

All hail the great dame

FIRST NIGHT
by
Nicholas de Jongh
Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? *The Almeida* ★★

Diana Rigg finds a new tragic voice

IT IS not just the most enthralling marriage play of the post-war period in which partners strike each other's nerve points like malicious fiends, Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* looks, in this terrific revival, like a classic revelation of how far we depend on fantasies and illusions to sustain our unsatisfactory lives.

In 1962 when the play was premiered in New York, audiences were reluctant to sympathise with the idea of a childless American couple who had married for a private fantasy for twenty-one years of having a son. Last night the shocking climactic scene when the husband brings the dream of parenthood to a deathly finale comes across as one of those defining moments in modern theatre — an image of the grief caused when people are forced to face up to heart reality.

And Diana Rigg, voice big, loud and hoarse with despair, discovers an overwhelming emotional power new to her — and to us. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is more than a mere psychodrama, an acid commentary of manners which ranges across the blooded battlefields of marriage.



Best performance of her career: Dame Diana Rigg with Lloyd Owen

Albee provides enough hints and allusions to make it clear his play was a damning verdict on society. As the alcohol flows freely into already well-lashed bodies, tongues are loosened and inhibitions cast aside in the course of a very dark night of drunkenness. That truth holds far truer today, though Howard Davies's production keeps a domestic emphasis. John Napier's set, with its garden bench, is dominated by three imposing sideboards. It's in this environment that middle-aged Martha and her husband, George, welcome a couple for a very late night drink. Nick,

a young biologist on the make, brings in tow his wife Honey (Clare Holman) — a considerably more than the alcohol flows freely into already well-lashed bodies, tongues are loosened and inhibitions cast aside in the course of a very dark night of drunkenness. That truth holds far truer today, though Howard Davies's production keeps a domestic emphasis. John Napier's set, with its garden bench, is dominated by three imposing sideboards. It's in this environment that middle-aged Martha and her husband, George, welcome a couple for a very late night drink. Nick,

scathing cut and thrust games. Dame Diana, being the model of cool and elegance, is the natural choice as the vivacious, eccentric Martha. Her red-wigged, loose-limbed and rambling, with a brooding laugh like a donkey, the actress faints and had-mouthe almost to the man's born.

DAVID SUCHET'S impressive, introverted George maintains the weary air of a man used to turning the other cheek and then suddenly striking back. It's when Lloyd Owen's truculent Nick has limply succumbed to Martha's

Woolf whistles and stamp of approval



Diana Rigg and David Suchet after their triumph

THEY clapped, they cheered and they stamped their approval last night as Dame Diana Rigg conquered new dramatic territory. This time, with dyed carrot-colored hair and ultra-patterned leotards, she portrayed the loud, vulgar Martha of Virginia Woolf.

Here she inhabits an entirely different world from the one she played as Medea and Mother Courage, but still looks as if it will be even more successful.

Co-starring David Suchet, the six-week run at the Almeida Theatre in Islington is already nearly sold out and the production moves to the Aldwych immediately afterwards under the stage of Robert Fox. He was among the first to congratulate Dame Diana and Suchet last night, as were two Almeida regulars, playwright David Hare and designer Nicole Paris.

"You were fantastic," Hare told them. Suchet's brother, newsreader John Suchet, was not far behind and among the many other collectors in the audience were Michael Winner, Zoe Wanamaker and Haydn Gwynne.

Not everyone was bowled over, but arts fundraiser Colin Tweedy was full of admiration. "It is yet another proof that Diana Rigg is one of the great actresses of her generation," he said. "It also demonstrates yet again that the Almeida is doing work that other theatres should do but do not have the courage to do."

The most important observation was Edward Albee himself, who has been attending director Howard Davies's rehearsal for the past few weeks. "I have been a very quiet mouse and occasionally not totally quiet," he admitted. "But it's a great production. They did a lovely job."

This was the third premiere of his play he is attending in three weeks, the other two being in Stockholm and Paris. "I think I prefer it in English," he said. "Besides, the audience is so responsive and responsible here. People care about theatre, whereas in New York they are often only there to see each other."

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Stunning performance unites critics

EDWARD ALBEE'S play divided the critics, but they were united in praise for the new production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and in particular Dame Diana Rigg's performance.

Nick Turner in the Daily Mail wrote: "Having outstripped most of her contemporaries with a mesmerising Medea and an astonishing Mother Courage, she now puts her indelible stamp on Albee's savage theatrical masterwork, *Martha*." David Suchet, as her husband George, and Lloyd Owen and Clare Holman were all praised for their performances.

"This is indeed a rare and dazzling event and one which no doubt will find a West End audience," said Tucker. "For although this is a marathon

work, done with literary illusion, and a boldy mind with verbal hunkerbunns. It is the most extraordinary picture of two human beings, both separately and together."

Charles Spencer in the Daily Telegraph doubts whether the play is a modern masterpiece, but had no such qualms about "Howard Davies's long but always enthralling production."

He wrote: "Diana Rigg has often come across as a mixture of cool style, labours but not here. Her Martha is loud, vulgar, sexy and often devastatingly funny. Rigg smirks, growls and

knocks back the gin like a woman possessed, but what is most memorable of all is her moments of fear and vulnerability." He adds: "David Suchet matches her performance every inch of the way."

In the Times, Kenneth Nightingale says she can certainly see the pain in Suchet's weary ironic George. You also see the vulnerability and fear in his swarthy mask and the fresh bravado, the vulnerability and fear that add up to Rigg's Martha.

He concludes: "Forty years ago the critic Kenneth Tynan declared that, brilliant and funny though the play was, it left the watcher's emotions 'untouched and unmoved'."

"Not at the Almeida, not last night."

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