Mother, Myth, or Monster: Gypsy's Momma Rose and The Glass Menagerie's Amanda Wingfield from 1945 to 2015

Mother, Myth, or Monster: *Gypsy's* Momma Rose and *The Glass Menagerie's* Amanda Wingfield from 1945 to 2015

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Abstract

There are some musicals and some plays that never seem to die. Their popularity is so great that Broadway continues to present revival after revival. *Gypsy* and *The Glass Menagerie* are two of these favorite classics. There is a strong mother in each of these works and her characterization and position in the story deeply affects the action and tone of each work. This study searches for evidence of a deep appreciation of each woman, especially in terms of being a mother, and how is that affected by the time and its collective memory of each production?

By examining three productions of each work during the period from 1945 to 2015 this thesis explores if the greater awareness of the "point of view of women" over the years since *The Glass Menagerie* and *Gypsy* first appeared has affected how these mothers are portrayed by actresses or received by critics and audiences through the examination of the text of each work, reviews, memoirs, and related scholarly works. This study finds that Arthur Laurents's continued creative control over productions of *Gypsy* until his death in 2011, with his insistence that Rose was a monster, as well as Rose's very direct refusal to adhere to male authority, has resulted in her becoming more of a monster over the years. Amanda, who appears to fulfill more of the traditional characteristics of a "good" mother and does not engage in threatening behavior with male authority, has eventually come to be seen in a more sympathetic light. As such, they provide opportunities for greater understanding of the how the role of Mother on stage evolves and may actually contribute to our collective awareness.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to anyone who has ever tried their best and worked hard to be a good mother, knowing full well that the work will never be enough, or acknowledged, or to everyone's satisfaction, but who does it anyway.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

What characteristics define the perfect mother? Which ones define a monster of a mother? How do/did we get the idea of what is or is not a good mother? In his introduction trailer for the PBS series, *Iconic America: Our Symbols and Stories With David Rubenstein*, the host notes, "Historical symbols have a lot to say about who we were and who we have become as a people in this country but our collective memory is shaped by who is doing the history telling." Momma Rose of *Gypsy: A Musical Fable* and Amanda Wingfield of *The Glass Menagerie: A Memory Play* are two iconic symbols of motherhood in the history of American Theatre, and it appears that their position in our collective memory is not always the positive reflection of a good mother. Why is that and who is creating the "history" of these characters to shape our collective memory? Also, how firmly do iconic symbols like these two characters influence collective memory over time? Are they part of a continued cycle of the cultural understanding of motherhood, by being both a reflection as well as a creator, of our collective memory of motherhood?

The term "collective memory" describes the understanding of the general population as a group, coming from without, as opposed to an individual's memory which is internal to each person based upon their specific experience. Collective memory can change over time as individuals of the present forget people or events of the past, especially as attitudes and priorities can shift. Collective memory is shaped by common

experiences, including artistic movements and the ongoing development of media, and accepted interpretations of multiple factors of different groups. Artists can use an awareness of the differences of collective memory in diverse societies at distinct moments in their history to increase understanding of characters and their motivations, resulting in a multifaceted and more satisfying interpretation which may possibly affect the collective memory going forward. As explained in the introduction of *Individual and Collective Memory Consolidation*, there is "an essential interaction" between the individual and collective levels of memory where "individual memory is socially mediated and that 'social frameworks' determine what an individual remembers" (Anastasio 9).

In *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism* Gayle Austin states, "A feminist approach to anything means paying attention to women…it means taking nothing for granted because the things we take for granted are usually those that were constructed from the most powerful point of view in the culture and that is not the point of view of women" (1-2). Since the end of the Second World War the understanding and the expectation of the role of mothers in Western society's collective memory have undergone some major developments, which can be traced through a study of these two famous, frequently performed maternal characters of the American stage. According to Judy Whipps in *The Three Waves of Feminism*, "As is often true in social justice movements, poets, artists, and novelists played an important role in this history as they stirred the imagination and became powerful voices for change" (Whipps 3). The influence of both of these characters has been amplified via various film and television adaptations. In a 2016 *Theatre History Studies* article on the importance of the role of

Momma Rose in American musical theatre, Jennifer Worth notes, "It seems that any discussion of the treatment of mothers in musicals must begin with *Gypsy's* Momma Rose" (Worth 256). In a 2020 piece in *Studies in Musical Theatre*, Denise A. Walen's examination of the role posits that Rose is "Ostensibly, the worst mother in the history of musical theater.." (Walen 294) and in his 2015 review of the musical in *The New York Times*, Ben Brantley notes, "I'm talking about Momma Rose, the stage mother to end all stage mothers."

Similarly for the role of Amanda in American drama, Walter Kerr, the famous *New York Times* theatre critic noted in his 1983 article, "*The Glass Menagerie: An Irresistible Dare for Actresses*" "Too many major performers have lunged headlong at the part, accepted its challenge with defiant wills of their own…The part has become everywoman's." Then Alex Witchel asserts in her 2013 *New York Times Magazine* interview with Cherry Jones who was preparing for her performance as Amanda, "For serious actresses, there is no greater challenge than mastering Amanda's complexities." Clearly, since each of these two characters has had a significant impact on American culture with their continued appeal for actresses and audiences, it is reasonable to conclude that they have contributed to - and become part of - our collective memory, making it worthwhile to use them in an analysis of the effects of theatre in defining our understanding of mothers and the role of motherhood.

The period from the first production of *Menagerie* until the present includes the beginning of the Second Wave of feminism which starting in 1960 which "focuses on women's equality" as well as the Third Wave that began in the early 1990s "taking a wider approach to oppression" (Whipps 4). These major movements became part of our

cultural awareness and although feminism didn't specifically focus on motherhood until recently, there certainly were changing attitudes towards all women that could affect the portrayals and receptions of these two mothers of the American theatre.

At the heart of both *Gypsy* and *The Glass Menagerie* is a strong and ambitious mother very actively involved in the lives of her children. There is the mother as written on the page, and in each production discussed in this thesis, there is the mother as conceived by each director, the mother as developed by each actress, and the mother as experienced by the audience and reflected in various reviews and commentaries for each production. How different was Laurette Taylor's Amanda in the original 1945 production from Maureen Stapleton's Circle in the Square version in 1975 at the time of second wave feminism, or Cherry Jones's in the third wave feminism version that was also produced on Broadway in 2013? Was Ethel Merman's Momma Rose as intimidating an interpretation of the role for subsequent actresses as Laurette Taylor's Amanda was?

It appears that advances in anthropology, psychology, and the women's movement affected an evolution of sorts for the Momma Rose of Bernadette Peters in 2003 as directed by Sam Mendes, as well as Imelda Staunton in the 2015 London production as directed by Jonathan Kent. How significant is the effect of the mythic ideal of the nurturing mother as held by the social consciousness of the time for many of the productions? It is enlightening to analyze how this idea was reflected in the depiction and reception of these women. Are they monsters who impose their will upon their children or women striving to prepare their children for their best lives? In this thesis it appears that the changing attitudes and understanding of motherhood as reflected in

misogynist or feminist views of society have influenced their evolution and it may also be true that these famous portrayals of the two mothers have helped to alter the understanding of motherhood in our culture.

It is difficult to measure how these changes in attitudes about women in general have had any influence on attitudes about motherhood since the mid-20th century. Is it possible that our collective memory dictates how these characters are portrayed, or do the various portrayals affect our collective memory? A very simple review of the history of the feminist movement during the decades since the first *Menagerie* was produced shows that there were many changes in the politics and cultural expectations for women and particularly, for mothers. As Whipps points out in part of an analysis,

> In (Simone de)Beauvoir's 1949 book *The Second Sex*…When women are defined by the male gaze, they are often put in categories of the "virgin," "mother," or "whore." …no matter what role women are assigned, they are always the "object" of another and not considered active subjects with the freedom to make their own choices. (15-6)

It is not difficult to find various theatre reviews and academic studies where both mothers are often referred to in harsh, negative terms, perhaps because they are attempting "to make their own choices" and to succeed without the guidance and control of male authority. Momma Rose takes her daughters on a constant quest for success in the world of vaudeville from the early 1920s until its death in the early 1930s, ignoring her father and the male theatre managers who tell her to stay home. Amanda, another single mother in the early 1930s, struggles to make ends meet and to find a way to provide for her physically impaired and painfully shy daughter without consistent financial assistance from her sensitive son. While there are any number of critical comments about each character's role as a mother in various reviews or examinations,

only few instances can be found, and only in more recent reviews, where there is any acknowledgement of each woman's challenges or strengths.

Neither character fulfills the myth of the totally selfless, thoroughly nurturing woman who embodies the understanding of maternal instincts that had been firmly established even prior to the Victorian era. This interpretation of the submissive and selfless mother was then further emphasized during the period after World Warr II when women were forced back to the role of homemakers after having filled jobs left vacant by men who had served in the military. The push to fulfill this myth has been reinforced in recent times as part of the backlash to feminism and the current, more liberal attitudes toward the roles of parenting for men as well as women. Is it the failure of these two characters to adhere to this mythic norm what makes them monsters?

Both women are ambitious for their children, both women have imaginations that inspire wonder in the audience, and most importantly, both have the courage to pursue their aspirations for themselves and their children despite any societal or family pressures to remain quietly at home like the "good little women" of their time should. These intriguing characteristics could explain why so many famous actresses over the years have played these roles in the many major revivals each piece has received and why various directors have tackled the challenge of presenting their very distinct stories.

The fascination with these two particular characters could also account in part for the continued popularity with the public for the musical and the play. Whether it is the comic shenanigans of Rose's attempts to keep her daughters' acts in the spotlight or the charming daydreams and reminiscences of Amanda's Southern belle, there is no doubt of each woman's appeal as presented in the texts of each work.

So why is Rose referred to as a "monster" by Arthur Laurents in his pitch to Merman about the role, (Laurents, *Memoir*, 378) or "a termagant; an aggressive, egocentric, maniacal mother" according to Walen (294), or both "a difficult, unappealing character" and "terrifying" by Stacy Wolf (*Changed For Good* 4)? Amanda had her share of detractors as early as a 1944 review where Burton Rascoe called her "horrible…pathetic" and then, in a subsequent review of a later production, as "delusional". Are the negative attributes embedded in the texts the actual intentions of the playwrights, or are they the subjective responses by these critics?

Further research into the sources for each play have offered some insight to this question. Arthur Laurents wrote the book for the musical *Gypsy*, based on the published memoirs of Gypsy Rose Lee. In his book, *Mainly on Directing*, Laurents admits that "*Gypsy*, ostensibly based on Gypsy Rose Lee's memoirs; three-quarters, however, was invention - which was why I called the show a 'fable'" (Laurents, *Directing* 57) bringing into question how accurate his negative assessment of the character, as presented in the memoirs, was. Laurents goes on to note, "Does any writer know all he is writing -- know what's underneath what he has written? Not if he's any good, is my guess" (Laurents, *Directing* 62).

The original production of *Gypsy* was staged and choreographed by Jerome Robbins. While he did not direct the original production starring Ethel Merman, Laurents, having publicly voiced his dissatisfaction with Merman's interpretation of the role, subsequently directed several other productions of the musical, including the famous revivals starring Angela Lansbury and many years later near the end of his life, Patti LuPone with significantly different versions of Rose. In 2003, according to reviews and

interviews of the time, director Sam Mendes had a radically different vision of Rose which Bernadette Peters provided in his production. Did Jonathan Kent offer a particularly British understanding of Rose with Imelda Staunton in the West End revival of 2015, or was she still a very American creature?

There is no shortage of sources for the study of the origins of Amanda, including Tennessee Williams's own memoirs and comments he made in various interviews over the years. Likewise, much can be learned by examining the various influences for the original production of *The Glass Menagerie*, starring the established actress Laurette Taylor as Amanda, and co-directed by Eddie Dowling and Margo Jones. In this thesis there is a closer consideration of why this production was championed by critics Ashton Stevens and Claudia Cassidy at its 1944 Chicago debut to the point where it was catiputled to an opening on Broadway in 1945. Was all the interest in these characters, especially Amanda, influenced by the incidents that the US was embroiled in during the final year of World War II? This study of the influences on the responses to the original production in this thesis did not reveal any correlation between the responses of audiences and critics and the effects of the post-war incidences in the United States. The second wave feminism had not yet begun.

Another interesting focus of this thesis is the 1975 production of the play starring Maureen Stapleton who had already appeared as Amanda ten years before on Broadway and was a close friend of Williams. The 1965 production was directed by George Keathly while the 1975 one was directed by Theodore Mann, the co-founder of Circle in the Square, during the height of the Women's Movement. It seems that the fact that all women were reexamining their roles in society resulted in a new or

different attitude toward Amanda's actions as a single mother and head of the Wingfield household.

The third Amanda discussed is Cherry Jones's in the 2013 Broadway production as directed by John Tiffany. Her interpretation of the role illustrates how there had been progress made in the understanding of the complex nature and challenges of motherhood during the 68 years since the first production was introduced to American culture, and she was not portrayed or received as a one-dimensional monster.

It is not difficult to find examples of how the criticisms that are thrust upon Amanda and Rose are more a construction of the male directors' and male critics' views and expectations of motherhood and women in general, than anything found in the text or lyrics. These attitudes are a reflection of the collective memory of the past seven decades as opposed to an actual appreciation of these roles as written. We find that this is so through analyzing and comparing the portrayals and receptions of the mothers in these productions presented over more than 60 years.

Various recent studies explore the influence of feminism on changing attitudes toward motherhood, as well as the impact of collective memory on art and media. They also examine the influence of art upon collective memory. However, none of these studies address how the assumptions of the directors and/or producers exerting their power in the creation of a theatrical production impact the players and the audience. The original production and all major revivals of *Gypsy* have always been directed by men. How different might it be if a woman directed a Broadway revival? *The Glass Menagerie*'s first production was co-directed by Eddie Dowling and Margo Jones. Otherwise, most of the revivals were directed by men, including the film and television

productions. Certainly, this is very relevant to the perceptions of these two female characters.

How does the same script result in such a variety of interpretations? If art is truth and should serve to change misconceptions or broaden the understanding of society, is it appropriate to maintain a status quo portrayal of these two unusual and well-known mothers, or can they serve to alter our collective memory by providing a more complex, sympathetic understanding of the myth of the good mother?

Despite how each character is actually written within her respective work, both Momma Rose and Amanda have traditionally been viewed as monsters or bad mothers. Yet in the years since each work was first produced, these depictions have, to a certain extent, evolved. However, the effects of the changing attitudes within our collective memory about mothers seem to have been more favorably applied towards Amanda. In this thesis it is argued that this difference emerges because Amanda more closely fulfills the still firmly entrenched expectations of a good mother than does the more independent and outspoken Rose.

Chapter II.

Evolution of Mothers in American Theatre and How Did We Get Here?

"But above all... she's a myth. The myth of the "good mother" is one continuously embedded in our lives, passed down from generation to generation, shape-shifting to fit the nuances of culture and society but always imbued with a fabled ideal of what constitutes the perfect mother."

Avital Norman Nathman. The Good Mother Myth: Redefining Motherhood to Fit Reality.

This exploration of Motherhood in American Theatre through an analysis of Momma Rose in *Gypsy* and Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* relies on an understanding of the history of the anthropological, sociological, and psychological development of the topic and how it is reflected in American theatre through these two characters. The stereotype of a good mother as being a necessity in our society is a deeply entrenched concept in our collective memory. Good mothers are a core value in the disposition of a perfect and functioning culture.

The role of a mother in any society at any time in history is a complex one. It affects every person, whether as a child of a mother, or as a mother of a child. It is influenced greatly by the needs of a culture at any given moment. Perhaps it was an effort to pin down a basic understanding of the important role of motherhood that created the need for the simplistic myth of a perfect mother. The success of a patriarchy relies on the myth of a perfect mother devoted to her children as a submissive individual devoid of any self-interest. However, given that the population of mothers is so vast and varied, can there really be such a thing as the universal mother?

Each mother's specific situation and unique personality affects an individual's ability to be a mother. This mothering is also influenced by the needs of the child, creating an almost infinite variety of characteristics that can be attributable to mothers. This wealth of possibilities should provide an exciting opportunity for anyone who creates a mother whether it's through writing or through performing. Because the idea of motherhood encompasses such a significant apportionment of both everyone's life and the realm of art, it is by necessity that for the purposes of this thesis we limit the examination to these two iconic roles, one from a musical and one from a play, in order to approach a clear understanding of the concept and its treatment in American Theatre.

The myth of the perfect or good mother looms so large that it is no surprise that any personification of her in a musical or play written by a man might be one dimensional, and too often attempts to make her more complex or actually human have resulted in her being viewed as a monster. The myth of the perfect mother is so pervasive in our collective memory that it is considered fact. Sophie Gilbert noted this in her 2022 article *The Redemption of the Bad Mother* in *The Atlantic*, by discussing how in current films and novels writers "are confronting the idea that being a 'good' mother means totally suppressing all your own needs and desires and instincts. They challenge the long-standing pact of American motherhood: We give mothers nothing and expect everything in return." There is no consideration for the autonomy or humanity of a good mother, but she is expected to be selfless and totally focused on the needs of her children as well as the father of said children. This is how good mothers are traditionally presented on stage.

Gypsy and *The Glass Menagerie* were not developed in a void or presented in a vacuum, and yet they are staged and possibly viewed more often than not without an awareness of the context of the period in which they take place. Both plays take place in early 1930s America, a time when Victorian attitudes towards women were being challenged by the early feminist movements. However, the myth of the perfect mother continued at the time each play was originally produced. As Wolf observes, "Mother, both valued and condemned for every social ill, was the key identifying role for women in the 1950s" (Wolf, *Changed for Good* 27). This is not to say that actresses approaching these roles should attempt to recreate a stereotype or static version of the character, or that an audience experiencing the play needs to view it as an historical recreation.

The myth of the good mother has been with us for centuries. However, the roles of both Momma Rose and Amanda are complex enough to transcend the period in which each play takes place whether or not they are viewed or measured against the current cultural attitudes towards expectations of a perfect or good mother. Unfortunately, their complexities have affected their popularity with critics and audiences alike who may still be measuring each mother against the very limited mythological good mother of the collective memory. Being forced to change or question a long standing "truth" of the collective memory does not always endear a character to its culture.

A number of important sources regarding the history of our current understanding of motherhood, written especially since the second half of the 20th century, illuminate how the understanding of the concept of the perfect mother came into being, and whether or not that has manifested itself in American Theatre as well as in our society's awareness. Many of these sources deal with the controversy or opposing views of what

constitutes good mothers in our society. How one particular view comes to dominate or overrule another one and become part of our collective memory is discussed in *Individual and Collective Memory Consolidation* where "memory is broadly defined as the ability to form long lasting knowledge constructs that, once formed, can be efficiently accessed" (Anastasio 2).

Also, "the more often a particular scenario has been played out in the experience of a group, the more likely it is to appear as a sub theme in its group narrative… Repetition can occur in the material realm, as when a group actually experiences many similar events, or in the discursive realm, as a group repeatedly recalls an event" (Anastasio 153). To have multiple expressions of a good mother represented in the same, limited way throughout any number of plays, musicals, or books reinforces the myth held by our collective memory. This is important to understand since the individual memory or attitude of a particular director about good or perfect mothers can affect the representation of a character in a play, even if it does not reflect the intent of the playwright. This in turn influences the actress who is portraying one of these mothers, which further affects the audience members and critics.

At any point during this distillation of memories and attitudes of those involved, one individual can reroute the manifestation of the character's portrayal, something which will be reviewed in detail in the following sections focused on each of the characters and the players involved in the specific productions. While this refashioning of ideas can provide some of the exciting aspects of the development of a character during the rehearsal process as well as the distinctiveness of the various versions of the

same play, how does any of it affect our understanding of whether or not each woman is a monster or not?

The process of the creation of an individual's memory or concept of a subject such as motherhood becoming part of or evolving from the collective memory involves "the creation of less changeable (stable) generalized knowledge constructs from systems of relationships that are established between items held in a more changeable fashion" (Anastasio 83). The popularity and high public attention of these two mothers in these two important plays and their frequent revivals can create an environment for "existing stable memories modulating the attention paid to certain events in the collective memory buffer, recur to influence the process of collective memory consolidation" (Anastasio 99). A "collective memory buffer" can be found in the repeated awareness of the portrayals of these two important and well-known characters in numerous professional productions. Because both works are performed often in major productions on Broadway or the West End, we use the term icon for the characters of Mamma Rose and Amanda. It can be said that the continued revival of the works serves as a type of "repeated retrieval (which) is important for shaping collective memory" (Anastasio 153).

So how did we get to a place where our universal understanding of societal roles for women contains the myth of the perfect mother? The archetype Mother, selfless, all nurturing, and submissive, has evolved over many centuries and has been maintained in some form or another to the present day to fulfill the suppression of female power in patriarchal society. More recently Sarah Blaffer Hrdy's work in *Mother Nature: Maternal Instincts and How they Shape the Human Species* presents the insufficiencies of the 19th and early 20th centuries' narrative of the perfect mother as put forth by scientists in a

particularly repressive patriarchal society. These male scientists limited their evolutionary observations to fulfill their own understandings and expectations of motherhood. Then in turn presented their finds as scientific facts that had resulted from their observations of animals in the wild.

As a result, when discussing the differences between the sexes on a human level, Charles Darwin famously noted "whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands, [man will attain] a higher eminence… than can woman," and "because females were especially equipped to nurture, males excelled at everything else" (Hardy19). The idea of the nurturing and selfless mother was established by imposing male-preferred understandings of women as individuals who were born to be passive, procreate, and to ensure the continuation and health of the human species and not by objectively observing nature.

These attitudes continued primarily unquestioned until the second half of the 20th century when female anthropologists and sociologists began their own exploration of the subject in the wild and in society without the preconceived notions and male biased "blinders" of their famous predecessors. Perhaps it is not surprising that these women discovered a very different environment since they understandably were not invested in finding a reflection of the patriarchal concepts that Charles Darwin and Herbert Spence had expected as facts. Instead, their observations resulted in a more complex understanding of the role of animal mothers as described in this excerpt from Hrdy's study:

> From 1975 onward, sociologists began to incorporate situation dependent phenotypes and maternal effects, along with natural selection, kin selection, and sexual selection, into our understanding of evolution.

> ‘Looking to the animals’ in this new way made it inevitable that sooner or later mothers would be recognized as playing active and variable roles on the evolutionary stage. (Hrdy 78)

While there is evidence of mothers taking care of their young, the reality is that for many species, mothers participate in infanticide of the weaker or smaller members of the litter to ensure the survival of the larger and healthier members. In more recent studies Hardy noted it has been found that the behavior of modern women “is not so much ‘unnatural’ as behavior that is in conflict with conventional expectations - all the myths and superstitions about what women are supposed to want” (Hrdy10). This puts a new light on the understanding of maternal instincts.

Feminist studies also focus significantly on the attitudes and treatments of mothers in our society. As Judith A. Baer points out in *Feminist Post-Liberalism*, “bad fathers are let off the hook, while bad mothers are condemned in perpetuity…The twenty-first century has not untangled the family from patriarchy” (Baer 97). Does Tom’s absent father, a man who has deserted his family in *Glass Menagerie*, come under the same scrutiny by reviewers and audiences to which Amanda is subject? While both plays in this study take place at the end of the first half of the twentieth century, revivals and studies of each play continue to be produced in the twenty-first century. It might have been expected then to have more sympathetic treatments of these mothers in the post Second and Third Wave feminism eras than at the time they were first produced. Unfortunately, as Baer notes above, patriarchy is so pervasive still in today’s world, that both women continue to be portrayed or perceived as bad mothers or monsters. In Ann E. Kaplan’s study, *Motherhood and Representation: From Post World War II Freudian Figurations to Postmodernism,* she notes, “The cross-cultural importance of the mother,

socially and symbolically, results in the need to separate the sexes..this means giving men rights over women..That other sex, the feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed" (Kaplan 93). This continues to reinforce the understanding of the "bad mother" in our collective memory, making it more difficult to expect or even accept a sympathetic version of either Rose or Amanda.

Nor does applying feminist observations to the world of theatre ensure that either woman might be released from the stigma of being a bad mother or monster. While it can address or reflect the effects of the political landscape and social situations of a time, Theatre is not Politics or Society. It is part of the Humanities, the Liberal Arts. Where else could we expect a more humane understanding of the respective plights of these two characters? Unfortunately, as intimated in Gayle Austin's *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism,* this may require that plays previously put forward as realistic, be deconstructed to examine the traditional focus on the male characters and review the female characters in a new light. As with *Gypsy* and *Glass Menagerie*, this reevaluation or deconstruction may not require any changes to the text, but instead involve a fuller appreciation of the female roles as more than just props or foils for the male roles.

Why can't Rose be a heroine, or Amanda be just as much a tragic hero as Tom and not a monster or villain? If we apply the findings of the female anthropologists of the late 1970s and the 1980s "that biology is not necessarily destiny for women, but that culture constructs women's roles" (Hrdy 41), it could be possible to evaluate their stories with a better understanding. This requires a wide-ranging effort on the part of producers, directors, actors/actresses and critics to get past the generally accepted norms on a consistent basis. The result of this broader awareness of the nature of these characters

could also lead to a broader awareness and acceptance of the more complex and realistic nature of motherhood for audiences and the world beyond the stage.

This brings us back to the buffers that construct the collective memory, the areas where changing views can occur, especially with repetitiveness. Given the immense challenge of shining a light on the many ways patriarchy manipulates our understanding of motherhood, the importance of these efforts cannot be overstated. As L. Bailey McDaniel asks in her 2013 book *(Re)Constructing Maternal Performance in Twentieth-Century American Drama*, "What opportunities are afforded by unpacking the relationship between social hierarchies and maternal performance when broader cultural phenomena are considered?" (McDaniel 155). Presumably, this examination of the portrayals of Momma Rose and Amanda and the related critical response for the three different productions of each work, will shed some insight into the extent of the "opportunities" for exciting drama, with the possibility of their resulting in social expansion as well as political and cultural progress.

There is an extensive examination for the treatment of the ideal of motherhood and how it has evolved in American television found in Susan J. Douglas's and Meredith Michaels's *The Mommy Myth*: *The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women.* We are all familiar with the perfect moms on television in the 1950s and 1960s around the time when *Gypsy* and *Glass Menagerie* were first produced. There was the unflappable June Cleaver in *Leave it to Beaver*, and Timmy's patient, kind but firm mother, Ruth Martin played by Cloris Leachman and later by June Lockhart in the *Lassie* series. They were sweet, soft spoken, always in control of the home, and

seldom seen outside of it, not loud and pushy like Rose or forceful and subject to flights of fancy like Amanda.

Television mothers of the 1950s and most of the 1960s never worried about making ends meet because there was always a father to lead and support the family. It was universally accepted that "Father (always) Knows Best". Even widower Andy Griffith can successfully raise a son while protecting the whole town of Mayberry as long as Aunt Bea takes care of all of the housework, cooking, and daily care of his son Opie. But like the movies, television did not actually reflect the reality of the times, but that did not prevent these TV mothers from being heralded as the models of good mothers.

Ironically, Cloris Leachman, mentioned above as a perfect mother in *Lassie* also starred as another type of perfect mother in the popular show, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* which was a groundbreaking program about a successful single woman of the early 1970s. Ms. Leachman as Phyllis Lindstrom, was almost a satirical portrayal of a perfect mother and constant critic of the main character, Mary, who in turn was an example of a new age single woman. Mary's career was as important to her as an expression of a successful woman as Ms. Leachman's was in the role of the traditional fulltime stay at home mother. This disparity between the two women was the source of many comic situations in which Ms. Leachman's character always assumed superiority created by her status as a mother, and in her mind, was therefore the more successful woman.

Douglas and Michaels also mention another intriguing portrayal of a liberated woman in 1970s American television "Maude", a spinoff series from the trailblazing "All in the Family". Although Maude, played by Bea Arthur, was a mother, her daughter was an adult and the show focused on a wider range of social and often controversial issues.

Maude's role as mother was just one of many other roles she embodied as a woman; wife, friend, and social and political activist. She was outspoken and opinionated and did not look or act as the soft-spoken and compliant TV mothers of earlier decades.

In response to the rise of feminism in the late 1960s and throughout much of the 1970s, there was a resulting backlash. Douglas and Michaels go on to point out that the mothers that began to populate television in the 1980s were a form of "momism" with "a set of ideals, norms, and practices, most frequently and powerfully represented in the media, that seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood, but which in reality promulgate standards of perfection that are beyond your reach" (P4-5). Would this attitude of expectation of perfection in mothers influence an audience's reaction to Rose's struggles to keep herself and her daughters working or even properly dressed and fed? How could Amanda fulfill the example of the perfect mother and satisfy the expectations of critics and audience members inundated with "momism"?

Would any father on television ever be held to this expectation of perfection? "As scholars like Andrea Press point out, there was no 'feminist moment' on TV, no shows that for even one second captured women's collective experience of being discriminated against based on gender" (Douglas 75). The men in the two works that are being examined here have not suffered the same level of criticism, especially the absent fathers. So once again, Mom gets blamed for everything and Dad gets a pass.

Thankfully in the late 1980s two decidedly different mothers appeared on television and became very popular, perhaps because of their outrageous noncompliance with the perfect mother myth. Rosanne Barr's show, *Rosanne*, presents an outspoken blue-collar mother and wife who gets visibly angry and frustrated with her family. She is

a complicated character who clearly loves her children despite the sarcasm and insults she often throws at them. The character of Peg Bundy of *Married With Children* was anything but a perfect mother, ignoring her children, never cooking, wearing provocative outfits and putting down as well as standing up to her husband. Both of these mothers attacked the perfect mother myth and the American public loved them. Maybe it was a recognition of reality that contributed to their success as well as escaping from the specter of the perfect mother.

Perfection was certainly beyond Rose's reach as she scrambled to keep a roof over their heads, food in their stomachs, and costumes that were attractive enough to ensure their continued success on "the circuit". In order to do all of that she had to push her way into the male-controlled world of theatre managers and agents to get the work they so desperately needed and to be resourceful enough to actually make the costumes or at least find the needed materials and come up with the acts. Of course, she had chosen this vagabond life and, unlike Amanda, did not care about creating an attractive home for her girls.

Although Amanda was more genteel than Rose, she also had to be resourceful and forceful with her adult children. Technically she had a man of the house in Tom, but his lack of self-discipline and motivation meant that she had to be the stable one with ambitions and plans for financial viability for all of them. Neither of these mothers had the support needed for the perfection expected of mothers in television, and yet they were more real and complete than the less than perfect TV moms like Peg Bundy or Rosanne mentioned earlier who had begun to appear on TV in the late 1980's as a counterpoint. Even these two outlying TV mothers were part of the traditional family structure.

Rose and Amanda were single mothers. As time went on, there were single mothers on TV, offering another alternative to the "new momism". It appears there was progress being made in television during this time in the perfect mother model held so dear in our collective memory. Was it enough to influence how Rose and Amanda were represented in later revivals, or were they still monsters, or at the very least, very bad mothers?

Although McDaniel does not reference either play in (*Re)Constructing Maternal Performance,* this work further explores the queering aspect of the treatment of mothers that is also reflected in the works of Stacy Wolf and Jennifer Worth, adding another component to the continuing expansion of the state of motherhood in theatre. While Amanda seems to be almost asexual in her role as faded Southern belle, anyone playing Rose is expected to have enough sex appeal to have had at least two husbands and for most of the play, a partner in Herbie. However, all of that is secondary to the plot of *Gypsy*. Rose, like Amanda, runs the family alone, without the help of a man. Is that enough to brand each of these women as monsters?

A 2016 article by Jennifer Worth in *Theater History Studies* entitled *"Who let in one of them mothers?": Maternal Perversity on the American Musical Stage*, prophetically quotes the first line of *Gypsy* and adds yet another viewpoint to the commentary on motherhood. Is this why Rose falls short as a mother in the eyes of those who would call her a monster? "Drama of any sort hinges on desire….if the someone doing the wanting is a mother, she will be read as deeply flawed, if not an utter failure. Mothers are free to desire only on behalf of their child/ren" (Worth 261). Worth goes on to say that part of Rose's attraction as a character is that she has desires of her own and

admits to them; something a good mother should never do if the myth of the perfect mother is to be believed.

She also points out that "It must be equally recognized, however, that in most cases, those celebrated voices are not really their own but rather the ventriloquisms of male creators, built around conventional, heteronormative romance and leaving a particularly narrow range of female representations: dewy ingénues, femmes fatales, comically sexual sidekicks, and feisty, but typically sexless, older women" (Worth 255). If this "must be..recognized" is there a way to overcome this perceived shortfall, or are the plays doomed to remain male reflections of females?

How much of this assumed failure of Merman's Rose as a mother was reflected by critics and the theatre community as noted in Stacy Wolf's *A Problem Like Maria : Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical?*"

> In spite of or perhaps because of its unusual grittiness, critics loved the show. Still, Merman lost the Tony to Mary Martin in *The Sound of Music*, a decision that clarified mainstream cultural values by rewarding a nun-turned-wife over a relentlessly ambitious stage mother. (Wolf, *Problem*106)

Actresses in subsequent productions of *Gypsy* won Tonys. Was this because audiences and critics were more sympathetic to Rose's plight, or did the actresses make adjustments to her character that were more or less sympathetic or appealing? According to so many of the reviews at the time, neither Bernadette Peters nor certainly Imelda Staunton were more sympathetic as Rose. It doesn't appear that the influences of popular TV and movie mothers of the time were positively affecting the reception of Rose as a mother.

It is widely known that the mother in both these plays is based on an actual individual and created through the lens of an adult child's memory. In the Prologue to Gypsy Rose Lee's *A Memoir*, she describes her mother as "charming, perhaps, and courageous, resourceful, and ambitious, but not nice. Mother, in a feminine way was ruthless. She was, in her own words, a jungle mother, and she knew too well that in a jungle it doesn't pay to be nice" (Lee 6). But the good mother according to the perfect mother myth would be "nice" and not a "jungle mother".

Unlike Gypsy Rose Lee's book that is filled with stories about her mother, Tennessee Williams's *Memoirs*, references to his mother are few and far between, although he very publicly acknowledged that Amanda was based upon his mother, Miss Edwina. He does note that "I feel that Mother always did what she thought was right and she has always given herself due credit for it, even though what she sometimes did was all but fatally wrong" (T. Williams, *Memoirs* 85). Is this a reflection of Williams as a "male creator", and another example of the impossible predicament of the perfect mother, doomed to always fail, or an astute commentary on a very human, if somewhat flawed, woman?

This also raises the question why is the assumption that a mother who does not fulfill the perfect mother myth, is in fact a monster mother and would be one who is more interesting from a dramatic point of view. Both Laurents and Williams understood how to construct an interesting dramatic plot and it is a very basic point of drama that there must be conflict. But why couldn't that conflict come from a failure of the characters to understand each other, or that they all had to overcome the challenges of their social or economical situations, or even that they shared the struggle to achieve success in their

chosen fields? All of these possible sources of drama are contained within both works. So why was it even necessary for Rose or Amanda to be monsters?

Chapter III

Momma Rose

"It ain't for me! It's for my girls. It's too late for me."

Although the musical is called *Gypsy*, there is no doubt that the main character is Momma Rose. Actually, the full title of the work is *Gypsy: A Musical Fable* and any formal reference to the musical includes the phrase, "Suggested by the Memoirs of Gypsy Rose Lee." These details are important to remember for our discussion of the treatment of Momma Rose on paper and on stage. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, a fable is "a fictitious narrative or statement such as a legendary story of supernatural happenings" or "a narration intended to enforce a useful truth" and as a transitive verb the definition is "to talk or write about as if true".

Indeed, the treatment and attitude of the creators surrounding the musical, *Gypsy* could be said to fulfill all three of these definitions. While the plot is loosely based on the facts of Gypsy Rose Lee's life as presented in her autobiography, by today's standard in American theatre, the story of Momma Rose and her two daughters is "legendary" if not "supernatural", and the playwright, Arthur Laurents, has written about the work that he meant to "enforce" the "useful truth" that everyone wants recognition and love. Also, his premise that Rose as a mother is a monster, is treated as "if true". Additionally, in *Mainly on Directing*, Laurents states that the character of Momma Rose "was the portrait

of a woman who has been called the Lear of musical theatre." (Laurents, *Directin*g 19), or in other words, a legendary character.

Momma Rose, as a bad mother, a monster and Lear as the demanding unyielding bad father, both share and express dramatic and outraged feelings of betrayal by their children, but that is where the analogy ends. Lear is a king who has ruled his significant property and people for years and is ready to retire comfortably, after portioning off his land among his three daughters for whom he has already provided with suitable husbands. He did not rely upon any of them for his wellbeing, nor share any ambitions for them, as far as we know, beyond appropriate marriages. Yet when his two eldest daughters turn on him to fulfill their own greed and his youngest, favorite daughter does not respond in what he perceives as a supportive, appropriately submissive way, he becomes so inflamed that he eventually goes mad. He does not consequently pick himself up and make any attempts at greater understanding of the complex relationships of parents and children and his role in them. He is not saved by greater self-awareness but is defended by loyal men in their attempts to rescue him from his dire situation. That is something Rose is never offered, not even by Herbie. Herbie asks her to give up her dream and the life she loves and come home with him to be one of the typical wives she described early on with derision in "Some People."

It may be a stretch to try to seriously examine the differences and similarities of these two characters in these two very different theatrical works, but the fact that Laurents and others would even consider comparing them is yet another way to see how subjective their understanding of Rose is. Is Lear condemned by scholars or the public as a bad father, or are Goneril and Regan the villains of this story? Most importantly,

Shakespeare's play is a tragedy. Lear may be said to have caused his own downfall in the tradition of the tragic hero, having fallen from a high place, but that also makes him considered worthy of pity or sympathy. *Gypsy* is not a tragic work, unless Laurents's assessment that Rose is emotionally destroyed and justifiably left alone at the close of the play is true. Still, Rose can also be said to have caused her own downfall. Too often Rose is not viewed in a sympathetic way in the minds of directors, producers, critics, or audience members when she is labeled a monster. So in this scenario Rose is the villain and her daughters are the sympathetic characters despite their respective betrayals of their mother.

But is this the Rose that Gypsy Rose Lee wrote about in her book? The book ends with Gypsy as an independent adult at the height of her fame leaving burlesque and going off to Hollywood for a new career in movies. She writes,

> I closed my eyes and along with the familiar noise of the train Mother seemed to be telling me again how lucky I was. "What a wonderful life you've had --- the music, lights, applause --- everything in the world a girl could ask for… (Lee 337)

This does not sound like the memories of a daughter who was bullied or mistreated by her mother. So how or why did Laurents translate this mother/daughter relationship to one of monster and her victims? Where are the origins of this attitude?

One possible answer to this question may be found in the 1993 book, *Mother Daughter Revolution: From Betrayal to Power* where the authors note in the section entitled Mother Blaming,:

> Over the past 100 years, mothers almost universally have been seen as the cause of dynamics that led to children's psychological distress…. The indictment of mothers in the psychological literature has historically been

> so nasty, so massive, so undifferentiated, and so oblivious of the actual limits of a mother's power or her context that it precludes a just assessment of real responsibility. The basic message is clear: look no farther; the cause of what ails you is your mother. (Debold 21)

They go on to say that mother blaming is so epidemic in psychology it has become the automatic answer for "too many social ills" within our culture. To illustrate the extent to which this mother blaming is taken they explain, "And in the media, as in conversations, anger and attention focus on individual mothers' inadequacies rather than on the inadequacy of our social systems" (Debold 22). At the time *Gypsy* takes place, there were limited options for mothers to provide for their children, especially, as in this case, single mothers who value their own independence.

Laurents's comments in *Mainly on Directing* alone could be used to support the points raised in this thesis of questioning the portrayal of Rose as a terrible mother. He admits that he decided not to remain true to the character of Rose as presented in Gypsy Rose Lee's autobiography. He and others who knew Ms. Lee - such as her son, Eric Preminger - note that Lee's stories often changed to suit her desire to create a better story, thus making it difficult to know for certain what was true about Rose. But was that justification enough to take another path in the telling of this "fable"? Or was it the well-established assumption, as noted above, that it's all Mother's fault?

Thankfully there is another source for understanding who Rose was, and that is found in June Havoc's own autobiography, *Early Havoc*, published in 1959 in part as a response to Lee's book and what Ms. Havoc saw as an incomplete representation on her part of the girls' childhood and her eventual experiences as an actress. "Dainty June" may have run off at the end of the First Act of *Gypsy*, but she did not fall off the face of

the earth as might be surmised by the absence of any mention of her in Act Two. There may not have been any dramatic reason to have included any of this information in the musical, and I only mention it here to further illustrate the unwarranted need to present Rose as a monster. That concept was established by the male creators of the musical.

Although Ms. Havoc did not see either Rose or Gypsy for some time after she abandoned them to live her own life, they occasionally met and corresponded over the years, and she continued her career ultimately as a successful performer, appearing in leading roles on Broadway, in several Hollywood movies, various regional theatre companies and on television. She also wrote plays for Broadway, directing some of them, and even becoming the Artistic Director of The Repertory Theatre in New Orleans in 1969. Again, all of this is worth noting to balance June's accomplishments with those of Gypsy's, which are detailed in the musical and to acknowledge that her portrayal of their mother is very similar to her sister's description.

Rose may have been demanding of the girls, and yes, she even physically stopped June from working with Gratzinger, (a character possibly based upon Alexander Pantages, an American vaudeville impresario) who wanted to teach June how to act and prepare her for a career on the stage. However, Rose had obviously been tuned in to their true talents as well as their desire to perform. Neither girl faded into obscurity nor had an insignificant career as a performer. Certainly, their continued focus on having careers as performing artists ultimately was the result of their own internal drives and not just because "Mother made us do it." Their mother made most of it possible despite improbable odds, a fact which is ignored in the play except as an attempt to show Rose as

a self-centered monster. So why isn't Rose praised for fostering their talents the way so many parents do today?

An unsigned article about the musical which appeared in June 1959 in the *Boston Daily Globe* offered another, more enlightened reaction to Rose:

> As Mama Rose, Miss Merman, fights everyone for her two daughters during the most robust part of the evening, which is the first, and concludes the performance by fighting for herself. Her final number, a song written with dramatic versatility by Jule Stein, is a triumph for the character, the actress, and the show. The curtain descends on Miss Merman's most dazzling moment.

This interpretation of the number "Rose's Turn" offers an obvious alternative to Laurents's understanding of the moment. Rose "is fighting for herself" but not until this moment as Merman seemed to have understood when she argued that fact was found in the lyrics themselves. As cited below, during a discussion of the interpretation of the scene, Merman reminded them all that it isn't until she sings "starting now" that Rose was "doing it for me," and not that she was the selfish monster the male creators wanted her to be.

Rose's frustration builds to anger in the song as she repeats the line "for me" giving voice to her own understanding that there was no recognition of her efforts to bring Gypsy to her present status of professional and financial success. Instead, she was made to feel that she was irrelevant and self-centered to even propose that she had any part to play in this process. This justified anger expressed in the second half of the song is not necessarily evidence of mental or emotional instability, no matter how much more comfortable that conclusion might be for a child who is holding onto the "good mother myth" that frees him or her from any responsibility for such anger.

This understanding of Rose, as a mother, being a monster if she was not 100% focused on the wellbeing of her children is not limited to men. It is part of the general expectations of all children, male and female, child and adult, and another manifestation of part of the "good mother myth" that limits women to the role of mother without any acknowledgment of their humanity, so that we can continue to go on "expecting everything (of mothers) and giving nothing." Women themselves can be harder on mothers than men are, leaving very little space for compassion or empathy for mothers. Jennifer Worth writes:

> If mothers are figured as the arbiters of morals and protectors of children, and the stage (or the performing life) is inherently immoral - or even simply amoral - then a mother who performs or encourages her child to do so, brings with her a severe internal conflict from the outset… A mother's place is in her home and not on or even near the stage, that most public of venues. For.. Rose… , to have a place as a woman and a role in the public sphere… is *incompatible* with her position as a mother. This means, in essence, that upon becoming a mother, a character in effect *ceases* to be a woman and thus must surrender her "easy, almost automatic access" to the stage and its privileges. (Worth 261)

Much has been written about the importance of the final number, "Rose's Turn", in and of itself as well as within the history of American Musical Theatre. The introspective aspects of the piece and the many changes in tone set it apart from anything that comes before it in the work. The number also sets the stage for a whole new movement in the genre of Broadway Musicals. It begins with Rose imagining that she could have been as successful a performer in burlesque as Gypsy was. Laurents points to this as proof that Rose is delusional, mentally unstable. Why can't it just be that Rose is creatively acting out her many frustrations, especially with Gypsy pushing her away? Is it inconceivable that a mother could do that? What aspiring performer hasn't imagined

being applauded for fulfilling a dream role, or a struggling athlete hearing the cheers of the fans after executing the play that clinches an important victory in a private moment?

Rose's imaginary success as a performer, as an individual, certainly is not in keeping with the myth of the selfless, always nurturing Mother, especially if theatrical tradition requires that in doing so she "ceases" to be a woman. But once again, Rose is no ordinary mother; or is she? Is it possible that Mothers can also be women in their own right? As a character Rose is a more complex portrayal than the typical Broadway Musical Mother of the time. So why should she be limited to the caricature of a monster? If Laurents or Robbins had had their way with the role, Rose would have become a cautionary tale of someone who did not properly reflect the perfect Mother Myth held as part of our collective memory.

Many point to this number as a breakdown of the character in the tradition of the Mad Scene so often found in opera. One of the most famous examples of this is the Mad Scene from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* where the bride Lucia after killing her husband, a man her brother has forced her to marry, comes into the wedding celebration with the knife in her hand, singing to her lover as if he is physically there. Although Rose pretends to perform for an audience and is certainly angry for much of the number, it does not necessarily mean that she has lost her mind or her grip on reality in the way that Lucia clearly has in her Mad Scene. Given the circumstances leading up to this particular moment in the musical, it can be safely argued that Rose has every right to be very angry, in other words, mad. She is expressing the frustrations that so many mothers feel when they have to let their children go, whether they want to or not. It is especially enraging to be dismissed out of hand with no hint of any appreciation for a mother's

services or sacrifices. This is another example of how society expects everything from mothers and gives nothing back.

It is probably simpler and more comfortable for children to see this type of anger and assume madness or mental or emotional frailty rather than to accept any responsibility for being part of the cause of the anger. While it may be more comfortable for men to hold on to the good mother myth and assume that women who are good mothers stay at home raising children without making any demands on men, it is also more comfortable in general for everyone to assume that their mothers require no consideration as individuals. Is it any wonder that mothers occasionally find the need to express anger or frustration? Until recently the idea of any expression of anger or even the depression caused by such anger in mothers, could often result in institutionalizing or heavily medicating women. In Ruth Bankey's 2001 article *La Donna é Mobile: Constructing the Irrational Woman*, she observes, "I am drawing upon histories that connect gender, clinical practices and hysteria to show how women and the feminine were portrayed and labelled as deviant" (Bankey 40). Does that mean that it is almost natural to assume that disgruntled or demanding mothers can expect to be treated as monsters in American theatre?

And where did this monumental "mad scene" come from? There is nothing in Gypsy Rose Lee's or June Havoc's memoirs that hint at such a breakdown or confrontation. The obvious answer is that it came from the imaginations of Laurents, Sondheim, and Styne. But did they really make this up with no basis of their own experiences with mothers, or, as is more likely, is it a reflection of their assumption that a woman as strong as Rose would breakdown or be destroyed if her services as a mother

were no longer required? Perhaps the dedication Laurents wrote for the play can give a hint about his general attitude or experiences with mothers. It reads, “To Erna Fillmore, the grandest maternal cannibal of them all.” The term “maternal cannibal” is particularly vicious and is a chilling beginning for the story of Gypsy Rose Lee and her mother, Rose. It would be very difficult to shake off that level of monstrousness if this was the foundational basis of Laurents’s vision of Rose.

According to both Gypsy Rose Lee and Ethel Merman in a 1967 segment on Gypsy’s San Francisco TV show, June accompanied Gypsy to opening night of *Gypsy* and the sisters, both in tears, went backstage afterwards to meet with Ethel Merman. They thanked her for such a wonderful portrayal of their mother, and June said, “Oh Ethel, you were absolutely magnificent. You weren't Mother, but you were magnificent.” To which Ethel Merman replied, “Well after all kid, I never met your mother. I did the best I could.” In that same TV segment Gypsy talks about how many people had told her that she must have hated her mother to write about her that way in the book and then how she was portrayed in the play. Gypsy said that she couldn’t imagine what would make people react that way because she had “always thought of it as a monument to my mother.”

Why would so many people, including Laurents, assume that the relationship between mother and child was unnatural or destructive to the girls’ well-being? Laurents’s explanation of the character of Rose is made with statements he treats as facts, and not as his opinions. They may be valid opinions, but they are not the absolute truths he seems to believe they are. Otherwise, why would there be room for different interpretations of the same work? While it is important for any director to have a central

understanding of the truth of any production, I would think that it would be dangerous to believe that Laurents's particular interpretation was the only one. But this musical first appeared during the time when directors and often playwrights were the absolute authorities and their views ruled.

In the chapter "Reviving the Revival" where Arthur Laurents talks about his final production of *Gypsy*, starring Patti LuPone he states :

> *Gypsy* was always about the need for recognition, which is also a need for love of one kind or another. It reaches its climax in the very last scene of the play, between Rose and Louise, when Rose admits, she did it all for herself, and then answers why:
>
> " I just wanted to be noticed," she says. " Like I wanted you to notice me," says her daughter meaning" like I wanted you to love me." Wanted, past tense; and Rose, the no longer wanted mother, breaks down in tears.
>
> Love was always the subject; it just needed a spotlight. (Laurents, *Directing* 71-2)

Now that's an Arthur Laurents idea. Granted, he wrote the book for this musical, and as previously noted, he admits that it's only lightly based upon Gypsy Rose Lee's actual autobiography. But here is a prime example of how personal his understanding of this short scene was. His insistence that Rose did everything just for herself is not supported in the actual text, as Ethel Merman pointed out, according to his own recollections. In the chapter titled "Guiding Stars", Laurents describes how during the out-of-town previews in Philadelphia the creators of the show had thought that

> they made a great point clearly and are puzzled that the audience doesn't get it. "We were all so sure, so proud that Rose's admission she had done everything for herself and not for her daughters, was not made as it customarily is in musicals -- by being spoken in a scene. This being new Musical Theatre, it was sung in 'Rose's Turn.' But the audience didn't hear it." They wanted Rose to admit she had done it all for herself, and we

> were certain she did it in the number but the Philadelphia audience didn't agree. (Laurents, *Directing* 24)

Laurents goes on to explain that the creators had to "reluctantly" add "a few clarifying lines, the ones about being noticed,… to the brief scene that followed "Rose's Turn," and everyone was happy.

> Except Merman. She refused to say the new lines. No Rose she played was going to say she did it all for herself. Steve argued that she had said it in the lyric, why wouldn't she say it in dialogue? " I don't say it in the lyric," she snapped at the lyricist. " I say starting **now** it's gonna be my turn."
>
> Ethel Merman may not have been the swiftest, but she knew what she sang better than the man who wrote the words. She knew better than all of us. *We were hearing what we wanted to hear, but it wasn't there.* (Laurents, *Directing* 24-5, emphasis added)

This rather long excerpt from the book has been included to show the lengths that the male creators of the show would go to impose their understanding of the character upon Merman and the audience. It's worth repeating that Rose does not say that she did everything for herself in this iconic 11th hour number until the last few moments after she has asked herself, "someone tell me, when is it my turn? Don't I get a dream for myself?" How is it possible that after all of the complex soul-searching she does until this point in the song that the only thing that Sondheim, Styne, and Laurents hear or remember are the final repeated phrases, "for me."

Taken in this light of self- reflection, most of "Rose's Turn" is not the ranting or unhinged illusions of someone having a breakdown. For anyone who understands the stress and pressure that are imposed on women who must live up to a myth of the selfless and perfect mother, as the mother of two herself, it would have been Merman. It is completely understandable that there would be anger and resentment when countless

selfless acts are taken for granted or unappreciated. Rose ate dogfood without question or complaint so the girls could have all of the chop suey. The natural progression from voicing this frustration after years of "doing it for the girls" would be to determine to begin some selfcare and "starting now" to do it "for me."

Merman refused to say the new lines and as Laurents continues:

> it came down… to that awkward moment when nobody wants to be the director, including the director. The star had dug in her heels, she has to be moved off the dime. Push has to come to shove, and it's the director who has to do the pushing and shoving. Well, after all, he *is* the director, ha ha ha; he's in charge, it's his show. Otherwise, it's the star's show and then everyone can go home. (Laurents, *Directing* 25)

Here is an excellent example of the way in which directors of that time imposed their ideas upon productions and bullied artists, especially female artists, to fulfill them. The language Laurents uses has the sound of physical force with no hint of apology for this type of bullying. It is no surprise then that Robbins and Laurents are included as "monsters" themselves in Jesse Green's June 8, 2022 *New York Times* article *Is It Finally Twilight for the Theater's Sacred Monsters?* where he analyzes the whole culture of "despotic" or "sadistic" directors. His article provides an important context for the world of theatre at the time that *Gypsy* was created.

It is a world where, as Laurents says, the director is "in charge" and not just that the director is a guiding factor in a world of artistic collaboration to create a production. Merman's strong dissent about how Rose's final moments should play was not even given any consideration. She had to be "moved off the dime" and as Green suggests "without monstrousness, we do not have what we have been conditioned to think of as the theater itself." Does what "we have been conditioned to" also affect what has been

accepted as truth as presented in these works? Surely it is past time that at least some of these assumptions that have been imposed upon us should be reexamined.

Still, in the few new lines of dialogue that were added for Rose and Louise are the questions about being noticed that are noted above. Couldn't Rose mean that, yes, she wanted to be noticed, to be loved all along, but that was not her only motivation for living this exciting life with her daughters? Also, when Louise says, "I wanted you to notice me," couldn't that just mean, "I've always wanted you to notice me." Why is it in the past tense? Does it mean, as Laurents writes, she no longer wants her mother to love her? Another important distinction could be made that when Rose breaks down in tears, it could be because she is so distraught at the thought that her daughter did not feel loved by her.

Given the constant demand on mothers to be perfect and to fulfill all of their children's needs, as well as a mother's own desire to do exactly that, it is just as valid to play the moment with the understanding that it can be truly heartbreaking for a mother to be confronted with the fact that she may have failed her child in some way. According to Laurents's interpretation of Rose, she is such a narcissist, that she is always thinking only of herself, and never of her daughters. Perhaps this attitude says more about Laurents than about Rose. It can be argued that that is a valid interpretation only if you believe Rose is a monster. But it can be equally valid to reject that and to explore the more complex, layered, and more realistic alternative that Rose is not a monster, but a mother who loves her daughters and is only human. In her autobiography Merman states:

> [M]any people thought Rose was selfish and self-centered. But the way I saw it was that she wanted everything for her two girls. It wasn't that *she* wanted to be a star. She says in "Rose's Turn," " It was for you June… It

> wasn't for me, Herbie." Only after the kids didn't need her anymore did she say that now it was her turn --- "You either got it or you ain't "---but that was because she was very upset. Mama Rose sacrificed her whole life, gave up the love of her life for Louise and June. That's why when I played her, I got sympathy. People cried. (*Merman* 205)

Ethel Merman was a mother and, more importantly, she had the added stress of always being in the public's eye during this period. She may have been more acutely aware of the stress that mothers live with while being only human and expected to live up to a myth of perfection. As men who never had the experience of being a parent, Arthur Laurents and Stephen Sondheim would not have had as direct an understanding of the complexities of this situation, and yet they presented themselves as experts on motherhood by their audacious proclamations about Rose, based primarily upon accepted cultural norms. Mothers are monsters. Laurents says that the LuPone Broadway production of *Gypsy* was all about love, even though he insists that Rose is no longer loved by Louise, and so she gets what she deserves.

Also, his attitude is that now that Louise doesn't need her anymore, Rose is done. Her only worth was as a mother and star maker for her girls. This sounds like a typical male attitude, a reflection of an all-embracing mindset toward a mature woman both then and now with little compassion or understanding of the very intricate nature of mothers and their daughters in childhood and later as independent adults. Is there any worth for a woman once her children are grown and her hands-on role as a mother has been completed? Is that one of the reasons women become invisible as they mature, a phenomenon that is not only reflected in society at large, but in theatre. For instance, as limited as mature, nurturing, motherly female characters are in American musical theater, there has been a trend to replace these women with younger versions, turning aunts into

cousins as with Nettie Fowler in various productions of *Carousel* or having a 27-year-old Barbara Streisand play Dolly Levi in the 1969 film of *Hello Dolly*, when Dolly is described as "a widow in her middle years".

If the musical was always about love, why does Laurents leave Rose loveless? He's unapologetic in his assessment of Rose. There's no question about it. In his vision of the work, Rose is not worthy of love. It's not possible that Louise could still love her in his scenario. He writes as if everyone would agree with him, and, if we accept this general collaborative association's attitude about the myth of perfect mothers, he could be correct. While everyone seems to agree that we all need a mother's love no matter how often we fail to be worthy of it, it appears that in the world of Arthur Laurents and the other male creators of this musical, there is no such total agreement that mothers are equally worthy of unquestioning love. As long as a mother is held up as a myth, or better yet, held to the standard of the motherhood myth, she is not a complete person: there is no complexity to her being. She is a means to her children's end, and not an end for herself, and even if Rose is supposed to be a new kind of more complete character, she is still subject to the two, if not one, dimensional limitations of theatrical mothers.

This harsh standard that mothers are subject to is not mirrored for fathers in the theater, the movies, most of TV, or life. As a matter fact, in *Gypsy*, there is no real father. Both of Rose's husbands, who are also the girls' fathers, seem to have left with no explanation or hint of condemnation. Is it possible that the playwright expected that the audience will reasonably assume that these poor men who have deserted Rose are to be pitied, because who would want to live with such a monster? Why isn't it just as valid to think that they were monsters of a sort, or at the very least, men lacking in the necessary

characteristics required of a good husband, and a good father? This certainly seems to be a glaring fault of her ex-husbands and the creators, both as fathers and the men responsible for producing this work of art. Otherwise, you would have to be sympathetic toward Rose. Of course, there is Herbie, and he seems like a good, loving man. Unfortunately, he is not able to accept Rose for the woman she is.

Later, in the chapter of *Mainly on Directing* entitled "How To", Laurents writes:

> [W]hen the characters themselves are the reason singing seems natural, it's because of what they are as characters. Much larger than life outside, but it's what's inside that produces the music. Sweeney Todd is frighteningly still outside. Rose is cheerfully threatening outside; inside, both are frustrated fury. His emerges icily then builds angrily until it erupts into an almost operatic volcano, hatred and vengeful determination; hers starts with a brassy jokey drive, then builds angrily until it shatters in a jazzed-up rage of hatred and wrenching determination. (Laurents, *Directing* 105)

This is an important aspect of the means of development for a character in a musical, except that Laurents is comparing Rose to a serial killer as if they are equally monstrous. But is it hatred Rose feels, or frustration? If there is hatred, is it toward the unfairness of life or is it really towards Gypsy/Louise? Is there any hatred in Rose towards Louise, or perhaps there is real envy as well as pain in being rejected. I'm not sure Laurents sees it that way. How could he? He is a man living during the time when men have the power that is demonstrated so much in his book. What kind of power does Rose have except that which she creates for herself and has to fight for, while men continually try to take it away from her? Perfect mothers are not supposed to be powerful in the real world. If there is any power associated with the perfect mother, it is that which comes from being responsible for raising good children.

This attitude, the certainty that Laurents's understanding of things is absolutely correct, comes from living in the world where men and their opinions are not questioned, ever, except perhaps by other men. Even as I write this, it seems so simple, so obvious that it is almost embarrassing to put forward no matter how eloquently this concept is presented in any number of the sources I have cited, including Worth's, "*Who Let in One of Them Mothers*?" which explores the pre and post second wave feminism effects on the understanding of Rose's character.

This situation is reminiscent of that old story about any business meeting where there is a lengthy discussion as everyone around the table tries to untangle some problem. A woman makes a suggestion, and it is disregarded or dismissed. Ten minutes later, a man says the same thing and everyone applauds his ability to reach the successful solution. This illustrates clearly how women are too often not seen and not heard. It is not uncommon. It is not a joke. It is too often the life of a woman. So if Rose seems too loud, too aggressive, too much, it may be because she feels unseen and unheard. This has always been the source of a comic trope, Rose, as a woman, as a mother is not taken seriously. She is treated as part caricature and part revolutionary.

In Keith Garebian's *The Making of Gypsy*, he observes that "The American heroine came to the fore in the late 40s and early to mid 50s…. fascinating parts of a flamboyant kaleidoscope, in which the American heroine was mythicized" (16), but "When *Gypsy* barged its way onto Broadway, it found itself alone in its risk with a benevolent monster, Mama Rose -- a sort of backstage Mother Courage who learns that she must live her own and not her children's lives" (20). There's that word monster again. At least in this examination Rose is treated with some respect and there is an

acknowledgement that as a character, by the final scenes she has experienced growth. But even in this exploration of the original production and Rose's character, the question of Rose's motivation for her actions is suspect.

> The real question is whether this was a Cinderella story in which Mama Rose was the Cinderella who always managed to postpone the dreaded stroke of midnight and who never really cared about a Prince Charming. In short, the question is whether Mama Rose lived her own fable more for herself than for her daughters and whether she was a sane or demented heroine. (Garebian 25)

Even if it could be proven that Rose was living this fable for herself and not her children, why must it be assumed that she is not sane or that she is demented? Does that fulfill one of the "flamboyant mythicized American heroine" roles or looked at from a non-mythicized perspective, could she be a mother working for the advancement of her children's careers as well as for her own well-being?

The criticism of Rose as a woman is not limited to her success, or lack thereof, as a good mother. Garebian also scrutinizes her relationship with Herbie. Rose has already clearly established her independent nature and unhesitating drive for her daughters' careers when Herbie leaves, but Garebian places the blame for the dissolution of the relationship squarely on Rose's shoulders..

> It is clear that she does not need Herbie as a man to look up to, because she is unable to look up to anyone. Her major focus is on her dream of success. Not attuned to the vibrations of a deep committed relationship with the only man who apparently cares for her, she lacks emotional maturity. She is a perverse woman child in her own way and Herbie signals this by his kiss to the top of her head and by his admonition "Be a good girl." his wording is best suited to a parent addressing a child. Feeling somewhat patronized Rose explodes in a curse, and this too is symptomatic of childish immaturity. (Garebian 48)

Why is Rose's focus on her dream considered a sign of immaturity? Would a man be subjected to the same sort of criticism for any continued focus on his dream of success? Single mindedness may result in a very lonely life, but in theatre and in society, successful, single-minded men are supposed to be supported by the loving and preferably unquestioning women in their lives who must "look up to" them. Herbie's kiss on the top of her head and his final words, "Be a good girl," are not "somewhat" patronizing, they are absolutely patronizing. Wouldn't a man also curse if he was treated in this manner? Would "Be a good boy," be acceptable or would it be egregious to a male adult? Yet these statements about Rose's faults are put forth in this 1993 study still as a matter of unquestionable fact in much the same way Laurents did in his book.

Does that mean that our collective consciousness regarding mothers and Rose, by extension, has not changed significantly in the 34 years between the staging of the original production and the publication of Garebian's book? Are there examples of some male leads in American Musicals who are as single minded in fulfilling their dreams but are not treated as emotionally lacking? How about Harold Hill from the 1957 musical *The Music Man* who is an absolute scoundrel bent on fraud and larceny on a large scale? Despite this, he is ultimately considered charming and forgivable, not a villain or monster in any way. Does anyone see him as "immature" or "demented"? The irony here is that he is "saved" by the love of a "good woman", one who is not brash or pushy or even slightly ambitious.

Continuing his evaluation of Rose, Garbeian reflects that "at the curtain, it is the mother who is subordinated at last and subject to reality" (51). Why exactly must the mother be subordinated to her adult daughter? There is no doubt that Rose is having a

very difficult time of giving up being in charge. It's a classic dilemma for so many parents. Rose certainly thrived on the excitement of being so close to the stage, but who is to say that a good part of this excitement wasn't for her daughters and the satisfaction that brought her? The premise that one keeps finding in all of these discussions of her character is still tied up in the myth of the perfect selfless mother who lives for her children, with no thought of herself. Whether anybody admits it or not, this is what is expected.

In an 2020 interview by Mark Peikert for *Playbill* with Angela Landsbury, who famously played Rose in the 1973 London production and again in 1974 on Broadway, she discusses what she understands happens to Rose at the end of the musical.

> What I brought was my total understanding of the character, as a character actress, which I think perhaps I was more so than any of the other ladies who've played it. For me, she was a whole character, that's what I brought, my understanding of this human. [Rose's Turn] was her finally understanding herself.

Even after being carefully directed by Arthur Laurents and taking a different approach to the character of Rose, there is no hint of Rose having a breakdown, or becoming a tragic character, or even being a monster. Rose is a "whole character", a "human" and although she is flawed, she is neither a myth, nor a monster. So, as much as her very different characterization of Rose was hailed by the press and even Laurents, did Lansbury fulfill his vision of Rose as the terrible mother? Her own comments about Rose "finally understanding herself" would lead us to believe that in her mind, she did not see or portray Rose as a monster.

In the final scene when Rose asks, "Why did I do it?" she has several answers including 'for you, June", "It wasn't for me, Herbie," and if she hadn't done it, "where

would you be, Miss Gypsy Rose Lee!" she believes that is true. The result of her work for them is that both daughters have their career as performers. Some claim that might be so despite Rose's drive, but there is no doubt that she made their opportunities possible, as a good mother should. Yes, she enjoyed the challenge and their successes, but that does not necessarily make her totally selfish even when she eventually says, "I did it for me."

No one accuses Louise of being selfish when she says, "I thought you did it for me, Momma." But isn't that the definition of selfishness, that someone else's actions were only for you? This is another example of the complexities of the mother – child relationship. Good mothers are expected to make their child/ren the center of their attention to the full exclusion of their own needs. So, is it fair to criticize a child for expecting that the relationship with their mother is primarily one way? Books and books have been written by those who are far more qualified than I am in this subject and there are as many answers as there are books. But maybe that level of complexity does not necessarily make for Broadway successes. It is easier for a director like Laurents to assume that he can provide the obvious answer to audiences. The danger for mothers is that these audiences are primed to accept these obvious and simple answers. And so the myth is reinforced within the Zeitgeist of our time.

That attitude of a child assuming that everything is for her and the mother's resulting frustration with the knowledge that she is not always able to fulfill the needs of her child might be behind Rose's repeatedly calling out "Momma" in Rose's Turn and not a pathetic plea to her own mother. That assumption of the need for Rose to call out to her own mother has never made sense because there is not even a hint in the text of any

dissatisfaction with her relationship with her own mother at this point in her life, not even in Gypsy Rose Lee's nor June Havoc's memoirs.

In Rose's scene in the First Act with her father she says "I want to enjoy myself. I want my girls to enjoy themselves and travel like Mamma does!" It appears that she admires her mother. When Pop says, "And you'll leave them just like your mother left you!" Rose replies, "Never!" One could say that this is a hint at Rose's dissatisfaction with her relationship with her mother, but it could also just be reinforcing her devotion to Louise and June. The only other reference to Rose's mother is before "Everything's Coming Up Roses" after she reads the note about June's elopement and she has watched the boys also leave the Act. She says, "I'm used to people walking out. When my own mother did it, I cried for a week.... Well this time, I'm not crying." Taken together with her comment earlier in the show, one could suppose that when Rose's mother left for the first time to travel without her family, Rose was a child or a very young adult. However, since then she has had two husbands leave her and has taken on the role of a single mother, the person responsible not only for herself, but for her two daughters and the rest of the members of the Act. It is possible that she had come to terms with her mother's being away so much. She may have even learned to understand it.

Despite this possibility of her self-awareness, the creators thought that no doubt this apparent desertion by her mother must have been the source of some problem for Rose with her mother, and that could explain why she behaved the way she did with her children. That would be the reflection of a common assumption in the standard psychological thought of the time that still exists today in many places. "It's always the mother's fault." It might be an interesting way to view Rose's actions, but again it puts all

responsibility upon Rose, or even Rose's mother, keeping them in the role of the villains, the bad mothers.

In her memoirs June Havoc recounts a time when her grandmother, Rose's mother, came home when they were visiting June's grandfather and they discovered that he had divorced her grandmother the year before and married another woman without telling any of them, including June's grandmother. June's grandmother threw him out of the house and the four of them all slept together in the same big bed for comfort and support: their grandmother, Rose, Louise, and June (Havoc 182). June also mentions times when their grandmother would travel with them when their paths crossed. These little anecdotes provide a very different picture of the relationships of these women.

In some of her lines before "Rose's Turn" begins, Rose is not being selfish when she says that she's "not an old work horse you can turn out to pasture just because you think you're riding high on your own." She is accurately describing what is happening. With all the focus on Rose's "nagging", no one is holding Louise accountable for her own cold-hearted selfishness in banning Rose from her apartment or her friends' parties. This may all be a normal part of life when children insist on their independence from their parents, but why is it only the parent - or more specifically the mother - who is being unreasonable or selfish? If the child wants understanding from the parent, who has devoted her life to their work and provided the means for this child to reach the life that she loves, couldn't there be some equal understanding on the part of the child for the parent who is having such a difficult time adjusting to this new reality?

Once again, we are back to mother-blaming and it all being the mother's fault. The mother is expected to act as an adult and to give the child exactly what she wants,

even if the child is also an adult who has benefitted from the mother's devotion to her. It's a complex situation that our culture has simplified by usually putting all of the blame on the mother through theatre, television, movies, and novels. Unfortunately, in order to do that, the mother must be a monster who has failed to fulfill the "perfect" mother myth.

The attitude that Rose was not a complex or interesting character in her own right does not seem to have occurred to Laurents. Garebian quotes Laurents saying, "I felt that Merman had a quality with all that brassiness, a quality of naivete, innocence. That helped me to write this woman who really didn't know what a monster she was. To help Ethel, I would write stage directions: 'slower', faster, louder, softer. You know, that's the way she acted" (Garebian 84). This shows us that even Merman was treated almost as a child and certainly not as an adult worthy of equal consideration by Laurents. His doubts about her acting was not in keeping with what was the generally accepted understanding of the public and critics after her performance in *Annie Get Your Gun.* As T. Clifford Dargin notes in his comparative study of the famous Annies,

"Robert Garland said, 'She's no longer Miss Merman acting like Ethel Merman. She's Miss Merman acting like Annie Oakley,' which suggests her acting ability did not come naturally and it was something she continued to work on" (Dargin 299).

Sondheim may have initially also shared Laurents's attitude toward Merman, but apparently during the course of the rehearsal period and the run of the musical he came to have a different take on her contribution to the show. Garebian shares this observation of Sondheim's:

> 'Everything's Coming Up Roses' taken out of context is merely another 'Blow, Gabriel Blow.' It's a song about nothing except a certain feeling with some images in it. Essentially it's a performer's song. Little did we

> know that she was a *wonderful* actress, which only made the moment richer. (Garebian 82)

As Merman's performance evolved, it's possible that Sondheim's understanding of the character of Rose may have as well.

We already know that Merman believed that Rose was dedicated to her daughters and as such 'Everything's Coming Up Roses' could be an anthem of sorts, meant to reassure Louise that everything will be okay because "Momma is going to see to it!" So why is it that in more recent productions this number is said to be "terrifying" for Louise? This may be part of the evolution of the character of Rose, but that is not more reflective of the progression of the understanding of motherhood in recent years. It could be simply a reflection of Laurents's insistence through numerous revivals of the musical that Rose really is a monster and that Merman wouldn't let her be one.

Denise Whalen referenced the contrast of Merman's rendition of the song with the 1974 Broadway revival of *Gypsy* that Laurents directed starring Angela Lansbury.

> Bosley Crowther remembered that Merman made this 'a song of courage, confidence and trust' (Crowther 1962: L24). And, when Angela Lansbury sang 'Everything's Coming Up Roses' she made the audience 'believe that if willpower and faith could rearrange the seasons, roses would indeed bloom in the snow wastes of Siberia' (Tinker 1973: 25). (Whalen 300)

This is a forceful woman, but is she a monster? Even Garebian noted

> Lansbury realized that *Gypsy* was really Rose's show and that she could play her easily as a monster or a bitch. However, she wanted to play her quite differently. "*Gypsy* is really about a tragedy of good intentions," she revealed. "Rose is a pathetic person but her guts make her riveting, exciting, and extremely stage worthy." (Garebian 120)

Does that mean that even Lansbury could not play Rose as a monster despite how "easy" it might have been? Was Laurents looking for the "easy" story and Merman and Lansbury knew that there was a more complex woman in Rose?

A later famous and somewhat controversial production of *Gypsy* that did not include Laurents's direct involvement was the 2003 revival starring Bernadette Peters and directed by Sam Mendes. In *Mainly on Directing*, Laurents goes into detail explaining why he originally thought that this production would not be a good one. Unlike many other critics who had doubts about Bernadette Peters's ability to sing the role, Laurents focused on the inexperience of Mendes as a director of musicals. Although the production details were the focus of much of Laurents's objections, one major characteristic in this interpretation of Rose's personality was also unique. Peters's Rose was sexy and not just flirtatious; something that was never obvious in Merman's Rose. As Wolf notes in the Merman chapter of her book, *A Problem Like Maria*,

> Rose renders motherhood sexual but not containable in marriage or homebound domesticity. The show refuses a musical's expected heterosexual romantic resolution. Instead, *Gypsy* eschews heterosexual marriage for a gynocentric world, comes forth as a star vehicle for a single woman's performance, and develops a primary relationship between two women. (Wolf, *Problem* 108)

Merman was not considered a particularly feminine or sexy actress, and her portrayal of Rose reflected that. Peters, however, did fit the role of a feminine and sexy woman, and that brought another layer to the uniqueness of Rose as a female lead in a Broadway musical. Whether or not this resulted in a satisfying portrayal of Rose is another story. By 2003 the celebrity mom was firmly established in American culture. As detailed in *The Mommy Myth*, magazines and TV interview shows were filled with the

stories of beautiful, successful actresses finding fulfillment as mothers. Perhaps this helped Mendes and Peters to feel comfortable enough to incorporate a sexy component into Rose's story. If Cindy Crawford and Kirstie Allie could be the perfect mother and still remain sexy, why couldn't Rose?

A Charles Isherwood review in *Variety* at the time addressed this issue of a newer, more modern woman but still provides another reference to the character of Rose as a monster;

> The choice of Peters was an acknowledged risk. Book writer Arthur Laurents, lyricist Stephen Sondheim and Mendez knew Peters 's image and performing style didn't necessarily fit the standard for Mamma Rose, the stage mother from hell who drives her daughters away in pursuit of a dream of stardom that she cannot bring herself to acknowledge as her own. The admirable idea was to seek out a new interpretation for this celebrated character, one of the great roles in the American musical canon: to accentuate her womanly qualities as opposed to her monstrous ones, to give us a more rounded, seductive, human-scaled Mamma Rose… and Peters, as expected, plays up Rose's purring femininity.

Isherwood goes on to observe, "But it's really when Momma Rose is most monstrous that she's most compelling - and, paradoxically, most human. Those chilling character-defining scenes in which Rose's determination to hound her daughters into stardom overrides a mother's loving instincts, tend to slip by in Peters' performance almost imperceptibly."

In light of the effect of the perfect mother myth on the character of Momma Rose, these comments raise some of the same issues previously examined here. First, this forces the question once again, does everyone ignore the facts that are clearly delineated in the piece; (1) that June ran away to pursue a career as a performer under her terms, independent of her mother and not because she didn't want to perform any more and (2)

that Louise did not give up her career as Gypsy when she was an adult and had the means to do so? Rose's determination and unstoppable drive may have pushed her daughters away from her in their efforts to create their own independence, but these "betrayals" as Rose sees them, do not result in a total rejection of her as their mother.

It may be more dramatic to assume that they hate or at the least resent Rose, but isn't there just as much drama in an awareness that we are watching aspects of the complexities of the mother-daughter relationship? Why is there an insistence to simplify this complicated and emotionally rich piece of theatre? The reviewers and music and theatre scholars who discuss this piece all seem to agree that it is transformative in the development of the American Broadway musical on many levels. As Mordden points out in his book, *Coming up Roses*,

> But it is my notion that *West Side Story* and *Gypsy* changed that again. I don't see these shows as climaxes of the Rodgers and Hammerstein era as much as the first strikes in the next era, one in which the musical really gives up its membership in the popular arts to confront its audience. Pop arms you; art questions you. Pop is fraud; art is truth. Pop promotes authority, convention; art dares, escapes. Pop worships mother; art asks what she wants. (Mordden 253)

Much of the reason for this is centered on the complexities of the character of Rose. If Rose is simply a monster or the personification of a myth, there is no room for subtleties of character. Along those lines, unfortunately, sexy is not part of the perfect mother myth since it does not support the selfless and platonically loving woman who dedicates her life to her children, despite the rise of the celebrity mom in the consciousness of the American population. But since so many assume that Rose is not a perfect mother, why would this new attribute in Bernadette Peters's Rose cause controversy?

Could it be that by 2003 Mendes felt that there was more to Momma Rose than a monster who did not fulfill the perfect mother myth, but that the audiences and critics were not prepared for that kind of change in their idea of who Rose is? Would this be so drastic an alteration in an established character in the universal perception that it could not be accepted without forcing a change in the collective memory? This would mean that in this 2003 production the specter of Ethel Merman's Rose was being questioned and as Mordden observed in 2000,

> Stage revivals with Angela Lansbury (from London) and Tyne Daly (after a national tour) have reaffirmed *Gypsy*'s place in American cultural history, each new Rose to be compared with Merman in search of the true Rose of the world, for Merman's portrayal remains one of the greatest performances in the musical's history, I daresay possibly even the greatest. (251)

Ben Brantley acknowledged this challenge and Bernadette Peters's success in creating a very different Rose in his *New York Times* review of the Peters production when he describes her skillful portrayal of a "most daunting maternal role" where it had been,

> a part cast in bronze by Ethel Merman more than four decades ago. Working against type and expectation under the direction of Sam Mendes, Ms. Peters has created the most complex and compelling portrait of her long career, and she has done this in ways that deviate radically from the Merman blueprint..Ms. Peters's brisk sweeping away of preconceptions about both a mythic character and the actress playing her casts new and haunting shadows on a familiar landscape. Rose emerges in this *Gypsy* with her monumental willpower intact. But something new and affecting is simmering within the character, a damning glimpse of self-awareness.

Peter Marks of the *Washington Post* also praised the new Rose, referenced the controversy surrounding anticipation of this production, and had a few new terms for the character of Rose:

> She's a downright sexy Rose,… one who uses her body as shrewdly as the strippers she disparages. And that's just swell. The toxic speculation on the Web and in the papers in recent weeks over whether [Bernadette Peters] was up to the job turns out to have been a lot of hooey. Lost in all the hand-wringing was an appreciation of Peters's range and an acknowledgment of her place in the pantheon. If she hasn't earned the right to play this legendary showbiz terrorist, who has? And who is to say the last word on Rose's black impulses belonged to Angela Lansbury or Tyne Daly or even Ethel Merman.

On the other hand, Michael Phillips of *The Los Angeles Times* thought that Ms. Peters was not up to the big numbers, both vocally and physically.

> It is Queen Lear, and in the show's two killer spots, "Everything's Coming Up Roses" … and "Rose's Turn"…, Momma Rose transforms into something 1959 audiences hadn't planned on... She becomes crazed, her dreams of show business glory ….galloping out of control ….aspects of Peters' arsenal are simply not ideal for the role. Her particular vocal timbre, hindered by somewhat mushy diction, doesn't devastate, even in full-devastation mode.

Perhaps Phillips did not think Ms. Peters's Rose was enough of a monster, and he failed to appreciate the subtleties that Brantley and Peters found. He also used the Lear comparison which demonstrates his attachment to the classic or iconic nature of Rose as a tragic heroine. However, from everything written about Merman's understanding of the role, Rose was never "crazed" and once again it is imposed upon the image of Rose. It takes time to change a perception of an iconic character or even the myth she is supposed to represent. But do Isherwood's and Brantley's reviews illustrate that there was some evidence that progress in this department was being made? Could Rose be accepted as a more complete woman who was sexy, strong, and maternal as well as difficult and pushy?

If the success of the 2015 London revival of *Gypsy* starring Imelda Staunton is to be believed, everyone loves Rose the monster best. "Imelda ..is unafraid to go full

monster in the role of Broadway's Mother Courage, dragging her children through the collapsing ruins of vaudeville," writes John Anderson in "'Gypsy' TV Review: Psycho Stage Mother" for *The Wall Street Journal*. He continues, "When she sings "Everything's Coming Up Roses"--a song that, after 57 years, has become something of a trite, optimistic cliché--it becomes an aria of madness, an anthem of chilling delusion… Ms. Staunton turns almost all the tunes around, mining them for pugnacious rage or pathetic need.' Staunton may have needed to make these choices since she is an actress who sings and not a singer who acts. Therefore, she could not have imbued the songs with the necessary emotional and musical force that Merman, Peters, and LuPone could.

Or is this again, a reflection of the time? There is no doubt that in the time since the first *Gypsy* was produced there have been more and more fabulous monsters filling our consciousness with the proliferation of the high budget and very popular Marvel and DC Comics movies of the past 25 years, or the Lord of the Rings cycle, and even the Harry Potter series. This is all in addition to any number of fantastic aliens on popular television programs such as Dr. Who and Star Trek. Does the fact that our culture is now populated by more sophisticated monsters force Rose to up her monster game to remain relevant in today's world? The groundwork had been laid by Laurents over the years after all. Why shouldn't this most recent iteration of Momma Rose appear to be even more Mommie Dearest than previous ones?

Is this why Anderson says that Ms. Staunton "gives us a Rose ….who harbors an unquenchable rage against God and nature for not having given her the gifts to live her dream. It's a rage that can never be extinguished, which is the wonderful thing Ms. Staunton digs out of the role, much to our joy. And, now and then, our horror"? Watching

Ms. Staunton's Rose can be disturbing. She grabs Louise with a viciousness that eliminates any possible love for the child. She often looks crazed and out of touch with reality, fulfilling the delusional aspect of the character that Laurents seemed to always be after in his productions. Unfortunately, there is no basis for any of the rage in the actual script.

John Walsh of *The Independent* called Staunton's Rose "deranged" and also celebrated the monstrous aspect of Rose's character in a musical that he calls "Greek tragedy masquerading as musical comedy, "*Gypsy*" is mythic, and so is Momma Rose--the mother of all stage mothers, and an acid test of a performer's ego: Just how malignant does an actress want to be?" Now she is "the mother of all stage mothers" and provides an invitation for any actress portraying Rose the opportunity to be as "malignant" as possible. So in order to do this, the actress in question must dehumanize Rose and play her as "mythic."

It is no surprise then that in a 2016 interview following her Olivier Award for playing Rose, Staunton described her as a "complicated and disturbing woman" and that there was a "Greek quality to her misery and inner demons." Staunton's negative comments about Rose echo "the mother of all stage mothers" theme and are clearly in keeping with the attitude illustrated in John Walsh's review.

In his *New York Times* review of Ms. Staunton's Rose, Ben Brantley suggests, "Sometimes it takes an outsiders eye to see a culture and its inhabitants with the perspective that brings fresh vigor to well worn classics." He also compares *Gypsy* to Lear and adds Hamlet as well, but says,

> That Rose clearly has a lot to answer for as a mother gives *Gypsy* a psychological harshness that is traditionally softened by its affection for good old showbiz. Sure, Rose is a narcissist, but it is just such beloved monsters who make (or become) stars…{and}.. Rose is unmistakably a sociopath, a juggernaut of ego, who comes close to strangling (and I mean literally) those who love her.

An actress has many choices to make when she develops her performance of a character, especially a well written character. But these choices should be anchored in the text, the lyrics, the truth of a scene and not in a hypothetical. There is no basis for a Rose who is a sociopath or a mother who comes close to strangling her daughter. That thought is as disturbing as the timbre of Ms. Staunton's singing, reflecting the harshness of her characterization of Rose. It may be interesting or even fun to play Rose as a horrible, demented villainess, but does that serve the piece or enrich the understanding of motherhood?

This brings us back to a significant aspect of the original hypothesis that mothers on the American stage are not consistently portrayed as complex characters in the way that so many male characters are. They are reflections of the perfect mother myth, or a "deranged" monster version of it, no matter how well the character is actually written in the book or script. Rose is not without her flaws, but this does not necessarily make her a monster. As a mother, her relationship with her daughters is complicated and has been fascinating to explore, but according to these reviews as well as the studies of the making of the original production, these complexities are overlooked in favor of the assumption of her being either a monster or a failure as an example of the perfect mother myth. It is difficult to not conclude that this is because the too many of the male directors of theses productions view mothers within the limited confines of myth or monster whether or not

that is a reasonable reflection of the evolving understanding of motherhood within our society in more recent times.

In his 2019 study *Whose Turn Is It? Where Gypsy's Finale Came From, and Where It Went*, Jeffrey Magee summarizes the evolution of the effects of various actresses' interpretation of the role of Rose.

> With Lansbury's performance, and subsequent performances by Patti LuPone (who, like Lansbury, performed under Laurents's direction), and Imelda Staunton, an actress who sings, we stand far from the model of the original Rose for whom the musical was a star vehicle: Ethel Merman. Throughout the thicket of collaboration detailed here, it is vital to remember that "Rose's Turn" and the entire show would not have existed without her. The dramatic values that some later actresses invested in Rose do not eclipse the foundational impact of Ethel Merman: the show was conceived for her and its writing geared to her talents. (Magee 127)

It is possible that the force of the memory of Merman's more warm hearted portrayal of Rose can sustain hope for a less monstrous version of this complex mother. The impact of her very famous performance is still held as an accepted part in our collective memory despite Laurents's best efforts.

Chapter IV

Amanda

"My devotion has made me a witch and so
I make myself hateful to my children!"

If the musical *Gypsy* is about Momma Rose, can the same thing be said about Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*? Possibly not, since the specter of its creator, Tennessee Williams looms quite large. This play is perhaps more widely known than *Gypsy* by the general population, as it is studied in schools all across the United States and it is commonly accepted that it is very autobiographical for one of the country's most famous playwrights. The second half of the title of the play is, after all, A Memory Play.

However, there is no denying that Amanda is one of the most well-known characters in American Theatre and many important actresses have appeared in the role over the years on Broadway, Off- Broadway, the West End, television, and film. Arguably, it could be easier for many of us to name a number of these actresses than it would be to recall the actors who played Tom. What does that say about the resonance of Amanda as a character? As Walter Kerr observed in his 1983 *New York Times* review of the play, "If one contemporary play has been hauled out of storage - or, more properly, the library - more often than any other, it is surely Mr. Williams's memory play, the one in which his mother and sister burn fiercely as blown candles before our dazzled eyes."

Maybe the play is in reality more Amanda's and Laura's rather than Tom's since these women are the focus of his memories and our attention.

The titles of these two works do not reflect the fact that each is primarily about a mother and the characters' relationships with their mother. Another similarity is that each is considered very important in the development of their respective genres, and there at the center of each play is a mother of mythical proportions, like a lightning rod, attracting scrutiny, criticism, and adoration. *Gypsy* represents the beginning of a new awareness in the American Musical of complex characters revealed through their songs rather than through their actions or dialogue.

By the same token *The Glass Menagerie* represents "a conception of a new plastic theatre which must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic convention if theatre is to resume vitality as a part of our culture," as Williams explains in his Production Notes for the play. It is possible that this new level of complexity of the characters and plasticity of form originates in the fact that both works are biographical, if not directly autobiographical as in the case of *The Glass Menagerie***.** If plasticity is the "capacity of being molded or altered," as defined by Merriam-Webster, then it could be said that there is no absolute or set formation of Amanda but rather a version of her held in Tom's memory. Thomas L. King argues in his *Irony and Distance in The Glass Menagerie,* "The play…is not Amanda's. Amanda is a striking and a powerful character, but the play is Tom's…Tom is the only character in the play, for we see not the characters but Tom's memory of them – Amanda and the rest are merely aspects of Tom's consciousness" (King 208). This is a significant contrast from a reality play, but how is an actress supposed to present a memory? Does this plastic nature of the

playwright's contrivance allow more freedom for each actress who approaches the role? If Amanda is only Tom's memory - an aspect of his consciousness - can there really be a definitive portrayal of this woman?

The structure of the family in *Gypsy* reflects the basic reality of Gypsy Rose Lee's life as presented in her autobiography and interpreted by Arthur Laurents. The family unit in *The Glass Menagerie* does not fully reflect the Williams family. If we are going to examine Amanda's treatment as a mother, even if only as she exists in Tom's memory, it is worth examining the fact that Williams chose to exclude his own father from his play by describing Mr. Wingfield as having deserted the family, "a telephone man who fell in love with long distances," and who only appears in a large photograph on the back wall of the set. Williams also had a younger brother, Dakin, but there is no mention of any other sibling in the Wingfield family. If this autobiographical play is a memory play, Williams certainly used selective memory in his construction of the Wingfield family. Would Amanda be as interesting a character if a husband was in the picture? Would her relationship with a second younger son significantly change the dynamic of her relationship with Tom? In James Grissom's *Follies of God,* he quotes Williams describing his life in St. Louis,

> I despised my father and every cruel act imagined in my plays emanates from his neurotic soul. I hated my mother for blandly accepting the mediocrity that was our life, and until I jumped on her train of outward bound dreams, I hated her for moving out of the real world where I felt she might have offered me some aid. (146)

Why would Williams be so willing to explore his relationship with his mother independent of any relationships with other male family members? Would she be a more sympathetic character as a wife and mother of three children, or was it necessary to keep

the focus on her motherhood in terms of Williams and his sister Rose for the sake of the dramatic structure of the play? He referred to his mother as Miss Edwina in his personal writings. In the following passage that Williams shared with Grissom he offers some insight into his understanding of her:

> My mother found her happiness in her past… and she drug us all with her to those places… I could not know then, because I hated her, that my mother was allowing me into her heart, was giving me all she felt worthwhile about herself, wanted both to elevate herself in my eyes, in everyone's eyes, but also because she needed me to see her as she saw herself. She wanted to be loved…The person I thought I hated, and felt I didn't understand, had made me someone who could appreciate these images, these illusions, and who had probably made me a writer. (147-8)

If this is true, then Amanda/Miss Edwina can also be said to share the force of Momma Rose in providing the opportunity for her child to become the artist he was meant to be. If this were so, it belies, at least in part, the accepted reactions of so many critics or scholars who have written about the character of Tom as someone who needed to reject a mother they saw as terrible and selfish in order to find the freedom to be the writer that he became.

In his 2021 article, *Tennessee Williams's Misunderstood Memory Play: Re-imagining Amanda Wingfield in The Glass Menagerie,* Ramón Espejo Romero says, "Amanda Wingfield may allegedly be the most viciously belabored character, not only in Williams's corpus but in the entire history of US drama." (478) In this examination of Amanda, Romero is focused on how the aspect of the "memory play" affects interpretations and critical responses to the character, but notes "a survey of critical reactions to Amanda Wingfield ever since she debuted in 1944…regard Amanda as an immutable, conventional figure, thereby misrepresenting the kind of play Williams was

trying to write. The fact that Amanda is generally regarded very unfavorably may stem from ageist or gender-biased positions" (Romero 478).

King agrees that the impact of the first production, particularly through Laurette Taylor's performance, skewed the generally accepted point of view of the play away from a memory play to that of a study of characters.

> Judging from the reviews, the distortion of the play began with the original production. The reviews deal almost wholly with Laurette Taylor's performance, making Amanda seem to be the principal character, and nearly ignore the [Tom's] soliloquies. Even the passage of time has failed to correct this tendency, for many later writers also forced the play out of focus by pushing Amanda forward. (King 207)

Romero does not explore the negative aspect of Amanda's treatment by critics in detail since he is focused on the "memory play" aspect, but he offers another illustration of how the collective memory of our culture distorts the portrait of an important character portraying an American mother. Even his reference of "viciously belabored" in discussing other scholars' treatment of Amanda points to deep seated and strongly felt reactions to her as a mother. He cites a number of reviews over the past 70 years with damning descriptions of the character of Amanda, often simply based upon the prejudices of the reviewer, as Romero explains, and not upon the text or actions within the play. These reviewers, primarily male, make scathing condemnations of Amanda as a mother in much the same way reviewers have treated Momma Rose.

This is all very surprising since Williams offers a very different description of Amanda in The Characters section of the play. Amanda is the first character described:

> A little woman of great but confused vitality clinging frantically to another time and place…She is not paranoiac, but her life is paranoia. There is much to admire in Amanda, and as much to love and pity as there is to

> laugh at. Certainly she has endurance and a kind of heroism, and though her foolishness makes her unwittingly cruel at times, there is tenderness in her slight person.

It may not be the most flattering of descriptions, but it is more than balanced toward the positive qualities found in a mother. Certainly, being referred to as having "much to admire," or having "endurance and a kind of heroism" as well as "tenderness" points to a sympathetic character overall as opposed to a monster. Is it unreasonable to expect that actresses playing the role, or directors creating her world, or audiences, scholars, and critics should understand that these qualities are part of a loving, well-meaning, if flawed, mother despite sometimes being subject to "foolishness" or "paranoia"? What makes it possible for Romero to point out that "an almost uniformly unfavorable depiction of her in book after book and article after article exists"? (Romero 478). Why does Burton Rascoe in his 1944 review describe her as a "sanely insane, horrible Mother, pathetic"? Was there a disconnect between the description Williams provided and how he portrays her through the actual text of the play? Did Laurette Taylor's famously illustrious interpretation of Amanda not incorporate the nuances that Williams thought he had provided for the character through his writing?

According to the descriptions provided in a number of reviews of the play at the time of its opening, it appears that Miss Taylor chose to play Amanda with little understanding of a Southern Belle, faded or in her prime. She is described as presenting Amanda as a "slipshod Mother Hubbard", "frowsy, decaying", and "droopy"; a woman who often mumbles. None of these attributes could ever be accepted within the Southern culture for a woman, like Amanda, who is so very aware of her own background and family's worth. The text of the play discloses that she grew up in a comfortable enough

social situation to have a coming out party and to have attended the Governor's Ball. She would have been raised to always act like a lady of refinement, aware of the necessary social graces expected of a young woman we know as a Southern Belle.

If she is faded, it is because she is no longer a young woman and because she has been deserted by her husband and left with very limited financial means. That does not mean that she does not still have a strong awareness of what is proper. Maintaining a graciousness, good manners, and kindness is not necessarily affected by a lack of funds. These are neither random airs that she puts on to make herself sound more important than she is, nor are they a reflection of a loss of her grasp on reality.

The world she now inhabits may not have room for such niceties, and to those who were not raised that way, her actions may seem frivolous and wrong for her time and place. But that could also be why Amanda holds on to them so desperately. These niceties are at the core of who she is. Proper deportment, good manners, and speaking clearly would have been drilled into her for most of her childhood and youth, as well as an understanding of the expectations of society. A phrase often heard by children of the South when caught in what is considered inappropriate or bad behavior is, "What will people think?"

There are also many examples of this in the popular culture of the time of the original production of *Menagerie*. It was a recurring theme in the 1936 bestselling book and the famous 1939 film, *Gone With the Wind*, as Scarlett O'Hara continually refused to follow the social conventions of her world causing all sorts of problems and criticism. Another famous example is the character of Regina in *Little Foxes* in both Lillian Hellman's 1939 play and the popular 1941 movie. Both of these Southern belles had also

lived past the grandeurs of their youth, but neither had lost the basic principles of correct demeanor and actions within the very specific traditions of their culture. That aspect of Southern life is probably still at work today in many circles, as personified by the Sugarbaker sisters in the popular 1990's television program *Designing Women*.

In his autobiography, *Memoirs,* Tennessee Williams references how this type of upbringing was so firmly a part of Miss Edwina and how it also determined her treatment of his sister, Rose, "She (Rose) was a very normal – but highly sexed – girl who was tearing herself apart mentally and physically by those repressions imposed upon her by Miss Edwina's monolithic Puritanism." (119) Miss Edwina was passing on the "monolithic Puritanism" with which she had been raised and was expected to use to guide her own behavior throughout her lifetime. Williams also noted that "I feel that Mother always did what she thought was right and that she has always given herself due credit for it even though what she sometimes did was all but fatally wrong." (T.Williams, *Memoirs* 85)

So, for a Southern belle turned Southern mother, the expectations of raising children properly may even have been higher than for most mothers. If the children of a Southern mother did not follow all the rules of the South's understanding of proper behavior, then the mother would certainly not be well thought of and could expect to be subject to societal scrutiny and criticism, if not scorn. Perhaps this is an even harsher version of 'blaming everything on mothers.' Whenever confronted by outlandish or questionable behavior, a good friend of mine who was raised in Georgia would say in a pronounced Southern drawl, "Doesn't (s)he have a Momma?" The awareness of these types of deeply ingrained Southern principles would assuredly have added even more

stress to Amanda's life as she struggled to make ends meet, keep Tom on the straight and narrow, and find a suitable situation for Laura's future, all within the strict standards of her heritage. It could also explain her constant need to recall her relatively uncomplicated and carefree youth as an escape from her current challenges. It was a coping mechanism. According to Maureen Stapleton in an interview with James Grissom, "And Tenn said that all the characters are crippled, but only Amanda wants to survive: The others only want to escape. So Amanda is the one aware of the loss and the struggle."

This examination of the characteristics of a proper Southern upbringing for a woman who is "prepared to occupy a position" is offered to provide a critical context for the review of the creation and reception of the character of Amanda in the original production. The structure of this way of life is not something that can be easily forgotten or discarded by those who were carefully, if not strictly, raised within it. It is also something that people who did not grow up in the South often mock or find foolish because they are not familiar with the traditions and do not understand them. In her article in the *Tennessee Williams Annual Review* entitled *Desire and Decay: Female Survivorship in Faulkner and Williams,* Bernadette Clemens writes, "On the decay of southern culture, Williams commented that it was "out of a regret for a South that no longer exists that I write of the forces that have destroyed it." (74) This would suggest that Williams was very aware of the importance of and understanding of "the forces" of Southern culture found in his plays and characters. This factor would have been informed by his "memory."

The importance of female endurance within the Southern culture is also noted in another section of Clemens's article.

> Cleanth Brooks makes a claim for Faulknerian women that holds true for Williams's female characters as well -- that they are ultimately figures of strength even within the context of illness, failure, and cultural decay. It is women's ultimate role in the work of these two southern writers to play the survivor. (Clemens 76)

This echoes what Williams had told Maureen Stapleton about Amanda and her role of survivor suggesting a nobility that would not be eliminated by frivolity or weakness of character. It also bolsters an argument for a more complex understanding of Amanda.

Based on reviewers' descriptions of Laurette Taylor's performance, there does not appear to have been much of an attempt to incorporate this vital aspect of "Southerness" into her interpretation of Amanda. In a January 14, 1945 review, *Memo from Chicago* for the *New York Times* during *Menagerie'*s initial run in Chicago, Lloyd Lewis describes Miss Taylor's Amanda as "Fumbling around the dolorous precinct of her home in a slipshod mother Hubbard(dress).." and that she "mumbles in magnificent realism." He goes on to commend Eddie Dowling's casting of Miss Taylor in the role because he had "seen that young Peg o' My Heart could be a ridiculous, irritating, pathetic, old woman." No mention of any admirable qualities there for Amanda or an awareness of her "Southerness."

Then there is Lewis Nichols's April 8, 1945 *New York Times* review, where he notes, "The whining accent of a shrew offers the reason why the husband has been driven to drink - and long distance - and why the son presently is to follow." So now it seems that there is no doubt that Amanda is the reason her absent husband was a drunk, and she has to shoulder the blame for his desertion as well, ignoring the fact revealed in the play that she belatedly discovered that Mr. Wingfield was known to drink in excess before their marriage. Once again, the father gets a pass, and everything is the mother's fault. Is

that why there is little sympathy for Amanda's plight, or is it assumed that she has no one to blame but herself?

In another article about the play published on March 25, 1945 in *The New York Times*, Lloyd Lewis says, "Now she (Miss Taylor) is 58 and plays a frowsy, decaying, southern belle who struggles fussily in a Saint Louis alley home…Her dumpy Amanda, nags and lectures in a droopy mother Hubbard, she mops her stringy hair in despair.." and offers another sad, dull picture of Amanda. How could she ever hope to inspire Tom and Laura into taking charge of their own lives if she spent all of her time in such a slovenly way? Where is the "vitality" William cites as one of the first characteristics in his Character Description of Amanda? There is no hint of a real understanding of the characteristics of a faded Southern Belle in these descriptions and I have to wonder how Williams felt about this reception of the character he purposefully created as a reflection of his own mother.

With that in mind, it is no wonder that Miss Edwina did not recognize herself in Laurette Taylor's Amanda. Here, from his *Memoirs,* is Tennessee Williams's description of the meeting of the two women backstage after the Chicago opening of the play:

> I don't recall her precise reaction to the play but it was probably favorable, for Mother was very concerned with my long delayed success. I do recall her coming backstage after the performance which she attended and paying her respects to Laurette.
>
> "Well Mrs Williams," said Laurette, briefly scrutinizing Edwina Williams in her dressing room mirror, "how did you like yourself?"
>
> "Myself?" said Mother innocently.
>
> Laurette was as kind a person as I have known in a theater mostly inhabited by jungle beasts, but even she…was not one to pass by an opportunity to be mischievous.

> "You notice these bangs I wear? I have to wear them playing this part because it's the part of a fool and I have a high intellectual forehead."
>
> Miss Edwina did not pick up on this either. She let it go by without a sign of offence. She was probably bedazzled by Laurette's somewhat supernatural quality on a stage. (T. Williams, *Memoirs* 85)

She may have also been taken aback by Taylor's rudeness if she did "pick up on" her remark about her "high intellectual forehead," and in an example of gracious courtesy that she would have been raised to offer in response to such an inelegant insult, "she let it go."

In response to the constant comparison of Amanda to Edwina, Mrs. Williams wrote the book *Remember Me To Tom*, as told to Lucy Freeman which was published in 1963. In it she offers her own more considerate recollection of this meeting.

> I wanted to congratulate Laurette, who had brought down the house with her amazing performance as Amanda Wingfield, the faded, fretful, dominating mother lost in the dream world of her past, bullying her son into finding a gentleman caller for his abnormally shy sister.
>
> I entered Laurette's dressing room, not knowing what to expect, for she was sometimes quite eccentric. She was sitting with her feet propped up on the radiator trying to keep warm. Before I had a chance to get out a word, she greeted me.
>
> 'Well how did you like you'seff, Miz Williams?" she asked.
>
> I was so shocked I didn't know what to say. It had not occurred to me as I watched Tom's play that I was Amanda. But I recovered quickly.
>
> "You were magnificent," I said quietly to Laurette.
>
> Someone mentioned to Tom the opposite receptions given *Angel*s and *Menagerie* and he explained this by saying, "You can't mix sex and religion…but you can always write safely about mothers."
>
> To which I say, "Ah, can you, Tom?"(E. Williams 148)

Mrs. Williams was also referenced as having some input in the development of the character of Amanda in *Laurette Taylor: American Stage Legend* by Lynn Kear. The necessary Southern accent proved troublesome to Taylor. Williams's mother watched it evolve during rehearsals.

> Laurette was a genius in the rapidity with which she acquired a southern accent. Describing herself as a 'southerner out of Ireland,' she said she had never been below Washington, D.C., except to Florida, but she had visited Southern Italy, if that helped. At first she kept charging up and down the stage, her head wrapped in a bandana, looking like a southern mammy and talking like one. I whispered to Tom, A southern lady doesn't sound like a southern mammy imitating a southern lady.' Laurette toned it down for the opening and thereafter. (Kear 197)

Meanwhile an unsigned review in *The Christian Science Monitor* describes "a family, headed by a whining nagging widow…forever mourning for the social splendors she knew as a Southern belle." At least Howard Barnes of the *New York Herald Tribune* provided a more balanced view with, " It is Laurette Taylor, who makes the play memorable…she performs with such vibrancy and perfection that she floods the offering with beauty and artistry…as an impoverished, southern matron, who jousts with windmills and the sordid realities of living in a sorry world, she is superb." This sounds more like the Amanda found in the text and the context of the play. This is another example of how Laurette Taylor's strong performance in the original production obscured what Thomas King and Ramón Espejo Romero argue is the real focus of the play, Tom's "memories."

From all accounts the rehearsal period was tumultuous with Laurette Taylor struggling to find the character of Amanda. Kear describes one aspect of this process:

Claudia Cassidy, drama critic for *The Chicago Tribune*, had her doubts about Laurette before opening night.

> I remember a day before the play opened. A woman crossed the stage, script in hand, mumbling. She wore pants and sweaters, scarf and big, muffling coat. Her hair was a scramble, her face what happens when a lovely one is puffed up, stretched out of shape, and then collapsed. That was Laurette. (Kear 198)

In *Memoirs*, Williams recalls Taylor's behavior during the rehearsal period as "Laurette knew she didn't have to give her lines until the play opened, and so she was watching the others, observing, waiting. But at the time we didn't know that, I thought she didn't know her lines and so did everybody else." (82)

Kear goes on to describe a number of references to Miss Taylor's drinking. Williams worried about that and Taylor's constant ad-libbing during rehearsals.

> In a letter to frequent correspondent Donald Wyndham, he expressed disappointment with Laurette."Taylor was ad libbing practically every speech and the show sounded like the Aunt Jemima Pancake Hour. We all got drunk, and this A.M. Taylor was even worse. I finally lost my temper and when she made one of her little insertions, I screamed over the footlights, 'My God, what corn!' She screamed back that I was a fool and all playwrights made her sick…that she had not only been a star for 40 years but had made a living as a writer which was better than I had done…then came back after lunch and suddenly began giving a real acting performance. (Kear 198)

Also, Paul Bowles said that she hadn't been drinking, "but suddenly the dress rehearsal coming up was too much. The night of the dress rehearsal she was nowhere to be found. And finally she was found, unconscious, down behind the furnace in the basement, by the janitor" (Kear 199). Then on opening night, Mrs. Williams recalls "Tom went backstage, unable to sit still, to find everyone gripped by a slight case of opening night d.t.'s…Laurette was discovered a few minutes before curtain time dying an

old bathrobe she was supposed to wear in the second act, because she suddenly did not like its shade" (E. Williams 146).

Despite this chaos Miss Taylor had a great success with the role and Broadway was excited to welcome the production after its Chicago run. What is very different about this play and *Gypsy*, is the fact that there were so many unknown quantities involved with the original production of *Menagerie* while the original production of *Gypsy* was being mounted with well-established and very successful Broadway veterans.

The team of Laurents, Sondheim, and Robbins had just had a huge success with *West Side Story* in 1957. Although Styne was not part of that piece, he had had several Broadway successes prior to working on *Gypsy*, such as *My Sister Eileen* in 1955 and *Bells Are Ringing* in 1956. And of course, Ethel Merman had been a huge star in many Broadway musicals over the past 30 years before *Gypsy* - ever since her debut in 1930 in *Girl Crazy*. She was already a Broadway legend when Laurents approached her about *Gypsy*, and yet Merman admitted in her autobiography, that this, Momma Rose, was "the role I consider the pinnacle of my career" (Merman 202). All of the members of the creative team for *Gypsy* were very much Broadway luminaries.

The team that brought *Menagerie* to Broadway, consisted of three known and respected individuals within the Broadway world, but certainly not with the same clout of the *Gypsy* crew. Eddie Dowling and Margo Jones, were co-directors. Dowling also played Tom, and then there was Laurette Taylor. The playwright, Tennessee Williams, was a relative unknown, having had only one professional production of one of his plays, *Battle of Angels* which opened and quickly closed in Boston in 1940. According to his

New York Times obituary, Dowling had received four New York Drama Critics Circle Awards during his forty years in the Broadway world as a playwright, song writer, actor, director, and Pulitzer Prize-winning producer of *The Time of Your Life* in 1940. As detailed in her biography in the Texas State Historical Association listing, although Margo Jones, the "Texas Tornado", spent time in the New York theatre, she focused most of her energies on establishing professional theatre elsewhere and was considered a pioneer of regional theatre. Laurette Taylor was certainly a known quantity, but she had not been in a Broadway hit for more than 30 years after her famous appearance in the title role in *Peg o'My Heart* which opened in late 1912. The level of enthusiasm that surrounded each of the openings of these works on Broadway was very different.

Although there is no film nor video of the original production of *Gypsy*, there is the original cast recording available to refer to where there is a clear sense of what it must have been like and why the musical created so much excitement. *Menagerie* had opened 14 years before *Gypsy* and relied upon the many glowing newspaper reviews that seem to have focused primarily on Laurette Taylor's performance to create a similar kind of buzz. The reviews of the first production of *Menagerie* were mixed. It was not recognized as a future classic of the American theatre, while the reception of *Gypsy* by critics was almost uniformly positive and effusive.

Chicago critic Claudia Cassidy had created a great deal of this excitement about the first *Menagerie*, reviewing it several times during its Chicago run. She perhaps comes the closest to describing exactly what captured the audience's imagination and created the awe over Taylor's performance.

> At the beginning, this…belle of the old south is sunk deep in frustration, pricked only by the nagging urge not to admit defeat. She looks like the scuffed, rundown slipper that outlived the ball. Yet when for a brief moment she knows hope, she leans on the tenement stoop and gazes at the moon that might have been that very slipper, brand new. And over her face flit all the lovely ghosts of girlhood when 17 gentlemen callers came riding to pay her tribute. You won't see a more radiant sight than Laurette Taylor at that magic moment. (Kear 200)

It may be because this is a female critic and all of the other previous quotes of reviews included here were written by men, but Cassidy's less complimentary comments do not seem as harsh and are balanced with an awareness of the beauty of Amanda's aspirations. Although a number of the male reviewers used the term "magic" in reference to her performance, their mentioning of any radiance or lightness was limited and lost given the focus on what they saw as Amanda's shrillness.

Ward Morehouse interviewed Miss Taylor during the Broadway run to discuss her thoughts about her performance and why it was causing such an enthusiastic response.

> In playing Amanda, and when I get on the stage, I become southern. The rest of the time I suppose I'm just American....I got most of the southern accent that I use from our author, Tennessee Williams. I really don't know any tricks any more. Acting is really so simple and my advice to young actresses is to try not to become a bedroom thinker but wait until you get to the theater to do your acting. I have never felt that playing Amanda was particularly difficult. It's a part in which you're actually riding on an audience's shoulders. There are actually only two parts in the play —the shrew in the old wrapper and the young girl in the faded blue dress. (Kear 210)

If Miss Taylor thought of Amanda as a shrew, and was indeed such an extraordinary actress, then the critics cannot really be blamed for echoing this grim assessment of Amanda in their reviews. This focus on the "old wrapper" ignores the fact that Amanda appears in any other clothes besides that and her cotillion dress. Was the shade of the

"old wrapper" not ugly enough and that is why it had to be dyed another color right before the curtain rose on opening night? Was it so necessary to maintain the impression that Amanda spends most of the play in an "old wrapper" to drive home the idea that Amanda is a shrew? There is no allowance that she might be considered normal in any way; that she might do her best to dress well within her very limited means or that she was raised to do whatever she could to always look her best and would never spend the day in her "old wrapper" in a slovenly way.

There is no indication in the text that would lead anyone to believe that she is that slattern. Even the references to Miss Taylor's dyeing a bathrobe on opening night mention it being worn in the Second Act, which would have also included the jonquils scene where Amanda appears in her old cotillion dress and continues to wear it for the actual dinner with the "gentleman caller". For all of the production details provided by Williams, there is no mention of what Amanda is wearing for several of the scenes. Amanda's first appearance is at the dinner table, and there is no mention of what she is wearing. If she was a slattern, perhaps she would have cooked dinner and come to the table in her bathrobe, but even the original production must have had her fully dressed for the day since on opening night the bathrobe would still have been soaking wet. There are references to a "cheap or imitation velvety-looking cloth coat(s)" and her hat being "five or six years old, one of those dreadful cloche hats that were worn in the late Twenties." But these seem to be more criticisms of a lack of style and reflective of their serious lack of funds, than a reflection of Amanda's sloppiness.

Perhaps it was decided that it was necessary to ignore any sense of propriety in Amanda and her attention to what she wore to drive home the assumption that she was a harridan. From the point of view of a mother who feels responsible for the proper upbringing of her children, how terrible is it that she needs to chide Tom for not sitting up straight at the table, for pushing his food around on his plate with his fingers and to not wolf his food down without chewing? Is she really a terrible woman because she expects her adult male child to act in a mannerly way at the table, and not as a uncouth slob? As any good mother knows, not only is it her responsibility to teach her children correct behavior, but she will be judged as a failure or a bad mother if the actions of her adult children do not reflect that correct behavior.

Tom's disinterest in basic proper etiquette during his evening meal after working at the shoe factory all day can be seen as a reflection of his constant discontent and the possible depression setting in because his sensitive soul is not designed to have to deal with the harsh and mundane realities of their difficult situation. But the same could be said of Amanda and of Laura. The sad state of their affairs is hard on them as well. So why is Amanda the only character in the play that is not treated as sympathetic, but instead, at best, pathetic? Does her role as a mother exclude her from receiving any compassion? It must be so because no one seems to be critical of Tom's haranguing Amanda, or his constant whining about how hard his life is because he has to go to work everyday. He comes home in a terrible mood and Amanda is the dog he kicks.

Laura seems to be the only one who sees this, which means, even Tennessee Williams knew this at least in some indirect way.

> With Amanda I was purging myself of the hatred I had felt toward my mother and was left only with the very strong love I knew was there. So I loved her through the play…What I learned from Laurette Taylor, from my mother, from *Menagerie* is that we - writers, people - only conquer when we love, because when we love we see clearly what is in front of us, and what was our past, and what we own. (Grissom 150)

Emily Roxworthy explores this tradition of always being critical of mothers in her 2016 article, *Frankenmom: Theatre as History in Deconstructing American Celebrity Motherhood*. "Western theatre has long served a modeling function for what Judith Butler might call the juridical construction of motherhood, and while the theatre has declined as a mainstream cultural apparatus in the United States, its power over how mothers are publicly displayed remains." (64) But is the modeling found within the intentions of the actress, the vision of the directors, or in the reactions and assumptions of the audiences and critics? What or where is the origin of the critical judgement of the actions of a mother?

In *Follies of God*, Grissom tells us that Tennessee Williams went into great detail about the thoughts behind the creation of Laurette Taylor's Amanda which includes the actress's understanding of Amanda's kind of mothering.

> Taylor explained her motivation in portraying Amanda as similar to a time when her daughter, Marguerite, was crying, and in her attempts to calm her child, Taylor made faces, bobbed balloons, found candy, and finally held the baby tightly and begged her to please stop crying. "She never forgot this manic desire," Tenn told me, "this spinning of many plates to calm and control someone she loved, and any mother or child could recognize her actions."(Grissom 151)

This is a tremendously insightful understanding of Amanda's situation, yet this level of complexity of character does not appear to have reached across the footlights to most of the reviewers. As many of the critics were male, we cannot expect that they

would be classified as “any mother” who “could recognize her actions.” But all of them were at one time some mother’s “child” and yet few, if any, acknowledged that Amanda’s actions could be called attempts to “calm and control someone she loved.” She is not perfect and Tom’s anger is understandable when he comes home to find that she has returned some of his books to the library because she found them objectionable and possibly because she thought they contributed to his impatience and dissatisfaction with his life. This is a good example of a well-meaning mother who continues to try to control her adult son because she feels that he is not ready to leave her nest. It is also something probably everybody has fought against with their own mother on some level, but the difference is that Tom resented it for years.

This sort of almost universal rejection of a mother’s interference coupled with little understanding of the mother’s desire to do her job properly for her children is an example of how the Roxworthy’s “frankenmom” has been sustained in theatre for so long. Whether it is Merman’s Momma Rose urging her young daughters to improve their performances or Taylor’s Amanda insisting that Tom “Eat food leisurely” or that Laura “develop charm – and vivacity”, the sight on stage of a mother fulfilling her purpose as the primary teacher and mentor for her children is generally viewed as nagging and not nurturing by reviewers and perhaps many audience members. It is also very telling then that in the book *Laurette* by Marguerite Courtney [Laurette Taylor’s daughter] she describes her mother’s relationship with Julie Haydon, the original Laura, during the rehearsal period:

> She fussed over the wraith-like Julie with some of the same tigerish concern Amanda shows for her daughter in the play, urging her to eat

> properly, dress warmly, and over Julie's protests that she never wore hats, insisted on buying her one as protection against Chicago's icy winds. (400)

It would seem that even Laurette Taylor understood the role of a good mother, whether her actions were welcomed or not. Also, it is worth noting that the choice of the term "tigerish" in describing Laurette's mothering of Julie is later echoed by Gypsy Rose Lee in her autobiography when describing Momma Rose as a jungle mother. (Lee 6)

Williams goes on with his description and explains that Taylor had decided that, "Amanda never falters in her impeccable performance, her affront to reality, when anyone can see her, but when reality makes its presence and its power known to her, her performance, her posture, and her face all momentarily and frighteningly would sag." (Courtney 400). Based on these memories of Williams, Taylor was presenting Amanda as a good Southern mother, in control, "performing" in a way that would be acceptable to the public, and to her children except for brief moments when reality became too much and she couldn't continue to fight it.

These moments when Taylor's Amanda became overwhelmed by reality must have been extraordinary moments in the theatre, but they were only moments. Yet, in so many of the reviews of the time, these moments of defeat when "her face..would sag" would seem to have fully defined Amanda's character in the minds of so many critics. So it must have also been with the sight of Amanda in a bathrobe. Was Taylor's showing Amanda's vulnerability or level of despair while wearing the bathrobe so great, that it obscured any other moments of normalcy or vitality even though she did not spend much of the play dressed that way? This must have been the case since in so many of the reviews it appeared to have been generally accepted and Amanda became known as a

"slovenly mother hubbard." They, the many male reviewers, could not "give Mom a pass". They did not see how hard Amanda was working to hold on for the welfare of her children and herself.

In addition to Claudia Cassidy's more balanced view of the original Amanda, is this quote from an April 14, 1945 unsigned review that appeared in the journal *America*:

> Tennessee Williams has created a group of characters so genuine and intense that their hopes and defeats possess the illusion of great importance. His portrait of the mother, splendidly interpreted by Miss Taylor, is nothing less than distinguished writing. To the casual eye an aging crone, a bit on the shrewish side, she is at heart a valiant woman, fighting a rear guard action against life, stubbornly refusing to lower her colors.

Here is an acceptance of the "valor" that Williams eventually attributed to Amanda, and that Taylor clearly understood.

By the time Maureen Stapleton appeared in her second New York City production of *The Glass Menagerie* in 1975 ten years after her first appearance in the role and thirty years after the original production, America was in the middle of what is commonly called the Second Wave of Feminism. But many of the long standing attitudes towards mothers and motherhood were still firmly entrenched in the current society. According to her article *Four Waves of Feminism,* Professor Martha Rampton of Pacific University explains that "The second wave was increasingly theoretical,… and began to associate the subjugation of women with broader critiques of patriarchy, capitalism, normative heterosexuality, and the woman's role as wife and mother." It could be expected that some of this theoretical evolution of feminism could have affected not only Maureen

Stapleton's interest in playing Amanda again, but also the response the character received in the press.

George Oppenheimer of *Newsday* made reference to having seen Laurette Taylor in the role of Amanda when he reviewed Stapleton's 1975 production. Here are his observations of Stapleton's performance in comparison to Taylor's:

> the highest compliment that I can pay her is that during most of the evening she made me forget Taylor. When I did remember her, it in no way lessened my admiration for Stapleton, for here again is a memorable performance, not quite as fragile and falsely genteel as Taylors, but nonetheless luminous, infinitely touching and, at times, highly comic.

It's worth noting that he admired the comic element in Amanda that Stapleton apparently had found and Theodore Mann had encouraged. One explanation for this continued movement toward a "softer" and even "comic" Amanda developed in the Stapleton/Mann production of *Menagerie* in 1975 was offered by actress Shirley Knight and director Emily Mann in a 2013 *Playbill* article about the women in Tennessee Williams's plays. Knight had appeared in a 1991 production of *Menagerie* directed by Emily Mann.

> "I found *Glass Menagerie* terribly funny," said Knight, who played the part at the McCarter. "Tennessee felt that way. He said when people did it too serious, it didn't work."
>
> (Emily) Mann, who has staged *Menagerie* twice (including the production that starred Knight), is inclined to judge the demanding Amanda less harshly than her son Tom, and some theatregoers, do. "Amanda is so darling as a mother," she said. "She flutters around her children and cares so deeply. Her mad need is to make things right — she's funny because of that."

How did Amanda go from a total "shrew" in 1944 to a "darling" in 1991? Could it be that these are the words of a woman director who has been raised in an environment of greater awareness of the struggles of a single mother with very limited financial means? The text

of the play hasn't changed in all these years. Has there been a real shift in the understanding of the context of the play? And most importantly, that shift does not appear to have diminished the drama in the play.

In Clive Barnes's review he appears to have understood that in Maureen Stapleton's Amanda in the 1975 production of *Menagerie,* she was offering a different interpretation of the role. His December 19th review in the *New York Times* describes the mother as "the first of Mr. Williams's faded Southern belles, slightly cracked, completely gracious, and always with intentions of grandeur." There is no suggestion of a slovenly Mother Hubbard here. Mr. Barnes does mention some remorse at never having seen the original production with Laurette Taylor. Still, he is so impressed with Stapleton's performance that he feels that his regrets at missing Taylor's are "at least assuaged". Her Amanda's "voice is beautifully modulated, but with a rigidly controlled hint of hysteria to it:..It is a lovely moving performance, all sad lavender tinged with tragic purple." The tone of this review reflects a much kinder understanding of Amanda with no hint of condemnation. Is this due solely to Stapleton's interpretation or is it in part to Barnes's willingness to accept a more forgiving understanding of the character?

The headline for Walter Kerr's *New York Times* December 28th review later that month was *A Menagerie without Claws* and hints at a response to the production that was very different from the response found in the Clive Barnes review. Kerr says "The lack in this case comes from, of all people, Maureen Stapleton," since "There is nothing honestly abrasive in her personality." He admits that she has not

> tried to make herself lovable as that maddening, yet affecting, mother who is willing to describe herself as a "witch." Nothing of the sort…. In fact, Miss Stapleton is often lovely to watch, brushing her hand across her mouth as though she could wipe fear away, expressing her admiration of the night's "silver slipper" of a moon, ... Yet there is one thing she cannot be, or has not found her way to being: intolerable. For all that is well meaning about this mother, she must in some sense be unbearable, heartbreakingly so… and Miss Stapleton, accomplished and experienced as she is, simply has nothing of the nag in her. Perhaps it is her eyes that keep giving the lie to the grating things she is saying. They are wide, startled, liquid, essentially and everlastingly innocent. She is a panda, without claws.

Kerr goes on to explain that in order for the "play to function at its richest" the claws are necessary, and complains that Theodore Mann's direction has made this production of *Menagerie* "softer, drowsier, less urgent than it should be."

Although there do not appear to be any published reviews by Walter Kerr of the original production of *Menagerie* with Laurette Taylor, he does make references to her performance in the role in subsequent reviews including his 1983 *New York Times* article about the role of Amanda as "everywoman's role." It is obvious that he feels strongly that a "softer" Amanda is not appropriate to the purpose or truth of the play, that the tensions between a demanding and harsh Amanda and a sensitive and belabored Tom are necessary for the drama. As a longtime reviewer, it may not be expected that Mr. Kerr was simply echoing the general attitudes toward Amanda from the reviewers of the original production with Miss Taylor. But it can also be said that these very reviews from that production and the mythological reverence with which Miss Taylor's performance was received had created an impermeable expectation of how Amanda should behave in all productions.

In a 1991 interview for Jane O'Niell's doctoral dissertation about the interpretations and critical responses to *Menagerie*, Theodore Mann explains his understanding of the basic characteristics of Amanda

> I've seen productions where she was portrayed as hysterical, neurotic, a gargoyle. I don't see her that way. I think Amanda is uncomplicated. She is a classic mother and abandoned wife. She is desperate because of her economic situation, but reasonably so. I think it is important to understand her, to like her… There is a warmth, a vulnerability, the sense of caring and loving mother. All this Maureen has.

Mann goes on to say, "Williams attended the first rehearsal, and, although he made minor changes in the script, he evidently did not influence Stapleton's depiction in any way."

Ms. O'Niell also interviewed Maureen Stapleton for this dissertation and found that Stapleton felt that her 1975 Amanda "had more depth and sensitivity." During that production Stapleton had two grown children and was a single mother and felt this helped with her understanding of Amanda. "In 1975, I could play myself. I did not have to reach to be older. I fit the role of Amanda."

Stapleton, who was a very good friend of Tennessee Williams's had originated the role of Serafina in his play *The Rose Tattoo*, in 1951. In her autobiography *A Hell of a Life*, Stapleton has this to say about the role of Amanda:

> Amanda is such a fabulously written role anyone could play her with the possible exception of Harpo Marx…. It's so hard to go wrong because Tennessee gives you so much to lean on. Amanda Wingfield had been fashioned after Tennessee's own mother. Joanne Woodward, herself a Southerner, told me that after she introduced her mother to Tennessee he said, "Joanne, if I didn't know I wrote Glass Menagerie about my mother, I would have thought I'd written about yours." I knew Tenn's mother, but I never used any of her character in my portrayal, because to me Amanda is not a specific person, she's "mother." Tennessee's wellsprings are so deep

> that he gives you enough to act without your having to go outside the part to find values. There is so much beautiful writing, so much humor, including a lot of belly laughs, but they always come out of character. (262)

The anecdote about Joanne Woodward and her mother is included here to reinforce the previously detailed comments about Southern mothers in general and how so much of Amanda Wingfield might be better understood in that context. Then, of course, there is Stapleton's comment about Amanda not being "a specific person, but simply "mother." This would suggest that the character of Amanda could change with each new actress in the role depending upon their understanding of what "mother" meant as well as the influence of any change in the general understanding of motherhood at the time of any production. These are significant points of reference for the choices an actress might make for her Amanda.

In Keira Williams's 2015 article *Between Creation and Devouring: Southern Women Writers and the Politics of Motherhood*, she explores the evolution of the Southern Mother in films and books. She describes the stereotype of "the southern self-sacrificing mother who finds ultimate fulfillment in her children. This regional portrayal of selfless motherhood replicated the pronatalist national culture of the United States at the turn of the 21st century--one that is still prevalent today." (K. Williams 28) The origins of this Southern Mother can be found in 19th century writings:

> In 1891, a clergyman and author Wilbur Fisk Tillett wrote of the typical southern woman, "On becoming a mother, her life was complete." This is the kind of maternity on view in (the film) *Steel Magnolias*: motherhood as the pinnacle of the female lifespan. In fact, it is worth more than the mother's own life (K. Williams 29)

This would seem to be a slightly more extreme embodiment of the typical perfect mother myth, and as noted earlier, could contribute to the stress under which Amanda exists.

In the chapter about Maureen Stapleton in *Follies of God*, Tennessee Williams had this to say on the subject of his own mother and any mothering attributes of Maureen Stapleton:

> My mother wanted very badly to help…Her desire was to help. She frequently told me and my sister that if she could only help she would. She craved the ability to help and to love but she didn't know how to do it. My mother gave me the dreams, and she infused me with so much passion and drama, not to mention an eye for a story, an eye for characters and details, but she couldn't hold me or love me in a way that made me feel safe for very long. This Maureen could do for me. Maureen always helped. (Grissom 23)

It's significant that Williams appreciated Stapleton's ability to always help him, especially in light of Edwina's inability to do so. This may also explain why Stapleton's interpretation of Amanda was softer, more nurturing than what the reviewers saw in Miss Taylor's.

In one of his blogs, James Grissom shared an interview with Maureen Stapleton where she discusses the challenges of portraying Amanda a second time, and how Williams, as the playwright, offered her some unexpected help, echoing his words to describe her.

> Well, I worked on that part a lot. Twice. I had a harder time when I did it with Ted (Mann at Circle in the Square, in 1975) and I don't really know why. I had more experience with children and loving them and worrying about them, but I had a difficult time dreaming of the husband, wanting to be cared for. I was past that by then. Something was missing.
>
> Tenn helped me, yet again. He always did. He told me to listen to "Witchita Lineman" by Glen Campbell…. he thought that the husband--

> out on his long-distance disappearance--was in places that felt and sounded like that song, and sometimes Amanda just wanted to get out there with him, get lost, get drunk, and frolic in the mental jonquils all she wanted to.

This provides insight into another aspect of Amanda's character that is rarely addressed in the reviews, that the desertion of her husband could possibly affect her state of mind or color her relationship with her children. There is little indication in the reviews that Amanda is a wife as well as a mother, except occasionally to say that her husband's absence is understandable; again putting all of the blame on Amanda. Any actress attempting the role would need to make a choice about how to understand the implications of this aspect of her character and how it might affect her mothering. Might this loneliness of Amanda's help to inform the "manic desire" as described in Miss Taylor's approach to mothering? Would she feel even more pressure in her loneliness as a single mother without a partner to share the burden to provide a safe future for her children?

In 2013 the actress Cherry Jones appeared as Amanda in another critically acclaimed but somewhat controversial production of the play. Kenneth Elliott had this to say about her performance in the *Theatre Journal*,

> The cast included highly skilled actors, but only Cherry Jones as Amanda managed to convey the heartbreak and humanity of Williams's writing. She was attuned to every nuance of the dialogue, and she fully embodied Amanda's misguided strength as well as her vulnerability. (585)

Allie White in *Back Stage* noted that "She's given posterity its due diligence with regard to the women she's played:…Amanda Wingfield, the much-maligned but misunderstood single mother in "The Glass Menagerie". (15) There is more compassion and less judgement in the terms "misguided" and "misunderstood" used to describe

Amanda here, as well as an acknowledgement of her status as a single mother. Momma Rose in *Gypsy* was also a single mother with very limited financial means and one outspoken and very independent child and another painfully shy daughter who did not seem to have the wherewithal to eventually support herself. Why hasn't Rose been afforded the same consideration yet as Jones's Amanda has in the more modern productions of *Gypsy*?

In an interview which appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, Jones told Alex Witchel that she allowed a "Greer Garson noble thing" to creep into Amanda

> because what she's doing is incredibly noble. She has a challenged child who cannot survive on her own. The clock is ticking and she has got this many minutes left to save this child's life…It's the most horrible dilemma I could imagine but that's exactly Amanda Wingfield's position when the play begins and she knows Tom is out the door in about 10 minutes. That's why she's so fierce. That and she's a little kooky too but who wouldn't be given the situation.?

It's clear that Jones does not consider Amanda to be a "termagant" or "shrew" and has a very sympathetic attitude toward Amanda as well as an understanding of the complexities of this mother's character. By allowing the truth of Amanda's situation to inform her interpretation of the character, Jones avoids making Amanda one-dimensional.

Ben Brantley of *The New York Times* also focused on the intricacies of Amanda's situation in his review when he says, "A one-time, Southern belle, long ago abandoned by her husband…. Amanda is a classic Williams woman, tethered to a beautiful past, and struggling to stay on her feet in an ugly present." He does not see this as delusional necessarily, but part of how she copes. He chooses some of the same terminology used in early reviews when describing Amanda, but he uses them within the context of her situation. "She (Jones) gives the foolish, garrulous Amanda - forever nagging her

damaged children to be successes and nattering about the social triumphs of her youth — a towering, pathos-steeped gallantry." He uses the term "pathos-steeped gallantry" instead of the term "pathetic" that had been used so often in the reviews for the original production when describing Amanda.

With a more informed awareness of the complexities of their family situation presented by this cast, Brentley also noted "for the first time, I sensed a grudging, loving rapport between Tom and Amanda. And our awareness of how they're bonded by their protectiveness of Laura… has never been more acute." In other words, Amanda is not simply the villain with Tom the long-suffering hero of this story. Tom does not overcome the challenges of the situation in the traditional way of the hero. He leaves, abandons his mother and sister in what could be called a cowardly act, if the story was simply one of good and evil.

With an even more sympathetic take on the play, Elysa Gardner in her *USA Today* review noted:

> The overbearing matriarch in Tennessee Williams' semi-autobiographical classic *The Glass Menagerie* can, in the wrong hands, emerge as something of a monster. But as played by Cherry Jones in the magnificent and harrowing new revival that opened Thursday at the Booth Theatre, she is most haunting for her robust but fragile humanity.

So the play is still "harrowing" and Amanda still runs the risk of being a "monster" of a mother "in the wrong hands." But thankfully, she is seen as having "fragile humanity" even with a large personality, because "Her Amanda is warm and funny and, without question, dedicated to her offspring." Does this dedication to her offspring make her a good mother? Is that where the kinder acceptance of Amanda comes from?

In various short clips available from this production, Jones can be seen to be dressed simply but not slovenly. She is often seen smiling and appears to even be teasing Tom at points. There is a tenderness and sense of girlish fun when she encourages Laura to wear "the Gay Deceivers" because "All pretty girls are a trap". As Amanda she is working hard or even "fiercely" to move her children forward to a better and safe future. This is not to say that this fierceness does not sometimes translate to harsh accusations, but this Amanda is multifaceted and very human. She knows that "the future becomes the present, the present the past, and the past turns into everlasting regret if you don't plan for it!"

Even in the scenes where Jones's Amanda is on the phone selling magazine subscriptions there is a charming playfulness that would be difficult to describe as irksome or annoying. It is no more troublesome than any good, male salesperson's pitch would be. So despite her desperate need for additional funds for the support of her children and herself, she approaches the task with determination and verve. This is in stark contrast to Tom's dismissive attitude about his job. His job may be more physical, but Amanda's options for employment at her age are far fewer. It's another example of Williams's observation that Amanda is a survivor with valor.

In the almost 80 years since *The Glass Menagerie* had its first debut, it appears that now there is a more accepted understanding that Amanda is doing what a mother should, being dedicated to her children in as unselfish a way as she can despite her own human flaws. Is this a reflection of a shift in our culture's understanding of the complexity of mothers in general? Does that mean Amanda can now be free of the taint of being a horrible person - a monster? Unlike Staunton's Momma Rose, Jones's Amanda

is seen as a woman who is more closely following the rules or expectations of what can be considered a good mother as long as her nagging and pushing of her children is seen as her dedication to them. Can Tom see that in his memories? Can he see - and by extension, the audience see – that dedication? That what may have been difficult for him to experience at the time was in part due to his own fear and guilt about not contributing to the more stable future for Laura that his mother so desperately wanted for her.

Chapter V

Conclusion

After completing the examination of the interpretations and receptions of the characters of Momma Rose and Amanda Wingfield, from the original production of each through to the more current ones, it seems clear that they did not share similar evolutions or reactions. This is rather unexpected and puzzling. Why did the understanding of Amanda evolve with less critical denouncement and instead some compassion being afforded to her as time went on, but not for Rose? What were the redemptive factors that contributed to Amanda's progression from a villainous character to an almost noble, if flawed, tragic heroine that were not deemed applicable to Momma Rose?

Were these differences a function of each actress's portrayal or of the cultural perceptions of mothers at the time of each production? Each character was originally considered a miscreant, or at the very least a terrible mother by the critics, and in the case of Momma Rose, by her creator, Arthur Laurents. Was his insistence that Rose is a monster – given the contractual creative control he had over all productions of the musical for almost 50 years - the deciding factor for her emergence as such a horrific being despite Ethel Merman's very sympathetic understanding of the role?

Their commonalities are numerous. Both women were abandoned by their children's fathers. Both women work very hard for the success of their children and to ensure their financial independence, seeming to devote their lives to this end. One of each of their two children leave, rejecting living with mother, and the child who remains is

somewhat lacking, beset with acute shyness or a physical limitation. Therefore, each mother has the added need to address the care for that child. Both women have strong and outspoken personalities that are often considered abrasive and even comic. And above all, both mothers love their children.

The primary differences seem to be in the circumstances surrounding their children. Rose's daughters were much younger than Amanda's. Both of Amanda's children were adults while Rose's daughters were children at the opening of the play and then only teenagers by the Second Act. Is that a part of the reason Momma Rose is considered even more of an ogre in current productions than she had been even in the original one? Is there something more threatening and horrible when a mother pushes a young child than when a mother pressures an adult child to live up to her expectations? Rose may shout or yell at the girls, but that is only a function of her directing them during a performance, needing to be heard above the singing and dancing of the members of the act. An actress may choose to shout at Tom or raise her voice to Laura to express Amanda's frustration with their inability to live up to her expectations. In the sense of the traditional perfect mother and even woman, raising one's voice is certainly considered inappropriate at the least. But does that make either one of these mothers a monster?

Also, the actions of *Gypsy* take place over several years and in public, while those of *Menagerie* take place in the privacy of the home and over the course of a few months at most. The fact that Rose's unwavering pushiness is not limited to her children, but also aimed at the men who control her ability to find work for her girls, has possibly added to her continued condemnation by audiences, while Amanda's is primarily limited to her

two adult children and does not involve fighting the patriarchy directly. Amanda tries always to use her charm to get her way, while Momma Rose is often forced to use more direct and sometimes threatening language in her dealings with the ever-present male authority in theatre management. That must make Amanda less of a threat in general and therefore offers her more understanding and sympathy from contemporary audiences and critics. Are Rose's persistent clashes with the public's expectation of a good mother so unforgivable that she has become incompatible with the perception of the good mother? Is Amanda perceived as being too silly or frivolous to be taken seriously, while Momma Rose is too hardened to be worthy of redemption? It seems that they are not judged equally, and this inequality is so great that each of these examples of motherhood has come to be viewed separately.

One final and very important distinction between the two is that the character of Rose was written by a well-known and respected writer in the world of American Musicals and Amanda is the almost poetic product of one of the most important writers in American Theatre. While each genre allows for the creation of complex and complete characters, are the creatures that populate American Musicals still considered less complicated than those found in American plays? Is Rose the victim of the shortsightedness of the theatre going public? *Gypsy* may not be studied in English classes all over the country, but *The Glass Menagerie* is. Tennessee Williams reportedly realized over time watching different productions of *Menagerie* that he didn't hate Amanda. However Arthur Laurents spent years directing productions of *Gypsy* with Rose as a grotesque version of a mother. Accordingly, this thesis has uncovered how and why

these two mothers of American Theatre have been treated and are now perceived so differently.

Collective memory is created and altered by events and trends in the general population. Is it possible that the present day unrest and growing uncertainty with the breakdown of the family unit, the threat of climate change annihilation, or the constant possibility of total destruction as a result of another World War have resulted in a yearning for the ideal mother who can assuage all these fears? These same fears may have contributed to the increased fascination and popularity with monsters over the past 80 years. They have gone from fuzzy simplistic images to the vivid and graphic, technicolor creatures we are surrounded with today - given advances in film techniques and CGI - providing us with an explicit and ever-present awareness of their horror.

Also, in the years since these two works first appeared, movies and television programs have progressively focused on horrible people and shocking events. Perhaps this influx to our social framework of tabloid ghoulishness and demoralizing media have influenced the evolution of Rose into a monster of American musical theatre despite the kinder original version of her that Merman fought for. And why is Amanda still found among lists of terrible mothers in American theatre? This fascination with monstrous behavior in movies and television may in itself not be dangerous, unless this fantasy world is mistaken for reality and seeps into our shared perception of a good mother.

Not all mothers are good mothers, nor do all mothers even strive to be good mothers. There is nothing wrong with exploring the nature and effects of bad mothers for the purposes of a theatrical piece. But the assumption that a mother cannot be called a good mother if she does not live up to an impossible perfect mother myth, too often

prevails in the theatre, and that distorts our understanding of mothers and demeans women. It is therefore imperative that performing artists continue to provide more complete and integrated representations of characters that more properly reflect the reality of the human condition, including the role of women in society, to combat the more one-dimensional renditions of mothers on the American Stage.

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