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## Words weapons in 'Woolf'

### Performers cut masterfully with banter in Albee classic

By Lisa Bornstein, Rocky Mountain News  
July 20, 2007

## Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

• **Grade:** A

• **When and where:** 7:30 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays through Aug. 11, Phoenix Theatre, 1124 Santa Fe Drive

• **Cost:** \$9.50 to \$19

• **Information:** 303-300-2210

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The metaphors to describe *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and the Paragon Theatre Company production of it come so fast and furious they could knock you off your feet.

It's a boxing match. A tsunami. A tornado. A chess game.

No matter the metaphor, the weapons remain the same: words. In Warren Sherrill's meticulously directed production, language clearly has been dissected and respected. It's almost Albee according to Mamet, where the words drive the performances. They come in torrential monologues, in well-rehearsed jokes that show the longevity of a marriage, and in hailstorms of banter that overlap so as to demonstrate that no one is listening.

At 45, Edward Albee's savage masterpiece is a classic, yet Paragon's actors find new spins on familiar quips. Martha Harmon Pardee, playing Martha, has a sexual need that helps to explain her viciousness and her sorrow. She enters drunk and, famously, braying, although neatly put together in a lime '60s dress and with fiery red hair.

She's come from a university party with her husband, George, in tow, then surprises him with the news that a young professor and his wife, Nick and Honey, are coming over for late-night drinks. George isn't happy, but then in Sam Gregory's revelatory performance, it's clear that George hasn't been happy in a long time. He enters the stage with the posture of the defeated, a scoliosis of the soul. Gregory curls up in a fetal position on the sofa, whining.

But once Nick and Honey arrive, George has an audience, and with a lot of 100-proof lubricant, he joins in Martha's blood sport. He reveals a varied arsenal of deliveries, racing through his sarcasm - "He's a god, we all know that" - or spitting out small talk. Together, George and Martha are an evenly matched team in this production, which makes the power shifts all the more absorbing.

George whets his teeth on a weaker opponent, beginning with Nick. But Ed Cord shows him to be less of a patsy, if still overwhelmed, than other actors have. Cord's Nick angers at being the mouse in this game, revealing himself to be as opportunistic and cruel as his elders.

As his wife, Barbra Andrews, in a perfect pixie haircut, starts off drunk and gullible, diving in with laughter where Honey hasn't been invited. She's a wide-eyed innocent with problems of her own, and it's pathetic when the evening's sordid proceedings give her an unwanted glimpse of reality.

Set designer David Lafont provides his own skewed view of realism, with period furnishings and a solid door but walls made of black velvet with books "shelved" on wires. Brynn Star Coplan's costumes reflect not only the era of the play but the sensibilities of the characters, from Martha's revealing sweater to Honey's youthful shift.

The play's denouement is wrenching, all the more so for Pardee's devastating performance. And it's a slow progression to tragedy, waylaid by the sharp, finely tuned comedy offered by Sherrill and his cast. Watch that laughter - it just might turn into a gasp.

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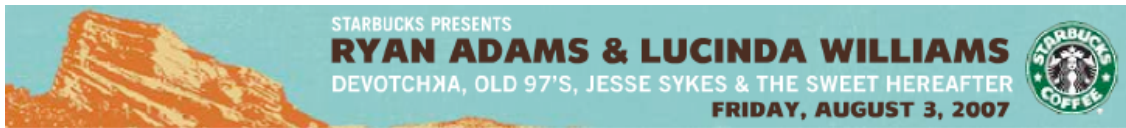
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