

The Glass Menagerie

Another favorite – I read this play a week before going to London. I saw the John Malkovich film in high school, but I didn't remember much of it. After I read the play, I thought Tennessee Williams was brilliant and I was really looking forward to seeing it in London. I also thought that our discussion of this play was the best class of this trip. We started out discussing truth and memory plays. Although Tom warns us that this is a memory play and therefore not realistic, I actually felt that it was quite realistic. Amanda's character may have been a bit exaggerated, but the other characters seemed fairly realistic to me.

Amanda's clinging to another time and place seemed exaggerated, but perhaps that is because this is how Tom remembers her. When she discusses all her gentlemen callers in the first scene, we just want to tell her, "Get over it!" She conveys herself as a beautiful young woman, wanted by all these gentlemen, when in reality this is only a fantasy that she cannot let go of. What is even sadder about her character is that she actually believes this fantasy is real. Toward the end of the play, she still talks about her gentlemen callers to Jim, which means she has not changed throughout the plot. She has failed to establish contact with reality, but she does not realize this.

However, we dislike her more than we should; she wants the best for her children but she doesn't have the right approach. This is demonstrated in the very first scene, when Amanda says to Tom during dinner, "Honey, don't *push* with your *fingers*. If you have to push with something, the thing to push with is a crust of bread. And chew – chew! ... Eat food leisurely, son, and really enjoy it... So chew your food and give your salivary glands a chance to function!" (Scene 1). While it is true that eating slowly is healthier, Amanda has annoyed Tom with her directions

on how to eat. She wants her son to enjoy his food, but her approach has led Tom to become irritated with her.

Amanda's method of getting a gentleman caller for Laura is also flawed. Laura knows that her mother's hopes are high when Tom invites Jim for dinner, so Laura feels tremendously pressured to make things go well, and combined with her social anxiety, she becomes sick and skips the dinner. The way that Amanda forces Laura to open the door for Tom and Jim deepens the pressure on Laura. While Amanda is desperate to make her children fit in and be normal, her approach only makes things worse. The only way for us to sympathize with her is to understand that while she's a terrible parent, at least she is still trying; even when there seems to be no hope for Laura, Amanda does not give up on her, the way that Tom does.

Laura is similar to Amanda, in that she has also failed to establish contact with reality, but Laura's situation is much worse. She lives in her little world of glass figurines, and while she knows that she's in the glass menagerie, she doesn't know how to get out. She knows that her glass collection is a fantasy world that cannot be real, but she doesn't have the strength to get out of it. She is also clinging to the past, which is demonstrated by her taking refuge in museums instead of going to business school and her constantly playing the Victrola. Whenever Laura is stressed and can't handle reality, she puts on the phonograph and looks at the glass animals. This routine indicates her habit of returning to a fantasy world when she doesn't know what to do in real life.

As the audience, we are hoping that Jim has broken her habit. When the glass unicorn breaks and loses its horn, we see it as a symbol of Laura breaking out of her shell. For a brief moment, we believe that things are looking up for her, until we find out that Jim is engaged already, and the breaking of the unicorn holds a darker representation. Although Jim does what

Amanda has been trying to do her whole life by turning Laura from a unicorn to another one of the horses, he also shatters Laura by pushing her hopes up, especially when he dances with her, and then revealing that he is engaged to Betty. After this revelation, we become uneasy about Jim's character; as mentioned in class, he seems to be both very generous and very cruel at the same time.

There is something about Jim that makes us unsure of him; perhaps his whole Dale Carnegie approach and outward labels of success make him seem superficial. He seems to be a failure like the other characters, but he also holds the most realistically positive attitude. This is shown when Jim tells Laura, "My signature isn't worth very much right now. But someday – maybe – it will increase in value! Being disappointed is one thing and being discouraged is something else. I am disappointed but I am not discouraged" (Scene 7). When I read that last line, I remember pausing to think about it. We are all disappointed many times in our lives, but what really matters is whether we are discouraged or not.

With the exception of Jim, the other characters in this play seem to be discouraged. At the end, Amanda yells at Tom, "Don't think about us, a mother deserted, an unmarried sister who's crippled and has no job!" (Scene 7). What struck me about this line is that throughout the play, Amanda has refused to label Laura as "crippled," but in this final scene, she uses that word to describe Laura, which indicates Amanda's loss of hope. Tom has clearly given up on his family when he leaves and never returns, just like his father. We are unsure of Laura's future, although now that Jim has shown her what her future could be, we are hoping that this is a step in the right direction. Tom tells Laura to blow her candles out, which she does in the very end, so perhaps she has finally stepped out of her fantasy world to come back to reality.

Billy Elliot

As another one of my favorites on this trip, I enjoyed every musical number in *Billy Elliot*. My favorite sequence was the number right before the intermission, “Angry Dance.” The hard rock music stood out from the other musical numbers, which were either comedic or sentimental. It was also interesting to see how rock music could be paired with tap dancing and ballet, and I think the production did that very well. When the police officers come out with their shields, Billy unsuccessfully tries to climb over them; I interpret this as his family blocking him from continuing ballet. The cops also added a good and powerful beat to the music toward the end of the scene. I also liked how the production chose to use red lighting for this scene, since red can represent anger and violence.

Another musical number I greatly enjoyed was “Expressing Yourself,” which was a fun and entertaining scene where Michael convinces Billy to dress in women’s clothes with him. The upbeat music and the talent of the two young actors really engaged the audience. I also liked the life-size dresses that danced with them toward the end of the musical number. It provided the viewers with many laughs and also sent out a good message: there is nothing wrong with expressing yourself.

Although both Mr. Elliot and Tony are on strike with the other miners, Mr. Elliot gets a reality check while Tony doesn’t. This is demonstrated in the scene where Mr. Elliot realizes that the only way Billy can reach his dream is if he returns to work. When Mr. Elliot is the first miner to cross the picket line, Tony becomes upset because he believes the unity of the miners is more important. Mr. Elliot believes that Billy’s future is more important, and considering how conditions have not improved during the duration of the strike, it was time for them to get a

reality check anyway. The miners are not winning by going on strike, and Mr. Elliot realizes this while Tony does not.

Though the miners return to work and Billy is accepted to the Royal Ballet School, I felt the ending was a bit sad. Sure, Billy has a bright future ahead of him, but I felt sorry for those who had to remain behind. Seeing Michael and Debbie say goodbye to Billy was also quite disheartening. As an audience, we are happy to see that Billy will go on to fulfill his dream, but we are also saddened by his departure from his family and friends.

Nonetheless, I enjoyed this musical and will definitely see it again if I get the chance. I was extremely impressed by the child actors, especially the actor who played Billy (Scott McKenzie). After he performed “Electricity” toward the end of Act Two, he broke his character three times because the audience’s applause was so exciting and he couldn’t stop himself from smiling. This was perhaps the only time I saw an actor breaking character on this trip (the mishap during *The Winter’s Tale* doesn’t count), though most of us saw this as adorable rather than unprofessional.

The actor who played Michael was also brilliant, and I especially liked him in “Expressing Yourself.” We could always count on him for comic relief, though a majority of the plot was already quite comical. Debbie was a weaker character, but I don’t think she was given enough scenes to allow her character to develop. I would’ve liked to see more scenes with Debbie, since she seemed to have a lot of potential for comic relief as well. The actress who played Mrs. Wilkinson was also quite talented, and her persona fit well for the role of a ballet teacher. I think the cast was great for the production we saw, and with first-row seats, we could really see the expressions on the actors’ faces (an advantage we did not have for *Phantom*). I

enjoyed being so close to the actors, especially since in a couple scenes, the young actors had to run right in front of us to get on stage, so we were only a few feet away from them.

The Phantom of the Opera and Love Never Dies

These two productions were the ones I was most looking forward to on this trip. After seeing *Phantom* on Broadway in the summer of 2009, I became obsessed with *Phantom*; I read the novel by Gaston Leroux, watched Joel Schumacher's 2004 film (and was kind of disappointed), and constantly replayed the title song on YouTube during my free time. After doing a lot of research on *Phantom* during that summer, I found out the original had opened at Her Majesty's Theatre in London and was still playing; I promised myself I would see it someday in London, but I had always imagined that I would be 30 or older by then – I never thought I would get to see it so soon.

I don't know if it was because I was overly hyped up about it, but the production was not as impressive as I remember it on Broadway. I think the seating may have been a huge factor as well; in New York, I was sitting in the center of the fourth row where it was not too close or too far, and here, I was sitting far up on the third balcony so I had to look down. I may have enjoyed the Broadway performance more because I didn't know what was coming next; seeing it in London, I already knew everything that was going to happen. For example, after the intermission, I remember being extremely impressed by the set design and costumes of the masquerade ball in the Broadway production because it was unexpected; in London, the set design and costumes of that scene were well done, but I wasn't nearly as impressed because I was already expecting it.

The one scene that I was most excited about was the title song, “The Phantom of the Opera,” and I was definitely not disappointed. As my favorite scene, both productions did very well with this musical number, and when I saw it again in London, it was almost exactly how I remembered it in New York. As the Phantom guides Christine back to his lair, the passageway is slowly lowered closer to the stage, and then candles emerge from the stage while the Phantom and Christine arrive in a boat. As mentioned in class, the production must have used doubles for this scene because there’s no way the actual actors could have moved so fast, but it was impossible to tell anyway because of the fog.

The general consensus of our group was that the actress who played Christine (Sofia Escobar) was not the best choice; one student thought she was awful because her Portuguese accent came through, but I didn’t think she was that terrible. She sang beautifully, but I felt that she was not right for the role, however this might be because I liked the Christine I saw on Broadway. The actors who played the Phantom and Raoul were excellent and really brought the story to life. Regardless of who plays the main characters though, I would never stop loving *Phantom*. If I ever return to London (and I will) and the show is still running (it’d better be), I would definitely see it again (and get better seats, no matter how expensive they are!).

As a typical *Phantom* lover, I was obviously excited to see *Love Never Dies*, even though it didn’t get good reviews. I was seated in row K of the stalls, close to the center, so I had a pretty good view of the stage. Right before the show started, I turned around and realized that most of the back rows were empty. This was a bit startling – was the show really that bad? I braced myself for the worst.

As expected, the show was quite disappointing; the first half was pretty slow and most of the musical numbers didn’t really draw me in. In the prologue, the Phantom (played by Ramin

Karimloo, who was brilliant and had a wonderful voice) sings “’Til I Hear You Sing,” which wasn’t a bad song, but it was too slow for my taste and didn’t engage me. The next musical number, “The Coney Island Waltz,” was reminiscent of “Masquerade” from *Phantom*, in that both sequences brought light to a darker story, but “Masquerade” still triumphed over it. The other musical numbers were okay but not as good as the music from *Phantom*; the one exception would be “The Beauty Underneath,” my favorite song in this production.

This scene occurs right before the intermission. The Phantom’s ghoulish assistants (who seemed to have stepped out of a Tim Burton movie) bring Gustave to the Aerie so the Phantom can show him more of the Phantasma. When Gustave plays a melody on the piano, the Phantom begins to suspect that he may be Gustave’s father. “The Beauty Underneath” is a duet between the two; although the music is quite heavy, it is reminiscent of “The Phantom of the Opera” because both are hard rock pieces that stand out from the other operatic pieces. At first, I felt that the heavy rock of “The Beauty Underneath” was a bit too much and strongly contrasted with the other musical numbers, but as the scene went on, I realized it was also the most engaging sequence so far. The Aerie is much like a haunted Halloween house, scary but fun for Gustave; it was refreshing to see a fun scene after the somewhat cheesy drama going on in the plot.

During the song, the Phantom and Gustave make a connection, which leads the Phantom to start trusting him. Gustave finds the Aerie fascinating and sings, “It seems so beautiful / So strange yet beautiful / Everything’s just as you say.” The Phantom sings, “To him it’s beautiful / My world is beautiful... / All of my most secret dreams / Somehow set free.” The song begins to gradually build up in intensity to prepare us for the very end, when the Phantom takes off his mask, believing that Gustave will accept him for how he is. However, Gustave is horrified, screams, and runs away.

Another one of the production's stronger scenes takes place right after the intermission, when the Phantom and Raoul sing "Devil Take the Hindmost." This takes place in a bar, where the Phantom is disguised as a bartender until Meg leaves. The Phantom and Raoul make a bet: if Christine sings, Raoul must leave alone. If she does not sing, Raoul may leave with her and Gustave. The Phantom also leads Raoul to question whether he is really Gustave's father (after Christine has already revealed to the Phantom that Gustave is not Raoul's). This scene was entertaining because it was the first face-to-face, settled confrontation between the two. In *Phantom*, Raoul confronts the Phantom at the cemetery and in the climax scene, but neither of these scenes were settled (both were only to rescue Christine in haste).

With the exception of a few scenes, the production was mostly a disappointment. In terms of character development, most of the characters were not very likable, except for the Phantom and perhaps Gustave. Even Christine wasn't that likable; if we return to the end of *Phantom*, she was very much in love with Raoul. Yet she spends a night with the Phantom before her wedding ("Beneath a Moonless Sky," the duet between the Phantom and Christine in which they recall that night, was also a good musical number); if this hadn't happened, *Love Never Dies* wouldn't exist, but because of this choice she made, I didn't like her character as much as I did in *Phantom*. Of course, I prefer the Phantom over Raoul, and like many *Phantom* lovers, I think Christine should've chosen the Phantom, but regardless of whom she chose, she should've been faithful. She chose Raoul, and I think she should've been loyal to him, so I see this act as infidelity, although *Love Never Dies* tries to justify this by having Raoul become an angry man who no longer loves his wife. Raoul is now a bitter alcoholic so of course we side with the Phantom, whereas the audience feels conflicted in *Phantom* because both were quite likable

characters – taking out this conflict for the audience made the plot even flatter. We also dislike Madame Giry and Meg now, whereas they were good friends of the protagonists in *Phantom*.

So now, just when all we care about is the Phantom and he finally gets what he wants, Christine dies. I don't know if the point of this is to make us sympathize with the Phantom even more, but Andrew Lloyd Webber should've thought of a better way to kill her off. In the final scene, Meg kidnaps Gustave and reveals to the others that she has been prostituting herself to earn resources for the Phantom. It is also suggested in this scene that Meg may have feelings for the Phantom and is jealous of Christine. While Meg is confronting the Phantom, she accidentally shoots Christine. Perhaps Lloyd Webber just couldn't think of another way to kill her off, but I found the whole character of Meg unreal in this production because she and Christine were best friends in *Phantom*. Meg was always supportive of Christine's career and showed no signs of competition or jealousy. Maybe Lloyd Webber needed to think of some antagonist to get in the way, and the Giry's were the only ones he could come up with.

I think a sequel to *Phantom* could've had a lot of potential, and *Love Never Dies* just didn't live up to it. I even think the title was a turn-off; *Love Never Dies* sounded a bit cheesy to me, and I thought the word "Phantom" should've been included in the title (like *Return of the Phantom* or something). The plot was ridiculous and left me hanging; after Christine dies, Gustave hugs Raoul and then hugs the Phantom before the curtain rolls down. I'm not sure if this means Gustave is going to live with the Phantom now or if he's returning to Paris with Raoul. I was also a bit surprised that the Phantom allowed Meg to leave after shooting Christine. We saw how his anger can lead to disastrous results in *Phantom* – he hangs Buquet and Piangi – so I expected him to kill or at least harm Meg, but instead, he tells Madame Giry to take her away, and then we have the stereotypical woman-dies-in-man's-arms scene.

This would've been the better ending: the Phantom hands the Phantasma over to Madame Giry, allowing Meg to be the star, and the Phantom and Christine run away together with Gustave. Raoul can go back to Paris alone, since we don't care about him anymore. Where the family runs away to can be a mystery to us – we don't need to know where they're going. They can just disappear, like the way he disappeared from his lair at the very end of *Phantom*. The happy ending is not expected, but with the ridiculous plot already, I would've liked it a bit more if Christine had not been accidentally killed by Meg. Then again, I would've like it a whole lot more if the plot had been completely different. I don't regret seeing *Love Never Dies* because it fulfilled my curiosity as a *Phantom* lover, but if I went back to London or if it opened on Broadway, I wouldn't pay to see it again.