THE WESTON PLAYHOUSE THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS

WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?

SHOW NOTES 2019
Synopsis

It's two o'clock in the morning when George and Martha return home from a college faculty party, but the night has only just begun. An evening of fun and games takes a dark turn as the line between reality and illusion blurs. As stirring and provocative today as it was when it premiered, this classic asks what we are willing to do to, and for, the people we love.

About the Author

Edward Albee

Edward Albee was given up for adoption shortly after his birth on March 12, 1928 in Washington D.C. Although Albee knew he was adopted by the age of six, he only learned the few details of the circumstances of his birth after his adoptive mother’s death in 1989: his biological father abandoned his mother Louise Harvey and she gave up her son Edward Harvey to an adoption agency two weeks after his birth. Reed and Frances Albee became his foster parents, bringing him to their home in Larchmont, New York when he was only 18 days old; they officially adopted him on February 1, 1929 and changed his name to Edward Franklin Albee III.

Albee moved into New York’s Greenwich Village, where he supported himself with odd jobs while learning to write plays. Primarily in his early plays, Albee’s work had various representations of the LGBTQIA community often challenging the image of a heterosexual marriage. Despite challenging society's views about the gay community, he did not view himself as an LGBT advocate. Albee’s work typically criticized the American dream. His first play, The Zoo Story, which was written in three weeks, was first staged in Berlin in 1959 before eventually premiering Off-Broadway in 1960. His next play, The Death of Bessie Smith, similarly premiered in Berlin before arriving in New York. Albee’s most iconic play, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, opened on Broadway at the Billy Rose Theatre on October 13, 1962, and closed on May 16, 1964, after five previews and 664 performances. The controversial play won the Tony Award for Best Play in 1963 and was selected for the 1963 Pulitzer Prize by the award’s drama jury, but was overruled by the advisory committee, which elected not to give a drama award at all. The two members of the jury, John Mason Brown and John Gassner, subsequently resigned in protest. An Academy Award-winning film adaptation of the controversial play was released in 1966 starring Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, George Segal, and Sandy Dennis. In 2013, the film was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant”. According to The New York Times, Albee was “widely considered to be the foremost American playwright of his generation.” Most recently, he served as a distinguished professor at the University of Houston, where he taught playwriting.

Albee died at his home in Montauk, New York, on September 16, 2016, aged 88.

Bio courtesy of the Edward Albee Society.
'VIRGINIA WOOLF' AND THE PULITZER PRIZE

Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? premiered in 1962, marking soon-to-be legendary playwright Edward Albee’s Broadway debut. The 34-year-old’s examination of George and Martha’s tumultuous relationship and critique of the nuclear family structure was considered shocking by many. While the play’s use of profanity and impoliteness left some audience members’ mouths agape, it was a critical success. Woolf took home both the 1963 Tony Award and Drama Critics’ Circle Award. The subsequent movie received numerous Academy Award nominations, winning five at the 1967 ceremony. Columbia Records even produced a “cast album” of the play, transporting George, Martha, Nick, and Honey to living rooms across America.

When it came to the Pulitzer Prize, however, the committee at Columbia University was not so keen on rewarding Albee for his daring portrayal of married life on an elite college campus. While several of the jurors nominated the piece and were ultimately set to award Woolf the prize, the committee voted to overturn its original decision at the last minute. In fact, the group was so divided on the merits of the play that no drama received the Pulitzer Prize that year.

At the time, the Pulitzer Prize in Drama was awarded to “the [best new] American play, preferably original in its source and dealing with American life, which shall represent in marked fashion the educational value and power of the stage.” The committee was also encouraged to select a play that “uplifted” audiences. While some jurors were unfazed by the more unpleasant facets of the play, others found it to be “unwholesome.” John Hohenberg, the Pulitzer Prize administrator from 1953 to 1975, described Woolf as “an alcoholic embellishment of a searing marital conflict.” Conversely, juror John Gassner wrote, “I see no insuperable objection to the work on the grounds of immorality, lubricity, or scatology once one reflects that we cannot expect the vital plays of our period, whether we like this period or not, to abide by Victorian standards.”

As a result of the conflict, the word “uplift” was removed from the selection guidelines the following year. Soon after Columbia announced there would be no Prize awarded for drama that year, Gassner resigned from the Pulitzer Advisory Committee. His colleague John Mason Brown asked Columbia’s Board of Trustees to reject his reappointment. “Although I can’t pretend that Who’s Afraid makes for a pleasant evening at the theater,” wrote Brown in his evaluation of the play, “I do know that it presents an unforgettable one.”

Albee eventually won his first Pulitzer Prize four years later for his play A Delicate Balance. He would be nominated for the award five times and win three before his death in 2016.

Source: www.pulitzer.org
AN INTERVIEW WITH KATHLEEN MCELFRESH

Rachel Liff: What was your first impression of Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?? Has it changed over time?

Kathleen McElfresh: Before reading the script again, my memory of both seeing and reading the play in years past was alcohol, anger and a lot of yelling. As we’ve worked on this production the play continues to reveal to me it’s soft underbelly and sharp study of our failings, our love, our will to survive.

RL: What excites you about playing Martha?

KM: When I was standing in front of my clown teacher in drama school, trying to discover what my clown’s identity was… my first attempt, a shy, mischievous imp of a clown, was rejected by her. Then I tried to eat my shoe and everything else in sight which my clown teacher embraced as my clown’s true nature. Martha’s also got a great big appetite and I enjoy embracing that which I usually feel a little apologetic about embracing.

RL: What have been the most challenging and most rewarding parts of this process?

KM: It’s a beast of a play. It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever worked on. And the most fun. Being in a room with these artists has been heaven.

RL: How does it feel to come back to Weston?

KM: In 2010 I came to Weston with my new husband and stepson. In 2014 I came also with my three year old. And now in 2019 to be here with all those guys plus a two year old, makes me feel full of gratitude.

RL: Why perform Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? today?

KM: Toni Morrison said, “We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.” With this play Albee leaves us with hope, always hope.
DESIGNS AND RENDERINGS

Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* takes place over the course of one night in a couple’s living room. Take a look at how our designers brought this drama to life.

Courtesy of Costume Designer Anya Klepikov

Courtesy of Scenic Designer Dane Laffrey
READING LIST

Other Plays by Edward Albee

A Delicate Balance
The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?
Three Tall Women
Seascape
The Zoo Story

Related Reading


Filmography

Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? directed by Mike Nichols, 1966

The Weston Playhouse Theatre Company encourages patrons to visit their local library and shop local.
Show Notes are tailor-made audience guides that accompany every production. They allow patrons and company members to dive into each show and gain well-rounded understanding of what makes this production unique. You can find Show Notes in the lobby before each performance or online at westonplayhouse.org.

Compiled by:
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