movies...

A departure from the commonplace

By Jeff Stolen

Not everybody will like "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" Many people are too distracted by the right of a marriage blinding itself to bits to enjoy the story of Martha and George, or else the raw language scoured them, or else they can't stand to have their images of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton destroyed. The pair have been cast into a role quite different from their previous performance in an all-time smash spectacular like "Antony and Cleopatra." Even "Sandpiper" was tame by comparison.

But if you are sick and tired of the usual schmaltz that emanates daily from Hollywood, with its Main Street morality and respect for all-American traditions, you might appreciate Albee-Nicholas' rendition of the controversial Albee play "Virginia Woolf." Wrenches an anger out of you and moves you to a kind of sympathy that only a playwright can produce. The film is raw because life can be raw.

And yet "Virginia Woolf" is a love story. Even though George and Martha lay into one another with language that would make a dragnet blush, one can detect beneath the surface of their incandescent real bond between them. They cling to each other. In this subworld, out of their mutual wounding, a lack of drive and creativity, Martha, tough as a longshoreman, is enough to destroy any man she lives with, unless he is wise to her games. And yet she tells Nick in the kitchen, "George is the only one who can master her, and that's why she feels in the presence of other men. The fact is, George proved a flop, a poor effort, her father's as much as her own. Of all but George, she is the superior, at least that is how she feels in the presence of other men. The fact is, George proved a flop, a flop as a husband, but he is one who can protect her from Virginia Woolf."

A word about the filming: Albee's play is set in a scene in a living room throughout the piece, even though part of the action occurs on stage. In Mr. Nichols' film version, the scene shifts from the living room to the kitchen, the yard, the bedroom, to a maid's room, and back to the livingroom. This moving about quickly, smoothly done and serves to break up the monotony that might arise from having a single set. The film is in a brilliantly edited version of the play in which the murky language is unsuppressed but not exaggerated.

Take a chance and go see "Virginia Woolf." It's a film that will give you double meanings and wide suggestions; it may perplex you even after the third time out; but there is a lot of substance in it if you are bold enough to look.