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## Cleveland

## Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Great Lakes Theater Festival

We're about to be lulled by the light entertainment of summer stock — but the Great Lakes Theater Festival ended its season with a bang, as guest director Steve Woolf of the St. Louis Repertory Theatre mounted a stunning production of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (May 7-24).

Hietikko were terrific as they knocked back drinks and insults until dawn. Bell was simply brilliant; her Martha was on an emotional rampage, relentlessly stalking her prey like a proud but wounded bird, strutting around in black velvet pedal pushers and stilettos. Her combination of wickedness and vulnerability proved heartbreaking in the scene where Martha fails to make George jealous of her infidelity with Nick. Matthews' browbeaten George retained his dignity as he ducked his wife's barrage of humiliations. As



Woolf's Woolf: Bell and Matthews as Martha and George.

Thirty-six years after it was written, the play is as fresh and relevant as ever. For those who haven't seen it on stage, and also missed the movie (if that's possible), the action takes place in the home of a New England history professor whose foul-mouthed spouse invites a new faculty member and his wife over for a nightcap and some witty but cruel mind games.

GLTF's Glynis Bell, Anderson Matthews, Ashley West, and Chris

Honey (West) slowly descended into drunkenness, we saw a sweet, naive Midwestern girl reveal herself to be a tormented woman with just as many dirty secrets as her older counterpart. Hietikko's Nick was a blond Adonis of a biology professor who represents the culturally numbing scientific future; he held his own arguing the value of science with George, though he ran out of steam in act three. After all of the verbal carnage, Nick says, "I



Get the guest: Matthews and Hietikko.

think I know what's been going on" — but Hietikko didn't seem to register that not only had Nick become privy to George and Martha's secrets, but his own and his wife's checkered lives had also been exposed. When Nick left with Honey, one didn't get the feeling they were on the verge of confronting their dark sides, as George and Martha were when they first married.

But Steve Woolf's direction was brisk and clean. As he stated in his program notes, the play is a love story: George musters up the courage to end the game-playing, and Martha bravely agrees to no more illusion. "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?" asks a calm George as he drapes his jacket over the quivering woman on the floor. "I am, George, I am," answers an emotionally, physically, and spiritually exhausted Martha as the sun rises and the curtain falls. The play's effect was enhanced by John Ezell's set design, which perfectly balanced realism and metaphor; on the slightly faded, wood-trimmed yellow walls hung a photo of the Colosseum, visually underscoring the fact that George and Martha's fun and games eventually had to end.

GLTF will begin its 37th season under new leadership. James Bundy, former associate producing director of The Acting Company, becomes the Festival's sixth artistic director on July 1; he replaces acting co-artistic directors Victoria Bussert and John Ezell.

— Christine McBurney

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