

ONSTAGE AT LE PETIT

Salvatore Mannino
directs production of
“Cat on a Hot Tin Roof”

By Dean M. Shapiro, Senior Editor



PHOTO COURTESY OF SALVATORE MANNINO

Professionally, he goes by his full name – Salvatore – but informally, among friends, he prefers to be called Sal. But, by whatever name he is called, he can also add the title of “director” and others that have reflected his profession over the years.

New Orleans born and raised, Salvatore Mannino, is a professional theatrical director, producer, writer, innovator, actor and just about everything else associated with live stage productions. He is currently directing “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,” one of Tennessee Williams’ best-known stage plays, at Le Petit Theatre, in conjunction with the upcoming 36th annual Tennessee Williams & New Orleans Literary Festival.

The show opened earlier this month and will run through Sunday, March 26.

Like others of Williams’ most popular works, the story takes place in the Deep South where he lived and spent much of his early and adult life. The story centers around an old Southern cotton plantation family and the drama plays out among the family members and how the will of the dying head of the family, known as Big Daddy, will be carved up following his death.

“I’m thrilled to be helping present this story,” Salvatore stated. “This production reanalyzes the impact of Williams’ text that helped shape the appearance of the American South and reveals the truth behind the characters’ desires. Using the youngest generation of the Pollitt family as our conduit for the story, we witness the effect these characters have on their family for generations to come.”

Salvatore emphasized that he is using Williams’ original version of the play; not the version Williams revised for the original Broadway production. But, although the story told on the stage is essentially in the playwright’s own original words, Salvatore noted that there are some deviations in the manner in which the story is conveyed to the audience.

“We have to ask ourselves, how does this work evolve?” Salvatore said. “Things that happen in Williams’ plays, specifically around the topics of race and domestic abuse, reflect a different climate, a different time, a different world than the one in which we’re now living. So it’s important for us to always recognize how we got to where we are today. Analyzing some of



Sal (right) with frequent collaborators and band mates, Kerm Burns & Zdenko Martin

these texts helps that process.

“We follow the story of the family in our script and production,” Salvatore continued. “As a director it’s about what kind of framework and lens are we’re looking at this play with. I’m aware that it’s 2023 and it’s not the 1950s. We’re not sitting in a theater when this play was set. We’re not there so it’s important to make sure we’re making choices that focus our attention on things that are for our community to understand and embrace.”

Members of the all-New Orleans cast include – in the lead roles - Elizabeth Argus as Big Mama, Silas Cooper as Big Daddy, Yvette Bourgeois as Dixie, Jonathan Mares as Brick, Mona Nasrawi as Maggie, Diana E.H. Shortes as Mae and Nick Strauss as Gooper. In supporting roles are David Sellers and John Wettermark. The creative team includes Joey Moro (scenic/lighting design), Bridget Boyle (costume design), Tyler Kieffer (sound design) and Laurin Hart (wig/hair design).

Salvatore’s road to the theatrical profession began with his early years growing up in Metairie. However, he didn’t get into acting in his first production until



Sal with his pup

he was 17. Prior to that, while attending Holy Cross High School in its pre-Katrina location in the Lower Ninth Ward, he was heavily into sports. At six-feet-tall, his preference was for basketball but he also played baseball, football, soccer and tennis and was into swimming. He envisioned himself becoming a college basketball coach.

But the connection between sports and theatre began to steer him toward his

eventual career. As he explained, “In team sports I found something comforting in that kind of collaborative environment that I really embraced and enjoyed and so I gravitated toward theatre. In theatre I felt like a part of me was getting fulfilled that never was before.”

After graduation from Holy Cross in 2003, Salvatore went on to the University of Southern Mississippi where he graduated four years later with a B.A. in Theatre. From there it was on to New York City for seven years of work in the theatrical field, and then to Los Angeles for his MFA in Producing from California Institute of the Arts in 2017.

During his time in the L.A. area, Salvatore helped start the company, NightLight Labs, which uses some of the latest advancements in technology to tell stories. He also worked with the Octopus Theatricals company where he collaborated on the Tony Award-winning Broadway musical, “Hadestown” during its off-Broadway run. While with Octopus, he also collaborated with theatre companies from Poland and Hungary on a show they were touring internationally to the U.S.

Eventually the road home led Salvatore back to New Orleans after he got a job offer

from Loyola University. He was hired in 2020 as artistic director and producer for the department of theatre arts and dance and he still there today.

After getting resettled in his former hometown, Salvatore went about making new connections with people in the city’s theatrical community but, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, live stage productions were put on hold. Finally, as the atmosphere began to clear, new opportunities arose.

“I had been away for roughly 15 years and I saw a lot of change in the theatre community; a lot of new faces,” Salvatore said. “I went out of my way to meet as many people as I could, trying to build bridges. It was just kind of a cold call to people in the theatre to say hello I’m here and I’m trying to produce some exciting work in New Orleans.”

His efforts were rewarded by a phone call from Don-Scott Cooper, the executive director of Le Petit Theatre, who was looking for directors as the theater reopened. “I threw my name into the ring and he responded and gave me an opportunity to direct “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.”

Later this season at Le Petit, Salvatore will be directing “The Curious Incident of



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SALVATORE MANNINO

Sal with partner, Sylvia Mannino

the Dog in the Night-Time” from May 18 through June 4.

And so, as “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” goes into its final weeks of full houses and favorable reviews, Salvatore is pleased with what he has seen so far. “I’m really proud of what our team has created,” he said. “Theatre is a team sport. It’s a very collaborative art form and I think we’ve really created something together here that we can all be really proud of. The designers are really fantastic and we have a wonderful cast. We’re working really hard to craft these characters with care and really take care with the story. I couldn’t be more proud.”

“Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” will be playing through Sunday, March 26. Shows are at 7:30 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays and 3:00 p.m. on Sundays. Ticket prices range from \$35-\$65 with \$15 student discounts available. Le Petit Theatre is located at 616 St. Peter Street in the French Quarter. For tickets and information call (504) 522-2081 or visit www.lepetittheatre.com.



Sal with his frequent collaborators and band mates, Kerm Burns & Zdenko Martin