

New Goldberg play is dark – and funny

By Jim Lowe, Times Argus Staff

BURLINGTON – After a hiatus, Burlington playwright Stephen Goldberg, known largely for his surreal black comedies, has returned with his most accessible and laugh-out-loud play to date.

"Who's Afraid of Edward Albee?" which opened Wednesday at the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts, a new 65-seat black box theater in the Old North End, pokes fun at the Edward Albee classic of a similar title and adds its own comic twists and turns. Directed by the playwright, the production benefits from a particularly fine cast.

Albee's three-hour "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" made famous by Mike Nichols' 1966 film with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, is an evening of head games played on a young couple – and on each other – by an older couple in New England academia. What makes it so

successful are its pinpoint-accurate psychology and the black humor that yields.

Pretty much the same can be said of Goldberg's new comedy – except that it's half the length and more obviously funny.

"We play games," Sandra Kline explains, and she doesn't mean the Scrabble her naïve young guests play in bed. Sandra's husband Harry is a college film professor and occasional novelist, while Sandra is the daughter of a late great film director. Apparently financially set, the two revel in torturing each other with head games. She attempts to emasculate him while he retaliates with jabs at her alcohol consumption and sexual compulsions.

So, when George and Daisy arrive for cocktails at 2 a.m. – after seeing the Eisenstein film "The Battleship Potemkin" – they are in for a ride. The comely Daisy is already inebriated and not unsusceptible to the mature charms of Harry, while the huntress Sandra goes straight for the meat – the athletic George – but they must play with their prey before the kill.

Of course, everything goes awry as each of the characters begins to unravel. It's all very nasty – and very funny, with just a hint of tenderness.

This premier production is particularly well cast. Monica Callan and Rob Donaldson were riveting as the hopelessly dysfunctional yet completely coupled Sandra and Harry. Callan's Sandra was a tigress while Donaldson's Harry was a droll cynic; what made them so compelling was the underlining attraction to each other they subtly revealed. Their interplay was so convincingly juicy that they became irresistible.

The elder couple's strategy seems to be separate and conquer. Genevra MacPhail's Daisy was priceless. Not only was she a convincing drunk – she didn't overact the part for a moment – she was convincingly naïve, even when being totally sexually frank. David Symons, better known as a musician, is also convincing as the straight-laced and unworldly George, the only sober person yet the weakest player in this psychological chess game.

Wednesday's opening night performance had a few fluffed lines but no awkward moments. In short, Stephen Goldberg's "Who's Afraid of Edward Albee?" was an intense and intensely funny experience.



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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?"