

Compass Rose points to strong characters in Williams' 'Hot Tin Roof'



Katrina Clark as Maggie and Jacques Mitchell as Brick in Tennessee Williams' "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" continuing weekends through February 28 at Compass Rose Theater. (Photo by Stan Barouh)

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Compass Rose Theater's production of Tennessee Williams' "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" — the 1955 Pulitzer Prize-winning drama chronicling steamy Southern passions for life and love — illustrates why this classic drama is frequently offered in revivals.

Purported to be a personal favorite of Williams, "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" is filled with strong characters confronting emotional life trials.

Among these trials is spousal rejection, experienced by seductive Maggie the Cat as she rails against husband Brick's indifference to her needs. Brick also ignores his father's attempts at reconciliation, even in the face of impending family tragedy.

Compass Rose founding artistic director Lucinda Merry-Browne again displays her expertise in bringing major 20th-century drama to vibrant life. She also shows her casting talents, selecting ideal actors from among favorites of past shows and newcomers seemingly destined to play these characters.

As Merry-Browne notes, the poetry of Williams' language requires seasoned actors to reveal its beauty.

Most challenging in the first half-hour of Act 1 is Maggie being required to deliver most of the lines. Her dialogue reflects her determination to break through Brick's alcoholic defensive armor in an attempt to rekindle their love so that she can conceive a child.

Maggie reasons that only a child will enable Brick to compete with older brother Gooper and his wife, Mae, to gain a share of his father's estate. Williams' study in mendacity is illustrated by Gooper and his scheming wife, along with their obnoxious children — who are barely tolerated by Brick and Maggie.

Making her Compass Rose debut in the challenging role of Maggie, Washington-based Katrina Clark conveys the sensuous, willful character's gritty determination.

She sparkles when she declares, "Maggie the Cat is alive!" before sharing with Brick her observations about Gooper, Mae and their brood of "no-neck" children.

Equity actor Jacques Mitchell takes time from his New York career to make an exciting Compass Rose debut as Brick.

Mitchell's Brick is a tragic hero incapable of lying — he simply hides a fearsome truth from his father, choosing to remain in his room rather than socialize with sycophantic family members.

Brick wields his crutch — required after a broken leg — as a sword, guarding his idealism. Mitchell captures Brick's hesitant bravery when responding to the efforts of his father, Big Daddy, to reconcile. In addition, he invests the playwright's poetry with truth and humor when recognizing the family's untruthfulness.

Ultimately, family bonds extend to Brick's respectful love for Maggie, requiring his gift of a supportive lie.

Compass Rose favorite Gary Goodson, another Equity performer who portrayed Atticus Finch in "To Kill a Mockingbird" several seasons ago and recently became patriarch W.O. Gant in "Look Homeward, Angel," returns here as Big Daddy.

Goodson gives the blustering tycoon an outsized love of life — and disdain for his son Gooper that grows to abhorrence of his wife and their children. Goodson's scenes with Brick portray robust emotion.

Big Daddy responds angrily to his wife's concerns about his health and doubts her declarations of love for him. Much-maligned Big Mama is sensitively played by Hillary Mazer in her Compass Rose debut.

Mazer becomes a formidable lady of the manor. A stranger to scheming and cruelty, Big Mama conveys genuine nurturing affection for Big Daddy and brings credibility to her maternal concern for Brick.

The third Equity actor in this production is Chris Dwyer, who makes his Compass Rose debut as Gooper. Dwyer gives a subdued portrayal of a competent attorney and devoted son who assumes responsibility for

the family plantation — before exhibiting ambition bordering on avarice. His wife, Mae, is richly portrayed by Samantha Merrick.

Merry-Browne reminds us that Compass Rose always welcomes young actors. Here, four children play Mae and Gooper's family: Darby Carroll as Buster, Haven Hitchcock as Sonny, Mackenzie Carroll as Dixie and Campbell Goodburn as Trixie.

Other contributing supporting cast members include Vashti Gray Sadjedy as a Sookee, Joe Arnett as the Reverend Tooker and Adam Harvley as Dr. Baugh.

"Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" continues weekends through Feb. 28 at Compass Rose Theater, 49 Spa Road, Annapolis. For tickets and more information, go to compassrosetheater.org.

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