CHAPTER 1

Blood-Hot and Personal

Into this scene comes the man of truth—awkward, timid, inept, even with an almost idiotic side. But he is the bringer of truth, the man from whom progress grows. He creates or destroys, there is no middle ground or compromise in him.
—Clifford Odets,
The Time Is Ripe: The 1940 Journal of Clifford Odets

I suspect my only influences were Chekhov, D.H. Lawrence—and my life.
—Tennessee Williams

On March 31, 1945, at the Playhouse Theatre on Forty-Eighth Street, on the unfashionable side of Broadway, in New York City, the curtain rose on the sold- out opening night of *The Glass Menagerie* ten minutes late, at 8:50 p.m. Tennessee Williams, the show's thirty-four-year-old playwright, sat in the aisle seat on the left side of the sixth row. Wearing a gray flannel suit with a button missing, a water-green shirt, and a pale conservative tie, he seemed, according to one paper, "like a farm boy in his Sunday best." Beside him was his friend, and cruising sidekick, Donald Windham, with whom he was collaborating on the romantic comedy *You Touched Me!* A few seats away in the same row, his chic, diminutive agent, Audrey Wood, sat clutching the hand of the renowned set designer Robert Edmond Jones, her escort for the evening. At the clumsy dress rehearsal the day before, an aphorism of William Liebling, her husband and business partner, kept playing through her mind—"You're only as good as the night they catch you." At the dress rehearsal, as the cast got their notes, the play's tyro producer Louis Singer slid beside her. "Tell me—you are supposed to know a great deal about theater—is this or is it not the worst dress rehearsal you've seen in your life?" he said. Words, for once, failed Wood. She nodded a vigorous yes.

Wood fiercely believed in Williams and in her own instincts. Her father, William Wood, a theater manager, had exposed her at a young age to the art and business of vaudeville and theater; the agency that she founded with Liebling in 1937 would come to represent some of the most influential theatricals in the industry: William Inge, Carson McCullers, Robert Anderson, Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift, Paul Newman, Audrey Hepburn, Elizabeth Taylor, Natalie Wood, Elia Kazan, and Joshua Logan among them. But Williams, her client of six years, had not yet known success. On April Fool's Day, 1939, tipped off to his talent, Wood had written the unknown author, "It seems to me, from what I've heard about you, that you may be exactly the kind of author whom I might help." She judged him "not a finished dramatist" but "highly promising." By May of that year, Williams had joined forces with Wood, who promptly sold one of his short stories to *Story* magazine. "You are playing a very long shot when you take an interest in my work," Williams wrote her. So it had proved. More than anyone in the Broadway audience that opening night, Wood understood the precariousness of his situation. "I'd reached the very, very bottom," Williams said, recalling his state of mind. "I couldn't have gone on with these hand-to-mouth jobs, these jobs for which I had no aptitude, like waiting on tables, running elevators, and even being a teletype operator. . . . I couldn't have made it for another year, I don't think."

Eddie Dowling, a jug- eared fifty-one-year-old actor, was improbably cast as Tom Wingfield, the play's young narrator. He was also the show's co-director and co-producer. Standing in front of set designer Jo Mielziner's transparent fourth wall—a see-through scrim that evoked the delicate moods of the play by allowing the exterior of the alley and the fire escape to be lit both separately and simultaneously with the shabby genteel interior of the Wingfield apartment, Dowling went into the opening speech. "Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve," the Narrator said, brazenly announcing Williams's visionary powers. "But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you the truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion. To begin with I turn back time."

As the lights faded out on Dowling, they faded in on Laurette Taylor as Amanda, the matriarch of the hapless Wingfield family, entering upstage into the apartment's dining room. The reception for Taylor, who had made her Broadway debut in 1903 at the age of sixteen and had been a full-fledged star for more than thirty years, was deafening. On the eve of her sixty-first birthday, she was returning to Broadway after a five-year hiatus. Her rustication was the aftermath of an Actors' Equity suspension for drunkenly disrupting and closing a play. The death of her playwright husband, Hartley Manners, in 1928, had sent Taylor "on the longest wake in history," as she liked to joke. "She'd closed many a show on opening night. The managers despised her, and they thought I was crazy entirely to have anything to do with her," Dowling said. Management might have been wary of Taylor—"the alcoholic of alcoholics," as she was known on the Rialto—but the public's loyalty was rock solid. "Nothing like this we'd ever heard before. And so it thwarted the action a little bit, and it threw her. It really threw her," Dowling recalled about the barrage of applause that greeted Taylor. To fill the stage time and to settle the audience, Taylor brushed the hair out of her eyes and talked into the telephone. "It's Amanda," she said, holding the receiver in her hand—vamping until the applause died down—"It's Amanda. And I've got to talk to you." Finally the audience grew quiet. "This was just about the time I came through the door and said, 'Ma, I've got good news for you,' " Dowling recalled. "Instead of giving me the right answer, she took me into the second act."

WOOD HAD ASKED Dowling to direct *The Glass Menagerie* because of his success staging William Saroyan's delicate and poetic *The Time of Your Life* in 1939. When she rushed him the slender, fifty- page script, Dowling was two weeks into casting a play called *The Passionate Congressman*. "Audrey I love the play that you sent me and I'll buy it," he told her. "Buy it for what?" Wood asked. "I said, 'We'll do it as a play.' She said, 'Will you put a curtain raiser in front of it? It's too short.' I said, 'We'll do no such thing. We'll make it 'long enough.' " Dowling added: "Send the boy around."

Dowling met "a sick, tormented boy" profoundly wary of Broadway and those swamis of box-office wisdom, "the Broadway crowd." "He couldn't believe. He sat and watched. He'd been through the wringer so much. I don't think he even heard half of what I was talking about," Dowling recalled. "He was far away. He was arriving at a decision within himself." "He said, 'Do you really mean that this will go into a Broadway theatre?' I said, 'Well, I wouldn't be wasting your time or my own, and I wouldn't be spending this money if I didn't think so. The Broadway theatre is the only theatre I know.' Without much ado, he left, not too excited. He didn't say much of anything."

"Success is like a shy mouse—he won't come out while you're watching," Williams had written; he certainly didn't see *The Glass Menagerie*'s potential. Dismissing it as "a nauseous thing" and "an act of *compulsion* not love," he scrawled his displeasure on the title pages of the various drafts: "a rather tiresome play," "the ruins of a play," "a lyric play," and, on the final submitted manuscript, "a gentle play." To this last comment Williams appended a note: "The purposes of this play are very modest. The hurdles are lowered to give the awkward runner an exercise in grace and lightness of movement. No stronger effect is called for than that evoked by a light but tender poem."

But the cloud that seemed to hang over Williams's view of the play didn't obscure its shine for Dowling. He broke his contract for *The Passionate Congressman*. "I gave up a sure $25,000 to do it, and I didn't have twenty-five cents when I did it. I was always just ahead of the sheriff," he said. The producers were furious, but Dowling's enthusiasm for his new property was so infectious that he persuaded one of them, Louis Singer, to put up $50,000 without ever having read it. The no-read condition was only part of the tough deal Dowling cut with Singer, who balked at first. "I said, 'Make up your mind.' He hesitated, and I thought I was going to lose him," Dowling recalled. "I said, 'I'll tell you what I'll do. You know what the usual deal is on the Street. The money gets 50% and the producer gets 50%, but the money gets their investment back before the other fellow gets a cent and then they divide dollar for dollar.' He said, 'That's right. Is that what you're proposing?' I said, 'No. That's the deal you've got now. You bring in an agreement where you're not to read the play, you're not to attend any rehearsals, you're not to have anything to do with this. You keep completely away, until we're getting ready to open, and until everything is paid for and all the bills are up. If you do this, I'll give you an extra 25%. You get 75% and I get 25%.' And that was the deal."

Dowling could turn his attention now to casting the four-hander, whose biggest challenge was Amanda Wingfield, the embattled bundle of Southern decorum and Puritan denial. At the suggestion of George Jean Nathan, an influential critic and the model of the waspish Addison DeWitt in the film *All About Eve*, Dowling went to see Laurette Taylor, who lived above the Copacabana at the top of Hotel 14 on East Sixtieth Street, where, as Dowling said, "she'd been hibernating with a gin bottle for twelve years." "She was a long time allowing me up," Dowling recalled. When she opened the door, the sight of her frightened him. "She was in her bare feet, with an old beaten[-up] kimono around her, and her hair all scraggly. It was a pitiful kind of thing," he said. He gave her the pitch and the play. "Is your telephone on here?" Taylor asked, and shut the door.

Not acting had left Taylor in a "jam about money." To keep going and to keep her brain from ossifying in the loneliness of her handsome apartment, Taylor wrote short stories and articles for *Vogue* and *Town and Country*. She also completed a novel, which she tried, unsuccessfully, to sell to the movies. But "no play has come my way all winter, which is indeed very discouraging," she wrote to her son. "I am, of course, desperately let down in my courage for a bit and certainly let down in my finances."

Taylor immediately sat down to read the play. "Between two and three in the morning, after I finished reading 'The Glass Menagerie', I thought a lot about the mother in the story," Taylor said later. In Amanda Wingfield's misguided endurance, Taylor recognized both the comedy and the tragedy of a grief

that she herself was still living through. “I could look back and see her as a girl. Pretty, but not very intelligent, with plenty of beaux. Not seventeen of them, of course. She says seventeen in the play, but she’s lying. I know why her husband left her. She talked and talked until he couldn’t stand it. She nags her children to pull them out of their poverty. She loves them. For them, she has strength and tenacity.” During the war years, Taylor had been sent scripts with only “tobacco-spitting mammas, horrible old harridans—crude disgusting roles,” as she put it. Now, she knew that “the absolutely right part had come along.”

The next day, Taylor called Dowling and asked him back up to her apartment. Taylor met him at the door with the play under her arm. “She’d spruced up a little bit,” Dowling recalled. “Do you think Broadway, this bastardly place, will buy this lovely, delicate fragile little thing?” Taylor asked. “This is what I’m betting on,” Dowling replied. “That’s the kind of talk I like to hear,” Taylor said, adding “but you can’t get a theatre with me.” Dowling pooh-poohed Taylor’s worry and told her that was his concern. “Can we talk business. Can you tell me what you want?” Dowling said.

“Right this minute? You know what I’d like better than anything else in the world? I’d like a martini,” Taylor replied.

“Would you like me to take you out and get you a martini?” Dowling said.

Taylor did a little twirl around the room and lifted her leg. “She said, ‘I can’t go out. Look,’ ” Dowling recalled. “She said, ‘Look at those nylon stockings. There’s a war on, you know that. I don’t have a pair of stockings to my name.’ I said, ‘I could order some things for you.’ ” Taylor continued, “You’re a big shot, head of the USO [United Service Organizations]. You have a lot of influence. Could you get me a few pairs of nylon stockings?”

“I can get you all the stockings you want. I have to get them for the troupes we send abroad. I’ll get them for you today,” Dowling said.

“All right,” Taylor said. “You’ve got your actress. I’ll play that Southerner.”

Dowling was thrilled to have his star; but Tennessee Williams, after hearing her first tentative reading at Hotel 14, was not. When he and Dowling got outside, Dowling remembered, Williams stood beside a row of garbage cans, beseeching him, “Oh, Mr. Dowling, you’ve got to get rid of that woman who’s doin’ a Negress. My mother ain’t a Negress. My mother’s a lady.” “Young man,” Dowling told him. “You’ll live to eat those words.” He went on: “You wait till the curtain goes up on it. You just wait.”

ON DECEMBER 16, 1944, the day the company was to catch the train to Chicago, where the play was trying out, Williams almost didn’t make it to Grand Central. The night before, he’d gone on the town with Dowling, Louis Singer, George Jean Nathan, and Nathan’s girlfriend, Julie Haydon, who played Laura Wingfield, Amanda’s daughter. Margo Jones, whom Williams called “the Texas Tornado” and whom he had lobbied to be the play’s co-director, an agreement that rankled Dowling, who referred to her as “my assistant,” also joined the party. They were having seasonal drinks at a French café when Dowling proposed a toast to Williams. “Wouldn’t it be great, George, a fine Christmas present, if the curtain went

up and the next day the Chicago papers gave our boy a hit?" Dowling said. "Just a minute before you drink that toast," Nathan cut in. "You're asking a whole lot, Dowling. I don't think there's going to be anything like that unless this young man takes out a lot of the delicatessen that's in there. I know it's still stunk up with a lot of Limburger he's got to get out of there. If he doesn't, you'll be back before New Year's, and we'll have a New Year's drink at the Algonquin."

With that, Nathan told Haydon to get her things, and got up to leave. "As Tiny Tim said," he remarked to the assembled. "Bless you merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay, even the wisdom of the acidulous Nathan." The famous critic was hardly out the door before Singer started to cry. "I knew it. I knew it," he sobbed. "What did you know?" Dowling said. "Ilka Chase told me. Laurence Stallings told me. The president of City College, my dear friend. A lot of my broker friends. They all told me what a silly ass I was to put up all this money. I don't want to go to Chicago. I knew everything that Mr. Nathan said." "Oh, you did? How did you find this out?" Dowling challenged him. "You left a copy of the play on the desk one day and I read it," Singer replied.

Williams was stung by the scene, but most of all by Nathan. "He doesn't mean to hurt you," Dowling told him later in the night. "Don't think that he dislikes you or that there's anything personal about this. . . . He's disappointed in me that I haven't had more influence with you." Dowling added: "Go home and don't try to sleep. Take a bottle of gin home with you. Have a damn good night. Stagger onto the train, but get on it and come out there." Williams didn't say whether he would or wouldn't be on the train. But later, after he'd left, Margo Jones took Dowling's arm. "Thank you, Eddie. He'll be on the train," she said. And the next morning, he was.

Setting off for Chicago, Williams didn't know what to expect. "It's just in the lap of the gods," he wrote to his friend the publisher James Laughlin, whom he frequently addressed as "Jay." "Too many incalculables—the brain-cells of an old woman, a cold- blooded banker's reckoning of chances, enigmas of audiences and critics. It is really a glass menagerie that we are taking on the road and God only knows how much of it will survive the journey."

The troupe had a mere fifteen days in Chicago to get their show to opening night. "Well, it looks bad, baby," Williams noted in his diary after an early rehearsal. In the narrow, carpeted Chicago rehearsal hall, Williams was perplexed by Taylor's flat, ungiving performance and her ad-libbing. "My God, what corn!" Williams screamed over the footlights after Taylor "made one of her little insertions." Williams wrote Windham about the encounter. "She screamed back that I was a fool and all playwrights made her sick that she had not only been a star for forty years, but had made a living as a writer which was better than I had done."

"What was she working toward in that terrifyingly quiet and hidden laboratory of her work in progress?" he wrote, several years later, recalling his mounting despair at her muted presentation. "There she sat, a small round woman with amazingly bright eyes usually shielded by a wide-crowned hat that came down level with her eyebrows. I say 'sat' advisedly for she did not often rise to her feet and when she did, she made such indefinite, shuffling movements that you wondered if she realized she was actually standing up! What was she thinking? What was she doing? What was going on? Only the eyes

seemed much alive to the progress of rehearsals. How they darted and shone as if they possessed some brilliant life of their own! Watching inwardly, outwardly! But what? And the speech—God help us! She usually seemed to have difficulty forming words with her tongue and sometimes the words were indistinguishable, they were only vague mutterings. . . . Sometimes she would not bother to get to her feet and perform a cross in the playing area. Rather she would mention it verbally. 'Now I get up,' she would say, 'and I go over there.' She would point a bit indefinitely, sometimes more at the ceiling than the floor, and you wondered if she intended to walk up the side of a flat like a human fly. 'When I get over there,' she would continue, hesitantly, 'I open my pocketbook and take out a handkerchief and sniff a little. No, I don't,' she would suddenly amend. 'I sit right there like I'm sitting and I don't do a thing!' And she would look up with blazing eyes at this heaven-sent inspiration, not at all troubled by the blank look that she got from the rest of us in the dim room. I was keeping a journal at the time. I don't have it with me but I can quote from memory this line. 'Poor Laurette! She mumbles and fumbles! Seems hopelessly lost!' "

Williams found himself in a full-court press of production concerns. Dowling condescended to him—he called him "laddie"—and badgered him for rewrites. "Mr. Dowling . . . is trying (in vain) to get the author to write more (God knows he talks forever more!) in his part," Taylor wrote to her son. "Tennessee is Southern, thirty [*sic*], and very obstinate when they call him 'an ungrateful little squirt.' " (Williams's response to Dowling had been to drawl, "I can't find the tranquility in Chicago to write.")

Singer, fearing economic catastrophe and refusing even to pay twenty-five dollars for a new dress for Laura, demanded a happy ending. At one crucial production meeting, Singer said he wanted Laura and the Gentleman Caller—Tom's workmate whom Tom is pressured to invite to dinner as a potential suitor for his sister—to get together at the finale. Williams was being steamrolled. Knowing the limitations of his shy, awkward personality, Margo Jones put her foot down. "Tennessee, don't change that ending," she said, slamming her fist into her palm. Part of Jones's job description was to run interference for Williams; she then leveled her husky voice at the producer: "Mr. Singer, if you make Tennessee change the play the way you want it, so help me I'll go around to every critic in town and tell them about the kind of wire- pulling that's going on here." Williams's ending stayed.

The opening night performance of *The Glass Menagerie* in Chicago was on the snowy day after Christmas in 1944. "It was a strange night," Dowling said. "There was no applause for anybody, no applause on entrances, nothing. It was bitter cold. The audience, it seemed to me in the first part of it, were all huddled like people trying to get close to each other to try to keep warm." Although subsequent ads for the play dubbed it "the greatest play in fifty years," the first- night audience, according to Audrey Wood, "was respectful but hardly ecstatic. The reviews were good, especially that of Claudia Cassidy, the drama critic of the Chicago *Tribune*. She and Ashton Stevens, another respected critic took it upon themselves to campaign for the survival of 'The Glass Menagerie,' " Wood recalled. However, there were no advance ticket sales and the box-office takings for the first fortnight were a meager $11,530. "For eight weeks, we starved. We were losing four and five thousand a week," Dowling recalled. For a production capitalized at $75,000, the writing was on the fourth wall. For most of its ten-week run, *The Glass Menagerie* was on the verge of closing.

The play's commercial future may have been in doubt, but the amperage of Laurette Taylor's star never was. The reviews heaped lavish praise on her, with the *Chicago Tribune* even comparing her to the legendary Eleanora Duse. Show-biz cognoscenti began converging on Illinois to see what the excitement was about—among them, Spencer Tracy, Katharine Hepburn, Raymond Massey, Maxwell Anderson, Luther Adler, Gregory Peck, and Ruth Gordon. (After seeing the play twice, Gordon sent Taylor three-dozen roses with a poem that read, "When Miss Taylor plays in 'The Menagerie of Glass' / She makes all other actresses seem a pain in the ass.")

Despite all the ballyhoo, only at the last minute did the production find a Broadway theater. By that time, Williams was in the doghouse. After he'd published a snippy letter to the editor in the *Chicago Herald-American* lamenting "the distortions that have taken place since businessmen and gamblers discovered that theater could be made part of their empire," Dowling and Singer, furious, struck his name from all pre-Broadway publicity. "Pandemonium back-stage!" Williams wrote to James Laughlin, with less than three weeks to go before Broadway. "Intrigues, counter-intrigues, rages, smashed door-panes—quelle menagerie!" He added: "Things are so tense all the time you never know when the whole company will just blow up and vanish! Actors are just not believable—so fantastic! Especially the good ones."

The Glass Menagerie opened on Broadway on the warmest March 31 on record. "We arrived in New York a week before our opening. I rehearsed them all week because I was worried about Miss Taylor. The minute she found out in Chicago that the odds were against us in getting a theater in New York and we might close there, she began to sneak a little martini or two. Nothing I couldn't handle, but I was frightened stiff." Even on opening night, Dowling had rehearsed the company until five in the afternoon, then called the cast back onstage at seven for "a quick run- through." "It seemed incredible to us that by curtain time Laurette would have the strength left to give a performance," Tony Ross, who played the Gentleman Caller, said. "All the company were on me, but I knew very well what I was up to," Dowling said.

The day was muggy; the trees in Central Park had begun to bud. Williams, accompanied by Donald Windham, spent the afternoon rummaging through junk shops on Second and Third Avenue in search of a lampshade for the show's second act. He dropped by a bookstore in Penn Station to tell his friend, the actor-turned-playwright Horton Foote, about the opening. Foote, who was eight years younger than Williams, thought of him as "artistically my big brother." Both men were young playwrights trying to forge a new, emotionally truthful American theater. Foote, who had read early versions of the play, had received permission to stage the Gentleman Caller scene at his Neighborhood Playhouse acting class. He was keen to be at opening night. Williams explained that he had ceded to his agent all but two tickets, with which he was taking Windham. He told Foote that he'd try to slip him in.

At about five-thirty, as Dowling and his wife, Ray, reached their hotel near the theater to change clothes and get some dinner, there was, as Dowling recalled it, "a torrential downpour." "Oh, it was frightful," he said. "And this was our opening night. Of course it didn't mean anything so far as tickets were concerned, but it meant a whole lot in performance, because when you bring in an audience soaking, wringing wet from head to foot, with all this sort of stuff, it's an uncomfortable audience. Well,

it was just an ominous kind of thing to happen at that particular time." When they came out on the street again, at quarter to seven, the rain had stopped. "The most beautiful rainbow that I've ever seen in my life was right across the sky encompassing the whole Playhouse Theatre, the sign, the sidewalk, everything," Dowling said. "It was almost like daylight. It was so gorgeous—this beautiful rainbow. And she and I stood and looked up at it. We were two very, very happy people." They strolled to the theater, "thanking all of the gods that we ever heard about, and just feeling so reassured."

As the Dowlings turned into the alley leading to the Playhouse's stage door, they saw Laurette Taylor. She was slumped on the steps, with the rain dripping from the roof onto her. She was drunk and "soaking, wringing wet, like a cat that's been locked out all night," Dowling said. They got her to her feet. "Hel-lo, Ray. Hel-lo, Eddie. It's the rain. Nothing wrong with me. Just the rain," she said. Curtain time was ninety minutes away. Dowling and his wife walked Taylor around, feeding her black coffee and stewed tomatoes from a can. Finally, an hour later, they got her into her dressing room, where she took a shower. "We could hear the buzzing of a great crowd outside," Dowling recalled. The beaming producers were backstage full of news of the celebrities in attendance. "I said nothing to anybody about her," Dowling recalled.

Fifteen minutes before curtain, Williams, with Horton Foote in tow, found Dowling smoking a cigarette in the alley. "Eddie, can you get him a seat for tonight?" Williams asked.

"Laddie, it's all sold out," Dowling said, turning to Foote. "Would you mind standing?"

"No, sir."

Dowling disappeared inside the stage door for a few minutes.

Because of Foote's warmth and bushy-tailed ingenuousness, Williams referred to him behind his back as "a pineapple ice cream soda"; however, the same earnest qualities had kept Foote in Williams's mind as possible casting for either the Gentleman Caller or Tom.

Dowling pushed open the stage door. "Tennessee, tell them in front to let him in. He's to stand," Dowling said.

"Thank you, sir," Foote said.

"Let's hurry," Williams said to Foote. They bustled off down the alley to the front of house.

Inside, as Williams rushed to his seat, Margo Jones worked the aisles, glad- handing friends. "Darlin', we gonna change the whole theater I'm tellin' you, we gonna do it. Honey, we gonna bring you along with us," she gushed to Foote just before the lights dimmed.