The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee

Edward Albee, perhaps best known for his acclaimed and infamous 1960s drama *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, is one of America’s greatest living playwrights. Now in his seventies, he is still writing challenging, award-winning dramas. This collection of new essays on Albee, which includes contributions from the leading commentators on Albee’s work, brings fresh critical insights to bear by exploring the full scope of the playwright’s career, from his 1959 breakthrough with *The Zoo Story* to his most recent Broadway success, *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* (2002). The contributors include scholars of both theatre and English literature, and the essays thus consider the plays both as literary texts and as performed drama. The collection considers a number of Albee’s lesser-known and neglected works, provides a comprehensive introduction and overview, and includes an exclusive, original interview with Mr. Albee, on topics spanning his whole career.
THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO EDWARD ALBEE

EDITED BY

STEPHEN BOTTOMS
All my plays are about people missing the boat, closing down too young, coming to the end of their lives with regret at things not done, as opposed to things done. I find that most people spend too much time living as if they’re never going to die. They skid through their lives. Sleep through them sometimes. Anyway, there are only two things to write about – life and death.

Edward Albee, interviewed in 1991

Don’t forget the laughs and slapstick so essential to the success of any of my plays.

Albee to the cast of A Delicate Balance, 1967
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**MATTHEW ROUDANÉ** is Professor and Chair of the Department of English at Georgia State University in Atlanta. He has written two books on Albee: *Understanding Edward Albee (1987)* and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?: Necessary Fictions, Terrifying Realities (1990)*, and is the editor of both *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams (1997)* and *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard (2002)*. His other books include *Conversations with Arthur Miller (1987)*, *Public Issues, Private Tensions: Contemporary American Drama (1993)*, and *Approaches to Teaching Miller’s Death of a Salesman (1995)*. Roudané is editor of the *South Atlantic Review* and served as dramaturge for 7 Stages Theatre in Atlanta, where he worked with Joseph Chaikin, who directed Albee’s *A Delicate Balance* in 2002. As a Fulbright scholar, he taught American drama at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain, in 2004.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

I would like to express my thanks to all the contributors to this book – for their cooperation in all things, and for their prompt responses to my inquiries. Thanks to them, my first experience of editing a collection has proved a less onerous task than I had imagined it might be. I am especially grateful to Matthew Roudané, for his advice in the early stage of approaching contributors, and to Tom Adler, for graciously consenting to act as “editor” on my own chapter for this collection – and in doing so, offering such useful feedback, and not asking for cuts! I would also like to thank Richard Bapty, at Glasgow University Library, for his advice on all things bibliographic, and Vicki Cooper, my ever-enthusiastic commissioning editor at Cambridge University Press.

Special thanks are due to Edward Albee himself, for consenting to be interviewed for this collection, for his swift approval of the resulting transcript, for permission to consult his closed archive at the Billy Rose Theatre Collection of New York Public Library, and for his kind permission to reproduce brief quotations from the unpublished manuscript of his play *Occupant*, in the essays by Ruby Cohn and Christopher Bigsby. I am also very grateful to Mr. Albee’s assistant, Jakob Holder, for his unstinting help in facilitating all this.
NOTES ON THE TEXT

Edward Albee’s plays frequently use three-dotted ellipses . . . to suggest brief pauses, or as indications of how an actor is to pace a speech. Since quotations including such ellipses feature throughout the essays in this collection, I have chosen to use square-bracketed ellipses [ . . . ] as an indicator of those instances where the author of the chapter has abbreviated the quotation itself. Albee’s own dots remain unbracketed, and thus clearly distinguishable. To avoid unnecessarily cluttering the text, however, ellipses in quotations from sources other than Albee’s plays are indicated with dots but not brackets, as is conventional.

Dates attributed to Albee’s plays indicate the year of first performance, rather than of composition or publication, unless the text clearly indicates otherwise (for example, in the case of an unperformed play).
1928  Born March 12 in Washington D.C. to Louise Harvey. Adopted by Reed and Frances Albee at two weeks of age. Raised by this wealthy family, inheritors of fortune made by Keith-Albee chain of vaudeville theatres.

1939  Leaves Rye County day school.

1940  Goes to Lawrenceville boarding school, New Jersey.

1943  Expelled from Lawrenceville. Enrolls at Valley Forge Military Academy, Pennsylvania.

1944  Expelled from Valley Forge. Enrolls at Choate School, Connecticut.


1947  Works for WYNC radio.


1951  Writes Ye Watchers and Ye Lonely Ones, a play in three scenes, dealing with struggles of four gay men (unpublished, unproduced).

1952  Moves in with composer William Flanagan, who becomes an important mentor figure.

1953  Meets Thornton Wilder, who encourages Albee to write plays. Writes The Making of a Saint, a verse play set in a railroad station, and dedicates it to Wilder (unpublished, unproduced). (Other unpublished plays and play fragments from the 1950s include The Invalid, The Ice Age, An End to Summer, The Dispossessed, and others.)

1955  Begins work as telegram delivery boy for Western Union.
CHRONOLOGY

1958 Writes The Zoo Story. Stops work with Western Union.

1959 September: The Zoo Story premieres in German, in translation by Pinkas Braun, at Berlin's Schiller Theater Werkstadt, in double bill with Samuel Beckett's Krapp's Last Tape.

1960 January: The Zoo Story receives American premiere at the off-Broadway Provincetown Playhouse. Directed by Milton Katselas, it is again paired with Krapp's Last Tape. In April The Death of Bessie Smith premieres in Berlin at the Schlosspark Theater, and The Sandbox at the Jazz Gallery in New York. FAM and YAM premieres in Westport, Connecticut, in August.

1961 January: The American Dream premieres in New York at the York Playhouse, with Sudie Bond as Grandma. Initially in double bill with Albee's adaptation of Melville's short story Bartleby (written as libretto for William Flanagan's operatic score), but Bartleby is swiftly closed and replaced in March by American premiere of The Death of Bessie Smith. Dream and Bessie both directed by Alan Schneider.

1962 October: Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? premieres on Broadway at the Billy Rose Theatre. Directed by Alan Schneider, with Uta Hagen as Martha and Arthur Hill as George. Critical response is mixed, and Albee is controversially denied the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for 1962–63. However, production is an instant box-office hit and runs until 1964, when it transfers to London for British premiere, with stars intact.

1963 October: Albee's adaptation of Carson McCullers's novella The Ballad of the Sad Café premieres on Broadway at the Martin Beck Theatre. Directed by Alan Schneider, with Colleen Dewhurst as Miss Amelia. Also that fall, Albee and his producers, Richard Barr and Clinton Wilder, use some of profits from Virginia Woolf to establish the Playwrights' Unit at the Village South Theatre, providing a platform for untested new playwrights. Albee also makes first attempt at directing his own work, with a low-profile production of The Zoo Story in Pennsylvania.

1964 December: Tiny Alice premieres at the Billy Rose Theatre, prompting critical controversy. Directed by Alan Schneider, with John Gielgud as Brother Julian and Irene Worth as Miss Alice.

1965 British premiere of Tiny Alice staged in London by Royal Shakespeare Company. Albee is reconciled with adoptive mother after seventeen-year estrangement (father died in 1961, while Albee was incommunicado).
Chronology

1966 January: Albee’s adaptation of James Purdy’s novel *Malcolm* premieres on Broadway at the Schubert Theatre. Critically panned, it closes inside a week. In September *A Delicate Balance* opens at the Martin Beck Theatre, starring Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn, and goes on to win Pulitzer Prize. Both plays directed by Alan Schneider. Meanwhile, Warner Brothers premieres Mike Nichols’s film version of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, and Albee is brought in as script doctor on a musical adaptation of Truman Capote’s *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (closes in December during out-of-town try-outs).

1967 November: Albee’s “Americanization” of Giles Cooper’s play *Everything in the Garden* opens on Broadway at the Plymouth Theatre, directed by Peter Glenville, with Barbara Bel Geddes and Barry Nelson.

1968 September: following March premiere at Buffalo’s Studio Arena, *Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* open on Broadway at the Billy Rose Theatre, in repertory with other Albee shorts. Directed by Alan Schneider.


1972 British premiere of *All Over* staged in London by Royal Shakespeare Company.

1973 American Film Theater releases film version of *A Delicate Balance*, directed by Tony Richardson, with Katharine Hepburn and Paul Scofield.


CHRONOLOGY

1980 January: *The Lady from Dubuque* premieres on Broadway at the Morosco Theatre, directed by Alan Schneider. Irene Worth takes the title role. It closes after twelve performances.

1981 March: Albee’s adaptation of Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Lolita* premieres on Broadway at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre, with Donald Sutherland as Humbert Humbert. Produced by Jerry Sherlock and directed by Frank Dunlop. Albee disowns the production, which closes swiftly. Also that year, he writes *Another Part of the Zoo*, a variation on the scenario of *The Zoo Story*, for showing at a private benefit function.

1983 April: *The Man Who Had Three Arms* opens on Broadway at Lyceum Theatre, following a try-out run in Chicago the previous fall. Directed by Albee, with Robert Drivas, it closes swiftly. In the following month, *Finding the Sun* premieres under Albee’s direction at the University of Northern Colorado, Greeley. Also staged at University of California at Irvine, in double bill with another new piece, *Walking*, which is subsequently abandoned by Albee.

1987 May: *Marriage Play* premieres at the English Theatre in Vienna, Austria, under Albee’s direction, with Kathleen Butler and Tom Klunis. American premiere comes five years later in 1992, at the Alley Theatre of Houston, again with Klunis, and with Albee directing.

1988 Named Distinguished Professor of Drama at the University of Houston, where Albee teaches annual playwriting class.

1989 Death of Albee’s adoptive mother, Frances Cotter Albee.

1991 June: *Three Tall Women* premieres at Vienna’s English Theatre, under Albee’s direction, with Myra Carter as A.

1992 April: *The Lorca Play* premieres under Albee’s direction at University of Houston but is subsequently withdrawn by the playwright. July: American premiere of *Three Tall Women* at River Arts Repertory, Woodstock, directed by Lawrence Sacharow.

1993 October: *Fragments* premieres at the Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati, Ohio, under Albee’s direction. The same fall, New York’s Signature Theatre Company opens season of works by Albee, which includes New York premieres of *Finding the Sun*, *Marriage Play* and *Fragments*.

1994 February: New York City premiere of Sacharow’s production of *Three Tall Women* at the off-Broadway Vineyard Theatre, with Myra Carter, Marian Seldes, and Jordan Baker. Transfers to Promenade Theatre, and wins Pulitzer Prize. Meanwhile, British premiere of *Three Tall Women* opens at the Theatre Royal,
chronology

Haymarket, before transfer to Wyndham’s Theatre in West End. Directed by Anthony Page, with Maggie Smith.

1996 April: Broadway revival of A Delicate Balance, directed by Gerald Gutierrez, with George Grizzard, Elaine Stritch, and Rosemary Harris. In the fall, in London, the Almeida Theatre’s acclaimed production of Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, with Diana Rigg and David Suchet, transfers to West End run at the Aldwych Theatre. Directed by Howard Davies.


1998 September: The Play About the Baby premieres in London at the Almeida Theatre. Directed by Howard Davies, with Frances de la Tour.


2002 March: The Goat, or Who is Sylvia? premieres on Broadway at the Golden Theatre, directed by David Esbjornson, with Bill Pullman and Mercedes Ruehl. Wins Tony award for best new play on Broadway. Meanwhile, projected premiere of Occupant, at the Signature Theatre Company, is cancelled owing to illness of its star, Anne Bancroft. (As of 2004, the play remains unproduced and unpublished.)

Figure 1. Edward Albee, circa 1962.