

# WU?<sup>@</sup>therep

## CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

By Tennessee Williams

Directed by Marshall W. Mason

MAJOR SPONSOR: MONSANTO FUND

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# the 11

At The Rep, we know that life moves fast—okay, really fast. But we also know that some things

are worth slowing down for. We believe that live theatre is one of those pit stops worth making and are excited that you are going to stop by for a show. To help you get the most bang for your buck, we have put together

**WU? @ THE REP**—an IM guide that will give you everything you need to know to get at the top of your theatergoing game—fast. You'll find character descriptions (**A/S/L**), a plot summary (**FYI**), background information on the playwright (**F2F**) and other NTK information. Most importantly, we'll have some ideas about what this all means **IRL**, anyway.

## CU@therep!

### The Teacher's Lounge



In an effort to make our educational materials more accessible to students and easier for educators to incorporate into the classroom, we have adopted a new, more student-oriented format. We hope that you will circulate this guide among your students in the weeks preceding your visit to The Rep, encouraging them to browse it before and after class and as time allows, using it as a launch point for both pre- and post-performance discussions. You may also want to visit our website, [www.repstl.org](http://www.repstl.org) for additional information regarding the production elements, such as scenery, costumes, and lighting. Any materials, either from this guide, or from our website may be reproduced for use in the classroom. As always, we appreciate your making live theatre a part of your classroom experience and welcome your feedback and questions.

NEATO!

The activities included here address the following Show Me Standards: CA 1, 2, 5, 6, 7; FA 1, 2, 3, 4, 5; HS 2; SS 6 and Illinois Learning Standards: 1, 2, 4, 5, 12, 18, 25, 26, 27, SEL 1, 2, 3.

## MIHYAP: TOP TEN WAYS TO STAY CONNECTED AT THE REP

- 10. TBA** Ushers will seat your school or class as a group, so even if you are dying to mingle with the group from the all girls school that just walked in the door, stick with your friends until you have been shown your section in the theatre.
- 9. SITD** The house lights will dim immediately before the performance begins and then go dark. Fight off that oh-so-immature urge to whisper, giggle like a grade schooler, or yell at this time and during any other blackouts in the show.
- 8. SED** Before the performance begins, turn off all cell phones, pagers, beepers and watch alarms. If you need to text, talk or dial back during intermission, please make sure to click off before the show resumes.
- 7. TMI** Not to sound like your mom, but "if you need to go now, you needed to go then." Leaving the theatre during the performance is disruptive, so take care of any personal needs before the show starts.
- 6. RTM** When you arrive at the theatre, read the production program. It's like a deluxe version of liner notes and a free souvenir, all in one.
- 5. P-ZA? NW!** Though your ability to eat ten slices at one sitting may impress your friends, no one wants to listen to you chew, slurp or smack, so please leave all food, drink and gum outside the theatre.
- 4. TLK-2-U-L-8-R** We know that you will be dying to discuss what you see onstage with your friends, but please wait until intermission. Any talking—even whispering—is very distracting for both the actors onstage and the audience seated around you.
- 3. LOL** Without you, we really wouldn't have a show. It's your job to laugh when a scene is funny or maybe even shed a tear or two in a tender moment. However, since you are not the audience at *The Jerry Springer Show* please refrain from inappropriate responses such as talking, whistling, making catcalls or singing along with the performers.
- 2. SOP** While it's great that you want a celeb picture of your day at The Rep, the theatre is off-limits to the paparazzi. Flash photography interrupts the performance and along with videorecording is prohibited by Actors Equity rules. You can sneak a peek at production photos on our website, [www.repstl.org](http://www.repstl.org).
- 1. LLTA** Let the actors know that you respect their work by remaining for the curtain call at the end of the performance. Show your appreciation through applause.

# A/S/L

**MAGGIE**, a self-described cat, hopes to use her feline cunning and primal sensuality to win back the husband she has lost to the liquor cabinet and persuade him to father a child.

**BRICK**, an ex-football star and current sports announcer, is the younger of the two Pollitt brothers and the clear favorite, in spite of his excesses in drink and shortcomings in producing an heir.

**BIG DADDY**, a self-made plantation owner and fierce patriarch of the Pollitt family, has worked his way up from riding freight cars to presiding over “twenty-eight thousand acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile” and now, on his sixty-fifth birthday is unwittingly dying of cancer.

**BIG MAMA** wields a sizeable frame and a stifling personality but neither prepares her to deal with Big Daddy’s condition.

**GOOPER** is Brick’s older brother, a “sober, responsible man” who practices corporate law in Memphis and is determined to protect what he sees as his rightful inheritance.

**MAE** is as calculatingly feline as Maggie but prefers to use saccharin smiles and her five children to secure her husband Gooper’s birthright from Big Daddy.

**REVEREND TOOKER**, the spiritual caretaker for the Pollitts, is more interested in soliciting a sizeable memorial in Big Daddy’s name than in providing solace for him or his family.

**DOCTOR BAUGH** is the longtime physician to the Pollitts and is an active participant in Big Daddy’s deception.

**MISS SALLY** is Big Daddy’s “old maid sister” from Memphis.

**SKIPPER**, Brick’s closest friend, died some time ago but their relationship and Brick’s handling of it still haunts him.

## READ MORE ABOUT IT

We encourage you to examine these topics in-depth by exploring the following books.

Downing, Robert. “From the Cat-bird Seat: The Production Stage Manager’s Notes on *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.” *Theater Annual* Vol. 14 (1956): 46–50.

Leavitt, Richard F. *The World of Tennessee Williams*. NY: Putnam, 1978.

Mayberry, Susan Neal. “A Study of Illusion and the

Grotesque in Tennessee Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.” *Southern Studies* 22.4 (1983): 359–65.

Murphy, Brenda. *Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan: A Collaboration in the Theatre*. NY: Cambridge UP, 1992.

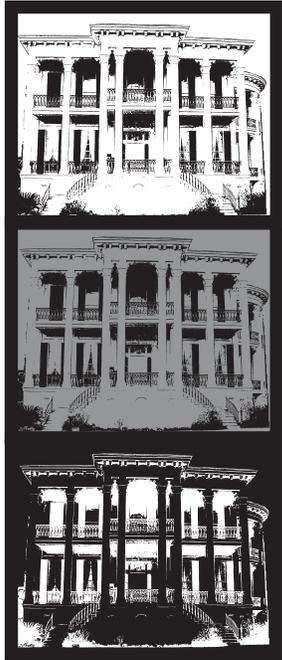
Stanton, Stephen S. *Tennessee Williams: A Collection of Critical*

*Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977.

Williams, Tennessee. *Memoirs*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975.

Winchell, Mark Royden. “Come Back To The Locker Room Ag’in Brick Honey.” *The Mississippi Quarterly* 48 (Fall 1995): 701–712.





ONE OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' most acclaimed works, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* portrays the evening of Big Daddy Pollitt's sixty-fifth birthday, a stormy night in which old secrets are exposed, carefully crafted lies are unraveled, and the rules of polite Southern society no longer apply. Big Daddy, proprietor of a huge Mississippi cotton plantation is surrounded by his family to celebrate both his birthday and what he believes is a stay of execution from cancer. However, his firstborn son, Gooper, along with his broodmare of a wife, Mae, have other plans. They know that the doctor has purposefully misled both Big Daddy and his wife, Big Mama, to believe that the patriarch merely has a spastic colon when in reality he is suffering from advanced inoperable cancer and is not expected to live long. Gooper, a lawyer, has already prepared papers which would transfer control of the substantial estate to him, but before broaching the topic with Big Mama, he and Mae will exploit their five children and Mae's new pregnancy in every way imaginable in hopes of currying Big Daddy's elusive favor.

THE CONSTANTLY performing children are a particularly powerful bargaining tool because Gooper's greatest competition for the inheritance, his younger brother Brick, is childless. A standout high school athlete turned sports announcer, Brick and his wife Maggie are married in name only. In fact, Brick has agreed to keep their marriage intact only under the condition that it remains strictly platonic. The two have not

shared a bed since Brick's best friend, Skipper, died several years ago, a fact that Maggie finds both humiliating and unbearable. Brick's disdain for her is outweighed only by his desire to drink, an urge which most likely led him to break his leg while running the hurdles on the high school track field the night before. This injury forces the birthday festivities into Brick and Maggie's painfully chilly bedroom, further highlighting the tension which everyone already knows is there.

OVER THE COURSE of the night, everyone from Mae and Gooper to Big Mama to Maggie to the Reverend of the local church attempts to win Big Daddy's affections, but no one is willing to tell him the truth. The one exception is Brick who has always been and continues to be the gruff old man's favorite. Distanced by alcohol from his family and his life, Brick has no motivation to pursue Big Daddy's fortune, but Big Daddy does pursue him. Determined to jolt his son out his self-induced stupor, Big Daddy dismisses everyone except Brick from the room and confronts him about his drinking, his façade of a marriage and his relationship with Skipper. The result is revelatory for both men as they realize that they have been living with layer upon layer of lies for years, chiefly because that is the expectation, even the obligation, of family and society. The truths that they inflict on one another are at once painful and liberating and will reverberate in this family for years to come.





# face 2 face

HE WAS BORN in Mississippi, grew up in Missouri (St. Louis, in fact), and called Louisiana his home, but the name that taunted him in childhood and is now known around the world, is Tennessee. Thomas Lanier Williams III was born into a genteel Southern family in Columbus, Mississippi in 1911 to Edwina Dakin Williams and Cornelius Coffin Williams. In 1918, his father's job transferred the family to St. Louis, and though Williams characterized the move as "tragic", he would also later describe his time he spent here as "the beginning of the social consciousness which I think has marked most of my writing." Here, his family's bloodline and social status meant little and his southern accent earned him derision from his classmates, along with the name that he eventually embraced, Tennessee. Urban life also made him keenly aware that outside of the South, his family's gentility quickly faded into simple poverty. This deceptive burden of prestige without power or wealth has become a hallmark of his plays and is quite evident in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* as Maggie's poor, but socially adept upbringing is cast in stark relief against Big Daddy's rise from anonymous poverty to enviable wealth.

A CHILDHOOD bout with diphtheria paralyzed his legs for several years and only exacerbated his father's distaste for his son's preference of literary pursuits over athletic prowess. The elder Williams routinely called his son "Miss Nancy," as a means of shaming him for this perceived shortcoming, behavior which could easily be seen as an influence for Big Daddy's preference for Brick, the athlete, over Gooper, the lawyer in *Cat*. In spite of these strained relations, Williams continued living with his family into his mid-twenties, leaving only for a brief stint at the University of Missouri which ended with his withdrawal. Under the direction of his father, he sold shoes during the day and wrote at night until he enrolled at Washington University in St. Louis in 1936,

with financial help from his "sainted grandparents." Unfortunately, this experience also ended in frustration and academic disgrace for him, but was probably invaluable in cultivating his sense of the "outsider" that flavors all of his work.

AN EXTENDED TOUR around the country after leaving Washington University eventually lead him to his "spiritual home" and primary work place, New Orleans. It was here that he settled into his writing career, enjoying his greatest critical and popular success in the 1940s and '50s with works such as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass Menagerie*, and of course, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Though he continued to write scripts into the '70s, nothing he produced in that era met with the same success.

THIS MAY BE due, at least in part, to his long-term struggle with drugs, including alcohol, and serious depression. The isolation and exclusion that he felt as a child extended into adulthood for him and even with the major commercial success that accompanied the film versions of his most popular plays, he still remained on the periphery of his profession. Elizabeth Ashley, who starred as Maggie in the 1974 Broadway revival of *Cat* said of Williams, "He broke all the rules. He was never a member of the club, for many reasons." Now, over twenty years after his death in 1983, his works are enjoying a resurgence of popularity with revivals on Broadway and prominent regional theatres throughout the country. Perhaps it is because the "outsider" is a permanent element in society, and though his plays offer no pat solutions, they do perpetually bring the problem to the fore. As fellow writer Horton Foote has said of the playwright, "He asked you to see things that we didn't face in those days." We still may not be facing those "things" today, but Williams continues to ask us to look, if only for a few hours' time.

IN THE STAGE DIRECTIONS for *Cat*, Williams writes of Big Daddy's confrontation with Brick:

*The thing they're discussing, timidly and painfully on the side of Big Daddy, fiercely, violently on Brick's side, is the inadmissible thing that Skipper died to disavow between them. The fact that if it existed it had to be disavowed to "keep face" in the world they lived in, may be at the heart of the "mendacity" that Brick drinks to kill his disgust with...The bird that I hope to catch in the net of this play is not the solution of one man's psychological problem. I'm trying to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people, cloudy, flickering, evanescent—fiercely charged!—interplay of live human beings in the thundercloud of a common crisis.*

THIS LENGTHY commentary on one of the play's most critical scenes is powerful in that it acknowledges the heartbreak and agony of an individual forced by society to wrestle

with demons in private and at the same time, confirms the universality of this experience. What Williams so skillfully addresses here is the almost unavoidable tendency of people to marginalize one another. Although Brick's specific struggle is with the nature of his relationship with Skipper and sexual orientation, Williams is careful to point out that the core of this man's fight is a common one, a sense of isolation and the failure to measure up to socially imposed expectations. Though to a lesser extent, he does mirror this conflict in the way that Big Daddy and Maggie deal with their pasts. Both come from lives of relative poverty and in spite of their financial security now, find it difficult to shed the stigma that it cast on them. Whether it is a matter of race, ethnicity, education, economic status or sexual orientation, most individuals feel compelled to fall in sync with the relative "norms" that surround them or face social consequences.



- DO YOU BELIEVE that society genuinely obliges people to look, think, act or feel a particular way, or is this simply a perceived problem?
- WHAT IS YOUR own experience and that of your friends?
- HAVE YOU FELT pressured to alter or disguise who you really are in order to have the quality of life that you want? If so, who or what do you think drives these social mandates, particularly, if as Williams points out, we are all in a "common crisis?"

*“I’ve lived with mendacity!—Why can’t you live with it? Hell, you got to live with it, there’s nothing else to live with except mendacity, is there?”*

BIG DADDY AND BRICK reach the conclusion that lying is a fundamental way of life and research indicates that they may be right. Why we routinely lie to one another is a complex matter, but how we feel about it is fairly simple. According to a principle known as the Fundamental Attribution Error, we assume that if we do something negative, it is because circumstances beyond our control force us to; however, if someone else behaves in the same way, it is because he or she has an innate character flaw. Two motivations drive this kind of thought. First, we need to believe that we are, at heart, good people, so we excuse our actions with rational

justifications. At the same time, we naturally have better insight into our own reasons for doing things than those of someone else, so we assume that our motives are acceptable while another’s are not.

BEHAVIORAL RESEARCHERS recently learned that this principle also applies to lying. Just as Big Daddy finds it acceptable to continue a sham marriage with Big Mama and yet deplores being lied to about his own health, a majority of participants in a controlled study perceived their own lies as less harmful than those of other people, even if the scenario was exactly the same. This could explain why a 1996 study found that 1 in 3 interactions among college students involves a lie, and 1 in 5 exchanges among the general population results in a lie.



- ▶ WHAT IS YOUR own experience with truthfulness? Conduct an informal survey of your peers to see if these findings hold true in your situation. Explore with your interviewees why they make the choices they do about telling (or not telling) the whole truth.

# SWDY?

***“Always, anyhow lived with too much space around me to be infected by ideas of other people. One thing you can grow on a big plantation more important than cotton! is tolerance!—I grown it.”***

- What do you make of Big Daddy’s conclusion? Is distance from outside influences necessary in order to cultivate a culture of acceptance? Is isolation the key to learning to tolerate a variety of ideas or beliefs?

***“Mendacity is a system that we live in. Liquor is one way out an’ death’s the other...”***

- Brick’s assessment of life is a rather bleak one. Do you agree that lying is an unavoidable element in our lives? If so, what are the consequences and how do we most effectively deal with them?

***“Any true thing between two people is too rare to be normal.”***

- What does Brick mean by this circular statement? Is sincerity in relationships an impossibility? Can we only know as much of an individual as he or she is willing to share? If so, why?

***“I guess it’s bad, but now I’m stronger than you and I can love you more truly!”***

- Is Maggie right? Does true sentiment necessarily stem from power or dominance? Does submission automatically equal weakness in a relationship?

***“You can be young without money, but you can’t be old without it.”***

- What does Maggie’s comment indicate about how she perceives society to work? Do you agree or disagree with her position?

# RBTL

Playwrights have one tremendous advantage over writers of other forms of fiction in that they can use visual and verbal symbolism simultaneously to express their ideas, communicating with the audience not only through the words that the characters speak but also via the physical environment of the play. Tennessee Williams uses both methods of substitution extensively throughout *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* with the following images taking on particularly important roles.

**THE BED**— The entire play takes place in Brick and Maggie’s bedroom, a place of privacy and sanctity for most couples. However, as the entire family converges on them, their room and their lives are anything but private, with the empty bed serving as a symbol for their empty marriage. It is also worth noting that their room is that of the former plantation owners, Straw and Ochello, who shared the bed and as Williams describes it, “a tenderness which was uncommon.”

**THE HI-FI CONSOLE**— Brick repeatedly seeks solace from this giant liquor cabinet/entertainment center that, in Williams’s own words “is a very complete and compact little shrine to virtually all the comforts and illusions behind which we hide from such things as the characters in the play are faced with.”

**BRICK’S CAST**— Much like his abuse of alcohol, Brick’s cast is a self-inflicted form of distancing himself from others. Just as he uses alcohol to separate himself from his thoughts and his family, he attempts to use his injury to secrete himself and his turmoil.

**BRICK’S CRUTCH**— The crutch affords Brick a certain measure of independence and control over when and where he goes, allowing him to continue indulging his injury and his alcoholism, but when both Maggie and Big Daddy strip him of this support, he is physically and emotionally vulnerable.

**CANCER**— Big Daddy’s advanced stage malignancy equates directly with the highly corrosive and invasive culture of lies in which this family lives. They are being devoured by an enemy that most of them don’t even acknowledge exists.

**PREGNANCY/CHILDREN**— Birth has long been a surrogate for hope, renewal and prosperity. So by pitting Mae’s seemingly effortless gift for producing children against Maggie’s inability to do so, Williams seems to comment on the injustice of good fortune being given not on the basis of merit but by sheer luck. Likewise, Maggie’s fabricated pregnancy in the final scene represents the false but necessary hope that she holds for her marriage.

**CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF**—Just as a cat is determined to maintain its aloof dignity no matter its circumstances, Maggie still cultivates a passionate, sensual nature in spite of her barren marriage.