

An indoor play

A conversation with **Ivo van Hove**

You have staged plays by Tony Kushner, Arthur Miller, Eugene O’Neill. Together with choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, you directed your version of the “West Side Story.” And now you return to Tennessee Williams. Do you feel a bond with the American theater?

Yes, the American theater, the American culture have been attracting my interest for many years. American playwrights talk about the society we live in. The play “A View from the Bridge,” for example, which I directed for Ateliers Berthier, talks about a specific society at a specific time, the ’50s. It was the time when Italian immigrants built a community in a large city, New York, at the coast of a vast continent. Arthur Miller describes the tensions that permeate this situation: the desire to belong to the community and, at the same time, the desire to remain yourself. American playwrights are very sensitive with these issues. Kushner in “Angels in America” also narrates the personal desire to be yourself, the ideal of social belonging, and the almost impossible resolution to this complex tension. The “West Side Story” also deals with this same issue.

Within this landscape of the American theater, what is the position of Williams?

Let’s take the case of “The Glass Menagerie.” It is an indoor play. It “takes place” in the inner world of the characters—but also literally indoors. It is a play behind closed doors. In a basement. The only space within the play that differs is the fire-escape landing. No outdoor space is visible. Yet this inner story is a short story within a greater story, and Tom states that in his very first monologue. It is the 1930s, and fascism rises in Europe, Germany and Spain. Tennessee Williams is aware of this historical phenomenon in his writings. He knows that the world is being gradually brutalized. After all, it resembles our world. We also feel an ever-growing cruelty. We don’t care at all about other people’s opinion anymore, we express ours immediately, we react instantly, instinctively, impulsively. This is dangerous. Such a world, where violence is so common, where nobody really understands the other, is dangerously close to war.

However, apart from the socio-historical context, isn’t it a very personal play, as well?

Of course. It is almost an autobiography. Williams tells us about his mother Edwina about his sister Rose, who has diagnosed with schizophrenia—nowadays we would probably refer to her as bipolar. Of course, he also speaks about himself through Tom, who is at a dead end and knows that, if he wants to be himself, he must cut ties with his family. This is something very difficult for him, an inner conflict, because his father has already done it before him. Tom feels that he bears a duty he despises. He hates this burden, he can’t stand his poorly paid job at a shoe warehouse. He is convinced that he is destined for something completely different—he is an artist. All this is Tennessee Williams’ life.

How would you describe the Wingfield family?

In “The Glass Menagerie,” I discovered a world with no obvious heroism, a world inhabited by fragile people, contrary to the play “A Streetcar Named Desire” that presents a heartless world. The Wingfields are full of doubts, scars, and secrets. All three of them resort to their own worlds. Amanda takes refuge in the past. For her, the South was a way of life, a place where you knew how to behave, how to act civilized. Laura strives to retire to an inner world, a universe of pure imagination, protected from time. The glass menagerie portrays this universe. And Tom wants to escape, to get away from all these things. He spends his time in constant retreat, yet always returns. He is on the border between two worlds, the inner world and the outside world. When he stands on the landing, he does so to find relief; within this few square meters, for few moments, he can be on his own, smoking a cigarette.

Tennessee Williams has called this play a “memory play.” This term is hard to define. Is it a play that is memory or a play dispersed by memory?

Tom makes it clear from the very beginning that the play is memory, that it has to do with memories. The naturalistic codes fail to capture it. Williams and his narrator Tom set the “glass menagerie” in a mnemonic reality, where everything is perpetually scattered, transformed, where memory is never identical to lived experience. This world escapes objectivity and the image of things, as Williams used to say. The truth of the events here is essentially subjective: this is what I, Tennessee-Tom, experienced, this is how I experienced it.

This memory does not comprise only of Tom’s recollections, but also of Amanda’s, who dreams of the South. And then there are also Jim’s memories, who recalls his high-school accomplishments, six years before.

Yes, there are memories of memories. Tom’s story contains and conveys Amanda’s, Laura’s, and Jim’s story. And Tom cannot avoid that. Time is not a prison cell that you escape. You can’t escape your story like this. The narrator-Tom knows it the moment he speaks to us. But the character-Tom doesn’t know it yet. He still has a very simplistic understanding of his imminent liberation.

What does that mean?

He was to get out of the box he is stuck in. One morning, when he returns home, he talks to Laura about his night experiences. He attended a show with a magician named Malvolio, who was nailed into a coffin and got out of it without removing one single nail. It is no coincidence that this trick impressed Tom. Malvolio realizes Tom’s dream: getting out of the coffin without anyone noticing and without any damage. At the end of the play, Tom will get out of his coffin, yet after ruptures and destruction. And Tom will have traveled further than the moon, as he says. But he will not have left his sister behind, he will not have escaped memory.

The word “coffin” is part of the identity of the playwright’s father. His full name was Cornelius Coffin Williams...

Oh, I didn’t know that!

Your work was based on the centennial edition of Williams’ play, published in 2011 by New Directions. This edition includes a significant introduction by Tony Kushner. What do you keep from his comments on the play?

His introduction is very passionate and personal. I found really interesting a remark he made on the last pages, where he compares “The Glass Menagerie” to the “Portrait of a Girl in Glass,” a ten-page long short story Williams had written before reworking it as a play. Kushner reveals that in this short story Laura says something that is omitted in the play: her words imply that Tom didn’t invite Jim over for his sister but for himself, because he is secretly in love with him, maybe without even realizing it.

Amanda tells her son that she doesn’t believe he goes to the movies every evening, as he says. What does Amanda know?

We should respect what remains untold in the play. It is clear that Tom has a secret life. He cannot talk about it. Only at one point in the play he has an honest conversation with his sister, only then he can really open up, when he tells her about Malvolio and the coffin. I am sure he goes to the movies—and that he also meets people. He uses the word “adventure” every so often. And, in the end, when he talks about companions he found walking along the streets of some strange city at night, he clearly talks about an “adventure.” I believe that in our time you get the message. But at that time it was impossible to talk about these things.

Tony Kushner also comments on how fragile these characters are.

This had staggered me as well, before reading his introduction. These people never had accomplishments and success in their lives, like Jim who used to be an idol and, six years later, he experiences failure at the shoe warehouse. Tennessee Williams describes this very world, not a world of winners. His characters are so charming exactly because they are so fragile. Directors often exploit their vulnerability and ridicule them. Amanda, for instance, is turned into a grotesque figure. In my conversations with Isabelle, I always described Amanda as an incredibly resilient woman. She always gets back up, even after a knockout. She is like a phoenix rising from the ashes. In the middle of the play, there is a scene where Amanda tells Tom that she knows his life at home gets harder and harder. You want to run free. Okay, well, but first you must find Laura a husband, someone to earn money in your stead. It is a straightforward and high-level negotiation! Amanda strives to ensure a better life for her children. She knows it’s going to be hard, but refuses to lose hope. Even when she denies reality, she doesn’t do so out of foolishness or naivety. She just does not renounce for any reason her fierce faith in life.

Is it a militant refusal?

Exactly. We should not forget that the Wingfields are not only weak and fragile, they are also poor. Their only income is Tom's wage and the little money Amanda makes by selling magazine subscriptions, without much success. She is a mother who fights. Her struggle is heroic. That's how I see her.

So, the play is melancholic rather than nostalgic?

Figures like Amanda and Jim embody an idealized past: that of the South or the glorious high-school years. However, for Amanda the South does not belong only to the past. It is a ticket to future success. The South is a whole culture, an inspiration, a source of useful energy. Jim has ambitions, too. He attends night classes. As he himself says in the end, "Knowledge, money, power—that's the cycle democracy is built on." It is the infamous American dream. However, we also feel something completely different going on here. Williams lets us notice that his country, in those times of crisis, was at a crossroads. As if on the one hand there is Jim's way, and on the other hand an unspoken and abstract possibility of another way of life. Maybe Laura's way, or the way that would become possible if those two met. However, no one can really follow Laura's way—not in this world. This crossroads might be nothing but a delusion, a mutual illusion. Rather a dream in Tom's memory, a dream he narrates. Something they trusted in the poet to guard.

At what point in the process are you with the actors?

We completed our first week working together. We rehearsed three scenes. It was wonderful. Everything felt in place immediately. I've known Isabelle for ten years. When I asked her to play Amanda, she accepted right away. I really appreciate the fact that Isabelle refrains from sentimentalism in this play—she directly understands me when I speak to her, when I describe this phoenix rising from the ashes... It's so beautiful! And technically speaking, she is incredibly skilled. She can change her vocal tone and shift between emotions in seconds, yet remain organic, never look unnatural. She has a sense of humor. That's great. A very dry sense of humor. That's exactly what such a play needs.

An interview by Daniel Loayza, Paris, **February 14, 2020**