

Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? Not Stephen Goldberg

By Jim Lowe, Times Argus Staff

Any similarity between Stephen Goldberg's new play "Who's Afraid of Edward Albee?" and Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" is purely intentional.

"It's not a takeoff," Goldberg explained after Tuesday's rehearsal. "I was to direct 'Virginia Woolf' and it was so long – but it never worked. I thought I could write something equally interesting.

"A little over-confident?" Goldberg added with a laugh.

Goldberg's "Who's Afraid of Edward Albee?" premieres June 16-26 at Burlington's new 65-seat black box theater, the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts in the Old North End. Monica Callan, Rob Donaldson, Genevra MacPhail and David Symons make up the cast of Vermont professionals.

Born in Queens, Goldberg began his career as a jazz trumpet player. His first stage pieces were influenced by the '60s "happenings." His early, somewhat abstract stage pieces were called "Assemblages" and were performed around New York City. During the time he was musical director of the Nimbus Dance Theater Company in New York.

Goldberg came to Vermont with Nimbus to do residencies at Johnson State College. At the time, he also became friends with playwright John Ford Noonan, who encouraged his writing. Goldberg's first play, "Sand Trap" (1983), was written in St. Croix and later performed in Burlington. Through his production company, One Take Productions, Goldberg has staged more than 20 plays in Burlington, Montpelier and New York City. Goldberg has also written two novels, several books of poetry and a collection of monologues, all as yet unpublished. Goldberg continues to perform as a jazz musician/composer with his own groups, including the experimental No Walls.

One of Vermont's foremost playwrights, Goldberg has written only one play since the untimely death of his wife, singer-songwriter Rachel Bissex, in 2005. "Bright Wings of Despair" premiered some four years ago.

"It was so dark – both characters end up committing suicide," Goldberg said. "It's been hard to get into it after Rachel's death, it really has. I've been doing a lot of poetry, readings and such. But, in terms of writing plays, it was just too dark."

Time seems to have changed this. "Who's Afraid of Edward Albee?" is full of black humor, but at Wednesday's rehearsal, it was frequently laugh-out-loud funny. And the connection with Albee's 1963 Tony-winning play is obvious, though Goldberg's version comes in at about half of Albee's nearly three hours.

The Albee is set in academia where a middle-aged couple invites a new faculty member and his insipid wife for an evening of booze-flavored head games – all sexually charged. In the Goldberg, the middle-aged couple mixes the film world and academia – she (Callan) is the daughter of a famous director, and he (Rob Donaldson) is a frustrated college film professor – and the young couple consists of the flamboyant but ditzy wife (MacPhail) and her insipid P.C. husband (Symons).

And it's even more sexually charged than the Albee – and funnier.

"They're all in these sort of hopeless relationships," Goldberg said. "Nothing is working out really – and Monica's character wants to have a night of fun."



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From left, Monica Callan, Rob Donaldson, David Symons and Genevra MacPhail having a great time in Goldberg's "Who's Afraid of Edward Albee?"