

SCENES FROM A MARRIAGE

The Tony Award-winning production of the American classic, *Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* comes to the Kennedy Center next month.

By Gerard Raymond

“Laughter followed by gasps, as the characters wounded one another with words, as the play moved inexorably to its final catharsis,” is how Mel Gussow recalled the astonishing opening night of *Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Reviewing the October 1962 Broadway premiere in *Newsweek* the late critic and journalist hailed the play as “a brilliantly

original work of art—an excoriating theatrical experience, surging with shocks of recognition and dramatic fire.” He added, “It will be igniting Broadway for some time to come.”

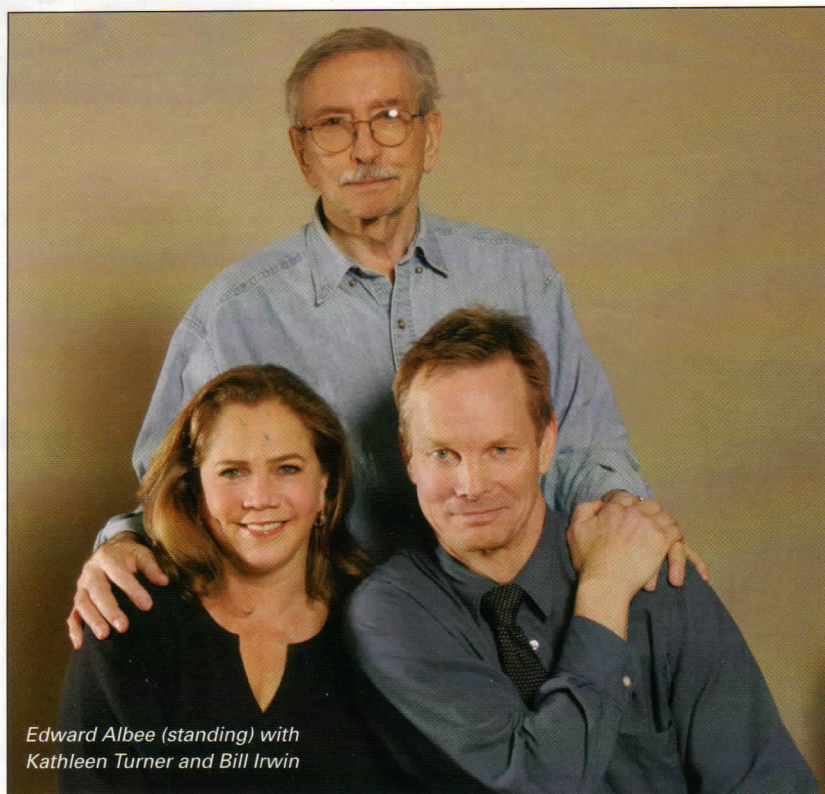
More than four decades later that prophesy still holds true. Albee's witty and shattering work hasn't lost any of its power to hold an audience in thrall.

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Kathleen Turner and Bill Irwin in *Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

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Edward Albee (standing) with Kathleen Turner and Bill Irwin

Director Anthony Page's insightful revival starring Kathleen Turner and Bill Irwin—which begins a national tour in the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theater January 4–28 after exhilarating Broadway audiences in 2005—confirms the enduring status of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as a classic of the American theater.

Albee had already distinguished himself off-Broadway, and also in Europe, with several short plays before *Virginia Woolf*, but this extraordinary Broadway debut catapulted him into the highest rank of American dramatists, joining the likes of Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller. Since then the playwright has earned countless honors including three Pulitzer Prizes and

three Tony Awards; the most recent accolades were for his latest new work on Broadway, *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* Today, at age 78, he is generally regarded as the country's greatest living—and still active—playwright.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? was a sensation when it arrived on Broadway. It sharply divided the critics with as many detractors as it had champions. Those who felt offended by the play and its language didn't hesitate to condemn it. "A sick play for sick people" declared one critic, "For Dirty-Minded Females Only" advised another. The majority of the members of the Pulitzer Prize advisory board at the time hated it as well, leading to a notorious decision not to

award a prize for drama that year over the objections of their own expert jury who had recommended Albee for the prize. The controversy generated by the play however fueled the box office and the production enjoyed a successful run of 664 performances through May 1964. Two years later it made headlines again with the release of the celebrated movie version starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton.

the youngest elected American President, was in the White House. Real and imagined fears of the Cold War were in the air, and within days of the play's opening night the nation would collectively hold its breath during the face-off between America and the Soviet Union over nuclear deployment in Cuba. Albee's advent on Broadway, at age 34, heralded the emergence of a new wave of playwrights; Sam Shepard, Lanford

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To Broadway audiences of the early 1960s, *Virginia Woolf* must have been bracing and even shocking. They had, of course, seen bickering couples on stage before. But the alcohol-soaked, high-stakes domestic battle between a seemingly milquetoast, middle-aged professor and his sexually provocative wife, fought out into the wee hours of the morning in the presence of their guests, a younger couple who are both spectators and unwitting participants, was quite unlike the prevalent commercial fare on the Great White Way.

The times were indeed a-changing. Theaters off-Broadway were producing more daring and experimental work reflecting a new social and cultural environment. The Permissive Sixties as we have come to know them were still a few years away, but the forces that brought about radical changes were already gathering momentum. The comfortable Eisenhower era was over and Kennedy,

Wilson, John Guare, and David Mamet are among the many who acknowledge his powerful influence.

Many commentators have noted an underlying theme of truth versus illusion in the enduring classics of the American stage. Albee himself has acknowledged a thematic connection to O'Neill's 1946 work, *The Iceman Cometh*, in which the playwright demonstrates how people cannot live without "pipe dreams" or false illusions. Typically, Albee argues the reverse. His unsparing and unsentimental, yet ultimately invigorating view of life, sets his classic play apart from the others like *Iceman* that came before. In Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which premiered in 1947, the romantically inclined Blanche, and those around her, would rather accept madness than face the possibility that she may have been raped by her brother-in-law. In Miller's seminal 1949 work, *Death of a Salesman*, the anti-hero clings to his illu-

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sions of the American Dream even if it means committing suicide to realize it for his sons. Albee's sparring, middle-aged couple, on the other hand, go through a grueling exorcism to strip away all the fictions that have made their lives bearable up to that point. They do this in order to find a way to renew themselves.



A scene from Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

CARDOL ROSEGG

In a preface to the published version of *The American Dream*, his short play produced in New York the year before *Virginia Woolf*, Albee described that earlier work as “an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society,” adding “it is a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen.”

The quirky title of Albee's most famous play was inspired by a saying that he noticed in the late 1950s scrawled on a mirror in a Greenwich Village bar. An obvious riff on the song title “Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?”, Albee says the graffiti meant, “Who's afraid of living without delusions?” In April 2006, he told students at Dartmouth College, “I think that I postulate that it's okay to have false illusions so long as you're on to yourself and know that they're false.” The ringing challenge implied by the question in the title of Albee's classic is both personal and national, as relevant today as when it was first posed almost 45 years ago.

And it's no coincidence that they're named George and Martha, the names of the nation's equally childless first family. Albee has said he meant this to be a “small irony, not a large truth.” But it's not hard to read the play as an examination of the state of the nation as much as that of a foundering marriage.

“Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?” asks George of Martha at the end of the play. There is both quiet devastation and hope for the future in the answer.

Gerard Raymond writes frequently about theater.