

British Theatre Guide

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Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

Tennessee Williams
Nottingham Playhouse
(2005)

Anyone who's ever penned a literary contribution which has been drastically changed must have sympathy for Tennessee Williams. When he came up with *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, which he considered the best play he'd ever written, he was amazed when director Elia Kazan asked for major changes for the production that appeared on Broadway.

Williams reluctantly agreed and produced a version with a totally rewritten third act. But the playwright didn't like the sanitised replacement and referred to it as being like a "deep psychic violation". In fact he was so disturbed by the experience he couldn't write for several months.

The original play has never been seen in England before. Now, for his swansong, Nottingham Playhouse's associate director Richard Baron has chosen the version favoured by Williams. Baron's been responsible for several excellent productions in Nottingham over the past five years - but none as memorable as this.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is set on one of the richest plantations in the Mississippi Delta. It's Big Daddy's 65th birthday. The first act involves the preparations for a party which has to be held in the bedroom of Big Daddy's son Brick because he's broken his ankle.

Brick turned to drink after the death of his friend Skipper. Both were professional football players. Now, disillusioned with life, Brick can't stand his wife Maggie and refuses to respond to her passion.

Lesley Harcourt produces an astonishing performance in the first act as the garrulous, insecure Maggie who is desperate for a child. Hers is a huge part and she comes over as sensual, concerned for her husband's welfare yet cunning and manipulative when the occasion demands.

Dugald Bruce-Lockhart has to play a supporting role in the first act until Brick reveals why he's so disenchanted with life. He perfectly captures his disdain for his wife and his standoffish approach reaches a climax when Maggie says their relationship makes her feel like a cat on a hot tin roof. "So, jump off then," Brick retorts.

Bruce-Lockhart grows in stature during the second act when his relationship with his father is brought into the spotlight. Big Daddy ushers the rest of the family out of the bedroom so that he can find out why his son has taken to the bottle. Here Bruce-Lockhart convincingly shows resentment over how his life's turned out, anger when Big Daddy questions his sexuality and mental as well as physical pain when the two of them get into a fight.

Aaron Shirley is equally stirring as bombastic, defiant Big Daddy who's been told he's not dying of cancer, as the whole family believed, and doesn't care who he upsets. Tennessee Williams, who found the inspiration for Big Daddy in his father, thought Big Daddy was probably the finest character he created; Shirley undoubtedly does the part justice.

Another fine performance comes from Christine Absalom as Big Mama, the fussy, dependent mother who believes that love is the answer to everything.

The third act explores the relationships between all the family members who, on realising that Big Daddy is after all close to death, reveal their true selves as they squabble over who should inherit his fortune.

In the final act there's so much malice and so many lies, ending in an unexpected victory for one of them, that it's difficult to believe the Broadway version could in any way have been as powerful as the original.

In Baron's production the quality of the acting is exceptional, Edward Lipscomb's design is commendable and Jeanine Davies's lighting creates exactly the right impression.

Previous Nottingham Playhouse productions have enjoyed London transfers. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* deserves nothing less.

"Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" runs until September 24th, then plays at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry and the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh

Rachel Lynn Brody [reviewed](#) this production at the Royal Lyceum, Edinburgh

Reviewer: [Steve Orme](#)