

DVD REVIEW on DVDTown.com

<http://www.dvdtown.com/review/catonahottinroofdeluxeedition1/18768/3636/>

By [John J. Puccio](#)

FIRST PUBLISHED May 1, 2006

I have to admit that of all of America's great playwrights, I've always found Tennessee Williams the most distant from my own way of life. I mean, compared to, say, Arthur Miller or Eugene O'Neill, Williams' characters seem to me to inhabit another planet. The women are faded Southern belles, Southern floozies, or Southern princesses; the men are ineffectual drunks, creeps, or brutes. Not that that's all bad; it's just different from my experience and most of the people I've met. But I can't argue that these folks aren't entertaining as all get out, especially the ones in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," like Maggie ("the Cat"), Brick, Gooper, and Big Daddy. At the very least, you could always count on Williams for great character names and great titles ("A Streetcar Named Desire," "Baby Doll," "The Night of the Iguana," "The Glass Menagerie," "A Rose Tattoo," "Orpheus Descending," "Summer and Smoke").

Williams called "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" a study in mendacity, and certainly everyone in the story lies in one way or another. He wrote the play in 1955, and it became an enormous, Pulitzer Prize-winning hit on Broadway, but he was said to have disliked the 1958 movie version we have here because it eliminated any hint of the homosexuality that underlined one of the character's motivations. Well, that was Hollywood for you in the 1950s and before.

There is a lot less thematic depth to Williams' plays than to the works of Miller or O'Neill, but Williams' characters have such emotional depth that audiences don't seem to notice or mind. Certainly, in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" the characters and their relationships with one another are the end-all of the drama. The screenplay was co-written and directed by Richard Brooks, whose films were almost always rooted in strong characterizations: "Blackboard Jungle," "Elmer Gantry," "Sweet Bird of Youth," "Lord Jim," "In Cold Blood," "Looking for Mr. Goodbar," that kind of thing.

And you couldn't ask for better actors and actresses in the main roles: Elizabeth Taylor, Paul Newman, Burl Ives, Jack Carson, Judith Anderson, Madeleine Sherwood. They're terrific, even if it's Ives, a holdover from the stage production, who steals the show as Big Daddy. He's nothing short of perfection, and his penultimate scene is a heartbreaker.

The story begins at Big Daddy Pollitt's sixty-fifth birthday party, an occasion for the gathering of the Pollitt clan at Big Daddy's antebellum-style, Mississippi mansion. Big Daddy is a grumpy, hateful old codger, very rich and very powerful. He dominates everyone around him, and his inability to express any kind of warmth or love provides one of the movie's central turning points. But more than the birthday party, the family has gathered to find out if the old man is going to live or die. He's dying presumably of cancer (although it's never mentioned in the film, the subject of cancer apparently being another of those taboo subjects that Hollywood's self-imposed censorship code forbade, along with sex and profanity and excess violence and a ton of other stuff we take for granted today). It's clear from the beginning, however, that the family is more interested in who will inherit Big Daddy's lands and money than in wishing him well. Interestingly, too, Burl Ives was only in his late forties when he did the role, and the singer/actor

would continue to perform for the next thirty years or more.

Newman and Carson play Big Daddy's two sons, Brick and Gooper. Brick is a drunken ex-football star, now sullen and uncommunicative, who says he can't stand his wife and does everything he can to ignore and avoid her, including sleeping on the sofa. They have been married three years and are childless, clearly a misdemeanor or sorts among the Pollitts. Gooper is the older son, a spineless lawyer with an obnoxious wife (Sherwood) and a half dozen equally obnoxious kids, all of them eager to get their hands on the old man's millions.

Taylor plays Maggie "the Cat" Pollitt, Brick's wife. Like everyone else in the story, she appears to harbor secrets. But is she as wicked as Brick implies, or is she the only person in the family with spine, gumption, heart, soul, and life? For Taylor, the role was another stepping stone in her transition from child star to adult award-winner, going on to do "Suddenly Last Summer," "Butterfield 8," "Cleopatra," "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?," "The Taming of the Shrew," and other mature works.

Brick and Maggie are the center posts of the film. Their relationship represents the "mendacity" that Williams mentions maybe a half dozen times in the story, a relationship currently built on lies, falsehoods, and deception. What are the real motives behind Brick's decline into alcoholism and despondency? Is he simply a spoiled, limp, indecisive jellyfish, governed entirely by his overbearing father? Does his hatred of his wife have anything to do with his best friend Skipper's suicide several years before? Or does he hate himself for Skipper's death, and is he now playing out a long, agonized guilt, which he blames on everybody else?

The characters all lie and connive (more of that "mendacity" business), and all of them appear not to be able to stand each other. Big Daddy doesn't seem to like either of his sons and plans to outlive them both just so neither of them will inherit his estate. Can any of these folks stop lying and hating for a moment to see the love around them?

The film is virtually all talk and takes place almost exclusively in Big Daddy's house. In those respects, the film betrays its stage origins more than do most film adaptations of plays. Yet, the dialogue is so absorbing and the acting so intense, we hardly notice that 108 minutes go by or that there is a whole lot less to the plot than meets the eye.

### **Video:**

The film's original 1.85:1 aspect ratio nicely fills out a 16x9 widescreen television, and WB's high-bit-rate transfer presents a brightly lit picture, with fairly natural colors. Overall, I'd judge it a tad soft on detail, but it is, nevertheless, quite realistic. There is no grain to speak of, and there are no moiré effects. If I had to fault the video at all, it is for being perhaps a shade too colorful for the story it has to tell. Black-and-white might have suited it better.

### **Audio:**

The audio engineers render the sound via Dolby Digital 1.0 mono, and while it has little to do but reproduce midrange dialogue, it has an odd, strained, nasal quality about it. This was most noticeable to me at the beginning of the film, and either the problem disappeared before long or I simply got used to it; I'm not sure which. In any case, expect nothing out of the ordinary here.

**Extras:**

There are two primary extras in this "Deluxe Edition": The first is an audio commentary by biographer Donald Spoto, author of "The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams." He tells us up front that he will try to make his commentary as entertaining for the listener as possible, and he delivers enough analysis, background information, and trivia to fulfill that ambition. The second item is a ten-minute featurette, "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof: Playing Cat and Mouse," which is mostly promotional but contains a fair amount of useful information as well.

The extras conclude with twenty-six scene selections, but no chapter insert; a widescreen theatrical trailer; English and French spoken languages; and English, French, and Spanish subtitles.

**Parting Thoughts:**

"Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" was probably the most melodramatic thing Tennessee Williams ever wrote, but its characters are so fascinating and the acting in the movie so good that it makes up for any lack of intellectual complexity. Taylor and Newman are expectedly good, of course, but it's Ives who steals the show.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences nominated the movie for six Oscars: Best Picture, Best Actor (Newman), Best Actress (Taylor), Best Director (Brooks), Best Color Cinematography (William H. Daniels), and Best Screenplay Based on Another Medium (Richard Brooks and James Poe). The movie went away empty-handed, but not for lack of trying. It made up for its shortage of Oscars by being one of the most-popular films of the year.

Warner Bros. have made the Deluxe Edition of "A Streetcar Named Desire" available individually or in a six-movie box set, "The Tennessee Williams Film Collection," which also includes "Baby Doll," "A Streetcar Named Desire," "The Night of the Iguana," "The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone," and "Sweet Bird of Youth."