

Theatre

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Almeida, London

One would rather be, ooh, back in the middle of Finals than be a guest at Beverley's gruesome little "do" in *Abigail's Party*. But one would rather be in intensive care than go anywhere near George and Martha's after-hours drinking session in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* At this sozzled, Strindbergian bitch-fest, it's venom on the rocks and guts out on the table. The obligatory games include Get the Guest, Hump the Hostess and playing puzzled pawn in a marital war conducted as vindictive vaudeville. Emigration would be preferable to participation, but, as Howard Davies's wonderful Almeida revival confirms, to be a fly on the wall at this event is one of the most exhilarating and cathartic experiences the post-war theatre has to offer.

This, Edward Albee's first big commercial hit, seems even more full of varied, compulsive energies when looked at in the light of his most recent success, *Three Tall Women*. That semi-autobiographical work revealed that the author held a double outsider status in being an adoptive son who was also gay. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is about a childless couple who have adopted a phantom son – a sustaining delusion and a deadly weapon – in a heterosexual union that sometimes seems like a parody of a bickering gay relationship (Martha's first speech is about Bette Davis, for God's sake). You can see how Albee's distinctive, in some ways privileged, perspective on marriage enables the play to speak with

piercing insight about all couples who (in lieu of children) face the strain of remaining an inventive double-act.

As Martha, a powerful Diana Rigg shows you the kind of woman who has gradually turned into a drag-queen version of herself. In her jazzy zebra leggings, she wears the trousers in more ways than one. With a holler that could wake up Abraham Lincoln, a gatting-gun laugh, and a growly, devastating way with the putdowns ("If you existed, I'd divorce you"), she's a ball-breaking *monstre sacré* who, you feel, might pop you into her Bloody Mary and call the result breakfast.

The terrifying cross in Martha between the Oedipally prurient "give mommy a big kiss" Earth Mother and the blousy, emasculating tart has been done better. But Rigg and David Suchet are splendid at communicating the depths of George and Martha's vulnerable dependency upon one another. Even in the thick of playing each other off the guests, you feel that essentially they are alone together and that these psychological maulings are an expression of love. Suchet is magnificent in the final straight of the play, stripping away Martha's delusions with an expression that manages to look both lethal and angelic in its calmly intense cruel kindness.

In the less obviously grateful roles of the naive mid-West newly-weds, Lloyd Owen and Clare Holman give superbly detailed performances. Ms Holman's body language (the toes that turn in more and

more, the finger that needlessly points to what she is talking about) is splendid semaphore of quietly hysterical social awkwardness.

On Wednesday's Press night, there was one fluff when the umbrella that shoots out of a joke rifle refused to close. George, who can't get it up, couldn't get this phallic symbol to go back down. It just goes to show how a dodgy prop can generate its own paradoxes.
■ To 26 Oct. Almeida St, London, N1. Booking: 0171-359 4404

PAUL TAYLOR



Diana Rigg, David Suchet and Lloyd Owen get stuck into one of the most exhilarating experiences the post-war theatre has to offer – the spectator, that is

Geraint Lewis

Find your ideal body shape.
(One video fits all.)



Who's Afraid Taylor Independent



Clipped By:
ianlharris
Sat, Nov 13, 2021