



STILL POWERFUL 50 YEARS LATER: (left to right) Tracey Letts, Carrie Coon, Amy Morton & Madison Dirks in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Photo: Michael Brosilow



Theater Review

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

50th anniversary revival of Albee classic still a masterpiece

WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?

Written by Edward Albee

Directed by Pam McKinnon

Booth Theatre

222 West 45th Street

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By Scott Harrah

Although it is one of the best American dramas of the 20th century, Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is not a show that has been revived many times since its original 1962 production, and for good reason. It is an epic piece of complicated theater, still as cutting-edge, rhythmic, and relevant as it was half a century ago. It is also incredibly tricky to cast because the lead characters, George and Martha, are so iconic. Mention this play and theater lovers immediately think of either Arthur Hill and Uta Hagen in the first Broadway mounting, the 2005 revival with Bill Irwin and Kathleen Turner, or the classic Hollywood adaptation, directed by Mike Nichols and starring Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. Although it is exciting to have *Virginia Woolf* back on the New York stage for its 50th anniversary, director Pam MacKinnon's interpretation may not please all true Albee aficionados and purists.

It is a complete, bracing thrill to see Tracey Letts (best known as the Tony-winning playwright of *August: Osage County*) playing the middle-aged college professor, George, and giving one of the best, solid renditions of the character most fans will experience in this lifetime. It is chilling watching him slowly unravel as Martha antagonizes him repeatedly, until he finally lashes back at her domineering ways.

However, Amy Morton's take on wife Martha immediately leaves us feeling that something is missing from the very first scene. When she quotes Bette Davis, Martha is supposed to say the now-historical line "What a dump" with the over-the-top ferocity and brash vigor of a character that is, well, a caricature herself. As the three-act saga progresses, Ms. Morton's Martha is continuously reserved and hollow, when she should be an in-your-face, bitter harridan, spewing venom in each of Albee's brilliant lines. Even Ms. Morton's delivery of one of the show's other famous lines, "I do not bray!" seems more like a nervous recitation than genuine braying. If this more refined, reserved Martha was director Pam MacKinnon's idea, it was a wrong choice.

Although she lacks the voluptuous physical presence of traditional Marthas, Ms. Morton certainly has the acting chops to pull of the role, as anyone who saw her Tony-nominated performance in Mr. Letts' *August: Osage County* can attest.

Carrie Coon's portrayal of Honey, the wife of young biology professor Nick (Madison Dirks), is manic virtuosity from start to finish. Honey and Nick are invited to the home of George and Martha for late-night drinking and perverse verbal parlor games, and Ms. Coon is often mesmerizing as a woman who laughs at George's bizarre jokes, erupts with numerous hyperbolic mannerisms, drinks, and gets sick from all the alcohol.

Mr. Dirks is less convincing as Nick. Although he is supposed to only be 28, many years younger than George, Mr. Dirks does not seem like it. Nick is supposed to be athletic, handsome and a threat to George as Martha flirts and makes more than a few moves on him.

In an age when revivals of American plays fill most of the Broadway roster and often do not live up to the originals, this production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, despite its shortcomings, still smolders with the crackling dialogue, gut-wrenching honesty and emotional brutality that established it as a masterpiece. This outstanding show has set the bar quite high for the 2012-2013 theatrical season.

Edited by Scott Harrah

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