Poor Virginia Woolf. She is almost as famous for belonging in the quirky title of Edward Albee’s play as she is for *To The Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway*. A whole generation has wondered how she could be so scary, when, in fact, she has been commandeered only for the sake of a literary joke. Who’s afraid of the big bad wolf? is a spell to ward off the unknown and the all-too familiar. Edward Albee’s famous play examines two couples, their secrets, lies, ambitions and vulnerability.

The setting is a fictitious American university town named New Carthage in the early sixties. George is an historian, his wife Martha is the discontented daughter of the college president. It is later in the evening and Martha has invited a couple new in town back to the house for drinks. Nick is a young, up-and-coming biologist and Honey is his nervy wife. Little do they know that they have ringside seats for yet another George and Martha slugfest, nor that they will be inextricably drawn into a psychologically brutal encounter.

This is the classic situation for dramatic revelation. Eugene O’Neill got the Tyrone family sauced and smacked out and the result was *A Long day’s Journey into Night*. With alcohol as a truth serum, Albee does something similar but, rather than seeking melodrama, he uses black comedy and a kind of absurdism.

His play has a larger perspective than just the lives of his four floundering characters, it is a metaphor for the paralysis and narcissism of the American middle class and its failure to challenge an emerging corporate amorality. George’s sense of history tells him that empires fall into decadence and ruin - isn’t that what happened to Carthage? - and he recognises the likes of Nick. He calls them “wave of the future boys” but he has neither the strength nor the will to challenge him.

In State Theatre’s production - one of its best this year - director David Field gives these ideas resonance, in part by not surrendering to a limiting naturalism. We don’t even take Victoria Lamb’s decor for granted, having seen it assembled by the stage crew before the performance begins. The
emphasis is on the artifice and the ideas, and Albee’s witty, excoriating script.

As a consequence the performances must be psychologically convincing, but also operate with a Pinteresque abstraction. Loretta Brades as Honey plays the blonde stereotype and gives us glimpses of a life distorted by co-dependence with a manipulative and dishonest husband. Nathan Page is memorable as Nick, full of belief in his destiny, but also easily unmasked by both George and Martha.

The latter role is a pivotal one, but Rosalba Clemente appears uncomfortable with the task. Her performance is mannered and whimsical and, it would seem, in avoiding sentimentality, is short on emotion altogether. Peter Kowitz, as George, is better able to negotiate these elements and his performance, seething with bitter intelligence, not only highlights the playwright’s own disillusionment, but ensures the success of this production.