

CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

BY TENNESSEE WILLIAMS
DIRECTED BY REBECCA FRECKNALL

Relaxed Environment Information Pack



Relaxed Environment Format

The duty manager will make an onstage announcement before the performance to explain what a Relaxed Environment performance is at the Almeida. The house lights will remain at a low level throughout the performance. Audience members are permitted to make noise, and are free to move about or come and go to take a break or access the facilities. Should you require there is also a monitor in the foyer to watch the performance from so you don't miss any of the action.

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Seating

In this production the seating in the stalls is arranged in long rows of approximately 20 seats with aisles at either end of rows.

Short Synopsis

The action takes place in an abstract and non-naturalistic setting that represents the bed-sitting room of a plantation home in the Mississippi Delta, occupied by Maggie and Brick, though the house itself belongs to Brick's wealthy parents.

Brick's father, Big Daddy and the head of the Pollit family, is gravely ill with cancer, though he remains unaware of his diagnosis. Under the guise of celebrating his 65th birthday, his wife Big Mama, their children and grandchildren all gather to honor him. But many of them remain fixated on securing a claim to his vast estate.

Maggie, Brick's wife, pleads with him to rekindle their intimacy so they can conceive a child and strengthen their claim to the inheritance. However, Brick, devastated by the loss of his close friend Skipper, has distanced himself emotionally and physically from her and is drowning his pain in alcohol.

Meanwhile Brick's older brother Gooper and his pregnant wife Mae, flaunt their three children Trixy, Buster and Polly, vying for Big Daddy's approval. Underlying tensions continue to build. To accommodate Brick who has broken his ankle and has a leg in plaster, the birthday celebrations shift to his and Maggie's room.

Big Daddy confronts the stark reality of Brick's alcoholism, pressing him to reveal the truth behind his downward spiral. This confrontation unearths buried secrets, unresolved grief, and the devastating effects of lies and shame.

The stakes grow higher as Gooper and Mae push Big Mama to create a trusteeship for the estate, but she resists their plans. In a desperate bid to secure her future, Maggie boldly announces she is pregnant with Brick's child. As the gathering disperses, emotions run high, with some overjoyed by the news and others devastated. Alone with Brick, Maggie implores him to make her lie a reality, insisting her love for him is genuine. Brick responds coldly, saying that her words would be funny if only they were true.

In this production, in addition to the family, is the ever-present figure of a pianist, a non-speaking role played by a young man. When not playing piano live, he silently observes the unfolding drama, initially with a neutral energy which builds to a heightened physicality that embodies the essence of Brick's deceased friend Skipper.

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Sensory Overview

Piano

The piano remains in a prominent position onstage throughout the performance, sometimes it is played live and sometimes the piano sound we hear is recorded. The music reflects the characters' emotions and enhances the unfolding action throughout. It alternates between harsh, discordant chords, creating strikingly loud and jarring tones, sometimes evoking screams and shouts, other moments are softer with subdued melodies that play under the dialogue. At the end of each act, the piano builds, becoming loud and dramatic, with the addition of layered sound effects.

Lights and Sound

In Act Two we hear the sound of exploding fireworks with some effects resembling the boom of a bomb. These explosive sounds are mirrored by bursts of bright, flashing lights that flood the stage, accentuating the impact of each firework. A metronome placed on the piano is used throughout and the ticking sound it makes increases and decreases in volume at different points in the performance.

Physical and Verbal Peaks

In Act One and Two there are moments of violence and confrontation that are both physical and verbal, and strong language is sometimes used. Confrontations take place between men and women, men and other men, and adults towards children. In one instance there is a depiction of the pretence of violence from an adult towards a child as well as an adult speaking to a child in a threatening manner, and in another moment a child pretends to shoot at an adult with a toy gun. There are also some moments where chairs are forcefully thrown. In Act Three there is a depiction of a child throwing small explosive caps onto the floor, producing sharp 'banging' sounds. Children's screams are a recurring motif throughout. In Act Two and Three there are two instances of high-pitched shrieks that add an unsettling layer to the action.

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Scene by Scene Synopsis

Act One

The Reveal – Mention of terminal cancer diagnosis.

Discordant piano chords symbolize the children's playful screaming. The pianist sets the metronome and begins playing as Brick and Maggie arrive. Maggie explains she had to change her dress after a child threw food at her, calling the children 'no-neck monsters'. She mocks Mae and Gooper for failing to impress Big Daddy at dinner and laments her childlessness. Maggie reveals that Big Daddy is dying of cancer.

How Brick Broke His Ankle – References to alcoholism.

Maggie warns him that his drinking threatens their inheritance. She fears Gooper could send Brick to rehab and gain financial control of the estate. Maggie recounts the recent drunken accident that led to Brick's broken ankle, where he was trying to jump hurdles on the high school athletics field.

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Big Daddy's Favourite – Discussion that references inappropriate sexual attention.

Maggie reminds Brick that despite his alcoholism he is Big Daddy's favorite child. She teases him that Big Daddy might even be attracted to her.

Maggie's Transformation

Maggie mocks Mae and Gooper, revealing that Mae's father almost went to prison. She scorns Mae's Cotton Carnival Queen title. Seeing Brick's reflection in the mirror, Maggie is shocked by his expression. She admits she has become cruel because she feels unloved and confesses her loneliness. Brick asks if she would prefer to live alone, and Maggie firmly says no.

Maggie's Game Plan – Sexual references and reference to suicide.

Maggie offers Brick a massage, which he refuses. She compliments his physique, comparing his drinking habits to Skipper's. She confesses that if she thought Brick would never sleep with her again, she'd kill herself, but unlike Brick, she won't give up.

Maggie Pokes a Sore – Raised voices and shouting, physical altercation – discussion of alcohol intoxication.

Maggie questions if Brick was thinking about Skipper when she saw his face in the mirror. Brick avoids answering and pours a drink. After a shouting match and a physical altercation where Brick drops the crutch, Maggie helps him retrieve it. Brick reveals he's drinking to achieve what he calls "the click," a feeling of peace he only gets when he's consumed enough alcohol.

Big Daddy's Birthday

Brick asks Maggie to keep her voice down, and she agrees if he stops drinking before the party. Brick claims ignorance of Big Daddy's birthday. Maggie presents a gift she bought on Brick's behalf, but he refuses to sign the card.

Mae vs. Maggie – Pretence of violence from an adult to a child.

Mae enters with her son Buster and Maggie's Diana Trophy, scolding Maggie for leaving it within the children's reach. Maggie pretends to shoot Buster with the bow, and Mae boasts about the children's performances. Gooper interrupts to announce the children's next act.

Maggie Makes a Move – Physical altercation between Maggie and Brick.

Maggie attempts to seduce Brick before the party, but he rejects her. Maggie launches herself at Brick, who pushes her away with the crutch just as Big Mama enters.

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Big Mama Gives Marital Advice

Big Mama moves the party upstairs, because Brick has a broken ankle. Full of relief and excitement she shares a false report that Big Daddy is cancer-free. She warns Maggie to fix her marital issues. Gooper hurries Big Mama back downstairs to other guests. Alone, Maggie reflects, calling herself 'Maggie the Cat.'

Big Daddy Has No Will – Discussion relating to marital sex – discussion of terminal cancer diagnosis.

Maggie confides in Brick about the lack of a will, revealing that Mae and Gooper are using Brick's alcoholism and their childlessness to secure the inheritance. She shares her admiration for Big Daddy's rise from poverty and her fear of a life without money.

Maggie Tells Her Truth – Raised voices, threat of physical violence.

Maggie recalls her affair with Skipper, which she says was an attempt to feel closer to Brick. Brick accuses her of tarnishing his friendship with Skipper, threatening violence. Maggie recounts how her ultimatum to Skipper led to his breakdown and death.

Maggie Offers a Solution – Shouting and raised voices, including verbal aggression from an adult to a child. Dramatic piano music at the end of the act.

Maggie proposes that conceiving a child could secure their inheritance, emphasizing that her fertility window is now. Despite Brick's resistance, she remains determined as the party moves upstairs.

Act Two – Act Two begins with a repeat of the dramatic ending of Act One.

Big Daddy's Birthday Party – Sexual innuendo, fatphobic comments.

A cake is brought into Brick and Maggie's room, and everyone sings "Happy Birthday." The young children perform a song for Big Daddy. Maggie gives Big Daddy his gift from Brick. Mae reveals that Maggie bought it. Big Daddy interrogates Brick about his broken ankle before dismissing all but Brick and Big Mama. Big Daddy accuses Big Mama of trying to take over. He recounts his journey to success and wealth, emphasizing that it was not down to Big Mama, who is hurt by his remarks and leaves.

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Big Daddy Questions Brick

Maggie leads Brick into the room and kisses him before leaving. Brick wipes away her kiss. Big Daddy confronts Brick about this, his drinking, and his lack of intimacy with Maggie. Big Daddy comments that although different, Mae and Maggie have a similar look. Brick responds that it's because they're both hungry to inherit the estate. Big Daddy declares that he intends to hold onto his estate for a long time. Big Daddy hears someone at the door. Mae and Gooper have been listening,

Big Daddy turns on Mae – Depiction of verbal abuse.

Mae comes in and asks Big Daddy if he wants to speak to Gooper. Big Daddy scolds her strongly for eavesdropping, he also scolds her for spying on Brick and Maggie and reporting their activities to Big Mama, who in turn tells Big Daddy.

More questions for Brick

Big Daddy comments on how much Brick is drinking and asks if he quit sports announcing because of it. He urges Brick not to throw his life away because of drinking. Big Daddy (who carries a cigar though does not smoke it in the scene) has a spasm of pain and claims it was caused by inhaling too much tobacco.

Big Daddy's World Trip – Derogatory language, reference to child sexual abuse and exploitation, prostitution, discussion of cancer.

Big Daddy recounts a disturbing encounter in Morocco when a young child was sent to solicit sex from him. Brick attempts to end the conversation. Big Daddy reflects on his fear of cancer.

Big Daddy's distaste for Big Mama

Big Daddy shares that he wants to experience pleasure with women now that he's cancer free. He reveals that he never had an affair because he tried to honour his wedding vows, despite never liking Big Mama or enjoying sex with her. A telephone rings and Big Mama comes to answer it.

Big Daddy's sexual fantasy – Shouting, mention of soliciting a prostitute, physical altercation, high pitched screaming.

As Big Mama is telling Big Daddy about her phone call with Miss Sally, Big Daddy gestures as if to shut her out of the room. Big Daddy tells Brick he's going to hire a prostitute, strip her naked and choke her with diamonds. Brick tries to leave the room. Big Daddy stops him and asks why he's so restless. Brick complains that he hasn't heard 'the click'. Big Daddy realises that Brick is an alcoholic. Brick tries to escape again and Big Daddy takes away the crutch Brick is using. Big Daddy vows to straighten Brick out now he's cancer-free. Trixie bursts into the room screaming and waving streamers.

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Brick and Big Daddy Fight – Physical altercation and shouting, chairs thrown, explosions from fireworks and dramatic discordant piano.

Brick tries to leave, but Big Daddy blocks him, escalating into a physical fight. Big Daddy throws Brick to the floor as Big Mama enters, only to chase her out. He grabs the crutch Brick is using and throws it, demanding to know why Brick drinks. Brick bargains for a drink in exchange for the truth and admits he drinks to kill his disgust at all the lies people tell. A telephone rings prompting Brick to remember the final conversation he had with Skipper. Brick reveals Big Daddy's terminal diagnosis to him. Fireworks explode as Big Daddy throws chairs across the stage before leaving. Intense music plays as the pianist crawls over the piano before picking up a decanter of whiskey and drinking heavily.

Act Three – Act Three begins with a repeat of the ending of Act Two including fireworks and loud discordant piano.

Doc Baugh tells the truth – Small explosive caps are thrown on the stage making sharp bangs. Shouting and children screaming. Discussion of terminal cancer diagnosis.

Buster climbs onto the piano, takes small explosive caps from his pocket and throws them onto the floor. At the same time Trixie and Polly run on stage screaming. Mae, Gooper, the Reverend, Maggie and Doc Baugh follow.

As Gooper looks for Big Mama, Mae tries to keep the Reverend and Doc Baugh in the room so they can finally tell Big Mama the truth about Big Daddy's diagnosis. Big Mama enters and describes how healthy Big Daddy is, based on how much he ate at dinner. Maggie goes outside to look for Brick. Mae worries that Brick has already told Big Daddy the truth. The Doctor and Gooper discuss cures for alcoholism and Big Mama reveals that Skipper died from alcohol poisoning at the hospital.

Brick arrives very drunk and drinks more. Gooper asks Doc Baugh to tell Big Mama about Big Daddy's cancer diagnosis. Doc Baugh explains that Big Daddy's cancer is terminal and offers to leave a dose of morphine before leaving.

Big Mama reveals Big Daddy's plan

Big Mama reveals Big Daddy's intention to leave the estate to Brick. Gooper argues that he wants a fair deal when it comes to his inheritance. Brick returns and lies down drunk on the floor. Gooper and Mae present their plan for a trusteeship to manage the estate. Big Mama refuses to sign the papers expressing her disgust that Gooper would organise this behind Big Daddy's back.

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Big Daddy's final decision – Sexual innuendo.

Big Daddy returns wearing Brick and Maggie's birthday gifts, a robe and slippers. He tells a story about people lying and accuses his family members of doing the same. Maggie points out that Big Daddy is wearing their gifts, then stands on the piano to give her final gift, the news that she is pregnant with Brick's child. Big Daddy declares that she has life within her and leaves with Big Mama to look over his estate one last time.

Mae exposes the lie – Raised voices.

Gooper gets a drink of whiskey. Mae becomes agitated that Maggie is trying to con them out of their inheritance, but Gooper tells her to be calm and says that Doc Baugh hasn't confirmed her pregnancy. Maggie argues that she's been to a different doctor but Mae snaps back claiming that they know Brick hasn't slept with her so her pregnancy is a lie. As they are arguing, Big Daddy lets out a scream of pain. Mae and Gooper leave.

The Click

Maggie thanks Brick for not exposing her lie. Brick finally hears 'the click'. Maggie reminds Brick that tonight is her window to conceive and urges him to make her lie true. Maggie pours out all Brick's liquor and promises to give him more once he's slept with her. She promises Brick that she does love him, but Brick doesn't believe her. As the lights fade the pianist crawls on top of the piano and curls up around a decanter of whiskey.

Curtain Call

The lights brighten and the actors return to take their bows then leave.