

Phoenix

Regional Reviews by [Gil Benbrook](#)

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

Mesa Community College

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Having just celebrated its 60th anniversary, Tennessee Williams' Pulitzer Prize winning drama *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* still resonates today as a cautionary tale of how a web of deceit can fracture family relationships. With a crackling cast and superb direction, Mesa Community College's production is, even with a few small shortcomings, a great production of this classic play. It vividly gets to the core of this story of sexual tension, death and, ultimately, survival.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof follows a wealthy Southern family headed by Big Daddy, the owner of a large Mississippi plantation. Big Daddy is unaware that he is dying of cancer, though most of his family knows and because of that knowledge have all gathered to celebrate his 65th birthday. While his oldest son Gooper maneuvers to gain control of the family estate, youngest son Brick, who is constantly drinking to forget his past, also has plenty of present problems with his sultry and sexually frustrated wife Maggie. The summer heat outside smolders while the family fireworks burn and pop inside.

The three-act play is full of secrets and lies and, in order for it to soar, requires six skilled actors to portray the emotional turmoil among the members of this family. MCC has found a group who deliver. As the brooding, ex-athlete Brick, Jesse Kinser makes it painfully obvious that he is drinking to numb the pain of his past, a past that includes the possibility that he and his former teammate, the recently deceased Skipper, were more than just best friends. Marissa Salazar plays Brick's wife Maggie, and she has the appropriate shades of strength, determination and desire for Brick, even though she is suspicious of what went on between him and Skipper. The tedious conversations the two have and the looks of disdain between them combined with the glances of longing that Salazar displays, all clearly show just how dysfunctional this relationship has become. Williams gives us a few clues about why Brick withdrew from his life and his wife, which allows the secrets of the play to become known, yet in a mysterious way. The combination of a perfect script and two very good performances makes us feel pity for both Brick and especially Maggie and her unsuccessful efforts to seduce her uninterested husband, which leaves her feeling like a "cat on a hot tin roof."

Billy Alewyn is perfect as Big Daddy, not being so forceful to tip the part into possible melodrama, but showing us that the seamlessly uncaring Big Daddy does actually care about a few things, especially



Billy Alewyn, Dolores Mendoza, Marissa Salazar, Jared Kitch, and Jesse Kinser

when it concerns his son Brick. With his imposing stature and his clear understanding of the part, Alewyn allows us to see the likeable man beneath the unlikeable vulgar, booming, and somewhat repulsive tyrant. It is a beautiful performance. Pam Darveaux is just as good as Big Mama. Flitting around the stage with an abundance of joy, Darveaux's elation in believing Big Daddy has received a clean bill of health is later offset when she learns the truth of his diagnosis, and her fear, despair and pain come bubbling up to the surface. Darveaux's display of Big Mama's wide range of emotions is natural and effective, as are her dealings with her husband and her children which are extremely realistic. Darveaux is so good in the part that she makes us care deeply for Big Mama, a woman who clearly is a long-suffering wife, with a husband who no longer cares for her, and someone who is just trying to hold her family together.

Jared Kitch and Dolores E. Mendoza play Gooper and his wife Mae, and both fill their characters with greed and disdain for the attention that Brick and Maggie receive from Big Daddy and Big Mamma. Mendoza is a firecracker, vicious in the insults she flings at those around her, yet displaying her Southern charms when required. Kitch shows how Gooper is always stuck in his brother's shadow and gives the character the right balance between doing what's expected of him while also trying to do what he thinks is best for the plantation, even though those intentions are in his best interest as well.

Director James Rio achieves excellent performances from all six of his leads, and stages the action effectively, using just about every space of the stage, though the more important scenes are played down stage front and center. Rio's direction and his gifted cast deliver engaging performances, with the pacing perfect throughout, allowing the intensity, emotion, and ultimately the honesty of the characters to shine through. However, there are a few small quibbles, though none of them offset the winning end result or the fever pitch of the drama. Some of the supporting performances are weak, and some of the accents leave a bit to be desired. We never get the sense that Brick is getting any drunker throughout the evening, even though he has consumed a large quantity of alcohol. Also, while Rio has Salazar moving constantly across the stage, like a cat, especially in the act one scene that focuses mainly on Brick and Maggie, the wood floor of the stage and the high heels that Salazar wears cause a continual noise that, combined with Salazar's thick southern accent and the fact that none of the cast are mic'd, occasionally means dialogue gets lost in the large auditorium.

Ezekiel E. Barkman's scenic design is sublime, giving the feeling of a large bedroom on an even larger plantation yet having an openness that gives the impression that no secrets can ever be truly concealed within the room. Mallory Prucha's costumes are equally good, with slinky period undergarments for Maggie and Brick in their act one scene and some stunning dresses for the women.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is a classic drama, with themes, situations - and conflicts that are universal and still relevant today. Even with a few small shortcomings, with the combination of a gifted cast, skilled direction, and evocative creative elements, Mesa Community College's production sizzles with passion and greed.

The Mesa Community College production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* runs through May 9th, 2015, at the MCC Southern & Dobson Campus at 1833 W. Southern Avenue in Mesa. Information for this and upcoming productions can be found at <http://www.mesacc.edu>.

Written by Tennessee Williams
Directed by James Rio
Scenic Design: Ezekiel E. Barkman
Lighting Design: Ryan O'Connor
Costume Design: Mallory Prucha
Sound Design: Christian Baker

Cast: (in alphabetical order):

Big Daddy: Billy Alewyn

Big Mama: Pam Darveaux

Brick: Jesse Kinser

Gooper: Jared Kitch

Dr. Baugh: Matt Madonna

Mae: Dolores E. Mendoza

Reverend Tooker: Sean Arthur Phillips

Margaret: Marissa Salazar

Photo: Tom McCoy / Mesa Community College

--[Gil Benbrook](#)

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