

Written by Thom White

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[Editor's note: On February 3, Harrison Hilltop producers Tristan Tapscott and Chris Walljasper announced the cancellation of the remaining performances for Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf.]

As much as I like theatre, three hours in a chair can be a bit too much for me. The Harrison Hilltop Theatre's recent production of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* felt long, but mainly because the show's script is populated with lengthy, repetitious monologues. Its current production, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is roughly the same length, but doesn't have the same plodding feeling. Perhaps it's because almost every line in the play seems weighty yet unpretentious, with an overall pacing quick enough to both keep and *force* your attention, lest you miss a sharp-tongued phrase.

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Directed here by Bryan Tank, frequently seen on stage at Quad City Music Guild, Edward Albee's award-winning play takes place during the wee hours of the morning. George (Ray Gabica), a college professor, and his wife, Martha (Jessica Flood), are home from a party thrown by her father, the president of the university. At the request of her father, they've invited the school's newest professor, Nick (Jonathan Grafft), and his wife, Honey (Jenny Winn), to their home, where the young couple is subjected to and riveted by the vicious back-and-forth banter between George and Martha through games called "Humiliate the Host," "Get the Guests," "Hump the Hostess," and "Bringing Up Baby." All four characters are liquored up to high heaven, returning frequently to the bar to refill their glasses, and Nick eventually becomes entangled in their wicked web while his wife cools her brandy-sickened body on the bathroom tiles.

Flood makes a boisterous Quad Cities theatre debut with her ability to turn on a dime emotionally, taking Martha from a mere colorful personality to a raging bitch seamlessly. "Powerhouse" is a word all too frequently used, but here it applies; Flood's talents let us know that this woman is both serious and seriously good. I'm left eager to see what she next brings to a local stage.



Gabica - Harrison Hilltop's James Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* - counters Flood with a quieter, almost mousy character, but one no less biting than Martha. During Friday's performance, Gabica stumbled over his words as if he was trying to get out the exact line from the script, often starting a line over to get it right. This could be read as a lack of skill, but it seemed appropriate for this performance, as it added to George's weaker-than-Martha personality. It showed a man, as Martha describes him, content to be "

in
the history department" rather than to "
be
the history department."

Grafft, last seen as Howie in the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's *Rabbit Hole* (also directed by Tank), seems rather green, able to interpret Nick's lines but not really developing a complete person out of them. His performance here shows that he has some acting ability, but Grafft needs more experience to hone those skills, so that he can become a character rather than simply *recite* one.

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Winn - whom I adored last summer as Gertrude McFuzz in Quad City Music Guild's *Seussical* - rounds out the cast, bringing an endearing smile to the role of Honey. She also shows off some adept timing with the delivery of her lines, sometimes inserting pauses before her own delivery and at other times almost overlapping other actors' lines. Perhaps most impressively, Winn portrays an increasing drunkenness that leaves you wondering if there really is brandy in her drinking glass.



Set Designer Chris Walljasper created an environment for these characters that is cluttered with books, glasses, bottles, and whatnot in a way that looks realistically lived in, rather than stocked with items set for aesthetic reason. He's also included a staircase, as is Harrison Hilltop's habit of late; it may seem a simple stage element, but here it enhances the illusions of a grand old house in which we're seeing just one of many rooms.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is lengthy without feeling tedious, thanks to the pacing of the sharp script, and the actors interpreting it.

For more information and tickets, call (563) 449-6371 or visit HarrisonHilltop.com.

Thom White is the entertainment news reporter on WQAD Quad Cities News 8.