

Woolf at the Fugard - theatre at its best

 By [Daniel Derksen](#)

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You must see the fiery Afrikaans version of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* at the Fugard Theatre. This is what consummate theatre at its most engaging is all about. It is theatre that you experience and drama you feel.

This fresh and invigorating theatre experience bursts with raw energy and offers the best theatre has to offer: commanding powerhouse performances from a stellar cast, a crackling translation of Edward Albee's award-winning masterpiece by Saartjie Botha, and imaginative direction by Christiaan Olwagen.

It does what live theatre does best, challenging perception and inspiring conversation, opening up a stimulating debate between a new generation of theatregoers who get a rare opportunity to see Albee's stalwart classic and purists who have seen more traditional and straightforward productions.

35 years ago I sat mesmerised watching every performance of Chris Barnard's *Taraboemdery* that starred Sandra Prinsloo and Marius Weyers, inspiring me to follow a life in theatre as playwright, journalist and eventually director, and now, watching Prinsloo and Weyers delivering a tour de force as the battle-scarred aging couple in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, I fully comprehend why theatre is in my blood.



Prinsloo and Weyers are two of South Africa's best and most esteemed actors and with this production, step outside their comfort zone to deliver performances that are mind-blowing. It's a privilege watching them draw every drop of sweat out of their characters.

Marius is as solid and unwavering as a rock as the History professor whose marriage to the foul-mouthed Martha is in serious trouble, and Prinsloo's transformation as the rough-and-ready uncaring drunkard will leave you speechless.

Their lives ignite when Martha invites a new professor and his wife over for drinks after a late night of partying, and it's like leading lambs to the slaughter.

Wessel Pretorius is fantastic as the cocky young professor who falls prey to the cougarish Martha; brilliantly balancing the passive aggressiveness of a jock with a bruised ego, and the sensitive soulfulness of an earnest young man contemplating a future and marriage that will hopefully not turn into the disaster to which he falls victim.

Grieta Pietersen is sensational as the fragile and naïve young wife whose playful nature and sometimes irrational behaviour turns her soft and gentle character into a feisty rebel.

When the young couple enter the warzone, the battle is on and nothing remains sacred as George and Martha battle forth and destroy the little integrity and dignity they have left.

This is drama at its most extreme, laced with acid humour that leaves one breathless and emotionally drained. It is delightful to watch two generations of actors take to battle and turn their characters inside out. Albee's journey into these broken lives is a life-affirming one, brilliantly dissecting the rot that sets in when passion is corrupted by malevolence and mendacity.

It's a much needed play that is extremely relevant in South Africa where relationships and marriages are destroyed by miscommunication.

Olwagen's staging is ingenious, offering an abstract and surreal journey into the mindscape of an archaic couple, where everything is out of proportion and the larger-than-life sofa that resembles a stretched limousine, shifts and morphs into different configurations.

This allows the setting of the play to be in a perpetual flux, with the actors moving the set pieces around, brilliantly amplifying the resonate themes of broken lives and disintegrating relationships.

The Fugard Theatre deserves recognition for staging this production that is extreme as it is exciting and is presented in English surtitles that open the play up to everyone.

Wie's Bang Vir Virginia Woolf? runs until 8 August at 7:30pm (Monday to Friday) and Saturday's at 4pm with an age restriction of 14 years. The running time is 150 minutes, including an interval of 20 minutes.

Tickets to Wie's Bang Vir Virginia Woolf? range from R100 to R180 and can be purchased at [Computicket](#) or through the Fugard Theatre box office on 021 461 4554. The usual discounts for Friends of the Fugard, students, block bookings of 10 or more and pensioners apply.

Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? premiered on Broadway in late 1962 and went on to win both the Tony Award and the New York Drama Critics' Circle award for Best Play. Hailed at the time as "a brilliant original work of art", the numerous award-winning revivals over the past half century have proven that the play still packs the same punch it delivered in its debut. The play's author, Edward Albee, has received three Pulitzer Prizes for drama and was selected by the award's drama jury for Virginia Woolf? but was overruled by the advisory committee which elected not to give a drama award at all that year because of the play's then controversial use of profanity and sexual themes. Albee is also well known for his other works including The Zoo Story, The American Dream and The Goat, or Who is Sylvia but Virginia Woolf? would likely be his most well known work in some part due to Mike Nichols 1966 film adaptation featuring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton.

ABOUT DANIEL DERCKSEN

Daniel Dercksen has been a contributor for Lifestyle since 2012. As the driving force behind the successful independent training initiative The Writing Studio and a published film and theatre journalist of 40 years, teaching workshops in creative writing, playwriting and screenwriting throughout South Africa and internationally the past 22 years. Visit www.writingstudio.co.za

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