

British Theatre Guide

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Three Tall Women

Edward Albee
Oxford Playhouse
(2006)

Three Tall Women is not a work likely, as Dickens had it, to lead to larks, dealing as it does with the tooth of time and rasure of - oblivion. Woman A, aged 91, or is it 92? the exact age is hotly disputed - is incontinent, slipping into senility, but raging against the dying of the light and her hired help, Woman B.

So it is perhaps unsurprising that this should be the first major revival of the play since its premiere at the National Theatre in 1994 in a production starring Maggie Smith. The play itself draws heavily on Albees fraught relationship with his rich adoptive mother from whom he was estranged for many years.

Thematically, it also reveals the playwrights indebtedness to Beckett and a reductive vision of life as light gleaming for an instant before returning to night.

For former National Theatre director Richard Eyre, it is the only one of Albees later plays (his comment preceded the premiere of 2003s [The Goat](#)), that is charged with the passion which Eyre feels marks the playwrights best drama.

Curiously though, for all this, the first half of the play feels, well, flat and, not having seen it before, its difficult to pinpoint quite why this should be so. The acting by the three women in question the old women, her middle-aged help and the young lawyer who arrives with documents to sign - is strong enough.

Marjorie Yates as A is notably fine. The pace feels funereal, but this doesnt seem obviously a fault of this production, directed by Irina Brown. Perhaps Albee is bodying forth the melancholy, long, withdrawing roar of old age?

The charge, famously levelled at *Waiting for Godot*, that nothing happens, equally applies here. Woman A, whom, Albee notes, is infinitely more sympathetic and multi-faceted a character than his own adoptive mother, alternately wallows in self-pity, flies into fits of rage, or lapses into reverie about her salad days - with a few frantic trips to the bathroom in between.

Woman B, ably played by Diane Fletcher, bears all with a tolerant allowance for age and infirmity, so it goes being an oft-repeated refrain. All this is very much to the bemusement of Woman C who has the unforgiving attitude that comes of youth and inexperience. I was reminded of Clive James observation that it is our mistakes which civilise us. Woman C cannot even bear what she sees as Woman As deception about being a year older than she will admit to.

The first half ends with Woman A suffering a stroke, though even this is far less dramatic than it sounds. When the play resumes Woman A is both in bed with an oxygen mask over her mouth and centre stage, sprightlier than we have yet seen her. All three characters then talk back and forth

about their single life of which they are at different stages. Anne-Louise Plowman as Woman C comes strongly into her own, adamant that her best days are yet to come and refusing to accept that, in time, she will marry someone for money.

Diane Fletcher, most recently seen as Mrs Lintott in *The History Boys*, but perhaps best known as Norris wife in *Coronation Street*, is also impressive.

The playwright himself spookily makes an appearance in the second half, mutely grieving at his ailing mother's bedside. Albee did return the prodigal and dutiful son although in real life as in the play, he was not to be forgiven.

Three Tall Women emerges here as an oddly disjointed work, at its best in the second half where the writing is deft, thought-provoking and truthful about life, ageing and the inevitable, to borrow Larkin's phrase. Albee is all too seldom performed on stage in the UK, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* aside, and Oxford Playhouse director Tish Francis is to be congratulated for going some way to remedying this situation.

Sheila Connor [reviewed](#) this production in Guildford and Robert William in [Cambridge](#).

Reviewer: [Pete Wood](#)