

A Conversation with Edward Albee

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Some Respectful Questions for Edward Albee By Richard Salzberg

On Thursday evening, October 4, at 8 p.m. Edward Albee will lecture at Webb Center at Old Dominion University; and on adjacent dates the ODU Theatre Program will inaugurate its 2001 / 2002 Season with special productions of two of the legendary Playwright's one-act plays, The Zoo Story and The Sandbox.

With his peerless career ongoing (and with three Pulitzer Prizes for his work, for A Delicate Balance, Seascape, and Three Tall Women), Mr. Albee is nonetheless quite familiar with the world of Academia, having taught a course in Playwriting at the University of Houston for the last 14 years.

In a recent conversation the witty and worldly artist was graciously willing to speak a bit about his work and his upcoming visit to Hampton Roads. Although, unavoidably, the dialogue had to begin with a mention of the preceding Tuesday's nightmare in New York.

Q: Before we begin to chat about playwriting, would you have any comment on Tuesday's tragedy?

A: Yes. I was actually emerging from the subway at Chambers Street at about 9 a.m., and I looked up to see the one of the towers on fire. . . It was all quite unbelievable, of course. . . I live about 6 blocks from there, so I returned to my home and watched what was happening in horror and disbelief from my own windows. . . Later in the day I had to walk to 34th Street in order to catch a train to leave the city. . . It was all very surreal, and still feels that way. And, unfortunately, I don't believe it's over yet.

Q: For a Playwright frequently associated with themes of optimism (albeit an eclectic sort of optimism), that is rather a sobering assessment.

A: Someone once asked Sam Beckett why his plays were so cynical and pessimistic, and he answered: "If I were a pessimist, I wouldn't write plays." Humanity is very durable. We have experienced great crises and tragedies before, and I'm certain we shall somehow get through this.

Q: How does one become a Playwright?

A: One doesn't "become" a Playwright. One becomes aware that one is a Playwright. [When asked about the report that Thornton Wilder had encouraged him to become a Playwright, Albee answered: "Yes, he encouraged me – indirectly. I met him when I was a young man and he was kind enough to look at some of my poetry. He suggested that I try my hand at playwriting – but I think he may have been trying to save Poetry."]

Q: How does one become a great Playwright?

A: I don't know.

Q: Who are the "great American Playwrights" (as well as yourself)?

A: I mistrust that word "great." Greatness is something that is determined 150 years down the road. But we can use the word "important." Certainly O'Neill is an important Playwright; and Williams; and Miller has written a lot of good stuff.

Q: As an Artist, how did you come to choose Theatre as your medium?

A: Because I had failed at all other branches of writing. I started writing poetry at the age of eight; and I wrote two novels in my middle teens.

Q: Were the novels ever published?

A: (*Laughing.*) No!

Q: Do you still have the manuscripts?

A: Yes – but they will never be seen by anyone!

Q: At which point does "a good idea" become a solid concept for a play?

A: When it won't go away.

Q: What most essentially is the Playwright's responsibility?

A: There are several. The Playwright's responsibility is to write honestly, skillfully, and movingly about that stuff that people should be paying attention to.

Q: How often do you view various productions of your plays?

A: I get to see a fair number of productions. Sometimes I'm happy with them; sometimes I'm not. It is interesting that current productions of plays that I wrote years ago are frequently better understood now than when they were new.

Q: How widely have your works been produced?

A: All over the world. Latin America, Europe, Asia. And I believe some of my work was rather popular in the former Soviet Union, but one wouldn't hear anything from over there about performances of one's plays at that time.

Q: How much control does a Playwright actually have over his own work?

A: We have control over the selection of the actors, the directors, and the translations; and of course there can be no cuts or changes to the text without our permission. So, we really have as much control as we need – if we bother to exert the controls.

Q: Do you have a favorite play?

A: Yes – my own. I am happiest with the play I am working on at the moment,

because no one has had the chance to find anything wrong with it yet.

Q: What are you working on now?

A: I have recently completed a play that will hopefully be staged in New York in the Spring.

Q: Does it yet have a title?

A: It is entitled *The Goat*. And I am currently at work on a play about the artist Louise Nevelson, the flamboyant surrealist sculptor. She was a friend of mine.

Q: Does that play yet have a title?

A: Yes – it’s title is: *Occupant*.

Q: Your upcoming lecture at ODU also has an interesting title: “The Playwright vs. The Theatre.”

A: That enables me to say almost anything.

Q: In a hundred years, how would you want to be remembered?

A: The fact of being remembered would be enough. Not that I would care very much.

– *Finis* –

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