

Albee ponders tragedy of taboo affair

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Mercury News

Article Launched: 05/22/2007 01:40:13 AM PDT



Nancy Sauder gives a stunning performance opposite Steven Lambert. (Kit Wilder)

The love that dares not speak its name ain't kidding around in "The Goat."

Meet Martin. He seems like a keeper, a Pritzker-winning architect, a loving father and a faithful husband of 22 years - that is, until he turns 50. He avoids the *usual* midlife cliches of blowing the 401(k) on a sports car or cheating with a younger woman. This guy has an affair with, well, a goat.

In "The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?" Edward Albee once again locks horns with social taboos, this time bestiality. And you thought George and Martha from "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" had marital issues.

While it's not the masterpiece Albee is capable of writing, in its San Jose premiere at the City Lights Theater Company, this is a perversely black comedy that will definitely get *your* goat.

Albee has dedicated himself to rattling cages. From "The Zoo Story" (1958) to "Three Tall Women" (1994), he has rubbed our face in the seamy underbelly of the status quo. He is a master of the theater of the absurd, but there also is something deadly serious at work here.

He once described his writing as "an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, and emasculation and vacuity, a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen."

Keep that in mind while watching "The Goat" in its bold but raw incarnation at the ever-adventurous City Lights. Some of the territory Albee charts will make you squirm. That is the point. This is theater as Rorschach test. His plays teem with metaphors as elusive as his dialogue is caustic.

Is Sylvia more a literary symbol than she is livestock? Kit Wilder's production wisely lets the uncertainties flourish from start to finish. This much is certain: Albee will do anything to shock us out of our complacency.

Martin's wife, Stevie, for one, will never be the same. Played with breathtaking depth by Nancy Sauder, this is a woman as smart and charming as she is levelheaded. She's the sort who can handle anything gracefully, or so she thinks.

Sauder strikes the perfect mixture of fear, rage and hysteria as she rampages around the tastefully appointed house screeching in pain and breaking everything ceramic. She understands the words coming out of her husband's mouth - that he actually is in love with a farm animal - but she can't make any sense of them.

It's a powerhouse performance that ratchets the whole cast to a higher level. Martin may have committed the sin, but Stevie is having the tragic downfall: "You have brought me down to nothing," she spits, her velvet tones turned to bile, "and, Christ!, I'll bring you down with me!"

Still, Martin remains the enigma at the core of the play. Steve Lambert holds back on the character's anguish, and he doesn't gild the smart-aleck word games as elegantly as Sauder, but he connects to the other actors with a moving possessiveness. The tangible bond between Martin and his son (Sam Krow-Lucal) is by turns touching and disturbing.

All along, Wilder deftly manipulates the venue's intimacy to heighten the play's in-your-face impact. He has thrust us headlong into a battle between husband and wife that culminates in a blood-spattered climax that's as unnerving as it is tragic.

'The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?'

By Edward Albee

The upshot: Master provocateur Albee gets our goat once more as this perversely black comedy makes its San Jose debut.

Where: City Lights Theater Company, 529 S. Second St.

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays; 2 p.m. June 10 and 17; 7 p.m. May 27, June 3.

Through: June 17.

Running time: 100 minutes (no intermission).

Tickets: \$15-\$25 (student and senior discounts available); (408) 295-4200, www.cltc.org.

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