

Michael Billington sees new life – and new meaning – breathed into Edward Albee's classic

Who's afraid of politics?

The revelation

THIS title is a godsend: Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf? But what is Edward Albee's play really about? Marriage? Language? Truth and illusion? All those things. But watching Howard Davies's exhilarating revival at the Almeida I realised that Albee's intimate epic is a highly political play about America. Initially labelled an Absurdist, Albee is really a committed social commentator.

Like all good plays, Virginia Woolf operates on any number of levels. At its most basic it is a black Strindbergian comedy—not unlike The Dance Of Death—about a couple who exist in a permanent state of love-hate. George and Martha, a New England professor and his older wife, bitch, booze, day each other alive and role-play for their unfortunate guests: a young biologist and his up-chucking wife. Expert at probing each other's weaknesses, George and Martha exist in a state of chronic dependence: their marriage is sustained not just by the idea of a fantasy son but by a paralyzing fear of solitude and death.

But Albee's play is political metaphor as much as studied domestic realism. As Christopher Bigsby shrewdly notes in the programme, the very names of George and Martha evoke the Washingtons, the college itself is situated in New Carthage and George, while his wife is playing adulterous games in the kitchen, curls up with Spengler's *The Decline Of The West*. Even the choice of professions is highly significant. Unable to face reality George, as a historian, seeks comforting patterns in the past while Nick, as a biologist, is credited with a plan for chromosome-alteration that will produce perfect specimens in the future. Not to exclude religion, Albee reminds us that Nick's father-in-law was a travelling preacher who reconciled God and Mammon.

You can't accuse Albee of lack of ambition: he is writing about the decline of western civilisation. If anything I find his views too narrowly deterministic. George, using history as form of escape, clearly represents the failure of humanism while Nick is meant to embody a totalitarian future that destroys diversity. But, even if the sense of doom is oppressive, one should remember that Albee wrote the play in the early 1960s when America was slowly emerging from the narcotic Eisenhower years and when peace was seen to depend on the balance of terror. Maybe the fact that George and Martha finally acknowledge the need to swap illusion for reality is even a symbol of



Drink it in . . . Diana Rigg produces a stunning performance as Martha

the early hopes of the Kennedy era. I am not suggesting that people are drawn to *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* by its politics: simply that the play is much more than a marathon bickerfest and that Albee is an impassioned social critic. Two years ago he told me that he liked plays to be "useful, not merely decorative" and that he feared that America was in danger of becoming "a non-participatory semi-democracy". This was clearly a man deeply concerned by the state of the Union.

In Howard Davies he has also found an ideally sympathetic interpreter who understands that Albee's play is both domestic and comic. John Napier's set is a cluttered campus living-room that, like the play itself, opens up on to wider territory. And the actors visibly grasp that the play offers a battle of ideas as well as egos.

David Suchet's marvellous George is both a ruthless pamese-player and a man who hides his sense of disappointment behind a sardonic exterior: watching him run intellectual rings round the hapless Nick, it struck me that George was the ancestor of all those Simon Gray academics who conceal their hurts behind a relentless one-upmanship. What the illustrious Diana Rigg brings to the party as Martha is also much more than the conventional blowy drunk: she presents us with a highly intelligent woman conscious of her power as the college president's daughter, yet who at the same time is haunted by self-disgust. The most moving moment in Rigg's stunning performance is her admission that George has made "the hideous, the hurting, the insulting mistake of loving me and must be punished for it".

Lloyd Owen and Clare Holman as Nick and Honey also prove that their characters are much more than punchbaps for the older heavyweights. It is very much a team show in which all four characters seem to embody variant aspects of Albee's vision of the collapsed American Dream.

Some say it's too long. But, as in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, the epic breadth seems to me the point. We become part of the ritual in which the characters slug it out until a kind of exhaustion sets in. Albee had O'Neill in mind but I am not sure that his is not the greater play. In *Long Day's Journey* O'Neill dramatises his own family's tribulations: Albee's achievement is that he puts on stage a much larger slice of his scarred and fatigued Republic. And to those who complain, like Sam Goldwyn, that messages are far Western Union, one can only retort that Albee himself once worked for them.

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