

# American playwright Edward Albee: The character of his opposition to the status quo

David Walsh

22 September 2016

Edward Albee, one of the most prominent figures in the postwar American theater, died at his home in Montauk, New York on September 16. He was 88 years old.

Albee is best remembered for works he wrote a half century ago or more, including *The Zoo Story* (1959), *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1960), *The Sandbox* (1960), *The American Dream* (1961), *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) and *A Delicate Balance* (1966). Out of critical and popular favor for decades, Albee experienced a degree of renewed success with *Three Tall Women* (1991) and *The Goat or Who is Sylvia?* (2000). During his lengthy career, Albee won numerous awards, including three Pulitzer Prizes for Drama and two Tony Awards for Best Play.

Albee was an immensely gifted and articulate writer, with a genuine feeling for the rhythm of language and an obvious flair for the dramatic. His early works, including *The Zoo Story*, a one-act play, and, most especially, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, a full-length work, made a strong impression on the public when they were first performed. In these works, and others of the time, Albee launched fierce attacks on middle-class complacency and hypocrisy, and the moral failure of American society.

The playwright described himself on many occasions as an enemy of the status quo. This was entirely to his credit. However, if Albee's conception of this enmity remained quite limited, as we shall discuss, this was bound up with the social-cultural environment in which he matured in Cold War America and the milieu in which he circulated.

Albee's family background is a singular one. He was born in Washington, DC in March, 1928 to a woman who could not support a child. The father had "deserted and abandoned both the mother and child," according to the subsequent adoption papers. When he was 18 days old, the child was adopted by Reed A. Albee and Frances C. Albee, a wealthy, childless couple. Reed Albee's money came from his father, the head of the Keith-Albee chain of vaudeville theaters. The Albees lived in luxury in Larchmont, New York on the Long Island Sound.

The writer later claimed that he always felt like an interloper in the household. "They bought me. They paid \$133.30"—i.e., the cost of the adoption services. His "outsider" status in his own family and his discovery of his homosexuality at an early age no doubt helped distance Albee from the American mainstream. He had a difficult time in school, being expelled or dismissed from several high schools and colleges. He left home for good in his late teens. Toward the end of his life, Albee told an interviewer he had been "thrown out" of the family home because he refused to become the "corporate thug" his parents desired him to be.

During the 1950s, Albee lived in Greenwich Village in New York City and worked at numerous odd jobs. He also received money from a trust fund. He wrote poems, plays and novels that were not published.

Albee wrote *The Zoo Story* in three weeks in 1958. It was first performed in West Berlin in 1959 on a double bill with Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*.

The short play takes place in Central Park in New York. There are two characters. Peter, a middle-aged man, an executive with a small publishing house, who "wears tweeds, smokes a pipe, carries horn-rimmed glasses." We eventually learn that he has a wife, two daughters, two cats and two parakeets, the perfect, contented American family. Peter is peacefully reading his newspaper on a park bench on a Sunday afternoon when Jerry enters into conversation with him. The latter is younger, poorer and suffering, according to Albee's description, from "great weariness."

The conversation begins innocently, if oddly, enough, with Jerry's now-famous line: "I've been to the zoo. (PETER doesn't notice) I said, I've been to the zoo. MISTER, I'VE BEEN TO THE ZOO!" Peter responds politely enough, but Jerry becomes more and more intrusive, asking personal questions and revealing the character of his own lonely existence. When Peter has had enough and tries to leave, Jerry becomes aggressive and pulls out a knife. He drops it and tells Peter, "There you go. Pick it up." The other man does so and Jerry eventually impales himself on the blade. In his final, dying words, he thanks Peter.

Something about the coldness and isolation, and inequality, of modern urban life emerges. Jerry lives in a rooming house, with a "few clothes, a hot plate that I'm not supposed to have, a can opener." His neighbors are the marginalized. His closest relationship, aside from those with prostitutes, is with his landlady's dog, about whom he speaks in a lengthy monologue.

Years later, Albee would explain, "Jerry is a man who has not closed down, ... who during the course of the play is trying to persuade Peter that closing down is dangerous and that life for all its problems, all of its miseries, is worth participating in, absolutely fully."

Albee was attacked for his play in establishment circles. On the floor of the US Senate, Prescott Bush (father and grandfather of two US presidents) denounced *The Zoo Story* as "filthy."

The influence of Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and the "theater of the absurd" is evident in *The Zoo Story*, which is to say, Albee was under the influence of some of the same social and intellectual tendencies as those writers. British playwright Harold Pinter, born in 1930, was an almost exact contemporary. Pinter's first play, *The Room*, was written and performed in 1957.

The intellectuals of the time, or the more sensitive ones, were appalled by contemporary society, by the giant corporations and institutions that had emerged in the aftermath of World War II, by the Cold War, by the threat of nuclear destruction, by the officially sponsored conformism and pursuit of material wealth.

On the other hand, for the most part they saw no way out of the situation. Stalinism and its crimes, widely identified with communism and socialism, seemed to many to have closed off the possibility of revolutionary change. The various counterrevolutionary "labor" bureaucracies suppressed the working class politically. Existentialism and other forms of irrationalism suggested that the human condition was absurd, but that one had to endure and find some meaning in what was

perhaps a meaningless existence. Abstract expressionism in painting and the “Beat” movement emerged from these general ideological conditions.

In *The Death of Bessie Smith* Albee paid oblique tribute to the civil rights movement and the suffering of African Americans. The short play takes place in Memphis, Tennessee in 1937, in a hospital. An overworked white nurse, a white intern and a black orderly feature prominently. The premise of the play is that Bessie Smith, the great blues singer (who never appears in the play), dies following a car crash because she is refused admittance to a whites-only hospital. This was generally believed at the time. In fact, Smith was taken directly to a hospital in Clarksdale, Mississippi where she died seven hours after the accident. But Albee’s play concerns itself with race and class relations in America, and retains much of its power. The character of the Nurse stands out in particular.

Albee reserved much of his venom for the American upper-middle-class, nuclear family. In *The American Dream*, an absurdist satire, the central characters are Mommy, Daddy and Grandma. The couple, we discover, had once adopted a son. Unhappy with it, they mutilated the child and ultimately killed it. As Grandma, a sympathetic character, explains, “Well, for the last straw, it finally up and died; and you can imagine how that made them feel, their having paid for it and all. ... They wanted satisfaction; they wanted their money back.”

A Young Man shows up, whom Grandma names “The American Dream,” who turns out to be the original boy’s twin. The old woman moves out and the psychologically damaged Young Man moves in. He will take the place of the original adopted child. The dialogue consists largely of a series of clichés and banalities. In typical Albee fashion, a well-to-do family conceals all the brutal realities.

Albee later asserted that the play “is an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation, and vacuity; it is a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen. Is the play offensive? I certainly hope so.”

The work for which Albee is best known, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (made into a film with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, released in 1966), opened in October 1962, only a few days before the eruption of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the confrontation between the US and the USSR over the deployment of Soviet missiles in Cuba. The often intangible and even unnamable psychological menace and paranoia generated by the threat of nuclear annihilation are woven into Albee’s early plays, as they are in many writers’ and filmmakers’ work of the time.

In its framework and episodes, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (borrowed from a bit of “intellectual’s” graffiti found on a wall) is more naturalistic than Albee’s previous efforts. George is a middle-aged associate professor of history at a small New England College; his wife, Martha, six years his senior, is the daughter of the college president. They return home late at night after a party, where they have already had a good deal to drink. Two guests arrive, a younger couple: Nick, a biology professor, and his wife, Honey.

For the rest of the night, George and Martha engage in furious, non-stop and occasionally amusing abuse of one another in front of the younger pair. Martha relentlessly taunts George and humiliates him. She dismisses her husband as “a FLOP! A great ... big ... fat FLOP!” In response, George breaks a bottle and holds the remains, like a weapon. Martha remarks, “I hope that was an empty bottle, George. You don’t want to waste good liquor ... not on your salary.” It goes on like this.

At one point he pretends to shoot her. “GEORGE: Did you really think I was going to kill you, Martha? MARTHA (*Dripping with contempt*): You? ... Kill me? ... That’s a laugh. GEORGE: Well, now, I might ... some day.”

The hosts play various vicious games, some on each other, some on their guests. When one of his games turns cruel, George explains calmly, “I

hate hypocrisy.” George and Martha also claim to have a son, who is coming home that day. In the end, it turns out that they have no child and the fantasy that they do is one of the great lies sustaining their lives and marriage.

The play, above all, suggests America’s decline into something miserable, sick and full of self-deception. Again, the fear and selfishness under the surface of middle class existence come out, along with that social layer’s hypocrisy and servility. Success and stature, the jockeying for position, on this wretched, unimportant little campus absorb much of the time and thought of all four characters. Whatever was promising about America and the American Dream (and George and Martha, of course, are the names of the first president of the US and his wife) has somehow come down to this: stupid, petty and sterile infighting, an endless drunken, malicious quarrel in the middle of the night. All this expenditure of energy ... for what?

The characters are not so much hateful, as pitiful. Toward the end of the play, Martha laments, “I do not wish to be happy, and yes I do wish to be happy. George and Martha, sad, sad, sad.”

In *A Delicate Balance*, a well-to-do couple, Agnes and Tobias live with Agnes’s alcoholic sister, Claire. Their daughter Julia is expected to arrive home soon, fleeing her fourth unsuccessful marriage. Friends of Agnes and Tobias’s, Harry and Edna, arrive and ask if they can stay. A terrible, intangible fear has overtaken them.

What to do with Harry and Edna, whether to ask them to leave or accept them and accept responsibility for them in their plight, becomes a central question in the play. The strongest element of *A Delicate Balance*, once again, is the contrast between the well-established rules of conduct of these polite, educated people and the painful, contradictory realities of life.

Albee wrote many other plays, including adaptations of works by Carson McCullers (*The Ballad of the Sad Café*) and Vladimir Nabokov (*Lolita*), but these early works contain the most compelling expression of his artistic ideas and social concerns.

Albee insisted until the end of his life that he was an enemy of existing conditions. In his introduction to *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* (1968), Albee argued that one of the chief obligations of the playwright was to “try to alter his society,” since, as he explained, “very few serious plays are written to glorify the status quo.” In an interview in 2009, he told a journalist, along the same lines, that “A play should be an act of aggression against the status quo.”

Nor did Albee have much use for fashionable and marketable “identity politics.” Defending his decision to write about a host of characters, he told an interviewer, fellow playwright Craig Lucas, in 1992, “After all, there are a number of things we have not been, you and I. We’ve not been women, we’ve not been 80 years old, we’ve not been black. A lot of things we haven’t been. But it’s our responsibility to be able to be them, isn’t it?”

Albee attracted criticism for rejecting the term “gay writer.” In a May 2011 speech, he commented, “A writer who happens to be gay or lesbian must be able to transcend self. I am not a gay writer. I am a writer who happens to be gay. ... Any definition which limits us is deplorable.” After his comments were attacked, he told National Public Radio, “Maybe I’m being a little troublesome about this, but so many writers who are gay are expected to behave like gay writers and I find that is such a limitation and such a prejudicial thing that I fight against it whenever I can.”

Albee’s criticism of the “status quo” could be quite fierce. He was quoted in 1980 as saying, “I think television is the destruction of the United States. I mean, that and the Republican Party ... And the Democratic Party, for that matter, come to think of it.”

In *Everything in the Garden* (1967), Albee’s American adaptation of a black comedy by British playwright Giles Cooper, a group of respectable suburban housewives turn to prostitution *en masse* (although unbeknownst

to one another) to supplement their husbands' incomes. When one of the wives is caught out, she turns on her husband and decries the corrupt, even criminal manner in which each of the men earns a living. She sums it up: "You all stink, you're all killers and whores."

Albee's sincerity was unquestionable. However, when the playwright spoke of opposition to the status quo, he meant primarily the *moral, sexual and psychological* status quo. To many intellectuals and artists in the US, and this view was encouraged by the various academic left tendencies (the Frankfurt School and so forth), capitalism had resolved its economic contradictions. What remained were the problems of alienation, loneliness, conformism and sexual repression.

Continuing to engage *exclusively* with these issues and ignoring the explosive questions that emerged in the 1970s and beyond, including the growing impoverishment of masses of Americans and the overall economic-cultural decline of the US, meant that Albee's work failed to treat much of what was new and challenging, and urgently in need of artistic description, in American life.

Many of Albee's later plays, and even some of the early ones, are not strong or convincing. Plays like *Tiny Alice* (1964), *Malcolm* (1966), *Seascape* (1975), *Counting the Ways* (1976), *The Man Who Had Three Arms* (1982) and others are not particularly engaging. The self-conscious "absurdism" often wears thin. There is a great deal of repetition, between and even within plays. The ideas are often murky and secondary, or commonplace.

Albee was at war with hostile critics for many years, and the critics were often obtuse, but the lack of success of many of his plays with the general public was not principally due to the reviewers' shortcomings. He wrote numerous tedious and almost pointless plays. He seemed to have run out of important things to say at a relatively young age.

Albee returned time and time again to his early family relations. The ineffectual, "castrated" father, the domineering mother, the victimized son ... There are only so many times one can cover the same ground. Did Albee have a childhood that was so excruciating, or that was of such world-historical significance that it needed to be treated over and over again, from different angles, during the course of 40 years?

No, that is not the case. It is rather that there are social and political conditions in which the artist's individual psychological problems and traumas take on "world-historical" importance to him or her. There are periods when one's family life dominates, when what one's mother and father did or didn't do years ago continues to be a central obsession in later life. This was the type of historical period in which Albee matured, when the class struggle apparently receded into the background.

Albee was no Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright, but some of the comments that Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov made on the subject of Ibsen in a 1908 essay ("Ibsen, Petty Bourgeois Revolutionist") seem appropriate. Plekhanov noted that at the time when "Ibsen's opinions and ideals were being formulated, a working class, in the present sense of the term, had not yet developed ... and was, therefore, nowhere evident in public life." This encouraged in Ibsen, "individual protests against the hypocrisy and vulgarity which surrounds him." His was "the revolt of the modern spirit."

Plekhanov goes on, "Now if a man teaches revolt simply because it is revolt, not knowing himself to what end it should lead, then his teaching will take on a rather nebulous character. If he is an artist, and thinks in terms of images and forms, then the vagueness of his thinking will necessarily result in vague artistic images. An abstract and schematic element will creep into his creative work. ... The 'revolution of the spirit of man' leaves everything unchanged. The pregnant mountain has again given birth to a tiny mouse."

Unhappily, for much of his later career, as a result of the nebulousness of his ideas and the formlessness of his opposition to the status quo, Albee gave birth to nothing but "tiny mice."

Robert Brustein, the distinguished critic, producer and academic, once referred to Albee "as one who sympathized profoundly with the oppressed of the world." One has no reason to doubt this, but it is not distinctly and sharply present in his work or public utterances. It is worth noting that in Mel Gussow's biography, *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey* (1999), there is a single reference to the Vietnam War in the index. According to an August 1968 *New York Times* article, Albee did lend his name as a sponsor of the anti-war "Summer of Support," aimed at US servicemen, along with Pete Seeger, Dustin Hoffman, Phil Ochs and others.

Overall, however, as one commentator notes, Albee's plays in the 1970s spoke to "personal" rather than "social" disillusionment.

One has to look to the general features of Albee's time, the postwar economic expansion and the Cold War, for the conditions that shaped his thinking. He traveled to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and certainly distinguished himself from the extreme right confrontationists, but his comments on the USSR do not rise above the level of garden variety anticommunist liberalism. His facile use of selections from Mao's "Little Red Book" in *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, either wooden truisms or Stalinist falsifications, gives some sense of his attitude toward what he took to be "Marxism" and "revolutionary theory."

The "abstract and schematic element" in Albee's work also manifests itself in the ahistorical character of his plays, and the often nameless characters: Mommy and Daddy, Young Man and Grandma, He and She, A B and C. He once told an interviewer, "Most of my plays are not tied to time, particularly." He didn't care for having the phrase "timeless" applied to his work, he explained, "but I don't think they [the plays] are beholden to specific dates."

Unfortunately, there is nothing that becomes dated more rapidly than the "dateless." Abstract psychological characterizations and speculations and, frankly, the obsession with oneself do not generally lead to the most rewarding, enriching art. "We all wish to devour ourselves, enter ourselves, be the subject and object all at once," asserts a character in Albee's *Listening* (1976). But the artist seriously attuned to the world and life has more compelling things to do.

Albee's great strength lay in his ability to represent his upper-middle-class figures, to reveal their inner lives. He helped demystify and discredit the affluent layers who thought themselves fully in control. Moreover, his rejection of corruption and cowardice, his insistence on unpleasant truths about American society in the late 1950s and early 1960s unquestionably contributed to the mood of radicalism and opposition that emerged later in the decade.

To paraphrase Plekhanov, drab, postwar American reality showed Albee what had to be opposed, but it could not by itself show him which road to pursue.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**wsws.org/contact**