

**Edward Albee**  
*A Critical Introduction*

Edward Albee (1928–2016) was a central figure in modern American theater, and his bold and often experimental theatrical style won wide acclaim. This book explores the issues, public and private, that so influenced Albee's vision over five decades, from his first great success, *The Zoo Story* (1959), to his last play, *Me, Myself & I* (2008). Matthew Roudané covers all of Albee's original works in this comprehensive, clearly structured, and up-to-date study of the playwright's life and career: in Part I, the volume explores Albee's background and the historical contexts of his work; Part II concentrates on twenty-six of his plays, including *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962); and Part III investigates his critical reception. Surveying Albee's relationship with Broadway, and including interviews conducted with Albee himself, this book will be of great importance for theatergoers and students seeking an accessible yet incisive introduction to this extraordinary American playwright.

Matthew Roudané is Regents' Professor of English at Georgia State University. He has published widely on various aspects of American drama, particularly the theater of major figures including Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Edward Albee. He is editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams* (1997) and of *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard* (2002).

# Edward Albee

## A Critical Introduction

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*For Jim Fox*

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## Preface

The title of this book, *Edward Albee: A Critical Introduction*, suggests its scope and emphasis: a study aimed at introducing the works of Edward Albee to theatergoers, readers, and a newer generation of students, many of whom are perhaps discovering Albee's plays for the first time. This book will explore the public and private issues that so inform Albee's vision, from his first great success, *The Zoo Story* (1959), through his last play before his death, *Me, Myself & I* (2008). This book traces Albee's artistic vision and his major subjects as reflected in twenty-six original plays.<sup>1</sup>

Part I, "Albee's Life and World," begins with Chapter 1, "Life," a brief introductory biographical chapter concerning Albee's life and world, while Chapter 2, "Overview: The Theater of Edward Albee," provides an overview of Albee's dramatic theory of art and what so preoccupied him over his legendary career. Chapter 3, "Contexts," presents an historical background focusing mainly on Albee's formative years in the later 1940s through 1962, the breakthrough year when he made his Broadway premiere with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Readers will get a sense of the ethos of Broadway when Albee entered that world.

Part II, "The Plays," concentrates on twenty-six Albee plays. Chapter 4, "Ritualized Forms of Expiation," explores the early plays from *The Zoo Story* through *The American Dream*, plays that first attracted us to a new, young playwright. Chapter 5, "Challenging Broadway," considers the rest of the plays from the 1960s, from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* through the companion plays, *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*. Albee, indeed, found an ossified Broadway "challenging" in many ways, with its aversion to experimentalism at odds with Albee's world view, and "challenging" in the sense that Albee with laser-like precision confronted Broadway with life and death matters in the profoundest ways. The title of Chapter 6 – "The greatest sin in living is doing it badly – stupidly, or as if you weren't really alive" – comes from one of Albee's lesser known plays, *Listening*, but stands as a touchstone into all of his plays; this is a chapter devoted to the plays from the 1970s. Chapter 7,



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“A Quest for Consciousness,” concentrates on the problematic plays from the 1980s, from *The Lady from Dubuque* through *Marriage Play*. Chapter 8, “As I Lay Dying,” examines the plays from the 1990s through the early 2000s, such as *Three Tall Women* and *The Goat or, Who Is Sylvia?*, works that reinvigorated Albee’s career. The last chapter devoted to the plays, Chapter 9, “A Theater of Loss,” considers the last four plays of Albee’s career, from *Occupant* through *Me, Myself & I*.

Part III, “Dialogues,” features Chapter 10, “Critical Reception,” a discussion of selected major critical studies published on Albee. I end the book with an epilogue, “Final Curtain,” a brief coda regarding this extraordinary American dramatist. This is followed by “Further Reading,” which gives readers a primary and secondary bibliography on Albee, one that points to excellent critical studies.

I have used *The Collected Plays of Edward Albee* in three volumes (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Duckworth, 2004–5), unless otherwise noted, to quote from the plays; I cite volume and page number parenthetically throughout this book.

\* \* \*

There is no shortage of Albee scholarship. From the early books on Albee by Gilbert Debusscher (1967) and Christopher Bigsby (1969) through the more recent work by Stephen Bottoms (2005), Toby Zinman (2008), Anne Paolucci (2010), Rakesh Solomon (2010), and David Crespy (2013), Albee’s plays have attracted much critical debate. Indeed, this *Critical Introduction* rests on the work of those (many of whom I know) who have written so impressively on Albee over the years. The sheer number of studies – books, book chapters, collections of critical essays, interviews, theater reviews, scholarly articles, and so on – make it increasingly challenging for students and the general reader to find a current and concise assessment of Albee, whose plays for some sixty years have engaged (and occasionally enraged) audiences globally. *Edward Albee: A Critical Introduction* addresses precisely such a challenge.

By exploring all of Albee’s major works, I hope to show something of the range and versatility of his imagination. In an ideal world, one should see an Albee play live; the special kind of collective experience the audience shares with the actors and the multivalency of live theater simply cannot be reproduced fully in the text version. That said, it is sometimes a challenge to find a theater company producing every Albee play. Hence, somewhat surprisingly, Albee himself points to the value of seeing and hearing the play as literature: “I would rather have a person who knows how to read a play *read* a play of mine and see a good production in his mind than see

a bad production.” As Albee explains, “Ideally, a superb production is to be seen, but given a bad production – well, I’d prefer a good reading any-time. You just have to learn how to read and be able to *see* and *hear* the play out loud while you are reading it.”<sup>2</sup> In light of Albee’s remarks, I have written the book so that one can use it whether approaching the text as performance or viewing the actual spectacle. Finally, I hope that *Edward Albee: A Critical Introduction* will help theatregoers or readers better appreciate one of America’s most important dramatists, one who reinvented as he re-invigorated the American theater.

On Friday, September 16, 2016, Edward Albee died. We have lost a titan of contemporary theater. With his passing, though, we can celebrate his life by enjoying his remarkable and distinguished contributions to the American stage. This book, I hope, is a humble and modest way to partake in that celebration.

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