

Creative

Director
– Sarah Esdaile

Lighting Designer
– Paul Pyant

Composer & Arranger
– Simon Beddoe

Movement Director
– Etta Murfitt

Designer
– Francis O'Connor

Sound Designer
– Mic Pool

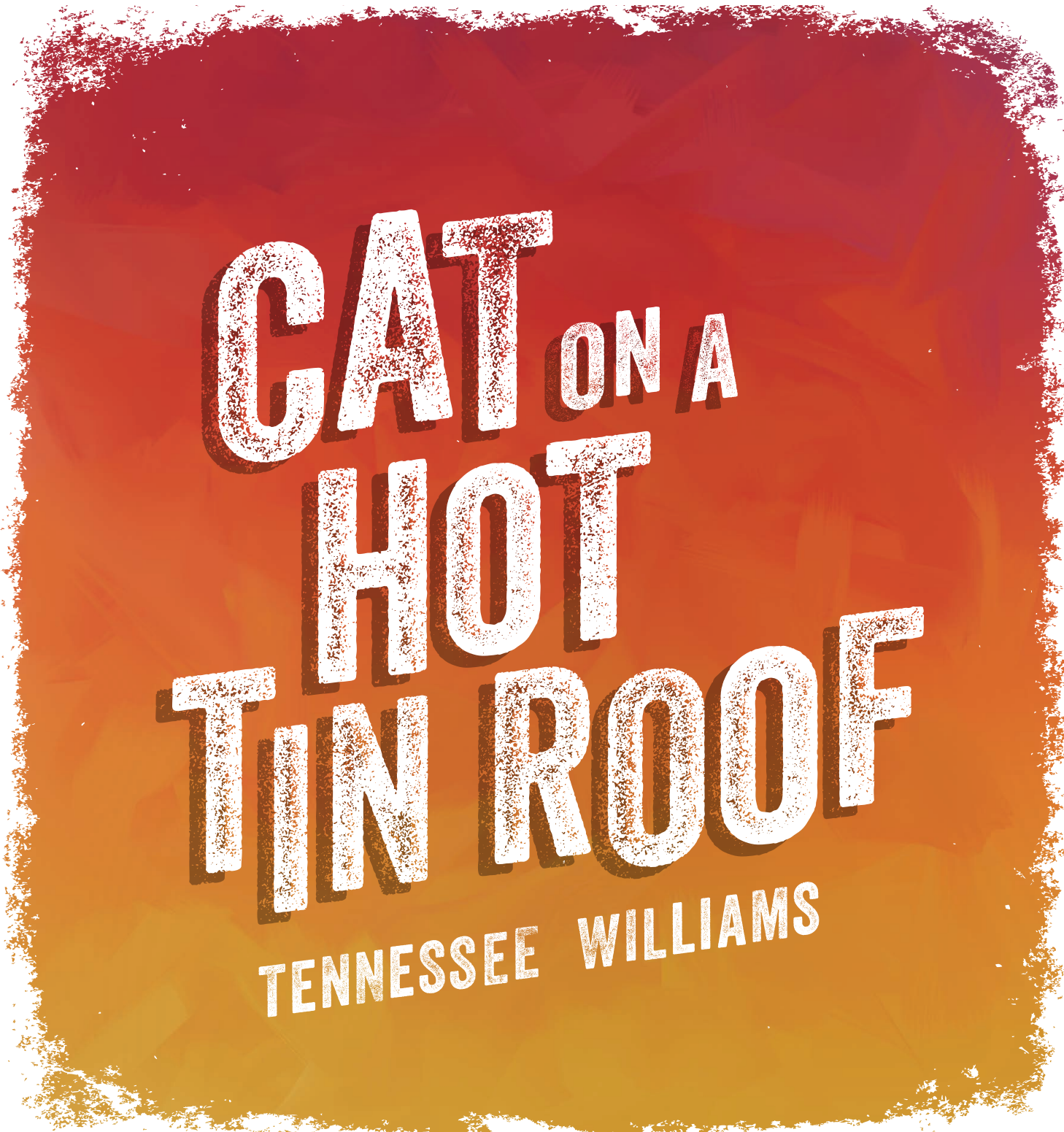
Dialect Coach
– Kara Tsiaperas

Casting Director
– Cara Beckinsale

WY **PLAY**
HOUSE

Cast

Amanda Boxer, Zoe Boyle, Richard Cordery, Jamie Parker, David Peart,
Simon Roberts, Benedict Sandiford, Hannah Stokely



**CAT ON A
HOT
TIN ROOF**
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

S C H O O L S B R I E F

Hello,

In response to many of your recent suggestions and comments about Cat on a Hot Tin Roof we have created this shorter brief which includes materials that are specific to students' learning.

We have also partnered with The Guardian online for this production to create a resource page with many exciting insights into the backstage area, interviews with members of the cast and creative team and moments from the rehearsal room plus lots more.

www.guardian.co.uk/stage/series/cat-on-a-hot-tin-roof-at-west-yorkshire-playhouse

I hope you find this brief and the online guide useful and please do get in touch to let me know your comments as this is a new way of working.

Best wishes

Aoibheann Kelly
Creative Education Officer

theguardian

Your search terms... Stage Search

News | Sport | Comment | Culture | Business | Money | Life & style | Travel | Environment | Tech | TV | Video | Dating | Offers | Jobs

Culture > Stage > Cat on a Hot Tin Roof at West Yorkshire Playhouse

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof at West Yorkshire Playhouse

How to get involved



Cat comes alive in Leeds

★★★★★

Sarah Esdaille's richly detailed production proves that British actors can be at home with Tennessee Williams's extremities of emotion, writes **Michael Billington** in this extended review

- Enjoy a 2 for 1 ticket offer for a special performance
- Help reinvent theatre criticism
- How to write a theatre review



Cat on a Hot Tin Roof – your reviews

We're gathering thoughts on West Yorkshire Playhouse's new production of the Tennessee Williams classic

- Cat on a Hot Tin Roof: watch the trailer – video
- Teaching Cat on a Hot Tin Roof: the play with a pull students can't resist

What you're saying

“ Beautiful and hypnotising set - loved the water - good southern draws, generally brilliant! (and made me want a cigarette) #catreview

@arigodwin commenting on Cat on a Hot Tin Roof – your reviews

“ Well sold! Great article, I haven't been to the theatre in years tut tut. You genuinely have my juices flowing now though!

Backroll commenting on Behind the scenes: Cat on a Hot Tin Roof at West Yorkshire Playhouse

“ By becoming vocal champions of art forms that engage us and by using our experiences to openly challenge the accepted models of criticism, audiences can inform the landscape into which work is offered

“ Really excited about it!

@zoeboyley commenting on this Twitter question from @Hmansoor: 'Hi! Was wondering: as a performer how do u feel abt recasting audience as critics (open journalism)? Thanks.'

On Stage

Most viewed | Zeitgeist | Latest

Last 24 hours



1. Lez Brotherston: design, dance and Diaghilev

2. Michael Jackson: The Immortal World Tour – review
3. Lez Brotherston: Bourne and beyond - in pictures
4. Edinburgh fringe's 10 funniest jokes revealed
5. This House; Scenes from an Execution; Damned by Despair – review

More most viewed

guardianbookshop

How to write a theatre review by Nick Ahad

Nick Ahad is full-time Arts Correspondent / Chief Theatre Critic for the Yorkshire Post. His relationship with theatre started when he was eight and saw a production of *Prince Caspian and the Sea*. A passion for theatre, born that day, meant he acted through schooling and at university, but followed his other love of writing into journalism. He became a news reporter in Oxfordshire, but from the first week of his journalism career he has reviewed theatre. In 2004 he became the full-time Arts Correspondent / Chief Theatre Critic for the Yorkshire Post.

The best piece of advice for a budding theatre critic is the same piece of advice given to writers in all mediums: find your voice. Why? Well, there are some basics you need to hit with a review, to discuss the important elements, but the thing that makes your review interesting to read and, ultimately, interesting for you to write, is if it's in your voice.

You need to write the review that only you could have written. There might be 800 people in the theatre, all with their own opinion. Some of them might have a deeper knowledge of theatre than you. Some might know the play better, might be more familiar with the work of the director, or the playwright, or the actors. All of that means that your review needs a reason to exist, a reason to want to be read by other people. The reason: it's in your voice. There's a poem I once found by accident on the internet when I was looking for a quote (and have never been able to find again, I'm afraid) but the sentiment of the poem was that the critic spends so much time and energy watching themselves, that they forget to watch the performance. That's one of the key things I try to remember when reviewing. Ultimately someone may read one of my reviews and decide whether or not a play is worth them spending their hard-earned money on a ticket. That's quite a responsibility - and a privilege. The only way I can tell them is if I experience the piece as an audience member - and that's not going to happen if I spend the whole time watching myself, watching the play. I have to actually engage with the piece. All of this is a round the houses way of explaining why I very rarely take notes. Even when I do take notes, it's rare that I look at them when it comes to actually writing a review. I wouldn't encourage you to not take notes - lots and lots of other critics do and this is just a personal view. I would, however, say that it's very hard to take legible notes in the dark of a theatre and they

can distract you from engaging in the piece that you're watching. If you do take notes, make sure you know why you are taking them and don't forget what you are there to do - see the production. Yes, you want to write an informed review, but the best way of doing that is by really engaging in the work. If you've got your head down trying to find a part of your page to write on, you might miss something key on the stage. Now, the above advice is not your Get Out of Jail Free card. You still have to write a review - 'but I didn't take any notes', or 'I was engrossed in watching the play' won't wash. The point is that you have to be not just a passive audience, but really actively engaged with what's happening in front of you. That way, when it comes to writing the review, those moments that you experience while watching the stage are really vivid and should be easy to recall when it comes to describing the experience for an audience - which, when all is said and done, is about as accurate a description of what a review is I can come up with: a description of the experience of watching a production. In the case of a classic play, chances are I will have seen a production previously and will often know the work of the director. When it comes to a new play I try to have a working knowledge of the writer's work, and possibly the director. But nothing remains more important than the fact that what you are reviewing is the piece of work there in front of you, at that moment. So, yes, have a working knowledge of a piece, know as much of the background of the creatives behind the piece as you find necessary, but don't let that influence your opinion of what you're watching. You might be watching a piece by a respected writer, a highly experienced director, starring famous actors, but if it's not good, it's not good.

How to write a theatre review by Nick Ahad

The reputation of the creative team built on previous success is no guarantee of future success. If it were, then you would be able to bring together elements that have worked in the past and guarantee a hit production. Screenwriter William Goldman said of the movie business that 'nobody knows anything'. He meant that it is impossible to say a movie will definitely be a hit. The same applies in theatre. All of this might sound like I go to the theatre, watch a play as an audience member and then later try to engage with analyzing what I've seen. Which to some extent is true, but I've been reviewing theatre professionally for almost 15 years.

Some pointers ▼

Do you believe that the actors believe that they are telling the truth? Complicated one, but if for a moment you see the invisible force field slip and see David Tennant playing Hamlet, rather than Hamlet, then the actor has stopped believing what they are doing and you stop believing it too. The whole edifice comes crashing down

Has the director given an actor a reason for doing something? I once saw a play where an actor was angry and he showed this by hitting a table with his fist. Three times. It was utterly mechanical and possibly the most over-directed piece of performance I've ever seen.

Production values. This doesn't just mean 'is the set wobbling when someone slams a door?'. I recently saw a production of John Godber's *Bouncers*, a play I've seen at least a dozen times. The production was lit brilliantly and gave it an almost filmic quality. It was one of the rare occasions that I had to find space in the review to praise the production values.

Take note of the audience, but don't necessarily take notice of them. They might be loving a production in which you are interminably bored. You may find people leave at the interval while you can't leave your seat because you're gripped by the production. Remember, it's your review - which is why it's written in your voice.

My relationship with theatre started when I was eight and saw a production of *Prince Caspian and the Sea*. A passion for theatre, born that day, meant I acted through schooling and at university, but followed my other love of writing into journalism. I became a news reporter in Oxfordshire, but from the first week of my journalism career I have reviewed theatre. In 2004 I became the full-time Arts Correspondent / Chief Theatre Critic for the *Yorkshire Post*.

Interview with Sarah Esdaile — Director of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

What was it about *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* that made you want to direct it?

I have always loved the work of Tennessee Williams. I love his emotional openness and truth-telling and the fact that he writes female characters extraordinarily well. I also love the fact that his work is always autobiographical; that he is drawing from his own experience in almost every character that he writes. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is his most brilliant play. So well crafted, devastatingly sad and hilariously funny by turns, I think that it really puts you through the wringer, as an audience.

What is the significance of the play's title?

The title refers to Maggie the Cat and how she has become “frantic...hard...cruel” as a result of the way in which her husband is punishing her. The Cat also refers to how resilient and tenacious she is in trying to make Brick want her and trying to ensure their financial future through Big Daddy's will.

What role do Tennessee Williams' stage notes play in shaping the story and characters?

Williams' stage directions are incredible and can be very intimidating both for actor and directors. They definitely help to indicate the emotional temperature that he expects from a character or a scene at any given time. They are also very poetic and beautiful to read.

Many themes are prevalent throughout the play such as mendacity, greed, family, sibling rivalry, illness, decay, love, homosexuality (amongst others). Would you say the play has an over riding theme? Are there any particular themes or moments have you decided to place focus on?

I think all of the themes that you mention are important in the play. Perhaps the most over riding one is the tension between truth and the lies or “mendacity” that are so often talked about in the play. How we as human beings so often lie to each other and, indeed, to ourselves and whether or not this is always a bad thing and indeed an inevitable part of survival.

How important is the presence of the field hands and maids and how does their presence contribute to the themes of the play?

Their presence was very important to me, which is why I wanted to see as well as hear them in the play. I am not sure that they contribute to the themes of the play but they are a key component of the backdrop to the story. Of the racial situation in America at that time and of the scale and size of the plantation on which the Pollitt's live.

There is reference to many off stage sounds in the play, heard at different moments when characters are speaking. What impact do these sounds have?

For me the sounds suggest the world of the play beyond that of Brick and Maggie's room which is the only environment that we see. From the suggestion of dressing room/bathroom and hallway and the surrounding gallery, all of which can be glimpsed on the set, to the sounds of croquet and party noises and fireworks and field hands singing beautiful gospel music, the sense of life continuing beyond the room was of fundamental importance to me. For example the little girl with her smacked bottom at the end of act two – for her, life at that moment, is as miserable as Big Daddy's, having just been told that he is dying of cancer. Everything is relative and people are fundamentally selfish.

Please could you tell us about how you have worked with the designer of the production and how much input you have into making creative design choices?

This is my sixth time working with the designer, Francis O'Connor so we have a good relationship and a good shorthand. It is hard to pinpoint whose choices are whose, within such a relationship. Basically, we come to the design choices together and talk about the world of the play and how we want it to feel and then he translates that into how it actually looks.

Do you have a favourite scene or moment within the play?

I have several favourite moments in the production. I love the moment when Big Daddy and Big Mama walk off together through the water, I love the moment when Maggie pours Brick's drink away, I love the ultimate confrontation moment between Brick and Big Daddy, I like the kids singing for Big Daddy's birthday and some of the sexy stuff between Brick and Maggie – too much to list here really....!

Interview with **Francis O' Connor** — Designer of **Cat on a Hot Tin Roof**

When did you first become interested in design and what kind of training or education prepared you for a career in it?

I first became interested in design through my time in amateur productions and youth theatre. I'm from Middlesbrough and there's a fantastic amateur theatre scene there. Originally, I wanted to go into acting but gradually I realised that design interested me much more and that's where my interests and skills lay. I studied drama for 2 years and then went to Wimbledon school of art to study stage design.

How have you worked with the Director, Sarah Esdaile for this Production? Has the design process been a collaborative journey?

Sarah and I have worked on four or five productions before, a couple of which have been here – Death of a Salesman and Crash. We've got a very good working relationship and share many similar feelings about plays. Once you develop a relationship with a director it makes it much easier to work together because you develop a common language – like how to approach a play and that's certainly happened in this case. In the beginning we would have a conversation about the play and I would come up with some initial ideas about what it might look like and carry out some research. Then I produce a white card model of how I think the design might look and we'd meet again. All the time, we'd be talking about what the world was like at the time the play was set and discuss the mood and atmosphere of the piece. So, it all develops in the form of a model box and that model is then used by other people in the theatre to refer to as the information to build and realise the design. So the model has got to be quite detailed and I enjoy that part of the process. What I see in a model is generally what we end up with on stage.

Were there any particular themes or moments from the play which influenced your own design choices?

This play is full of atmosphere so the big challenge for me was to try and realise that atmosphere that exists in the text and somehow create it on stage and to create a work that's utterly believable and plausible for these people to live in. I also needed to think about how to create a sense of heat and dampness because it's a

humid atmosphere and, importantly, a sense of what the room's previous occupants were. Williams gives a brilliant introduction where he describes what the set should look like and his description is very naturalistic. However, at the end of his description he makes a comment that enables the designer to make the set less realistic or abstract of they wish to. So that's a challenge to a designer. It's brilliant actually because it releases the designer from being utterly naturalistic and so we were trying to find a world that expresses the play not just in terms of doors and windows and furniture, the physical ingredients of what you need to put the show on, but also trying to create a world that releases the play. There's a visual metaphor we've come up with which when you see the play will be clear to you.

Has the Quarry theatre space influenced your design in any way for this Production?

For me the Quarry is a fantastic space, but it's challenging at the same time because the auditorium is so vast. Leeds is really lucky as there aren't many theatres like the Quarry in the country. This play is a challenge to a designer because it only has a few characters in it and a lot of the scenes are just two – handers. You have an epic space with an intimate play and so trying to make the intimacy work in what is a huge stage is a challenge but also fascinating. The play itself is quite operatic and symphonic in its tone so it allows a breadth of expressionism that we try to release on stage.

Have you ever had to compromise in regards to any of your ideas? If so, please could you give an example?

Yes, yes, yes – there's always a compromise. It's usually to do with economy and budgets. With every show you as a designer, present a model and then it is costed. Normally, there would be something that's unaffordable in the initial design and I would have to adapt or develop to make it affordable. Compromises are usually born out of economic necessity. In this play we had one compromise – there's a large pool of water that the set is falling into and originally I had wanted rain to fall into the water too as there's a storm sequence. The compromise in this situation was that we could get the water but despite all attempts to try and afford the rain, it became unaffordable. But I

Interview with **Francis O' Connor** — Designer of **Cat on a Hot Tin Roof**

don't think it's a big issue as we have movement in the water anyway and I don't think the audience will miss the rain but I will because I designed it with that in mind. Another compromise was that I designed very specific railings for the set with specific mouldings I had researched which would have been used on a house in the Mississippi Delta. We couldn't afford to get all these mouldings cut the way I wanted them so we used stock mouldings. It looks absolutely fine, it's just some of the details that perhaps are luxuries that no one would really know about but I have a sensitivity for those things are often a compromise.

What would you say are the most important qualities for designer to have to succeed in this industry?

Have a good enthusiasm for drama and you also need to be able to collaborate with other people. Remember your work is being interpreted. I come up with a design and a model but I'm working with carpenters, production managers, technicians, painters, costume makers and you've got to be able to build a relationship with those people.

It's a collaborative process and as a designer you're reliant on how others interpret your work so it's important to have a good spirit about you when you're working. You've got to train to do it properly and be able to communicate your ideas and model making skills but you only acquire those skills by training and there are some great courses around. There are some designers I know who don't draw very well and don't model make and but have great ideas and find other ways of communicating those ideas, so the theatre industry is quite accommodating to different ways of working and peoples quirks. Computer aided design is a very popular programme with some designers but I'm a bit more traditional or old fashioned in that when I was training it was all hand drawings and model making. CAD isn't beyond me but its not where I started. So, to sum up – excellent communication skills, a great enthusiasm for drama and an enjoyment for collaboration is an excellent place to start. So, the importance of communicating with people and a love of the work quite a few people study stage design but very few carry it on.

6



**You
Tube**

Visit our YouTube page

youtube.com/wyplayhouse

to watch an interview with Francis, along with more behind-the-scenes insights into how the production comes together and a trailer for the show.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof — Rehearsal Process

Andrew Whyment (Assistant Director)

WEEK
01

The first day of any rehearsal process is one filled with excitement and anxiety. It's the point of no return. For the director, it is the end of half of the process. By this point, many decisions have already been made. The set design, the cast, the poster, what the No Neck Monsters look like; it's all been decided before the cast arrive. From the wide-open canvas that any artist begins with, the palette of colours has already been decided and there's no going back.



The majority of the West Yorkshire Playhouse's 'in house' staff gather, along with all of the cast and creative team, to hear the first read through. This is a particularly unproductive time in the rehearsal room. Whilst it's great for everybody to hear the play and, for the very first time the voices of those playing the characters can be heard together, there is very little work done in the read through which is of value to the final production. In fact, read throughs are mostly for the producers, press officers and other theatre staff to get a glimpse of the play; the likelihood is that they won't see the production again until press night!



And so, onto week one of rehearsals. The moment at which the cast of eight, Sarah (Director), Vickki (the Deputy Stage Manager) and myself are left alone in Rehearsal Room One for the very first time is certainly a relief. It's the moment where the work can really begin. Sarah is one of the most thorough directors I have ever come across. Long before rehearsals started I was meeting with her to compare and contrast the several different published versions of Tennessee Williams' classic play, as well as researching every one of the items, places and turns of phrase that pop up throughout the text. In order to make decisions and choices of any artistic value and integrity, the world of the play, the details of the characters and every piece of information that the author has given you, must be explored. This is exactly what Sarah and I had been doing in the lead up to the beginning of rehearsals through our research, and now, on week one with the cast in the room, the same process begins with the actors.



Cat on a Hot Tin Roof — Rehearsal Process

Andrew Whyment (Assistant Director)

WEEK
02



It's the beginning of week two and we're wading through the depths of character work. Sarah has a very particular approach to the formation of character, which she has moulded for herself based on the work of theatre company, Shared Experience. It's a process that not all actors are used to and a certain amount of diplomacy is required to get them on board and ready to work through what, for some, is quite an alien method. Over the course of a week or so, we spend two hours focusing on each of the characters in the play, however big or small. In preparation for the session, the actor playing the character 'in the spotlight' writes out everything they say about themselves, everything that he/she says about other people, everything that other people say about them and every stage direction where they are mentioned in the play. In addition to this, they read out a biography of facts about themselves based on everything that Williams tells us as well as an imagined history; a piece of prose that in some way joins the dots and explains something of how for example, they met their partner, when they left home or how they came to be working where they work at the time of the play's setting. This usually takes the form of a five minute-long, monologue.



With all of this information shared, the room is abuzz with thoughts about the character in focus and it's often clear already where the conflict or tragedy lies within the character. It was quite moving for example to hear Big Mama saying such praising things about all those around her, and then, when hearing everything that people say about her, it was clearer than ever that she is a bullied woman with incredible resilience and strength. These are not thoughts that I had about Big Mama previously but Sarah's process unlocked these thoughts and many others in all of us.



The next stage is bringing the character to life for the first time. A chosen personal object is shared with the group, a colour and animal associated with the character is selected and finally, a piece of music that in some way defines the character is played and the actor is encouraged to move to the music for the first time. This is followed by twenty minutes of hot seating where the rest of the company question the character on anything they wish. Responses are given in character. This is useful in terms of characterisation but often more useful to clarify all kinds of important backstory. It was during these sessions we discovered that Gooper and Mae often badmouth Maggie and Brick in front of their kids at home in Memphis, that Maggie had to prompt Brick to ask for her hand in marriage the year after they graduated from college and that Reverend Tooker may be a gay man. Some of the information that you discover during these sessions is essential, some of it is secondary but it is Sarah's belief that the explosion of the many facets which make these people who they are and this play what it is allows you to make stronger decisions and creates a shared experience, a shared knowledge which permeates throughout the theatre in performance.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof — Rehearsal Process

Andrew Whyment (Assistant Director)

WEEK
03

Now we're onto staging the play. We have less than two weeks to get through the entire three acts of the show. Actors begin to only be called in when required. We have furniture in the rehearsal room on an exact sized mark-up of the playing area. It is during these two weeks that the play will take shape. The density of this play means that often rehearsals will spin out into discussions about themes and meaning.

WEEK
04

Some plays do not require rehearsal room discussion around metaphor and subtext but this is no ordinary play. Williams' work brilliantly treads the fine line between realism and heightened expressionism. We often find ourselves stumbling into territory that, without more macro discussion, would be impossible to play. Slowly but surely, we unpick the dense script, draw on our research and character work and make the decisions that feel truest to both the text and our production.

WEEK
05

We're onto final rehearsals in the room. Next door, the set is going up; a huge plantation house bedroom with a first floor balcony which wraps all the way around the space. The whole stage is raked into a pool of bourbon, which fills the entire front portion of the stage. The space looks spectacular and the expressionistic frame of the play is taking shape. In rehearsal, we are now noting each act. This is the week where we need to see how the thing hangs together as a whole. It's very easy to see the play as three separate plays in three separate acts, but each act needs to feed the next and how this works (or doesn't work) only becomes clear as we begin to run the entirety of the play.

On Thursday, technical rehearsals will begin and the essential elements that make up the otherworldliness of this production and enhance the psychological journeys of all the characters in the play are about to be added. By opening night the show will be sitting in a space which is sinking into bourbon, there will be a live jazz score punctuating the psychological turmoil of the family, the cyclorama will be awash with moody sunsets and storm scenes and the illusion fireworks will be blasting high into the sky as the drama of act three draws to a close. The actors are ready, the decisions have been made, but yet more decisions need to be made in the space as technical rehearsals begin and our version of Williams' story comes to life...



Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

