

The allure of Amanda

[Patrick Folliard](#) | Feb 24, 2011 | [Comments 0](#)



Sarah Marshall and Clark Young in Georgetown's 'Glass Menagerie' production. (Photo by Laura Mertens; courtesy of Georgetown University)

'The Glass Menagerie'

Through March 26
Davis Performing Arts
Center
Georgetown University
Campus
\$7-\$18

D.C. favorite Sarah Marshall isn't the type of actor who readily rattles off a wish list of roles she's dying to tackle. But last year when she was asked how she might want to participate in Georgetown University's Tennessee Williams Centennial Festival ("Tenn Cent Fest"), Marshall, who is gay, quickly responded that she'd really like to play Amanda Wingfield, the determined mother from Tennessee Williams' classic "The Glass Menagerie."

Commemorating the gay playwright's 100th birthday, Georgetown University Theater and Performance Studies Program (where Marshall is a professor), in partnership with Arena Stage, has scheduled an extensive program of Williams-related plays, readings, concerts and screenings celebrating the playwright's enduring place in American culture. A major element of the festival is "The Glass Menagerie Project" comprised of a full production of the play as well as many smaller associative pieces like gay playwright Chris Durang's parody "For Whom the Southern Belle Tolls," and "Elegy for Rose" an ensemble-created/devised piece about Williams' relationship to his sister Rose, who was institutionalized and lobotomized, as explored from Rose's perspective.

Highly autobiographical, "The Glass Menagerie" is the story of Tom, a young poet who longs to shake a boring warehouse job and stifling home life where his faded southern belle Amanda (based on Williams' mother Edwina) obsesses over the impossible tasks of making ends meet in Depression era St. Louis and finding a potential mate for her painfully shy and slightly lame daughter Laura.

When local theatergoers think Amanda they may not think Marshall: the Helen Hayes Award-winning actor is most widely known for more supporting, quirkier roles. Still Marshall, who has played leading roles and mothers in the past (including the frighteningly fertile Sister Woman in Williams' "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" at Arena Stage), says she is not out to prove anything: Amanda is simply a character with whom she feels close and wants to know better.

Marshall explains the affinity: "Well first, there's a lot of humor in the play, and that's something I do. And like Amanda, my mother — though not southern — was a kind of belle: She was very verbal, funny and rye and she had a million boyfriends before meeting the love of her life, my father.

“Also, like a lot of the playwright’s best female characters, Amanda reminds me of some great gay men. And then there are all those layers of tragic/comic, heartbreaking, nerve-wracking humanity. Williams describes her as being a fierce little woman, and of course being kind of little, I like that.”

The festival’s artistic director Professor Derek Goldman describes The Glass Menagerie Project as a prism through which a lot of other work can be viewed and connections drawn. Goldman is also staging the play. He says many productions tend either to be too reverential or try to entirely reinvent the material. Like Marshall, his intent is to go back to what is on the page. Goldman says, “Sarah is relentlessly honest about getting to the brass tacks of Amanda. Asking questions like ‘How does she run a household on very little money?’ It’s easy to get caught up in the aura of ‘Amanda-ness’ associated with the part, and Sarah doesn’t do that.”

While recently re-reading “Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams,” (the 1995 bio by Lyle Leverich), Marshall became – quite fittingly for someone playing Amanda — rather protective toward the playwright. She sometimes thinks about young Tom (Williams’ name prior to taking on the geographically inspired moniker Tennessee) and worries about his destructive behavior and is amazed at how he survives all that risky boozing and cruising. Then inevitably she returns to the beauty of his plays.

“For months I’ve been steeped in Williams’ work and it’s been wonderful,” Marshall says. “Really, the Tenn Cent Fest is another chapter in my longtime love affair with the playwright that began for me in high school. I don’t see it ending anytime soon.”

For more Tennessee Williams Centennial Festival information, go [here](#).

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