

The American Century Theater  
presents

# Edward Albee's

SEASCAPE

**Audience Guide**  
Edited by Jack Marshall



July 30-August 22, 2009  
Theater II, Gunston Arts Center





*Theater you can afford to see—  
plays you can't afford to miss!*

## About The American Century Theater

**The American Century Theater** was founded in 1994. We are a professional company dedicated to presenting great, important, and neglected American plays of the twentieth century . . . what Henry Luce called “the American Century.”

The company’s mission is one of rediscovery, enlightenment, and perspective, not nostalgia or preservation. Americans must not lose the extraordinary vision and wisdom of past playwrights, nor can we afford to surrender our moorings to our shared cultural heritage.

Our mission is also driven by a conviction that communities need theater, and theater needs audiences. To those ends, this company is committed to producing plays that challenge and move all Americans, of all ages, origins and points of view. In particular, we strive to create theatrical experiences that entire families can watch, enjoy, and discuss long afterward.

These audience guides are part of our effort to enhance the appreciation of these works, so rich in history, content, and grist for debate.

*The American Century Theater is a 501(c)(3) professional nonprofit theater company dedicated to producing significant 20th Century American plays and musicals at risk of being forgotten.*

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# The Playwright: Edward Albee

We know Edward Albee was born on March 12, 1928, but there is some controversy about *where* he was born. Most sources say it was in Washington DC, but *Magill's Survey of American Literature*, in 2007, claimed that he was a Virginian. In either case, Albee was an orphan. He was adopted at the tender age of two weeks by Reed Albee, the wealthy son of Edward Franklin Albee II. Albee's paternal grandfather and namesake was a power in the vaudeville world, in which he owned a chain of profitable theaters known as the Keith-Albee Circuit. Young Edward seemingly had the benefit of the perfect situation, for he was brought up in affluence and raised in an environment rich in theater influences and history.

As he has made abundantly clear in his many interviews, Albee hated almost everything about his upbringing, especially the pressure applied to him by his forceful mother, Reed's third wife, Frances. She wanted him to be a respectable member of Larchmont, New York, society; he was drawn to the arts, writing dark-themed stories and poems and associating with artists and intellectuals who Mrs. Albee regarded as beneath him.

Albee spent his youth getting expelled from various private and military schools, a pattern he continued through college. His formal education ended in 1947 at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, when he was expelled for skipping classes and refusing to attend compulsory chapel. By the age of twenty, he had left college, home, and the world of the wealthy Albees forever. In one interview, the playwright said, "I never felt comfortable with the adoptive parents. I don't think they knew how to be parents. I probably didn't know how to be a son, either." He told interviewer Charlie Rose on a lengthy PBS interview that his parents "threw him out" because he refused to be a "corporate thug."

Albee moved to New York's Greenwich Village, where he was stimulated by the counterculture and avant-garde movements thriving in that hotbed of political ferment and creativity. He survived on a bequest from his paternal grandmother, then took a series of subsistence jobs to support his writing. Albee moved into playwriting, where his major influences were European, especially Samuel Beckett and the French absurdist Ionesco. (At various times, Albee has

also mentioned Ring Lardner, James Thurber, and Jean Genet as significant influences on his work.)

His first produced play, written at the relatively advanced age of thirty, was *The Zoo Story* (1959). It was a surprise international hit that instantly established him as an exciting new voice on the American stage. Three years later, the longer *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* became a Broadway sensation and an instant classic. Albee emerged as the leader of what was hailed as an exciting new theatrical movement in America, merging the traditional and the avant garde, grafting the realistic to the surreal. Critics proclaimed Albee the successor to Miller, Williams, and Eugene O'Neill. *A Delicate Balance* (1966) won Albee his first Pulitzer Prize and reinforced the consensus.

But, as with his family life, Edward Albee refused to take an easy path in his career. As he has noted, sometimes ruefully, he could have had a traditionally successful career by repackaging the themes, mordant humor, and vicious wordplay of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* into a series of commercially successful works. Instead, Albee always experimented, exploring a dizzying range of theatrical styles and subjects, often in defiance of the critics, audience preferences, and financial wisdom. In 1959, Albee explored American race relations in *The Death of Bessie Smith*. He launched American absurdist drama with *The Sandbox* (1959) and *The American Dream* (1960). *Tiny Alice* (1964) is a metaphysical dream play in which Albee explores his curiosity about reality versus illusion, mysticism, and religious faith. In 1975, Albee won his second Pulitzer Prize with *Seascape*, showing a more reflective side that combined theatrical experimentation and social commentary. *The Lady from Dubuque* (1979) is a fable, in which the title character is Death.

After *Seascape*, Albee suffered through fifteen years of commercial and critical failures, ranging from a musical version of *Lolita* that never made it to Broadway to a one-actor rant by a bitter man with three arms called, not surprisingly, *The Man with Three Arms*. By 1990, Edward Albee was widely regarded as having reached, prematurely in his forties, the point that Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams reached in their sixties: he was assumed to be at a creative dead end. Then the semi-autobiographical play *Three Tall Women* opened to critical raves, and Albee was back on top—and awarded another Pulitzer.

Albee's resurgence has continued with plays such as *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* (2002), which depicts the disintegration of a marriage in the wake of the

revelation of spousal bestiality. He recently expanded *The Zoo Story* into a two-act play. The absurdist *Me, Myself & I* (2007) trenchantly analyzes the relationship between a mother and her twin sons.

Albee, the college dropout, served as a distinguished professor at the University of Houston from 1989 to 2003. A member of the Dramatists Guild Council, Albee has received, among his many honors, the three Pulitzer Prizes for drama—for *A Delicate Balance* (1967), *Seascape* (1975), and *Three Tall Women* (1994); a Special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement (2005); the Gold Medal in Drama from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (1980); and the Kennedy Center Honors and the National Medal of Arts (both in 1996). He is the President of the Edward F. Albee Foundation, Inc., which maintains the William Flanagan Memorial Creative Persons Center, a writers and artists colony in Montauk, New York.

Now in his eighties, Albee still believes his best play will be his next one.

Don't bet against it.



## The Evolution of *Seascape*

—Mel Gussow

© 1998 by *The New York Times*

*[In this 1975 interview, Edward Albee discusses his then-new play, Seascape.]*

Edward Albee's new play, "Seascape," which begins previews tonight and opens on Sunday at the Shubert Theater, is about a middle-aged married couple (Deborah Kerr and Barry Nelson) who encounter two lizard creatures (Frank Langella and Maureen Anderman) on a beach. This is Mr. Albee's first play since "All Over" in 1971 and the first premiere that he has directed. It is also the first time that his cast has not been entirely human.

Sitting in his office, surrounded by posters and memorabilia of past productions (including the popgun from "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"), the author

said that the play was not “far fetched.” “Near fetched,” he suggested with a smile. “It’s a true-to-life story.”

He explained that it all could happen. “There are still prehistoric fish at the bottom of the ocean,” he said. “It’s conceivable that they could evolve. In the course of the play, the evolutionary pattern is speeded up billions of revolutions.”

Paraphrasing a line in the play, he said that the “skip from ‘glop’ to string quartets and tangerines takes a very small amount of time—150 million years? Things evolve or devolve. Everything is always undergoing mutation in order to survive. It’s the survival of the most adaptable. Whether or not it’s for the better, I don’t know, but it’s certainly more interesting.”

He continued, “The play deals with a number of matters that concern me in all the plays: people closing down, how people get along with one another, how they make a marriage. The relationship between Charlie and Nancy [Mr. Nelson and Miss Kerr] has reminded some people of the relationship between George and Martha [in ‘Virginia Woolf’].”

With George and Martha, “on the surface there are lots of fireworks and vituperation.” In comparison, Charlie and Nancy’s conflict is “subtle;” the feeling is one of “regret.” “If I wanted to make them George and Martha,” he said, “I might have called it ‘Who’s Afraid of Two Green Lizards?’”

In tracing the evolution of this evolution play, he said that about seven years ago he started thinking about writing two one-act plays, companion pieces called “Life” and “Death”. “Death” began to have a life of its own: it grew into the full-length “All Over.” Then, during the last three years, “Life” became “Seascape.” It is, he said, with characteristic wryness, “a four-character, outdoor, costume play.”

It is comic as well as serious, as are most of his 13 other plays—“even the somber ones. I remember at ‘Box’ and ‘Quotations’ the four people who were in the audience every night laughed a lot. Our best serious playwright, Samuel Beckett, is extremely funny. You’ve got to have a tragic sense of life to see the humor of the absurd.”

The play takes advantage of a longtime Albee interest in science and the sea. For many years, he has been fascinated by the underwater, skin-diving, and

snorkeling. In preparation for the play he read more deeply in an anthropology and animal behavior, with particular emphasis on “lizard-type creatures—their habitat, mating, familial aspects.” He added, “The human is one of the few animals that kills its own kind.”

“Seascape” is still very much a play of the imagination. “I guess it’s the most difficult I’ve written,” said Mr. Albee. “Since the two people in the play are experiencing things that people have not experienced before, I didn’t have any guide lines. With the other two characters, it was a problem getting their tone exactly right. You had to be able to relate to them, but they have to react, think, and experience things differently. Their reactions are instinctual rather than emotional.”

One crucial question was language. “If they were going to speak English,” he said, “it had to be grammatically correct and without much accent. They shouldn’t speak pigeon English or . . . lizard English. In the Vienna production they speak German, though Austria doesn’t have a seacoast. I suppose they come up from the Danube. For a time I thought that here they might speak French—that they had landed on the wrong beach.”

The lizards are named Leslie and Sarah. “What should I call them?” he asked. “Grock and Ook?” Then, tracing the derivation of the names, he said, “I had two cats in Montauk—Leslie and Sarah.”

He wrote the play in his house in Montauk, Long Island, where he will probably next attack his long-awaited play about Attila the Hun. “My house is 80 feet above the beach,” he said. “My windows look out on nothing but the beach and the ocean. I suspect that had something to do with ‘Seascape.’”

Because of his double function as author and director, he was more involved than he has ever been in the actual production (although for many years he has been his own co-producer). “As director, I had a very good relationship with the writer who was understanding of my needs. At the same time the author feels that I as director served him well. I tried to keep a decent rapport.” Director and author jettisoned a large section of the play. “At one point, part of it took place at the bottom of the sea. It was not necessary, too fantastic, and very hard to construct a set that could transform itself. It was turning into a play about set changes.”

Some of the rewriting was during the tryout in Baltimore. Before or after the critics came? “There are no critics in Baltimore,” he said emphatically. “There were some baseball reporters who covered the play. Actually there was one bright man and three others who didn’t like the play.”

As the play changed, the out-of-town reviews improved. Actually, the final version came too late for Vienna and The Hague. Productions have already opened there, using the original version (twice as long and down to the bottom of the sea).

Technically, there have been problems in the production, such as the question of how to costume the lizards. “We wanted them to be halfway between creatures and humans. They have the carapaceous belly of a turtle. The length of the tail, the degree of the knobbing down the back—these were all decisions. “Of course, there had to be a certain amount of anthropomorphism. They should be so real that in a sense we can smell them. They should be quite frightening. Seeing them for the first time, the audience should have that shock of recognition. After all, it’s what we all were.”



## Language: The Muse That Provokes Stoppard and Albee

—Ben Brantley

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Do you know what it’s like to be deeply, unbearably in love, all the while aware that you can never completely trust the object of your affection? I would wager that Edward Albee and Tom Stoppard do, almost to the point of delirium.

Don’t misunderstand me. I have no intimate acquaintance with the personal lives of these dramatists. It’s just that their ruling passion, jubilant and exasperated, proclaims itself publicly in pretty much everything they write, including their new plays of this season (“Rock ’n’ Roll” from Mr. Stoppard, and “Homelife” and “Me, Myself & I” from Mr. Albee).

How could it be otherwise, when it's the most basic tools of their trade that they so adore? The faithless lovers of Tom Stoppard and Edward Albee are, in a word, words.

Or to quote one of the interchangeable title characters in "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead," the 1966 play that made the young Mr. Stoppard famous: "Words, words. They're all we have to go on."

It is one of the livelier paradoxes of the English-speaking theater today that its two most dazzling wordsmiths are incurably suspicious of the language they ply with such flair. No other living playwrights give (and, it would seem, receive) more pleasure from the sounds, shapes and textures of their lavishly stocked vocabularies. And none is more achingly conscious of the inadequacy of how they say what they say.

This contradiction is not just an element of their style; it's the essence of it. It's what gives that distinctive, heady tension to their plays, the friction that sends the minds of receptive theatergoers into exhilarated overdrive. It is also what makes actors say that mastering these playwrights' ornate, fast-footed language requires the sort of hard study demanded by Shakespeare.

Inordinately slick and fleet of tongue, Stoppard and Albee heroes—from the 19th-century Russian philosophers of Mr. Stoppard's "Coast of Utopia" to the battling husband and wife of Mr. Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"—are forever trying to pin down chameleon words, like so many adrenaline-drunk Ulysses-wrestling shape-changing sea gods. (Words, as one character in "The Coast of Utopia" puts it, "just lead you on" and "arrange themselves every which way.") These heroes may not stand a chance of winning but, oh, what a beautiful fight.

And the love-hate matches show no signs of abating. Mr. Albee turns 80 next month; Mr. Stoppard turned 70 last year. Yet if anything, their sense of true communication as a valiant and impossible dream has only intensified in the decades since they made their names, Mr. Albee with "Zoo Story" (in 1960) and Mr. Stoppard with "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern."

In "Rock 'n' Roll," Mr. Stoppard's cross-cultural story of love and revolution in Prague and Cambridge, England (on Broadway through March 9 at the Bernard B. Jacobs Theater), the possibilities for misunderstanding are multiplied by the different languages in play: not only Czech and English, but also ancient Greek,

Fleet Street journalese, governmental bureaucratese and the mystical poetry of Pink Floyd lyrics. The penultimate scene is a combative dinner party that might as well be set in the Tower of Babel.

In Mr. Albee's "Me, Myself & I," which closed on Sunday at the McCarter Theater in Princeton (with a New York run planned later this season), words erupt like exploding cigars in the mouths of their speakers. Almost all words—including personal pronouns and proper names—tremble with multiple meanings in this philosophical farce about a mother of identical twins who can't tell them apart. (The idea of twins, superficially the same yet internally dissimilar, becomes a physical pun.)

"Rock 'n' Roll" and "Me, Myself & I" found ideal embodiments for their authors' semantic perplexity in two very different performances. As the rock-loving Czech dissident in the Stoppard play, the British actor Rufus Sewell seems to exist in a state of eternal bafflement, squinting warily at the sentences lobbed at him by academics, politicians and journalists. (The play is filled with simple misunderstandings of words: "bold" for "bald," for example.) When he speaks, it is as if he expects what he says to bite him.

In "Me, Myself & I," Tyne Daly played the mother with an aggrieved, ineradicable question mark on her face. On some level she has resigned herself to not knowing which twin is which and which meaning is meant by which word. But she has managed to incorporate her doubts into how she talks, to make them part of a game that she plays aggressively. Small wonder that an outsider to the family, listening to Ms. Daly's Mother volley and dissect clichés with her doctor-companion (the wonderful Brian Murray), feels compelled to ask, "Is this English you're speaking?"

That state of questioning every word can paralyze. There's the sense with Mr. Albee and Mr. Stoppard that their characters keep talking as fast as they can because otherwise they would sink into silence and all the terrifying questions that lie within.

They are heirs to the feverish logorrhea that afflicts Winnie, the (literally) earthbound heroine of Samuel Beckett's "Happy Days," brilliantly rendered by the Irish actress Fiona Shaw in Deborah Warner's traveling production, recently at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Buried up to her solar plexus in a mound of dirt, Winnie does her best to sustain a blithe, chattering monologue. But every so often she grows still and fretful, as the terror descends that the day will come when "words fail" and "there's nothing left to say."

Mr. Albee and Mr. Stoppard are directly descended from Beckett. Like him they consider the meaninglessness of a life that knows its own extinction, of being in the face of nothingness. They share this worldview with that other great successor to Beckett, Harold Pinter.

As the splendid new Broadway revival of “The Homecoming” makes clear, Mr. Pinter too is obsessed by the unreliability of language. It’s not so much what the fractious and possibly murderous family members of “The Homecoming” say—which is often impure invention—as the intentions that lurk beneath. Silence is the only form of honesty. And Mr. Pinter’s famous pauses are cut from the same dark cloth as the stillnesses that increasingly took over Beckett’s later plays.

Mr. Albee and Mr. Stoppard respond to the echoing silence by talking a purple streak. That doesn’t mean that they don’t know that unfathomable quiet will always vanquish the sound and fury of speech, however impressively loud and polysyllabic.

It’s telling that in the debate-driven nine hours occupied by the trilogy “The Coast of Utopia,” the most enduringly theatrical image summons the noiseless world of a deaf child, who can’t hear the philosophical arguments of his elders but can feel the thunder of change.

Similarly, while “A Delicate Balance,” Mr. Albee’s Pulitzer Prize-winning drama of 1966, has the structure and finesse of a drawing-room comedy, you’re always aware of the mortal chasm over which this artifice is built. Speech, elegant and striving for precision merely papers over the silence beneath, not so unlike the magpie monologues of Beckett’s Winnie.

Within this shadowy context, so profound as to be immeasurable, Mr. Albee and Mr. Stoppard use bright, impeccably assembled dialogue to illuminate the provisional structures of daily life. They see the cosmic joke within the limitations of language and revel in it in ways that remind us of how much the Absurdists have in common with music-hall comedians.

Mr. Stoppard has created unabashedly silly farces centered on characters hamstrung by speech impediments and spoonerisms (“Rough Crossing,” “On the Razzle”), as well as dizzying homages to artistic ancestors like James Joyce, Tristan Tzara and Oscar Wilde, in “Travesties,” and A. E. Housman in “The Invention of Love.”

Mr. Albee regularly comes up with light-handed but heavy-hearted verbal vaudevilles that explore love and death with the rhythms of the Borscht Belt (“The Play About the Baby,” “Counting the Ways,” “Me, Myself & I”). But puns abound in his most serious works as well. Who else would include a running joke about cardinals (as in churchmen) versus cardinals (as in birds) in a play as ontologically dense as “Tiny Alice”?

Don’t think that these writers abandon their verbal self-consciousness when they turn to relatively naturalistic portraits of, say, marriage. The couples of Mr. Albee’s “Virginia Woolf” and “Delicate Balance” and of Mr. Stoppard’s “Real Thing” and “Jumpers” are always squabbling about the meanings and uses of words. Whoever controls language has the upper hand, however conditional. Not that these couples ever have much hope of completely connecting through language. In “Jumpers,” a dithery philosopher and his terminally neurotic wife reach their happiest peak of communication in a game of charades. And Mr. Albee’s “Homelife”—which received its New York premiere this season and is a companion piece to his first play, “Zoo Story”—begins with this exchange between a husband and wife:

ANN: We should talk. (Waits; no reply; turns, exits whence)

PETER: (After she goes—recognizing he had heard her) What? We should—what? (Louder) We should what?

ANN: (Offstage): What? (Reentering) We should what?

PETER: We should what?

The dialogue that follows is elegant, witty and highly literate. But those first four sentences are the X-ray of all that is subsequently spoken in “Homelife” and, for that matter, much of Mr. Albee’s work—and, I might venture, Mr. Stoppard’s.

The last scene of “Rock ’n’ Roll” finds a non-Czech-speaking Englishwoman (the superb Sinéad Cusack) in Prague, unsure of whether the people around her understand her or not but ecstatic all the same. The play’s final lines address what is a basic human condition of Mr. Stoppard’s world with defiance and triumph: “I don’t care! I don’t care! I don’t care!”

And the working title for Mr. Albee’s next play? “Silence.”



# Doing It His Way: The Exacting Mr. Albee

—Jack Marshall

Edward Albee is famous in the theater world for more than being the nation's greatest living playwright. He is also well known as the nation's most protective playwright—a zealous and fierce guardian of the integrity and safety of his children, his plays. Woe to the professional theater company that decides to “improve” on an Albee play with a radical new concept, non-traditional casting or *<gasp!>* cuts in the text. For each performance copy of an Albee script makes one thing very clear: the play must be produced, staged, and acted his way, or not at all. And the language of the licensing agreements gives the playwright all the legal weapons he needs to close down a production that displeases him.

Any playwright can do this, of course, and virtually all scripts include scary-sounding legal prohibitions against “altering the work” in performance. Two things distinguish Albee plays in this regard, however. First, the warning language goes much further, usually insisting on strict adherence to set design and stage directions, and second, Albee *means* it. This is no boilerplate. A professional company cannot usually get the rights to perform an Albee play without direct permission from the man himself. To earn that, Albee requires a company to prove it is capable of doing his play justice. The theater, cast, director, designer and technical designers must present their resumes and credentials for review. Obviously, if a company's production displeases the playwright, the chances of having another production approved diminish considerably. At times, Albee has gone further, actually threatening legal action and a loss of the rights to perform a play when it appears a production is veering into unapproved territory.

Albee's strict enforcement of his rights as an artist has both good and bad effects. Undoubtedly, his vigilance ensures that the occurrence of a poor production of one of his plays—defined as a production that he himself would find objectionable—will be rare. If your company does an Albee play, you know he is watching, or someone is watching for him. Imagine, if you will, that William Shakespeare is in the habit of haunting theaters and wreaking

ectoplasmic vengeance on companies whose liberties with his masterpieces annoyed him. You would not see many Viet Nam War-set *Othellos*, sex-reversed *Twelfth Nights*, or 90-minute *King Lear*s. Directors and designers, who too often feel that it is their prerogative to re-interpret and re-imagine classic works as if they were the authors, clearly understand what their task is with an Albee play: do it his way, the way he wrote it.

Or else.

Albee pays a high price for the purity he insists upon, though he unquestionably pays it without an ounce of qualm. His steel-fisted control speaks to his discomfort with, and perhaps rejection of, the unique collaborative nature of the theater. Without a director, cast, and production company, a play is only words on paper. Unlike a novelist, who only needs a publisher (and, if he's Thomas Wolfe, an editor), or a painter, who only needs a wall, a playwright must have major assistance from others for his art to exist at all. These artists, reasonably enough, see themselves a creative partners.

Other American playwrights, as accomplished as Albee, have submitted to this relationship and thrived on it. Elia Kazan aggressively shaped some of Tennessee Williams' best plays, sometimes browbeating the playwright into making major changes. But Albee insists on the primacy of the playwright and believes that all other artists involved are essentially soldiers, taking orders. It should come as no surprise that as his career has proceeded, Albee has increasingly chosen to direct his plays himself. He directed the original production of *Seascape*. Fortunately, he is a gifted director. He does not gain the benefit of that independent eye, the artistic partner who might see some angle, some opportunity or nuance, that he does not. With his greatest plays, this is a probably a small loss. With some of his less successful works, however, Albee's refusal to submit to interpretations that are not his own may guarantee obscurity. Sometimes directors and performers have taken a flawed play and found a way to make it succeed. Albee steadfastly maintains that some of his least critically-successful plays are among his best. If that is true, perhaps they need someone other than the playwright to make them work.

In 1990, the National Theatre in Great Britain produced Arthur Miller's *After the Fall*, a drama that had never found a place among Miller's most popular or best-regarded plays. With Miller's assent, the production employed non-traditional casting to have a black actress play the part of Maggie, a character inspired by Miller's late ex-wife, Marilyn Monroe. A black Maggie speaking

with a British accent effectively removed any thoughts of Monroe from the show's audiences and critics, with the result that it received a fresh look and new appreciation. The production was a hit, but more importantly, it raised the reputation and visibility of *After the Fall*. Albee's *The Lady from Dubuque*, however, is unlikely to have a similar opportunity for rebirth. He will not permit one of his plays to take a new creative journey that he doesn't chart himself, and almost certainly will install a system to ensure that this doesn't change after his death.

True, that meddling ghost of Shakespeare would have stopped the mincing Richard III Richard Dreyfus had to play in the fictional off-Broadway *Richard III* of Neil Simon's *The Goodbye Girl*. But Ghost Bard might also have prevented Orson Welles' *Voodoo Macbeth* and his Fascist *Julius Caesar*, both brilliant productions. It is a fair guess to say Albee does not care about the loss of potentially successful re-interpretations of his works. More than most playwrights, he seems far less interested in the critical response to his plays, the awards they win or the tickets they sell, than he is in making certain that it is his voice that the audience hears, without static from other creative intruders. For this, he deserves both respect and obedience. As long as he feels it is important that his works reflect only his ideas and balance of dramatic elements, and no one else's, Albee's insistence on uniformity is an act of integrity and more. He is exercising a right he earned by delivering powerful, challenging, thoughtful drama, breaking rules and challenging established tastes again and again. Edward Albee believes that he understands his words, themes, and characters better than anyone else, and knows what is good for them.

Who can argue with that?



## Albee on Albee, Theater, and Life

*[Edward Albee is a willing participant in interviews and has done many over his long career. He speaks more easily and candidly about himself and his craft than many playwrights, perhaps because he does not want to leave the analysis to others. Below, taken from numerous published interviews, are some of his responses to questions. Some of the very best Albee interviews have been done by Charlie Rose on PBS. You can find five of them on the web at [www.charlierose.com/guest/view/1004](http://www.charlierose.com/guest/view/1004).]*

### **On his upbringing**

I was an adopted kid, and I was raised by this wealthy family who had been involved in theater management—vaudeville management, the Keith–Albee vaudeville circuit. And so, the house would be filled with retired vaudeville performers all the time. So, I got to meet Billy Gaxton, Victor Moore, and Ed Wynn, and all those people that nobody’s ever heard of. And, I started going to the theater when I was really young. I think when I was six years old I went to see *Jumbo* at the old Hippodrome theater, that musical with Jimmy Durante and an elephant. That was my first experience in the theater. So, I was raised on live theater, which was about the only good thing about the adoption.

### **On his childhood**

I never felt comfortable with the adoptive parents. I don’t think they knew how to be parents. I probably didn’t know how to be a son, either. And, I stayed pretty much to myself. I had a fairly active inner life. I certainly didn’t relate to much of anything they related to. They sent me away to school when I was nine, ten years old, not to have me around. So, that was fine. It was all right. I took care of myself. I never felt that I related to these people, which may be interesting, because most kids are trapped into feeling an obligation to their natural parents. For what? For being born, I guess. Foolish notion, but still. And, since I didn’t relate to these people, and I knew that I wasn’t from them, I had a kind of objectivity about the whole relationship. This is all second-guessing, of course, but I suspect it probably was in my mind. I am a permanent transient. That’s probably where that line in *The Zoo Story* came from! “I’m a

permanent transient. My home is the sickening rooming houses on the Upper West Side of New York City, which is the greatest city in the world. Amen!" I bet that's where that line came from, in *The Zoo Story*.

### **On what inspired him to become a writer**

I knew I was going to be involved in the arts in some fashion when I was very young. That's why I wanted to be a composer and did painting and drawing and writing. It just seemed inevitable to me. That's who I was, therefore that's what I would do. It's just the way the mind works. Was it hearing Bach for the first time? Was it seeing a great painting? Was it reading Turgenev? Or all together? I can't be sure. I don't know.

### **On the genesis of his first play, *The Zoo Story***

I know that I liberated a large typewriter from the Western Union Company and dragged it down to the apartment I was sharing with all my friends and just started writing this play. It took me two weeks. It's called *The Zoo Story*. I'd been writing a lot of stuff until then. I'd made a couple of half-assed attempts at plays which I never finished, and all of a sudden I wrote *The Zoo Story*, and I had a very odd sensation: "This isn't bad. This may even be individual." It's the first thing I ever wrote that I could say, "You wrote this. All the influences have been put aside, and put under. You've learned enough. This is your voice." I was aware of that at the time. That was a good feeling . . . . You know, here I was delivering telegrams at Western Union, which is okay to do if you're a kid, but you can't go on into your fifties doing it. You've got to have some other kind of career.

### **On how he writes his plays**

Ideas come into my head that I've got to get out of my head. That simple. I'm a playwright, therefore I write plays. That's what I do, that's what I am. I think it's true with all creative people. Some people are composers. Some people don't get it right. You know, Henry James thought he should be a playwright. He was wrong. Arthur Miller thought he should be a novelist. He was wrong. They figured it out . . . . It's very hard to explain to anybody who isn't a playwright. If you're a playwright . . . that's why I was not a very good poet, and a bad novelist, and a bad short story writer. And then I wrote a play and I figured out that's what I was supposed to be doing all my life. And I just think that every writer—everybody in any of the arts—has a particular time when

they can become individual. You know, some people, they're doing it when they're eighteen. Some don't get to it until they're fifty. And *The Zoo Story* was that moment where I knew I'd written something good—and individual. And you just take off from there. That's when it happens.

The only play that I've known what began it, was when I wrote a play about Bessie Smith, the great black blues singer who was allowed to die outside of Memphis in 1937, because she was black and the hospitals were white. Even there, she's not in the play, her blood is. But, with the exception of that one, I write my plays to find out why I'm writing them—what's going on in my head that is turning into a play. And, I become aware that it's turning into a play, and so I write it down. So, simple and so easy and so true. I'm not one of these didactic playwrights who says, "I must now write a play about . . ." this or that subject, and find some characters. It comes into focus very slowly for me. When it's sufficiently into focus, I can hear the characters, know them, and put them in their action . . . . Whenever I am writing a play, I see it and hear it as a play being performed in front of me while I write it. I visualize myself watching it. Because I have to be the audience, too.

### **On what he sees as the writer's place in society**

Peripheral! Tolerated, perhaps. Writing should be useful. If it can't instruct people a little bit more about the responsibilities of consciousness, there's no point in doing it. But we all write because we don't like what we see, and we want people to be better and different. Sure, that's why we do it.

### **On dealing with his career setbacks**

I think you've got to assume that nobody promised you a rose garden. Sometimes it's going to be okay, and sometimes it's going to be tough. But, if you haven't got a sufficient sense of self to surmount either failure or success, you're in trouble. I know that some of my plays that have been least popular are some of the best ones. They'll figure it out eventually. I've never lacked self confidence in my talent as a writer. This sounds wrong. It sounds terrible, but it's true. I've never had doubts about my ability as a writer.

### **On critics**

There is a syndrome in this country. The critics set somebody up, maybe too soon—underline maybe—and then they take great pleasure, the only pleasure

critics do take—except possibly with their wives and mistresses—in knocking them down. The majority of our critics are best qualified to cover brush fires in New Jersey . . . . It's hard not to get paranoid in the theater, but I think I've succeeded.

### **On trying to please his critics**

Why should one be interested in doing that? Every play has its own density, its own specific gravity. Some plays are simple, some plays are more complex. Some are experimental, some are naturalistic. If you're trying to please everybody all the time, you're bound to fail. You have to write the play that's in your head and make the assumption that your talent hasn't collapsed and that if people will pay attention, they might learn something.

### **On taking creative risks**

I don't get up every morning and say, "Now, can I find some risks I have to take?" No. But, I don't think I've compromised either. I don't think I've ever said to myself, "Gee, this is going to be an unpopular subject. Maybe I'd better not write it." Or, "Gee, maybe I'd better simplify here." No. Nor do I do the reverse—try to make myself look better by making them more complicated. No. You write what's in your head.

### **On rewriting**

I don't rewrite. Well, not much. I think I probably do all the rewriting that I'm going to do before I'm aware that I'm writing the play because obviously, the creativity resists—resides—in the unconscious, right? Probably resists the unconscious, too—resides in the unconscious. My plays, I think, are pretty much determined before I become aware of them. I think they're formulated there, and then they move into the conscious mind, and then onto the page. By the time I'm willing to commit a play to paper, I pretty much know—or can trust—the characters to write the play for me. So, I don't impose. I let them have their heads and say and do what they want, and it turns out to be a play.

### **On becoming a celebrity with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?***

I was delighted that people liked it. That's fine. But they liked *The Zoo Story* and *An American Dream* and *The Death of Bessie Smith* and *The Sandbox* also. They liked those too, but this was different. This was on Broadway, therefore it was meant to be a rival—ridiculous attitudes like that. Commercial theater. You

put up with that stuff. You know, I've written—what—twenty-eight plays now. I think the majority of them had their world premieres in small theaters. And of my twenty-eight plays, maybe no more than half have been on Broadway. And, I don't care. Most Broadway theaters are too big. I would much prefer a 400-seat theater to a 900-seat theater anytime for my plays, which are basically chamber plays. And, I find the audiences—the smaller the theater, the more alert the audiences are, and the younger they are, and the more intelligent they are. So, I'd be perfectly happy never to have another play on Broadway, except maybe you have a responsibility to hit those people, too.

### **On what provides the greatest sense of satisfaction**

Not selling out. Not lying. Putting my plays down the way they want to be and not compromising in production or casting or anything of that sort. I've been pretty much able to be my own person, which is nice. Maybe that was made fairly easy for me by the initial success of *Virginia Woolf*. There are all these pressures on you to sell out and do something different, but I've got a kind of orneriness to me: this is the play that I wrote, and this is damn well the play I want done.

### **On compromising**

I made one experiment. I said, "All right. Everybody tells me that this is a collaborative art." Something that I've never believed, by the way. It is a creative act, and then there are people who do it for you. With one play I said, "Okay. All these people think they're so bright. I will do whatever they want." Without changing the text. And, I put up with a lot of stuff that I didn't like very much or didn't really approve of. It was a fiasco. And, if I'm going to have a fiasco, I want it to be on my terms. I like to take my own credit and my own blame because I can make as many mistakes as the next person, you know. But, I think my mistakes are more interesting. They are to me, anyway.

### **On the value of art**

All art is useful because it tells us more about consciousness. It should engage us into thinking and re-evaluating, re-examining our values to find out whether the stuff we think we've been believing for twenty years still has any validity. Art's got to help us understand that values change. If we've stopped exploring the possibilities of our mind, then we're asleep, and why not just stay asleep? So, all art has got to be utilitarian and useful. That's one of the great things

about African art. It's not made as art. It's utilitarian. It's made for religious, dance purposes. And, people who make it don't think of themselves, "Gee, I'm a great sculptor." No. They're making something useful. I think this is true with novels, plays, poems. I think basically all serious creative people feel the same way. Most of us are smart enough not to talk about it.

### **On America's values**

So many words get misused all the time. I don't think much about my values. I know what they are, if anybody pins me down. I will do whatever I possibly can to save us from the forces of darkness that are trying to take over our democracy, and that I believe we are a slowly, peacefully evolving, revolutionary society. That's what we were formed as by the merchant class, and that's why it should be a peacefully evolving society. I try to keep us awake to the fact that democracy demands informed voting and that democracy is fragile. And, if we don't stay on top of things we'll get what we deserve—as we seem to be doing right now. And I do think that all art is fundamentally political, in the large philosophical sense.

### **On the messages in his plays**

I hope there are a bunch of them. Participate in your own life—fully. Don't sink back into that which is easy and safe. You're alive only once, as far as we know, and what could be worse than getting to the end of your life and realizing you hadn't lived it?

### **On his best play**

Some people ask me, What do you think your best play is?, and I tell them, If I've written it already, why am I still writing? I hope I haven't written my best work. I'm still learning more about my craft, and I'm hoping the next two or three plays that I write will be interesting and useful, useful being most important I think.

### **On measuring success**

I can't do it in my own work, because I can't look at my own work that way. If I read a book, go to a play, see a painting, or hear a piece of music that makes me expand the parameters of my response—makes me think differently, makes me think more completely about something—then I've had a useful experience. Otherwise, as I said, it's merely decorative and a waste of time.

## **On problems facing America**

Most of our voting doesn't have anything to do with what is going to be most good for the most people. It's selfish and uninformed voting. I find that terribly dangerous. That can kill a democracy very, very quickly. I find that the inroads on civil liberties in our society are terribly dangerous. There's never been any danger from the far left to the United States. The death of democracy is fascism, and I see us moving closer and closer to that compliance all the time, and that worries me a lot.

## **On his advice to the young**

Try to get into your own mind a little bit. Figure out what it is you want to do with your life, what you really want to do, who you really are. Don't waste your life doing something that you're going to end up being bored with, or feel was futile or a waste of time. It's your life, live it as fully and as usefully as you possibly can. "Useful" being the most important thing there. Life must be lived usefully, not selfishly. And a usefully lived life is probably going to be, ultimately, more satisfying.

## **On death**

I was recently talking to a psychiatrist who told me that most people are not willing to accept the fact of death. I had an awareness of death when I was fifteen, but when I turned thirty-six or thirty-seven, I became aware that I, Edward Albee, was going to die. The realization did not fill me with dread. I simply became aware of the fact that this is the only time around for me. I'm going to be alive for a certain time, and then I won't exist any more.

## **On life**

Life is absolutely super and wonderful. There shouldn't be any sadness in it. People should be aware of all things at all times, they should experience the extremities of life, fulfill themselves completely. Why does everyone want to go to sleep when the only thing left is to stay awake?

## **On being remembered**

I would rather go on than be remembered.



# The Stage Works of Edward Albee

*The Zoo Story* (1958)

*The Death of Bessie Smith* (1959)

*The Sandbox* (1959)

*Fam and Yam* (1959)

*The American Dream* (1960)

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1961–1962)

*The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* (1963)

(adapted from the novella by Carson McCullers)

*Tiny Alice* (1964)

*Malcolm* (1965)

(adapted from the novel by James Purdy)

*A Delicate Balance* (1966)

*Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1966)

(adapted from the book by Truman Capote)

*Everything in the Garden* (1967)

*Box* (1968)

*All Over* (1971)

*Seascape* (1974)

*Listening* (1975)

*Counting the Ways* (1976)

*The Lady From Dubuque* (1977–1979)

*Lolita* (1981)

(book to a musical, adapted from the novel by Vladimir Nabokov)

*The Man Who Had Three Arms* (1981)

*Finding the Sun* (1982)  
*Marriage Play* (1986–1987)  
*Three Tall Women* (1990–1991)  
*The Lorca Play* (1992)  
*Fragments* (1993)  
*The Play About the Baby* (1996)  
*The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* (2002)  
*Occupant* (2001)  
*Knock! Knock! Who's There!?* (2003)  
*Peter & Jerry* (2004)  
(two-act adaptation of *The Zoo Story*)  
*Me, Myself & I* (2007)  
*At Home at the Zoo* (2009)  
(reworking of *Peter & Jerry*)

## Awards and Nominations

### *Awards*

1960 Drama Desk Award Vernon Rice Award—*The Zoo Story*  
1963 Tony Award for Best Play—*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*\*  
1967 Pulitzer Prize for Drama—*A Delicate Balance*  
1975 Pulitzer Prize for Drama—*Seascape*  
1994 Pulitzer Prize for Drama—*Three Tall Women*  
1996 National Medal of Arts  
2002 Drama Desk Award Outstanding New Play—  
*The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?*

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\*The Pulitzer Prize committee in 1963 recommended *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* for its Drama prize, but the Pulitzer board rejected the recommendation with objections to the play's language and subject matter. It announced no Drama Award that year.

2002 Tony Award for Best Play—*The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?*

2005 Special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement

2008 Drama Desk Award Special Award

***Nominations***

1964 Tony Award for Best Play—*The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*

1965 Tony Award for Best Author of a Play—*Tiny Alice*

1965 Tony Award for Best Play—*Tiny Alice*

1967 Tony Award for Best Play—*A Delicate Balance*

1975 Drama Desk Award Outstanding New Play—*Seascape*

1975 Tony Award for Best Play—*Seascape*

1976 Drama Desk Award Outstanding Director of a Play—  
*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

1994 Drama Desk Award Outstanding Play—*Three Tall Women*

2001 Pulitzer Prize for Drama—*The Play About the Baby*

2003 Pulitzer Prize for Drama—*The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?*

2005 Tony Award for Best Revival of a Play—  
*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*





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