

STAGE

Classic *Virginia Woolf* Unites Audiences

By Iris Wiener

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The idea of a loving, compassionate relationship was never such an oxymoron until Edward Albee created Martha and George, one of the most famous couples written for the stage. The relentlessly dueling duo have been revitalized in the latest production of *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?*, currently playing at the Longacre Theatre. The play's first production in almost 30 years, *Woolf* currently stars Kathleen Turner (recently seen in *The Graduate*) and Bill Irwin (*The Goat, Or Who Is Sylvia?*). Both stars brilliantly embody the tough shoes they've been asked to fill, spitting venomous insults perfectly timed with a passionate craze.

When Albee won his first Tony Award in 1963 for the script of *Woolf*, no one would have guessed that the dysfunctional dynamic between Martha and George would be all the more poignant in 2005. An era in which family structure is all the more vague and dysfunction has actually become the norm, the drama plays to its audience's similar mindset.

George and Martha suffer through their marriage to the backdrop of the living room of their house, which lies on the campus of a small New England college in 1960. The home is intricately planned, with dimensionally appropriate nooks and crannies mirroring the secrets and twists to the relationships developing on stage. John Lee Beatty's set invites its audience of curious observers into its arms, eventually enveloping, and then draining those that have ventured in.

This home becomes a prison as George and Martha taunt Nick and Honey, a young couple who become blood sport during an alcohol-drenched party within the confines of the master house. *Woolf* becomes a game for the foursome, an exploration of strength and will. Also a test of humanity drawn through psycho-

logical warfare, the play questions our limits as a member of a committed relationship.

Woolf is an excellent theater experience on many levels, but if for no other reason, it should be seen for Kathleen Turner's dynamite performance in one of the most well written roles to date. Sure to be nominated for a 2005 Tony Award, Turner has given the theater district the jump it needs with her saucy, yet domineering presence, and her throaty vocals. Sexy and omnipresent, Turner makes the role unimaginable for anyone else to play. Her crass diatribes with the wonderfully talented Bill Irwin perfectly express a burning hatred with compassionate undertones.

Supporting players imbue less fire and more comedy than the play's stars, granting it most of its lighter moments. Broadway newcomer Mireille Enos gives Honey an annoying twang which, with her character's equally annoying penchant for drunkenness, makes for a laughable breakdown of her defenses. Enos makes small moments bigger, and bigger moments memorable. Nick, Honey's husband, is played by David Harbour (*Invention Of Love* and *Fifth Of July*), the only actor who fails to go the distance with his intriguing role. Harbour performs a textbook version of the frayed, confused young gentleman who threatens George's existence.

A story expertly driven by its characters and ambience, *Woolf* is an exciting revival not to be missed. Ignore Harbour's short inadequacies and an unnecessarily long run-time (three hours with two intermissions!), and you have a deep, stylistically enhanced revival of a classic play that has clearly been proven timeless.

Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf? is playing at the Longacre Theatre, 220 West 48th Street. For tickets, call Telecharge at 212-239-6200, or order online at Telecharge.com.



Photo Courtesy Carol Rosegg

Kathleen Turner plays Martha in a new rendition of the stage classic *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?*, playing now at the Longacre Theatre in New York City.