

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE
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With the astoundingly successful *Pillowman* held over an additional three weeks, we were all shunted to the Roda Theatre space next door to the Thrust Stage. The Roda is a straightforward proscenium stage with a deep blocking-space that goes all the way to the back wall of the building, and banked boards which allow for free movement of large ensembles.

Island-Life staff attended Friday evening the world premier of Adele Edling Shank's adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel, "To The Lighthouse." The novel does not adhere to conventional standards of plot or narrative, but glides easily via stream of consciousness techniques from character to character with the occasional stitch of dialog and narrative event to loosely trace the lives of the Ramsey family with its eight children and friends of the family over the course of ten years spanning World War I.

To the Lighthouse (published in 1927) encompasses two days placed ten years apart. The "plot" centers around the Ramsey family's anticipation of and reflection upon a visit to a lighthouse and connected familial tensions. One of the primary themes of the novel is the struggle in the creative process that beset painter Lily Briscoe while she struggles to paint in the midst of the family drama. "Women cannot paint nor write," a Mr. Tansley asserts.

Virginia Woolf is generally regarded as one of the most significant English language lyrical prose stylists of the Twentieth Century. Her nine novels and dozens of short stories and essays pushed the interior monologue presented in the final pages of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, to its most cultivated level, changing the way virtually every form of English writing is presented and perceived, from the most common dime store paperback, to drama, to serious literature, magazine articles, and even the commercials presented on TV and radio.



It is difficult to imagine that the way a character's interior thoughts, from fully realized thinking and memories to unconscious thoughts and feelings are presented mixed with overtly objective narration simply did not exist in any form prior to Virginia Woolf and the Modernist school of which she was a part. The idea of presenting the unconscious in distorted forms exteriorly did exist in expressionist drama, but Virginia Woolf was the first to present interior states naturally and without hammer-headed symbolism. When symbols exist in her work, they are subjective symbols of significance to the character presented, and not of the author's attempt at "meaning."

The lighthouse represents different things to each of the characters, including young and older James Ramsey, who saw the structure as distant, silver, shimmering and dreamlike, but upon approaching as a young man sailing up to the dock sees a harsh "black and white concrete tower", and so attempts to discard his earlier impression until he realizes that the lighthouse is both the image of the past as well as the concrete object in the present.

The result, in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, is lyrical evocation, rather than objective narration. Thematically, she has recurring concerns, but never insistent demonstrations or arguments. The presentation of "social realities" and the divergence between social expectations and personal acts is a consistent issue with her, especially in what she saw as onerous expectations and dependence upon women to constantly "rise to the occasion" so as to bolster any old situation, from Society and Civilization to the decorum of the dinner table and the fallibilities of men in general. Indeed she is regarded as a proto-feminist and, after a post-WWII decline in popularity, experienced a resurgence of interest during the feminist upwelling of the seventies.

Another concern with Virginia Woolf, and very much the linchpin of *To the Lighthouse*, is the necessity and importance of the artist to find and present the truth of things from the inside out, whether via painting or via writing. Her belief was that strict representation missed the essence of things, and so was inherently false.

That said, dramatizing a work like *To the Lighthouse*, which has no overt protagonist, no linear plot, no narrative, no crisis, and no Aristotelian unity of Time, although there is unity of place, presents significant challenges to the playwright.

Virginia Woolf is not foreign territory for playwright Adele Shank, author of *Rocks in Her Pocket*, a play that features the ghosts of Diane Arbus, Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf collaborating to prevent the suicide of a young artist but it is by far her most daring effort. Does the play work? Hard to say, as of the four

audience members we interviewed, not one of them could make up their minds and none of them claimed to understand what it all "meant." Then again, for a such an introspective, reflective work, a few hours of pondering may make a difference.

Among our Staff, we all agreed that the more oblique second half of the play, which abandoned language in favor of working the stage space more, using scrim projections and lighting effects, and expanding the use of Paul Dresher's excellent mood music all worked better and -- oddly enough -- truer to the original intent of evocation -- than simply fleshing out the novel's language with dramaturgy. To the extent that the playwright used theatrical devices, the play did work, becoming one with the musical score and ending with a nice resolution of flowing movement as Mr. Ramsey (played with a nice balance of comedy and pathos by Edmond Genest) stands up in the boat at the base of the lighthouse just as Lily (a superb Rebecca Watson) steps back from her finally completed painting (having been ten years in the making) and states triumphantly, "It is finished."

The first act does have a rather nice presentation of a dinner at which characters voice inner thoughts before uttering banal or provocative statements by turns as Mrs. Ramsey comments upon each of the guests and family members, with a wish near the end of dinner, after disagreements and disagreeables have been resolved into harmony, how she wants to capture that moment of harmony in the face of its immediate dissolution in the face of advancing Time, with the women gathering together to exit stage right. As the

men rise up and turn to walk off stage left, she says, "Too late. It's over and the moment is in the Past."



Mrs. Ramsey is the matriarch at the center, sitting on the sofa that belonged to her grandmother, preserving what she can in the present, and trying to establish beautiful order in the form of a fruit centerpiece -- which is destroyed when the loutish Mr. Tansey removes a pear to carve up with a knife -- and she passes away during the War. It remains for Lily Brascoe, the painter artist, to preserve that which was in a painting that preserves balance and harmony.



The play does not hit the audience over the head with Meaning or tremendously deep symbols. The boar's skull that is mounted on stage evokes inevitable mortality, but that is all it is, and nothing more. The effects of gestures, words, looks, are subtle and effective cumulatively, like waves coming in one after another to make the tide, a trope often employed by Ms. Woolf in her books.

Passing from the *Pillowman's* graphic depiction of torture and child abuse to the intricate subtleties of *Lighthouse* may be a far reach for some. Some have taken VW to task for her subject matter. But if Virginia Woolf is to be faulted for focussing overmuch upon effete well-to-do folks who have the financial resources to be introspective and can afford "summer houses", then one tosses out Jane

Austen, all the Brontes, George Sand, and George Eliot, all of whom worked within the limitations enforced on them by society at large, and -- like Virginia Woolf -- did good work with what they had.



Ultimately, if the play is about anything, it is about the triumph of preservation through artistic process over inevitable decay. And that is not trivial at all. In any case it is really nice to see a group of people go out on a limb together and essay something different from the Same Old Thing. Lord save us all from yet another tiresome *Oklahoma* and Andrew Lloyd Webber shrieker.

In her diaries, edited and published posthumously by her husband (absolutely required reading for anyone who pretends to write), she wrote in her final entry four days before her death, "No: I intend no introspection. I mark Henry James' sentence: observe perpetually. Observe the oncome of age. Observe greed. Observe my own despondency. By that means it becomes serviceable. Or

so I hope. I insist upon spending this time to the best advantage. I will go down with my colours flying. . . . And now with some pleasure I find that it is seven; and must cook dinner. Haddock and sausage meat. I think it is true that one gains a certain hold on sausage and haddock by writing them down."



Photographer Kevin Berne
Adapted from the novel by Adele Edling Shank
Paul Drescher - Music composer
Les Waters – Director

Monique Fowler - Mrs. Ramsay
Rebecca Watson - Lily Briscoe
Edmond Genest - Mr. Ramsey
Whitney Bashor
Clifton Guterman
Jack Indiana – James
Jarion Monroe
David Mendelsohn
Lauren Grace
Noah James Butler
Sophie Gabel-Scheinbaum, Gabriel Stephens-Siegler and Amara Radetsky as the Ramsay children

Annie Smart - set design
Christal Weatherly - costumes
Matt Frey - lighting
Darron L. West - sound
Jedediah Ike- video.