

Welcome to American Mosaic from VOA Learning English.

I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

On the show today, we play some music by Lou Reed, who died earlier this week.

But first, we tell you about a new stage production of a classic play.

## **'The Glass Menagerie' Revisited**

The Tennessee Williams play "The Glass Menagerie" was first performed in 1944. The next year its New York production on Broadway won the Drama Critics Circle Award.

The story of heartbreak and lost dreams has held true for theatergoers in the many years since. "The Glass Menagerie" was also adapted for film, television and radio.

Now, the show is back on Broadway. Christopher Cruise tells about it.

When people enter New York's Booth Theater, they see a simple but striking stage. It looks like a small apartment, with a sofa, a dining room table and a few other pieces of furniture. There is also a long fire escape reaching upward, but no walls. Everything else, all around, is black. The set appears to be floating in an empty space.

"I want people who hate the theater to see it."

That is Cherry Jones. She plays Amanda Wingfield, the strong-willed mother in the play.

"Because I really do think it's one of those productions that could change people's minds about the theater. This production takes people places they have never been before."

The first Broadway production of the “The Glass Menagerie” established Tennessee Williams as one of the greatest playwrights of his time. He later won the Pulitzer Prize for “A Streetcar Named Desire” and “Cat on A Hot Tin Roof.” But “The Glass Menagerie” was the most autobiographical of all his plays. It was also the least naturalistic. It calls for music and magic.

Director John Tiffany says Williams’ made very clear in his stage directions that “The Glass Menagerie” is impressionistic.

“He begs us, as theater makers, not to go down the path of naturalism, not to have a real Frigidaire (refrigerator), he says, and real ice cubes tinkling in a glass. For Tennessee, that wasn’t where theater was at its best. He said it’s a place of the imagination, where poetry, not just poetry of words, but poetry of gesture, poetry of design, poetry of lighting, poetry of acting, all comes together and meets in the space above and between the audience and actors.”

Film and television actor Zachary Quinto is appearing his first Broadway show in this remake of “The Glass Menagerie.” He plays Tom, the character Tennessee Williams based on himself. Williams’ real name was Tom.

Zachary Quinto says he read a lot about Williams to prepare for the play. He says he learned about the playwright's complex relationships with his mother and sister.

"Learning that dynamic and understanding that Tennessee spent his entire life both trying to capture something in his writing, but also trying to escape something in his writing, was something that informed me a great deal."

In the play, the father no longer lives with his family. Tom, the young writer, works in a shoe factory and has little hope of getting a good-paying job. He helps support his mother, Amanda, and sister, Laura, who is physically disabled and emotionally disabled.

In real life, Tennessee Williams' sister was identified as a schizophrenic. She was sent to a mental hospital. In an effort to help Laura, doctors performed an operation on her brain called a lobotomy.

“How tragically her life unfolded, is something Tennessee never fully reconciled within himself or probably even forgave himself for, on some level.”

Cherry Jones says all the characters in “The Glass Menagerie” are desperate, especially Amanda.

“Her son is about to fly away, never to be seen or heard from again. And she knows it. And her daughter is mentally completely stifled. She cannot move. And so it’s like a parent with a severely challenged child, physically or mentally: ‘what in the world is going to happen to that child when I’m gone.’”

So Amanda urges to Tom to invite a “gentleman caller” to date his sister. But in this play, as so often in life, things do not always work as planned.

## **Remembering Rock and Roller Lou Reed**

It was a sad week for rock and roll fans. Singer, songwriter, guitarist and band leader Lou Reed died Sunday at the age of 71. Reed was a music legend. As leader of the 1960s and 70s band The Velvet Underground and as a solo artist Reed was hugely influential.

Our producer Caty Weaver has been a fan of the artist for more years than she will say. She was lucky enough to meet him. Caty joins me now to talk about Lou Reed and play some of his music.

So, that song “Walk on the Wild Side” was Lou Reed’s biggest hit. He released it in 1973, a year after he left the Velvet Underground.

Did he walk on the wild side? What is this song about?

He did walk on the wild side. But the song was really about people that he hung around with a lot. Andy Warhol, the artist, was a big fan of the Velvets and provided them with a performing space. He really helped them gain a following. “Walk on the Wild Side” was about some of the people who hung out at Warhol’s studio, The Factory.

It is a song about drugs, sex, transgenders and prostitution. It has an infectious beat but there is a lot of pain in the lyrics.

And, Reed himself was a drug abuser, right?

He was. He was a heroin user for years. He stopped in the 80s but didn't quit drinking alcohol. His liver was damaged by many years of drugs and alcohol. And, he had a liver transplant earlier this year. The Velvet's' song "Heroin" is probably the most truthful, sad and yet appealing song about that drug and its hold on people.

Now, Caty, you met Lou Reed, right? You met him in the 80s?

I did. I met him in 1986. He played here in D.C. and my best friend and I went to the concert. We waited outside the stage door for him to come out and, hopefully, give autographs. And I started talking with his tour manager while we were waiting. He offered tickets to the next two shows and backstage passes.

So, a few months later we went to see Reed play at Radio City Music Hall in New York...which was his town. He was a life-long New Yorker. The concert was amazing. It was just like Reed's song, "Perfect Day."

So, we got to go to the after-party at Radio City Music Hall and talk with Lou Reed.

What was he like?

You know, he was just a nice guy. He had a reputation for being very private, very guarded. He certainly was not an easy interview for reporters. But to me, I was just a 20 year-old fan, and he was great.

Why do you think Lou Reed was such a groundbreaker?

He influenced so many people in music. David Bowie, Pattie Smith, the Talking Heads, and so many punk bands.



I think it was his songwriting that set him apart. The songs seemed so honest and his lyrics so simple, but the subjects were often shocking.

And his lyrics were deceptively simple because each line could have many meanings. He also kept his distance as a vocalist. He sang in a dispassionate way, an unemotional way. So it added to the mystery of the message.

You could never be sure if Reed was expressing pathos or parody.

Lou Reed died on October 27<sup>th</sup> in New York, on Long Island. His is survived by his wife, musician Laurie Anderson.

I'm Kelly Jean Kelly. Our program was written and produced by Caty Weaver. Join us again next week for music and more on American Mosaic from VOA Learning English.