

# Get Your Goat

## The Rep does admirably with a beast of a play

by Martin Brady

Making love like animals? As long as it's between consenting adults, there's nothing wrong with that.

But making love to animals? That's the question being addressed in Tennessee Repertory Theatre's excellent production of Edward Albee's *The Goat or, Who Is Sylvia?*, a stirring examination of society's boundaries of acceptable behavior.

Winner of the 2002 Tony Award for Best Play, *The Goat* is about an urbane architect who destroys his near-perfect life by confiding to a friend that he's having an affair—well, sexual relations, anyway—with a goat. Outraged, the friend informs the man's wife. What follows is approximately 90 uninterrupted minutes of anguished, emotionally destructive theater.

Ever the provocateur, absurdist master Albee latches onto the taboo practice of bestiality to challenge his audience's own behavioral boundaries while also considering the concepts of morality and judgment. Just how liberal can a society dare to be? That question gets pushed more so in the course of the play as the author asks us to consider not only man-boy love, but even father-son love.

Of course, if the Bible is your moral authority, the answer is clear. According to Leviticus, Chapter 18, "Nor shall you mate with any animal, to defile yourself with it.... It is perversion." Those passages are interesting reads, but not nearly as galvanizing as Albee's *Goat*.

The majority of the action consists of endlessly painful—and scenery-rattling—exchanges between husband Martin and wife Stevie, as the origin of the affair is revealed, and as Martin sincerely, even naively, explains the beauty of his goat-love. The couple's 17-year-old gay son, Billy, appalled at his father's revelations, becomes caught in the crossfire.

Not surprisingly, there's no shortage of expletives in this rawly imagined scenario. Albee's characteristic wordplay and shards of nervous but smart humor only add to the train-wreck curiosity, and are a testament to his cunning—maybe even devious—craftsmanship. The ending packs a wallop too.

The Tennessee Rep production is pristine. That such untoward matters should be presented with care and brilliance only adds to the viewer's conflicted feelings.

As the aggrieved wife, Ruth Cordell masterfully navigates her way through a thicket of pain and betrayal. With her sharp-edged, precise performance, she earns our sympathy, effectively conveying her character's combativeness and indignation.

Maybe the tougher role is that of Martin, enacted courageously by Matthew Carlton. It's an outlandish role that has to be played straight—an otherwise hugely successful 50-year-old man who is so enamored of his hircine paramour that he can't see why everyone close to him objects so vehemently. Carlton amazes—he's pertinently disconcerting, and he makes the almost surreal seem credible.

Henry Haggard, as family friend Ross, is superb as well. Metaphorically, he represents the moral firewall, separating decent people from wholly objectionable behavior. He gives a strong and rugged depiction, laced with care for the distressed family but unswerving in his conscientious conviction. Andy Kanies is Billy, and he plays some gut-wrenching scenes with Carlton that are riveting. The young actor brings the appropriate sensitivity and sadness to a difficult role.

René Copeland directs, and it's doubtful that anyone could more thoughtfully transact such a complex and contentious piece while insightfully revealing its multiple levels of meaning.

*The Goat* is boundary-busting theater, and very worthy for those who don't mind thinking.