

Anthony Ross, Laurette Taylor, Eddie Dowling and Julie Haydon in the Broadway production of *The Glass Menagerie* (1945)

*The Glass Menagerie* opened on Broadway in the Playhouse Theatre on March 31, 1945, and played there until June 29, 1946. It then moved to the Royale Theatre from July 1, 1946, until its closing on August 3, 1946. The show was directed by Eddie Dowling and Margo Jones. The cast for opening night was as follows:



- Eddie Dowling as Tom Wingfield
- Laurette Taylor as Amanda Wingfield
- Julie Haydon as Laura Wingfield
- Anthony Ross as Jim O'Connor

Laurette Taylor's performance as Amanda set a standard against which subsequent actresses taking the role were to be judged, typically to their disadvantage. In the 2004 documentary *Broadway: The Golden Age, by the Legends Who Were There*, Broadway veterans rank Taylor's performance as the most

memorable of their lives.

The play won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award as Best American Play.<sup>[2]</sup> Williams gave credit to two Chicago critics, Claudia Cassidy and Ashton Stevens, for "giving him a 'start...in a fashion'..." Cassidy wrote that the play had "the stamina of success ..." Stevens wrote that the play had "the courage of true poetry ..."<sup>[3]</sup>

## Autobiographical elements

The characters and story mimic Williams' own life more closely than any of his other works. Williams (whose real name was Thomas) closely resembles Tom; his mother, Amanda. His sickly and mentally unstable older sister Rose provides the basis for the fragile Laura (whose nickname in the play is "Blue Roses", a result of a bout of pleurosis as a high school student), though it has also been suggested that Laura may incorporate aspects of Williams himself, referencing his introverted nature and obsessive focus on just one aspect of life (writing for Williams and glass animals in Laura's case).<sup>[4]</sup> Williams, who was close to Rose growing up, learned to his horror that in 1943 in his absence his sister had been subjected to a botched lobotomy. Rose was left incapacitated (and institutionalized) for the rest of her life. With the success of *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams was to give half of the royalties from the play to his mother. He later designated half of the royalties from his play *Summer and Smoke* to provide for Rose's care, arranging for her move from the state hospital to a private sanitarium. Eventually, he was to leave the bulk of his estate to ensure Rose's continuing care.<sup>[5]</sup> Rose died in 1996.

## Development

The play was reworked from one of Williams' short stories "Portrait of a Girl in Glass" (1943; published 1948).<sup>[6]</sup> The story is also written from narrator Tom Wingfield, and many of his soliloquies from *The Glass Menagerie* seem lifted straight from this original. Certain elements have been omitted from the play, including the reasons for Laura's fascination with Jim's freckles (linked to a book that she loved and often

reread, *Freckles* by Gene Stratton-Porter). Generally, the story contains the same plot as the play, with certain sections given more emphasis, and character details edited (for example, in the story, Jim nicknames Tom "Slim", instead of "Shakespeare"<sup>[6]</sup>). Another basis for the play is a screenplay Williams wrote under the title of *The Gentleman Caller*. Williams had been briefly contracted as a writer to MGM, and he apparently envisioned Ethel Barrymore and Judy Garland for the roles that eventually became Amanda and Laura, although when the play was eventually filmed in 1950, Gertrude Lawrence was cast as Amanda and Jane Wyman as Laura.

In 1944, after several reworkings, while touring on the road, the play arrived at the Civic Theatre in Chicago. The producers wanted more changes and were heavily pressuring Williams for a happy ending. The play had not found an audience and production was being considered for closing after the opening night in Chicago. Then the reviews by critics Ashton Stevens in *The Chicago Herald-American* and Claudia Cassidy in the *Chicago Tribune* came out. They praised the production, especially the writing and the performance by Laurette Taylor, with Cassidy writing about it several times. These reviews drove Chicago audiences to the Civic Theater and the play became a hit, propelling it to Broadway the next year.<sup>[7]</sup>