

## Interview with Michael Holt

We caught up with *The Glass Menagerie* designer Michael Holt to tell us more about the process of designing for a production and what obstacles there are when designing for different theatre spaces.

### Firstly tell us how you approached the design for the set and costumes of *The Glass Menagerie*? Is the fact that it's a memory play important in your process?

*The Glass Menagerie* is an early play of Tennessee Williams and I think it shows in the writing. Williams' script shows a young writer playing with the fashionable experimental techniques of the era. We start with a soliloquy from Tom, the play's protagonist, who tells us that what we are about to see is a magic trick. We are going to see his story using the magic of theatrical presentation and also the magic of memory. The play script is then littered with suggestions of projected extracts from the dialogue, music and odd sound effects. It is a youthful exploration of theatre conjuring.

So the first thing that struck me on confronting the design was the disparity between these effects and the wonderful gritty realism of the family scenes. At the heart of the play are the relationships within the family and Tennessee Williams brilliantly explores the tensions and affections which drive the rather slight plot forward to a cruel and thrilling climax. Very real drama here and it sits at odds with the quirky stage directions.

So which way to go? Experiment or social realism?

The answer I think is in the notion that this is a dream laid out before us. Tom, in telling his story is not giving us history but memories - selective and partial. And this must be the starting point. The trick I felt was to float a real setting on a sea of memory. Could I use colour dissolved boundaries and the familiar other effects of memory to surround a quite real American apartment characterised by poverty and aspiration?

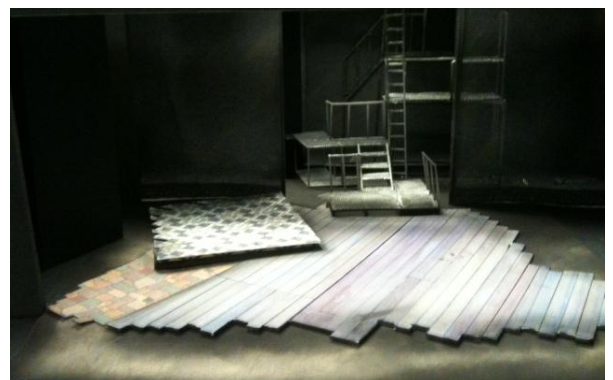
These were my starting points for the design of *The Glass Menagerie*.

### *The Glass Menagerie* is set in St Louis in 1937. How do you begin to research a play that is set in a different era? Does it make your job more difficult?

As a set and costume designer you acquire the habit of harvesting historical information wherever you are. Design and art books, photographs and films, some television programmes are obvious sources but also keeping your eyes open when visiting houses, towns and antique shops becomes second nature. After a while you have a vocabulary of general historical visual information at your fingertips. So tackling a period you have not designed before is a matter of connecting it within the general historical development of fashion and design. What did the fashion of 1937 succeed and what came after? Why did



Model box of *The Glass Menagerie* set at the New Vic Theatre



Model box of *The Glass Menagerie* set at the Oldham Coliseum

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those changes occur? What social and cultural influences were forcing change? And was it specifically different in St Louis? The search for this information begins as soon as you start designing.

These connections are important because in any situation people will be wearing clothes that are not quite up to date and others will be quite fashionable. Their houses will contain items from the recent past as well as from the present day for a variety of reasons. In *The Glass Menagerie* we have a family who struggle with poverty and whose head lives in memories of the past. Many of their clothes are hand-me-downs and some furniture has been in the family since they lived the American South. A good job my bookshelves groan with art and history books

**Can you give us an insight into what happens in the life of a theatre designer between your first meeting with a director and opening night?**

Most people know that a designer will make scale models for the set builders and the actors to work from and do costume drawings for the makers. And I suppose they also know that I choose materials for both furnishing and costumes. I attend fittings and production meetings and watch some rehearsals.

What I would emphasise however is that Theatre Designing is a fluid process. Things will change as we go along as actors encounter new ideas, have problems tackling a stage direction and worry about any number of things. And the workshops will encounter problems too; a required material cannot be bought in time, a fabric is no longer available, etc.

I think we work to produce a complex finished product in a very short time and we must be capable of changing as we go along.



Model box being used during rehearsals

Because of this I think a large part of my job is to be inventive and to adjust to any new ideas that may come as actors and carpenters and painters tackle the job and discover by them "happy accident". Good relationships with colleagues are essential for encouraging experiment and discovery. The team is very talented and experienced and it would be foolish not to capitalise on that.

This is really what makes the job continually exciting.

***The Glass Menagerie* is opening at the New Vic Theatre, which is an in the round performance space and is then transferring to the Coliseum, which is a traditional proscenium arch theatre. What problems does this create for the designer and how to you tackle them?**

I think the difference in using the two spaces is in which way the actors are required by the stage to face!

In the round theatre requires the actors to face inwards because otherwise they would disadvantage too much of the audience especially as they act on the edges of the space. In a proscenium arch play the actors face out, into the auditorium. That way they can communicate to the whole house.

The secret is in the planning of course. I know both spaces very well and have kept both in mind while working. I used copies of the two stage plans on tracing paper and overlaid them continually. That way, I hope I have designed a set which can adapt to each house by the actors simply changing which way they face!

### **What has been your favourite production that you have worked on during your career?**

I did an opera production of Vaughn Williams' *Pilgrim's Progress* in Brisbane Australia.

It was barely a year after the twin Towers attack on 9/11 and I suggested that we made John Bunyan's City of Destruction the ruins of Ground Zero. The Pilgrim's journey was one of discovery as he encountered victims and rescuers, politicians and statesmen within the terrible ruins. There were so many parallels and the effect was startling. The opera opened as a New York fireman watched a giant piece of shattered building hoisted away, revealing a dust covered business man clutching his briefcase. This was our Pilgrim.

It was very exciting and moving, making the sixteenth century moral tale highly pertinent to the modern world

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*The Glass Menagerie* opens runs the Oldham Coliseum Theatre from 20 October – 5 November. To book your tickets or for more information call 0161 624 2829 or visit [www.coliseum.org.uk](http://www.coliseum.org.uk).

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## **Biography**

### **Michael Holt – Designer.**

#### **Theatre credits include:**

*The Admirable Crichton, The Rivals, A Taste of Honey, The Price, Cider with Rosie, A Christmas Carol, Misery, East is East, Romeo & Juliet, Big Maggie, Travels with My Aunt* (New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme); *The Safari Party, What Every Woman Knows, Taking Steps, Wolf at the Door, Man of the Moment, Time and the Conways* (Scarborough); *Season's Greetings* (American Premiere, Joyce Theatre, New York); *The Woman in Black* (Fortune Theatre, London); *Absurd Person Singular* (Whitehall Theatre, London); *The Glory of the Garden* (Duke of York's Theatre, London); *Rough Justice* (Apollo Theatre, London), *June Moon* (Vaudeville Theatre, London); *Julius Caesar* (Regent's Park Open Air Theatre); *Charley's Aunt* (Centennial touring production); *A Chorus of Disapproval, Way Upstream* (Stephen Joseph Theatre); *Private Lives, The Turn of the Screw, Driving Miss Daisy* (Oldham Coliseum); *Mixed Feelings, Snakes and Ladders* (TEG Productions Ltd); *House and Garden* (Salisbury Playhouse).

#### **Opera credits include:**

*La Boheme* (Sadler's Wells Theatre), Benjamin Britten's *Billy Budd* (Brisbane); Vaughan Williams' *The Pilgrims Progress* (Royal Opera House); the Knokke Opera Festival (Belgium) and productions for the Royal Opera House, Copenhagen.

#### **Ballet credits include:**

*The Sleeping Beauty, Madam Butterfly, Romeo and Juliet* (Northern Ballet) and ballet designs for the Hong Kong Ballet company.

Michael has also written a number of books on stage and costume design and has published a book on the plays of Alan Ayckbourn.

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