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Theatre: Tennessee Williams's 'Cat'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

For Tennessee Williams and for the rest of us, the news could hardly be better this morning. For "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," which opened at the Morosco last evening, is a stunning drama.

Again Mr. Williams is discussing some people of the Mississippi Delta, which he knows well. And again the people are not saints and heroes. But this time, Mr. Williams has broken free from the formula or the suspicion of formula that has hovered around the edges of his plays.

"Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" is the work of a mature observer of men and women and a gifted craftsman. To say that it is the drama of people who refuse to face the truth of life is to suggest a whole school of problem dramatists. But one of the great achievements is the honesty and simplicity of the craftsmanship. It seems not to have been written. It is the quintessence of life. It is the basic truth. Always a seeker after honesty in his writing, Mr. Williams has not only found a solid part of the truth but found the way to say it with complete honesty. It is not only part of the truth of life: it is the absolute truth of the theatre.

In a plantation house, the members of the family are celebrating the sixty-fifth birthday of the Big Daddy, as they sentimentally dub him. The tone is gay. But the mood is somber. For a number of old evils poison the gaiety- sins of the past, greedy hopes for the future, a desperate eagerness not to believe in the truths that surround them. Most of them are living lives as uncomfortable and insecure as the proverbial "cat on a hot tin roof."

Nothing eventful happens in the course of the evening, for Mr. Williams has now left the formulas of the theatre far to the rear. He is interested solely in exploring minds. "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" is a delicately wrought exercise in human communication. His characters try to escape from the loneliness of their private lives into some form of understanding. The truth invariably terrifies them. That is the one thing they cannot face or speak.

They can find comfort in each other only by falling back on lies- social lies, lies about health, lies about the past, lies about the future. Not vicious lies, for the most part. The central characters want to be kind to each other. But lies are the only refuge they have from the ugly

truths that possess their minds.

As the expression of a brooding point of view about life, "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" is limpid and effortless. As theatre, it is superb. Mr. Williams and his brilliant director, Elia Kazan, has used the medium of theatre candidly. Jo Mielziner has graphically suggested a bed-sitting room on what amounts to an apron stage that thrusts the action straight at the audience. Most of the play is written in long duologues without dramatic artifice. Occasionally the actors speak directly to the audience without reference to the other characters.

The acting is magnificent. There is about it that "little something extra" by which the actors reveal awareness of a notable theatrical occasion. Barbara Bel Geddes, vital, lovely and frank as the young wife who cannot accept her husband's indifference; Ben Gazzara, handsome, melancholy, pensive as the husband; Burl Ives as the solid head of the family who fears no truth except his own and hates insincerity; Mildred Dunnock as the silly, empty-headed mother who has unexpected strength of character- give marvelous performances.

There are excellent performances also by Madeleine Sherwood, Pat Hingle, Fred Stewart, R.G. Armstrong and some other good actors. "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" is Mr. Williams' finest drama. It faces and speaks the truth.

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