

New York Glenda Frank

Intrepid theatregoers know the experience: you have seen a play or musical two, maybe three times before, but this time around all the lights are on, someone polished the silver. Same old has become how-did-I-miss-that! *A Delicate Balance* by Edward Albee now at the Golden Theatre is a masterwork in what may be a definitive production.

Director Pam MacKinnon's (a Steppenwolf and Women's Project alumna) revival of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* walked away with 2013 Tony and Drama Desk awards. All the pyrotechnics of earlier productions had been masking the important interpersonal dynamics that MacKinnon helped her actors – Amy Morton and Tracy Letts – discover and position centre stage. 'It's important,' she confided during a 2012 interview, 'that the language be muscular.' Working once again with some of the finest stage actors, she reveals the heart of the drama in the quieter moments, even the silences. John Lithgow, always impressive, is a giant as the laconic paterfamilias Tobias. He is the fulcrum, the emotional centre of the play.



Pam MacKinnon's revival of Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance* at the Golden Theatre with an all-star cast including above, Glenn Close as Agnes and John Lithgow as Tobias. Photo: Brigitte Lacombe.

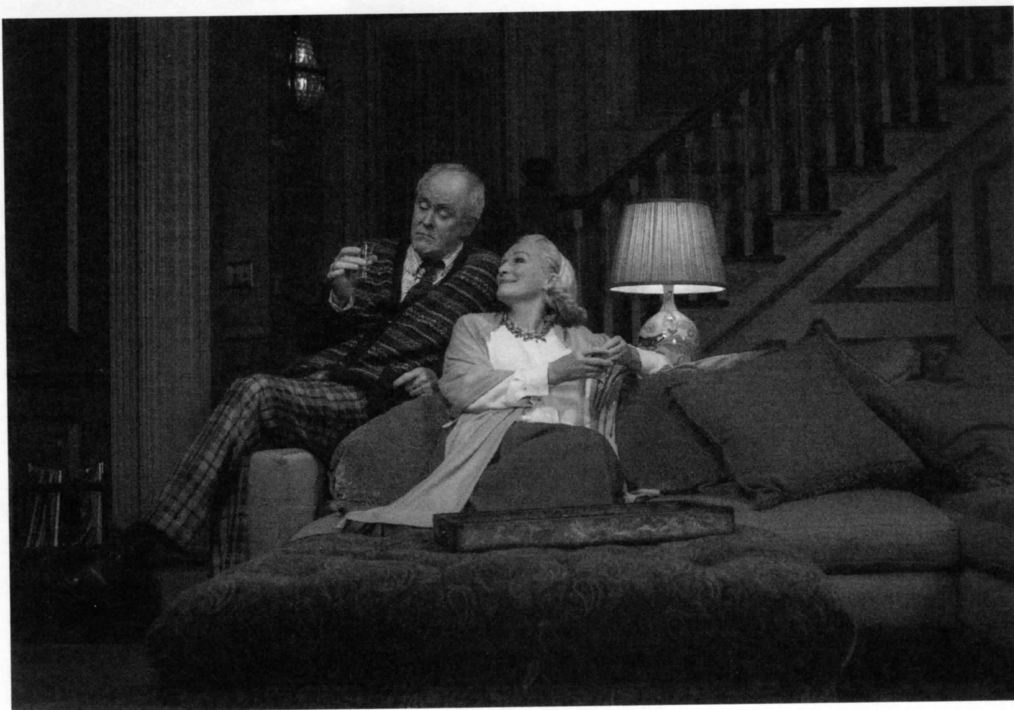
According to Claire (Lindsay Duncan), the family's alcoholic gadfly and Agnes' live-in sister, the problem is a failure to

connect: Tobias loves wife Agnes (Glenn Close), Agnes loves daughter Julia (the lovely Martha Plimpton), Julia loves Claire, and

Claire, 'burdened by love,' wants Tobias. Into this house of tensions arrive Harry (Bob Balaban) and Edna (Clare Higgins), dear old friends who take up residence in Julia's empty bedroom because they are terrified, a condition Agnes likens to a plague. We all know this plague although we call it by different names: job loss, divorce, a bad stock market, foreclosure, disease, free-floating anxiety. It makes the 1966 play feel very contemporary – and very Theatre of the Absurd. Agnes alerts us later on that she is allegorical. Any literal reading is too limiting.

When Julia returns home with her fourth marriage in shambles to discover that her room is occupied, tempers explode. (Claire calls Julia a quadruple amputee, 'home from the wars with four purple hearts.')

The theatrics of the play are vintage Albee – a slap across the face, a threatened accordion recital, lots of shouting, doses of liquid comfort sometimes before breakfast, and a funny disquisition on drunkenness. But at its centre is a smart, hard look at choices, the delicate balances. Do friends of 40 years have the same rights as



John Lithgow as Tobias and Glenn Close as Agnes in the current New York revival of Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance* at the Golden Theatre. Photo: Brigitte Lacombe.



John Doyle's revival of a pared-down version of Sondheim's *Into The Woods* with Ben Steinfeld, Jennifer Mudge and Jessie Austrian. Photo: Joahn Marcus.

children? When does parenting end? What makes a marriage last? And, more philosophically, should we, like Agnes and Claire, accept whatever direction love turns or, like Julia, cut our losses and search again for happiness?

In the hands of this exceptional cast, each family member burns with a private, compelling intensity. Balaban and Higgins' characters live on a different level of consciousness. Even socialising with the family in designer Santo Loquasto's comfortable upper-class living room, they are stalked by terror. Ann Roth loves these actresses. For each, she creates a distinctive, eye-catching style, from Eileen Fisher sophistication to modern Bohemian. This production is a wonderful gift to the season.

Another gift, off-Broadway, is the revival of Stephen Sondheim (music and lyrics) and James Lapine's (book) *Into the Woods* (1987) at Roundabout's Laura Pels Theatre. It – and we – owe a great debt to Scottish director John Doyle. In 2004 (2005 on Broadway) he stripped *Sweeney Todd* down to ten actors from 28, had them double as musicians, and amazed us with the new-found power of the 1979 musical. A year later he reprised the magic

with *Company* (1970), with 14 actor-musos down from 18.

Directors Noah Brody and Ben Steinfeld of Fiasco Theatre, in association with the McCarter Theater Center in Princeton, NJ, have created an 11-person (down from 23) *Into the Woods* that is funny, engaging and poignant. When Noah Brody isn't playing Cinderella's prince or the wolf, he is her wicked step sister, complete with beard and a curtain on a rod held in front of him for a dress. Andy Grotelueschen is Milky White, the other wicked sister, and Rapunzel's prince. The casting and sometimes costumes emphasise the jokey lyrics and rhymes; we are invited to have fun rather than enter a fantasy. So when the giantess arrives – as a shadow – we are ready for tragedy, the death of the baker's wife and Jack's mother especially. The second act is still lackluster, but it is more emotionally accessible.

Emily Young, who doubles as the intrepid Little Red Ridinghood and the the witch's angry daughter Rapunzel, is a Sondheim natural. She makes the musical phrases sparkle effortlessly. Patrick Mulryan as Jack and the Steward has a remarkable voice. Overall this is a strong ensemble, who take pleasure in the work. When a character dies, the actor falls then

rises to don another costume and become someone else.

Christopher Akerlind's lighting creates a world on Derek McLane minimalist set – stretched ropes are a tangle of trees, a collage of harp-like shapes border the stage, and above hang mismatched crystal chandeliers. Props too are clever: a feather duster is a hen, the princes ride children's hobby horses, and Milk White's udder is a baby bottle. I missed the princes' wolf costumes as they sing about infidelity and the cartoon-like houses in Act I, but I walked away happy and humming like most of the audience.

It is difficult to write a two-person play, a producer's delight. Nick Payne (2009 winner of the George Devine Award for Most Promising Playwright) succeeded in *Constellations* at Manhattan Theatre Club's Samuel J. Friedman Theatre by combining a hot literary trend (via string theory in physics) of parallel universes with acting exercises in which performers switch perspective, tone, emotions, even lines at the drop of a dime. (The current musical *If/Then* at American Airlines Theatre is also based on this premise of parallel universes.) The most enjoyable switch is when

each confesses to adultery in sequential scenes – and we are left to ponder the details and decide which one cheated, or both.

The script is thin and the characters confusing ciphers: Why would a successful physicist marry the seriously dumb beekeeper? But the romance is doomed, which is often a winning ploy. The appealing Jake Gyllenhaal and the versatile, emotive Ruth Wilson prove their chops. They are models of fine acting and astonishing versatility, with Gyllenhaal (Broadway debut, *Brokeback Mountain*) usually calm and Wilson (Olivier Award for *Anna Christie*) overacting to mask the underwriting. Crisp direction is by Michael Longhurst (Olivier and other nominations for *Constellations* at the Duke of York's and Royal Court).

The set by Tom Scutt and lighting by Lee Curran are spectacular. Real balloon and globe lights float like fantastic clouds over the actors with alternating areas lighted. As we learn about Marianne's disease, balloon fall from the flies. It is highly dramatic. Real skills plus smoke and mirrors – all blend into a whole.

BROADWAY LISTINGS:

Aladdin, New Amsterdam; *An American in Paris*, Palace; *The Audience*, Schoenfeld; *Beautiful – the Carole King Musical*, Stephen Sondheim; *The Book of Mormon*, Eugene O'Neill; *Cabaret*, Studio 54; *Chicago the Musical*, Ambassador; *Constellations*, Samuel J. Friedman; *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*, Barrymore; *A Delicate Balance*, John Golden; *Dr. Zhivago*, Broadway; *Finding Neverland*, Lunt-Fontanne; *Fish in the Dark*, Cort; *Fun Home*, Circle in the Square; *Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*, Walter Kerr; *Gigi*, Neil Simon; *Hand to God*, Booth; *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, Belasco; *The Heidi Chronicles*, Music Box; *Honeymoon in Vegas*, Nederlander; *It Shoulda Been You*, Brooks Atkinson; *Jersey Boys*, August Wilson; *The King and I*, Vivian Beaumont; *Kinky Boots*, Al Hirschfeld; *Les Misérables*, Imperial; *The Lion King*, Minskoff; *Mamma Mia!*, Winter Garden; *Matilda the Musical*, Shubert; *On the Town*, Lyric; *On the Twentieth Century*, American Airlines; *The Phantom of the Opera*, Majestic; *Skylight*, John Golden; *Something Rotten*, St. James; *The Visit*, Lyceum; *Wicked*, Gershwin; *Wolf Hall, Parts One and Two*, Winter Garden.