

Michael Billington relishes *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* at the National

Southern discomfort

IS IT better to shroud oneself in illusions or square up to reality? That is one of the great questions of modern drama. And Tennessee Williams offers us his variation on it in *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* which gets its first London showing in 30 years at the Lyttelton in a superlative production by Howard Davies which sent Bravos coursing round the theatre. British directors and actors, nurtured on native irony, currently seem to relish the frank emotionalism of American drama.

Williams's play is certainly a fine one. The second act confrontation of Big Daddy and Brick has high emotional voltage. The play is also laced with that rich Southern humour that is Williams's trademark. I recall him in later years sitting at the back of theatres chucking at his own portraits of human desperation. And yet, in a play originally banned in Britain because of its homosexual allusions, I find a strange vagueness about the exact nature of the hero's sexuality.

Brick is an ex-football star who has retreated into alcoholism and moral paralysis since the death of his friend Skipper. He is clearly crippled by guilt—he hung up on his friend in his darkest hour—and by doubts about his own sexual identity. Big Daddy, whose estate the family is fighting for, sees this. So too does Brick's wife Maggie. But having raised delicate questions about what lies behind the facade of American virility and male bonding, Williams abruptly terminates the discussion.

Given the theatrical conventions of the

Fifties, you could hardly expect Williams to be more explicit. My point is that the play as it stands, does not quite add up. Everything Williams puts on stage—including Brick's hysterical horror at the idea of sodomy—implies that his hero is living a lie, that he is fundamentally homosexual. But Williams always denied this in interviews and finally shows Brick lured back into Maggie's bed with the clear hint that they will successfully procreate. As a conclusion it may square with Broadway expectations but it undercuts the debate about lies and illusions.

Where Williams is terrific is not—as people think—in his handling of sex but in his portrayal of social attitudes.

And in the final act Williams gives a lethal portrait of the vindictive cruelty of American family life as Brick's elder brother, Gooper, and his wife, Mae, move in for the kill brandishing a provisional will under their mother's nose. Williams is not only the poet of frustration. He is also a social satirist who sees through the great American illusion that possessions can protect you against reality.

Howard Davies, a director expert at linking private and public worlds, brings this out beautifully. Everything in this production seems right from the choreographed display put on by Mae's ingratiating brood to entertain Big Daddy to the shy evasions of Colin Jeavons's cleric who can talk only about memorial windows in a house haunted by death. Every role is precisely inhabited from Paul Jesson's Gooper, whose spectacled features have

the sheen of rapacity, to Barbara Leigh-Hunt's Big Mama swathed in a voluminous silvery dress that proclaims the rustle of money every time she moves.

But it is on the central trio that the play's emotional impact securely rests. Eric Porter, too long absent from our theatre, might seem unusual casting for Big Daddy in that his forte is intellectual gravity. But, bulky in white linen and with flowing patriarchal locks, he exudes both crude materialism and the residual tolerance of the worldly-wise: it is Porter's sudden gleam of compassion for Brick's plight that actually makes this a moving performance.

Ian Charleson as Brick spends much of the evening hobbling over to the liquor cabinet on crutches; but the success of the performance is that Mr Charleson suggests both the crew-cut jock and the tormented soul within. And Lindsay Duncan's Maggie is a triumphant mixture of sexual hunger, venomous wit and smouldering defiance, not least in the way she angles her head when she announces her pregnancy as if to defy her husband or anyone else to say her nay.

Possibly William Dudley's Mississippi plantation-house suite is a little too creamily new and seductive for a room Williams describes as "Victorian with a touch of the Far East." But the constant reminder of the pale moon and tropical trees gives the house a context and epitomises the way nature mocks the mendacity, greed and hypocrisy that Williams so scathingly portrays.



Smouldering: Lindsay Duncan. Picture by Douglas Jeffery

Billington On Cat

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