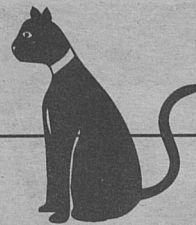


The Cat Still Plays on the Hot Tin Roof



BY CHRISTINE BARNEY

For those who like to go beneath the surface of a play, Briggs Opera House helped while away a gray Sunday on November 15. They sandwiched a 2.5 hour play between a 60 minute lecture and a discussion with the cast about themes in the play.

Professor Richard Orth provided a prologue to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* with a lecture

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comparing Tennessee Williams' work with that of Arthur Miller. He supplemented the literary criticism with personal background of the playwright's life, including Tennessee's outing himself in the early '60s.

Orth summarized Williams' professional career as struggling for years, taking off near the end of World War II, and washing out after 1961, in that none of his later works achieved critical acclaim. The professor suggested that the mark of the successful plays was their ability to be credible to the audience of their day, rather than to seem forced or contrived. Would *Cat's* themes still have the ring of truth and relevance 43 years after it was written? The answer is yes.

The cast provided skilled portrayals of family tensions along many dimensions based on human nature, which is timeless. The sad social commentary is that the play's homophobia is also totally credible today.

Mendacity, which one could concede is a gender neutral term, plays throughout the story. Each character offers different justifications and goals for lies, covering most categories contemporary people use. Intermittent explosions between the players sequentially destroy various mythical ways that silence or pretense was supposed to be benign.

Motives include: ensuring direct personal gain, avoiding being on one's own after escaping poverty through marriage, keeping Big Daddy's spirits and appetite up for his 65th birthday, making someone else look bad, or making the family look "good." Eventually, they all are exposed as just increasing the intensity of conflict, and destroying trust. Token parts for a cleric who overlooks the obvious, and a physician who

practices paternalistic lying and secrecy, warn that deceit exists beyond family ties. Unfortunately, this too has a current credibility.

The shockingly unexpected stench of authentic cigarette and cigar smoke in a "smoke free" theater seemed unnecessarily dramatic parallelism of Big Daddy's lines alerting his family that he has detected the smell of deceit. This and the full volume shouting in confrontational scenes advocates that sensitive souls would be better off towards the rear seats, though the view from row B was superb.

What are the *Cat's* messages about relationships? The only one described as rare in its closeness, equality, gentleness and purity, is that of Brick and Skipper, which the play portrays as never consummated. Brick had not come to terms with, and perhaps had no modeling for, the idea that gay men's relationships could be pure and clean in a moral sense, without being chaste.

Over the course of the play, it becomes clearer that his abhorrence of the suggestion of an eroticized nature of his friendship with Skipper, arose once others intruded by naming it. His pleasure in the magical connection shattered when it was no longer secret, and when he had to encompass the idea that it could represent what he had been trained to view as evil. His attempt to cloak his grieving in alcohol, since the death of his friend will not be recognized in the heterosexist world as equal to the loss of a spouse, still rings true.

The bar is prominent on stage, and draws Brick back time and time again. Over the play, he tries to answer the obvious question of why he drinks. He finally describes that he seeks the "click," that transformation from active brain that struggles with his

lies and loss, to peaceful brain that will not let him feel the pain. He drinks even as he tells that his true friend died of being a "lush." Family tried to threaten, command, wheedle, and punish him to get him to stop, as if their word was enough to break his habit. Some try to take blame themselves or place blame on others, as they try to explain why the favorite son turned into someone who will live only for this click.

Credibility in the presentation suffered most in the non-verbals of some of the cast. Brick's behavior was too unaffected by the obviously escalating amount he drank, until at the end he at least looked sleepy. His movements, his clarity of speech and thought, and his balance while doing one legged hops with a cast, all looked sober. (Perhaps one is to conclude that his wife and family, in the desperate attempt to control his drinking, had watered the liquor.) Mae's obvious girth of theatrical pregnancy was not matched by appropriate stance or gait.

The power of confronting death, escaping it, then returning to deal with the reality that time is limited and unpredictable for all, seems to cast a plea for the audience to hold life precious. All the power over the field workers, dominion over vast acreage of fertile soil, scornful control over his

mate and his brood — none of his "achievements" can forestall Big Daddy's death.

As the play nears a close, another lie would prophesy the fulfillment of Big Daddy's fondest dream for Brick's heir. When the lie becomes a manipulative threat to cajole intercourse that Maggie has sought throughout the play, one wonders where the lies will end, and what do dreams really mean anyway?

In responding to the offer/threat, and to the factual challenge posed by the ever-eavesdropping greedy brother and sister-in-law, Brick issues one of the more multilevel hopeful comments of the play: Some people love quietly.

Northern Stage, and Tennessee Williams, brightened a gray day with the production. Maybe in some humanistically enlightened day, it will become outdated; for now, it still is a success. ▼

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commentary is that the play's homophobia is also totally credible today.

Noël and Friends Unplugged for First Night

Noël & Friends will be performing for the 6th year in a row at the annual First Night St. Johnsbury. During the first two of three sets at 9pm and 10pm, the always stellar Bad Puppy Trio featuring Becky Canedy, Cathy Sargent & Pat Webster, will join Noël in performing some original tunes along with some favorite holiday and non-holiday songs. The Vermont Gay Men's Chorus, of which Noël

is a member, will sing a few selections as well as backing up Noël on a couple of holiday tunes during the final set at 11pm. All three shows will be accompanied on piano by the talented Mark Violette and will be totally acoustic in nature.

This marks a departure from the loud and lively CD backing tracks that are usually a part of a live Noël & Friends experience. All three performances will be held at the Universalist

Church on Cherry St., across Eastern Ave. from Catamount Arts.

First Night is an alcohol-free, family-oriented (whatever family means to you) event featuring singers, story-tellers, magicians, musicians, artists, actors, dancers, etc. at several venues surrounding the Main St. area in St. Johnsbury, VT.

Admission buttons, which allow entry to all venues except food vendors, can be

purchased for \$8 prior to Dec. 25th and \$10 during the week between Christmas and the actual New Year's Eve event. For more information contact the First Night St. Johnsbury office at (802)-748-4561. For more information about Noël call (802)-748-1024 or email iris@together.net. For more information about The Vermont Gay Men's Chorus (A Vocal Minority), email robnyves@together.net. ▼