

ND actors have delicate touch with 'Glass Menagerie'

REVIEW

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SOUTH BEND -- The prized unicorn in Laura's glass collection is so fragile, she says, that a breath might shatter it. Playwright Tennessee Williams filled "The Glass Menagerie" with similar but subtler warnings, beginning with Tom's opening description of this "dimly lit" memory play: Handle with care.

A production now at the University of Notre Dame demonstrates an admirably delicate touch, at least on the company's part. At one point in Wednesday's opening performance, the quiet, second-act encounter between the pathologically shy Laura (Molly Topper) and her long-awaited "gentleman caller," Jim (Bryce Cooper), was building to such an exquisite sweetness, the two young people side by side on the floor, their tentative faces set aglow by candlelight, their silly banter growing more easy by the minute -- and then someone in the balcony dropped something heavy while another viewer downstairs had to exit from a seat in the middle of a center row.

These things (and worse, especially in this era of cell phones) happen in the theater, and with some plays, the disruptions are hardly felt. With "The Glass Menagerie," especially this climactic stretch in which the door to Laura's pathetic fantasy world slowly, and all too fleetingly, opens to admit another member, a cough from the audience can sound like a jackhammer. It took Topper and Cooper several beats to wind us fully back into the scene's gossamer embrace, but they did it, and the performance just kept getting stronger: Katharine Kertez, as Amanda Wingfield (the original "steel magnolia"), puts the force of a lifetime's disappointment behind the mother's embittered "For *what?*," when the all-important dinner party turns out badly, while Tom Conner, as Tom, trusts Williams' words to convey the poignancy in the haunted protagonist's final speech.

As directed by Siiri Scott, this well-chosen student cast never forces, never over-plays. They make few movements that aren't specifically demanded by the script.

Among the equally modest design elements, only Emily T. Phillips' set calls attention to itself. An unattractive hybrid of the realistic (the minimal furnishings, the fire escape) and the stylized (a wall of staggered, illuminated shelves on which Laura's menagerie is displayed), the V-shaped set does little to suggest Tom's feelings of confinement in this particularly troubled corner of his memory; we do, however, clearly see his escape

route. The many fractured portraits of the Wingfield's absent patriarch, hung clothesline-style in the fly space, call to mind not so much the family scrapbook Scott mentions in her program notes as a Shanghai street scene in the days of Chairman Mao.

Memory and metaphor can be tricky things, but this "Glass Menagerie" gets them right most of the time. The production continues through Sunday in Washington Hall.
