

October 25, 2009

UD ensemble does justice to 'Hot Tin Roof'

Themes hold up for modern audiences

By TOM BUTLER

Special to The News Journal

Director Adrian Hall stages a powerful and verbally rich version of Tennessee Williams' still stinging "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof."

The 1955 play is presented with then-shocking themes of cancer and homosexuality that could seem quite dated and stale today. But the University of Delaware Resident Ensemble players produce so many thoughtful, vital portrayals that the "old fashioned" themes ring true and telling.

Elizabeth Heflin is Maggie, the "cat" of the title. She slinks and flounces about the stage, intently trying to seduce her taciturn, drunken husband. Heflin has the Southern accent under perfect control and gets the full impact of the poetry and vitriol in the Williams text.

As she flits about the bedroom in her slip, pulling off then rolling back on her stockings and cooling her arms and neck with ice cubes, she tries every studied sensual ploy to win back the affection of her dissipated man. At the same time, Maggie spills out insights into the hypocrisy of "civilized" Southern life.

Mic Matarrese is a dour Brick, hobbling about on a broken ankle and tossing back glass after glass of whiskey, "waiting for the switch in his head to click" and give him some release. A faded football hero, Brick is drinking himself to death because a beloved friend and teammate committed suicide.

Maggie forced the friend, Skipper, to confront the nature of his relationship with Brick and it eventually destroyed him. Brick cannot confront the fear of his own sexual feelings nor can he forgive Maggie. Matarrese's rich resonant voice gives extra strength to the characterization because Brick so rarely expresses himself in words, preferring to sulk and pout, speaking directly only when pushed beyond endurance.

As Mae, "the monster of fertility" with her brood of five "no-neck monsters" and enormously pregnant, tiny Carine Montbertrand presents a strong counterpoint to Maggie. Mae is grasping and manipulative and, like Maggie, covets the wealth of her father-in-law but lacks the grace and passion of "the cat." All Mae's efforts seem petty.

Mark Corkins plays her husband, the hard working "good son" Gooper, with control and subtlety.

As "Big Daddy," the foul-mouthed, selfish patriarch who worked his way to millions, Stephen J. Pelinski dominates the stage whenever he is on. Big Daddy is an intentionally exaggerated character, but Pelinski manages to keep him human. Even while confronting his own mortality, Big Daddy remains an autocrat.

Laurie Birmingham beautifully manages the more difficult challenge of humanizing Big Mama, the matron of the family. The character is coarse, loud and frequently overbearing, but Birmingham's creation seems real and capable of real love for her family, difficult to achieve for this character.

The REP production values are always excellent and the sets and lighting for "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" create a very real sense of a Southern mansion on a steamy evening.

Additional Facts

REVIEW

WHAT: "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" by Tennessee Williams

WHERE: University of Delaware's Resident Ensemble Players, Thompson Theatre, Roselle Center for the Arts, Orchard Road at Kent Way, Newark

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday through Oct. 31; 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday through Nov. 1

ADMISSION: Evenings. \$22, students \$18; matinees \$18, students \$8.

FYI: 831-2204 or www.udel.edu/theatre
