

# 'It's a ferocious fandango of sparring and sex during a long night's journey into day'

## THEATRE

By Michael Coveney

**E**dward Albee returned from the professional near-death with *Three Tall Women*, but last play in years. In the programme for the latest

knockout revival of his early success, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), he pondered the likelihood of playwrights memorialised for just one big play.

Tough, but true. Virginia Woolf's a great play, and Albee's written nothing finer. Last week's opening at the Almeida in Kingston of Howard Davies' fascinating revival starring Diana Rigg and David Schofield — both gracing the performance of their careers — has already entered theatre legend. The show is sold out and transfers immediately to the Albany (and probably Broadway beyond) in November.

In this classic long night's journey into day, the clock ticks round to dawn and George and Martha Washington — failed middle-aged bachelors — are introduced to the daughter of the New England university president, six years his senior — entertain a new college couple, a biology tutor and his edgy wife, for yet more drinks and other drinks. The play gets the guests and thump the banter, trying desperately with hysterical confidence of having a child who never comes home.

There are Oedipal secrets here, but also a ferocious bluntness of social sparring and brutally coded sexual monologue. Above all, the text is a beautifully turned artefact in which, as the critic Christopher Isherwood has said, experience has been substituted with language.

As dramatic literature, *Who's Afraid* is poised between the last great surge of American postwar playwrighting of Williams and Miller and the off-Broadway mid-60s explosion. It never betrays as a momentary piece of fast opportunity. You climb aboard an emotional rollercoaster that is also a backing, disturbing discovery.

The bitter atmosphere of this is mixed with a mood of enlightening social attraction: like the quavering in Coveney's *Private Lives*, Albee's couples are paired off in emotional weapons and losses. The play is a dance of the damned, a biological fight to the death, led by Stage's nervous, still beautiful Martha in alibi, alpha-striped jingling and a springy stop of orange hair. The tension comes from the routine of abuse and dissent rehearsed for a new audience — Lloyd Owen's uncharacteristically good Nick and Charles Hitchman as his messy spouses.

Richard Durrant and Elizabeth Taylor never made a better fit together, but Davies's production is far more humorous and, finally, powerful, thanks to Schofield's daring, aerobic delivery, while Rigg's

scraped the vowels off the back of his throat and seemed to curl up and die behind his spectacles. Schofield rules the roost with the mercurial modulation of a man for whom defiance is the most potent weapon of attack. This makes Rigg's attacks all the more vulnerable, all the more moving.

If Albee drew you in, Samuel Beckett pumps you up. This, at least, is the original view of Peter Brook, whose new production of Beckett's *Les Bannis* (*Happy Days*) — like the Albee, dating from 1962 — opened on Wednesday at his theatre in North Uxbridge in Paris. The whole idea of Beckettian ingenuity is false, says Brook in a programme note. Probs, mistakes, because maybe that's a con, a great orator unique, most done at their own expense or interest.

The play was written first in English, and then performed famously in French by Madeline Renaud (whose performance I saw at a World Theatre Season in 1963). Beckett's biographer James Knowles has a wonderful bilingual edition that points out the differences. In Paris, the new Francophone *Woolf* — turned up to her waist in a volcanic sand dune in the first act, up to her neck in the second — is a ritual heavy, defiant and of comic desperation in Nabokov's airy, elegant and finally irresistible performance. She is more Whimsy, shaped in sand and peels her constrictive prison around more redoubtable generalised burrows than volcanic Lancelotti, a very sensible hand where she systematically lays out the elements of her madcap in the glaring sun.

The pitifully appropriate *Who's Afraid* (which I had read and read behind her, later, he murmured with a wistful smile) and black support stretched like a lizard slipping down the slope, unable quite to reach the top and show her (or his?) teeth off. The tone, and glances of loving contempt cast in his direction by the status of marvellous misery is something I shall not easily forget. Here indeed is a concentrated marriage of George and Martha's terrifying impasse.

A great small play such as *On Les Bannis* short can say everything about the human condition, but we still need the epic ambition of Robert LePage to join up the dots in our hectic modern lives. The *Bannis* of *Streams of the River Osa* at the Royal National Theatre (two complete show today and two more next week) and *Part One* on Thursday, *Part Two* on Wednesday and *Friday* is a double original piece of imaginative theatre that binds East and West, order and chaos, beauty and the bomb, in a cunningly well-structured narrative over five decades.

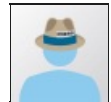
LePage's production was three hours long at the Edinburgh Festival of 1986. Two months later, it had improved immeasurably in Manchester



Diana Rigg and David Schofield in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 'Climb aboard an emotional rollercoaster that is also a backing disaster.' Photograph by Neil Libbert

A five-hour version has now been transplanted by the Royal National Theatre from its original Edinburgh Festival of 1986. The original opens around the Edinburgh Festival of 1986. Two months later, it had improved immeasurably in Manchester five times as a bold format of a Zen monastic ruse Hiroshima. In 1966 an American soldier is photographing the consequences of the catastrophe. Hiroshima has now been structured by two brothers, both called Jeffrey, products of the postwar years, bound by their father to Japan and America. LePage's seven streams flow through seven onstage screens, a setting marked off with a platform and a gravel forestage above, joined, inside of one of the Jeffreys, entrance with Aldo's map, show in the death camp; the dance of displacement finally represented by characters interweaving within Madeline Butterfly's kitchen, which is also the ritual wedding dress of it in Stockholm, Paris or New York before the year's end.

# Who's Afraid Coveney Observer



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