Tennessee Williams on the Mexican stage: Director David Olguín's adaptation of *The glass menagerie/El zoologico de cristal* at the Teatro El Milagro (August-September 2025)

.

Interviewer: Sophie Maruéjouls-Koch
E-mail: sophie.maruejouls-koch@univ-tlse2.fr

Sophie Maruéjouls-Koch is an Associate Professor at Toulouse–Jean Jaurès University in France. She has published articles in national and international peer-reviewed journals, including Transatlantica, Polysèmes, e-Rea, Modern Drama, and The Tennessee Williams Annual Review. She is a co-founder of the International Tennessee Williams Society (ITWS) and is currently completing a monograph on Tennessee Williams's paintings.
Her recent research, informed by the notion of empathy and Édouard Glissant's theory of creolization, examines the various modalities of the relationship to the Other – as stranger, foreigner, or enemy – in the theatre of Richard Maxwell, Naomi Wallace, and Suzan-Lori Parks.

David Olguín is a playwright and theatre director. His recent directorial work includes *1521*, *La dulzura*, *Amor y rabia*, and *La nostalgia*. His most recent stagings of works by other authors include *Each in his own way*, by Luigi Pirandello, produced with the National Theatre Company in 2024, and *The glass menagerie*, by Tennessee Williams, the latest production of Teatro El Milagro.
He has received numerous distinctions, including the National Playwriting Award for Belice, the Juan Ruiz de Alarcón Award, and the Fifth Jorge Ibargüengoitia Literature Prize, awarded in recognition of his complete dramatic oeuvre. He serves as a playwriting tutor at the Fundación para las Letras Mexicanas and is a member of the artistic council of Teatro El Milagro. He was inducted into the Mexican Academy of the Arts in 2017 and was awarded the 2023 Fine Arts Medal by INBAL.

Anaïs Umano is an actress trained in France and internationally. Her work encompasses classical and modern dramatic repertoires, including plays by Shakespeare, Molière, Claudel, as well as contemporary playwrights. She has performed in New York at the Times Square Arts Center and in Mexico, where she participated in an international production inspired by *Exit the king*, by Eugène Ionesco in 2022.
She holds a PhD in Theatre Studies and regularly contributes to international academic conferences on theatre. In 2026, she will publish *Tennessee Williams's late characters in search of actors: the theory of plastic acting* with Routledge. Situated at the intersection of theory and practice, her work is grounded in a sustained dialogue between artistic creation and scholarly research, through which each continually informs and enriches the other.

El zoologico de cristal, a play by US playwright Tennessee Williams, was staged in Spanish at the Teatro El Milagro from August 29 to September 21. The positive reception of Olguín's original production led to the purchase of 35 more performances at the National University of Mexico (UNAM) theatre in February 2026.

Sophie Maruéjouls-Koch interviewed director David Olguín and French actress Anaïs Umano on 9 October 2025 in a video conference. The interview was transcribed for publication.

Sophie Maruéjouls-Koch (henceforth *SMK*): From what I read in the reviews, this production is the end result of a collaboration between a French theatre company and a theatre in Mexico. Could you tell us how the idea of staging this famous play by Tennessee Williams in Mexico originated?

Director David Olguín (henceforth *DO*): We had already worked with the Paris-based theatre company, Comala, for the production of Eugène Ionesco's play, *Le roi se meurt*, and Anaïs Umano and Fernando Valenzuela who co-founded the French company told us that they had the rights of *The glass menagerie*. We were in financial troubles at the time. Independent companies had to face substantial government cuts and we did not know what the next step would be. We had started working on another project when the proposal from Comala to stage *The glass menagerie* came. Our actress, Laura Almela, was enthusiastic about the play. She knew the film version and thought the character of Amanda was a perfect match for her. Many Mexican actresses have played this role and she felt it was time for her to rise up to the challenge.

So we decided to collaborate again with Comala on this play. My son, David Juan, who was Tom and Jim's age, could play young Tom and Jim while Miguel Cooper would be Tom as the narrator of the play. Anaïs Umano would be Laura.

It was a family project for a family play with my wife in the role Amanda and my son in the role of Jim/young Tom. There was also our set designer whom I have worked with for more than forty years now. He used to be my teacher at university. So there we were: four actors, a director, a set designer and a play.

We had a venue and a small amount of money. We could get started.

I think of difficulties and constraints as opportunities for our imagination to liberate itself and for our creativity to surpass itself. This is what happened for this project.

SMK: Was it the first time you worked on a Tennessee Williams play?

DO: As a director, yes it was. As an actor, I remember working on some plays by Williams and actually, as a director at school, I studied some pieces of his late plays published in *Dragon country*. But this was my first full-length play.

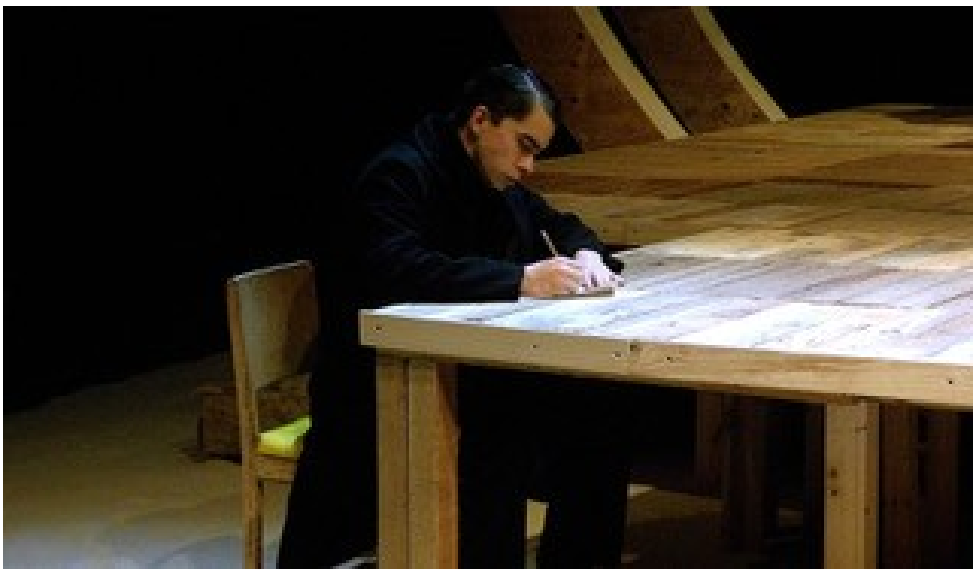
SMK: Anaïs, could you go back to your own interest in this particular play?

Anais Umano (henceforth *AU*): With our company Comala, we were mostly interested in staging the late plays by Williams. Yet, Fernando and I felt that, if we wanted to work on the late plays, it was important to go back to his earlier, successful plays first. Staging *The glass menagerie*, which is the play that launched Williams's career on Broadway and made him internationally known, was a wonderful opportunity to revisit a theatre classic and to maybe open new perspectives on Williams's work. When we looked at previous Mexican and US productions of the play, we realized that they mostly focused on the dramatic content and the psychology of the characters. I think there is more to it and this is the reason why we contacted David and El Milagro theatre. Together, we had worked on the production of the absurdist play by Ionesco, *Le roi se meurt,* and this collaboration encouraged us to revisit Williams's play in a way that would indeed focus on the drama of the characters, but that would also reveal the tragi-comic tone of the play, something we had explored with the Ionesco play. The presence of Laura Almeda, who is a great actress in Mexico, also played a part in our decision to perform this play: The role of Amanda requires a powerful actress.

SMK: The choice of setting also seems to have attracted much attention, not just the reviewers' attention, but also the spectators', and mine in particular. I must admit I could not describe the setting at first. It looked like a huge rib cage to me. The reviews mention the skeleton of a ship and it is true that there is sand on the stage. The poetic transformation of the Wingfields' apartment into the inside of a dead whale, or of a stranded ship, opens the way to metaphorical, abstract interpretations. It is a rib cage and a prison too. The characters are the prisoners of this dead stranded thing. They live in it. Where did this idea of the setting come from?

DO: I worked with Gabriel Pascal, our set designer. We started thinking about the kind of material we were going to put on stage. I had in mind those pieces of wood used in construction work. We had already used that sort of material. The idea was to give the impression that you are by the sea, on the limit of land, and there you have this sort of cave, or port, which is Tom's memory.

Image 1 – David Juan Olguín as young Tom



Source: Instagram - @brengarcia_f /@paramo_escenico.

We know that the whole story happens in his mind. We wanted the set design to be an image of that: the image of time. Time is something that flows, but it can be stopped, or fixed, and so it becomes a port or a cave, a refuge out of the flow of time.

This led us to the idea of Noah's Ark. Tom is a sailor and the house, the ruin of a building, is where his memory is kept. That memory follows him everywhere he goes. The set had to evoke all this. The sand was time and the wood construction was the indeterminate, indefinite form of an elusive present. What interested me most was this impossibility of approaching the present. What is the present of the play?

We knew that *The glass menagerie* had been staged many times in Mexico City. So we read the play through the eyes of Chekhov or Pinter and tried to see a bolder, more audacious side of Williams, something that could emerge from the melodramatic form he was writing in at the time, which is why this play is so effective in commercial Mexican theatre. And we realized the setting had to be broken. The image of the house could not be a house. It had to be something different: the skeleton of a ship, Noah's Ark, the bones of a whale with animals inside, a menagerie inside and out.

SMK: This makes me think of one moment in your production when hope rises. Amanda comes up with this plan for Laura and she is suddenly very happy and elated. She steps on the platform that serves as a dining table for the family and it looks like she is on a diving board ready to jump into the sea. The transformative potential of the setting makes

it a place of transition on many levels.

DO: We thought of using that platform as a balcony, but also as a table. It is a place from where you can see the sea, where you can feel hope. But it can lead you to drowning…
Our objective really was to work on the tragic-comic aspect so as to avoid the dangers of falling into the soap opera form. We wanted to show the humoristic side of the play. Williams builds up the sense of hope gradually. The whole scene in which Amanda talks about her plan to Tom can be played as a comedy, but the scene also says something about the bond that develops between the mother and the son around the destiny of Laura. To me, that's how Williams tricks us with humour. And, you know, laughing at tragedy is what lies at the very core of the Mexican soul.

Image 2 – Laura Almela as Amanda and Miguel Cooper as Tom



Source: Instagram - @brengarcia_f / @paramo_escenico.

SMK: Talking about humour and laughter, it is true that the audience laughs a lot during the performance. Yet the characters are never ridiculous, they may be a little grotesque at times but we don't laugh *at* them because there is a feeling of empathy, a sense that we understand them on an intimate level that prevents us from being completely detached. It might have something to do with the effect of heightened realism that is produced by the setting as well as by the acting. In one of the reviews I read, the expression used was that of "realism imbued with strangeness," which is what makes this production different and original. For example, the character of Laura is very often played as a fragile, quiet young

woman who usually whispers or talks in a soft voice. Anaïs Umano chooses not to conform to this idea of Laura. Instead, she shows a wider range of emotions, revealing another side of Laura as a passionate and lively girl. She can be very loud on stage, especially when she shouts at her mother. The violence of her emotions also transpires through her gestures, contributing to a sense of excess that makes her more than the fragile girl who breaks as easily as glass. Laura Almela similarly avoids the melodramatic trap by treading a thin line between comedy and tragedy. The effect on the audience is a mixture of empathy and detachment.

DO: On the one hand, you have to love them and, on the other, their flaws appear in a grotesque and pathetic light that has been part of our work on stage for some time now. Several years ago, we staged *Uncle Vanya* by Chekhov and we had a similar approach. This Chekhovian view somehow extends to this production through Anaïs Umano's French accent. Her Spanish is fluent but her accent adds another dimension to the character of Laura, making her strange in a different way.

The public reacted positively to her accent. Some spectators even thought it was part of the role.

It was a risk and we took it. I guess the word "ambivalence" best defines the way we wanted to work.

Image 3 – Anaïs Umano as Laura and Laura Almela as Amanda



Source: Instagram – @brengarcia_f / @paramo_escenico.

SMK: There is another touch of "Frenchness" when Laura suddenly turns into a glamorous French woman from the 1930s. She starts smoking a cigarette and a French melody is heard.

DO: At that moment, she turns into the confident woman she could be and the glamorous role we all want her to play suddenly comes true. It is all about playing with the imagination, with the stereotypical images of French women as seen through the eyes of Mexican people. And it is also about reflecting upon the woman she could be, under different circumstances. So Laura eludes a clear-cut characterization. She remains a memory in Tom's mind. And he transforms her in his imagination, to make up for the loss. Another reason for tapping into French culture is Williams's own reference to François Villon's song in the stage directions. We projected the French lines on the stage and then, we decided to continue playing with the French language. It took part in our attempt to heighten reality, to make it strange. The use of different languages, like the projections on the screen, contributed to the alienation effect.

SMK: The reality shown on stage indeed seems to be suspended between Hollywood-manufactured dreams and nightmarish pictures of war and violence.

DO: The image of the painting by Picasso, *Guernica*, dominates the opening scene.

AU: I remember when we started working on the play, we all agreed on a non-realistic setting, on an image from the past filtered through the memory of the narrator. The Spanish translation came from a production staged in the 1960s in Buenos Aires. It was not a translation of Williams's text, it was just a transcription of the staged play. All the production notes, the use of projections and other non-realistic devices had been erased.

DO: The discovery of Williams's text gave free reins to our imagination. The reference to cinema as a way of escape from reality encouraged us to use that medium through the screen projections to emphasize the difference between cinema and theatre. Cinema is used as a counterpart to theatre, either to create an ironic distance, or simply to reveal its ideological power, which is why we projected video extracts from the pre-war period, like

Gone with the wind or *The wizard of Oz.*

SMK: Can we move on to the character of Tom? In Williams's text, he is both the narrator and a character in the play. In your production, his duality is exploited even further since two actors play the part. At first, they play the separate roles of character and narrator but then, they exchange lines until their parts blur into one. In the end, Tom is typing the story on a typewriter and we understand he has turned into the playwright himself. The multiplication of roles, from character to narrator to stage director and then to playwright works quite well on stage.

Image 4 – Miguel Cooper as Tom



Source: Instagram – @brengarcia_f / @paramo_escenico.

DO: I remember reading Williams's poetry. He started as a poet and then he became a playwright. And he was also an employee in a shoe factory. Williams was many people too and I found that interesting. It gave me the idea of the play as a hall of mirrors where reflections can be mistaken for real things. As I was trying to envision the character of Tom, I had the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy in mind. In a poem entitled "Ithaka," he writes about what travel means, what it means to leave the place where you were born. And I think that, at the end of the play, Tom has arrived. It is the end of his traveling, the moment when he can make a pause and turn back. And in another poem called "The City," Cavafy writes lines which strongly echo Tom's situation in the play:

You won't find a new country, won't find another shore.
This city will always pursue you.
You'll walk the same streets, grow old
in the same neighborhoods, turn gray in these same houses.
You'll always end up in this city. Don't hope for things elsewhere:
there's no ship for you, there's no road.
Now that you've wasted your life here, in this small corner,
you've destroyed it everywhere in the world.

Tom's last monologue sounds like a confession to me. He is confessing that he cannot leave Amanda and Laura behind, no matter how far he goes. And so the possibility of the play ending on Jim and Laura's love story – a light comedy ending – suddenly gives way to the tragedy of Tom, which bears obvious autobiographical overtones.

Many young people came to see our production and they reacted to the comic dimension of the play, to the possibility that love could prevail over the tragedy. In the end, they were crying. This is part of the magic of storytelling and Williams is a wonderful storyteller.

What he talks about is humanity and the need for hope. In this moment when we hate Americans, I felt it was important for me to say that we do not hate great people. Art is a platform against hatred and fear. This production blends French, Mexican and US culture to make an artistic statement about the destiny of humans.

AU: What struck me during the performances was the reaction of the audience. Mexican spectators were very expressive. It was the first time in my acting experience – I've worked in New York and Paris – that I had felt such an intense connection between the performers and the spectators. And it was different every night. From laughter to tears. And then, sometimes you could sense that the audience did not know what to do, whether to laugh or cry, as in the final scene when Amanda and Laura are left alone after Tom's departure. It was a great experience as an actor.

SMK: There is a strange quality to the kind of laughter that runs through the public, as if the spectators were empathizing with the characters more than mocking them. It is not cruel.

DO: It might be because we really wanted to let the playwright's voice speak through the Spanish language. We really wanted to avoid sentimentalism and to reveal the full extent

of Williams's irony. I mean, *The glass menagerie* is imbued with a sense of the absurd. Just before the Second World War, Williams wrote a play about the great irony of life, about the great illusion of the American dream. He was ahead of his times as a playwright and, in a way, he anticipated the Theatre of the Absurd.

The character of Jim especially illustrates this idea. He remembers his high school glory, when everybody thought he was going to be the president of the United States. We chose to resurrect that glorious past on stage through screen projections of Jim running and jumping fences. But fate played a trick on him too and, in the end, he is just a clerk working in a shoe company like Tom. The projections are there to reveal the irony of it all, they take part in the creation of an alienation effect that makes the audience smile in the face of tragedy.

Image 5 – Anaïs Umano as Laura and David Juan Olguín as Jim



Source: Instagram – @brengarcia_f / @paramo_escenico.

There is one moment when I felt like I had to change the text to make Tom less cruel toward his sister. I wanted Tom and Laura to get together in suffering because they share the same desperate situation. Yes, I wanted empathy too.

AU: The character of Jim was also reshaped along these lines to reveal his deep understanding of Laura's shyness. I had never before thought of Jim as a character who could empathize. I found this approach interesting.

SMK: So, in the end, Jim is not that different from Laura, or from Tom or Amanda for that matter. He shares their frustration with life. It is the avowal of his vulnerability that brings him closer to Laura when she understands that he is not the hero she had fantasized about but a human being with frustrated dreams like her.
Can I ask you one last question about the Spanish translation? You mentioned a translation that you were not satisfied with and I would like to know how you managed to find a translation you could work with?

AU: We turned to the official Spanish translation and realized that the presence of screen projections had been completely omitted. Williams's production notes on scenography, light and music had been translated but there was nothing about the screens. So we took the original version and we navigated between Spanish and English together. We would read scenes to each other in both languages and then translate them together, revising and correcting until we were satisfied.

DO: I found it amazing that an officially recognized Spanish translation of a Tennessee Williams classic could have omitted so many important aspects of the text. It was not his voice. It was more an adaptation than a translation. We had no choice but to go back to the original version. We read the whole play in English and, little by little, we worked out our own adaptation in Spanish.

SMK: Your production is scheduled to run for 35 performances at the National University of Mexico – Unam – in February 2026.

DO: Yes, the adventure goes on.

SMK: Thank you both very much for your time and good luck with the February venue.

Submetido em: 09 jan. 2026
Aprovado em: 27 fev. 2026