

## Chapter 2

# Overview: The Theater of Edward Albee

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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.”<sup>1</sup> 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,

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*

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.<sup>2</sup>

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 adaption 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.”<sup>3</sup>

## 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

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.<sup>4</sup>

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."<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

Albee's theatrical strategy ideally minimizes the actor/audience barrier. As active participants within the play, the audience contributes to the ritualized forms of confrontation and expiation that characterize much of Albee's work. This is why Albee sees the violence and death as, finally, and paradoxically enough, life-giving:

If one approaches the theater in a state of innocence, sober, without preconceptions, and willing to participate; if they are willing to have the status quo assaulted; if they're willing to have their consciousness raised, their values questioned – or reaffirmed; if they are willing to understand that the theater is a live and dangerous experience – and therefore a *life-giving force* – then perhaps they are approaching the theater in an ideal state and that's the audience I wish I were writing for.<sup>8</sup>

## Language

In 2016, playwright Terrence McNally, who lived with Albee for some six years in the 1960s, rightly noted that Albee “invented a new language – the first authentically new voice in theater since Tennessee Williams. He created a sound world. He was a sculptor of words.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Albee animates his “life-giving” theater through language. In fact, language stands as the most conspicuous feature of his dramaturgy as well as his major contribution to American drama. Albee's verbal duels, some of which seem analogous to musical arias, are now a well-known part of American dramatic history. In both text and performance, his technical virtuosity emanates from an ability to capture the values, personal politics, and often limited perceptions of his characters through language. Christopher Bigsby characterizes Albee's work thus: “By turns witty and abrasive, and with a control over language, its rhythms and nuances, unmatched in the American theater, he broke new ground with each play, refusing to repeat his early Broadway success.”<sup>10</sup> Although the language from *A Delicate Balance* onward becomes more stylized, elliptical, even obscure, Albee's repartee – when he is at his best – still generates a compelling energy within each play. One of the chief tenets of the Living Theatre, writes Julian Beck, was to “revivify language,” and through language the playwright might realize the civic and religious powers of the art of drama: “to increase conscious awareness, to stress the sacredness of life, to break down the walls.”<sup>11</sup> Although Albee was in no way associated with the Living Theatre, the language of his early plays captured the “kinetic” energy which Judith Malina and Beck felt so necessary for the stage.

Few American playwrights use language as effectively – and as precisely – as Albee. His is a multifoliate diction, often with detailed references to food,

animals, and even grammar. His stage directions at times function as mini prose-poems within the text, accentuating for the actor and reader the emotional intensity during particular scenes. No other American playwright, moreover, uses italics for *more nuanced* deliveries of lines, lines that embody heightened emotional tensions thanks to those strategically placed italics.

Albee's theater, for many, reflects the sweep and play of a nation thinking in front of itself, of a culture seeking to locate its identity through the ritualized action implicit in the art of theater. Albee, it seemed, was the new Angry Young Man, a decidedly sociopolitical dramatist who anticipated, and subsequently became a part of, the social eruptions in the United States during the 1960s. Such a play as *The Death of Bessie Smith* only cemented his reputation as a "political" writer, one whose rage existed in equipoise with his moral seriousness.

## Consciousness

Despite his experiments with dramatic language and structure, and such seemingly political works as *Bessie Smith*, Albee presents a kind of intuitive *existentialist* apprehension of experience. Throughout his career, in plays, college lectures, and private conversations, Albee alludes to the influence the existentialist movement exerts on his artistic vision. Indeed, once while visiting Albee in his Tribeca home, he told me – over a cup of freshly brewed coffee and with his cat meandering about – "I would say that I'm an optimistic existentialist. I'm interested in exploring self-awareness and the healthy isolation of the individual. But consciousness is all, for heaven's sake! And what bothers me so much is that many people are sleeping, are wasting their lives – not participating."<sup>12</sup> In an early interview, moreover, he discussed the impact of this movement on the literary artist:

The existentialist and post-existentialist revaluation of the nature of reality and what everything is about in man's position to it came shortly after the 2nd World War. I don't think that it is an accident that it gained the importance in writers' minds that it has now as a result of the bomb at Hiroshima. We developed the possibility of destroying ourselves totally and completely in a second. The ideals, the totems, the panaceas don't work much anymore and the whole concept of absurdity is a great deal less absurd now than it was before about 1945.<sup>13</sup>

Such a "revaluation of the nature of reality" has since become the unifying principle within Albee's aesthetic. Not surprisingly, he often alludes to Albert Camus's influence on his thinking. Thus Albee reaffirms the importance of one of his most compelling subjects, consciousness:

The single journey through consciousness should be participated in as fully as possible by the individual, no matter how dangerous or cruel or terror-filled that experience may be. We only go through it once, unless the agnostics are proved wrong, and so we must do it fully conscious. One of the things art does is to not let people sleep their way through their lives. If the universe makes no sense, well perhaps we, the individual, can make sense of the cosmos. We must go on, we must not add to the chaos but deal honestly with the idea of order, whether it is arbitrary or not. As all of my plays suggest, so many people prefer to go through their lives semiconscious and they end up in a terrible panic because they've wasted so much. But being as self-aware, as awake, as open to various experience will produce a better society and a more intelligent self-government.<sup>14</sup>

The confluence of public issues and private tensions – the civic as well as personal functions of the theater – is wedded to Albee's sense of consciousness. The preeminence of consciousness necessarily generates within his heroes primal anxieties, dissociations, imbalances. Certainties yield to ambivalences. If his heroes demonstrate gracelessness under pressure, if their deadening routines prompt lifelong friends to respond to each other as uninvited guests, Albee still maintains faith in the regenerative powers of the human imagination. Animating the imaginative faculties, of course, is consciousness, and Albee celebrates Albert Camus's views concerning self-awareness. "Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life," writes Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "but at the same it inaugurates the impulse to consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows ... For everything begins with consciousness and nothing is worth anything except through it."<sup>15</sup>

Physical, psychological, and spiritual forces – these stand as the elements that so often converge within Albee's characters. Such an intermixture, moreover, precipitates an elemental anxiety, what Albee calls "a personal, private yowl" that "has something to do with the anguish of us all."<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, the power of Albee's plays emanates not from their philosophical content but from their powerful narratives that dramatize humankind's struggle with the complex and messy business of living. If his heroes are to "burst the spirit's sleep," as Saul Bellow writes in *Henderson the Rain King*<sup>17</sup> (a novel that appeared when Albee's first plays were mounted), such epiphanic moments are not realized through the process of philosophic intellection but, as Bellow's hero discovers, through the process of concrete immersion into a cosmos which seems exciting yet hostile, reliable yet puckish, life-giving yet death-saturated. Underneath his characters' public bravado lies an ongoing inner drama, a subtext presenting characters' quest for consciousness. The profound irony



stems from the characters' inability to understand the regenerative power of consciousness.

For Albee, the play becomes the hour of consciousness. During this fleeting but illuminating hour, Albee's vision underscores the importance of confronting one's self and the other, without O'Neill's "pipe dreams" or illusions. If O'Neill's, Ionesco's, Mamet's, or Beckett's characters seem aware of suffering, they also accept an attitude that precludes any significant growth. In contrast, Albee's heroes suffer, dwell in an absurd world, but realize the opportunity for growth and change. Of course, Albee ironizes such opportunities, for it is often too late for his characters to recover from their spiritual inertia. Or, as Toby Zinman aptly observes, "Many of his characters make the fundamental human discovery that they have tried bravely and failed miserably, but that there was nothing, finally, to be done, life being what it is, they being who they are."<sup>18</sup> Still, they sometimes experience a coming to consciousness that draws them – to allude to an important metaphor in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* – toward "the marrow": toward the essence, the core of their relationships. Stripped of illusions, Albee's protagonists stand naked. And once naked, they begin rekindling those forces which may profoundly alter their stance towards human encounters. Of course, Albee offers no guarantee of order, comprehension, survival, or love. Whether each character takes advantage of powers of consciousness varies from play to play. Or if indeed it is too late for his characters, perhaps the audience or reader, through the process of engagement with each Albee play, can become more honest with both their own inner and outer worlds. Hence there is a powerful civic dimension to Albee's work.

Throughout his career, Albee defines in dramatic terms, to use his own words, "how we lie to ourselves and to each other, how we try to live without the cleansing consciousness of death."<sup>19</sup> To experience the "cleansing" effects of such self-awareness, the Albee hero necessarily questions the nature of his or her values, predicaments, and relationships. To live honestly is a liberating quality that frees the mind, even at the risk of facing a grimly deterministic world in which one suddenly feels the utter precariousness of existence. That certain characters fail to take advantage of this capacity to bear a world so conceived, that certain audiences seem unwilling to accept experiments with dramatic language and structure, that sometimes the plays themselves cannot always sustain the dramaturgic burdens placed upon them, does not negate the significance, Albee suggests throughout his theater, of such self-perception.