



Plenty of mendacity to go around

By **DEBBIE FORMAN**

CONTRIBUTING WRITER

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WELLFLEET — You can imagine Maggie the Cat having nine lives. She is a survivor, tough, willful and determined to lure her husband, Brick, back into the bed he's deserted, fulfilling her destiny as a woman.

Tennessee Williams created a great female character in his Pulitzer Prize-winning "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," and in the Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater production, Madeleine Lambert gives a captivating portrayal as the frustrated yet formidable Maggie. She is in excellent company with director Elizabeth Falk taking you on a roller coaster ride through the emotions in one of Williams' great plays, first produced on Broadway in 1955.

Set in the Pollitt home on a 28,000-acre plantation in the Mississippi Delta, the play explores the struggles of characters whose individual inclinations defy the social conventions of the time. As he denies his homosexual feelings for his friend Skipper, Brick turns away from Maggie, which is the conflict at the centerpiece of the play. Brick turns to drink, making him unavailable not only to his wife, but also to his family in crisis. Big Daddy has returned from an exploratory operation that confirms cancer, yet this truth is hidden from him and Big Mama.

"Mendacity," Brick calls out to Big Daddy, explaining his descent into alcoholism. And his father picks up on it. He has lived a lie with his wife of 40 years. He is repelled by her, just as Brick is repelled by Maggie. And, of course, the lies continue as the family tries to hide the truth of the cancer from Big Daddy and Big Mama.

Brick, an ex-football player and most recently sports announcer, represents the macho man, who is burdened by his hidden desires. He is the favorite son. His older brother Gooper, a corporate lawyer, and his wife, Mae, struggle with that fact as they try to wrest control of the family fortune. Conflicts explode between Maggie and Brick; Gooper and Brick; Big Daddy and Big Mama; and Mae, who has produced five children with the sixth on its way, and the childless Maggie.

Lambert explosively hits the stage in the first act with a long diatribe on her frustration with Brick, her resentment of Gooper and Mae, and her desire to bring Brick back from his drinking to take on an active role with her as well as the family. Lambert presents a scintillating picture of a Southern woman of her time, vulnerable, yet determined to use her allure to win a position as the true wife of Brick and the mother of his children.

Steven De Marco presents a passive Brick, a drunk hiding from the truth, lost in his repressed desires and guilt. Although consistent with the numbness alcohol can produce, De Marco's performance could be improved with a greater evocation of a charismatic quality that has made his character the favorite son and so sought after by Maggie.

A treat is seeing Keir Dullea as Big Daddy. Although not big in stature, Dullea is a powerful presence, evoking the vigor of a self-made man who has built an empire, and now faces his mortality on his 65th birthday. He commands the stage as he confronts Brick with a litany of regrets and pressures him for understanding.

Mia Dillon, Dullea's wife, gives a vibrant performance as Big Mama, a flighty woman who flutters across the stage in a range of emotions that captures the persona of a woman so devoted to her husband she can deny his disdain for her.

So there is enough "mendacity" to go around.

Amie Lytle sounds just the right tone as Mae, the other "cat" in the play. A busybody who personifies the description of "catty," she is constantly attacking Maggie by casting aspersions on her infertility.

As Gooper, Clifford Blake sensitively depicts the conventional son who stands in the shadow of his brother, yet can't understand why.

Supporting roles are played by Dennis Cunningham as Dr. Baugh delivering the bad news to Big Mama, Bob Costa as the Rev. Tooker and Lucy Blood as one of Gooper and Mae's five children.

The beautiful bedroom set by John Malinowski is richly furnished, the bed being the centerpiece against tall plantation-home windows.

Falk's impeccable direction illuminates Williams' play with all its conflicts, insights and drama of a family caught in the conventions of the time that are in conflict with their identities and desires.

This production will go on to play Sept. 27-29 at Town Hall in Provincetown during the Tennessee Williams Festival.

If you go

What: "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof"

Written by: Tennessee Williams

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Mondays, through Sept. 22

Where: Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater, Julie Harris Stage, Route 6, Wellfleet

Tickets: \$37; students: \$10

Box Office: 508-349-WHAT (9428); online: www.what.org

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