



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Was it wisdom? Was it knowledge? Was it, once more, the deceptiveness of beauty, so that all one’s perceptions, half way to truth, were tangled in a golden mesh?”

-From Virginia Woolf’s novel, *To the Lighthouse*

A few weeks ago, I went to the opening night of the Berkeley Repertory Theatre’s *To the Lighthouse*. It was a festive evening that included dinner at the Downtown Restaurant, the first time I have eaten there. There were hors d’oeuvres (including deep-fried olives) and wine and dinner and dessert and the room was full of people who support and celebrate having Berkeley Rep. The director, Les Waters, gave a heartfelt speech on the challenges and excitement of producing the play. All in all, it was a great build-up to the play itself.

My mother loved Virginia Woolf, and often quoted her books and recited her life to us. Even Woolf’s suicide – she put rocks in her pockets and walked into a river – carried an allure for people like my mother, who felt unheard, misunderstood and at times powerless. Woolf uses words in a way that becomes like a meditation – each word counts and yet it is the feelings underneath them

that convey her intent. She interweaves information, descriptions, thoughts, memories and feelings, and it is her skill and ear for language that make this work.

So, to create a play from a book like this is quite a challenge. The novel is not plot-driven, by any means, and it is not easily summarized – no good book is, of course. I could ask what the director and the playwright, Adele Edling Shank, was trying to achieve. If it was to bring attention to Woolf in general and this book in particular, they succeeded. When I looked for reviews of the play, I found six immediately. Six people took the time to explain what this production lacked and what they liked and who exactly Virginia Woolf was.

At theatermania.com, for instance, Tiffany Maleshefski starts her March 2 review with “Author Virginia Woolf shook up the literary world with her works that sought to accurately

portray society, and within that, draw out all of its hypocrisies.” Even for those who haven’t seen the play, there is a reminder of the long-reaching effects of Woolf’s writings.

However, if it was to give us an interpretation of the book, so we will carry away from the performance an understanding of this author and this novel, then I’m not so sure. The power of *To the Lighthouse* rests in the experience of reading it. The careful descriptions of scenes and thoughts, nothing too trivial to be assumed, can’t be put into dialogue or displayed on a set. How do you stage a sentence like: “She could see her now, stooping over her flowers; and faint and flickering, like a yellow beam or the circle at the end of the telescope, a lady in a grey cloak, stooping over her flowers, went wandering over the bedroom wall, up the dressing-table, across the wash-stand, as Mrs.

McNab hobbled and ambled, dusting, straightening”? One way, as Berkeley Rep did, would be literally to act out the novel, adding beautiful new music to compensate for all the missing words. Somehow this just didn’t work. Perhaps less attention to the text and more emphasis on the feelings would have produced something more true to Woolf’s actual intentions; maybe as an audience we could then experience the depths of her understanding of human nature.

On the other hand, I appreciate the effort. As Berkeley Rep Artistic Director Tony Taccone says in the prologue to the 2006-07 number 5 issue of *the berkeley rep magazine*: “Experimentation in the arts is not encouraged in these times...” And so, despite my disappointment in the outcome, I applaud their courage.