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## MAT brings pair of classic American dramas to the stage

'Glass Menagerie' and 'Death of a Salesman' running in alternate weeks

By [Stephen Real](#)



Havre Daily News/Ryan Berry

Risa Bakke, playing Laura Wingfield, plays with a glass unicorn during a dress rehearsal of "The Glass Menagerie" Tuesday in Havre. The Montana Actors' Theatre production opens at Montana State University-Northern's Little Theatre Thursday.

*Editor's note: This corrects the spelling of the name of Denae Ellis and states that she is assistant director of "Death of a Salesman."*

Montana Actors' Theatre is kicking off the new year producing a pair of classic American dramas with "The Glass Menagerie" and "Death of a Salesman."

The plays will be in production, in alternating weeks, starting with "The Glass Menagerie," directed by MAT and Fort Peck Summer Theatre veteran Pam Veis, the following week "Salesman," directed by MAT Artistic Director Jay Pyette with Denae Ellis as assistant director, begins, with another run of "Menagerie" the week after and the final week having more productions of "Salesman."

Pyette said MAT decided to do both "The Glass Menagerie" and "Death of a Salesman" because they felt they had not done a classic American drama for a while.

"The Glass Menagerie" opens Thursday at 8 p.m. Veis said she has been acting just more than 30 years and has spent time acting and directing at Fort Peck Summer Theatre as well as MAT.

"The Glass Menagerie" was written by famous playwright Tennessee Williams, who is also known for his other hit plays "A Streetcar Named Desire" and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof."

Veis has directed before, but this time she collaborated with Grant Olson, who also plays the role of Tom Wingfield. The story is narrated by Tom and is told from his perspective on certain events from his past involving his mother, Amanda, and sister, Laura.

Along with Olson, Risa Bakke, Veis and Chad Zulke will be starring in the play.

The particular directing method that Veis said she chose to go with for the play was challenging, she said. The method required actors to look at a few lines of script and then try to recall as much of it as possible from memory, but ultimately trying to feel what it is their characters would say.

"It kind of peels away a lot what we would call acting and gets down to what a human being would do," she added.

The crew has been working on "The Glass Menagerie" since November, Veis said, and the toughest part has been being both director and actor. Veis brought in Elles to get her directing opinion on the production.

"I like delving into the family dynamic. The family relationship," Veis said. "I think all of the characters are extremely skewed. They all have their flaws and are struggling to get by in a really difficult time in our country's history."

Veis said she has invested a lot of time and energy into this play and hopes that people will come and see it.

Pyette said the famous Arthur Miller play "Death of a Salesman" is about Willy Loman, played by Martin Holt, and the American dream.

Holt has extensive experience in MAT including in the recent pantomime production of "Peter Pan."

"It's really time for Martin," Pyette said. "He's played a great many character roles. I mean everybody recognizes him. He's been on stage a zillion times for us, but always in these character roles. And this is a time that people are going to see how talented this man really is."

The storyline for "Death of Salesman" isn't linear and jumps back and forth from Loman of the present and Loman 30 years previous, Pyette said. He added that it would be hard for actors to try and grasp the idea of Loman's perspective in both eras and tying it all into the ending theme of the play.

"You're going to see some exceptional acting in this, in both shows," Pyette said. "Not to discount the acting that's required in a comedy, but when you get into a heavier, darker play like this, it absolutely takes some real acting chops. And it gives some of our veteran actors a chance to shine."

Pyette said he recognizes the seriousness of the play, but hopes that audiences don't go into the show thinking it's going to be a depressing production.

"It is serious, but I hope that they'll be able to look at it and say that it's not that unusual," he added. "I mean it's not a happy ending. I mean, spoiler alert, the title kind of gives some of it away. But that there is some hope in it, as well, and there's some comedy in there, of course. It's just real. I hope that when people get done they're not going, 'Well that was the most depressing thing I've ever seen,' because it's not. Either show."

He added they decided to run "The Glass Menagerie" and "Death of a Salesman" because they have similar themes. Both plays deal with a person's "skewed perception of the American dream, they're striving to achieve that and, ultimately, the failure to do so," he said.

It has been tricky, Pyette said, with trying to schedule rehearsals with both plays opening soon along with rehearsals for "Cabaret" going on, as well. However, the "Cabaret" production is rehearsing offsite at Pershing Hall, Pyette added.

"With casts, we've actually been very fortunate that we've been able to schedule around each other in the theater, but I got to say, Northern has been just exceptionally awesome to work with," he said.

The crew has been working on "Death of a Salesman" for about six weeks, Pyette said. The most challenging part of production has been the complexity of the script, he added.



Havre Daily News/Ryan Berry

Pam Veis, as the matriarch of the Wingfield family, talks on the phone during a dress rehearsal Tuesday. "The Glass Menagerie" takes place in 1920's St. Louis.

Pyette said that after the showing of "Death of a Salesman" Saturday, Jan. 19, MAT will be holding a talk back. Both casts will be at the theater after the show to talk about the process and the show. They will also answer any questions from the audience.

Veis added that she would like to know what the audience thinks of the play.

"I'd be really curious what the audience took away from it," she said. "I would love it if people came to (the talk back) and hear what the audience thinks. You never know. Perception is just so different."

"The Glass Menagerie" opens Thursday at 8 p.m. and continues Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. Showings continue Thursday Jan. 24 at 8 p.m. through Jan 26, at 8 p.m. as well.

"Death of a Salesman" opens Thursday Jan. 17, at 8 p.m. and continues through Jan. 19 with all showings at 8 p.m. The show continues Jan. 31 through Feb. 2 with all showings at 8 p.m.

Prices are \$15 for adults and \$10 for students, seniors and military.

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### Havre Daily News

119 2nd Street  
Havre, MT 59501  
Ph: (406) 265-6795  
Email: [news@havredailynews.com](mailto:news@havredailynews.com)