted to the play, which added an element of involvement and investment in the story. But the slapstick comedy, magic tricks, silly jokes, and simplicity of the story did not take away from the detail, mastery, and commitment of the actors.

I loved the focus on Beauty's character in this version of the classic fairytale, and I loved being able to experience the slow and beautiful development of the relationship between Beauty and George. The details about her appreciation for nature, her curiosity regarding the house and its master, her enthusiasm for life, and her relationship with her mother added layers to Beauty's character and helped the story to come alive. The beast was also well-developed in the play. Small moments such as watching him struggle to eat his food and to sit down or watching him pace with nervousness before interacting with Beauty helped the audience empathize with the beast and understand the frustration of being trapped inside the body of a monster. Because the play took the time to develop both individual characters as well as the relationship between the two, the ending was even more joyous and touching.

The strong female characters in the play were very interesting features of this version. Beauty's individualism was so apparent. Her disregard for appropriate female dress and conduct and the fact that she proposed to George in the end gave *Beauty and the Beast* a feminist feel. This theme was furthered by the character Cecile. After being constantly berated by Mr. Pink, Cecile finally gains the strength and courage to stand up to him and eventually even take over the entire show. Both Mr. Pink and George are misunderstood, yet Cecile and Beauty are able to penetrate these tough exteriors and actually command and lead the relationships. Even a smaller female role like Lettuce showed cleverness, initiative, and depth.

Both the beast's appearance and his transformation were so creatively portrayed in this version. Although I was very accustomed to Disney's beast, this beast grew on me rather quickly. I loved that they put him on stilts to give him the large, clumsy, and uncoordinated feel needed to understand the struggle his character dealt with throughout the play. His transformation was less magical than the Disney version. The ultimate reversal of the fairy's

spell seemed like a birth or a shedding of the skin as the human George spilled out of the beastly fur on the table. I appreciated that the actor retained some of his animal characteristics when he first emerged.

1/7/11

*The Master Builder*

The depth of this show symbolically, metaphorically, and thematically was simply astounding. The set was quite simple, but it perfectly conveyed a feeling of isolation, darkness, and bleakness. It reminded me of a dungeon. Yet it also reminded me of the foundation of a house that was never actually built with the real dirt floor and short upright planks. I loved the contrast between height and depth as well as lightness and darkness throughout the production. The master builder had had his creative climax when he was building tall houses and churches with spires that reached high into the air. His turnaround was marked by a fear of heights and a place of residing that seemed to be dug deep into the ground. There were no windows and the long, endless staircase on the back wall gave the impression that his home was far beneath ground level. There was also a play between Solness' his name and the word sol, meaning sun. There was an additional play on words with the introduction of the word son. This was evocative of the master builder's deceased children, his fear of the younger generation and especially Brovik's son Ragnar, and Jesus Christ the son of man and the incarnate son of God.

The religious undertones of the play were extremely interesting. The master builder seemed to be challenging God in a sort of way. God is, after all, the master builder and creator of the universe. The demise of the master builder was brought about when he attempted to create a building that seemed to rival God in majesty and size. He conquered his fear by climbing the building but died a death reminiscent of the Fallen Angel in the Bible. I could not help but think

that his death was a divine punishment because he had refused to build churches after the deaths of his children and had built houses for ordinary people that rivaled the churches, the houses of God. He had also promised to build a kingdom in the sky for Hilda, which seemed like a challenge of the heavenly kingdom of the Father. Hilda even seemed to worship the master builder with an undying love and devotion that should be reserved for God.

The characters in the play were all a little insane. They really got inside the audience's heads and caused us to go a little crazy as well because we were constantly questioning reality and the truth of the people and events they recalled. Homes and houses are supposed to be a source of security, stability, happiness, and love. But in *The Master Builder*, this notion is completely turned on its head. Here, we feel little sense of safety or security. The houses are more like confinements and cause pain and memories of the past.

The acting in *The Master Builder* was absolutely and utterly phenomenal. Each character walked the fine line between villain and protagonist perfectly. I thought that the main actor was the most naturalistic actor we had seen on the entire trip. I admired the subtlety, precision, commitment, and complexity he brought to the role. I was also very impressed with his wife. I thought she did a fantastic job of continually gaining the audience's sympathy, then confusing us to the point where we questioned why we were even sympathizing with her at all. Her character was very intriguing. The play left the interpretation of her character to the audience. She could have either been crazy and psychologically damaged or she could have been able to hear the thoughts of the master builder like the other women and, therefore, been certain of his insanity.

This ambiguity translated to most aspects of the play and left the audience uncertain about most things they saw or heard. I do not believe that one can easily disregard the master

builder's claims about his ability to will things to happen. There were so many oddities and matching details in multiple accounts that I found myself believing alongside the master builder.