

Tennessee Williams: Life on a hot tin roof

A focus on Williams in the 1950s during the creation of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, a time when his life seemed constantly at crisis point. As he recorded his trials in his notebooks, we see just how much of himself Williams poured into *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

It was the decade during which Williams hit the height of his success, whilst also hitting what he described as the “bottom of the pit,” suffering from anxiety, dissatisfaction, loneliness and bouts of ill-health exacerbated by his tendency to hypochondria. As he drifted through Europe and America during the 1950s with on-again-off-again partner Frank Merlo, a sparkling circle of high-society friends and a dwindling parade of sexual partners, Williams became increasingly despondent and substance-dependant. From the depths of depression and addiction would come one of his most successful works, and into it he poured his ruthless self-examination and raging internal conflict.

A play with as many incarnations as the nine lives of its namesake, the beginnings of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* first appeared when Williams, “almost panicky with depression” was in Venice recovering from an accident in the summer of 1951, after driving his car into a tree at high speed, narrowly

avoiding hospital, or worse. He had hit the road with a “thermos of martinis” in the passenger seat, in a state of dislocation in part due to an increasingly frosty relationship with Merlo. “F has all the warmth and charm of a porcupine here lately,” Williams wrote in his personal notebooks, which he had kept since 1936. Sensing a need to protect himself, he later added, “I must... start drawing the sails of my heart back in, for the wind is against them.”

In these years Williams’ notebook entries were increasingly haunted by the destructive spectre of addiction, namely alcoholism and a reliance on the prescription drug, seconal, a sedative to combat insomnia and anxiety.

“Just taken: 2 phenobarbs, 1 seconal, 1 martini. Now already the magic begins to work. But I know it isn’t right, it isn’t well, this cycle of sedation.”

Drinking heavily during his recovery he began reflecting on his addiction in

a story called *Three Against Grenada*, a meditation on southern drinkers which featured a young Mississippi character of great promise who succumbs to alcoholism, by the name of Brick Bishop. The story was rewritten many times and eventually published in *The New Yorker* as a short story, *Three Players of a Summer Game*. The character of Brick and his battle with addiction, so clearly linked to Williams’ own, was the beginning of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

Williams wrote of Brick:

“He falls in love with his liquor with the same heroic abandon that he showed when he fell in love with and courted the girl he married... Everything else disappears behind the comforting veil of his liquor, or is seen through it with indifference and dimness, and then from that time on until the incredibly long time after when it does eventually kill him, long after when it should have, in a car crash on a highway... he seems to be throwing himself away like something disgusting he has found in his hands and has to get rid of as rapidly as he can.”

Williams’ own addiction would eventually kill him too. In 1983, aged 71, Williams was found curled in a foetal position on his hotel room floor, 13 bottles of prescription drugs on his bedside table, the cap of one bottle stuck in his throat, seconal tablets scattered around his person and his blood stream saturated with secobarbital, the sedative that had unfailingly held its grip on Williams for decades.

For now, with the publication of the short story, Brick and his struggles were set aside, and Williams returned to America and other projects. Merlo’s

affection continued to elude him, but his friendship with Russian-British actress and socialite Maria Britneva flourished in this time, as Williams still craved the attention and intimacy she could provide. Britneva was an eccentric, fiery, witty and at times desperate personality who would be direct inspiration for the character of Maggie the Cat, the embattled wife of Brick. “Oh that tongue of yours!” Williams would say to Britneva when they first met. Maggie’s famous “no-neck monsters” quip about Brick’s brother Gooper’s children was a direct quote from Maria. Williams eventually dedicated the play to her.

In 1953 Williams found himself in hospital, admitted for emergency surgery for hemorrhoids. Though the surgery was ultimately avoided, it was a painful and traumatic experience. His most recent play, *Camino Real*, had received mixed reviews and was a financial failure, and Williams was more dependent on the “pinkies” (as he called seconal) and liquor than ever, transferring himself during recovery from the prestigious but “dry” Ochsner Clinic to the “shabby”



Tennessee Williams

(Photo: Bruce Paulson, courtesy New Directions Publishing)

Touro Infirmary, where liquor was allowed. "All hell is descended on me" he wrote whilst there. Alone and afraid in hospital, he became consumed with thoughts of his own mortality, many of which he later wove into the storyline of *Cat's Big Daddy*, father of Brick and head of the family estate. As he wrote in a letter to The Times after *Cat* opened two years later, "What [the play] says, in essence, through the character of Big Daddy, is this: When your time comes to die, do you want to die in a hotbed of lies or on a cold stone of truth?"

It wasn't the first time fear had inspired him. After the trauma of a hospital experience in 1946 when he had required emergency surgery for a rare intestinal problem, Williams had written *A Streetcar Named Desire*, his biggest success to date. "Despite the fact that I thought I was dying, or maybe because of it, I had a great passion for work," he later wrote in his memoirs. This would prove true once again, and his time after the latest hospital visit would be prolific. Amongst other projects, Williams began adapting *Three Players of a Summer Game* into a play.

That summer, as Williams worked on the new play, now titled *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, he knew he had stumbled upon a worthwhile creative trail, and yet was passing through "the worst nervous crisis of my nervous existence", exacerbated

by his troubled relationship with Merlo, which still struggled to find equilibrium. "One gets tired of begging for crumbs under the table," he wrote. "That old c**ksucker Wilde uttered a true thing when he said, each man kills the thing he loves." On the one hand, his solution was the kind of emotional retreat that he illustrated so tragically in the character of Brick. "Liquor and seconal are my only refuge and they not unfailing," he wrote in 1954. "The thing to do is adopt, forcibly, an acceptive, stoic attitude, quite deliberately and resolutely 'let go'! Be limp. Drop everything."

And yet the complete and unemotional surrender he described in his notebooks and personified in Brick, was not Williams' totality. Despite his depression he had a determination to survive and an unquenchable desire to be loved which is epitomised in the passionate, combative character of Maggie the Cat. "En Avant!" [onward] he signed off most of his notebook entries, even the most depressive among them. This dogged determination to carry on became not merely a character, but a central theme of *Cat*. "Vitality is the hero of the play!" he wrote. "The character you can 'root for' is not a person but a quality in people that makes them survive."

The marital struggle between the despondent, self-medicating Brick and the ambitious, frustrated Maggie was a struggle within Williams himself. As John Lair writes in his seminal biography, *Tennessee Williams, Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh*, "He came to understand the play as 'a synthesis of all my life'. In Brick and Maggie's battle, Williams projected the war inside himself between self destruction and creativity...[He] had begun to intuit the utility of his

masochism, to become a connoisseur of his own collapse. He was prepared to destroy himself for meaning."

"Perhaps if I had not been so tormented myself it would have been less authentic," he wrote of *Cat* in a letter to his friend, theatrical producer Cheryl Crawford, in 1954.

By September of that year, *Cat* production plans were already brewing with the famous Elia Kazan at the helm who, in addition to being the most celebrated film and theatre director of his era, had already established a firm friendship and creative partnership with Williams after directing *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Camino Real*. Kazan expressed a keen interest in the script, but insisted on rewrites in the name of narrative resolution. One of the key issues revolved around Big Daddy who, despite being one of Williams' finest characters, was entirely absent from the play's final act.

In a clear sign of respect for Kazan, likely mingled with a desire for the success which surrounded the director's projects, Williams conceded, and took many of Kazan's suggestions on board in a rewrite which softened the play with a more positive, resolution-filled third act. Williams would come to regret this, feeling the success of *Cat* was tainted by its commercialisation. His treatment of the issue in an essay which accompanied the play's printed publication would ultimately sour his relationship with Kazan, on whom he placed all blame for the revised ending. Kazan maintains he offered to return to Williams' original script before the play opened.

Once *Cat* reached the rehearsal stage, Williams was typically negative. He



considered the set "a meaningless piece of chi chi", found the lead actress, Barbara Bel Geddes, "inadequate", while Burl Ives, as Big Daddy, "acted like a stuffed turkey". Despite these misgivings, in March of 1955 *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* opened to rave reviews, later winning both the Pulitzer Prize and New York Drama Critics' Award. But Williams, unable to enjoy his success, felt only fatigue. "You see," he wrote, "I have nothing to say. The play production and its tensions drained every thing out of me." As John Lair wrote in the conclusion of his Williams biography, "In him, until his last breath, the forces of life and death were pitched in clamorous battle. Art was his habit, his 'fatal need', and his salvation."

Towards the end of 1956, Tennessee Williams wrote in his notebooks,

"Sat out and looked at the stars tonight but I didn't feel the presence of God. I haven't felt it for a long time now. Something's awfully gone away from here, meaning me.

But still we persist, like the cactus, and still say En Avant."

"Williams had become a connoisseur of his own collapse."
