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Follow Spot by Michael Portantiere

Cat Chat with Keir Dullea and Mia Dillon

A real-life married couple since 1999, Keir Dullea and Mia Dillon have worked together several times before on stage -- sometimes playing spouses, sometimes not. Now, they're taking on two of the juiciest husband/wife roles ever written: Big Daddy and Big Mama, in a production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* that's currently unfolding on the Julie Harris Stage at the Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater (through September 22) and will transfer to Provincetown at the end of this month for the annual Tennessee Williams Festival there.

I'd had the pleasure of interviewing Keir, a film icon (*2001: A Space Odyssey*) whose many stage credits include creating the role of Don Baker in *Butterflies are Free* and playing Brick in the lauded 1974 Broadway revival of *Cat...*, for the NPR website

when he starred in a 2010 Off-Broadway revival of *I Never Sang for My Father*. But I'd never met or spoken with his lovely and talented wife, a Tony nominee for *Crimes of the Heart*, until I had the golden opportunity of chatting with both of them recently about *Cat...*, Williams, Elizabeth Ashley, Fred Gwynne, and other related subjects.

BROADWAYSTARS: The epic confrontation between Big Daddy Pollitt and his son Brick in the second act of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is one of the most searing in all of dramatic literature. Keir, having played Brick 40 years ago, how does it feel to go at the play from the other perspective?

KEIR DULLEA: Big Daddy is a great role, and I've never had the experience of inhabiting a character so completely. When I'm playing him, I get completely lost in the character. This is the most pleasurable role I've had, maybe in my whole career, ever since I got my Equity card in 1957.

MIA DILLON: And he's brilliant, absolutely brilliant in the play.

STARS: I was wondering how often you folks have worked together, and how often you've played husband and wife. I've read that you did *Deathtrap* at the Cape Playhouse in 1999.

KEIR: Yes, we did a tour that included the Cape Playhouse. The funny story about that is, we had just gotten married the week before, and then I got to kill her off every night on stage.

MIA: It was a good beginning to the marriage! We had actually played an estranged husband and wife years ago, before we were married; we played Amanda and Elyot in a production of *Private Lives* in New Hampshire that was directed by Keir's late wife, Susie Fuller. We also played husband and wife at the Berkshire Theatre Festival in Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance* -- a fabulous production directed by David Auburn, who wrote *Proof*.

KEIR: And we're both in a new movie called *Isn't It Delicious*, but we're not a married couple in that. Mia plays my sister-in-law, and Kathleen Chalfant plays my wife.

MIA: And Alice Ripley plays Keir's daughter. The film is doing the festival circuit right now.

STARS: I'll have to keep an eye out for it. Back to *Cat*. In an interview with the *Cape Cod Times*, Mia you spoke about the relationship between Big Daddy and Big Mama. He says some really awful things to and about her during the course of the play...

MIA: Yes, but I don't know if you've been around old couples who've been married and bickering for many years. At the bottom line, there's frequently a lot of love in those relationships. This is a very complex play with layers and layers of emotional depth in it, so many issues being addressed. We're fortunate that we have a fabulous director, Elizabeth Falk, who is a Southerner. She really knows that milieu, and she's been able to bring out all of the richness in the text.

STARS: Keir, you've said that your performance owes a great debt to Fred Gwynne, who was your Big Daddy in the 1974 production. But in doing my research for this interview, I noticed that you



Keir Dullea and Mia Dillon



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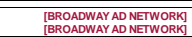


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Sept. 28: Brief Encounter - Studio 54

Sept. 30: The Pitmen Painters - Samuel J. Friedman Theatre

Oct. 3: Mrs. Warren's Profession - American Airlines Theatre

Oct. 7: Time Stands Still - Cort Theatre

Oct. 12: A Life In The Theatre - Schoenfeld Theatre

Oct. 13: Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson - Bernard Jacobs Theatre

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Oct. 21: Lombardi - Circle In The Square

Oct. 25: Driving Miss Daisy - John Golden Theatre

Oct. 26: Rain - A Tribute To The Beatles On Broadway - Neil Simon Theatre

Oct. 31: The Scottsboro Boys - Lyceum Theatre

Nov. 4: Women On The Verge Of A Nervous Breakdown - Belasco Theatre

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made your Broadway debut in 1967 in a play called *Dr. Cook's Garden* -- and that play co-starred Burl Ives, who originated the role of Big Daddy on stage and recreated it in the film.

KEIR: That's right, but I've got to tell you: Burl Ives was good, but he didn't come close to the talent that Fred Gwynne had.

MIA: I didn't see that production, because I wasn't in New York yet, so Keir and I went to the Lincoln Center archives [of Theatre on Film and Tape, TOFT] to watch it. Now I can understand why people are still talking about Elizabeth Ashley's performance as Maggie. She was brilliant.

STARS: According to the *Cape Cod Times* interview, Keir, you were somewhat surprised to be offered Big Daddy because you thought perhaps you were too physically slight and too clean-cut for the role.

KEIR: I didn't really worry about being too slight specifically, because I think "Big Daddy" refers to rank rather than size. Since Burl Ives created the role, a lot of people think "big" refers to the man's girth, but it doesn't. I was just surprised because, in terms of the parts I've played, it wasn't obvious casting. But I've coveted this role for many years, even though I thought I'd never get to play it. The offer came out of the blue, and I accepted on the spot.

STARS: It's great that a tape of the 1974 production survives. Keir, you must have had a thousand thoughts running through your mind as you watched it. What were some of your main reactions?

KEIR: Well, in the first act of the play, Brick basically tunes out. He's drinking away, and he's pretty monosyllabic in his responses to Maggie. She delivers a page of dialogue, then Brick says "Oh really, Maggie," then she goes on for another page, and so on. For a lot of the first act, I was downstage, stretched out on a chaise longue, while she was mostly upstage of me, fluttering around the stage and trying to attract my attention. So of course I heard Elizabeth's performance, but I never really saw a lot of it. And when I finally saw it on that tape, I was bowled over. As for Fred Gwynne, Laurence Olivier said, "We actors borrow from the very best." So that's what I'm doing. It's my performance, but there are certain moments that I've borrowed from Fred.

STARS: Speaking of which: Olivier also played Big Daddy, in a TV production that starred Natalie Wood and Robert Wagner, with Maureen Stapleton as Big Mama.

KEIR: And there was another television production with Rip Torn as Big Daddy, Jessica Lange as Maggie, and Tommy Lee Jones as Brick.

STARS: In terms of passing the torch: Has Steven DeMarco, who's playing Brick in this production, discussed the part with you at all?

KEIR: He's asked me some questions about it. But as Mia said, we have a wonderful director who really understands this play, so his performance is what he's brought to the role with her guidance.

MIA: Steven's background is so close to Brick's, it's almost uncanny.

KEIR: Much closer than mine. I was in shape when I played the part, but I was never an athlete. Well, Steven was on the varsity football team at Dartmouth. Also, in the play, Brick breaks his leg from running the hurdles on the football field...

MIA: ...and that was Steven's sport, too. Track and field. So he brings a lot to the part. Our Maggie, Madeleine Lambert, is also fabulous. She's done a lot of work with Steppenwolf in Chicago, but she's originally from Kentucky. And she's beautiful.

STARS: It must be quite an experience to do a Williams play in Provincetown, which is often called the birthplace of the modern American theater because people like Williams and O'Neill spent so much time there.

KEIR: Yes. What's also wonderful about doing this particular play in Provincetown is that the town has such a large gay community, and I think we're pointing up aspects of the text that



Mia Dillon and Keir Dullea in CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

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Nov. 11: The Pee-Wee Herman Show - Stephen Sondheim Theatre

Nov. 13: The Merchant of Venice - The Broadhurst Theatre

Nov. 14: Elf - Al Hirschfeld Theatre

Nov. 18: A Free Man Of Color - Vivian Beaumont Theater

Nov. 21: Elling - Ethel Barrymore Theatre

Dec. 9: Donny & Marie: A Broadway Christmas - Marquis Theater

Jan. 13: The Importance of Being Earnest - American Airlines Theatre

Mar. 3: Good People - Samuel J. Friedman Theatre

Mar. 6: That Championship Season - Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre

Mar. 11: Kathy Griffin Wants a Tony - Belasco

Mar. 17: Arcadia - Barrymore Theatre

Mar. 20: Priscilla Queen Of The Desert The Musical - The Palace Theatre

Mar. 22: Ghetto Klown - Lyceum Theatre

Mar. 24: The Book Of Mormon - Eugene O'Neill Theatre

Mar. 27: How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying - Al Hirschfeld Theatre

Mar. 31: Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo - Richard Rodgers Theatre

Apr. 7: Anything Goes - Stephen Sondheim Theatre

Apr. 10: Catch Me If You Can - The Neil Simon Theatre

Apr. 11: The Motherf**ker with the Hat - Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre

Apr. 14: War Horse - Vivian Beaumont Theater

Apr. 17: Wonderland: A New Alice. A New Musical Adventure. - Marquis Theatre

Apr. 19: High - Booth Theatre

Apr. 20: Sister Act - The Broadway Theatre

Apr. 21: Jerusalem - Music Box

Apr. 24: Born Yesterday - Cort Theatre

Apr. 25: The House of Blue Leaves - Walter Kerr Theatre

Apr. 26: Fat Pig - Belasco

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have been there all along but haven't always been stressed. Big Daddy is a redneck, born in 1890. Around the turn of the century, he quit school and bummed around the country for 10 years, so I'm sure he saw a lot of relationships like we see in *Brokeback Mountain*.

STARS: Good point. There are those references to the relationship of Jack Straw and Peter Ocello, the two men who used to own the plantation. I think one reason why some people don't remember that material is because most or all of it was cut from the film version.

MIA: Maybe, but a lot of people miss it on stage, too. I know theater people who've seen four of five different productions of this play. I say to them, "Do you realize the entire play takes place in the bedroom of the gay couple that used to own the plantation?" And they say, "No!" It's mentioned at least four times, and nobody picks up on it. Our production begins with a scene with no dialogue, but with music behind it, of the two men in that bedroom. In the script, Williams talks about how the ghosts of these two men should permeate the space. So that's what we start with.

STARS: I guess Jack Straw and Peter Ocello are finally getting their due.

MIA: Yeah!

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Michael Portantiere has more than 30 years' experience as an editor and writer for TheaterMania.com, InTHEATER magazine, and BACK STAGE. He has interviewed theater notables for NPR.org, PLAYBILL, STAGEBILL, and OPERA NEWS, and has written notes for several cast albums. Michael is co-author of FORBIDDEN BROADWAY: BEHIND THE MYLAR CURTAIN, published in 2008 by Hal Leonard/Applause. Additionally, he is a professional photographer whose pictures have been published by THE NEW YORK TIMES, the DAILY NEWS, and several major websites. (Visit www.followspotphoto.com for more information.) He can be reached at michael@broadwaystars.com

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