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## Theater: Zachary Quinto In Fragile *Glass*; Dee Dee Bridgewater In *Cloudy Day*

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**THE GLASS MENAGERIE** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**LADY DAY** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

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**BOOTH THEATRE**

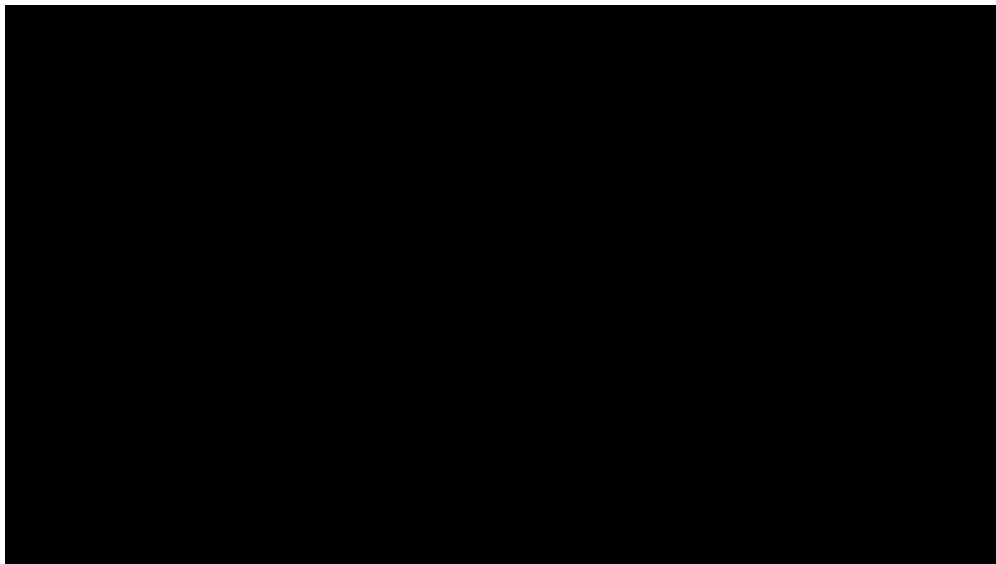
Despite glowing reviews from its out of town tryout, a stellar cast and a great play, I was not transported by the performance I caught of *The Glass Menagerie*. I blame the New York Yankees and the raves.

Why blame the Yankees? Because when I booked this show, I kept the faith that the Yankees might still make the post-season. The only performance I could catch that didn't conflict with baseball was a matinee. Now matinee performances are the bane of any serious theatergoer and this one was no exception. Cell phones went off, the crowd was restless and you never felt that focused tension between audience and actor that is the hallmark of an exciting show.

Why blame good reviews? Because when a show receives overwhelming adulation, it can sometimes throw the actors off their game. Suddenly, they're savoring the moment, lingering on lines and pauses. The performance I caught ran 15 minutes long, which is a very substantial amount of time indeed. Director Mike Nichols once told the cast of a hit show they would be having a meeting the next day to "discuss the improvements," as droll a definition of the flabbiness that can strike a success as I've heard. That might be called for here.

I can imagine a much better experience of seeing this cast in this play -- that's the mystery of live performance. Still, at best I think I would have been a curmudgeonly contrast to the hosannas.

The play is one of Tennessee Williams' two masterpieces (*Streetcar* being the other). A sad, disintegrating family is just hanging on. Writer Tom (Zachary Quinto of *Star Trek Into Darkness*) feels trapped and might just follow the footsteps of his father who abandoned one and all for the territories. Mother Amanda (the great Cherry Jones) feasts on the memory of the gentleman callers she enjoyed as a girl and desperately, perhaps foolishly hopes the same may occur for her crippled daughter Laura. Laura (Celia Keenan-Bolger) is content to stay hidden away in their apartment, limping around, staring at her collection of glass animal figurines and treasuring the one brief crush she enjoyed in high school. The Gentleman Caller (Brian J. Smith) actually arrives, bringing some fragile magic with him. It doesn't last the evening but you hold your breath during their "date" nonetheless.



It's no surprise that Keenan-Bolger and Smith have the best moment of the night during their lovely conversation. It's one of the best written scenes in the theater and no matter the production, remains the highlight of the show. Here the very appealing Smith has a sad, lost air combined with a self-help philosophy that makes his desire to improve Laura believable and sweet.

Quinto is an excellent stage actor but he never got under the skin of Tom. It's a sign of a show that's not working when small artistic touches don't ring true from the start. Tom stumbles backward into his memories, the family mimes certain motions like eating a meal in an avant-garde manner and I never bought it for a moment.

Jones, of course, is one of the greats. She brings a more realistic air to the deluded Amanda, along with another wonderfully distinctive vocal characterization. But the overall effect of her grounded nature, Keenan-Bolger's less wounded Laura and Quinto's shielded Tom is a show where the stakes are lower. Throughout there was a slackness in performance, not a laziness but maybe a Southern indulgence. That's not out of whack with Tennessee's more florid moments but it's not welcome either.

The usually brilliant Bob Crowley made some major missteps in the scenic and costume design. The spare set is shrouded in darkness, with an inky pool of blackness all around. That inky pool didn't really register for me; perhaps it came across better out of town. In a clever touch that amounted to little, director John Tiffany had the cast enter and exit in abrupt, unexpected fashion -- Tom leaves through a hole in the floor, Amanda is swallowed up by the blackness in back and Laura is literally born from the couch, slipping out of it at the beginning and sliding back in again at the end.

All this emphasizes the memories at play of course. But why is there a fire escape that climbs up to the sky in a stunted perspective? It's a distracting fixture. Amanda comes out for dinner in a jokey gown that's too dressy by far. Of course jokey costumes are always a warning sign. But here the outfit is so unattractive and absurd looking you're not sure what to think. Is Amanda delusional in remembering her many callers and that she was the belle of her community? The dress is not the tattered remains of a once lovely fashion a la Miss Havisham. It's just ferociously ugly and not the sort of thing any young woman with a modicum of sense would ever don. Jones is a very un-deluded Amanda, so this visual touch muddies what she's doing. Laura's dress makes the attractive Keenan-Bolger look foolish, again undercutting the magic of her big scene.

Worst of all is the bizarre moon that pops up out of the floor at various times for no particular reason. It remains at floor level, literally below the stage the actors are on and was so curiously placed I had no idea what I was looking at. Why is there a lighted image of a horn sticking out and then retracting again, I thought? It wasn't until the interval that my guest said it was the moon. What the hell is the moon doing below their modest apartment rather than up in the sky? I have no idea. The sound design by Clive Goodwin is similarly misguided; the rain that occurs at one point sounds more like a tap has been left on. The score by Nico Muhly did not distract or add to the proceedings.

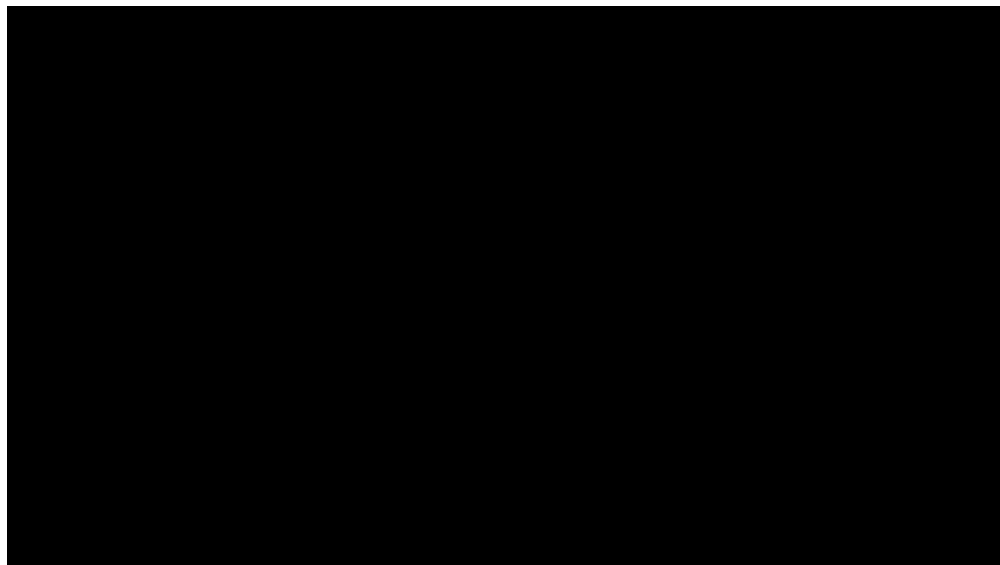
But keep in mind -- I am distinctly in the minority on this one. The praise has been unstinting, the show has exploded at the box office and it will likely be remembered come Tony time. So if you check it out, make sure to avoid matinees (as you always should) and hope that director John Tiffany has addressed the improvements.

#### **LADY DAY \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*** **LITTLE SCHUBERT THEATRE**

The wonderful Tony- and Grammy-winning artist Dee Dee Bridgewater is trapped in a banal stage musical about Billie Holiday that trots out every cliché in a poorly written, poorly staged production set during a rehearsal and performance by Holiday in 1954. You spend the entire evening frustrated, wishing they would just let Bridgewater sing.

Of course, she already sang and toured with the Grammy winning album *Eleanora Fagan (1915-1959): To Billie With Love From Dee Dee Bridgewater*. That album featured Bridgewater putting her own inimitable stamp on some classic Holiday tunes.

Here she does something quite a bit trickier. Bridgewater sings very specifically in the spirit of Holiday: the sometimes slurred vocals, the raspy growl and more. But she doesn't imitate Holiday. At various points in the show, Bridgewater belts out a passage in a very un-Holiday like manner. This keeps her performance from being a slavish imitation and lets her pay tribute to Holiday without restricting her own artistic choices. It's quite a high wire act and different from what she did on her album.



But as I said, her performances of "A Foggy Day (In London Town)," "Lady Sings The Blues," "God Bless The Child" and more

are interrupted too often by awkward stretches of biography. Holiday is in London because she lost her cabaret license in the US. Nervous and worried about making a comeback, Holiday is late to rehearsal and would rather drink and tell stories than face the task in front of her: giving the performance of a lifetime. Her manager Robert (a handsome David Ayers) is there to keep an eye on Holiday, keep the rehearsal moving forward and urge her to face those demons and other platitudes. Also on stage is her band, which jokes and bickers with Billie and Robert when not delivering strong backing for the vocals.

Bizarrely, there's also a stage hand who wanders around fixing up lights. Rafael Pueriet has I think all of one line (he corrects someone on his name) but he's so omnipresent you waste half the show wondering when he's going to have something to do. He never does, though Pueriet does come out at the end for a big bow and to sing along (softly) on the curtain closing number. Why any producer would allow this utterly superfluous presence to remain in the show is beyond me. And why do they give the fine bassist (James Cammack) a few lines when he's clearly uncomfortable saying even something as simple as hello? Perhaps it meant the difference between paying him as a musician and an actor?

The book and direction by Stephen Stahl let Bridgewater down at every stage. In typically awkward staging, she's often sitting on a piano and facing the audience while telling a story to the boys in the band. But they're seated *behind* her, so Bridgewater is forced to repeatedly look over her shoulders at the guys she's supposedly talking to. It's one of the more unnatural and unlikely ways of imagining such a scene but clearly Stah couldn't figure out any other way to let Bridgewater face the audience and talk to the guys at the same time.

In badly written moments, the adult Bridgewater is forced to reenact the rape of the young Billie Holiday or the horrors of Jim Crow, all while the band plays some melodramatic, spooky sounding backing. The Jim Crow section is especially annoying since it distracts entirely from Bridgewater's performance of "Strange Fruit." They already had a brilliant number that distills everything you might want to say about racism in the South. If Holiday had just spat out her anger towards Jim Crow and then sang this song, it would have been far more chilling than the clamorous recollections that hammered the same point home to less effect.

The second act is if anything even worse, with Holiday on stage, breaking down, talking in a bawdy manner to the audience and pulling it together to sing her songs. Bridgewater can do nothing with the cliches piling up here. All we can do is sit there like her manager (and that stagehand!) who watch helplessly and wish Holiday would just stop talking and sing.

#### THE THEATER OF 2013 (on a four star scale)

*The Other Place* \*\* 1/2  
*Picnic* \* 1/2  
*Opus No. 7* \*\* 1/2  
*Deceit* \* 1/2  
*Life And Times Episodes 1-4* \*\*  
*Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* (w Scarlett Johansson) \* 1/2  
*The Jammer* \*\*\*  
*Blood Play* \*\* 1/2  
*Manilow On Broadway* \*\* 1/2  
*Women Of Will* \*\* 1/2  
*All In The Timing* \*\*\*  
*Isaac's Eye* \*\*\*  
*Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery* \*\* 1/2  
*The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County* \* 1/2  
*Much Ado About Nothing* \*\*\*  
*Really Really* \*  
*Parsifal at the Met* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Madrid* \* 1/2  
*The Wild Bride at St. Ann's* \*\* 1/2  
*Passion at CSC* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Carousel at Lincoln Center* \*\*\*  
*The Revisionist* \*\*  
*Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella* \*\*\*  
*Rock Of Ages* \* 1/2  
*Ann* \*\* 1/2  
*Old Hats* \*\*\*  
*The Flick* \*\*\*  
*Detroit '67* \*\* 1/2  
*Howling Hilda* reading \* (Mary Testa \*\*\*)  
*Hit The Wall* \*  
*Breakfast At Tiffany's* \* 1/2  
*The Mound Builders* at Signature \*  
*Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Cirque Du Soleil's Totem* \*\*\*  
*The Lying Lesson* \* 1/2  
*Hands On A Hardbody* \*  
*Kinky Boots* \*\*  
*Matilda The Musical* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream* \*\*\*  
*Motown: The Musical* \*\*

*La Ruta* \*\* 1/2  
*The Big Knife* \*  
*The Nance* \*\*\*  
*The Assembled Parties* \*\* 1/2  
*Jekyll & Hyde* \* 1/2  
*Thoroughly Modern Millie* \*\* 1/2  
*Macbeth w Alan Cumming* \*  
*Orphans* \*\* 1/2  
*The Testament Of Mary* \*\* 1/2  
*The Drawer Boy* \*\*  
*The Trip To Bountiful* \*\*\*  
*I'll Eat You Last* \*\* 1/2  
*Pippin* \*  
*This Side Of Neverland* \*\*\*  
*A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney* \*\*\*  
*Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812* \*\*\*  
*Colin Quinn Unconstitutional* \*\* 1/2  
*A Family For All Occasions* \*  
*The Weir* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Disney's The Little Mermaid* \*\*  
*Far From Heaven* \*\*  
*The Caucasian Chalk Circle* \*\*  
*Somewhere Fun* \*\*  
*Venice* no stars  
*Reasons To Be Happy* \*\*  
*STePz* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Comedy of Errors* (Shakespeare In The Park) \*\*\*  
*Roadkill* \*\* 1/2  
*Forever Tango* \*\*\*  
*Monkey: Journey To The West* \*\* 1/2  
*The Civilians: Be The Death Of Me* \*\*\*  
*NYMF: Swiss Family Robinson* \*\*  
*NYMF: Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue Presents The Brontes* \* 1/2  
*NYMF: Mata Hari in 8 Bullets* \*\*\*  
*NYMF: Life Could Be A Dream* \*\*  
*NYMF: Mother Divine* \*\*  
*NYMF: Julian Po* \*\* 1/2  
*NYMF: Marry Harry* \*\*  
*NYMF: Gary Goldfarb: Master Escapist* \*\* 1/2  
*NYMF: Castle Walk* \*\*\*  
*NYMF: Crossing Swords* \*\*\*  
*NYMF: Bend In The Road* \*\*\* 1/2  
*NYMF: Homo The Musical* no stars  
*NYMF: Volleygirls* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Murder For Two* \*\*  
*Let it Be* \*\*  
*The Cheaters Club* \*  
*All The Faces Of The Moon* \*  
*Women Or Nothing* \*\* 1/2  
*Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play* \* 1/2  
*You Never Can Tell* \*\*\*  
*Romeo And Juliet* \*  
*Arguendo* \*\*  
*August Wilson's American Century Cycle* \*\*\*\*  
*The Glass Menagerie* \*\* 1/2  
*Lady Day* \* 1/2

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