

ALBEE
Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

*

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CHAPTER ONE

‘FUN AND GAMES’ PRODUCTION STRATEGIES / PRODUCTION PROBLEMS

The production history of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* has been marked by ‘fun and games’ of various sorts, from internecine warfare among cast members and production teams to conflicts with external powers over presentation and censorship – which have ranged, in turn, from the sinister to the ludicrous. The extent to which the substance of the play itself lies behind such disputes is variable, but it is surely not merely coincidental that the performative vitriol on stage has so often been mirrored by controversies off. Certainly, in the cases of the opening production and the film version, the frank abrasiveness of Albee’s text flew in the face of the prevailing conservatism of Broadway and Hollywood alike, with the respective producers engaging in what, in many respects, were calculated acts of provocation. In both instances, *Virginia Woolf* appeared at the right time and in the right conditions to facilitate a kind of breakthrough: Albee’s play, quite beyond the author’s intent, took up a vanguard position in the liberalisation of attitudes which took place during the course of the 1960s. In this chapter, I shall examine the circumstances surrounding these productions in some detail, before moving on to outline, more briefly, the major American and British revivals of subsequent decades. Though possessing nothing like the shock value of the earlier versions, these productions have redefined the play in their own, subtler ways, and have often conjured controversies all their own.

WRITING PROCESS, 1961–2

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is usually regarded as Edward Albee's first 'full-length' play, although he has always denied the validity of that label, stressing that any play should be as long or as short as its author feels it needs to be. The off-Broadway successes of his controversial one-act plays *The Zoo Story*, *The American Dream* and *The Death of Bessie Smith* had already proved his point for him, raising more public and critical interest in 1960 and 1961 than did the work of most of Broadway's established three-act artisans put together. Two other, still shorter, works, *The Sandbox* and *Fam and Yam*, had also appeared in the same period, and though the latter was little more than a satirical sketch, the former is still justifiably seen by Albee as one of his best works, a fifteen-minute jewel worthy of standing alongside Samuel Beckett's similarly distilled shorter works. Given this prolific output of short plays, however, it was perhaps inevitable that expectations were sky-high for Albee's first extended work.

Perhaps conscious of such pressures, Albee allowed *Virginia Woolf* to evolve over time, rather than rushing into writing it. The basic concept had been in his mind at least as early as February 1960, when, following the opening of *The Zoo Story*, he told the *New York Times* that he was planning to write a piece called *The Exorcism*. He mentioned that it might carry the comic subtitle 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?', a witty graffito he had recently seen in the men's room of a Greenwich Village bar; 'but it's not a funny play', he stressed (Albee 1960). With productions of his various one-act plays taking up much of Albee's attention over the next eighteen months, it was not until the summer of 1961 that he began to flesh out these initial ideas for the play. While vacationing at Water Island, he drafted the first two acts and twenty pages of the third. The remainder of the final act, together with revisions to the first two, was then completed in the spring of 1962 at his apartment in Greenwich Village.

The development of Albee's ideas between these two stages of writing is fairly clearly indicated by the draft scripts archived at New York's Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts. Though the final text for the first two acts still stands substantially as it did in the first draft, and thus retains a powerful sense of spontaneity, Albee made various minor adjustments, like replacing some of the easier, cruder abuse (the first draft is liberally sprinkled with such epithets as 'bitch', 'cow' and 'asshole') with more emotionally charged alternatives. At the second stage of writing, he also gave Nick a name, where previously all the character's lines had been attributed simply to 'Dear'. The dialogue itself remained unaffected by this change, since Nick is never actually referred to by name by George and Martha, and Honey persists in calling him 'dear' just as he calls her 'honey'. Yet the effect is nevertheless to make the playscript itself appear more straightforwardly realistic, and less obviously cartoonish or 'absurdist' – thus effecting an important modification in the first impressions formed by his producers, director and actors.

The most significant advance in this second phase of writing, however, was unquestionably the creation of George and Martha's imaginary child, no mention of which appears in the earlier draft material. Albee's 1960 reference to the play as *The Exorcism* indicates that he had always had a purging of some sort in mind for this marriage (and the Latin litany was mentioned in that same early interview), but it was only with the writing of the third act that this idea seems to have found a clear form. Albee then went back and inserted various references to the child into the earlier stages of the script, such as George and Martha's argument preceding Nick and Honey's first entrance: 'Just don't start in on the bit about the kid' (19). (The traces of this particular change are still evident in the text: George's repetition of the line 'All right love . . . whatever love wants' brackets the inserted passage, whereas in the earlier drafts he said this only once.) The relatively late insertion of such details points up the fact that, for Albee, the gesture toward conventional plot mechanics was an afterthought rather than the initial focus of his attention: in the

writing, the moment-by-moment ebb and flow of confrontations between characters was always the source of the play's momentum. Interestingly though, if the insertion of the child device is – on one level – a concession to linear plot development, it was also at this stage in the writing that Albee very self-consciously inserted material which would frustrate any attempt to read the play's revelations as presenting a straightforwardly 'true' narrative of the characters' past. Apparently clarifying for himself what the play was doing with the themes of truth and illusion, Albee made other adjustments to the previous acts, such as in the passage where George attempts to recover from Martha's revelations about his 'first novel'. Here, Albee inserted the lines 'True or false? Hunh? I mean, true or false that there ever was such a thing. HA!' (86), thereby rendering far more ambiguous George's next reference to the novel as 'my . . . memory book'. Where in the first draft it seems clear that the novel really was autobiographical (and that his strangling attack on Martha is thus motivated by fury at her revelation of a dark secret), the changes destabilise this reading. The third act exchange in which Martha and George collectively mock Nick's attempts to make sense of their stories then confirms the unresolvability of this issue:

NICK: Hell, I don't know when you people are lying, or what.
 MARTHA: You're damned right!
 GEORGE: You're not supposed to . . . At any rate . . . My Mommy and
 Daddy took me [to the Mediterranean] as a college graduation
 present.
 MARTHA: Nuts!
 NICK: Was this after you killed them?
 [GEORGE and MARTHA swing around and look at him; there is a brief,
 ugly pause.]
 GEORGE [*defiantly*]: Maybe.
 MARTHA: Yeah; maybe not, too. (118)

Interestingly, the first public exposure of material from the play took place well before Albee had written his third act or made the consequent alterations to acts I and II. In the autumn of 1961, Albee con-

sented to be the subject of an extensive interview for a series of programmes called 'Playwrights at Work', which was being prepared by the National Educational Television network. In response to the request for rehearsal footage of work in progress, he offered the first fifteen pages of his then-untitled new script. This opening scene between George and Martha, minus 'the bit about the kid' and leading up to the entrance of – who knew? – was staged by the eventual director of the full premiere, Alan Schneider, who elected to work with actors Peggy Feury and Shepperd Strudwick (later to become the second Broadway George). Albee has not divulged whether or not his subsequent completion of the play benefited from seeing this early scene fleshed out in this way: it proved useful commercially, however, since WNET elected not to broadcast the programme until 15 October 1962, two days after the play's premiere (and the same day that the press reviews appeared). 'This was excellent TV', the New York *Daily News* television critic enthused the next day, noting that 'capital use' was made of 'the charged excitement that attends a controversial but explosively creative drama'. This a mere 24 hours after the same newspaper's theatre critic, John Chapman, had dismissed the play as being 'four characters wide and a cesspool deep' (Chapman 1962a).

PRODUCING THE PREMIERE

If the writing of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* had taken time, so too did the process of finding the right circumstances for that first production. With the play finished, Albee initially offered it to Lee Strasberg's Actors Studio, a school with which he had developed close links, despite the apparent gulf between the strictly observed naturalism of Strasberg's 'Method', and the more offbeat, absurdist-inflected approach of Albee's early one-acts. Then at the height of its fame, the Studio was planning to expand its horizons beyond its teaching activities and was looking for a property with which to launch itself as a

producing theatre. Albee's play seemed like a good prospect, since the author's status as the much-debated *enfant terrible* of the off-Broadway scene would guarantee public interest in his collaboration with the Studio, while the play itself appeared to be the kind of intense, realist drama at which Method actors excelled. Initially persuaded of the mutual advantages involved in using the Studio's prestige to launch Albee on Broadway, Strasberg proposed to cast Geraldine Page and Eli Wallach as Martha and George, and to have Alan Schneider (also an associate of the Studio) direct. That plan was abandoned, however, when Strasberg capitulated to pressure from his producing colleagues Cheryl Crawford and Roger L. Stevens, who persuaded him that the play was too long, too vulgar, too humourless, and unworthy of the Studio's attentions. Instead, the Studio launched a short-lived Broadway career with a revival of Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*, which, quite apart from being even longer and vastly less amusing than *Virginia Woolf*, proved to have dated badly since 1928.

Immediately Strasberg backed out, Albee handed the play over to Richard Barr and Clinton Wilder, whose company had handled the off-Broadway productions of his previous plays. Albee now confesses that he would have been happy to see *Virginia Woolf* produced in similar circumstances ('I didn't know whether it should [be on Broadway] or not'), and certainly this was the preference of Alan Schneider, who was still slated to direct. 'I didn't think it had a chance commercially,' Schneider stated in a symposium on the play in 1982, 'I always said, "Don't do it on Broadway"' (quoted McNally 1982: 19). Albee, after all, had no Broadway track record, and in that arena his play would appear unprecedentedly frank in its use of 'strong' language, its character portrayals and its treatment of sexuality. Richard Barr, however, though well aware of the risks, decided that the time was right to try to push Albee on to the 'top rung' of New York's theatrical ladder. Broadway, after all, was then still the only arena in which a new play would be treated seriously enough for elevation to the status of a 'major work'. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

seemed the obvious choice with which to take this next step, and Barr was conscious that it would have been a failure of courage on his part *not* to attempt this, given that the production company he had founded was explicitly dedicated to advancing the cause of a serious American theatre.

Barr was a highly adept producer, but was also far more than a mere exploiter of commercial potential. He had left his partnership in the Broadway firm of Bowden, Barr and Bullock in 1959, having grown increasingly dissatisfied with what he viewed as the company's misplaced priorities. In 1953, for example, they had supported director Joshua Logan in a dispute with playwright William Inge over his play *Picnic*, forcing Inge to make substantial changes to the last act in order to better suit the tastes of Broadway audiences. This kind of treatment was fairly standard for Broadway writers during this period: in 1955, no less a figure than Tennessee Williams was forced into extensive rewrites for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* when director Elia Kazan predicted commercial and critical failure without them. Richard Barr, however, believed firmly that if the American theatre was to realise its artistic potential, it needed first and foremost to serve its playwrights. Abandoning, at least temporarily, the commercial rat-race of Broadway, he began producing new plays at smaller, off-Broadway theatres. In 1959 he established Theatre 1960 (the company's title was updated for each subsequent season), and in 1961 he forged what became a seven-year alliance with wealthy producing partner Clinton Wilder. Wilder too had worked on Broadway productions but was more interested in producing quality work at off-Broadway venues such as the Phoenix (where in 1955 he had co-produced a landmark production of Pirandello's *Six Characters In Search of An Author*). Like Barr, he knew that the economics of production were distinctly less cut-throat off-Broadway than on.

Broadway theatre had been hit badly by the inflationary atmosphere of the post-war 'boom' years, as spiralling production costs and falling attendances conspired to drive up ticket prices. Consequently, producers were less willing than ever to take risks on new or

unproven material, and during the 1950s many of New York's more adventurous theatremakers chose (or were forced) to work in the low-paid but relatively intimidation-free atmosphere of the emerging off-Broadway scene (which had been granted professional status in 1949 when Actors' Equity permitted its members to work there at a lower weekly pay-rate). Yet, with a few notable exceptions, off-Broadway was at this time a 'library stage', in the sense of mounting either classic revivals or imports of new European plays which had already proved themselves in Paris or London. New work by young American playwrights appeared only rarely, since commercial pressures – though less intense than on Broadway – were nevertheless an increasingly dominant factor in off-Broadway production throughout the 1950s, and producers were simply not prepared to take risks on unknown quantities. Ironically, even Albee had had to 'become European' before finding an American production: his first play, *The Zoo Story*, received its world premiere in German translation in Berlin in 1959, appearing on a double bill with Samuel Beckett's latest piece, *Krapp's Last Tape*. Richard Barr, who had optioned Albee's play as his first independent acquisition, realised that the same pairing might also work in New York: his production opened in January 1960, with Albee's play unexpectedly attracting the bulk of the popular and critical attention (Barr and Wilder responded to public demand by reviving *The Zoo Story* eight times over the next six years). That production also brought Albee to the attention of Alan Schneider, who had directed the American premieres of both *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, and whom Beckett had specified must direct *Krapp*. Although *Zoo Story* was originally directed by Milton Katselas, Schneider was sufficiently impressed by the writing that he offered to direct Albee's next one-act piece, *The American Dream*. What Beckett and subsequently Albee saw in Schneider was an able, hard-working director who was primarily concerned with realising the playwright's vision on the stage with as little interpretative 'spin' as possible from himself. He was the ideal director to assist in Barr's dream of reviving a 'playwright's theatre' on Broadway, and in 1962

he was brought on board from the outset as plans were made to premiere *Virginia Woolf*.

If the decision to produce the play on Broadway was a calculated commercial risk – undertaken out of an admirably idealistic belief in the need to rejuvenate an important theatrical arena which had become creatively moribund – this idealism was also backed up by an unapologetically pragmatic approach to development and marketing. Barr and Wilder, described by Albee as 'the shrewdest producers I have ever met' (Kolin 1988: 29), understood immediately that the play's controversy value, just as much as its artistic virtues, could be exploited to sell tickets. Indeed, it was with the prospect of creating a *succès de scandale* that they persuaded impresario Billy Rose to book the show into the theatre which bore his name. Known as a promoter of musical revues and the creator of the Aquacade (a sort of theatrical version of Busby Berkeley's synchronised can-can swimming), Rose saw Albee's play as a potential hit if its foul-mouthed naughtiness could be turned to marketing advantage (he was particularly fond of George's game 'Hump the Hostess'). A former copywriter, Rose went as far as personally penning newspaper advertisements for the show's low-price previews, appealing directly to secretaries by informing them that they would understand the play even if their bosses did not. Rose was apparently tuned to the same wavelength as the reviewer who later condemned the play as being 'For Dirty-Minded Females Only'.

Rose also, however, vetoed a more ambitious publicity stunt dreamed up by Richard Barr, who suggested opening the play in two different productions simultaneously, on and off-Broadway, with different casts, directors and sets, 'the point being that one of them might get away with it' (quoted McNally 1982: 19). Barr's explanation is disarming but also somewhat disingenuous: financial realities were not such that you could pull such a stunt just to see if one production 'worked' better than the other. This was clearly an attempt to play on the controversy value of the perceived gap between Broadway and off-Broadway standards, perhaps even to taunt Broadway

audiences and critics with the more enlightened, intellectual attitudes of the off-Broadway crowd, whom Barr knew would continue to champion the piece even if the headline production folded early. Rose, however, was utterly opposed to this idea, and understandably so, given that it was his theatre which stood to end up looking foolish. Barr was not in a position to bargain with Rose on this point and, in retrospect, Albee is profoundly grateful for the shelving of the plan. It was, he says, 'one of those silly notions. A very, very silly notion.'

Far less silly was the producer's determination to rehearse the play in the actual theatre space where it was to be presented. It was this plan which, according to Barr, had necessitated the use of the Billy Rose in the first place, since this 'was the only theatre available for what we wanted to do: move onto an empty stage to put in our set and lights' (McNally 1982: 19). The theatre was hardly ideal in other respects: besides being located on 41st Street, several blocks south of Broadway's hub around 44th and 45th Streets, its stage was 'considered too large for a straight play and too small for a musical' (Schneider 1986: 312), and would not lend itself easily to the kind of close-up intimacy demanded by Albee's single-set chamber play. Yet the practice of rehearsing on set, greatly favoured by actors and directors, was one of the artist-friendly aspects of off-Broadway production which Barr and Wilder were intent on bringing to Broadway. Their preparedness to make sacrifices to this principle is nowhere clearer than in the fact that, given the union rules governing Broadway production, the use of the theatre itself for rehearsals necessitated the employment of three full-time crew members to sit around doing nothing.

In calculating for such circumstances, Barr and Wilder budgeted the production at \$75,000, to be raised by selling share units at \$1,500 each. This total was vastly more than what it would have cost to mount a comparable off-Broadway production, but was still cheap for Broadway. In the event, only \$55,000 was raised, a sum that included \$14,000 invested by Barr and Wilder themselves and \$750

from one of the cast members, George Grizzard. The eventual costs of mounting the production, however, totalled less than \$47,000. Such economic prudence ensured that the producers made themselves at least partially immune to the familiar Broadway hazard of negative reviews killing the show at birth. The surplus capital meant that they were in a position to let the show run at a loss for some while, thus allowing time for audiences to build up via word-of-mouth should the initial press reception prove unfavourable. In this regard, as in so many others, Barr's planning represented a careful infiltration of off-Broadway production principles into the Broadway arena. Albee, for one, is in no doubt about the importance of this approach to the production's success. As he remarked wryly in a 1967 interview,

it didn't get the full-blown [Broadway] treatment. The script wasn't changed: none of the actors asked for their parts to be rewritten so they'd be more sympathetic; we didn't have a director who wanted to be terribly creative and change all of the author's lines. No, it wasn't the usual full-blown treatment at all. It was a sneaky little low-budget production. But it managed to have damned good actors and a good director. It was put on pretty much exactly the way I wrote it . . . as I wanted it done. (*Kolin 1988: 83*)

CASTING AND REHEARSALS

The one factor Albee omits here is that the 'damned good actors' were not quite the all-star cast initially intended. All involved knew that, to sell the play on Broadway, the star system would have to be embraced to some degree, and Billy Rose had only consented to lease his theatre on the explicit condition that big names should be involved. In the event, though, only Uta Hagen could lay claim to such status, and even she – despite her reputation as one of America's most distinguished actresses – was making a comeback to the Broadway stage after a self-imposed exile of several years. Despite the best efforts of

the producers, the other three cast members were relative unknowns, a factor which indicates just how 'dangerous' appearing in the play was thought to be for established names. Henry Fonda, who was Albee's first choice for George, was not even shown the script by his agent, who simply took it as read that his appearing in the play was out of the question. (According to Alan Schneider, Fonda told him years later that his greatest regret was that 'I never got to play George' [1986: 313].) The first choice for Martha, Geraldine Page, was lost to the production for even more bizarre reasons: despite the Actors Studio having pulled out of producing the play, she was insistent that her mentor and teacher Lee Strasberg be intimately involved. Albee recalls that 'Gerry loved the play and said she wanted to do it very much, but that Lee had to be there at all the rehearsals. And so we said sorry Gerry.' Katherine Hepburn was sent the script, but she turned it down saying she was not good enough for the part. The next choice was Uta Hagen, who with her husband Herbert Berghof ran one of Lee Strasberg's major actor-training competitors, the HB Studio. Four pages into reading the script, Hagen was determined to play Martha, although she had severe personal reservations about working with Alan Schneider.

It was Schneider, however, who proved the key figure in determining the rest of the casting. Various potential Georges had been discussed, from Richard Burton to Robert Flemyng, but none proved appropriate or available. It was somewhat in desperation that Schneider suggested Arthur Hill, a Canadian actor better known in London than New York, whom he remembered seeing on Broadway in James Agee and Tad Mosel's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *All The Way Home*. 'He didn't seem ideal for us, but he was around fifty, male . . . and available' (Schneider 1986: 314). Albee himself had never heard of Hill, but by this stage he was prepared to take Schneider's recommendation on trust. Schneider also proposed that George Grizzard, one of his favourite actors, with whom he had worked on several previous occasions, be cast as Nick, and Albee agreed despite the fact that Grizzard was not as physically imposing as the 'quarter-

back' he had envisaged in the role. Melinda Dillon, a Broadway newcomer but something of a protégée of Schneider's, was cast as Honey even though, again, Albee had never heard of her. Only Grizzard put up a serious objection to this final casting decision, on discovering that Dillon was taller than he – a fact which hardly helped in his attempt to envisage himself in the role of a young stud. According to Schneider, it took considerable persuasion to prevent him from quitting the production.

Thanks to contractual and financial necessity, the less-than-stellar cast had only three weeks to rehearse a play lasting three-and-a-half hours, prior to the first of ten preview performances. The situation was exacerbated by Arthur Hill's late arrival, following a three-day overshoot on the film he had been making in London. That the production came together in the frighteningly short time that remained is testament to the skills of all involved, and to the careful preparation of the key figures before rehearsals began: Schneider claims he read the play 'every day for six months', and that on his first meeting with Uta Hagen to discuss the play, she had 'a big notebook containing eighty million questions which she had already answered. Her preparation was terrific' (quoted McNally 1982: 17, 19). Hagen herself adds that the fact of rehearsing on the stage set itself was also of vital importance:

To start with a play of that length and difficulty *without* the props and scenery, we would have had to rehearse eight weeks longer. To me, this was one of the unique experiences of my entire life in the theatre, starting with the things that are food for the play being alive on stage – every little ice cube, every little clinky glass. I found this the most useful circumstance of any production I've ever been in. (McNally 1982: 10)

Clearly Barr's and Wilder's commitment to taking off-Broadway's prioritising of play and actors into the Broadway arena paid important dividends. Even so, the time pressures took their toll. Arthur Hill, whose busy schedule had not allowed him the same preparation period as the others, reportedly lost 10 pounds in the three weeks as a



1. Arthur Hill as George and Uta Hagen as Martha in the original Broadway production, 1962. Note the attention to detail in William Ritman's set.

result of anxiety over learning his lines and moves in time. Although Hill remembers the rehearsals as 'tremendously stimulating' (Spector 1990: 194), Alan Schneider claims that he seemed to need almost constant reassurance and support while developing his role. Schneider also suggests that there was a certain tension between Hagen and Hill owing to their radically different approaches to acting: Hagen used a rigorously psychological approach to exploring Martha's motivations, while Hill – operating more in the British tradition – 'was what Method-trained actors always contemptuously term "a technical actor." Each move, each gesture, came from outside, studied and deliberate' (Schneider 1986: 321).

Schneider's account here, however, is hardly an objective one, since the greatest difficulty during rehearsals was the continuous, underlying tension between Hagen and Schneider himself. The various accounts of the problem conflict somewhat, but it is clear that Hagen had little respect for Schneider from the outset, and stipulated that she would only take the part on the understanding that he would not interfere with her artistic judgement. Schneider believed that her

hostility originated with a feud he had with Herbert Berghof over the Broadway premiere of *Waiting for Godot* in 1956 (Berghof had taken over direction of the production after Schneider pulled out following a *débâcle* over its preview run in Miami: Berghof publicly accused Schneider of ineptitude; Schneider sued Berghof – unsuccessfully – for stealing his blocking). Hagen insists, however, that her objections were more than merely personal: 'He was wonderful with producers and very often with playwrights,' she has said of Schneider, 'but with actors he was a sadist . . . Those kind of stories were rampant among theatre people. [But] he was never mean to me. He was scared of me' (Spector 1990: 181). Hagen's comments on Schneider's unpopularity with actors are not without foundation: in her autobiography, Colleen Dewhurst (who worked with Schneider on the premiere production of Albee's *Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, and later played Martha in Albee's own 1976 revival of *Virginia Woolf*) makes her own intense dislike for him patently clear. As Albee himself remarks diplomatically in a contribution to Dewhurst's book, 'I do know that Alan occasionally had trouble with strong women' (Dewhurst 1997: 251). To be fair to Schneider, though, there were other actors who adored him: Nancy Kelly, who played Martha on the 1963–4 road tour, remarked simply that 'I'd trust Alan with my life' (Gardner 1963).

Part of the problem between Hagen and Schneider clearly lay in their radically differing approaches to preparation and rehearsal. Hagen's acting and teaching practice was grounded in the Stanislavsky system, which for her meant that preparation for a role must be painstakingly carried out in advance, in order to think oneself into the psyche of the character. She was therefore dismayed when, at her first meeting with Schneider (a five-hour lunch date at Sardi's), he seemed unable to answer any of the questions she had about the play, and confessed to being less well prepared than she. Schneider's apparent lack of readiness, however, reflected his preference for not attempting to answer the play's questions prior to rehearsals. He preferred, instead, to see how the dynamic of the piece

would develop on stage with the particular actors involved. For a director committed to exploring the potential of the writer's text rather than imposing his own vision over it, this was an understandable approach, especially given that this play hinged entirely on the interaction of the four actors and the fluidity of their dialogue: 'I had a terrible time trying to plan the staging ahead of time,' he notes, because 'there were too many imponderables' (Schechner 1965: 146). Schneider's more pragmatic, step-by-step approach meant that he was as dismayed by Hagen as she was by him, perceiving her pre-rehearsal decisions about Martha to be 'totally formed in her mind and not negotiable' (Schneider 1986: 317).

Whatever the rights and wrongs of this dispute, it is clear that Schneider chose discretion as the better part of valour and opted to shape the production *around* Hagen's performance, while allowing her an almost totally free hand in developing her ideas. He always insisted, publicly, that he had immense admiration for her work, and saw very little need to intervene in the development of her performance, since he almost always agreed with her decisions. This approach, however, simply added to Hagen's disrespect for him: 'The best thing Schneider did is that he didn't interfere', she told critic Susan Spector: 'He didn't help. He didn't have any ideas, so obviously I had ideas because he never told me one word' (Spector 1990: 194). Schneider's bowing to Hagen's will also resulted – more importantly – in a premiere production in which the play was perceived as revolving around Martha's dynamic presence, with the other characters acting as foils for her onslaughts. This is not to say that the other actors were ridden over roughshod: as Arthur Hill notes, 'she could be a steam-roller, I imagine, if she feels she's in company where somebody needs to be steam-rolled. [But] George Grizzard and I were certainly not folks who were going to be steam-rolled. I think she knew that' (Spector 1990: 195). Yet the performance that emerged was a long way from the four-way ensemble piece which *Virginia Woolf* has become in other incarnations. All the actors realised their parts powerfully, but Uta Hagen, the one genuine 'star' of the production, was indisputably the focus of attention.



2. George Grizzard, Uta Hagen, Arthur Hill in a confrontational moment from the 1962 production. Note the exact same image reappears with equivalent actors in the film version.

For his part, Albee himself remained largely at a distance from the day-to-day wrangles of rehearsals, preferring to allow Schneider to get on with things without feeling the author was breathing down his neck. By his own admission, Albee was at this stage a relative novice with regards to the production process, and indeed on that level felt himself to be learning from Schneider. He too preferred to see how the piece would develop organically, without imposing solutions in advance, although this only added further to Hagen's frustrations: 'I asked Edward, "How do you want to use the child?" and he said "I don't care. However you want."' My questions remained totally unanswered' (Spector 1990: 188). Albee went into the theatre to see rough versions of each act when they had been mapped out, but made very few comments on what he saw. His intervention was felt mostly through the appearance of various judicious cuts in the text, which reduced the play's running time by an estimated fifteen minutes. In keeping with Barr and Wilder's playwright-first policy, nobody had required these cuts from him, despite the play's unusual length.



3. Uta Hagen and Arthur Hill as George and Martha in the 1962 Broadway premiere, with Melinda Dillon as Honey and George Grizzard as Nick.

However, hearing the text played aloud and discussed among the cast clearly helped him arrive at some decisions on fine-tuning. One or two of his changes, moreover, actually saved him some blushes. In the rehearsal script, for example, both George and Nick refer to ‘chromozones’ without further comment. Someone apparently corrected Albee on his scientific terms, and he chose to make his own error a feature of the text by having Nick point out to George that the word is ‘chromosomes’.

Among Albee’s more significant changes were the excision of George’s farewell speech to Nick and Honey at the end of Act III, which, as Christopher Bigsby observes, was ‘a redundant summary of character and action [which] was deleted with some purpose and effect’ (Bigsby 1984: 272). Much the same was also true of the biggest cut made during rehearsals: nine pages of dialogue between George and Honey were removed from the beginning of Act III, so that the action moved straight into Martha’s ‘daddy white mouse’ monologue. The abandoned scene, which had somewhat laboriously revealed Honey’s decision to blank out her memory of events

at the end of Act II, over-emphasised both her apparent vacuousness and George's cruel dismissiveness. It was effectively substituted for by the simple addition of a few, more pointed, lines from Honey to George after her re-entry later in the act: 'I've decided I don't remember anything . . . and you don't remember anything, either' (124).

Albee's changes to the dialogue were complemented by his decision to tone down some of his more explicit stage directions. It is unclear whether these changes resulted from a discomfort with seeing them acted out, from objections raised by cast and director (several of whom expressed reservations about the extent to which the script dictated stage action as well as dialogue), or from a degree of self-censorship motivated by the imminence of the Broadway premiere. Whatever the cause, however, the final, published script lacks a number of directions which appear in the rehearsal script. For example, both George and Martha's 'blue games for the guests' (Act I) and Martha's attempted seduction of Nick were originally described in much more graphic physical detail, complete with descriptions of male hands cupping breasts and even being inserted into Martha's cleavage. Similarly, Albee elected to delete the third-act directions suggesting that George should physically brutalise Martha in preparation for the final game of 'bringing up baby' – by pulling her hair, manhandling her head and slapping her face. One can well imagine Hagen raising objections to such treatment, but the deletion of these directions was also in line with Albee's general tendency – in his fine-tuning of the script – to weed out those words and actions which seemed casually excessive in their violence rather than pointedly forceful. The play is much better for these adjustments.

PREMIERE PERFORMANCES

Albee made further minor changes during the ten preview performances, and Schneider also tightened up the staging somewhat. However, the show that eventually appeared before the opening night

audience was substantially the same one that the first preview audience had seen. As the decision to forgo the usual, pre-Broadway try-outs in New England indicates, there was never any intention of revising the play for the satisfaction of commercial audiences. The producers did not have the money to budget for such a tour anyway, and since regional audiences were thought to be even less open-minded than Broadway audiences, there was no benefit to be gained from going out of town. Instead, the ten previews were scheduled to allow the performers to 'break the play in' before sympathetic spectators: indeed the first five drew their audiences, by invitation only, from the local theatrical community. This was another calculated risk on the part of the producers: as Richard Barr notes, it was precedent-breaking because 'usually you don't want [other actors] anywhere near your show until it's opened and the critics have had their say' (McNally 1982: 9). In this instance, however, it was felt that if anybody was likely to appreciate the special qualities of the play at first sight, it would be other theatre people. Sure enough, the preview audiences began to talk up the production *before* the critics had had their chance to praise or damn it. About four thousand invited guests witnessed the first five performances, and by the time that the five open-access previews gave the general public a first glimpse of the play, word-of-mouth praise and Billy Rose's 'advertisements for secretaries' had ensured that there was barely a ticket to be had, despite the almost complete absence of advance sales a few days previously. The success of Barr and Wilder's preview ploy meant that previews became a regularly-used alternative to try-out tours during the 1960s. As critic Martin Gottfried noted in his 1967 book *A Theater Divided*, 'previews as we know them today were invented' through the precedent set by *Virginia Woolf*. The practice had reintroduced 'a theater for playgoers who were willing to gamble along with the producer', who would opt to see a play at a cheaper rate before they had been told what to think about it. These audiences, Gottfried notes, 'were nowhere to be seen once a production opened. They were new, unrecognized, strange. They were the lost excitement of a living theater' (Gottfried 1967: 53).