

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Edward Albee's At Home at the Zoo

(Formerly titled *Peter and Jerry*)

DIRECTED BY REBECCA BAYLA TAICHMAN

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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OPPOSITE Edward Albee at his typewriter, which he "liberated" from Western Union (May 1963).

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NEXT PAGE Central Park Benches, by Marcus Beard (2008).



CHARACTERS, CAST, AND SYNOPSIS OF

EDWARD ALBEE'S AT HOME AT THE ZOO

Edward Albee's At Home at the Zoo was produced under the title *Peter and Jerry* by Second Stage Theatre, New York, in 2007. *Homelife* was commissioned by Hartford Stage, Connecticut, to accompany Albee's 1958 one-act *The Zoo Story*; together they were produced at Hartford Stage as *Peter and Jerry* in 2004. The original version of *The Zoo Story* premiered at the Berlin Festival, Germany, in September 1959.

CHARACTERS AND CAST

ANN	René Augesen
PETER	Anthony Fusco
JERRY	Manoel Felciano

THE SETTING

New York City, present day. Peter and Ann's living room. Then, Central Park.

SYNOPSIS

ACT I. *Homelife*. The living room of Ann and Peter's apartment. Sunday afternoon. Peter—45 years old, tidy, and bland—sits alone, absorbed in a book. His wife, Ann, 38 and unexceptional, enters from the kitchen. "We should talk," she says. Peter does not reply, and she goes back to the kitchen. Finally registering that he has been addressed, he calls after her; she returns, and he apologizes for being lost in concentration. They talk about dinner and muse over the fact that they own two of everything—microwaves, daughters, parakeets. Peter says wistfully that he wants a dog. She corrects him, "No, you don't," and he agrees. She asks him about the 700-page textbook he is reading for work. He explains that it is the most boring (and probably the most important) thing his company has ever published; he recommends it to Ann if she ever has trouble sleeping, and then admits that he has noticed her leaving their bed before dawn.

She needles him about why he has never questioned her about where she goes. He asks, and she explains that she goes "to the kitchen, usually," where she was recently "thinking about thinking about" having a double mastectomy as a preemptive measure against breast cancer. Then she recalls that these thoughts came to her after her mother told her she had decided to have an affair. Ann and Peter acknowledge that neither of them is thinking about having an affair.

They discuss what would happen if, one day, Ann suddenly came back to bed and woke Peter up to tell him something important. They then agree that they don't have "important" things to discuss, because their life together has been smooth. Although each admits to having his/her own personal ups and downs, there is "nothing to be done about" such problems, so they don't trouble each other with them. They wonder if they should.

Ann unloads, voicing her concern that Peter does not love her the way she needs to be loved and that nothing in her life is "sufficient." He responds that he thought they had made a pact to live an uneventful life together, a pleasant voyage on a calm sea. She agrees, but adds, "Isn't it frightening," predicting that their lives are so even and peaceful they'll never even die—they'll simply vanish. She points to their sex life: she tells Peter he is good at making love, but "terrible at fucking," and she wonders if they are too civilized. This prompts a story from Peter concerning his college years, when, as part of a fraternity hazing, he was set up with a girl at a sex party. The girl asked for rough sex, which culminated in Peter losing control and seriously hurting her. Since then, he has been careful never to hurt anyone. Ann clarifies that she does not desire more pain in their sex life: "I think I was talking about being an animal—nothing more." He responds, a little uncertain, that everyone is an animal. She agrees, but adds that a person's animal nature can be learned away.

Ann promises that she is happy with him for being a fine husband, but unhappy with "something else." Peter asks if their conversation has helped. "Yes," she says, "a little," then she slaps him hard across the face before kissing his cheek. She says she wants a little bit of chaos in their lives, and they imagine a tornado tearing through their home, destroying everything while leaving them untouched. Ann returns to the kitchen to continue cooking. Peter decides to go to Central Park to read.

ACT II. *The Zoo Story*. Central Park. There are two park benches. Behind them: foliage, trees, sky. Peter, seated on one of the benches, is reading his book. Jerry—a carelessly dressed man in his late 30s—enters and announces, "I've been to the zoo," repeating himself with growing intensity until he captures Peter's attention. As Jerry rambles, Peter, anxious to dismiss him, prepares his pipe and returns to his book. Jerry persists: "Do you mind if we talk?" While obviously minding, Jerry says, "Why . . . no, no," and puts down his book.

Jerry questions Peter about his home and work life. Peter attempts to dodge some of the more intrusive questions but eventually answers them. Jerry moves about the stage with slowly increasing determination and authority as he tells Peter that, in order to get to the zoo, he walked from Greenwich Village all the way up Fifth Avenue. Peter takes this to mean that Jerry lives in the Village, and this fact somehow excuses his odd behavior.

Jerry corrects him: he lives in a four-story brownstone rooming house on the Upper West Side. He describes his life in his “laughably small room” surrounded by a motley crew of tenants.

Jerry explains that both his parents died when he was around 12; then his guardian (his aunt) died on the afternoon of his high school graduation. He says that he “was a h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l” for eleven days when he was 15 and never sleeps with a girl more than once. Peter suggests that he has not yet met the right person, and Jerry angrily changes the subject back to his living arrangement. He describes his unfortunate, lustful landlady and her dog, the gatekeepers to his dwelling.

Jerry then tells “The Story of Jerry and the Dog,” in which he describes the “black monster of a beast” in great detail and examines the progression of their relationship. The dog hated Jerry from the first and would snap at him when he tried to get to his apartment. Jerry decided to win the dog over with kindness and fed it hamburgers. Jerry repeated this for days, and at first the dog seemed satisfied, but it continued to attack Jerry. So he decided to kill it. He put rat poisoning in one of the burgers and the dog became very ill. Although it recovered, the dog never snapped at Jerry again. It was an empty success, however. Now when the two meet in the hallway, they stop and regard each other with “sadness and suspicion” and feigned indifference. Jerry reports, “I have gained solitary free passage, if that much further loss can be said to be a gain.” Jerry realizes that he loves the dog: “If you can’t deal with people, you have to make a start somewhere. WITH ANIMALS!”

After completing his story, Jerry becomes cheerful. Peter, numb, claims he does not understand why Jerry told him this tale. Jerry calls him a liar, and Peter, checking his watch, says he has to get home. Jerry begins tickling Peter and coaxes him into listening to another story, this one about what happened at the zoo, where Jerry went “to find out more about the way people exist with animals, and the way animals exist with each other, and people too.” As he tells this story, Jerry begins to poke, punch, and push Peter off the bench, resulting in a territorial confrontation over who has the right to sit there. Jerry takes out a knife, and tosses it at Peter’s feet so that they will be “more evenly matched.” Peter refuses to pick it up, but Jerry grabs Peter by the collar and demands that he take the weapon and fight for his self-respect and “that goddamned bench.” Jerry then slaps Peter, spits in his face, and mocks his manhood. Enraged, Peter finally picks up the knife. Jerry charges Peter and impales himself on the blade. Peter screams. Jerry screams, the primal “sound of an infuriated and fatally wounded animal.” Jerry then smiles and thanks Peter—“I came unto you and you have comforted me”—and tells him to leave before the police arrive. Horrified and weeping, Peter leaves, and Jerry dies.

EDWARD ALBEE'S *AT HOME AT THE ZOO*

MEET AND GREET/DESIGN PRESENTATION

Excerpts from Remarks Made to A.C.T. Cast and Staff May 13, 2009

During the first week of rehearsal of each production, A.C.T. staff members and the show's cast and creative team gather in a studio to meet, mingle, and get to know each other. After personal introductions are made, the director and designers present to the assembled group their vision for the design of the production, which is typically the culmination of months of research, discussion, and textual analysis. This introduction is a kind of "snapshot" of the creative team's understanding of the world of the play at the moment they step into the room with the actors, an understanding that will evolve and grow and perhaps change in significant ways as the cast brings life and breath and physical action to the playwright's words over the following four weeks of rehearsal.

Below are excerpts from remarks made at the first rehearsal of *Edward Albee's At Home at the Zoo* at A.C.T., which offer a glimpse into the initial impulses behind the look and feel of the upcoming production.

DIRECTOR REBECCA BAYLA TAICHMAN

I am deeply, deeply delighted to be here. I've just been on a 26-hour flight from Rwanda. I have a scrambled brain. Forgive me!

At Home at the Zoo. It's a delicate piece and it requires a kind of constant ambiguity—so while sometimes the director can "explain the play" on the first day I'm going to resist that impulse. Boiled down descriptions or easy answers seem especially unhelpful with actors as wonderful as these—actors who can so brilliantly contain contradiction and ambiguity. Best, in this case, to trust the text—with all the complex questions it asks, with all its bruised and elusive humanity. It's an absurd, slippery, and also profoundly real, humanity in Albee's world.

Having just returned from Africa, I'm reminded in a new way how deeply AMERICAN this play is. And how much it speaks to us *right here right now*. Perhaps this is best articulated in the contrast to what life is like in Rwanda. When I was there, I kept thinking about how a lot of us live—at least where I live in New York—we're all living in the sky, in these weird little shoeboxes. I often think about that—I'm in my little shoebox trying to go to sleep, and there's somebody else in a little shoebox next to me trying to go to sleep, and there are these weird little walls that separate us, and we're all kind of lonely dangling up there. That was a key image for [scenic designer] Robert [Brill] and me. I was interested



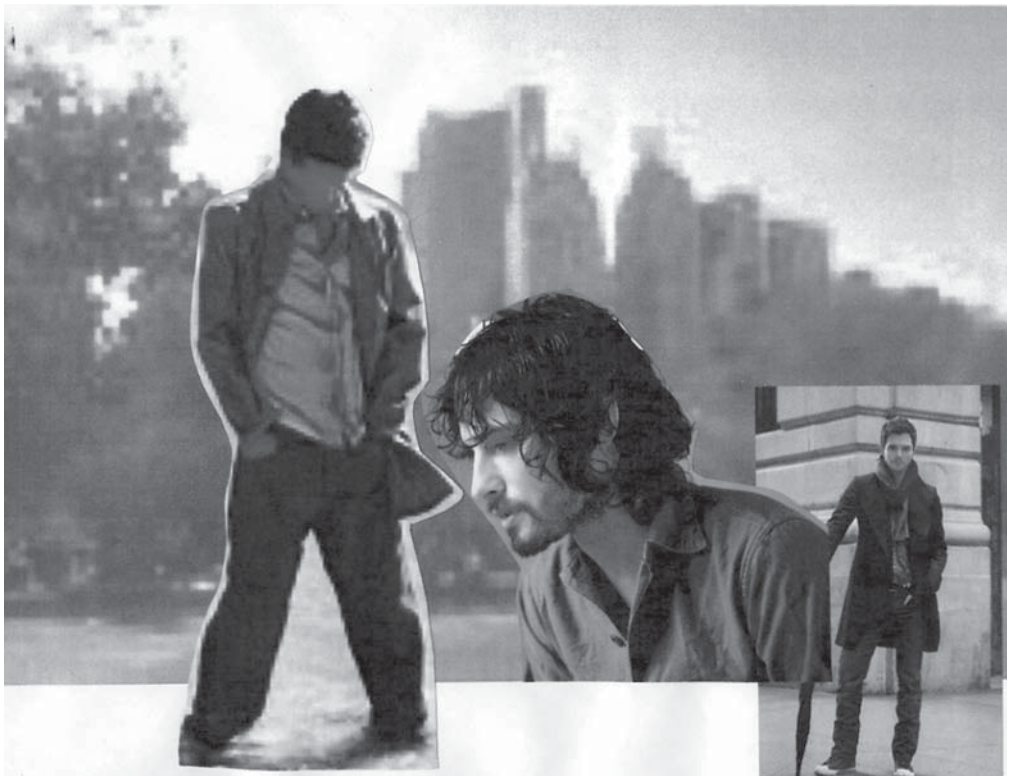
Research collage for Ann by costume designer David F. Draper

in this idea of a floating, disconnected home: the first act is set in this apartment building on the Upper East Side, and it should feel rootless. It's just the opposite in Rwanda: people are connected to the EARTH, in their homes, on the streets (some paved, but most not) . . . There are stark differences between having money, privilege—STUFF—which these two characters [Ann and Peter] obviously do), and what I saw in Rwanda—severe poverty. In some ways we're incredibly lucky to have all these *things* and options, but it seems to have led to a kind of spiritual emptiness that we're rattling against, that we're trying to fill up with *things* rather than true connection or intimacy. We are *civilized* and *organized*—but is that anywhere near enough?

There's one moment from my trip to Rwanda that I wanted to share. It evokes what is so painfully missing from Ann and Peter's lives, and what Jerry is pushing for and desperate to find. ok . . . so I'm in Rwanda, working on this piece for Sundance, and it's mostly dance and music. There is a group of women drummers; this woman I'm working with (her name is Kiki) has started a group of women drummers. Until recently it had been forbidden for women to drum in Rwanda, until Kiki started this group . . . These are all traumatized people—there was a genocide in Rwanda 14 years ago—so all of these women have been through unimaginable horror. Part of the performance they presented that night was eight

of these women drumming for 45 minutes. It was simply beyond anything I've ever experienced. It shook everything inside all of us stuffy white people. I can't even begin to explain the sound and the release—and the chaos—and the beauty of this incredible emotional release from people who have been hunting for and finding a way to release their pain and longing, to reconnect to joy. At the end of their performance, I stood up, and I thought, "Well, I'm supposed to be here as a director," and I was supposed to say something, but all I could do was just scream, "Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!" All eight of the women ran to me and picked me up, and it was just this wild expression of feeling and raw truth. I felt part of their family.

There is something terrifying about how out of touch we tend to be with this kind of uncensored release and *reaching out*. It's one of the most terrifying things about "civilized" upper-class society. It's what is haunting Jerry, and it's why he tries so desperately, and with such vivid ferocity, to really *tear* down the bars of Peter's cage to make him truly connect to another human being—to make him come out of his well-heeled, well-polished



Research collage for Jerry by costume designer David F. Draper



Research collage for Peter by costume designer David F. Draper

shell and see what it feels like to be truly *present* to life and all its pain, its messiness, its contradictions, its underprivileged, its chaos.

In terms of the set, we talked a lot about this image of the shoebox, and we do want it to start with a strange blankness. Stark whites and creams. Warm, beautiful wood floor. A neutral, personality-less home. A small, windowless room—claustrophobic indoor space. It was Robert's idea to have the door sitting between them (in the background)—an exit between them rather than an expression of home or family.

For the second act, it is important that it be a sunny, luminous day. Like 9/11. There was nothing that said TRAGEDY about the actual day. The wood floor will remain—as if a shard of the apartment stuck to Jerry in his trip to the zoo—and Peter hasn't fully left the shattering afternoon with Ann behind him. The green [back]drop will be lit from behind, and have a lightness and energy to it and should suggest park-ness. Also, act one will be flat on the stage, but for act two we'll rake the stage, and in a tiny way the gravity will have been changed. It's just a little more off balance. The world is a wobblier place to be.

A.C.T. PRODUCTION MANAGER JEFF ROWLINGS: This is the first time since [A.C.T.'s 2001 production of Harold] Pinter's *Celebration* and *The Room* that we'll be using the theater's hydraulic system to tilt the stage halfway through a performance.

TAICHMAN: It's great because, in a subtle way, the whole geometry of the space will change. We're very lucky people to be able to have a button to push and change the stage during intermission.

COSTUME DESIGNER DAVID F. DRAPER: This is a fairly simple show [to design], but it's also very difficult. This very plain set is gorgeous, but it makes it a little harder to put clothes against. Against these really stark backgrounds I want to give the clothes as much texture as possible, so there are layers on people, and they're not wearing just one piece. So there are things on top of things, with different textures but still fairly simple colors.

TAICHMAN: The body isn't too revealed; there are layers covering everybody.

DRAPER: The other thing I want to accomplish—it will look very real.

TAICHMAN: Real . . . but stylized. With a slight theatrical lift.

A.C.T. ARTISTIC DIRECTOR CAREY PERLOFF: Are we assuming that this takes place in a contemporary world?

TAICHMAN: Yes, we're assuming it takes place now, in the present.

PERLOFF: That is the odd thing about this play. Because Albee hasn't rewritten *The Zoo Story*, the language of the act is the same as when he wrote the original in 1958, which was this very iconic, sort of proto-absurdist moment in American playwriting. And then he wrote [the first act,] *Homelife*, in 2004. So the language of the first act sits interestingly next to the second. One is a contemporary play and one is a timeless period play. We met with Albee in February and talked through all of the language, but he was not interested in changing anything in the second act. You can set *The Zoo Story* in the 1950s, but it really isn't the kind of play that demands that. It's like Pinter: it lifts out of that time period. It's a bit like when we did Pinter's *The Room*, which opened, oddly enough, on September 12, 2001. That play is from 1957, and then Pinter wrote *Celebration* almost 50 years later, which we produced on a double bill with *The Room*. It was a similar kind of thing, except that these two Albee plays are meant to sit together.

ACTOR MANOEL FELCIANO: Seeing this set will help us a lot in terms of not being so tied to a specific time.

TAICHMAN: Right. It's more "Central Park-ness" than literally, "We are in Central Park right now."

We're just beginning to talk about the sound design. Maybe the beginning is all in silence. The text is a score really—a gorgeous and intricate piece of music. I think it needs to be a very silent world against which the characters are trying to communicate—and [we need to] trust the great musicality of Albee's language.

SOUND DESIGNER JAKE RODRIGUEZ: I've been going around the city recording environments, so I've got some stuff for act two.

TAICHMAN: There is something to scoring the park that is so delicate. You do need to feel more of a life happening around them, but in a delicate and strange way. So it's going to be a bit of a process finding that. Otherwise silence feels right.

PEERING INTO THE SHOEBOX

An Interview with Scenic Designer Robert Brill

BY LESLEY GIBSON

When Edward Albee wrote *The Zoo Story* in 1958, the original script called for a fairly simple set. “Central Park,” the stage directions read, “there are two benches.” In 2004, Albee introduced a new first act to *The Zoo Story* called *Homelife*, which is set in the Upper East Side apartment of Peter (*The Zoo Story*’s unassuming book editor) and his wife, Ann (a new character), bringing another dimension to the world of the play as the story digs deeper into Peter’s emotional background. We talked to scenic designer Robert Brill about the process of reconsidering the setting of one of American theater’s most familiar dramas for the West Coast premiere of its 21st-century incarnation at A.C.T.

LESLEY GIBSON: WHAT WAS YOUR INITIAL APPROACH TO THE DESIGN FOR *AT HOME AT THE ZOO*?

ROBERT BRILL: We began with a few basic ideas. Both the director, Rebecca Taichman, and I felt it important to approach the design with a minimalist sensibility. We knew that the second act would be rooted in just two benches, and that if we were successful we would find a similar minimalist approach to the design for Albee’s new first act. It’s a living room, which sounds simple, right? That’s where the real challenge began.

Rebecca wanted to create a sense of isolation in the first act, so that the open space of the park in the second act would afford the play a kind of liberation of physical space. I remember mentioning that there might be a way to visually objectify [Peter and Ann’s] life in this isolated apartment in the same way that you would look into a diorama—the kind of shoebox diorama that you might have created when you were in second grade. We both felt that creating that kind of strong contrast between the two acts was vital to the play, so I would say that establishing that aspect of the set was probably the most important part of developing the design.

We also knew that color could play a significant role in creating a contrast between both acts. Our gut instinct was that the apartment would be neutral—most likely a traditional white interior—hopefully a blank canvas for the actors. It’s sort of empty, devoid of color, and reduced to just the shapes and volume of the room. In contrast, Rebecca felt that it was important for the park setting to reflect something bold, striking, and beautiful, versus a place that is foreboding and dangerous. While we didn’t want the approach to be realistic, we decided to explore the color green as an abstract background for the action. No leaves or

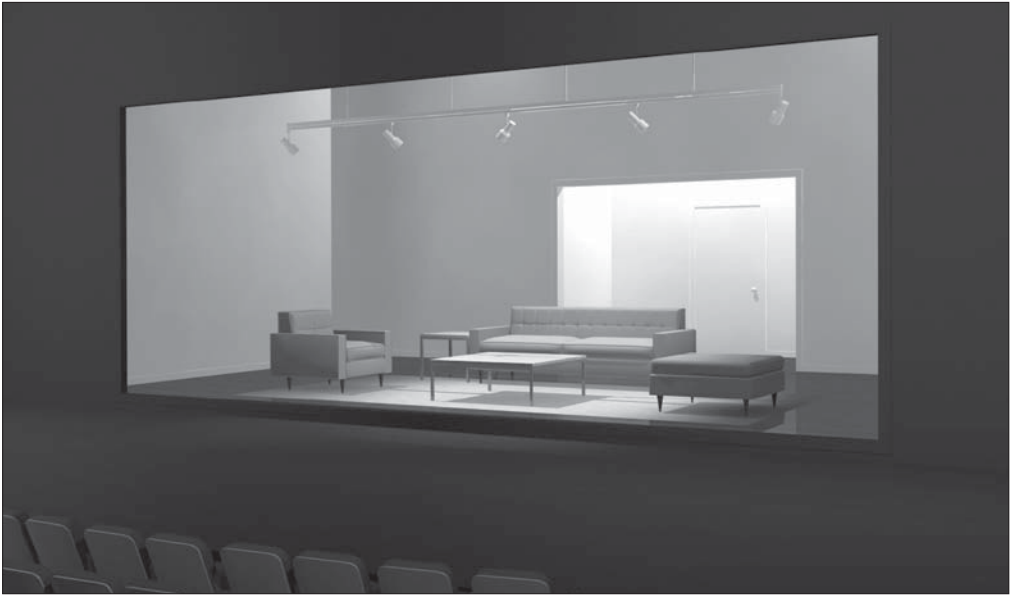


Lange Bank (Long Bench), by Rupert Ganzer (2008)

branches—just a large color field. Rebecca imagined it sort of as a large illuminated green lightbox. To unify both acts, I'd suggested that we might use a beautiful dark hardwood floor—like the rich intense color of espresso. This would give us an appropriate and handsome surface for the apartment and a neutral and somewhat theatrical floor for the park.

WHAT SPECIFIC DESIGN ELEMENTS DID YOU EMPLOY TO CREATE THAT SENSE OF ISOLATION, AND WHAT WERE YOU HOPING THE APARTMENT WOULD REVEAL ABOUT THE CHARACTERS?

I'm hoping that there's something oddly unsettling about the first-act setting. I kept checking in with Rebecca: Is it too austere? Does it feel clinical? Is it still serving the characters and the play? Sometimes it's hard to determine the precise character of a space because so much of it has to do with the quality of light in the room, and that's something that will evolve when our lighting designer, Stephen Strawbridge, begins his work onstage. Until then, we feel confident with the basic architectural ideas—the room is simple and spare, basically three walls and a door upstage center. You can almost consider the door, the exit from their domestic life, an additional character. And while the plan of the furniture is fairly straightforward and realistic, the shell of the room (or the envelope of the space as



Set model for Act I of *Edward Albee's At Home at the Zoo (Homelife)*, by scenic designer Robert Brill

we like to call it) is slightly exaggerated, creating an odd and somewhat dynamic tension between the confinement and the volume of the room. On paper it can appear austere, but again the objective is to create a canvas for the characters, and a few well-chosen props. On a set where you can't hide behind a lot of window dressing, it's a little like working under a microscope—the selection of items like a newspaper, or a coffee cup, or the fabric on a throw pillow needs to be spot-on.

IS THE DESIGN OF THE APARTMENT INTENDED TO BE TEMPORALLY AMBIGUOUS?

Albee does give some suggestion about what this space is like; in the opening stage directions in the script he suggests that there may be something modestly Scandinavian about the furnishings of this apartment ["Their living room; New York City, East Side, seventies. Pleasant; a little Danish Modernish, maybe."]. As I mentioned, it was important to maintain a sort of visual economy, but of course that doesn't mean that it has to be boring! It seemed appropriate that their furniture might descend from mid-century styles, so we assembled a collection of contemporary pieces—a sofa, a chair, and an ottoman—all unified in a similar color that matches the walls of the room. They're almost like acting cubes, very simple shapes. If we had gone with pieces with more character, I felt that we might've been giving away too much information. What we've tried to create is a kind of stylized



Set model for Act II of *Edward Albee's At Home at the Zoo (The Zoo Story)*, by scenic designer Robert Brill

“New York” apartment. I think our setting for the apartment is not so much ambiguous as it is modest and suggestive, and my hope is that there’s something visually dynamic in its simplicity. The goal is that it’s both minimal and neutral enough to allow the language and the actors to come forward.

DID YOU HAVE TO TAKE ANY SPECIAL CONSIDERATION IN CREATING A MINIMALISTIC DESIGN FOR A SPACE AS LARGE AS THE AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER?

One thing that I tried to avoid was to make it too vast, which is always a great opportunity on that stage. It’s sometimes hard to resist. You always run the risk of swallowing the actors by filling the entire stage or opening up the space completely, so I tried to find a balance that would keep the actors in focus and in the sweet spot of the stage.

DID YOU DO ANY SPECIFIC RESEARCH INTO THE BENCHES OF CENTRAL PARK? IS THERE A UNIFORM DESIGN?

No; the benches in Central Park do vary. But this bench in particular . . . the bench is really like the third character in the second act—although because there are two benches, I suppose that it’s really like four characters. I wanted them to be very, very specific and not



Central Park

like a bench you might find at a park in any other city. Not that this bench couldn't exist elsewhere, but in my opinion it really is the quintessential Central Park bench. I've always admired them. The style of the arm is something that is very particular. The arm is round and it's forged from cast iron. It's not terribly ornate, but it has it's own beauty. I definitely wanted them, so we did some research and located the same vendor—I think they're based in Connecticut—that provides the benches in Central Park. We ordered two and they're currently on their way to A.C.T.

“MISTER, I’VE BEEN TO THE ZOO!”

BY MICHAEL PALLER

In early 1958, Edward Albee sat down at a rickety table in the kitchen of his apartment on West Fourth Street in Greenwich Village. On yellow paper that he’d “liberated” from Western Union, for whom he worked delivering telegrams, using a typewriter obtained from the same unwittingly generous source, he wrote: “I’ve been to the zoo. I said I’ve been to the zoo. MISTER, I’VE BEEN TO THE ZOO!” In about two and a half weeks he’d finished *The Zoo Story*, two days before he turned 30. The play was far from the first thing he’d written; according to his biographer, Mel Gussow, it had been preceded over the past decade by seven other one-acts, two full-length plays, dozens of stories, and more than a hundred poems (not to mention the three-act sex farce called *Aliqueen* he wrote when he was 12, which, Albee says, his mother threw away). This new one-act, however, was the first work he wrote that was really *his*. “The thing that happened with *The Zoo Story*,” he said later, “was that I suddenly discovered myself writing in my own voice.” He told Gussow, “This was invention, this was creativity. This wasn’t . . . taking ideas from other people.”

He sent the play around in hopes of getting a production; Thornton Wilder and William Inge offered encouraging words, but neither was inclined to help further. Then, at the suggestion of his lover, William Flanagan, Albee sent it to the American composer David Diamond, who lived in Rome. Diamond was both encouraging *and* inclined to help. At his urging, Albee sent it to a Swiss actor named Pinkas Braun who might, Diamond thought, want to do it on television. Braun loved it, but knew it belonged in the theater. He made an audio recording of it, playing both Peter and Jerry, and sent it to the head of the drama department of the large German publisher S. Fischer Verlag in Frankfurt. She, in her turn, loved it, too, and contacted Boleslaw Barlog, the director of the Schiller Theater in Berlin, who produced it, in Braun’s German translation, on a double-bill with Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape* at the 1959 Berlin Festival. Through this odd chain of contacts, Albee became a produced playwright.

He flew to Berlin and his first experience of his play, which is in part about the difficulty of communicating one’s deepest feelings, was in a language he didn’t understand. He spent most of the first performance observing the audience, who were, he said later, rapt and laughing in the right places. He also reported in a letter to Flanagan that Jerry’s long speech about what happened at the zoo, delivered after he impales himself on the knife, was cut. “I miss it,” he wrote. “After all, it does help explain what the title means.” But overall, Albee pronounced himself more than satisfied.

In January 1960, the play opened in New York, off Broadway at the Provincetown Playhouse, once again on a bill with *Krapp's Last Tape*. Despite mixed reviews (Brooks Atkinson in the *New York Times* wrote, "Nothing of enduring value is said in either play"), the play was a hit with audiences who recognized, more than many critics did, a new voice: honest, wry, straightforward; one that had a way of slipping into the unexplored heart of a character without revealing how it, and we, got there.

Albee had found a way to reveal the emptiness and fear below the surface of everyday life. He was hardly the first 20th-century American playwright to do so (the hollowness of the American Dream has been the leading subject of almost every serious American playwright since Eugene O'Neill), but he was the first to do it in the postwar European moment of Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Sartre, and Pinter, and he did it within the confines of American material realism. As a result, he was immediately labeled a member of that synthetic tribe, the Theater of the Absurd. Albee has been too protean an artist to fit anyone's label or box, however, and his restless experiments with form and content led, in the late 1970s, to the fate so often allotted to highly praised American playwrights after their first bright bloom of success: categorical critical repudiation. Nonetheless, Albee kept writing, and in 1994 *Three Tall Women* returned him to the critical favor which, to his healthy indifference, has been his ever since.

Fast forward to 2004. Hartford Stage has commissioned Albee to write a new play to share the bill with their production of *The Zoo Story*. He writes a one-act called *Homelife*, which shows Peter in his Upper East Side apartment with his wife, Ann, before he goes to Central Park and encounters Jerry. The new play (or, perhaps, the new act, since Albee says he is unlikely to let *The Zoo Story* be professionally performed on its own anymore) allowed Albee to create a better balance between the two. He's said in interviews that after directing *The Zoo Story* a few times, he realized that Peter wasn't drawn as fully as Jerry, that audiences saw Peter mostly through Jerry's eyes, which wasn't necessarily a complete view of him. "I knew more Jerrys than Peters," he says of himself in 1958. "Maybe I was a little contemptuous of Peter when I was writing the play." That possible contempt came in the form of Albee's keeping the focus off of Peter's inner life. Audiences never knew why he refused to engage Jerry, and the refusal risked coming off as mere priggishness or timidity. *The Zoo Story*, Albee has said, is "about one man trying to persuade another one to live his life more fully, participate in it. And the guy can't do it, and that's why the tragedy occurs at the end of the play." By letting us see Peter the way he is at home with Ann, Albee allows us to understand why he is the way he is in the park with Jerry. As a result, the tragedy is deepened, and so is our reaction to Peter. Now we can connect with both men—and Ann, a beautiful and subtly drawn new character, is a bonus.

It was easy for Albee to revisit Peter 46 years after creating him. “I still knew who Peter was,” he told the *Hartford Courant*, “how he looked, how he sounded, and how he lived his life. . . . I didn’t have to reimagine him: I still had him in my sights.” It was similarly easy to imagine Ann. “I knew who she was,” he’s said.

Of course writing, for Albee, is not the struggle it is for some writers. *The Zoo Story* came in a surge; putting it down on paper was easy. And so it has been with most of his plays. An idea will occur to him, let him know that it’s there, but he won’t fuss with it, ask it questions, or make demands of it—or allow it to make demands of him. “I discover that I am thinking about a play and I write it down when it is time to write it down,” he told the *New York Times*. Only once has Albee put a play into rehearsal and then discovered that it needed significant work (*Seascape*), and he’s never gone back and rewritten a play once he decided it was finished.

Which isn’t to say that the second act of *At Home at the Zoo* is identical to *The Zoo Story* in every respect. The play, which once took place in 1958, now takes place in our present. So Jerry’s salary, which originally was “around eighteen thousand a year,” is now \$200,000, and a reference to the writer J. P. Marquand (who wrote satiric novels about the upper class as well as the Mr. Moto series of spy novels) has been replaced with one to Stephen King. And Albee cut Jerry’s last speech about what happened at the zoo—the one which helped explain what the title meant. “You’ve got a knife in your aorta, you don’t talk for a page and a half. You die,” he’s said. Also, he thought that the speech suggested that Jerry might have entered the park and confronted Peter with the idea of suicide already in his head, which wasn’t what Albee intended. “If Peter had said, ‘I get it. I understand. Let’s go off and have a beer,’ that’s the way the play would’ve ended and Jerry would be alive today.”

The title of the two-act play has also changed. At Hartford Stage, Albee called it *Peter and Jerry*. Last year, deciding it reminded him too much of Ben and Jerry’s ice cream, he changed it to *At Home at the Zoo*.

One thing about Albee that has not changed is his insistence that people who come to the theater should expect to have a significant experience. In 1960, he told the *Times* that he was “interested in digging so deep under the skin that it becomes practically intolerable. I want the audience to run out of the theater—but to come back and see the play again.” When Hartford Stage produced *Peter and Jerry* in 2004, he said, “Most people apparently want to go to the theater and not have anything happen to them. Or something that if it does happen it’s so boring and ephemeral that you can’t remember it five minutes after you leave the theater.” That, however, isn’t Edward Albee’s theater. “Serious theater is meant to change people, to change their perception of themselves,” he told an interviewer in 1971. Judging by *At Home at the Zoo*, he still thinks so.

EDWARD ALBEE RETURNS TO THE ZOO

BY JESSE GREEN

A good marriage is not the first thing that comes to mind when you think of an Edward Albee script, but in the playwright's latest work, called *Homelife*, that's what you get, or seem to: a well-off, delicately balanced couple named Ann and Peter.

But wait, isn't Peter the name of the buttoned-down Manhattan book editor who has a violent encounter with a hostile loner in Mr. Albee's career-making debut, *The Zoo Story*?

The Zoo Story, completed in 1958, earned Mr. Albee instant acclaim as an American Beckett, attuned to the rage and daily despair beneath the surface of middle-class life. Surreal though it is, the drama is based on the instantly recognizable humanity of its characters: not just Peter but also Jerry, the loner, whose tales of a pathetic existence among marginal people (and a deranged dog) in a



George Maharis as Jerry (left) and William Daniels as Peter in the American premiere of *The Zoo Story* at Provincetown Playhouse in 1960

rooming house on the Upper West Side form the bulk of the drama. If the play's ceaseless needling at affluent illusions seemed a young man's prerogative, Mr. Albee has never really outgrown that approach, managing for 45 years to remain—in plays ranging from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) to *The Goat* (2002)—as prickly and funny and disturbing as he was in *The Zoo Story*.

Popular though it proved to be, the 48-minute one-acter, typically billed with such absurdist playmates as *Krapp's Last Tape*, by Samuel Beckett, and Mr. Albee's own *American Dream*, has always seemed a bit incomplete. Now, with *Homelife*, the author has custom-built a companion piece; the two short plays together form a full-length work he calls

Peter and Jerry. . . *Homelife*, performed first, takes place on the morning of Peter's encounter with Jerry in Central Park. After intermission, *The Zoo Story* is played unchanged, except—a profound change—by the experience of seeing *Homelife*.

JESSE GREEN: *THE ZOO STORY* IS OFTEN CITED AS YOUR FIRST PLAY, BUT WHAT ABOUT THE MYSTERIOUS *ALIQUEEN*?

EDWARD ALBEE: A sex farce.

WHICH YOU WROTE AS A 12-YEAR-OLD. DO YOU HAVE ANY RECOLLECTION OF IT?
My mother wisely threw it away. I made a couple of attempts at writing plays in my middle 20s, but didn't finish anything. It wasn't until I wrote *The Zoo Story*, in 1958, that I really remember thinking to myself, "o.k., this is fairly original, this sounds like you." I didn't know what "you" was, but that's who it sounded like.

DO YOU REMEMBER THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE COMPOSITION?

I know exactly the rickety desk that I wrote it on, in the kitchen of the place on 238 West Fourth Street; it was a three-room apartment I was sharing with eight or nine of my closest friends. I had liberated a big typewriter from the Western Union Company, where I was working. And I wrote it on that, on yellow paper that I also liberated from Western Union. I remember everything about writing the play except what caused it.

YOU DIDN'T DEVELOP THE IDEAS FROM THINGS YOU'D EXPERIENCED?

I don't develop ideas. I discover that I am thinking about a play and I write it down when it is time to write it down. There was nothing in my life that would produce *The Zoo Story*—although it's true that a lot of the people whom Jerry describes in his rooming house I actually met delivering telegrams on the Upper West Side, which was then not a fashionable neighborhood, believe me.

THROUGH AN ODD SERIES OF CONNECTIONS, IT WAS ORIGINALLY PRODUCED IN BERLIN, IN SEPTEMBER 1959. DO YOU UNDERSTAND GERMAN?

I understand that it is a language.

SO PERHAPS IT WAS NOT THE IDEAL WAY TO SEE FOR THE FIRST TIME WHAT YOU HAD WROUGHT.

I knew what they were saying because I had written the play. But opening night I spent more time watching the audience and how they were responding than watching the stage.

THE PLAY WAS PRODUCED IN NEW YORK JUST A FEW MONTHS LATER.

It opened January 14, 1960, at the Provincetown Playhouse. The original cast was George Maharis, a fine actor who vanished into TV, as Jerry, and Bill Daniels as Peter. George had a wonderful kind of danger, and yet intelligence, and never played it in that awful way that most young actors do—self-pitying—but instead with the intention to be a real teacher, a real tough teacher of Peter. It was a lovely production.

AND THE REVIEWS?

The reviews were pretty much the way all the reviews of all of my plays have been until fairly recently: mixed. Everybody says, “Gee, he used to get such great reviews all the time and then he had that fallow period when nobody liked his work, and then it was all good again.” But it wasn’t like that. Right from the start, the majority had quarrels.

DID YOU PAY ATTENTION?

I try to learn from reviews. There have been some critics over the years who have been able to tell me things about my craft. But for the most part you learn the limitations of the critic. You learn what’s fashionable, what is tolerated and what is not. And I developed a couple of wonderful enemies early on, which is very useful too.

SUCH AS?

John Simon and—what’s his name who ended up in Cambridge for so long?

ROBERT BRUSTEIN.

Yeah. But both of them, I think their brains are softening a little bit. Simon even gave me a good review for *Three Tall Women*. It made me wonder what I had done wrong.

LEAVING THE CRITICS ASIDE, HOW DID AUDIENCES TAKE TO *THE ZOO STORY* IN 1960?

The audiences were great. That’s why we ran for such a good long time.

AND DID YOU IMMEDIATELY LET GO OF THE PLAY, OR DID YOU TRY TO KEEP CONTROL OVER WHAT YOU HAD DONE?

As I still do, I would go in at least every three weeks to take a look and make sure the improvements hadn’t started. And I concerned myself with recasting and other productions. It’s my work up there, and I want it as close as it can be to my intentions. I’d rather take my own praise and my own blame than somebody else’s. And that’s why I’ve retained approval of all actors and directors in all my plays, from the very beginning.

WHAT OTHER RESTRICTIONS HAVE YOU FOUND IT NECESSARY TO PLACE ON PRODUCTIONS?

Early on, there were still segregated theaters in the United States, so I had to put in my contracts that my plays may only be performed in fully integrated theaters.

WHAT ABOUT RESTRICTIONS ON CASTING? GENDER, FOR INSTANCE?

After the movie of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* came out, a critic, knowing I was gay, suggested that I was really writing about a gay relationship in the guise of a heterosexual relationship. It's just so preposterous—I mean, I know a lot of gay relationships and I haven't come across a hysterical pregnancy in one yet. But it led an awful lot of people to say, "Oh, let's do a production that way." And so I finally had to have it put in my contracts that my plays must be performed with accuracy as to the sex of the characters. To protect the play, not me. And protect the audiences.

A LOT OF PEOPLE, PARTICULARLY CERTAIN KINDS OF DIRECTORS, FEEL THAT A TEXT IS A MERE SUGGESTION.

It is a suggestion, yes, and pay absolute attention to it! Don't assume things that it's not your prerogative to assume. I tell actors at the beginning of any new production, whether I'm directing or not: "Do whatever you want as long as you end up with exactly what I intended." It gives people the illusion of leeway.

AND THEY'RE SADLY BROUGHT INTO LINE LATER.

I'm coming across like an ogre here.

YOU'RE PROTECTING YOURSELF.

No, I'm protecting the play. I can handle myself. I protect the play from myself, too. That's why I don't rewrite. Well, I trimmed *The Zoo Story* a little—the death scene was too operatic so I reduced it from a page to a paragraph—and updated a couple of minor things over the years.

SUCH AS?

I changed the reference to J. P. Marquand, whom no one knew even then, to Stephen King. And Peter's salary. He's now making over \$200,000.

OH, HE'S DOING WELL.

He's doing very nicely.

OTHER THAN THE FACT THAT HE IS A PUBLISHING EXECUTIVE, HAS A WIFE, TWO DAUGHTERS, TWO CATS, AND TWO PARAKEETS, PETER IS SOMETHING OF A CIPHER. THE CHARACTER OF JERRY IS VERY WELL DEVELOPED, AND AN AUDIENCE IS PERMITTED A DOUBLE VISION OF HIM: THE WAY HE PRESENTS HIMSELF AND THE WAY PETER SEES HIM. BUT NOT PETER. WE ONLY REALLY SEE HIM AS JERRY DOES.

Well, I knew more Jerrys than Peters. And I probably enjoyed Jerry more than Peter. Maybe I was a little contemptuous of Peter when I was writing the play.

YOU WERE NOT YET 30 WHEN YOU WROTE IT. NOW YOU'RE 76. PERHAPS THE OLDER, MORE SETTLED CHARACTER IS MORE INTERESTING TO YOU NOW?

No. I just think that if I'd known my craft a bit better when I wrote it, I probably would have balanced it better.

WHEN DID THAT THOUGHT OCCUR TO YOU?

After I'd directed it two or three times. But I didn't want to go around rewriting. My sense was: "o.k., it works, that's fine. Leave it alone." But something kept nagging at me. Peter is not as well drawn as he might have been.

SO WHEN DID YOU DECIDE TO ADDRESS THAT PROBLEM?

When Hartford Stage said they would like to commission a new play to be done with *The Zoo Story*.

DID YOU CONSIDER ANYTHING ELSE BESIDES A PLAY IN WHICH WE LEARN MORE ABOUT PETER, EARLIER IN THE DAY, AT HOME?

No, that was the first thing that snapped into my mind. Which meant I must have been thinking it long before. After all these years, I still knew who Peter was. I knew what he sounded like. I knew the way his mind worked. And so in writing *Homelife*, I didn't have to invent very much, I just had to revisit him, put him in a situation I hadn't put him in before. It was almost as if I had written it already.

THERE IS, HOWEVER, A NEW CHARACTER.

Yes. His wife.

DID YOU KNOW WHO SHE WAS, TOO?

Well, of course. They'd been living together for 20 years!

OR, IN YOU, FOR 40 YEARS.

I didn't have to puzzle her out. She's very bright. A good wife. It is a good marriage because they decided to have a safe and peaceful marriage. Calm seas and prosperous voyage. And there are things that happen in the first play that let us see the abyss underneath any effective compromise. But what we learn from *Homelife* more than anything else is who Peter is. And he carries that into the second half of the evening.

HOW EASILY DID THE WRITING GO?

Very easily. It's usually the way writing goes for most of my plays, once I'm ready to write them down. It sort of comes straight from beginning to the end. I wrote *The Zoo Story* originally in two weeks. I think I probably wrote this one in about three.

SO YOU'RE SUFFERING A 50 PERCENT DECLINE.

Yes, in speed—nothing else.

AND YOU FEEL THAT *HOMELIFE* SOLVES THE PROBLEM YOU HAD NOTED IN *THE ZOO STORY*?

For better or worse, I accomplished what I intended. That's all you can expect. Whether people think I should have done it is another matter. Are they going to be unhappy that their adolescent dreams of what *The Zoo Story* was all about were incorrect? That I'm destroying their illusions? That's tough.

IN A WAY YOU'RE LOCKING IN WHAT YOU MEANT. WILL YOU REQUIRE FROM NOW ON THAT THE TWO PLAYS BE PERFORMED TOGETHER AS ONE?

I think so.

IS THAT, IN PART, A WAY OF LOOKING OUT FOR POSTERITY?

Who is this posterity, and what does he want?

YOU TELL ME.

I don't know.

DO YOU CONCERN YOURSELF WITH THAT?

No. You can't think about yourself in the third person. That's madness.

BUT YOU HAVE AN IMPULSE TO PROTECT WHAT YOU'VE DONE.

I am the guardian of the plays that are sitting in my head that want to come out.

AND YET YOU'RE ALSO THE GUARDIAN OF THE PLAYS THAT HAVE ALREADY COME OUT. AT LEAST THE TEMPORARY GUARDIAN.

I don't think we should think about legacies ourselves.

There are some writers who make the mistake of constantly fiddling with their early work. Often to no better effect, and certainly to the worse effect of not producing as much new stuff as perhaps they should.

Everybody writes differently. I don't let a play go into rehearsal until I think it's ready to be performed. I've got a play that I've kept in my head for about 40 years now.

AH, COME ON. LET IT OUT.

No, I think I'm keeping it there. In case I wake up that dreaded day, and haven't got any ideas, I can write this one.

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

Attila the Hun. Now he was an interesting guy.

SO WE SHOULDN'T SEE YOUR REVISITING *THE ZOO STORY* AS VALEDICTORY, AS A WAY OF RETURNING TO WHERE YOU STARTED AND COMPLETING THE CIRCLE. THAT SYMMETRY DOESN'T INTEREST YOU.

I think, on the whole, asymmetry is probably better.

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A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EDWARD ALBEE

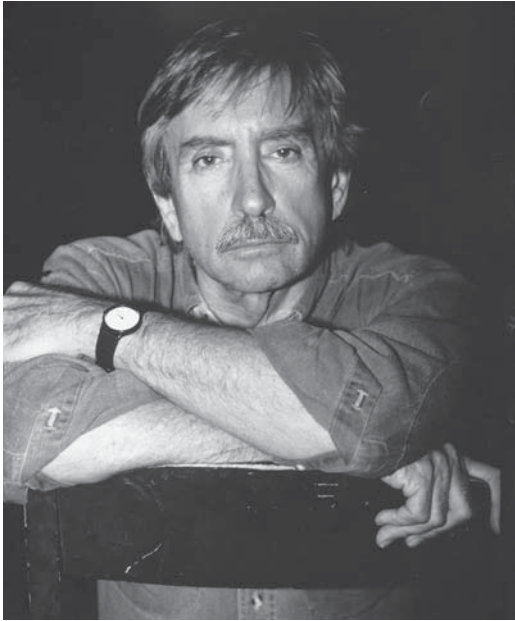


Photo of Edward Albee by Allen Gilmore

Edward Albee was born in 1928 and grew up in Manhattan and the upper-crust community of Larchmont as the adopted son of the wealthy heirs to the Keith-Albee chain of vaudeville houses. In 1959, the 30-year-old Albee was catapulted from his life as a prolific amateur poet, Western Union deliveryman, and Greenwich Village loiterer into the role of America's Playwright with the international success of his controversial one-act play *The Zoo Story*. His first production on Broadway, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in 1962 (also controversial, and his first full-length play), solidified his reputation with a Tony Award.

Between 1975 and 1994, Albee fell out of Broadway's favor. Critical censure of *The Lady from Dubuque* (1977–78), *The Man Who Had Three Arms* (1981), and Albee's adaptation of Nabokov's *Lolita* (1981) gave New York all the ammunition it needed for one of its favorite games: Tear Down the Idol. With the successes of *Three Tall Women*, the 1996 revival of *A Delicate Balance* (Tony Award), *The Play about the Baby* (2001 Pulitzer nominee), and *The Goat or, Who is Sylvia?* (which ran on Broadway for 309 performances and earned him a third Tony in 2002), however, Albee has clearly reclaimed his precariously lofty perch in the Big Apple.

Albee's other plays include *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1959), *The Sandbox* (1959), *The American Dream* (1960), *Tiny Alice* (1964), *A Delicate Balance* (1966, Pulitzer Prize), *All Over* (1971), *Seascape* (1974, Pulitzer Prize), *Listening* (1975), *Counting the Ways* (1975), *Finding the Sun* (1982), *Marriage Play* (1986–87), *Fragments* (1993), *Occupant* (2001), and *Me, Myself and I* (2007). He is a member of the Dramatists Guild Council and president of The Edward F. Albee Foundation. Albee was awarded the Gold Medal in Drama from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1980 and was a recipient of the 1996 Kennedy Center Honors and the National Medal of Arts, and in 2005 he was honored with a special Tony Award for lifetime achievement in the theater.

NEVER TRUST A MAN WHO LOVES ANIMALS

Never trust a man who loves animals. First, ask him why he loves them. If he says that he loves them because they are artless and innocent, or incapable of duplicity, or because of the wholehearted unselfishness of their affection, or because their souls are not tainted by envy, or something like that, beware. It is likely that that man is of two minds about humans.

Edward Albee, the most important living American playwright, loves animals. He stops and chats with dogs he meets on the street. He likes to visit children's zoos where he can sit with animals close up and talk to them and play with them. He has always kept pets—chiefly cats and Irish wolfhounds. He claims that *Black Beauty* is one of his favorite movies. James Thurber, who wrote intimately about animals, is one of his favorite writers; another is A. A. Milne. "What do I love about *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *The House at Pooh Corner*?" Albee muses (a love from which, take note, he excludes Christopher Robin). "I think that these people have not been destroyed by anything. The purity of them. The fact that they're always going to be that way, and nice. They're forever good."



"*The Zoo Story*, Edward Albee's brilliant satire of American life featuring Wyman Pendleton as Peter (left) and Stephen Rose as Jerry, opens the American Conservatory Theater's presentation of *Albee Directs Albee* on October 24, 1978, at the Marines' Memorial Theater. Produced by Mark Hall Amitin, the three rotating programs of one-acts directed by the playwright plays through November 5 in San Francisco."

—A.C.T. press release (1978)

The animals that appear in Albee's plays are not forever good. They are not adorable or fluffy. But they have the animal quality of being thoroughly themselves. They are what they are, and humans feint and scheme around them. Albee's first play, which opened in 1959, a one-act called *The Zoo Story*, centers on a narrative about a vicious dog and a man who tries to win him over, then tries to kill him, and then, having failed at both, resigns himself to a wary and cold détente.

In Albee's 1966 play *A Delicate Balance*, Tobias confesses that he had a pet cat killed at the vet's because it had started to dislike him. A character in the 1993 play *Fragments* relates how she decided to enlarge by several feet the grave she had dug for her dead dog because he had been frozen at the vet's and his tail was sticking straight out and she didn't want to snap it off (this actually happened to Albee and his late Irish wolfhound Harry).

Albee is perhaps the only playwright to write two leading roles for lizards. And it is no accident that it was he who

came up with the brilliant idea to write a play about a man who has fallen in love with a goat. . . . The poet and translator Richard Howard, who has known Albee since he was in his 20s, once wrote a poem about Albee and himself in which the Albee figure is named Feral. Albee's plays tend to cherish, in both their animal and their human protagonists, childlike, creaturely, feral qualities—authenticity, impulsiveness, imagination, openness to unconscious thoughts. Woe betide any character who displays adult human virtues such as rationality, courtesy, prudence, or restraint. . . .

The Zoo Story had an enormous influence on younger writers. "Theater for years became littered with park benches," John Guare wrote. "To show you were avant-garde, you needed no more than a dark room and a park bench." The play was followed, in 1960, by an uncharacteristically didactic race drama, *The Death of Bessie Smith*, and *The Sandbox*, of which Albee is especially fond—a 14-minute one-act in which a perky old woman, Grandma, dies in a sandbox, attended by an endearingly clumsy young man who turns out to be the Angel of Death. . . .

As these plays were being produced, Albee was talked about as part of the theater of the absurd; he was said to be the first playwright to bring this European sensibility—epitomized by playwrights such as Beckett, Pinter, and Ionesco—to America. Albee encouraged this association—the first scene of *The American Dream* is a virtual rewriting of the



Joe Cino (left) and Edward Albee, March 15, 1965, in the lobby of the Writers' Stage Theater before a benefit presentation of several scenes by Caffè Cino playwrights and performers to provide help in rebuilding Caffè Cino after it was destroyed by fire. Photo by James D. Gossage.

first scene of Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*. Martin Esslin, in his 1961 book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, which popularized the term, defined it as theater after the death of God: theater that attempts to convey the situation of mankind in a universe without meaning. To Esslin, absurdist theater was vital because, by confronting its audience with an existential vision, it forced the audience to experience and come to terms with frightening reality. It represented, in that sense, a return to the original function of theater as a form of religious ritual. But not all absurdist theater was of this type: in his view, there was another sort of absurdism that was satirical rather than ritualistic—the absurdism of Ionesco rather than of Beckett, which concerned itself with parodying the pettiness of society rather than with dramatizing the void. More often than not, Albee's plays belong to this second category. In his work, meaninglessness appears less a quality of the universe, a primary fact of the human condition, than as a personality flaw for which particular benighted people can be blamed and mocked.

If there is a single theme that runs through Albee's work, it is the importance of being open to a full consciousness of life, with all the social and emotional risk that entails. "Dangerous" is one of his highest terms of praise, and "restful" is one of his worst insults. Albee defines himself against the O'Neill of *The Iceman Cometh*, who suggests that people cannot survive without the comfort of their delusions. In *The Iceman Cometh*, the truth-teller who, with the best intentions, strips a group of failures and drunkards of their fantasies turns out to be the most destructively deluded character of them all. In Albee plays, though, truth-tellers are brave and wise, and the damage they do is all to the good. Jerry, in *The Zoo Story*, tells Peter that his life is dull and limited; George, in *Virginia Woolf*, forces his wife to give up her fantasy that she has a child; Man and Woman, in *The Play about the Baby*, destroy Girl and Boy's fantasy that they have a baby; Tobias, in *A Delicate Balance*, tells his best friend that he doesn't love him; the Wife, in *All Over*, tells her children that she doesn't love them; Cordelia, in *Finding the Sun*, tells Abigail that her husband doesn't love her; A and B, in *Three Tall Women*, tell C that she will not marry for love. "If you have no wounds how can you know if you're alive?" says the Man in *The Play about the Baby*. "If you have no scar how do you know who you are?" It is not surprising that a man who has never experienced self-doubt has no respect for comfort or compromise or safety.

Excerpted from "Passion Plays: The Making of Edward Albee," by Larissa Macfarquhar, *The New Yorker*, April 4, 2005.

WOULD YOU SAY THAT IN YOUR WORK THERE IS A MESSAGE?

Probably. I hope there are a bunch of them. Participate in your own life—fully. Don't sink back into that which is easy and safe. You're alive only once, as far as we know, and what could be worse than getting to the end of your life and realizing you hadn't lived it?

—Edward Albee (2005)



REACTION TO *THE ZOO STORY*, 1959

I was in a daze. I was lost but I was at home. I was at sea but not drowning. The future had finally shown up. Whatever theatrical revolution had started in England and France had finally hit America. I walked around the village for hours in a fever afraid to let go of the spell. Holy Christ, maybe I could be a playwright. . . . You can't imagine the debt that every American playwright writing after 1960 owes to Edward Albee. . . . A generation had a figurehead.

—John Guare

That's the best fucking one-act play I've ever seen.

—Norman Mailer

The first reading of *The Zoo Story* [at The Actors Studio in 1959] showed me how the theatrical cobwebs that eternally hang over stages—then and now—can be swept away by a bench, two characters, and the plain truth. All the splendors of seemingly profound films, beautiful musicals, dazzling performances, electrifying directorial concepts, and all that, were suddenly childish compare with the bone simple shattering truth that play dramatically expresses, which a whole country faced thereafter.

—Romulus Linney

I distinctly remember my first reading the play. Sitting alone in the attic, I began with my usual cynicism accorded to a new script by a new writer. By the third page, I guessed I was on to something. By the tenth page, I hoped I was on to something. By the last page, I knew I was on to something. Here in my lap was one of the best one-act plays ever written. Certainly, it was the best written by an American writer.

—producer Richard Barr

A QUIET BENCH ON A SUNNY AFTERNOON

A Brief History of Central Park

BY LESLEY GIBSON

“Hey, I got news for you, as they say. I’m on your precious bench and you’re never going to have it for yourself again.”

—Jerry to Peter, in *The Zoo Story*

In the summer of 1901, entrepreneur Oscar Spate received a license from the Manhattan parks commissioner to place long rows of rocking chairs throughout Central Park. No public announcement regarding the chairs was made before they appeared, nor was any signage erected explaining their presence; if a park visitor stopped to rest in one of the new seats, he would soon be approached by a city employee, who politely informed him that the privilege to sit in the chair came at the fee of five cents.

Spate’s venture was designed to capitalize on the pressures felt by turn-of-the-century Manhattanites, the last generation of New Yorkers that would remember a time when the city was not covered entirely in buildings, who stood witness as Manhattan’s population rapidly outgrew the island. That generation watched as an incredible cocktail of cultures converged in one place, as by 1901, Manhattan was home to two million residents, roughly 850,000 of which were foreign-born.

Because of its location far uptown (when the park was constructed in the 1860s, most of New York’s then-500,000 residents lived below 38th Street, and a trip to the park’s southernmost border along 59th Street was an expensive and infrequent luxury for most middle- and lower-class New Yorkers), Central Park had been used in its first three decades primarily as a promenade for the city’s elite. By 1901, however, the park had become the common breathing ground for a wide cross-section of residents. With his rocking-chair venture, Spate was betting on a business that would provide an alternative for those weary upper-class city dwellers who were accustomed to spending their afternoons reflecting in the park’s pastoral surroundings—“self-respecting” New Yorkers who were, as one of Spate’s supporters wrote to the *New York Times*, “unwilling to subject themselves to the ordeal of sitting next to unclean, often-drunken, and generally foul-mouthed loafers.”

Spate’s business, however, did not last through the summer. An outraged public, who observed that many of the park’s most desirable, tree-shaded *free* benches had been replaced

OPPOSITE *Central Park*, by Lucy Bold (2009)



with his nickel seats, made good use of the chairs but defiantly refused to pay. New York's working poor received the change as an attack on the lower classes and took to Tammany Hall in large numbers. After a month of pressure, the commissioner rescinded Spate's permit, the rocking chairs were removed, and the benches restored to their original places. Before the ruling, the *New York Times* reported that one man had been overheard observing to a park employee, "You fellers will ask a man for a permit merely to live soon."

Fifty-seven years after the Spate incident vanished into history, Edward Albee wrote a one-act play depicting a seemingly random and inexplicably violent encounter over a Central Park bench, between a shady character of dubious appearance and unpredictable behavior and a New Yorker of significant means. The encounter between Jerry and Peter serves as an apt (if simplified) illustration of the history of its setting, one of the few remaining open spaces in a metropolis whose residents have been engaged in a continuous struggle to stake their claim to every last inch of rapidly disappearing breathing room, and encapsulates a century of territorial stake-claiming as the city's cramped and crowded citizens have dragged the tensions of the city itself into the park.

In the early 1850s, in a rare political consensus, New York politicians agreed that their city was in need of a large-scale public park. Once a location was selected, a public competition was held to find the perfect design, and the winner was a pastoral man-made work of landscape architecture dreamed up by the then superintendent of New York park workers Frederick Law Olmstead and architect Calvert Vaux. Olmstead and Vaux specifically intended the park to be used as a placid escape from urban life, a picturesque setting for quiet reflection. Loud, boisterous recreation was to be avoided, as was walking on the grass, picking the flowers, and sporting activities. For the park's first 30 years, as the city's working class had little access to its greenery, the park was utilized as its creators intended, primarily by wealthy Victorians. But as the designers' generation died off, the park evolved to accommodate the changing lifestyles of the residents of the city around it. With each succeeding generation, as New York changed, the park changed within it, subject to constant strife over its perpetual redefinition.

By the turn of the century, the working class had established its permanent presence in the park, and after the subway system opened in 1904, the park was infiltrated by the increasingly diverse cross-section of New Yorkers who finally had access to it. Over the next 30 years, as battle after battle was waged over the park and its "proper" use, two larger philosophies emerged—that of the preservationists, whose priority it was to maintain the beauty of the park, and the recreationalists, who believed that the park would be

CENTRAL PARK BENCH FACTS

Central Park has approximately 9,000 benches, which would stretch seven miles if placed end to end. Styles include:

Central Park Settee (wood & iron): Based on historic benches originally used in the park, this bench has a simple design without armrests. It is found in informal, pastoral landscapes.

World's Fair Bench (wood & iron): Designed for the 1939 World's Fair, it is more ornate and features circular armrests. It is used in formal areas such as plazas.

Wood and Concrete: The prototypical park bench, it is found throughout the park and along the perimeter.

Rustic Bench (wood): This handmade bench is found in the park's woodlands and other picturesque areas; each one has a unique design and is usually made of locust or cedar.

Source: Central Park Conservancy: Adopt-A-Bench. http://www.centralparknyc.org/site/PageNavigator/womenscommittee_bench

best used as an active exercise site and playground. In the early part of the 20th century, the recreationalists prevailed. As New York's various ethnic groups began to form micro-communities throughout the city's Upper West Side, they fled to the park in large groups for the first time, trampling the grass and leaving behind litter and debris that disfigured the landscape. The park fell into the hands of a series of indifferent politicians who neglected its enormous maintenance requirements, and it fell into decay.

In the early 1930s, however, New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia appointed Robert Moses to the post of New York's parks commissioner. Moses was a focused and quick-acting commissioner with a comfortable budget comprised largely of federal WPA dollars, and under his authority the park was swiftly transformed. Moses, who by then had to answer to scores of specialty groups with a vested interest in the evolution of the park (bird watchers, kite users, little league teams, model-boat sailors, horseback riders, playground mothers, etc.), was a strict recreationist, and throughout his tenure, he made it a priority to transform the park into functional sporting and exercise grounds. Moses, whose recreational aesthetic served New York's working class well, appeased the preservationists by maintaining a strict code of "appropriate" behavior and employing a large staff of park employees, who distributed citations to those who violated the park's rules (picking flow-

ers, digging, littering, wearing bathing suits, and modest necking, to name a few) and kept the grounds pristinely manicured.

Moses was a popular commissioner, and during his reign he enjoyed mostly unchallenged authority over the park. By the late 1950s—when Albee was writing *The Zoo Story*—while Moses had done his best to make the park a healthful place for all New Yorkers, a few highly publicized crimes, as well as the increased presence of emerging minority communities, resulted in a public wave of fear. Racial and homophobic tensions in Manhattan revealed themselves in park territoriality: Puerto Ricans, whose New York population had doubled in the early 1950s, were afraid to cross into the perceived African-American section of the park; African Americans were afraid to cross into the perceived Puerto Rican side; both groups were afraid to stumble into known gay pick-up grounds. Meanwhile, middle- and upper-class whites were too afraid to go near any of these areas, much less share a bench with members of these distrusted communities. Although not one murder occurred within the park between 1955 and 1964, the period in which Edward Albee penned *The Zoo Story* marked the pinnacle of park fear. In 1961, poet Ogden Nash wrote:

If you should happen after dark
To find yourself in Central Park,
Ignore the paths that beckon you
And hurry, hurry to the zoo,
And creep into the tiger's lair.
Frankly you'll be safer there.

The actual peak of crime in Central Park wouldn't arrive until 20 years later. After Moses stepped down from his post in 1960, the handful of commissioners that followed responded to the changing needs of the time by "opening up" the park. The youth culture of the sixties, with its open and tolerant values, jumped at the opportunity, bringing an era of "-ins," as Central Park became a preferred site for love-ins, be-ins, gay-ins, fat-ins, kite-ins, and paint-ins. Political activists, bikers, jugglers, drummers, painters, and musicians could be found in every corner of the park; its permanent status as a central gathering place for an eclectic and unpredictable cross-section of New Yorkers was established and largely accepted. But the financial crisis of the 1970s hit the city hard, and Central Park, which mirrored the worst of New York by the latter half of the decade, slid into a state of deterioration. The city simply could not afford to maintain the park's grounds and buildings, and the decade marked the park's low point, as graffiti covered the majority of its man-made surfaces and the level of crime in the park reached its height.

Faced with financial peril and the park's impending ruin, Mayor Ed Koch established the Central Park Conservancy in 1980, shifting control of the city-owned park to a public/private "partnership" run by a board of advisors who oversees the maintenance of the park. Like the members of a museum or opera board of directors, the private citizens on the board are primarily responsible for protecting and preserving the park, while taking advantage of their resources to raise money; throughout the 1980s these well-connected preservationists began to restore the park to health with the infusion of millions of dollars in private funds. Graffiti-marred structures were scrubbed clean, and a ranger program, comprised of a "uniformed force that patrol the park and educate park users," as well as the



The Tigress and Her Cubs, by Auguste-Nicolas Cain (1867), today located in the Central Park Zoo. Photo by Joan Scheier.

Park Enforcement Patrol, which issues summons for infractions of park rules, established a permanent presence. Today, the Conservancy funds 85% of the park's maintenance costs.

Since 1991, crime in the city of New York has decreased and much of the city has been cleaned up. The spot in Central Park where Peter and Jerry first met in 1958—on the East Side, near 74th Street and Fifth Avenue—would today be more likely to be clean, manicured, and patrolled, and still one of the few spots in the nation's most densely populated metropolis where a man can (theoretically) sit undisturbed on a quiet bench on a sunny afternoon and listen to the sounds of nature as he enjoys a good book.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What is the underlying difficulty in Ann and Peter's marriage?
2. In Act 1, what does each character learn about the other over the course of the conversation? How do these discoveries irrevocably change their relationship?
3. The second act of *Edward Albee's At Home at the Zoo* was originally a stand-alone one-act play titled *The Zoo Story*, written in 1959. How does the addition of the first act (*Homelife*) change your understanding of how Peter behaves towards Jerry in Central Park? *Homelife* was written in 2004, and *At Home at the Zoo* is set in the present day. How does *The Zoo Story* work differently in a contemporary setting?
4. Why do you think Jerry went to the zoo? What is his need to tell Peter about it?
5. Why does Peter stay when Jerry begins abusing him?
6. What is Jerry trying to tell Peter with "The Story of Jerry and the Dog"?

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