

Review: Lab Theater's revival of "Virginia Woolf" sensational the second time around

By CHRIS SILK

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SANIBEL — Many things, like fine wines and hard cheeses, get better with age. Add the Laboratory Theater of Florida's production of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" to that list. A revival of their 2010 show, which opened at BIG ARTS Herb Strauss Theater Thursday, explodes off the stage with renewed vigor.

The Lab Theater [offered "Virginia Woolf" with the same cast across the river in Fort Myers last October](#). After critical raves and sold-out houses, BIG ARTS approached the group about an island revival. Last fall's production was very, very good. This one is exceptional.

Edward Albee's witty, wordy 1960s masterpiece traces a marriage made in hell between bickering George and Martha. They fight, they scream and they devour each other and anyone unwise enough to wander into their traps. Set at New Carthage University (Carthage, take note, was destroyed), the older faculty couple invite newcomers Nick and Honey over for a party. A night spent drinking and talking descends into nasty games, wars of words and brutal meltdowns.

The three-act, three-hour play casts a hard light on the illusions that people weave in order to survive when their lives are built on lies. The "Virginia Woolf" of the title refers to the "big bad wolf" of children's tales - and represents truth, as in "the big bad wolf is coming to blow the lies away."

Despite a year layoff, the actors slide back into the roles like they're slipping on a pair of Gap jeans from that famous 1992 commercial. Director Annette Trossbach and her cast already had the groundwork for the characters - their thoughts, feelings and motivations - established, so she could work even more on style, movement and the craft of acting.

If you've seen this particular production before, what's new is a feeling of depth to each of the characters - as if the actors have clawed their way inside the skins. They're not acting - they're inhabiting; the timing seems sharper, more natural and the rhythms of the play flow even better. Think of it as watching TV in HD for the first time. If you're new to "Virginia Woolf," you will not find a better place to start.

What's more, with a second go-around, the details of Albee's oh-so-literate (and oh-so-angry) verbiage tend to pop now that you're not so worried about catching the details. The underlying themes of the play - the shattered illusions and the real truths behind the two relationships (George and Martha really do love each other, while Nick and Honey don't) come through louder, clearer and with more force.

Scott Carpenter brings his angry, mauling George to new heights. Stephanie Davis made her braying Martha the one to watch last year. She's still there - just as snappish, just as intense - and still fabulous to watch as she narrows her face, flares her nose and tears into the dialogue like the raging hyena Martha is written to be. But it is Carpenter who focuses his character's rage even better during George's long interrogations or whining, snarling back-and-forth verbal slugfests. The third act, when Davis and Carpenter each have a long stretch of dialogue, is edge of the seat entertainment.

Doug Landin (Nick) and Nykkie Rizley (Honey) have lifted their smaller parts too. Rizley is never still - acting even when her tiny role has no dialogue. Landin (in a third go at the character) finds subtle depths in his Nick. He illustrates just how barren the marriage is - and the emptiness of Nick's blonde ambition. There's also a sense that every actor on the stage has gained the confidence to react on a more instinctual level - even if Davis and Carpenter have probably 90 percent of the play's dialogue between them.

The set (a rumpled and untidy living room) remains mostly unchanged, but where it floated inside the vast cavern of the Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center, the Herb Strauss Theater space makes it feel intimate, tighter and more confining, thereby ramping up the pressure-cooker intensity.

The second time was - is - the charm. Journey to Sanibel, peek inside a detonating atom bomb of a marriage of a discover a sublime treasure of a show. "Virginia Woolf" is loud, ugly, uncomfortable - and you can't take your eyes from the stage for three hours.

Who's afraid of the big bad wolf? Email me, csilk@naplesnews.com, find me on Twitter at [@napleschris](#) or read my [Stage Door theater blog](#). You can also sign up to [receive the Stage Door blog via email](#).



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