



Profile

Whistling in the dark

As a baby Edward Albee was adopted by wealthy New Yorkers whose rigid Republicanism later kindled leftist leanings and led him to walk out at 21. One of America's finest dramatists, he has written 28 plays but feels saddled with the 1962 triumph of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* His latest work maintains his Absurdist fascination with language and emotional conflict

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Saturday January 10, 2004

Guardian

"There is chaos behind the civility, of course," reads a stage direction in Edward Albee's 2002 play *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*, and while, like all his many stage directions, it is dauntingly specific to the lines that follow, it is also not a bad summation of a typical Albee play. *The Goat*, which receives its UK premiere at the Almeida Theatre in London this month, is in many ways a distillation of Albee: discomfiting (it is about a fêted architect who falls in love with a goat); experimental; very funny, and yet utterly serious in its concerns: the confounding nature of love, the necessary breaking of innocence, the life-giving properties of danger, the dark voids that gape under the most polished, most privileged surfaces, the problem, once these have been perceived, of going on living.

The Goat received mixed reviews when it opened in the US, and that too is typical - it also received a Tony Award for Best Play. USA Today's Elysa Gardner called it a "self-indulgent mess", a "cynical, disdainful view of family life". Ben Brantley of the New York Times thought it contained "some of the most potentially powerful scenes in the Albee canon", but a "lack of emotional credibility is a problem throughout. There is too little of the breathless dramatic momentum for which Mr Albee can usually be relied on ... There is a feeling that [it] lacks the courage of its darkest convictions." The Guardian's Michael Billington, however, believes that it is Albee's best play. "It's powerful and moving. It had a much more shattering effect on me than *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*"

Which, incidentally, highlights a problem for Albee, of which he is well aware. He has written 28 plays over 44 years, but as he wrote in the programme notes for the Almeida's 1996 revival of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, that play, premiered on Broadway in 1962, has "hung about my neck like a shining medal of some sort - really nice but a trifle onerous". Among American playwrights he ranks alongside Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, and like them he has suffered critical rejection: *The Goat* was his return to Broadway after an absence of 19 years and is the continuation of a late flowering that began with 1991's *Three Tall Women*, the first play for which Albee remembers receiving nearly unanimous good notices in the American press, and, when it transferred to London in 1994, his first play in the West End for 20 years.

Three Tall Women, essentially a factual biography of his adoptive mother, is the most deeply personal of his plays. It is a portrait and exploration of everything he has always defined himself against, and thus in some ways an inverted autobiography; in the final act he himself appears as a returned prodigal, a silent presence watching over her death bed.

Edward was born to a woman called Louise Harvey, whom he has not tried to trace, on March 12 1928; all that is known about her is that she was abandoned by the baby's father. Edward was adopted by Reed Albee and his third wife Frances when he was 18 days old. He grew up in great affluence in Larchmont, New York, surrounded by servants and protected from any unsuitable contacts. Reed, a short man with one glass eye, was heir to a vaudeville empire and retired in his early 40s. He was a serial adulterer, an abdicator from family life; Frances ("Frankie") was a tall glamorous former shop mannequin, and, according to Albee's biographer Mel Gussow, "imperious, demanding, and unloving".

"I think that from the very beginning I must have been wired differently," says Albee. "I learned that I was adopted when I was five or so, and I wasn't surprised. Many kids when they're growing up have the fear that maybe they're not the natural children. I had the terrible fear that maybe I was. When I was told that I was adopted I remember being rather relieved. I just didn't feel that I belonged. And the older I got the more I was able to observe the way they lived their lives and the more I was convinced that there was something very amiss there. And by the time I began to develop some sort of awareness of politics and class and all the rest of it I realised that I was with the enemy. They voted Republican regardless. They didn't care, he could have been Attila the Hun and they would have voted for him." The current Bush administration has only fanned his lifelong, fierce anti-Republicanism; Albee is soft-spoken but, the day after Bush's photo-op with a Baghdad turkey, his voice is laced with fury. "The cynicism is beyond imagining. It's the most destructive administration we've had in many many years. They're trying to undo all of the social good that started happening in 1932. They're making the country safe for greed and the rich and it's disgraceful. I can't be in the same room with the man."

He tells stories of colluding with the servants, and of being chastised for reading - leatherbound Turgenev, specifically: "We had breakfast together - the adoptive grandmother and the adoptive parents. It was rather cool there emotionally one morning, and they said, 'if you go to the library, you will see that there's a book missing from the shelves - like a tooth that had been removed from a mouth or something.' I said, 'well yes - I've got it upstairs'. [They said] 'It looks terrible'." He was thrown out of various private schools, was sent to the military academy that also disciplined JD Salinger, and lasted three terms at college, more because of a refusal to do what bored him than any lack of aptitude or industry; he was writing, especially poetry, but some plays.

He knew he was gay from about the age of eight, he says, and though it was never discussed, it was yet another difference, and it cemented his parents' disappointment in him. In *The American Dream* (1961) he mocks that disappointment and their specific case becomes a general indictment of American consumerism. In 1949, after what sounds like a fairly routine spat about a late night, he left Larchmont. He would not see Reed Albee again, and it was to be another 17 years before he was reunited with Frankie.

He headed straight for Greenwich Village, taking to it as to a natural home. "I found myself surrounded by people who were creative, painters and sculptors and composers and writers. A lot of experimental theatre was going on, so you could educate yourself. That was a feast. Everybody was poor, and nobody was famous. All things seemed young, and open and really good." He inherited a bit of money from his adoptive grandmother, but otherwise supported himself with odd jobs; working at Schirmer's music store, where he liberated the occasional book; and for Western Union, delivering death notices such as the one George invents in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* He wanted time to write, but also to absorb everything around him.

"To a great extent, New York in the late 1940s and early 50s was the equivalent of Paris in the 20s," writes Gussow in his biography of Albee, *A Singular Journey*. Albee met Auden (who suggested he write pornographic verse) and engineered a meeting with Thornton Wilder, who looked seriously at his poems and suggested that maybe he ought to be a playwright instead. And he met a slightly older composer called William Flanagan, who became his lover and his most important, most perceptive mentor. Unfortunately, Albee told Gussow, he also "turned out to be an alcoholic, and I think he encouraged me in that direction, not that I needed much

encouragement".

As he approached 30, however, he began to panic that his talent and ambition would get frittered away, as Flanagan's eventually was. In February 1958, Albee sat down at a stolen typewriter; two days before his birthday he had finished a short play about an encounter between two strangers in Central Park, a terrible, moving vision of urban loneliness. Albee was initially unable to get an American producer, and *The Zoo Story* premiered in Germany on a double bill with Krapp's Last Tape (*Marriage Play* and *Three Tall Women* would also receive their first performances in Europe - in Vienna in 1987 and 1991); in New York three months later it received the mixed reviews that would become customary, but nevertheless was a word-of-mouth success.

Gussow compares Albee with John Osborne at the Royal Court in terms of the impact that Osborne had in freeing other writers. Albee "was a breath of fresh air in the American theatre and did inspire a number of other playwrights, including John Guare, David Mamet and Sam Shephard. Dealing with outsiders, the disadvantaged and disaffected - it may seem old hat today, but it certainly wasn't back in 1960." Anthony Page, who directed Osborne at the Royal Court, agrees, though "I must say that Edward's writing is more classic and more lasting, less journalistic and of the moment than John's. I do think he's an extraordinary classic dramatist."

The Zoo Story was followed, in quick succession, by a series of short plays: *The Sandbox* (1960); *The Death of Bessie Smith*; *Fam and Yam* (1960) and *The American Dream* (1961). *The Death of Bessie Smith*, the closest Albee has got to agit-prop, reimagines the death of the 1920s blues singer, refused treatment at a white hospital in Memphis after a car crash (it has since transpired that this story is not true). Albee feels it ought to be paired with *The American Dream*, "then you have the whole spectrum of what's wrong with America".

But it was time to try a full-length play. Albee had been thinking for a while about a faculty couple, talking to another couple about a son who doesn't exist; about, he said at the time, "the destructive forces of various falsities in relationships". Interviewed in the middle of writing it, he said it also had "something to do with what I thought *The American Dream* had to do with - the substitution of artificial for real values in this society of ours. It's sort of a grotesque comedy." It is also, of course, a virtuoso verbal display. Gussow writes that friends recognised Albee and Flanagan's alcohol-fuelled relationship in the "brilliant, snappish dialogue, the matching of insult and retort ... [they] were legendary for their wit and also their malice". (Their seven-year relationship had ended at about the same time that *The Zoo Story* was taking off; Albee was now with playwright Terrence McNally.)

"I thought *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *The Zoo Story* were both really tough and totally unsentimental," says Harold Pinter, who met Albee when he went to New York for *The Caretaker* and is a friend. "There is a great sense of danger in Edward's work, and you never quite know what's going to happen next." *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* opened on Broadway on October 13 1962, with Uta Hagen and Arthur Hill as Martha and George, and despite the usual caveats was a huge success - further cemented, of course, by the 1966 film starring the married-in-real-life Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton.

The critic Martin Esslin claimed Albee for the Theatre of the Absurd, along with Ionesco, Beckett (a hero of Albee's, together with Chekhov and Pirandello), Genet and Adamov. The Absurd play, said Esslin, dispenses with conventional narrative in favour of the logic of dreams; furthermore, in a century stripped of certainties, the Absurd playwright understands that conversation, listened to closely, becomes "nonsensical illusions, empty chatter, whistling in the dark". Again and again Albee's plays are concerned with language: phrases are repeated, meaning something different each time, or meaning nothing at all: at its most extreme this produces a polyphonic experiment like *Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (1968), but it is often more subtle, more couched in seeming realism. "In *The Goat*," says Page, "which is very much in the Absurdist theatre, the central character is a pedant - he's always correcting people - so the mixture of pedantry and his out-of-control, dark emotions, hidden emotions, is tragi-comic. I think Edward's very good on the way that

people express things in words. And he has a very sharp left-field wit, which is very much reflected in his plays - the awful humour in the darkest things."

The title of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is taken from graffiti Albee saw one night, scrawled on the mirror behind a New York bar called the College of Complexes; he has said it means "who's afraid of the big bad wolf, which means who's afraid of living life without delusions?", and the play is about stripping away illusion. The imaginary child must be killed; the *dies irae* George intones at the end is a requiem for a dream.

Illusions, or delusions, take different forms, and Albee has tackled most in his career. "I don't mind people having false illusions as long as they know that they're false," he says. "If people want to kid themselves, it's important that they know that they're kidding themselves. Life is too short to take the middle ground." His next full-length play (after he adapted Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café* for the stage in 1963), was *Tiny Alice*, which combines a *Bluebeard's Castle* nightmare quality with arguments about the nature of God. "What that play is about, as much as anything" says Albee now, "is the misuse people put religion to - God in the image of man, and the effrontery of that." But it is his problem play: it falls down wells of pretension and baffled the critics; more troublingly, it baffled its lead, John Gielgud, who fought to cut a long disquisition on martyrdom and transformation and wanted to withdraw nearly every day. Albee still responds with stubborn self-belief. "I've cut that speech," he says. "It was too long. Gielgud was right. But people were attacking that play for preposterous reasons. Because critics didn't understand it they thought it was incoherent." Gussow writes, drily, "he was so busy being metaphysical and reaching for profundity he let the play get away from him."

Albee returned to marriage in *A Delicate Balance* (1966), in which an affluent suburban family is visited by long-time country-club friends Edna and Harry, who, it transpires, have had a vision of existential terror, and have come to stay, indefinitely. (They are based on a real Edna and Harry, friends of Albee's parents.) This, however, tests the friendship too much and provokes crisis. Flanagan, in a letter to Albee, praised it as "V. Woolf, written with a kind of Chekhovian, naturalistic, poetic restraint". The *Daily Telegraph's* Patrick Gibbs, on the other hand, reviewing the 1976 film starring Katharine Hepburn and Paul Scofield, said, "I find the remark of one American critic particularly apt. 'Albee is one of the most dazzling stylists in the English-speaking theatre, but it is a pity anyone ever told him so.'" The play won Albee's first Pulitzer prize.

At his most successful, says Michael Billington, Albee "has the ability to say difficult things within an acceptable framework - he takes what looks like the marriage play, the family play, and then makes you realise that something unnerving is happening behind it all". Such conventional frameworks are on one level simply useful dramatically: the familiarity of long marriage, the loosening effects of alcohol, innocence all serve the same purpose - they allow characters to say anything. Then add the necessary conflict, the tripwire. Such scenarios are essentially gladiatorial. People bait each other. They strip each other's illusions to shreds, and we laugh, uncomfortably.

"I think what is one of the most pronounced ingredients in his work is mischief," says Harold Pinter. This dark, antic quality, which can come across as wilful cruelty, is integral to Albee's vision of the world and theatre's role in it. Near the beginning of *Seascape* (which won Albee his second Pulitzer, in 1975) a middle-aged husband and wife, Charlie and Nancy, loll by the sea, discussing what to do with their lives. Impatient with what she sees as simply settling, Nancy snaps at Charlie. Hurt, he says, "You're not cruel by nature; it's not your way. Why do you do this? Even so rarely - why?" It's "a healthy sign", she answers, "shows I'm nicely alive". It's the logic that makes *Virginia Woolf?*, despite everything, a love story, but it also, Albee hopes, is a logic that works on the audience. "I think you can change the way people think about their consciousness, you can change just about everything about them. You make them aware that they're missing the boat, that they're not being fully alive. And if people start thinking more about their responsibilities to themselves, about being fully alive, and their responsibilities to other people, they'll start voting intelligently.

"All plays, if they're any good, are constructed as correctives. That's the job of the writer. Holding that mirror up to people. We're not merely decorative, pleasant and safe." This attitude, unfortunately, doesn't go down well on Broadway. Albee's plays were doing less and less well: "I was astonished," says Page, "when *The Lady from Dubuque* [1980], which I thought was a fantastic play, was swept away and replaced by this play called *Children of a Lesser God*, a very sentimental play about deaf people - fine, heart in the right place - but nothing like the quality of Albee's play." *The Man Who Had Three Arms*, an angry satire on unearned celebrity that evaporates when the eponymous man loses his third arm, was the last straw. "They thought it was a play against critics, I think," says Page. "They turned on him like a pack, as they do, and of course the *New York Times*" - whose critic Frank Rich called it "a temper tantrum in two acts" full of "virulent and gratuitous misogyny" and "narcissistic arrogance" - "is always the leader of the pack."

Personal problems paralleled this decline. An incompetent financial adviser left Albee deep in debt to the tax authorities; he was a heavy drinker, but the problem became particularly acute in the early 70s. He stopped with the help of Jonathan Thomas, the Canadian sculptor he has been with since 1971 ("I'd be dead without him," he told Gussow), but suffered several spectacular falls off the wagon. Peter Hall has said - and others concur - that "Edward is a very daunting personality. He makes a religion of putting people off. He loves destabilising people"; when he was drunk this tendency often turned to outright cruelty. After a particularly virulent episode at a dinner party at Gussow's house in 1978, Albee wrote a letter of apology: "By nature, I am a gentle, responsible, useful person, with a few special insights and gifts. With liquor, I am insane."

But he is also "a stoic," says Page, and Albee retrenched, teaching drama at the University of Houston, and concentrating on the foundation for promising artists he had set up near his second home in Montauk, Long Island. Gussow applauds his generosity. "Foundations are started by major benefactors - by the Rockefellers and the Guggenheims, not by playwrights. He's close to an exception there."

Albee directed his own plays ("I have great respect for the author's work," he says) and he kept writing. Critical rejection "made it clear to me that I'm not an employee. I don't depend upon acceptance to keep on doing my work. I don't recall becoming bitter, or disillusioned or anything. I have too much ego. I go about my business."

Introducing Quotations from Mao Tse-Tung, Albee wrote "I have indicated, quite precisely ... by means of commas, periods, semi-colons, dashes and dots ... the speech rhythms. Please observe them carefully, for they were not thrown in, like herbs on a salad, to be mixed about." Page, who is directing *The Goat* at the Almeida (he has also directed *Three Tall Women*, *Finding the Sun*, *The Marriage Play* and *A Delicate Balance*) is very aware of these strictures. "You need great precision in the way the words are delivered, and in the way the emotions are understood. If you start leaving out words or putting them in or coming in on the wrong bit it spoils it. But Albee understands that when you are playing a play it's very important that it's naturalistic on the surface. That it is like jazz. If the actors are playing well together, you have the structure, you have the beats, but you maybe play it a bit differently every night. That's the way Maggie [Smith] played *Three Tall Women*. And that's very much the way Jonathan Pryce and this cast are working."

Albee has strong opinions on how his plays should be cast and staged. No wrenching racial choices, no black George or Martha, for example, because it couldn't have happened in 1962, and, says Page, "he doesn't like a lot of lighting effects or music. He thinks the audience is going to wonder who's pressing the buttons, and that it takes away from the reality. I've found that it's much better to just let the play come out of the dark and speak for itself."

In 1965, Albee received a phone call from "somebody who worked with my [adoptive] mother, a secretary, who said 'she's had a heart attack, she's lonely. Make nice.'" And so he did. He held dinner parties, placing her at the head of the table; she went to his opening nights, she came to Montauk or he stayed with her in Palm Beach; she told him a great deal about her youth and marriage. But it was not easy. She never really forgave

him for leaving, and never countenanced his love life; Thomas was often excluded from dinner parties, or had to move out when she came to stay. When she died, in 1989, "I was practically cut out of her will. The money went to a church she never went to and a hospital that didn't do her any good." How did that feel? "I was making a larger yearly income than she was earning by then, so I didn't need the money. And I think I was not surprised." In fact there had been an earlier will, in which she had left him the bulk of her estate; according to Gussow, she changed it after a conversation with a friend who "told her that she would be able to see Edward more and have a better life if only she just accepted the fact that he was gay".

Three Tall Women, in which Frankie is portrayed at 26, 52 and Alzheimer's-ravaged at 92, is an exorcism, but not as bitter as Albee intended: he kept asking Page to make her "more disagreeable, more repellent. And actually it was very hard, because for the audience, seeing someone in that extreme state of not being in control of their mind or body, you can't help sympathising with them, like Lear." What comes through, instead, is a grudging understanding and respect. Perhaps gratitude, too; Frankie revived his career, and earned him his third Pulitzer.

Except for a brief foray to Fifth Avenue, Albee has not strayed far from Greenwich Village; he lives in a large, airy loft in Tribeca that doubles as a gallery for the art he has been collecting all his life - paintings by Kandinsky, Chagall, Arp, masks and figures from West Africa, a calm, central place from which to enjoy his rediscovered prominence. Recently, however, he has had new claims on his stoicism: Jonathan Thomas was diagnosed with cancer and has just undergone 18 weeks of chemotherapy and a nine-hour operation. "It's been a rather distressing time," says Albee quietly. "But you go on. Remember what Beckett said. 'I can't go on, I'll go on.'"

Life at a glance - Edward Albee

Born: March 12, 1928, Washington, DC.

Education: 1940-42 Lawrenceville (Princeton, NJ); '42-44 Valley Forge Military Academy (Pennsylvania); '44-46 Choate (Connecticut); '46-47 Trinity College (Hartford).

Relationships: 1952-59 William Flanagan; '59-63 Terrence McNally; William Pennington, '71 - Jonathan Thomas.

Some plays: 1958 The Zoo Story; '60 The Death of Bessie Smith; '61 The American Dream; '62, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?; '64 Tiny Alice; '66 A Delicate Balance; 68 Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao; '75 Seascape; '80 The Lady from Dubuque; '82 The Man Who Had Three Arms; '83 Finding the Sun; '87 Marriage Play; '91 Three Tall Women; '98 The Play About the Baby; '02 The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?

- Edward Albee's The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia? is at the Almeida Theatre, London N1 from January 22 to March 13. Box office 0207 359 4404.

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