

# The Tennessee Williams Annual Review

## Bringing Back Big Daddy

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I also had to violate my own intuition by having Big Daddy reenter the stage in Act Three. I saw nothing for him to do in the act when he reentered and I did not think it was dramatically proper

that he should reenter.

— *Memoirs* 169

What “everybody knows” is that when Tennessee Williams published *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* with New Directions in 1955 (reprinted in volume 3 of *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*, 1971), he printed two versions of Act 3: one called “*Cat* number one,” the other “Broadway Version,” with a “Note of Explanation” sandwiched between them saying that the latter incorporated three major revisions required by the director, Elia Kazan,—making Maggie more likeable, having Brick accept her willingly, and bringing back Big Daddy—with only the first of which Williams himself agreed. Then, after New York reviewers queried the taste of a mildly obscene elephant joke that Big Daddy tells in the “Broadway Version,” this was replaced by a speech tamely (and repetitively) condemning “mendacity,” and it is this second revision that is printed in the Dramatists Play Service edition of 1958. What everybody does *not* seem to know is that Williams experimented with some bizarre alternatives before settling on the scripts that played New York, and that there is a yet later version, published by New Directions in 1975, that scholars generally fail to take notice of. For the sake of concision, this paper will concentrate only on the Big Daddy alterations in Act 3.

<sup>12</sup> First, however, two difficulties must be realized. The first, and more crucial, is that the Elia Kazan archives at Wesleyan University, Connecticut, still—at the time of writing—remain closed to scholars. This means that we cannot be sure of precisely *when* Kazan’s suggestions began to influence Williams’s revisions, though I shall be suggesting that it was probably quite early—months before he actually agreed to direct the play.<sup>2</sup> Nor can we be sure about the pressure he brought to bear by threatening not to direct, because the account he gives in his 1988 autobiography, *Elia Kazan: A Life*, contradicts Williams’s version in his “Note of Explanation” and is inconsistent in itself (Kazan 540-6; the situation is oversimplified by Murphy 97-130). In her ghosted autobiography, *Represented by Audrey Wood* (1981), Williams’s agent insists that it was Kazan who “patronizingly” defended the smutty elephant joke (Wood 167), but her own account of *Cat*’s genesis (Wood 165-6) is dangerously misleading. Williams sent her a three-act draft in March 1954 (Texas 10: Parker 493), but in her book she says that she first became aware of the play while visiting him at Rome later in the summer of that year, and that, at this time, *Cat* was only a two-act play for which Williams had written speeches alternatively from Brick and Maggie’s points-of-view;<sup>3</sup> moreover, she goes on to confuse her own demand for

Williams to add an *extra* act with Kazan's advice that he write a *different kind* of third act. Maria St. Just claims that Wood never understood the triptych structure of *Cat*, even though it was explained to her by Williams and by Maria herself (St. Just 80); and at the first-night party in New York, Williams, who still feared that the revised script would fail, had a "blinding row" with Wood (St. Just 108) in which he accused her of having "ruined" his play with the help of her husband and business partner, William Liebling—the beginning of a rift between them that was later to widen catastrophically (see *Memoirs* 169). Unless something unexpected turns up in Kazan's archives, Wood's account agrees neither with Williams's extant letters nor with drafts and variants of *Cat* itself.

¶13 The manuscript (strictly "typescript") evidence is as follows. The "Cat number one" version combines his first draft of Act 3 with passages from quite late revisions to produce a script that seems to have been prepared for publication but not actually to have been staged until Peter Hall produced it in London in 1958. Nevertheless, so far as the Big Daddy material is concerned, the first full-length draft—completed in Spring 1954 and subtitled "A Place of Stone" from its epigraph by Yeats (Texas 10: Parker 493),<sup>4</sup>—is very like that of "Cat number one": Big Daddy does *not* reappear in Act 3 but is heard bellowing with pain off-stage, when Big Mama rushes desperately in to fetch a hypodermic syringe of morphine. It is a copy of this "Place of Stone" version that Kazan has marked up for revision and signed in green ink (Texas 11: Parker 482), which is one reason I think his influence came early.<sup>5</sup> These revisions include deletion of the Yeats epigraph, a recommendation that Williams take "Dylan Thomas reading" as his stylistic model, a note that big Daddy's speeches should be spoken directly to the audience, and a sketch for a set with one corner projecting out into the auditorium which Jo Mielziner dutifully implemented (Kazan 542-3: "Dear Tennessee was stuck with my vision, like it or not"). This marked-up copy contains no actual demand that Big Daddy be brought back, but parts of its second and third act are missing, and, anyway, Kazan may well have made the suggestion verbally (or in a letter now only to be found in his archives).

¶14 Certainly Williams says that Kazan made such a demand but that he found it difficult to imagine how Big Daddy might be brought back into the action (*Memoirs* 169). Influenced probably by the phrase "there on the sad height" of the epigraph from Dylan Thomas which he substituted for the one from Yeats, his first idea was to add sequences in which Big Daddy soliloquizes broodingly over the "Family Council" of Act 3 from a belvedere high above the stage, armed with a rifle to shoot intruders and perhaps ultimately himself. There is an elaborate narrative version of this sequence (Texas 15: Parker 483), from which I shall quote a few paragraphs (about half of it):

[At the end of Act 2] the curtain rises for the first time to the full height of the proscenium, exposing the roof of the house and the belvedere, a white-fenced square at the centre of the roof, open to the night sky, [and Big Daddy is seen climbing up to this carrying a loaded hunting rifle or shot gun. Act 3 then begins with the direction:] Curtain remains all the way up. In his seat on the belvedere BIG DADDY remains dimly visible throughout Act 3, but light and shadow, alternating with clouds' passage under the moon, sweep his lonely figure up there like spasmodic waves of pain in his body. When the spasm grips his bowels, HE rises from the wood bench and with his hands clench[es] fiercely on the white balustrade [ . . . ] and through his clenched teeth, each time, he says to himself and the sky: "A pig squeals: a man keeps a tight mouth about it." — This seems to be the last thing left in his heart, the ultimate dictum by which he has chosen to die. [ . . . ] Did he take the gun up to kill himself or to defend his

position away [sic] from all liars? He probably doesn't know which, it doesn't matter. There's nothing in him but rage and hate and pride to the end of the play . . .

Sometimes between spasms of pain, HE opens his eyes wide and looks out like a hawk over his land and murmurs to himself such lines as: "Twenty-eight-thousand acres: twenty-eight-thousand acres of the richest soil this side of the Valley Nile . . ." Not always mockingly, sometimes with a lingering pride of possession, but sometimes as if he would like to seize it between his two clenched hands [ . . . ], as if he identified this prodigious growth of property with the malignancy in his flesh. [ . . . ] Once he says: "Hello, Moon!" [Brick's line in other drafts] with a mocking grin; then, the grin turning fierce, adds a silent obscenity, his face distorted as a grinning grey gargoyle overhanging the house. [ . . . ] Once, after a particularly fierce spasm, as it subsides, HE reaches up among the dark, lustrous dark [sic] leaves of a huge magnolia tree, and plucks an unearthly white blossom: regards it with wonder, feels the texture of the petals with his finger-tips, murmuring: "*Flesh* . . ." Then, a new spasm hits him and he hurls it passionately away.

At the end of this act, BIG DADDY can have a final cathartic scene, perhaps with BRICK, perhaps with BIG MAMA, perhaps with MARGARET. Perhaps he doesn't call BIG MAMA, perhaps she comes up defying his threats with the gun, and HE doesn't shoot her, but after suffering her passionate, tearful embrace, says only: "Now if you're through, sit down where I can't see you, [ . . . ] and leave me alone till the goddam ambulance gets here and hauls me away!" [ . . . ]

This can be timed with the scene between BRICK and MARGARET below, so that immediately after his speech, BIG DADDY can grip the rail of the belvedere in another spasm of pain as the moon goes back of clouds and MARGARET turns out the rose-silk lamp by the bed where BRICK surrenders.

I don't think a soft, or sentimental ending, can do anything but injury to the play which says only one affirmative thing about "Man's Fate": that he has it still in his power not to squeal like a pig but to keep a tight mouth about it . . . and also that love is possible; not *proven* or *disproven*, but possible.

The last paragraph of this quotation is extremely important (it bears rereading) because it explicitly identifies Williams's *tragic* intention in the play—which all Kazan's alterations weaken.

<sup>¶15</sup> This belvedere concept is incorporated into several draft fragments in various forms (Texas 12, 15: Parker 483-4): one where big Mama also appears up on the belvedere and comforts Big Daddy as Brick accepts Maggie below (Texas 15: Parker 484), for example; and another, quite bizarre one (Texas 12: Parker 484) where Big Daddy takes Maggie's archery prize up there with him (impounded from Gooper's brats at the end of Act 2) and shoots arrows at members of the family who venture out onto the gallery, then descends to the living room to threaten Big Mama's life with it before proclaiming himself still the only "king" of his plantation. It even appears in a draft late enough to include the "Broadway Version's" elephant story, which replaced it; and it remains vestigially in Big Daddy's Act 3 exit lines—"I'm goin' up on the roof to the belvedere [ . . . ] to look over my kingdom before I give up [ . . . ] twenty-eight-thousand acres of the richest land this side of the Valley Nile"—in all of the "Broadway Version," *Dramatists Play Service*, and *New Directions* (1975) texts, with Big Mama following him out.

<sup>¶16</sup> During the Philadelphia tryout, Big Daddy was eventually brought back on stage to tell a ribald story about an "ol' bull elephant" still capable of sexual erection (Texas 14, 15: Parker 484-5), which it should be realized was originally meant to combine with a particularly sensual piece of business between Big Daddy and Margaret (Texas 12, 21; Parker 484, 487)—the latter, incidentally, played much against Williams's wishes by Kazan's ex-lover, Barbara Bel Geddes (Kazan 540-1). There are photographs of this sequence on stage in Philadelphia, and

it is sometimes mentioned by reviewers, but in *none* of the printed versions of Act 3 does it survive. After Maggie has knelt at Big Daddy's feet, claiming to be pregnant (and, to Mae's indignation, wearing "only Chinese silk pyjamas"), the text is as follows (Texas 15, 21, NYPL 2, etc.: see Parker).

(SHE rises, clinging a little to his robe to help her ascent.)

(HIS eyes rise with her eyes, steadily staring into them. SHE returns his gaze unflinchingly, cords of muscle standing out in her long throat.)

BIG DADDY (slowly, softly)

Stay in front of me but turn around. I want to feel your body. Sometimes a lie is something you can touch.

(BIG DADDY catches her thin shoulders in a fierce grip. HE turns her before him. SHE catches her breath in pain under his fingers. His other hand circles her waist and slides down, slowly and light over the soft, silk-covering-silk, tender mound of her abdomen.)

BIG MAMA (softly, protesting)

BIG DADDY!

(MARGARET's eyes flutter and close like a butterfly giving up life. SHE sighs and leans her head back against the chest of BIG DADDY, tilting it so that it rests on his chin.)

BIG DADDY (slowly, sensually, pressing, prodding, the softness of her belly)

Uh-hu, uh-huh . . .

MAE (savagely)

Maggie, say, "AH!"

GOOPER

Say "AH!"

BIG DADDY

You two be still — Uh-huh, this . . . *girl has life in her body, that's no lie!*

(A soft but startling phrase of music.)

BRICK (as soft as the music)

Jesus!

BIG MAMA

*BIG DADDY's DREAM!*—come true . . .

(MARGARET turns as quick as a bird can fly to kiss Big Daddy: but HE leans back from the kiss.)

BIG DADDY

Watch out!—It might be catching!—This is . . . *CANCER!*

17 Before opening in New York, however, it was thought expedient to sanitize the text a little, with BIG DADDY's profanity considerably toned down and mere *staring* substituted for his sensual groping of Maggie (Burl Ives's acting script— Texas 32: Parker 489—even has a note reminding himself only to stare.) The revised stage direction reads: "Big Daddy helps Margaret rise. He crosses above her, [and] bites off the end of a fresh cigar, taken from his bathrobe pocket, as he studies Margaret" ("Broadway Version" in *Theatre* 308)—before affirming (from a distance) that she certainly does have life in her body. This leaves the elephant joke without a precise point, however, as merely an arbitrary coarseness that is irrelevant to the action, and—as Audrey Wood objected (Wood 167)—a psychologically unconvincing reaction from a man who has just heard with despair that he is about to die from cancer.

18 Kazan also experimented with stage responses to the elephant joke. At first there was a typical Kazan attempt to use it as a vehicle for male bonding between Big Daddy and Brick, with Brick encouraging his father to tell the story, hanging onto his shoulders, and laughing uproariously at the punch line. Then in successive drafts Brick gradually ceases to respond, and the sycophantic response is transferred to his odious brother, Gooper (NYPL 3: Parker 489). And after the production received a visit from the New York Licensing Commission (on 31 March 1955), the elephant joke was dropped on April 7 in favour of denunciations of "mendacity" that duplicate material already exploited in Act 2 (Texas 28, 29: Parker 489).<sup>6</sup> Ironically, the Commission did not, in fact, require that the joke be emended (they were exclusively concerned about the moral welfare of the play's child actors), but Williams told reporters that he had never liked the elephant joke anyway and was glad to have an excuse for getting rid of it (*Variety*, 4 April 1955: *Memoirs* 169)—Kazan by this time had sailed to Europe, so he was unavailable for comment.

19 It is this "mendacity" version that is enshrined in the Dramatists Play Service edition, along with an extraordinary amount of stage business added by Kazan for New York, as a short "Editor's Note" before the "Broadway Version" makes clear (169): extra servants and children were added, "plantation-type" songs interpolated, and effects of an offstage croquet game, fireworks, dogs howling, and clouds passing created, with a final tremendous thunder storm that sends the servants scurrying to shut windows and cover up Gooper's car. This elaborate staging provides the sort of symbolic "environment" and social commentary that Kazan's productions were famous for, but it does so at the expense of Williams's own concentration on what he calls, "that cloudy, flickering, evanescent—fiercely charged—interplay of live human beings in the thunder cloud of common crisis" (*Theatre* 114). Kazan supplied an actual thunder storm for this, whose significance he clumsily underlined by having Big Daddy reenter with the question, "Which stawm are you talkin' about, th' one outside or th' hullabaloo in here?"; and the film version (which Williams despised) exploited such business even further.

20 Finally, all discussions of this contentious revision known to me ignore the fact that Act 3 was revised *yet again* for a revival in 1974-1975, apparently with Williams's consent. Basically, this version returns to the text of "Cat number one," restoring Williams's own idea of the set, eliminating direct address to the audience, and deleting most (though not all) of Kazan's directorial elaborations, including the plantation songs, with the storm effects considerably reduced. There are differences, however, between the first production of this version by the American Shakespeare Company at Stratford, Connecticut in 1974—which, with some alterations, was

published the next year by New Directions, and is currently the only single play version of *Cat* available from that publisher—and its revival for performance at the ANTA theatre of New York in 1975. And these differences are particularly striking in Act 3.

¶11 In both productions Act 3 reverted largely to “*Cat number one’s*” preference for continuing friction between Maggie and Brick and an enigmatic rather than an upbeat ending. But contrary to Williams’s own earlier objections, both productions did bring back Big Daddy, though in rather different ways. The 1974 production included both Big Daddy’s elephant story (though *not* his groping of Maggie) and the mendacity speeches with which it had originally been replaced (New Directions 1975, 177). The 1975 revival, however, deleted this mendacity revision (and yet more of Kazan’s stage business) but kept the elephant story as an awkwardly freestanding joke (NYPL 4: Parker 491). Moreover, though both versions kept the initial business about the hypodermic of morphine and had Big Daddy bellow with agony offstage, Big Mama is shown returning to get the syringe only in a video record of the actual 1974 production, stored in the Billy Rose Collection of the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center. Her return is not in the New Directions text of that production, and it was also cut for the 1975 revival. Tennessee Williams was immensely enthusiastic about Elizabeth Ashley’s brilliant performance as Maggie, but he seems to have made no other comment on the revival (Ashley 153-4).

¶12 Realizing the mayhem that his many drafts and revisions could create in the hands of less talented adaptors, Williams added a codicil to his will forbidding the presentation of his plays in any form that he had not approved of during his lifetime. But even honouring his wish (which Maria St. Just immediately broke), there are many very different conclusions of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* from which to choose. Which should be preferred for teaching and production? Remembering his explicit rejection of “a soft or sentimental ending” cited earlier, I would argue strongly for the version that he called “*Cat number one.*” It is closest to his original vision and furthest from Kazan; and only in this script does *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* attain the complexity of tragedy. Like the distorting “hermanos” over-emphasis in *Camino Real*, what bringing back Big Daddy really catered to was the macho sensibility of Elia Kazan, and not Williams’s own moving but austere compassion.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this paper was presented for the Tennessee Williams Scholars’ Conference of the annual Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival at New Orleans on 24 March, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> It was usual for Williams to seek Kazan’s reactions to scripts early in the hope of involving him in production, so Kazan often had considerable influence on a play’s revision even when, as with *The Rose Tattoo*, he eventually declined to direct it.

<sup>3</sup> For a possible explanation of Audrey Wood’s confusion, see Parker 483-4, n. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Mss. drafts and revisions will be referred to by the designations assigned in Parker.

<sup>5</sup> Note that, in his “Note of Explanation,” Williams says that Kazan “was shown the first *typed* version of the play” (my italics: *Theatre* 167).

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Williams’s estranged friend Donald Windham claims that some of these criticisms of “mendacity” were written early enough to have been inserted into his own play, *The Starless Air*, when Williams directed its premiere as early as May 1953 (*Tennessee Williams’ Letters to Donald Windham*. Verona: Stamperia Valdonega, 1976, p. 278). In which case, “mendacity” was a key imaginative “seed” for the later *Cat*.

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