

5/2007

directed at FSLT in the past, but has been taking a hiatus—waiting, I guess, for just the right part to come along. And it finally did—the role of a lifetime, in fact, and Mike makes the most of it. He truly brings Big Daddy Pollitt to life, which as you will soon see, may or may not be such a good idea.

Amy Long, who plays our former Cotton Carnival Queen, Mae (Mrs. Gooper) Pollitt is another FSLT newcomer and another jewel in our theater's costumery crown. Hopefully, this is only the first of many parts Amy will eventually play at FSLT. She has worlds of natural ability, wonderful pep, and will strengthen any cast in virtually any role she's asked to play. As our Sister Woman, she exudes a cattyness that almost out-felines Maggie, a bitchiness that may soon drive Gooper to the bottle with Brick, and an assortment of schemes and manipulations so obvious that you can almost hear the gears whirling inside her. I think you'll love her her performance as much as I do.

Duff Taylor, who is also an assistant director on this play, portrays the role of the long-suffering, long-smouldering Gooper with a nastiness completely absent in his actual character. In fact, the hardest thing Duff had to do in order to play this part was to learn to completely cover up his usual cheerful good-naturedness. That was very hard for him, because Duff just might be too nice a person to play anybody in any Tennessee Williams play, much less the dislikable Gooper. But he doesn't let that stop him. He does his best to make you dislike him and succeeds remarkably well. Audience members who remember Duff from small roles in several FSLT productions over the years will be impressed with his performance in this important dramatic role, just as I have been very impressed by his work in the myriad roles he has had to play as "Cat's" assistant director.

Reverend Tooker is not a real minister. Not even close. In fact, he's an engineer cum philosopher named **Jay Smith** who is also making his debut at FSLT. As a matter of fact, Jay is making his acting debut period, having never before appeared on stage. That's important for you to know, because Jay's performance is so good you may otherwise think this is all old hat to him. It's not. It's new hat all the way.

Bob Wanslow, my long-time friend and sometimes collaborator, was generous enough to play what is the hardest role in this or any other play—that of Producer. Among uncountable other obligations, it is the producer's thankless job to see to it that the people doing all the other thankless jobs get thanked. In connection to the producer's many dismal duties, Bob has been on hand every step of the way, helping with auditions, casting, set building, and everything else under the artificial theatrical sun. Bob has been a part of most of my happiest experiences in theater, and he has truly done all he could to make this outing another one.

The lion's share of the work done in constructing the set for our production of "Cat" was done by my boyhood friend, **Fred Miller**, as a personal favor to me. How does one thank someone for that? Fred sawed virtually every board, made or moved every one of the 20-odd platforms we are using for this production (and carried all of the cinder blocks underneath them), framed every door, braced every wall and did all kinds of other things I have no idea of because I am as clumsy with a hammer and nails as Fred is facile. Perhaps the hardest thing about staging good shows at FSLT is lining up capable volunteers to assist in all the many arduous jobs that must be done. Every show needs a builder as capable and affable and patient as Fred. (But they can't have him.)

And there are so many other people to whom I am indebted—to assistant director Nancy Moon and Costume Mistress **Angie Ellis** who put so much thought and needle time into our perfect costumes; to Set Designer **Lindy Cotner** who has given us another of his unique, artful, enchanting sets, unlike and in my opinion, superior to all others; to our Prompter and Stage Manager **Leslie Kidder**, without whom the show would not go on; to **Theresa Starr** and **Rickkee Workman**, our Property Mistresses, for whom "Cat On A Hot Tin Roof" is a first theatrical experience; to my dear friend, **Robin Presson**, who searched for just the right furnishings and fabrics to make our set come alive, to Lighting Designer **Rebecca Stoltz**, her husband, **Lucas**, and their friend **Kishan**, for designing and setting our lighting, and to **Brendan Hope** for making it work; to the FSLT Board of Directors for enabling me to present this powerful play.

Fort Smith Little Theatre
presents

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

by Tennessee Williams

Directed by Ray Coleman

May 31 - June 9

Produced by special arrangement with Dramatist Play Services, Inc.

CAST

Cara Cunningham	Maggie
Luis Lamb	Brick
Amy Long	Mae
Suzy Hestand-Laird	Big Mama
Duff Taylor	Gooper
Mike Southern	Big Daddy
Jay Smith	Reverend Tooker
Ray Coleman	Dr. Baugh
Logan Ledbetter	Polly
Xander Ellis	Sonny
Connor Petray	Buster

CREW

Director	Ray Coleman
Assistants to Director	Duff Taylor, Nancy Moon
Bob Wanslow	Producer
Set Design	Lindy Cotner
Set Dresser	Robin Presson
Set Construction	Fred Miller, Matt Burris
Lights	Rebekah Stoltz, Lucas Stoltz
Sound	Rham Cunningham
Wardrobe	Angie Ellis, Nancy Moon
Props	Theresa Starr, Rickkee Workman
Stage Manager	Leslie Kidder
Assistant Stage Manager	Jill Ledbetter
Prompter	Leslie Kidder
Documentarians	Fred Miller, Rodney Davis
Artwork	Emory Holland

Director's Notes

The world is rich in versions of *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*. Officially, there are three of them—not counting the movie version, which we won't, because Tennessee Williams detested it.

Of the three existing “stage” versions of “Cat,” I much prefer the one that is performed the least, the one that originally came from Williams’ typewriter. The two later versions, one a revision of the other, both incorporate major changes that famed director Elia Kazan insisted on before he would direct the 1955 debut of the play on Broadway. But Williams always believed that his first finished version was truest to his original vision and was the best version overall. And since I firmly agree, it is Williams’ original, unmodified, version of the play that we are presenting here at FSLT.

In addition to what I feel is a more believable ending and a more consistent “arc” of behavior in the major characters, a major reason why I prefer the original script is that numerous author’s comments are sprinkled throughout the text. These detailed comments offer insight as to what Williams had in mind while he was writing *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*. As a director, I found these comments invaluable as indicators of the direction Williams wanted to the play to go. Indeed, it is because of these comments that I see how the Kazan-inspired modifications diverted the play from Williams’ original goal.

Here’s one of those comments, taken from a much longer exposition that appears unexpectedly in the middle of Brick’s tumultuous confrontation with Big Daddy:

The bird that I hope to catch in the net of this play is not the solution of one man’s psy-

chological problem. I’m trying to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people, that cloudy, flickering, evanescent—fiercely charged! —interplay of live human beings in the thundercloud of a common crisis. Some mystery should be left in the revelation of character in a play, just as a great deal of mystery is always left in the revelation of character in life, even in one’s own character to himself.

Thus, Williams’ original goal in writing *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* was not to tell a typical story: The “bird” he wanted to catch was the reality of how a closely linked group of people might actually think and behave in the throes of a common crisis. He didn’t care if there was “mystery” left unexplained in the characters or the storyline. In fact, he wanted just such mystery to remain with audience members after they left the theater, and pique their further speculation.

But Kazan thought the play had to be more of a “typical” story in order to succeed commercially. He wanted resolutions to the conflicts and changes provoked in the nature of some of the characters, specifically, Brick and Big Daddy.

As for me as director, the “bird” I am hoping to catch is Tennessee Williams’ quintessential *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*, the play he originally wrote and always preferred. I am no Elia Kazan, so the best I can do is to stage the play as closely as possible to the way Williams initially envisioned it (with just a couple of additional, ‘artistic’ touches). And that is what our volunteer group of actors and technicians have set out to accomplish.

Now, about those actors and technicians:

Cat On A Hot Tin Roof is drama, which is not every theater-goer’s cup of tea. The silver lining to that, from a dramatic actor’s point of view, is that audiences who do attend dramas are composed of the most sophisticated people who regularly come to plays, people who pay attention and respect performers. Such people understand that drama is much more difficult to ‘do’ than comedy, requiring a much deeper reach into each actor’s individual self and fraught with many more potential artistic pitfalls. The difficulty scale is higher. The fall to the ground below is farther. To use a circus metaphor, comedy is the clowns; drama is the high-wire act.

Which is why I have been so gratified to have worked with such a fine, death-defying ensemble of actors in *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*. In one way or another, all of them are ‘new’ to FSLT. Our Maggie, **Cara Cunningham**, is the only cast member who has previously appeared in multiple featured roles at FSLT. Cara long ago proved to be one of the funniest, smartest, most talented, most-pleasant-to-listen-to actresses in our extended troupe. Specializing in musical-comedy, Cara most recently appeared as Miss Adelaide in *Guys and Dolls*, in which she was hilarious and delightful. With the role of Maggie the Cat, Cara has sailed into uncharted waters, but—not surprisingly—delivers a dramatic performance every bit as captivating and memorable, and, I think, even more impressive than the many impressive comedic and musical roles she has played before.

Our Brick, **Luis Lamb**, has appeared in only one previous FSLT show, *Enchanted April*, where he instantly seized everyone’s attention. “Who’s that guy?” we asked. “He’s good!” Originally from Corpus Christi, Luis has absolutely tremendous natural acting ability and, in my opinion, the potential to become known as one of the best actors this area has ever seen. I cannot say enough about how good he is to work with or how able he is to take the least suggestion and make it glow with life. A fine, fine actor is Luis Lamb.

Suzy Heston-Laird is a newcomer to FSLT, but it’s about the only place in Fort Smith where she was not already well known. Suzy is currently the Director of the Fort Smith Museum of History and portrays “Miss Suzette,” a character of her own creation on the very popular “Murder and Mayhem????” Fort Smith Trolley ride through the historic district. Suzy was selected from a wonderful assortment of talented and experienced potential Big Mamas because we sensed she would bring not only ability but also a whole new sort of vital energy to the role. We were right.

Mike Southern, our Big Daddy, is a sort of hybrid. He’s not a newcomer, but it has been so long since he appeared onstage at FSLT, he might as well be. Mike, who is also a musician, has acted and

(a 'soiled dove' from Fort Smith's past), for which she is currently better known. Suzy has found playing Big Mama to be both a pleasure and a challenge and looks forward to participating in Little Theater again in the future.

DUFF TAYLOR (Gooper/Asst Director)

*I don't give a damn if Big Daddy likes me or don't like me,
did or never did, or will or will never!*

My first local theater experience was a 1985 production of "To Kill A Mockingbird," directed by a then-coworker of mine, Ray Coleman. Before I knew it, I was both assistant stage manager and playing a character! My next role was one of the leads in "Born Yesterday," the last production staged at the old Little Theater building on North "O" Street. I am thrilled to again participate in local theater as both Assistant Director and as the character Gooper in this great American drama.

AMY LONG (Mae)

That woman isn't pregnant!!!

Amy is an educational professional currently serving as the Charleston Middle School counselor. This is her debut theatrical performance. Former experience as an instructor of Drama and Literature, as well as a lifelong scholarship of southern writers, contribute to her delight at being selected to perform in a play by Tennessee Williams. As a teacher, I consider Williams to be a giant of our literature, whose talent lies in eviscerating the southern familial experience. Our cordial customs and traditions belie the passion natures seething beneath the chivalrous veneer. He creates tragic characters the audience can love because of -- not despite -- their flaws."

Conner Petray (Buster)

Logan Ledbetter (Polly)

Xander Ellis (Sonny)

Abby Parker (Trixie)

Addison Bartlett (Dixie)

We want Big Daddy! We want Big Daddy!

Conner says: After being in FSLT audiences for three years, this is my first time on stage. I have been in several plays at church and school, but this would have to be the best. I am happy to be working with an awesome cast and director for this great learning experience. Logan Ledbetter (whose mom and dad, Jill and Rob are active at FSLT) is making her dramatic debut with this play, but is also active in local school and church productions. Abby Parker is a veteran of several local plays, including "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever" and is anxious to do even more performing. Addison and Xander, we are happy to say, are beginning their performing careers with "Cat On A Hot Tin Roof."

Because of some late casting conflicts and/or early deadlines, the names of some of the actors and crew members involved in this production don't appear in the program. We hope to partially amend this by listing their names in this special program supplement.

ADDITIONAL CREDITS

- ◆ Bradley Kidder portrays Doc Baugh
- ◆ Abby Parker portrays Trixie
- ◆ Addison Bartlett portrays Dixie
- ◆ Dave Peevehouse provided set pieces and hours of labor
- ◆ Amy at Cooper Clinic provided Brick's cast
- ◆ Brendan Hope, assisted with lighting design, lighting and operation
- ◆ Mike Tickler operates the lighting

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

ThankYouThankYouThankYouThankYouThankYou

I can't say it enough -- Thank you to all my new and old friends who have worked (and I mean *worked*) so hard to bring this demanding play to FSLT. We only had about four weeks to put this show together, start to finish, which is an especially short time for such an especially difficult play. We also had very few volunteer workers to help us prepare to stage it. In addition, we also had a number of new actors in our cast who needed additional time to get their "sea legs" under them. For all those reasons, this production has been one of the most challenging and difficult plays I have ever directed. Which is why I am even more grateful than usual for the immense amount of time and labor the handful of us who were involved with "Cat" expended to get this play ready for its first audience.

Of all those workers, the one to whom I owe the most thanks is my boyhood pal, Fred Miller. Fred has always been one of the best people in my life and has done me a million good deeds, but none so large as this one. Although he had help from other members of the cast and crew, the fact is that Fred built the entire set you see before you almost single-handed. He is undoubtedly the single person most responsible for making our production possible. "Cat On A Hot Tin Roof" never had a better friend than Fred Miller, and neither have I.

Our producer, Bob Wanslow, is another old friend of mine whom I found ways to confound that you'd think a man who'd raised a half dozen children would be immune to. Bob helped Fred measure and saw and cut and screw and nail and paint and lift and carry. And when he had a minute, he'd stand next to me and help me watch Fred work. All that, in addition to the many hats he wore as our producer, not the least of which was trying to keep me organized. (He failed.) Bob, too, took on all these extra tasks as a personal favor to me and I have no idea how I can ever thank him.

Another old friend who helped me a lot on this show is Lindy Cotner, who has helped me a lot on other shows in the past. Anyone who has patronized our theater for any length of time is bound to be familiar with Lindy's wonderfully creative work as a scenic and technical designer, an actor, and (too seldom) as a director.

Yet another old friend is Jay Smith, who in addition to answering my distress call for an actor to fill the role of Reverend Tooker, has proved to be the most energetic, helpful, able and available volunteer worker to have come out of our cast. For FSLT's sake, I hope we see a lot more of Jay in the future.

CAST MEMBERS' NOTES

CARA CUNNINGHAM (Maggie)

*What is the victory of a cat on a hot tin roof?
I wish I knew -- Just stayin' on it, I guess, long as she can.*

The first show I ever saw was "To Kill A Mockingbird" at the King Opera House. I was six years old and was awe-struck by the wonder and beauty of the imaginary world. I was so upset when intermission came. It was at that moment I decided I wanted to be an actress. Ray Coleman was the director of that show. I am honored that Ray is my director now. Maggie is a most difficult role for an actress, but for me it has also been rewarding. I gave myself over to her and I hope you enjoy this show. I thank my husband for his support and my parents for taking me to see "To Kill A Mockingbird" so many years ago.

LUIS LAMB (Brick)

One man has one great, true thing in his life. One great, good thing which is true. I had friendship with Skipper -- You are naming it dirty!

It has been a real pleasure being cast in another Tennessee Williams play. A few years ago, at another Little Theater that I was involved with, I was fortunate to play the part of Stanley in "A Streetcar Named Desire." I have also been privileged to play the major roles of King Lear in "King Lear," Emile Debec in "South Pacific," and Dracula in "Dracula." Most recently, I played Frederick in FSLT's last production, "Enchanted April." So far, my experience with Fort Smith Little Theater has been truly amazing!

MIKE SOUTHERN (Big Daddy)

*Think of all the lies and liars I have had to put up with!
Pretense! -- Ain't that mendacity?*

I studied theater at both the University of Central Arkansas and Ouchita Baptist University, graduating in 1980 with a BA in Theater. This is my first time back at FSLT in six years. I have always wanted to work with Ray Coleman, although playing a role he has played in the past has proved to be a little stressful. My past FSLT credits include "Smoke On The Mountain"; "Monkey Business"; "Broadway Bound," and others. The role of Big Daddy has been a real challenge for me and I hope you enjoy it as well as the whole show.

SUZY HESTON-LAIRD (Big Mama)

*Time goes by so fast. Nothin' can outrun it. Death commences too early.
Almost before you're half acquainted with life -- you meet with the other.*

Suzy is the Executive Director of the Fort Smith Museum of History. This is her first experience with Little Theater. The role of Big Mama is quite a change from playing the Museum's running character, "Miss Suzette"