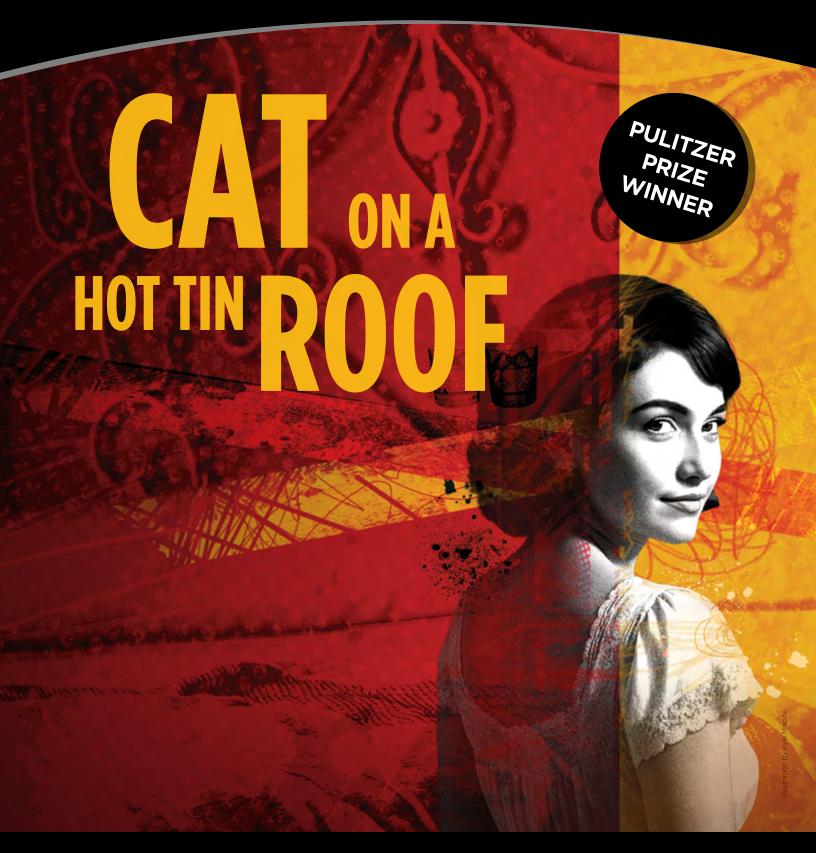


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Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

By **Tennessee Williams**Directed by **Chris Coleman**

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SYNOPSIS: CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

Tennessee Williams' Pulitzer Prize-winning drama unfolds one sweltering Mississippi night on the Pollitt family estate, where three generations reunite to celebrate Big Daddy's birthday. As speculation about Big Daddy's health simmers just beneath the festivities, rivalries for his favor and the family fortune heat up. Determined to come out on top, Maggie struggles to get her troubled husband Brick to fall in line as they

dance around the secrets and sexual tensions that threaten to destroy their marriage.

As the sun sets and the veneer of Southern gentility slips away, family betrayals and unburied truths leave no one unscathed. Raw, turbulent, and riveting from start to finish, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is a bona fide American classic that you simply can't afford to miss.

PLAYWRIGHT & DIRECTOR BIOS

Tennessee Williams, Playwright

Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) explored passion with daring honesty and forged a poetic theatre of raw psychological insight that shattered conventional proprieties and transformed the American stage. The autobiographical *The Glass Menagerie* brought what Mr. Williams called "the catastrophe of success," a success capped by *A Streetcar Named Desire*, one of the most influential works of modern American literature. An extraordinary series of masterpieces followed, including *Vieux Carre, Sweet Bird of Youth, The Rose Tattoo, Orpheus Descending* and the classic *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.*

Chris Coleman, Director

Chris Coleman is passionate about the connection between stories and community. He joined the Denver Center Theatre Company (DCTC) as Artistic Director in November of 2017 and has directed Little Shop of Horrors, Rubicon, Hamlet, A Little Night Music, Hotter Than Egypt, Much Ado About Nothing, Rattlesnake Kate, Twelfth Night, A Doll's House, Anna

Karenina, and Oklahoma!. Previously, Chris served as Artistic Director for Portland Center Stage in Oregon for 18 years. Under his leadership, PCS renovated the city's historic Armory into a new home, saw annual attendance nearly double, workshopped 52 new plays that went on to productions at over 100 theaters around the US and UK, and became a national leader in how theaters engage with their community.

In 1988, Chris founded Actor's Express in Atlanta (in the basement of an old church), a company that continues to be a cultural force in the Southeast today. He has directed at major theaters across the country, including Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the Alliance Theater, Dallas Theater Center, Baltimore Center Stage, Actors Theatre of Louisville, ACT/ Seattle, the Asolo, Pittsburgh Public, 59E59, and New York Theater Workshop. He and his husband, actor/writer Rodney Hicks, live in Reunion. Since moving to Colorado, he has hiked Dominguez Canyon, wandered the Cliff Dwellings of Mesa Verde, explored a working mine in Creede, and rafted down the Arkansas River.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Margaret ("Maggie the Cat")

A beautiful, ambitious, and emotionally intense woman. Maggie is married to Brick and deeply frustrated by his emotional and physical withdrawal. She is determined to secure their place in Big Daddy's inheritance by proving her loyalty and fertility, even if it means manipulating the truth.

Brick Pollitt

A former athlete turned alcoholic, Brick is emotionally detached and haunted by the death of his friend Skipper. He is disillusioned with life and uninterested in being intimate with Maggie.

Big Daddy Pollitt

The powerful patriarch of the Pollitt family, Big Daddy is blunt, crude, and commanding. He is dying of cancer, though initially unaware of it. His wealth and authority make him the center of family conflict, especially regarding inheritance.

Big Mama (Ida Pollitt)

Big Daddy's devoted wife. She is emotionally fragile, doting, and often dismissed by her husband. Big Mama is desperate to maintain family unity and deeply affected by the news of Big Daddy's illness.

Gooper Pollitt ("Brother Man")

Brick's older brother, a lawyer who feels overshadowed by Brick. Gooper is ambitious and eager to take control of the family estate. He and his wife, Mae, represent conventional success and fertility.

Mae Pollitt ("Sister Woman")

Gooper's wife, proud mother of five (soon six) children. Mae is manipulative, competitive, and obsessed with securing Big Daddy's favor. She undermines Maggie and Brick, pointing out their childlessness and his alcoholism.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

By Suzanne Yoe

Longtime Denver Center Theatre Company patrons are used to being close to the action for shows in the Kilstrom Theatre — from food fights and space orbits to taking a shower and cooking in a kitchen. This 380-seat theatre-in-the-round has only seven rows, creating an intimate connection between actor and audience.

In Tennessee Williams' Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, audience members will feel as if they are part of the family drama. They are so close, in fact, that they could touch the tension that feels like an actual character in the play. According to Scenic Designer Lisa Orzolek, "If you are sitting near the stage, chances are you are closer to an actor than their counterpart who is 30 feet away. Our theatres are amazing for how close the audience is to the action."

Because Artistic Director Chris Coleman has chosen to stage this production in-the-round, the design requires that an audience can see through the various set pieces, eliminating high walls, solid doors, and separate spaces. Instead, these spaces are defined through lighting, half walls, and door frames.

The size of the estate isn't conveyed through the scenic elements; rather, it is implied through movement on and off stage. Williams sets the play on the Pollitt estate — 28,000 acres of cotton in the Mississippi Delta during a sweltering summer in the 1950s. The Theatre Company production stays true to the script, using four of five voms to create a sense of largess to the plantation house. One actor may step through a door frame and out onto the gallery or into a hallway, each of which leads to a vom. These spaces between seating areas allow actors to enter and exit the stage. "Our actors will exit one vom and reenter through another. The amount of travel will imply a bigger house," Orzolek said.

While many theatres opt to embrace a southern gothic atmosphere of history, decay, and darkness for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Orzolek's design remains relatively simple. She draws upon European influences to denote wealth and pairs them with fabric and furniture that is typical of the South in this period. "We search through our warehouse first to see what we own, looking for period pieces evocative of the 1940s," she says. "The trick is to select furniture that all looks good together to create a seamless aesthetic that implies one person designed a room.

"One element that is true to the period is using the same pattern everywhere — in the drapes, bed coverings, furniture upholstery, and wallpaper." As the heat rises, so too does the strain among the characters who are vying for Big Daddy's favor...and inheritance. A single ceiling fan is the only scenic element to imply rising temperature. "The heat will be translated more through the costumes, sound, and lighting design," Orzolek explains. "Women may unbutton their blouses. Men may roll up their sleeves. Their clothing will become looser while their actions will be accompanied by the typical hum of bugs in the summer. And lights can make the stage feel hot or cold with the color and intensity of light that is used." Beyond that, she says, the dialogue fills in the rest of the grandeur audiences expect.



While the physical design of the set shapes the audience's experience, it's the symbolic elements — particularly one central piece — that deepen the emotional resonance of the production. The play is well-known for its symbolism and there is no greater symbolic element than the bed, which is placed in the center of the stage. As the focal point of the play, the bed symbolizes unfulfilled possibilities, inner conflict, and lost dreams.

In this production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the scenic design does more than set the stage — it deepens the emotional intensity and symbolic weight of the story. Every detail reinforces the play's themes of longing, legacy, and illusion, making the audience not just observers, but participants in the Pollitt family's unraveling.

MENDACITY, ADDICTION, AND OUR UNLIVED LIVES: TRAUMA VS. TRUTH IN CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

By Barbara Hort, Ph.D. and Psychodramaturg on Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

There is a pain — so utter —
It swallows substance up —
Then covers the Abyss with Trance —
So Memory can step
Around — across — upon it —
As one within a Swoon —
Goes safely — where an open eye —
Would drop Him — Bone by Bone —
Emily Dickenson ~

Trauma is a subtle and deadly thief. It appears to commit incidental robberies in the moments when it strikes — pains and shocks and losses that can be so sly and shaming that we later retain barely a memory of their assault on our innocence. But the very definition of trauma, born of the Greek word tr'oma ($\tau pa\^u\mu \check{a}$) for "severe blow," suggests that our blurry memories of the assault are the least of the prices we will pay when we receive the traumatic blow. Why is that?

One of the miraculous capacities of the human psyche is its ability to respond to a grievous assault such that we can quickly carry on with our lives, almost as if nothing had happened. This miracle is made possible by the process that psychologists call "dissociation" — the psyche's ability to contain certain feelings, thoughts, and memories in a separate box, initially airtight, thereby sealing off our anguish from the rest of our consciousness.

In a very general sense, it is as if one part of us immediately retreats into the consciousness we held just before we were dealt the traumatic blow — an innocent state of relative peace that enjoys a reasonable amount of life force. And simultaneously, the other part of us retains awareness of the blow itself, responding with the best coping mechanism it can find — usually Fight or Flight, but sometimes a state of virtual paralysis that psychologists call "Freeze."

This dissociated state is the structure of psyche that we carry forward into our lives after we experience a trauma. We toggle between whatever we can be as the pre-traumatic Innocent, and whatever we have to be as the post-traumatic Survivor — Fighting, Fleeing, or Freezing, as our survival tactics decree. This arrangement is a very effective means of surviving trauma in the short term, rather like emergency medicine allows us to survive physical trauma immediately after a terrible accident. But over time, we pay a terrible price for this arrangement, and this is where trauma commits its insidious embezzlements in our lives.

You see, the psyche is like the body; it does not function well when it is divided from itself. This is why the psyche works relentlessly to reunite its separated parts, just as the body works relentlessly to heal its skin lacerations, broken bones, and wounded organs. The problem is that every time the psyche tries to reunite the pre-traumatic Innocent with the post-traumatic Survivor, the trauma itself is revisited, reignited, and emotionally relived. If not conducted with great care and good fortune, this reunion process usually reinjures psyche with memories of its trauma, triggering its reversion to its long-standing pattern of dissociation and damage control.

And it is important to remember here that in addition to whatever damage the original trauma inflicted on us — physical anguish, emotional loss, the threat of imminent death — most forms of trauma also include the soul-killing element of *shame*.¹ Especially when we are children, but even when we are adults, we are apt to blame ourselves for the bad things that abruptly happen to ourselves and others. So when trauma strikes, we often see ourselves as being somewhat or entirely to blame for the disaster. One might say that shame is the changling spawn of trauma.

Not only is recurring traumatization extremely painful and shameful, as we must repeatedly revisit our old demons while psyche tries to reunite itself, but the methods that we employ for simply containing the damage from this recurring trauma are very costly in their own ways. Specifically, most of us try to contain our post-traumatic pain with a variety of "remedies" — treatments that initially offer relief, but quickly take their own grievous toll on our well-being.

The post-traumatic "remedies" that we find — mostly mood-altering substances or actions — have taken an infinite number of forms throughout human history. As you can probably guess, they include all of the addictions, compulsions, obsessions, and demanding disciplines that you can imagine. Each means of physical and emotional escape becomes a temporary shelter for the trauma survivor who is hiding from the agony that split their psyche in the first place. And each "remedy" demands an ever-increasing price for the ever-decreasing respite that it doles out.

Beyond the various "remedies" that lure traumatized people into this deteriorating quest for relief, there is an equally seductive/destructive shelter that post-traumatic people usually wrap around themselves like protective cloak. This cloak varies in size and shape, depending on the post-traumatic person's original trauma and ongoing need for protection. But the cloak is always woven of the same cloth...the thing that Tennessee Williams so aptly referred to as mendacity.

I'd like to think that Williams had more than artistic reasons for his selection of this poetic word, for choosing "mendacity" rather than relying on the prosaic labels of "lies" and "lying." I'd like to think that Williams' selection of "mendacity" was born of his exquisite appreciation for psyche's creativity in surviving the traumas that outrageous fortune randomly slings at us.

Certainly, there is no official distinction in the dictionary between "lying" and "mendacity." But it seems as if Tennessee Williams may have granted a special depth to "mendacity" when he wrote *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. The ordinary definition of "lying" implies a certain degree of consciousness and even intention in the expression of something that is not true. But what do we call untruths that we have repeated so often, including to ourselves, that they have come to feel as if they *are* the truth?

The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point that he cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others.

And having no respect he ceases to live.

Fyodor Dostoevsky ~

Williams knew a *lot* about trauma and its consequences, and we are profoundly fortunate that he had the courage and genius to translate what he knew into the stories that he left for us. Not only did he understand that the traumatic blows we receive leave wounds that cannot be seen by others (and often, not even by ourselves), but he also understood the excruciating price we must pay for those unhealed chasms — some that are visible in our self-destructive "remedies," and some that are only discernable in the miseries and mendacities that permeate our lives.

There ain't nothin' more powerful than the odor of mendacity. You can smell it. It smells like death.

When we no longer stand in the actual truth of our bodies and our hearts, it is virtually impossible for us to know who we are, impossible for us to live an authentic life. This does not mean that our truth itself is dead. Quite the contrary. Our truth lives on within us, knocking on our inner doors in a desperate effort to come out. But it lives in the same place where the traumatic pain lives. So we do all the things we have learned to do to silence that place, and that pain, and we carry on with the as-if life we have constructed in the absence of our complete self. We maintain existences suffused with the stench of what Tennessee Williams calls "mendacity."

Well, why not live in this fictionalized version of life, especially when our truth and the real life it holds feels so horribly painful, so riddled with shame? The mendacious life always feels like a reasonable approach to dealing with trauma when we undertake its construction. And it might well be the only approach available to us, especially in the early days, when our traumatic wound is still fresh and we are still stunned by its blow, even fighting for our survival. But over time, a fictionalized life — a life that is cobbled together from dreams, denial, and desperation is doomed to failure because it is not rooted in reality. It is like a hydroponic plant that lives on vitamin water — surviving only soluble nutrients. But with no natural soil and firm grounding, its roots atrophy and the plant is doomed to die.

Man is not what he thinks he is, he is what he hides. ~ André Malraux ~

This is what we see (and feel) after years of addiction, compulsion, obsession, and dissociation. When we remain separated from the parts of ourselves that were dissociated in the original trauma, we survive on the vapors of desperate dreams...and equally desperate fear. This is, I would suggest, what Williams was referring to when he spoke of the "smell of mendacity" that "smells like death." We could similarly say that this is the smell of a partial life, a pseudo-life, an unlived life, an undead life. We who survive this way are not technically dead, but we might as well be.

How do we clear this noxious miasma? How do we breathe fresh air and live a *real* life?

The answer (as you can probably guess) is to reassociate the parts of ourselves that have been dissociated by the original trauma. And yes, that means facing our trauma and making our peace with it, but without retraumatizing ourselves in the process. This delicate work of healing trauma without further traumatization has recently been given life by a variety of inspired healers, including Donald Kalsched² and Peter Levine³. But when Williams wrote his brilliant plays, such healing was only available through the work of gifted artists with a healing effect...including Williams himself.

You see, when we encounter a story about a traumatized person who has been paying a terrible price for a life of post-traumatic dissociation, and when we see the dynamics that might enable such a person to move toward healing that dissociation and its precipitating trauma, we are better able to consider the means by which we might awaken to the healing of the traumas that have stolen our lives. We are more likely to detect the smell of mendacity that we have allowed to suffuse our lives in our effort to escape our trauma and devise a pseudo-life. This process is what Barry Lopez described in his book Crow and Weasel when he said, "Sometimes we need a story more than a meal to stay alive." Or to cite another insightful artist:

Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth. ~ Pablo Picasso ~

In Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, as in many of Williams' stories, life-giving truth is delivered from a variety of sources to a variety of characters who are living in mendacity. Many of those truth sources are less than kind and far from gentle. But sometimes their raw authenticity and fundamental love makes up for their blunt words and rough handling. Williams never writes easy stories with simple and happy endings. But then again, neither does life. Nonetheless, there is a sense in Williams' stories that something has changed by the final curtain — something has awakened, something is reborn, something is in the process of becoming alive. In the end, it seems as if Williams offers us a chance at real life by enacting the advice of Emily Dickinson:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —

¹ As a reminder, the difference between guilt and shame is that guilt is what we feel when we have made a mistake, but shame is what we experience when we feel that we are a mistake.

² Kalsched, Donald The Inner World of Trauma: Archetypal Defenses of the Personal Spirit https://a.co/d/eCarw4D

³ Levine, Peter Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma. https://a.co/d/bRzvGTx

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KEY THEMES IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' SOUTHERN MASTERPIECE

Tennessee Williams' Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is a searing portrait of a Southern family in crisis, where truth is elusive, desire is suppressed, and legacy is contested. Set in a single bedroom on a Mississippi plantation, the play unfolds over one evening — Big Daddy's birthday — and exposes the emotional fractures beneath the surface of wealth and tradition. Here are the central themes that drive the drama:

Mendacity: The Lies We Live With

"Mendacity" is Brick's word for the falsehoods that surround him — and the reason he drinks. Lies permeate the Pollitt household: lies about love, health, and identity. Williams uses mendacity to explore how people construct illusions to survive, and how truth, when spoken, can be both liberating and destructive.

"What is the smell in this room? Don't you notice it, Brick? Don't you notice a powerful and obnoxious odor of mendacity?" — Big Daddy

Desire and Repression

Maggie's longing for Brick is palpable, but Brick's emotional and physical withdrawal leaves her desperate and isolated. The play explores the tension between desire and denial — not just sexual, but emotional and existential. Brick's repression, especially surrounding his relationship with Skipper, is a central source of conflict.

"It was one of those beautiful, ideal things they tell about in the Greek legends, it couldn't be anything else, you being you, and that's what made it so sad, that's what made it so awful, because it was love that never could be carried through to anything satisfying or ever talked about plainly." — Maggie

Legacy and Inheritance

The Pollitt estate — 28,000 acres of cotton — is more than land; it's a symbol of power, continuity, and control. The question of who will inherit it drives much of the action. Mae and Gooper parade their children as proof of worthiness and legacy, while Maggie fights to secure her place through charm and strategy.

"They're up to cutting you out of your father's estate." — Maggie

Mortality and Denial

Big Daddy's terminal illness is the truth no one wants to face. The family clings to false hope, even as the reality of death looms. Williams explores how people cope with mortality — through denial, distraction, and desperate attempts to hold onto life.

"Most of them want it on earth and not in heaven."

— Maggie

Gender and Power

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof explores gender, not through overt critique, but through the pressures and struggles the characters face to fulfill traditional gender expectations. While Mae and Gooper parade their children as proof of stability and legacy, their fertility is not celebrated by others in the play. In fact, Mae's children are often treated as a nuisance, and her role as a mother is often viewed as more strategic than revered.

Maggie's perceived failure is not about her own fertility, but about Brick's emotional and physical withdrawal. The question of legacy — who will inherit Big Daddy's plantation and power — is tied to Brick's viability, not Maggie's, yet she is the one who must navigate the situation with intelligence, determination, and resilience. Maggie's final move — claiming pregnancy — may be a lie, but it's a calculated act of survival in a world where her worth is tied to her husband's potential.

"You're childless and my son drinks!" — Big Mama

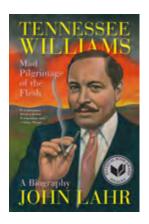
Isolation and Loneliness

Despite the crowded house, each character is profoundly alone. Brick isolates himself with alcohol; Maggie is emotionally abandoned; Big Daddy is surrounded by family but disconnected from them. The play suggests that loneliness is not just physical — it's spiritual.

"Living with someone you love can be lonelier than living alone." — Maggie

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

The Denver Public Library recommends:



READ!

Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh by John Lahr

This excellent biography of Williams that was a best book of 2014 highlights his Southern roots and the forces shaping his development and blossoming as a dramatist. Lahr, the son of the actor Bert Lahr, was noted as one of the most perceptive American theatre critics. The biography also explores how the plays like *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* were adapted, through great effort, for stage and screen.

WATCH!

Truman & Tennessee, dir. Lisa Immordino Vreeland (2020) A fascinating dual study of Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote highlighting their friendship and identities as gay Southern writers. It includes lots of good trivia as well, including Williams views on film adaptations of his plays.





LISTEN!

The Complete Dirty South by The Drive-By Truckers

This concept album by the Southern rock group gets you in the mood for steamy Delta hi-jinks. It explores the margins of respectability as well as the harsh truth of growing up on both sides of the track in the South.

DOWNLOAD!

Southern Gothic Films Collection

Like Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, the films in this collection are a counterpoint to the romanticized image of Southern culture in works like Gone with the Wind. Selections include <u>Sweet Bird of Youth</u>, based on another Tennessee Williams play, and <u>A Rose for Emily</u>, an adaptation of an early William Faulkner story.





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DISCUSSION GUIDE CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

- What does it mean to be "a cat on a hot tin roof"?
 Maggie uses this metaphor to describe her emotional state. Who else in the play might be a "cat on a hot tin roof," and what keeps them there?
- 2. How does the setting a single bedroom in a Southern plantation shape the drama? Consider how confinement, heat, and family legacy intensify the characters' conflicts.
- 3. Brick's silence is central to the play. What is he avoiding? What does his refusal to speak openly reveal about grief, guilt, and masculinity?
- 4. Big Daddy and Brick share a moment of brutal honesty. What truths are exchanged between them, and why are they so difficult to face?
- 5. Mendacity (lying) is a recurring theme. What lies are told in the play? Are they protective, destructive, or both?
- 6. How does the play explore desire and repression?
 Think about Maggie's longing, Brick's detachment, and the tension between them.
- 7. What role does inheritance play in the family's behavior? How do Mae and Gooper use their children to gain favor? What does the estate symbolize?
- 8. How does Maggie's final claim about being pregnant shift the power dynamic? What does it say about survival?
- 9. How does the play portray gender roles and expectations? Consider how women are valued for fertility and men for strength or success.
- 10. What emotions did the production evoke for you? Did you feel sympathy, discomfort, anger, or hope? How did the staging and performances influence your response?

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