

WEEKEND JOURNAL.

© Copyright 2010 Dow Jones & Company, All Rights Reserved

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Friday, March 26, 2010 **W1**

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Friday, March 26, 2010 **W7**

ENTERTAINMENT & CULTURE

REVIEW: THEATER | By Terry Teachout

A Masterpiece Made Manifest

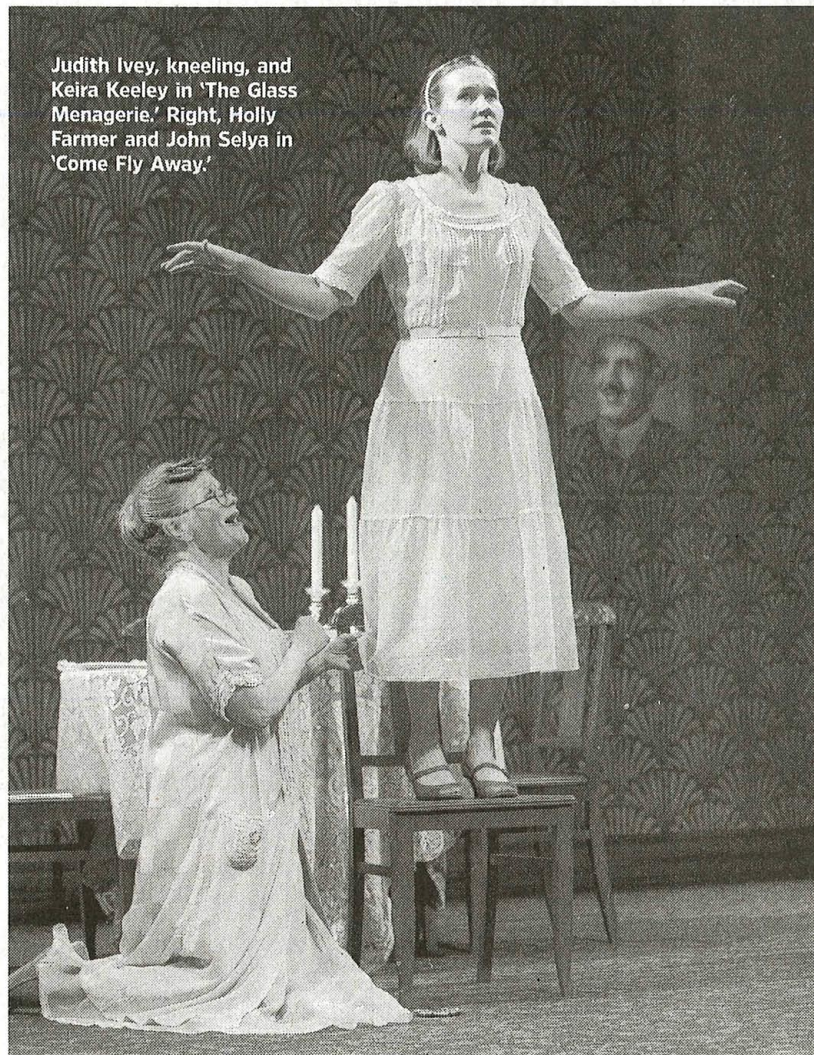
New York

CLASSIC PLAYS are protean, capable of infinite transformation in the fiery crucible of performance yet always remaining themselves. I've reviewed two great productions of "The Glass Menagerie" in this space, one by Gregory Mosher for Washington's Kennedy Center in 2004 and one by David Cromer for Kansas City Rep in 2009. They were as different as two stagings of the same script could possibly be, yet equally powerful and identically convincing.

Now there are three.

Gordon Edelstein, whose past productions at New Haven's Long Wharf Theatre include the best "Uncle Vanya" I've ever seen, has brought his version of Tennessee Williams's masterpiece from Connecticut to the Laura Pels Theatre, the Roundabout Theatre Company's Off-Broadway house. It should have gone to Broadway instead, and perhaps it will someday. In the meantime, though, you *must* see this show at once. No matter how well you know "The Glass Menagerie," you'll feel as though you're watching it for the first time. Every line, every pause, every gesture is as fresh as a shaft of sunlight.

Mr. Edelstein has added a surprise of his own to the oft-told tale of the Wingfield family, who come north to St. Louis in search of a new life and find themselves trapped in the quicksand of shabby gentility and fading hope. Since "The Glass Menagerie" is an autobiographical memory play narrated by Tom Wingfield, Williams's alter ego, Mr. Edelstein sets the action in a single playing space designed with penny-plain restraint by Michael Yeagan that doubles as the tenement apartment of the Wingfields and—here's the surprise—a grubby New Orleans hotel room to which Tom has fled in order to write the very play that we are seeing. Needless to say, that's not what Williams had in mind, and on paper it may sound like an overingenious directorial conceit, but in performance it heightens to a breathtaking degree the immediacy of Tom's recollections. In addition to rethinking the play in so innovative a way, Mr. Edelstein



Judith Ivey, kneeling, and Keira Keeley in 'The Glass Menagerie.' Right, Holly Farmer and John Selya in 'Come Fly Away.'

has assembled a masterly cast whose members perform without the faintest hint of sentimentality. Patch Darragh, who plays Tom, all but quivers with half-suppressed rage. Judith Ivey (Amanda, his Southern-belle mother) is a hectoring cast-iron coquette with a voice like a klaxon. Keira Keeley (Laura, his crippled sister) is snivelingly whiny. Michael Mosley (Jim, his best friend) is a blowhard whose self-love cannot conceal his self-doubt. Not once do they solicit your sympathy—which is what makes their plight so unutterably poignant.

This is the kind of revival that, once seen, becomes a golden yardstick by which all future productions of the same play are measured.

* * *

Twyla Tharp racked up a major disaster three seasons ago with "The Times They Are A-Changin'," one of the lamest jukebox musicals ever to stagger onto Broadway. Not surprisingly, she's playing it very, very safe this time around: "Come Fly Away" is a love-in-a-nightclub fantasy set to the ever-popular music of Frank Sinatra, whose recordings have previously accompanied three of Ms.

Tharp's ballets. The songs are familiar, the dancers are pretty, the set is fancy and the band is hot. All that's missing from this recipe for success are a star and a few memorable on-stage events.

The absence of a star is inevitable, this being an all-dance show almost entirely devoid of dialogue, and it will be interesting to see whether Sinatra's name alone is enough to rope in the tourists. As for the second deficiency, a good many people disagree with my largely unfavorable opinion of Ms. Tharp's work, so let me say now that if you like her stuff, you'll like "Come Fly Away," which is chock full of her signature moves (the women get flung around a lot). I find her choreography cluttered, and here as in "The Times They Are A-Changin'," I'm also struck by her inability or unwillingness to spin a sustained narrative. For all intents and purposes, "Come Fly Away" amounts to an evening-long suite of vignettes that have little in common beyond their setting. In ballet, that can work; on Broadway, it's risky in the extreme, and my guess is that most playgoers will find the results aimless.

It doesn't help that the "characters" portrayed by the principal dancers are little more than embodied stereotypes—the sassy black gal, the sophisticated lady, the clumsy waiter—and it is undoubtedly for this reason that only one of the dancers in the cast, Charlie Neshyba-Hodges, emerges as a strongly individual personality. He plays the waiter, a comic role that he invests with energy and pizzazz.

As for the real star of "Come Fly Away," I confess to finding it disconcerting to hear the disembodied voice of Ol' Blue Eyes electronically superimposed over Russ Kasso's 18-piece band throughout most of the evening (Hilary Gardner, who is a real person, not a recording, sings a handful of the show's 35 numbers for contrast, and quite nicely, too). What came off in Ms. Tharp's more modest Sinatra ballets, for which the music was completely canned, is less convincing on so grandiose a scale. You might even find yourself giggling at the final tableau, in which a Rushmore-size, multicolor fiber-optic portrait of Sinatra appears on the backdrop, presumably cueing the audience to hurl flowers at the stage and make burnt offerings to the Chairman of the Board.

* * *

If you feel the need for a stiff dose



THE GLASS MENAGERIE
Roundabout Theatre Company,
Laura Pels Theatre, 111 W. 46th St.
(\$70-\$80), 212-719-1300,
closes May 30

COME FLY AWAY
Marquis Theatre, 1535 Broadway
(\$66.50-\$126.50),
212-307-4100/877-250-2929

THE BOOK OF GRACE
Public Theater, Anspacher Theater,
425 Lafayette St. (\$60), 212-967-7555,
closes April 4

of fatuity, head straight down to the Public Theater to see Suzan-Lori Parks's "The Book of Grace." The setting is Texas, which is—naturally—a desert full of bigots. The villain of the piece is an ultraconservative border-patrol officer (John Doman) whose long-estranged biracial son (Amari Cheatom) has come home for a visit, in the course of which he beds his Pollyannish stepmother (Elizabeth Marvel, who is, as always, astonishingly good). We are, I think, invited to suppose that the father molested the son once upon a time, or maybe vice versa. On the other hand, pretty much everything that happens in "The Book of Grace" is symbolic, so I assume it's possible that the sexy kiss the two men exchange stands for something else. Not to worry: You don't have to get all the details exactly right to know that "The Book of Grace" is about how blacks in America continue to groan under the yoke of their white oppressors. Or something like that.

Mr. Teachout, the Journal's drama critic, is the author of "Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong." Write to him at tteachout@wsj.com.