

January 17, 2013

THEATER REVIEW

A Storm From the South, Brewing in a Bedroom

By BEN BRANTLEY

A four-alarm urgency infuses every breath that [Scarlett Johansson](#) takes in the oxygen-starved revival of Tennessee Williams's "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" that opened on Thursday at the Richard Rodgers Theater.

Ms. Johansson plays Maggie, the magnificent, ravenous title creature in this oft-revived Pulitzer Prize-winning 1955 play about truth and mendacity on a bourbon-soaked Southern plantation. And Maggie's husband, the limp Brick (Benjamin Walker), gets it absolutely right when he tells her that her voice sounds "like you'd been running upstairs to warn somebody that the house was on fire!"

Well, why shouldn't it sound that way? Maggie's prospects of both a financially secure future and a satisfying sex life are in jeopardy, as her angry young husband drinks himself into a coma of indifference. It is also true that whoever plays this character needs the stamina and breath control of Wagner's Brunnhilde to get through Maggie's protracted opening aria of lust and lamentation without passing out.

Add to this list the anxiety that has to eat at a 28-year-old movie star required to hold a live audience's attention pretty much by herself for the whole of a long first act. Ms. Johansson was terrific in her Broadway debut in Arthur Miller's "[View From the Bridge](#)" three years ago, and she deserved the Tony she won for it.

But that was in a supporting, largely reactive role. Maggie is a front-and-center part, written in a poetic prose that approaches Shakespearean intricacy. And New York theatergoers are among the most unforgiving on the planet. If you were she, you'd be gasping too.

Fortunately, Ms. Johansson, like Maggie, seems to possess a confidence that can turn raw nerves into raw power. Her sophomore Broadway performance isn't as fully integrated as the one she gave in "Bridge"; there are a few miscalculations in her take on Maggie. She is perhaps too forthright to be truly feline, and for a poor but well-brought-up debutante, her accent is strangely common. (At times she sounds like [Hattie McDaniel as Mammy in "Gone With the Wind."](#))

But Ms. Johansson confirms her promise as a stage actress of imposing presence and adventurous intelligence. Quibble all you want about the particulars of her performance. She obviously has a strong sense of what she wants to do here and the convictions to follow it through. Her Maggie is, as she must be, an undeniable life force and — as far as [this production](#), directed by Rob Ashford, is concerned — a lifeline.

If I seem to be devoting disproportionate space to Ms. Johansson, it's not just because she's the most famous person in the room, or that Maggie (thanks to a steamy incarnation by [Elizabeth Taylor in the 1958 film](#)) is the play's most famous character. Ms. Johansson is also the only major player in "Cat" who appears to have a fully thought-through idea of the character she's portraying. With a palatial bedroom of a set by Christopher Oram and vivid period costumes by Julie Weiss, the show is as light on persuasive acting as it is saturated in Southern Gothic atmosphere.

That imbalance is perplexing, given the stature of the show's other stars: Mr. Walker, the sexy, charisma-charged leading man of the musical "Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson," and the estimable veterans Debra Monk (a Tony winner for "Redwood Curtain"), as Brick's fond and foolish mother, and [Ciaran Hinds](#) (a devil to remember in "The Seafarer") as the ultimate filthy rich Southern patriarch, Big Daddy, whose terminal illness has his kinfolk gathering like vultures.

All these fine performers bring a snarling aggression to their parts (even Mr. Walker, when Brick is finally startled out of his pickled lethargy) that I suppose befits a play in which people are frequently characterized as rutting, territorial animals. (Michael Park and Emily Bergl give conventional Southern snake performances as Brick's conniving brother and sister-in-law.)

But even when they raise their voices and square their shoulders, they seem to be marking time, as if hoping inspiration would strike and tell them how to say the next line. Yes, we're told that Brick is drinking himself into oblivion because of the death of his best friend, Skipper, to whom he was suspiciously close; that Big Mama exists to please Big Daddy and dotes on Brick; and that Big Daddy is as filled with the hunger for living (which includes good ole sex) as Maggie.

But aside from the startling flashes of vulnerability that tear the carapace of Ms. Johansson's Maggie, there's scant evidence of subtext, of the thoughts behind the blustery facades. I doubt this is quite what Williams had in mind when he wrote, in the stage

directions for “Cat,” that “some mystery should be left in the revelation of a character in a play.”

The second act, in which Brick and Big Daddy have one of the great father-son confabs in American theater, gives off sparks only when Mr. Walker and Mr. Hinds physically hit at each other, then collapse in an Oedipal heap on that big, dominating bed that occupies center stage (a reproachful reminder of Brick’s neglect of his husbandly duties).

Otherwise, the scene has the singsong prosiness of a petulant teenager and his old man having an everyday argument about Junior’s raiding the liquor cabinet again, albeit with a father who may possibly have mob ties. (Mr. Hinds’s delivery sometimes evokes a Southern variation on “The Sopranos.”) As much fun as Maggie’s soliloquies are in the first act, the soul of the play is here, as Brick and Big Daddy force each other to confront the evasions that cripple their lives.

Mr. Ashford — who is best known here for musicals (“Promises, Promises”) but staged an acclaimed version of Williams’s “Streetcar Named Desire” in London several years ago — doesn’t seem to trust his actors to deliver Williams’s poetry. So instead he imports it. The sound of fireworks exploding (in honor of Big Daddy’s birthday) is embarrassingly used to underscore revelatory lines.

The interpolation of a character playing the ghost of Skipper, who appeared in previews, has been mercifully exorcised. But Adam Cork’s sound design remains unnecessarily intrusive. Crucial dialogue is sometimes lost as the sound of servants singing spirituals and work songs (“Oh, lordy, pick a bale of cotton”) drifts from the wings.

And when a summer storm arrives, it’s the scenery-rattling, curtain-whipping kind you associate with vintage dark-house suspense movies. There’s lots of thunder and lightning, of course. But Mother Nature shouldn’t have to do the work of actors. In this production only Ms. Johansson suggests the tempest in the human heart.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

By Tennessee Williams; directed by Rob Ashford; sets by Christopher Oram; costumes by Julie Weiss; lighting by Neil Austin; music and sound by Adam Cork; hair and wig design by Paul Huntley; fight director, Rick Sordelet; production stage manager, Lisa Dawn Cave; production manager, Aurora Productions; associate producer, Kevin Emrick; general manager, STP/Patrick Gracey. Presented by Stuart Thompson, Jon B. Platt, the Araca Group, Roger Berlind, Scott M. Delman, Roy Furman, Ruth Hendel, Carl Moellenberg, Scott

and Brian Zeilinger, Nederlander Presentations Inc., Tulchin/Bartner Productions and Scott Rudin. At the Richard Rodgers Theater, 226 West 46th Street, Manhattan; (800) 745-3000, ticketmaster.com. Through March 30. Running time: 2 hours 40 minutes.

WITH: Scarlett Johansson (Margaret), Ciaran Hinds (Big Daddy), Benjamin Walker (Brick), Debra Monk (Big Mama), Emily Bergl (Mae), Michael Park (Gooper), Vin Knight (Reverend Tooker), Brian Reddy (Doctor Baugh), Tanya Birl (Daisy), Will Cobbs (Brightie), Lance Roberts (Lacey), Cherene Snow (Sookey), Laurel Griggs (Polly), Victoria Leigh (Dixie), Charlotte Rose Masi (Trixie), George Porteous (Sonny) and Noah Unger (Buster).