



Theater review: Love, family and Tennessee Williams close a stellar year of UAF theater

Whoever classified all southerners as being polite and well-mannered clearly didn't meet the characters in Tennessee Williams's "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." They're nasty people, the whole lot of them, and even the children deserve a glass of sweet tea thrown in their faces to wash away their vile behavior.

That being said, their nastiness toward each other makes them utterly fascinating to observe, and that sharp dialogue and their complicated relationships make it understandable why William's play is still so popular more than 50 years after it was first performed. Yes, it's clichéd to label any type of art as "timeless" but that does hold true with the modern themes woven throughout the play. Sexual repression, greed and mendacity, oh my!

The talented kids on the Hill at Theatre UAF, assisted by some equally talented townies, knock the production out of the park with a great combination of a gifted director, excellent cast and a spectacular set. Directed by Rebecca George, "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" makes for a very enjoyable evening of theater.

"Roof" opens by introducing us to estranged married couple Brick (Jaron Carlson) and Marggie (Mary Conlin). Brick is a self-aware, self-loathing alcoholic hobbling around on a cast as a result of trying to relive his glory days as an athlete; Marggie is a strong and determined vixen of lady, lonely because of the constant rejection from her husband. There's great chemistry between Carlson and Conlin in the play's opening; Carlson adequately portraying Brick as a man who has given up on life, covering a wide range of emotions as his character gets drunker and drunker throughout the evening; while Conlin vivaciously smolders around the stage. My only complaint was that Conlin's line delivery in the play's opening was so rapid and so thick with a southern accent that it was difficult to comprehend what she was saying at times.

Eventually, we are introduced to the other main characters in the play, including Thomas Petrie as Brick's brother Gooper; his wife, Mae, played by Katrina Kuharich; and Big Mama, played by Siri Tuttle. All do a fine job in their supporting roles, Tuttle in particular in her authentic portrayal as the simple matriarch who unquestionably loves her family. Well, most of them, anyway.

Then there is Steve Mitchell as Big Daddy, and when he takes the stage, to paraphrase Nigel Tufnel from "This is Spinal Tap", things go to 11. Mitchell fills the stage with his commanding performance, one of the best that I have seen this veteran actor in. Big Daddy is the quintessential rich southerner, brash and vulgar in his mannerisms, and Mitchell depicts him wonderfully, even convincing us that underneath his arrogant exterior there exists a caring nature.

Rounding out the cast are Michael Shaeffer and Doc Baugh and Sam Thompson as Reverend Tooker, and a foursome of youngsters as Mae and Gooper's growing family, to include Molly Cable, Lizzy Cable, Josie Adasiak and Charlotte Phillips.

Scenic designer Adam Gillette makes great use of the vast space of the Salisbury Theatre stage with a magnificent set largely centered around Brick's and Maggie's bedroom. His work, combined with that of costume designer Amanda Casterline, brings the play to life in a pleasing manner visually and authentic to the time. Lighting designer Kade Mendelowitz deserves kudos for other details that add icing to the cake, to include a fireworks show in the background and subtle but noticeable changes in lighting to depict the passing of the hours.

"Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" is the final production of Theatre UAF's 2015/2016 season, and what a great season it was, delivering a trifecta of exceptionally well done and often times quite controversial yet thought provoking mainstage plays to also include "Stop Kiss" and "Closer." We are fortunate as a community to have a university that provides quality of life enhancements that make our city a better place to live, work and raise a family; whether that be a theatrical production, a hockey game or events such as Science Potpourri. Let's hope that the dismantling of our university currently taking place in Juneau, where the dysfunction makes the family in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" appear well-balanced, doesn't change any of that.

"Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" runs through this weekend with performances Friday and Saturday at 7:30p.m. and a Sunday matinee at 2 p.m. More information at www.uaf.edu/theatrefilm.



Mary Conlin is Maggie and Jaron Carlson as Brick in Theatre UAF's "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof"

Kade Mendelowitz photo / UAF