

## Introduction

Edward Albee's career began with a shocking play, shocking in both its content and its redefinition of realism; *The Zoo Story* would radically alter American theater in the second half of the twentieth century. And it is splendid that nearly half a century later, *The Goat* shocked American audiences and critics again.

Albee's prolific career, studded with three Pulitzer Prizes and the prestigious Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement, is still in full swing. His newest play, an as yet unpublished "prequel" to *The Zoo Story*, is called "Homelife" and opened on May 20, 2004; Albee is currently working on several scripts including one called "Me, Myself and I" about a doppelgänger (sounds more like a triplegänger to me). His plays have been seen in major revival after major revival, on and off Broadway, in recent seasons. Albee's drama over the years has been both praised and reviled, but he has remained an immense force on the contemporary stage, reshaping the theatrical mainstream while remaining outside it. His plays are populated by literate, articulate, witty, self-aware characters whose civilized lives are shredded by powerful forces; those forces are both internal and external, both personal and metaphysical; the flashpoint is the intersection where the mythic meets the pedestrian. Many of his characters make the fundamental human discovery that they have tried bravely and failed miserably, but that there was nothing, finally, to be done, life being what it is, they being who they are.

With the recent publication of *The Collected Plays of Edward Albee* in three volumes, the structure of this book became obvious: I have written about each play, following the chronological order through volume 1 (1958–65), volume 2 (1966–77), and volume 3 (1978–2003), reflecting forward and backward as the needs arise. That said, I have begun by violating chronological order, by starting with "Homelife"; although this is Albee's latest play, he wrote it as a first act to his first play, *The Zoo Story*, and dramatic sense rather than

strict chronology ruled; thus the earliest and the latest plays launch this discussion. Each of the plays has its own essay, facilitating access for the reader who, having seen a production or read a script, wants to know more. I imagine these essays as the basis of a silent dialogue between us (“So, what did you think?”), attempting to provide insight into Albee’s concerns and techniques as well as links to the biography, to other plays, and to other playwrights. The only works omitted from discussion are Albee’s adaptations from other authors (*The Ballad of the Sad Café*, *Malcolm*, *Everything in the Garden*, and *Lolita*). These rarely performed plays raise issues that would consume too much space: the pros and cons of contravening genre-specificity, the fundamental differences between fiction and drama, as well as my interpretation of each original work versus my interpretation of Albee’s (which in the case of Nabokov would require immense analysis).

Although each of the following essays addresses Albee’s themes as they emerge from a particular play, this introduction provides an overview of his recurrent preoccupations, motions of mind traceable over nearly half a century. The strategy here is to allow the reader to see how links between and among Albee’s plays can be reconfigured; this roaming through the canon can be a rich experience, providing readers with the wherewithal to come to their own understandings and appreciations, rather than merely react to hermetically sealed interpretations. My reluctance to promote a particular way of reading a play (or all the plays), that is, holding up a feminist or Marxist or Freudian lens through which to read or watch, echoes Albee’s firm views. In “Read Plays?” Albee insists that reading scripts is as rewarding as seeing productions, where the playwright’s work may have been altered by the actors and the director: “I’m not suggesting you should not see plays. There are a lot of swell productions, but keep in mind a production is an opinion, an interpretation. . . . Of course, *your* reading of a play is *also* an opinion, an interpretation, but there are fewer hands (and minds) in the way of your engagement with the author” (257).

But he acknowledges that a playwright can interfere: “There is a

tricky and magical moment: the first rehearsal. Then the playwright should go away for two and a half weeks—after it's gone to hell and begun to come back." He adds, "I suspect I've been directing my own work and others' (like Beckett's) to learn about the craft of directing so I could work intelligently with other directors and actors. My *Zoo Story* was the worst production I've ever seen. [Alan] Schneider, [Peter] Hall and [Louis] Barrault were my faculty for learning directing." Finally, he opines, "Directing is one of the most boring professions imaginable" (Playwrights Panel, June 2002, Last Frontier Theatre Conference, Valdez, Alaska).

Albee's encouragement of young writing talent is famous. Among many other efforts is his support of the Last Frontier Theatre Conference, which for thirteen years brought about four hundred people each June to the tiny town of Valdez, Alaska. In 2002, I was invited to attend as a judge, so I was able to observe Albee in action: he provided formal and informal lectures and master classes, and sat through readings of fourteen full-length plays. When he had a comment, he would modestly raise his hand, providing insights of great value. Just as his generosity toward new playwrights is legendary, so is his mistrust of actors; he told the assembly of playwrights: "Actors are not stupid. Actors are shrewd and bright, except the ones who are stupid. A sufficient minority of actors are talented, and casting is probably 95 percent of the problem solved." He went on, softening his remark, "Out of twenty-seven plays with about 250 characters, of all the hundreds of actors I've worked with, there are only four I would never work with again." In an interview in *American Theatre*, speaking about *Three Tall Women*, he said, "I always tell actors, whenever I direct, 'You can do anything you want, as long as you end up with exactly what I want'" ("Yes Is Better Than No," 38). With a very straight face, Albee gave this advice to a roomful of aspiring playwrights: "Be very careful about casting an actor you're sharing a bed with; either the script or the relationship will suffer." Albee mistrusts designers, too: "Be very leery of a set that wants to tell you what the play is about—a set is a container. It is impossible *not* to have a set—even a total absence of a set is a set. The only require-

ment is that it be right for the production; there are many possibilities for a play, as long as the designer understands the play" (Albee speaking in Valdez, Alaska, June 2002).

*"Film hates words. Theater loves words."*

Albee's remark in a televised interview is, like so many of his remarks, both pithy and combative, a provocation to thought. But, generally speaking, his distinction is a shrewd and incisive one, and it is certainly the case that Albee's theater loves words. He relishes definitions, puns, grammar—all part of the arsenal his articulate characters use to protect themselves, assert themselves, and attack each other. He makes considerable linguistic demands on his audiences, assuming we will rise to the occasion he provides. Language is not only the way we communicate with each other and with ourselves, it is also the one necessity to a theatrical script, the way the playwright communicates with us.

One of Albee's techniques for linguistic enjoyment is to seize on a word and candle it, hold it up to the light to see what inspection will yield. In *Counting the Ways*, for example, a character called He wonders, "Can less encroach?" (2:533). Or in *Listening*, the Man says to the Woman, "Well, you never *know*. You know?" (2:486). My favorite example is an early one from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*: Martha, flirting with Nick, who is a biologist and not, as Martha had thought, a mathematician, says, "Good for him. Biology's even better. It's less . . . abstruse." George corrects her: "Abstract." Martha replies, "ABSTRUSE. In the sense of recondite. (*Sticks her tongue out at GEORGE*) Don't you tell me words" (1:196). Albee's plays, filled with marital battles and détentes, are always fought on a linguistic field.

Consider, for example, some of his titles: *Marriage Play* is carefully not called *The Marriage Play*, suggesting that "play" means games as well as script. The title of a later work, *The Play About the Baby*, sounds like a reference to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by someone who has forgotten its title and is simply describing "the play about the baby." Of course the title *is* a summary of the newer

play, too, descriptive of the plot as well as suggesting the definition of “play” as it describes the cruel game about the baby that is, in fact, the plot of *The Play About the Baby*. Both *Marriage Play* and *The Play About the Baby* are filled with linguistic sparring and assaults; most of them in *Baby* are based on intimidation (Man and Woman can talk rings around Boy and Girl), while the husband and wife in *Marriage Play* are evenly matched. During what may—or may not—be the final and defining argument of their marriage, they argue over parts of speech and imperfectly remembered quotations, and Gillian tells Jack, “Oh, what a wangled teb we weave,” a line later echoed by Woman in *Baby*. Practicing deception (to follow the implication of the allusion to Sir Walter Scott’s “Oh, what a tangled web we weave / When first we practice to deceive”) is fundamental to marriage, to communication, and to the function of language itself. Perhaps the most shocking linguistic moments come when the couple in *The Goat* have their tragic showdown; it is as if Medea and Jason, or Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, had paused to note the wit of each other’s riposte.

*“The manner of a play is determined by its matter”*

Albee’s plays vary widely in “manner”; some are short, some are long; some turn on violent action, while some are physically static; some hew to the requirements of realism, while some violate the convention of the fourth wall (that invisible wall which would hide the stage from the audience’s view) and others do not. His plays are almost always tragicomic, which is to say Albee can convey the grimmest vision of life while amusing us; here lies his greatest debt to Samuel Beckett, an author he admires greatly. When asked in a public forum in Valdez if Beckett had influenced him, he replied, “We learn from our betters.”

Albee’s creative method, as he has described it, is to let a play incubate in his mind, without notes. Eventually, “He will test it: he will . . . introduce his characters to a situation that is not part of the play. If they behave easily and naturally—if he is able to improvise dialogue for them without effort—then he will decide that he and

they know each other well enough, and he will start to write. Once he has started writing, he will write one draft, read it over, make corrections, and write out a second. Then he is finished" (MacFarquhar, 77).

Albee experiments frequently with a technique often referred to as "direct address," a character speaking directly to the audience; he returns to this technique often, from the very early *Sandbox*, where Grandma speaks to us unheard by the other characters, to the very recent *Occupant*, where the entire play is addressed to the audience from a podium. This choice (most often seen in the work of the contemporary Irish playwrights) suggests the need to violate the theatrical illusion, all the while sustaining it (a high-wire act perfected by Renaissance soliloquies). In fact, very few of his plays conform to the rules of naturalistic theater. A comment on Jonathan Thomas's paintings (Thomas was Albee's life partner from 1971 until Thomas's death in 2005) seems to comment on the effect of Albee's plays as well: "It is this vibration—this cross-fade—between the explicit and the implicit, between the totality and the construction, which gives these painting their disturbing magic" (*SMM*, 157).

*"Maybe I'm a European playwright and I don't know it"*

In an article about his trip to Easter Island, the fulfillment of a long-time dream, Albee wrote, "Way before the movie *Planet of the Apes* showed us the Statue of Liberty half buried in the sand, I have felt the need to experience cultures which grew, fell into decadence and vanished. These are probably cautionary tales even beyond their aesthetic marvel" ("Easter Island," 1). Albee's affinity for "cautionary tales" is clear in many of his plays, and it is in this widest sense that they may be called political, and thus may be called European.

American drama is generally preoccupied with the psychology of dysfunctional families; the focus is usually on battling brothers who are still competing for parental love or attention or money; these brothers are already grown men, and thus their sibling rivalry can be seen as protracted adolescence. Benedict Nightingale called this "diaper drama" and Martin Esslin addresses it in "'Dead! And Never Called Me Mother!'" Consider this brief list of major American plays

that reflect this same parent-child dynamic: Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Sam Shepard's *True West*, and Suzan-Lori Parks's *Top Dog/Underdog*. This may well be a reflection of a nation self-defined by a psychological civil war, as well as the Civil War and its lingering, unresolved brother-against-brother issues. Unlike these other major American playwrights, Albee's preoccupation is with adult relationships, particularly upper-middle-class marriage. The internecine battles between husbands and wives may be seen as a reflection of American society in tormented collapse, the shredding of the fabric of hope, the betrayal of the values of that social institution which emblemizes the joining of like-minded people and a commitment to the future. This focus on mature relationships and, by extension, the focus on self-understanding, is far more philosophic than psychological, and is more frequently a characteristic of British and European drama than of American drama.

The famous line from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, "Truth and illusion. Who knows the difference, eh, toots?" illuminates Albee's views about life as well as relationships—relationship to oneself as well as to others. Of course, theatrical art, dependent as it is on both truth and illusion, is at the heart of the matter. His characters often consciously playact or create plays within plays, delivering lines, striking poses. Most significant are the offspring of these toxic marriages—usually one son (sometimes imaginary)—who either vanishes, or dies, or is mute or betrayed or stolen. The heart-wrenching conceit of the illusory child comes and goes throughout the plays; consider all the ambiguous children who haunt the Albee canon, including those in *American Dream*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *A Delicate Balance*, *Three Tall Women*, *Listening*, *The Play About the Baby*, *Finding the Sun*, and *The Goat*.

*"And what is gained is loss"*

In this succinct line from *The Zoo Story*, Albee expressed his vision of life in his first play—and, tellingly, expressed it through wordplay.

This idea would sustain many—perhaps all—of his plays in the five decades following *The Zoo Story*. He has modulated this grim idea of inevitable loss (of love, of innocence, of expectation) into a deeply ironical meditation on life, reminiscent of Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*; one loses not only teeth, hair, eyes, but, finally, "everything." When an interviewer asked if he found it ironic that *Three Tall Women* was acclaimed as a "new play" when it was already several years old, Albee replied, "There's irony for me in everything" ("Yes Is Better Than No," 38).

The inevitable loss, regardless of the encroachments of bifocals and receding hairline, is of mortal time. Albee's constant subject is time's pressures and its passage; sometimes this is revealed paradoxically, as in *All Over* when the play's leisurely pace is held in tension with the last hour of the dying man's life, or in *Seascape*, where the very long view—evolutionary time—is telescoped into one crucial afternoon. Concomitant with this thematic preoccupation is a practical one: Albee's theatricality requires precision timing, and he can be heard to mutter "*temp!*" as he watches a production of one of his plays, implying that the scripts are like musical scores. In a published conversation called "Context Is All," Albee suggests this musicality of a play: "You can conduct a play when you're directing it" (*SMM*, 228).

### *"Calm seas and prosperous voyage"*

This line from "Homelife" describes the choice Peter and Ann made of a marriage of safety, a life without storms and without worry—a choice already showing signs of exhaustion before Peter leaves their home to spend his Sunday afternoon, as he always does, reading a book on a bench in Central Park. In Albee's view, it is this very safety that is so dangerous. It is worth noting that his plays have become more and more interested in sexuality as a driving force in human life, as a gauge of vitality. Many of Albee's plays are about heterosexual, long-lasting marriages between sophisticated, middle-aged, well-to-do men and women; despite his own homosexuality, he rarely writes about same-sex relationships. From the start, the plays



emphasize the need to acknowledge one's "animal" existence—a belief introduced in the first play, *The Zoo Story*, and evident throughout the rest, in crescendo, until its most literal as well its most metaphoric manifestation in *The Goat*. The underlying urgency of Albee's belief, which fuels all his work, is revealed in a remark made on the radio: "We must stay fully alive knowing full well we are not going to stay alive forever . . . I wish more people would live dangerously" (National Public Radio, September 23, 2004). Living and making art and responding to art are all of a piece for Albee; in his essay "Some Thoughts on Sculpture," he discusses "the illimits of art" and, specifically, a few contemporary sculptors whose work he has acquired for his private collection: "They are all dangerous, in that they do not leave our perceptions unaltered" (*SMM*, 163). One might say the same of Albee's best—and most dangerous—plays.

In his introduction to volume 1 of *The Collected Plays*, Albee writes, "I do not plan out my plays to fit in with either critical bias or commercial safety; nor do I worry that my themes may be difficult or dangerous and my techniques unconventional. I go with what my mind tells me it wants to do, and I take my chances. . . . it gives me freedom for my wisdoms and my follies" (1:8). The dangers of safety are examined in each of Albee's plays, which reveal, in dazzlingly different ways, how crucial it is to live honorably—true to oneself, true to one's art, true to one's ethical and philosophical beliefs. In a television interview with Charlie Rose when *The Goat* was nominated for the Tony Award for Best Play (which it subsequently won), he explained that his theatrical aim is to make "people imagine what they cannot conceive of imagining, to imagine how they would feel if they were in this situation, to learn something about the nature of love, of tolerance, and consciousness." This comment could stand as the headnote to the entire Albee canon.