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Introduction: The man who had three lives

It is now more than forty years since Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* – the play for which he is still best known – gave him his first Broadway hit and propelled him into the front rank of American playwrights. Today, he is frequently listed alongside Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller as one of the nation's great (white, male) dramatists of the twentieth century. Other candidates for that shortlist have appeared since (David Mamet, perhaps Sam Shepard, Tony Kushner), but these writers, operating primarily in the decentered, post-1960s world of off-Broadway and regional theatre, have never been Broadway mainstays in the way their predecessors were. Thus Albee, who hit Broadway just before Broadway's preeminence as a launching pad for serious drama began seriously to be questioned, has for many years tended to be seen as “the last of the line,” and, consequently, as a figure not only of the establishment, but also of the past. In a fragmented, postmodern theatre culture full of young pretenders and competing, multicultural voices, it is all too easy to forget that the somewhat patrician figure of Edward Albee was himself once a controversial young iconoclast, and indeed that, throughout his long career, he has consistently refused to do what is expected of him – and has the sling and arrow scars to prove it.

Albee's somewhat paradoxical position in American culture was perhaps summed up by the Kennedy Center's honors ceremony of 1996, at which he was lauded by (the perhaps equally paradoxical) President Clinton: “Tonight our nation – born in rebellion – pays tribute to you, Edward Albee. In your rebellion, the American theatre was reborn.”¹ Still sufficient of a rebel to become the first playwright to provide a sympathetic treatment of bestiality on the Broadway stage – with 2002's *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* – Albee seems to delight, even now, in prodding and unsettling conventional sensibilities, often with a kind of vaudevillian glee. And yet he is also a deeply serious, highly erudite figure, very much a member of the literary establishment. He is, in short, a writer of many faces, many moods, and any

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assessment of Albee's fascinating, diverse body of plays should, perhaps, be similarly multifaceted. In assembling perspectives from a wide variety of critics, of different ages and scholarly backgrounds, this collection seeks to be open-ended rather than conclusive in its assessments. The views of the contributors, as the old line goes, do not necessarily represent those of the editor – and rightly so.

Nevertheless, in introducing this book, it is perhaps useful to provide a concise mapping of Albee's career, against which to contextualize subsequent chapters. That career, it seems to me, can be divided roughly into three periods – early, middle, and (if he will forgive me) late – much as, in his 1991 play *Three Tall Women*, Albee refracts the depiction of a woman's life into three “ages.”

Albee's early career was characterized by a long apprenticeship of trial-and-error experimentation, followed by a sudden, almost meteoric rise to success and notoriety. During his twenties, after having decisively walked out on his wealthy, adoptive parents, he lived inconspicuously among the artists and bohemians of New York's Greenwich Village. He tried his hand at several different genres and styles of playwriting – from the three-act naturalism-cum-melodrama of *The City of People* (1949), to the meta-physical parable format of *The Making of a Saint* (1953–54). Written in rigidly metered rhyming couplets and dedicated to Thornton Wilder (whose *Pullman Car Hiawatha* seems to have been a key influence), the latter depicts a group of passengers waiting at the station for the train of life. Like his other early manuscripts (now held in the Albee archive of New York Public Library's Billy Rose Theatre Collection), *Making of a Saint* seems at once entirely untypical of Albee's later work, and yet haunted by his now familiar existential preoccupations: will one choose to *take* the train of life, or remain seated in the delusory security of the station? Similarly, in *The Invalid* (1952), a young man of twenty-four (Albee's own age, at that point) is faced with the choice between “participating” and “not participating,” and opts for the “extraordinary lethargy” of the latter – much as Tobias in *A Delicate Balance* or Charlie in *Seascape* were to do – and so becomes the canceled-out figure of the title (invalid; in-valid). In *The City of People*, the young Alan attempts to make the opposite choice, by accepting the love of a woman, Anna, who might help him to escape the rarefied, intellectual ivory-tower environment in which he has been raised by his professorial father, and to face the daunting yet thrilling urban sprawl of the title – and in doing so, to replace the comfortingly abstract constructions of words and ideas with *real* experience. Alan, though, prefiguring other Albee children, was born “perfect but lame,” and – as the cherished, symbolic substitute for his now-dead mother – has always been protected and guarded jealously by his father

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George. Their relationship, Anna suggests, has a “delicate balance” that she is afraid to tamper with: will Alan cope with having to confront the world at large?

With the benefit of hindsight, these early manuscripts seem redolent with “Albee-esque” concerns, but they are also – as the playwright himself would be the first to acknowledge – both derivative and unwieldy. It was not until 1958, at age thirty, that Albee finally found his own voice as a dramatist, when he sat down to write *The Zoo Story* – the one-act play that was to make his name. Drawing on the relative poverty of his own life at the time, and on his experiences while working in “the city of people” as a Western Union telegram delivery boy, Albee created the menacing, world-weary, but highly articulate character of Jerry, to give unfettered expression to his sharply critical view of the conventional, bourgeois world embodied by Peter. Albee later described the experience of writing the play as a kind of revelation for him; it was the first time he felt as if the characters’ language and rhythms were simply flowing, unforced, from his subconscious. *The Zoo Story* also proved a revelation in the context of the American theatre of the time, embodying onstage the restless, youthful energy of the disenfranchised “Beat” generation, as well as providing a homegrown response to the recent innovations of European “absurdist” playwrights such as Samuel Beckett (whose *Krapp’s Last Tape* Albee’s play was initially paired with in double bill).

Premiering in Greenwich Village in January 1960, in the same Provincetown Playhouse that had launched Eugene O’Neill’s career in the 1910s, *The Zoo Story* single-handedly transformed New York’s off-Broadway theatre scene into a viable arena for the discovery and development of new American playwrights. Thanks to a ruling by Actors’ Equity, producers at small alternative theatres had been able, since the start of the 1950s, to mount fully professional productions on a lower wage-scale than Broadway, but they had nevertheless tended to “play safe” during that decade. Off-Broadway theatre in the 1950s was largely characterized by revivals of the kind of classic plays that were no longer commercially viable on Broadway itself. *The Zoo Story*, however, with its compelling and controversial dialogue, and its affordably low-budget “two men and a park bench” minimalism, drew the attention of critics, producers, and public alike to the regenerative potential of off-Broadway as a launch-site for new playwrighting voices. Albee became chief advocate and poster boy for this new “movement,” writing a string of further one-acts over the next couple of years, and declaring in the *New York Times* that the Broadway theatre, driven primarily by commercial concerns, “panders to the public need for self-congratulation and reassurance, and presents a false picture of ourselves to ourselves . . . For it is a lazy public that produces a slothful and irresponsible theatre.”²

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Given such provocations, it is hardly surprising that Albee's own first Broadway production, with his first multi-act play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), attracted even more interest and controversy than had his previous work. Fusing domestic realism with the cyclical verbal interplay and mysterious uncertainties characteristic of the so-called "theatre of the absurd," this play attracted virulent hostility from some critics, and qualified, rather condescending praise from others. To the surprise of many, it also proved instantly popular with audiences. This brutal, hilarious play – depicting the drunken, late-night confrontation of college professor George and his wife Martha, enacted for the benefit of their unsuspecting guests – ran on Broadway for two years, and later spawned a highly successful movie version. With some of the profits from the show, Albee and his producers Richard Barr and Clinton Wilder established the Albarwild Playwrights' Unit at the Village South Theatre in Greenwich Village, where new one-act plays by promising writers were staged, free of charge, to invited audiences every weekend. Surviving from 1963 to 1971, the Unit brought professional standards to the Village's burgeoning "off-off-Broadway" scene, and provided a testing-ground for a generation of young playwrights whose careers were partially inspired by Albee's example. Writers as diverse as Amiri Baraka, Adrienne Kennedy, Lanford Wilson, John Guare, and Sam Shepard all continue to acknowledge a profound debt to him.

Albee's problem in the mid-1960s, however, was knowing how to sustain and develop his own writing career, now that he had reached the lofty heights of Broadway success. Determined to keep experimenting with form and content, he resisted the temptation to settle into a predictable, easily marketed dramatic style. One option might have been to retreat to the relative safety of smaller-scale, off-Broadway theatre, but Albee, Barr, and Wilder believed that – having established a foothold on the Great White Way – it was their responsibility to keep up the challenge to its complacency; to insist that popular accessibility and aesthetic integrity were not necessarily inimical. The afterglow of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* guaranteed them a Broadway honeymoon of sorts. Albee's delicate adaptation of Carson McCullers's novella *The Ballad of the Sad Café* was respectfully received in 1963, running for a healthy (if not rosy) 123 performances, and in the following year his next original play, *Tiny Alice*, became the talking-point of the season. This complex puzzle-box of a play, a meditation on the uncertain relationships between religion, sexuality, and reality itself, might have been ridiculed and dismissed outright had it appeared at a later stage of Albee's career, but post-*Virginia Woolf* it generated sufficient intrigued, infuriated debate among audiences to do decent business.

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By January 1966, however, when Albee's second novel adaptation, based on James Purdy's *Malcolm*, closed on Broadway inside a week, after receiving universally dismissive reviews, it was clear that the honeymoon was over. Undramatic and meandering, *Malcolm* was, most agree, a serious miscalculation on Albee's part. With hindsight, it can also be seen as marking the beginning of the long middle period of his career. Over the next decade and a half, Albee's star went into decline with critics and public alike, as show after show closed on Broadway after runs that were modest at best. Part of the problem was that critics tended to compare every new play unfavorably to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (even though the original reviews for that piece had themselves been distinctly mixed). Beyond that, though, Albee was doing what he had always done, following his creative nose wherever it led – which was often into distinctly uncommercial territory. Some of his work proved too formalistic or intellectually oriented to be popularly appealing (as with 1968's *Box-Mao-Box* triptych, in which static, disconnected figures talked at cross-purposes), some of it too bleak or depressing (as with the starkly beautiful *All Over*, from 1971, in which a dying man's family wait for him to expire). As if in prophetic anticipation of troubles to come, Albee wrote in a June 1965 letter to his former lover and mentor William Flanagan that he felt caught

twixt the devil of compromising for public acceptance (V. Woolfs don't come along every day, with their acceptance coming from only partly the right reasons) and the deep blue sea of writing good plays as one wants to write them, having them done well, *be* good plays, and yet have them rejected, thereby becoming a "failure" because one does not have continuing public and critical "success."³

There were, of course, occasional silver linings to the grey cloud that Albee now found himself under – most notably the two Pulitzer Prizes that he won for *A Delicate Balance* (1966) and *Seascape* (1975). Even these plays, however, had closed after disappointing Broadway runs (the latter survived for just sixty-five performances), and endured largely negative reviews. Indeed, when *A Delicate Balance* won the Pulitzer, there were those who suggested that this was merely in belated recognition of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which had controversially been denied the prize when the award scheme's board of trustees had overturned the recommendation of their drama panel. Others argued, still more cynically, that Albee had created a play that was deliberately similar to *Virginia Woolf*, in a bid to recapture popular and critical attention. This depiction of an alcohol-soaked, upper-middle-class family teetering on the brink of terminal implosion is, in fact, far more muted and restrained in tone than its biting, spitting

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predecessor – more Chekhovian lament than Strindbergian dance of death. The play’s relatively uncommercial status was underlined by Walter Kerr’s *New York Times* review, which dismissed it as a “void in which the characters live and have their non-being.”⁴ Conversely, though, *Village Voice* critic Michael Smith – a champion of off- and off-off-Broadway theatre – regarded *A Delicate Balance*’s box-set naturalism and socially privileged characters as embodying the values of Broadway, “which I despise.”⁵ Even today, the real worth of *A Delicate Balance* remains hotly disputed: among contributors to this volume, for example, Thomas Adler rates it as “the pivotal American drama of the second half of the twentieth century,” while Ruby Cohn sees it as merely “diluted *Virginia Woolf*.”

Among Albee’s Pulitzer winners, *Seascape* might more plausibly be accused of being shaped to fit commercial requirements. The first of Albee’s plays to undergo “out-of-town try-outs” on its way to Broadway, it was also the first to be substantially revised during rehearsals, as Albee cut his convoluted three-act script drastically down to just two. The resulting play, while playfully linking personal growth to the Darwinian theory of evolution, works primarily as a kind of light comedy of mismatched manners – as two humans and two giant lizards meet on a beach and compare notes on existence. The major surgery to which Albee subjected *Seascape* seems indicative of the pressure he was under at the time: after years of critical hostility, his confidence in his own abilities seems to have been severely dented. His once prolific creativity had also tailed off markedly since the late 1960s. After presenting a new Broadway show every year for seven years (1962 to 1968), he completed only two during the next decade – *Seascape* and *All Over*. From 1968 he also dispensed with the services of his ever-present but much-criticized director, Alan Schneider. Albee elected to direct the premiere of *Seascape* himself.

Throughout the 1970s Albee also struggled with alcoholism, but while his “drying out” toward the end of the decade seems to have facilitated a new burst of creativity – with three new plays appearing in the four years at the start of the 1980s – the critical responses to his work proved more hostile than ever. *The Lady from Dubuque* (1980), *Lolita* (1981, adapted from Nabokov’s novel), and *The Man Who Had Three Arms* (1983) were all assaulted with a ferocity out of all proportion to whatever crimes against taste or dramaturgy they may have committed. Albee, it seemed, was now yesterday’s man, a remnant of the 1960s completely out of place in the new, Reaganite 1980s. But if Broadway had lost patience with Albee, the same may have been true in reverse. *The Man Who Had Three Arms*, in which a demented circuit lecturer rails against his audience (as “played” by the actual theatre audience), was a brutally scathing, deliberately “tasteless” attack on complacent, middlebrow values. Albee must surely have known

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that it was never going to run for long on Broadway (even Richard Barr refused to back it as producer), but he defiantly insisted on having *The Man Who* mounted there anyway. Biographer Mel Gussow reports that, on the morning the reviews came out, Albee “bought a copy of the *Times* in Times Square, read the deadly notice, and said to [his partner] Jonathan Thomas, ‘Oh well. That’s that. Let’s go home.’”⁶

It was nearly two decades before another new Albee play premiered on Broadway. The 1980s marked the beginning of Albee’s third career phase, during which he had, in effect, to start again from scratch, gradually rebuilding a life and reputation for himself. Regarded as a failed has-been in the New York theatre world, Albee decided to go where he was wanted, and began accepting invitations from colleges and universities to speak, to teach, and to direct plays. He developed, for example, a longstanding relationship with the University of Houston, in Texas, where he still regularly teaches a spring-semester playwriting class – thus continuing his commitment to mentoring new writing talent. Yet Albee’s own writing benefited, too, from this period in the theatrical “wilderness.” Various new plays were written to commission for small low-profile theatres, including *Finding the Sun* (1983) for the University of Northern Colorado, *Marriage Play* (1987) for the English Theatre in Vienna, Austria, and *Fragments* (1993) for the Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati. At first glance, these relatively short pieces might also seem fairly insubstantial: indeed, *Fragments* is subtitled “A Sit-Around,” in self-deprecating recognition of that fact that the characters simply sit around and talk, without apparent purpose or “through-line.” Yet closer examination of these plays reveals all kinds of intriguing undercurrents in mood and characterization, as well as some ingenious formal games with scene structures. Released from the pressure of being a “major American playwright,” writing “major plays” for Broadway, Albee seems to have relished the chance to return to writing unassuming “chamber pieces” for more intimate spaces, just as he had with *Listening* and *Counting the Ways* – two companion one-acts that first appeared together in 1977 at the Hartford Stage Company, in Connecticut.

After ten years as *persona non grata* in New York, Albee’s reputation among audiences and critics there began to be rehabilitated in 1993, when the nonprofit Signature Theatre Company launched an entire season dedicated to limited-run productions of Albee’s shorter, lesser-known plays: a reappraisal was in the offing. The following year, Albee’s *Three Tall Women* – first seen in Viennese obscurity in 1991 – opened off-Broadway and won him his most favorable notices in decades, as well as a third Pulitzer Prize. Frequently over the years, Albee’s work had been accused of seeming too coldly intellectual or unfeeling, but *Three Tall Women* shattered that stereotype,

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by providing a strangely affectionate portrait of an elderly, dying woman, modeled directly on Albee's recently deceased mother, at three stages of her life. The play eschews sentimentality, in favor of a warts-and-all depiction of a cantankerous, bigoted old woman, viewed nonjudgmentally but from a certain wryly amused distance. With this moving, accessible character study – written with the same kind of concise, unassuming directness that characterizes much of his later work – Albee deservedly found himself with an unexpected hit on his hands. *Three Tall Women* played at the 400-seat Promenade Theatre for 582 performances – a run exceeded in length by only one previous Albee play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Three Tall Women was swiftly followed by acclaimed revivals of *A Delicate Balance*, both on Broadway and in London's West End, thereby completing Albee's rehabilitation. Suddenly he was being showered with awards and honors, and feted as the respected elder statesman of the American theatre. This late career revival was something that had eluded Tennessee Williams, who had died in 1983 after twenty years of critical opprobrium, and even Eugene O'Neill, whose late great works were only fully appreciated after his death. Albee, however, has remained in no doubt as to the fickleness of fashion and popularity, and has continued to do things his own way. Since the mid-1990s he has completed two new plays that are as distinctive and original as anything he had written previously. *The Play About the Baby*, aptly described by *Newsday* as “an exhilarating, wicked, devastating piece of emotional terrorism,” depicts the theft and disappearance of a young couple's infant as a kind of savage vaudeville routine.⁷ Although its premiere at London's Almeida Theatre in 1998 was received coolly by reviewers, it went on to play a very healthy run off-Broadway in 2001, and – as the commentaries in this volume make clear – is already coming to be regarded as one of his most important plays.

Baby's disorientating combination of bouncing wit and bleakly tragic vision also prefigured *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* Opening on Broadway in 2002, this extraordinary piece about a prize-winning architect helplessly smitten with a farmyard animal careers from comedy-of-manners into a titanic marital confrontation bloodier than anything in the Albee canon. Prompting a critical controversy (as opposed to dismissive ridicule) comparable to that accorded to *Tiny Alice* in 1964, *The Goat* ran for a year, won a Tony award, and was shortlisted for yet another Pulitzer Prize. Judging by current form, Albee's “late” career phase may yet turn out to be his richest and most productive, just as was O'Neill's. In 2004, as if to demonstrate his having come full circle, back to the kind of acclaim he received early in his career, Albee completed a new companion piece for *The Zoo Story*, titled

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Homelife: yet another marital encounter, this one charts Peter's day with his wife Ann, immediately prior to his fateful meeting with Jerry in Central Park.

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The essays in this collection are arranged in a broadly chronological order, in relation to the plays they discuss. Thus, for example, the first piece, Philip Kolin's essay on Albee's early one-acts, is followed by Matthew Roudané's on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* These pieces both provide very persuasive variations on the traditional readings of these plays – with Kolin emphasizing in particular the aspects of social commentary and angry satire apparent in the breakthrough works, and Roudané focusing more on the interpersonal dimensions of *Virginia Woolf*, which of course also border on the metaphysical, thanks to George and Martha's preoccupation with questions of truth and illusion. Albee's unusual ability to fuse social relevance with existential profundity has, of course, been one of the defining features of his work, and these first two essays establish this clearly.

The third essay changes gear somewhat, with John Clum offering a rather more skeptical perspective on Albee's next two original plays, *Tiny Alice* and *A Delicate Balance*. Treating them both as portraits of marriages (an unusual move in the case of the former), Clum emphasizes – like Roudané – the ways in which the leading characters deceive themselves and each other, to avoid confronting the rot in their relationships. Yet where Roudané, in relation to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, sees these bleaker aspects of the work as preparing the way for an essentially affirmative outcome, Clum's reading is somewhat darker, suggesting that Albee's relationships seem ruled more by entropy than renewal. He pursues this, also, through an analysis of the dysfunctional couples portrayed in Albee's later play *Finding the Sun* – which features the playwright's only depiction of a homosexual relationship, alongside heterosexual ones. Clum asks some difficult questions of Albee, but this essay's juxtaposition with the next one, by Thomas Adler, puts yet another spin on the discussion. Adler, also discussing *A Delicate Balance*, but this time in relation to Albee's other, later Pulitzer Prize winners, *Seascape* and *Three Tall Women*, argues that it is precisely in Albee's ability to explore the darker corners of the human heart that his greatness lies. Each of the Pulitzer plays explores the potential for personal growth and evolution, he argues, but it is in *A Delicate Balance*'s depiction of a family *refusing* that dangerous challenge, and insisting on maintaining a numbed equilibrium, that the most painful truths are to be found.

Albee's ongoing concern with that most significant relationship of all – between one's life choices and the inevitability of one's death – is given

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particular focus in Brenda Murphy's essay on "Albee's Threnodies." Here she charts the evolution of Albee's plays on death and dying – from *All Over* through *The Lady from Dubuque* to, again, *Three Tall Women* – demonstrating a gradual shift of concern from the disturbing impact of a death on those living, to the release and reflection that may be brought to the one about to die. According to this reading, *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, which directly preceded *All Over*, represent Albee's most abstract and coolly distanced treatment of entropy and death – whereas *Three Tall Women* is his most personal and involved. Intriguingly, though, in the next essay, by Gerry McCarthy, *Box* and *Mao* are viewed altogether differently – as the purest expression of Albee's deeply *felt* concern for the ways in which language, in its tones, rhythms, and interplay, as much as its explicit content, can conjure emotional textures akin to those created by music, in the mind of the attentive listener. McCarthy goes on to offer a fascinating argument about Albee's insistence on creating plays which exist primarily in the present, onstage (much as the performance of music does), rather than in some imagined, fictional elsewhere. The "realism" of Albee's plays, he suggests, lies less in the Method-style psychological realism of "believable characters" doing "believable things" (a realism that Albee, early in his career, ridiculed as "really and truly The Theatre of the Absurd"⁸) than in the *reality* of thought and feeling being conjured in the mind of the spectator as the play progresses, with all its immediate, theatrical twists and turns. Albee's recent *The Play About the Baby* is, for McCarthy, an exemplary instance of this approach.

McCarthy's essay also heralds something of a shift of emphasis in the collection as a whole. If the essays in the first half of the book tend to focus on Albee's major themes and concerns, often from a primarily "literary" perspective, most of those in the latter half view him more explicitly as a theatremaker. My own essay on Albee's "monster children" explores his ingenious theatricalization of novels such as *Lolita* and *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, while also focusing attention on *The Man Who Had Three Arms* – arguably his most critically despised play, but one which I see as his most explicit attempt to challenge and shake up the complacency of theatre audiences, by exploiting the very immediacy apprehended by McCarthy. Christopher Bigsby follows this up with a survey of some of the lesser-known plays written by Albee during the 1980s and 1990s, after *The Man Who* had finally put paid to his career as a Broadway playwright. Bigsby echoes the thematic concerns of previous essays by emphasizing Albee's ongoing preoccupation with the need to *live* life, rather than sleep through it, but he also echoes McCarthy in demonstrating that these concerns have, of late, been