

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD 2011-2012

GROUP – WRITTLE C.A.R.D.S.

TITLE – THE GLASS MENAGERIE

ADJUDICATION – 2ND FEBRUARY 2012

INTRODUCTION – Arriving without losing our way and in good time in spite of having difficulty in finding a car parking space easily Liz Mullen and I looked forward to seeing this production not least because Tennessee Williams plays are not seen too often on the amateur circuit. Scanning the programme, which was set out in simple fashion in black and white, it was interesting to read the director's comments before the play started. The idea of "unusual production elements" was fascinating and we looked forward to our evening with Tennessee Williams who was an intense writer and whose dialogue could be considered to have poetic qualities.

THE SET/ PROPS- The set was distinctive as black was the dominating colour in the first half and in the second half, with some promise of escapism, then the lightening of the décor by introducing white and colour - turquoise, clearly indicated expectation and a dream of the "real world". There were flowers on display and the table had a large candelabra. The actual set was substantial and the furnishings simple but creating the overall effect of an angular environment with exit through a fire escape - "a box" like the many others in the vicinity. The lack of such as eating implements etc. (Mime being used) added to the overall feeling of being in a surreal environment. The image of the long gone father imposed on us at appropriate moments as did other images relating to the characters' thoughts and conversation. The set, visually striking, conjured up the images of the unattainable of this family cocooned in their own dream-like "world". In the extended stage we could see the glass collection separated from the main stage symbolically indicating Laura's isolation. Further symbolism was displayed throughout the production in the form of slogans and statements, which appeared on anything from table runner to Laura's sash. The audience were immediately taken into the poetic, perhaps personal world of Tennessee Williams and his characters.

LIGHTING & SOUND – The lighting certainly enhanced the atmosphere of each scene. The down lighting at the back of the stage was particularly notable. With black drapes and furnishings the effect was of a claustrophobic environment which held the characters in a "web". There was a subtle change in the second half but the feeling of confinement remained. The music played to indicate scene changes was not intrusive and that played at the neighbouring dance hall was livelier – an indication of the world outside? Music was subtly used to assist in developing the nuances of events. Neil Smith and Tom Harris enhance to performance with their efforts.

COSTUME & MAKE-UP – Again there was clear contrast between the first half and the time of preparation for Jim's visit. The simple dress worn by Laura at the beginning of the play and her loose hairstyle contrasted significantly to the attire

worn for the gentleman's visit and the fact that she had removed her glasses. The colour of her dress toned with that of the cushions. Mother, whom we first saw in a dull coat and hat, reflecting again something of the life being led in this home, was carefully, somewhat incongruously, dressed up for this "auspicious" evening. Tom, in working clothes, demonstrated his mundane lifestyle from which he longed to escape. Jim O' Connor looked every bit the ordinary young man who was getting on with his life and looking forward. Again the themes of this production were reflected in the costume and the makeup which was suitably minimal.

PERFORMANCES-

Tom Wingfield - Aware of lost opportunities this character held on to the hope of finding escape. Nick Caton performed this part with conviction and a consistent accent. He showed his feelings clearly whether of frustration with his mother or of consideration for his sister. There was a definite awareness of his responsibilities with father having left and his sister and mother needing support but the resentment came through from time to time appropriately. As the narrator, who took us through the action with poetic licence helping to convey the time and place and taking us through memories and explanations, Nick never lost sight of the character. Constantly smoking and obviously, at times drinking, he did need to be careful that getting rid of the cigarettes did not suggest that they were artificial. Nick defined the need to move forward in his life and yet on his final "escape" we are made aware that memories remain strong and influence our lives. This was a well sustained performance.

Amanda Wingfield - This was a complex character, well conveyed to us by Paulette Harris. Sometimes pathetic, sometimes irritating, sometimes manipulative, Amanda's character often expressed what she had had in the past. She refers to her younger self, her attraction, yet understands that life is not easy, that she sees it as a constant "solitary battle" but then extorts support from her son and cajoles her daughter. With a well sustained accent Paulette created the many elements of a woman trying to live out her everyday life but desperately clinging to "another time and place". That she cared for her children and imagined what they might achieve was clear. Paulette changed her manner and tone on Jim's arrival but the flirtatious attitude and her dress showed the foolishness of Amanda. Her delivery of lines sustained momentum throughout. This was a lively and convincing performance.

Laura Wingfield – There was a quality of separateness communicated to the audience by the physical positioning of the character, often being set apart from the others. Megan Hill showed stillness and quiet concern when confronted by Jim. She suggested an ethereal quality which created the impression that she functioned outside the normal and that life for her was confusing. There could have been more projection in her opening dialogue and a little more facial expression at times. Again the accent was consistent. Laura said of herself that she was shy. Megan showed a young person who, whilst going through the daily routines and manners of each day, had little awareness of communicating with others; her emotions were locked in. This was a good performance.

Jim O'Connor – Ben Fraser provided another sincere performance as a pleasant, friendly, ordinary man who came into this environment from the outside world. Whilst not quite the preconceived image of an American High school "hunk" now, as an adult he showed the outgoing, polite personality of a man of confidence. Ben's dialogue was kindly in tone when talking with Laura and

indicated an easy manner. He had good pace, picking up cues sharply in response to Laura's few words. There was warmth in this characterisation and the development of the scene with Laura showed a kindly compassion as two people recounted their past. Never easy coming in at the end of a play Ben's characterisation had humour and vitality as he delivered his lines in an encouraging manner and with a clear accent. He used his eyes expressively Well done.

DIRECTION – The programme explained that Laura Bennett, as director, wanted some “unusual production elements” in this performance. The result made for an interesting and thought provoking evening. The emphasis on the oppressive black in the first half and the introduction of white and turquoise in the second, demonstrated the changes in the characters' demeanour when connected to the ordinary outside world. Costume followed this pattern and the atmospheric lighting also gave a brightness to the anticipated coming of the gentleman whom Amanda, in her delusory conception, hoped would provide escape. The use of projected images to reflect mood or reference to dialogue was a useful tool even though there were odd moments when I felt distracted from the dialogue. The additional props in the second half increased the awareness of change –e.g. flowers, lamp and a candelabra which did block Amanda at the head of the table. The concept of the narrator starting in a director's chair helped to establish the unreality of the play as did the various lampoon –like comments which appeared on various props and clothing e.g. Laura's sash, a cloth, Tom's mac, a cushion. The mimed eating demonstrating, I believe, the habitual activities and comments that coloured this family's lives, was well performed. “ Ou sont les neiges d'antan “ has been used by such as Coward and Bennett to express a transient concept – a nostalgia for what was and may be –a dream.

At the beginning the question is asked “what is going to become of us?” and at the end we are aware that memory is what stays with us. Certainly Liz and I felt this to be a memorable interpretation of The Glass menagerie. Thank you.

Adjudicator - Kate Sheffield
Assisted by - Liz Mullen