

Written by Mike Schulz

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Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* opened at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre last Thursday, and I may as well preface by admitting that, before the show started, I couldn't have been more excited, as this classic has long been one of my absolute favorite plays.

Easily the funniest of the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright's full-length works, it's also one of his most emotionally overwhelming; the aching family dynamics among dying plantation owner Big Daddy, his browbeaten wife Big Mama, the childless Brick and Maggie, and the rest of the play's squabblers are rendered with exquisite detail and, of course, gloriously rich language. It's a sprawling yet intimate piece - the continuous action unfurls without scene changes (but with one intermission) - and while it's not as sublimely constructed as Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, it's the next best thing, which is to say, the next best thing to perfection.

I've seen the 1958 Elizabeth Taylor/Paul Newman film version at least three times and PBS's

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1985 *American Playhouse* production (I'm embarrassed to admit this) at least a dozen, yet until last Thursday, I'd never caught *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* on stage. And as the lights dimmed at the Barn Theatre last week, I had two thoughts, probably the same two we *all* have when first encountering stage productions of material we love: "I can't wait for this," and "Please please please don't mess up my play."

I needn't have worried. Richmond Hill's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, under the positively glorious direction of Jalayne Riewerts, is not only a sensational production of Williams' work, but for someone who feels he knows the script backward and forward, a most *surprising* one. I had hoped the show would be well-acted and well-staged, and it most certainly is that. But who could have guessed that this verbose three-act play would zip along so *quickly*?

Riewerts has made the marvelous decision of having the actors deliver much of Williams' dialogue in breathless, overlapping fashion. When the stage is filled with characters - as during the presentation of Big Daddy's birthday cake - several conversations freely tumble over one another, and when Big Daddy and Brick square off, they hurl a torrent of accusations and recriminations simultaneously, and not a moment, not a word, is lost; the sequences have the ebb and flow of real life. (In a break from tradition, the director has also, shrewdly, positioned the telephone *off-stage*, so we can merely hear one end of a conversation while witnessing the conversation of others - a clever, inspired touch.) Yet even when the conversations don't overlap, the performers - nearly actor for actor - jump on their cues and keep the show moving at a breathless clip; this *Cat* is paced within an inch of its life, yet the action never feels rushed. It feels *true*.

It feels truer still whenever John VanDeWoestyne's Big Daddy is on the scene. Intimidatingly powerful and boasting extraordinary vocal control, the actor is in splendid form here; he performs playful tricks with his dialogue, elongating and shortening syllables in unexpected ways, and when his character is waylaid with bad news, VanDeWoestyne makes the sequence devastating - he's visibly shaken, and makes you shake, too. When VanDeWoestyne exits the scene, roaring Big Daddy's epic "*Lying! Dying! Liars!*" rant, it's almost as if we're no longer watching a figure from Williams - it feels like we're watching *Lear*.

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VanDeWoestyne could easily have been the whole show. With the marvelous caliber of talent assembled for Richmond Hill's production, though, he doesn't need to be. Chris White, to my mind, has never been better than he is here as Brick. This is a deeply thought-out interpretation of the role, and he wrenchingly underplays Brick's anger and self-loathing, and when White's simmering disgust reaches a boil, the actor's passion matches VanDeWoestyne's - it's a sight to see. Melissa McBain is both heartbreaking and divinely amusing as Big Mama - her blithely tender air-kisses to her husband are *Cat's* best running gag - and Molly McLaughlin, as Maggie, is clearly focused and touchingly connected to her character; she doesn't quite possess the confidence of her three co-stars, but that's a tall order, and she's

more

than well on her way.

I could go on and on with reasons for loving this *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*: Angela Rathman's snippy, bitter Mae, the actress' suggestive voice like a bracing shot of whiskey. Kevin DeDecker's emotional, wonderfully re-imagined Dr. Baugh.

(The actor's heartfelt work in this minor role also pays off for Don Faust's comedic Gooper, who earns a big laugh with his comment about wishing the doctor had delivered his news more humanely.) The quintet of "no-neck monsters" - Brooke Ashley, Tarah Fisher, Hunter Kuffel, Robert Shore, and

The Bad Seed

's

deliciously evil Hannah Waller - who play brats so enjoyably that you honestly wish they were around

more

often. The discreet emotional violence inherent in Riewerts' staging. (When Big Daddy throws a coat at Mae, or when Brick tosses an empty liquor bottle toward Maggie, there were actual, deserved gasps from the crowd.) The period grace of Erica and Shelli L. Eng's costumes. The fantastically subtle sound design.

But my biggest reason for loving this *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is because everyone on stage - and everyone who worked on the show

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stage - appears

equally

connected to the material, a theatrical happenstance that, as an audience member, you all-too-rarely experience. The participants here haven't just created a piece of theatre; they've created an entire

world,

and it's impossible to imagine Richmond Hill's 2006 season ending on a finer note.

This Kitten Has Claws: "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre through October 15

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For tickets, call (309) 944-2244.