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A Delicate Balance, Starring John Lithgow and Glenn Close

David Sheward · Wednesday, January 14th, 2015



Martha Plimpton (Julia), Clare Higgins (Edna), Lindsay Duncan (Claire), Glenn Close (Agnes), John Lithgow (Tobias), Bob Balaban (Harry). Photo: Brigitte Lacombe

Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance* gets a more shaded interpretation in Pam MacKinnon's thoughtful revival. The 1966 play was received with quizzical shrugs by the press and audiences in its initial edition and closed after a brief run. It won the Pulitzer, but many saw that as a consolation prize after Albee had been denied the award for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Gerald Guitierrez's 1996 Lincoln Center version gave fresh perspective to the drama, and MacKinnon adds even more in this nuanced revival.

The central conceit of Albee's play is wide open to interpretation. Wealthy suburban couple Agnes and Tobias, already dealing with the return of their much-divorced daughter, Julia, and the troubled residence of Agnes's alcoholic sister, Claire, find themselves in an ethical dilemma when their best friends, Harry and Edna, show up one night, asking to move in because they're frightened. The source of their terror is never explained, and the question becomes not what is scaring the refugees but what to do with them. Albee asks the difficult questions: What are the limits of friendship and what do we owe those close to us?

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With the same insight she brought to her 2012 direction of *Virginia Woolf*, MacKinnon makes this existential conundrum very real. The relationships are believable and the cause of Harry and Edna's flight and fright is as tangible and yet as ephemeral as *Godot*. They don't want to die alone, and they believe their friends will save them from this fate. At least that's what I got from the marvelously specific acting of Bob Balaban and Clare Higgins as the terrified couple. John Lithgow is equally intense as the confused Tobias. At first, Tobias is mystified by the problems besetting him and hides behind his newspaper and brandy, but this incisive actor gradually reveals the character's awareness of his isolation. His final entreaty for Harry to stay becomes a desperate plea for meaning. Lithgow makes us see that Tobias realizes that 40 years of friendship count for nothing when it comes to facing death, and it terrifies Tobias just as it does Harry and Edna. It makes Albee's sometimes obscure living room drama a searing confrontation with the unknown.

As the in-control Agnes, Glenn Close is coolly commanding but fails to show the tremors beneath her icy surface. Lindsay Duncan makes a marvelously acerbic Claire and doesn't take over the play as Elaine Stritch did in the 1996 version. Martha Plimpton keeps Julia from turning into a whining

brat, but the actor affects a stereotypical “stagey” voice. Santo Loquasto designed the well-appointed set and Ann Roth provided the chic costumes, though Agnes appears as if she’s headed for a Kennedy Center Gala rather than an evening dealing with life’s biggest mysteries.

This review has appeared previously on [ArtsinNY](#) and [Theaterlife](#).

***A Delicate Balance*: Now–Feb. 22. Golden Theatre, 252 W. 45th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time 2 hours and 45 minutes, including two intermissions. \$60–155. (212) 239-6200.**

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