

THREE BY EDWARD ALBEE: A DRAMATURGICAL DISCUSSION

HONORS THESIS

Presented to the Honors College of
Texas State University
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements

for Graduation in the Honors College

by

Tyler George

San Marcos, Texas
May 2016

THREE BY EDWARD ALBEE: A DRAMATURGICAL DISCUSSION

by

Tyler George

Thesis Supervisor:

Jeremy O. Torres, M.F.A.
Department of Theatre And Dance

Approved:

Heather C. Galloway, Ph.D.
Dean, Honors College

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I: EXISTING RESEARCH.....	1
I.1 Playwright Biography.....	1
I.2: <i>The American Dream</i>	2
I.3: <i>Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?</i>	7
I.4: <i>The Goat or, Who is Sylvia?</i>	11
II: CONTEMPORARY RESPONSE.....	15
II.1: List of Questions.....	15
II.2: Summary of Responses from Discussions.....	18
WORKS CITED.....	30

Dedicated to the memory of John Hood, a teacher and mentor.

Acknowledgements

Special thank you to Diann McCabe for all of her support. Another thank you to all of my interviewees: Beth James, Luke Jenkins, Sidney Rushing, Samuel Brett Howard, Carlos Rodriguez, Camillo Stone, Katie Quentin, Jared Sloan, Nick Gollihugh, Jo Hogan, and Caroline Bobbitt.

Abstract

This project aims to compile existing research on Edward Albee, specifically regarding his three plays *The American Dream*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and *The Goat or, Who is Sylvia?*, and add to the conversation through a number of interviews with young theatre students and professionals. Questions will cover critical theory and opinions, thematic content, and contemporary relevance. The interviews will consist of actors, directors, dramaturgs, and other theatre professionals in order to initiate a multidisciplinary conversation on the texts and on general issues in the theatre. The goal of this project is to create a dramaturgical resource for anyone who has an interest in these plays, either in approaching them for production or for academic study, and to gain new understanding on how Edward Albee fits into a historical and contemporary view of American theatre.

I: EXISTING RESEARCH

Since the beginning of his career, Edward Albee has been the subject of a wide range of critical speculation. While the majority of his plays received almost unanimously positive critical reception, some of them received mixed reviews or even a majority of negative responses. Over the course of his career, Albee has experimented with style, theme, and content. His plays maintain his signature voice, always making use of playful language and tackling the issues of family and social politics in American society. Often Albee disagrees with the scholars who write about him and his work, and rejects the theories they present regarding how to classify and discuss his plays, but nonetheless they have a way of setting the tone for how researchers and theatre professionals view and discuss Albee. A brief summary of biographical information will help to gain a greater insight into the playwright himself, providing a starting point for understanding his work. The best way to understand three specific Albee plays, *The American Dream*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and *The Goat or, Who is Sylvia?* is to look at production history, critical responses, themes and symbols in each play, and how each play functions stylistically and within different categories of dramatic critical theory.

I.1: Playwright Biography

There have been numerous books and articles written that extensively cover all aspects of Edward Albee's life, from his birth in Virginia on March 12, 1928, and subsequent adoption, to his current residence in Houston, Texas and role as a distinguished professor at the University of Houston (Kellman). While it is unnecessary to include a full biography, it is important to include a brief summary of his life as part of

the dramaturgical process. Hilton Als offered his own summary of Albee's early life, saying, "Albee was a genius child of privilege, a sensitive boy reared in an adult world defined by money, gothic sexiness, callousness, and neglect. He was adopted as an infant, in 1928, by a wealthy couple, Frances and Reed Albee, of Larchmont, New York. Frances was an ambitious arriviste from New Jersey; Reed was an emotionally recessive philanderer who addressed his wife as Mommy. Albee's parents paid little attention to him; he was a bourgeois prop, meant to complete their specious idea of "family." Albee never saw his adoption as a form of acceptance. It only exacerbated his sense that he was different—an observer, and not a participant." Albee went on to get kicked out of boarding school, a military academy, and college before ending up as a writer in Manhattan. This is where he met Thornton Wilder, who encouraged him to shift his focus from poetry to playwriting.

I.2: *The American Dream* (1960)

As suggested by the title, *The American Dream* is a meditation on the story of a family exploring the theme of the American Dream, both old and new. The comedic play has been classified as an example of the Theatre of the Absurd. A tenet of this genre is the concept that words are unable to bear genuine meaning and often are empty and repetitious, illustrating the ineffectiveness or lack of communication between even close family members. The play also uses the comedy of illogic, incorporates biographical details from Albee's life, and critics have acknowledged that it bears a resemblance to Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*. The play stands as an early index to characters and themes that recur in later Albee plays (Dircks).

The American Dream premiered Off-Broadway on January 24, 1960, at the York Playhouse, and then continued with two productions at the Cherry Lane Theatre in 1962 and 1964 (*The American Dream*). In 2008, the play was revived for another production at the Cherry Lane Theatre which ran for roughly three months and was directed by Albee himself (“‘The American Dream’ 2008”). Following its original premiere, critics were mostly positive, finding the play brilliant, innovative, bizarre, and brash (Dircks). However, it seems that the play has a different place in today’s theatre landscape. In regards to the 2008 production, David Finkle wrote that, "Watching Edward Albee's dark comedies... can't be the same today as coming up against them when they were written almost 50 years ago. Since they first jolted audiences into sitting up and taking notice, they've influenced too many subsequent plays, just as they were influenced by the Absurdist playwrights preceding them in the late 40's and 50's. But though they've lost a sizable chunk of their shock value, these one-acts still offer their own rewards especially as directed by the hardly mellower octogenarian playwright himself." Another critical response came from the New York Theatre Guide, following a double feature of *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox*, who said, “Though hardly great theater, these one-acts give important insight into the budding playwright... Though 'American Dream'... [is] autobiographical, Albee is too complex a playwright to leave it there. He is not just trashing parents who didn't understand the unconventional young man they adopted, he is also trashing *The American Dream*... Taking our norms and turning them inside out and upside down is Albee's signature, and 'The American Dream' reminds us that we must constantly refine our own version of the American Dream before we eventually dive into the finality of the *Sandbox*.” These critics are acknowledging that the play was clearly

written for an audience of the early 1960s, but the ideas presented still resonate with audiences today, providing ample material for critical discussions.

One way to break down the play's themes and symbols is to view each of the characters as symbols themselves. First, there is Mommy. Mommy is a classic image of an Edward Albee matriarch; she is bitterly cold, sarcastic, and clearly the head of the household. Completing this quintessential American couple is Daddy. Throughout the play, Daddy serves as a counterpart to Mommy, often seeming detached and unmoved by Mommy's harshness. Als describes the character of Daddy, saying, "Daddy agrees with whatever Mommy says because he can't deal with her belittling sarcasm and judgment. He has no mind—or balls—of his own. Daddy has been emasculated, literally: he "has tubes now where he used to have tracts." His only real function in their little family is to supply the money; cash is the cushion on which Mommy's cold sentimentality and spite rest, like pointed baubles." Completing the family is Grandma, a representation of the unapologetic older generation who has the freedom to express any and every thought, much to the dismay of the younger members of the family. Mrs. Barker, who is an outside voice in this family's home, serves as the voice of reason, upsetting the rhythm of this particular family and their unique way of interacting with one another. The final character is the Young Man, who brings with him a huge amount of thematic intrigue. As the twin of the child who Mommy and Daddy mutilated and killed as punishment for his actions, the Young Man eventually steps into his role as the perfect replacement for the lost child. The Young Man is a physical representation of the American Dream, with his beauty and inhuman characteristics, but his connection to the lost child is perhaps even more important. This missing child motif will return in many of Albee's plays throughout

his career. The implications of what a murdered, absent child could mean as a symbol have long been the favorite topic of academic papers based on Albee and his works. There are clear connections to his own history as an adopted child who struggled to fit into the bigger picture of his own family.

Beyond the symbolic nature of the characters, the themes of the play ultimately return to the American Dream itself. Dircks described this overarching idea, saying, “The American Dream has eroded, the promise is gone, and the American Dream stands now ready to do anything for money. Trenchant beliefs are harbored beneath the surface of this clever, fast-moving play: the deterioration of the American ideal and the subsequent lack of vision, the loss of its original intent to acknowledge that all men are created equal, the marginalization of specific groups, and the emphasis on tangible beauty.” Another scholar, Zsanett Barna, added specificity to the American Dream, breaking it up into the Old American Dream and the New American Dream. She asserted that the characters in this play, as well as other Albee plays, fall into either one category or the other. For example, *Grandma* represents the Old American Dream, which is rooted in old values, history, and tradition, and focuses on what cannot be achieved. The New American Dream, represented by the other characters in the play, is concerned with exterior appeal, representing an unproductive and desperate future. These two opposing views are set up to clash with one another, and this tension is what Albee explores on stage with the dramatic world he has created.

Stylistically, this play proved that Albee was a master of form and language from the beginning of his career. One of the most influential texts regarding Albee’s writing style was written by Martin Esslin. In his essay “Albee as Absurdist,” Esslin argues that

Albee's work attacked the foundations of American optimism, progress, and faith in the national mission, pouring scorn on the sentimental ideals of family life, togetherness, and physical fitness. He made note of how Albee satirized American clichés and followed the non-American style of Ionesco and Pinter. One thing that many critics have noted is how Albee's structure directly impacts how an audience processes the plays' complex themes. Albee's satirical approach to absurdist theatre is presented in the way he distorts characters into abstractions inhabiting an unreal world (Harris). This allows for the characters to have unreal cleverness and actions, which do not have to be justified as they would in a realistic world. Albee's absurdism is the perfect vehicle for exploring his concept of the hollowness of American values and ideals. Harris summarizes this idea, saying, "No quality of the twentieth century has been more often cited than the lack of assured values, the search for some code to replace all those standards which disintegrated during the latter half of the nineteenth century." He goes on to claim that Albee's audience is drawn into the absurd world of the play by seeing it as a dramatic construction rather than an illusion of reality. Due to the fact that all values are being denied, the audience is led to experience painful emotions. This ideally will bring audiences to the point where they identify their own lack of certainty and direction, underlying the action on stage.

An additional point of interest is the sexuality that exists in his work, and how it changes in subtlety throughout his career. It is more subtle in *The American Dream*, as it is with most of his early works. In this play, the Young Man has been credited by some as a gay fantasy, presented as a sexless body despite his ripe sexuality. His representation of the American Dream, therefore, is that it is to be both admired and satirized, as beautiful

yet empty or festering inside (Hirsch). Hirsch states more generally that homosexual imagery and character types are presented indirectly in Albee plays, and sex is incorporated symbolically. He was writing before Albee's later works were ever written, which present these issues much more straightforwardly, clearly showing the development of Albee as a playwright over time. Hirsch goes on to state that Albee's work is more cerebral than sexual, lacking the sensual energy of playwright's like Tennessee Williams.

Albee has answered questions directly addressing themes, including the American Dream, and responses in his own words add an interesting perspective on how one might interpret his plays. He says hard work is a good thing, but that it is not all there is to existence. In his opinion, problems are created when the acquisition of wealth and property, along with conspicuous consumption, become the answer for people seeking meaning in life.

I.3: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962)

The most well-known of Albee's plays, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* has found a place for itself in the fabric of American culture. It was popularized and immortalized in the 1966 film version starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. But as a play, *Virginia Woolf* has a significant reputation of its own. Set in the home of a New England professor and his wife, the play explores how people communicate, and manipulate each other. It has been described as a secular morality play, an affirmative work, and a love story (Dircks).

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? premiered on Broadway at the Billy Rose Theatre on October 16, 1962, running until May of 1964 (*Virginia Woolf*) The play

returned to Broadway in March of 2005, running for approximately six months before transferring to London and other major cities in the U.S., and has been revived in other various professional productions ever since (“Listing, 2005 Broadway”). The critical reception when the play was first published and produced was complicated, in that there was an overwhelming amount of praise and attention but many critics condemned the play’s objectionable language and content. This conflict was probably best illustrated by the fact that the play was selected for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama by the Award’s Drama Committee, but was then denied the award because of its offensive language and blatant subject matter, resulting in no Drama Award being given that year. However, the play still received a Tony Award for Best Play and a New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for Best Play, essentially sweeping all of the major awards any modern American play can hope to win. Critics praised the play’s powerful language and consummate theatricality, while others criticized the characters as caricatures, found the resolution unbelievable, and the tone abysmally vulgar. Over time, audiences have adjusted to the play in a major way. Originally, audiences were often shocked and upset by the play, mostly due to the fact that they were not ready for a radical departure from realism and objected to the play’s language and “morbid, subversive” atmosphere. Audiences today more often find the language and dramatic situation thrilling and mesmerizing (Dircks).

The play’s controversial nature inspired many critics to write opinions on *Virginia Woolf* and how theatre deals with morality in general. Wendell Harris defended the play, arguing language and the openness of human actions or relationships cannot be used to judge the morality of play. He claimed that what separates this play from Albee’s previous plays is that they are absurd and therefore no system of values exists, because

characters cannot make a choice between good and evil, unlike in *Virginia Woolf*. He went on to say that the absurdism of *The American Dream* promotes the idea that human life is selfish and trivial, but *Virginia Woolf* does not negate the possibility of meaningful human action. Instead, it presents three-dimensional characters who can make a willed choice, establish human relationships, and work toward meaningful goals. Emil Roy commented on the play's structure saying *Virginia Woolf* is a culmination of theatrical techniques used by dramatists like Strindberg, Ibsen, Chekhov, Pirandello, and Shaw. He claimed the play is contemporary without being a full departure, but combining the conventions of naturalism, existentialism, and the Theatre of the Absurd in a new way. He also linked Albee to French Existentialists, especially Sartre, in both mode and theme.

The play is rich with themes and symbols, in classic Albee style. One concept Albee explores throughout the text is the title of the play's first act: "Fun and Games." The older couple uses a series of games as a framework for the evening, in order to communicate ideas to the younger couple. These games allow for other themes to surface, such as illusion versus reality and childhood versus adulthood, which both culminate in the play's broader theme of the disillusionment of childhood. Setting the play in an academic environment introduces the symbolic nature of academic discourse, educational exploration, and the hierarchy of institutions. The characters each have individual roles, both professionally and within their family/relationship unit. The men are both professors, though at opposite ends of the spectrum of experience, and the women are mostly defined by their relationships to the men in their lives. These roles explore the themes of gender, the dynamics of relationships, and the American ideals of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In the words of one critic, John Kenneth Galbraith, “At *Death of a Salesman*, everyone carried Willy Loman’s suitcases with them for an evening. At *Virginia Woolf*, everyone faces the greater horror of the day when he is discovered to be an empty shell.” He goes on to claim that the academic setting creates the perfect environment to explore the theme of failure, but the play fails to present George convincingly enough as a failure to make it a great play, merely an interesting one. Michael Rutenburg describes this play, among Albee’s other work, as theatre of social protest, reflecting the perspectives of the audience for whom it was written. In describing plays written for an audience of the first television generation, raised watching wars and assassinations, Rutenburg says, “These plays, rich in verbal texture and poetic rhythms display his uncanny genius for theatricalizing human conflict and speak to a modern generation determined to break through the deadly apathy of the fifties.” He continues, saying Albee’s styles of realism, surrealism, symbolist mysticism, and theatrical revolution all aid the social commentary of their respective plays. They are all “protests in defense of those outcasts of society who have been victimized by the stupidity and bias of the successful elite.” His plays work because they “touch the pulse of change our time” and he is well connected to the issues of current society. He has always been a social protestor, committed to the cause and human dignity; he “speaks and feels for the America that is *now*.” In the many years since that statement was written, it has proven to still be true with each new decade.

Emil Roy described *Virginia Woolf* as a parable of the threatened disintegration of Western society. The “death” of George and Martha’s imaginary son, he asserts, serves as a ritual for the loss of both of their fathers and their attempts to simultaneously reduce each other to the helplessness of a child and regain their own childhood innocence. Roy

addresses the issue of morality on a thematic context, saying, “From the broadest perspective Albee is a moralist, despite objections to the adultery, profanity, and perversion in his play.” He said the artist who indicates degradation, sin, and vile language in his work is attacking not goodness, but specious goodness by revealing the corruptions that are concealed by a puritanical moral code. Dircks summed these themes up accurately, saying the play illustrates issues in 1962 American society, using the names of the first President and First Lady to highlight that. “Albee saw American life as sustaining itself on the national illusions of prosperity and equality,” requiring an honest confrontation of problems and a heightened sense of communication. Structurally, he says the play uses a sense of physical confinement to escalate tension, and the central metaphor is game playing as a form of stylized communication.

I. 4: *The Goat or, Who is Sylvia?* (2002)

In the most recent of the three plays, Edward Albee tells the story of a family that finds itself in the middle of a set of tragic circumstances, but not in any traditional way. Dircks describes it as drawing inspiration from Shakespeare’s *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and assuming some of the tragic elements of an ancient Greek play like *Medea*. Albee includes along with the play’s title that it “notes toward a definition of tragedy.” The play tests the limits of how far one should be allowed to defy social taboos to pursue love, as well as the limits of an increasingly liberal society and progressive mentality. As with most Albee plays, the play aims to force audiences to question their own morality and system of beliefs. Albee himself suggests that it deals with the theme of the limits of tolerance; he wanted someone to go to the play, put themselves in Martin’s position, and think really hard about how they would respond in that situation (Dircks).

The Goat or, Who is Sylvia? premiered on Broadway at the John Golden Theatre on March 10, 2002, and ran until mid-December (*The Goat*). The play also premiered shortly thereafter in the UK and Australia, running until 2006 in various productions. The play opened to mixed reviews, and critics mostly used humor to avoid actually addressing one of the “few remaining taboos of our culture” (Gainor). Critics noted how well the play functioned with different sets of actors and that audiences seemed to accept the main taboo of bestiality and focus on the play’s larger themes (Finkle). While there was some backlash regarding the play’s controversial subject matter, it did not have much of an effect on its success, proven by the fact that the play won the Tony Award for Best Play, the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding New Play, and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

Symbols are vital in this play, and the main themes of the play revolve around its central metaphors. First and foremost is the goat, whose name is Sylvia; Sylvia is a literal goat who is described throughout the play before finally being dragged onstage after being murdered. Since the whole play is structured around Sylvia, it is no surprise that it has been the subject of ongoing critical discussion ever since. One theory about Martin, the protagonist’s, bestiality is that it is a masked argument for the normalcy of homosexuality, or the difficulty of knowing one’s beloved (Dircks). On the homosexuality theory, another critic noted how Albee’s play lined up with ideas presented by other voices of pop culture regarding sexuality and the topical issue of gay marriage. For example, Ellen DeGenerous had a comedy routine in which she compared gay marriage to marriage with a goat, and critic Ellen Gainor argued *The Goat* helped cement the zeitgeist of the highly charged struggle around sexuality in contemporary

American culture, using bestiality as an aberration to make homosexuality seem normal in comparison.

Another important symbol in the play is Martin's job as an architect, and his recent acquisition of the task of building a "dream city" of the future. Gainor notes the thematic significance of Martin's job, and even connects it to the previous symbol of the goat and what that represents for the characters and audience. She asserts that Martin shares a reverence for the American pastoral ideal, contrasting nature and the rural environment with the urban "dream city" he is building. Martin and his wife, Stevie, share an attraction to, yet an alienation from, the rural natural world. Martin violates nature through his relationship with Sylvia and also his destruction of nature in order to build a futuristic utopian city, summarizing our complicated relationship with nature and progress, seeking a natural self, and fully understanding the consequences of disrupting the natural world now and for future generations.

Something noted by David Finkle that appears in various critical responses is that while audiences seem to quickly come to terms with the bestiality presented in the play, they have a much more difficult time accepting the homosexuality and borderline incestuous relationship Martin shares with his son Billy in one short scene. Finkle states, "Audiences seem to have no trouble accepting the whole goat thing in *The Goat*, perhaps because they go along with it as something too extreme to be believed and therefore harmless; yet they gasp when Martin is kissed by his gay son in a genuinely touching father-son encounter. This reaction indicates that, while attempting to shock audiences into re-examining their prejudices, Albee doesn't quite know what society's intolerances continue to be." Gainor adds to this conversation, including the theme of childhood

sexuality itself, saying Albee, “confronts the dominant heteronormative culture, with its designation of gay sexuality as aberrant, and challenges it to rethink not only these categories, but also the impossibility of making clear-cut distinctions among the manifold, polymorphously perverse expressions of sexual desire.”

Stylistically, this play stays true to the many elements that have established Albee as a master playwright while also illustrating the development he has made throughout his long and successful career. Dircks notes that Albee maintains a level of absurdity, as he was defined by Martin Esslin early in his career. To summarize Esslin’s theory, he describes this absurd style as follows: “first, ludicrous or ridiculous; secondly, out of harmony with reason; and third, devoid of purpose, thus leading to a sense of the hopelessness of the human condition” (Dircks). Gainor expounds on this, saying that unlike with *Seascape*, which also deals with encounters with The Other, *The Goat* eliminates the fantastical in favor of a new form of absurd. It transcends existential tensions (and the hermeticism of his older work) to the more pressing contemporary global issues of ecological significance. Gainor asserts that *The Goat* incorporates familial/marital elements (as in *Virginia Woolf*) and is more naturalistic and straightforward than *The Play About the Baby*, and it utilizes Albee’s razor sharp wit and playful dialogue, and his common trope of painful confession.

II: CONTEMPORARY RESPONSE

Over time, certain plays and playwrights become iconic, and start to make up the fabric of our cultural history. For playwrights like Edward Albee, a career creating theatre spans over many decades and across a wide variety of shifting cultural climates. Many questions can be raised about Albee and his relevancy to contemporary audiences, and how he has changed throughout his career to reflect the needs of his audience and the world around him. Furthermore, there are general questions that can be raised from Albee and his work that continue to be relevant questions for every new generation of theatre artists and professionals. In addition to studying and understanding the existing research regarding Edward Albee, another way of gaining insight into these issues of relevancy and how we interpret past scholarship is simply to pose these questions to artists and professionals who represent today's generation of theatre. By interviewing a number of theatre colleagues, including students and practicing artists from the various fields of acting, playwriting, dramaturgy, and directing, one gains a clearer understanding of Albee's place in contemporary theatre.

II.1: List of Questions

Here are a list of questions, based on the research from Section I, that have been posed to a number of colleagues representing today's generation of theatre:

- What are your thoughts on Edward Albee? How familiar are you with his work, and what are your opinions regarding him and his plays?
- What are some of the challenges of an established dramatist trying to write for a contemporary theatre audience?

- Albee’s plays are known for often dealing with issues of family and the roles of mother, father, and children within an American household. How might these issues have changed since *The American Dream* (1960) or *Virginia Woolf* (1961) was written?
- Albee once said that he, as the writer, has the clearest vision of what a play should look and sound like, and no other director can come as close to its original intentions, saying, “Why not have the person who best knows the play direct it?” Should playwrights direct their own work? What are some of the advantages/disadvantages?
- *Virginia Woolf* was deemed a “filthy play” by a member of the Pulitzer Prize advisory board, largely for its use of profane language, and when it came out many critics called for the removal of instances of taking the Lord’s name in vain. It was also denied a Pulitzer Prize for its “offensive language” and “blatant subject matter.” Do you agree with these critics? Has the attitude toward these issues changed over time?
- Albee’s plays often present women who are strong-willed and considered maternal rather than romantic. However, Albee still has a reputation for characterizing women in a negative light, which has been argued as a result of his misogyny. How does this fit into a modern understanding of feminism and feminist theory?
- *The Play About the Baby* is one of Albee’s most experimental works. The characters are called Man, Woman, Boy and Girl, rather than named, there is no specific setting or time, characters address the audience directly, and

it pushes absurdist elements to more of an extreme. How does this form of absurdism fit in with the experimental theatre scene of today? Given that it has been argued as a deconstructed version of *Virginia Woolf*, which play do you find more appealing?

- In his most recent play of the three, *The Goat or, Who is Sylvia?* (2002), Albee uses the concept of a man falling in love with a goat, “as both a literal situation and a complex metaphor for a human being’s longing for love and ecstasy.” Most critics avoided saying anything directly about the play’s content, likely because of their discomfort. What do you think of this play? Do you think it is appropriate for a contemporary audience?
- *The Goat* won a Tony Award, a Drama Desk Award, and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Do plays like *The Goat* prove Albee can maintain relevance with a contemporary audience?
- Albee has revealed the complicated relationship he had with his mother and also is openly homosexual. This leads critics to draw lines between characters in his plays and details from his own life. How relevant is a playwright’s biographical information when reading/understanding a play?

II.2: Responses

These interview questions were presented to number of undergraduate and graduate students in the theatre department, and were asked in a specific way that enabled those who were not familiar with Albee's work to still be a part of the conversation. In these cases, the questions established a basic understanding of a specific Albee play, or the view of a particular critic, and then asked for a personal opinion. The questions also ranged from specific to broad, so that the discussion could be primarily about Albee but also about larger issues that apply to plays and playwrights in general. The questions were also catered to the interviewees; for example, they might ask for a director's opinion or the answer from the perspective of a playwright. The purpose of these interviews was not to prove or disprove any particular idea, nor was it to answer these questions with any superior authority or to establish objective answers. Rather, the purpose was to gain an understanding of where Albee stands in the minds of a group of young theatre professionals, and add to the ever-growing conversation about his works and the nature of theatre in general.

1. *What are your thoughts on Edward Albee? How familiar are you with his work, and what are your opinions regarding him and his plays?*

This question was met with a wide range of answers. Of those interviewed, everyone had heard of Edward Albee, but only about half were familiar with any of his work specifically. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was the most well-recognized of his plays, followed by *The Goat or, Who is Sylvia?*. *The American Dream* was mentioned a few times, as well as other titles including *Seascape*, *The Sandbox*, *Three Tall Women*, and *The Zoo Story*. For those who were familiar with these plays, they all had a clear respect

and admiration for them. Some interviewees listed Albee amongst their favorite playwrights and there was only one play, *Seascape*, which was negatively regarded by one interviewee. There was more than one director interviewed who was currently planning, or had previous experience already, directing some form of Albee's work.

2. *What are some of the challenges of an established dramatist, specifically Edward Albee, trying to write for a contemporary theatre audience?*

A few interviewees made the point that Albee's biggest challenge is himself. Edward Albee does not want anyone to change the scripts in any way, and he has a reputation for reprimanding directors who try to take an innovative approach to his plays. One compared him to Beckett (or Beckett's estate) in that he does not allow anyone to deviate from the original vision for the plays. Audiences today are looking for interpretation of texts, and theatre professionals today want the freedom and ability to interpret texts in different ways.

3. *Albee once said that he, as the writer, has the clearest vision of what a play should look and sound like, and no other director can come as close to its original intentions, saying, "Why not have the person who best knows the play direct it?" Should playwrights direct their own work? What are some of the advantages/disadvantages?*

One interviewee, who identifies as a playwright, shared that he believes playwrights should not direct their own work because they will have a single, specific view of how a play should be produced, but if another director is brought in, he or she will see things in the text that the playwright never even thought of or included on a subconscious level.

Another interviewee added that the problem with one single vision by a playwright who also directs is that it rejects the idea that the audience will bring their own interpretations or opinions to the material as they are viewing it. When one person is so focused on promoting their main vision, a lot of the other ideas that the text might be able to offer will be lost. Another added to this idea, claiming that a playwright directing his or her own work is effectively “inbreeding” their own play; just as genetic diversity is important for allowing species to adapt and survive, dramatic texts must adapt with the multitude of diverse audiences, both in terms of demographics and time period, for which they will be performed. Another claimed that some playwrights are afraid of allowing another director to produce their work because they believe it will dilute their message, which he claimed to be false, because allowing another artist to approach one’s work can be beneficial.

Another interviewee, a director, added that while a playwright absolutely can direct their own work, it might be beneficial to release the script after it is finished to another creatively minded artist and let it gestate with them before coming back to direct it. This will allow another set of ideas to inform the play and could enlighten the final product.

One interviewee said that having a playwright as part of the process can negatively impact the production, because it limits a director and the two roles can conflict during rehearsals. This might support the idea that a playwright who directs his own work could be more successful because it would eliminate that conflicting voice. Another interviewee said that every director will always have a slightly different vision, and therefore the playwright just becomes another director with a vision that happens to line up more closely with a script’s original intentions. Ultimately it comes down to how well that playwright functions in the role of director, and his level of skill dictates the final

product, regardless of the fact that he wrote the play as well. However, one interviewee added that if a director wants to completely change the intentions of a script, then that person should either pick a different script or become a playwright because he or she misunderstands the role of a director. On the topic of following a script exactly, especially with regard to stage directions, some interviewees stated that a playwright who is extremely specific in their stage directions and unwilling to allow any changes severely limits the number of artists who are willing and able to produce that show, thereby limiting the play's overall impact and reach.

4. *Virginia Woolf* was deemed a “filthy play” by a member of the Pulitzer Prize advisory board, largely for its use of profane language, and when it came out many critics called for the removal of instances of taking the Lord’s name in vain. It was also denied a Pulitzer Prize for its “offensive language” and “blatant subject matter.” Do you agree with these critics? Has the attitude toward these issues changed over time?

One interviewee said the attitude has completely changed, and audiences today want as much controversy as possible in order to keep writing interesting. However, another playwright explained how he has had submissions rejected because a lot of the groups seeking plays want to remove all the controversial or inappropriate content. Adding to this, one interviewee said that this dichotomy illustrates how audiences are slowly changing their attitude about this issue. He claimed that professional theatre critics, especially those more in tune with younger generations, are really looking for controversy in writing whereas smaller, local theatre groups, which provide the greatest source of people seeking new work, are still largely controlled by older generations who

want to perpetuate the same ideals and story rather than attempting to challenge or change them. These theatres often respond with the claim that they are a “family” organization, which raises the question of whether it falls to playwrights to suit their plays to the organizations for whom they are writing, but sometimes it is impossible to know even if an effort to research has been made. It was said that the general idea has changed within the literary community but not the theatre community as a whole; it is acceptable to write and read about controversial issues and language, but when it comes to staging there is still a resistance in a lot of places. Young Jean Lee’s play, *Straight White Men*, was mentioned as an example of a play that has been critically acclaimed but still results in audience members walking out during performances. One interviewee said that it is not up to the playwright, who may be years ahead in terms of their progressivism, to determine what is acceptable but rather audiences and society at large who make that determination. This concept makes it often unfair for playwrights who produce material during certain periods of time which may be held back for reasons that later become non-issues or even advantages (i.e. controversial topics or profane language). The interviewees acknowledged that their opinions reflected the fact that they represented a younger generation and would likely be different from a group of older people. Another interviewee added that television and movies have changed the language and content of popular entertainment, usually requiring more illicit ratings in order to be successful. He claimed this is reflected in theatre, especially on Broadway where profits and popular appeal have such a huge influence on what shows are produced, often over artistic merit.

5. *Albee's plays often present women who are strong-willed and considered maternal rather than romantic. However, Albee still has a reputation for characterizing women in a negative light, which has been argued as a result of his misogyny. How does this fit into a modern understanding of feminism and feminist theory?*

One interviewee claimed that just because a writer creates a strong female character does not mean she has to be a *good* strong female character, citing Lady Macbeth as an example. She claimed that even if his female characters were painted in a bad light, the male characters were written in a similarly negative view so it should not be viewed as a fault of the playwright for creating equal characters. Another added that this idea illustrates the concept of trying to capture an ideal versus trying to capture the true nature of a culture or person. He said that Albee tries to capture what he has seen, and exaggerate it in order to make a point about how he has viewed the world, rather than trying to create an ideal world. This might conflict with modern feminists who believe in only portraying the ideal woman, rather than what might be a more accurate representation of a woman in today's society whom might not live in a way that aligns with the ideals of feminism for a number of different reasons. Another interviewee claimed that his plays include female characters who are written from the perspective of men, or talked about by the male characters on stage, sometimes resulting in a skewed idea of what women are really like, or presenting them as objects.

6. *In his most recent play of the three, *The Goat or, Who is Sylvia?* (2002), Albee uses the concept of a man falling in love with a goat, "as both a literal situation and a complex metaphor for a human being's longing for love and ecstasy." It*

has also been theorized that the play is a metaphor for forbidden love, namely that of homosexuality. Do you think that the themes of sexuality and love in general are presented fairly? Is the presentation/comparison of bestiality to homosexuality going too far?

One interviewee said that comparing homosexuality to bestiality might be taking it too far, but writing a play that suggests these cultures are okay even though they are treated as a taboo is perfectly acceptable. Another said that as younger, more liberal theatre artists, we are more prone to label something as dynamic or interesting rather than offensive, but someone who is more conservative might find it disgusting or agree with an ill-informed interpretation of the concept. Another said that as artists, we can usually separate from our personal sensibilities and view a play for what it is and for its overall intentions. For people who appreciate art, good theatre, and complex metaphors, they would not get caught up on a label of “offensive.” He added that the play might work better in 2016 than 2002, because people would look more at the artistry of it, given how a lot of society has progressed significantly with their understanding and treatment of human sexuality even in the last 14 years. In 2016, with social media and pop culture icons like Lady Gaga and Miley Cyrus drawing so much attention for their controversial artistry, plays like *The Goat* would fit in as way of starting conversations on larger issues. The content of the play was probably more shocking in 2002 than 2016, given our updated conversations on sexuality and gender. Another interviewee felt the concept was offensive and insulting, because there is a history of certain bigoted people comparing homosexuality to bestiality so putting it on stage aligns with the mentality of those people.

Do you think human rights activists would appreciate this play?

One interviewee said that activists probably would not appreciate the play but Albee wrote it likely because he wanted to illustrate how he feels society is treating this particular group of people. Someone could take the play and claim it is unacceptable, but if the playwright is saying that in his experience someone has treated his homosexuality in a way that makes him feel it is taboo, then it is not unacceptable. Another said that writers are presenting their own viewpoints and while they may be written in a way that is extreme or over the top, that is only because the writer is trying to prove a point about the way society reacts to and talks about certain issues. It might be difficult for an audience to get past the issue at hand and focus on the larger ideas it is trying to present. Another interviewee compared the play to a different play that dealt with the same subject but was strictly a comedy, and what makes Albee's play different is how it is structured with both comedy and tragedy, noting toward the definition of a tragedy. Another opinion was that the play might function differently for different audiences. Audiences who have experienced the issues of the play may relate to it better, while those who haven't faced those same struggles might not understand the play's intentions.

Is there a line of what is appropriate in theatre?

One interviewee brought up the idea that "without thinking, there is no right or wrong," adding that audiences should have to see an idea presented that will make them think. He said that an audience should come to the theatre with an expectation of what will be presented on stage, especially given a title like *The Goat*, and be open to the ideas presented. He compared the play to other works that present taboo subjects, like Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge*, saying it is intriguing and even thrilling to see a play

about something considered “dirty.” Another said that theatre is a great medium for deconstructing what our norms are as a society, and that it should emphasize and focus on taboos. He asserted that he loves *The Goat* because it is painful and ultimately a tragedy; it combines silliness with the grotesque which creates a visceral effect on people, making audiences really question themselves and view the situation from their own perspective. He added that Albee explores the subjectivity of love and the many themes that revolve around such a concept, so when a taboo subject arises in theatre it should be embraced. If no one is being hurt physically or caused psychological harm, there are no boundaries on stage. And while these topics might be something audience members are not used to dealing with, it can be fun for them to have to step out of their comfort zone.

7. Albee has revealed the complicated relationship he had with his mother and also is openly homosexual. This leads critics to draw lines between characters in his plays and details from his own life. How relevant is a playwright’s biographical information when reading/understanding a play?

One interviewee said that it was very relevant, and that reading an Albee play before and after understanding the playwright’s personal background resulted in a huge impact on his understanding of the text. He said that in his personal experience he was once of the mindset that a playwright’s biography was irrelevant, but after reading extensively on Albee’s biographical information and then rereading *Virginia Woolf*, he was significantly more informed on what was happening and it illuminated the text in a major way, allowing him to understand it on a deeper level. Another interviewee added that while this playwright information might lead to a better understanding of the text, one should be able to relate to it and its characters without any of that outside knowledge. From a

playwright or dramaturg's perspective, it might help to analyze character flaws and motives, but Albee is also able to influence an audience and convey his theme's clearly without them knowing any biographical information. The consensus was that these details inform a playwright or dramaturg in a different way and can be more important for those roles than a director, actor, or audience member. Additionally, it was stated that it is important to consider how someone approaching these plays defines a successful production. In Albee's own opinion, it would require a vision as close to the original playwright's intention as possible, and therefore this information would be vitally important in understanding that original vision. But if this definition of success is loosened to allow room for interpretation then this information is not as relevant, as a director and production team would just need to rely on the text and their own ideas and experiences to craft the performance they want.

8. *The Play About the Baby is one of Albee's most experimental works. The characters are called Man, Woman, Boy and Girl, rather than named, there is no specific setting or time, characters address the audience directly, and it pushes absurdist elements to more of an extreme. How does this form of absurdism fit in with the experimental theatre scene of today? Given that it has been argued as a deconstructed version of Virginia Woolf, which play do you find more appealing?*

One interviewee stated that most times he would rather see something new rather than seeing a play he is already familiar with. An older generation might like something with a more standard format, but a younger generation, especially one who is more informed about theatre, would probably want to watch a newer, more experimental piece. Another added that *The Baby* is more up for interpretation, which is something that might be more

fun or interesting for an audience, also adding that it would be an interesting experience for an audience who knows the classic text *Virginia Woolf* to see what might be a deconstructed version of it and be able to compare and contrast the two plays. Especially given someone like Edward Albee, it would be fun to watch a playwright deconstruct and experiment with his own ideas and stories. Another interviewee added that conventional plays work well when the characters are easily relatable, but experimental works often allow for a wider interpretation and a greater ability for people to look for the meaning in the text, and relate that message to themselves. Conventional plays can be hit-or-miss in their ability to create relatable characters, as they present people with more specific characteristics. Another interviewee added that older generations come to the theatre to see what they know whereas younger audiences are always looking for a fresh way to present theatre, even if they have an appreciation for classic texts. One interviewee, a director, said that he thinks theatre is evolving, and new works reflect an updated rehearsal process. Directors rarely sit and watch from the audience anymore, actors appreciate when they direct onstage with them and create new work collaboratively. He said contemporary theatre is more about creating “the art” and has started to blur a lot of the traditional labels and hierarchies that were prevalent in theatre practices in the past.

9. *Some critics have labelled Edward Albee as a “playwright of his times.” His work spans from the early 1960s into the twenty-first century; has he managed to stay relevant or is he more aptly labelled as a classic playwright?*

One interviewee said he is a great marriage of both a classic and contemporary dramatist. He maintains his relevancy even though he is a timeless icon, like many other established figures in our pop culture who still have the power to present new messages.

He labelled Albee a “timeless playwright” for every season; his form is older, but his new plays are still updated in thought. Another said that he believes Albee will be remembered well into the future for his contributions to theatre; even now *Virginia Woolf* is referenced casually by theatre professionals which says something about Albee’s work and what he has done for the theatre. He respects how Albee can transition from *Virginia Woolf* to a more deconstructed piece like *The Baby* and then something as rowdy and fun as *The Goat*.

10. *Albee’s plays are known for often dealing with issues of family and the roles of mother, father, and children within an American household. How might these issues have changed since The American Dream (1960) or Virginia Woolf (1961) was written?*

One interviewee said plays like *The American Dream* and *Virginia Woolf* are twists on the ideal picture of the family, and while a lot has changed since the 1960s, the main issues facing families are largely the same. Another said that there are still a lot of the same basic issues people are dealing with, such as teenagers wanting to express themselves and make their own decisions. There will always be children who want to break away from their parents’ generation, but the difference is that society has stopped repressing this desire as much and released a lot of the pressure for young people to align perfectly with the goals and ideals of their parents. Some of the details have changed, and families may look different, but the same issues of family relations and human beings being able or unable to communicate with each other will never go away.

Works Cited

- Albee, Edward. *Edward Albee's The American Dream: The Sandbox; The Death of Bessie Smith; Fam and Yam*. New York, NY: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 2009. Print.
- Albee, Edward. *Edward Albee's The Goat or, Who is Sylvia?*. New York, NY: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 2004. Print.
- Albee, Edward. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. St. Louis, MO: Turtleback Books, 1988. Print.
- Als, Hilton. "Just the Folks." *New Yorker* 1 Dec. 2014. Web. 12 Feb. 2016.
- Dircks, Phyllis T. *Edward Albee: A Literary Companion*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010. Print.
- Esslin, Martin. "Albee as Absurdist." Kolin and Madison 63-65.
- Finkle, David. "Review. 'The American Dream' and 'The Sandbox'" *Theatremania*. Theatremania, 1 Apr. 2008. Web. 20 Feb. 2016.
- Gainor, J. Ellen. "Albee's The Goat: Rethinking Tragedy for the 21st Century." *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee*. By Stephen J. Bottoms. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2005. N. pag.
- Galbraith, John Kenneth. "The Mystique of Failure: A Latter-Day Reflection on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*" Kolin and Madison 149-151.

- Gross, Robert F. "Melancholia-Machine: Perversity and Loss in *The Play About the Baby*." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 50.1 (2009): 121-133. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Dec. 2015.
- Harris, Wendell V. "Morality, Absurdity, and Albee." *Kolin and Madison* 117-122.
- Hirsch, Foster. "Evasions of Sex: The Closet Dramas." *Kolin and Madison* 125-135.
- Kellman, Steven G. *Magill's Survey of American Literature, Volume 6*. Salem, MA: Salem Press, 2007. Print.
- Kolin, Philip C., and J. Madison. Davis. *Critical Essays on Edward Albee*. Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1986. Print.
- "Listing, 2005 Broadway" *InternetBroadwayDatabase*. Web. 14 Jan. 2016
- Mehlman, Barbara and Manus, Geri. "Review" *Newyorktheatreguide.com*. Web. 15 Jan. 2016.
- Roudané, Matthew C. "A Playwright Speaks: An Interview with Edward Albee." *Kolin and Madison* 193-199.
- Roy, Emil. "*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and the Tradition." *Kolin and Madison* 87-94.
- Rutenberg, Michael. "Albee in Protest." *Kolin and Madison*.
- "'The American Dream' 2008" *Lortel.org*. Web. 15 Jan. 2016.
- Zsanett, Barna. "Old Vs. New. Edward Albee Dreams Of America." (n.d.): *BASE*. Web. 20 Dec. 2015.