Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

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COMMUNICATIONS

"CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF"

Dears Sirs,

William Becker's adulation of Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, in the Summer, 1955 issue of *Hudson Review* is so shocking a refutation of the critical principles by which Becker's previous criticism had been characterized, I can only conclude that he was genuinely thrown off balance by a sympathetic identification beyond the reaches of immediate analysis. In his review this experience was irreconcilable with the limitations of the play apparent to his intelligence. With the permission of the editors, I should like to ask HR's readers to observe the contradictions between Becker's conclusions and his premises, contradictions that result in overstated comparisons and undemonstrable claims.

Consider, first, a sentence in the final paragraph of the Kazan-Williams piece. "If he [Kazan] were not empty of convictions and utterly unscrupulous, if he were more thoughtful and less absolutely intuitive, his conscience would probably destroy him. It is precisely because his imagination is reckless and, to a degree, irresponsible, that he succeeds in creating theatrical effects of a daring and power that no other director on Broadway can begin to approach. . . ." Surely the initial sentence here is not an attack on Kazan, the man, and if not, how is it possible for a director so described to produce the masterpiece credited to him in the earlier paragraphs of this critique? We know there is no necessary connection between character and talent, but an artist's *work* cannot be empty of conviction and emerge from an irresponsible imagination and still be worth so much *exclamatory*. Assuming the second sentence to have any general validity, I would still question its exaggerated application in the case at hand. Lights projected onto the cyclorama; an amplified thunderstorm; off-stage darkies singing in the fields, while on-stage characters break bottles in a counsel of desperation: are these "effects of a daring and power" unapproached by any showman from David Belasco to Orson Welles, including every director who staged Eugene O'Neill in the Twenties?

Return, now to par. 1 (p. 268): "the *kind* of theatre produced by [Williams, Kazan and Mielziner] is a strictly American creation and has as yet no European counterpart . . . a curious dialectic of intense realism and rather eloquent fantasy." Good Heavens, might this not be a fair description of *The Great God Brown* or *The Adding Machine*, and were these not derived from Italian and German Expressionism (e.g. Chiarelli and Kaiser) and can't it all be traced back to Strindberg? Further—"talk that develops special rhythms and elevates itself into speech". If this means anything at all, shouldn't it apply to any stage language whatever?
Par. 3. "There are, in Big Mama, Gooper, Brick's older brother, and Mae, his wife, three brilliant tragi-comic portraits, satirical in quality and devastating in their accuracy." (Though they speak "with unnatural inflections"—see par. 1). I deny categorically that these cliché supporting parts can justifiably be interpreted as "brilliant tragi-comic portraits".

Par. 4. "The method is Tchekovian . . . in the sense that the climaxes are psychological, and the play's rhythms are created not by external events, accidents or gimmicks (like the fire in Ghosts) [a gratuitous side-swipe], but by developing relationships between people or by increasing self-awareness in an individual character. As in Tchekov, there are long rambling speeches and lengthy personal reminiscences . . . Williams' speeches tend, like Tchekov's, to be entirely necessary [sic]. . . . The better part of the entire first act of Cat is one long monologue by Maggie the Cat addressed to her husband, and only occasionally interrupted by Brick's icy non-committal responses. [Into par. 5] If the dramaturgy is in debt to Ibsen and Tchekov, the general tone and manner owe something to Strindberg." I really don't follow this sequence at all, but I suspect that Williams is receiving a left-handed aggrandizement of his real lack of form by these insecure references to Tchekov. Becker has first compared the manner of Williams with that of Tchekov and eliminated Ibsen from serious comparison. Dramaturgically, the ancestry in modern drama of the monologue with a silent or non-committal partner does indeed go back to Strindberg, with his one-act play, The Stronger.

Space limits prevent my engaging the central problem of this sequence as I would like. Nowhere in his sketchy analogy does Becker face the awful truth that Tchekov's essential genius is exemplified rather less in his mastery of inconsequential dialogue than in the fact of his characters sharing in a large consciousness: they try to relate themselves socially and they ask the profound questions. This, above all, distinguishes them from any of Tennessee Williams' characters, in this play especially; the irony (unglimpsed by Williams) of their morose predicaments is that none of them ever asks a large question; they only give tawdry answers to a world they've experienced with deficient or perverse sensibilities. Which is why Big Daddy, to whom life appears as a dirty joke, cannot be graced with the epithet (in Becker's par. 3) of "nearly heroic".1

Par. 5. "Nonetheless some of the most powerful theatre writing to enliven the drab stages of Broadway in some time." A superlative so qualified as to mean nothing.

Par. 6. "The play dances, thematically, around the problem of Truth, though without saying anything very substantial on the subject." Here, Becker saws off the limb (the hot tin roof-tree?) he is sitting on.

1In extenuation, it may not be presumptuous of me to call to the attention of interested readers—Mr. Becker among them, I hope—a comparative essay on productions of Williams and Tchekov, which I wrote prior to Mr. Becker's published remarks. "The Social Drama from B 108 and A J13" will appear in the Spring 1956 issue of "Southwest Review" (S.M.U. Press, Dallas, Texas).
Same par. "The resolution of the play is also sexual, though the ostensible subject is still truth... as the final curtain falls, Brick and Maggie are going to bed to create that child. *This rather intellectualized and schematized handling of the question,*" etc. Italics, mine! (Incidentally, why does Mr. Williams believe that a child can be created in one willed intercourse, and why have thousands of theatregoers, including Becker, accepted this preposterous biological joke?)

I submit that up to this point in his criticism Becker has failed to give us any concrete illustration, grounded in the play's conception or content, of its generally assumed importance; he has justified not at all his attempt favorably to rate Williams by reference to Tchekov; he has invited us to accept judgments of the acting and of the staging certainly not self-evident when I saw the play and not adequately defined in this article.

Back in par. 7 again—which is where we came in—Becker ratifies my captiousness. "It should be said, in conclusion, that the great weakness of the Williams-Kazan synthetic creation, and particularly of Kazan's part in it, is that much of the artifice tends to be hollow and pasted on... There is, in the method, a certain amount of opportune dishonesty, bamboozling and trickery which is, however, perpetrated with consummate theatrical finesse, and revealed only when recollected in tranquillity."

If Becker insists on Wordsworth for counsel, I'll retain Shakespeare. When Glendower boasted, "I can call spirits from the vasty deep", Hotspur replied:

"Why, so can I, or so can any man; But will they come when you do call for them?"

Vernon Young

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"AUSTRALIA: A VACUUM FILLED"

The following letter was written in reply to a request from the Editors for a description of the Australian literary scene.

Dear Sirs,

That one can enter a bookshop in Melbourne or one in, say, Rome and find exactly the same stuff points to the incontrovertible fact that the barriers now are nearly all down and banality has free play. Organised resistance is almost a thing of the past and individuals seeking to maintain values have less and less communication with fellow-battlers. Australia, with no real history—even in the sense that Canada and the United States have history—is a vacuum into which pours culture from Britain and the U.S.