

DISCOVERY GUIDE

KATHLEEN BILL  
TURNER IRWIN

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



Photos: Carol Rosegg

with  
KATHLEEN EARLY      DAVID FURR

Directed by  
ANTHONY PAGE

February 6–March 18, 2007  
Ahmanson Theatre

 Center  
Theatre  
Group  
L.A.'s Theatre Company

P.L.A.Y.

PERFORMING FOR LOS ANGELES YOUTH

# DISCOVERY GUIDE

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

## How to Use this Discovery Guide

OBJECTIVES  
OF THIS  
DISCOVERY  
GUIDE

A LATE-NIGHT GET-TOGETHER becomes a harrowing and hilarious battle royal as a middle-aged couple strips away the illusions of their marriage. This is the story of Edward Albee's legendary masterpiece *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The acclaimed 2005 Broadway revival, directed by Anthony Page, makes its West Coast debut at the Ahmanson Theatre.

This Discovery Guide has been created to complement and extend your experience of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* You will find here a glossary of uncommon words and references used in the play, a discussion with actors Kathleen Turner and Bill Irwin about the production, and a brief consideration of playwright Edward Albee's influence on American theatre.

Vocabulary words are in **bold type**. You will find definitions of these words at the end of each section.

Explain some of the terms and references used in the play

Direct you to resources that will help you further explore the work of playwright Edward Albee

Offer insights into the play, playwright and production

Examine Edward Albee's influential ideas about theatre

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# A Conversation with Kathleen Turner and Bill Irwin

## PRODUCTION HIGHLIGHTS *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*



AS THE STARS of the new revival of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Kathleen Turner and Bill Irwin have taken two of the greatest roles in American drama and, in performances that have won universal acclaim, made them their own. These preeminent artists have also given many theatregoers a chance to see their work in a somewhat new way. Kathleen Turner is a movie star, renowned for her commanding performances in such films as *Body Heat*, *The War of the Roses*, *Peggy Sue Got Married* and *The Virgin Suicides*. But over the last decade she has returned to her "first love," the stage, most notably in the Broadway and West End production of *The Graduate*. Bill Irwin, a MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship Award-winning master of movement and physical comedy, is revered as an innovative clown and mime. Although known for the stage shows that display his dazzling clowning, such as *The Regard of Flight* and *Fool Moon*, he has always thought of himself as first and foremost an actor, and he has a distinguished career doing dramatic roles, including Edward Albee's *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* on Broadway.



Bill Irwin and Kathleen Turner in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*  
PHOTO BY CAROL ROSEGG.

Ms. Turner and Mr. Irwin took time out of rehearsal to talk to P.L.A.Y. about *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

**P.L.A.Y.:** Ms. Turner, you long felt that the humor of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is under-appreciated and one of the many original aspects of this new production is that it reveals the play's comedy without compromising Albee's portrayal of the characters' self-deception and savagery towards one another. How do you feel comedy is used in the play?

**KATHLEEN TURNER:** I don't think that any production I've heard of—because I've never seen one before—left the impression of the comedy and wit inherent in Edward (Albee)'s play. If anything, the impression left by the film seems to have been basically of two drunks screaming at each other. But in truth, the laughs, all brilliantly placed, break the tension so that we can start a new build. In fact, it's the humor George and Martha share that shows their love.

**P.L.A.Y.:** You have observed that you often play characters that are not likeable and that you yourself sometimes dislike them until you discover why they act as they do, at which point you frequently end up loving them. Did you go through that with Martha?

**KATHLEEN TURNER:** Initially, Martha's behavior seemed so self-destructive and senseless, I found myself wanting to slap her. But then looking at the context of that time, 1962, I realized that here is a woman of great intelligence, energy and ambition, with no real outlet other than a terribly disappointing, unambitious husband. So being blocked from using her innate talent, it's no wonder that sitting in an

empty house, without even the responsibility of a child, she'd start drinking. So, I do suppose understanding promotes empathy, and I end up loving her.

**P.L.A.Y.:** Mr. Irwin, you have commented that as a young actor you became interested in physical characterization and this led you to study clowning and movement. How did you approach physical characterization with George, who is both aggressively and subtly verbal?

**BILL IRWIN:** From the moment I picked the play up (over two and a half years ago) I had some instincts on George's physical life. I've spent time around academia, I know a little—or can **extrapolate**—about the exhilaration and tedium of living with books and **curricula** and tides of students coming and going and the layers of sediment that can accrue in the body, and spirit, in this life. George has an awkward physicality, and with it comes a jealousy of more graceful people. The **sternum** area—a much more expressive area than we tend to acknowledge—is where George recedes, and then his shoulders must compensate; his back is not strong. None of this is to say that George is weak; he's the hero of the play, at least it's my job to see it that way.

Edward's play—like any great play—is actually a very physical play. Pages of text, yes, (which actors have to learn) but every word is after something, every word can be applied to the actor's job of getting what his character wants. Albee is verbal but not **discursive**. **Molière**, for all his bond to **commedia** and physical comedy, is actually harder, at times, to keep active, and to keep physical, than this play of Edward's.

### Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?: An American Classic

Edward Albee was already hugely celebrated—and criticized—as the leader of a revolution in American playwriting when his first full-length play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, opened on October 13, 1962. *Virginia Woolf* was more than a huge theatrical success; it was a cultural watershed. The play fulfilled the hopes of those eager for a rebirth of American drama, but also outraged many who found the play obscene, morbid and decadent. The conservative Pulitzer Prize Committee overruled the recommendation of its own judges and refused to award the Drama prize to Albee, on the grounds that his play did not present a “wholesome” view of American life. Familiar to tens of thousands who have never seen or read it, influencing countless plays, movies, novels and short stories, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is one of the very few American dramas to fully permeate American life.

### Vocabulary

**Commedia or Commedia Dell'arte:** A largely improvisational Italian theatre developed between the 16th and 18th century, Commedia is noted for its broad physical comedy, formulaic stories and traditional characters, such as Pantaloon and Harlequin, who were identified by long-established masks and costumes.

**Curriculum:** The set of courses offered by a school or required for a particular subject; plural is curricula

**Discursive:** Rambling; wandering from one topic to another

**Extrapolate:** To arrive at a broad conclusion working from a limited number of facts or observations

**Molière:** French playwright, actor, director and all-around man of the theatre, Molière (1622–1673) is regarded as one of the greatest of all dramatists. His work was profoundly influenced by Commedia Dell'arte.

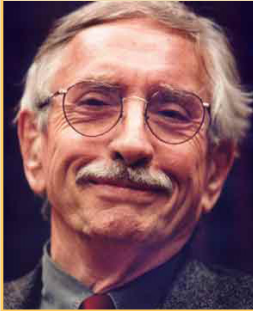
**Sternum:** The flat bone and cartilage in the front of the chest to which most of the ribs are attached



Kathleen Turner and Bill Irwin in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*  
PHOTO BY CAROL ROSEGG.

# Edward Albee and the New American Theatre

## SETTING / CONTEXT Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?



### EDWARD ALBEE, IN HIS OWN WORDS

“And I would hope that every play I write shakes a few people up, asks a few questions that people would rather not think about.” *The New York Times*, September 1, 1991

“Each play is an act of aggression against the status quo. Too many playwrights let the audience off the hook instead of slugging them in the face, which is what you should be doing.”  
*The Boston Globe*, March 7, 2004

“But there is not always a great relationship between popularity and excellence. If you know that, you can never be owned by public opinion or critical response. You just have to make the assumption you’re doing good work and go on doing it. Of course, there are the little dolls you stick pins in privately.”  
*The New York Times*, April 13, 1994

“I despise restful art.” *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey*

“I think you can change the way people think about their consciousness – you can change just about everything about them. You make them aware that they’re missing the boat, that they’re not being fully alive.” *The Guardian (U.K.)*, January 10, 2004

A GOOD CASE can be made that no individual has had a greater influence or effect upon the American theatre of the last half-century than Edward Albee; not that anyone has dared to attempt to write like him. Despite the often stunning power of his individual plays and the imposing cumulative achievement of his approximately 28-and-counting play **oeuvre**, there is no “school” of Albee-esque playwriting. As with the work of one of his major influences, the Nobel Laureate Samuel Beckett, Albee’s voice is so individual and original, his every play so unprecedented and unique, that he cannot be imitated. But the vision of theatre and of playwriting that animates Edward Albee’s writing and career – and his uncompromising commitment to his voice and vision over a career that has included many years of disfavor, as well as periods of immense acclaim – has transformed America’s theatre culture.

When Edward Albee’s breakthrough first play, *The Zoo Story*, opened off-Broadway in January of 1960, American society and culture had been adrift for most of a decade. It was an era of complacency and conformity, during which artists were discouraged from engaging in formal experimentation, social criticism or political dissent. The **malaise** extended to the Broadway theatre (and at this time the commercial theatre of Broadway was the American theatre), which seemed increasingly devoted to formulaic dramas and frivolous entertainments. A young writer trying to find his voice, Albee came of age in 1950s New York, but his focus was not the “uptown” showbiz world of Broadway but rather “downtown,” in Greenwich Village. There he immersed himself in avant-garde and decidedly non-

mainstream arts and ideas, including the innovative work of European playwrights Beckett and Eugene Ionesco, whose non-realistic and sometimes **oneiric** plays explored the absence of meaning and/or moral authenticity in life. It was a style of theatre that would later be labeled “**absurdism**.”

Nourished by such ideas and influences, Albee developed a view of theatre, and of the place of the playwright in theatre, that was unconventional if not defiantly radical. He became a passionate advocate for theatre that was not mere entertainment, but serious art – and by “serious” he meant art that is not formulaic or **palliative** or that validates the social, moral or aesthetic prejudices of the audience. For Albee, “serious” art challenges an audience’s assumptions and prejudices. And for Albee, the playwright is not only a serious artist: he or she is the essential creative artist of a sophisticated theatre. A playwright could only be great by staying true to his or her own individual voice, and American theatre could only become great if it nurtured such original and defiant new artists.

If these ideas are now commonplace in America’s theatre (although perhaps more honored in the breach than in the observance), and if our theatre is extensively devoted to developing new plays and playwrights, the credit is largely due to Edward Albee. His plays, his advocacy and example, have inspired generations of theatregoers to demand more challenging theatre and generations of playwrights to abandon imitation and formulae and write in new, fresh ways.



# SETTING / CONTEXT

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?



Bill Irwin, Kathleen Early, David Furr and Kathleen Turner in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* PHOTO BY CAROL ROSEGG.

## What's in a Title?

In the opening scene of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, George and Martha argue over George's failure to admire a joke Martha made earlier in the evening: she replaced the "Big Bad Wolf" of the song, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?," from the 1933 Disney cartoon *The Three Little Pigs*, with the name of the avant-garde British writer, "Virginia Woolf" (1882–1941). The joke conveys the sophistication of the couple—and their preoccupation with wordplay and games.

Albee first encountered the joke inscribed in soap on a mirror behind the bar of a local hangout, long before he wrote the play. He found it funny and remembered it years later when he was writing about a couple that have—and do not have—a son. When asked, Albee explains that the big, bad wolf is a life lived without delusions. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* depicts one couple's struggle both to retain and to destroy their delusions.

## Glossary: Who's Who and What's What in the Play?

*Courtesy of The Guthrie Theater: Belinda Westmaas Jones, Study Guide Editor and Carla Steen, Dramaturg*

The dialogue in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is rife with literary allusions and foreign words. Knowledge of these references will enrich the theatregoers' appreciation of both the humor and cruelty of the play.

**Bête:** French; beast (Act II)

**Canaille:** French; riffraff, a scoundrel (Act II)

**Carthage:** A North African city which fell prey to internal conflicts and eventually was sacked by the Romans during the Punic Wars (c. 150 B.C.); in Virgil's *The Aeneid*, the ancient, tragic love story of Dido and Aeneas is played out in Carthage. "You think you're going to be happy here in New Carthage, eh?" (Act I)

**Chippie:** Slang; promiscuous woman. "Ohhhh! I'll bet! Chippie-chippie-chippie, hunh?" (Act III)

**Cochon:** French; pig (Act II)

**Dies Irae:** Latin, from the Catholic "Mass for the Dead". "(T)hrough all the sensible sounds of men building, attempting, comes the Dies Irae." (Act II)

# SETTING / CONTEXT

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

**Flores; flores para los muertos. Flores.:** Spanish; Flowers; flowers for the dead. Flowers. Quoted from Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Act III)

**Gomorrah:** Biblical city that God destroyed by fire for its wickedness. "And this ... this is your heart's content—Illyria... Penguin Island... Gomorrah..." (Act I)

**Illyria:** City on the coast of the Adriatic Sea; home of a contentious people, the city was destroyed by Rome during the Punic Wars. Also the setting for Shakespeare's play *Twelfth Night*. "And this... this is your heart's content—Illyria... Penguin Island... Gomorrah..." (Act I)

**Lady Chatterley:** Character in the novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) by D. H. Lawrence; she is an aristocrat who elopes with her groundskeeper. "A kind of junior Lady Chatterley arrangement ... the marriage." (Act I)

**Monstre:** French; monster (Act II)

**Parnassus:** In Greek mythology, a mountain whose twin summits were devoted to Apollo and to the muses; considered to be the seat of poetry and music. "That what you were drinking over at Parnassus?" (Act I)

**Penguin Island:** From a satirical treatment of French history by Anatol France (*L'Île de Pingouins*, 1908); an island proselytized by a near-blind French monk, who baptizes the island's inhabitants without realizing that they are all penguins. The fictional society eventually destroys itself when capitalism runs amok. "And this ... this is your heart's content—Illyria ... Penguin Island ... Gomorrah ..." (Act I)

**Putain:** French, vulgar; whore (Act II)

**Sacre du Printemps:** French; Rite of Spring; a ballet (1913) by Russian composer Igor Stravinsky that evokes Russian pagan rituals with its dramatic, almost violent rhythms. "Martha's going to pin on some rhythm she understands ... *Sacre du Printemps*, maybe." (Act II)

**Walpurgisnacht:** German; the eve of May Day; witches' Sabbath, celebrated in medieval Europe; a night of orgiastic celebration on which evil spirits are exorcised from cities and towns (Title of Act II)



Bill Irwin, Kathleen Early, Kathleen Turner and David Furr in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* PHOTO BY CAROL ROSEGG.

# SETTING / CONTEXT

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

## Vocabulary

**Absurdism:** Also known as Theatre of the Absurd, it is a term coined to describe the work of post-World War II avant-garde playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco and Jean Genet, as well as those they inspired. These writers shared both a sense that we live uneasily in a universe that has no decipherable meaning and a skepticism about the validity of language, conventional ways of life and traditional dramatic forms.

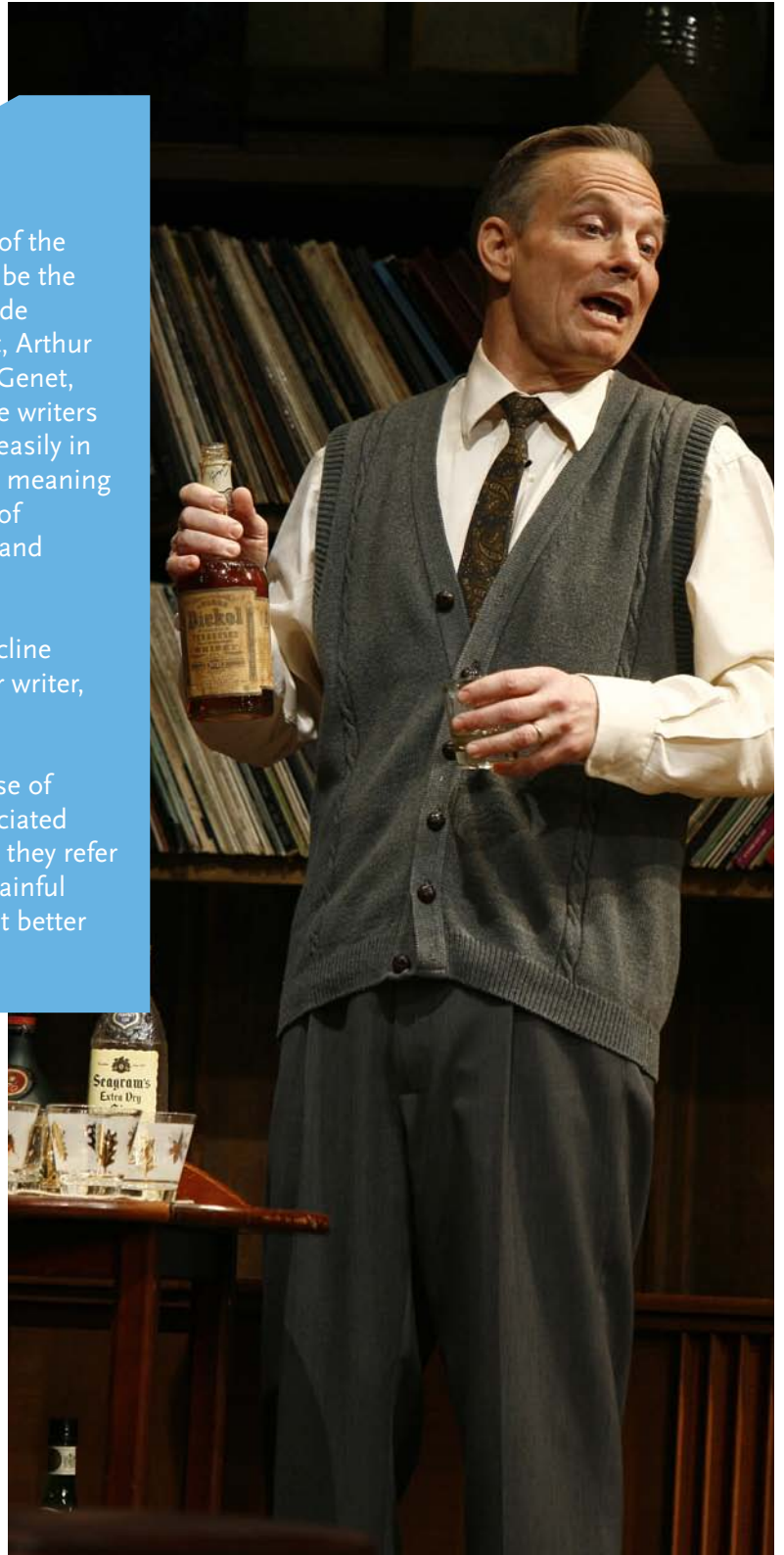
**Malaise:** A vague feeling of unease; a vague sense of social or moral decline

**Oeuvre:** All the works of a particular writer, artist or composer

**Oneiric:** Having to do with dreams

**Onomatopoeia:** The formation or use of words that imitate the sounds associated with the objects or actions to which they refer

**Palliative:** Making something less painful or serious without actually making it better or right



Bill Irwin in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* PHOTO BY CAROL ROSEGG.



# RESOURCES

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?



## BOOKS:

Edward Albee has written over 30 plays, including one-acts and adaptations. Most are available in individual editions and all but the most recent are collected in the (so far) three volumes of *The Collected Plays of Edward Albee*:

***The Collected Plays of Edward Albee: Volume 1 1958–1965*** by Edward Albee (Overlook, 2004) Includes the landmark works *The Zoo Story* (1958) and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962)

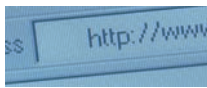
***The Collected Plays of Edward Albee: Volume 2 1966–1977*** by Edward Albee (Overlook, 2004) Includes *All Over* (1971) and the Pulitzer Prize winners *A Delicate Balance* (1967) and *Seascape* (1974)

***The Collected Plays of Edward Albee: Volume 3 1978 – 2003*** by Edward Albee (Overlook, 2006) Includes *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* (2000), *The Play About the Baby* (1996) and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Three Tall Women* (1991)



***Edward Albee: A Singular Journey*** by Mel Gussow (Simon & Schuster, 1999) A candid biography of the complex and brilliant dramatist by the late drama critic for *The New York Times*

***Movement for Actors*** edited by Nicole Potter (Allworth Press, 2002) A collection of articles on different movement techniques and styles



## WEBSITES:

[www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/albiint-1](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/albiint-1)

A June 2005 video/audio interview with and biography of Edward Albee on the Academy of Achievement site

[arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,11710,1119811,00.html](http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,11710,1119811,00.html)

A 2004 interview with the playwright on the Web site for the British newspaper *The Guardian*



## FILM & VIDEO:

Edward Albee has rarely allowed his plays to be made into movies, but the exceptions are noteworthy.

***Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*** directed by Mike Nichols (Warner Brothers, 1966) Starring Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor (who was very young for the role) as George and Martha, the film was controversial for its profanity but was nominated for 13 Academy Awards and won five, including a Best Actress Oscar for Taylor.

***A Delicate Balance*** directed by Tony Richardson (American Film Theatre, 1973) Katharine Hepburn, Paul Scofield and Joseph Cotton star in this film version of Albee's 1967 Pulitzer Prize-winning play.



Kathleen Turner in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*  
PHOTO BY CAROL ROSEGG.

# About P.L.A.Y.

**P.L.A.Y.**  
Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

NOW IN ITS 36<sup>th</sup> YEAR, Performing for Los Angeles Youth (P.L.A.Y.) is Center Theatre Group's award-winning youth theatre and theatre education program. P.L.A.Y. serves more than 35,000 young people, teachers and families annually through a variety of performances, residencies, discount ticket programs and innovative educational experiences. P.L.A.Y. offers programs that allow young people, teachers and families to attend productions at the Mark Taper Forum, Ahmanson and Kirk Douglas Theatres for low or no cost. P.L.A.Y. is dedicated to artistic excellence and innovation in its theatrical productions and to the development of young people's skills and creativity through the exploration of theatre, its literature, art and imagination.



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