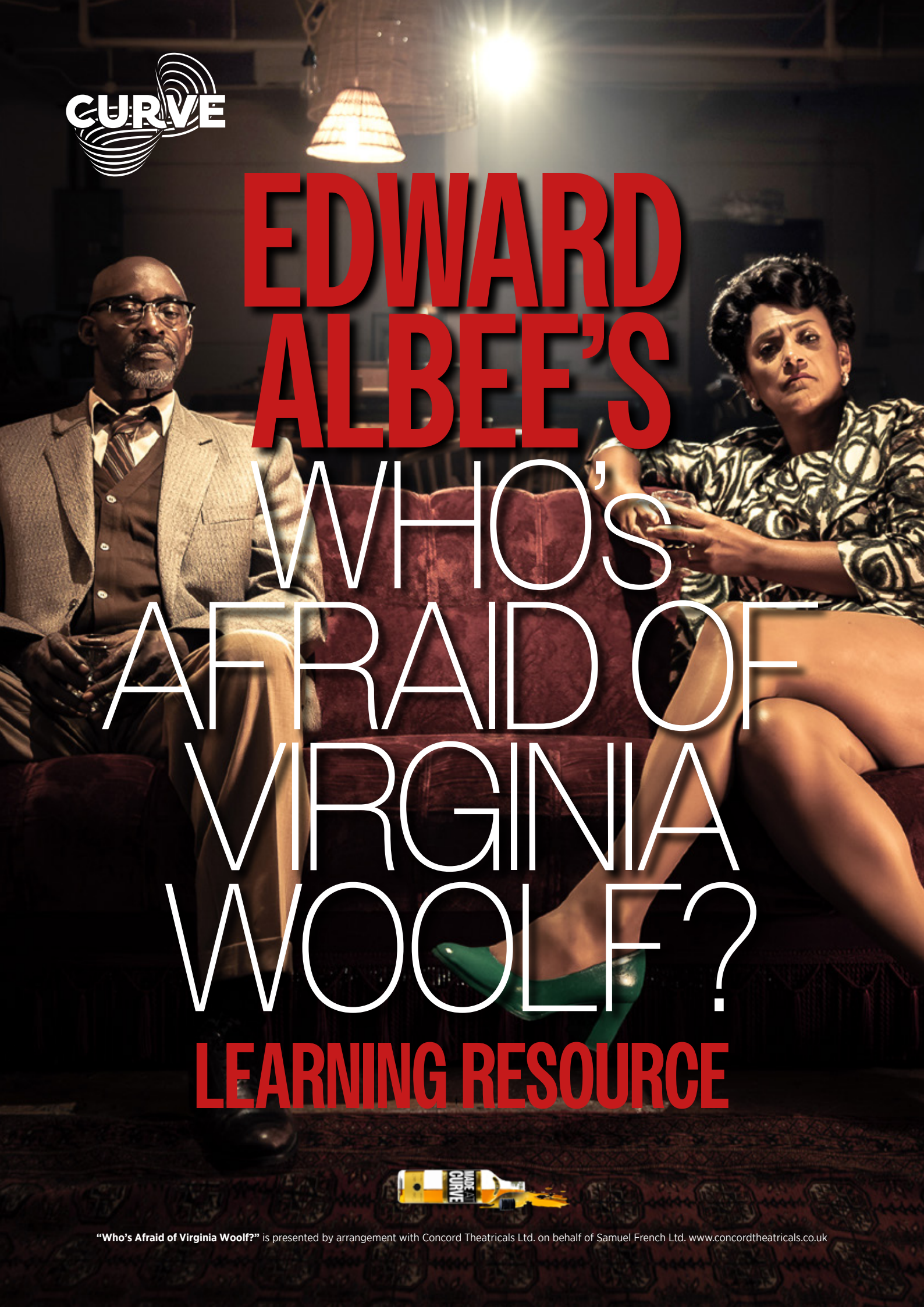

EDWARD ALBEE'S WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?

LEARNING RESOURCE

"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" is presented by arrangement with Concord Theatricals Ltd. on behalf of Samuel French Ltd. www.concordtheatricals.co.uk

INTRODUCTION

Edward Albee's WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? is a landmark of 20th-century drama, brutal, darkly funny, and deeply human. Written in 1962, the play offers an intense, emotionally charged look into the lives of two couples over the course of one long, alcohol-fuelled night. At its heart, it explores themes of illusion, truth, identity, and the emotional cost of human relationships.

This resource pack is designed to support GCSE, BTEC and A-Level students in exploring the play through the lens of naturalism, a theatrical style that aims to present believable characters, realistic dialogue, and authentic emotional experiences on stage. Albee's writing and the structure of the play offer rich opportunities to explore naturalistic performance techniques especially through character psychology, subtext, and the real-time unravelling of events in a single domestic setting.

While the characters may sometimes seem exaggerated in their language or behaviour, the emotional truth at the centre of George and Martha's volatile relationship remains grounded and painfully real. Their verbal battles, shifting power dynamics, and fragile attempts at connection reflect the key principles of naturalism: truthful acting, plausible motivations, and the idea that people are shaped by their environment and past experiences.

As you work through this pack, consider how naturalistic elements can be used to heighten the tension, create empathy, and bring authenticity to the performances. Why do these characters say what they say? What are they hiding? And how can actors use naturalistic techniques to convey the inner lives of people who are both ordinary and extraordinary?

WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? challenges performers and audiences alike to confront uncomfortable truths, but it also offers a powerful exploration of what it means to be human. We hope this pack will help you unlock the play's raw emotion, complex characters, and enduring relevance.

Cara Nolan
Curve Associate Director and Director
WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?



Photograph from trailer photoshoot: **Jonathan Pryke**

Scan the QR code to hear from Director **Cara Nolan**.



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Pack contents written and compiled by Lisa O'Hanlon.

1. THE HISTORY OF THE PLAY



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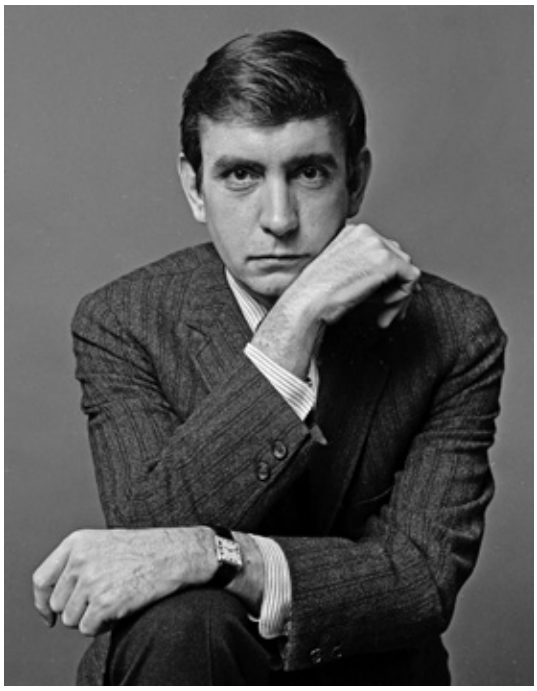
EDWARD ALBEE
THE PLAYWRIGHT AND HIS CONTEXT



Edward Albee, in 1965.
Photograph by Jack Mitchell / Getty

Edward Albee was born on March 12, 1928, and is widely regarded as one of America's most significant playwrights, standing alongside Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller.

Albee was adopted at 18 days old by Reed Albee, a successful vaudeville theatre owner, and his third wife, Frances (known as Frankie), a glamorous socialite. He was raised in the wealthy suburb of Larchmont, New York, in a home filled with privilege but lacking emotional warmth. Although surrounded by luxury, Albee later described his upbringing as deeply alienating. As he told biographer Mel Gussow, *"I just didn't feel that I belonged... I realised that I was with the enemy."*

He became aware he was gay at around the age of eight – something never discussed in his household – which further distanced him from his adoptive parents. This sense of otherness and emotional conflict would become a central theme in many of his plays, particularly those dealing with identity, truth, and dysfunctional families.

Albee's rebellion extended into his education. He was expelled from high school, sent to military academy, and later dismissed from Trinity College, Connecticut, reportedly for refusing to attend chapel and skipping classes. While academically bright, he rejected anything that bored him, and from a young age, was more interested in writing poetry, short stories, and plays.

In his late teens, after a final argument with his parents, Albee left home and cut off contact for twenty years. He moved to Greenwich Village in New York City, immersing himself in the vibrant world of painters, composers, and experimental theatre. *"That was a feast,"* he later said of the artistic scene. During this period, he found a creative mentor and personal partner in composer William Flanagan and received crucial guidance from playwright Thornton Wilder, who encouraged him to focus on playwriting.

Albee's initial writing garnered little interest from the industry and so in 1958, shortly before turning thirty and with a sense of urgent desperation, Albee wrote THE ZOO STORY, a dark, symbolic one-act play exploring isolation and communication. Written in just three weeks as a *"birthday present"* to himself, it premiered in Berlin before its first American performance in 1959. Though reviews were mixed – a trend that followed him throughout his career – the play marked his debut as a serious playwright and won several early awards.

Albee's first major commercial success came with WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?, which opened on Broadway on October 13, 1962. A fierce, emotionally charged examination of a marriage in crisis, the play cemented Albee's place in American theatre and remains one of the most influential works of 20th-century drama.

(Reference: Mel Gussow. Edward Albee: A Singular Journey: A Biography. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999)

1962 PREMIERE
WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?
"NO PUBLICITY IS BAD PUBLICITY!"

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? premiered on October 13, 1962, at the Billy Rose Theatre (now the Nederlander Theatre) on Broadway in New York. The original cast featured Uta Hagen as Martha, Arthur Hill as George, George Grizzard as Nick and Melinda Dillon as Honey, with direction by Alan Schneider.

The production was a major critical and commercial success, running for 664 performances. It won the 1963 Tony Award for Best Play, along with Tonys for Best Actress (Hagen), Best Actor (Hill), and Best Direction (Schneider).

Despite these accolades, the play's reception was polarised.

- Howard Taubman of The New York Times praised it as *"a wry and electric evening in the theater,"* while also noting that audiences either loved or loathed it.
- Time magazine said the play *"jolted the Broadway season to life."*
- Newsweek called it *"a brilliantly original work of art – an excoriating theatrical experience, surging with shocks of recognition and dramatic fire."*

However, not all critics were impressed.

One reviewer dismissed it as suitable only for *"dirty-minded females,"* while others condemned its *"most soiled and fruitiest language"* ever heard on a Broadway stage.

Objections extended to its moral tone, with complaints about profanity and pessimism, and even doubts that characters like Martha and Honey were *"plausible women."*

CONTROVERSY AND THE PULITZER SNUB

In 1963, the Pulitzer Prize drama jury unanimously recommended WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? for the award. However, the Pulitzer trustees overruled the jury, judging the play too vulgar. As a result, no Pulitzer Prize for Drama was awarded that year – a decision widely criticised in the theatre world as censorship under the guise of morality.

Albee, however, remained unfazed and defiant, going on to win three Pulitzer Prizes for:
A DELICATE BALANCE (1967), SEASCAPE (1975) and THREE TALL WOMEN (1994).

MAJOR PAST PRODUCTIONS AND REINTERPRETATIONS

A LEGACY OF REINVENTION

Since its explosive Broadway premiere in 1962, WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? has been revived, reimagined, and reinterpreted in numerous landmark productions around the world. Below is a timeline of some of the most influential and innovative stagings in USA and UK.

1964 UK PREMIERE – PICCADILLY THEATRE, LONDON

- Directed by: **Laurence Olivier** (as Artistic Director of the National Theatre)
- Starring: **Flora Robson** (Martha) and **Ray Dotrice** (George)
- Reception: British audiences encountered the play for the first time just two years after its U.S. debut. Robson's performance was praised for its raw intensity. Some critics were unsettled by the emotional directness and "American" style of the dialogue.

1964–65 GIELGUD & GARRICK THEATRES, LONDON

- Starring: **Constance Cummings** (Martha) and **Ray McAnally** (George)
- Note: These early UK stagings helped establish the play's place in the British theatre landscape, despite cultural differences in audience response.

1976 BROADWAY REVIVAL

- Directed by: **Edward Albee**
- Starring: **Colleen Dewhurst** (Martha) and **Ben Gazzara** (George)
- Significance: Albee's own direction restored the original psychological edge and darker tone that had been softened in some earlier versions.

1996–97 ALMEIDA & ALDWYCH THEATRES, LONDON

- Directed by: **Howard Davies**
- Starring: **Diana Rigg** (Martha) and **David Suchet** (George)
- Reception: Widely acclaimed. Rigg's Martha was regal and ferocious, while Suchet brought a quiet devastation to George. The production transferred successfully to the West End (Aldwych).

2001 HOWARD UNIVERSITY PRODUCTION

- Directed by: **Vera Katz**
- Context: This groundbreaking adaptation featured an all-black student cast at a historically black university. Katz reached out to Edward Albee, who personally approved changes to the text to suit the casting, including altering references to the "blond blue-eyed child" and the universities mentioned in George's past.

1. THE HISTORY OF THE PLAY

- Albee's involvement: He visited rehearsals, met the cast, and gave a lecture. He also toured the campus, expressing a strong desire to better understand Black history and culture.
- Significance: A powerful example of how the play's universality allows it to transcend its original context when approached thoughtfully and respectfully.

2005 BROADWAY REVIVAL

- Directed by: **Anthony Page**
- Starring: **Kathleen Turner** (Martha) and **Bill Irwin** (George)
- Significance: Set in a post-9/11 context, this revival highlighted new anxieties and re-examined gender dynamics. Irwin won the Tony for Best Actor; Turner was praised for balancing Martha's aggression with vulnerability.

2012 STEPPENWOLF/BROADWAY REVIVAL (50TH ANNIVERSARY)

- Directed by: **Pam MacKinnon**
- Starring: **Tracy Letts** (George) and **Amy Morton** (Martha)
- Awards: Tony Award for Best Revival of a Play
- Interpretation: Letts' George was more emotionally dominant than in previous portrayals, shifting the traditional power balance and offering fresh insight into the characters' dynamic.

2017 HAROLD PINTER THEATRE, LONDON

- Directed by: **James Macdonald**
- Starring: **Imelda Staunton** (Martha) and **Conleth Hill** (George)
- Reception: Universally acclaimed. Staunton's performance was hailed as "the definitive Martha" by many UK critics, and the production revitalised interest in the play for a new generation.

2020 BROADWAY REVIVAL (CANCELLED)

- Directed by: **Joe Mantello**
- Starring: **Laurie Metcalf** (Martha) and **Rupert Everett** (George)
- Note: This highly anticipated revival was cancelled after just three preview performances due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It would have marked the first Broadway revival since 2012.

NOTABLE POP CULTURE REFERENCES:

Since its debut, WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? has been widely referenced and parodied in film, television, and theatre. Its iconic characters, biting dialogue, and emotional intensity have made it a frequent subject of satire and homage.

- THE SIMPSONS episode "Heartbreak Hotel" (Season 29, Episode 12) features a segment that parodies the play. In this segment, Homer and Marge, along with their guests John and Gloria (voiced by the same actors as Homer and Marge), engage in a night of intense verbal sparring and emotional revelations, mirroring the dynamics of the play. The episode also includes a cameo by George Segal, reprising his role as Nick from the 1966 film adaptation of the play.
- The US OFFICE released an episode in 2008 called "The Dinner Party."

These parodies and references illustrate how deeply WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? has entered the public imagination. Even audiences unfamiliar with the full play often recognise its marital issues, psychological games and brutal honesty, highlighting the enduring power of Albee's work.

THE 1966 FILM ADAPTATION

STARRING ELIZABETH TAYLOR AND RICHARD BURTON:

THE 1966 FILM

Director: **Mike Nichols** (in his film debut)

Screenplay: **Ernest Lehman**

Cast: **Elizabeth Taylor** (Martha), **Richard Burton** (George), **George Segal** (Nick) and **Sandy Dennis** (Honey)

The 1966 film adaptation of WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? is celebrated as one of Hollywood's greatest stage-to-screen transitions. Mike Nichols retained the raw intensity of Edward Albee's original text while using cinematic tools – close-ups, lighting, and varied locations – to deepen the emotional impact of his storytelling.

At its core are powerhouse performances from Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, whose volatile off-screen marriage added a charged authenticity to their portrayal of Martha and George. The film's bold choice to keep Albee's controversial language and dark themes challenged Hollywood's strict censorship codes and contributed to the eventual demise of the Hays Code, paving the way for the modern film rating system.

CRITICAL AND CULTURAL IMPACT

- **Oscar recognition:** Nominated in every eligible category at the 1967 Academy Awards and won four, including Best Actress (Taylor) and Best Supporting Actress (Dennis).
- **Box Office:** Despite its adult content, it grossed over $33 million – a major success for the time.
- **Cultural legacy:** Selected by the Library of Congress in 2013 for preservation due to its "cultural, historical, and aesthetic significance"; ensuring its legacy for future generations.

STAGE vs SCREEN
A COMPARISON

DIALOGUE

The film remains remarkably faithful to Albee's original script, preserving much of the dialogue. Minor edits were made for censorship and pacing, but the emotional core and verbal brutality are intact.

SET AND ATMOSPHERE

The stage version relies on a single, confined setting to heighten the tension and claustrophobia. The film expands the world of the play with additional locations and background characters, offering a broader emotional and visual palette.

PERFORMANCE STYLE

On stage Uta Hagen and Arthur Hill delivered raw, psychologically intense, performances driven by live dialogue and sustained presence. In contrast, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton bring cinematic intimacy, star power, and magnetic chemistry.

LEGACY

The 1962 play broke theatrical conventions and redefined the American stage. The 1966 film challenged Hollywood censorship, influenced the creation of the modern movie rating system, and helped usher in a new era of adult, psychologically complex cinema.

A COMPARISON TABLE

Fill in the table below to compare elements of the stage production and the 1966 film.

This screen version is available across a number of streaming platforms
https://www.justwatch.com/uk/movie/whos-afraid-of-virginia-woolf

Element	Stage Production	1966 Film
Dialogue		
Setting		
Acting Style		
Tone		
Legacy		



Photograph from trailer photoshoot: **Jonathan Pryke**

2. THEMES AND CONTEXT



Photograph from trailer photoshoot: **Jonathan Pryke**

KEY THEMES

ILLUSION vs REALITY

This theme is central to the writing and a driving force of the play's emotional and psychological tension; exploring how the characters create illusions to cope with the disappointments and failures of real life.

- Martha and George construct extravagant lies, in particular the fiction surrounding their imaginary son, to escape the pain of infertility and a failing marriage.
- The younger couple, Nick and Honey, also hide behind illusions about their relationship and ambitions.

As the play progresses, these illusions are brutally stripped away, revealing the raw emotional reality. In essence, the play demonstrates how people use illusions as emotional armour, but also suggests that confronting reality, no matter how painful, is necessary for genuine connection and healing.

TRUTH

Both couples avoid facing the truth about their lives; George hides behind his storytelling and sarcasm, Martha drinks and belittles George. Nick and Honey initially project success and a loving, normal relationship. Both couples are trapped by their own need to appear in control, even as their truths begin to unfold.

IDENTITY

All four characters struggle to truly define themselves amidst their failures and fantasies. George feels trapped by his professional disappointments and his inability to live up to his wife and father in law's expectations. Martha's identity is built on her relationship to men, particularly her powerful father. She uses aggression, attention-seeking behaviour and seduction to assert control over her husband and younger male guest. The imaginary child becomes central to her identity as a woman and a mother. Nick's identity is rooted in external validation: career success, physical attractiveness and social climbing. Honey is the most passive and underdeveloped character in terms of identity. The quiet, 'agreeable wife' persona she adopts aligns with societal norms and masks her lack of identity and fear of self-awareness.

EMOTIONAL COST OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

This is central to the play's intensity. Albee portrays relationships, especially marriage, not as sources of comfort, but as battlegrounds where love, pain, truth, and illusion collide. George and Martha's marriage is filled with psychological games, power plays and emotional combat, yet beneath this hostility is a desperate need for connection. The characters hurt each other because it's the only way they can feel close or real. Albee suggests that true intimacy requires confronting painful truths and that the emotional cost of human relationships is both destructive and necessary.

KEY THEMES QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTIVE DIARY

KEY THEMES TO EXPLORE:

Illusion vs Reality, Truth, Identity and the Emotional Cost of Human Relationships

ILLUSION vs REALITY

Characters in the play create illusions to escape painful truths.

Think about:

- What illusions do George and Martha maintain?
- Why do Nick and Honey avoid facing their real problems?
- What happens when these illusions are exposed?

TRUTH

Avoiding truth causes conflict and emotional damage.

Think about:

- Find examples of how George and Martha use sarcasm or alcohol to avoid honesty.
- What "truths" come out by the end of the play?

IDENTITY

Each character struggles with how they see themselves – and how others see them.

Think about:

- How does George feel about his career and role as a husband?
- How is Martha's identity tied to her father and her marriage?
- What roles do Nick and Honey play in their relationship?

THE EMOTIONAL COST OF RELATIONSHIPS

Albee portrays marriage not as comfort, but conflict.

Think about:

- Why do George and Martha stay together despite their cruelty?
- Is hurting each other their way of showing love?
- Do you think the play ends with hope or defeat?

EXTENSION TASK: REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

Choose one theme and find a moment in the play that best represents it.

- Explain how the dialogue or action shows that theme.
- Record your thoughts in your Reflective Journal

SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

1960S AMERICA, POST-WAR VALUES, GENDER ROLES

This play was written and first performed in the early 1960s – a time of deep social anxiety, shifting values, and increasing disillusionment in post-war America. Understanding this historical backdrop can help deepen your interpretation of Albee's characters and themes.

VIRGINIA WOOLF (1882–1941) – A SYMBOLIC REFERENCE

Although she never appears in the play, her name in the title is significant. Woolf was a pioneering modernist author, known for exploring identity, inner thought, illusion vs reality, and the constraints of society; especially around gender and class. Albee uses her name to evoke intellectualism, existential questioning, and the idea of who's afraid to live without illusions?

POST-WWII AMERICA (1945 ONWARDS)

After WWII, America entered a period of economic prosperity and cultural conformity, but also increasing psychological unrest. The American Dream idealised marriage, family life, material success, and social stability. Sitcoms like LEAVE IT TO BEAVER and FATHER KNOWS BEST reflected idealised suburban life but many people's lived experiences didn't match the glossy image. Albee's characters, especially George and Martha, distort this idealised perception; revealing the darkness and pain beneath their facade.

THE COLD WAR AND NUCLEAR ANXIETY

The Cold War (1945–1991) created a constant sense of global tension and potential catastrophe. The 1945 bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, followed by the Soviet atomic bomb test (1949), launched an arms race that left many Americans living in quiet fear of annihilation. This paranoia and instability underpins the emotional volatility of the play.

THEATRE OF THE ABSURD (1940S–1960S)

Albee's work is often associated with this movement. Other playwrights include: Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Eugène Ionesco. They explored the idea that life is inherently meaningless, and that social roles and behaviours are often absurd attempts to create structure in a chaotic world. WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? reflects this with its characters clinging to illusion, playing roles, and struggling to find meaning in their personal lives.

DOMESTIC CONFORMITY vs INNER CHAOS

Under President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953–1961), consumerism, suburbia, and the "nuclear family" became the cultural norm. Albee's characters defy this ideal. George and Martha live in a university town, childless, angry, disillusioned and they mock the very idea of perfect family life. The play exposes the emotional and psychological toll of trying (and failing) to live up to society's expectations.

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT (1950-1960)

Between 1950 and 1960, the Civil Rights Movement in America began to take shape as African Americans challenged segregation and demanded equal rights. One of the most significant events was the 1954 Supreme Court case Brown v. Board of Education, which ruled that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. This gave hope to civil rights activists and led to increased efforts to end racial discrimination. In 1955, the Montgomery Bus Boycott began after Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger. Led by Martin Luther King Jr., the boycott lasted over a year and showed the power of peaceful protest. These early actions laid the foundation for the larger and more widespread civil rights campaigns of the 1960s.

STRUCTURE OF THE PLAY:

The setting is the living room of a house on the campus of a small New England college, where middle-aged Martha and her husband George are joined by the younger Nick and Honey for late night drinks after a party. It is formed of three acts, each with an ironic and symbolic title:

ACT I – "FUN AND GAMES"

The characters are introduced and the verbal combat, masked in humour and sarcasm, begins. Social tensions rise and, beneath the games, darker emotional undertones begin to surface.

ACT II – "WALPURGISNACHT"

A reference to a Scandinavian festival with Pagan origins; a night of witches, playing pranks, fertility rites and chaos.

The mood shifts: illusions begin to unravel, and painful truths are revealed. Emotions intensify and the conflicts within the relationships become more destructive, revealing the characters' rawness and vulnerability.

ACT III – "THE EXORCISM"

Albee's original title for the play.

In this final act all remaining illusions are stripped away. The fantasy of the imaginary son is exposed and George and Martha are left emotionally shattered. The play ends without resolution, but with an uneasy sense of truth and honesty.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SINGLE-SETTING AND REAL-TIME FORMAT:

The play's single-setting (George and Martha's living room) and real-time format heighten the tension by trapping the characters together, forcing them to confront their painful truths without escape. This confined, realistic space creates a claustrophobic environment (for actors and audiences) which reflects the pressure and intensity of the characters' relationships, making the unravelling of their illusions feel immediate and unavoidable.



Photograph from trailer photoshoot: **Jonathan Pryke**

3. CHARACTERS IN DETAIL



Photograph from trailer photoshoot: **Jonathan Pryke**

GEORGE

INTELLECTUAL PRIDE, SUPPRESSED RAGE, A DEEP YEARNING FOR RECOGNITION AND RESPECT, COMPLEX.

George, a 46-year-old associate professor in the History Department, is portrayed as a failed academic and passive figure, largely through Martha's harsh descriptions. She claims to have married him due to her father's early hopes for his future, which faded after perceiving George as weak. George relies heavily on his intellectual prowess, such as speaking Latin or using scholarly references, to maintain a sense of superiority and control. Martha mocks these moments as pretentious. Possessing a quick wit and a sharp tongue George uses sarcasm as his main form of emotional expression and resistance; subtly masking his bitterness and discontent whilst exposing the hypocrisy of those around him. His identity is predominantly shaped by Martha's criticisms, until he finally reclaims some power by cruelly inventing the death of their imaginary son.

MARTHA

EMOTIONAL VOLATILITY, DESIRE FOR ATTENTION AND VALIDATION, PAST DISAPPOINTMENTS

Martha, the daughter of the college president where George and Nick teach, is described by Albee's as "a large, boisterous woman, 52, looking somewhat younger. Ample but not fleshy." She is locked in a volatile and deeply acrimonious marriage with George, characterised by emotional manipulation, psychological games, and long-standing resentment. Their relationship swings between brutal confrontation and toxic co-dependency. Martha openly admits to past infidelities and flirts aggressively with Nick throughout the play, eventually seducing him into at least a kiss, possibly more. Her relentless criticism of George's lack of ambition may reflect deeper insecurities about her own unfulfilled professional or personal aspirations, including motherhood. Beneath her brashness lies a woman confronting grief, loneliness and a profound dissatisfaction with her role in life.

DISCUSSION POINT

In Curve's production of WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?, the roles of Martha and George are played by Black actors. The experience of Black individuals in academia during this time in America would have been very different from that of their white counterparts. It is important to consider the social and political context of the era when developing and understanding these characters.

How might this casting choice affect or influence an audience's understanding of the play and its characters?

CONSIDER

- Casting Black actors as Martha and George in WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? adds a powerful new layer to the play, especially when considering the social and political context of 1960s America. At that time, Black academics often faced significant barriers, ranging from overt racism to institutional exclusion so placing Black characters in these roles immediately highlights issues of power, marginalisation, and resilience that might otherwise go unspoken.
- For an audience, this casting can deepen the emotional and psychological tension between the characters. George's frustrations with his stalled academic career, for example, take on new meaning when viewed through the lens of racial inequality. Similarly, Martha's complex relationship with status and image may resonate differently when portrayed by a Black woman navigating a predominantly white and often hostile academic world.
- Overall, this interpretation challenges audiences to reconsider the play not just as a personal drama, but as a reflection of wider social struggles. It opens up conversations about race, power, and identity that are just as relevant today as they were in the 1960s.

NICK AND HONEY

THEIR ROLES AS OUTSIDERS AND REFLECTIONS OF GEORGE AND MARTHA

As a young couple newly arrived at the college, Nick and Honey are outsiders; both socially inexperienced and emotionally unprepared. They become embroiled in George and Martha's psychological warfare, serving as pawns in their battles. Their growing discomfort and involvement in the gameplay highlights and reflects the dysfunction in George and Martha's marriage, while gradually exposing the fractures in their own relationship. As the play unfolds, the lines between the two couples blur, suggesting that Nick and Honey may one day become like George and Martha, (and vice versa), embodying the consequences of dissatisfaction, deception, and disillusionment in marriage.

NICK

Nick, a 30 year-old biology professor, described as "blond, well put together, good-looking," is young, ambitious, and accomplished; gained his Master's at nineteen and was a college boxing champion. He stands in stark contrast to the older, "thin hair going grey", stagnant George. However, beneath the surface, Nick's life is far from ideal. After a few drinks, he admits he married Honey not out of love, but due to a false pregnancy and family pressure.

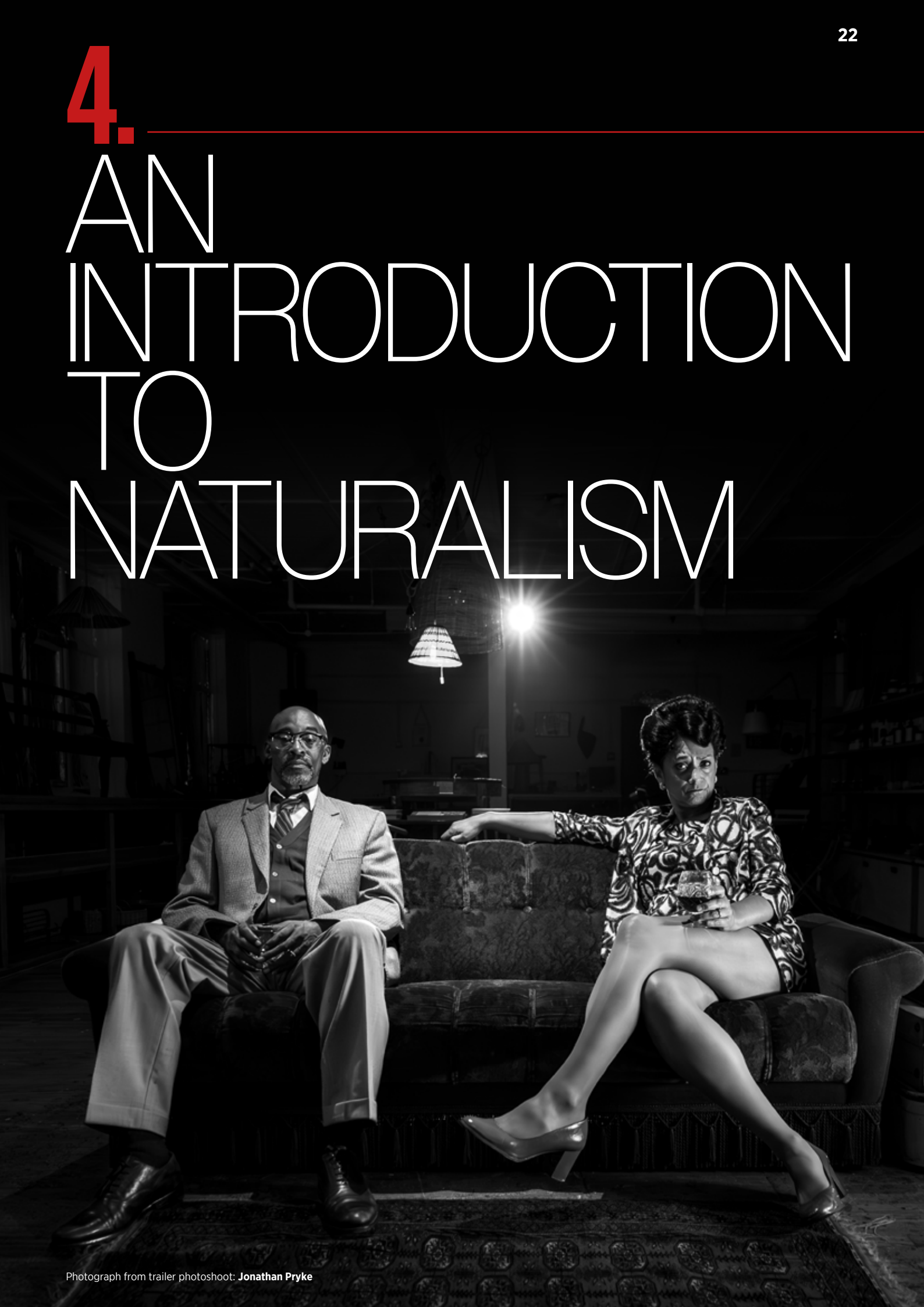
HONEY

Honey, 26, is described as "a petite, blonde girl, rather plain" and presents as emotionally fragile from the outset, becoming drunk very quickly and often retreating from conflict. She spends much of the play offstage, lying on the bathroom floor peeling labels off alcohol bottles. She is arguably the weakest character, lacking intelligence and self-assurance. Her infertility, like Martha's, reveals a hidden source of pain, and contributes to the quiet failure of her marriage to Nick, who clearly feels superior to her.



Photograph from trailer photoshoot: **Jonathan Pryke**

4. AN INTRODUCTION TO NATURALISM



Photograph from trailer photoshoot: **Jonathan Pryke**

WHAT IS NATURALISM?

Naturalism (a branch of Realism) originated in France with Émile Zola (1840-1902), who first articulated its principles as we understand them today. It is a literary and artistic movement focused on portraying life accurately and objectively, emphasising everyday reality without idealisation or romanticism. Naturalism highlights how environment, heredity, and social conditions shape human behaviour, often depicting characters as products of their circumstances. It strives for detailed, realistic representation and frequently explores darker or mundane aspects of life.

Realism and Naturalism are closely related theatrical styles that aim to represent life truthfully on stage, but they differ in focus and intent.

Realism seeks to depict believable characters and situations, often focusing on middle-class life and exploring psychological depth, moral choices, and social issues. It aims for authenticity, but still allows for structure, symbolism, and artistic interpretation.

Naturalism, on the other hand, takes realism a step further. Influenced by science and social theories like Darwinism, it portrays characters as products of their environment and heredity, with little control over their fate. Naturalist plays often focus on the working class or marginalised groups, showing life's harsher realities without idealisation. Whilst realism emphasises individual agency and emotional nuance, naturalism leans toward a more detached, observational style, emphasising cause and effect, and the influence of external forces on human behaviour.

NATURALISM AND REALISM

Key differences between **Realism** and **Naturalism** in theatre:

Feature	Realism	Naturalism
Time Period	Emerged in the mid–19th century	Late 19th century (developed from realism)
Goal	To portray everyday life truthfully	To depict life scientifically and objectively
Focus	Believable characters and realistic situations	Human behaviour shaped by heredity and environment
Philosophical Influence	Humanism, psychology, social observation	Darwinism, determinism, scientific observation
Free Will	Characters make choices and change	Characters are shaped by forces beyond their control
Style	Realistic dialogue, detailed but stylized sets	Often hyper-realistic sets and unfiltered speech
Acting Approach	Psychological realism (Stanislavski's system)	Deeply rooted in behaviour shaped by circumstances
Examples	A DOLL'S HOUSE (Ibsen), THE CHERRY ORCHARD (Chekhov)	THE WEAVERS (Hauptmann), MISS JULIE (Strindberg)

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

NATURALISM AND THE RISE OF MODERN DRAMA

In the late 19th century, European theatre was in decline, dominated by formulaic melodrama and romanticism. A shift was inevitable. As critic Martin Esslin wrote, "The coming of the naturalist revolution was inevitable; it was an expression of the Zeitgeist."

Key social and intellectual changes influenced this theatrical transformation:

- **Darwin's Theory of Evolution** challenged religion and emphasised heredity and environment.
- **Freud's psychoanalysis** sparked deeper interest in human psychology and unconscious drives.
- **The women's suffrage movement** questioned traditional gender roles.
- **Scientific thinking** encouraged a focus on determinism and cause and effect.

Naturalism emerged as a movement portraying life truthfully – without idealism – highlighting how characters are shaped by their environment and past. Writers like Zola, Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, and Shaw explored emotional repression, class struggle, and psychological realism. As Esslin noted, these great Naturalists revealed "the tragic greatness of simple people... and the bitter ironies of unspoken thoughts."

KEY PRACTITIONER – KONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKY

Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863–1938) was a Russian actor, director, and theatre theorist who revolutionised modern performance through his approach to acting, now known as the Stanislavsky System. His work laid the foundation for what we now call Realism in theatre and his system is documented in four main publications: My Life in Art, An Actor Prepares, Building a Character and Creating a Role.

Stanislavsky believed that great acting must be psychologically truthful and emotionally authentic. He encouraged actors to move away from exaggerated, presentational styles and instead "live the part" by connecting deeply with a character's motivations, objectives, and emotional life.

His methods included:

- **Given Circumstances**: Understanding the fictional world of the play and the character's context.
- **Objectives**: Clarifying what a character wants in each scene and overall.
- **Emotional Memory**: Drawing from personal experience to bring genuine emotion to the role.
- **The Magic If**: Encouraging actors to ask, "What would I do if I were in this situation?"

Stanislavsky co-founded the Moscow Art Theatre, where he directed influential productions of Chekhov's plays, including THE SEAGULL and THE CHERRY ORCHARD. His teachings influenced generations of actors and directors around the world, and laid the foundation for contemporary acting approaches including:

Method Acting (Lee Strasberg) – emphasises emotional memory.

Stella Adler Method – focuses on imagination, text analysis and action.

Meisner Technique (Sandford Meisner) – centres on truthful behaviour and spontaneous reactions between actors.

Practical Aesthetics (David Mamet & William H. Macy) – teaches action-based acting.

WHY WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? IS AN IDEAL PLAY TO EXPLORE NATURALISM

While Albee's work is often linked to Absurdism, WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? draws heavily from the naturalist tradition in both content and form:

- Set in **real-time**, in a **single domestic space**, intensifying dramatic tension
- Features **flawed**, **psychologically complex characters** shaped by trauma, failure, and their environment
- Uses **raw**, **emotionally volatile**, and **naturalistic dialogue**
- Explores themes of **illusion vs. reality**, **emotional dependency**, and **power struggles**
- Offers **no comforting resolution**: only the painful exposure of truth
- Demands **emotionally honest**, **detailed performances** rooted in lived experience

HOW THE CHARACTERS AND SETTING DEMAND TRUTHFULNESS IN PERFORMANCE

The play's confined, real-time setting traps four characters in a psychological battlefield. The living room becomes a pressure cooker of **repressed emotion**, **power shifts**, and **personal revelation**.

Its actors must:

- Sustain **emotional intensity** throughout prolonged, intimate scenes
- Convey **shifting layers of personality**: the mask vs. the hidden self
- Respond to fast changing dynamics with **authenticity and spontaneity**
- Use **naturalistic delivery** to serve Albee's emotionally charged text
- Foster **genuine connection** and **active listening** to remain believable

The audience should not feel they are watching a performance, but rather eavesdropping on a real night of confrontation and unravelling truths.



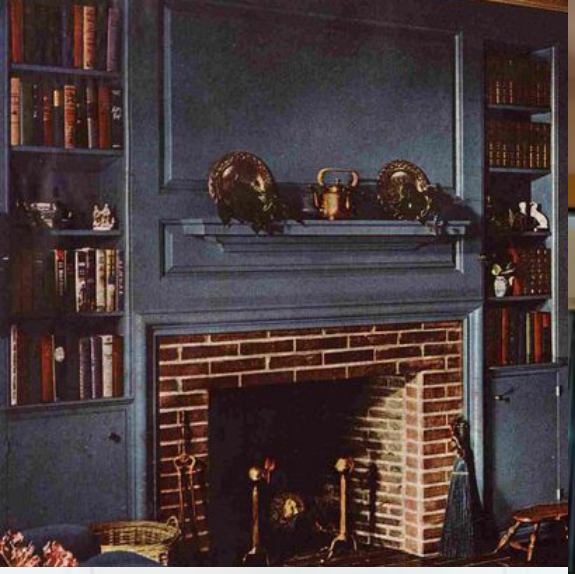



SET DESIGN
INSPIRATION































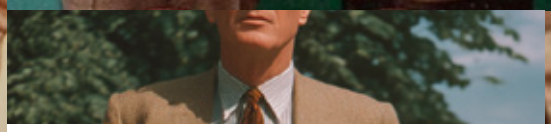













COSTUME DESIGN INSPIRATION





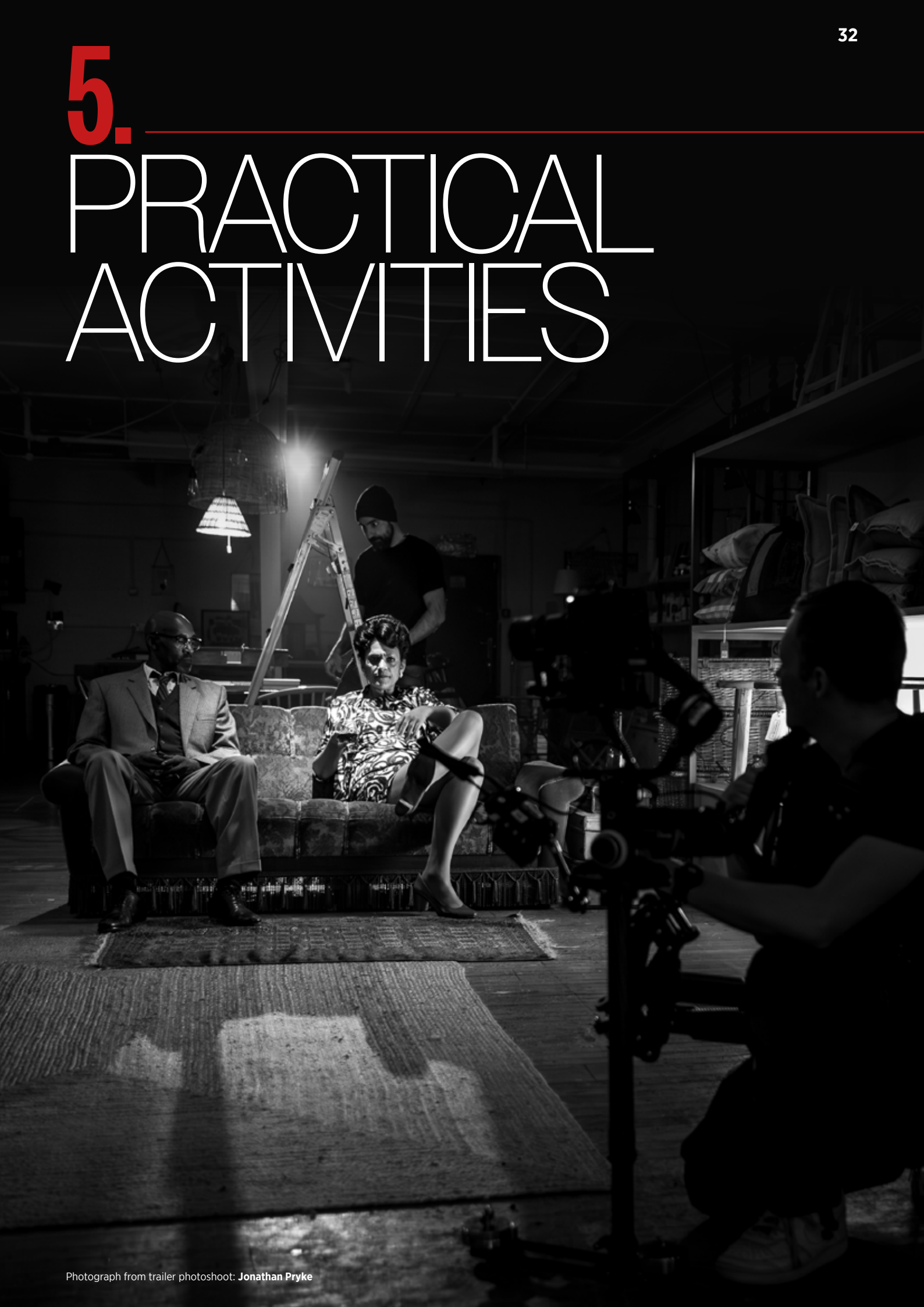


SET AND COSTUME DESIGN





5. PRACTICAL ACTIVITIES



Photograph from trailer photoshoot: **Jonathan Pryke**

PRACTICAL ACTIVITIES
FOR THE CLASSROOM

OPTION: YOU ARE INVITED TO START AN ACTING JOURNAL

Keeping an acting journal helps actors develop insight, consistency, and emotional depth in performance. It's a practical tool for refining both character and craft.

- **Understand Your Character**
  Explore backstory, motivations, and emotional shifts to make truthful choices on stage.
- **Track Your Growth**
  Reflect on rehearsals, note challenges and breakthroughs, and monitor your progress.
- **Connect Emotionally**
  Link personal experiences with your characters to add authenticity and vulnerability.
- **Support Text Work**
  Use the journal to break down subtext, beats, relationships, and discoveries.
- **Prepare for Performances**
  Revisit entries to clarify your intentions and ground yourself before going onstage.
- **Develop Your Process**
  Over time, journalling reveals what works for you – helping shape your unique acting method.

Your acting journal can be hardcopy or digital – whatever suits your style. Decorate it to reflect your personality, interests, or even the theme of the play you're working on. Make it as unique as you are.

Feel free to: Skip pages - Write upside down - Doodle - Stick things - Use colour & images

This is a working document, not a display piece, so don't worry about neatness. It's about honesty, exploration, and process, not perfection. Make it a space where you feel free to **reflect**, **experiment**, and **grow**.

TASK 1
EDWARD ALBEE HIS LIFE AND THE PLAY

AIMS

- To spark curiosity and critical thinking about Albee's life and work.
- To gain a deeper understanding of setting, characters and themes in WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? through collaborative research.
- To analyse and record how Albee's personal experiences may have influenced his writing.

DESIRED OUTCOMES

- Students will begin to think like actors/directors by connecting life experience to dramatic text.
- Students will develop greater insight into the motivations behind the play's content and tone.
- Students will work collaboratively and respectfully to build a shared understanding.
- Students will contribute ideas to a wider group discussion and develop oracy skills and confidence.

TASK INSTRUCTIONS (SMALL GROUP WORK)

1. **Get into small groups** (3–4 people).
2. **Go to: edwardalbeesociety.org/biography**
   Split the reading between group members if needed.
3. **As you read**, think about how Albee's lived experience may have influenced WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?
4. **Discuss your ideas**, focusing on: **Setting ■ Characters ■ Themes ■ Other**
5. **Record your group's ideas in your Actor's Journal**, under the four headings above.
6. **Be brave**, **bold** and **respectful**. Challenge each other's thinking and ask deeper questions.
7. **Whole-class share** (optional) Come together for a group discussion to share your findings.
   A teacher or student facilitator can lead the sharing.

SAMPLE RESPONSE

The play is set on a university campus – with class distinctions – could reflect Albee's relationship with education and class – bored and frustrated – he rebelled against his schooling – he got expelled from Trinity college...

TASK 2
CHARACTER BUILDING: UTA HAGEN'S 6 STEPS

Uta Hagen (1919–2004) was the original Martha in the 1962 Broadway production and the 1963 radio recording of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Edward Albee described her as "a profoundly truthful actress." She was also a respected teacher who adapted Stanislavsky's principles into six practical questions to help actors build believable, emotionally truthful characters.

UTA HAGEN'S SIX STEPS

Use these prompts to guide your character analysis:

Who am I?
What is my current emotional and physical state? How do I see myself? What am I wearing right now? Why?

What are the given circumstances?
What time is it? What season? Where am I exactly? (City? Room? Type of home?) What has just happened? What's happening now? What do I expect will happen next?

What surrounds me?
What objects, people, or environmental details are around me? What condition are they in? How do I interact with them?

What are my relationships?
How do I relate to the other people in the scene? What is my attitude toward this place, these objects, and this situation?

What do I want?
What is my immediate goal in this moment? What's my overall objective in this scene?

What is in my way / What do I do to get what I want?
What's stopping me? (Person, feeling, memory, fear?) What actions or tactics do I use to try and overcome this?

(A Challenge for the Actor, Uta Hagen, 1991)

AIMS

- To utilise Hagen's 'Six Steps' as a practical tool for exploring the given circumstances and character development.
- To analyse text and ignite the imagination to fill in the emotional and contextual gaps in the script.

DESIRED OUTCOMES

- Students will gain a deeper insight into the character and the play text.
- Students will develop confidence using the 6 Steps as a tool for character analysis.

TASK INSTRUCTIONS (INDIVIDUAL WORK)

1. Read Act I of the play up to the point just before Nick and Honey enter.
2. Choose either Martha or George as your focus of study.
3. Answer the '6 Steps' questions in first person (from the character's point of view) based on evidence you find in the text. Return to the script as often as you need—this is about discovery, not memory.
4. Fill in any missing details with your imagination, using clues from the text to stay grounded in the world of the play.
5. Record your responses in your acting journal or directly on your script with notes, underlining, or doodles, whatever helps you connect to the role.
6. Option to 'Hot Seat' students (in character) to share their '6 Steps' responses with the group. Compare and contrast your responses and record anything of interest in your Actor's Journal.

SAMPLE RESPONSE

Who am I? Martha

What is my current emotional and physical state?
I'm restless. I'm wired and worn out at the same time. I've had too much to drink, but I'm still aware. I feel like a coiled spring. I'm angry at George, bored with my life, and aching for some attention, affection, maybe just distraction. I'm volatile. I laugh too loud, move too fast, and attack before anyone else can hurt me first.



Photograph from trailer photoshoot: **Jonathan Pryke**

TASK 3
CONTENTLESS SCENE: PLAYING RELACOM (RELATIONSHIP COMMUNICATION)

"Communication and interaction are both ongoing systems, not single events... Communication has two basic modes: content and relationship, which occur simultaneously."

Robert Cohen, Acting Power

AIMS

- To explore relationship-driven performance using neutral dialogue.
- To develop an understanding of subtext (what is not said but strongly felt).
- To strengthen reactive listening and emotional responsiveness.

WHAT IS SUBTEXT?

Subtext is the underlying meaning or emotion behind what a character says. It is how something is said; not just the words themselves. In real life, we rarely say exactly what we feel; the same is true in naturalistic acting.

DESIRED OUTCOMES

- Students will experience how neutral text can hold endless emotional possibilities.
- Students will be able to identify and perform subtext using physicality, tone, and timing.
- Students will build awareness of relationship dynamics and how they shift moment to moment.
- Students will demonstrate truthfulness and responsiveness in their acting.
- Students will learn to give and receive constructive, specific feedback.

TASK INSTRUCTIONS (GROUPS OF 3)

1. Work in groups of 3. All group members should commit the whole Contentless scene to memory so that they can take turns as Actor A, Actor B, and Observer.
2. Rehearse the dialogue multiple times, exploring a new relationship and emotional subtext in each version. Use body language, tone, pauses, and facial expressions to communicate subtext clearly.

SUGGESTED SCENARIOS TO TRY

- A parent greeting a teenager after they have stayed out too late (parent child dynamic)
- Colleagues with unspoken romantic tension. (lover/lover dynamic)
- A tense reunion between siblings after a falling out. (sibling rivalry dynamic)
- Any other appropriate scenario suggested by the observer

3. The Observer's role is to offer constructive feedback on: Clarity of subtext: Which emotions and relationships were conveyed? Believability: Did it feel authentic or real? Connection: Were the actors truly reacting to each other?
4. Record your responses, thoughts, findings and feedback you received in your Actor's journal
5. Scene sharing with the wider group (optional): Share scenes and findings/feedback in the whole group setting. Notice if, and how, having a larger audience affects your performance of The Contentless Scene.

SAMPLE RESPONSE

Saying *"Hello"* could mean:

- *"I've missed you"* (warm subtext) smiling expression, speaking in an enthusiastic, happy loving, tone, open body language, arms wide open, listening, calm, breathing, not rushing text
- *"I'm avoiding a fight"* (tense subtext)...
- *"I'm testing you"* (playful or suspicious subtext)...
- *"I'm furious with you"* (hostile subtext)...

THE CONTENTLESS SCENE:

A: ***Hi***

B: ***Hello***

A: ***What did you do last night?***

B: ***Oh, not much. How about you?***

A: ***Oh, watched a little T.V.***

B: ***Anything good?***

A: ***Well, no. Not really.***

B: ***See you later.***

A: ***OK***

TASK 4
ACTIONING WANTS – UNITS & OBJECTIVES

AIM

- To develop clarity in character intention and emotional shifts by identifying units of action and objectives, with feedback from a peer observer.

DESIRED OUTCOMES

- Students will understand and communicate objectives more clearly.
- Student (as observers) will improve their analytical and feedback skills.
- All participants build stronger performance awareness and emotional range.

TASK INSTRUCTIONS (GROUPS OF 3)

1. **Select a short excerpt of emotionally charged dialogue** from WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? Suggestions include:

   George & Martha (Martha starts to talk about their courtship)

   Martha & Nick (flirtation and manipulation)

   George & Nick (intellectual or social conflict)

2. **Assign Roles:** Actor A, Actor B and Observer (watches and gives feedback).
   Swap around after the exercise so that everyone participates.
3. **Read the Scene Together** All three students read the text aloud, noting the emotional beats, major shifts, or rising tension.
4. **Break into Units:** Working individually, **divide the scene into smaller sections** (units), which are points where the character's tactic, (intention or want) or emotion changes.

   Look for changes in: Tone – Subject/topic – Power or emotional control and Physical behaviour.

   Mark each change directly on your script. Remember that unit length depends on the character's emotional or tactical shift, not on how many lines they speak.

   Each student may break the scene differently and that's perfectly okay.

   This is a personal interpretive exercise.
5. **Define Objectives:** Still working individually, write down the objective for each unit using active verbs.

SAMPLE RESPONSES

Martha may want 'to belittle' or 'to provoke' George

Nick may want 'to impress' George

George may want 'to defend his' achievements and status in life

Honey may want 'to seek affection' from Nick

Remember: Objectives should be what your character **wants from the other person** in each unit.

6. **Perform the Scene using your personally defined Units and Objectives:** Students perform the scene focusing on: Playing one clear objective at a time: Adjusting tactics when the objective isn't working and reacting truthfully to the other actor's emotional shifts
7. **The observer watches closely:** Noticing if the shifts between units are clear and motivated: If the objectives feel real and connected to the text and if tactics are varied and dynamic.
8. **Observer offers feedback:** Some guidelines:

   After the scene run, the observer invites the actors to briefly reflect on their experience:
   (How did it feel emotionally? What was clear or unclear in your intentions or connection?)

   Then, the observer offers **constructive feedback**, focusing on:

   - ☐ **Clarity of Objectives** Were the characters' wants and intentions clear?
   - ☐ **Tactical Shifts** Did the actors show changes in approach or emotion effectively?
   - ☐ **Listening and Reacting** Did the actors respond truthfully and remain engaged with each other?
   - ☐ **Physicality and Staging** Was the use of space, gesture, and movement purposeful?
   - ☐ **Emotional Truth** Did the performance feel authentic and grounded in character?
9. **Take a moment to note down your thoughts** (and feedback received/given) in your actor's diary) Actors may want to reflect on: **Which objectives felt natural versus forced. Whether they felt "in the moment". How physicality and voice helped or hindered their performance**
10. **Repeat the exercise** for the next pairing of actors.
11. **(Optional Task): Swap Scene Partners** Swap partners with someone new from the wider group and rehearse your scene again. If time allows, perform your 'new' version in sequence with others, following the order of the play.
12. **Actor's Journal Reflection:** After the exercise, reflect on the experience from both perspectives; as an actor and as an audience member. Consider: **How did your scene partner's choices influence your own? What surprised you in this version? Did the scene reveal something new?**
13. **Remember:** to approach each new scene partner with openness. Avoid going in with fixed choices: allow the moment, their energy, and your shared connection to shape the scene naturally. **Acting is reacting!**

TASK 5
TUG OF WAR POWER PLAYS

(Group Work – 8 Students per Group)

AIM

- To explore the shifting power dynamics between characters in the play
- To develop skills in sight reading and text interpretation

DESIRED LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Students will gain a deeper understanding of how power shifts within dramatic scenes
- Students will build confidence in sight reading and performance under pressure
- Students will begin to recognise subtext and emotional cues in live dialogue

MATERIALS REQUIRED

- One large, sturdy square sheet or blanket per group
- 4 printed copies of the selected text (suggested: 6–8 pages from Walpurgisnacht)

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Form groups of eight**
   Each group should select a 6–8 page extract where all four characters (Martha, George, Nick, and Honey) are present.
2. **Set up the stage**
   Lay the blanket or sheet flat on the floor.

   Assign a character (Martha, George, Nick, Honey) to each corner of the blanket

   There should be 2 students per corner:

- Student A (physically engages with the sheet)
- Student B (reads the script aloud from behind Student A)

3. **Start the reading**
   Student Bs begin reading the play aloud, staying in character and attending to emotional tone and rhythm. Student As listen attentively to both the text and the subtext, focusing on power shifts as they unfold.

4. **Respond to power dynamics**
   At any moment, if a Student A believes their character has or wants power in the scene, they may begin to gather the sheet at their corner to metaphorically claim control.

   The other Student As must decide whether to resist or relinquish the power.

   No student may let go of their corner – resistance will create a physical tug of war as power moves between characters.

5. **Movement and interaction**
   The blanket may shift or pull students toward the centre, depending on how many are exerting force.

Safety is key: this should be done in a clear, open space with no obstacles.

REFLECTION

- After the exercise, groups should briefly discuss:

  What moments felt like turning points in the scene?

  How did the physical movements reflect or exaggerate the characters' emotional states?

  What did you notice about how power is taken, shared, or lost in conversation?

  This exercise offers a **physical**, **visual metaphor** for emotional and psychological dynamics on stage — making the invisible power plays of theatre visible and tangible for students.



Photograph from trailer photoshoot: **Jonathan Pryke**

TASK 6
ACTOR'S JOURNAL – STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

This exercise aims to help you explore how the play affected you personally. It's not about analysis or critique, it's about capturing your immediate, authentic response.

1. As soon as possible after watching WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? record a stream of consciousness, either as a written journal entry or a voice recording (minimum 5 minutes).
2. Remember to:

- Let your thoughts flow freely. Don't worry about structure, grammar, spelling, or whether your sentences make perfect sense.
- Focus on whatever comes to mind:
  - ☐ Note the moments from the play that stood out?
  - ☐ Record how it made you feel? (And if that feeling remains or has changed)
  - ☐ Note which images, lines, or characters you remember most clearly?
  - ☐ Did it remind you of anything else? People, memories, thoughts, emotions?
- Allow your mind to wander. There's no right or wrong direction to take.
- Be honest and non-judgemental with yourself – this is a private reflection, just for you.
- Important: This is not an academic exercise. No one else needs to read or hear it.
  The goal is to capture your genuine thoughts and feelings in the moment, without editing or filtering.

A NOTE

This is an activity that Director Cara Nolan does after reading a play for the first time.

"It is a really helpful way to gather first impressions on a play. As most audience members will only experience the play once and will most likely not have read it before hand. Therefore this helps to remind me when working on the play where the peaks and troughs are for the audience."

CATHY **TYSON**



PATRICK **ROBINSON**



TILLY **STEELE**



GEORGE **KEMP**



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

DIRECTOR CARA NOLAN

SAT 18 OCT – SAT 8 NOV • STUDIO THEATRE

COMPELLING • BITING • FUNNY

Edward Albee's Tony award-winning play is exclusively in Leicester this autumn.

Starring **Cathy Tyson** (MY FAIR LADY) and **Patrick Robinson** (CASUALTY) as loving, yet destructive couple Martha and George and **George Kemp** (BRIDGERTON) and **Tilly Steele** (DR WHO) as young, naive couple Nick and Honey who are drawn into their bitter and warped world of truths and games. This darkly funny play is a witty, hugely entertaining, provocative and lacerating study of a marriage in crisis.

Go behind-the-scenes with **WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? Theatre Day** on **WED 29 OCT**.

Age guidance: 14+
Show warnings: Contains strong language and adult themes including violence
Running time: Approximately 3 hours and 20 minutes (performance includes two 15 minute intervals)

SPONSORED BY DE MONTFORT UNIVERSITY LEICESTER

"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" is presented by arrangement with Concord Theatricals Ltd. on behalf of Samuel French Ltd. www.concordtheatricals.co.uk

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