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Theater review: 'The Glass Menagerie' at Venetian Theatre in Hillsboro hits the mark

Published: Sunday, September 26, 2010, 4:34 PM Updated: Monday, September 27, 2010, 6:41 AM



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View full size Bag & Baggage Productions
Elizabeth Helman (left) plays Amanda and Theresa Park plays Laura in Bag & Baggage Productions' version of "The Glass Menagerie."

"The Glass Menagerie," performed with clarity by Bag & Baggage Productions, seems set in just the right venue, an old movie house, which the revamped Venetian Theatre in Hillsboro once was.

Filmy white curtains fill the high space, above which we see a projected backdrop of a St. Louis tenement building's alleyway. Scenic designer Alan E. Schwanke has kept the furniture and props in sepia tones, remindful of a black-and-white movie from the 1940s.

As this is Tennessee Williams' lyrical memory play, the look back at a family through the eyes of its narrator Tom (Ian Armstrong) gives us a strong feeling of time and place without it ever being specified in the program notes. And, aptly enough, Tom loves the movies: That's where he goes to escape from his overpowering mother Amanda (Elizabeth Helman), while his crippled, painfully shy sister Laura (Theresa Park) stays at home with her glass collection.

But Tom has escaped further as Williams' autobiographical story begins. He's joined the Merchant Marines and, as the play begins, we get

the sense that he's pulling the strings here, shaping what we take in, only with no magic just truth. "Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve," he says, speaking from some distant port of call. "But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you the illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion" (apparently, his own mother Edwina was much more domineering and smothering than Amanda).

Like a ghost, he briefly wanders through the front room, an outsider touching once-familiar things. Then he morphs into a figure of the past, sitting at the table with his mother and sister as the memory shapes into a play. The only absent character is the family's father, a telephone employee who "fell in love with long distance," as Amanda tells it. He left home 16 years ago, and his presence is felt only from a framed photograph on the wall.

Director Marion O. Rossi, who also has fashioned the effective memory music throughout, keeps the blocking simple and clean, and appears to bring out the best in his actors, even though Park, as Laura, initially seemed out of her league until she relaxed into her role most effectively in the second act. Park's stuttering was believable, as was her limp: And when she meets the Gentleman Caller in the second act, she comes to life with a spontaneous grin.

Tylor Neist is wonderful as Jim O'Connor, the young man Tom brings home to meet his sister, at the insistence of Amanda. Bespectacled, scrubbed up and sociable, and almost as loquacious as Amanda, O'Connor is a bright light in a dim setting (Tom has failed to pay the electric bill), and Neist's too-brief scene with Park fairly glows with a light of its own.

Helman's Amanda at first seems stereotypical, but she moves past that in a hurry. As she reveals more and more of this complex character, we are caught up by somebody painfully real, with her maternal love twisted by her own unfulfilled desires, her non-stop chatter, her unrealistic ambitions for her children, and her obsession with her girlhood in the Deep South. Helman uses a sing-song speech that at first is slightly offputting, but then works in her favor as Amanda comes to life, growing larger and more real over time. She's a verbal dervish, a cloying flirt with Jim, talking non-stop, clinging to hope, in the shabby-gentile apartment.

As Tom, Armstrong creates a memorable presence as the character saves himself by escaping, leaving the adventures of the movies behind to pursue his own. But leaving his sister behind will haunt him, no matter how far he goes.

The production runs two hours and 15 minutes with one intermission.

-- Holly Johnson

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