

## INTERVIEW WITH

# The Actor: JUDITH IVEY

WE RECENTLY SPOKE WITH TWO-TIME TONY AWARD-WINNING ACTRESS JUDITH IVEY ABOUT HER ROLE AS THE MATRIARCH OF THE WINGFIELD FAMILY, AMANDA, IN *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*.

### **How did this revival of *The Glass Menagerie* come about? Who approached whom first?**

Gordon Edelstein called my agent with the offer. It made me giggle; the offer had a proviso saying, “Please tell her she is not old enough to play this part. But I want to stage the play with a younger Amanda.” I said yes immediately. I said, “Don’t worry about how old I am, because I am old enough to play that part.” He just made me feel good about myself.

### **This production unfolds in a dingy hotel room in New Orleans; Amanda and Laura walk into this space and take over Tom’s memories. Who came up with this conceit during the production process?**

Gordon did a lot of research and read many books about Tennessee Williams, which he passed on to all of us. It was his concept to place *The Glass Menagerie* in a hotel room. Viewing the play from the vantage point of the present, we have the luxury of knowing a great deal about Williams—that, for example, his real name is Thomas, and that Tom the narrator was the playwright. Many elements make this play autobiographical. Gordon felt, “Why are we going to tiptoe around this fact? Gordon wanted to embrace the concept that Tennessee Williams was *writing* about his life. That’s why this production places the setting in his hotel room while he is struggling to write this play, instead of showing us a man who reflects on the past and talks about it to the audience. This Tom is a writer struggling to put together his story.

### **How does that shift in setting affect your own approach as an actor?**

Gordon’s interpretation doesn’t really change my interpretation of Amanda, nor does it impact it emotionally. If we had done the play exactly as written, I would have approached her exactly the way I approached her in Gordon’s revival. I have wanted to play this part since I was 18 years old. I read it in English class. The teacher, who happened to be my real mother, had everybody read *Glass Menagerie* out loud. I read the part of Amanda. I thought then that if I do become an actress (I had just started to act when I was 17), I had to play this role one day. I had thought about how I would portray Amanda longer than I care to confess.

### **What was it about Amanda that spoke to you?**

I love Amanda because of her sense of joy, her devotion to her children, her passion. She’s very passionate about everything. She’s passionate about selling the magazines, for example, mostly because they’re going to be the pennies that may make the difference in paying the light bills. There are productions I’ve seen where she’s played as a victim. I don’t see her as a victim at all. If she is a victim, she doesn’t know she’s a victim. There’s a kind of happiness about Amanda I like.

### **Amanda is frequently seen as the first of a long line of faded Southern belles written for the stage; how do you confront the history of a character coming from such a background?**

I think Southern belles take on certain qualities in order to get what they want. These are very strong, determined women — and, once again, passionate. They might use fragility to make you give them something. They send the double message of “I can’t do it myself. I need it,” but indeed they could get up and do it by themselves. Florence King, a wonderful writer [the author of *Southern Ladies and Gentlemen* and *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady*], has written extensively about what it is like to be a Southern man and a Southern woman; I have gone back to her and read her works, which have been very helpful, because in the end Amanda really is much more about strength than weakness. Someone mentioned to me “Did you read the book his mother wrote about being Tennessee Williams’s mother?” so I read that book [Edwina Estelle Dakin Williams’s *Remember Me to Tom*, published in 1963] as well. It has been a great good fortune for me that there is a long line of actresses that have played Amanda. I haven’t seen all of them, god knows, but the ones I’ve seen give you the advantage of learning from somebody else’s mistakes — or knowing exactly what you are going to steal from that performance, because it was such a brilliant choice. I am not intimidated by the history of this role — not at all. I see it as to my advantage that other people have gone before me. I have created a lot of roles in my career; I’ve been the original interpreter of new roles in many new plays. That latter process is, for me, more intimidating than roles that have a past.



**How have you made the part of Amanda your own?**

I keep going back to the joy of it. Amanda is always telling stories. She's always got a monologue; she's not a person who speaks in monosyllabic responses. She is poetic. She is funny. She makes jokes. She shows off. She wants to be the center of attention and was. The text is so familiar to me; so recognizable as out-of-the-mouths-of-other-women-and-their-behaviors. To create Amanda, I drew from my grandmother and my own mother, Dorothy Lewis Ivey. My mother very much has that flavor of Amanda; she, too, loves to tell stories. I always used to say to her, "Take a breath, mom." She'll dazzle you with one long story, if you let her go with it. It's part of that culture to tell stories, to entertain and to make you feel comfortable. Part of making you feel comfortable is to never let there be a silence.

**Is Amanda a monster?**

No, but she handles things monstrously. I don't think she's a monster at all. She is maybe overzealous. I think she lives in a state of fear that she could be out on the streets, without a home, very easily. The lights go out in the play, at one point, and it is not because of the thunderstorms. Amanda has no perspective. If she had perspective and she behaves the way she behaves in the play, then she would be a monster. But she has none. She lives with that passion, the desire to help and her will to survive. She cares deeply about her children. I have two children myself, and they are much younger than Laura and Tom at this time. I totally identify with the notion of living in fear that your children won't be good citizens in the world and that they won't be able to live without your constant presence. Hopefully

I don't handle that parental problem monstrously; hopefully, I don't panic. *The Glass Menagerie* is very complicated. It's easy to make Amanda a monster, and if you do make her so, that means you haven't understood her. You haven't fully gone into the other side of her. All the characters in *The Glass Menagerie* are 4D, not just 3D.

**I'm curious to hear your thoughts about the mother-daughter dynamic in *The Glass Menagerie*.**

What is most obvious in the play is that Amanda sees Laura as a failure. The second scene of the play involves Laura dropping out of business school and Amanda discovering it in a terrible and humiliating way. Being Amanda, she absolutely cannot believe Laura is not enrolled, and Amanda insists that the school is at fault. When she discovers that indeed Laura has not been going to classes and that all that money for school has been wasted (money they don't have), all of Amanda's dreams and her hopes for the future for some kind of protection dissolve. This woman, Laura, clearly was never going to be the belle of the ball; she was never going to put the party dress on and have 17 gentlemen callers sitting around her on folding chairs. This horrible, horrible need to overcome this problem lifts Amanda up and raises her resolve to give Laura some positive thrust. The gentleman caller is the Second Coming in their lives.

**Does Amanda see herself in Laura?**

No, I don't think Amanda sees herself in Laura at all. There probably was a great deal of Laura in Amanda, but she overcame those issues. And Amanda wasn't afflicted with this bum leg. If anything, Amanda *was* the belle of the ball; she was a huge success. She made a stupid mistake when she married Mr. Charm; he was not the right guy for her. I do think she sees her husband in her son, and she thinks the same thing is going to happen there. If Amanda had real perspective, if she had understood human frailty, she would respond differently, because she is a good person. But she doesn't have that perspective, and so the disappointment in her is enormous. What I did not realize until I was in the thick of playing Amanda was how she struggles to overcome that disappointment. She struggles to find the positive, and the play is beautifully written to express that struggle. Once that gentleman caller becomes the focus, there's a blossoming of hope in the middle of the play; that hope takes us all to the point where you *feel* that when the gentleman caller arrives, life is going to be great. And indeed it looks like life might be that. Another element that Gordon confronts in this play is that everybody is a good person, especially the gentleman caller. It's

just that the characters don't necessarily deal with things in the best way, and they're caught in horrible circumstances. So *The Glass Menagerie* is really a play about: What survives? Who survives? And how do they survive?

**In Gordon's revival a kind of reversal happens: Amanda and Laura leave Tom behind at the end of the play to stew both in his memories and in the act of creation.**

Well, the exit did come from just us doing improvisations. I picked up the vase, I ran out the door, and I threw it at him. Tom did actually leave when we were first playing with the scene: he left, and the vase of flowers went after him, and I ran back in the room. And then as rehearsals evolved, Gordon said, no, no, I think you Amanda and Laura are the ones who leave. Of course, there's this wonderful scrim wall, and we could just disappear. And when in the farewell scene Tom talks about what happens to his mother and sister while sitting in the candlelight, it's almost like another scene that is separate from what was originally written. What Roundabout audiences will see comes from our playing with those last scenes. The wonderful thing that happens because the play takes place in a hotel room and we are all Tom's memories is that he controls the entire storytelling. He never leaves the stage. Gordon's vision to place it in the hotel and embrace Tom as Tennessee Williams just made this production so much more exciting.

**Are there other roles in the Williams canon that you long to portray?**

I would love to play Alexandra del Lago, the aging movie star in *Sweet Bird of Youth*. I would have liked to play Maggie "the Cat" in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, but Big Mama is all that's left there for me now. I have to say that I never understood Blanche DuBois from *A Streetcar Named Desire*. I think I'm just not crazy enough to tap into her; that one never attracted me. I always wanted to play Amanda — always, always, always. I'd say that I've pulled *The Glass Menagerie* down the shelf three or four times a year and sit and read it.

**If Tennessee Williams were alive today and you could ask him a question, what would it be?**

Oh, gosh. Directors often kicked Tennessee out of rehearsals because he laughed so much and often at

odd intervals during actual performances. When I read that information about Williams in the books, I thought to myself, "This is why I am supposed to play this role: Because I think she's hilarious." So if Tennessee could come to rehearsals; I would ask him, "Where can I find more jokes?"

**You have also been directing as well as acting. What is it about directing that appeals to you?**

I was told years ago that I should be a director. I just felt they were complimenting my acting. But directing finally happened. I love actors. I love watching them find a story. During rehearsals for *The Glass Menagerie*, I loved sitting and watching the gentleman-caller scene. I love making a piece of literature come alive, whether I'm in it as an actor or as a director.



Judith Ivey and Keira Keeley in *The Glass Menagerie*