

March 7, 2008

THEATER REVIEW | 'CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF'

## Yet Another Life for Maggie the Cat

By [BEN BRANTLEY](#)

Those eternal adversaries, irresistible force and immovable object, clash with gusto in the first act of the otherwise flabby revival of [Tennessee Williams's](#) "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," which opened Thursday night at the Broadhurst Theater.

The irresistible part of the equation is embodied most persuasively by Anika Noni Rose as that determined Southern seductress Maggie the Cat. Taking on the immovable duties is [Terrence Howard](#), in his Broadway debut, as Brick, Maggie's self-anesthetized husband.

Watching Maggie test her will of fire against Brick's Scotch-glazed shield of ice sends off such lively sparks that for the show's first 40 minutes or so you wonder if this might not be the most entertaining "Cat" since [Elizabeth Ashley](#) had her way with [Keir Dullea](#) more than three decades ago. But as any of Williams's disappointed characters could tell you, life is full of pretty hopes that fade before your eyes.

It's starting to feel as if "Cat," first staged in 1955, has become as frequent a visitor to Broadway as "Rigoletto" is to the [Metropolitan Opera](#). The previous revival, starring [Ashley Judd](#), [Jason Patric](#) and [Ned Beatty](#), closed only four years ago. But this melodrama of Southern-fried mendacity, Williams's personal favorite, is blessed with temptingly juicy roles that larger-than-life actors can't wait to squeeze.

So there was reason to be excited when this latest incarnation, directed by [Debbie Allen](#), was announced. And not, at least for me, because of the novelty of an all-black cast. (By transporting the play from the 1950s and the age of

Jim Crow to a later, unspecified decade, Ms. Allen wisely pushes past the issue of race.)

What sounded promising was the matching of performers and roles. [James Earl Jones](#), of the earth-shaking baritone and overpowering stature, as the tyrannical, filthy-rich Big Daddy; [Phylicia Rashad](#), who won a Tony as the long-suffering matriarch in the recent revival of “A Raisin in the Sun,” as his long-suffering wife: it was as if these parts were their birthrights.

Most tantalizing of all was the idea of Mr. Howard as their alcoholic son, Brick. Mr. Howard brought an eye-opening freshness to the perennial screen archetype of the sensitive but manly brooder in his Oscar-nominated turn as a small-time pimp in “Hustle & Flow.” The big question, it seemed, was whether Ms. Rose, hitherto known as an able supporting actress (“Caroline, or Change” and the film version of “Dreamgirls”), would be able to hold her own in such daunting company.

As it turns out, Ms. Rose more than holds her own. She pretty much runs the show whenever she’s onstage, and when she’s not, the show misses her management. Mr. Howard and Mr. Jones have moments that suggest what they might have made (and possibly still could make) of their roles. And Ms. Rashad presents a creditable, if arguably misconceived, Big Mama. But this time it’s Maggie who rules the Pollitt family’s dusty old house of lies.

Ms. Rose’s Maggie is less ornately stylized than earlier versions (including Ms. Ashley’s and [Kathleen Turner](#)’s, as well as [Elizabeth Taylor](#)’s in the 1958 film), and she more or less ignores Williams’s baroque descriptions of the character’s changes in timber and tempo. But what Ms. Rose grasps, with riveting firmness and clarity, is Maggie’s hard-driving sense of purpose.

Maggie, as you may recall, has an exceptionally clear through line for a Williams character. She has to make her husband, long absent from her bed, have sex with her again. This is because: 1) she really loves him; 2) a woman has her needs; 3) if she doesn’t conceive a child, it’s possible that the estate of the terminally ill Big Daddy will go to his other son, Gooper ([Giancarlo Esposito](#)), who has an annoyingly fertile and conniving wife (Lisa Arrindell Anderson).

It's the hot-and-bothered aspect of Maggie that originally made "Cat" a succès de scandale. But it was her unyielding will to survive that most interested Williams.

Though Ms. Rose wears a slinky slip as beguilingly as Ms. Taylor did, it's her take-charge energy and unembarrassed directness that make this Maggie such a stimulating presence. When she exclaims, "Maggie the cat is alive!" you can only nod in admiring agreement.

The play's first act has always been Maggie's, an aria of insistence and supplication directed at Brick, who, having broken his leg, is a captive audience. But what a perfect audience Mr. Howard's Brick is here, doing his best (and understandably failing) to tune out a wife who keeps prodding open wounds — like his suspicious closeness to his best friend, Skipper.

Brick is often played in the first act with robotic disaffection. Mr. Howard is more visibly amused, disgusted and drunk than any Brick I've seen. You're always aware that the click into numbness he aspires to has yet to arrive, lending a livelier than usual dynamic to his avoidance of Maggie.

The problem is that by the second act, when Big Daddy and Brick confront the truth together, Mr. Howard is wearing his character's pain all too palpably, mopping his eyes and tearfully bleating his lines. This turns Brick into a wounded little boy instead of the willfully numbed creature he must be to challenge Big Daddy into anger.

As a consequence Mr. Jones is forced to play his character as a blustery but affectionate fellow whose vulgarity masks a good heart, not so different from the lovable codger he recently portrayed in "On Golden Pond." Ms. Rashad, in turn, seems to grow in supportive strength and mother-knows-best wisdom. The production acquires a haze of sentimentality that makes it soft when it should be sharp.

The same might be said of Ms. Allen's direction. There's plenty of life in her staging, which keeps an army of Pollitts and servants, assembled for Big Daddy's birthday, running around Ray Klausen's standard-issue Southern-

mansion set. There is even, for reasons beyond my ken, a saxophone player (Gerald Hayes) who struts across the stage before each act.

The resulting atmosphere is festive, for sure, and the show is never boring. But too often it's without focus. Ms. Allen tries to resolve the problem by having her principal characters awkwardly spotlighted for their defining soliloquies. (William H. Grant III did the oddly abrupt lighting.) But she needs to rein in her cast.

Mr. Esposito, Ms. Anderson and even on occasion Mr. Jones resort to broad exaggeration more appropriate to a sitcom. And Mr. Howard is allowed to punctuate Brick's speeches with slackening silences of interior exploration on which the audience is not invited to accompany him.

I will admit that I have yet to see a perfectly balanced "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." What I recall of [Anthony Page's](#) version in 2003 is Mr. Beatty's magnificent Big Daddy.

But Williams wrote that with "Cat" he was "trying to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people, that cloudy, flickering, evanescent — fiercely charged! — interplay of live human beings in the thundercloud of a common crisis." The only fiercely charged element at the Broadhurst is Ms. Rose's Maggie. This "Cat" cries out for more lightning.

## CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

By [Tennessee Williams](#); directed by [Debbie Allen](#); sets by Ray Klausen; costumes by Jane Greenwood; lighting by William H. Grant III; sound by John H. Shivers; hair design by Charles G. LaPointe; production supervisor, Theatresmith Inc.; production stage manager, Gwendolyn M. Gilliam; general manager, NLA/Devin Keudell; original music by Andrew (Tex) Allen; associate producers, Beatrice L. Rangel and Terrie Williams. Presented by Front Row Productions and Stephen C. Byrd with Alia M. Jones, in association with Clarence J. Chandran, Norm Nixon, Michael Fuchs, Anthony Lacavera, Edward J. Jones, Sheanna Pang, Jovan Vitagliano and Al Wilson. At the Broadhurst Theater, 235 West 44th Street, Manhattan; (212) 239-6200. Through June 22. Running time: 2 hours 45 minutes.

WITH: [Terrence Howard](#) (Brick), [Phylicia Rashad](#) (Big Mama), Anika Noni Rose (Maggie), [James Earl Jones](#) (Big Daddy), Lisa Arrindell Anderson (Mae), Lou Myers (Reverend Tooker), Count Stovall (Dr. Baugh), [Giancarlo Esposito](#) (Gooper) and Gerald Hayes (saxophone player).