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Kazan and *Cat*

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"He's terrifying," someone said, "but you'll like him just the same. Everyone does."

Not everyone. My more conservative friends called him a dirty commie, and the ones left of center said he was a rotten fascist informer. I didn't bother to figure out this contradiction—what did I know or care about politics? He was Elia Kazan, the greatest director of his time, and I had been given the opportunity to sit in on his staging of the new Tennessee Williams play. It was the first day of rehearsal, always a trying time, and I had no assurance that he would not suddenly order all strangers to clear out. I had heard of his fierce forthrightness and was prepared to leave with dignity. However, as I entered his rehearsal hall, he recalled why I was there and gripped my hand, a short, well-built man with a Turkish profile and a shock of vigorous dark hair slanting over his high forehead. "Show up on time and stay out of sight," he told me, surprisingly affable.

¶3 I watched him push through the crowd of production assistants, all with an emergency to share. Without slowing his pace or looking around, he answered each with quick decision: "OK." "Too damn bad!" "I don't buy that!" I sensed no rest in him at all. Even when he slumped into a seat in the theatre and closed his eyes for a moment, the fingers drumming his knee telegraphed, *C'mon, c'mon, what's next?*

Abruptly he peered around the playhouse and, not finding who he wanted, signaled to me. "Come take notes," he ordered. I quickly borrowed a pencil and, having nothing to write on, grabbed a paper towel from the men's room. He had already forgotten me when I sat down beside him, however, and my paper towel remained unmarked except for a heading I printed out in block letters: Cat On A Hot Tin Roof. Day One.

¶5 That I was there at all was still a surprise to me. By this February I had expected to be in rehearsal for *my* first play, which the Theatre Guild had persuaded Joshua Logan to direct. But Logan was suddenly called out to Hollywood to repair a botched filming of *Mister Roberts*, and to ease my disappointment he had persuaded Kazan to let me sit in on the rehearsals of *Cat.*

It was noon, and a small crowd of producers, backers, and agents began arriving to hear the first reading, urgent with an expectation that even the shabby surroundings did not dim. The little playhouse high on top of the New Amsterdam Theatre had originally been created by Ziegfeld for his midnight *Frolics*, but now the stage where those orchidaceous beauties had dragged their plumes was splinter-dry and scarred, and the dark corners hid crumpled candy wrappers and the stubs of cigarettes long since ground out.

¶7 Silence was immediate as a boyish man with gray hair, playwright-producer Robert Anderson, came on stage and introduced the cast. Members of the Actors Studio were instantly distinguishable from the others—they did not smile when their names were announced. Sitting around a table, under the tormenting clarity of work lights, they began to read aloud from their scripts, wholly unprotected by illusion.

The play was read through without a break. Gradually I found myself listening less to the lines than to the audience. Feet scraped restlessly against the floor in counterpoint to coughing. Little flickers of light betrayed cigarettes being sneaked. Eyes sought out eyes. When the stage manager at long last said, "Curtain!" the applause was little more than patty-cakes, and few in the audience lingered to congratulate anyone. I stationed

myself by the elevator door and listened to the discreetly lowered voices. “A disaster,” murmured one of the producers. Another said thoughtfully, “I wonder if it will even reach Philadelphia.”

¶9 Unaware of, or indifferent to, this reaction, Kazan charged into rehearsal as soon as the elevator dropped away with the last of the experts. Once again the actors read through the play, sometimes leaping up from their chairs to stride about, script in hand, as if to force some action into the long speeches. Once, Kazan stopped Barbara Bel Geddes in the midst of Maggie the Cat’s desperate monologue, which, with few interruptions, is the bulk of act 1. “The surest way to make a long speech long is to rush it,” he said. “Take your time, all of you.”

Despite his conspicuous drive, he seemed to be in no hurry. Not yet. Although opening night in Philadelphia was a scant four weeks away, his remarks were low-key, and he dismissed the cast early that day. A good thing too: everyone was exhausted. Even, unthinkably, himself.

¶11 I had decided to make extensive notes on the production and was eager to type these up at once, but the phone was ringing when I got back to my apartment. The wife of one of the backers was calling, a woman I knew only slightly, wanting to hash over the first reading. Had I seen who Edmond arrived with? I didn’t know Edmond. What on *earth* was Elizabeth wearing? Never heard of Elizabeth. “And what about that play?” she cried. “I had no idea it was going to be so—y’know—*queer*! I mean, he comes right out with it!”

Tennessee Williams had done just that. In many ways revolutionary, it was the first American play that had openly focused on the homosexual male. There had been several dramas about lesbians, notably *The Captive*, a sensitive French import the police had closed in the 1920s, calling it detrimental to public morals. A similar fate shut down *Trio* as late as l944. *Tea and Sympathy*, a story of a young boy coming into manhood, touched discreetly on the subject, and in Williams’s earlier *A Streetcar Named Desire* there had been reference to a young gay poet, now dead; but in this latest play the forbidden relationship was central. In every way the production of such a play was a gamble. Even supposing the police did not swoop down to protect the public’s rumored innocence, there was no promise that the audiences were ready for the subject so starkly revealed.

¶13 For Williams had not sweetened his draught with sentiment. The colors he was using here were not out of everyone’s rainbow: a young southern woman, despised by her homosexual husband, is determined to have a child by him at any cost, so as to figure in her father-in-law’s will. The characters—their guilt, greed, and desperation—were so densely drawn that the final design was far from clear. The backer’s wife, for instance, was convinced that Maggie got Big Daddy to go to bed with her. “Her husband is too drunk,” she insisted. “He can’t or won’t, and she’s got to have that baby, so she goes after her father-in-law, cancer and all. I mean, *ugh*!”

I assured her that this was not how the story was resolved but had to admit I wasn’t sure what actually did happen. “If it’s already in rehearsal and nobody knows what it’s about yet,” she cried, “my husband has just lost a ten-thousand-dollar investment.”

¶15 On the way to the theatre the next morning, I ran into Robert Downing, the stage manager, a large and affable don of a man. “Kazan wants to start right off using the physical realities,” he said. “The crutch, the bottles, the pillow—in short, props galore!” He gave me a list of things to start looking for, “—just in case you feel like doing more than taking notes on paper towels.”

Thinking it would amuse him, I repeated the remarks the backer’s wife had made. He only sighed. “There’s been too much of that talk already,” he said. “Just leave it where it lies. You’ll get along best with Kazan if you stay out of the gallery.”

¶17

I did not understand this allusion until late that morning, when designer Jo Mielziner explained the set to the cast. Maggie and Brick's bedroom in the great plantation house is comfortable, even luxurious, opening onto an enclosed balcony that girdles the entire building and connects all the rooms—a kind of whispering gallery, where, in the deepening dusk, figures pause to eavesdrop, trade gossip, or hatch plans. It is a powerful symbol within the play but also in the life of this production. For, almost from the first moment, whispers were parallel with breath. Nobody believed the rumors, of course, but somehow that didn't stop them: the producers wanted the play withdrawn for rewrites, we heard; the producers wanted it withdrawn, period. The backers wanted out. The star, Barbara Bel Geddes, wanted out. Since the rehearsals quietly continued meanwhile, this gossip lacked credibility—but never listeners.

¶18 Suddenly, however, Tennessee stopped coming to the theatre. There could be no disputing this fact. According to several impeccable sources, he had quarreled bitterly with Kazan and walked out on the production. Even after it was established that he had simply gone South for his grandfather's funeral, we kept hearing he would not be returning.

Yet during his absence the play began to take shape, and the necessary limitations of speech and space were defined. A stylized ground plan, the scenery's chart of anatomy, suddenly appeared on the stage floor, marked out with masking tape. And almost immediately, at Kazan's suggestion, everyone in the cast (and even the crew) began speaking with southern accents. Even offstage. Even at home! Some of these accents were pretty funny—three parts Texarkana to one part minstrel show—but Kazan quickly brought in a young woman from Monroe, Louisiana, whose relaxed pronunciation gradually unified the company's diction. Even mine.

¶20 Since I was restless merely sitting and observing in the semidarkness of the playhouse, I gradually hooked and crooked my way into various duties backstage. I was not too proud to push a broom over the stage or run errands of mercy, usually getting coffee. I helped improvise props and, by bringing my typewriter to the theatre every day, was able to copy out the almost constant changes in the script. Perhaps my most dazzling contribution was an ability to imitate the cry of a peacock, one of the night sounds Kazan worked in to suggest the unseen splendors of Big Daddy's Delta kingdom.

What I liked best, however, was cueing Barbara Bel Geddes. I had met her before—she had, in fact, been mentioned for the lead in my play but declined it "because I'm prettier'n that." And so she was: blonde and glowing, with perfect legs. A perfect memory too. Despite the length and repetitiveness of her act 1 diatribe, she knew her lines almost at once. Burl Ives, however, hitherto a concert and nightclub performer, was not used to memorizing words without music. Long after the others had put aside their scripts, he was still reading aloud from his, and the buzz was constant that he would shortly be replaced as Big Daddy. Kazan's response to this was head-on. He had Burl's cues fed to him every minute he was in the wings, and he was never more than a shadow's length from him on stage, immediate with encouragement or illumination. Working so close with such high intensity, Burl said later, was like "acting in the only damn spotlight on stage."

¶22 Sometimes spotlight, sometimes laser beam, Kazan was penetratingly critical of mere theatricality, matinee mannerisms, or the tried and untrue. He wanted, he said, the secret life of the character to dictate the performance, this involving thought and imagination. "I want you to invent something here that will tell me," he often said. (And once it was invented, he frequently cut it out as being superfluous.) "You're portraying a preacher, and I don't want that," he told the actor playing Reverend Tooker. "I want to see *you* sweating in there."

His way of extracting a performance was often mysterious, for he spoke quietly to the actor, sometimes drew him aside and whispered. Occasionally he would dismiss the whole company for ten minutes while he and the actor experimented with the scene. Sometimes he let me stay, and I would see his extraordinary patience at getting just the degree of meaning he wanted. But that patience was by no means limitless. When all else failed, he would simply tell the actor how to say the line. Perhaps my jaw bobbed the first time this happened, for he barked at me, "*Well?*"I said I had understood that a Method director did not give line readings. "To hell with that," he said. "You get the meaning any damn way you can."

¶24 At the end of the day, as I rode down in the elevator with him, I would occasionally feel I finally knew him well enough to call him Gadge like everyone else did. Everyone but Bel Geddes. With a star's prerogative to be different, she called him Gadget, the origin of his nickname. I never heard anyone anywhere call him Elia. One night, when we all sat down at a family table in a small Armenian restaurant, Ben Gazzara asked him how his first name was actually pronounced. He said with the kind of grin that must have accompanied him to his first day of school, "My father always said it was E-*li*-a."

In the meantime, I went on calling him "Mr. Kazan."

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¶26 The day Tennessee returned to rehearsal, the actors made a special push to please. Although some still glanced at their scripts, they were already on their feet, moving around the outlines of the set with premature assurance. The excitement in that shabby little playhouse was almost a solid.

Tennessee, however, did not like what he saw. At the first break he came up onto the stage, a shortish man in his forties, rounded, somewhat awkward, fair of hair and mustache, with incurious blue eyes. He did not raise his voice above a murmur, but there was no one present who did not hear. Bel Geddes in particular distressed him. She was apparently not even coming close to what he had conceived. As an actress and a person, she was so straightforward that the truth simply blurted out of her. It was this directness, this vital honestly, that had made her a star, and this same quality illuminated her Maggie. Tennessee, however, had written the part of a grasping young woman from a shabby-genteel background, who had married into wealth and, one way or another, meant to hang onto it. "She wants that money," Tennessee said—and here was Barbara involuntarily making the role sympathetic. Even worse, he claimed, she was setting up audience expectation for a conventionally happy ending. "That's not what I'm writin' about," he told her, adding a memorable and unintentional couplet: "I do not write plays / for Miss Helen Hayes!" Barbara burst into tears of frustration and anger and walked offstage.

¶28 Neither did he care for the Big Mama of Mildred Dunnock. Like much of the cast, she was a disciple of Stanislavsky—was indeed one of the gemstones of the Actors Studio. Out of memory, experience, and intuition, she was beginning to blend the details of the corn-cob tough, cream-puff soft old country woman. The only trouble was Miss Dunnock was physically fragile, a wisp of a woman, in no way the fat, panting old bulldog Tennessee had described in his script, and he could not reconcile the two images. The very way Dunnock breathed struck him as wrong. Even how she crossed the stage! One scene in particular caused him such concern that eventually Kazan allowed him to show her what he had in mind.

¶29 Personal communication was Williams's great problem, however. If its lack had forced him into becoming a powerful writer, it made him a poor actor and worse director. Most of his plays had been interpreted by Method

people, but he apparently had no faith, possibly no understanding, of this system of acting. There was no discussion, no analysis, no coaxing of memory in his dealing with Miss Dunnock. He took her by the elbow and marched her across stage, counting all the time. “Six, seven, eight, pause! Then say the line like this.” He recited it.

“Oh, Tennessee,” she wailed, “I can’t act that way! I’ll try to get what you want, but I can’t count it out.”

A conscientious actress, she retired to the wings to search her script for whatever element he found missing in her portrayal. Someone suggested that perhaps the costuming could make her look heavier. “It’s not the pounds I’m missin’,” she said, using a Southern accent even in her indignation. “It’s the *blame*! Yes!” she added when someone questioned this. “Tennessee wants Big Mama and Maggie to be the blame for Brick’s problems. He wants *women* to be the blame. But we’re not to blame! *Nobody’s* to blame!”

¶32 Throughout the rehearsals that followed, Tennessee remained what one member of this closely knit production called “the remarkable stranger.” He was polite but remote; learned all our names but, excepting Kazan, rarely spoke to anyone. The lone time he singled me out was to ask bluntly if I wanted to have sex. I told him I was tied up with someone. It was not the truth, and perhaps he knew it, for he moved on sullenly.

Barbara thought she had the explanation for his withdrawn manner. “He’s got some kind of kidney problem,” she said. “He makes about a hundred trips to the johnny every afternoon.”

The men’s room backstage, however, was used for almost everything but what it was designed for. Here the props were stored, here coffee was brewed. It was also the impromptu office where I typed up the continual changes in dialogue. Several times an hour, I would glimpse Tennessee stealing in on tiptoe. Without a glance at me, he would take a paper bag from inside the towel dispenser, tip it back for a quick gulp, carefully hide it again, and steal out.

¶35 The floating playwright did not originate with Tennessee. Not with Christopher Marlowe either. Perhaps it comes with the job. Or anyway, with rehearsal, for that is where the joy goes out of playwriting. The work, painfully wrung out of loneliness, is suddenly usurped by a horde of newcomer know-it-alls. There is no way out of this, and no help for it either, except the hidden bottle.

Or sweet death. Once when I was passing around cups of the thin coffee we featured backstage, I warned Tennessee that there was no sugar. He shrugged, not meeting my eyes. “Arsenic will do.”

¶37 The fact that he had worked twice before with Kazan and that one of these productions, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, had swerved the American Theatre back into the fast lane, did not seem to ease his insecurity. The circumstances were too different. When he had given *Streetcar* to Kazan, it was already a completed work, lean, unrelenting, full of sharp images. Except for minor cuts and readjustments—such as sparing Blanche the final humiliation of being taken away in a straitjacket—little revision was needed, and the crisis in the New Orleans tenement was staged substantially as Tennessee had conceived it.

Not so *Cat*. The play that Kazan had originally received was not exactly scrawled on the backs of old envelopes, but it was an uncut first draft, loosely derived from Williams’s downbeat *New Yorker* story, “Three Players of a Summer Game.” Kazan saw a tremendous potential in it but wanted changes—a deeper humanity in Maggie, a wider reach for Big Daddy, some kind of awakening in Brick. According to the whispering gallery, this was little short of blackmail: if Tennessee wanted Kazan to direct, he would also have to accept as unbilled co-author this vital, powerful man who believed as spontaneously in affirmation as the playwright did in ultimate decline and fall. Both cared greatly about the play and their own relationship, but with all the good will

in the world, their intentions were worlds apart. It was in this undefined outer space, then, that *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* had gone into rehearsal.

¶39 Kazan worked fast, but so did the clock, and soon he had to coax a dispensation from Actors' Equity permitting longer hours and Sunday rehearsals. I heard no one complain. Something unusual was taking shape here, and both cast and crew were increasingly dedicated to making it happen. Sometimes the tension became unbearable; sometimes the fatigue. Yet suddenly rehearsal would take on the gaiety of a children's party. Make-believe! Improvisation!

A sudden storm was to sweep over the Delta plantation late in the third act, for instance, and for a glorious half-hour the entire company interpreted it. We roared and moaned imitating the wind, writhed as trees, drummed our fingers on the stage for rain. Eventually all this would be improved upon by stage effects, but for now Kazan wanted a storm that even the best switchboard could not accommodate: the emotional climate of the play. Spontaneously the metaphor began to fill out—distraught voices called for someone to close the shutters, a black woman scurried by with a newspaper over her head, Big Daddy loomed in the doorway, glowering and swollen as a dark rain cloud.

¶41 After his slow beginning, Burl had suddenly become Big Daddy, and the other actors would stand in the wings and grin at the relish with which he played this ponderous redneck patriarch, life-hungry and blasphemous. As yet, words like "fuck" were not acceptable on the stage, or anywhere except in real life, but Kazan had Burl and Ben Gazzara using them in rehearsal. Once the intention and impact of this verbal violence had been achieved, such all-purpose words as "rut" and "rot" could be substituted. What there never was any substitute for, however, was the violence itself. It lit this dark play like heat lightning, sudden terrifying flares of it: Brick swinging his crutch at Maggie and smashing the lamp; Brick menacing her with a chair or pitching his highball glass across the room. Big Daddy's attack on Brick was even more savage, both physically and emotionally. It was contagious stuff—kept everyone a breath away from mayhem while those scenes were being worked out. Nor could we shed it at will. Not even Kazan could, I was to discover.

¶42 Because I had been useful to directors in other productions—suggesting cuts, spotting redundant dialogue, and finding visual means for exposing character—I believed I could be a help to Kazan. He put up with my suggestions for a while, even tried out a few. Then I mentioned the phrase that Maggie used not once but many times in her long opening monologue. "As you know—" she would tell Brick, then sneak loads of explicit exposition to the audience. It is a narrative device much admired in Victorian novels and daytime serials, as I was sure the critics would point out. Worse, it made Maggie seem a callous bore, insistently telling her husband so many things he already knew—no wonder he had withdrawn from her. I asked Kazan if four of the five uses of the phrase could be cut.

¶43 Perhaps he was tired. Perhaps he was fed to the teeth with interference. Perhaps his blood was still racing from the violence of the last scene. Whatever the reason, he wheeled around suddenly and hurled a crutch across the stage at me.

I was able to dodge everything but his invective, and I promised myself to keep my mouth shut after that. But I didn't. The production was too exciting, and my enthusiasm kept spilling over. However, since I could no longer seem to get my words out when I also had to meet Kazan's impatient eyes, I usually wrote my suggestions on slips of paper and put them on his script when he was busy elsewhere. Afraid of another flying

crutch? Damn right! But more afraid that Kazan would find some excuse to leave me behind when the company took off for the out-of-town tryout.

¶45 Despite the continuing rumor that *Cat* would never see the lights of Broadway, the day to leave for Philadelphia arrived. Most of us had decided to stay at the same not-so-grand hotel, and we persuaded even Bel Geddes and Kazan to join us there. "Like a family on vacation," said Cliff Robertson, one of the understudies. Or perhaps we were clustering together for mutual reassurance. We even edged our tables closer in the hotel restaurant. Thelma, our waitress, had once been an actress and was sympathetic—advance word on the play was not very good, she said.

¶46 We felt better when we got to the theatre, a few blocks away. The house lights were on but the curtain was up, exposing to our eyes for the first time the bedroom set, with its shutters, rococo wicker, and severely raked floor, which seemed to tilt right into the orchestra pit. Even when the curtain was lowered, a considerable corner of that floor still jutted out beneath the final flounce. Eyes questioned Kazan, and though he had been hard at work here all afternoon, his mood was easy. "That'll warn 'em in advance that this isn't going to be any ordinary play," he said.

No, it was not ordinary, not by any standard. Again and again Kazan had disregarded that sense of real life still so prized by the theatre. Actors frequently faced the audience and spoke to it directly. Inconvenient props were simply pantomimed. Invention was constant and surprising, but not until dress rehearsal did we see his most brilliant concepts. Barbara's costumes were just one example. Although she wore only a nylon slip for most of the first act, she eventually put on a yellow eyelet-embroidery dress. In the last act, she appeared to be wearing it still, but actually it was another dress, more simply cut and a softer color, a pale sea green, which enhanced the elegiac mood that closed the play. Would people out in front notice the change? I doubted it. All the same, they would probably be obedient to its suggestion.

¶48 His use of the subliminal was even more effective with sound and light. There was no musical score except the sounds ordinary to the plantation—the faraway rolls of thunder, the muted blend of black people singing and Brick drunkenly humming to himself—which were placed so as to heighten the emotional peaks. The lighting was complex beyond logic, more elaborate than for most musicals, ranging from the great fireworks display that underscored the remarkable climax of the second act, down to the ordinary flashlights held in the wings and trained on Bel Geddes and Gazzara's faces. Yet half of Kazan's effort was to disguise the effort, so that the audience would never be consciously aware of responding. In this play, the directing of this most direct of men was by indirection.

¶49 My whole life now was geared for the moment when the curtain would finally go up and I could experience along with an audience the validity of all this effort. However, the day before the Philadelphia opening, the jangle of the telephone woke me at seven-thirty in the morning. It was stage manager Bob Downing, and he sounded ominously brisk. "Kazan wants you at the theatre. Make it fast!"

I began pulling on my clothes with one hand. "What's happened?" I asked, uneasily. "Am I in trouble?"

"I don't know," he said. "But if I don't see you again, goodbye, and good luck."

¶52 I ran all the way to the theatre, muttering the kind of unthinking prayer that used to race through my mind when strange dogs charged at me on the way to grammar school. As I came into the foyer, Kazan was arguing with the lighting designer, so his temper was thoroughly pre-heated by the time he turned to me.

"*Did you tell Bel Geddes the hem of her costume was crooked?*"

There was no denying it. She had asked, and I had answered. Seemingly an unimportant trespass, but it was interference all the same, and I had been warned before to have no opinions. “Je-sus Christ!” he raged. “She went screaming to the costume designer, and the damn designer came screaming at me—”

¶55 There was more, a whole docket of misdemeanors, and he arraigned them all. Since I hadn’t actually been hired, it was clear he wasn’t firing me so much as throwing me away. I could have made it easier on myself by walking out with dignity then and there, but I dug in, said yes sir and no sir, and met his terrible eyes. I wanted to stay with this production more than anything in the world and managed to say why with a directness that was more natural to him than to me. He eyed me piercingly, then strode off, muttering, “I don’t give a good goddamn what you do.”

¶56 Returning to the hotel, I packed my bag but didn’t check out; bought a ticket back to New York but didn’t catch a train; performed my duties at the theatre but out of sight of anyone who could tell me I was no longer welcome. Whatever the eventuality, I was determined to see the play performed in front of an audience. The preview was that night, and I bought a ticket so no one could keep me out of the theatre. All went well until the second intermission, when I was having a cigarette in the foyer, and not only blundered into Kazan but also Lucinda Ballard, his aggrieved designer.

¶57 She saw me first and stiffened like a Spanish corselet, narrowing her nostrils so conspicuously that Kazan started to laugh. “Hey, Lucinda, have you met Jess?” he cried. “Big world authority on hemlines!” He bounced his eyebrows at me, tapped the ash from an imaginary cigar, and marched away with that Groucho gait that sometimes accompanied his kidding.

I was apparently reinstated. “But just barely,” the stage manager mentioned, “so get wise—don’t breathe!”

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¶59 *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* as it opened in Philadelphia was not the failure that had been predicted, but neither was it a success. The first-nighters sent up some of the adjectives that were fashionable that season, and the reviews were respectable, yet the box-office quickly made it clear that audiences didn’t much like the play. The ending was too weak and the language too strong. Although the actual profanity had been cut out and replaced as planned, the dialogue remained remarkably outspoken, and Brick’s closeted bond with his friend Skipper was kinkier far than the relationships most people expected in the theatre.

¶60 Curiously, the homosexuality was less singled out for criticism than the bawdy elephant story. In his wrath, Big Daddy forces Brick to face an ugly fact, and Brick strikes back with an uglier fact: Big Daddy is dying of cancer. The old man storms out of the room but in a while returns, calmer now, even a bit philosophical, and to affirm himself as unchanged, unrepentant, and still full of life, he tells Brick and the family a dirty joke. I thought it was one of the best moments of the play, positive and human, and the old man’s rough relish of the story was unforgettably played. Yet at every performance, disapproval simply fizzed up throughout the house. It broke the bittersweet mood and, more importantly, snapped Kazan’s careful hypnosis, which made the precarious ending of the play seem possible. After a week of now you see it, now you don’t, the elephant story was finally abandoned.

¶61 If this disappointed Burl, he did not miss a beat. This Illinois troubadour had been trained by tent show and glory circuit, and he was used to dummying in chords until he found the right tune or improvised another. Every night, whatever the difficulties of rehearsal or performance, he left the door to his hotel room open, and most of

the players eventually found their way to it. There was usually an uncorked bottle of bourbon there, a bucket of ice, and a leaning tower of paper cups. And music, lots of it. One of the African Americans in the cast played a guitar darker in tone than Burl's, and another had a harmonica; Cliff Robertson sat in with them, drumming a metal wastebasket with the eraser ends of yellow pencils. Burl would sing some of the folk songs he had made famous and some that few had heard in a century. What he liked best, however, was to pose a theme and have everybody, one after another, make up and sing out a new verse. Since mendacity was a key word in Tennessee's play, there were soon over fifty verses to "Those Old Mendacity Blues," some of them decent.

¶62 Kazan sometimes joined us, and sometimes Tennessee sat down too, impassive in a haze of smoke, his cigarette elongated by an ivory holder. Once and once only did Barbara come, accompanied by Williams's agent, the legendary Audrey Wood, an impeccable bandbox of a woman, kindly, precise, with the majesty of a Velázquez court dwarf. Barbara teased at Burl to sing some backroom ballads, but he hesitated. These were the boozy musings of vagabonds, he explained, and not meant for the delicate ears of et cetera, et cetera.

The ladies laughed, and Miss Wood pointed out that, after all, she and Barbara were both adults and may have even heard saucy words before. So Burl obliged and sang out as ribald a song as ever bulged a preacher's eyes. "Hope that wasn't too much," he remarked when he finished, but the ladies had long since slipped away with an "oh!" and an "*oh!*"

¶64 There were other refrains less agreeable, these from the ever-whispering gallery. Though it was generally admitted now that *Cat* would probably go to Broadway after all, it was equally conceded that it couldn't last long there. This sorry news, repeated everywhere, brought a rush of visitors from New York, eager to advise, gloat, or protect. In this last category, particularly, was Tennessee's extensive clique. "The Camp Followers" some called them, and some, "The Williams One-Note Singing Family." Most notable was his friend Frank Merlo, a gentle Sicilian boy in the last stanza of his life, but there were others less gentle, whose single and militant cause was protecting the playwright. They were open in their suspicion of Kazan and the cast, and they kept Tennessee in a constant ferment of distrust with a cry that soon even the stagehands were mimicking: "Oh, Tinnessee, Tinnessee, what have they done to your beautiful play!" As time grew shorter their interference became more intense, and finally, after the high priestess of the Camp Followers, Maria Britneva (later St. Just), threatened Barbara Bel Geddes with the evil eye, Kazan delivered his well-known speech of farewell. "*Get out!*"

¶65 Still, he was powerless to banish the more distracting visitors. Actors are the most susceptible of fans, and if our cast found out that someone like John Steinbeck was at rehearsal, it tended to lose concentration. Gore Vidal kept turning up, remarkably handsome but rude to waiters and walk-ons. Grace Kelly often dropped by. And again and again, Marilyn Monroe, sometimes in black wall-to-wall mink, sometimes in blue jeans and a pink chiffon babushka. She seldom spoke louder than a whisper but could not have caused more distraction had she screamed through everyone's lines.

¶66 Here too came William Faulkner. The formidable novelist, a gleaming portrait in silverpoint, would appear at the theatre during rehearsal and sit alone in the darkened house, apparently missing nothing that happened on the stage but guarding his every response. Later, when rehearsal broke for the day, he could be seen in the hotel bar puffing at his pipe, taking an occasional sip of his drink, but meeting no one's eyes. "Won't you join us, Mr. Faulkner?" Barbara Bel Geddes asked one late afternoon. He moved over to the table where some of the cast was sitting but merely lowered his eyes when the actors acknowledged him. I knew better than to even try,

having crossed his path before. However, the new editor of *Theatre Arts* magazine did not. An improbable scamp named Rod MacArthur, he was in town to do a story on the new Williams piece.

¶67 "Hey, Mr. Faulkner, how do you feel about the competition's play?" he asked. It was a friendly question and his smile was wide, but it did not engage Faulkner's attention. The young man was ready with another question, however, and it was his playfulness more than his persistence that seemed to give offense. Faulkner set down his glass and, without resorting to obscenity or even profanity, loosed an attack on MacArthur's progenitors, descendants, intelligence quota, appearance, current occupation, and future options. It was the use of a hammer where a flyswatter would have been sufficient, and it went on and on. If the rest of us just sat there frozen, feisty Barbara Bel Geddes did not. "We came here to relax, Mr. Faulkner," she interrupted. "You have made that impossible for us." Rising, she left the room. A moment later, another of the actors left too, and soon only the novelist was left at the table, puffing at his pipe and watching some indeterminate distance.

¶68 Of all who came to prejudge the out-of-town show, the most memorable was a figure who limped into the dim theatre almost every day. At first one of the assistants tried to turn her out, thinking she was a bag woman who had strayed in from the street. She was possibly still young, her hands wrapped in soiled gauze bandages, her partially paralyzed face fiercely contorting in an effort to smile. She had to be helped up the stairs. Doors had to be opened for her. Doors *did* open for her, for she was Tennessee's close friend, the southern novelist Carson McCullers.

It was she, a woman of great inner radiance, whom I first heard use a particular phrase in Philadelphia. In defense of the increasingly evident flaw of the play, she said gently, "But it's the truth." Or more gently answered any suggested solution: "Ah, but that's not the truth." Soon it became the rallying cry of the Williams One-Note Singers: *Up the truth!* One afternoon I asked Mr. Kazan why he had restored a certain scene when the play seemed clearer without it. He met my eye somberly, then shrugged. "Tennessee says it's the truth," he replied. "Maybe it is, I dunno."

"What do they mean by 'the truth'?" I asked Bob Downing. He laughed and shook his head. "Pilate had trouble with the same question," he said. The company joked about it for a while and then forgot, but in the years since, Carson's gently rebuking statement has sometimes come back to me, opening up, explaining, clarifying.

¶71 About the time Tennessee's *The Glass Menagerie* began flinging reflections into the theatre, another prize playwright, Maxwell Anderson, republished an essay that was to be of equal influence on the plays to come. Called "The Essence of Tragedy," the article isolated a factor that separated Anderson's hit plays from his failures. In all his successes, he pointed out, the hero passed through an experience that opened his eyes to some flaw in his character, causing such a profound emotional reaction that his immediate course of action was completely altered. This moment of self-discovery, with its promise of renewed life, seemed to provide the lift, the catharsis that changed theatrical dross into gold.

¶72 Soon Anderson's rule became the only game in town. No tulip frenzy or hula-hoop craze peaked as quickly or stayed around as long. For several seasons, scarcely a play opened that couldn't just as well be called *Change of Heart*. Not just the hero but all the characters in the new plays—even the maid—suddenly seemed to be transformed by new insight in the last act, and Anderson's perceptive law became formula, sometimes effective, more often contrived. To Tennessee Williams, it was *always* contrived—an artificial device to instruct or to point a moral, but in no way a mirror to real life. He had not experienced this kind of transformation himself,

nor did he find it in the lives he most closely observed. The characters in his major plays learn nothing from experience. As they are when the curtain rises, so they remain. No decisive action rescues or ennobles them. What efforts they make are generally ineffectual, and eventually they run away from their problem, escape into madness, stay drunk, or die. The autobiographical Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* ducks out on his family. In *Streetcar* Blanche DuBois takes off into darkness. Stella closes her eyes to everything, her final failure to even question Stanley being one of the shockers of that bitter drama.

¶73 And look at Brick, son of Big Daddy. Tennessee must have drawn on the torment of his recurrent writer's block to create this young man, incessantly nagged by a duty he can no longer perform, hobbled by guilt, and with liquor as his crutch. Even when the source of his conflict is identified and he recognizes his part in Skipper's death, he is not freed, he cannot move. This is how it would be in actuality, Williams is telling us. That people do not change is the "truth" that he and Carson defended so earnestly. And this is what made a satisfying ending so difficult to achieve in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

¶74 At almost every performance in Philadelphia, a new final scene was tried out—even one in pantomime. All were variations of Tennessee's original last act, but the original itself was never tried. This fact was not ignored by the gallery or the Williams One-Note Singing Family. Before long the whispers had gotten so strong they were being quoted out loud. The third act had become an arena for the two men, everyone was saying. At each other's throats, my dear! Williams sabotaging his own play! Kazan a bully boy! Literary rape!

These rumors, brought back to earth, simply changed their construction and took to the air again. Time would give them authority, for they would endure longer than this production itself. Years later Lillian Hellman told Gower Champion that she dated the decline of serious American playwriting from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. After that, she said, the writer's work became a mere convenience for the director. "Kazan wasn't the first to tamper with a play, but he was the most important, and his success opened the way for every second-rate stager and dance master to dictate what the play would ultimately say."

¶76 The legend of Kazan's takeover got another boost into permanence when the printed edition of the play eventually came out with two endings: the playwright's original third act and the "Broadway version." Williams's accompanying note of explanation was gracious but damning, even his praise of Kazan sounding blameful. Some years later Tennessee retracted this on a TV interview. Yet toward the end of his life, when I saw him briefly in Florida, he was still protesting what had been done to *Cat*.

¶77 How far did Kazan actually swerve the work from its course? It is still the first question people ask about this play. And in any announcement of its revival, the matter always finds its place in the first paragraph. Just how accurate was Williams's charge, how true Kazan's denial?

Indisputably, the two third acts follow different lines. Or do they? In both, Big Mama is forced to face the fact that Big Daddy is dying. In both, cartoonish relatives squabble over the prospective inheritance. In both, Maggie tells the face-saving lie that she is pregnant. And in both, she desperately grabs up all Brick's bottles and hides them until he will take her to bed and make good her lie.

¶79 And here, approximately three minutes before final curtain, is where the major difference occurs. In the unproduced version, Brick does not rise to Maggie's bait. He is in love with his liquor, he tells her—in love with his crutch, his death. The curtain that falls on Tennessee's tragic original has Brick smiling with "charming sadness," but no assurance that he will—or even can—give Maggie a child.

And the Broadway version? When Maggie vows to keep Brick from his liquor until he makes good her lie to Big Daddy, he catches some glimpse of her vitality, her tenacity, her life force that he himself has let go of, and it makes possible his first grudging admiration. He draws closer, sits down on the bed, still passive but not unwilling. Maggie sinks down beside him, full of tender encouragement, her cat-on-a-hot-tin-roof determination finally justified and triumphant.

¶81 And that's what all the furor was about. Not so much the altered speeches or the changed stage directions, but the appearance of hope. For in this element, the Broadway version contradicts the original intention as flatly as a foreman reading a verdict of innocent for the jurors' finding of guilty.

Yet at the time it was put in, Williams did not seem dismayed. There was no visible hostility between him and Kazan. On the contrary, both seemed united by the effort to save this curiously unsatisfying play. I can only guess that, later, Tennessee had second thoughts. Once the harvest was safely in the barn, this new, dear-bought grain began to seem to him like corn.

¶83 Corn or not, it did play. The night this version was first performed was the first time the public responded positively at the final curtain. Even Kazan, who claimed not to consult audiences, must have heard that applause. In succeeding nights, as Bel Geddes and Gazzara played the new implications for depth, the audience response grew even stronger. Suddenly Kazan froze the action. No more additions or subtractions. This at last was the version of *Cat* that would go to New York.

Not gossip now but word of mouth preceded the play. The expectation in town was almost too great, courting foreseeable disappointment—what was hot in Philadelphia might seem tepid in the self-proclaimed arbiter of world taste. The New York opening, however, was a classic. That glittering crowd that passes for beautiful even arrived on time. They scarcely talked during the performance. The cast seemed to me overly tense, and yet everything worked with the timing of a rocket. The final curtain came down to crashing applause, which, without any trouble at all, lifted into cheers.

¶85 There was a party afterward at one of the great hotel ballrooms, with Helen Hayes as hostess. Tennessee was reluctant to attend in case the critics should turn out to hate his play or put down his concern for "homos." There would be no way for him to get out of the crush quickly, he told me, "because you can't get Carson to move fast; she wants to say good-bye to everyone."

He did appear, however, looking dapper, even radiant. There was nothing for him to fear. When the newspapers finally arrived—great stacks of them, three or four to each little table—a momentary silence fell as everyone hastened to read . . . then the buzz, then the jubilation. The reviews were ecstatic. "Mr. Williams' finest drama," proclaimed the *New York Times*. And unaware of any irony: "It faces and speaks the truth."

¶87 I danced with Barbara, and I danced with Miss Dunnock, and then the experience began to end for me. I had been asked to continue with the production as an assistant stage manager and understudy for two of the smaller roles, but I wanted to get back to my own work, my own world. So in fact I was really saying good-bye when I spied Kazan in the crowd and went up to him.

I could have said it then, I suppose: So long, Gadge. But I didn't. Didn't use any name at all, just said good-bye and thanks. "Did you thank Helen Hayes for this party?" he interrupted. I looked at him in surprise and said I didn't know Miss Hayes. "Well, you must thank her anyway," he said, and pointed out the table across the room where she was sitting with Anita Loos.

¶89

Already a bit nostalgic for what this moment was ending, I obeyed one last time: I crossed over to where the two ladies were chatting and waited to be noticed. Miss Hayes did not look up. She was probably aware that someone was standing there, but undoubtedly someone was always standing there, and she did not look up. At a loss, I glanced across the ballroom at Kazan. He was watching me implacably. I cleared my throat, but cautiously: the First Lady of the American Theatre Hayes undoubtedly was gracious, but according to reports, you messed with her at your own peril.

Suddenly, accusingly, she looked up at me. *"Yes?*"

"Thank you for the party, Miss Hayes," I said.

¶92 She stared at me as if I were deranged—stared at me for a long count, and then, with fierce impatience, turned back to her friend. I didn't care; I had carried out orders and cheerfully waved my good-bye across the crowd to Kazan. He was no longer watching, however. Not me or anyone else either. Once again his face showed that restless expression, as if he were saying under his breath, *C'mon, c'mon, what's next?*

Then the music quickened, the crowd shifted, and I lost sight of him.