Black and Multi-Racial Productions of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*

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In an earlier essay,[1] I traced the history of Black and multi-ethnic productions of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and explored the sociological/theoretical implications that such productions have for an interpretation of Williams's script. In this essay on *The Glass Menagerie*, I will similarly investigate this Williams play as it is represented in Black and multi-racial productions. Non-traditional (sometimes labeled "color-blind" or "open") casting has brought new life to, and disclosed complex texts in, Shakespearean drama for more than thirty-five years. In large measure, Joseph Papp's "New York Shakespeare Festival" was responsible for the riches non-traditional casting can bring to script, director, actors, and audiences. Black productions of *The Glass Menagerie*, as I intend to show, also establish a vital counter-tradition (or para-tradition, to be fair) to a dominant and potentially repetitious white theatre culture. While I make no claims to document every Black or multi-racial production—professional or amateur—of *Glass Menagerie*, I believe that the productions discussed in this article are representative of their respective decades and theatres.

Black (non-traditional) casting of Williams's plays perpetuates rather than distorts Williams's legacy. These non-traditional productions address four key issues:

(1) Williams's plays, as done by African American companies, renegotiate the question of universality as a term in Western aesthetics.

(2) The language of ownership, often used in relation to plays and playwrights is also problematized. As Ruby Dee affirms, "I feel Tennessee belongs to me, too."[2]

(3) Black and multi-ethnic productions of *The Glass Menagerie*—or *Streetcar* or *Summer and Smoke*—liberate the subtext from racially-imposed constraints.

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In fact, I have argued that it is only through a production of a Williams play with an all-Black cast that certain dimensions of the subtext can be realized and released.[3] These dimensions would never be privileged (or destabalized) in a traditional (white) production because of the historical limits/possible preconceptions of the actors/audiences/directors.

(4) While Black productions of Williams's plays parallel white ones, Black productions have been neglected or treated as "unique." Such a position, comparable to political isolationism, might be called "theatrical isolationism." White theatre history has been, a priori, the standard by which Williams's productions are measured. All Blanches are compared to Jessica Tandy, Uta Hagen, or Ann-Margret. All Amandas are held up to the performances of Laurette Taylor—the original Amanda—or Helen Hayes, or Maureen Stapleton, or Joanne Woodward. Black productions of *The Glass Menagerie*, therefore, free the play from restrictive so-called "prototypical" or "seminal" interpretations of individual roles by white actors.

I

The first production of *The Glass Menagerie* with an all-Black cast was done less than two years after Williams's play premiered on Broadway. From December 9 through December 12, 1947, the Howard Players at Howard University performed *Menagerie* at the intimate (150-seat) Spalding Hall. The production was directed by James W. Butcher and starred two individuals who later went on to highly successful acting careers—Robert Brown, known as Graham Brown with the Negro Ensemble Company in New York, played Tom and Shauneille Perry (Ryder) who played Laura became a distinguished actress, director, and playwright. William Coleman was Jim O'Connor and Doris Williams was Amanda. Butcher did not change a line of Williams's script for his Black actors or predominantly Black audiences. He did not have to in order to win the applause of local critics who, while they did not single out Butcher's production for being the first attempted by a Black troupe, nonetheless saluted his "bravery" (as H. M. put it in the *Washington Evening Star*, Dec. 12, 1947). Oscar Haynes, in the *Washington Afro-American*, was equally congratulatory, insisting that Butcher's production is "a must on the local theatregoers' calendar" (Dec. 12, 1947). Both reviewers compared the Howard production favorably with the Broadway *Menagerie*. Pointing to Doris Williams's Amanda, H. M. observed that she "captured more than surface comedy underlying the tragedy . . ." A scene from Butcher's production is found in Figure 1. Clearly, though, Brown's performance gave the play to Tom; for H. M., Brown's work "comes off best,"

while for Haynes, Brown's Tom, standing in Figure 2, was "the most dominant figure of the evening." The only fault leveled against Butcher's historic production was that it was "unnecessarily experimental" (according to Haynes), no doubt because Butcher decided to include the screen device which Williams omitted from the acting version of the play. This first *Menagerie* by Black actors looked forward to later productions by capitalizing on Williams's humor and by portraying an angry, socially-conscious Tom Wingfield.

The second Black *Menagerie* was performed three years later by Lincoln University's Stagecrafters under the direction of Thomas D. Pawley, a classmate of Williams at the University of Iowa in 1937. Joseph Arnold, seated on the stairs in Figure 3, was a lean and indignant Tom Wingfield; Gertrude Kelley played Amanda. William Goble was Jim O'Connor and Dolores Clinton was Laura, as seen in Figure 4. In a letter to me, Pawley recalled some of the reasons he performed *The Glass Menagerie*:

> The play intrigued me not because I knew Tom Williams but also because it was set in St. Louis, the home of at least two members of the cast and countless members of our audience.
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> I believe I set out to capture the tender fragility of the play which according to some persons Williams had first offered to the theatre department at the University of Iowa and had been rejected. (This may be sheer fantasy; I do not know.) I was searching for a play within the acting potential of my students who were largely liberal arts majors and one which would sustain the audience's interests.
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> My philosophy has always been to try to stage what the playwright has written, adhering as closely as possible to the intent of the author as I have interpreted it. Therefore, I did not adapt the play to accommodate the all-Black cast and audience. I do not recall even changing the lines with ethnic references. I never do unless they intrude on the audience's will-to-believe.[4]

The next two early productions of *The Glass Menagerie* by Black colleges were done four years apart—in Nashville. On February 14-15, 1952, the Tennessee State (University) Players, under the direction of Thomas E. Poag, staged *Menagerie* in a production dedicated to "National Negro Week." Alfonso Sherman was Tom; Billie Macklin was Amanda; Carolyn King took the role of Laura; and John Jordan was her Gentleman Caller. According to the program, this production emphasized *Menagerie* as a "theatrical tone poem" in which "more light than darkness" prevailed. Williams was highly praised for his

"concern for the unconventional." And on April 28, 1956, the Stagecrafters performed *Menagerie* as part of Fisk University's 27th Annual Festival of Music and Art. Lillian Vorhees directed June Skinner as Amanda, Mary Buyck as Laura, Curtis Patton as Tom, and Andrea Rhodes as Jim. H. D. Flowers, currently the Director of the Black Studies Program at Virginia Tech, has been the guiding hand behind two important Black productions of *The Glass Menagerie*, twenty years apart. In the spring of 1968, Flowers directed a production at Carver High School, an all-Black school in Del Ray Beach, Florida. He cast as Laura a Black girl who was handicapped. The second all-Black *Glass Menagerie* Flowers directed was for the 1988-89 Studio Theatre Season at North Carolina A&T University in Greensboro by the Richard B. Harrison Players. In this production, Mary L. Grimes played Amanda; Terrence Satterfield was Tom; Monica Scott was Laura; and Robert White acted the Gentleman Caller. Flowers made no changes in the promptbook to accommodate the play or the performance.

Flowers offered the following reasons for directing the play, reasons which, he emphasized, were unchanged from his first (1968) to his second (1989) production.

> I selected this delicate, haunting "memory play" to be presented by an all-Black cast for three basic reasons. One, the play is a classic, and the students majoring in theatre need to see and perform classics regardless of race. Secondly, the play lends itself to Black actors and audiences because of the prevailing themes that are "real" to the Black family: (a) the young son taking over the financial matters of the home after the father leaves, (b) the desire of the mother wanting assistance from the son to help find the sister a mate, (c) the desire of the mother to teach a child with a deficiency to cope with or just ignore the problem, and (d) the over-protective mother who is just doing what she feels is best for her family. Thirdly, the play was written by Tennessee Williams, one of America's most prominent authors to write of experiences in the South which are so close to the Black experience.
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> Because the experiences in *The Glass Menagerie* are so real to the Black community, I found that performances by Black actors are more compelling. Most Black actors have witnessed or felt the problems and obstacles that confront Laura, Tom, and Amanda—even the Gentleman Caller.[5]

Flowers's interpretation of *The Glass Menagerie* is both sociologically challenging and dramatically effective. As Evelyn Bennett, the dramaturg for the Harrison Players, observed: "H. D. Flowers's production of *Glass Menagerie* is about a near poor Black family . . . The Richard B. Harrison Players definitely destroyed the myth that all-Black casts must confine their talents to all-Black plays."[6] Flowers's interpretation of *The Glass Menagerie* is far reaching and consistent with much later professional work, as the following discussion shows.

While their productions (except perhaps for Flowers's) attempted no overt social or racial commentary, these early Black achievements nonetheless paid tribute to the power of Black theatre and the rights of Black actors to perform a so-called "white" play.

II

Two inter-racial productions of *The Glass Menagerie*—one in 1965 and the other in 1967—continued to emphasize the universality and adaptability of Williams's masterpiece. The Karamu Theatre in Cleveland, Ohio staged *The Glass Menagerie* from January 13 to February 9, 1965 with a Black cast, except for a white Gentleman Caller. The aims of the Karamu Theatre were succinctly outlined in the program for the production: "In Swahili Karamu means 'a place of joyful gathering for all.' Karamu House, founded in 1915 by Russell and Rowena Jelliffe, attracts people of all racial and social backgrounds to more than 60 separate activities," including theatre, dance, and sculpture. This production of *The Glass Menagerie* was directed in a theatre-in-the-round setting by Reuben Silver, who observed in a letter to me, "I did not modify the script in any way. At Karamu, audiences have been accustomed for decades to casting without reference to color in a non-race play. . . . They accept the concept and there is no discussion about it . . . audiences will accept this casting approach if the performances are good enough."[7]

Undoubtedly the Karamu performances were "good enough" for both audiences and critics. As the critics observed, Silver's *The Glass Menagerie* was "as warm and poignant as Williams meant it to be" and was "first rate in its humor and sensitivity."[8] Ella Apple starred as Amanda; J. Herbert Kerr, Jr. was Tom; Marion Miller alternated with Ellen Thornton as Laura; and a white Edward Dean was Jim O'Connor. Dean appears with Apple and Kerr in Figure 5. While a number of reviewers were silent about the issue of the actors' race, Stan Anderson of the *Cleveland Press* pointed out "Three of the four members of last night's cast—the mother, daughter, and son—were Negro. It was their task to seem believable in roles designed for whites" (Jan. 13, 1965). Ultimately, though, there were no comments about the social implications of a white man

calling on a Black woman. Given its goals and expectations, the Karamu theatre magic worked.

Ella Apple's Amanda would deconstruct anyone's opinion that white actors/actresses had proprietary rights to the roles in *Glass Menagerie*. Figure 6 is a moving representation of Apple's Amanda and Thornton's Laura. Apple brought to the role the plight of Black women, making her Amanda stronger, more sensitive, and yet more comic than many white actresses who played Amanda. Silver commented on why he believed Amanda resonates most sympathetically for a Black audience: "She is the strong, matriarchal figure raising her family alone, with all the economic and psychological problems that obtain."[9] Apple conveyed this heritage of strength through her "biting humor," her "air of fierce desperation trying to fight loneliness and destiny" and, as Pullen also observed in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, "her striking originality flows through her portrayal of a one-time Southern belle" (Jan. 14, 1965). Anderson also testified to Apple's power to play the Southern belle—"Much of Mrs. Wingfield's dialogue frames her character as that of an effete white woman from the Old South. It is, therefore, vastly to the credit of Ella Apple, a strong actress, that she can make the part of the mother convincing." The role of Amanda underwent a significant transformation thanks to Apple, a transformation accommodated by the role itself. Amanda is both the nagging, comic matriarch and the sensitive, romantic belle. Apple's representation of Amanda as the one does not preclude her being the other.

Another important multi-ethnic production of *The Glass Menagerie* was performed by the Inner City Cultural Center in Los Angeles on November 18, 1967. Directed by Lonny Chapman, the production had three white performers and one Black. Maxine Stuart's Amanda "won sympathy from the audience as an eternally feminine though faded Southern belle";[10] as Laura, Bonnie Bedella was compared with Sandy Dennis as a combination of charm and clumsiness; and Larry Kert was Tom/the Narrator. The Gentleman Caller was played by Paul Winfield who later starred in *King*, *Sounder*, etc. Henry Smith of the *Los Angeles Times* said, "There were eyebrows raised when Winfield, a fine young Negro actor, was cast . . . in Tennessee Williams's magnolia-scented epic."[11] But Winfield did not play Jim O'Connor as a Black man but as a white one. Winfield wore "light-skin make-up with an uplifted Irish nose and a red wig,"[12] seen in Figure 7. Even in such a disguise, Winfield earned high honors. Said Smith: "He's splendid, endowing the part with not only swaggering gusto but a tender, even touching perception." Similarly praising the white-faced Winfield, Harvey Siders of the *Los Angeles Citizen-News* described the actor's talents: "Winfield provides a remarkable contrast as the Gentleman Caller: confident, gregarious, almost brash yet keenly aware of his impact on Laura. Winfield

handles a difficult role extremely well." Interestingly enough, Siders did not mention that Winfield is Black or that he was wearing a disguise.

What does Winfield's disguise say about this multi-racial production or the contributions of Black actors and actresses to *The Glass Menagerie*? Is it possible (or fair) to conclude that Winfield's disguise means that race is not an issue, or does it say just the reverse—that race had to be concealed? The Inner City Repertory Company, which had a long history of showcasing multi-racial work, certainly would not have concealed Winfield's race. Such deception violates the very *raison d'etre* behind the ICC. So why the disguise? It seems to me that the reason for Winfield's disguise lies in this observation, again by the perceptive Cecil Smith—the students who saw the ICC production "are unaware that Winfield is not as he seems. They're delighted in post-performance seminars with the revelation when he removes his make-up, they're party to the illusion." Whether the adult audience that saw the play on November 17 discerned the Black actor behind the disguise is an intriguing but unanswerable question.

Winfield's disguise supports the validity of Tom Wingfield's/the Narrator's claim that "Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion."[13]

On three successive weekends from February 26 through March 14, 1974 the AMAS company staged a Black *Glass Menagerie* in their flexible one-hundred seat house at the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew on West 86th Street in New York City. Directed by Conrad McLaren, the AMAS production starred Leona Johnson as Laura; Maurice Woods as the Gentleman Caller; Terry Alexander as Tom; and Louise Stubbs as Amanda. Overall, the AMAS *Menagerie* received low marks from the critics, though not because it was done by a Black company. Arthur Sainer, for example, called the production "uncertain," the acting "too studied," and the setting "too symmetrical and too flat."[14] While one or two cast members were praised—most notably Maurice Woods for his "perfectly callous" Gentlemen Caller[15]—it was Stubbs who clearly stole the show. While the reviewers did not address the question of what Black actors and actresses bring to the play, Sainer did point to one characteristic strength of the AMAS productions. In the hands of the AMAS company, the "*The Glass Menagerie* becomes more than ever a low-keyed cry of moral anguish." AMAS vibrantly stressed the strong social protest found in Williams's script for and through its Black cast.

III

A highly politicized *Glass Menagerie* was performed by the Spelman/Morehouse Players at Spelman College in Atlanta from February 17

through 21, 1987. Directed by Thomas A. Brown, this *Glass Menagerie* starred Eleanor Russell as Amanda, Clearance Anthony as Tom, Tracy Lucas as Jim, and Shar Pearsall as Laura. It also included two dancing couples, a dance hall owner, a bag woman, and four street toughs (two men and two women). This production was imbued with revolutionary fervor capturing, through Williams's script, the spirit and turmoil of the early 1960s. "This time of 'changes' becomes a backdrop and a motivator for the action of the play."[16] The "Director's Note" in the program beautifully outlines the approach Brown followed in his production:

> I have set the play in the industrial westside of St. Louis during the early 1960's. At that time, all America was poised for revolution. As a consequence, many "dreams" were being created while many "myths" were being broken. Cassius Clay, later to become Muhammed Ali, was building dreams of championship while breaking myths of inferiority. Simultaneously, Dr. Martin Luther King was attempting to build a moral and just society while breaking the unjust laws of segregation and racism: a dream of equality.
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> In *The Glass Menagerie*, the Wingfield family is as much poised for revolution and the realization of dreams as was America. They are the microcosm. Amanda, Tom and Laura are poised on the brink. It is the parallel of the two societies, and the intersection of myth and dream that form the conflict in *The Glass Menagerie.*

The Spelman production effectively reminds us how close Tennessee Williams's script is to the poetry of Langston Hughes, the plays of Ed Bullins or even Imamu Amira Baraka, and certainly the frustrations and hopes expressed in *A Raisin in the Sun.*

IV

An all-Black cast performed *The Glass Menagerie* at the Drury Theatre of the Cleveland Play House from April 11 through May 7, 1989. The production was billed as the first done with Black actors by a professional theatre company, a claim that possibly should be qualified in light of the earlier Karamu production. The decision to stage *Menagerie* with an all-Black cast was made by Josephine Abady, who became the Play House's artistic director in 1988. Abady argued that Black audiences would be "able to see Black performers in good classic drama."[17] This Cleveland Black *Menagerie* was directed by Tazewell Thompson who was "casting for a different truth."[18] Making almost no changes in Williams's script, Thompson was praised for "staying true to the texture of Williams's melancholy tone poem."[19] But he was roundly censured for his

textual faithfulness by one critic who lambasted: "As to the production itself, its only bow to Black culture is the use of old-time Black music. Otherwise there are some real howlers here. By sticking to Williams's script, the audience will witness the incongruous sight of a Depression-era Black family lovingly toasting the Old South, not to mention the sentiment by the character Amanda of her failed dream of marrying a plantation owner's son."[20] The cast, pictured in Figure 8, included Shawn Judge as Laura; Josephine Premice as Amanda; Leon Addison Brown as Tom; and David Toney as Jim O'Connor.

Some critics were skeptical about such cross-cultural casting, and a few were downright disparaging. Mastroianni again decried Abady's decision: "Her arguments seem disingenuous at best. . . . A Black *Glass Menagerie*, under the circumstances, hardly seems to be urgently relevant to the needs of the Black community nor does it inform white audiences." Yet Mastroianni conceded that this play "about a matriarchal household is one to which Blacks can relate."[22] David Patrick Stearns told *USA Today* readers that "School teachers in Cleveland complained that an all-Black production of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*—about Amanda Wingfield, abandoned by her husband and left with two children—would misrepresent the play."[21]

The majority of reviewers (and audiences, too, judging from the popularity of the production) were far more tolerant and congratulatory. Irene Shaland applauded the Black cast, arguing that "they make the audience aware of the social dimensions." Perhaps the most significant contribution of the Cleveland *Menagerie*, though, is that it intensifies Williams's social concerns. Writing for the *Cleveland Jewish News*, Robin Rosner admitted that: ". . . it is, as Jim told Laura, that being different (either because of race, religion, or even disability) is nothing to be ashamed of—and that when you get to know people, they aren't that different."[22] Barbara Christian brilliantly elucidated some of the cultural advantages of the production: When *The Glass Menagerie* ends, "the fact that the actors are Black is totally forgotten and yet when you think about it, it can't be ignored. For a Black family, the Depression gave the future an added bleakness . . . the lives of all four characters seem a little more desperate, their dreams a little more unattainable and the past for Amanda, as she tells it, far more fantasy than fact." Black actors and actresses can claim a paradoxical achievement: they reinforce the perhaps universal patterns of suffering, loss in love, failed dreams of *The Glass Menagerie* as their history of suffering emerges poignantly through Williams's characters.

In this Black production, Amanda becomes the heroic survivor which, thanks to Premice, opens the role up to a broader range of emotions as well as critical censure. Premice was better known for roles in musical comedy than tragedy, a fact that gave ammunition to Keith Joseph who labeled her "a musical

star miscast in a role she seems to have no understanding of . . . she is an invigorating presence but inappropriately jazzy, like a musical comedy diva in the wrong direction." For Mastroianni, Premice was "shrill and mannered, more annoying than sympathetic." But as the symbol of nagging mothers, Premice deserves credit. She eschews the pathetic sentimentality that has sometimes enshrouded the part in stage history. Premice thus delightfully brought out the gentle humor Williams incorporated into Amanda's role, an accomplishment not achieved by many white actresses who—in the febrile tradition of Laurette Taylor—have hung a pall of doom over Amanda.

The other actors also brought unique interpretations to the roles. Leon Addison Brown's Tom is the "angry young man not the suffering poet" who is eager to "escape the domestic hell of the Wingfields."[23] Audiences sensed the seething anger, racially motivated, which Brown was able to emphasize. The subtext of *The Glass Menagerie* is legitimately expanded because of the racial history that Black actors and actresses invest in their roles. Praise went to David Toney's Jim for his "masculine sensitivity"[24] and his presentation of a young man who is "honest, open, and almost lovingly lifts Laura to her first and maybe her last kiss."[25] That brief but loving relationship is captured in Figure 9. The dreams of success are urgently spoken in the Black community of this *Menagerie*. Toney speaks the same words of hope that Walter Younger does in *A Raisin in the Sun*.

V

Six months after Tazewell Thompson directed *The Glass Menagerie* at the Cleveland Play House, he mounted another production of Williams's play, again with an all-Black cast, at the Arena Stage in Washington, DC—from October 6 through November 26, 1989. Ruby Dee starred as Amanda; Jonathan Earl Peck was Tom; Ken LaRon played the Gentleman Caller; and Tonia Rowe was Laura. After leaving Cleveland the previous spring, Thompson was appointed Artistic Director at the Arena by Artistic Director Zelda Fichandler who wanted Thompson to continue exploring Williams's play from a Black perspective. One of Arena's key goals was "To provide audiences, both Black and white, with powerful, thoughtful works that celebrate and explore African-American culture."[26] Both Fichandler and Thompson wanted to attract minority audiences to the Arena, and saw a Black *Glass Menagerie* as a fitting vehicle to help them.

In numerous interviews, Thompson emphasized the applicability of *The Glass Menagerie* and the unique advantages a Black cast brought to Williams's play. "The themes within the play are universal and speak to a larger truth about humanity and survival that transcends color and race. . . . This family could be Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, Black, white—all families during the

Depression went through what this family goes through."[27] Thompson further stated: "This play is not the sole and exclusive rights of any ethnic American in this country. It belongs to all of us."[28] That said, Thompson also recognized, and eloquently defended, the rights of a Black production on the grounds that it legitimately reflected the experience of Blacks in America as well as that of whites. "I want everyone here to come and see us as we are. We're Afro-Americans, and as Afro-Americans we have a great deal of depth and humor and musicality and emotion and enrichment that we can bring to this play. We don't want you to forget who we are. We want you to witness it and celebrate it with us."[29]

The program for the Arena *Menagerie* offered the audience some salient facts from Black history against which their production of *Menagerie* makes a great deal of sense. "In the late 1930's, African Americans constituted 11.4 percent of the population of St. Louis, a city which had been a haven since Civil War times."[30] Ethnographically, then, a Black Wingfield family could be as much at home in St. Louis as would a white one. A Black *Glass Menagerie* also emphasized that the hard times that befell white Americans were even more devastating for Black Americans. As Grace Cavalieri observed: "I think it is true to say that everything—everything—in life which has been hard, has been harder for Afro-American people in America . . . the dream of success, the wish for fulfillment; therefore this play takes on a deeper dimension when seen through this paradigm."[31]

If Williams's classic can poignantly translate and represent the Black experience in America, and thereby expand the script, the play can also, in the words of Jonathan Earl Peck (Tom), provide "new meaning, especially when you think about the problems of Black families today."[32] In one interview, Thompson offered this relevant autobiographical interpretation of *The Glass Menagerie*:

> *The Glass Menagerie* is about a family—about a mother and, in this case, a Black mother, who has been abandoned by her husband and has to raise two children on her own. I know something about that. I come from a background where my mother and my grandmother, who helped my mother out, raised me because my father was not around. There's a lot in the play that strikes a chord in me. Tom wants to enter the arts—wants to be a writer. That's something I identified with too. We went through some very tough times. It wasn't the Depression, but living in my apartment and growing up in Harlem you could not convince me it was not the Depression. It was very lean times.[33]

As in his Cleveland *Menagerie*, Thompson made only minor changes in Williams's script to accommodate his production with Black actors and actresses. He replaced Amanda's belonging to the DAR with her being a member of the Delta Club, a Black sorority which was highly appropriate since Ruby Dee herself was a Delta. The Irish ancestry of James Delaney O'Connor was dropped, and the Gentleman Caller's name was changed to James Douglas Connors. Offensive names such as "darky" or "Negro" were replaced with "servant," etc. Background music of famous Black stars such as Ethel Waters, Duke Ellington, and Louis Armstrong situated *The Glass Menagerie* squarely within Black culture.[34]

Reaction to Thompson's production was mostly favorable. Hap Erstein's review in *The Washington Times* was exultant: "The evening is pure Tennessee Williams and you would swear that he always meant the play to be set in the Black milieu."[35] Similarly, Mary LaFrance insisted that "While it is arguable whether Williams's characters would even be transplanted from their native Southern soil, Arena's production proves beyond a doubt that their dignity and frailty are qualities that transcend color lines."[36] Perhaps the most encouraging review came from Morris Burns: "The decision to cast the play with Black performers may serve as a catalyst for other theatres to bring an expanded vision to their casting of old and new plays alike."[37]

Not all reviewers were happy with a Black production of *The Glass Menagerie*; some of these maintained, however, that their negative view of the production was in no way "race-related." David Richards of *The Washington Post* objected not to the race of the cast but to their acting: "The uneven results, however, have little to do with Black actors taking up residence in what has traditionally been a white play. The failures and triumphs are those of craft."[38] Undoubtedly the most bitter reaction came from Laurie Winer of *The New York Times* who charged Thompson with a disregard for history: "Forget the improbability that a Black woman in the 1930s would recall long-ago beaux who were prominent young planters on the Mississippi Delta and who went on to become vice presidents of banks."[39] Winer further claimed that "The main problem with this production is not race-related. No, this 'Menagerie' tramples on the internal poetry of the characters, on the very heart of the play itself." Winer was not alone in objecting to Thompson's making his Black Amanda a Southern belle. L. T. Bolt angrily noted: "Arena's *Glass Menagerie* is true to Williams's words but that is part of the failing of this production. The only place that a Negro (yes, that was the proper word then) would have at a Southern cotillion at that time would be in the kitchen washing dishes or cleaning up after the ball."[40] Bolt indignantly concluded that Thompson's "Black version" of *Menagerie* was "demeaning to Blacks. What is next? *Gone With the Wind* with white and Black roles reversed?"

Rebutting such criticism, Ruby Dee told Michael Kilian that having a Black woman belong to such a social group "is not far-fetched. . . . It's just the limited knowledge of the history of Black people in this country that makes it seem incredible—that in the 1930s a Black woman could have had all this wealth. Not at all. In this very town [Washington] I had an aunt and uncle considered wealthy. He was a bail bondsman. I remember people owning large farms and people coming out at cotillions."[41] In another interview, Dee directly corrected a "misinformed" Laurie Winer: "At the time of the piece—in my lifetime, in my mother's lifetime [there were] landed Black people, landed Black planters and wealthy Blacks. There had even been [pre-Civil War] Blacks who owned slaves."[42] Dee's interpretation of history is accurate. Blacks, either through inheritance or their own labor, owned sizeable amounts of property in a post-bellum South. Thus the Arena *Menagerie* not only interpreted Williams perceptively but even helped to set the record straight about Black culture.

Undeniably, the *coup de theatre* for the Arena was getting Ruby Dee to play Amanda. One of America's pre-eminent actresses, Dee came to the Arena with over forty years of achievements. She "had broken the Shakespeare barrier in 1965, when she became the first Black actress to appear in major roles like Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew* and Cordelia in *King Lear* at the American Shakespeare Festival. . . ."[43] She also starred in classical and contemporary plays, including her memorable portrait of Ruth Younger in both the stage and film of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Dee made no secret of her desire to play Amanda: "I can't think of any role that could be more challenging for an actor to want to do."[44] However, she lamented that "It was one of those roles I left to white actresses."[45] Such restrictions in the theatre were exactly what Thompson was fighting against in his production. One of the reasons why Dee decided to do the role was to break down racial barriers, to dislodge stereotypical thinking about the way parts are cast.

Dee offered a fresh, unconventional interpretation of Amanda. "She's 5 feet, 1 inch but she plays the mother four inches taller. She's brilliant," observed Jonathan Earl Peck of Dee, his stage mother Amanda.[46] Dee's size separated her, with positive results, from many actresses who played the role. But even more important, Dee's Amanda parted company from the blustery, nagging harridan that some actresses have portrayed Williams's heroine as being. As Figure 10 clearly shows, she was more the Southern belle than many white actresses who have attempted the role of Amanda. Said Michele May: "Ruby Dee's interpretation of Amanda Wingfield is soft and lovely. She doesn't hustle and holler like most women cast in the role, and her genuine charm makes it believable that she once enjoyed the attention of 17 gentlemen callers."[47] Dee herself commented on the way she portrayed Amanda:

> In [Amanda's] frantic search for salvation and security, she does mad things—sobs, becomes garrulous . . . tries to make her daughter a saleable product in the marriage market. . . . And I don't know if anybody's ever looked at Amanda that way before, but that's how she struck me. . . . It became a part I wondered why I couldn't have done years ago when Tennessee was alive, and he could have helped to talk about some of the . . . trans-cultural aspects of it.[48]

If Dee's softer and more sentimental Amanda differed from white actresses' interpretations of the role, she portrayed Amanda in far different terms than did Josephine Premice before or Phyllis Applegate after her. Dee clearly but gently dominates as can be seen in Figure 11. There is no stereotypical Black representation of Amanda as the performances of Dee and these other Black actresses attest.

Jonathan Peck gave a strong performance of Tom Wingfield by offering an independent, fresh interpretation. Like the real Tom Williams, Peck's Tom displayed a "sense of irony—that's the incipient writer in him."[49] He is a "son who must break family ties" for Horne, and as Kilian added, "He further breaks the family ties by avoiding the regional accent that Tom's mother and sister assume." Such difference may have been all the more noticeable because of Peck's "expressive baritone voice," as Burns noted. Talking more like a midwesterner than a Southerner (like his mother), Peck's Tom sought to escape an oppressive culture. Berlin emphasized Peck's distinctive achievement in the role: "Peck is fine as the poetic young man trapped in an unfriendly world. He demonstrates both the grace and the occasional ruthlessness of the character."[50] As Burns also noted, Peck brought anger and tenderness to his interpretation of an embattled Tom.

As the Gentleman Caller, Ken LaRon was appropriately cast. The handsome LaRon was a regular on *Guiding Light* as a dashing young man, and so he easily became Jim. LaRon, however, gave a new direction to the role. He played the Gentleman Caller "as a slick but sensitive young man on the way up, a would-be Horatio Alger. His character is multi-dimensional, more realistic than the part is usually played."[51] Tonia Rowe's Laura, too, differed from other interpretatitons. According to Richards, "Her performance, discreet and secretive, is a real heartbreaker—partially because she asks for no pity." A calm though isolated Laura is represented in Figure 12.

VI

One of the most innovative and provocative Black *Glass Menageries* took place at the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre from May 15 to June 2, 1991. The

leading Black theatre in the San Francisco area, the Hansberry made history by staging *Menagerie*, for it was the first play written by a white dramatist that they did.[52] Such a decision, however, was entirely in keeping with the Hansberry's dedication to cultural diversity. Quintin Easter, Hansberry's Executive Director, provided the artistic justification for doing *The Glass Menagerie*: "We ought to be able to look at any American play and bring our perspective to it" and a little later added, "The resonances for people of color are just as powerful as for white actors. We came from a love of the play."[53] Stanley E. Williams, the Artistic Director of the Hansberry, likewise observed: "We are taking ownership of our history and culture, exploring the tremendous joy and pain that is our heritage as Afro-Americans."[54] In light of these observations, Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* again takes its place firmly in an African-American heritage, a fact earlier recognized by such directors as H. D. Flowers and Tazewell Thompson.

The Hansberry *Menagerie* boasted an impressive cast seen in Figure 13. Phyllis Applegate, who played Amanda, brought a long list of theatre and television credits to the part; she appeared in *China Beach*, *thirtysomething*, and *L. A. Law*. Michael P. Boatman, who was Tom, also appeared on *China Beach* and starred in *Hamburger Hill* and *The Trial of Bernard Goetz*. Thea Perkins played Laura, and Leith Burke was Jim.

The leading force behind the Hansberry's *Menagerie*, however, was its director and set designer Whitney J. LeBlanc (Figure 14). LeBlanc worked as director and designer for *The Red Foxx Show* and *The Jim Nabors Show*, and was the associate producer of *Good Times*; he also served as the Director for Television for the Maryland PBS. In his "Director's Notes," the aesthetic manifesto for the Hansberry production, LeBlanc defended the Hansberry's doing an all-Black *Menagerie* on the grounds of its universal, artistic appeal and the right of Black Americans to participate fully in such a great work of art. He emphasized that since *Menagerie* expresses the human condition it is wrong to exclude Blacks from such experiences. "It is only when life experience is presumed reserved for a special class or group that one encounters problems . . . Since the arts, especially theatre, are concerned with the discovery of truth, I could see no better selection than *The Glass Menagerie* to bring to life the concept of cultural diversity."[55]

LeBlanc eschewed any such thing as a "Black interpretation" of the play. "I never worked in this show from an ethnic bias . . . [I emphasized] the human condition these people found themselves in, regardless of color."[56] But, as LeBlanc also fully understood, using Black actors produced "unexpected meanings."[57] In fact, Black actors performing *The Glass Menagerie* accentuate Williams's themes, reinforce the historical conditions around which the play is built, and heighten the play's irony in ways impossible for an all-white cast.

Scott Rosenberg approvingly announced that LeBlanc "transposed Williams's Wingfield family into an African milieu with a minimal of textual alteration"[58] and then pronounced the Afro-American appropriation "entirely creditable." Commenting that *Menagerie* is "basic, universal, and colorblind," Gerald Nachman claimed that, after seeing LeBlanc's production of the play, it "might almost have been written by Lorraine Hansberry."[59]

As with the productions done by the Cleveland Play House or the Arena, not all the reviewers endorsed a Black theatre company performing *The Glass Menagerie*. Judith Green, the reviewer for *The San Jose Mercury*, strenuously objected to Phyllis Applegate playing Amanda: ". . . the largest problem is that Amanda is a white Southern gentlewoman, the faded vestige of a class whose manners, politics, and gentility were anchored to a slave-based economy."[60] Professing that Amanda's "race is germane to her social background," Green pointed out that "her pampered privileged attitude, as expressed in ultra refined language, doesn't change color just because words are spoken by a Black woman."

As Ruby Dee has pointed out, Amanda does not have to be white to have aristocratic aspirations or language; moreover, the play and the role do not belong to one specific race, as the history of Black productions attests and as LeBlanc eloquently maintained in his "Director's Notes." Southern Black women possess elegance and wealth, too. Born in Louisiana, LeBlanc recalled in one interview: Amanda's "very reminiscent of women I've always known, Black women who were elite bourgeois, looking for the finer things of life."[61] In a 1992 interview, LeBlanc stressed: "There is nothing in Amanda's social background that has not been experienced by persons of other ethnic backgrounds."[62]

Several reviewers quarreled with Scott Rosenberg's assessment that LeBlanc made only "minimal textual alterations" or with Harv's conclusion that LeBlanc performed his Menagerie "without a single facelifting change."[63] In her *Oakland Tribune* review, Crawford asserted that LeBlanc "changed a fair amount of dialogue."[64] There is no question that LeBlanc made a number of changes in and around the script—not to "sanitize," as Judith Green protested—but to show the "commonality of human experience" in *Menagerie*. Before the play started, audiences at the Hansberry heard a radio account of Jesse Owens's victory at the 1936 Olympics, and then were treated to music from Duke Ellington and other Black performers which emanated from the Paradise Dance Hall across the street from the Wingfield apartment. The few changes LeBlanc made directly in the script were to use "servant" in place of "colored boy," "darky"; "vice-president of a college"—in place of "Vice-President of Delta Planter's Bank"; "Meeting" instead of "DAR," and so forth.[65] In production, LeBlanc wanted to substitute Daughters of Isis (DOI), a distinguished Black woman's organization, for the

DAR. Stanley Williams, the Hansberry's Artistic Director, and LeBlanc clashed over this emendation of Williams's script. Stanley Williams maintained that Black women were currently members of the DAR and so Williams's original wording should be retained. Reluctantly conceding Stanley Williams's objections, however, LeBlanc did not use DOI in production even though the note was left in the program.[66]

Unquestionably, the most provocative element of the Hansberry *Menagerie* was the picture of a white man for Amanda's estranged husband who "fell in love with long distances." Gerald Nachman spoke for many who no doubt thought Mr. Wingfield was "unaccountably white." But the picture of the absent white father in the Black Wingfield household gave LeBlanc an opportunity to attack unscrupulous white men for their treatment of Blacks and the subsequent dissolution of the Black family—"We've always been abandoned by fathers ever since miscegenation."[67] Again, no white production could or would incorporate such a scathing observation.

Working with Black actors and actresses allowed LeBlanc to reveal still further themes and subtexts unavailable to audiences of white *Menageries*. In directing Phyllis Applegate, seen in Figure 15 with Thea Perkins as Laura, LeBlanc expanded the role of Amanda. This Black Amanda was hard-hitting, not sentimental, or introspective, or pathetic, as different from Laurette Taylor as from Ruby Dee. Deborah Peifer perceptively stated that LeBlanc's production breaks down the barriers established by stage history; no longer must "the ghost of Laurette Taylor be shrouding our eyes and our senses."[68] To LeBlanc's credit, he freed us from Laurette Taylor's seemingly model (or prototypical) "haunting but maudlin portrayal"[69] of Amanda. By bringing more gusto to the role, Applegate successfully challenged white theatre history's lockhold on Amanda.

Those who objected to Applegate's interpretation again failed to appreciate the expansiveness of Williams's script. Applegate, for Judith Green, "turns Amanda into a coarse shrew without even the shadow of a genteel past."[70] Like some others, Green found it incongruous that a Black woman would play the part of a faded Southern belle. While admitting that Applegate was "voluble and buoyant," Rosenberg thought she "plays a little too eagerly . . . [the] comic aspects of Amanda's overprotectiveness." Such a reservation seems ill-founded, since it drains the humor out that Williams built into the role of Amanda. As Josephine Premice's Amanda displayed in the Cleveland Play House's Black *Menagerie*, humor helps a Black Amanda, without resources and with a family to keep together, to adjust, to interpret, and to survive. It is highly appropriate that LeBlanc was the associate producer of *Good Times* where another Black mother, Florida Evans (played superlatively by Esther Rolle), exhibited much compassion, intimacy, and love through pointed humor.

Michael Boatman's Tom Wingfield (see Figure 16) brought both a new yet justified interpretation of Williams's character. Unlike many other (white) Toms, Boatman's Tom performed the role in a "refreshingly unpoetic manner."[71] A number of critics pointed to his "tension and anger,"[72] "rebelliousness and love"[73] and, "explosive anger that lurks beneath his mannered surface."[74] Behind Boatman's Tom rages the anger of many generations of young Black men quarreling with the injustices of a corrupt social system, whether symbolized by a racist world order at large or through the indignities of the Continental Shoe Company at home.

VII

The Glass Menagerie is one of Williams's most popular and most frequently performed plays. At least five filmed versions of it have been made; and the play has attracted some of the leading actresses of the American stage, including Laurette Taylor, Helen Hayes, Jessica Tandy, Maureen Stapleton, and Katharine Hepburn. White (mainline) productions of *The Glass Menagerie* have been the standard by which the script of Williams's play has been interpreted. But there is a vital and critically important theatre history of *Menagerie* with Black and multi-racial casts. From the late 1940s on, Black directors have staged Williams's classic in productive ways. There are far more open casting productions of *The Glass Menagerie* today than ever before, and these recent productions starring Black actors and actresses underscore the evolving power of Williams's play. Productions by Black theatre companies have major significance for a (re-) interpretation of Williams's play. Reflecting the history of the times in which they were performed, Black *Menageries* disclose political and social messages ignored by or impossible to incorporate in white productions. By representing aspects of Black culture inscribed in *The Glass Menagerie*, Black directors and actors/actresses expand and elucidate the (sub)text of Williams's play. In our age of cultural and critical pluralism, these productions offer invaluable commentary on the evolution of *The Glass Menagerie* and the fears and dreams of the audiences who respond to and are reflected in Williams's play. No audience owns *The Glass Menagerie* exclusively, either.

University of Southern Mississippi

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Figure 2: Robert (Graham) Brown as Tom; Shauneille Perry as Laura and Doris Williams as Amanda in the 1947 production of *Glass Menagerie* at Howard University. Photo courtesy of James W. Butcher.

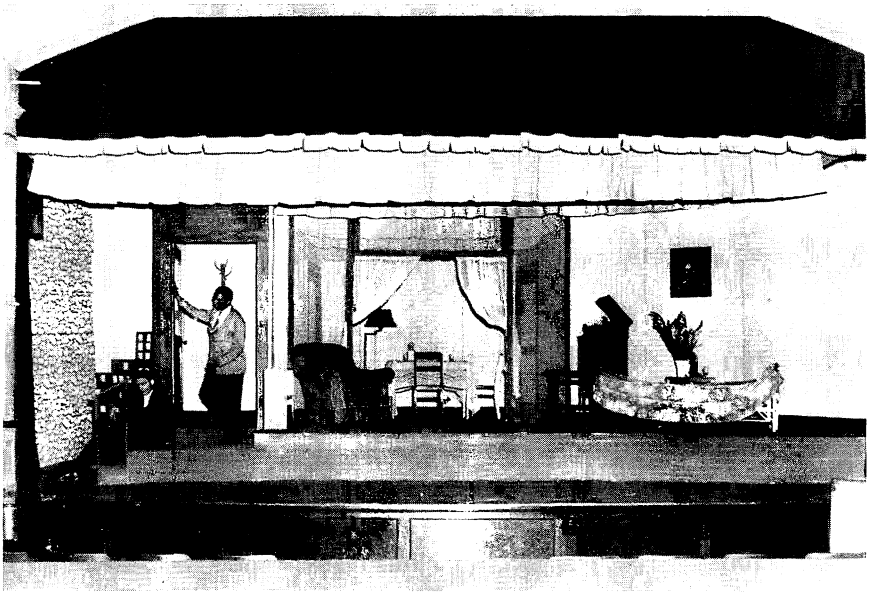

Figure 3: William Goble as Jim O'Connor (Standing) and Joseph Arnold as Tom Wingfield (Sitting) in the 1951 production at Lincoln University. Photo courtesy of Thomas D. Pawley.

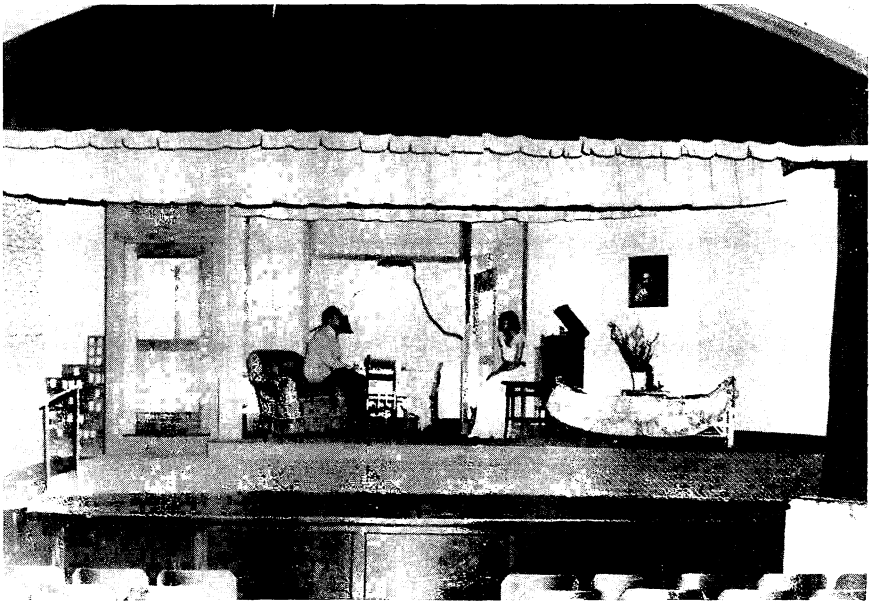

Figure 4: William Goble as Jim and Dolores Clinton as Laura. Photo courtesy of Thomas D. Pawley.

Figure 5: Ella Apple as Amanda; Jo Herbert Kerr as Tom; and Edward Dean as Jim in the Karamu production in 1965. Photo courtesy of Reuben Silver.

Figure 6: Shown here in a moving moment are Ellen Thornton (left) as Laura, and Ella Apple as her mother, Amanda Wingfield.

Figure 7: Paul Winfield as Jim and Bonnie Bedella as Laura in the Inner City Cultural Center's production in 1967. Courtesy Eugene Bolande and the Inner City Cultural Center.

Figure 8: (Starting from left, clockwise) Leon Addison Brown (Tom), David Toney (Jim), Josephine Premice (Amanda) and Shawn Judge (Laura) in 1989 production. Courtesy of Cleveland Play House.

Figure 9: David Toney portrays the gentleman caller, Jim, and Shawn Judge is Laura. Drury Theatre of the Cleveland Play House. Courtesy Cleveland Play House.

Figure 10: Ruby Dee as Amanda in the Arena Stage production. Photo by Joan Marcus. Courtesy of Arena Stage.

Figure 11: (Front) Tonia Rowe, (Rear, Left to Right) Ken LaRon, Ruby Dee, Jonathan Earl Peck. Photo by Joan Marcus. Courtesy Arena Stage.

Figure 12: Tonia Rowe, Ken LaRon. Photo by Joan Marcus. Courtesy Arena Stage.

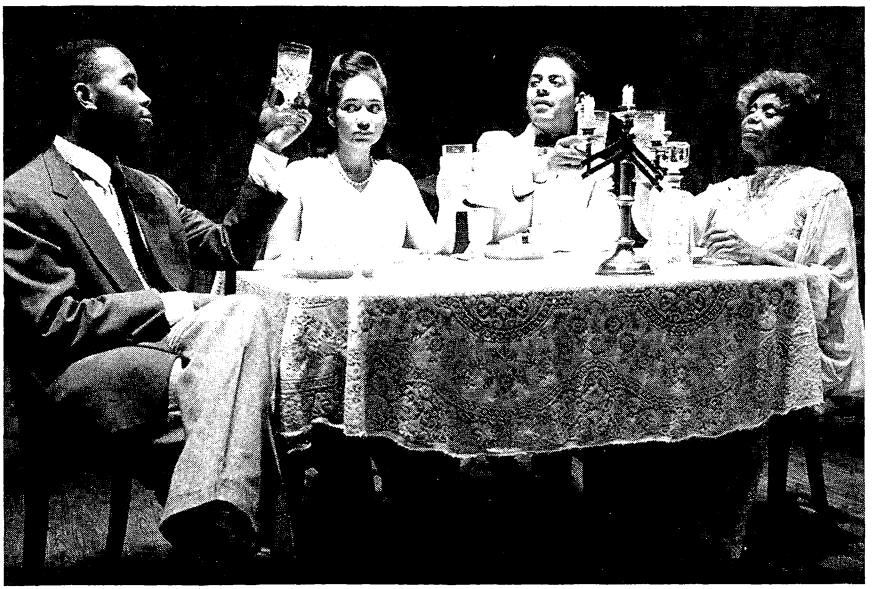

Figure 13: Phyllis Applegate as Amanda; Michael P Boatman as Tom; Thea Perkins as Laura; and Leith Burck as Jim in the 1991 production at the Hansberry. Copyright Adrian Ordenana.

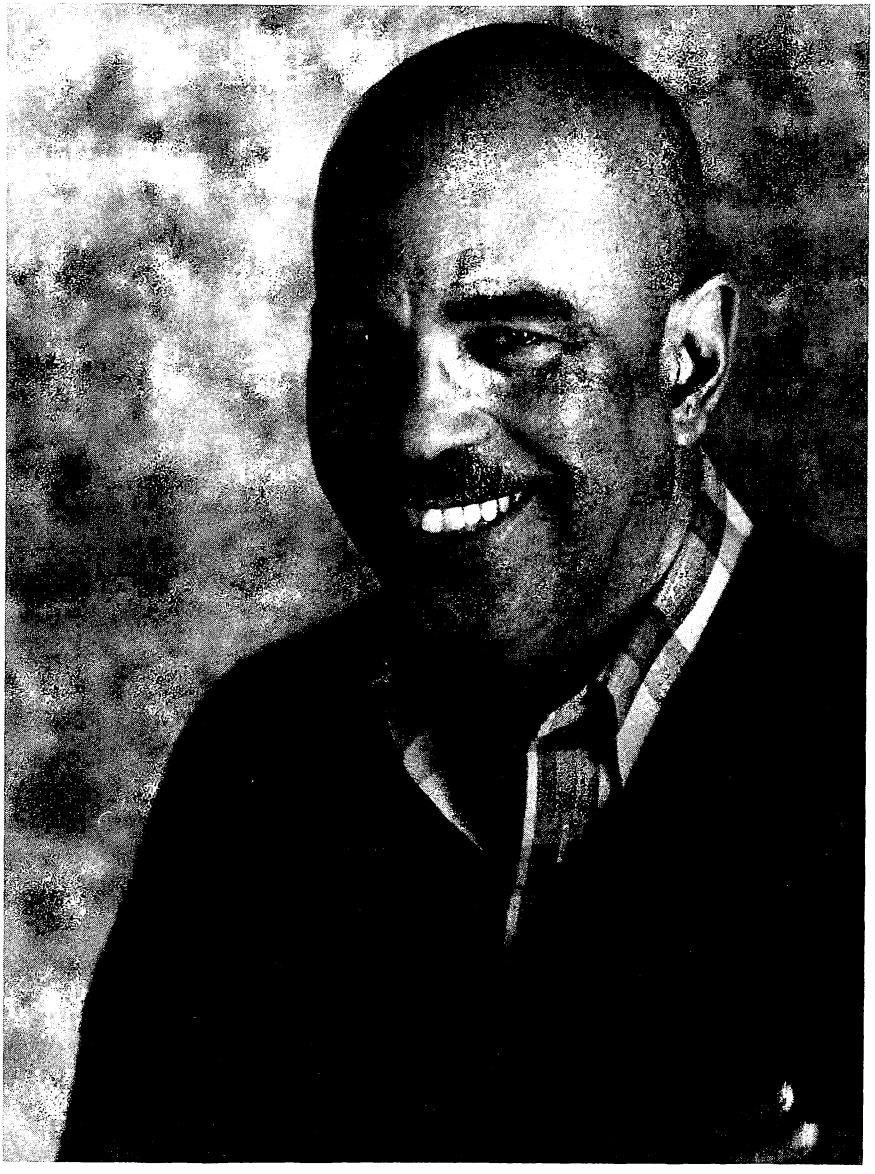

Figure 14: Whitney J. LeBlanc. Courtesy Whitney J. LeBlanc.

Figure 15: Phyllis Applegate as Amanda and Thea Perkins as Laura. Courtesy Whitney J. LeBlanc. Copyright Adrian Ordeana.

Figure 16: Michael Boatman as Tom and Phyllis Applegate as Amanda in the 1991 production of *Glass Menagerie* at the Hansberry Theatre. Courtesy Whitney J. LeBlanc. Copyright Adrian Ordeana.

Praxis