

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor  
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The Community Players' production of "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," Tennessee Williams' Pulitzer Prize-winning play, was such a success that they extended the run to include a matinee Sunday, March 16.

As the stage lights dimmed in the final scene, the enthusiastic audience rose to their feet to show their appreciation for a finely tuned performance.

The play revolves around the subject of life and death, with death holding the upper hand for most of the three-hour production. Black clouds hover over the action, oppressive and ominous. It's the life in the characters, however, that brings light, redemption and hope to the script.

### **Play synopsis**

Maggie's marriage to Brick Pollitt is in trouble. Like her mother-in-law says, when marriages fall apart, they fall apart in the bedroom first. Brick drinks himself into oblivion every night and refuses to touch his wife. She's desperate for intimacy and is aware of the need to produce a Pollitt heir.

Brick and Maggie are living with his parents, Big Daddy and Big Mama, on 28,000 acres of prime Mississippi Delta land.

Brick, a has-been athlete-turned sports announcer, is still reeling over the death of Skipper, his best friend and teammate from college, who may or may not have had an affair with Maggie and who – from all evidence – had an "unnatural" love for Brick.

The play opens during Big Daddy's 65th birthday celebration. Brick can't come downstairs because he's nursing a broken ankle after a drunken "one man track meet" on the high school field the night before. So, the action – fittingly – unfolds in Brick and Maggie's bedroom.

Big Daddy has just returned from a clinic and thinks he's got a spastic colon, but Brick and Maggie know different. Big Daddy has cancer and it's terminal. They're going to join Gooper and Mae, the older son and his brood mare of a wife, in telling Big Mama the truth after dinner, cake and fireworks.

Of course, Big Daddy sniffs out the "mendacity" of the ruse, adding drama to an already tense situation.

"Tennessee Williams loved words," director David Woody said when he welcomed the last audience. The play asks a lot of his characters, giving them long scenes with complex speeches, requiring total immersion into their alter egos.

Although she was a marvelous actress and one of the world's most beautiful women, I never

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felt Elizabeth Taylor was a good fit as Maggie "the cat" in the film version.

At first, I thought my reluctance was because Taylor was English by birth, but realized I loved Vivien Leigh as Scarlett O'Hara, so that couldn't be the reason. And, it's not like the violent-eyed stunner hadn't experienced her share of pain. She lost husband Mike Todd while making the film. For whatever reason, I just didn't buy Taylor in the role.

So, imagine my surprise on Sunday when I discovered a Maggie who made me believe every word she spoke and who totally captured the character's desperate essence.

Leah Conner seemed to slip easily into Maggie's skin. The first scene requires her to walk onstage and undress. Conner let her lace frock fall effortlessly to the floor, wearing only a modest full slip for most of the next two acts. That, my gentle readers, takes confidence, and Conner pulled it off without one ounce of awkwardness.

Conner's Maggie does her best to seduce her husband, but when that fails, she lets the fur fly by making Brick listen to the true story of what happened with her and Skipper.

She admires herself in the mirror. She stalks Brick around the room. She talks about her past, how she grew up poor, reduced to having only two dresses for her debut and having to wear her grandmother's wedding dress when she married Brick. Nothing gets through to Brick. He is, as his name suggests, a wall of indifference, waiting for that elusive "click" in his brain, where peace lives.

Conner does a lot of the heavy lifting in the first two acts but you'd never know how hard she's working. She made it look easy.

It was hard to get beyond Elizabeth Taylor and Paul Newman's stunning good looks in the film, but Conner and Michael Moore, who bears an uncanny resemblance to Russell Crowe, made the audience examine their complicated, painful relationship in a sometimes uncomfortable, up-close and personal way.

Moore's job was to be elusive, sullen and – as the play progresses – drunk. He held his own with Conner, which was no small feat. She had it her way during the first act.

Maggie's desperation to have a child and Brick's descent to the bottom of the bottle were palpable.

Of particular mention here is the powerful performance by John D'Avignon as Big Daddy.

Of course, anyone who's seen the film knows Burl Ives owned the role. In this production, however, D'Avignon puts his stamp on Big Daddy. He blusters, blows, curses, commands and rages against the dark night – and he does it with 100 percent conviction, never shying away from Pollitt's dark, unattractive side.

Maryann Miller as "Big Mama" is to be commended, too, as the wife of a rich and powerful man. The play was written in the mid-1950s, so Big Mama is drawn as a woman who ran the house and her family with little concern for the rest of the world. She fusses, stews and frets about Big Daddy's health and fawns over Brick, to the dismay of Gooper and "Sister Woman," who have their eyes set on the future – when they'll be running things, along with their six children. Miller brought just the right balance of confusion, devotion and denial to the part.

Mary Rose Duncan was spot on as the ambitious, fertile Mae Pollitt, a woman who has borne five children and is ready to deliver her sixth, just to ensure a favorable spot in Big Daddy's \$10 million will. She throws her "no neck monsters" up to Maggie and Brick at every opportunity, certain of her place in the pecking order because she's got heirs to the Pollitt fortune.

In the movie, Mae is just plain stupid. The Mae in this play, however, is conniving, cunning and sometimes cruel – a Southern take on Lady MacBeth, if you will. Duncan delivered her Mae

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with a deft touch, taking her just to the limit of treachery.

Landon Mabe – an actor with a ton of potential – was cast as Gooper and, though young, did an admirable job performing alongside more seasoned actors.

Lilly Worth, Sadie Conner, Savannah Lilley, Lucy Conner and Mac Conner were terrific as the Pollitt heathens. They would drive me to distraction. Good job. No wonder Maggie calls them monsters.

Together, this strong and able cast, led by a brilliant Maggie, brought Tennessee Williams' flawed family to glorious, Technicolor life. And, although there was a lot of darkness in the Pollitt household, in the end, they left us with hope and the promise of new life.

This is one of the best productions The Community Players has offered in recent memory.

Kudos to everyone involved and a special tip of the hat to director David Woody, who obviously had a deep and personal attachment to this project. Every director's dream is to bring out the very best in his actors and Woody hit this one over the fence.

I'm looking forward to the company's next production, "Dixie Swim Club," a story about five Southern women who have been friends for more than 30 years. Auditions are Tuesday and Wednesday at 6:30 p.m. The play runs May 8-17.

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Registration for the annual Children's Theatre Workshop will be held May 19, 20 and 21 at 6:30 p.m. at the theatre. Production will run July 17-20. The workshop is open to children from age seven to 17.

"Over the River and Through the Woods" will be presented Sept. 18-27. Auditions to be held Aug. 4, 5 and 6.

Auditions for "A Tuna Christmas" will be held Sept. 29-30 and Oct. 1 at 6:30 p.m. Performances will be Dec. 4-13.

For more information, call 903-885-91917 or visit [www.mainstreettheater.com](http://www.mainstreettheater.com)