

Chapter 1

Life

In “*Exorcism – the Play O’Neill Tried to Destroy*” (2012), Edward Albee reflected on the start of his playwriting life.

The Zoo Story was my first play – and there it sits in all definitions: Edward Albee’s first play. And I think of it that way. The only possible complication here is that I wrote three or four plays *before* I wrote *The Zoo Story* – before I wrote my first play – before I wrote my Opus 1 ... In the case of *The Zoo Story*, it *was* a lot better than the stuff I wrote before it, rather as if my talent – such as it was – had matured enough to have it examined seriously. We separate our student work from our theoretically mature work, and we’re usually right.¹

Six decades later, Edward Albee betokened to the theater world a body of work whose impact animates as it energizes the American stage. Bringing to the stage, as he did, the ironist’s sense of balance, the absurdist’s sense of futility, and the poet’s sense of loss, Albee staged original, challenging productions that define selected public issues of the nation as reflected through the private anxieties of the individual. When he died on September 16, 2016 at the age of eighty-eight, we lost one of *the* great forces of the American stage.

The early work of Edward Albee began when he knew he wanted to be a writer when he was only six years old. He continued writing poetry and fiction for the next twenty years, without much success. Realizing his limitations as a poet, he once told me, “I never felt like a poet; I felt like someone who was writing poetry. I attempted the novel twice, in my teens, once when I was fourteen – a novel of some 1,800 pages – and again when I was sixteen, when my energies were either depleted or elsewhere, a second novel of only 900 pages.”² The form of the novel, like poetry, was not in accord with his artistic instincts.

The legendary playwright Thornton Wilder mentored, briefly, the twenty-something-year-old future playwright. As Albee remembers in a *New York Times* video (circa 2007), *The Last Word: Edward Albee*,

We went to a tiny little lake in New Hampshire, sunset, with a bottle of bourbon and my poetry. And as we discussed my poems, he kept

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throwing them, gently setting them in the water. And when we finished, all of my poems were floating in the water. He said, "I read all these poems – (pause) – have you ever thought about writing plays?" I don't think [Wilder] saw the incipient playwright because it's not there in the poetry. I think he was trying to save poetry from me!³

Wilder had a great influence on the young Albee, as Lincoln Konkle reminds us in *Thornton Wilder and the Puritan Narrative Tradition*. Moreover, Konkle suggests that "For Albee, Thornton Wilder was important to American drama attaining the status of literature (an achievement usually credited to Eugene O'Neill alone), as opposed to the tradition of commercial entertainment that was a legacy of the nineteenth-century American theater for which Albee continuously criticized theater owners, producers, and playwrights."⁴ Having tried his hand at poetry, the novel, and the short story, Albee thus attempted playwriting. He wrote *Aliqueen*, a three-act sex farce, when he was twelve and, in his teens, *Schism*, a one-act piece whose protagonist, Michael Joyce, becomes alienated from Catholicism and finally from his own sense of humanity. But it was not until the late 1950s that Albee found his *daemon* while composing *The Zoo Story*. "Something very, very interesting happened with the writing of that play. I didn't discover suddenly that I was a playwright; I discovered that I had *been* a playwright all my life, but didn't know it because I hadn't written plays ... And so when I wrote *The Zoo Story*, I was able to start practicing my 'nature' fully." With this play Albee quickly established himself as an adamant voice in contemporary American literature. *The Zoo Story*, Albee enjoyed recalling fifty-three years later,

had its world premiere in West Berlin, Germany, at the Werkstatt of the Schiller Theater on September 28, 1959 – in German! – on a double bill with Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*. (How fortunate can a young playwright be!)

The U.S. premiere was (in English!) on the same double bill at the Provincetown Playhouse in New York City's Greenwich Village on January 12, 1960. The evening was well reviewed and *The Zoo Story* ran for nearly three years.⁵

Thus Albee progressed from his "student work" to his "mature" work, and for six decades that maturation process has continued. An indefatigable writer, Albee was working on *Laying an Egg*, his newest play, at the time of his death.

Albee was abandoned by his natural parents soon after his birth on March 12, 1928 in Washington, D.C. Louise Harvey gave her son up for adoption two weeks later – after the father (name unknown) abandoned both the mother and the son. Albee would never meet his natural birth parents. Fortuitously,

millionaires Reed and Frances Albee of Larchmont, New York, took into their mansion the infant on March 30, and he was formally adopted on February 1, 1929. Mel Gussow in his excellent *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey* (1999), the only biography of the playwright, writes that “Albee later referred to himself as ‘tiny me, a little twig of a thing.’ ‘They bought me,’ he said. ‘They paid \$133.30,’ explaining that was the cost for ‘professional services.’”⁶ They named him Edward Franklin Albee III after his adoptive grandfather. Albee was thus taken in by a family with theatrical background, for his grandfather co-owned, with B. F. Keith, a profitable chain of vaudeville theaters. Indeed, it was the largest and most vibrant vaudeville circuit in the United States, and in 1928 Edward F. Albee II sold his shares of the theater to Joseph P. Kennedy, father of the thirty-fifth president of the United States. Albee’s new mother was nearly a foot taller than her husband and, apparently, was the domineering wife who remained emotionally distant and finally estranged from her newly adopted son. In the mid-1980s, Frances Albee, unbeknownst to her son, changed her will – and cut her son out of much of the inheritance. In any event, as a young man Albee found himself in a family bereft of love (except for his grandmother) and within the wealthy community of Westchester, New York. As a child he motored around in a Rolls Royce and the family sometimes traveled in their private train car to Florida. As he grew older, he met in his home such writers as Thornton Wilder and W. H. Auden.

A rebellious youth, Albee and school did not mix well. After being expelled from three preparatory schools and a military academy, Albee somehow managed to graduate from Choate, a Connecticut prep school. His two-year stay at Choate influenced his literary aspirations, for he received the kind of support that any young writer needs: his work – poems, short stories, essays, and one play – was accepted for publication in the *Choate Literary Magazine*. When Albee was in his eighties, he credited his adoptive parents with giving him what he called an excellent high school education because there he found teachers who encouraged him to pursue the creative arts. He attended Trinity College in Connecticut, lasting only one-and-a-half years before being asked to leave for not attending certain required classes and chapel. As Albee later reminisced, “I didn’t write *Catcher in the Rye* and *End as a Man*; I lived them.”⁷

After working at various odd jobs from 1948 to 1958, Albee felt increasingly desperate because he might not succeed in any profession. A modest trust fund, established by his grandmother, did not allay his uneasiness as a young man in his twenties in New York City. Apparently out of a sense of youthful *Angst*, then, Albee once again committed himself to serious playwriting; in a self-consoling effort he penned *The Zoo Story*, a “sort of a thirtieth birthday

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present to myself.”⁸ In 1981, Albee recalled the creative process he experienced while composing what would be his first public success:

One evening, twenty-three years ago, I borrowed a hundred sheets or so of poor quality yellow typing paper from the Western Union office where I was employed as a messenger boy, brought it back to my Greenwich Village walk-up and placed it on the rickety kitchen table next to my battered non-portable typewriter. Three weeks later, some fifty sheets of yellow paper had become a play, and I had become a playwright.⁹

When Albee launched his career, he was unknown. However, suddenly in the earlier 1960s Albee found himself in the very epicenter of the American theater world. Essentially an Off-Broadway dramatist, he found his plays being staged on the Great White Way. The theater critics often took issue with Albee; he often took issue with the critics. Controversy and Albee made good bedfellows. In any event, this relatively unknown newcomer found himself on the cover of *Newsweek Magazine*. He traveled to the Soviet Union with John Steinbeck, who had just won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1962. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) was a sensational hit on Broadway, while the Hollywood 1966 film version, starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, catapulted Albee into the midst of popular culture. Regardless of his growing fame, he always challenged his audiences. He was the fresh, new, exciting voice of American drama. But many felt that, after the Pulitzer Prize winning *A Delicate Balance* (1966), Albee's language, once the source of heated repartee, became more brittle and abstract. After *Seascape* (1975), which won him his second Pulitzer Prize, he fell out of favor with many critics and the theatergoing public. As Christopher Bigsby put it, “Edward Albee also visited the outer planets of the critical world for several decades.”¹⁰ *Three Tall Women* (1991), however, signaled his return, earning him his third Pulitzer, and since then Albee's reputation, it seems, has been restored. He ultimately survived the critical ambushes gracefully, never compromising artistic probity for commercially safe plays.

Not only had Albee become a playwright of the first rank in the early 1960s, but he also began a lifetime of helping, encouraging, promoting other, younger playwrights such as Terrence McNally, Sam Shepard, Amri Baraka, and Adrienne Kennedy. He influenced Tony Kushner, David Mamet, Paula Vogel, Suzanne Lori-Parks, and, among many others, Karen Finley. Surely such newer voices such as Lynn Nottage, Amy Herzog, Sarah Ruhl, Katori Hall, Francis Ya-Chu Cowhig, Tracy Letts, and David Lindsay-Abaire saw Albee as an inspiring model. In the 1980s and 1990s, he taught playwriting at the University of Houston and, afterwards, was a central participant in

the Last Frontier Theatre Conference, held each summer in Valdez, Alaska, a conference in which he challenged new playwrights to achieve dramatic excellence. Albee also increasingly directed his own plays well into the twenty-first century, exerting authorial control over his work and receiving praise for his directorial skills. Indeed, no major American dramatist has directed so many of his own original plays as has Albee. Further, he has worked the college circuit over the decades, lecturing throughout the country. Honorary doctorates, here and abroad, have been bestowed upon him. For decades he oversaw the William Flanagan Memorial Creative Persons Center, an artist colony in his second home in Montauk, New York. This was part of his lifetime commitment to supporting new writers and artists. Albee was also a skilled essayist, as evidenced in his collection *Stretching My Mind* (2005). Many of the essays are vigorous in their plain style and perspicuity.

Albee lived for most of his adult life in New York City (Tribeca) in a beautifully renovated warehouse filled with original art that he began purchasing in the 1960s. He was with his lifetime partner, sculptor Jonathan Thomas, from 1971 until his death in 2005. Once a notorious drinker, Albee had been on the wagon since the mid-1980s, and in 2012 he marveled how, after five years of grieving over the loss of Thomas, he turned an emotional corner for the better. In 2012 he underwent open heart surgery, an operation that left the then eighty-four-year-old understandably frailer, but as helpful, sharp, and opinionated as ever. Albee was pleased to learn that in 2013 a group of dedicated American drama scholars established the Edward Albee Society, housed at the Cherry Lane Theatre.

Some two dozen original plays, three Pulitzer Prizes, and numerous other dramatic accolades later, including an Obie Award for Sustained Achievement in the American Theatre (1994), a National Medal of the Arts (1996), and a Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement (2005), Albee rightfully stood side by side with such other major shapers of the American stage who came before him, most notably Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller. With the passing of Miller in 2005, Albee was, until his death in 2016, considered the elder statesman of American theater, one who commanded worldwide acclaim for his incredible body of work. Today he is considered, simply put, one of America's preeminent playwrights.

Chapter 2

Overview: The Theater of Edward Albee

The theater of Edward Albee is a theater of rebellion and recovery, confrontation and expiation. His plays provoke and incite, engage and surprise. His interest lies not in surface banalities – though indeed many of his characters seem mired in just such a prosaic world – but in various disputatious zones, zones in which his characters’ indifferent or uncomprehending masks of imperturbability are shattered by a coming to consciousness about the self, the other, and the culture they inhabit. What’s left by curtain’s end is often rough stuff. Typically a married character, sleepwalking through much of his life, is shocked by some epiphany, some key point in which he realizes that much of his life has been wasted. Often Albee + Marriage = Trouble. There is, to be sure, a sense of hope, even guarded optimism embedded in the earlier plays, but Albee tempers such affirmation with an increasing emphasis in the later plays on death and dying, on wasted opportunities, on loss, and on the individual dwelling in an absurdist universe. Albee very much believes in the primacy of consciousness. But gaining such consciousness comes with a penalty: what is gained, to paraphrase Jerry in *The Zoo Story*, is loss. If one looks back at six decades of Albee’s career, one hears Albee echoing precisely such thoughts – in the plays, foremost, but also in interviews, prefaces, articles, and other commentaries. As Steven Price astutely notes, “Albee is, in a crude sense, a more repetitive playwright than his contemporaries: he returns obsessively to particular images, patterns, structures, and ideas.”¹ Loss, dying, death, pain, betrayal, abandonment, and anesthetized individuals leading death-in-life existences have long been the central subjects of his theater.

Ever since Jerry fatally impaled himself on the knife in *The Zoo Story*, Mommy and Daddy recounted their spiritual dismemberment of their child in *The American Dream*, and Martin reveals he is in a love relationship with a farm animal in *The Goat or, Who Is Sylvia?*, Albee has been recognized for his focus on confrontation and death. Indeed, verbal dueling and death – real and imagined, physical and psychological – pervade the Albee canon. His plays typically address such issues as betrayal, abandonment, illusionary children,

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and withdrawals into a death-in-life existence by white upper-middle class articulate married couples – hardly issues appealing to the commercial world of Broadway. And yet, even after reluctantly making a successful transition to a commercially based and family-friendly Broadway in 1962, Albee continued to stage morally serious plays, imbued with a kind of absurdist density, often with surprising twists and turns that baffle as they astonish.

Albee's plays may be, generally speaking, divided into three periods. The first, the Early Plays (beginning in 1959–66), are characterized by gladiatorial confrontations – Jerry impales himself on a knife at the end of *The Zoo Story*; we learn about the (metaphorical) dismemberment of a baby in *The American Dream*; there is the bloodied action (actual) within *The Death of Bessie Smith*; and, of course, George and Martha fight to the (metaphorical) death in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Ever one to follow his artistic instincts rather than commercial formulas, Albee's voice, tone, and frenzied action began to change – slightly at first, but with more clarity as the years went on – as early as 1964 with the baffling *Tiny Alice*, continuing in 1966 with the beautiful *A Delicate Balance*, and culminating in 1968 with the experimental *Box and Quotations from Mao Tse-Tung*.

Certainly after 1971, Albee entered what could be called the Middle Plays (1971–87), which extend roughly from 1971 with *All Over* (1971) and *Seascape* (1975) and through the 1980s with *The Lady from Dubuque* (1980), *The Man Who Had Three Arms* (1982), *Finding the Sun* (1983), and *Marriage Play* (1987). During this period, Albee lost favor with the theatergoing public and critics alike, and he himself turned his back on Broadway and began premiering his plays in regional theaters in the United States and in various European cities, notably Vienna and London.

Regarding the long trajectory of his career, Albee shifts his writing style while staying true to his world view. The frenzied action of *The Zoo Story* or *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* gives way, in many of the later plays, to a more rarefied, abstract theatrical spectacle. Albee, many theatergoers felt, had fallen prey to the mimetic fallacy. Frenzied action yields to linguistic games in which the various meanings of a word are debated and dissected by bewildered characters. Actors sensed a difference. That is not how someone *speaks* in a performance; that is how someone *writes*. Audiences sensed the difference, too. Given such issues and charges of self-destruction, it is hardly surprising to discover both students and critics labeling Albee a pessimistic or even nihilistic writer, a dramatist whose plays are single-mindedly fixed on presenting the demonic, the destructive. Beginning in 1991–2, Albee staged what could be called the Later Plays (1991–present). He enjoyed a remarkable comeback with *Three Tall Women*, and since then most Albee plays – especially *The Goat*

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or, *Who Is Sylvia?* (2002) – have been watched by appreciative audiences and critics the world over.

There is, then, a beauty, a resonance to Albee's plays that still have a purchase on our consciousness. One way to appreciate more fully Albee's theater is to consider his world view. A careful viewer or reader will discover that the plays embody, on the one hand, a palpable sense of loss. On the other hand, underneath the external action, aggressive texts, and obvious preoccupation with death lies an inner drama that discloses the playwright's compassion for his fellow human beings.

A Full, Dangerous Participation

This sense of compassion becomes easier to understand when one listens to the playwright. Albee outlines what has for six decades engaged his imagination:

I am very concerned with the fact that so many people turn off because it is easier; that they don't stay fully aware during the course of their lives, in all the choices they make: social economic, political, aesthetic. They turn off because it's easier. But I find that anything less than absolutely full, dangerous participation is an absolute waste of some rather valuable time. ... I am concerned with being as self-aware, and open to all kinds of experience on its own terms – I think those conditions, given half a chance, will produce better self-government, a better society, a better everything else.²

Albee's observation provides a key to understanding all of the plays. Alluding to a spiritual malaise that may psychologically anesthetize the individual, Albee suggests that "full, dangerous participation" in human intercourse is a necessary correlate to living authentically. His remarks also suggest something of his underlying hope or optimism for his fellow human beings. The Albee play, in brief, becomes equipment for living. As the Woman in *Listening* recalls her grandmother saying, "We don't have to live, you know, unless we wish to; the greatest sin, no matter what they *tell* you, the greatest sin in living is doing it badly – stupidly, or as if you weren't really alive" (2: 489). Her reflection could well serve as a touchstone of the ethical problem with which every Albee hero deals. In plays as different in dramatic conception as *The Zoo Story*, *Box*, *Seascape*, and *Occupant*, Albee consistently implies that one can choose consciously to intermix the intellect and the emotions into a new whole, measured qualitatively, which is the aware individual. The tragic irony, of course, lies in the fact that too often his characters become aware – after it is "all over."

While the plays appear consistent in artistic purpose, they are quite varied in method. Albee uses a wide range of theatrical styles and technical devices to present naturalistic and satiric images as well as expressionistic and absurdist images of the human predicament. The plays range from fourteen-minute sketches to full-length Broadway productions. Occasionally Albee presents social protest pieces or domestic dramas staging imbalances within relationships. He has borrowed from others, with less than satisfying results, in the adaptations: *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1963), *Malcolm* (1966), *Everything in the Garden* (1967), and *Lolita* (1981); he also worked on the script for a musical adaptation of Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1966). But he remained steadfastly drawn to innovative plays whose musical quality complements the visual spectacle. A technically versatile dramatist, Albee demonstrates – often at the cost of commercial if not critical success – a willingness to take aesthetic risks, a deliberate attempt to explore the boundaries, the essences of the theater. As Albee writes in his prefatory remarks to the interrelated plays *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, two of his most structurally experimental works, “Since art must move – or wither – the playwright must try to alter the forms within which his precursors have had to work” (2: 262). Each play demonstrates Albee's ongoing efforts to reinvent dramatic language and contexts, his awareness of the modern dramatic tradition, and his individual talents. Such experiments invite Anne Paolucci to observe: “Albee's arrogance as an innovator is prompted by profound artistic instincts which are constantly at work reshaping dramatic conventions. He does not discard such conventions, but restructures them according to the organic demands of his artistic themes.”³

Audience

Albee always challenges the audience. He delights in inviting the audience to partake in a complex spectatorial process, one that may prove entertaining, astonishing, tedious, depressing, life-affirming, and anxiety-inducing. In his experiments with dramaturgic boundaries, he places much faith, and responsibility, in his audience. It is a faith predicated on Albee's conviction that the ideal audience approaches a play unencumbered by preconceptions or distorting labels, with the capability to suspend disbelief willingly, and to immerse itself fully within the three-dimensional essence of the stage experience. Albee rejects the audience as voyeur. He courts the audience as active participant. Of course, Albee does not direct characters to assault the audience physically, as Judith Malina and Julian Beck of the Living Theatre had performers do to their

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audience. But the structure and language of an Albee play conspire to assault the audience's individual and collective sensibility. Regarding the spectators, Albee explains that in many of his plays:

actors talk directly to the audience. In my mind, this is a way of involving the audience; of embarrassing, if need be, the audience into participation. It may have the reverse effect: some audiences don't like this; they get upset by it quite often; it may alienate them. But I am trying very hard to *involve* them. I don't like the audience as voyeur, the audience as passive spectator. I want the audience as participant. In that sense, I agree with Artaud: that sometimes we should literally draw blood. I am very fond of doing that because voyeurism in the theater lets people off the hook.⁴

Albee's reference to the French actor, director, and aesthetician Antonin Artaud is important. In 1938 Artaud, founder of the Theater of Cruelty, wrote *The Theatre and Its Double*, a study which Robert Brustein calls "one of the most influential, as well as one of the most inflammatory, documents of our time."⁵ In this seminal study Artaud discusses, among many other issues, the civic function of theater: the dramatic experience should "disturb the senses' repose," should unleash "the repressed unconscious," should produce "a virtual revolt."⁶ Cruelty, for Artaud, was the primary ingredient that could generate an apocalyptic revolt within the audience – an audience which Artaud viewed as the bourgeois Parisian who expected realistic performances. But it is important to recognize that his theories extolling aggression and violence were grounded more in the cerebral and metaphysical than in the merely physical. His aesthetic imagination focused on religious, metaphysical experiences. Artaud felt that the cruelty he wished to deploy was more of a cosmic and metaphysical kind, a kind that worked to sever individual freedom. Albee, of course, does not stage the kind of theater Artaud envisioned, but Artaud's influence on Albee is unmistakable in terms of the use of physical, psychological, and metaphysical violence on stage. Albee emphasizes the value of staging Artuadian militant performances:

All drama goes for blood in one way or another. Some drama, which contains itself behind the invisible fourth wall, does it by giving the audience the illusion that it is the spectator. This isn't always true: if the drama succeeds the audience is *bloodied*, but in a different way. And sometimes the act of aggression is direct or indirect, but it is always an act of aggression. And this is why I try very hard to involve the audience. As I've mentioned to you before, I want the audience to participate in the dramatic experience.⁷