

## Six Commodified Adoption, the Search Movement, and the Adoption Triangle in American Drama since Albee

In the previous chapters of this book, I have been bridging a large historical gap in reading earlier literature from my perspective as, among other things, an adoptee of twenty-first-century America. In this and the chapters that follow, the gap is smaller, as I discuss works written during my lifetime and about my own society, and in some cases even commenting directly on a movement in which I have participated. This chapter will move from the novels that provide so much representation of individual consciousness back to drama, but to a mode of drama very different from the classics by Shakespeare and Sophocles. Most of the plays I discuss are, arguably, more interesting in their commentary on the social issues of their immediate time than for any other reason. I am not treating them at great length, but rather looking for clusters of concerns and selectivity of emphasis. Nevertheless, one writer stands out in this chapter. Edward Albee, one of the few playwrights influential at midcentury and still today, was involved in the beginning of the adoptee rights movement, portrayed adoption in one of his earliest plays, and has turned to the topic again in some of his most devastating recent works.

### Edward Albee, American Adoption, and Commodification

In 1953, Jean Paton, a forty-one-year-old adoptee and social worker, placed an ad in the *Saturday Review of Books*.

Were you adopted before 1932? Your experience may assist research in adoption from the point of view of experienced adult.<sup>1</sup>

This ad—explicitly aimed at adult adoptees, contrary to the continuing picture of the adoptee as a child—produced sixty-four responses, and forty of the respondents filled out questionnaires that Paton sent. These questionnaires became the basis for Paton’s pioneering 1954 book *The Adopted Break Silence*, which showed a great diversity of viewpoints on adoption.<sup>2</sup> Some had been happy in their adoptive family; some had not; they were also mixed in attitudes about birth parents. Paton had to self-publish this book, since there was then little market for discussions of adult adoptees’ experiences.

One of the respondents to Paton’s ad was a twenty-five-year-old unknown and virtually unpublished writer named Edward Albee, obviously very unhappy with his adoptive family, whose home he had left four years before.<sup>3</sup> Five years after answering this questionnaire, Albee would burst upon the theater scene with *The Zoo Story*, which began his career as the leading American playwright of what came to be called the Theater of the Absurd.<sup>4</sup> In 1960 he wrote a play, *The American Dream*, in which Mrs. Barker of the Bye Bye Adoption Service drops in on Mommy and Daddy and Grandma.

Mrs. Barker’s organization is the first adoption agency in any of the works discussed in this book. For the first time we are considering texts from a culture in which infant adoption is legally formalized, and from a nation that has a special affinity with the institution of adoption. Barbara Melosh has recently written, “Adoption has been accepted more readily and practiced more widely in the United States than in any other comparable industrialized nation.” She attributes this to our openness, fluid class and social structure, diversity, optimism, and “belief in the malleability of human nature and the beneficence of institutions.”<sup>5</sup> But some of the plays I shall discuss—such as *The American Dream*—represent adoption in very different ways, and it can also be argued that adoption is important in American literature partly because of its usefulness in representing key American themes of ambivalence about the past and the family.<sup>6</sup>

In recent American drama about adoption, questions about the meaning of family and parenthood and the relative importance of heredity and environment raised in earlier literature continue to be important. As in earlier literature, playwrights often use adoption plots

to bring together characters that differ greatly, especially in class. But the plays I will discuss here comment more specifically than nineteenth-century literature on adoption practices in their society. When they employ the plot of search for birth parents, they are not only following a structure as old as *Oedipus*, but often responding more specifically to the open-records movement and to adoptees' searches reported in their own newspapers. And the critique of adoption practices as commodification of children, briefly suggested in *Daniel Deronda*, becomes a major concern.

In the United States, formal adoption with protection of children's interests began in Massachusetts in 1851, and by the beginning of the twentieth century most of the states had established a similar legal procedure.<sup>7</sup> (Adoption would not be similarly formalized in Britain, where keeping inheritance rights in the "blood family" seemed more important, until 1926.)<sup>8</sup> Until the 1920s, the number of adoptions remained relatively small, but then they began to increase, apparently because of Progressive Era reforms.<sup>9</sup>

During this time adoptive parents and adult adoptees could generally find out information about heredity. Nevertheless, in the 1930s the procedure began of issuing new birth certificates that listed only the names of adoptive parents. The main reason was to protect adoptees from the stigma attached to adoption and, especially, to illegitimacy.<sup>10</sup> The original birth information was at this point supposed to be available to adoptees when they came of age. However, after World War II, when there was a large increase in the number of middle-class women who placed their children for adoption, and also an increase in the number of childless couples seeking to adopt, state officials and social workers began to tighten up, and gave less information both to adoptees and to adoptive parents.<sup>11</sup> The hope was that adoptees could be raised as a kind of genetic blank slate, erasing any possible stigma for them and both sets of parents. This would seem to fit with the general emphasis on assimilation in the 1950s—but of course, even though there was an attempt to match adoptees to their parents, some adoptees needed medical information that was unavailable, or, perhaps for reasons of looks or temperament, felt out of place, especially in a family or a subculture where heredity was still felt to be important.

And there must have been many people who did feel heredity was important. For one novel of the period so popular that it became both a stage play and a film was *The Bad Seed*, in which the environmentalist

is stupid and the villain is the eight-year-old child of an adoptee; she has inherited the gene for being a sociopathic murderer from her birth grandmother.<sup>12</sup> One of the chief messages of the plot is that adoption is dangerous because the adoptee may bear the seeds of hereditary evil—if not in her own life, in her children’s. This was not the dominant attitude about adoption in the 1950s, but it had been earlier in the century, and probably many people in the audience at least thought they knew someone who had a similar prejudice.<sup>13</sup> Thus one of the few plays that breaks the silence about discussing adoption—and could be seen as arguing that the adoptee ought to know more about her heredity—reinforces its stigma, promoting further silence. I was about the age of the Patty Duke character at the time, and have a vague memory of hiding the book, though not of reading it—perhaps a symbol of how taboo discussing adoption was in our house.

Roughly the same time *The Bad Seed* was popular, Albee’s *American Dream* was also telling a story about adoption in the family, though here it is the adoptive parents who are murderous, rather than the birth mother and the adoptee’s child. This play first presents Mommy as a consumer constantly demanding satisfaction, or at least a ritual attempt to meet her demands. Twenty years ago, we eventually learn from Grandma, Mommy and Daddy adopted an infant, or, in the play’s language, “the lady, who was very much like Mommy, and the man, who was very much like Daddy, . . . *bought* something very much like a bumble” from Mrs. Barker.<sup>14</sup> But the bumble kept doing things wrong, from the parents’ viewpoint—bumbling, you might say—with nightmare results. In such novels as *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations*, adoptive mothers were the ones responsible for deformation of adoptees; this pattern is repeated here, since mothers are generally considered more responsible for how a child is raised, although there is an adoptive father who is also to blame for his passivity. When the child “only had eyes for its Daddy” (99), its mother gouged out its eyes, and after further mistakes and offenses, Grandma says, “they cut off its you-know-what” (100). Then its hands, and its tongue. Furthermore, “it didn’t have a head on its shoulders, it had no guts, it was spineless, its feet were made of clay” (101). Not surprisingly, it eventually died, and as Grandma says, “you can imagine how that made them feel, their having paid for it, and all. . . . they wanted satisfaction; they wanted their money back” (101).

In Jean Paton’s book, one of the anonymous unhappy adoptees

writes, “The child has little to do with choosing who adopts him and he should not be made to feel like some merchandise to be sent back (or, in this case, away), if, after many years, it does not satisfy.”<sup>15</sup> Was this Albee? The similarity in this language to that of the play could point to a commonality of symbolics among adoptees in dysfunctional families; still, I think most likely this writer was Albee, and, perhaps under the encouragement of the questionnaire, images that would eventually become *The American Dream* were beginning to form in Albee’s mind. Mel Gussow’s recent biography emphasizes from beginning to end the importance to Albee of his feelings about being adopted; one detail he does not mention is that Albee kept in touch with Jean Paton when he became successful as a playwright and sent her copies of his plays; indeed the copy of *Tiny Alice* that Albee sent her in 1965 included a handwritten dedication to her organization, Orphan Voyage.<sup>16</sup>

Albee was not the first writer to relate adoption to commodification. Already in the 1920s, when he was adopted, there were more couples wishing to adopt than there were healthy white infants available, and some worried that wealthy parents, like Albee’s, were using their financial power to circumvent agency requirements and get children more quickly. In an article from 1930 the *Saturday Evening Post* called adoption “a big bull market,” with “Baby securities” promising “investors” plenty of “dividends” paid out in “toothless smiles and endless giggles.” In 1924 an Oklahoma department store had a display of bassinets—and borrowed babies up for adoption from a local child-placing society to display in them.<sup>17</sup> Writings intended to help children understand their own adoption or to help parents explain adoption to their children sometimes follow the commodification model in a way that may sound more disturbing. The journal *Hygeia*, in 1942, for example, suggested that adoptive parents explain to children that parents who get children by birth “just have to be good sports and pretend there never was such a perfectly beautiful baby before. But that’s what happens to folks who have to order sight-unseen. Now in your case, we saw a lot of children. We looked them over and suddenly we actually saw just exactly what we wanted—right size, right sex, right sound and everything.”<sup>18</sup> There was a similar emphasis in the famous book for adopted children, *The Chosen Baby* (1939). By the time Albee wrote his play, some psychologists were criticizing this language. In fact, though there were now relatively more children available for adoption, parents were more likely to be choosing an agency that proposed one specific child to them. But the

myth remained, and perhaps because of the consumerist identity of American society as a whole in the 1950s, it continued to have resonance. Mommy and Daddy can easily be seen as bitter caricatures of the repressive, consumerist family of the 1950s and early 1960s, and their adoptive status, in the fact that it literally involved their giving money to get a child, as a metaphor for a more general condition in which parents treat children as commodities and try to mold them to requirements. Surely this was one of the reasons that many people besides adoptees found the play a devastating critique of the family. Biographical critics, knowing that Albee is himself gay, can see in it a critique of homophobic parents being unable to accept their child's sexuality, the reason for Albee's break with his own parents.<sup>19</sup> But adoptees have special reason to be interested in it.

Does conceiving and giving birth to a child, or nurturing it, make a parent? If nurture is more important, adoption can be real parenthood. But Mommy and Daddy in *The American Dream* are parents by neither definition, only by virtue of money and adoption law. At several points, the characters refer to the problems of seeing under artificial light, which recalls the theme of adoptive parenthood as pretense, opposed to natural parenthood.<sup>20</sup> More directly, the lack of nurture Mommy and Daddy provide is established by Grandma's account of how they destroyed their child. At the end of his play, Albee provides for Mommy and Daddy an apparently healthy and good-looking young man, whom Grandma identifies as the American Dream of the title, and who is probably the identical twin of the one who died. Upon seeing him, Mommy says, "Now this is a great deal more like it! . . . Who says you can't get satisfaction these days!" (124-26; ellipsis mine). The *Hygeia* writer would be shocked, but Mommy's attitude is an extrapolation of his picture of the advantages of adoption.

There are other ways in which this play can be seen in relation to adoption history. The adoption was arranged not by a social worker but by "a dear lady . . . who did all sorts of Good Works" (97). At the time that Albee himself was adopted, social workers believed in blood ties and family preservation rather than adoption; he was placed by the Alice Chapin Adoption Nursery, which was founded not by a social worker but by a physician's wife.<sup>21</sup> And, as Garry Leonard has pointed out, when Grandma refers to the child as a "bumble of joy" (97), the word echoes the name of Dickens's Mr. Bumble of *Oliver Twist*, who oversees a workhouse for orphans and "colludes with those running the

institution to maximize the profits from money given by the state to the workhouse . . . by starving the children, and . . . when possible, by selling them.”<sup>22</sup> Commodification again.

The character referred to as the American Dream has a long monologue in which he elaborates on his loss of feeling—and consequently his inability to relate to others—in his eyes, his heart, his groin, his hands. This reinforces the idea of his correspondence to the physically mutilated boy. But among his losses he gives relatively little attention to his birth parents. Matter-of-factly, he begins his story, “My mother died the night that I was born, and I never knew my father; I doubt my mother did” (113–14). His major emphasis is on his loss of his identical twin brother. “We . . . we felt each other breathe . . . his heartbeats thundered in my temples . . . mine in his” (114). According to Gussow, among the many questions related to his adoption that Albee himself often wondered about was whether he had a brother or sister, perhaps a twin, stillborn or alive.<sup>23</sup> He had questions about his birth parents as well, but they do not enter into the play. The concern of the play is with an adoptee’s identity and how it has been destroyed by his adoptive parents.

At this point—1960—few people in the United States except for Jean Paton were talking about the people who are now called birth parents. In fact, in the late 1950s a licensed adoption agency in Washington, D.C., organized and controlled by adoptive parents, surveyed its adoptive parent members. This organization’s name, the Barker Foundation, is oddly echoed in the name of the “dear lady” of *The American Dream*, Mrs. Barker. They found that only half whose children were ages six to eight had told them anything about their biological parents, and most of them felt that “adopted children should have virtually no information about their biological parents during early childhood.”<sup>24</sup>

Albee’s own parents did not give him any such information. Ironically, the records were relatively open during the time that he was growing up. His parents had kept his adoption papers, but never told him that they had them; he learned his birth mother’s name only upon finding the papers when his adopted mother died, in 1989.<sup>25</sup> According to Gussow, he was haunted by a line from James Agee’s loving memoir about his parents—they “will not ever tell me who I am.”<sup>26</sup> Albee’s parents had kept him in ignorance in a more literal sense, and a less affectionate way. By the time he answered Jean Paton’s questionnaire, adoption records were more generally closed, and many other adoptees,

whose adoptive parents might have been willing for them to have information, could not receive it because of adoption agency policy.<sup>27</sup> Some adoptees whose adoptive parents were much more nurturing than Albee's still felt that their lack of information about their history and contact with "blood relatives" made them feel mutilated, using images close to those in *The American Dream*.<sup>28</sup>

## The Open-Records Movement

Because of these protests and others, soon the general invisibility of adoptees and, even more, of birth parents would begin to change. In the 1960s and early 1970s adoptee writers and activists Betty Jean Lifton and Florence Fisher pursued long and difficult searches for their birth mothers, and then wrote about them for a larger audience than Paton had gained.<sup>29</sup> The greater publicity of the adoptee rights movement from the 1970s on resulted from many factors. There now were more adoptees who had experienced denial of their requests for information. In many geographical areas and population groups adoption and illegitimacy had lost some of their stigma. Researchers such as the psychiatrist Arthur Sorosky and his coworkers Annette Baran and Reuben Pannor published studies promoting open records and open adoption in both popular and professional journals.<sup>30</sup> And there was now an international interest in the history of minority and subjugated groups. The open-records movement, active in many countries, could draw on the language of decolonization and civil rights protest. Many adoptees arguing for open records used analogies with the loss of names in slavery and the search for family history in Alex Haley's *Roots*.<sup>31</sup>

In 1975, England officially opened records to adoptees at the age of eighteen.<sup>32</sup> However, in the United States, the adoption rights movement met a backlash that sealed records even in some states, like Pennsylvania, that had been partially open. But during this same time adoption as an institution has been changing in other ways. Because the stigma of illegitimacy is somewhat less, contraception is more available, and since 1973, abortion is legal, fewer healthy infants are available for adoption—at least fewer healthy white infants, those most actively sought. More babies and children have been adopted cross-culturally, making adoptive families more obvious, and more people have been establishing new kinds of adoption in which the adoptive parents and

birth parents have some kind of contact from the beginning. Both of these changes are consistent with the idea that adopted adults have a right to information about their heredity, and searches and legislative struggles continue. In the 1990s and the next five years, nine states passed laws that—with varying qualifications—opened their adoption records to adult adoptees.

## Celebratory versus Oedipal Adoption Plots

With the greater visibility of adoption in the contemporary society, it is sometimes used theatrically for a celebratory close. At the end of Wendy Wasserstein's *Heidi Chronicles* (1989), the feminist art historian Heidi holds her Panamanian daughter Judy triumphantly as if they were a Madonna and Child statue.<sup>33</sup> Heidi has always looked forward to motherhood, but has not married; the key men in her life either begrudge her professional identity, or are not available for marriage because they are gay. International adoption is presented as the triumph that finally permits her to combine love and her career. The utopian ending of the American musical *Ragtime* involves the adoption of the black orphan Coalhouse Junior by the WASP Mother and the Jewish Tateh. After all the intergroup conflicts the play has dramatized, including the racially motivated killing of Coalhouse Junior's parents, the musical suggests, bringing tears to my eyes, yes, we can all not just get along but become a family. There is an analogous celebration, with a little more look at family tensions, at the end of *Widows and Children First*, the third play in *Torch Song Trilogy*, where the youth who has been staying in foster care with the two gay men on whom the play focuses decides that he wants them to adopt him.<sup>34</sup>

But in a number of different recent plays adoption is not simply the happy ending. In several darker plays, the representations of the adoptee's lack of knowledge of ancestry draw more on the *Oedipus* tradition than on realistic representations of the search movement. Two recent examples use a plot similar to that of *Oedipus* to deal with social shame and to attack inequalities. The British musical *Blood Brothers*, which, as of this writing, has been continuously playing in London since 1988, repeats from Sophocles the prediction of familial murder and the fruitless attempt to avert it. A poor woman bears twins, and her rich,

childless neighbor adopts one of them: the chorus tells us that if the two boys ever meet, they will kill each other. The play emphasizes the unhappiness of the rich family and the warmth of the poor mother, who looks longingly on the son she has given up. But the inevitable class hostility arises (this is Britain), and in the last scene, after they find out about the brotherhood, the poor brother accidentally (apparently) shoots the other and is shot by the police. The musical uses the adoption plot to protest against the split between the rich and the poor.

Even closer to *Oedipus* is Rita Dove's play *The Darker Face of the Earth*, which deals with race, arguably the fault line in American culture as class is in Britain. At the beginning of this play, set in the nineteenth century, a white woman bears a child by one of the slaves on her plantation; he is sent to a slave market and returns to the plantation as an adult. He unknowingly kills his birth father and sleeps with his birth mother. The truth is revealed in the middle of an at least temporarily successful slave rebellion; she kills herself and he is proclaimed the leader.<sup>35</sup>

Clearly the way in which relinquishment for adoption divides people formerly connected, whom the audience will intuitively feel belong together, fascinated both Willy Russell and Rita Dove as they used elements from *Oedipus* for social commentary. Following the assumption predominant in *Oedipus* that the "blood tie" is the only real tie, in *Blood Brothers* the adoptive relationship is presented as false and unhappy and the birth mother is treated with sympathy; in *Darker Face* Amilia is promised that Augustus will be brought up by kind people, but from his own speech it seems that the closest thing Augustus has to an adoptive parent is a generous slave-owner. These works portray relinquishment for adoption as the tragic error that perpetuates and dramatizes the divisions of society; they bring birth parents to visibility and are not interested in reflecting on the possibilities of adoptive parenthood.

## Plays about Birth Mothers

A drama in which social criticism focuses even more on the situation of the birth mother is *Top Girls*, written by the British playwright Caryl Churchill in 1982.<sup>36</sup> Here, uniquely among these plays, the adoption is an informal one, within the extended family, the adoptive mother is the

poorer sister, and the economic and emotional issues are contextualized with more widespread contemporary issues of child care and the history of restrictions on women, as women from different centuries in the first act remember giving up their children. This play contains a truncated search plot; Angie suspects that her professionally successful aunt is her mother, but she never receives acknowledgment. While this play is not formally a tragedy and does not end with the violence of *Blood Brothers* or *Darker Face*, it presents a less tangible social violence in which the birth mother's prosperity is futile given her emotional hollowness, and all three characters in the adoption triangle, plus most other characters in the play, are miserable. This play has been widely performed in America, but its representation of an adoption in which the adoptive parents and children live in poverty is increasingly distant from the way adoption is visualized in the United States.

By contrast to *Top Girls*, Carol Schaefer's *Sacred Virgin*, a recent off-Broadway American play by and about a birth mother, contextualizes adoption very specifically within the history of attitudes toward the "unwed mother."<sup>37</sup> In this play, Bridget, an acting student in her late thirties who seems emotionally blocked, remembers her time in the unwed mothers' home that has finally sent her a letter, which she cannot bear to open, from her lost son, Liam. Before her acting class, she role-plays her feelings about him with David, another actor in the class who is himself an adoptee. When she decides to open the letter, she finds that he has recently killed himself, in despair because of his separation from her. David resolves to find his birth mother, and in the play's final moment he and Bridget embrace.

Like *Top Girls* this play presents a collective experience: This play gives us not only Bridget's own experiences as a birth mother, but her memories of Sarah, Cathy, and Mary, from the Mercy Home, as well as another birth mother, Mary from her acting class. In her memories, there is a friendly sense of exchange among the girls, in spite of the fact that they are forbidden to tell one another their last names. They giggle as the boyfriend of one of them sneaks them a bag of Christmas snacks through the window. They share confidences about their sexual experiences and the effect of their pregnancy on their bodies.

When she tells the other students in her acting class about her experiences, some of that friendly sense of confidence and support is repeated. Most of the others don't know about unwed mothers' homes, and Bridget gives them a social history lesson. For some of them life

seems very different now: Sophia says, “You would not believe when I lost my virginity! It took me until I was almost seventeen to know how to say no” (act 2, p. 5). Echoing the emphasis in *Top Girls* on continuity of women’s problems throughout history, Mary, on the other hand, just returned after an obviously painful month away, says, “Times haven’t really changed all that much. Not from Shakespeare’s time. Not from twenty years ago. Families still freak out when a daughter becomes pregnant. But now their daughter doesn’t have to let them know. She can take care of the problem” (act 2, p. 10). Mary, who has been away for a month, has had an abortion, but when she acts out her experience, she mimes it as giving up a baby for adoption.

One of the main ways in which this play differs from *Top Girls* and others I will discuss is in its emphasis on the influence of religion and shame on the birth mothers. In *The Sacred Virgin*, the economic issue is mentioned only briefly: “Johnny’s parents thought it best we not marry, since we were not financially stable and hadn’t finished college” (act 2, p. 5). Bridget’s trauma is closely linked with shame—“I believed if I kept my son he would have been called a bastard the rest of his life”—and the Catholic culture of the unwed mothers’ home. It is not a coincidence that the play contains unwed mothers in two different generations named Mary, or that the first memory scene in the Mercy House is set on Christmas Eve, or that a piece of stained glass depicting the Madonna and Child is one of the most important props. These religious images not only comment ironically on the fate of the unwed mother in a culture that honors the Virgin Mother, they also predict the fact that like the Mary of Christianity, Bridget must deal with her son’s death. Liam turns out to be a sacrifice to the social institutions of shame and adoption. Nevertheless, Bridget finds a spirituality to help her cope with the loss. Anna from her acting class has said, “A broken heart is a heart broken open” (act 2, p. 11), and in her final soliloquy Bridget says, “Strange, this peace just knowing his name. . . . My son is now enveloped in pure love” (act 2, pp. 15–16).

*Sacred Virgin*’s rather melodramatic ending puts the central adoptee back in the position of the dead son in *The American Dream*, although the institution of adoption rather than the particular insensitivity of his adoptive parents is to blame in this case, and although the play tries to remedy the bleakness by ending with Bridget’s peace, David’s resolve to search, and his embrace of Bridget. The letter that Liam writes portrays him as an adoptee who still remembers the trauma of lying in his

bassinet alone in a tiny room after he has been given up for adoption. “I scream in rage for you. . . . I died in that little room. My soul died” (act 2, p. 14). It is as if the play were trying to dramatize Nancy Newton Verrier’s theories about adoptees’ lifelong pain because of the memories of early separation in *The Primal Wound*, without recognizing her qualification that the memories are unconscious for adoptees separated at such an early age.<sup>38</sup>

All of these plays—*Blood Brothers*, *Darker Face of the Earth*, *Top Girls*, and *Sacred Virgin*—have bleak endings, though there are gestures toward hope in *Darker Face* and *Sacred Virgin*. All the plays besides *Sacred Virgin* are concerned with other social issues in addition to adoption, and this may have helped them gain recognition. Given the lack of literature and drama that focuses in depth on the situation of the birth mother, it is unfortunate that *Sacred Virgin*’s melodrama limits its appeal. The play has won raves from some activists of the open-records movement, but even in that group it has critics, especially with regard to the last segment. The vividness of Liam’s memories of his early infancy is improbable in the realistic framework the play has maintained up to the appearance of his letter, and if his suicide because of his relinquishment for adoption touches the audience, then Bridget recovers too quickly.

## Plays about Searching Adoptees

Plays that focus on the adoptee’s search rather than the birth mother’s and allude explicitly to the search movement may have happier endings.<sup>39</sup> Two surprisingly similar plays about searching adoptees from the early 1990s are Lanford Wilson’s *Redwood Curtain* and John Olive’s *Evelyn and the Polka King*.<sup>40</sup> In both the adoptee, a girl of seventeen or eighteen, from a rich family, near the beginning of the play confronts a seemingly burned-out man she thinks is her father, hoping to find out more about herself. In both plays, the plot brings the adoptees together with characters from widely different worlds—in Wilson’s a homeless Vietnam vet, Lyman, who fits some of the description she has of her birth father; in Olive, an apparently washed-up polka player, Hank. Both these male playwrights make the daughter’s relationship to the birth father crucial; though in *Redwood Curtain* he turns out to be dead, in *Evelyn and the Polka King* he is the real focus of the play.

These, like a number of recent adoption plays, position both the adoptee and the theater audience as torn between two sets of parents. We can see why the adoptee feels alienated from the family she knows, but we can also see that the new world she confronts poses problems for her as well. In both plays the adoptee thinks she has been treated as a commodity, and her adoptive parents are the unappealing rich. Evelyn's adoptive father is a banker who has literally stolen ninety-four million dollars during the savings-and-loan buyout. He is named Starkweather, which might recall the mass murderer of that name. Geri's adoptive mother and her rich friends talk about food all the time, even when they are pretending to be interested in concerts.

Olive's play makes the audience learn about her birth father's world as Evelyn does; she begins to appreciate her birth father and her Polish roots at the same time as the audience members are encouraged to sing along with the chorus of his polka band, "Kielbasa, beer, and sauerkraut!" (39). On the other hand, Hank learns to wake up to the present, enjoy Evelyn, play polkas again, and write new ones. In *The Redwood Curtain*, the happy ending also involves music; the half-Vietnamese Geri, disillusioned with her ability as a pianist when she associated it with her adoptive father, Laird, returns to playing when she discovers that he was also her birth father.

Both plays are odd mixes of sociology and fantasy. *Redwood Curtain* locates Geri in relation to television shows about what her aunt Geneva calls "hopelessly arrogant young men and women claiming their right to know their biological parents at whatever cost to everyone else" (66). It locates Lyman in relation to other Vietnam veterans hanging out in the forests of California, and Geneva in relation to stock takeovers and clear-cutting of redwoods. Yet Geri has magical powers that can produce thunder and lightning, and intuitive semihallucinatory knowledge about Vietnamese culture and her ancestry: she thinks that her birth mother owned a flower shop, and that turns out to be true.<sup>41</sup> *Evelyn* quotes from a sociologist on the relation of polka music to the fate of the white urban middle class, but its plot is built on a highly improbable adoption certificate with the birth father's full name (although he didn't even know about the child) and only initials for the birth mother, and the idea that Evelyn is on the lam with a suitcase full of the millions her adoptive father stole and can give the money away with no bad consequences.

*Evelyn and the Polka King* is really a father-daughter love story. Not

for Hank such refinements as “birth father”; when he hears her story, he is immediately moved and gives her a new name, Junior. He has just given up drinking, and the past that she wants to know about is also the past that he wants to recover from his previous alcoholic haze. Evelyn at first looks down on the birth father who is so enthusiastic about her, hates the idea of having “polka blood” in her veins” (32), and uses him as a means to find her mother. But in the process of searching, she comes to depend on him, and learns more about people outside the rich South. She gives the stolen money away to impoverished Polish farmers, a home for retarded adults, a family in Oshkosh (another Polish town) whose child needs an operation, a Slovenian church. Though she has expected that finding her birth mother, Wanda, would be the key to her identity, when she discovers that Wanda has been in a mental institution and is still fragile, Evelyn is only briefly upset about it, and begins to mother Wanda instead. She eventually returns to her adoptive parents and begins to appreciate that “Daddy’s . . . actually being . . . brave” (63) about going to jail. But she decides to go to college at Northwestern, near Hank in Chicago, not too far from Wanda in Wisconsin. She doesn’t turn out to be obviously much like either of her birth parents, though she says “fuzzy water” (8) as Hank does. But her life is clearly expanded from meeting them.

*Redwood Curtain* is a somewhat darker play, and takes more seriously the idea that finding a birth parent who is mentally disturbed has implications for the adoptee. Geri is uncomfortable with the solitary life she has had as a pianist, and associates it anxiously with Lyman’s anti-social behavior. Then when she discovers that Laird was her birth father, she is upset because she knew him as sad and usually drunk. Feeling that she must follow her father’s footsteps, she worries, “Not a very promising path he’s laid out for me to follow” (94). But then she discovers that he was melancholy because he missed her birth mother and, like Geri herself, was unhappy in the money-oriented milieu of her adoptive mother. At the end she learns that before the war he was a much happier man. So she can identify with the earlier Laird. (Given the fact that so much is made of her Vietnamese identity, it is a surprise that the parent she discovers and identifies with turns out to be the upper-class Anglo one she already knows.)

Finally the adoptees’ searches benefit other characters as well. New starts are possible for many of them. Evelyn rejuvenates Hank and takes Wanda to visit to Chicago. Geri has the persistence to make a connec-

tion with the taciturn Lyman, getting him to tell the truth about her birth, and finally drawing him into sit and listen to her play piano. She also gives Geneva, dispossessed from her family's past, the possibility of a new career as her manager. The adoptive parents don't particularly benefit, except that Mr. Starkweather, about to go to jail, may now have a better relation to Evelyn; he and the adoptive mothers are simply sketched or caricatured and never appear.

Both of these plays, like so much other literature, meditate on nature in relation to adoption—but here it is often to emphasize damage to nature and what the adoptee and others have lost. In *Redwood Curtain*, Geri, having lost her history, is fascinated with the twenty-thousand-year-old trees that are about to be cut down. Olive's play includes the environmental damage theme but ends differently. As Hank tries to search for Wanda, he remembers a small town with pine trees; when they find the town, it's different: "those houses weren't there, it was all woods then" (58). That the environment has been damaged is part of what Evelyn tells Hank as she gets him to wake up to the present: "the acid rain, and the skin cancer every time you go outside, and, oops, the trees're gone" (she comes from Texas) (6). He decides to write a polka about the damage to the ozone layer, to take the polka beyond Polish traditional themes and audiences. But the "Ozone Polka" he actually writes is not the angry protest he promised but a strange combination of environmental consciousness, humanism, and fatalism, to confirm his claim that the polka takes anger away: "The earth giggles when we polka on her. I've faced it now, and I've decided that, maybe, we're not long for this planet. But I tell you, I'd still rather be a human being than almost anything else I can think of. . . . OH, IT'S TIME TO PARTY NOW / THE EARTH WON'T MISS US ANYHOW" (62). The environmental message here is subordinate to Hank's theme "change or die": "And I'm doing it, one day at a time. If I can change, we can all do it, one polka step at a time" (61).

The greater importance of birth parents in these plays may result partly from the fact that now many adoptees have made contact with their birth parents or are working to change laws that prohibit this contact, more adoptions are made with some contact from the beginning, and many birth parents themselves have conducted searches or gone public for legislation. However, it is ironic that these plays focus on birth fathers when it is birth mothers who have actually been much more visible as part of the movement, and it is, in general, birth moth-

ers who are sought first by adoptees and are more likely to want contact than birth fathers. The focus on birth fathers in these plays partly reflects the difficulty women playwrights are still having in getting their work performed. The adoption rights movement involves many more women than men, but the contemporary search plays most widely known reflect the structure of the theatrical world more than the composition of that movement.<sup>42</sup>

Two recent plays that appear to be closer to the search movement deal with adoptees looking for their mothers. In neither case does the play actually show the mother, though one character in each play finds hers. Both of these plays are in a more experimental mode, and use ethnic music and dancing, though to very different effect. *Mask Dance*, written by Rick Shiomi of Minneapolis's Theater Mu, and performed there in 1995, based on interviews with a number of Korean adoptees, focuses on three teenagers who have been adopted into the same family, and another Korean adoptee in her early twenties, P. K., a performance artist.<sup>43</sup> From the very beginning this play emphasizes that adoptees can react in very different ways: Karen values an old Korean doll from their childhood and Lisa doesn't. Carl, their brother, is more alienated from the family, and also, initially, hates "that Korean stuff [Mom] tries to shove down our throats."<sup>44</sup> P. K. and Lisa talk about the racism that they experienced; Karen seems better adjusted, and Carl more reticent. The crisis comes when Lisa attempts suicide, feeling alone because Karen and Carl, who are older, have left home. They all come together to help her feel less alone, and the adoptive parents decide to move to the city so Lisa will be closer to the others.

After this greater family solidarity is established, in the last phase of the play, Lisa and Carl go to Korea, and each of them has a disappointing experience. Carl learns that he was found in a plain brown basket, the nurse he remembers has died, and the train station he remembers is going to be torn down. Lisa visits her birth mother and her husband and children in a small apartment, and realizes that she is American and doesn't want to stay, as she is invited to. Karen, who has been more interested in Korean culture all along, surprisingly refuses to accompany Carl and Lisa. She doesn't want to lose her image of herself as a lost princess, and feels justified when she hears their experiences, but at the end of the play is planning to visit with a college tour group. The play emphasizes the solidarity of the adoptees, especially Carl, Lisa, and Karen, who found each other in the orphanage and insisted on staying

together when they were adopted. Some of the variety insisted on at the beginning disappears by the end when Karen decides to go on her trip, but there are still differences: she doesn't commit herself to visit the orphanage or Lisa's birth mom; Carl is still more distant from the parents because he is "still sorting a lot of things out" (385).

In keeping with the adoptees' double identity, this American domestic drama moves into a different style with the presence of two characters called Spirit, described as "Asian Spiritual character with half-white face," and Mask Dancer, described as "Asian Movement Character wearing Chwibari Mask." Chwibari is identified later in the play, by P. K., as "the playboy . . . the prodigal son . . . sometimes the monk gone bad. . . . He's a real prankster" (372). The play begins with Korean drumming and unnamed performers dancing traditional Korean mask dances, and then comes a duet between Spirit and Mask Dancer. These characters sometimes speak for one of the adoptees, and often intervene in the narrative later; for example, at one point the Spirit holds Carl's hand to keep him from walking out on a conversation with his sisters; after Lisa's attempted suicide, the Masked Dancer helps Carl reach her against the opposition of other figures. They do a dance to exorcize Karen's troubled spirit. And the characters' responses to the mask mix the "realistic" plot with the Mask Dance theme: after he reaches Lisa, Carl picks up a Chwibari mask and shows interest in it, though earlier he had refused to try it on, and at the end of the play—before the last two dances—Lisa and Karen give him a similar mask as a housewarming present.

Lauren Weedman's 1999 play *Homecoming* focuses, like most of these plays, on just one adoptee, and it gives a detailed picture of her relationship with her adoptive family, but also uses music and dance in a way that could be seen as a parody of their use in *Mask Dance*. After an initial "Freedom Dance" to Aretha Franklin's "Think," the play begins with the main character's first meeting with her adopted grandmother and ends with her first phone contact with her birth mother.<sup>45</sup> The birth mother never appears.

Like the adoptee herself during the play, who is constantly wondering about her ethnicity, we are left in doubt about what the birth mother looks like. The grandmother fears, at the beginning, that she might be black, and this possibility is hinted at by the use of Aretha Franklin and other black music between scenes, the adoptee's sometime membership in the Black Student Union, and suggestions from her

black boyfriend's mother. In *Masked Dance* the Korean music at the beginning represents the adoptees' ethnicity, with which they have, in a sense, come to terms at the end; from most of the script, *Homecoming* might be about an adoptee coming to terms with the fact that she is biracial, or at least still wondering if she is. But the author Lauren Weedman, who plays the character Lauren Weedman, is actually very fair-skinned. So when she performs, the idea that Lauren or her mother could be black most likely seems improbable, maybe even comic. With a darker performer, the effect would be quite different.

Clearly, the racial issue here is a metaphor for Lauren's sense of alienation from her adoptive family. In the beginning her grandma sets her on the floor on a "dog towel" (scene 1, p. 3); later she is the only family member without a lock on the door. Her sister is constantly claiming that family relations mean less to the adoptee because she has more of them, though she doesn't know them. But the theatrical irony is that this is a one-woman, autobiographical performance piece, so that the adoptee herself plays the roles of all the difficult people in her adoptive family, as well as her friends, black and others, and herself. One person playing the role of many different people in turn is not only splendidly theatrical, but also embodies the sense of chameleonic identity that many adoptees feel.

This is a funnier play than any of the other search plays I have mentioned, as well as more involved with details of the search process, though it works a switch on the usual procedure because Lauren's adoptive mother, Sharon, is the one who pursues the search. Through Sharon it explores the official rules about closed adoption records in Indiana, a support group meeting, and the search underground. It shows the difficulty people have with language about birth relatives: Lisa speaks of "your birthmom or your natural-mom or I don't know what you call her" (scene 2, p. 9). Her adoptive mother, Sharon, insists that she is searching for Lauren's BM (initials with a scatological double meaning), but when she finally reaches her on the phone, she says, "I'm her mother—well you're her mother" (scene 13, p. 44).

Though it's a funny play, *Homecoming* touches on a lot of important issues of Lauren's identity confusion. In her first attempt to get information from Sharon, long before Sharon starts to search, she says, "Well, I feel like I can't tell what I look like" (scene 2B, p. 12). Sharon says, "You are what we are" (13) and tries to remember her ethnicity: "You're German-English." Her sister says, "I hope you'll always

remember that I consider you my real sister. And I always have. Okay? Did I ever tell you how for a long time I thought you were a foster child that was just staying with us for a while until your family came to get you?" (scene 3, p. 16) As the search progresses, Lauren has a scene of fantasies about her birth mother. Does she smell like fresh cookies, or does she walk away trying to deny responsibility? Is she a fat Italian who thinks Lauren is too skinny, an Irish dancer, or a new age blue vapor, or a Hispanic she can call "Mi Corazon"?

But much of what carries this play is the obvious affection with which the quirky adoptive mother, Sharon, is portrayed. She asks her teenage daughters for an okay to put a clause in her will that they accept her visiting them as a ghost. Near the end she puts on a wig and fake glasses so she can go undercover on the phone to do the search. Eccentric as she is, she loves Lauren as best she can.

When Sharon asks at the adoption agency if Lauren had head injuries as a child, the answer is another question, "Is she a teen-ager?" (scene 6, p. 23). The conflicts between them have much in common with the conflicts between mother and daughter in any family. The mother looks incredibly weird to the daughter, whose perspective we generally share, but the daughter has moments of rebellion that the audience may well see from her mother's point of view. The *New York Times*' enthusiastic review of this play was appropriately titled, "Seeking Her Birth Mother, Loving Her Adoptive One."<sup>46</sup>

All four of these plays deal with the social tension around adoption by affirming the search. Whereas Albee's adoptee was passive, these are quite active, even if Sharon does some of the detective work for Lauren. The plays by Olive and Wilson deviate usefully from the myths by making clear that what the adoptees find is neither an ideal other family nor on the other hand a disaster; Olive in particular shows some of the issues of working out a new relationship with a birth father who is very different. *Masked Dance* presents the trip to Korea as important in the "will to face the past," even if what is found is disappointing. Karen's refusal to go is a turning away from the others that needs to be exorcised and reversed. *Homecoming* leaves many issues to be resolved, ending with a phone reunion that makes only the slightest of gestures toward the question of what kind of relationship the adoptee and birth parent will actually have.<sup>47</sup>

In all four of these search plays, the adoptee is younger than the typical age of actual searchers.<sup>48</sup> This positions her as younger than almost

everyone in the expected theater audience and identifies her search with the typical adolescent search for self, as explicitly happens in *Homecoming*. On the one hand, this could be seen as trivializing adoptees' searches; on the other hand, it makes it possible for people without adoption in their families to connect with the characters. Quite likely there are fathers whose daughters have always been in their family who feel some of what Hank feels as he tries to appreciate his daughter and deal with her scorn. But I would imagine most adoptive parents, particularly adoptive mothers, would really dislike the plays by Olive and Wilson, and so, I think, would most birth mothers and fathers, unless they could identify with Hank, who has a charm of his own. And I don't think I am the only adoptee to be annoyed by the picture in *Redwood Curtain* of Geri as having magical powers and magical knowledge about her ancestry. *Homecoming* and *Masked Dance* are probably the best of these plays for communicating to people outside adoptive families something about the experience of growing up in one, as well as of searching. The fact that Sharon is so obviously eccentric—though also loving to her daughter—may help relieve her from the duty of representing all adoptive parents. *Mask Dance* also gives a sympathetic picture of the adoptive mother. She has a moving scene in which she tells Karen about the moment when she stopped mourning her hypothetical unborn children, and decided to adopt.

Although *Mask Dance* uses cultural traditions specific to Korean culture, many of the issues it deals with are those faced by transnational adoptees from many different countries, larger versions of the problems of domestic adoptees with which most of these plays concern themselves. Like *Homecoming*, it draws in more of the audience because of its theatricality.

## Plays of Struggle over the Baby

While other playwrights were developing the theme of the adoptee's identity in a far different way than Albee had in *The American Dream*, Albee himself was returning to the adoption issue after many years during which it was mostly submerged, and writing his first well-attended plays in years out of a look at the perspective of other members of the adoptive triangle. After a partial reconciliation with his mother and her subsequent death, he wrote *Three Tall Women*, which for the first time

gives a relatively sympathetic picture of her. This play presents her at three different ages as three different characters who discuss their memories and expectations, and thus considers her disillusionment, losses, and physical pain as well as her prejudices. When the son refers to her throwing him out of the house as firing him, the play makes something of the same critique of adoption as trying to build a family with money made in *The American Dream*, though this acknowledged portrait of his mother never makes explicit her adoptive status.<sup>49</sup>

Albee spoke for open records when giving the keynote address at the annual meeting of the Congress for Equal Rights in Adoption in 1995, and a few years later wrote *The Play about the Baby*.<sup>50</sup> First produced in Germany in 1997, it ran in New York for most of 2001 and mystified many in its audience, though reviews were excellent, but to those familiar with the institution of adoption, one of its referents is obvious. This play is about a younger couple who have a child and are then persuaded by an older couple that they did not. This persuasion is an exact parallel to the advice that birth parents often still receive, to go on with their lives and put their past behind them as if nothing has happened. Having begun with a focus on the pain of the adoptee, switched his focus to see that the adoptive mother also has sufferings, Albee now for the first time looks at adoption from the birth parents' point of view.

*About the Baby* joins two other recent plays that consider relinquishment and adoption at a time close to that of the baby's birth—*Emma's Child* and *The Baby Dance*. Albee's is the least sociological and most abstract. "Man" simply announces, "We've come to take the baby" (28). Woman takes it while Man is talking to "Boy" and "Girl." She briefly returns the blanket, which is all we have seen of the baby, and then reveals that there is no baby there (as of course, in the theater, there never literally was). Boy and Girl had no intention of giving up their child; there is no specific reference to institutions of adoption. The closest parallel suggested is kidnapping by Gypsies, but Man and Woman are not Gypsies (though they claim to be at one point), and there is no hint that they plan to raise the baby themselves (nor, particularly, that they plan to kill or sell it).

The birth parents are presented mostly in terms of naïveté, youth, playfulness, and innocent sensuality—except when they are in uncomprehending pain. The older characters, Man and Woman, have the long speeches, during which they question not only the younger characters' parental status but also their other memories, their fidelity, and their

sexual identities. They are defined not only in terms of their cruelty but also in terms of their greater experience of life; Man says, "If you don't have the wound of a broken heart, how can you know you're alive?" (36). Most of the audience would be old enough to be uncomfortably forced into identifying with Man and Woman at some moments. Man says to Boy and Woman to Girl, "I am your destination" (36, 37), and this line, though a reversal of one used romantically earlier by Boy of Girl ("She's my destination" [18]), also suggests that the older characters represent what the younger will turn into later in their lives. This play is not only about birth parents' loss of their child, but also about the loss of youth's simple confident pleasures experienced in growing older.

*Emma's Child*, by Kristine Thatcher, and *The Baby Dance*, by Jane Anderson, both more sociologically realistic, focus on the question of what happens to a proposed adoption if the baby is, or might be, damaged in some way.<sup>51</sup> Both plays deal with the new world of adoption, in which birth parents appear to have more choice and deal with adoptive parents more directly. And in both plays the would-be adoptive mother wants to take care of the child in spite of its defects and her husband does not. *Emma's Child*, by Kristine Thatcher, focuses much more on the potentially adoptive parents, the possibilities for nurture of a deformed child, and the theme we have seen presented so often, that nurture rather than genetics defines real parenthood. *The Baby Dance*, by Jane Anderson, gives a more thorough picture of the sociological contrasts between the birth parents and the adoptive parents, and, like *The American Dream*, presents adoption as commodification.

*Emma's Child* presents Jean and Henry as a couple under stress from the pressures of infertility and preadoption procedures, but, ultimately, caring for each other and for others. When the baby, Robin, turns out to be hydrocephalic, she continues to visit him, changes his diaper, lets him practice sucking on her finger, massages him, exercises his arms and legs, brings him a Walkman, and learns from the nurses how to hold him and feed him. She enjoys hopeful signs as his condition improves slightly and eventually he smiles. She even wants to take a sabbatical from her university job so that she can visit him regularly if he is moved to a more distant hospital. Meanwhile, we discover that Henry's reluctance to do anything for Robin is not from simple coldness, but from the belief that the baby is suffering as he himself did during a painful operation for cancer. In spite of small improvements,

Robin dies and Jean and the staff mourn him, but at the end Jean and Henry have won another birth mother's approval and are going to try again.

Throughout the play Robin legally belongs to Emma, but after the birth she disappears. Jean has no right to make any official decisions about Robin's care—about an operation, a change of hospitals, or resuscitation—but Emma can't be reached. The one decision she has made, the Do Not Resuscitate order, prevents the hospital staff from taking extraordinary means to save him when his heart stops beating, means that by that time Jean would have endorsed. The play offers a protest against the assumption suggested by the title, that this is Emma's child. Emma has given up on him and Jean has not, so should he not be considered Jean's child?

Emma is not condemned for her lack of persistence. Henry gives a quick sociological sketch of her difficulties: "Emma lives on welfare with her alcoholic father and her two-year-old son" (47). But the play does not explore her life or the difficult potential relationship between her and Jean. And Michelle, the second birth mother, who turns up at the end, becomes a kind of wish-fulfillment figure for Jean and Henry when she says, as she leaves the play, "Ever since I got pregnant, I feel like I've been baby-sitting. Watching over this child for somebody else. She isn't mine . . . I've taken care of her for somebody else" (74). Older, more educated, and less oppressed than Emma, she even likes the fact that they have two different religions.<sup>52</sup>

Jean is not perfect. She can easily be seen as someone who always tries too hard. She prepares for a social worker's visit by filling the living room with too many flowers. As they wait for the arrival, she nags her husband about his clothes, and begs him for the cigarettes she has just asked him to keep from her. But the play is an affirmation of her spirit, and her husband's too. At the interview with Michelle, when Jean is, for a moment, too drained to respond to the question, "What can you give this child?" her husband puts in, "Time," and gives her his hand. This gesture enables her to go on: "Time, effort, yes. . . . My hands. My voice. My lap. Stories. Music. . . . We have a wonderful home, and a great big garden. I want to go on my hands and knees across that garden with my child" (73–74). As in *Silas Marner*, the nurturing of adoption is associated with nature.

*The Baby Dance* gives a much harsher picture of adoption, though some of the lines that present the characters at their worst are cut in the

1998 adaptation for television—changes perhaps made partly for the differently positioned audience, which would include more people similar to the birth mother, and partly because in the meantime Anderson and her female partner had adopted a child. (Thatcher was a fairly recent adoptive mother when she wrote *Emma's Child*.) As in several of the search plays, the audience is positioned between two sets of parents. Its would-be adoptive parents are richer (in the movie business instead of teaching and writing), they adopt independently rather than using an agency, and when they give flowers to the birth mother, the flowers are an expensive and inappropriate gesture rather than the result of their hard work in the garden. Class contrast is emphasized, and Rachel is less a nurturer than a preacher: she tries to get pregnant Wanda, who lives in a stiflingly hot trailer, to drink bottled water, take prenatal vitamins, avoid caffeine, and play classical music (in 1998 she doesn't try the classical music, and more emphasis is placed on her painful infertility treatments, which have resulted in many miscarriages). Wanda and her husband use the money Rachel wants them to spend on air conditioning and their phone bill to repair their car and pay bail for Wanda's mother, who takes care of their other four kids. Meanwhile Rachel lectures Wanda against prejudice and in favor of compassion to welfare mothers because, as she says, "poverty causes a lot of despair which breaks down the family unit" (18).

Though Wanda doesn't follow middle-class maternity health rules, she loves her children, including the one she is carrying. When Rachel proposes breaking off the contract, Wanda talks about how happy the child will be with her own pool in her own backyard, and persuades her not to break it off. In spite of all its strain, the two women could have a semifriendly relationship; not so their husbands. Richard resents Al's height and fertility, and even when not fighting him is oblivious to his need for respect. Each of them accuses the other of caring too much for money and not enough for people; Al's anti-Semitism emerges, since Richard seems to fit his stereotype of the rich Jew who exploits everyone else.

Such class-related conflict could happen with many adoptive and birth parents today because the adoption of healthy white babies is getting more and more expensive, birth parents are in general choosing wealthier adoptive parents, and the gap between rich and poor in our society is growing drastically.<sup>53</sup> This particular case, however, is made somewhat more difficult by Ron, the sleazy lawyer go-between, as well

as by the requirements Rachel and Richard have for their child. Another pregnant woman, a premed student also using Ron as a lawyer, might have been more compatible with them, but she is only four feet eleven, and Richard, a short man himself, agrees with Ron that that is too short. When Richard is annoyed by the financial demands from Wanda's husband Al, Ron talks like a drug dealer: "You're still gonna get the rush, you're gonna get the rush when you hold the baby" (55).

While Robin of *Emma's Child* is unambiguously disabled, the nameless infant of *The Baby Dance* may actually be all right, but she has some oxygen deprivation during the delivery, which leaves the *possibility* that she is developmentally damaged. Richard will not adopt her with this uncertainty. "I want a child I can teach the alphabet to and take on hikes. I didn't go through all of this for a kid who might sit in a corner and rock her knees all day" (72). Rachel protests, "We *have* a child, that other child does not exist, I want *this* child," but Richard says, "Honey, she's not the only one." We are looking at the other side of the chosen baby story, the side of the child who is not chosen.

For the 1998 television adaptation, the baby's total abandonment is clear. The would-be adoptive parents take a plane home to Los Angeles. The birth mother sits in her truck, shows on her face that she thinks for a moment of reclaiming the baby, but does not. The baby is never given a name, and the space on the hospital bassinet that should hold her mother's name is vacant.<sup>54</sup> She is no longer a valuable commodity. Obviously the warning in this play holds not just for adoption but also for new reproductive technologies like surrogate motherhood and genetic engineering. Ron, the intermediary who encourages Rachel and Richard to abandon the baby and provides no counseling or other help for Wanda, is symptomatic of the fact that adoption practitioners are absolutely unregulated, which may make an unscrupulous one even more dangerous in the age of the Internet.

*Emma's Child* deals with a situation somewhat similar to that in *The Baby Dance*, but Robin is not presented as commodified in the same way as the nameless little girl, even though in both cases there is some discussion of the parents' requirements and of the challenge the disabled baby is to their image of what parenthood would be like. Not only is their wealth less, but also Jean and Henry go through an agency, rather than through an independent lawyer who presents them with pictures of birth mothers he thinks might appeal to them. It follows that Jean and Henry are closer to home, and it is more possible for Jean,

who seems to have a better relationship with her husband anyway, to keep on visiting the child when he doesn't want to. Jean's experience contradicts the view of Richard that "there will be no joy with a child like this" (72).

Furthermore, *Emma's Child* gives a less bleak picture by including caring hospital staff: verbal Laurence, who appreciates the classical music Jean wants Robin to listen to, and Mary Jo, who doesn't, but still finds Jean an article claiming that hydrocephalics can have normal intelligence. They are overworked and tell her that hospital volunteers don't pick up babies like Robin, but nevertheless they give a larger picture of a nurturing society, in spite of problems with the administrative bureaucracy that determines many hospital decisions.

I value *Emma's Child* for its ability to imagine such nurturing, and for its tribute to the persistence that enables Jean to go on to another adoption possibility—while Rachel seems to give up. It also provides a more three-dimensional picture of the would-be adoptive father and of other males than *The Baby Dance*, and extends its treatment of commitment to explore male-female relationships as well. Nevertheless, by contrast to *The Baby Dance* it seems somewhat evasive of potential problems in adoption today.

Like *American Dream*, *Baby Dance* deals both with the general issue of commodification in American society and with specific modes of commodification that adoption can involve. The mode of this play, however, is realism rather than Albee's grotesque surrealism. Richard, who wants "the magic of taking [his child] to her first play" (72), is not so different from the expected theater audience, even if he has more money, and neither is Rachel, who could raise the child she has seen if her husband could accept her, but not alone. Wanda and Al—already stretched with four children and only a trailer to live in—have relinquished her, and have no resources for dealing with another child, let alone one who might have special needs. And so, very likely the child will remain in foster or institutional care, perhaps to be mutilated figuratively as the bumble in Albee's play is—offstage—mutilated literally. Commodifiable children may be wanted by too many parents—others by too few. As the gulf between the rich and the poor grows in our society, so will this gulf. These conditions for adoption are not inevitable; in England, unlike the United States, adoptions are treated as a social service with no fees involved, although individuals can circumvent national policy by adopting internationally (or, as in *Top Girls*, by

giving up the baby informally, placing the adoptive mother in poverty). In *The Baby Dance*, the abandonment of the baby by both rich and poor prospective parents may be seen as an allegory, but the conditions it allegorizes are intimately involved in the real life parallels to its story.

Is there any special affinity between adoption and nonrealistic modes of drama? Garry Leonard has argued that there is in Albee, that many of his plays “present the existential absurdity of growing up within the process of the closed-record adoption system.”<sup>55</sup> *The Play about the Baby*, written after Leonard’s article, extends scrutiny to the absurdity of living as a birth parent in a system where the birth is supposed to be forgotten. Institutions that require erasure of the past indeed lend themselves to portrayal in a mode different from usual conventions of realism. Furthermore, the play with identity involved in adoption procedures that involve the adoptee taking on a new name, new parents, and perhaps even a new country has affinity with the theatricality of Weedman’s *Homecoming*, in which the performer plays every role in her story. Dramatizing cross-cultural adoption leads several playwrights to theatrical uses of magical realism, such as Wilson’s in *Redwood Curtain* and Shiomi’s in *Masked Dance*. On the other hand, *Emma’s Child* and *The Baby Dance*, in both of which the adoptee’s perspective is present only by implication, stay very much within the mode of realism, though in different ways. In these plays the question of identity, or of reality, is less important than the question of who should or can take care of the child. In neither of these plays does adoption actually occur.

Drama is the literary form in theory most capable of showing many different viewpoints on the same situation. But, after surveying recent American plays about adoption, I am struck by how difficult it is for plays to represent three positions on the adoptive triangle in depth. Most, indeed, focus on only one point of view. Albee has represented characters in all these positions over the course of his career, but in his early plays the audience sees from the viewpoint of the adoptee, and the adoptive parents are caricatures and the birth parents invisible.<sup>56</sup> *Evelyn and the Polka King* and *Redwood Curtain* ignore or caricature the adoptive parents. *Homecoming* doesn’t try to represent the birth mother (and doesn’t consider the birth father). *Emma’s Child* gives a fully imagined adoptive mother and father, but only a sketch of two birth mothers, one of whom is impossibly matched to her requirements in the play. *Sacred Virgin* presents a detailed picture of several birth

mothers, but only stereotypes of the adoptee, and doesn't consider adoptive parents. *The Darker Face of the Earth* presents the birth mother and her adult son in depth, but does not consider him as an adoptee. *Mask Dance* shows several adoptees and an adopted mother with sympathy, and there is a brief narrative of the difficulties of Lisa's birth mother, but we don't see her. Though I find its social commentary telling, at least four of the five characters in the theatrical version of *The Baby Dance* are satirically treated types. But in its TV adaptation, where the last scene is the nameless baby crying, it comes close to the ability of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* to show the pain of characters on all three sides of the triangle. All of these plays present adoption in more depth than do those listed at the beginning of this chapter, which use it as a celebratory close—although in *Ragtime*, at least, we know the stories of the birth parents before their death and the stories of the adoptive parents before the adoption.

Unlike the novel, which is usually read silently and individually, the drama is an inherently public genre; it is one of the few forums in our society where people with every relation to adoption, including total ignorance, can potentially see something of how it appears to others with different perspectives. American theater now presents many other representations of adoption in contemporary life beside that in *The Bad Seed*. These plays have helped to keep adoption in public discussion and, in most cases, added a dimension to the representations in news media and television. I hope for more plays to extend our awareness of adoption's complexity, diversity, and connections with other aspects of society.