

The History of Nontraditional Casting in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by Le Petit Theatre summer intern, I'Maya Gibbs

Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is an American classic that explores the conflict and complexities of its couple, George and Martha. However, beyond the stage, the play's complicated history of nontraditional casting mirrors the play's complexities.

The play takes place in the early '60s at a New England university and has traditionally been cast with white actors and actresses. In the late 20th and early 21st century, there began a concerted movement for nontraditional casting or casting in which an actor's race, ethnicity, gender, or physical capability is irrespective to the role. With the trend of nontraditional casting, there was a shift in casting decisions, and actors of different genders, physical abilities, and, most notably, races and ethnicities were considered for roles they had previously been denied.

Tommye Myrick is the director of Le Petit Theatre's upcoming first all-Black professional production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* However, this is not Myrick's first production of Albee's classic work. In 2004, Myrick directed the show and was artistically motivated to cast the production nontraditionally. Through Myrick's directorial lens, casting George and Martha as a white couple and Nick and Honey as a Black couple made the play take on a new compelling persona and added layers to the work. In a 2004 Times-Picayune article, Myrick stated "that the 'dynamics of power' in a bi-racial 'Virginia Woolf' strike her as 'provocative and powerful.'" Despite Myrick's new take on the work, she met opposition from Albee's agent with claims that her nontraditional casting violated copyright laws as it deviated from the text and changed the play without Albee's approval. To retain rights to the show, Albee's agent requested that she recast the Black actors playing Nick and Honey to abide by copyright laws. Standing firm in her vision, Myrick refused to recast her actors, and unfortunately, her show did not premiere in 2004. Similarly, in a more recent instance in 2017, Albee's estate withdrew rights from a Portland theater company for casting a Black actor as Nick.

Based on these incidents, Albee and his estate may appear artistically regressive. However, Albee staunchly believed in not altering his artistic vision and acknowledged the impact these specific nontraditional castings would have on his seminal play. Contrarily, Albee, supported nontraditional casting within his 2017 productions of *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* More importantly, he allowed a 2001 Howard University production with an all-Black cast of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

When Albee was contacted in 2001 by Howard University theater professor Vera J. Katz about adapting *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* for an all-Black cast, he not only agreed to make script edits to accommodate the cast but also visited the university and met with students in the theater department. During his visit to the historically Black university, Albee cultivated discussions about the play with students, clarified theatrical elements, and gave students acting advice. While not present for the opening, Albee supported and encouraged the cast and provided students with a wealth of knowledge that they carried with them. In reexamining *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf's?* turbulent history with nontraditional casting, we view both its complications and controversies.

Le Petit Theatre's upcoming 2024 production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* will use the version Albee edited for the Howard University production and hopes to unite diverse theatergoers around the greater New Orleans Area. An all-Black cast will expose white theatergoers to the show with a new artistic lens and perspective, broadening its scope. Also, an all-Black cast will draw in Black theatergoers and introduce them to this American classic in a reimagined way. Le Petit Theatre is engaging in and contributing to a future in which racial identity does not inhibit casting opportunities for artists but creates the opportunity for talented, diverse actors to take on iconic theatrical roles, enhancing the art form's diversity and inclusion.