

## Once Bitten

Well after getting off the plane flying for 24 hours I really didn't know how coherent I would be for the first play. But considering that in the case of dozing off during Once Bitten could have resulted in not having my wits about me enough to know when to move out of the way of the actors, being wide awake was really the only option. I thoroughly enjoyed this unexpected audience participation as I felt it wove the audience into the brisk pace necessary for the farce. However that ran two risks, one being that the audience participation may have just been inevitable due to the layout of the theater and had I not been sitting in an area where I ran the risk of an actor running into me, the brisk nature may have been lost as the length of time given to walk through the unnatural doors would have probably been two seconds too long. Even if either happened to be the case, I fully enjoyed the position I had in the audience as I very much benefited my seating arrangement. The unnatural doors I mentioned were very innovative as the use of door sounds matched with the miming of opening and closing doors provided a near sense of coming in and out of doors which is a much needed device in any farce. However this near sense may not have been near enough as I mentioned earlier if I had not been in the crux of the movement. Though the theater space did not provide the actors with the proper use of doors needed, it did provide a rather unique experience of theater in the round. In this manner the space lent itself to the mayhem of the farce as actors were coming in and out from all sides funneling into a vortex of hilarity, mistaken identities, and of course a bit with a dog. Speaking of which, the liking of the yappy dog and to the yappy the mother-in-law was uncanny. I think this was illustrated throughout the play as she bit at the heels of her son-in-law every chance she could but was especially highlighted in the scene where the mother-in-law relentlessly barked "Don't lie to me!" in every way possible proving how much worse her bark was than her bite.

In general the normal devices for the farce were all present in some way shape or form, but the utilization of them wasn't to the fullest extent and the play had a rather mechanical feel with a long build-up rather than a laugh-a-minute consistent flow where the story can't help but unfold in front of the audience as opposed to slowly having one event create the next, letting the audience catch up too often to the point where a lot of good "yuks" are lost.

By the end of the play I was absolutely more exhausted than when I began watching which is always a good sign of how thoroughly engaged I was throughout the entire play and I really enjoyed the talk back session with the actors and director afterwards. It gave me a better sense of what they thought of the play and confirmed what I had been thinking as far as the logistics of putting the play on in that type of theater house went. But I would have to be really nit-picky to sit here and say that this play wasn't well-performed and well-directed. It was clear that any stroke of any limb from any one of the actors was intentional and that kind of attention to detail was very evident and much appreciated.

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## The Glass Menagerie

**[A general caveat: any strong opinions in here should not label a city or a people. These opinions are personal and are meant to label my own experiences thus far and their connection with this production. They are not meant to be absolute statements even if they are written as such.]**

The Glass Menagerie has always been a play that hit home for me in more ways than one. Starting with the obvious connections to my hometown of St. Louis and the general non-existence and stagnant nature (yearning to be more, but mostly holding steady) the Midwest holds in the eyes of those who did not grow up there at least beyond the acknowledgement that it's the "heartland" of America, going to the shared longings of freedom (Tom) and utopia (Amanda) and ending with the overwhelming fear of what it would take to attempt to achieve either (Laura). That's only the beginning. Something happens in the heartland where there's no real identity and so everyone grasps for some ideal to feel fulfilled. The East and West coast have their obvious stereotypes as do the Northern and Southern regions. But any stereotype associated with the heartland can generally be associated with the identities of the other four. It's a melting pot and a black hole all in one. We're found grasping for the American Dream only to find that we've remained stuck in the same position we began. We then become too afraid to break those fragile ties at home, to break out and fulfill ourselves because we're comfortable right where we are. We stunt our own growth because we think the east coast is too mean, the west coast is too care free, the north is too cold, the south is too heated (and not just the weather), and the Midwest is just right. We were born into our niche, so why even think about anywhere else? We justify it time and time again as Laura does with her fear, as Amanda does with her adamant belief that she's just being a good parent and as Tom does by excusing himself with the control of his mother. We constantly play the blame game and justify ourselves right back into our seats. There are many reasons for this, one being that we're in denial like Amanda and justify our actions by saying that we're simply trying to do the best

we can with each day god has given us when we're really just living vicariously through the next generation hoping they can achieve that dream that we were unable to attain in our youth. But then it's just a vicious cycle of masochism if we never admit to ourselves that this ideal is simply unrealistic and that we have to create our own dreams instead of trying to live someone else's or forcing our dreams on others because we feel our time for living them on our own is over.

Now beyond these very personal feelings of the play (emphasis on the very personal- I am not speaking for the entire population of the Midwest), this particular production was beautifully done from the very different portrayal of Tom to the perfect set with a boxing ring curtain ready to perform Tom's latest magic tricks for us instead of Laura at any moment.

Honesty is something I've treasured from the womb and it's beautifully expressed in this play, but particularly in this production of it. This version dramatized the weaknesses of the characters to the point where we saw them for what they were in their most vulnerable state. It was raw and it was real. There were no qualms about being too emotional and feeling everything to its fullest extent to represent the repression and need to break out like a caged wild animal. At times it's a laugh riot. At times it's the most tragic thing you've ever encountered. Tom's ability to play on his mother's imagination is fascinating and amusing until he crosses a line with her fragile state-of-mind and the joke kills itself because her faults are no longer funny. We see them for what they really are and they're not pretty. Happiness is always short-lived and we can either acknowledge this and fight for it with all of our might or accept it for what it is and simply be satisfied with being contentment. Laura's happiness is so beautiful and amazing all at once and that's why when it's lost it's as if the rug is ripped right out from under her. She's thrown so off kilter she breaks a fragile tie quite literally. She breaks one of her animals but gives it to Jim as homage to what he's done for her, not to her. He's truly given her a gift. He's made Laura realize that *she* is something to be treasured and loved, not coddled and treated like a broken doll

too fragile to live life. The emphatic scream from Laura just plays into the raw reality that this production really tried to get across. It is pain, it is exaltation, and it is release all at once.

It's a small world in St. Louis, smaller than you'd think. This production played on that perfectly, especially with this space. It really is a little corner of the world where no matter how much you run you come funneling right back into the same mad routine, seeing the same faces, having the same experiences where the only growth is in your frustration and longing to break from the norm.

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## **A Flea in Her Ear**

Now this had the advantage of many doors facilitating in the fast-paced hilarity of a great farce. A Flea in Her Ear was a gem I felt despite the lack of its main actor Tom Hollander. I felt as though if I were to hold onto what the play could be like if he were in it would only leave me sitting there the entire play with a bitter taste in my mouth and then I would not be able to enjoy it. So rather than have anything spoil this wonderful opportunity to see a brilliant farce, I sat and waited to see comic genius unfold. The timing was needless to say impeccable throughout this production. I don't think there was a point in the play where the timing was more poignant than when Carlos Homenides de Histangua covered up the knocking from the other side of the door with a few quick Spanish-dancing footsteps. It was brilliant. Raymonde Chandebise was the perfect wife with too little to do and too great an imagination and I particularly enjoyed the airy manner in which she was portrayed. It seemed as though at any moment she would be swayed in any direction by any gust of wind that may happen to tilt her light-headed way another direction. By that I mean to say that her imagination was so strong and her logic so off balance, it never took much for her to be flustered and create more trouble for herself because she always had something nagging at her imagination, like a flea in her ear, or rather a flea in her bonnet. As we discussed in lecture it was most certainly a play about borders: most obviously the borders between Germany and Spain exemplified by Carlos and the German guest at the hotel of Coq d'Or. But borders were also obvious between classes like the upper class status of Victor Emmanuel Chandebise vs. Poche and how the confusion between them very nearly killed the both of them. Borders were breached in age as the maid sought out an affair with the young Frenchman Camille and then with the German hotel guest (that one was not so much sought out however as forced upon). Borders of understanding were also represented between the inability to understand Camille without his mouth guard, Camille trying to cross the border of having them understand his English and conforming from speaking French, and the unfortunate similarity between Poche and Monsieur Chandebise covering up any border there may

be between them, especially when it is one that is so great. Also, with the borders created by the sanctity of marriage that Mr. Tournel tried to breach of Raymonde at nearly every turn. Now when I say every turn, I quite mean every turn especially in the literal manner it was taken with in the second half of the play where we enter the lavish world of the Hotel Coq d'Or and a good chunk of the mess, trouble, and hilarity come from a brilliantly mechanized bed that will turn out of one hotel room and into another with a touch of a most obtuse button that would seem evident, cheesy and vulgar to anyone except of course Mr. Tournel. He especially enjoys the rather bachelor-bad, Vegas nights look the room takes on and it's a good thing too because he finds himself growing quite accustomed to crossing the border between the insanely vengeful Carlos with a gun to the homeless man in the other room via this magical bed.

What was obvious in this farce was that it was very much about the mechanics of a farce. Between the excessive use of doors, the ridiculously mechanized bed and the nearly overuse of having the whole entourage react in the same way at the same time at the end of the play, it seemed to rely so heavily on it that I was unfortunately not able to completely understand the nature of the characters. Now this juxtapose to Once Bitten just seemed to be the polar opposite. What Once Bitten lacked, A Flea in her Ear overcompensated for.

## Hamlet

This production of Hamlet was one that really played with all the normal facets of the play. It even played with the very special rounded stage on which it was placed. Part of the stage had to stick out into the audience and some chairs had to be removed in order for the normal squared off set to fit within the rounded off stage. I enjoyed the choleric portrayal of Hamlet that ran throughout the play all the way to his 'villain' smiley faced shirts that he passed out to all the players. I particularly enjoyed it because I felt as though it gave more levels than to make him whiney because if there's anything that Hamlet's not, it's whiney. He's insightful and it would seem that he wouldn't fall for the traps set throughout the play, from him falling for the trap of killing Ophelia's father as opposed to his Uncle and the trap the uncle sets to kill him kills his mother and so on and so forth.

I felt as though we were at a disadvantage in our seating only due to the way the snakelike connected set was used. We lost the ability to see anything that occurred up stage right on the stage. In addition, when the walls were moved around, they were so tall it completely blocked some of the actors.

Overall I got lost in the many soliloquies and monologues that ran throughout the play primarily due to my fatigue. But the sensual portrayal of Hamlet's mother who used alcohol as her crutch to hide from the truths as long as she could and the choleric and childish, and quite playful version of Hamlet was a brilliant take.

A couple other devices I noticed were things such as when the uncle's portrait was thrown down on the floor and Hamlet sees his father's ghost one more time and the mother goes toward where the ghost should be, she walks right on top of the uncle's portrait subliminally sending a message of disrespect. Though it seems she immediately betrays Hamlet after he leaves that subtle message that the seed of doubt has been planted and she no longer trusts the uncle.



I also enjoyed the theme of the press and the FBI that ran throughout, especially the point where Ophelia's suicide appeared to be a cover-up on the part of Hamlet's mother. I appreciated it because Gertrude's monologue there always seemed too lavish and beautiful to be real, almost as if she was covering something up. Who would go to that much trouble to describe a suicide if it were truly a suicide?

Though my interpretation of this production is not particularly as thorough as others, I have nothing but respect for this unique, modern portrayal of Hamlet which doesn't always happen when modernity is woven into Shakespeare.

## Midsummer

I'd never really experienced this unique of a type of storytelling. In the program, there is an entire map of the places we as the audience visit along the entirety of the play. We travel all over Edinburgh and yet we never physically leave the Bedroom with all sorts of particles of life lying about a four-poster bed. This is where we start and end because this is the universe of this play and like the earth itself, if we follow it long enough, the story that is, we'll end up exactly where we were. It's this very matter-of-fact way of talking about love and the adventures life will take you on if you let it that made this play so refreshing. There was virtually no predictability. One might be able to argue that the story ends on a happy note, as any romantic comedy would. However, we really aren't left with a satisfied feeling. Sure 'Change is Possible' and all the sudden she decides to take him away for a few days, but there are no promises of love or happiness made. A chance to escape, but no romantic get-away is in order. These two are not sailing off into the sunset. I believe I've phrased it in every way possible now. The point being that it's meant to leave us with the uncertainty of love and life. The point is to just go with it. You don't have to be stuck in a rut, you can choose to change, to live with life, and not just jog beside it.

Beyond this, one of my favorite themes came into play in three beautifully different ways. The rhythm of the comedic timing, the rhythm of the Edinburgh accents, and the rhythm of the musical interludes that sewed everything together were such that I was lulled into a glorious state of side-splitting enjoyment and loved every minute of it. The audience participation didn't feel as though the two actors were forcing us to enjoy their play, but rather saying, 'we're having so much fun up here, please, come share it with us.' The timing of the costume changes matching the speed of the speech and playing with the rhythm of the entire play, either increasing or decreasing it unfortunately made it very apparent when something was out of place. For example when her mustache fell off when she was trying to impersonate an officer and she broke character as she laughed and quickly picked it up again, it was

obvious that was not meant to happen only due to how tight and seamless the rest of the production was. In the end I bought the program, script, and soundtrack because this was one comedy I knew was different from the many other indie romantic comedies that I've seen before. It was dynamic in its humor, anything but censored, extraordinarily creative in the levels of humanity it wanted to reach, from quarter life crises to trying to see if a life was made better because of them. For Bob, that matter was resolved in revisiting his son Aiden. He found the life inside of him in more ways than one; the life inside that Helena had been talking about. They both find the lives inside of themselves and have made each other's lives different because they were in each other's' lives. I don't know how to stray from this becoming sappy. I think it's primarily due to the treatment of the ending and how we don't know if it's for the better or for the worse that it ends in such an ambiguous way. I think the brevity is the point of it. Happiness is for a short time, as is Midsummer. It lasts for a moment when all the magic of the world seeps into their core and lets them (and the audience) enjoy the tragedies in their lives so we can laugh at it and be slightly removed from the true tragedy. But the moments it brings us back to reality hit so much harder because of the light spirits we're in. It was a play of timing, of true happiness, and in the end, truth itself that there possibly is no meaning to what happens in life, and if we can accept that, we'll be able to laugh a little more because, hey, the pressure's off.