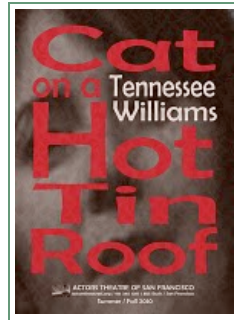




CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF at ACTORS THEATRE OF SAN FRANCISCO



ACTOR'S THEATRE OF SAN FRANCISCO PRESENTS....

CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

By

Tennessee Williams

Tennessee Williams is a master storyteller whose words are as poetic as they are true to the society we have created and the kind of people it has forged. He says, "I have found it easier to identify with the characters who verge upon hysteria, who were frightened of life, who were desperate to reach out to another person. But these seemingly fragile people are the strong people really."

The characters Williams gives us are unforgettable because they are us. At some point in our lives, we are all a Maggie determined to survive and overcome the hurdles life has put in her path or a Brick who escapes into oblivion. We are all Big Mama (Hannah Marks) desperate to believe her family is perfect, her husband really loves her and she loves him. Those of us whose material success has not given them peace or happiness are just as angry, just as unreasonable, just as controlling as the Big Daddy we see on that stage. We look at how we fought to make our goals happen and realize that our money can buy anything but what really matters. It is these searing and true portrayals that are the reason Williams is considered one of America's greatest playwrights.

Tennessee Williams' prose is pure poetry. His use of repetition for emphasis makes every speech a song. Because all his dramas have immense sociological and psychological implications, I always prefer seeing his plays in an intimate setting rather than a huge theatre where the actors are so far away and the set so elaborate that I don't relate to each character as a person. The 77 seat Actor's Theatre is ideal for this kind of presentation. Each member of the audience feels that he is eavesdropping the Pollitt family as they claw their way to the top of the family hierarchy. There is no wasted word, no meaningless action, no slowing of the pace in this beautiful production at Actor's Theatre. Director Keith Phillips has choreographed the movement on stage so that every speech is emphasized by the movement of the characters and yet nothing seems artificial or forced. The entire three hour production is a non-stop rat-a-tat-tat of repartee as every member of the family tries to get the upper hand and diminish the others. The dialogue seethes bubbles and often explodes. Each character tries to destroy one another pushing emotional buttons without mercy and with the accuracy of William Tell aiming at that apple.

This is a moving and timely play about the Pollitts, a dysfunctional Southern family fighting one another for Big Daddy's favors. They have come together to celebrate Big Daddy's 65th birthday on his plantation in Mississippi on a hot August evening in 1955. Big Daddy has been undergoing endless diagnostic procedures and when the play opens the doctors have told him his only illness is a spastic colon. Big Daddy is overjoyed because he has had a reprieve from death and is determined to live what time he has left to the fullest. He tells his favorite son Brick that it took the shadow of death to open the door for him and says, "Life is important. The human animal buys and buys and buys; he hopes one of his purchases will buy him life everlasting."

The rest of the family knows that Big Daddy has had no reprieve at all. His cancer is so advanced that surgery will not help him and he is on his way out of this life and into the next. Big Daddy, like all of us, thinks that he is eternal and so he has never made his will. The eldest son Gooper (Sean Hallinan) and the two wives, Mae (Carol Robinson) and Maggie are vying for a place in that unwritten document and Brick is far too drunk to care.

Christian Phillips is the most interesting Big Daddy I have ever seen on stage. Big Daddy is usually portrayed as narrow minded, but canny redneck, tough as rawhide, who pulled himself up from poverty to wealth without

other discoveries

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regard for the people he trampled as he climbed his ladder of success. He manipulates his family like a puppeteer dangles them like marionettes ignoring their need to be individuals. Christian Phillips' Big Daddy is bigger than life and his performance is no less than thrilling. There is not a false note in his persona; indeed he dominates every scene he is in. He is mesmerizing and has the audience in the palm of his hand the moment he walks on stage.

Phillips portrays a man frustrated and angry at the unexpected results his wealth created. Big Daddy Pollitt is a man all of us have seen before: a successful man who uses his money to lavish what he never had on his family and then discovers that the very luxury and ease he has provided has squelched their ambition and sanded down the challenges that give life its zest and excitement. He surveys what he has wrought with disgust and defeat. Tennessee Williams explains, "Luxury is the wolf at the door and its fangs are the vanities and conceits germinated by success. When an artist learns this, he knows where the danger is."

Those vanities and conceits have smothered the Pollitt family. Big Daddy realizes that his two sons do not have the grit, the strength or the ambition to accomplish what he has done. He is faced with a family of weak parasites who repel him with their lack of drive....except for Maggie. Maggie is determined to grab her dreams by the same coat tails that he did. The two respect and love one another because of the steel core each has that gives them the strength to fight for what they want.

Jennifer Welch is a deliciously human Maggie. You cry with her over her broken dreams and you respect her for her desperate attempt to make this marriage work despite her husband's obvious distaste for everything she represents. She is a Maggie like no other, vindictive and scheming, yet so very real that one must admire her courage and her determination to save her marriage at any cost. It is very difficult to portray Maggie in a sympathetic light, but Welch manages to make us understand her character even as we recoil at her merciless, amoral and unscrupulous behavior. Maggie cannot stop her marriage from crumbling despite her every effort to paste it back together. Her husband wants nothing to do with her and she knows she is the cause of his hatred. Maggie has always seemed selfish and hard to me, but not so in this production. Jennifer Welch shows us a woman who aches to repair the unintentional damage she did to the man whom she loves more than anything or any one in the world. When she compares herself to a cat on a hot tin roof you realize the futility of all she is trying to do: "What is the victory of a cat on a hot tin roof? I wish I knew. . . . Just staying on it, I guess, as long as she can. . . ." Welch gives us an exquisite performance, touching and sympathetic to the core.

Brick is Big Daddy's favorite son: a former athlete and sports announcer who has descended into the depths of alcoholism, hating his marriage, hating his family and despising himself. The Bricks I have seen in other productions wallow in self pity and dissatisfaction that is all the more difficult to swallow because it is uncomfortably real. However, Nicholas Russell's interpretation adds a deeper dimension to the role. He gives us a disillusioned man who reached for his own star and could not understand why his grasp was so far from his reach. The shame of homosexuality and the shadow of guilt it has cast on Brick Politt is the driving force of the play. To Brick, the only pure love he has ever given or received was from Skipper, a man so torn by his own conflicted loyalties that he killed himself with alcohol. Brick is well on the way to ending his own life the same way because alcohol is the only way he can escape his own personal hell. He tells his wife and his father over and over again that he needs to drink until "That click I get in my head makes me peaceful."

The father and son have no real connection; they live on opposite pages of reality. Big Daddy tells his son he wants them to have a real conversation but Brick answers, "There just don't seem to be much to say." His pain at the cruelty of life is so great he cannot reduce it to one source. It defies definition: "It's not one thing, it's the whole thing." He says.

This is the third time Actors Theatre has presented this beautiful play, and the production they offer is professional and polished, a gem on every level. There is no weak link in this cast; every character is perfectly drawn. This play explores what happens to the human psyche when truth, ambition and fantasy collide. "We all live in a house on fire, no fire department to call; no way out, just the upstairs window to look out of while the fire burns the house down with us trapped, locked in it," says Williams. The Politt house is indeed aflame with no way to save it.

Actor's Theatre is to be commended for taking on such a complex, challenging play, one that is so difficult to make meaningful to today's audiences. Few women in the twenty-first century would stand for the kind of verbal abuse that both Maggie and Big Mama receive. Women today do not have to fawn over relatives they detest or allow their men folk to diminish them to survive. As I listened to the hatred, the anger and the merciless jabs the characters thrust at one another, I was reminded of the time when men dominated their families and women accepted their abuse because they relied on their husbands for every advantage, from the food they ate and the roof over their heads to the money they could spend. I remembered the way men used women and battered them with words, deeds and fists because they believed that was their right. Women had no legal recourse and no avenue of appeal. We often wonder whether women have achieved real equality with men or if they have only taken on more tasks for less compensation, emotionally and physically. If Cat on a Hot Tin Roof does nothing else, it convinces us that we have come a very long way, no matter how far we still have to go.

IF YOU GO:
CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF
Wednesdays - Saturdays

8:00 PM until September 4, 2010
Actor's Theatre of San Francisco
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