

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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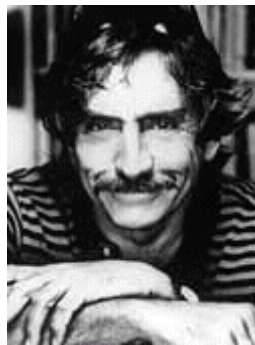
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Chapter 8: Edward Albee (1928-)

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Primary Works

Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?, a play, 1962; *The sandbox. The death of Bessie Smith (with Fam and Yam)*, 1963; *The play, The ballad of the sad cafe*. Carson McCullers' novella adapted to the stage, 1963; *Tiny Alice*, a play, 1965; *Everything in the garden*. From the play by Giles Cooper, 1968; *A delicate balance: a play*, 1968; *Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung; two inter-related plays*, 1969; *All over*, a play, 1971; *Seascape : a play*, 1975; *Counting the ways and Listening : two plays*, 1977; *The lady from Dubuque: a play*, 1980; *Selected plays of Edward Albee*, 1987; *The plays*, 1991; *Marriage Play*, 1987; *Three Tall Women*, 1991; *Fragments*, 1993.

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| [Top](#) | Edward Albee: A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Christina Goforth

Of Edward Albee's birth, it is only known that he was born on March 12, 1928 somewhere in Virginia. His biological parents gave him up for adoption two weeks later to Reed and Frances Albee, and this transaction took place in the District of Columbia. His adoptive father was the heir to the famous Keith-Albee Theatre Circuit, and thus it was young Albee's fortune to be surrounded by wealth and privilege from the earliest days of his life. The Albee's lived in a large Tudor house in Larchmont, New York where servants, tutors, horses, pets, toys, and chauffeured limousines were part of their lifestyle. Albee's mother, Frances, was twenty-three years younger and almost a foot taller than his father, who tended to be taciturn and deferential toward his wife (MacNicholas 4). Albee's relationship with his adoptive parents was fraught with discord and he freely admits that he was a problem child (Rutenberg 3). There was, however, one member of the family living in the house with whom he formed a close relationship with: Frances Albee's mother, Grandma Cotta. Later he would dedicate his short play *The Sandbox* to her (Biggsby 1).

Educationally, Albee's performance was poor and finally at the age of eleven his parents sent him to Lawrenceville, a boarding school, in hopes that he would straighten up. He rebelliously cut classes, refused to do his homework and participate in sports, and behaved so badly all around that he was expelled within a year and a half. A lack of improvement in his attitude at home prompted his mother to send him off to a succession of fashionable Eastern preparatory schools, at which he continued to do poorly academically (Rutenberg 1). In 1944 he entered Choate School, and although his grades did not improve, he was happy there, and found teachers who encouraged his writing. During this time he experimented with many literary genres, writing numerous poems, stories, a play, and even a 538- page novel. Most of these works were rather banal and unremarkable; however, one of his poems was published in a Texas literary magazine (MacNicholas 5). In 1946 Albee attended Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut where he tried his hand at acting, but neglected his other classes and was asked to leave. Aside from two very brief enrollments in Columbia University and Washington University, this brought his formal education to an end (Biggsby 7).

In 1950 Albee, at odds with his parent's politics, morality, and, as he states, "bigotry," left the family home. Although some biographers speculate that his less-than-amiable departure had to do with his homosexual identity, Albee himself denies this: "That was never discussed between us" (Gussow 71). For the next ten years of Albee's life he lived at a number of different addresses and supplemented the income from his trust fund by working various jobs as an

office boy, a salesman, and a messenger. Artistically he was frustrated. He continued to write, but produced nothing of real substance (MacNicholas 5).

On his thirtieth birthday, in 1958, Albee made the decision to quit his job as a messenger and sat down to write his first successful play, *The Zoo Story*. He finished the play in three weeks. *Zoo Story* was initially rejected by several New York producers and so its first premiere, on September 28, 1959, occurred at the Theater Werkstatt in Berlin. Four months later it played on a double bill with Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* at the Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village and received largely positive responses from the critics (Roudane 3). With the advent of this first success, Albee went on to write and produce three other plays in the next year: *The Death of Bessie Smith*, *The Sandbox*, and *Fam and Yam* (Bigsby 175). All three of these plays attack certain features in American society and reflect his lifelong tendency toward idealism.

In 1961, Albee produced *The American Dream*, which explicitly criticizes the shortcomings of American values. In response to its negative reception by some critics, Albee stated, "The play is an examination of the American scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society . . . it was my intention to offend — as well as amuse and entertain" (Debusscher 35). *The American Dream* is a landmark in American theater because in it Albee integrates the discoveries of the French avant-garde theater (Debusscher 84). In contrast to the grimly realistic social criticism in *The Death of Bessie Smith*, *The American Dream* takes up the style and subject matter of the Theatre of the Absurd and transmutes it into an original American form (Bigsby 23).

In 1962, Albee took Broadway by surprise with what became one of his most famous plays. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* was an enormous success, running for a total of 644 performances and thereby firmly establishing Albee as a major playwright (MacNicholas 8). It also sparked impassioned controversy amongst the critics, many who attacked the work for its destructive theme. It was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and yet the committee decided not to bestow this award on it because of the controversy. Some members of the committee who supported Albee's nomination resigned in protest (Roudane 7). Nonetheless, he did receive the New York Drama Critics Award and Tony Award for the play.

| [Top](#) | Albee then went on to produce a number of less popular plays: *The Ballad of the Sad Café* in 1963; *Tiny Alice* in 1964; and *Malcolm* in 1966. More successful was, *A Delicate Balance*, also produced in 1966, for which he was awarded his first Pulitzer Prize. In 1967, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from Emerson College. In the next few years he produced: *Everything in the Garden*, 1967; *Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, 1968; and *All over* in 1971. He also received another honorary doctorate in 1974 from Trinity College. Nearly ten years from the date of receiving his first Pulitzer Prize, Albee was awarded a second for *Seascape*, which opened in New York in 1975.

He continued to write and produce plays through the 1970's and 80's, among them are: *Counting the Ways and Listening*, 1977; *The Lady from Dubuque*, 1980; and *Marriage Play*, 1987. In 1991, he won the Pulitzer Prize for the third time for his play *Three Tall Women*. In this work, he finally deals with the years of conflict with his mother from a new perspective, that is, the family's story is told from her point of view. Though his attitude is still sardonic, he is able to incorporate empathy for her as well (Gussow 19).

Today Albee still continues to write plays; more recently he has produced: *The Play about the Baby*, 1998; and *The Goat, or, Who Is Sylvia*, 2000. At this time he is part of the distinguished faculty at Houston University School of Theater where he teaches a playwrights workshop.

Albee has been and continues to be controversial for his denouncement of American values and for his unwavering commitment to produce higher art. Heralded by many as *the* playwright of the 1960's, he challenged the orthodox aesthetics of Broadway, refusing to repeat dramatic formulas that might raise his reputation in commercial and even critical terms (Roudane 1). His plays tend to be dark and challenging; the themes of solitude, loss, and death recur throughout his works (Cohn 44). His representation of the American family is usually less than ideal and he focuses on the meretricious nature of many human relationships.

Albee is not easy to classify in terms of style, for he is unique in his generation for having tried his hand at extremely diverse dramatic forms: naturalism, surrealism, expressionism, symbolism, the one-act satiric farce, the full-length tragicomedy, and the metaphysical allegory (Debusscher 84). It is said that his plays have the formal inventiveness and depth of O'Neill's and the social acuity and judicial firmness of Arthur Miller's, but he outdoes them both in his wit and grace with words. He is experimental like Thornton Wilder, but his plays have greater passion. In his understanding of marginalized members of society and his ability to produce tight poetic dialogue, Albee is equal to Tennessee Williams, but his work is more consistent than Williams and has a greater intellectual quotient (MacNicholas 22).

For all these reasons and more does Albee's work continue to be the subject of much scholarly discussion. An inquiry into the Dissertation Abstracts reveals that his work has been the subject of more than forty doctoral dissertations, eight of which were written in the last ten years.

With all his success, Albee might easily be expected to retire, but his indefatigable nature and interest in social issues continue to motivate him to create higher art. For him, a playwright has two obligations: first, to make some statement about the condition of 'man' and, second, to make some statement about the nature of the art form with which he is working. In both instances he must attempt change (MacNicholas 22). Albee's work consistently demonstrates a commitment to these ideals as he continues to challenge audiences intellectually and morally.

List of Awards, etc.

1959 Berlin Festival Award

1960 The Vernon Rice Memorial Award and the Obie Award for *The Zoo Story*

1961 Foreign Press Association Award for *The American Dream* and *The Death of Bessie Smith*

1961 The Berlin Festival Award for *The Death of Bessie Smith*

1961 Lola D'Annunzio Award for *The American Dream*

1963 Two Tony Awards, the NY Drama Critics Circle Award, The Foreign Press Assoc. Award, American National Theatre and Academy Award, and Outer Circle Award for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

1966 Election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters

1967 The Pulitzer Prize for *A Delicate Balance*

1967 D. Litt., Emerson College

1974 D. Litt., Trinity College

1975 The Pulitzer Prize for *Seascape*

1980 Gold Medal in Drama from Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters

1994 The Pulitzer Prize, NY Drama Critics Circle Award, Lucille Lortel Award, London Evening Standard Award, and Outer Critics Circle Award for *Three Tall Women*

1994 Obie Award for Sustained Achievement in Theatre

1996 Tony Award, Best Revival of a Play, *A Delicate Balance*, Lincoln Center Theatre Broadway revival

1996 Kennedy Center Honors

1996 National Medal of Arts

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