

IRRESISTIBLE FORCE

Johansson, in a J. Mendel silk-chiffon dress, and Walker, in a Frette robe, star as Maggie and Brick in Rob Ashford's new production. Hair, Julien d'Ys for Julien d'Ys; makeup, Alice Lane; grooming, Losi for Martial Vivot Salon; set design, Nick Des Jardins for Mary Howard Studio. Details, see In This Issue. Sitings Editor: Phyllis Posnick.

FIRE & ICE

Scarlett Johansson and Benjamin Walker heat up Broadway as the beautiful, ruined couple at the center of Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

By Adam Green. Photographed by Annie Leibovitz.

I first saw *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in a college production starring my then-girlfriend as Maggie, the Southern temptress who spends most of the play half-naked, trying to lure her bourbon-swilling ex-football hero husband, Brick, into bed. Ten minutes in, I realized that my girlfriend was totally sleeping with the guy playing Brick. It made for a very long two and a half hours, but on the plus side, they sure set off a lot of onstage fireworks. Most of the *Cats* I've seen since have lacked that chemistry, but that promises to change with Rob Ashford's new production of Tennessee Williams's Pulitzer-winning 1955 family drama about lies and loneliness, which opens this month at the Richard Rodgers Theatre, starring Scarlett Johansson and Benjamin Walker.

During a rehearsal break, I see why Ashford chose them for the roles most glamorously incarnated by Elizabeth Taylor and Paul Newman in the 1958 movie version. Walker is the guy who made the American presidency sexy and dangerous, onstage (*Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*) and onscreen (*Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*). In jeans and a black leather coat, the six-foot-three-inch Georgia native exudes, as Ashford puts it, "a kind of ease—what you'd expect of a golden boy like Brick." Though playing a man who drinks himself into a stupor because he despises "mendacity" but can't face the possibility that he was in love with his dead best friend, Walker plans to avoid the pitfall of taking his character's name literally. "There's nothing passive about him," Walker says. "He's trying not to be involved with people, but it's like watching a pot. You're not going to be waiting for the lid to blow if the water's not boiling."

In turtleneck and jeans, Johansson, who made a remarkable Broadway debut opposite Liev Schreiber in 2010's *A View from the Bridge*, radiates sensuality. ("She doesn't have it," Ashford says. "She is it.") But she's not interested in such vampy histrionics as "slithering around the stage in a nightgown and scratching at the floor," she says. "It's not about that. They're two people in this claustrophobic, oppressive heat, and there's so much at stake—that's sexy in itself." On the surface, Maggie wants Brick to sleep with her so that she can produce an heir and claim their share of her father-in-law's estate. But she's fighting for something more primal. "There's a true love story here—as twisted and blistering as it is," Johansson says. "If Maggie sometimes acts manipulative, it's only because she's a survivor, and she's married to this man and they promised something to each other, and God damn it, we're going to figure it out—I'm going to figure it out." Johansson clearly relates to Maggie: "I understand what it's like to be alone in a relationship with somebody, especially when you feel that you're, at times, the only one willing to fight to make it work. And when someone ignores your needs or doesn't want to talk about it—I know what that can do to your psyche."

Walker, who is married to the actress Mamie Gummer, also recognizes certain dynamics in the play, though he is loath to make explicit connections. "I knew some Bricks growing up, and, yeah, this play hits pretty close to home," he says. "But it's private." After some pressing, he adds, "I can certainly relate to his need to dodge reality—in very much the same way that I'm dodging this question." Maybe Johansson's passion and Walker's reticence are constitutional, or maybe I'm watching Maggie and Brick emerge.

Best known as a director-choreographer of Broadway musicals (*How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*), Ashford has also directed the Olivier-winning *Streetcar Named Desire*, with Rachel Weisz, and *Anna Christie*, with Jude Law, at London's Donmar Warehouse. But he insists that, like those productions, this *Cat* (whose cast also includes Ciarán Hinds as the dying patriarch, Big Daddy) won't just be a star vehicle. "It's our job to take these characters off their pedestals and put them back into the play," Ashford says. "This isn't Scarlett Johansson does her Maggie—it's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*." □