

INTERVIEW WITH

The Director: GORDON EDELSTEIN

UPSTAGE RECENTLY SAT DOWN WITH DIRECTOR GORDON EDELSTEIN, WHO SERVES AS ARTISTIC DIRECTOR FOR THE LONG WHARF THEATRE COMPANY WHERE THIS PRODUCTION OF *THE GLASS MENAGERIE* WAS FIRST PRODUCED.

Why did you want to direct *The Glass Menagerie*?

It's a play I have been thinking about since I was a teenager, and it's one of the great plays of all time. I've always loved it and it's always haunted me since I first encountered it. So in many ways I've wanted to direct it for 30 years.

Did you do any sort of research to prepare?

Yes. I had a notion of how I wanted to do the play for some time, and I read *Tom* a biography of Williams by Lyle Leverich. There was a paragraph in the biography which gave the notion of how I wanted to do the show, its grounding. I read his letters. I read everything I could find about his earlier years and anything he wrote while he was thinking about writing this play. Williams' idea for this play was kicked around for many years and took many forms.

It's certainly the most autobiographical of Williams' plays. Do you agree?

Yes, but I believe his father was more of a tormentor than his mother.

Tell us a little bit about your concept for the play.

This is one of the greatest plays in the American canon. The impulse to direct a play, for me anyway, is to share my love of the play with the audience. I'm not really a concept director. Part of the challenge is getting the audience to see the play with fresh eyes. It occurred to me that a large part of this play is the eternal desire of young people to break the chains of home and start afresh. Nearly everybody leaves home. So I started to think, what did Tom take with him when he left home? What was the struggle for him leaving home? How do we recreate ourselves? I started to imagine a place where Tom actually wrote the play. The play has two realities—there are the scenes and the monologues, and the monologues have been problematic in productions of the play I've seen. The monologues are very poetic; it's as if the artist, Tennessee Williams, was searching for his own voice. So I started to think, "What if we actually saw Tom/

Tennessee writing the play? He leaves home and he winds up in this hotel and begins to write the play." When I read the Leverich biography he describes in detail Tennessee Williams leaving home and going to a hotel in New Orleans and what he had with him. So when Tom enters in this production of the play he has with him those exact objects. I have him bring in that which Leverich describes that Tennessee had with him. I imagine Tom writing the play and Amanda and Laura entering his mind, as memory does. Memory enters your mind in the place where you are. As Tom tries to struggle to understand his past, he turns it into art.

How did you work with your design team?

This group of designers are all people I've worked with many, many times. So when I was talking to Michael Yeargan, the set designer, I wanted to see if we could use the furniture in the hotel room and not bring on furniture. Can the hotel table double as the dining room table? We struggled to find a way to do it and we did it. And with Jennifer Tipton, the lighting designer, what she was most interested in was the candlelight. Of course Laura and the gentleman caller fall in love, in a sense, in the candlelight.

What were you looking for in the actors?

I offered Judy Ivey the part of Amanda a year before we did it. I've known Judy a long time. Our children go to the same school and I kept saying "I want to find a play for you." I knew that casting Amanda was key, but of course Tom and Laura are just as important. I wanted someone to play Amanda who was not too old and still had a sensuality about her, a very attractive woman, which, of course, is Judy. I wanted someone with both warmth and humor. I did not want a bad mother, which is sometimes how she is erroneously played. Then I cast the other three parts in auditions. In the case of Tom, I wanted to create a family that was visually credible and I wanted to find actor that was credibly gay, but in no way effeminate. I needed someone charismatic who could bring trouble to stage because the character of Tom is in torment. I auditioned and I found Patch Darragh. For Laura, who is played by Kiera Keeley,

I needed someone who was damaged. I wanted to really show what Tom, by leaving home, was abandoning and how desperately Laura needed Tom. Michael Mosley is playing the gentleman caller in this production of the play. These are good people; they do what they need to do. The gentleman caller is often played as an arrogant, shallow character and there may be some elements like that that are true, but the reality is that this character has had his own struggles since high school. He hasn't lived up to his potential.

Can you talk to me a little about how you evoke the South?

I didn't spend a lot of time on that. I didn't want to get lost in Southern manners. I was not worried about regional authenticity.

I sense from reading about the production that you found a lot of humor in the play?

Yes, that's true. The play is filled with humor. Williams was a very funny man; he was hilarious. Tom and Amanda are both very smart and they're funny.

How did this play affect you working on it? Did you learn something new?

That's a very good question. I would say this: I guess I became more deeply aware of how families need each other. Of course I was aware of it before. Tom and Amanda know each other and love each other very much. I suppose the revelation for me was how deeply some families love each other and the cost of that.

Has working on this production inspired you to direct more Williams?

I approach the great plays with a great deal of respect and fear. I've been around for a while, but it's only been in the last years or so as a director that I have felt comfortable enough to take on the great plays. I spent a lot of my career directing new work. It's only in the last ten years as a director and as a human being that I have felt ready to take on the masterpieces of writers like Williams. I was not an impetuous young person. I was not someone who felt like I could do Ibsen and Chekhov and Miller. I was aware that I wasn't ready to take on



the great works, and at a certain point in my life I slowly became ready. *Glass Menagerie* is part of a personal project of mine—to take on the plays I have loved my entire life. This play has been one of the great joys and privileges of my life, and I have been generally pleased with the results. I am thrilled that Todd Haimes, the artistic director of the Roundabout, liked it well enough to want to bring it to New York. I am working on *A Doll's House* right now—my own adaptation, and that's a play I have been thinking about for many years. I hope to do it at Long Wharf in the Spring. So, we'll see...

What advice would you give a young person who wants to direct?

My first piece of advice would be to respect the play. You are virtually never smarter than the play. Find your personal connection to anything you are going to direct. What does the play mean to you in your most private thoughts? Try to see what the intersection is between yourself and the play. Where is the place where you and the play meet? That could be your source of inspiration. **UP**