

CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF: PRESS RESPONSES

Curve, Liverpool Everyman & Playhouse, and English Touring Theatre co-production (2021)
anthony-almeida.com

THE GUARDIAN | Mark Lawson

★★★★

Big Daddy's birthday party still blazes. An imaginative staging of Tennessee Williams' classic foregrounds the southern drama's roots in Greek tragedy

One of the catchiest titles in the theatrical canon will always draw audiences to Tennessee Williams' 1955 play set during a cataclysmic 65th birthday party for a Mississippi plantation owner. Anyone lured to find out what *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* means should leave satisfied with this imaginative staging.

Anthony Almeida, young winner of the Royal Theatrical Support Trust's Sir Peter Hall director award, follows Ivo van Hove and Yaël Farber's work on Williams's contemporary, Arthur Miller, by emphasising the deep ancient Greek roots of American drama of this period.

The relatives, pastor and doctor accompanying Big Daddy at this landmark anniversary often speak in a choric, choreographed manner. During furious duologues exposing the family's numerous delusions, off-stage characters watch from a raised surround that might aptly be called a catwalk around a stage bare except for a table that can suggest bedroom or banquet. Maggie the Cat begins the play showering off-stage, prompting designer Rosanna Vize to shroud some scenes with a retractable railed drape invoking shower curtain, mosquito net and the family's instinct to obscure the truth.

Modern dress and diverse casting shift the white supremacy implicit in the characters into more submerged forms of modern racial tension, positioning this version intriguingly between traditional stagings and the all-black casting of a 2009 Broadway and West End version. Themes of public and private mendacity – “we can make that lie come true” is a pivotal line – are anything but dated. This, with Miller's *All My Sons* and Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, is one of the texts most justifying David Mamet's claim: “All plays are about lies ... when the lie is revealed, the play is over.”

Siena Kelly's magnetic Maggie embodies the sleek, skittish, erotically frustrated energy in the title image. Peter Forbes's Big Daddy, dominant but shrinking, wounded yet still fighting, feels consciously related to Brian Cox's Logan Roy in HBO's *Succession*, reasonably so as both are explicitly latter-day King Lear.

Classic revivals with a modern vision are sometimes derided as “director's theatre”, but Almeida is always true to a play as great as its name.

THE STAGE | Tim Bano

★★★★

Anthony Almeida's blank-space approach turns the Tennessee Williams classic into a contemporary horror show

When you strip away the southern grandeur, the heat and the literalism of Tennessee Williams' masterwork *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, what are you left with? In the production that won him the RTST Sir Peter Hall Director Award, Anthony Almeida shows that without its usual trappings, Williams

becomes Shakespeare. He removes everything that makes the play a period piece and leaves us with just the words in all their psychological complexity.

There are strong Peter Brook and Ivo van Hove vibes to the production. Nothing is allowed into Rosanna Vize's set beyond a net curtain hung in a huge circle and hard benches around the edge of the stage. The only props are ones that are necessary – pretty much just liquor and a crutch.

At first you wonder how Almeida will conjure the sense of stifling heat that in most productions is like an extra character, but it becomes clear he isn't interested in that. Instead, he's interested in creating a space like a reckoning. No one can hide in this house, and everything is overheard. Family members linger in the background like phantoms, wandering on and off, or just sitting still. It gives the whole play a sense of painful inevitability: there's too much mendacity, as Brick complains, and the truth will have to come out.

Most of the time, the characters aren't actually doing what they're saying. Their actions sit at odds with their words. Other times, they reveal their true feelings when they're not saying anything at all: the sight of Sam Alexander's Gooper sitting silently on a bench, slowly stuffing his mouth with cake tells us everything we need to know about how he's doing.

Despite very carefully detailed performances all round – including a preening, sauntering performance from Siena Kelly as Maggie the Cat, whose quickfire monologue in the first scene seems never to cease – it's in the interactions between Peter Forbes' Big Daddy and Oliver Johnstone's Brick that the production becomes completely riveting.

Forbes, when he first appears, makes Big Daddy a tyrant in miniature, barking, straining and sweating as he berates his family. When everyone else leaves, and it's just him and Brick, the emotions that flash between them are many – not least, amid the frustration and the disappointment, a huge amount of tenderness. Big Daddy intently studies Brick's face while monologuing, desperate to strike upon something that might connect with his beloved son. Other scenes only suffer by comparison.

Almeida's decision to take away everything that might interfere with the lines and the complexity of intent behind those lines pays off hugely. When the usual extras are gone all we're left with is the characters' lies and the spaces between them. Into those spaces flows everything that we, as an audience, bring with us. The Pollitts suddenly become relatable, and the play becomes a contemporary psychological horror show.

WHATS ON STAGE | Tanyel Gumushan

★★★★

It takes a hot minute in a cool, dark room to truly appreciate just how intense Anthony Almeida's *Cat* on a Hot Tin Roof gets.

As the winner of the 2019 RTST Sir Peter Hall Director Award, Almeida's direction is assertive and unapologetic, taking a beloved Tennessee Williams piece and proving its relevance and relation to human ego anywhere at any time.

Set over the course of one evening, we meet a family supposedly celebrating the 65th birthday of the head of the family, Big Daddy (Peter Forbes) and his clean bill of health following a cancer scare. Alongside him and his fiery temper is his wife, the doting Big Mama (Teresa Banham) and their sons; an alcoholic has-been, Brick (Oliver Johnstone) mourning the loss of a friend, and Gooper (Sam Alexander) who has spent his life cast in the shadows of his younger brother.

Joining them are their wives. The prowling Maggie (Siena Kelly), like a cat in heat, is restless and frustrated in her childless marriage to Brick. Kelly's performance is stellar as she parades both her desperation and determination with gooey smiles and tears in her eyes.

In contrast, the stern-faced Mae (Shanaya Rafaat) moves like a snake in the grass in pursuit of inheritance and justice for her baring of five sons, with another on the way. These young boys join the cast to scream and pop balloons and eat cake, acting as a sinister reminder of the ease of childhood in comparison to the nightmarish, never-ending party. The addition of a constant clicking clock as a soundtrack is a reminder of the battles that the characters have with mortality.

The script is relentless. Self-indulgent "talking in circles" monologues make the first half slow-moving, as we unveil anxieties about adultery, sexuality, wealth and power. Despite this, each word is venomous on the beat and finds a steady rhythm that ticks along; rather like Brick's repeated analogy of how he drinks till something in his mind clicks into place and he finds peace.

It makes for a claustrophobic viewing experience with no respite moment of silence as we deep dive into toxic family psyche.

Rosanna Vize's design features a central mosquito net that allows prying eyes and casts shadows for unannounced and undetected eavesdropping. That, a table and a healthy amount of liquor bottles complete the minimal staging that, while unfortunately lacking depth, represents multiple rooms in a large estate. At the back of the set is an illuminated passageway that leads to nowhere in particular – sanctuary perhaps.

Almeida's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is a challenging watch – but one that is executed with razor-sharp precision.

CULTURAL CAPITAL | Maryam Philpott

★★★★

The lure of *Curve Leicester* is increasingly irresistible. A searing production of Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* that absolutely burns with the fire and fury that the playwright built into this towering drama. Tight as a drum and thrumming with palpable tension, Anthony Almeida's production is ferocious, a magnificent adaptation that follows other recent approaches to Williams by modernising the setting and focusing on the complex emotional intensity as a family combusts in front of us.

Previous attempts to place Williams's work in a more contemporary or at least timeless setting have had mixed results; the Young Vic worked its magic with a 2014 version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* gratefully broadcast by National Theatre at Home last year, the Almeida too with that defining production of *Summer and Smoke* that did so much to revive the immediate potency of Williams's emotional excavation. More recently, Hampstead Theatre's pandemic-delayed version of *The Two Character Play* incorporated plenty of modern tricks and techniques but failed to lift this difficult work, while the most recent West End version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* directed by Benedict Andrews with a starry cast was a sorry, cold and lustless affair that confused nudity with chemistry.

So, Almeida's production for *Curve* is an interesting lesson in how to take a beloved classic play, really strip it back to its essential characteristics using minimal staging and still hold on to all of the complex emotional currents, changes of direction and the bubbling tension that make it worth revisiting. There is, crucially, real danger here, it absolutely bristles with confrontational energy, that once-in-a-lifetime truth-telling session for the Pollitt family that was somehow inevitable but long delayed, as characters buried their feelings or hid from the truths they cannot bear to face. What

Almeida brings to this revival is that feeling that its now or never for these people and once the storm plays out, everyone's outlook will be forever different. Because this is a play about the fight, everyone has an agenda, they all need something, a clarity that relies on someone else noticing them or being honest about what's going on. And the audience sees, particularly in the stonking first half and the early part of the second, is that this is really high stakes stuff, and while Williams holds back some of the cards for later scenes, we come to realise that everyone has everything on the line on this fateful night that Almeida's production rather gloriously brings to life.

And across the 2.5 hours of this story, there is very little relief, plunging the audience immediately into the marital troubles of Maggie and Brick and thereon holding our attention with an iron grip. Even the sudden interval which comes in the middle of the intensive and combative duologue between Brick and Dig Daddy gives little pause, leaving characters on stage before jumping right back into this full-throttle encounter without missing a beat – it is an extraordinary feat for the actors and demands an instant hush from an audience resettling after the break.

What this Curve and ETT revival does so well is to delineate the individual trajectories, opening with a forensic skill the wants of each character while still creating a consistent family dynamic – albeit a relatively dysfunctional one – and you believe in all of their ways of being. Williams, of course, shines the brightest spotlight on the central couple kept apart by sexual jealousy, resentment and self-loathing, inspired and fuelled by Brick's alcoholism. Here, we are shown their parallel tracks as Maggie tries desperately to bring their paths back together. She is fighting for her marriage and a remembrance of the man she loved. It is a furious, desperate, scrappy business for her using every bit of her armoury from her body to various means of manipulation to get what she wants. Brick, by contrast, and arguably unrecognised by his wife, is actually fighting for his life, even more so than Big Daddy, almost letting it slip away but clinging to fragments of his own memories – the man he was, his athletic prowess and friendship. There are snatches when he looks at Maggie with something like his old feeling for her, amused, impressed, even proud of her resilience and determination.

Likewise, the relationship between Big Mama and Big Daddy feels crueller than ever, his lack of sympathy and bullying a clear template for his sons and their struggle to connect with or impress him. The volcanic rage he directs at everyone very occasionally appears in his sons while his wife silently accepts his bitter diatribes while trying to find comfort in noise, knowledge and the family she has endured so much to create and sustain. But she has strength too, a refusal to bend or break whatever direction the wind is coming from, quietly holding it all together. Meanwhile the obsequious Gooper and Mae seem far more sinister than previous productions, a pretence of happiness designed to sell Big Daddy a dream and reward them with his millions. The switch from kindness to cold, hard business in the penultimate scene is, therefore, rather chilling.

In staging this production, designer Rosanna Vize creates a simple but evocative space filled with places for characters to listen-in on each other's conversations – a key theme in the play that contributes to the tight claustrophobic experience that Williams generates and so unnerves the protagonists. Initially played through a gauzy circular curtain surrounding Maggie and Brick's bedroom, the hazy focus responds to their mismatched view of each other while creating a seductive feel to their passionate opening conversation. The intrusion of other characters, Mae in particular who draws the curtain back, cuts through all of this to remove the filter, presaging what will become a night of revelation.

The combination of design and lighting creates an intense central playing space which seamlessly becomes the various locations. A raised edge doubles for the eavesdroppers' balconies and Almeida uses these areas to emphasis moments of particular tension, silently lining-up the usually off-stage or unseen characters who observe the action, placing further pressure on the speakers who struggle to be honest without privacy, while continually drawing attention to the complex network of family

and neighbours whose lives so completely intersect. It is notable that the church and medical profession are represented as the outside-insiders who become part of this household tonight but represent death and damnation that hangs over the Pollitts as their crisis ripens.

The staging, then, becomes both narratively functional and representational, allowing Almeida to create drive and drama in this soulless space of opaque materials and emptiness, but at the same time fill it with the emotional baggage and vast landscapes of Williams's creations. Occasionally, the symbolism goes too far asking the audience to imagine phones that don't exist or the cashmere robe Big Daddy is given for his birthday, but unlike Andrews's interpretation whose windowless luxury sucked the soul from the drama, Almeida finds a wonderful and utterly compelling harmony within these contrasting elements, unleashing the very great power in one of Williams's finest work and, with Joshua Gadsby's lighting, create pace and evocative stage pictures that illuminate the work anew.

This production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* also owes much to its cast who find depth and resonance in their character to give them fresh appeal. Siena Kelly's Maggie is both tenacious and vulnerable, driven by a need to make her marriage work that goes beyond the humiliation of failure to some almost romantic concept of destiny. But Kelly's Maggie is an earthy creature, a woman open about her mistakes and failures but also her desires. Kelly carries herself so particularly, using her body and knowing its value as a communication tool, dressed in sensuous fabrics and prepared to grapple in the dust, pay whatever price and do whatever it takes to bend this family towards her.

Oliver Johnstone has been one to watch for some time with notable performances in the RSC's *Imperium* and *Cymbeline* as well as *All My Sons* for the Old Vic. Here he gives his best performance yet as a deeply troubled and broken Brick Pollitt. There is such a desperate sorrow in Johnstone's approach as his Brick becomes slowly more inebriated. But rightly, it never makes him pitiable or too empathetic. A character bent on his own destruction, there is a huge range here, disillusion turning to fury to amusement and attraction, despair, cruelty, disregard and even a hint of affection for his nephews that betrays his own desire for children, the chance that he and Maggie may really want the same thing after all. Johnstone holds the characterisation throughout, entirely immersed in the role, always reacting, responding or lost in Brick's pain as he searches for release.

Peter Forbes as Big Daddy is equally strong, a self-made man who betrays his roots when a brush with death makes him vulnerable, something that manifests in his ebullience and need to re-establish control, making him a powerful and glowering presence while trying, like everyone else, to make sense of his life and its future direction. As Big Mama, Teresa Banham has less stage time as the men hammer-out their problems but the portrait of her marriage is vivid and while she may not have Maggie's openness, Banham suggests a woman fighting in her own way for status and notice as a house full of domineering men consume all of the oxygen.

Curve Leicester is pushing boundaries with this version of *Cat On a Hot Tin Roof*, combining a chic visual aesthetic that supports a deeply reflective take on a play that continues to yield new insights and surprises.

DAILY MAIL | Holly Williams

A darkly elegant interpretation of Tennessee Williams's classic drama

This stark, stripped-back production of Tennessee Williams's classic drama is directed by Anthony Almeida, who won the Sir Peter Hall Director Award for his vision for it.

He updates the setting to an abstract present: on a blood-red stage flanked by walkways, a family's lies and delusions are slowly exposed over the course of a birthday party for their ailing patriarch,

Big Daddy (Peter Forbes). There are flashes of potent visual metaphor – as when Big Mama pulls across the stage a curtain her son is tangled in, as if trying to drag him out of his alcoholism.

What is well brought out is how the family continually interrupt each other. The decision to have characters talking past others or in the wrong direction – while underscoring the theme of how impossible they find it to communicate – can be wrong-footing for the audience. But the evening still grips. Teresa Banham is superb as Big Mama, who starts icy and wily but ends up bewildered. Siena Kelly as Maggie the Cat, is always a magnetic presence – trying to make her husband Brick love (or at least sleep with) her again. Oliver Johnstone plays Brick as a frail alcoholic; his glory days are long gone in this darkly elegant interpretation.

THE TIMES | Sam Marlowe

A bold reimagining of an American classic

A family fight like cats in a sack in this audacious reimagining of the Tennessee Williams classic, which turns the Pollitts' plantation home in the Mississippi Delta into a nightmarish rat trap of lies, suspicion and vicious desperation.

Anthony Almeida, winner of the RTST Sir Peter Hall award for emerging directors, strips away the specifics of time and place to pounce on the play's destructive relationships in all their snarl, spit, scratch and bite. That's not to say that the staging is spartan — it's crammed with conceptual flourishes, some brilliant, some distracting. I'd bet that Almeida is an admirer of the avant-garde Belgian theatre-maker Ivo van Hove, whose paw prints are all over it.

Rosanna Vize's design encloses most of the playing space in a tube of white gauze curtain. Around it is an angular catwalk with an illuminated doorway allowing for lurking eavesdroppers and unflattering family portraits, the Pollitts freeze-framed in the aperture in a dysfunctional group.

Caterwauling children in party hats race around the perimeter, or hover behind the veil of fabric like the ghostly progeny that Siena Kelly's sinuous, self-assured Maggie wishes she had had with Oliver Johnstone's miserable, self-loathing Brick.

At the opening the curtain suggests the shower in which Brick tries to rinse himself clean of despair and mendacity, as well as the bedroom he unwillingly shares with his wife. It divides the warring relatives and ensnares them together, and is ripped down as ugly secrets are exposed. The curtain also conveys the haze of Brick's alcoholism, as we watch him through its blurring billows; at one point he's tangled from head to foot in its folds as he crawls towards the whisky bottle.

Moments thrillingly pay off: Teresa Banham's wounded Big Mama and Peter Forbes's frightened bully of a Big Daddy facing off across his birthday candles; or Sam Alexander as Brick's prissy, grasping sibling Gooper quietly stuffing his mouth with cake while his father and brother claw each other's guts out. Overall, Almeida's production is tense, unnerving and arresting — it has unmistakable flair.

SHENTON ON STAGE | Mark Shenton

A revelatory modern production of this enduring classic

It's not just because director Anthony Almeida has that Islington theatre in his own name that made me think of Almeida Theatre; this is the sort of Tennessee Williams make-over that they established with *SUMMER & SMOKE*. It feels utterly contemporary yet, mostly, entirely faithful (albeit with a few added "fucks").

It is also acted with a ferocious intensity that's also got human warmth: a rare combination. The relationship between Peter Forbes's Big Daddy and Oliver Johnson's Brick is deeply moving, tender and compassionate; so are their interactions with Teresa Banham's Big Mama. Gorgeous work, too, from a quietly wonderful Sam Alexander as Gooper and Siena Kelly's Maggie who also provided acute studies in desperation.

This is a riveting production, full of bold modern choices, that perfectly captures the brooding, desolate sense of isolation, loss and desperate estrangement of the characters from each other and themselves.

THE REVIEWS HUB | Selwyn Knight

★★★★

Big Daddy asks his son, Brick, why he drinks. 'Mendacity,' he replies, helpfully defining it as, 'Lies and Liars.' And that's the heart of this production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*: everyone has secrets; everyone lies. Over a celebratory evening meal at Big Daddy's plantation home, layers are peeled away and the lies exposed.

In the programme, the designer, Rosanna Vize, explains the dilemma in depicting this setting and the questions the team asked themselves: What do we need to allow people to be alone, and yet overheard? How can we create loneliness in a crowded room? The harsh monochromatic sparse set is the team's answer. The stage is largely empty with benches on three sides and a table. But most striking is the circular gauze curtain hanging like a column. At times we strain to see what is going on inside as characters are physically as well as emotionally separated. As time goes on, even that sanctuary is lost as past and present motivations are revealed, one-by-one. Occasionally, cast members will loom just outside the playing space, observing, listening.

This is a very thoughtful production, with director Anthony Almeida trying to strip away nearly seventy years of acquired wisdom about the play to present something fresh and new that speaks to audiences today. It's dialogue-heavy and it takes one's ear a short time to tune in to the characters' southern drawl. While much is intense, there are flashes of humour that the audience pounces on, grateful for the light relief. The experience is powerful and ultimately cathartic.

The first characters we meet are Big Daddy's second son, Brick (Oliver Johnstone), and his wife, Maggie (the Cat) (Siena Kelly) in a fiery opening scene. Johnstone somehow makes Brick a sympathetic character even as he wallows in self-pity. Kelly's incredibly feline Maggie is sultry and seductive – but unable to move him. Both characters are instantly believable and remain at the centre of the storm that develops around them. Shanaya Rafat brings us a Mae with a very specific view of what is right and wrong. A scene in which the true colours of Mae and Gooper (Sam Alexander) are revealed is especially powerful with their changing emotions becoming ever clearer and ever more feral. Peter Forbes' Big Daddy is a straightforward, largely self-made man. Forbes brings us his conflicted emotions and later confusion around the members of his family well.

This is not an easy watch by any means, the themes are often heavy and the characters are largely unsympathetic and difficult to warm to. Nevertheless, as a dark dissection of a family whose members lurch from crisis to crisis, it certainly works.

NOT EXACTLY BILLINGTON

The RTST's Sir Peter Hall Director Award champions emerging directors tackling big plays for audiences around the country. Back in January of last year, the current recipient Anthony Almeida

featured in Curve's season preview ahead of this revival of Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). At the time, we wrote that he spoke eloquently about his affection of the play's emotional setting and how he threw away any assumptions when reading it. Over 18 months later, on a hot September night, we finally got to see his production. Almeida's fresh take on the play brilliantly evokes the heat and intensity of the Deep South setting.

Rosanna Vize's design opens with a translucent gauze circling Brick and Maggie's bedroom. The white curtain cools the heat of the room and hints at the wider plantation beyond the gallery doors. Brick and Maggie play much of their opening scene behind it and on opposite sides of it to each other, evocative of an emotional barrier between the two. If this offers a degree of protection to the heat of the Delta, it is soon ripped down in one of Brick's drunken struggles, revealing the room, including its harsh red floor, as a confrontational space with nowhere for the characters to hide. Vize's design is effective in its simplicity, and nicely synchronised with Almeida's direction in that both are stripped of any fuss.

Williams plays with space in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. The private sanctuary of the bedroom becomes a public arena for humiliation and personal confrontation of unwanted truths. Characters are in a constant struggle for privacy and breaking that privacy: whether that is Maggie locking the door only for Big Mama to come in, or Mae, Gooper and their five 'no neck monsters' trying to interrupt. In Almeida's production, this is blasted open. There are no walls meaning phone calls from the hallway take place centre stage and Big Mama stands over Brick from her first entrance. Everything is out in the open. This is no more apparent than in the scene where Big Daddy confronts Brick about his alcoholism and relationship with his friend Skipper. Whereas in the text, the gallery is an offstage place for eavesdropping, here the intruders are ever-present, watching their private conversation from the sides. As Big Daddy says, 'It's hard to talk in this place'.

Almeida has made some other strong choices. Placing the interval at the height of Act Two allows him to build the tension again in the lead up and aftermath of Big Daddy's exit in the second half. Imagining the final phone conversation between Brick and Skipper also gives us some more insight into what Skipper meant to Brick. Almeida also has an eye for detail for the peripheral characters, always watching from the side-lines. I particularly enjoyed Sam Alexander's Gooper absent-mindedly tucking into Big Daddy's birthday cake, candles still lit, as he stared into the distance struggling with the fact he'll always be second best.

There are moments when Almeida's direction reminds me of Ivo Van Hove's treatment of the 'classics', not only in its menacing tension, but also in its aesthetic focus on stark physicality off-set by an ethereal sense of purgatorial unease. This approach suits Williams' play, where physical, mental and emotional boundaries are crossed and blurred in a space where there is literally nowhere to hide.

The production features some fine performances, led by Peter Forbes' Big Daddy. He growls at Big Mama to be quiet and roams the stage like an older lion trying to keep control of his pack. The character provides much of the humour to the play but it's often coarse or at the expense of someone else. In a way he feels like the keystone, all the other characters either fawning over him or playing in an unwinnable game of one-upmanship for his praise. That is all apart from Brick, searching for the 'click' in his head. Oliver Johnstone gives a physical performance as the faded football star. He's often in a world of his own either hobbling around stage in search for his next drink or bouncing a balloon at the back of the stage. Rounding off the central performances, Siena Kelly is magnetic as a breathless Maggie, seductive yet malicious, headstrong yet desperate. Kelly manages to balance the many facets of the character while maintaining an odd, yet entirely believable purity of spirit. Kelly is most definitely a name to look out for.

Almeida has shown with this production that he has a bright future ahead, and in updating such a well-known play proves that there are still unplumbed depths in all the classic plays. In exposing the

bare bones of the play, and placing the relationships at the fore, Almeida has created not only a highly entertaining piece of theatre, but a tableau of family life that can still resonate with modern audiences.

WEST END BESTFRIEND | Alanna Boden

★★★★

Sharp, nuanced and innovative. A play as uncomfortable as its title. By the end, we all identify as the cat, tentatively stepping from one foot to another, in order to remain up on that hot, tin, roof.

Rosanna Vize's set design is an indicator of the central theme, a large round translucent circular curtain frames the main acting space, whilst the soundscape by Giles Thomas sets the tension levels. Between the two, the atmosphere is defined and it is not a comfortable one. The constant pulsing and dripping of the soundscape weaves in and out of your consciousness, whilst the curtain sinisterly moves in the air. The design is clear, you can be alone, but still be seen.

Though billed as an ensemble piece, Siena Kelly as Maggie, Oliver Johnstone as Brick and Peter Forbes as Big Daddy carry the greatest weight. Williams' play is wordy; very, very wordy. Yet these three manage to execute vast monologues with ease, though the content of the monologues is often exhausting. Kelly is sultry and alluring; they hold their own power and are unapologetically honest regarding their own desires and aspirations, which is often described as 'catty'. Kelly is the one we should be rooting for and though ultimately Maggie's journey is the one we as an audience most identify with, you don't end up rooting for any of them.

Sam Alexander's Gooper is quite possibly the most likeable of the team but this is largely down to a small section of extreme tension that takes place in the central acting space. Gooper is sat to the side, silently eating a birthday cake which is not theirs. Simple and hilarious. What to do when in an uncomfortable situation which you don't want to get involved with. Eat cake.

As a piece, it felt like it achieved everything director Anthony Almeida wanted it to achieve. It is tense, relentless and uncomfortable. Having not seen any previous productions, it is impossible to comment on how it deviated from the original but this fresh take is intricate and nuanced. Despite the play's age, its content is still relevant today and this, above all, is the most difficult pill to swallow. We would like to believe we have come so far in the past 70 years and we have. Yet we as people, still struggle with communication, hold fast to a view that keep us unchanging, and choose self-destruction over the pain of growth. The overarching circular motion is reflected at every opportunity from the set, the sound, the conversations, even through to the closing and opening moments.

There is something for everyone in this production. It is full of stylised and artistic moments. Linguists and lovers of literature will dance in the long monologues and witty exchanges. It is doubtful that any hardcore Tennessee Williams fans will be offended or disappointed with this adaptation. There are insufficient light moments to tip this solidly into the realm of enjoyable; that being said, enjoyment was probably not one of its aims. It left us frustrated and we can't help but question if this was indeed Tennessee Williams' aim and Anthony Almeida has been bold enough to see it through. It is sharp, innovative and nuanced and the production itself cannot be faulted or its delivery but it isn't a comfortable ride.

It is a truly sweltering night at the Curve Theatre, Leicester to see this new adaptation of Tennessee Williams' blistering classic, *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*, and it proves to be more than a theatrically pathetic fallacy for this melting pot of a play. In both reality and in the intimate Curve Studio production, *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* proves to be a claustrophobic and raw examination of a dysfunctional family and the lies they tell themselves. It's hot stuff both outside and within the air conditioned confines of the Curve Studio.

Performed in the studio, which adds to the feeling of intimacy, the play opens with a gauze-like curtain hung in a circle, revealing Brick, a young man collapsed on a bed. Brick's wife Maggie, prowls around the perimeter of the curtain like a caged tiger. At once seductive, then accusatory, then pleading. She is desperate for Brick's attention and the more she tries, the more impenetrable he becomes. The containment the curtain provides hints at the privacy of a boudoir but its transparent quality makes it clear there are few secrets in this household.

The family are gathered for Big Daddy Pollit's 65th birthday, but the celebrations are all posited on a lie. Bitterness, neglect and disappointment are at the heart of each of the relationships. Here is a family so entrenched in their flawed connections that they can't escape, even when they desperately want, finally, to be honest, find comfort, or even care somewhat for each other.

Anthony Almeida's direction reveals the enduring nature of the play and its themes by removing any reference to time period. Figures are constantly moving, turned away, fractured from each other, emphasising both isolation and lack of privacy, and constantly changing perspectives. The set by Rosanna Vize is sparse: the floor the colour akin to fresh blood, its shiny surface reflecting back at the contenders. Blank openings frame eaves-droppers and observers like family portraits with a torrid and unfathomable difference.

Colour in the costumes, by Sarah Mercadé, is used sparingly to strong effect. Maggie is in gold coloured silk, which ripples with her cat-like walk. Big Mama wears a structured dress in a rather unnatural pink with bright jewels, restrictive and glittering, all surface. The rest of the cast are in shades of grey and blue, giving emphasis to the women as objects of beauty, their real-life 'costumes' helping them 'play the role' of love, wife, mother.

Oliver Johnstone's performance as Brick is barely contained. He teeters on the brink of grief and exhaustion, waiting for the relief of the 'click' in his head which alcohol brings. Tormented by his own guilt, his body shakes with tension. It feels a positive relief when he finally speaks the truth. Equally controlled, Siena Kelly as Maggie is temptress and provocateur, her heartfelt pleas for connection contrasted with cool calculation. Her sensuous physicality maintains her presence even when in the background.

Big Daddy's relationship with Big Mama is another built on lies. Revelations shift the axis of power back and forth. Peter Forbes lends menace to the role of Big Daddy, but he transpires to be the one who is finally searching for some sort of truth. Teresa Banham as Big Mama is sharply focussed and restrained, her stiff posture hinting at hidden emotions and buried dreams.

Anthony Almeida is the winner of the 2019 Royal Theatrical Support Trust Sir Peter Hall Director Award, and this production becomes the prize: to create a new interpretation of a classic play, which will tour the UK. As he states in his Director's Note, he has tried to remove the layers of 'lacquer' associated with the play through school syllabuses, previous productions and even the film. He has stripped it back to reveal the essential humanity within it, and presents a polished, abstracted version of the play.

BEYOND THE CURTAIN

★★★★

A captivating and intense character study

This tense, cramped and confined production of a families fractured relationships whilst they deal with ill health, drink, lies and each others confessions. Director Almeida, winner of the 2019 Royal Theatrical Support Trust Sir Peter Hall Director Award, strips back the piece in an attempt to make the material fresh and speak to a modern audience. The scene is set from the get go with the 5 children walking on stage and let out the most ear piercing screams.

The piece is very wordy and the characters are hard to sympathise with but ultimately this window into this family is a fascinating examination of humanity and connection with those around you with each cast member delivering a terrific performance. As an audience you feel very much like eve's droppers the whole time as you get a window in this family.

Oliver Johnstone does a fantastic job with Brick. He's not a character you should probably sympathise with but ultimately there's something charming about Johnstone's performance. He superbly maintains the limpness of a man lost to his drink. Siena Kelly is seductive and likeable as an outsider who in on the inside as a relatively new member of the family. Those early scenes are a particularly uncomfortable as the pair row.

The central relationship between Johnstone's Brick and Peter Forbes's commanding Big Daddy is gripping to watch. The pair struggle to maintain conversation as Brick accuses Daddy of never being able to say whatever he needs to. The second act felt much more precise with the actions moving with much speed as we learn further of Big Daddy's ill health diagnosis, which has been kept secret from him.

The design by Rosanna Vize is striking. Throughout the use of the other characters being on stage sat on benches that surround 3 side of the stage is a clever choice that enhances the audience to feel like your part of the action as you listen in to the confessions that flow from each person. It feels like every word has someone else listening. The early use of a curtain distorting some of the scenes parallels the lostness of the relationships.

Ultimately this is a family so torn but in the end still connected. It'll make you question your connections with those around you. After the past 18 months where we've all been kept apart this play about connection is fascinating especially witnessing these well rounded characters and their relationships with each other.

BRITISH THEATRE GUIDE | Sally Jack

“We talk in circles, we have nothing to say to each other.” These words, fired in frustration by different characters during Tennessee Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, provide a literal reference for the main feature on an otherwise sparse stage in this new production of Williams’s 1955 classic.

Rosanna Vize’s design is simple yet rich with metaphor and symbolism: a large circular frame high above and just off centre-stage is draped with a semi-transparent curtain, a veil of deceit and mendacity. There is a table. Props are a single crutch, whisky glasses and liquor (endless bottles). The stage is edged on three sides by a raised walkway, also serving as occasional seating, but mostly as vantage points for the cast to listen and watch, ghostly in the shadows. The whole stage space itself gives a sense of a fighting arena, apt for the sparring of Big Daddy, Big Mama, their two sons and scheming wives.

Lies and feuds, simmering jealousy, sibling rivalry, greed, unrequited and forbidden love, hate—it's all here as each character tries to assert their claims on Big Daddy's fortune, and satisfy their individual cravings for love, truth and meaning.

Director Anthony Almeida (winner of the 2019 Royal Theatrical Support Trust Sir Peter Hall Director Award) responds confidently to the question as to why revive this play, and why now? He allows the sparsity of Vize's design to provide an unrelenting focus on the family drama at the core of Williams's play. Written in a very different era, these arguments and raw emotions are as relatable now as they ever were.

Kelly's Maggie is a prowling cat of a woman (and the restless cat on the hot tin roof of a marriage she won't leave), sultry and scheming and her frustration with her disinterested husband Brick is painful. Johnstone is a jittery, withdrawn Brick and desperately sad. Similarly, Gooper sits ignored and alone, comfort eating his way through the remains of Big Daddy's birthday cake as Big Daddy and Brick argue. Despite his unpleasantness and bile, Forbes manages to trigger some sympathy for Big Daddy as his vulnerabilities are revealed beneath his brusque exterior.

There are moments of great power and poignancy: when the veil is pulled from the frame, it is used like a shroud, wrapping Brick in a claustrophobic cocoon as Big Mama pulls hard on the umbilical cord of connection between them. Giles Thomas's sound design keeps things on edge with a constant background ticking—Maggie's biological clock and Big Daddy's health. It is compelling and compulsive viewing.

WEST END WILMA | Rosie Bambur

★★★★

You could hear a pin drop in the auditorium last night, as the curtains opened at Curve on the bold and fresh revival of Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

Directed by Anthony Almeida, the show opens to the tumultuous, loveless, and passionless marriage of Maggie and Brick (Sienna Kelly, Oliver Johnstone) and closes on the lifelong bitter brawl between two brothers, Brick and Gooper (Sam Alexander). Somewhere in the middle, we pay a visit to another loveless marriage seeded in distaste and bitterness between

Sienna Kelly delivers a breathtaking performance as Maggie. While at the start you may write her off as arrogant and pretty obnoxious, by the end of the performance I could barely take my eyes off her – watching for every expression, every movement that gives you a deeper understanding of what is ultimately the story of a girl born into poverty and loves a man who cannot love her back.

Oliver Johnstone's Brick is phenomenal. Barely taking his focus off of the whisky glass he fills up again, and again, he truly plays the part of an obsessive alcoholic with veracity. Like his counterpart, he draws you into his heartbreak at the loss of his career and his best friend.

The set was minimalist, with a sheer curtain used to convey both spaces and emotions, and the lighting was simple and yet effective. Nothing else was needed to distract from the powerful script, and the gradual tension that bubbles gradually with every glass of liquor Brick pours himself – until he finally reaches that 'click'.

All in all, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is a hugely powerful, intense and sometimes challenging to watch, but definitely worth the trip.

GOOD NEWS LIVERPOOL | Nigel Smith

★★★★

Playwrights like Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams were very keen on providing extraordinarily prescriptive and lengthy notes for both set design and stage movement and, in Williams' case, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was no exception. However, after a page and a half of very detailed notes for the designer he adds "The set should be far less realistic than I have so far implied... I think the walls below the ceiling should dissolve mysteriously into air" and "Above all the designer should take pains to give the actors room to move about freely... as if it were a set for a ballet".

Director Anthony Almeida and designer Rosanna Vize have taken these caveats very much to heart. The set is a black box with a raised walkway to the sides and back, and with one backlit opening in the centre of the rear wall. In the centre of the stage a fine voile curtain hangs from a circular track, creating a translucent, cylindrical enclosure within which a large part of the first act takes place. The only furniture is a single, plain table.

The barest minimum of essential props are used – a birthday cake, some balloons, Brick's crutch, the ever-present liquor bottles – and much of the action that suggests props are performed with words only. Notably, if there's a telephone conversation, there is no miming of a phone, just words spoken into the air. The effect of all this minimalism is to strip away almost everything but the words, and it is a technique that genuinely elevates the production. The text and the emptiness into which it is spoken becomes everything.

One of the key players in the show is not visible onstage – Ginny Schiller. The casting director is an unsung hero of many productions, and it is a part that has been played here to absolute perfection. An extraordinary cast of actors has been assembled and they are individually and collectively stunning. Siena Kelly and Oliver Johnstone are an outstanding pairing as Maggie and Brick, and Peter Forbes' Big Daddy is colossal, but they are the only very visible tip of an iceberg of talent onstage.

Under Almeida's direction the ensemble gives breath-taking clarity to the dialogue. For the most part the words are delivered with unhurried deliberation, and hang almost visibly in the air, but occasionally several characters speak at once in a choreographed cacophony that still allows the meaning to be clearly heard. Equally choreographed is the stage movement, bringing to mind again Williams' design notes. At times characters in a direct interaction will be at opposite sides of the stage, highlighting the emotional distances between them. Frequently those not speaking are seen stalking the walkway in silent scrutiny, like a mute Greek chorus. Underpinning all of this is the thrumming pulse of a single cello in Giles Thomas's mesmerising sonic backdrop.

Williams was right in feeling that the 1958 cinema adaptation diminished the work significantly, not only stripping out most of the anguish of Brick, but also feeling the need to placate the audience in added scenes of reconciliation with Big Daddy. Forbes and Johnstone's performances here need no additional material to be able to show the love and respect they have for each other.

This is a beautifully focused reading of the play which shows with great transparency that, for all the tragedy and heartbreak in the narrative, the most important aspects of it are love and hope.

WRITE BASE | Emma Bowles

9/10 – Outstanding

An electric and contemporary version of an old classic with a focus on strength, mendacity and recovery.

Rosanna Vize's set is nothing like I could have imagined. Minimalist in comparison to other images I've seen of previous sets. A draped circular curtain is centre stage. Hanging from a height. Almost eerie. The curtain gives a nod to the family obscuring the truth and works well when it is ripped down when Brick falls, stumbling as a direct result of injuries sustained while inebriated. The curtain crashing to the ground also symbolising how his alcoholism can no longer be kept behind the veil. He now has to face the bones of contention within the family. The play affords us to continue our 'peek' behind the curtain, taking a closer look at the points of the play which at nearly 70 years old are still as relevant today. Communication, loneliness and unspeakable lies.

Other than the curtain there isn't much else onstage. A table, placed inside the curtain. Power of suggestion is needed when it comes to this, although frequently used, it's never actually used as a table. Lay on, sat on and thrown across the stage, it's the central point where conversations are had, voices are raised and truths are exposed.

Raised benches are placed around the exterior of the stage. This is used by the cast at various points of the show, to watch the ins and outs of the scenes, especially in the second act, when Big Daddy often refers to the "walls having ears".

We meet Maggie and Brick first, played by Siena Kelly and Oliver Johnstone. Maggie is slick and sultry. Frustrated in her unfulfilled marriage to Brick, we begin with her as she is unburdening herself by way of a tirade of consciousness. Pouring out of her in an uncontrollable fashion. She skates over lines with such passion, a strong and accomplished performance from a clearly capable actress. Johnstone plays Brick with conviction. He is full of self pity. A woeful and exhausted man. Drinks himself into a stupor to relieve himself of his troubles, drinking more to wash it all away and to feel the 'click' that the alcohol brings. His body shakes with tension and suddenly it stops as he finally speaks the truth, a positive relief.

A superb performance by Teresa Banham as Big Mama. Steadfast and controlled, her passion for Big Daddy comes to fruition in the second act when she hears of her son Gooper's plan for Big Daddy's estate. We then see her motherly and protective instinct come into touch. Longing to do right for Big Daddy even though their relationship is built on lies.

Sam Alexander as Gooper brings light relief to what is a wordy and heavy script. Him sitting eating leftover birthday cake is simple, amusing and oh so relatable, if only to me. What to do in an uncomfortable situation? Eat of course!

Big Daddy is the man of the hour; he is played with authority. The right amount of overbearing and a touch of steadfastness by Peter Forbes. Riddled with cancer, his portrayal of someone reaching the end is admirable and well executed. He has to deal with some vast monologues but does this with ease, bringing a lightness to the role and we almost feel a fleeting fatherly instinct towards Brick. Although the head of the family, confident and knowledgeable about the goings on in his family, we find him searching for some kind of truth.

Reportedly, Anthony Almeida hoped to give audiences an 'exciting and moving night out'. Well, he has certainly accomplished that. His version of *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* feels fresh, innovative and modern. He has focused on the characters, flipped preconceived notions and represented a classic in today's world. Everything comes together in this intense, brilliant and intriguing rendition of *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*. Highly recommended.

KENT ONLINE | Megan Carr

A contemporary, modern twist on the 1950s classic, *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*, had audiences captivated at its first show in Kent last night. The raw family drama, showing at the Marlowe Theatre in Canterbury, was engaging, clever and well re-imagined by director Anthony Almeida.

The very simplistic set design is extremely effective and the use of a single table and a rounded, see-through curtain manages to create an intense scene. Even with very little to focus on, the contemporary adaptation of the play manages to capture the different settings of the performance wonderfully.

Known as the film that starred Elizabeth Taylor, the script was stripped back and the actors have been able to put their own spin on the 1955 characters. This enabled audiences to see the psychology behind the heart of raw family dynamics.

The lighting and focus on different characters was cleverly executed and the simple set helped create extra depth and meaning for audiences. Although quite heavy going, *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* is a play about a family and that is something we can all understand as a model in one way or another.

The show feels timeless and many different spins of the story will no doubt be made - that is what was so fascinating about Anthony Almeida's take. *Cat On a Hot Tin Roof* is a classic approached in a brand new way, and I definitely suggest seeing it.

IPSWICH STAR | Katy Sandalls

Mendacity: The key theme of one of Tennessee Williams' most beloved play '*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*'. It was a word that I was not familiar with myself before entering the theatre for the New Wolsey's latest offering but not one that I am likely to forget after leaving it.

Williams' offering, his preferred of all his pieces, is still as relevant today as it ever was even almost 60 years after it was first performed. A modern tale with a world filled with people determined to keep secrets and lie while keeping up a certain appearance feels particularly relevant in the age of social media and influencers.

There was something stifling, claustrophobic and intense about the performance, in the best kind of way of course, as Brick struggles to keep his wife Maggie and extended family away from him not only physically but emotionally too. It was an idea that was reflected on set with a circular curtain around the set trapping the lead on occasion and separating him from other characters during other scenes. The moving in and out of characters from the scene – perhaps one where they don't even have anything to say – adds to the feeling that the ears certainly do have walls and that mendacity is ever present.

Indeed the very simple set betrayed a much more complex arrangement of figures on stage. Each one seemingly poised to listen in on the others. It's definitely worth listening closely as the productions sound design is beautifully understated and pitch perfect. It added to the tension on set at crucial points without drawing away from the physical action at all.

Oliver Johnstone's Brick captivated the audience showing moments of childlike innocence as well as very real and adult shame about his own mendacity while Peter Forbes' Big Daddy captured well a man desperate to live life to its fullest, despite what it might do to others, at a time when his future is less than bright.

ARTS CITY LIVERPOOL

★★★★

This revival of Tennessee Williams' sultry Mississippi Delta story – an E&P co-production in residence at the Playhouse this week – is shorn of its usual Southern comfort and fussy furbelows. Rosanna Vize's stark staging gives us a wide-open space on a reflective deep red floor flanked by two curving low walls/walkways (from behind which Oliver Johnstone's languid alcoholic Brick conjures an endless series of secreted bottles like a magician) and – at its centre - a full-length, semi-transparent gauze curtain which serves to hide, separate and stifle characters and emotions. Upstage there is a single back-lit doorway. It has the feel of an Athenian amphitheatre, which is apt as what is Williams' play but Greek tragedy transplanted from Parthenon to plantation?

Here there is even a kind of chorus in the hangers on gathered at Big Daddy's (Peter Forbes) birthday bash, albeit for the most part a silently watching one. The lack of visual stimulation focuses our attention solely on the narrative and dialogue; it allows it to take on a more vivid and intense quality, although of course it also means there is nowhere to hide.

The dysfunctional Pollitt family has gathered to celebrate the birthday of its patriarch – but only he and his wife Big Mama (a sympathetic performance from Teresa Banham) are unaware of the diagnosis which means it will be his last.

Under Anthony Almeida's award-winning direction there's a suffocating, claustrophobic relentlessness to the first half as we're plunged into the middle of the drama of Brick and his wife Maggie's turbulent, fractured relationship.

Siena Kelly brings a physical feline quality to 'Maggie the cat', the wife driven by fear her husband's capacity for love died with his 'best friend' Skipper and who wants to energise her silent, detached spouse into fighting for his imminent inheritance against the manoeuvres of his brother Gooper and fecund sister-in-law Mae.

The house is a simmering pressure cooker of secrets, delusion, self-deception, and what family favourite Brick – forced into a corner by Big Daddy's persistence - is driven to denounce as "mendacity – liars and lies". And the oppressive atmosphere is further concentrated by Joshua Gadsby's subdued lighting and a disconcerting, stifling soundscape from composer Giles Thomas.

BRITISH THEATRE GUIDE | Suzanne Hawkes

Set in the Mississippi delta over one hot summer evening, it has all his typical characteristics: tense, intimate scenes, layered characters and big themes of betrayal, lies and death. And these are all exploited to the full by this very talented company.

The main protagonists—and the main centre of attention in the first half of the play—are younger son Brick, a washed-up alcoholic adrift after losing his football career to injury and the death of his best friend, and his sensuous wife Maggie, with whom he has fallen out of love. Theirs is a relationship forged in passion and broken on the wheel of disappointment and betrayal and Oliver Johnstone and Siena Kelly play these two flawed characters to perfection. Brick is the perfect balance of the laconic and the hopeless yet concealing a propensity for violent rage. Maggie is teasing, alluring, aware of the power of her body yet unable to break through the barriers Brick has raised up against her. Their chemistry is at times palatable.

Towards the end of the first half, we meet the other members of the family. Older brother Gooper (Sam Alexander), always on the outside of his parents love, married to 'hard as nails' Mae (Shanaya

Rafaat), who has produced five children and is expecting a sixth—and both eyeing up what they hope will be their rich reward in the shape of the family estate.

The set is as minimal as you can get—just a table in the middle of the stage surrounded at the start by a diaphanous curtain which somewhat obscures the opening scene. There are a number of raised levels to give structure but most of the props are mimed and there is very little in the way of costume change. But this does allow the play and the characters to speak for themselves and once the conventions were set it didn't detract.

This is a powerful production with a raw delivery that is at times uncomfortable to watch as it exposes the layers of pain and hurt during intimate exchanges, yet is absorbing and challenging in equal measure. We are eavesdropping on family relationships that are ultimately fractured beyond repair but are as relevant and as emphatic today as when they were written.

There is strong language and adult themes throughout, but this is a well directed production by Anthony Almeida of a superbly written and performed drama that will leave you both shaken and stirred. Well worth seeing.

LIVERPOOL UNDERLINED

Burl Ives, Paul Newman and Liz Taylor cast a long shadow over any new production of *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*. Playing one of theatre's – and cinema's – most dysfunctional families, they almost wrote the book on familial melodrama and it's possible to see Tennessee Williams' sweat-soaked study of grief, loss and repressed emotions in a lot of what has followed.

Williams disliked the film as it stripped out a lot of what the play is fundamentally about, namely the homosexuality – or belief in the homosexuality – of one of its leads: liquor-soaked, broken-down athlete Brick. But whatever he is repressing it's nothing compared to the spitting, purring, Maggie – his in-heat wife coveting her share of the family silver and a portion of something else her husband is denying her.

As a backdrop to this matrimonial disharmony is a wrangle over who gets to inherit some of the most fertile land this side of the Nile. Family patriarch Big Daddy is stricken with cancer – though his family haven't told him – and the descendants are jostling for position to inherit his fortune.

Peter Forbes really drives the story along when he arrives as Big Daddy, hunched and stooped but still a fearsome presence, he's like a wrecking ball clad in Levi's, held together by a too-tight belt. He dominates the stage as he dominates the narrative, trying to make sense of what he's happened to his son and what's occurring around him. During the interval he sits at the side of the stage, breathing heavily, and staring upwards, quizzically at this diffident son.

Oliver Johnstone as Brick wrings a lot out of his face, taking a leaf out of Paul Newman's book with a pleasingly understated performance. He feels like he'd amble out of the story itself if he could. Siena Kelly as Maggie is slinky, sensual: she has moments of explosive sexuality and frustration here but her role seems diminished.

So too are the supporting cast who deliver some belly laughs as much as they do tragedy. Anthony Almeida has brought a lot to this new production – an insistent sound bed, stifling voiles and brilliant rectangle of colour, against which characters make their entrance and exits.

This is a superior production that doesn't offer anything as simple as a happy ending. Has Brick come to terms with his loss, his confusion? And has Maggie wrenched her husband back from the brink? Brick and Big Daddy spend the play decrying mendacity – but *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* ends with both embracing perhaps the biggest lie of all.

NORTH WEST END UK | Kiefer Williams

★★★★★

Williams's beautifully constructed play has many elaborate and intoxicating layers and explores each fractured character in great depth – his dialogue is always stark and unrelenting, and director (Anthony Almeida) lets each of the actors shine in all the iconic parts.

Big Daddy played by (Peter Forbes) is the patriarch who likes to be the centre of his own universe as the owner of a vast plantation, a bully by any other name but fiercely loyal when it comes to family. His two sons the emotionally damaged and repressed Brick (Oliver Johnstone) and his jealous and greedy brother Gooper (Sam Alexander) are only too willing to play the game of who will inherit Big Daddy's estate, cheered on by partners Maggie (Siena Kelly) and Mae (Shanaya Rafaat). Other characters include Doc Baugh (Suzette Llewellyn) and Reverend Tooker (Minal Patel) both unfortunate participants of Big Daddy's birthday party. Big Mama (Teresa Banham) like her husband Big Daddy watches on as the family rip themselves apart and Banham gave both a sensitive and thoughtful performance.

For me, the family interactions were totally mesmerising.

It's fair to say that the main focus of the play is between Brick and Maggie and both (Johnstone) and (Kelly) give muscular and supremely well- judged performances throughout. Unlike the Paul Newman and Elizabeth Taylor 1958 movie, this is the unadulterated version that doesn't hide away from Brick's obviously latent homosexuality and Maggie's raging inner torment – this is Williams true vision and not given that false Hollywood sheen that lacked a great deal of passion and solid characterisation.

Almeida skilfully interwove all the characters within the claustrophobic confines of Big Daddy's birthday celebration to great effect and led us, the audience to the final act that provides some tenuous closure but no overall resolution. Pitch perfect performances from the entire cast but particularly Forbes, Johnstone and Kelly who have total command of the stage. The set designed by Rosanna Vize is truly captivating involving circular transparent curtains that act as a metaphor for the truth that is hidden by all the family members throughout the play – mention also to the brilliant lighting design by Joshua Gadsby.

Cat is probably one of the best American plays ever written and it is to the company's credit that they bring their best game to such an iconic and remarkable piece of theatre. It works so well. A total treat both visually and emotionally.

EXEUNT MAGAZINE | Mostyn Jones

The opening tableau of director Anthony Almeida's production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* sees the figure of a man splayed out on table as if ready for vivisection, veiled behind a column of white curtain that stands in the centre of the stage. That image of surgical sterility is a fitting introduction to a show that takes a scalpel to Tennessee Williams' monumental script, extracting each organ and presenting it to the audience. Almeida shows a keen understanding of dramatic anatomy.

In Rosanna Vize's design, a white curtain is the first and most prominent way the production takes the emotional and subtextual content of the script and presents it physically: it places a literal barrier between characters who struggle to connect with one another, casts a shadow across the stage as the shades of past events cloud the present moment. When it works, it really works; at one point, Oliver Johnstone's Brick stumbles backwards and falls through a section of curtain as he tries to escape confrontation with his family. The moment when the veil falls down and tangles around

him as he tries to maintain composure elicited genuine gasps from an audience unsure whether the falling curtain was part of the production. In that moment we were all sharing Brick's panic, all willing him to pull himself together, to free himself from the ties that bound him.

One thing that remains consistent throughout the show is the performers' adherence to the dialogue as written in the script. They recite their lines as though they were in a more conventional staging, while their movements exist on a different plane. Characters crisscross the stage and stand near or apart from one another depending on how near they are to a moment of reconciliation. It means that sometimes two performers will stand on opposite sides of the stage and carry on a conversation as though they were face to face.

Again, there are times when this is very effective. As Big Daddy, Peter Forbes chews his way through the heavy monologues of the dying patriarch's existential crisis, repeatedly wondering aloud 'why is it so damn hard for people to talk?' As Big Daddy spirals through the loneliness of his life, of his impending death, he and his son draw closer to one another, until, in a moment unacknowledged by either of them, Big Daddy silently places a hand on Brick's shoulder.

In that moment, the two are united in an unspoken acknowledgement of their own inadequacy. Both knowing that they long to be honest but both so unaccustomed to vulnerability that they'd never recognise true affection if they felt it. In that small action Almeida shows an understanding of the play's characters and presents a dimension of them that is rarely brought to the fore, the inner longing and vulnerability that another production might lose in the more explosive confrontations.

The characters' inability to connect, to relate to one another honestly, is the thematic core of the play. The family are restricted by the social mores of the setting, the specific expectations placed on people of their class and gender, the social codes of southern etiquette and American masculinity. The production strips away much of that context while maintaining those central themes.