

DAN PEGODA AND LYN BURG
AS GEORGE AND MARTHA

CRUEL INTENTIONS

OCT's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is both brilliant and twisted — exactly as it should be

Alas, poor George and Martha: As the boozy, bitchy combatants at the center of Edward Albee's 1962 play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, these two go at it like rabid animals, incapable of restraint, tearing at each other in an alcohol-fueled barrage of verbal abuse, all set to the tinkling rhythms of ice plinking against a cocktail glass. And the beating goes on.

Reasonable people may question the wisdom of subjecting oneself to such marital carnage, again, especially when Mike Nichol's iconic 1966 film version of the play, starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, did such a bang-up job of traumatizing us all. Fear not. Oregon Contemporary Theatre's current production, expertly directed by Craig Willis, answers any doubts, by creating an intimate and immediate domestic scene that, while painful to behold, is shot through with artistry and a kind of strangled grace.

For the uninitiated, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* takes place over the course of one long night in the home of George, a professor of history, and Martha, the daughter of the president of the university. Having returned late from a party, this long-married couple — already full of whiskey, piss and vinegar — start right in on each other, hurling high-minded barbs that, more often than not, land somewhere below the belt. Unbeknownst to George, Martha has invited over a young faculty member, Nick, and his effervescent wife, Honey, whom the hosts proceed to manipulate like sexual playthings in a game of sick psychological one-upmanship.

Things get ugly. There is nothing quite so grotesque, and grotesquely captivating, as watching smart people stupidly hurt each other. Albee's dialogue is swift and stinging, and the mutual sadism he depicts burrows down so deep that the misery becomes perversely ecstatic, constantly veering toward eruption and revelation. As director, Willis orchestrates the madness with a sure hand that keeps everything up-close and humid. No gesture is wasted. Everything is locked tight, so that wherever you look — to the speaker or the listener, the abuser or the abused — a story is being told.

The cast is flat-out excellent. As George, Dan Pegoda brings to the role an aspect that Burton, as great as he was, didn't and perhaps couldn't — an air of mute, shambling defeat revealing the fey dignity of the emasculated husband. Lyn Burg, as Martha, is a perverse force of nature, all appetite and damaged pride beneath which lurks the abysmal secret of a broken heart. Equal to these two leads are Cloud Pemble and Erica Towe as ambitious Nick and neglected Honey; they bring a dimensionality, a reality, to a pair of characters who might otherwise get flattened out as mere punching bags.

Yes, it's like watching a three-hour train wreck in slow motion, but — in the talented hands of the folks at OCT — what a fascinating, fucked-up and, ultimately, exhilarating train wreck it all is. ■

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? plays through March 14 at Oregon Contemporary Theatre; \$15-\$30; 465-1506.

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TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT Fri-Sun 12:25, 2:25, 5:05
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THE IMITATION GAME Fri-Sun 1:00
Mon-Thu 1:45

A GIRL WALKS HOME ALONE AT NIGHT Fri-Sun 12:00, 4:45, 7:10, 9:30
Mon-Thu 4:45, 7:10, 10:00

BIRDMAN Fri-Sun 3:40, 6:20, 9:00
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