



CULTURE

Why We're Still Afraid of 'Virginia Woolf' 50 Years Later

By JAY A. FERNANDEZ

June 22, 2016

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Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton in 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf'/Image © 1966 Warner Bros

In this twenty-first-century post-Oprah era, where couples therapy is as woven into the social fabric as Little League and backyard barbecues, we take the concept of the dysfunctional family for granted. Books, movies, TV series, and plays these days are largely grounded in families like the Sopranos, Bluths, and Lannisters, clans that make us cringe and flinch as much as they make us laugh. While it's true that the dysfunctional family goes back as far as Sophocles two and half millennia ago, the post-modern version as we've come to know it spilled out of the anxiety and dissatisfaction that followed World War II, as filmmakers, novelists, and playwrights of the 1950s and '60s eagerly and viscerally began stripping away the illusion of the "perfect" American family. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), and Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1956) all became undisputed classics that won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama as they shuddered and contorted across the stage with the bitterness, anguish, and disappointment unique to the family of origin.

"Are we supposed to be horrified or impressed by their enthusiasm for destroying each other's illusions?"

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But no one had ever seen anything quite like George and Martha, the married, spectacularly alcoholic protagonists of Edward Albee's Tony Award-winning masterpiece *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, when they first stalked the Broadway stage in 1962. The critically acclaimed film version, which was released fifty years ago, on June 22, 1966, starred Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton and won five Oscars, though it was nominated for thirteen — a feat that puts it in the company of classics "Gone With the Wind" and "From Here to Eternity." In the blackly comic story, George, a university professor, and Martha, whose father runs the college, host a listless younger couple for a very long night of boozing and vicious emotional games, during which they display such vituperative hatred that it can only signal a deep need for each other. What's unique about

Albee's invention is that the family as it exists here is largely symbolic — the younger couple can be read as George and Martha's "kids," or as their younger selves — and defined by the ghostly presence of an imaginary son that George and Martha have colluded in nurturing for years.

Albee's work, which was adapted for the screen by Oscar-nominated writer Ernest Lehman ("West Side Story," "North by Northwest") and director Mike Nichols ("The Graduate"), brilliantly and explicitly exposes the fictions couples and families instinctively agree to live inside as a cushion against the harsh, embarrassing truths of their collective, compromised humanness. Though George and Martha (even their common, placid-sounding names seem like a sick joke) take disgusted glee in their willingness to call out publicly each other's weaknesses and failures, they still save for themselves one gigantic, sustaining fabrication — a fantasy that George finally murders in an act as courageous as it is cruel. As witnesses to this carnage, are we supposed to be horrified or impressed by their enthusiasm for destroying each other's illusions? It's telling that the Pulitzer board refused to reward *Woolf* after the jury recommended it for the prize, a decision ostensibly based on the play's profanity and sexual content but which just as easily could stand in for society's discomfort with the unvarnished complexities of the human relationship.

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Woolf's influence can be seen in everything from Harold Pinter's Tony Award-winning *The Homecoming* (1965) and Sam Shepherd's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Buried Child* (1978) to Robert Redford and Alvin Sargent's Oscar-winning film "Ordinary People" (1980) and Jonathan Franzen's National Book Award-winning novel *The Corrections* (2001). And Albee, in turn, was influenced by every American family cursed by delusion or disillusionment, afflictions that are no less potent or widespread today.

"Truth and illusion, George; you don't know the difference," says Martha, sounding the bell for every codependent couple that ever had the masochistic temerity to bond.



Who's Afraid

Woolf??

by Edward A

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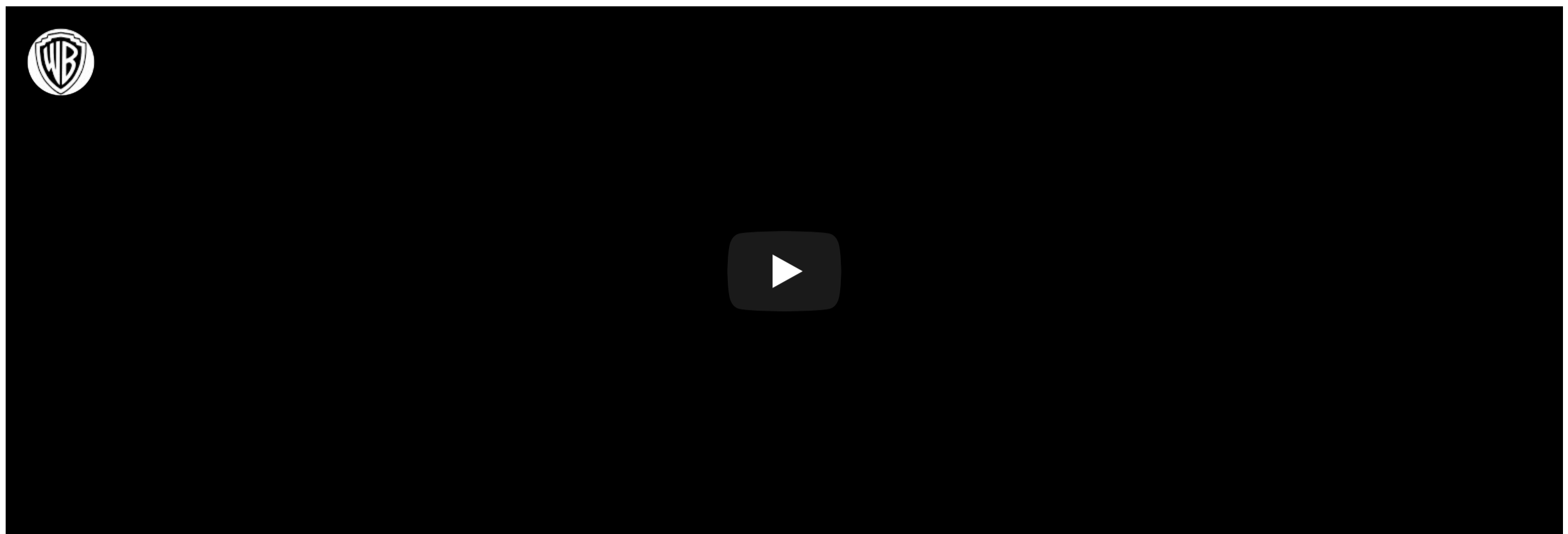
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“No,” George responds, “but we must carry on as though we did.”

“Amen,” she says.



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CLASSICS

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ELIZABETH TAYLOR

MOVIE TRAILERS

MOVIES

PLAYWRIGHTS

RICHARD BURTON

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