

## This kitten has claws

River Cities' Reader – October 11, 2006 - by Mike Schulz

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 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*.

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 Seeds* 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 *off 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.

## **Richmond Hill rises to challenge of "Cat"**

**Quad City Times – October 15, 2006 - by Ruby Nancy**

Not many groups would attempt Williams' classic

While local and regional audiences do get to see more contemporary Pulitzer Prize-winning dramas than in many other theater markets, the choice of an older script with similar credentials such as Tennessee Williams' "*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*" is pretty darn rare.

As you find out in the director's notes when you attend a performance of this show at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre in Geneseo — which I highly recommend, should any tickets or waiting-list slots still be available when you read this — even the director didn't believe the organization would choose this material.

It's an old-fashioned, real-time drama with a number of heavy emotional layers, and it is frankly more complex than the shows we expect many directors and theater groups to choose.

To be truthful, however, if the occasional theater-goer attended shows on a more regular basis, he or she might be surprised by just how often great writing and complex stories do make it onto local stages.

In the case of this "*Cat*," the decision to launch such an ambitious undertaking was a very good one. Director Jalayne Riewerts has the chops for such a project, and she has found a number of first-rate performers to bring to life Williams' oddly named characters.

A few smaller roles featured less-than-stellar performances at the performance I saw opening weekend, but it is difficult to quibble with minor goofiness when the heart of this work is so superbly done.

Ditto for a couple of wavering Southern accents that only an ex-Southerner would likely notice.

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Molly McLaughlin is languid and limpidly perfect as Maggie, the play's title virtual monologue near the beginning of the show sets up the multi-layered nuance that later unfolds. Her restless, understated diatribe sets the stage — in tone as well as function — for all that follows, and this critical task is wonderfully done.

As the near-mute Brick, who mostly drowns himself in a haze of liquor as Maggie unloads her frustration, Chris White is also excellent. As Brick, he spends a lot of time on stage, even when he has very little to say, and White maintains this disheveled, increasingly whiskey-soaked character throughout the timeline of this show. White's interpretation shows us an understated, lazy veneer that almost — but not quite — conceals great pain, and this kind of thing is incredibly difficult to do. Though, as it happens, White makes it look nearly effortless.

John VanDeWoestyne is also awesome as Big Daddy, lending a surprisingly multi-faceted and moving performance as the angry, blustering patriarch who worked his way up to wealth from absolutely nothing. Big Daddy's conversation with Brick, which is literally and figuratively at the heart of this fine drama, is a work of art — the interplay between two very different, yet amazingly talented performers in a pair of conflicting and intertwined roles. Anyone who appreciates the craft of acting will be thrilled at their work here.

Melissa McBain's almost-oblivious Big Mama is also a finely crafted role, as is the crafty Gooper, played by Don Faust; and Angela Rathman — weighted down by costume and makeup that made it difficult for her to fully nail the brittle belle turned birth mother — still pulled off an acceptable Mae.

Too good to miss — and definitely for adults and teens — this *"Cat on a Hot Tin Roof"* is another "too good to miss" show, so make sure you don't.

## **`Cat on a Hot Tin Roof' full of hot performances**

**Dispatch / Argus – October 13, 2006 - by Julie Jensen**

The Tennessee Williams classic "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" is a real sizzler at the Barn Theater in Geneseo.

Talk about a dysfunctional family! Fine acting, and excellent directing by Jalayne Riewerts, make it possible to have empathy with these characters.

Molly McLaughlin is Maggie the Cat, who is spurned by her husband for reasons that unravel as the action progresses. She is so provocative that it's hard to see how he can resist her.

Brick, her husband, is played by Chris White. He drinks until he hears a click in his head, and this takes so long during the two acts that he's blotto both sooner and later.

He's also in a cast after missing a high hurdle as he tries to relive his days as a professional football player. He hobbles around with one crutch, and when it's out of reach, he tumbles so realistically that one wonders if he'll wear a real cast before the end of the play's run.

John Van DeWoestyne is a superb Big Daddy, a tyrant who bellows at anyone who displeases him. He's Brick's father, and he has just received test results indicating that he doesn't have cancer. The reprieve comes on his 65th birthday, and this new lease on life prompts him to resolve to find a hot female.

He says insulting things about his wife of 40 years, Big Mama, saying he stopped sleeping with her five years earlier.

Melissa McBain plays Big Mama, and she is so attractive that you wonder what's wrong with the old man. She is devoted to him despite his lack of feeling for her. She bursts into tears most convincingly.

Angela Rathman is Mae, or Sister Woman, the wife of Gooper, or Brother Man, played by Don Faust. They have five children, whom Maggie calls "no-neck monsters," and Mae is pregnant again, lording it over the barren Maggie.

The kids are Buster (Hunter Kuffel), Sonny (Robert Shore), Dixie (Hannah Waller), Trixie (Brooke Ashley) and Polly (Tarah Fisher). They're heard off-stage frequently, making plenty of noise, and when they burst in, they fire cap guns and shriek. Their rendition of "Skinner ma rinka dinka dinka, skinner ma rinka doo" is a kick.

Larry d'Autremont is the Rev. Tooker, who comes around hoping for a bequest to his church and is of very little comfort to the family when they need that, and Kevin DeDecker is Dr. Baugh, who has to deliver some very bad news.

The set is a bed-sitting room in a plantation home in the Mississippi Delta, and it works very well.

There's a laugh when Big Mama pulls the preacher down on her lap and tickles him, but this is definitely not a comedy. It's a tragedy, but just perhaps, there may be a brighter tomorrow for Brick and Maggie, the cat on a hot tin roof.

## **Actor overcame stage fright and got hooked on performing**

**Dispatch / Argus – October 8, 2006 - by Claudia Loucks**

Thirteen years ago, Chris White was terrified to step on stage.

Before his first performance in a spring play at Davenport West High School, he was a mess.

"(But) once I got out in the lights, hit my first joke, and got a huge laugh from the audience, I knew I was hooked," he said. "I am still performing and making people laugh."

Mr. White currently is playing Brick in the Richmond Hill Players' production of "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." The show is his second with the Geneseo theater group. His first performance with the Richmond Hill Players was in June of this year, when he was cast as Tom in "Perfect Wedding."



He also was seen on a local stage this year as Randall McMurphy in Playcrafters' "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest."

Born in Davenport, Mr. White lived for many years in Blue Grass, and he got involved in high-school drama after that first experience with stage fright.

"The drama teacher asked me to audition for the play and I decided I would, figuring that I would get a small role if I was lucky, but more likely no role at all," he said. "I ended up getting one of the five leads in the show."

After high school, he lived in Chicago while attending Roosevelt University as a theater major.

"After an unsuccessful stint of college, I started working in most of the professional theaters in Chicago for set construction," Mr. White said, listing the Goodman, Touchstone Organic and Steppenwolf.

He later became the assistant technical director of Roosevelt University's theater department before moving back to the Quad-Cities area.

Having been on stage in numerous productions, Mr. White said his favorite role was probably McMurphy in "Nest."

"The show was a great production, well directed and had an absolutely great cast," he said. "Randle P. McMurphy is a favorite. He is one of the greatest characters I've ever read. He has a very broad and expansive emotional charge throughout the show."

Mr. White named Axel Hammond in "The Nerd," as another of his favorite roles. The show, written by Larry Shue, was produced by Playcrafters in the Barn in 2005.

Other favorite roles of his include an ensemble role in "Full Moon Vagaries," a show which he co-wrote and performed in at The O'Malley Theater in Chicago while he was in college, and Versati in "The Underpants" by Steve Martin, performed for the Ghostlight Theatre company in 2004.

He said it was the persistence of his girlfriend, Jessica, that made him audition for the Richmond Hill Players.

"My biggest support and encouragement has always come from my mother," Mr. White said. "Recently, I can say that if it would not have been for my girlfriend, Jessica, I would not be where I am right now."

When he is not on stage, Mr. White is employed as a security technician for Nightwatch Security Services Inc., and he also works as a player and bartender at ComedySportz.