

ARENA'S PAGE

STUDY GUIDE

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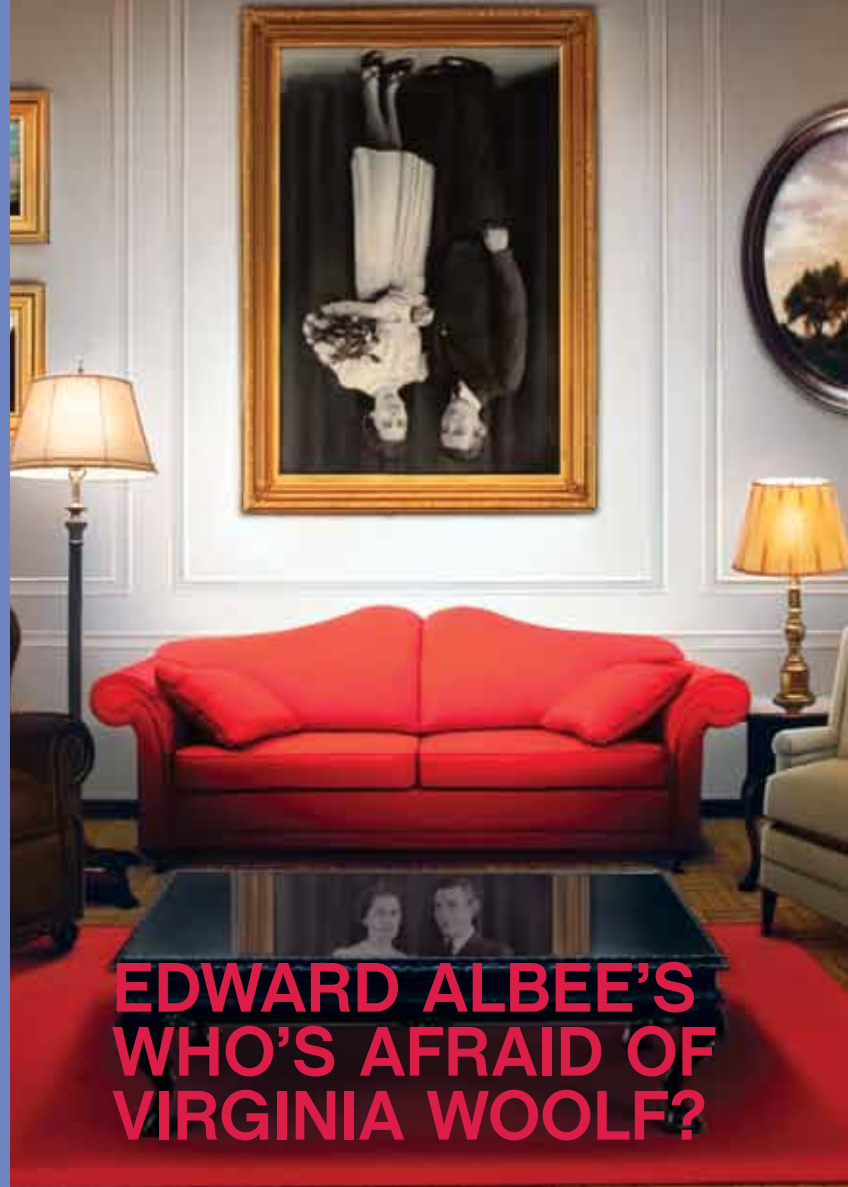
THE PLAY

Husband and wife George and Martha fight like cats and dogs. George is a college history professor and Martha is the daughter of the university president.

Against George's will, Martha invites an unsuspecting couple over for (more) drinks after a party. Little do they know they are entering a marital war zone.

New professor Nick and his mousy wife Honey find themselves caught in a web of manipulation, abuse and chaos. As the night goes on, fun and games become insults and attacks. What will be left standing when morning comes?

"I like your anger. I think that's what I like about you most ... your anger." – Martha



EDWARD ALBEE'S WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?

Now Playing in the Kreeger

Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater
March 3, 2011-April 10, 2011

Directed by Pam MacKinnon

MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



“A playwright is someone who lets his guts hang out on the stage.”

– Edward Albee, Playwright

Edward Albee was born in Washington, D.C. Abandoned as a baby, he was later adopted by a wealthy couple. Albee developed a passion for the arts at an early age. His parents, however, wanted him to be a conventional businessman rather than an artist. He struggled to stay in school and dropped out of college at age 20.

He moved to New York City and experimented with poetry and other forms of writing, finally settling on playwriting. His first major work, *The Zoo Story*, earned him worldwide acclaim and his plays began premiering off and on Broadway. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, for which Albee is best known, was the first of his plays to premiere on Broadway.

Albee received the special **Tony Award** for Lifetime Achievement as well as three **Pulitzer Prizes** (see article). He created the Edward F. Albee Foundation, which helps support young artists in the Long Island area of New York. He has dedicated much of his time to teaching young playwrights and continues to encourage youth to be innovative artists. ●

Tony Award - a prestigious award that recognizes excellence in American theater, awarded to Broadway plays and performances in New York City

Pulitzer Prize - a prestigious U.S. award for achievements in literature, journalism and musical composition

“It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality.”

– Virginia Woolf



WHO IS VIRGINIA WOOLF?

Virginia Woolf was a British writer during the early 20th century. Her work greatly influenced modern thought. She was a feminist and a member of the Bloomsbury Group, a group of writers, intellectuals, philosophers and artists who discussed matters of gender, sexuality, literature and ethics.

Woolf was known for writing about complex human emotions and the raw reality of existence. She tried to reveal the truth. Some interpret the title of Albee's play as a commentary on the characters' unwillingness to face the facts; it can be noted that George sings the song every time one of the characters is confronted with reality. ●

“WHO'S AFRAID OF THE BIG BAD WOLF?”



The song that inspired *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was originally written for a 1933 animated film called *The Three Little Pigs*. It was used as an inspirational song during the Great Depression, when the country struggled against the “big bad wolf” of poverty and debt.

Some consider the complexity of Virginia Woolf's writing combined with a children's song to be a commentary on childhood and adulthood, both of which are central themes of the play. ●

ACTIVITY
Research the songs and forms of entertainment that were popular during the Great Depression in the United States. What do these things have in common with “Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?” What do they have in common among themselves?

THE PRIZE WITHHELD

In 1962, Edward Albee's Broadway hit *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was selected by the Pulitzer Prize drama panel to win that year's award for drama. However, the Pulitzer committee overrode the panel, claiming that the play did not represent a “wholesome” view of American life. No drama prize was awarded that year, and half of the drama jurors resigned in protest. History has long since justified their original judgment. In the four

decades since its debut, the play has been produced around the world and is now regarded as a classic of modern drama. ●

ACTIVITY
What kinds of things are shocking and/or censored in our culture today? Who determines what should be censored or modified? What is your personal opinion and experience regarding censorship?

A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

ACT I - "Fun & Games"

George and Martha's idea of fun and games are "Humiliate the Host," "Get the Guests" and "Hump the Hostess."

ACT II - "Walpurgisnacht"

Translated as "Night of the Witches," this is a night in European folklore when witches would gather for orgies. Here, the games have become nightmarish.

ACT III - "The Exorcism"

The secrets are out. Now what?



REQUIEM TRANSLATION

Near the end of Act III, George recites a Catholic prayer in Latin for the dead or dying. Part of its translation is:

Deliver me, Lord, from death eternal on that day of terror, when the heavens and earth are moved, and You shall come to judge the world by fire. Trembling I am, and fearful of the judgment that shall come and of the coming wrath. When the heavens and earth shall be moved, on that day, that day of wrath, of calamity and misery, that great and bitter day, when You shall come to judge the world by fire, Lord have mercy on us.

Why does George say the prayer?
What is dead or dying? ●

Activity
The characters live and work in a university environment. Therefore, they make allusions to history, literature and film. They also speak in other languages from time to time. As a class, examine the script for words or events that are unfamiliar and find their meanings. How does understanding these allusions enhance your understanding of the play?



THE CYCLE OF ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

The relationship between Martha and George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* can be characterized as abusive. Which of these types of abuse do you find in the play? What factors may cause or escalate abuse? Is there love in an abusive relationship?

LURKING BENEATH THE SURFACE



The 1950s in America were idyllic – on the surface. World War II was over and the U.S. was established as a world power led by a well-loved president. The country was productive and prosperous: the American Dream in action. Yet, at the same time, people lived in fear of communism and the Soviet Union, anxious and even paranoid about threats to American culture and safety.

A measure of personal success, emphasized in politics and by popular culture, was a happy family with a strong father, loving mother and cute children (à la *Leave It to Beaver*). Family members neither raised their voices nor stepped outside their social roles. Underneath this perfect image, however, could be family fights, unhappy marriages and disappointments.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf premiered in 1962 and was written, in part, as a response to the 1950s. How does the play examine and/or critique the public vs. private image of a couple or family? What does the play have to say about the truth? ●

Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

Arrive at least 30 minutes early.
Visit the restroom before the show starts.

Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.

Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.

Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!

Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum.

Do not use cell phones for calls, text messages, pictures or games.

Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.

Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.

Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.

Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.

Enjoy the show!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books

Woolf Across Cultures by Natalya Reinhold
Collected Plays of Edward Albee: 1958-1965 by Edward Albee
Edward Albee: A Singular Journey: A Biography by Mel Gussow

On the Web

The Edward F. Albee Foundation: www.albeefoundation.org

On DVD

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Warner Home Video, 1966
Charlie Rose Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks; Edward Albee, Mercedes Ruehl & Bill Pullman; Billy Crudup & Kate Burton May 31, 2002

At Arena Stage

Come see readings of all Edward Albee's plays at the The Edward Albee Festival at Arena Stage. Visit www.arenastage.org for details.



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Arena Stage productions
and educational opportunities.