

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

Appeared in - The Australian

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf

by Edward Albee

State Theatre Company

Adelaide Festival Centre, The Space

Until 13 September. Bookings at BASS 131 246

Tickets \$16.50 - \$ 42.

Poor Virginia Woolf. She is almost as famous for belonging in the quirky title of Edward Albee's play as she is for *To The Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway*. A whole generation has wondered how she could be so scary, when, in fact, she has been commandeered only for the sake of a literary joke. Who's afraid of the big bad wolf? is a spell to ward off the unknown and the all-too familiar. And Albee's celebrated play, about two couples locked in a marathon game of truth or dare, examines both the comfort of illusions and the fragility of reality.

Set in the small University town of New Carthage in 1962, the play is, in the tradition of Eugene O'Neill, a long day's journey into night for George, a History professor, and his wife Martha, as well as their guests Nick, newly appointed to the Biology department, and his young wife Honey. It is an all-too-familiar night for George and Martha whose co-dependence hinges on a bitter and wounding war of words. Then, when gormless Honey and the ambitious Nick enter, they have just what they most crave, an audience, witnesses to their torment. Now the alliterative games can begin - Humiliate the Host, Hump the Hostess and Get the Guests.

But the play has more than a domestic focus. George and Martha have echoes of George Washington and his wife, and Albee's play has an Absurdist, symbolic twist as it shows the liberal American middle class immobilised by neurosis and unable to respond to - George's term for Nick - "Wave-of-the-future boys."

Director David Field is intent on finding these larger implications and reminding us that social construction begins with the decor. As the play begins, Victoria Lamb's cutaway set of George and Martha's bookish living room is assembled in front of our eyes. This is not seamless naturalism but suggests instead a black comedy of manners with overtones of Pinter and even Beckett.

The performances serve this. Honey, often over-played for psychological complexity, is, from Loretta Brades, more your Legal Blonde. She is a player in the events nonetheless, and her complicity with George in the final revelations is telling. Nathan Page is excellent as Nick, looking for the main chances, the young man on the ascendant, the biologist fit to survive.

As Martha, Rosalba Clemente has a key role but her performance is disappointingly flippant and mannered and only seems to gain a dramatic centre in the final minutes of the play. It is instead Peter Kowitz as George, the historian, who captures Albee's larger ambitions. In many ways he is the playwright's voice and has most of the best lines, but Kowitz makes the most of his chances with a memorable performance. With this strong production State Theatre reminds us it's not Virginia Woolf we should be afraid of, but the prophetic insights of Edward Albee.