In December I was lucky enough to be in New York City and saw five shows of varying quality. By far the best was *Twelve Night*, an “original practice” production (ie, all-male cast) from London’s Globe Theatre featuring Mark Rylance as Olivia and Stephen Fry as Malvolio. It was the funniest production of this Shakespeare comedy I have ever seen, with stellar performances from the entire hilarious ensemble. Interestingly, the show was so good that the cross-gender casting became almost irrelevant.

Another show I attended, at Roundabout Theatre, was entirely unknown to me. *Machinal* is a 1928 play written by a woman playwright (quite a rare thing at that time) named Sophie Treadwell. The lead role is played by Rebecca Hall, a rising young British actor whom I’ve seen before on stage and she is very good in this challenging piece where she is onstage for almost the entire time. But I was mostly interested in seeing this almost 90 year-old play—loosely based on an infamous contemporary case of spousal murder—from our 21st century perspective.

Described by critics at the time as a “tragedy of submission,” it offers an expressionistic yet sympathetic rendering of a young woman so oppressed by societal expectations that she is driven to kill her husband and in the end is executed herself. An audience in 1928 would have had an easier time recognizing the economic entrapment and emotional desperation of the main character, when working outside the home was still considered a mere stepping stone before marriage and children. A 21st century audience struggles a bit more to empathize with this protagonist. Today, a woman (ideally?) has as many opportunities as a man to have a career and make choices that may or may not involve domestic life.

These proto-feminist themes are echoed in two works appearing in town this month. Theatregoers in Victoria have the chance to catch a couple of classic mid-century American plays: William Inge’s 1953 play *Picnic* is on at the University of Victoria’s Phoenix Theatre (February 13-22) and Tennessee Williams’ 1944 play *The Glass Menagerie* is at Blue Bridge Theatre (February 11-23). There are many points of connection between these two writers, not the least of which is their remarkable ability to write women’s roles. Many male playwrights have written great roles for women (consider Shakespeare alone!), but it is notable in Inge and Williams how female characters are presented as complex, conflicted and constrained by gender codes against which they struggle.

The sensitivity to this issue of these playwrights was informed by their own lives. Both were gay, Inge closeted and Williams out. Both of their careers rose around the same time, in the 1940s and 1950s, in a sexually repressive US climate. Both authors had their plays turned into successful film versions. Both careers peaked early, leaving them suffering in later life as their reputations founded. Inge ended up committing suicide at the age of 60 while Williams sank into ever-deeper addictions. These were sad endings for two Pulitzer Prize-winning writers who broke significant new ground in modern theatre.

*Picnic* emerged out of an earlier one-act play by Inge called *Front Porch* which features a set of Midwestern spinster women of various ages sitting together on a porch considering the missed opportunities and regrets of their lives. These characters morphed into the women seen in *Picnic*: an abandoned wife and mother, her two daughters, her single schoolteacher boarder and senior spinster next-door neighbor. The daughters dream of freedom and a very different life than the older women around them. The glimmer of hope at the end of the play is that perhaps they might find this happier ending, in differing ways. Inge introduces a rooster into this hen-house, a drifter named Hal (played by Paul Newman on Broadway and William Holden in the film version) who sends all of these repressed Kansas females into tizzies of lust and longing.

Beauty, or the lack of it, is a central theme of the play, and we see how the good-looking Hal and the pretty daughter Madge are drawn to each other via mutual attraction. In Inge’s original version of the play, Hal and Madge part ways and Madge seems destined to be the town floozy, her reputation damaged beyond repair by her affair with Hal. Director Joshua Logan pushed Inge, quite forcibly, into a happier ending he felt would be more acceptable to audiences. But I find it fascinating that Inge creates so many portraits of women, both younger and older, who are chafing against the constraints placed on them by society. Yet the solution found in the play by a couple of female characters is a very traditional one: to find a man (even an unsuitable one) to fulfill one’s needs.

Losing and finding dubious men is also seen in Tennessee Williams’ *Glass Menagerie*, one of my all-time favourite plays, featuring some of the greatest and most moving dramatic writing I know. I saw an excellent production in New York four years ago featuring Judith Ivey as overbearing faked southern belle and abandoned single mother Amanda Wingfield. Amanda is a role that draws many middle-aged women actors and is rightly viewed as one of the most demanding and rewarding in the American canon. Laurette Taylor originated the role that has since been played by luminaries such as Gertrude Lawrence, Helen Hayes, Shirley Booth, Jessica Tandy, Maureen Stapleton,
Katherine Hepburn, Jessica Lange and (here in Canada) Shirley Douglas. Locally, we will see it tackled by stage and screen actor Joanne Wilson. Amanda’s struggle to survive the Depression and help her socially-inhibited daughter Laura find a husband is at the heart of the drama.

In this autobiographical memory play Williams presents a pain-filled yet loving and poetic version of his own family, placing himself in the cast as the narrator Tom Wingfield. Tom’s struggle is to escape these two women who shackle him into a dead-end job in a shoe warehouse. His guilt at wanting to leave them behind to follow his dream of becoming a writer is the impetus for what we witness. Williams effectively plumbs the depths of despair in the lives of women who have been repeatedly disappointed in and abandoned by men—gentlemen callers, lovers, husbands and sons. What options remain for these women who lack the protection and financial security of a male presence? Amanda retreats into her memories of youthful beauty surrounded by suitors, while Laura finds solace in her collection of fragile glass animals and her long-gone father’s discarded records.

It has been much discussed by scholars that these gay playwrights were capable of writing women’s roles so well in part because of their own marginalized sexuality at that time. Personally, I tend to appreciate this the other way round. What draws me to these great plays again and again are the portrayals of women for whom I ache in empathy. I leave the theatre after seeing productions of Picnic and Menagerie all the more grateful for the feminist progress that allows me to live a full life, unlike so many women of earlier generations.

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