



CAT'S LATEST LIFE: Scarlett Johansson as Maggie the Cat in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Photo: Joan Marcus



## *Theater Review*

# Flawed direction makes this one tepid *Cat*

### ***CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF***

Written by Tennessee Williams

Directed by Rob Ashford

Through March 30, 2013

Richard Rodgers Theatre

226 West 46th Street

(877-250-2929), <http://www.catonahottinroofbroadway.com>

By Scott Harrah

One of the greatest gifts Tennessee Williams gave to the American theater, besides timeless classics with universal themes, is poetic, crisp dialogue. He wrote lines meant to be heard and savored by audiences. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is one of his best, so watching director Rob Ashford's busy, boisterous production must be frustrating for audiences unfamiliar with this gem of a show. This loud interpretation is too ambitious for its own good, from Scarlett Johansson's gravelly, Southern-belle-on-amphetamines take on Maggie the Cat to the ear-splitting sound of the fireworks that nearly drown out Brick (Benjamin Walker) and Big Daddy's (Ciarán Hinds) crucial scene at the end of act two.

By the time act three rolls around, it is truly nerve-wracking focusing on Big Mama (Debra Monk) and her meltdown because she is competing with the sounds of thunder, servants singing gospel songs, birthday wishes, and God knows what else. This is certainly a poor directorial choice by Rob Ashford, best known as the Tony-nominated director/choreographer for such recent Broadway musical revivals as *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* and *Promises, Promises*.

Granted, there are plenty of casting and acting flaws in this latest revival, but the fact that everything takes place on the massive stage of the Richard Rodgers only complicates matters more. *Cat* only works in an intimate Broadway theater, and the Rodgers is best reserved for big

musicals. The cast is often literally swallowed by the cavernous stage and Christopher Oram's beautiful but empty, impractical set, from the offstage bathroom to the veranda on which the Politt family and household staff often gather to make lots of noise.

Scarlett Johansson must be given some credit for trying (but ultimately failing) to put a fresh spin on one of the most memorable, iconic heroines of the American stage, Maggie the Cat. Act One is basically Maggie's show: a long soliloquy or spoken-word aria in this tragic epic. Miss Johansson is one of the few actresses this side of the millennium who has done Maggie any justice, but unfortunately without the requisite tenderness and vulnerability. In addition, she often shrieks out the lines with such ferocity and venom that it's nearly impossible to understand her. Mr. Walker, as her alcoholic, former football player and sportscaster husband Brick, lacks any chemistry.

Irish actor Ciarán Hinds is completely miscast as Big Daddy. This is a larger-than-life character, played on the stage over the years by everyone from Charles Durning and James Earl Jones to Burl Ives. Mr. Hinds has neither the imposing physical presence nor concept of characterization to make this Big Daddy plausible. He looks and sounds more like Brick's older brother than the cancer-ridden, acerbic but bighearted patriarch of the Pollitt family, and founder of a successful Mississippi plantation.

Debra Monk gives this production's most solid performance as Big Mama. She has all of the character's genteel mannerisms down well and offers the perfect mix of down-home sass, delicacy and emotional fragility. In essence, Ms. Monk is completely believable as a woman grappling with the grim truth about her husband of 40 years.

There have been far too many misguided revivals of *Cat* over the past decade, and this latest attempt is yet another half-baked attempt. Let's hope that the next time *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* returns to Broadway (and there is no doubt it will), someone will stay true to Mr. Williams, forgo all the gimmicks, unnecessary sound effects and pointless filler, and just do the show as the simplistic, gorgeously written masterpiece it is.

***Edited by Scott Harrah***

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