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Performa Playbill: James Franco and Laurel Nakadate

by [paul david young](#) 11/14/11

Laurel Nakadate and James Franco's *Three Performances in Search of Tennessee* was a semi-rehearsed, semi-conceptual piece of theater that invoked the spirit of Tennessee Williams and used two parts of his 1944 play *The Glass Menagerie* for some good gags.

Three Performances . . . began with an extended scene in which the audience was led through breathing exercises and then invited to participate in a séance to draw up Williams's spirit. The séance was mostly a set of practiced speeches that combined the sort of nondenominational spiritual babble of a yoga class with congratulatory messages to Franco from the dead Williams. If any of this was meant

as a joke, it drew not a chuckle.



The second act had Franco—appearing via onscreen projection as himself, in plain

black clothing—perform the part of Jim O'Connor, the "gentleman caller" from *The Glass Menagerie*. In the original play, O'Connor is the first gentleman to visit the family's reclusive, handicapped daughter, Laura. A series of women, some with an obviously prepared schtick, played Laura by reading her lines off the projection screen. Franco and Nakadate (whose practice is barely reflected here), sat to the side of the stage offering directions, at first rather sternly but later laughing at their own gags.

Franco, a charming rogue, would seem to be a natural to play O'Connor, but he wasn't in top form here. He was halfway committed to the role, neither a convincing O'Connor nor anything else, really. The women, who are possibly untalented actors or somewhat randomly gathered people, bumbled through their lines and didn't know how to behave onstage. Franco called out to one woman by name, encouraging her. "Come on, Nina. We know you can do it."

One of the women disregarded the protocol and telephoned her mother while onstage, excited to report where she was and what she was doing. The effect was very staged.

Franco had the best part when he "kissed" Laura, miming a prolonged tongue action and an unsubtle grope, completely outside the bounds of what Williams's script calls for.

The scene between Laura and O'Connor is the climax of Williams's most beloved play, the one that launched his career. The idea is to make credible for a few seconds that maybe Laura will snare the handsome man she idolized in high school, before her heart and her glass unicorn shatter forever. This fragile emotion was lost in the karaoke-style set-up.

In the last performance, a half-dozen men, among them the artists Kalup Linzy and Ryan McNamara, delivered the closing monologue by Tom, Laura's brother. Tom relates that, after the events in the play, he ran away from his family in St. Louis, but her heartache haunted him wherever he went. McNamara asked Franco to spit tears on his face while Nakadate blows in his hair, because, he said, he can't cry on cue and he imagined the scene in a windswept alley. It's gross, weird and intimate as a hokey special effect. Franco had a good time with the indelicacy of it all, and leaned in as if kissing him instead.

All the performances were mediocre in their own way, having just enough rehearsal to make them awkward but not enough to make them polished. Though there was some good fun after the first scene, the concept behind the overall piece remains elusive.

Select portions of the performance are available for viewing on [Paddle8.com](https://paddle8.com), for one week, beginning today.



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