

## Review: Davis, Carpenter wage war of words in Lab Theater's "Virginia Woolf"

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FORT MYERS — Twin hurricanes named George and Martha blow through the Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center during the Laboratory Theater of Florida's production of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" Edward Albee's three-hour masterpiece arrives with the fury of a blustery, bourbon-fueled tornado and leaves a frayed emotional landscape behind.

Written in the early 1960s, "Woolf" explores marriage, truth and illusion when two university couples spend the night drinking, talking and fighting - among other things.

The phrase "who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?" really means "who's afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" A reference to the classic children's tale, the big bad wolf represents "truth" and Albee's truckload of verbiage constructs a portrait of people who prefer to live behind illusions - because their real lives are built on lies.

"Woolf" won multiple Tony Awards but was denied the 1963 Pulitzer because of its controversial themes; Elizabeth Taylor won her second Oscar playing Martha in the 1966 film version.

Stephanie Davis bulldozes her way through the first act. Her Martha, a braying harridan - Albee even has the character screech out "I DO NOT BRAY!" - yells for liquor, yells for her husband George, yells for just about anything. Davis brings exactly the vicious broken intensity the character needs - pushing buttons, seducing, lashing out at anything and everything in an effort to keep the darkness at bay. Yet, a third act monologue with Davis alone on the stage, lights dimmed, talking to her absent father showcases something beyond the witch within.

Scott Carpenter (George) matches Davis verbal blast for verbal blast. Carpenter hauls George's lifetime of petty disappointments around like a visible weight, throwing insults like cannonballs and slinging drinks just to range the competition. A cruel "Get the Guests" monologue, when the plays internal balance of power shifts from Martha to George, lands with force, as does the play's final, devastating scenes.

Douglas Landin (Nick) and Nykkie Ryzley Ptaszek (Honey) serve as a target throughout the evening. Set up as an attractive, successful, idealistic young couple, their marriage reveals itself as almost a total sham. Albee uses both characters as a further commentary on illusion; the pretty people lie too.