

'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf' cast impresses

By CHARLES RUNNELLS • crunnells@news-press.com • October 22, 2010

Drink enough bourbon, and the truth comes out.

Masks and illusions slip away. Pain and poison bubble to the surface.

Lies stand naked and exposed.

Edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" still packs an emotional wallop, almost a half century after it first appeared on Broadway.

Under director Annette Trossbach's guidance, Laboratory Theater of Florida takes this classic and wrings out every last drop of black humor, viciousness and gut-wrenching tension.

The action takes place at the home of a college history professor and his abrasive, foul-mouthed wife (also the daughter of the college president). Along come their unsuspecting guests for a late-evening nightcap.

From that set-up, Lab Theater slices and dices marriage, ambition, identity and the illusions we hide behind. And they does it with a bit of illusion, themselves.

"Woolf" starts out so witty and funny, you're lulled into thinking this will be a fun night of comedy. You almost don't realize it as you're sucked farther down into Albee's bleak worldview. Suddenly, you're riveted to your seat and stunned by what you're seeing onstage.

Hosts George and Martha are plum roles, and actors Scott Carpenter and Stephanie Davis don't waste this opportunity.

Davis (who writes as The Downtown Diva for The News-Press) is particularly riveting. She barks and spews icy insults as she downs her alcohol. And yet underneath it all there's a heartbreaking fragility that reveals itself later.

Carpenter matches her quite well, though, giving all his voluminous lines a sheen of contemptuous superiority. "Yes, love," he says when Martha asks him to answer the door, his words dripping with

acid. "Whatever love wants."

Together, this unhappy middle-aged couple conjure a brutal intensity. Martha brays and henpecks. George jabs and pontificates. And each one feeds the other, pushing buttons as only longtime couples can.

As biology professor Nick and his mousy, "slim-hipped" wife Honey, the visiting couple start out mainly as verbal punching bags. They enter George and Martha's New England house, unaware that this "polite conversation" is full of venom, full of secrets, full of traps and tricks.

Douglas Landin's Nick is straightlaced and athletic, seemingly the perfect example of The All American Male. Then George starts digging, and the alcohol starts loosening tongues and inhibitions, and the real Nick turns out to be quite different from the facade.

Wife Honey (Nykkie Rizley Ptaszek) can barely keep up with what's really happening here, and her staggering drunkenness certainly doesn't help. Ptaszek's comic intoxication - bleary-eyed, goofy and hilariously wobbly - offers a welcome relief from the dramatic intensity. But it can feel cartoonish and out of place among the other actors' more realistic portrayals.

The play's third act - with its required "morning after" feel - loses some of the show's hard-won tension. But that's a small complaint in such a strong show.

In the first play of its new season, Lab Theater



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reaches for something powerful and unsettling. And it succeeds at both.

Just like the play's miserable intellectuals, you probably won't leave this one unscarred.

If You Go

- What: "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"
- When: 8 p.m. today and Saturday
- Where: Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center, 2301 First St., Fort Myers
- Tickets: \$20 (\$10 with a valid student ID).
- Info: Call 333-1933 or go to laboratorytheaterflorida.com.
- Online: Director Annette Trossbach recently interviewed playwright Edward Albee. Listen to her phone interview at laboratorytheaterflorida.com

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