

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

BY TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

DIRECTED BY ISRAEL HICKS

GEARY THEATER

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SYNOPSIS, CHARACTERS, AND CAST OF

CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof opened at the Morosco Theatre in New York on March 24, 1955, directed by Elia Kazan. On July 10, 1974, the play was restaged by the American Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, Connecticut, with a rewritten third act and other substantial revisions, followed by a Broadway run that opened September 24, 1974, at the ANTA Theatre.

CHARACTERS AND CAST

MARGARET, <i>also called Maggie the Cat</i>	René Augesen
BRICK, <i>Maggie's husband</i>	Michael James Reed
BIG MAMA, <i>Brick's mother</i>	Kathryn McGrath
BIG DADDY, <i>Brick's father</i>	Jack Willis
GOOPER, <i>Brick's bother, also called Brother Man</i>	Rod Gnapp
MAE, <i>Gooper's wife, also called Sister Woman</i>	Anne Darragh
REVEREND TOOKER	Julian López-Morillas
DOCTOR BAUGH	James Carpenter
SOOKEY, <i>a servant</i>	Fannie Lee Lowe
<i>Mae and Gooper's children:</i>	
DIXIE	Anya Jessie Richkind/ Devyn Hocevar-Smith
BUSTER/SONNY	Austin Greene/William Halladey Lanier/ Kevin Matthew Maltz/Tobiah Richkind

THE PLACE

An upstairs bedroom and sitting room of the plantation house of Big Daddy Pollitt, in the Mississippi Delta.

THE TIME

An evening in summer, circa 1955.

SYNOPSIS

ACT ONE. It is the evening of Big Daddy Pollit's birthday and a party is taking place on the lawn of his massive plantation home. Brick, Big Daddy's second son, a former

pro football player and sports announcer, is getting ready for the party in the suite he shares with his wife, Maggie. He wears a cast and hobbles about with a crutch, having broken his ankle the night before by jumping hurdles at the high school athletic field while drunk. Maggie enters, complaining to Brick that one of Mae and Gooper's obnoxious "no-neck monsters" has hit her with a buttered biscuit, so she has to change her clothes. As she changes, Maggie complains about the innuendos her in-laws have been making about her childless state.

Maggie informs Brick that Gooper and Mae are trying to cut Brick out of his inheritance from Big Daddy, who has been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Big Daddy's doctors have assured him and Big Mama that he suffers merely from a spastic colon, but the others have been told the truth. Maggie claims that Mae and Gooper are parading their brood around in hopes of winning Big Daddy's affection and a larger share of the inheritance.

Maggie berates Brick for making their task easier with his drinking, foolish behavior, and general lack of interest in the plantation or anything else in life. Brick is Big Daddy's favorite, and Big Daddy is fond of Maggie, but she is afraid that he will not be willing to leave the estate to an irresponsible drunk with no children. Maggie is determined to fight for and win what she wants: a rich life in a secure home with a loving husband and children.

Mae enters and an argument erupts as Maggie ridicules Mae's children and Mae berates Maggie for having no children and a husband who is a drunk and won't make love to her. Mae is called away by Gooper, and Maggie begs Brick to end his cold treatment of her, to make love to her and conceive a child. She compares herself to a cat on a hot tin roof, trying to endure the pain for as long as she can.

Big Mama enters, first rejoicing in her belief that there is nothing wrong Big Daddy, then questioning Maggie about the problems in her marriage with Brick. Big Mama leaves, intending to bring the party to Brick as he is unable or unwilling to come downstairs. Continuing her argument with Brick, Maggie reveals that Big Daddy is in fact dying, and that the family plans to tell Big Mama later that night.

As Maggie finishes dressing, she forces Brick to talk about the death of his best friend from college, Skipper. Skipper began drinking after he and Brick had established their own pro football team. A spinal injury kept Brick home for a few away games, which Maggie attended with Skipper. After drinking together one night, Maggie accused Skipper of being in love with her husband. In response, Skipper attempted to prove his manhood to her in bed, but when he was unable to perform, he assumed that her accusation was right. Skipper abandoned his career in profootball and succumbed to the world of drugs and alcohol, which killed him.

Losing his temper, Brick tries to silence Maggie by attacking her with his crutch, and he falls. Dixie, one of the children, comes in and mocks Maggie for not having children. The rest of the family arrives to continue Big Daddy's birthday celebration.

ACT TWO. Big Mama, Big Daddy, Reverend Tooker, Dr. Baugh, Mae, and Gooper join Brick and Maggie in their bedroom. Big Mama is overjoyed, reveling in the news that Big Daddy will live, but Big Daddy is less than enthusiastic about the celebration. He ignores the family's bickering and insincere birthday wishes, instead interrogating Brick about his broken ankle, demanding to know if he broke it "layin' a woman."

Everyone else retires, leaving Big Daddy and Brick alone. Brick would rather just continue drinking until he feels the "click" that gives him peace, but Big Daddy wants to have a frank talk with his son. Trying to elicit what is troubling Brick, Big Daddy describes his relationship with Big Mama over the years, assuring Brick that his troubles with marriage are common and manageable. As Brick remains unresponsive, Big Daddy steals his crutch and demands to know why he drinks. Brick expresses his disgust with the "mendacity" (lies and untruths) that surrounds them. Big Daddy observes that Brick started drinking when Skipper died, and Brick reluctantly tries to explain how Skipper cracked up when Maggie put it in his head that he was in love with Brick. Brick tells Big Daddy that he abandoned Skipper, by refusing to speak to him when Skipper called to confess just before his death. Big Daddy tries to let Brick know that he would accept any truth about Brick's relationship with Skipper, so long as Brick actually faces the truth himself. Big Daddy tells Brick that Brick's disgust is really with himself, for not facing his friend's truth. Brick answers that Big Daddy's willingness to tolerate lies is no better, accepting happy returns for his birthday when he knows there won't be any more birthdays. When Brick realizes he has just revealed to Big Daddy the bitter truth that he is dying, he apologizes; Big Daddy storms out, denouncing his family and all of the world as "lying dying liars."

ACT THREE. The commotion brings the rest of the family back into the room. Mae tells Gooper to put the children to bed and asks the reverend to stay, as a friend of the family, while they tell Big Mama the truth about Big Daddy's condition. After continued bickering among Gooper, Mae, and Maggie, Big Mama is finally seated and Doc Baugh and Gooper tell her about the results of Big Daddy's tests: he does in fact have advanced cancer, which will bring him great pain. Big Mama's reaction is explosive and she insists that Brick come in from the gallery to comfort her. Gooper tries to talk to Big Mama about his plans for Big Daddy's estate, but she adamantly refuses to listen.

Amid the confusion, Big Daddy enters from the gallery to find out what the fuss is all about. Maggie announces that she has yet to present Big Daddy with his true birthday gift: the shocking revelation that she is carrying Brick's child. Big Daddy confirms Maggie's statement and orders Gooper to bring his lawyer to see him in the morning. As Big Daddy leaves to "survey his kingdom" from the roof, Big Mama follows, leaving Mae and Gooper to accuse Maggie of lying. Once they are alone, Maggie thanks Brick for not exposing her lie, and he achieves the peacefulness he has been seeking all night with a final shot of alcohol. Maggie removes all the bottles from the liquor cabinet, telling Brick that she will now take charge: first they will transform her lie into truth (her doctor has told her it is the perfect time for her to conceive), after which she will bring back the liquor and they will get drunk together. Maggie tells Brick that she really does love him. He answers with a sad smile: "Wouldn't it be funny if that was true?"

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Thomas Lanier (“Tennessee”) Williams was born on March 26, 1911, in Columbus, Mississippi. The most-performed—and most autobiographical—American playwright, Williams wrote some seventy plays, fifteen film scripts, two novels (*The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* [1950] and *Moise and the World of Reason* [1975]), and an autobiography (*Memoirs* [1975]), as well as scores of essays, poems, and short stories. His most famous works appeared on Broadway and in film throughout the 1940s and 1950s and number among the great classics of American theater. His first success came with *The Glass Menagerie* in 1944, followed by *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1947, which won the Pulitzer Prize. In 1953 *Camino Real* was commercially unsuccessful, but *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) also won a Pulitzer Prize and was successfully filmed, as were *The Rose Tattoo* (Tony Award, 1951), *Orpheus Descending* (1957), *The Night of the Iguana* (1961), *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), and *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959). His later, less known plays include *THIS IS (An Entertainment)* (which had its world premiere at A.C.T. in 1975), *Vieux Carré* (1977), *A Lovely Sunday at Crève Coeur* (1978–79), and *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* (1980).

Williams died in February 1983 in New York after apparently choking on the cap of a pill bottle.



“I DISCOVERED WRITING AS
AN ESCAPE FROM A WORLD
OF REALITY IN WHICH I
FELT UNCOMFORTABLE.”

—Tennessee Williams

FACTS ABOUT ME

BY TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

I was born in the Episcopal rectory of Columbus, Miss., an old town on the Tombigbee River which was so dignified and reserved that there was a saying, only slightly exaggerated, that you had to live there a whole year before a neighbor would smile at you on the street. As my grandfather, with whom we lived, was the Episcopal clergyman, we were accepted without probation. My father, a man with the formidable name of Cornelius Coffin Williams, was a man of ancestry that was descended on one side, the Williamses, from pioneer Tennessee stock and on the other from early settlers of Nantucket Island in New England. My mother was descended from Quakers. Roughly there was a combination of Puritan and Cavalier strains in my blood, which may be accountable for the conflicting impulses I often represent in the people I write about.

I was christened Thomas Lanier Williams. It is a nice enough name, perhaps a little too nice. It sounds like it might belong to the son of a writer who turns out sonnet sequences to Spring. As a matter of fact, my first literary award was \$25.00 from a Woman's Club for doing exactly that, three sonnets dedicated to Spring. I hasten to add that I was still pretty young. Under that name I published a good deal of lyric poetry, which was a bad imitation of Edna Millay. When I grew up I realized this poetry wasn't much good and I felt the name had been compromised so I changed it to Tennessee Williams, the justification being mainly that the Williamses had fought the Indians for Tennessee and I had already discovered that the life of a young writer was going to be something similar to the defense of a stockade against a band of savages.

When I was about twelve, my father, a traveling salesman, was appointed to an office position in St. Louis and so we left the rectory and moved north. It was a tragic move. Neither my sister [Rose] nor I could adjust ourselves to life in a Midwestern city. The schoolchildren made fun of our Southern speech and manners. I remember gangs of kids following me home yelling "Sissy!" and home was not a very pleasant refuge. It was a perpetually dim little apartment in a wilderness of identical brick and concrete structures with no grass and no trees nearer than the park. In the South we had never been conscious of the fact that we were economically less fortunate than others. We lived as well as anyone else. But in St. Louis we suddenly discovered there were two kinds of people, the rich and the poor, and that we belonged more to the latter. If we walked far enough west we came into a region of fine residences set in beautiful lawns. But where we lived, to which we must always return, were ugly rows of apartment buildings the color of dried blood and

mustard. If I had been born to this situation I might not have resented it deeply. But it was forced upon my consciousness at the most sensitive age of childhood. It produced a shock and a rebellion that has grown into an inherent part of my work. It was the beginning of the social consciousness which I think has marked most of my writing. I am glad that I received this bitter education for I don't think any writer has much purpose back of him unless he feels bitterly the inequities of the society he lives in. I have no acquaintance with political and social dialectics. If you ask what my politics are, I am a Humanitarian.

That is the social background of my life!

I entered college during the great American depression and after a couple of years I couldn't afford to continue but had to drop out and take a clerical job in the shoe company that employed my father. The two years I spent in that corporation were indescribable torment to me as an individual but of immense value to me as a writer for they gave me first-hand knowledge of what it means to be a small wage earner in a hopelessly routine job. I had been writing since childhood and I continued writing while I was employed by the shoe company. When I came home from work I would tank up on black coffee so I could remain awake most of the night, writing short stories, which I could not sell. Gradually my health broke down. One day, coming home from work, I collapsed and was removed to the hospital. The doctor said I couldn't go back to the shoe company. Soon as that was settled I recovered and went back South to live with my grandparents in Memphis where they had

moved since my grandfather's retirement from the ministry. Then I began to have a little success with my writing. I became self-sufficient. I put myself through two more years of college and got a B.A. degree at the University of Iowa in 1938. Before then and for a couple of years afterwards I did a good deal of traveling



Tennessee Williams entering his home, 1948 (© Bettmann/CORBIS)

around and I held a great number of part-time jobs of great diversity. It is hard to put the story in correct chronology for the last ten years of my life are a dizzy kaleidoscope. I don't quite believe all that has happened to me, it seems it must have happened to five or ten other people.

My first real recognition came in 1940 when I received a Rockefeller fellowship and wrote *Battle of Angels*, which was produced by the Theatre Guild at the end of that year with Miriam Hopkins in the leading role. It closed in Boston during the tryout run but I have rewritten it a couple of times since then and still have faith in it. My health was so impaired that I landed in 4F after a medical examination of about five minutes' duration. My jobs in this period included running an all-night elevator in a big apartment-hotel, waiting on tables and reciting verse in the Village, working as a teletype operator for the U.S. Engineers in Jacksonville, Florida, waiter and cashier for a small restaurant in New Orleans, ushering at the Strand Theatre on Broadway. All the while I kept on writing, writing, not with any hope of making a living at it but because I found no other means of expressing things that seemed to demand expression. There was never a moment when I did not find life to be immeasurably exciting to experience and to witness, however difficult it was to sustain.

From a \$17.00 a week job as a movie usher I was suddenly shipped off to Hollywood, where MGM paid me \$250.00 a week. I saved enough money out of my six months there to keep me while I wrote *The Glass Menagerie*. I don't think the story from that point on, requires any detailed consideration.

This essay originally appeared on the jacket of the record album *Tennessee Williams: Reading from His Works* (Caedmon Records, 1952).

“THIS IS LIFE”

BY MICHAEL PALLER

Shakespeare, like his Elizabethan playwriting colleagues, was an eager plunderer of other people’s work for use in his own plays—it was the only way to satisfy his audience’s bottomless appetite for new work (it didn’t hurt, either, that there was no such thing as copyright law). Tennessee Williams was an equally enthusiastic pilferer: he stole from himself. Time and again he would revisit old material: sometimes new plays would emerge from old ones (*Orpheus Descending* of 1957 is a much-improved rethinking of 1940’s *Battle of Angels*; the 1947 *Summer and Smoke* begat the 1964 *Eccentricities of a Nightingale*). On occasion, one-act plays blossomed into full-length works, as was the case with *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real*, which lost the first four words of its title but gained the equivalent of an act, and *Confessional*, which became *Small Craft Warnings*. More often, short stories morphed into plays: “Portrait of a Girl in Glass” eventually became *The Glass Menagerie*; “Man Bring This Up Road” was the starting point for the undervalued *The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore*; “The Angel in the Alcove” became *Vieux Carré* via a couple of one-acts; “The Night of the Iguana” became the play of the same name; and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* began life in Williams’s imagination as one of his best short stories, “Three Players of a Summer Game.”

That story, written 1951–52, is about a wealthy young southern planter, Brick Pollitt, who for reasons never explained, takes to drink and throws “his life away as if it were something disgusting that he had suddenly found in his hands.” The pieces are swiftly collected by his wife, Margaret, who seizes control of Brick’s Mississippi Delta plantation, acquires Brick’s power of attorney, and assumes management of all his business affairs. That’s not all she seizes. In a diamond-hard passage of prose, Williams describes a remarkable transformation that occurs between wife and husband:

It was as though she had her lips fastened to some invisible wound in his body through which drained out of him and flowed into her the assurance and vitality that he had owned before marriage. . . . She became vivid as Brick disappeared behind the veil of his liquor. . . . She abruptly stopped being quaint and dainty. She was now apt to have dirty fingernails which she covered with scarlet enamel.

Margaret cuts her hair short and replaces her husband in the world of male power by inhaling his masculinity, leaving him an empty shell—or rather an empty highball glass awaiting the next freshener. The last time we see them, Margaret is driving through town

in Brick's Pierce Arrow touring car, while Brick sits, swaying in the back, "grinning with a senseless amiability." We never learn what caused Brick's collapse, why he takes a mistress, or why, while dashing across a wide front lawn with football in hand, he stumbles, falls, and then sprawls beneath a sprinkler wearing only his underwear, before quietly being taken away by the police. Nor do we get any inkling of what will happen next between him and Margaret. What we do get is the portrait of a weak man dominated by an increasingly powerful woman. The roots are all buried in a powerful subtext.

The journey from "Three Players of a Summer Game" to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was tortured. As Williams wrestled with the material in his Key West studio in 1953, he suffered from a terrific writer's block, and his drinking ratcheted up. He wrote his agent, Audrey Wood, that he had to drink in the morning before being able to work, but that the results were so poor that he ended the day more depressed than when he began. He thought about psychotherapy (but put it off until the twin crises of the failure of *Orpheus Descending* and his father's death drove him to it in 1957). What caused Williams so much trouble? We can't know for certain, but one explanation might be found in Williams's attempt to make clear the cause of Brick's paralysis. Williams invented a relationship with a man called Skipper, Brick's best friend during college and then teammate on a pro football team, The Dixie Stars. Or is "best friend" the right way to put it? Actors, directors, and critics have been at odds for years as to whether Brick is gay, latently gay, straight and deeply insensitive to Skipper's feelings for him, or some strange combination of all of the above. Something between Brick and Skipper (who is dead, having drunk himself to death) has caused Brick to become an alcoholic and cast Maggie (as Margaret becomes in the play) from his bed.

Williams himself seemed uncertain about the nature of the relationship, and when asked about it gave different answers at different times, each one carefully shaded and ambiguous. In a 1954 letter to the play's director, Elia Kazan, when the two were discussing the revisions that ultimately became famous and problematic, Williams provocatively wrote, "I now believe that, in the deeper sense, not the literal sense, Brick is homosexual with a heterosexual adjustment: a thing I've suspected of several others, such as Brando, for instance." But even this is less than clear on second reading. How is someone gay or straight "not in the literal sense"?

Williams's troubles with the play continued well into rehearsal, where he made—and then unmade—many dozens of changes in the text. The major revisions that Williams made at Kazan's urging are well known; Williams described them when he first published the text in 1955, complete with two versions of Act Three. One, called simply "Act Three," was the version Williams submitted to Kazan in 1954; the other, called the "Broadway Version," was the one that Kazan actually directed the following year. The alterations that Kazan requested fell

into three categories: he wanted Maggie to be more feminine and more “sympathetic” to the audience; he wanted Big Daddy to appear in Act Three (he didn’t in any of Williams’s earlier drafts), and he wanted the audience to see that Brick had gone through a significant change as a result of his searing confrontation with Big Daddy in Act Two. Williams made these changes because he wanted Kazan to direct the play, but he was not happy about it. Indeed, when the American Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, Connecticut, mounted a major revival in 1974 (which subsequently moved to Broadway), he undid most of them. He then published the new version (known as the “1974 revision,” containing only the newest Act Three), which is the edition director Israel Hicks has chosen for A.C.T.

Although Williams wrote in 1955 that he “embraced wholeheartedly” Kazan’s suggestion to soften Maggie’s rough edges, his letters say otherwise. While mulling Kazan’s ideas, he wrote Audrey Wood, “I am not sure this new ending [i.e., the Broadway Version] is what I want. Do you think it contains an echo of ‘Tea and Sympathy’? The other, harder ending of it didn’t. Here is another case of a woman giving a man back his manhood, while in the original conception it was about a vital, strong woman dominating a weak man and achieving her will.” He wanted Maggie to be as tough at the end as she is at the beginning (and she enters the play in a fighting mood), but he thought that the Broadway Version of Act Three was sentimental, and a falsification of Maggie’s tenacious nature. In the version Kazan first read, Maggie, who knows what it is to be poor and is determined never to be poor again, sees what she wants and takes it—and will drag Brick with her if necessary. In the Broadway Version, however, her interest is, as Williams wrote Wood, in giving Brick back his manhood. This was one of the changes that Williams removed in 1974.

Although Williams was sufficiently dissatisfied with Kazan’s desired revisions that he published both versions of Act Three in the play’s early editions, he didn’t spurn the resulting Pulitzer Prize or New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award. Still, while the positive reviews were some of the best professional news Williams had had in years, niggling doubts remained in the minds of some as to just what Brick’s problem was, and *who* he was.

John McClain of the *Journal American* wrote that Brick “finds himself unable to rid himself of an infatuation for his college room-mate . . . and hence is incapable of [a] normal relationship with his wife or any protracted period of sobriety.” Robert Coleman, writing in the *Daily Mirror*, described the relationship with Skipper as “unnatural.” Although the *Daily News’s* John Chapman felt “frustrated . . . some heart or purpose or point is missing,” it was clear to him that Brick was “a drunkard and a queer.” (Well into the 1960s, journalistic and academic critics alike were perfectly relaxed about using language like that.)

Perhaps the most interesting case was Walter Kerr, then the daily critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*. Throughout their respective careers, Kerr was one of Williams’s major

champions. In *Cat*, Kerr sensed a major drama with a major hole. The play, he wrote, “is a beautifully written, perfectly directed, stunningly acted play of evasion: evasion on the part of its principal character, evasion, perhaps, on the part of its playwright.” When Kerr saw the 1974 revival, he viewed with different eyes what amounted to a different play, in a different time. The new production “displays the work as something clearer than it seemed to be in its original and vastly successful Broadway run, clearer and more honest than some of us at first supposed,” he wrote in the *New York Times*. “An unresolved mystery has always seemed to envelope Brick. Was he not homosexual, did Williams mean him to be but—given the discreet silences of 20 years ago—cautiously refuse to say so? The answer comes exacerbatingly clear—to me, at least—in the new mounting.” The answer was “yes.” Nonetheless, the point is ambiguous enough that the answer today is likely to differ according to who is answering.

In all versions of the play, of course, Williams filled out Brick’s world, introducing Big Mama, Mae, Gooper, and the five No-Neck Monsters, but in every iteration, Maggie and Brick are the center of his concerns. What do they have in common that many of the other characters lack? A desire to tell the truth, almost an instinct for it. “Yes, yes, yes! Truth, truth!” Maggie says. She admires Big Daddy, she tells Brick, because he “is what he is and he makes no bones about it.” Big Daddy, too, is a truth-teller who smells “the powerful and obnoxious odor of mendacity” when he enters in (the 1954 and 1974) Act Three just as Gooper reveals his plan to take control of the estate on Big Daddy’s death. Brick is in the habit of telling the truth—he won’t disguise his drinking, or the fact that he forgot Big Daddy’s 65th birthday. So being unable to face the truth of his relationship to Skipper—whatever it was—is most painful. Indeed, the play dramatizes one of Williams’s favorite themes: to tell the truth amidst the lies, in this case, the lies families tell to each other, that we tell to ourselves. Discussing *Cat* in a 1957 interview, Williams was referring to Brick and Maggie when he said,

I think that deliberate, conscienceless mendacity, the acceptance of falsehood and hypocrisy, is the most dangerous of sins. . . . I meant for the audience to discover how people erect false values by not facing what is true in their natures, by having to live a lie, and I hoped the audience would admire the heroic persistence of life and vitality; and I hoped they would feel the thwarted desire of people to reach each other through this fog, this screen of incomprehension. What I want most of all is to catch the quality of existence and experience. I want people to think, “This is life.”

Indeed it is: chaotic yet ordered, clear yet mysterious, a play that acts on our minds like . . . well, one hesitates to say it, but like a cat on a hot tin roof.

A TENNESSEE WILLIAMS TIMELINE

1907 On June 3, Cornelius Coffin “c. c.” Williams (1879–1957), a descendant of Tennessee pioneers, marries Edwina Dakin (1884–1980), the daughter of a Mississippi rector.

1909 Edwina gives birth to Rose Isabel. c. c. works as the manager of three telephone exchanges in Gulfport, Mississippi.

1911 After losing his job with the phone company, c. c. takes a job as a shoe salesman. Thomas Lanier (later “Tennessee”) Williams III is born in Columbus, Mississippi, on March 26.

1918 The family moves to St. Louis when c. c. is offered an office job. Edwina and the children are devastated by the move to such a crowded, polluted, urban setting. Rose begins to retreat from the world.

1919 Dakin, Tennessee and Rose’s brother, is born.

1925 Tennessee attends Soldan High School, the school mentioned in *The Glass Menagerie*. He feels like an outsider because of his southern accent. He writes movie reviews for the school newspaper. Rose finds companionship only with her brother and spends much of her time with a glass collection she treasures.

1927 With a piece entitled “Can a Good Wife be a Good Sport?” Tennessee wins third place in a national essay contest sponsored by the magazine *The Smart Set*.

1929 On October 29, “Black Friday,” the u.s. stock exchange collapses, signaling the beginning of the Great Depression, which by 1932 leaves more than 15 million Americans unemployed—approximately 25% of the work force.

1932 c. c. withdraws Tennessee from the University of Missouri to put him to work in a warehouse for the International Shoe Corporation.

1933 On March 23, Hitler becomes dictator of Germany; on December 5, Prohibition is repealed in the United States.

1936 In Spain, an army revolt led by Emilio Mola and General Francisco Franco begins a civil war. In August, Spanish playwright Federico Garcia Lorca is arrested by Franco’s forces for his association with Republican intellectuals and is shot at dawn after having been forced to dig his own grave.

1937 After years of withdrawal from life, Rose is diagnosed as schizophrenic and committed to an institution. Tennessee has moved away from home to pursue his career as a writer.

There are 177 sit-down strikes in the United States: auto workers in Flint, electrical workers in St. Louis, shirt workers in Tennessee, broom workers in Colorado, trash collectors in Connecticut, gravediggers in New Jersey, and 17 blind workers at the New York Guild for the Jewish Blind.

1938 Tennessee graduates from the University of Iowa. In September, the Munich Conference takes place, in which Chamberlain of Great Britain, Daladier of France, Hitler of Germany, and Mussolini of Italy agree to transfer the Sudetenland (a part of Czechoslovakia populated by many German-speaking people) to Germany.

1939 The short story "A Field of Blue Children" is the first work to appear under the name Tennessee Williams. Four of his one-act plays win a \$100 prize in the Group Theater's American play contest. His plays are sent to agent Audrey Wood, whom he meets in September. She becomes the force behind his success. In March, Hitler invades the rest of Czechoslovakia. Spanish Republicans in Madrid surrender to Franco, ending the Spanish Civil War. Britain and France agree to support Poland if it is invaded by Hitler. In September, Germany invades Poland. Britain and France declare war on Germany, and World War II begins.

1940 Williams receives a Rockefeller grant of \$1,000. *Battle of Angels* is staged by the Theatre Guild in New York. Chamberlain resigns as prime minister of Britain and Winston Churchill replaces him, forming the National Government. Germany invades France; 300,000 British and Allied forces are evacuated from Dunkirk, a city on the coast of northern France, to safety on English soil. In June, Italy declares war on Britain and France. German forces invade Paris. France surrenders, concluding an armistice with Germany.

1941 While living in New Orleans, Williams begins the short story "Portrait of a Girl in Glass." In June, Germany invades the USSR. On December 7, the Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor.

1943 A lobotomy is performed on Williams's sister, Rose (now 34 years old), after multiple periods of hospitalization for nervous disorders. Commissioned by MGM to write a script for Lana Turner, Williams adapts "Portrait" into a screenplay called *The Gentleman Caller*.

1944 Williams reworks *The Gentleman Caller*, renamed *The Glass Menagerie*. The production opens in Chicago on December 26. After a first week of poor audience turnout, the producers are ready to close the show. But thanks to favorable reviews, *Menagerie* begins to sell out.

1945 *The Glass Menagerie* opens on Broadway and receives the New York Drama Critics' Award for best play of the year. Williams begins work on *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

1946 Empowered by the gift of half the royalties from *The Glass Menagerie* from Tennessee, Edwina is able to separate from her husband. Although c. c. is opposed to the separation despite 37 years of marital discord, he gives Edwina their house in Clayton, Missouri, and half his stock in the International Show Company.

1947 *A Streetcar Named Desire* wins the New York Drama Critics' Award and Pulitzer Prize.

1948 With the success of *Streetcar*, Williams travels to London for an overseas production of *The Glass Menagerie*, directed by John Gielgud and with Helen Hayes as Amanda.

1950 Williams's first novel, *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, is published.

1951 *The Rose Tattoo* is produced.

1952 Williams publishes a short story entitled "Three Players of a Summer Game." This story is the seed of the Brick-Maggie plot line in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

1955 *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* premieres at the Morosco Theatre on Broadway. It wins the New York Drama Critics' Award and Pulitzer Prize.

1956 The film *Baby Doll* is released. A Broadway revival of *The Glass Menagerie* allows veterans of World War II to see the play for the first time.

1961 Frank Merlo, Williams's lover since 1947, dies of cancer.

1965 The 20th anniversary of *The Glass Menagerie* prompts a second Broadway revival.

1974 *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is revived by the ANTA Playhouse on Broadway.

1975 Williams publishes his *Memoirs*.

1983 Tennessee Williams dies in New York on February 24, having choked on a bottle cap.

1990 *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is revived on Broadway, with Kathleen Turner as Maggie the Cat, Charles Durning as Big Daddy, and Daniel Hugh Kelly as Brick .

2004 *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is revived on Broadway yet again, with Ashley Judd as Maggie, Ned Beatty as Big Daddy, and Jason Patric as Brick.

2005 *The Glass Menagerie* is revived on Broadway with Jessica Lange as Amanda; *A Streetcar Named Desire* is revived on Broadway with Natasha Richardson as Blanche and John C. Reilly as Stanley. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* celebrates its 50th anniversary.

TO A FRIEND WHOSE WORK HAS COME TO NOTHING

W. B. YEATS (1865–1939)

Now all the truth is out,
Be Secret and take defeat
From any brazen throat,
For how can you compete,

Being Honor bred, with one
Who, were it proved he lies
Were neither shamed in his own
Nor in his neighbors' eyes?

Bred to a harder thing
Than Triumph, turn away
And like a laughing string
Whereon mad fingers play

**Amid a place of stone,
Be secret and exult,
Because of all things known
That is most difficult.**

The last stanza (in bold) was chosen by playwright Tennessee Williams as an epigraph for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT

DYLAN THOMAS (1914–53)

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

**And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.**

SOMETHING KEPT ON ICE

BY MICHAEL PALLER

I

In 1953, as Tennessee Williams recovered from the failure of *Camino Real* on Broadway, an ongoing campaign against gay men and lesbians in America, which had begun with the advent of World War II, broadened and intensified. Days after *Camino Real's* opening, Williams and his lover, Frank Merlo, left New York and returned to their bungalow in Key West. Two months earlier, at the order of the mayor, Miami police had raided several gay bars and cruising areas following the murders of two gay men who had been picked up in bars. What followed was a classic example of victimizing the victims. The City Council passed a law requiring professional chaperones in movie theaters to protect teenage customers from homosexual predators; it approved legislation forbidding the serving or selling of alcohol to homosexuals. The mayor then called for a change in the law so that gay men and lesbians could be prosecuted under an existing white slavery act. By the end of 1953, the names of those arrested for “homosexual offenses” in Miami were made available to police departments across the southern part of the state.¹

Settled in his studio in Key West, Williams understood what was happening. He had seen gay bashing in Key West and Miami before. Three years earlier, he had described the persecution of homosexuals in Key West in two letters to his friend Paul Bigelow. On April 5, 1950, he described a number of incidents of harassment:

Every girl in town has been booked on vagrancy. As far as I know, at this point we are the sole exceptions. Erna and her little family have fled from the Keys. They were refused drinks and told by the management (at an after-hours joint) that they were on the “undesirable list.” The pianist at the Trade Winds was hauled in and Lyle Weaver, organist at the Bamboo, was told to be out of town by the fifteenth. Michelle from Hector’s is out on \$250 bond. He is about the only one of the bunch that refused to plead guilty. Of course Pat, the Female Imp at the Cabana, was almost the first to get the ax. . . . It is funny, but also pretty frightening and disgusting as an example of how Fascistic little southern communities can become when they have a mind to. There are sixteen different kinds of “vagrancy” in Florida. All you have to do is walk down Duval after dark if they are out for you.²

A week later, he brought Bigelow up to date:

I am inclined to go along with you in your analysis of the Key West Situation. I am told that these clean-ups nearly always coincide with the “fin de saison” and in this instance, along with a hotly contested local election. It doesn’t make it much more pleasant, but for the moment, at least, the pressure seems to have eased up and Frank and I have not yet felt the heavy hand of the law.³

As usual, Williams’s response to discrimination would be restless artistry. He set to work revising *Camino Real* for publication before traveling to Houston to direct his friend Donald Windham’s play *The Starless Air*. Williams left Houston before the opening, drove to Memphis to see his grandfather, then by train went on to New York, whence he and Merlo sailed for Europe early in June. Following a brief stay in Rome, they traveled to Spain, then back to Rome, then on to Vienna, Venice, Zurich, Spain again, and southern Italy. By early autumn, Williams was in Tangier with Paul Bowles. At the end of October, he was back in New York.⁴

His habitual restlessness was now compounded by a serious inability to write. No place he visited proved any more conducive to work than the last, and as the weeks wore on, he became increasingly bad company for Merlo and anyone else who crossed his path. In mid October, he wrote Audrey Wood that he had to drink in the morning before being able to write, but that the results were so poor that he would end the day more depressed than when he began.

Back in New York, he moved into an apartment on East 58th Street near First Avenue. From there, Williams could have observed what was becoming a ritual in American politics: the election-year series of roundups, arrests, and gay bashings. As a run-up to the mayoral elections of 1953, police raided gay bars and swept the dunes and beaches where gay men still gathered before Labor Day. Gay men were arrested by the dozens on Sutton Place, a popular cruising area minutes away from Williams’s apartment. As usual, the names of those arrested appeared in the next day’s newspapers.⁵

After a brief stay in New York, Williams pulled up stakes again, and with Merlo and the Reverend Dakin, who had joined them on their return from Europe, headed for New Orleans. Here, too, the gay population was under siege. The police recently had arrested 64 women at a lesbian bar in the French Quarter; the next day, the courtrooms were full of men and women arrested at other bars all over the city.⁶

II

In 1952, Williams wrote a short story called “Three Players of a Summer Game” about marital infidelity and the mysterious transfer of gender characteristics from a husband—a wealthy Southern planter named Brick Politt—to his wife, Margaret. In 1953–54, as Williams fought his writer’s block with work and alcohol, he transformed this story into a play about a man unable to acknowledge his homosexuality for fear of what the world might do with the news. In fleshing out the material from short story to full-length play, and probing Brick’s psyche which earlier he had left untouched, Williams added key elements that complicated the play considerably—seemingly as much for himself as later for director, audience, and critics.

Perhaps in raising the issue of homosexuality and how a gay man could be paralyzed with the fear of the very real consequences of exposure, he was reacting to the events occurring around him in Miami, New York, New Orleans, and elsewhere. At the same time, he was reaching back into his days as an unattached and recently out gay man. In Provincetown in 1940, he’d fallen in love with a young dancer named Kip Kiernan. He wrote long letters to Donald Windham describing, in the most Whitmanesque terms, the beauty of Kip’s body and the ecstasy of sex with him. The affair, however, ended badly. A friend of Kip’s convinced him that Williams was trying to convert him into a homosexual, and Kip withdrew. Williams threw a boot at the head of the interfering woman. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams rearranges the scene. Maggie recalls to Brick how she told Skipper (Brick’s best friend who is dead when the play begins), “STOP LOVIN’ MY HUSBAND OR TELL HIM HE’S GOT TO LET YOU ADMIT IT TO HIM!” and Brick hurls his crutch at her head. In trying to make Skipper (and perhaps Brick) face the truth, Maggie creates a situation far worse than did her real-life counterpart: Kip broke off with Williams, and the playwright, although traumatized and broken-hearted, moved on. As a result of Maggie’s insistence on truth, Skipper slides into alcohol and suicide and Brick is seized by a paralyzing guilt.⁷

When Williams fled to Mexico in the wake of Kip’s crushing rejection in 1940, he met a young man who wanted to have an affair with him. He described the man to Donald Windham as a wealthy former football star for the University of Michigan who now did little but talk of suicide. This ex-football star may well have been a model for Brick Politt in the short story, but there Williams submerged the man’s homosexual and suicidal feelings. As he worked on the play, he resurrected both, and now traces of the football star are found not only in Brick, but in his athletic companion Skipper, whose name bears more than a faint echo of the dancer’s for whom a younger Williams fell so hard, and by whom he’d been so badly hurt.⁸

Williams's heart was not nearly as calcified as he had both hoped and feared, and Kip was not so easily forgotten (for years Williams carried a photo of him and reproduced it in *Memoirs*). Nor did the hurt Kip inflicted fully heal. Skipper will die a death that Williams doesn't specify, but is a projection of Williams's own worst fear: dying alone and rejected.

If Williams was exacting a psychological revenge on Kip in "Two Players of a Summer Game" and *Cat* by killing him off, it was probably an unconscious one, and all the more damaging, psychologically and dramaturgically, for being psychically unavailable.⁹ It also probably filled him with guilt. For as deeply as Williams was wounded by Kip, he continually punished himself for transforming him, and others (his sister, Rose, especially), into material he could exploit in his work. Williams hated using other people's misfortunes as material, but as a writer he had no other choice. As late as 1981 in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* and *The Notebook of Trigorin*, he would confess his guilty feelings for using people, and try to come to terms with them. Being used by her husband as mere material is Zelda Fitzgerald's accusing refrain toward Scott in *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*. Catharine Holly will allude to such guilt in a famous line in *Suddenly Last Summer*, which, written two years after *Cat*, is a meditation on the ways people use each other and call it love.

Brick's guilt and spiritual paralysis, then, seem to spring as much from Williams's own guilty feelings—not over homosexuality, but concerning his appropriation of other peoples' lives for his own art and enrichment—as from anything in Brick's fictional history. This complication, like Williams's conflicting emotions about Kip, originating as it does outside of the play, causes *Cat's* dramaturgy to be murky at best. Hence the hole in the play's fabric that has so long frustrated and puzzled actors, directors, and critics.

Laying across this hole, as it were, is another layer of guilt, and this one will have to do with homosexuality. But that guilt has nothing to do with being homosexual; rather, it stems from the reluctance to admit it to the world, because the world in the 1950s was so quick to punish the admission. For a writer whose self-appointed task was always to tell the truth, such a lie, clashing with the desire not to lie, could be paralyzing, indeed. Thus, in approaching this dangerous material, Williams was caught in a double bind, trying to reconcile in the play not one but two psychic conflicts.

Williams's own life was becoming severely disrupted by the alcoholic symptoms he described in *Brick*. As those symptoms began exhibiting themselves in 1953, Williams returned to their fictional manifestation in a story from a year earlier and begins to puzzle out their source. The original short story works as well as it does because its subtext is so thoroughly submerged—as unknown to Williams, perhaps, as to the reader: we never learn what causes Brick to take up drinking and to give up on life. In the play, where Williams wants to be at least as concerned with the causes of Brick's drinking as with its effects, the

unconscious material begins to surface and this is where his troubles begin: Williams creates an offstage character whose name is unmistakably close to Kip Kiernan's, and includes in Brick's portrait details from the sad life of the former football star with whom Williams was briefly involved while he was attempting to get over Kip. The material, shot through with his guilt for using it, is still too fraught for Williams to control artistically. Unlike Brick, who needs to have a drink in his hand at all times, Williams, at least according to the letter he wrote to Audrey Wood, needed to drink only in order to write. Whatever was troubling him enough to make him turn seriously to alcohol was a matter that expressed itself, albeit incompletely and confusedly, in his work.

The composition of the play was made yet more difficult by the famous concerns regarding its dramaturgy by the director, Elia Kazan. Kazan, on reading the draft that Williams sent him in the spring of 1954, was interested, but had reservations. As Williams summarized them in a "Note of Explanation" first published in the 1955 mass-market paperback edition of the text, Kazan wanted a Maggie who was softer and whom an audience would find more sympathetic than she was in the original draft (in which she seems closer to the ruthless and masculine Margaret of "Three Players of a Summer Game"). Kazan thought Big Daddy "too vivid and important" to disappear from the play after Act II, and he wanted to see some change in Brick following his "virtual vivisection" by Big

Daddy. Williams wrote in his "Note" that, while he complied with all three of Kazan's wishes, he was comfortable only with the first. Nonetheless, he made the requested changes because he had confidence in Kazan and, despite the failure of *Camino Real*, wanted him to direct. Williams felt at least partially justified in his acquiescence, for the rewrites helped the play to win the Pulitzer Prize. "The reception of the playing-script," Williams wrote in the "Note," "has more than justified, in my opinion, the adjustments made to [Kazan's] influ-



Left: W. Jordan Masee, Sr., who many people believe was an inspiration for *Cat's* Big Daddy. Masee, a friend of Tennessee Williams, was dubbed "Big Daddy" by his granddaughter and often used the expression "nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof."

ence. A failure reaches fewer people, and touches fewer, than does a play that succeeds.” Williams, however, was also of another, less sanguine mind regarding Kazan’s influence. In the mass-market edition, published by Signet shortly after the play opened, Williams included the original Act III, in which Big Daddy does not reappear and Brick does not undergo a significant change resulting from his Act II confrontation with Big Daddy. This was followed by the “Broadway Version,” written at Kazan’s behest. That Williams’s original version comes first, followed by the explanatory “Note” and then the revised Act III, strongly suggests the belief he still had in the first version, as does the decision to publish both in the first place.

What Williams leaves out of his “Note of Explanation” is any mention of the numerous changes he made, passages he cut from the production and then restored in subsequent published editions, concerning the relationship between Brick and Skipper. Williams was a compulsive rewriter; but even for him, the number of cuts, reinstatements and re-excisions in *Cat* is high. They suggest that in the matter of Brick and Skipper, Williams was unusually uncertain and indecisive, and that he remained so long after it came time to publish the play. In the Dramatists Play Service acting edition of the play, published in 1958, he made yet more revisions, but did not print the original version of Act III or his “Note of Explanation.” In the version he published in 1971 as part of his collected plays, *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*, still more revisions appear, along with the “Note” and the original third act. In 1975, he published yet another version based on a 1974 production at the American Shakespeare Theatre. This one, published without the “Note of Explanation,” contains a new third act that combines elements of both the original and Broadway versions.

The play has two primary lines of action. One has to do with telling and facing the truth; the second, with maintaining one’s place in the world. Big Daddy must come to terms with his mortal illness; Brick must admit to himself his culpability in Skipper’s death and, perhaps, his homosexuality. In doing so, Brick also confronts his desire to retain what Williams calls, in a significant stage direction, his “early laurel.” The rest of the family is also caught up in a fierce struggle to inherit Big Daddy’s vast holdings upon his increasingly imminent demise.

In the preproduction script that Kazan approved in November 1954, Williams gave a speech to Maggie that described Brick and Skipper’s relationship during their college days at Ole Miss, which, while not mentioning a sexual relationship, does indicate a closeness that makes Brick vulnerable to a charge of a love by no means platonic. Williams cut the speech during rehearsals, and it did not appear in the production. He restored some of it,

however, in the Signet edition and retained it in the 1975 New Directions American Shakespeare Theatre edition¹⁰:

It was one of those beautiful, ideal things they tell you about in the Greek legends, it couldn't be anything else, you being you, and that's what made it so sad, that's what made it so awful, because it was love that could never be carried through to anything satisfying or even talked about plainly. Brick, I tell you, you've got to believe me, Brick, I do understand all about it! I—I think it was—noble! My only point, the only point that I'm making, is life has got to be allowed to continue even after the dream of life is—all—over. . . . Why, I remember when we double-dated at college, Gladys Fitzgerald and I and you and Skipper, it was more like a date between you and Skipper. Gladys and I were just sort of tagging along as if it was necessary to chaperone you!—to make a good public impression.

At which point Brick threatens to hit Maggie with his crutch. When Williams published the play for a second time, in the Dramatists Play Service acting edition, in 1958, he cut the details about Brick's college dates again, only to restore them in the 1971 collected plays edition published by New Directions.

Also included in the 1955 published text but omitted from the 1958 edition and restored in 1971 was most of a speech by Maggie in which she explained why she and Skipper had sex one night in a hotel in Chicago, while Brick was hospitalized with a football injury. It was earlier that day that Maggie had urged Skipper to "STOP LOVIN' MY HUSBAND OR TELL HIM HE'S GOT TO LET YOU ADMIT IT TO HIM!", after which, according to Maggie, Skipper "ran without stopping once, I am sure, all the way back into his room at the Blackstone." That night, Maggie came to his room and in an attempt to prove to her that her accusation was untrue, Skipper tried unsuccessfully to have sex with her: "And so we made love to each other to dream it was you, both of us!"

Maggie recounts these events, which Brick can barely stand to hear, because she is trying to convince him of the importance of honesty. She tells him the truth not only about Skipper, but also regarding her desire to have sex with Brick again. She loves him, but after all, in order to have a chance to inherit the plantation, they ought to have children, just like Gooper and Mae, who now are expecting number six. She is equally frank about her desire to inherit the plantation. All of this, she tells Brick, she can at least admit honestly. One of the reasons she admires Big Daddy is "because Big Daddy is what he is, and he makes no bones about it."

Here the play's two lines of action intersect, for if Brick is to admit, like Big Daddy, who and what he is, he will have to come to grips not only with his culpability in the matter of Skipper's death, but also with the nature of their relationship and its potential social consequences. Like Maggie, Brick seems generally in the habit of telling the truth. He won't lie to Big Daddy about forgetting his birthday; he doesn't for a moment try to hide his alcoholism from anyone in the family or their friends who have gathered for the party. But he cannot tell the truth when it comes to his relationship with Skipper, because doing so requires facing the world's disapproval.

Williams was similarly uncertain about how much he wanted to say in the long scene in Act II in which Big Daddy, shocked by his son's condition, tries to ascertain its origin. Big Daddy is a tolerant man: "Always, anyhow, lived with too much space around me to be infected by ideas of other people. One thing you can grow on a big place more important than cotton!—is tolerance!—I grown it," he tries to reassure Brick. Two people who did infect Big Daddy with some ideas were the owners of the plantation when he arrived there as a young man, broke and shoeless: Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, who shared for years the very room and bed where Brick and Maggie are no longer lovers. In a draft that preceded the version with which Williams and Kazan began rehearsals, Big Daddy spoke with admiration of the two men's love and loyalty in a long speech, in which he compared their behavior to Brick's refusal to speak to Skipper when the latter called him drunkenly to finally confess his love. While Brick upholds his version of their relationship as pure because it was platonic, Big Daddy believed it was a lesser love than that of Straw and Ochello, which was based on loyalty and honesty. But Williams cut this speech before rehearsals began. He restored a small portion of it in the 1955 published text (and retained it in later editions), describing Big Daddy's arrival at the plantation, how the pair of owners took him in, and, "Why, when Jack Straw died—why, old Peter Ochello quit eatin' like a dog does when its master's dead, and died, too!"¹¹

In the preproduction script, Brick's response to Big Daddy's mere mention of Straw and Ochello in the same breath with his own and Skipper's is fury. He fairly shrieks at his father:

BRICK: You think so, too? You think so too? You think me an' Skipper did, did, did!—sodomy!—together?

BIG DADDY: Hold—!

BRICK: That what you—

BIG DADDY: —ON—a minute!

BRICK: You think we did dirty things between us, Skipper an'— [. . .] You think that Skipper and me were a pair of dirty old men? [. . .] Straw? Ochello? A couple of—

BIG DADDY: Now just—

BRICK: —ducking sissies? Queers? Is that what you—?

Williams cut most of this for the production, but restored it in the published texts. In Williams's original Act III, there is no indication that Brick has undergone any change from this fierce colloquy. At Kazan's request, however, he suggests a provisional possibility of a change. Brick says to Maggie near the opening of the Broadway version of Act III, "I didn't lie to Big Daddy. I've lied to nobody, nobody but myself, just lied to myself. The time has come to put in me Rainbow Hill [a drying-out center for alcoholics], put me in Rainbow Hill, Maggie, I ought to go there."¹²

What was it, however, that Brick has been lying about? His failure to allow Skipper to be honest with him about his love? His own erotic love for Skipper? Guilt about both? Williams is not explicit. He allows both possibilities to be subsumed under the general topic of loyalty. This sudden vagueness leaves us feeling dissatisfied and, perhaps, cheated.

III

While giving the play the best notices Williams had received since *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the critics tended to share none of Williams's uncertainty regarding the relationship between Brick and Skipper. Robert Coleman described it as "unnatural"; John Chapman called Brick "a drunkard and queer," and felt "frustrated . . . some heart or point or purpose was missing." Richard Watts wrote that Brick "has a deep terror that he is homosexual," and John McClain that he "finds himself unable to rid himself of an infatuation for his college room-mate . . . and is hence incapable of either [a] normal relationship with his wife or any protracted periods of sobriety." William Hawkins alone thought that only "in the end is the truth of the young men's puzzling relationship clarified."¹³

Walter Kerr paused to wonder more deeply about Brick and Skipper, and he echoed Chapman's suspicion that something was missing. "*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is a beautifully written, perfectly directed, stunningly acted play of evasion: evasion on the part of its principal character, evasion, perhaps, on the part of its playwright," read the first paragraph of his review. "Brilliant scenes, scenes of sudden and lashing dramatic power" could not divert Kerr from a nagging feeling that the playwright was keeping too much to himself. It is worth quoting at length:

There is, however, a tantalizing reluctance—beneath all the fire and all the apparent candor—to let the play blurt out its promised secret. This isn't due to the nerve-wracking, extraordinarily prolonged silence of its central figure, to his merely repeating the questions of other people rather than answering them. It is due to the fact that when we do come to a fiery scene of open confession—between a belligerent father and his defiant son—the truth still dodges around verbal corners, slips somewhere between the verandah shutters, refuses to meet us on firm, clear terms.

We do learn, in a faint echo of *The Children's Hour*, that there has been something to the accusation—at least on the part of Brick's friend. We learn that Brick himself, in his horror at the discovery, has done the damage he blames on his wife. But we never quite penetrate Brick's own facade, know or share his precise feelings. . . . In *Cat On a Hot Tin Roof* you will believe every word that is unspoken; you may still long for some that seem not to be spoken.¹⁴

Williams was distressed by Kerr's notice. Kerr was not only an influential critical voice, but also Williams's most appreciative and perceptive critic among the daily reviewers. Williams wrote a long reply called "About Evasions." Rather than mailing it to Kerr, however, he sent it to his friend Maria St. Just for, in her words, "safekeeping." Why Williams did not send it to Kerr is a small mystery. He might have feared Kerr would take offense, or he simply might have been as uncertain of the critic's reaction as he was on the matter of Brick and Skipper. He also may have feared that Kerr's suggestion that a vital, clarifying truth was missing was correct.

"I still feel that I deal unsparingly with what I feel is the truth of character," he wrote. "I would never evade it for the sake of evasion, because I was in any way reluctant to reveal what I knew of the truth." He then quotes, with some minor changes, the long stage direction that appears in the 1955 published text (deleted for the 1958 acting edition), just as Big Daddy and Brick approach the cause of the young man's drinking. This is its crucial passage:

The thing they're discussing, timidly and painfully on the side of Big Daddy, fiercely, violently on Brick's side, is the inadmissible thing that Skipper and Brick would rather die than live with. The fact that if it existed it had to be disavowed to "keep face" in the world they lived in, a world of popular heroes, may be at the heart of the "mendacity" that Brick drinks to kill his disgust with. It

may be at the root of his collapse. Or it may be only a single manifestation of it, not even the most important.¹⁵

He then addresses Kerr's question about Brick directly:

Was Brick homosexual? He probably—no, I would even say quite certainly—went no further in physical expression than clasping Skipper's hand across the space between their twin-beds in hotel rooms and yet—his sexual nature was not innately “normal.” Did Brick love Maggie? He says with unmistakable conviction: “One man has one great good true thing in his life, one great good thing which is true. I had friendship with Skipper, not love with you, Maggie, but friendship with Skipper.” [. . .] But Brick's overt sexual adjustment was, and must always remain, a heterosexual one.¹⁶

Probably straight, no, certainly straight, yet “not innately ‘normal.’” Brick's “overt” sexual adjustment “must always remain” heterosexual. This declaration is less than straightforward; and “overt adjustment” is not the same as “sexual orientation.” Perhaps the overt adjustment must always remain heterosexual in order to disguise another, shadowy truth: that Brick is an invert, perhaps an unknowing one. In case Williams has not complicated matters enough, next he invokes Pirandello, who “devoted nearly his whole career as a playwright to establishing the point that I am making in this argument: That ‘Truth’ has a Protean nature, that its face changes in the eyes of each beholder. Another good writer once said, ‘Truth lies at the bottom of a bottomless well.’” Next, he adds an addendum: “The story must be and remained [sic] the story of a strong, determined creature (Life! Maggie!) taking hold of and gaining supremacy over and converting to her own purposes a broken, irresolute man whose weakness was imposed on him by the lies of the world he grew up in.” This last is odd. While Margaret's appropriation of Brick's strength is a major event in “Three Players of a Summer Game,” Williams, seemingly under Kazan's influence, muted the question of Maggie's “masculinity” in the play, and her “taking hold and gaining supremacy over” Brick is overshadowed by Brick's paralysis and Big Daddy's attempt to get at its cause. After spending so much time inhabiting both story and play, Williams may honestly have thought that what was in the one was in the other. And just what is the “weakness” imposed on Brick by the lies of the world?¹⁷

Unlike critics, artists are rarely interested in putting their work in neatly labeled boxes. This may explain Williams's constant hedging over Brick's supposed heterosexuality. His hedging, however, has the feeling of genuine uncertainty. Nonetheless, in the midst of all of Williams's hesitancy, he says one thing quite clearly, first in the long stage direction, and

then again towards the end of his letter to Kerr: it is not Brick's sexuality per se that may be "at the root of his collapse." Rather, it is, "The fact that if it existed it had to be disavowed to 'keep face' in the world they lived in." Brick's weakness was "imposed on him by the lies of the world he grew up in." While Brick's denial of his authentic sexual identity, too, proves to be negotiable (it may be at the root of his paralysis, or it may be only a single manifestation of it, "not even the most important"), Brick's wish to keep his position in the world is worth our attention if only because Williams brings the subject up twice.

As much as he abhors and denies the charge (made, Big Daddy tells us, by Gooper and Mae) that he is a "fairy" and breaks into a noticeable sweat over it, Brick is even more concerned about what people would think if it were true. "Don't you know how people feel about things like that?" he demands of Big Daddy. He continues:

How, how disgusted they are by things like that? Why, at Ole Miss when it was discovered a pledge to our fraternity, Skipper's and mine, did a, attempted to do a, unnatural thing with—We not only dropped him like a hot rock!—We told him to git off the campus, and he did, he got!—All the way to—[. . .] North Africa, last I heard!

In Act I, Maggie addresses the same question while dodging Brick's threatening crutch. When Brick refers to the "one great good true thing" in his life, namely his "friendship" with Skipper, he accuses her of naming that thing "dirty":

MARGARET: I am not naming it dirty! I am naming it clean!

BRICK: Not love with you, Maggie, but friendship with Skipper was that one great true thing, and you are naming it dirty!

MARGARET: Then you haven't been listenin', not understood what I'm saying! I'm naming it so damn clean that it killed poor Skipper!—You two had something that had to be kept on ice, yes, incorruptible, yes!—and death was the only icebox where you could keep it.

When she relates how Skipper was unable to consummate an act of sex with her, when "he made that pitiful, ineffectual little attempt to prove that what I had said wasn't true," she tries to make her point again: "In this way, I destroyed him, by telling him truth that he and his world which he was born and raised in, yours and his world, had told them could not be told? [sic]" The speech was honed for the 1958 acting edition: "In this way, I destroyed him, by telling him truth that his world which he was born and raised in, had taught him couldn't be told!"¹⁸

During Brick's second act vivisection by Big Daddy, Williams speaks in his own voice in a stage direction that is meant to clarify the emphatic fear with which Brick spits out the epithet "Fairies": "In his utterance of this word, we gauge the wide and profound reach of the conventional mores he got from the world that crowned him with early laurel." This sentence, from the 1955 Signet edition, is omitted from the 1958 acting edition. Is this—the fear of being thought a homosexual—finally more important than whether or not Brick actually is gay? As with Tom Wingfield, an actor and a director must make a choice. Surely, Maggie's descriptions of Brick and Skipper together, and Brick's shrieking, furious, violent denials, don't convincingly suggest that Brick is not gay. What is clear is that he fears being perceived as gay, and while this fear of what others think may be a projection of his own fears, the more important point would be not his shame at being gay, but his shame at denying it. At two points in the 1955 published text, Williams, in stage directions, suggests that this is the case as strongly as he would state anything related to Brick's sexuality: It may be the "root of his collapse." In his "Note of Explanation," in those editions where it appears, Williams refers to the "moral paralysis" in Brick that is "a root thing in his tragedy" that cannot, in his judgment, be affected by a single conversation, even one as intense and concentrated as his Act II encounter with Big Daddy.

Whatever Williams might have felt about Brick's sexuality or about the character's reaction to being thought gay, Williams's uncertainty makes Brick the most difficult to act of his male leads, because for most of the play he does nothing. The little action he has is negative: he denies, he stonewalls, he is paralyzed, unable to move forward or back. He is most active when attacked, and then, defensively, he lashes out. He attempts to hit Maggie, but the cast on his leg hampers him. When Big Daddy confronts him with the same truth—that he let Skipper die rather than even speak of the possibility of gay feelings between them—Brick turns on him "ominously" and tells Big Daddy the play's other big secret: the elderly man's own impending death from cancer. Why would Williams, a careful craftsman, pose himself a problem as grave as an inactive central character, and then proceed not to solve it? Perhaps he was unaware that he was creating the problem because it was too much a part of his own life.

Williams describes the atmosphere of "Three Players of a Summer Game" as "a season that was a struggle for something of unspeakable importance to someone passing through it." In the play, Brick is engaged in a desperate struggle; this conflict is the cause of his paralysis. On one hand, he needs to deny his homosexuality so as not to lose his place in that world that crowned him with early laurel. He is a walking example self-loathing. But some part of him also wants to tell the truth. If it did not, Brick would not have taken to drinking or cast Maggie from his sexual life. If Brick could simply deny the truth of his

homosexual feelings he would not be paralyzed. In *Not in Front of the Audience*, Nicholas de Jongh accuses Williams of creating characters who prefer “evading and concealing truth, who prefer the pipe dreams and balms of illusion.”¹⁹ But if Brick wished only to evade and conceal, there would be no struggle, no play. To deny his homosexuality, or even homosexual feelings never acted on, is to betray Skipper, to be guilty of just what Big Daddy accuses him as their confrontation reaches its climax:

BIG DADDY: Anyhow now!—we have tracked down the lie with which you’re disgusted and which you are drinking to kill your disgust with, Brick. You been passing the buck. This disgust with mendacity is disgust with yourself. You!—dug the grave of your friend and kicked him in it!—before you’d face the truth with him!

BRICK: His truth, not mine!

BIG DADDY: His truth, okay! But you wouldn’t face it with him!

BRICK: Who can face the truth? Can you?

By 1957, Williams finally sounded clear on this point. Responding to a question about *Cat’s* moral values in an interview with the *New York Herald Tribune*, he said, “I meant for the audience to discover how people erect false values by not facing what is true in their natures, by having to live a lie, and I hoped the audience would admire the heroic persistence of life and vitality; and I hoped they would feel the thwarted desire of people to reach each other through this fog, this screen of incomprehension.” When he speaks of the “heroic persistence of life,” Williams might have been referring to Maggie, but he might have been thinking of that part of Brick that refused to let him lie so easily about the truth of his own nature and forced him into an acute crisis.²⁰

IV

Is Brick an honest picture of Williams’s own psychological condition? On the face of it, this suggestion would seem hard to sustain. Williams was open to everyone who knew him. In the world of theater and film, his homosexuality was no secret. He had recently included an uncompromising portrait of a gay man in *Camino Real*. Why would creating another one, albeit a central figure onstage for the entire play, generate such difficulty?

By 1955, Williams seems to be of two minds about portraying homosexuality openly in the mid 1950s, and the Baron represents only one of them. In the *Memoirs*, Williams relates an anecdote from this time:

I remember how Irene Mayer Selznick, daughter of that awful old Louis B. [and producer of *A Streetcar Named Desire*], used to invite me to socially prestigious dinners at the Pierre and say, “Ask Frankie to drop in afterward.”

“Tell her to go fuck herself,” was his invariable and proper remark when I relayed these insulting invitations.²¹

But Williams did not stop attending these parties, nor did he bring Frank with him.

In his “Notes for the Designer” at the beginning of the Signet edition of *Cat*, Williams reveals his ambivalence again. He tells us about two gay men who apparently were open about their lives and did not suffer for their candor. Describing the bedroom where most of the action occurs, Williams writes,

It hasn’t changed much since it was occupied by the original owners of the place, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, a pair of old bachelors who shared this room all their lives together. In other words, the room must evoke some ghosts; it is gently and poetically haunted by a relationship that must have involved a tenderness which was uncommon.

The crucial thing about set descriptions and the long Act II stage direction concerning Brick and Big Daddy is that they are both present and invisible. They are unknown to an audience at a performance while available to actors and others who read the published text. They are a part of the play, but also not part of it, in the sense that if they were deleted, nothing in a production of the play would change. That Williams clarified the relationship between Straw and Ochello in his stage directions tells us that it was an important issue for him. That he could express it only in a stage direction (having cut Big Daddy’s tribute to Straw and Ochello), and even there euphemistically, indicates how deep a struggle the expression of this issue was for him. The telling of truths was always a goal for Williams, at least in his work. If one wanted to identify what some Stanislavski-influenced directors and actors call a spine—that active idea that binds the characters of a play together and that lends thematic unity to a work—for *Cat*, it might well be, “To tell the truth amid all the lies.” That is, the problem the play chiefly concerns itself with is finding the courage required to face and tell the truth. The family wants to keep the truth of Big Daddy’s condition from him. Brick cannot face his. The truths the family needs to face are difficult, painful, antisocial. They won’t be told by the play’s representatives of society’s supposed repositories of truth, Doc Baugh and Reverend Tooker, but by Maggie.

While some criticize Williams for not being forthright about Brick’s dilemma in *Cat*, it is useful to remember that the voices of Maggie and Big Daddy are as much parts of the

play as Brick's; they were created by the same author; all are a part of him. While some critics concentrate on Brick's homophobic statements, they ignore the fact that the play is not a monologue. It is peopled with other characters who also take positions on honesty, whose lines were also written by Williams. The understanding and tolerance and desperate plea for the truth spoken by Big Daddy also came from Williams's struggle with himself; the love for his son that Big Daddy evinces, whatever Brick's situation may be, is also in Williams (and may have reflected a wish on Williams's part regarding his own father). So, too, is Maggie's determination to live—and her willingness to lie to keep on living. Those who, years after the fact, bemoan Williams's "failure" to make more clear the issue of Brick's sexuality and Brick's shame for not admitting it, misunderstand not only the complexity of Williams's feelings (simplifying them with the demands of a political slogan: "the positive image"), they also neglect the simple fact about the world in 1955: It was one thing for Williams to be out to his friends, family, and colleagues; it was another to make an announcement to the world. But while Williams made no announcement, neither did he ever take an action that could be considered a denial. He never married, and he never made a secret of his late-night carousings.

Certainly, that he was using Kip's rejection, suffering, and death as mere material was a truth he was uncomfortable with, as was the fact that he enjoyed his celebrity and the financial rewards his appropriation of the pain of others brought him. He may have feared, if he was entirely honest about homosexuality, losing the fame and wealth that came with being his country's leading playwright. Williams also felt himself in a perilous position as a commercial playwright (the only sort of playwright there could be in America in the 1950s): three of his last four plays—*Summer and Smoke*, *The Rose Tattoo*, and *Camino Real*—had been financial failures. He had written candidly about what critics would consider the "sordid" aspects of gay life in short stories, but stories have audiences of one reader at a time, and in the 1940s and 1950s they received nothing like the attention given a Broadway play by an established writer; stories provided far less opportunity for a career-damaging scandal. On the other hand, if Williams had had no qualms about concealing the truth as he knew it—about his homosexuality and the ways in which society condemned homosexuals—he could have written play upon play with ease; he might have been a boulevard playwright, genteel and discreet, who kept his secrets among an antique-filled apartment, who never mentioned the forbidden subject in his work, and blunted his torments with silence and alcohol. Williams endured his torments with increasing amounts of alcohol, and soon enough with drugs, but concealment was not one of his attributes—at least when not balanced by the equally strong urge to reveal.

V/VI

The problem Williams built into *Cat* with his failure to clarify the nature of Brick's sexuality and his feelings about it has provided critics with endless opportunities to engage in enthusiastic spadework, much of which has more to do with the political imperatives of their own time and place than with Williams's or with Williams's concerns and experiences as a human being and an artist. John Clum, writing with the safe outrage possible in the early 1990s, affirms that homophobia, clear and simple, is at the root of Brick's "sexual and emotional malaise," while the play's language "is no more positive than the heterosexist discourse that pervades Williams's other work."²²

As drama and as theater, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is the story of human beings contending with competing emotions and desires, written by another human being engaged in his own struggle for something of unspeakable importance: a resolution in the battle between living an authentic life and keeping the material comfort and fame that may be acquired if one fudges. In the world in which playwrights live and work, intricate, subtle, and often unconscious transactions between that life and work are the immediate reasons that lay behind a piece's aesthetic failure or success. In the case of Brick Pollitt, one might claim that Brick fails ethically because, finally, he seems willing to deny his nature and a lover before forfeiting his comfortable position in the world, and will not admit that he is making this choice. One might posit next that the reason the matter is so unclear and so unsatisfactorily dealt with is due largely to Williams's own unresolved conflicts over this issue and over his use of other people in attaining success. In this conflict, politics and culture clearly played an important part. But they are not theoretical politics; they are personal and public politics as practiced every day, and which Williams read about in the newspapers and magazines, saw in bars and on the streets, and then mixed, with a degree of consciousness finally unknowable, with his own preoccupations, desires, and fears. It is, after all, the unconscious element that separates art from propaganda, artistic from purely political statements.

In the end, what do any of these considerations—biographical, historical, psychological, or the purely theoretical—have to do with the actor? The actor playing Brick is forced to make choices that can rely only on the actions and the circumstances provided by the playwright between the covers of his play. Is Brick gay? Is his sexual nature more or less important than his fear that he may be perceived as gay? An actor must choose, for Brick's relations to Maggie, his father, and Skipper are dependent on whom he has feelings for, the nature of those feelings, and with whom he wants to share a bed. What can explain his paralysis? A man who is truly comfortable with his sexual nature, and especially one as well situated in life as Brick, has nothing to fear in the opinions of other people: He knows who

he is. A comfortably heterosexual man could tell his friend Skipper that he couldn't return his feelings and that, although painful, would be that. A gay man who loved Skipper as Skipper loved him has a choice. Either he can find the strength of character to admit it to himself and to Skipper, and then deal with the consequences; or, unable to admit that he loves a man, can cut the man off in the time of his greatest need. Then he can face the consequences of that act, or deny them. The few actions that Brick does take indicate that his regard for Skipper was not just that of the average heterosexual male. Nor does anything in the play suggest that Brick can admit to loving Skipper. What choice does this leave the actor? The only one that explains what Brick does (drink, evade, lash out) and what he doesn't do (sleep with his wife, admit that Skipper loved him, keep his composure in the face of his father's love and understanding) is that he did indeed love Skipper, but could not admit it to him or to himself. Brick, then, is gay, and for fear of losing his privileged place in life, cannot say it, perhaps even to himself. (Yet another choice the actor must make: If Brick has homosexual feelings, how aware of them is he? If he is unaware of them, can they be acted?)

The actor cannot afford to adopt Williams's own uncertainty on this matter. The next question for the actor, then, is, how to play Brick's dilemma? The answer may sound like an equivocation, but it is not. Rather than assume, as he usually would, that a character has one overall objective and that everything he does is an attempt to achieve it, the actor playing Brick may have to hold in his head two opposing objectives, one playing the major role at one moment, and the other the next. The one would be to tell the truth about his feelings for Skipper (as he does when it comes to other subjects); the other to protect the position he has attained in life. It is the clash of these two opposed desires that produces his paralysis. Another possible overall objective for Brick might be, "to find peace." Unfortunately, neither alternative grants him that—and again, paralysis is the result.

Excerpted from *Gentlemen Callers: Tennessee Williams, Homosexuality, and Mid-Twentieth Century Drama*, by A.C.T. Resident Dramaturg and Director of Humanities Michael Paller (Palgrave MacMillan, April 2005).

1. John D'Emilio, *Making Trouble*, 63.
2. Williams to Paul Bigelow, April 5, 1950. Tennessee Williams Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.
3. Williams to Paul Bigelow, April 12, 1950. Tennessee Williams Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.
4. Spoto, *The Kindness of Strangers*, 210–12.
5. D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 50.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (New York: Signet Books, 1955).
8. Windham, *Tennessee Williams' Letters to Donald Windham, 1940–1965*, 16.
9. He may have done the same thing in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, where the poet Allan Grey kills himself with a bullet to the head. In "Three Players of a Summer Game," a character named Dr. Grey dies of a brain tumor—as did Kip Kiernan in 1944.
10. Murphy, *Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan*, 104.

11. *Ibid.*, 107.
12. *Ibid.*, 105.
13. Robert Coleman, "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof Is Likely to Be Hit," *Daily Mirror*; John Chapman, "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof Beautifully Acted, but a Frustrating Drama," *Daily News*; Richard Watts, Jr., "The Impact of Tennessee Williams," *New York Post*; John McClain, "Drama Socks and Shocks," *Journal-American*; William Hawkins, "Cat Yowls High on Hot Tin Roof," *New York World-Telegram*; all March 25, 1955, quoted in *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1955* (New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, Inc.), 343–44.
14. Walter F. Kerr, "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," *Herald Tribune*, March 25, 1955.
15. Williams, *Five O'Clock Angel*, 109.
16. *Ibid.*, 110.
17. *Ibid.*, 110–12.
18. Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1958), 28.
19. de Jongh, *Not in Front of the Audience*, 71.
20. Quoted in Devlin, *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, 40.
21. Williams, *Memoirs*, 167.
22. Cium, *Acting Gay*, 156. See also de Jongh, Savran, and Corber. For example, to Savran, Big Daddy's youthful indiscretions with hobos and plantation owners are now costing him dearly. His fatal colon cancer is, in Savran's interpretation of Williams's outlook, "the wages of sodomy." This illness is, "as in 'The Mysteries of the Joy Rio,' . . . the currency of mortal debt in Williams's homosexual economy." While Big Daddy also has a streak of libertarianism in him, Williams (in this view) has planted even deeper "a malignancy that is unmistakably the sign of his homosexual inheritance." (Savran, 101) Unmistakable it may be, perhaps, to Savran and other academic critics who comb literature for examples of colon cancer suffered by homosexual characters and apply them as an all-embracing trope to any writer of any era regardless of personal experience and sensibility. Such a symbol is not, unmistakably, a trope of Tennessee Williams's. Indeed, other than Big Daddy and the two characters of "The Mysteries of the Joy Rio," Emil Kroger and Pablo Gonzales (whose bowel cancers can also be interpreted not as the wages of sodomy but those of hiding from the world one's true nature), there is not another gay character in Williams's plays that succumbs to it. The artist Nightingale will die of tuberculosis in *Vieux Carré* and Haley, the offstage gay brother of Leona in *Small Craft Warnings*, dies of pernicious anemia. Williams's other gay characters, unless one counts the bisexual Kip in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, do not suffer a metaphorical punishment from a wrathful God or from nature. (Lest one think, however, that only gay characters die of painful diseases in Williams's plays, numerous heterosexual characters succumb, as well, including Lord Mulligan in *Camino Real*, Lot Ravenstock in *Kingdom of Earth*, Trinket in *The Mutilated*, Mark in *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*, D. H. Lawrence in *I Rise in Flame, Cried the Phoenix*, Mrs. Shapiro in *This Is the Peaceable Kingdom*, Clare in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, and Jane in *Vieux Carré*. Among the gay characters who do not die of bowel cancer in Williams's plays: Sebastian Venable in *Suddenly Last Summer*, Tom Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*, The Writer in *Vieux Carré*, August in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, Quentin in *Small Craft Warnings*, and the Baron de Charlus in *Camino Real*.)

A CENSORSHIP HISTORY OF *CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF*

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof won both the Pulitzer Prize and the Drama Critic's Circle Award for the 1954–55 season, and ran for 694 performances on Broadway, but performances of the play have ignited controversy in the United States and in England. Longtime theater critic John Gassner wrote in 1960 that he had little to say about *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* “except to acknowledge that its vivid characterizing power makes most playwrights look like anemic pygmies . . . [but] if Williams had anything of consequence to say in his family drama he did not manage to get it across.” Gassner described the play as “blatant with vulgarity,” yet approved that it “blares out in praise of the vim and vigor of a healthy sex life.”

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof contained subject matter and language that were risqué for the conservative 1950s, and the dialogue is decidedly frank as the characters discuss homosexuality, greed, and sexual desire. When the play was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, many members of the theater establishment expressed shock and recalled the controversy that had emerged in 1925 when Hamlin Garland, the senior member of the Pulitzer Prize committee, had refused to recommend *What Price Glory?* because of its earthy language, despite the support of two Pulitzer Prize jurors. He pressured them to vote instead for Sidney Howard's *They Knew What They Wanted*. Although the Pulitzer Prize committee accepted the language of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, critics were less tolerant, and several suggested that the story could easily be told and the realism maintained without the rough dialogue.

In a review for the *New York Daily News*, critic John Chapman condemned Williams's dialogue and wrote, “the considerable amount of dirty talk in it was mere boyish bravado and rather pointless.” The language in the play led to difficulties with the authorities in New York City two weeks after the play opened. Edward T. McCaffrey, commissioner of licenses, received complaints from numerous individuals but took specific action only after the Children's Aid Society lodged a complaint with his office that the children in the cast were being exposed to “vulgar language” and “unhealthy suggestions” in the play. The commissioner attended the play, then conferred backstage with directors to determine the impact of the language on the child cast members. McCaffrey identified specific passages that he and the Children's Aid Society had found to contain objectionable language, and the directors assured him that the children remained in their dressing rooms while the identified dialogue was spoken on stage.

Although McCaffrey was assured that the children were protected, he demanded that directors cut one off-color joke from the play, claiming that it was gratuitous and added

nothing to the action. The directors complied. The joke, which appears in Act III after Brick and Big Daddy have completed their intense discussion regarding Skipper, serves to further underscore Big Daddy's earthy nature. As he tells the joke, he uses Brick as his straight man, asking him as intervals, "Ain't that a nice way to put it, Brick?" and "Ain't I tellin' this story in decent language, Brick?" to which Brick replies at point, "Yes, sir, too fuckin' decent!"

The joke concerns a young married couple who take their son to the zoo on a Sunday to look at the animals. They see "this ole bull elephant" who is caged next to a female elephant in heat, and the "bull had somethin' else on his mind which was bigger'n peanuts." The joke describes the manner in which the bull, which "still had a couple of fornications left in him," begins to butt his head against the case and "there was a conspicuous change in his profile—very conspicuous!" When the little boy asks his parents about the elephant's physiological change, "His mama said, 'Oh that's—nothin'!'—His papa said, 'She's just spoiled!'" McCaffrey also asked that Brick's use of slang regarding homosexuality be edited out, changes with which the directors also complied.

The play also ran into greater difficulty with censors in London the following year, because public discussion of the subject of homosexuality was still largely unacceptable, especially on stage. The Lord Chamberlain, still in control of the licensing of plays for performance on the public stage, refused to grant *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* a license for performance, so the producers staged the play at club theaters, among them the Comedy Theatre in Piccadilly Circus in London, which opened in 1881 specializing in comic opera but became a private club in the 1950s to avoid the prevailing tendency toward censorship. Such clubs provided private performances for members only.

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A CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF GLOSSARY

BY EMILY MIRANKER

“ONE OF TH’ NO’ NECK MONSTERS MESSED UP MY LOVELY LACE DRESS SO I GOT T’ CHANGE”

In *Five O’Clock Angel: Letters of Tennessee Williams to Maria St. Just 1948-1982*, Tennessee Williams’s long-time friend Maria St. Just writes:

Tennessee and I used to swim in a private club pool in Rome. It was plagued by a perfectly revolting child, completely square, like a biscuit. I am a very cautious swimmer, and like to have one toe firmly on the bottom of the pool at all times. This little brute, however, would jump in, nearly on top of me, and splash me. One day I looked around the pool and remarked to Tennessee, “Oh, my goodness! There’s that no-neck monster here again!” Tennessee roared with laughter. And then, a year or so later, the “no-neck monster” resurfaced in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

“I FEEL ALL THE TIME LIKE A CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF.”

This phrase refers to a person who is nervous or jumpy. Williams said, “My father had a great gift for phrases. The title *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* comes from him. ‘Edwina,’ he used to say, ‘You’re making me as nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof.’” In *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*, biographer Lyle Leverich attributes the phrase to the father of a friend of Williams, Jordan Masee, Sr., “an imposing southern gentleman, whose granddaughter had dubbed . . . ‘Big Daddy,’ was a true raconteur, and used expressions such as ‘nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof.’ He was also endowed with an inexhaustible supply of stories about plantation life ‘on the richest land this side of the Nile.’”

“Quick as a cat on a hot tin roof,” was also a slang phrase for “fast” common in the rural Midwest, especially Missouri, where Williams spent much of his childhood. The phrase derives from the English “nimble as a cat on a bake-stone” (a large stone on which bread was baked) or “like a cat on hot bricks,” referring to a person who is ill at ease. First recorded around 1880, the phrase became common in the United States around the turn of the 20th century.

“BIG MAMA JUST WANTED YOU TO KNOW THAT THEY’VE GOT THE REPORT FROM THE OCHSNER CLINIC AND WHAT BIG DADDY HAS IS A SPASTIC COLON.”

With locations throughout southeastern Louisiana, the Ochsner Clinic Foundation (OCF) is a nonprofit healthcare provider that covers health plans, health care, research and education. It was founded in 1942 by Drs. Alton Ochsner, Edgar Burns, Guy A. Caldwell, Francis E. LeJeune, and Curtis Tyrone.

“ALWAYS HAD TO SUCK UP TO PEOPLE I COULDN’T STAND BECAUSE THEY HAD MONEY AND I WAS AS POOR AS JOB’S TURKEY. YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT THAT’S LIKE.”

The phrase “poor as Job’s turkey” comes from the stories of Judge Thomas Chandler Haliburton (1796–1865), whose pen name was Sam Slick, published in the *Novascotian*. Sam once said that Job’s turkey had only one tail feather and needed to lean against a fence to gobble. The central character of the Book of Job in Old Testament, Job was a righteous and prosperous man living in Uz (possibly Edom, south of the Dead Sea), during the period of the Patriarchs. Job suffered many afflictions intended to test his faith in God, but remained steadfast. After successfully enduring his sufferings, Job regained his former position, doubled his wealth, fathered seven sons and three daughters, and died at the age of 140. Job’s name is now associated with patience for enduring great hardship.

“I AST YOU BRICK IF YOU WAS CUTTIN’ YOU’SELF A PIECE O’ POON-TANG LAST NIGHT ON THAT CINDER TRACK?”

“Poon-tang” is disparaging slang for a woman and the female pudenda. Sometimes just “poon” is used. Etymologically the term may be related to the French *putain*, for prostitute, deriving from Old French *pute*, the feminine of *put*, meaning foul or reeking, from the Latin *putidus*, from the verb *putere*, to stink or to be rotten. The term probably spread through the South from the Creole dialect.

“WE GOT THAT CLOCK THE SUMMER WE WINT TO EUROPE, ME ’N’ BIG MAMA ON THAT DAMN COOK’S TOUR, NEVER HAD SUCH AN AWFUL TIME IN MY LIFE”

Born in Derbyshire, England in 1808, Thomas Cook was the innovator of the conducted tour and founder of Thomas Cook & Son, a worldwide travel agency. The family owned the travel agency until 1928. Its now called Thomas Cook AG and is owned by Lufthansa (a German airline) and Karstadt (a German business corporation).

“IF YOU AIN’T CAREFUL YOU’RE GONNA CRAWL OFF THIS PLANTATION AND THEN, BY JESUS, YOU’LL HAVE TO HUSTLE YOUR DRINKS ALONG SKID ROW!”

“Skid Row” is slang referring to the area of a city where derelicts, petty criminals, and alcoholics gather. The phrase originated in the 1880s in Seattle’s “Skid Road,” Yesler Way, where logs were skidded into the water for transportation to the Henry Yesler lumber mills. Economic decline hit the area with the Great Depression and “Skid Row” came to refer to any bad neighborhood.

“CLUBS! —ELKS! MASONS! ROTARY! —CRAP!”

Big Daddy refers to three well-known service clubs found in many towns throughout the United States and a familiar part of community life in the mid 20th century. Usually composed of business and professional men or women, these clubs promote fellowship among their members and are devoted to the principle of volunteer community service.

The idea of the service club originated in the United States and has had its greatest popularity here, though service clubs now exist in many other countries and are often linked in international associations. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the fraternal society was one of the primary sources of health care and health insurance for the working poor in Britain, Australia, and the United States. As recently as 1920, more than one-quarter of all adult Americans were members of fraternal societies.

Founded in New York City in 1868, the **BENEVOLENT AND PROTECTIVE ORDER OF ELKS** began as a private drinking club, the Jolly Corks. Since its inception the Order of Elks has grown to include nearly 1.2 million men and women in almost 2,200 communities. Committed to the ideals of charity and patriotism, the Elks have disbursed more than \$2.69 billion in cash, goods, and services to American youth, veterans, the disadvantaged and handicapped, and in support of patriotic and civic programs. (“Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benevolent_%26_Protective_Order_of_Elks)

The fraternal order of **FREE AND ACCEPTED MASONS** is the largest worldwide secret society. Freemasonry evolved in England from the guilds of stonemasons and cathedral builders of the Middle Ages. With the decline of cathedral building, some lodges of operative (working) masons began to accept honorary members to bolster their declining membership. From a few of these lodges developed modern symbolic or speculative Freemasonry, which, particularly in the 17th and 18th centuries, adopted the rites and trappings of ancient religious orders and of chivalric brotherhoods. In 1717 the first Grand Lodge, an association of lodges, was founded in England. Though often mistaken for such, Freemasonry is not a Christian institution. Freemasonry contains many of the elements of

a religion; its teachings enjoin morality, charity, and obedience to the law of the land. For admission the applicant is required to be an adult male believing in the existence of a Supreme Being and in the immortality of the soul. ("Freemasonry," www.britannica.com/eb/article-9035303)

ROTARY INTERNATIONAL is a civilian service club founded in the United States in 1905 by Paul P. Harris, a Chicago attorney, to foster the "ideal of service" as a basis of enterprise, to encourage high ethical standards in business and the professions, and to promote a world fellowship of business and professional men. The club's motto is "Service above Self." Headquartered in Evanston, Illinois, Rotary International has members in some 150 countries. ("Rotary International," www.britannica.com/eb/article-9064177)

"BY THE LIGHT, BY THE LIGHT, OF THE SILVERY MOON"

The song "By the Light of the Silvery Moon," written by Gus Edwards and Edward Madden in 1909, was featured in a film of the same title, starring Doris Day and Gordon MacRae, released in 1953:

Place, park, scene, dark,
Silv'ry moon is shining through the trees
Cast: two, me, you,
Sound of kisses floating on the breeze.
Act one, be-gun.
Dialog: "Where would you like to spoon?"
My cue, with you,
Underneath the silv'ry moon.

By the light of the silvery moon
I want to spoon,
To my honey I'll croon love's tune.
Honey moon,
Keep a-shinin' in June.
Your silv'ry beams
Will bring love dreams,
We'll be cuddling soon
By the silvery moon.

Act two, scene new,
Roses blooming all around the place.

Cast three: you, me,
Preacher with a solemn-looking face.
Choir sings, bell rings,
Preacher: "You are wed forever more."
Act two, all through,
Ev'ry night the same encore.

"SHOW ME THE WAY TO GO HOME"

The song "Show Me the Way to Go Home" was composed and written by Irving King in 1925.

When I'm happy, when I'm happy,
Singing all the while,
I don't need nobody then
To show me how to smile.
When I've been out on the spree,
Toddling down the street,
With this little melody
Everyone I greet:

Show me the way to go home,
I'm tired and I want to go to bed.
I had a little drink about an hour ago,
And it's gone right to my head.
Wherever I may roam,
On land or sea or foam.
You will always hear me singing this song:
Show me the way to go home.

"BIG DADDY LOVES HOPPIN' JOHN. WE HAD A REAL COUNTRY DINNER."

Thought to have originated in the meager food of African slaves in the American South, Hopping John is a mixture of black-eyed peas (sometimes cooked with pork) and seasonings served with rice, traditionally eaten on New Year's Day. The phrase was first recorded in Fredrick Law Olmstead's *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* (1856).

“IN MY DAY THEY USED TO HAVE SOMETHING THEY CALLED THE KEELEY CURE FOR DRINKERS.”

Nineteenth-century U.S. physician Leslie E. Keeley (1832–1900) developed a controversial treatment for alcoholism and drug addiction known as the Keeley Cure. Keeley began his treatment of alcoholism and drug addiction by opening a sanitarium in Dwight in 1879. By 1890, the success of this institution and the Keeley Cure enabled Keeley to hatch expansion plans. Soon franchises began springing up throughout the country and Keeley was a millionaire.

The Keeley Cure consisted of hypodermic injections of the double chloride of gold. Keeley claimed that by 1895 his treatment had cured 250,000 people. The medical profession thought that the cure was bogus and attributed his success largely to the power of suggestion. Keeley is also known for his belief that alcoholism is a disease, not a vice. (“Keeley, Leslie E.,” www.britannica.com/ebi/article-9328064)

“BIG DADDY’S DYIN’ OF CANCER AN’ IT’S SPREAD ALL THROUGH HIM AN’ IT’S ATTACKED HIS VITAL ORGANS INCLUIN’ THE KIDNEYS AN’ RIGHT NOW HE IS SINKIN’ INTO UREMIA.”

Big Daddy was most likely suffering from stomach or gastric cancer, which may start in the stomach and spread to other areas, including the small intestine, pancreas, liver, colon, esophagus, and even the lungs, lymph nodes, and ovaries. Uremia is a toxic condition caused by failure of the kidneys, when the waste product urea remains in the blood, rather than being excreted in urine.

“I’M AFRAID YOU’LL HAVE TO WARM THE BENCH AT THE SUGAR BOWL THIS YEAR, BRICK. OR WAS IT THE ROSE BOWL THAT HE MADE THAT FAMOUS RUN IN?” / “IT WAS THE PUNCH BOWL, HONEY, THE PUNCH BOWL, THE CUT-GLASS PUNCH BOWL.”

The Sugar Bowl is an annual postseason American collegiate football game played in New Orleans on or around January 1. From 1935 to 1974 the game was held in Tulane Stadium. Since 1974 it has been played in the Louisiana Superdome. The event has been part of the Bowl Championship Series. since 1998.

The Rose Bowl is the oldest American postseason college gridiron football contest, held at the Rose Bowl Stadium in Pasadena, California, also around the first of the year. Part of the Tournament of Roses event, the Rose Bowl game was first played in 1902.

“I’M GOIN’ UP TO THE ROOF TO THE BELVEDERE ON TH’ ROOF TO LOOK OVER MY KINGDOM BEFORE I GIVE UP MY KINGDOM—TWENTY-EIGHT THOUSAND ACRES OF TH’ RICHEST LAND THIS SIDE OF THE VALLEY NILE.”

The Lower Mississippi River Delta is nicknamed the “Nile of the New World,” or “Nile of the Western Hemisphere” because of the great fertility of the region, similar to that of the actual Nile Valley in Egypt. At 6,270 km or 450 miles from its source, Lake Itasca in northwestern Minnesota, to the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi River is the second longest river in the United States (after the Missouri River).

According to the Mississippi Department of Archives and History a plantation of the quality and size of Big Daddy’s would have been worth about \$8,400,000 in the mid 1950s. Today it would be worth about \$56,000,000.

“The Richest Land this Side of the Valley Nile,” was one of Williams’s working titles for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. The other was *A Place of Stone*, taken from a W. B. Yeats poem. Williams is said to have heard many stories about plantation life “on the richest land this side of the Nile” from Jordan Massee, Sr., believed to be an inspiration for *Cat*’s Big Daddy.

A belvedere is a structure, like a summerhouse or patio, designed to command a view. The term is derived from the Italian for “beautiful view.”

DESIGNING *CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF*

Interviews with the Designers of the A.C.T. Production

BY EMILY MIRANKER

SCENIC DESIGN: RALPH FUNICELLO

EMILY MIRANKER: HOW ARE YOU APPROACHING THE DESIGN FOR THE PLAY?

RALPH FUNICELLO: This is the second time I've done this play. I did a production in Seattle [in 1987]. There were certain things about that set I liked very much, and there were certain things I was talked out of doing that I wanted to do. Tennessee Williams wrote a very detailed description of the set in the published edition of this play. He describes in careful detail exactly what this plantation is, the men who lived in this room, and how the room should reflect that. Then he writes, "But of course the room shouldn't be realistic. It should be airy and it should have the sky above." I had designed, from reading the play, a set that was fairly realistic. A fairly realistic box set, with a lot of faded wallpaper and things. When the director read this description by Williams she seized on those last couple of sentences



Model of the set design for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* by Ralph Funicello

and said, “Tennessee Williams didn’t want this to be so real. Could we do all these different things?” So we didn’t [use my original set]. And I always thought it was the wrong idea.

When I thought about doing this show again I dug out a photograph of the old model of the set. I thought, this is pretty good. I reread the play and the set worked. When I met with [director] Israel Hicks, I found that he agreed with me that this play, unlike many of Williams’s other plays, is very realistic. It’s not like [A] *Streetcar [Named Desire]* or *The Glass Menagerie*, which have a lot of dream moments and memory. The only things you could say are removed from realism are the names: Big Mama, Big Daddy. But certainly in that part of the South you can imagine even that being completely real. People do go by those names.

For this design, I’ve gone back and changed certain things. I’ve reintroduced the wallpaper. I’ve added a second level upstage, made the set a little taller, things I felt would make it fit nicer and work better on the Geary stage. As I was doing this, I called designer Ming Cho Lee [who apprenticed under *Cat*’s first designer, Jo Mielziner], my teacher and an old friend. I said, “Ming, my impression is that Mr. Williams was a very gracious man and hated the set [of Kazan’s Broadway production]. For the published edition, he put in this description so that no one would ever do a set like that again, but he didn’t want to offend Mielziner, so he put those disclaiming sentences at the end.” Ming paused and said, “Williams hated Jo’s set. You’re absolutely right.” So I felt justified in my realistic approach. What I’m trying to do is just what Williams described.

DID SPECIFIC PLANTATION HOUSES INFLUENCE YOUR DESIGN?

I’ve based it on a plantation called Nottoway, which was built in 1859. Nottoway has rooms that have a curved gallery around them. I liked that because I thought it was a feminine shape for the room. What Williams describes is actually more Greek revival. The plantation home I’m basing this design on isn’t really even that. I’m choosing to make mine more Victorian than revival, simply because it’s more feminine. We don’t see the exterior; it doesn’t matter. I think the scale of the room will evoke the size and detail of the house. We see the inside and they only talk about the outside. You see through the curtains and the windows upstage a couple of columns, maybe some Spanish moss hanging down. I see this interior as a feminine space with a man hobbling around in it. There is sexual tension in this room, more than in the rest of the house. The sexual trauma of the play is interesting. Whether Brick and his friend were gay or it was a “manly” love, the fact is that the room [Maggie and Brick] are sleeping in is the same room where the old gay couple lived for years without acknowledging to the world what Big Daddy sensed their relationship was.



The Nottoway plantation house, completed in 1859, stands overlooking the Mississippi River in southeastern Louisiana, near Baton Rouge and New Orleans. One of the largest antebellum plantation houses in the South, Nottoway is composed of 64 rooms, 7 staircases, and 5 galleries. This 53,000-square foot plantation home was constructed by John Hampden Randolph, whose father had come from Virginia in 1820. In 1860, Nottoway encompassed 6,200 acres and Randolph, the builder and owner of the property during that time, owned 155 African Americans who worked his sugarcane plantation as slaves. Nottoway survived the Civil War; damage occurred, however, when a Union gunboat on the Mississippi River attempted to destroy the magnificent house, before the gunboat officer realized he had once been a guest there and decided to spare it. The Randolphs held onto the house through the Civil War and Reconstruction until 1889, when Mrs. Randolph sold the mansion following her husband's death. (The house was not damaged by Hurricane Katrina.) See www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/louisiana/not.htm.

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IS IT TRICKY TO CONVEY THE TWO VERY DIFFERENT PERIODS, THE VICTORIAN ERA AND THE 1950S, IN A SINGLE SET?

I think the only new aspect of the room is the bar. Williams describes a piece of furniture that may or may not have ever existed in reality [*laughs*]. It's a combination TV/stereo/bar. What I know of from that period, because I was a child in the '50s, was the big console for TV and stereo, but not with a bar.

But the reality of it is, when you get onstage, you want a big TV console that's used as a bar. You never want to put the bottles away. You want a tray on top of it, with the whiskey bottle, glasses, and an ice bucket. Because Brick doesn't want to have to bend over and open a door to get out his whiskey. He needs it much more accessible than that. He keeps going over and refilling his drinks. That's the one piece of jarring furniture. Williams says it's the one thing in the set that isn't reflective of the older couple that lived there.

What's interesting about that room is that it's not necessarily furnished with [Brick and Maggie's] furnishings. It's furnished from another era. They haven't made it their own. This marriage has apparently always been uncomfortable. They're living in someone else's space waiting for their own chance, or Maggie is waiting for her opportunity. It's like when you go home and live in your parents' house as an adult. What does that feel like? It would almost be like living in your parents' room.

HOW DO YOU SEE THE BAR PLACED IN THE SET?

I put the bar very far downstage left. So that it's very pronounced every time Brick goes to get a drink. You can see everyone's eyes when they look at Brick going to get a drink. They are all very conscious of his drinking and he's oblivious to their attention. If he's walking, I want the bar in a position where he could do an extreme cross to get a drink. I thought that was important.

HOW DOES KNOWING THE GEARY THEATER STAGE AS WELL AS YOU DO INFLUENCE YOUR DESIGN?

I just think in terms of the Geary Theater [*laughs*], as I've done so many plays there. The main aspect of the Geary that is always an influence is the height of the second balcony. One has to acknowledge in some way that there are going to be large numbers of audience members looking at the play from that high angle. In some cases that is a limitation to what you can do or an inspiration for what you should do. One of the reasons that I'm making this set the height that I'm making it is to make sure those people don't feel that they are cut off from the play, and just observing from the top.

THIS PLAY IS VERY REALISTIC COMPARED TO OTHER WILLIAMS'S PLAYS. DO YOU THINK OF THIS AS TAKING A SLICE OF A REAL HOUSE AND SHOWING PEOPLE WHAT'S IN IT?

Perhaps it will be looked at that way. Sometimes when people do realistic sets they have the set come downstage and just chop off the edges and paint them black. So it does look like a knife has cut into the room and that you're looking into it. I've never been very

intrigued with that idea. So this set ends itself and sits in the space. Because of the width of the stage, when you're sitting in the audience you see past the proscenium slightly into the wings. You see the set end and it ends in what I tried to make an interesting, decorative way. It's not isolated but like a fragment of a room as opposed to a slice of a room.

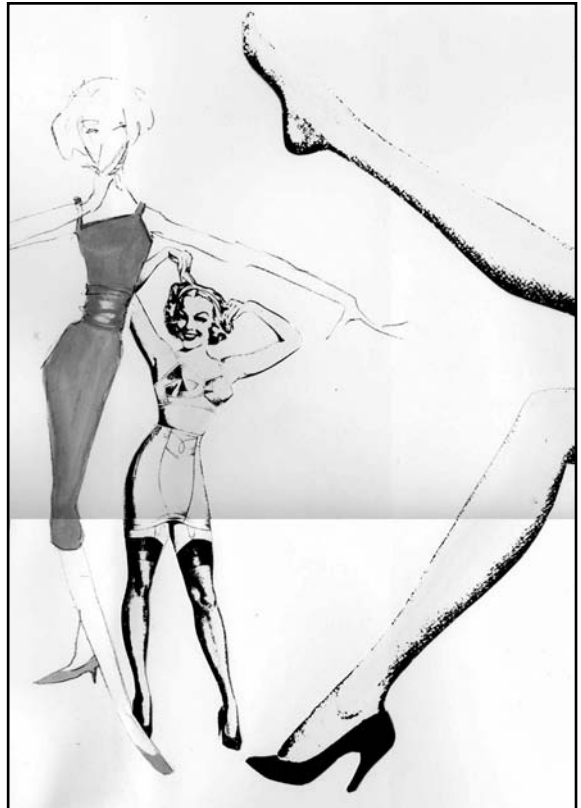
WHAT IS THE MOST INTERESTING FEATURE OF THE ROOM?

It's always interesting to design a room with a history. Which is what this set is. It's a more interesting thing to accomplish and to work on. I always look forward to that. You see old photographs of abandoned train stations or something and you can see the history of the room in the photograph. All the [A.C.T.] craftspeople bring an astonishing level of detail [to a set]. When the door [in A.C.T.'s 2001 production of *"Master Harold"...and the boys*] opened, for example, you could see where the [rain] had spattered and warped the outside of the door. It's a pleasure to work with them, to do something they can really contribute to. This set is something you can sink your teeth into when you're building and painting it.

**COSTUME DESIGN:
SANDRA WOODALL**

**WHAT KIND OF EXPERIENCE DO
YOU DRAW ON IN DESIGNING THIS
PRODUCTION?**

SANDRA WOODALL: [The 1950s is] a period I'm interested in. I remember my Mom in dresses from that period that were very beautiful. So I have a certain direct contact with the period; that's the first thing. The second thing is that I've had some experience going to the South. So I also have some direct experience in terms of the feeling and nature of these kinds of people.



Costume sketch for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* by Sandra Woodall

YOU ALSO DESIGNED THE COSTUMES FOR THE 1991 A.C.T. PRODUCTION OF *CAT*. WHAT IS IT LIKE TO TACKLE THE PLAY AGAIN IN A NEW PRODUCTION?

This is a completely new project. There's the slight benefit of being more familiar with the story. When I read it again, I get into it in a way, I don't know if I would say deeper, but the combination of rereading and the new director's point of view makes it fresh to me.

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO DESIGN THE ICONIC SLIP FOR MAGGIE THE CAT IN ACT I? DOES KNOWING THE ACTRESS, RENÉ AUGESSEN, INFLUENCE YOUR DESIGN?

I think about René first. I've been lucky enough to work with her on other productions. It does have an impact, knowing her, working with her, and having had such wonderful experiences with her. I really enjoy dressing her. She's very beautiful. So I think about her and the feeling of the character. Then I make something that seems right. So I know her figure and I'm aware of the garment and the period. I wanted to make that all work together. I want to work with something in such a way that it looks beautiful on René.

HOW DOES THE PHYSICAL HEAT OF A SOUTHERN PLANTATION ON A SUMMER EVENING READ THROUGH THE CLOTHING? WHAT KIND OF FABRICS WOULD CONVEY THAT HEAT?

I want the texture of the fiber and fabric of the clothes to reflect the feeling in that environment. They're not really crisp. They may have had a crispness when they were just taken out of the closet. I've always amazed thing whenever I was in the South to see how you get up, put something fresh on, and ten minutes later you feel moist; you try and hold your sweat back for a moment, but there's no resisting it. Everything is a little bit soft. Even if it's a starched garment, there's a limpness and a softness to it—not like flannel, but like it has absorbed some moisture. The play takes place in the afternoon and evening, so the cloth should be slightly wilted. Another element that I didn't use the first time I did *Cat* is the reference for Big Mama to have three dresses. No really clear reason why. But when the director and I talked about it, we both felt she's a very big woman: how you feel, sweating and all of that, she probably would just change her clothes periodically.

DO YOU CONSIDER COSTUMES PART OF A FACE THE CHARACTERS PUT ON? OR ARE THEY SOMEHOW INDICATIVE OF THE CHARACTERS' TRUE FEELINGS?

There are references to lace in the text of the play, and lace is very much a fabric of the '50s, so lace is one of the fabrics I'll be using. And I think there was a dressier quality in the '50s. I want to keep that as well. It's a birthday party, so you have that dressiness, which kind of relates to your façade question. You can always see another layer beneath lace.

Many aspects of this play are very feminine, especially in the design. The house is described as being Victorian, an era when domestic arrangements were associated with women. Lace is an effeminate fabric, and the clothing references even for the men are feminine: the cashmere robe and Brick's silk pajamas, for example.

I'm also using silks. A silk crepe or silk chemise has a nice weight to it, yet it also has a dampness to it. For Maggie's dress, there'll be silk with chiffon over the top, which was also quite popular, that kind of double layering. I think layering gives that quality of the façade. It also has a feminine feeling. The men will be in linen. It's the appropriate weight for summer. Also, as they're performing, their garments will become softer and wrinkled. I like the change that happens. When they first come out onstage they'll be pressed, then you'll see the change.

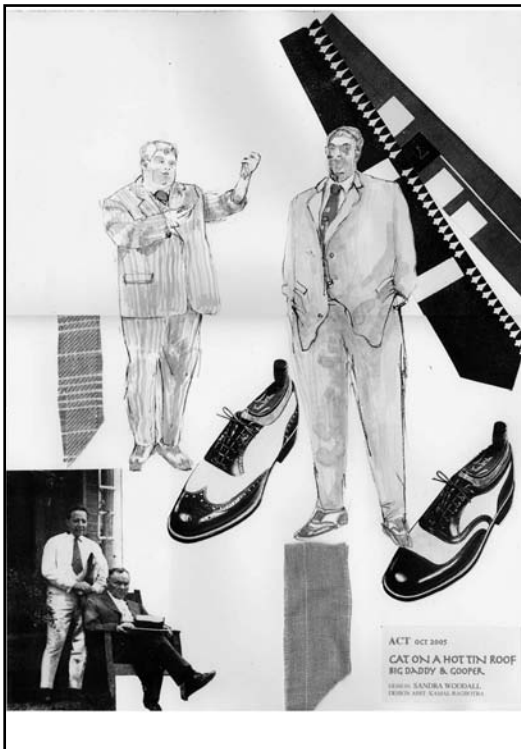
ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT ANYTHING IN TERMS OF COLOR FOR DIFFERENT CHARACTERS OR FOR DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE PLAY?

I wanted to relate the father and Gooper. I think that's another aspect that keeps the play fresh for me. That makes a lot of sense to me in thinking about my own experience in the South and this particular family—showing the family dynamic through their clothing.

WHY ARE YOU INTERESTED IN RELATING BIG DADDY AND GOOPER, CONSIDERING BRICK IS THE FAVORITE SON?

When I think about families and family dynamics I often observe that kind of connection. It doesn't have to be in the South. I just notice that dynamic in families. In my own family I can think of how my sisters and I line up in relation to my mom. When I talked to Israel [Hicks] about the characters, we thought it was an interesting element. Gooper and Big Daddy are antagonistic, but they are both successful businessmen. What defines success in the family? You unconsciously model yourself after what seems successful.

Costume sketch for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* by Sandra Woodall



HOW DO YOU SEE THE YOUNGER WOMEN WHO HAVE MARRIED INTO THE FAMILY? THEY ARE PART OF IT, BUT DIDN'T GROW UP IN THAT HOUSEHOLD.

There's competition between those two women. Certainly competition in terms of children. Their actions are like chess moves. I find the writing in the play and the moves that they make all very realistic. If you let yourself think about it, can't you find people in your family in the play? Maybe they're not southern. The South is an element as well. When I was in the South, I found it initially like a foreign culture.

THE BIG THEMES IN *CAT* AREN'T NECESSARILY TIED TO THE SOUTH, BUT TO ME SEEM TO BE UNIVERSAL. WILLIAMS OFTEN CALLED *CAT* HIS MOST REALISTIC PLAY; DOES THAT HAVE TO DO WITH THE THEMES BEING LESS TIED SPECIFICALLY TO SOUTHERN CULTURE?

For me, the piece is universal. As a designer I would like to enhance, not to create distance with the audience. I find that when you observe design details extra carefully, a play can be more universal. But if you just summarize things it doesn't quite hit the mark. When I think about this family in the broad sense, I can picture their dynamic in anybody's home. Not the specific style or the nastiness of it, but when there's stress in a family, people have different opinions. That's universal. I think the play becomes the most realistic when the design includes elements specific to the characters' culture.

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO WORK ON A PLAY WITH SO MUCH HISTORY AND INFORMATION EMBEDDED IN IT?

I certainly take that into consideration, but I don't feel limited. Williams describes it in detail, which I appreciate. I also want to work at that level of detail. So in the drawings, I not only have the drawing of the dress, I have include underwear ads of the time. I think the more detail and information I have, the better it all works. Not in a slavish way, but to create the atmosphere of the period.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE THE AUDIENCE WILL READ IN THE COSTUMES?

I want them to see it as whatever their personal reaction inspires. I think the costumes should be seamless with the nature of the characters. I want it to look like a seamless whole among the set, the lights, the costumes, the performance, so that you couldn't pull any of it apart. The detail should be so integrated that we've created an entire world.

LIGHTING DESIGN: RUSSELL CHAMPA

WHAT IS YOUR DESIGN FOCUSED ON?

RUSSELL CHAMPA: My design is focused on the emotional tenor of the piece. The set is fairly realistic, so the lights have to maintain a certain amount of realism, although I'll try and find some interesting ways to tweak that realism or at least heighten it.

WILLIAMS WROTE A NOTE DESCRIBING THE SET AND ATMOSPHERE AS REAL, BUT THEN AT THE END SAYS, "IT SHOULDN'T BE VERY REALISTIC." HOW DO YOU INTERPRET THAT?

I don't pay strict attention to the stage directions, ultimately. I think what Williams wrote about the lights and atmosphere is actually very interesting and intriguing, so I absorb it in the same way I absorb the rest of the play. I lean towards a very heightened realism that's fairly reflective of the emotional state of the play or the characters at that moment in time.

HOW DOES HEIGHTENED REALISM UNDERScore THE MOOD AND ACTION?

One way to heighten realism is with color. The world of this play is fairly colorful. What's happening outdoors in the sky and on the windows—Tennessee Williams is very specific about stuff that's going on out there in terms of storms and fireworks. I think there is a lot of fun to be had playing with ways to make those events recognizable, while also exploding them in the play and reflecting what's going on outdoors in the interior space.

HOW DO YOU CREATE A STORM ONSTAGE THAT THE AUDIENCE CAN READ?

Creating a realistic storm often requires a pretty good amount of technology. However, with color and some well-placed flashes and a little bit of interesting sound, you can create the suggestion of a storm that can certainly be imposing emotionally, maybe not visually, but certainly emotionally.

THIS IS THE SOUTH IN THE SUMMERTIME, SO THE ATMOSPHERE IS LITERALLY HOT AND SULTRY. HOW DO YOU CONVEY THAT HEAT WITH LIGHT?

The two ways to do that would be either with intensity and brightness, or with color. That kind of heat is overwhelming and it can beat you down. Somehow you'd want the lighting to reflect that kind of overbearing heat. Some of that also could come from angle. If we were dealing with noon, the quality of light would be very crisp and white, sharp-edged, strong light. However, later in the day it would start to take on a slightly warmer, thicker

feel in terms of the lighting. You want your light to light the actors but also to fill the stage so that you feel the actors moving through that heat, that light.

HOW DO YOU WORK WITH SPECIFIC INPUT FROM ISRAEL HICKS?

Well, he's the boss [*laughs*]. Our time to work together comes when we actually get inside the theater and start turning lights on. That's the crux of the lighting designer/director discussion: when you're actually in the theater, making the piece work. I'm trying to assimilate what Israel and Ralph and Tennessee Williams and everybody else is saying to me and design my lighting to fit into that world.

DOES KNOWING THE GEARY THEATER AFFECT YOUR THINKING?

It helps immensely. Anytime you work in a new theater its a little more difficult, practically speaking, because you don't know all of the places where you can put the lights. New people and new theaters are always a challenge. But it's also part of what makes doing this work so much fun. The Geary is a wonderful theater; it has such a rich flavor and atmosphere of its own. Somehow, it always affects the design: you can't make the make the Geary Theater go away the way you can with more standard black boxes or less-detailed spaces.

WHAT KIND OF STYLISTIC CHALLENGES DOES THE GEARY PRESENT?

In this instance we want to take some focus away from the space. I recently worked on *The Voyage Inheritance* with Carey [Perloff]; that show was written and the set designed to be in the Geary Theater. We actually lit the proscenium and used the frame as part of the visual picture of the play. We probably won't do that for this piece. However, the proscenium is bright gold, so it won't go away completely.

DOES THE PERIOD OF THE PLAY, THE 1950S, AFFECT THE LIGHTING DESIGN?

Yes, I do need to be aware of that. There are certain colors of light that feel very modern: a kind of super bright purple and deep ambers and yellows feel very modern. So we don't necessarily want to use colors like that in a period piece like this. I think the colors need to be more subtle, warmer, and more related not only to the period but the place. Once again, practically speaking, you have to think about an interior at night. They're not going to have tungsten or halogen light bulbs in this house. They're going to have fairly old-school bulbs. That's going to create a different kind of light coming from the practicals (lamps onstage) and fixtures in the room.

HOW DOES THE SETTING, THE SOUTH, INFLUENCE THE LIGHTING?

As we all know from traveling to different parts of this country and the world, the lighting in different regions, the sunlight, the ambient light, always feels different—to me, at least. Of course, I'm attuned to it because it's my job to be very sensitive to that. The sunlight in the South is very different from the sunlight in San Francisco.

CAN YOU DESCRIBE THAT? HOW DO YOU TRANSLATE THAT ONTO A STAGE?

You need the secret lighting designer decoder ring! The light right now in San Francisco is crisp, white, bright light. Because of the haze and the fog, it's often terribly thick light, and it sometimes feels like you can see it. In the South, certainly at midday, the light's going to be very bright and very white, but it's going to have a much sharper, harsher feel to it, than what I feel is a slightly softer light here in San Francisco. That's one example of how they're different.

DO YOU HAVE TO KNOW THE BLOCKING FOR THE ACTORS—WHERE THEY ARE STANDING AND MOVING—AND WHERE THE SET PIECES ARE BEFORE YOU DECIDE WHAT KIND OF LIGHTS TO HIT THEM WITH?

When you're in the theater writing the cues you're very attuned to the blocking. On a play like this there will probably be a couple of hundred light cues, and I would imagine that three quarters of them—if I'm doing my job well—won't necessarily be noticeable. Part of the job of the lighting designer is to help the audience focus and know what they're supposed to look at. We do that by moving the light around with the actors. So it is very blocking specific and blocking related.

YOU MENTIONED THAT THE LIGHTING WILL ENHANCE THE REALISM, BUT WILL IT EVER CROSS OVER AND BE MORE NOTICEABLE?

I think there are definitely moments when the characters go into internal worlds and when the world totally shifts and maybe everybody else in the room goes away, at which point the lighting may want to reflect that shift of attention away from the outer realism to more of an inner, emotional state.

**IS THE SWITCH FROM THE REAL WORLD TO INNER MOMENT LIGHTING PRO-
NOUNCED OR IS IT GRADUAL SO THAT YOU DON'T NOTICE THE TRANSITION?**

I think there's a call for both in this piece. Although I think in the big picture it should be subtle. I don't think there's going to be a moment when all the lights snap to special and everything else goes away. I think it should probably be slower and softer and subtler.

That's also in an interesting way a period thing, too. I think a quick shift from full stage light to one tiny light or one small light on an actor is more of a modern event.

HOW YOU WOULD LIKE THE AUDIENCE TO BE AWARE OF THE WORK OF A LIGHTING DESIGNER?

You don't necessarily want them to be aware of the lighting. In fact, that's a tough question; I think there are several schools of thought. Some people believe that good lighting is never noticed and it just emotionally enhances the audience's journey. There's another school of thought, in which the lighting almost becomes another character in the play. The audience is aware of what the lighting is doing and how it's helping them along, understanding the story.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Who is the most sympathetic character in the play? Is one character more sympathetic than others in different acts?
2. Big Daddy tells Brick that one has to live with lies in this world. Do you agree? What is Tennessee Williams's attitude toward telling the truth? Which of the characters tell the truth? Which ones lie? Are there times when a lie is more valuable than the truth?
3. Why does Brick drink so much? What kind of relationship do you think he and Skipper had? Why do you think that? How do you think Skipper feels about Maggie?
4. What kind of statement is Williams making about sexuality in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*? Do you consider this to be a "gay play"? Why or why not? How have attitudes toward sexuality, especially homosexuality, changed since the play was first performed in 1955? How have they remained unchanged?
5. How much love do you think there is in the Pollitt family? How much respect? How are they expressed?
6. What are the functions of the "offstage" elements of the play: the children, telephone calls, Dr. Baugh, and Reverend Tooker's conversation? What do you think the rest of the house and plantation look like outside Brick and Maggie's bedroom? What do you think life is like out there?
7. Do you approve of Maggie's lie about being pregnant? Why do you think Big Daddy supports her? What do you think her relationship with Brick will be like after the play ends? Will they make good parents?
8. Williams wrote that the set of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* should not be entirely realistic, although he felt that the characters he created in *Cat* were among his most realistic. Do you find the set "unrealistic"? Do you find the characters "realistic"? (How do you define those terms?) How might an unrealistic setting serve realistic characters?
9. What elements normally associated with the post-Civil War (Antebellum) South appear in the play? What more modern elements appear? How can elements from such diverse eras coexist in this play?
10. How have women's economic and social roles changed since the first production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1955—in the world in general, and in the American South in particular? In what ways have they remained unchanged?

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