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## HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

### Theater: Scarlett Johansson Slinks Onto Broadway; *Life And Times In Real Time* (Unfortunately)

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**CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**LIFE AND TIMES EPISODES 1-4** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

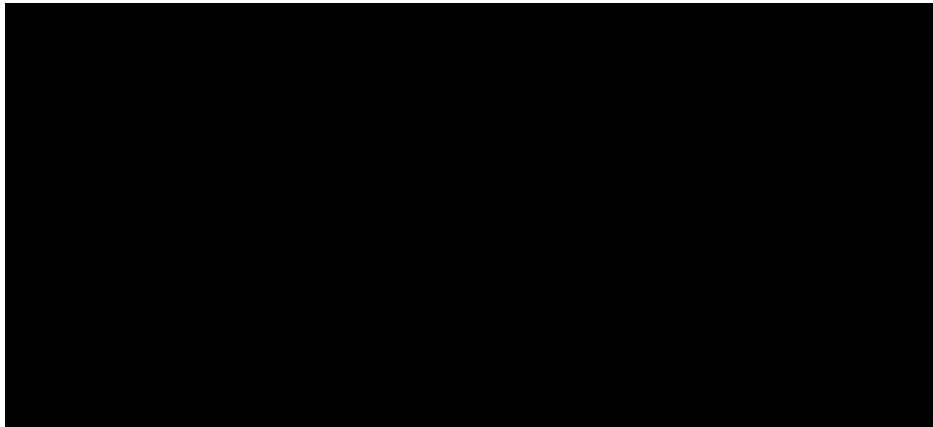
**CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**RICHARD RODGERS THEATRE**

*Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* is surely one of the most dated of Tennessee Williams' plays. Not because it's about a man who is probably closeted even to himself, but because of how Williams tells that story. *A Doll's House* isn't dated even if women have basic civil rights in many countries. And this subject needn't be dated either. But this steamy Southern tale of a sex-starved Maggie (Scarlett Johansson) begging her hunky husband Brick to make love to her while the rest of the family circles around the dying patriarch Big Daddy like vultures at a slaughter feels flat and unfocused from the start.

After Williams, the responsibility for this Broadway revival lays squarely on director Rob Ashford, who has done some acclaimed dramatic work, especially in the UK. Here every element is poorly thought out, from the vague, cavernous set, the sound design (which includes the singing of field hands off stage for a tacky, *Song Of The South* touch) and actors who by and large have no focus or purpose.

And after Ashford, I'm afraid the burdens of the play fall squarely on the broad shoulders of Benjamin Walker, who has yet to capitalize on his breakthrough in *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*. Here he is either miscast or just not up to the part of Brick, a character who should be the seething, confused, self-loathing center of attention. In this show, he just seems to hop around on one leg and whether he's in the room or not, if Brick isn't talking, you rarely pay attention to him. Since Walker is at the center of the action for virtually the entire play, this is a problem.



The same cannot be said of Johansson. I missed her Tony-winning performance in *A View From The Bridge* so this was my first chance to see her onstage. She's a magnetic presence, though whether because of lack of chemistry with Walker or general unease in this faltering production, Johansson seems to amp up the energy early on and then have nowhere to go. When Maggie lies and tells Big Daddy she's pregnant, it could be for any number of reasons: maybe she's trying to frustrate those greedy relatives, maybe she just wants to warm the heart of a dying man or maybe she hopes saying it's so will push Brick back into her arms. But in this revival I have no idea what might be driving Maggie and -- worse -- it didn't occur to me to wonder.

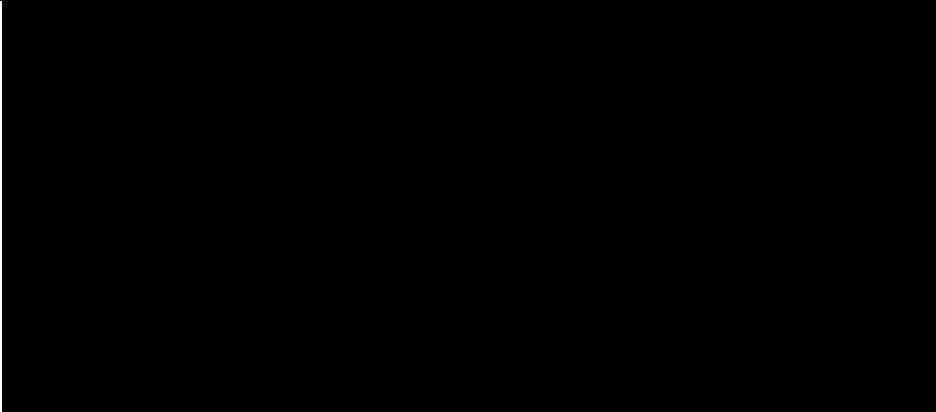
The set is vaguely in line with the description offered up by Williams, though the bizarre decision to have a phone that's supposed to be out in the hallway located practically in the bedroom itself makes it seem like people who should be out of sight are actually standing alongside everyone else. That sound design -- which includes heavy ponderous crashes at the beginning of each act -- is similarly awkward.

I've never seen a good production of *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*, so maybe it is the play itself. But it is intriguingly modern in some ways. About the only person who seems to have a problem with Brick being gay or bi is Brick himself. Big Daddy is a man of the world and says he doesn't care. Maggie didn't like the competition of Brick's truest friend (or true love) but she's hardly bothered by the idea itself. Heck, the 28,000 acre plantation came into Big Daddy's hands only because the two gay lovers who founded the place left it to him when they died after a lifetime of tenderness and affection. It's only Brick himself who seems disgusted by the idea. Of course his real guilt may simply be over rejecting a friend who came out to him and said he loved Brick but that's a nuance too far for this heavy-handed show.

It's sole redemption are two pros: Ciaran Hinds and Debra Monk as Big Daddy and Big Momma don't quite triumph; the show isn't good enough for that. But they do show everyone else how it's done and their presence on stage provides the main pleasure to be had here. When Big Daddy switches from full of life to standing at death's door in one fell swoop, you're suddenly reminded of the emotional depths that even lesser Williams can provide.

***LIFE AND TIMES EPISODES 1-4* \*\* out of \*\*\*\***  
**PUBLIC THEATER WITH SOHO REP**

You've got to love a theater company that names themselves after an imaginary troupe created by Franz Kafka. This is my first opportunity to see a production of *Nature Theater Of Oklahoma* and I came away impressed by the talent on stage and the ambition in their work. Unfortunately, *Life And Times Episodes 1-4* -- a Soho Rep production presented at the Public Theater -- is misguidedly ambitious, confusing length with importance and repetition with profundity. I've seen plenty of avant garde works so don't think I was offput by the idea of an eight hour musical play based on the mundane life of an anonymous woman. Frankly, that's my idea of a draw. In fact, when I go to film festivals or attend theater festivals, I often make a point of tracking down the lengthiest work under the working assumption that the most ambitious in length that makes it into the fest probably has some worth to it. This has served me well over the years. Not this time. By the end, I still admired the troupe and their dedication to the task at hand (this is an extremely demanding piece) but wondered with frustration why someone didn't raise their hand after an hour or two or three to point out the obvious: that this show was spinning its wheels.



Here's the set-up, which was conceived and directed by Pavol Liska and Kelly Copper from a telephone conversation with Kristin Worrall. A woman (Worrall) is interviewed at length about her childhood, encouraged to go into as much detail as possible about her memories, year by year and grade by grade, from earliest memory to the junior prom. Her words are transcribed and often set to music, with various actors on stage taking turns delivering this monologue. A childhood in the late 1970s and early 1980s seems to be the era in question, since our heroine mentions things like all the girls suddenly reading *Are You There God? It's Me Margaret* and other touchstones of the era. But this is not a pop culture heavy work. Mostly it's just generic references to third grade and being best friends with this girl and then best friends with that girl, worrying about fitting in or what clothes to wear, a first kiss and so on. And on.

One key creative choice was to keep many if not all of the woman's "um's" and "uh's" and "like" and "oh my god" and other verbal tics. This creates an interesting rhythm at first, with the likes and ums serving as punctuation of sorts. Like so many other elements of the show, they pound this quirk into the ground. Instead of introducing those repetitious phrases and then pulling back, using them more sparingly as the show goes on to break scenes or stories, they simply keep using them over and over until the monotony makes them unwelcome.

The show is presented over three nights. On the first night, the cast wears a uniform of sorts, with the guys dressed one way and the women a similar way but not identically. Musicians are below the stage with the audience but they occasionally jump up and join in. The settings for the dialogue (I'd say 70 percent or more of it is sung on the first two nights) is by far the most interesting. Arrangements include flute and various keyboards and other offbeat choices that keep the music fairly fresh. The musicians also have the curiously endearing habit of peering out at the audience and studying them in a friendly way. By the end of the night, we'd only reached about third grade and it was distressingly clear that they had avoided the real work of turning the meandering memories of a woman into art. Transcribing is not the same as shaping. And repeating mundane if familiar stories of childhood at numbing length does not automatically give them a totemic profundity.

Night two was all too familiar. This time the cast was dressed in track suits of varying color. The stage was black instead of white and a disco ball hung from the ceiling. The musical arrangements were far more anonymous than the first night, making the entire evening much less interesting. The story trudged on towards high school, darkening a bit as our heroine becomes aware of abusive dads, unhappy friends, and other starker realities of life. But it doesn't deepen in interest. The now tiresome accretion of vaguely familiar stories marches on.

Night three is a radical departure. This night most of the dialogue is spoken instead of sung. The set is an intentionally flimsy country estate and the actors are dressed up as "characters." The music is mock soap opera dramatic and the style is akin to sketch comedy. This livens things up a bit though it also has the distressing effect of seeming to mock the concerns of our heroine, not a very happy feeling after letting the poor thing

pour her heart out for more than five hours. Still, it does pay some dividends.

But yet again the sheer banality of the material overwhelms the presentation. By the end, desperation clearly sets with practically the first flashback. This flashback involves a spoken monologue delivered with the lights dimmed low and the cast standing starkly still, a very different approach from their almost constant motion and choreographed gestures. It involves religion and a first confession but any expectation of actual profundity or insight is soon shattered as our heroine delivers yet another banal story. That's followed by the jokey reappearance of cast members in alien costumes and voice-over narration (a first) done in a mechanized voice a la Laurie Anderson. The exhaustion of ideas is complete and the audience that had gamely applauded with some enthusiasm the first two nights was deflated and mum at the end.

The challenges of this production are staggering and the cast generally delivered, especially the first two nights. One choice was to display the text of the interview on a screen while the dialogue is being spoken or sung. You can't help noticing how the vast majority of the time they get every "um" and "uh" dead right. Two actors stumbled quite a bit on night two and since they make such a point of including like every precious verbal stammer it's only fair to point this out as well as the fact that it didn't make much of a difference. Perhaps night three was less-rehearsed than night two? Throughout the show cue cards are held up for the actors to view; they leaned on them to a far more notable degree on the final night (though I'm willing to imagine this was some sort of artistic choice, I don't think so).

Certain effects are memorable. When you've been watching just a handful of actors for several hours, having the stage suddenly filled with 15 or so people is quite a powerful touch. The cast grew even louder on night two, again to a notable effect. After hours and hours of straight monologue, the appearance of a comment by the interviewer feels similarly notable; that is the advantage of a lengthy presentation. Yes, the varying presentations of the memories of this woman were interesting. But they could have been condensed into a ten minute sketch with no loss whatsoever. And even then the piece would benefit from actually shaping and editing these memories instead of merely coughing them up whole and hoping sheer length and mundanity would be confused for importance.

#### **THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013** (on a four star scale)

*As You Like it* (Shakespeare in the Park with Lily Rabe) \*\*\*\*

*Chimichangas And Zoloft* \*

*Closer Than Ever* \*\*\*

*Cock* \*\* 1/2

*Harvey with Jim Parsons* \*

*My Children! My Africa!* \*\*\*

*Once On This Island* \*\*\*

*Potted Potter* \*

*Storefront Church* \*\* 1/2

*Title And Deed* \*\*\*

*Picture Incomplete* (NYMF) \*\*

*Flambe Dreams* (NYMF) \*\*

*Rio* (NYMF) \*\*

*The Two Month Rule* (NYMF) \*

*Trouble* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2

*Stealing Time* (NYMF) \*\*

*Requiem For A Lost Girl* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2

*Re-Animator The Musical* (NYMF) \*\*\*

*Baby Case* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2

*How Deep Is The Ocean* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2

*Central Avenue Breakdown* (NYMF) \*\*\*

*Foreverman* (NYMF) \* 1/2

*Swing State* (NYMF) \* 1/2

*Stand Tall: A Rock Musical* (NYMF) \* 1/2

*Living With Henry* (NYMF) \*

*A Letter To Harvey Milk* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2

*The Last Smoker In America* \*\*

*Gore Vidal's The Best Man* (w new cast) \*\*\*

*Into The Woods at Delacorte* \*\* 1/2

*Bring It On: The Musical* \*\*

*Bullet For Adolf* \*

*Summer Shorts Series B: Paul Rudnick, Neil LaBute, etc.* \*\*

*Harrison, TX* \*\*\*

*Dark Hollow: An Appalachian "Woyzeck"* (FringeNYC) \* 1/2

*Pink Milk* (FringeNYC) \* 1/2

*Who Murdered Love* (FringeNYC) no stars

*Storytime With Mr. Buttermen* (FringeNYC) \*\*

*#MormonInChief* (FringeNYC) \*\*

*An Interrogation Primer* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*

*An Evening With Kirk Douglas* (FringeNYC) \*

*Sheherizade* (FringeNYC) \*\*

*The Great Pie Robbery* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2

*Independents* (FringeNYC) \*\*\* 1/2

*The Dick and The Rose* (FringeNYC) \*\*

*Magdalen* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*

*Bombsheltered* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2

*Paper Plane* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2

*Rated M For Murder* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2

*Mallory/Valerie* (FringeNYC) \*

*Non-Equity: The Musical!* (FringeNYC) \*

*Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Prairie Dame* (FringeNYC) \*\*\* 1/2

*City Of Shadows* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*

*Forbidden Broadway: Alive & Kicking* \*\*\*

*Salamander Starts Over* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*

*Pieces* (FringeNYC) \*

*The Train Driver* \*\*\*

*Chaplin The Musical* \* 1/2

*Detroit* \*\* 1/2

*Heartless at Signature* \*\*

*Einstein On The Beach at BAM* \*\*\*\*

*Red-Handed Otter* \*\* 1/2

*Marry Me A Little* \*\*

*An Enemy Of The People* \*\* 1/2

*The Old Man And The Old Moon* \*\*\* 1/2

*A Chorus Line at Papermill* \*\*\*

*Helen & Edgar* \*\*\*

*Grace* \* 1/2

*Cyrano de Bergerac* \*\*

*Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* \*\*\*

*Disgraced* \*\*

*Annie* \*\* 1/2

*The Heiress* \*\*

*Checkers* \*\* 1/2

*Ivanov* \*\*\*

*Golden Child at Signature* \*\* 1/2

*Giant at the Public* \*\*\* 1/2

*Scandalous* \* 1/2

*Forever Dusty* \*\*

*The Performers* \*\*

*The Piano Lesson at Signature* \*\*\* 1/2

*Un Ballo In Maschera at the Met* \*\*\* 1/2 (singing) \* (production) so call it \*\* 1/2

*A Christmas Story: The Musical* \*\*

*The Sound Of Music at Papermill* \*\*\*

*My Name Is Asher Lev* \*\*\* 1/2

*Golden Boy* \*\*

*A Civil War Christmas* \*\* 1/2

*Dead Accounts* \*\*

*The Anarchist* \*

*Glengarry Glen Ross* \*\*

*Bare* \*\*

*The Mystery Of Edwin Drood* \*\* 1/2

*The Great God Pan* \*\* 1/2

*The Other Place* \*\* 1/2

*Picnic* \* 1/2

*Opus No. 7* \*\* 1/2

*Deceit* \* 1/2

*Life And Times Episodes 1-4* \*\*

*Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* (w Scarlett Johansson) \* 1/2

*The Jammer* \*\*\*

*Blood Play* \*\* 1/2

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**Note:** Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.

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