

Entertainment

Theater Review: Goldberg blurs art, reality in intoxicating 'Albee'

By Brent Hallenbeck, Free Press Staff Writer • Thursday, June 24, 2010

The famed Edward Albee play "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" is built around illusion, primarily demonstrated by a perpetually bickering couple named George and Martha who create false lives for themselves that they spend much of the lengthy three-act play tearing apart.

Burlington playwright Stephen Goldberg takes that premise one step further with his new work, "Who's Afraid of Edward Albee," which premiered June 16 at the new Off Center for the Dramatic Arts that he co-founded. Goldberg's play is built around illusion, too -- as most of his surreal, harsh and darkly comic scripts are -- by building a plot that closely follows that of Albee's work while including references by the characters to a production of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf." Goldberg is continually fascinated by the blurring of lines between art and reality, and "Who's Afraid of Edward Albee" makes those lines as blurry as the vision of the hard-drinking-and-drugging couple at the center of his script.

Goldberg, who's also the play's director, writes in the author's program notes that he came up with "Who's Afraid of Edward Albee" after being asked to direct Albee's play. Albee has a reputation for asking theater companies producing his works to adhere 100 percent to the words and stage directions in his scripts and to let him have approval over casting selections, and Goldberg's play appears to stick it to Albee by completely appropriating his work into his own much shorter yet strangely mutated version.

"Who's Afraid of Edward Albee" centers on another drunken, arguing couple, this one named Sandra and Harry (played by Monica Callan and Rob Donaldson). She is the daughter of rich, dead Hollywood types and he, like George in Albee's play, teaches at a university. Also as in Albee's play, they receive a late-night visit from a younger couple, George and Daisy (David C. Symons and Genevra MacPhail); the Daisy character is modeled on the young woman known in the play as Honey, and to further muddle things, George is named after both the other male character in Albee's play and George Segal, the actor who played the younger man in the film version of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" that starred Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor.

That 1966 film caused a stir in Hollywood with its (at the time) frank language and talk about sex, and not surprisingly, Goldberg turns that heat up a few notches. "Who's Afraid of Edward Albee" is sexy in a tawdry, you'll-regret-this-in-the-morning sort of way as the couples toy with just a wee bit of spouse-swapping. Callan especially vamps it up as she stalks poor innocent George as, to borrow a currently popular metaphor, a cougar stalks its prey ("We like games," she says ominously). Symons holds George together as well as can be expected for the only sober person at a party veering wildly out of control.

The two men in the play spend much of their time on the defensive as their wives move in directions they don't entirely understand. While his wife is busy berating him, Donaldson manages to succinctly deliver some of the play's best lines ("We have a symbiotic relationship," Harry tells George, "like the elephant and the dung beetle"). MacPhail, like Goldberg a co-founder of the Off Center, might be the play's most entertaining performer, as she makes Daisy into a surprisingly graceful, endearing drunk.

The entire play, in fact, has that same woozy feeling of over-intoxication, or at least the sensation of waking up suddenly from a baffling dream. That unclear perspective carries over to Goldberg's intent; he might be trying to say something about the role of art in daily life, or he just might be having a bit of crazy fun at Albee's expense.