

Nineteenth Season
TENNESSEE REPERTORY THEATRE
David Grapes, Producing Artistic Director

*Who's Afraid of
Virginia Woolf?*
by Edward Albee

Director
David Grapes**

Scenic Design
Julie Meador

Lighting Design
Elizabeth A. Deem

Properties Master
Steven Lepley

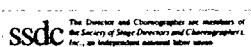
Dramaturg
Robert Neblett**

Costume Design
Polly Boersig***

Sound Design
Darin E. Karnes

Production Stage Manager
Erin Joy Swank*

* Member of Actors' Equity Association
**Member Society of Directors & Choreographers
***United Scenic Artist



Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is presented by special arrangement with Samuel French, Inc.



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SCENE

LIGHTING 100

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DRAMA TURG NOTES

Who's Afraid of *Virginia Woolf*? is arguably the most infamous American play of the twentieth century, and George and Martha have become two of the most memorable characters in the entire theatrical canon. With its devastatingly raw language and fiery sexual intensity, *Virginia Woolf* shocked audiences in 1962 by breaking down deeply-ingrained barriers of social propriety and envisioning a level of psychological violence that rivals any amount of literal bloodshed. And it continues to horrify us today, even though at times it seems that we are constantly inundated by the media with desensitizing portrayals of dysfunctional family dynamics, so much so that they often appear to be the status quo.

Director David Grapes has approached this production, which surprisingly marks award-winning playwright Edward Albee's debut on the Tennessee Rep stage, as an epic battle of wills from which arises no clearly discernible victor. His central visual concept, mirrored in the claustrophobic living room set created by designer Julia Meador, is that of a boxing ring in which polite party games like charades and musical chairs are abandoned in favor of more savage, bloodthirsty entertainment. The veteran couple has fashioned its own esoteric rules for vicious diversions like "Humiliate the Host," "Hump the Hostess," "Get the Guests," and "Bringing Up Baby," much to the confusion and dismay of their younger counterparts. These are illogical games of emotional torture, from which there is no escape.

Domestic bliss gives way to a title match between George and Martha, during which newcomers Nick and Honey are

transformed from passive spectators into unwitting sparring partners. Albee's couples slug it out with bourbon-soaked insults, lascivious indiscretions, and unforgivable betrayals of each other's darkest secrets. In this free-for-all arena devoid of referees, no one is spared from disorienting sucker punches that hit below the belt. However, no one can be counted out either in this trial, which is in the end an endurance test more than a show of brute strength, until George's final strike of malice against his wife, which decimates her utterly.

This is a play about transformation. We as audience are changed from observers into voyeurs, unable to tear ourselves away from the hideous inhumanity unfolding before us. Nick and Honey lose their innocence in this unparalleled battle of wills. And George and Martha must finally confront the unspeakable deception that has plagued their marriage for years. Bit by bit, veneers of modesty and decorum are stripped away, revealing the unique vulnerabilities of each of the players until they are exposed and defenseless, prime targets for the terrible emotional violation that is visited upon them all.

This is a play of unmatched cruelty and psychological violence, and yet ultimately it is a love story. From the emotional devastation of George and Martha's sadistic parlor games arises a fresh chance for new beginnings, a hope that their doomed marriage may yet be salvaged. Lies and disguises melt away with the coming of the dawn, their personal demons have been exorcised, and they are finally able to see each other honestly and unencumbered by the emotional baggage that has prevented them from experiencing true intimacy in their relationship.

— Robert Neblett, Production Dramaturg