Great change comes when enough people can imagine the world differently.

Steppenwolf’s 2008-2009 season explores the power of imagination.

Through our productions this year we hope to further understand the source of imagination, its effect on family and community, and the loss endured when imagination fails to grow into reality.
Imagination and the American Dream

In Tennessee Williams’ The Glass Menagerie, the ability to imagine a different life, a better life, is what keeps the Wingfield family afloat. It is also the source of their frustration and unhappiness, as they fail to bring this imagined life to fruition.

In America, this imagined life of prosperity and fulfillment is commonly called the American Dream.

Matriarch Amanda Wingfield, her son Tom, and daughter Laura all struggle to achieve their versions of the American Dream. But what that dream really is, and how an average family living in America is actually meant to achieve it, is a question that generations of Americans have struggled to answer.

This study guide will explore The Glass Menagerie through the prism of the American Dream. While even the nation’s most prominent leaders have trouble defining what this dream is, most commonly it involves upward mobility and a chance at happiness. But those are in themselves subjective bars, set by society and not the individual. What happiness means to each character in The Glass Menagerie, and to each of us as individuals, is intensely complex and not always aligned with societal norms.

We are in the throes of a heated election campaign. Each candidate promises a better chance at the American Dream for all of us. But what does that promise really mean?

Shanésia Davis plays Amanda Wingfield

Amanda thrives on the memories of her past. She was raised in a prominent Southern family, but has since experienced a complete shift in economic status. Amanda glorifies her socialite adolescence during which she had a deluge of gentlemen callers seeking her attention. The stark contrast between the opulence of her past life and squalor of her current one is too painful to confront. Instead of dealing realistically with the family’s difficulties, Amanda pours all her energy into living vicariously through her children - pushing them to climb back up the social and financial ladders. Amanda has never been the breadwinner; she has no tangible skills or trade of her own. Her only source of hope is her children, whom she fears will eventually leave her behind. Amanda constantly pressures Tom to demonstrate more ambition at work in hopes that he can save the family from economic disaster. Amanda is also counting on Laura to win over a gentleman caller, who she hopes will offer the Wingfield family economic and social stability.

1944

The Glass Menagerie trial run at The Civic Theatre in Chicago.

1945

The Glass Menagerie opens in New York at the Playhouse Theatre. Two weeks after opening, it earns the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best American Play.

1950

The Glass Menagerie movie is released, starring Kirk Douglas, Arthur Kennedy, Gertrude Lawrence and Jane Wyman.

Just the typical american family.

Shanésia Davis plays Amanda Wingfield

Laura is Tom’s youngest sister and Amanda’s daughter. Her social isolation stems from years of self-doubt and crushing timidity rooted in her physical disability. Laura is under constant pressure from her mother to work and find a husband despite her shyness and physical handicap, limitations that essentially prevent her from achieving the prosperous lifestyle Amanda imagines. The plot is centered on Laura’s fragility, and the juxtaposition between what she wants for herself and what her mother wants for her. Despite her muted existence, Laura clings to hopes and dreams that are quieter, but just as powerful as those of her mother and brother. She does not dream of high-society parties or grand adventures, but rather of social inclusion, acceptance and a chance at normalcy. Her glass menagerie is deeply symbolic of her character—beautiful, fragile creatures that may break at any moment.

During her brief encounter with Jim O’Connor, Laura demonstrates a surge uncharacteristic confidence. The exchange suggests that in the right situation, with the right person, Laura can break through her shell and flourish.

Barack Obama

“The American Dream must never come at the expense of the American family”

Imagination and the American Dream

“The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” - James Truslow Adams

“May I never wake up from the American Dream” - Carne Lalet

Barack Obama

“The American Dream must never come at the expense of the American family”
A Question of Character:

**Amanda**

- How does Amanda show her love for her children?
- Do you think Amanda’s account of her youth is true? Why or why not?
- What is the significance of it being true or untrue?
- What is Amanda’s interpretation of the American Dream?

**Laura**

- What do music and the glass menagerie mean to Laura?
- How does Laura’s encounter with the Gentleman Caller change her?
- What effect, if any, will that encounter have on her future?
- Is Laura shut out of the American Dream?

**Tom**

- What purpose does Tom serve as the narrator of a memory play?
- Have Tom’s dreams resolved themselves at the end of the play?
- Is Tom running away from, or in search of the American Dream?

**Jim**

- In what ways is Jim different from the Wingfields?
- In what ways is he similar?
- What does the end of the play say about Jim’s character?
- How is Jim an archetype of the American Dream?
This production of *The Glass Menagerie*…

**Is Something Different**

Steppenwolf’s production of *The Glass Menagerie* strives to universalize Tennessee Williams’s classic text. Using an all African-American cast demonstrates that the Wingfields’ story could be any family’s story – regardless of race, religion or geographical location. Too often, the phrase ‘American Dream’ conjures only one image of the archetypal American family, an image that is not broad, diverse nor comprehensive enough to include the many faces of today’s American family.

Steppenwolf’s production of *The Glass Menagerie* forces us to redefine the American family and, in turn, redefine the American Dream.

**The Unlikely Playwright**

Born in 1911 as Thomas Lanier Williams III, Tennessee Williams’s life is defined by both great success and great struggle. He was born in Columbus, Mississippi to Cornelius and Edwina Williams, a traveling salesman and a fallen southern belle. His father suffered from an alcohol problem that he would pass onto his son, and was also reportedly abusive to the family’s three children. When Tennessee was five years old he was diagnosed with a paralytic disorder that paralyzed his legs for almost two years. It was during this time that his mother encouraged him to make up stories to pass the time, perhaps sparking the playwright’s first storytelling skills.

It was at the University of Missouri that Thomas was first nicknamed Tennessee, in honor of his thick Southern accent. He later earned his degree from the University of Iowa in 1938, and moved to Louisiana to write for the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

Less than a decade later, this troubled, shy man had become one of America’s most celebrated playwrights. Tennessee Williams won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award in 1945 for *The Glass Menagerie*, and two Pulitzer Prizes for *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1948 and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1955. However, despite his artistic success (or perhaps because of it) Tennessee continued to struggle with depression, paranoia and alcoholism. He was also forced to confront his own homosexuality at a time when being openly gay was still harshly taboo in American society.

Tennessee was also very close to his sister Rose, who suffered from severe schizophrenia and is assumed to be the inspiration for Laura’s character in *The Glass Menagerie*. Rose later underwent an operation to “cure” her disease that left her incapacitated for the rest of her life, a tragedy that many biographers speculate contributed to Tennessee’s growing substance abuse and anxiety.

Tennessee’s last play is entitled *A House Not Meant to Stand*, which he wrote in 1981 shortly before his death the following year. He was 72 years old.

“Life is all memory, except for the one present moment that goes by you so quickly you hardly catch it going.”

– Tennessee Williams

1987

Another Glass Menagerie movie is released, directed by Paul Newman and starring Steppenwolf ensemble member John Malkovich, Joanne Woodward, Karen Allen and James Naughton.

1988

Steppenwolf mounts its second production of *The Glass Menagerie*, featuring ensemble member Tracy Letts.

1998

The Glass Menagerie is again produced at Steppenwolf, this time with ensemble members Tim Hopper, Molly Regan and Martha Plimpton with current Associate Artistic Director David New.
Artistic Director of SYA
Hallie Gordon
Interviews director and ensemble member
Yasen Peyankov

YASEN PEYANKOV: I came from Bulgaria 18 years ago, so the American Dream is very real to me. I left Bulgaria because I wanted to pursue my dreams, my happiness. I knew fully well what it meant to come to Chicago. I’m probably one of the few lucky ones that actually got to realize my American Dream, which was to earn a living as a theatre artist.

YP: Yes, I think so. We have a typical American family living in a very volatile world and trying to preserve their humanity and their dignity. It’s very similar to the situation we live in right now with war looming in the background and with an economy that is bringing people down. There are no villains in this story, only beautiful, fragile people. They all have dreams that have been broken but they continue to pursue them to the best of their abilities.

YP: That’s a hard dream for anybody—to make a living as a theatre artist.

HG: Yes, so I do consider myself one of the fortunate ones. But I still believe that your destiny is in your own hands, that you make it what you can. I had a few opportunities go my way, and maybe a little bit of luck here and there, but I took chances. I capitalized on what was given to me. I felt like there was always a ceiling for me where I came from. There were just too many obstacles to do things, to get places. And once those restrictions were lifted I capitalized on my opportunities. So, I do believe this country still has a dream to offer. But at the same time this dream can turn very sour.

HG: This is true in The Glass Menagerie, right?

YP: No, I don’t believe that. The Glass Menagerie is a nostalgic play about family life and it revolves around the idea that home is something you always get drawn back to. Tom is revisiting that part of his life and making peace with the past. He has a lot of burdens placed on him by his mother’s high expectations and these burdens drive him to the movies, to alcohol, to places where he can escape his reality. Tom has to figure out what to do when his goals don’t coincide with his family’s goals for him. Under that kind of pressure, of course he thinks about escaping, about dropping everything and just going. I understand those pressures very well because I have worked many, many bad jobs while also being the artistic director for European Repertory Theatre Company. I was working in a furniture store during the day and the money I was earning there was not only going to pay the bills but also sometimes even to subsidize the theatre.

HG: Tom clearly wants to be a writer and working in the warehouse to support his family is suffocating for him. Do you think he is even more vulnerable as an artist?

YP: Absolutely. Imagine how out of place he must feel working in the warehouse.

HG: Nobody talks to him.

YP: Right, he’s the weirdo. The others look at him, giving him funny eyes.

HG: The feelings, issues, and challenges Tom is facing are universal, aren’t they?

YP: Right. I love the idea of making this play with African-American actors because it also opens an opportunity to make something so immediate for our audience, makes the story universal and accessible.

HG: How do you see it playing out aesthetically and design-wise with an African-American cast?

YP: I am going to try to follow Tennessee Williams’ direction as closely as possible. He is very specific, right down to the music and light cues. It is fascinating to follow his road map and see where he takes me. I am looking for a dream-like quality.

HG: You’ve been an ensemble member since 2002 and this is your first time directing at Steppenwolf. What is the interest in directing for you?

YP: Well, I’ve been directing for the European Repertoire Theatre Company since 1992. I have had a desire to direct at Steppenwolf, but the scheduling never worked out. I love The Glass Menagerie and it’s been a dream of mine to direct an American play. This opportunity is a gift, basically.

HG: I’m so glad that you’re doing it.

YP: I can’t wait to start hearing Williams’ words spoken by these actors. It’s going to be a magical experience.

The Glass Menagerie returns to New York starring Jessica Lange, Sarah Paulson, Christian Slater and Josh Lucas at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre.

The Glass Menagerie is produced at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Two productions of The Glass Menagerie run concurrently in Chicago, one at Steppenwolf Theatre and the other at Shattered Globe Theatre.
Back in the Classroom....

**Words on the Wall**
There are many complex themes that develop throughout this play. While there are several to choose from, use these key words as examples: Escape, Memory, Dreams, Fear, and Success. Write these five themes as headers in separate columns on the board and then break into groups. Have each group write one word under each column that they immediately associate with that particular theme. After each group participates, take time to read the words aloud.

**Discuss:**
- What associations seem to contrast each other, even though they are in the same column?
- Were there similar responses across the themes? Did certain words appear in more than one column?
- How do the ideas in these columns speak to each other? Is there a correlation among them?

**Discussion break-out**
Break up the class into four groups. Each group should be assigned one of the characters from *The Glass Menagerie*. Using the same themes from above (or additional key themes that you or your students choose) have your students discuss these themes as they relate to their assigned character. After the four groups discuss separately, they can present their ideas to the class to compare and contrast the four characters.

**Story sharing**
Begin with one of the theme words mentioned above and ask if anyone in the class has a personal story that they wish to share that exemplifies one of these themes (a story of escape, a time they were afraid, etc.). When another classmate hears a word that triggers a story of his/her own experience they chime in and begin to tell his/her story. This give and take continues until everyone has shared some portion of a story. This exercise can also be expanded to utilize a monologues or lines from the provided script of *The Glass Menagerie*. The class can get inspiration from lines within the text, but should jump in when a particular idea triggers a personal story.

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What Ever Happened to Laura Wingfield?
The end of *The Glass Menagerie* is intentionally open ended. Tennessee Williams does not give us all the answers. We have, however, become acquainted with these complex characters throughout the play, and can venture to imagine what happens after the curtain goes down.

- What do you think Amanda and Laura’s lives are like after Tom leaves?
- What do you think will happen to Jim if he doesn’t achieve all he sets out to do?
- Do you think Tom will ultimately be fulfilled by his new life out on the road?
- Do you think Laura will ever leave home?

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Discuss
Why has *The Glass Menagerie* become part of the American theatre cannon?
Why have people responded to this work with such lasting enthusiasm?

Debate
Is the American Dream really about financial prosperity?

Deliberate
Do you think this year’s presidential candidates have different images of the American Dream?
Calling all students….
Steppenwolf is sponsoring an ESSAY CONTEST! We want to hear from YOU!

Imagine…. you could have your essay read aloud by a Steppenwolf ensemble member and broadcast on the Steppenwolf website
Imagine…. you could WIN an iPod Nano
Imagine…. you could score a visit from a Steppenwolf teaching artist for your entire class

Submit your essay to Program Specialist Whitney Dibo at wdibo@steppenwolf.org by November 24th for a chance to win. You must include your name, the name of your school, your grade, and the name of your teacher in order to qualify. Please no more than 1,000 words.

Please respond to the following question:
James Truslow Adams, the American writer and historian who coined the term “The American Dream” defined it as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity, for each according to ability or achievement...a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.”

The Glass Menagerie suggests that the dreams of one generation are often times imposed upon subsequent generations. While your parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles might have had one conception of the American Dream, how do you imagine it? What is your American Dream?

Calling all Teachers….
The Fidelity Investments Inspire the Future Award

Fidelity Investments created this prestigious award with Steppenwolf to honor two educators from Chicago Public Schools who are passionately dedicated to the advancement of youth through theater and the arts.

The winners will receive a special Fidelity Investments/Steppenwolf Young Adults Inspire the Future memento and his/her school will receive a $2,500 grant to support arts programming for its students.

For more information and to apply for this award please contact Lindsey Barlag at lbarlag@steppenwolf.org.
Application materials will also be posted online this winter.

Additional Resources

The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams.
by Donald Spoto
A critical and complete biography of Tennessee Williams.

Tennessee Williams: Plays
A two volume collection of Williams’ plays that enhance the study of his life. Volume one compiles his earlier plays, and volume two includes his later, lesser known plays.

“American Dreams: Reality or Myth?”
by James Nagel (PBS American Masters)
An essay that re-examines the roots of the American dream through 20th century literature.
http://www.pbs.org/weta/americannovel/ideas/american_article.html

The Epic of America
by James Truslow Adams
A story of America’s historical heritage in which Adams speaks to the potential of every man and woman, to the greatness of the American Dream.

“Deepening the American Dream”
An online multi-media project by Bill Moyers and contributors that discuss redefining the American dream.
http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/americandream/index.html

American Family Stories
by autobiographer Joe McHugh
Short audio stories from around the country that help us connect to one another and learn about the strength of the American family.
http://americanfamilystories.org/home.html

Contributors to the SYA Program:

Fidelity Investments is the Corporate Sponsor of Steppenwolf for Young Adults and the Fidelity Investments Inspire the Future Award.

Kraft Foods, Inc. is the Corporate Sponsor of Steppenwolf for Young Adults. Polo Bros. Target is the sponsor of the Target 2-for-1 Sunday Matinees. Corporate support for The Glass Menagerie is provided by Chase. Foundation is the sponsor of Educator Workshops offered in partnership with the Chicago Public Schools Office of Language and Culture.

Steppenwolf’s Auxiliary Council, a community of dynamic young professionals, dedicates their support to Steppenwolf for Young Adults. The Siragusa Foundation is the sponsor of the Steppenwolf Young Adult Council.


This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, and by a CityArts Program 4 grant from the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs. Steppenwolf’s Steppenwolf for Young Adults is a citywide partner of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) School Partner Program.

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