

INTERVIEW WITH

The Actor: PATCH DARRAGH

UPSTAGE DISCUSSED *THE GLASS MENAGERIE* WITH ACTOR PATCH DARRAGH ON PLAYING TOM AND HIS TAKE ON THIS VERY PERSONAL CHARACTER.



Why did you choose acting as your profession?

Well, I can't really say that I chose acting because I didn't really give it much thought. I was always interested in performing, and it was something I did from when I was a kid. I had a supportive family and really great teachers in my high school. My drama teacher worked on a scene from *The Glass Menagerie* with me and then she directed me in *A View from the Bridge*. About that time I realized I didn't want to do anything else. Then at 17, I applied to colleges, again not really thinking about any other options. I was accepted at Julliard and I came to New York and I've been here ever since.

Where did you come from?

I'm from Toronto, but my family moved to Michigan when I was two, and I lived there until I was 18.

When you say you were performing as a kid, do you mean as a musician?

No, I mean that as a kid I was always performing for the family, or friends would come over and I would be putting on skits. So I always wanted to act and to make people laugh. But I didn't start taking it seriously until I was exposed to Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller when I was older.

Where do you find your inspiration as an actor?

A get a lot of inspiration from music. Some people make fun of me when I work because I almost

always have music on. I feel that music is the real key into my imagination and the life of my character. I also am really blessed to have some friends and colleagues in the theatre industry that I am inspired by. In terms of this role, my friend Dallas Roberts has definitely been an inspiration for me. And I have friends who are older than me and who have been in the business longer and have been very encouraging, taking me under their wing. I am also inspired by a lot of the young playwrights. So I would say I am inspired by people in the community.

Do you find that when you have friends who are actors who aren't necessarily in competition with you that you can have a constructive conversation about the role you are playing?

Yes. I think there is always a healthy competition between actors; it helps everyone push themselves and work harder, to share more of themselves. I have a couple of friends who I am close enough to that we can talk about the work. It's very helpful. One of my friends, Marin Ireland, who I have worked with several times, is doing Sam Shepard's *Lie of the Mind* right now; we have been talking about that and *Glass Menagerie*. It's wonderful to have each other as a sounding board. It helps me to talk things out. One of the things Gordon Edelstein, the director, and I really connected on is that he's a director who doesn't mind talking about things.

You alluded to the fact that you were introduced to the role of Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* in high school. What made you want to play it at this time your career? Was it a no-brainer?

It wasn't a hard decision for me to take the role, given what a break it is, especially being able to do it with the Roundabout. In terms of what made me want to play this role, I can say being a kid from the Midwest who left home to go to the big city to be an artist is a lot of what *The Glass Menagerie* is about, so sometimes a the story of a play lives within you. Tennessee Williams was talking about the pull to go forth on his own and experience life away from his family. But he was haunted by, particularly, the memory of his sister and some of the tremendous guilt he had about leaving her. I am actually getting to express something I have been working on for a long time in my life. So when this role came along,

it was a time when I was moving into a new phase of my own life, saying goodbye to certain things and certain people.

Tell me about how you went about preparing to play Tom. Did you read any biographies of Tennessee Williams?

We didn't have a long time between when I got cast and the time I got to New Haven where we first presented the play at The Long Wharf Theatre. In between, I was shooting a TV pilot, so it was sort of a busy time leading up to rehearsal, and then we only had three weeks of rehearsals. I delved into the autobiography, biographies and letters of Williams; there is just a treasure trove of material about the plays he wrote and then tons of letters. At some point, I had to just focus on the play. The research is all fun to read, but you have to have a balance between what is essential and what is not.

It's been about six months since hearing word from Todd Haines that we were going to do the show again here in New York and during that time I really had a chance to go further with the research. You start to see how choices can be made from the little gems Williams took from his own life. The other thing that I have done is I took a trip to St. Louis last month for a weekend and got to see his high school and the elementary school, the football field where Jim would have played, the apartment where he set the play, the fire escape, the alley, the grey winter. The weekend before we start rehearsals for *Roundabout*, I am doing a solo trip down to New Orleans because Gordon set our production in New Orleans in a hotel. Tom feels that the distance between New Orleans and his family in St. Louis is longer than the distance to the moon. Tennessee traveled all over the country, but it wasn't until Tennessee was the age I am now that he wrote *The Glass Menagerie* and broke through to become a success. New Orleans was instrumental in Tennessee's development, and most of his plays after *The Glass Menagerie* were set there. *Menagerie* is almost its own unique piece. It has qualities that we associate with Williams, but it is also this very personal play and it sort of precedes most of Williams' artistic growth. It's the play he wrote when he was still Tom Williams and not Tennessee Williams yet. I feel like it will be useful for me to take that trip to New Orleans. I don't know what I'm going to do down there; I don't

know anybody there. I'll hang out for the weekend and I think it will be a nice way for me to arrive at rehearsal.

I don't know if you are familiar with Stella Adler's book on Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov, but in it she talks about how an actor can't really approach a play until he understands the life of the playwright who wrote it.

I think that is never more true than with a play like this, which is so autobiographical. Gordon's take on our production is very much Tennessee in New Orleans writing the play and the play coming to him. It's a different lens to look through, and I think it illuminates the play and especially the monologues because those monologues can be a little flowery. It's nice because there is the added dimension of me the writer trying it out for an imaginary audience in my hotel that slowly through the course the evening comes alive.

I spoke to Gordon yesterday and he explained the concept to me—it sounds amazing and I can't wait to see it.

A lot of our collaboration was figuring out how to make it work. We changed a lot even in previews. We used to start the first couple of previews with just me in the dark, drunk, and then it shifted into the hotel, but we saw that it was putting too much distance between me and the audience. It was too dark too quickly. Now, I go out and get a bottle of liquor and come back with the intent of writing this play.

What do you look for in a director?

I have been very fortunate to have worked with some great directors over the years, Gordon being one of them. We have similar taste, which is helpful, but we also have a similar way of working especially at the beginning of the day. It would be Gordon and our wonderful stage manager and we would just find our way in. We would just talk about the scene we were about to work on and maybe at 10:30 we'll give it a try and do it a few times. He lets the performance happen to the actors. Before you know it the play is working on everybody. I prefer to work that way. The creative process and it can't be rushed or pushed. Gordon wants to put it all on the table and share a lot of really wonderful insights about the play and his ideas about the characters. He doesn't want to block the show. You

know I've seen a lot of modern dance and I've seen a lot of work by Mark Morris, who I think is an incredible artist, and the stories that his company can tell without words, that's what we can strive for in a narrative play—to tell the story physically but with freedom. So we'll eventually have the blocking, or the choreography as I like to call it, but it has to flow rather than be dictated. And that's what I love about working with Gordon, the freedom and the trust he puts in the actors that we are going to find things and come up with exciting work.

It sounds like Gordon really gave you an opportunity to own your performance.

He really did. He said to me: “You know you do a lot of things that I don't think most people would do with Tom, but I want to give you a chance to do that.” And I was thinking, “I'm just doing what I think anyone would do with Tom. I'm not trying to be brazenly original with choices.” Setting the play in the hotel room altered everything. It allowed us to make choices people hadn't seen before. The door was really swung open by Gordon to a new way of looking at it and to get out from under the pressure of playing these iconic roles. I played Romeo before, and it's the same thing where you think, “Now I'm going to come to that part,” and you think how you are going to make it original. Gordon was very helpful in encouraging that kind of bravery and originality.

I noticed that in the script a lot of the stage directions have been crossed out. Was that helpful to not have to follow them?

I'm not an actor who goes through the script and crosses out the stage directions like some actors do. *Glass Menagerie* has a lot of different versions, and we looked through them, maybe all of them, and considered different word choices Williams made. He kept re-writing it for years and years; he kept refining all his plays really. As far as stage directions, it doesn't bother me to say, “Okay, that's what that actor did. Maybe Tennessee wrote those and maybe it was a stage manager taking notes.” It doesn't really matter. Is it useful? Is it helpful? Usually the stage directions take care of themselves if the actors know what they are doing and have a confident director.

I just read in the *Wall Street Journal* that *The Glass Menagerie* is one of the ten most produced plays of the past decade. Do you have a sense of what makes this play so popular with audiences?

I think it is really simple. I think it is a play about the most fundamental relationships that a person has: father-son, mother-son, mother-daughter, brother-sister. I say in the opening speech that although the father isn't there, he is present and he affects every single thing that goes on—that relationship is paramount to what the play is about. We all have parents, whether they die when we're in childhood or not. If we have adoptive parents, that's another relationship, but we all have parents and siblings and they are the most meaningful and complex relationships we have. The play is certainly unique, but there are many things about it that are universal. There is a lot of love in this family and these relationships are the most meaningful ones you can have. We can never solve these family relationships, but we can keep working on them and making them better. That's why people keep coming back to see this play.

Is the portrait of the father in the room?

Yes, it is in the room, but we don't follow some of the directions about the slides and other stuff. We are a little free about those, but the father definitely drives certain moments. The father informs and drives a lot of what Tom does. In the beginning, it's “I don't want to turn into this guy,” and at the end, it's “I've followed in my father's footsteps.” That's what he ends up doing; it's kind of a curse. It allows for a lot of opportunities for the father in Tom—the man of the house, the reckless drinker—to come out. Cornelius Williams didn't leave the family as he does in the play, but he was very absent and he drank a lot and gambled a lot, which was really not fair for the family and for the kids.

Did Tom hate his mother?

One of the things people mention about our production is that Judy Ivey plays Amanda with so much compassion. People think Amanda is often played as a monster. Judy is scary at some moments, but there is such a beautiful spirit beneath that woman in her performance. William was incredibly poor all through his twenties, and then he wrote this play that is an overnight sensation and follows

it up with *Streetcar*. He gave 50% of his *Glass Menagerie* earnings to his sister, who was already in an institution, and 50% of his *Streetcar* earnings to his mother so she could get out from underneath the burden of his father. So, wow, I'm sure a lot of that was, "Hey dad, look what I'm doing. Your boy, who you really didn't like, is now providing for the family in a way that you didn't." It's also out of love.


I wanted to end this with what advice you might have for young people who want to be actors. What most actors usually say is, "Don't do it if you don't have to." Do you feel the same way?

If acting is something you enjoy but you could do it as a hobby, then you should do it as a hobby. A lot of young actors complain about not being given a career, but just because you enjoy acting doesn't mean that you are going to be able to make a living doing it. There are a lot of people who have this dream and it takes a lot of luck and tenacity. A friend from college told me, "My uncle was an actor, you know, but he never really made it. He had an apartment in the village and he had a really big house upstate and he put three kids through college." And I said, "It sounds like your uncle did make it." Of course, in our world we sometimes think you didn't make it unless you are a household name, unless you are famous, which is not true.

It was very helpful to me to train. Not everyone feels that way, and certainly Julliard has gotten a lot of flack over the years because certain students are deemed too technical, but I learned a tremendous amount there. I didn't really know what I was doing in terms of acting or understanding a text or sharing something of yourself. And then there's vocal and physical work. I'm actually going to meet my Alexander teacher this afternoon and do a session with her. You continue to build on your training as a working artist.

You really should also see other people's work, hear readings, participate in readings. I've done 1000 readings in my life, and hopefully I'll do 1000 more—anything you can do to be involved—do it. I did a lot of regional plays, and my first real role in New York City was a play at the Rattlestick called *Where We're Born*. I think it's very important for your work to be seen. It's a long journey and there is no one way to do it. I know some actors who have gone to

the finest schools who have a hard time getting work and other actors who have had no training who became movie stars.

There is a great book people should read that is called *Acting is a Job*. It reminds you of the realities—the financial reality and other realities of doing this as a career versus doing Community Theater and working at another job. That was never really an option for me. 



The Glass Menagerie Photos: T. Charles Erickson