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Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Reviewed by Holly Bartges

Several actors portrayed George and Martha on Broadway in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. When the subject creeps into conversation, however, it is Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor who spring to mind from their awesome performances in the 1966 film.

After seeing Paragon's blockbuster breath taking production at The Phoenix Theatre, Taylor and Burton may well take a backseat, at least in the second row. The names that will immediately come to mind will be Sam Gregory and Martha Harmon Pardee. Not only Gregory and Pardee will be etched in the mind, so also Barbra Andrews as Honey and Ed Cord as Nick.

Director Warren Sherrill brought together the over-the-top exquisite cast and dug into the heart of Edward Albee's riveting great American classic. Nominated for the 1962 Pulitzer Prize, Columbia University's Board of Trustees who oversees the final decision, backed down with cold feet because of its controversial honest, forthright colorful language. Almost second nature today, the American public reeled over the language at the time. No play was given a Pulitzer that year. Virginia Woolf did garner a New York Drama Desk Award and a Tony for Best Play. Even though some dialogue was cut from the film downplaying the political influence, Virginia Woolf was nominated for all segments in the Oscars, winning five.

David LaFont designed the comfortable living room set in the middle of a New England campus. The walls decorated with bookcases lined with books expected of a history professor. Never mind a couple of *Reader's Digest* books found their way onto the shelves. Maybe Martha reads them to focus her tortured mind while creating new games for the two of them while George is in class. Then again; maybe not.

It matters little.

What truly matters is the intensity emanating from George and Martha's relationship, met with the intrigue, horror, and confusion by Honey and Nick.

Erection of the Berlin Wall and the impact of the Cold War influenced Albee's thinking. Deliberately confining the play to the living room represented the microcosm where Albee explores the death of the American Dream. Battle weary George represents the Old American Dream. Albee deliberately named Nick after Nikita Khrushchev. Interesting throughout the play Nick is never once referred to by name.

In spite of the cold War reference, and the exploration of the death of the American Dream, the brilliant writing and character development moves the play into a depth of elements from the individual to segmented groups, to national and world stages. Wherever and however it hits home, it applies.



Front to Back, Left to Right: **Martha Harmon Pardee and Barbra Andrews, Ed Cord and Sam Gregory in Paragon Theatre Company's production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*.**

Location

Paragon Theatre Company: Phoenix Theatre
1124 Santa Fe Drive;
Denver, Colorado

When

Thursday-Saturday: 7:30 PM

Dates

Now showing through August 11, 2007

Tickets

\$19.00 (Thursdays 2 for the price of 1)

Reservations

Box Office: (303) 300-2210 or

www.paragontheatre.com

Martha's father is President of this small New England College. Once-upon-a-time Martha clung to a dream that George would become Head of the History Department. For four weeks he had the opportunity, but administration wasn't his cup of tea.

Disappointed?

Embarrassed?

Ashamed?

On an initial glimpse into their lives, one might assume those emotions describe Martha, but this is a highly-complicated intelligent woman as George is a highly complicated intelligent man.

Mind games keep them on edge. Mind games glue them together. Mind games feed their relationship no matter how hurtful, brutal, or how far the games dig into their tortured souls.

With Albee's ability to look into the heart of the American society shaping representative characters so George and Martha take on a distinct likeness to U.S. society.

There is something enviable about George and Martha's relationship digging and squirming, digging some more, cutting, tearing, and hurting, coming up for air laughing. There's no pussy footing between the two of them, no pretense, no walking on egg shells, no concern over political correctness, no worry about hurting anyone's feelings, no worry if someone doesn't get their way they will shut down picking up their marbles and going home. Their love, and need for each other reaches a depth no game, no matter how vicious, can unearth.

Pardee's character development reaches into the soul of humanity wrapping her in a bubbled illusion. Funny, mean, cruel Martha knows which buttons to punch and puncture to turn George upside down. Pardee takes the breath away with every word, every sound, and every move. Overstepping her boundaries, breaking an agreement with George, referring to a child supposedly celebrating his 21st Birthday tomorrow, a child that never existed becomes her crumbling downfall.

Andrews gives us a pathetic naive little girl dressed in women's clothing with a penchant for Brandy her system doesn't know what to do with, dissolving when she discovers in the midst of the Get The Guests Game why Nick married her. Andrews provokes smiles and giggles from her no-pain consistent Looney Brandy induced smiles and at the same time grabs the breath while Andrews reduces her to disillusionment. Astonishing in the manner Andrews captivates this insecure wobbly personality.

Cord's unsettled Nick feels trapped in a marriage that wouldn't survive one week of George and Martha's punching games. Duped, confused, nervous, because of a false pregnancy, wanting to run away from the chaos, compelled to confide in George, mesmerized and rattled over Martha's attention, Cord magnificently lays it all out in force, giving strength to an uncertain character from the inside out.

Gregory's playful, violent, brutal George vacillates between destroyed and destroying, and yet a fullness of George emerges with deep compassion when the smoke-ringed illusion clears the air. He loves Martha, needs Martha, as she needs him. Gregory is simply exhaustingly awesome with his integration of this intelligent harried history professor.

In our society too many relationships of all sizes and shapes fall to pieces because defensive walls crumble too soon, feelings get hurt, people can't always have their way, someone always has to be in control. Someone always has to be right, no matter how wrong they may be. Polite society avoids stepping on toes, avoids confrontation, avoids stretched growth, avoids honest relationships, avoids finding out how deep one's love and commitment can really go.

Not George and Martha. They have just returned from one of her father's soirees at 2:00 AM. Both have drunk a great deal. Both tired beyond measure. Because her father told her to take care of a new professor and his young wife Nick and Honey, Martha invited them over then and now.

Precisely and intelligently written, dialogue meets dialogue head on. New to the area, with careful uncertain steps, Nick and Honey walk into a game already in mid flight.

Singing who's afraid of Virginia Woolf deemed academically ironic and hysterically funny for the partygoers. In the solitude of the living room the sing song lyrics takes a couple of sharp right turns, turning deadly. Who's afraid of the unknown? Of life? Of fear? Of loneliness? Of disassociation? Evaporated Hope? Destroyed dreams? Dissipated illusions?

Jacob Welch's lighting design punctuates the atmosphere for the three-act play matching the mood swings from soft, to dark, from light-hearted to played out destruction.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? can be interpreted on a variety of different levels, always the mark of a classic play. Paragon, through the minutest detail, surrenders itself to its depth and vision.

Virginia Woolf must be on the "Have-To-See" list because of where it travels, how it explores and the finely-tuned detailed developed characters. It's going to be a topic of conversation for a long time, as well it should be.

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