

THE ART OF THEATER NO. 4

EDWARD ALBEE

The interview happened on a scalding, soggy-aired Fourth of July in a sunny room in Albee's small, attractive country house in Montauk, Long Island. Keeping in mind his luxuriously appointed house in New York City's Greenwich Village, one finds the country place dramatically modest by comparison. With the exception of a handsome, newly built tennis court (in which the playwright takes a disarmingly childlike pleasure and pride) and an incongruously grand Henry Moore sculpture situated high on a landscaped terrace that commands a startling view of the sea, the simplicity of the place leaves one with the curious impression that the news of the personal wealth his work has brought him has not quite reached the playwright-in-residence at Montauk. Still, it is in his country house that he generally seems most at ease, natural, at home.

Albee was dressed with a mildly ungroomed informality. He was as yet unshaven for the day and his neo-Edwardian haircut was damply askew. He appeared, as the climate of the afternoon demanded, somewhat uncomfortable.

The interviewer and subject have been both friends and composer-writer collaborators for about eighteen years. But Albee's

barbed, poised, and elegantly guarded public press style took over after the phrasing of the first question—though perhaps it was intermittently penetrated during the course of the talk.

— William Flanagan, 1966

INTERVIEWER

One of your most recent plays was an adaptation of James Purdy's novel *Malcolm*. It had as close to one hundred percent bad notices as a play could get. The resultant commercial catastrophe and quick closing of the play apart, how does this affect your own feeling about the piece itself?

EDWARD ALBEE

I see you're starting with the hits. Well, I retain for all my plays, I suppose, a certain amount of enthusiasm. I don't feel intimidated by either the unanimously bad press that *Malcolm* got or the unanimously good press that some of the other plays have received. I haven't changed my feeling about *Malcolm*. I liked doing the adaptation of Purdy's book. I had a number of quarrels with the production, but then I usually end up with quarrels about all of my plays. With the possible exception of the little play *The Sandbox*, which takes thirteen minutes to perform, I don't think anything I've done has worked out to perfection.

INTERVIEWER

While it doesn't necessarily change your feeling, does the unanimously bad critical response open questions in your mind?

ALBEE

I imagine that if we had a college of criticism in this country whose opinions more closely approximated the value of the works of art inspected, it might; but as often as not, I find relatively little

relationship between the work of art and the immediate critical response it gets. Every writer's got to pay some attention, I suppose, to what his critics say because theirs is a reflection of what the audience feels about his work. And a playwright, especially a playwright whose work deals very directly with an audience, perhaps he should pay some attention to the nature of the audience response—not necessarily to learn anything about his craft, but as often as not merely to find out about the temper of the time, what is being tolerated, what is being permitted.

INTERVIEWER

Regarding adaptations in general, can you think of any by American playwrights that you admire at all?

ALBEE

No, I can't think of any that I admire. I've done adaptations for two reasons: first, to examine the entire problem of adaptation—to see what it felt like; and second, because I admired those two books—*The Ballad of the Sad Café* and *Malcolm*—very much and thought they belonged on the stage; I wanted to see them on the stage, and felt more confident, perhaps incorrectly, in my own ability to put them on the stage than in most adapters'.

INTERVIEWER

One of the local reviewers, after *Malcolm* came out, referred to it as Edward Albee's "play of the year," rather as if to suggest that this is a conscious goal you've set for yourself, to have a play ready every year.

ALBEE

Do you remember the Thurber cartoon of the man looking at his police dog and saying, "If you're a police dog, where's your badge?" It's the function of a playwright to write. Some playwrights write a large number of plays, some write a small number. I don't set out to write a play a year. Sometimes I've written two plays a

year. There was a period of a year and half when I only wrote half a play. If it depresses some critics that I seem prolific, well, that's their problem as much as mine. There's always the danger that there are so damn many things that a playwright can examine in this society of ours—things that have less to do with his artistic work than have to do with the critical and aesthetic environment—that perhaps he does have to worry about whether or not he is writing too fast. But then also, perhaps he should worry about getting as many plays on as possible before the inevitable ax falls.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean by “the inevitable ax”?

ALBEE

If you examine the history of any playwright of the past twenty-five or thirty years—I'm not talking about the comedy boys, I'm talking about the more serious writers—it seems inevitable that almost every one has been encouraged until the critics feel that they have built them up beyond the point where they can control them; then it's time to knock them down again. And a rather ugly thing starts happening: the playwright finds himself knocked down for works that quite often are just as good or better than the works he's been praised for previously. And a lot of playwrights become confused by this and they start doing imitations of what they've done before, or they try to do something entirely different, in which case they get accused by the same critics of not doing what they *used* to do so well.

INTERVIEWER

So, it's a matter of not being able to win either way.

ALBEE

Actually, the final evaluation of a play has nothing to do with immediate audience or critical response. The playwright, along with any writer, composer, painter in this society, has got to have

a terribly private view of his own value, of his own work. He's got to listen to his own voice primarily. He's got to watch out for fads, for what might be called the critical aesthetics.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you think the reviews were so lacerating against *Malcolm*—a play that might simply have been dismissed as not being very good.

ALBEE

It seemed to me the critics loathed something. Now whether they loathed something above and beyond the play itself, it's rather dangerous for me to say. I think it's for the critics to decide whether or not their loathing of the play is based on something other than the play's merits or demerits. They must search their own souls, or whatever.

INTERVIEWER

When you say that the play was badly produced—

ALBEE

I didn't like the way it was directed, particularly. It was the one play of mine—of all of them—that got completely out of my hands. I let the director take over and dictate the way things should be done. I did it as an experiment.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean “as an experiment”?

ALBEE

As a playwright, one has to make the experiment finally to see whether there's anything in this notion that a director can contribute creatively, as opposed to interpretively.

INTERVIEWER

Do you believe that a director has any creative vitality of his own?

ALBEE

Well, that's a very "iffy" question, as President Roosevelt used to say. I imagine as an axiom you could say that the better the play, the less "creativity" the director need exert.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever had the experience of finding out that the director's way was a certain enlightenment?

ALBEE

I can't answer that honestly, because something very curious happens. In rehearsals I get so completely wrapped up with the reality that's occurring on stage that by the time the play has opened I'm not usually quite as aware of the distinctions between what I'd intended and the result. There are many ways of getting the same result.

INTERVIEWER

Well, you talk about keeping complete control of your plays. Let's say that you'd envisioned in your own mind a certain scene being done a certain way.

ALBEE

I'm not terribly concerned about which characters are standing on the right-hand side of the stage.

INTERVIEWER

That's not the point I'm trying to make. In the preparation of the early Kazan-Williams successes, Williams was in constant conflict with Kazan, and yet Kazan would come up with the one thing that would finally make the play work.

ALBEE

Do we know that it was better than Williams's original idea?

INTERVIEWER

According to his own alleged view of it, yes.

ALBEE

Some writers' view of things depends upon the success of the final result. I'd rather stand or fall on my own concepts. But there is a fine line to be drawn between pointing up something or distorting it. And one has always got to be terribly careful, since the theater is made up of a whole bunch of prima donnas, not to let the distortions occur. I've seen an awful lot of plays that I'd read before they were put into production and been shocked by what's happened to them. In the attempt to make them straightforward and commercially successful, a lot of things go out the window. I'm just saying that in the theater, which is a sort of jungle, one does have to be a little bit careful. One mustn't be so rigid or egotistical to think that every comma is sacrosanct. But at the same time there is the danger of losing control and finding that somebody else has opened a play and not you.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you decide to become a playwright? You wrote poems without notable success, and then suddenly decided to write a play, *The Zoo Story*.

ALBEE

Well, when I was six years old I decided, not that I was *going* to be, but with my usual modesty, that I *was* a writer. So I starting writing poetry when I was six and stopped when I was twenty-six because it was getting a little better, but not terribly much. When I was fifteen I wrote seven hundred pages of an incredibly bad novel—it's a very funny book I still like a lot. Then, when I was nineteen I wrote a couple hundred pages of another novel, which

wasn't very good either. I was still determined to be a writer. And since I was a writer, and here I was twenty-nine years old and I wasn't a very good poet and I wasn't a very good novelist, I thought I would try writing a play, which seems to have worked out a little better.

INTERVIEWER

With regard to *Zoo Story*—was its skill and power and subsequent success a surprise and revelation to you?

ALBEE

A lot interests me—but nothing surprises me particularly. Not that I took it for granted that it was going to be skillful and powerful. I'm not making any judgment about the excellence or lack of it in the play. But it did not come as a *surprise* to me that I'd written it. You must remember I've been watching and listening to a great number of people for a long time. Absorbing things, I suppose. My only reaction was, "Aha! So this is the way it's going to be, is it?" That was my reaction.

INTERVIEWER

The biggest news about you at the moment, I expect, would be the success of the film *Virginia Woolf*. The Production Code approval came hard, but apparently you approved of it yourself.

ALBEE

When the play was sold to the movies I was rather apprehensive of what would happen. I assumed they would put Doris Day in it, and maybe Rock Hudson. And I was even a little apprehensive about the actual casting. Especially Elizabeth Taylor. I wasn't apprehensive about the idea of Richard Burton being in the film, but it did seem to be a little odd that Elizabeth Taylor, who is in her early thirties, would be playing a fifty-two-year-old woman.

Tobias:

(Recollection) The cat that I had.

Agnes (Someone):

Hum?

Tobias:

The cat that I had....when I was --well, a year or so before I met you. She was very old: I'd had her since I was ~~about~~ ^{very young}; she must have been fifteen, or more. An alley cat. She didn't like people very much, I think; at least she'dabsent herself. She wouldn't run, or hide; she wasn't skittish, or, or hysterical. When people came....she'd....pick up and walk away. She liked me: or, rather, when I was alone with her I could see she was content: she'd sit on my lap, or near me, or on the basin when I shaved, or sleep on my clothes if I left them somewhere. She was....content, I guess; I don't know if she was happy, but she was content. We'd not had other animals --my family, and I'd taken her to college with me, and into the city, and she was....well, as much a fixture as....my good gold watch, my favorite bathrobe. She was there. We didn't play, you understand: she was getting on, and she'd never been....frisky --like some-- and half the time I doubt I knew she was around --consciously. It was her absence I would have noticed. *and I missed her very much.*

Agnes (Someone):

Yes.

Tobias:

And how ~~it~~ ^{the thing} happened I don't really know. She....one day she....well, one day I realized she no longer liked me. No, that's not right: one day I ~~realized~~ ^{must have} realized she ~~had~~ stopped liking me some time before. I was very busy --very social, I guess, away weekends, nights out, parties where I lived, lots of people in....I spent less time alone; I used my place less than I just lived in it. But one evening I was alone, home, and I was suddenly aware of her absence, not ^{just} that she wasn't in the room with me, but that she hadn't been.

INTERVIEWER

At one time you were apprehensive about Mike Nichols, the director.

ALBEE

I was curious as to why they chose a man who'd never made a film before and had made his reputation directing farces on Broadway, why they chose *him* as a director to turn a serious play into a movie. I think I learned the answer: being innocent to the medium he doesn't know how to make the usual mistakes. I had a number of other reasons for apprehension. One always knows what is done to a script when it goes to Hollywood. When I saw the film in Hollywood about two or three months before it was released, I was startled and enormously taken with the picture, partially through relief I imagine. But more than that, I discovered that no screenplay had been written, that the play was there almost word for word. A few cuts here and there. A few oversimplifications.

INTERVIEWER

Oversimplifications?

ALBEE

Yes, I'll go into those in a minute. Ernest Lehman, who is credited with the screenplay, did write about twenty-five words. I thought they were absolutely terrible. So really there wasn't a screenplay, and that delighted me. It was a third of the battle, as far as I was concerned. So that was my first delight—that the play was photographed word for word. I'm not saying it was photographed action for action. The camera didn't stay thirty-five feet from the actors and it wasn't done in one set, it moved around a good deal. It behaves and acts very much like a film. In fact, it *is* a film. There are some shots, close-ups, lots of things you can't do on the stage. Then my second delight, after finding that the play was intact, was to appreciate that the director, Mike Nichols, understood not only the play, my intentions (pretty much, again

with a couple of oversimplifications), but also seemed to understand the use of the camera and the film medium, all this in his first time around. Third, I was happy that Elizabeth Taylor was quite capable of casting off the beautiful-young-woman image and doing something much more than she usually does in films. And the rest of the cast was more or less fine too, Dennis and Segal. I have a few quarrels with their interpretations, but they're so minor compared to what could have happened. I found that it made an awfully good picture.

INTERVIEWER

The play as a film seems to be generally better understood by film reviewers than it was by drama critics. Is it possible that these oversimplifications you're talking about, that you blame Mike Nichols for, or somebody, are responsible for the fact that the play comes over more clearly?

ALBEE

I suppose if you simplify things, it's going to make it easier to understand. But without placing blame, I'd say there *was* an oversimplification, which I regret to a certain extent. For example, whenever something occurs in the play on both an emotional and intellectual level, I find in the film that only the emotional aspect shows through. The intellectual underpinning isn't as clear. In the film I found that in the love-hate games that George and Martha play, their intellectual enjoyment of each other's prowess doesn't show through anywhere nearly as strongly as it did in the play. Quite often, and I suppose in most of my plays, people are doing things on two or three levels at the same time. From time to time in the movie of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* I found that a level or two had vanished. At the end of the film, for example, with the revelation about the nonexistent child and its destruction, the intellectual importance of the fiction isn't made quite as clearly as it could be. In the film it's nowhere near as important as the *emotional* importance to the characters. In my view, the two of

them have got to go hand in hand. But this is quibbling, you see. It's a really very good film. There are a few things that I wish hadn't happened—that enormous error in accepting somebody's stupid idea of taking the action away from the house to the roadhouse. That's the one area of the film where somebody decided to broaden it out for film terms. Yet it was the one part of the film, curiously enough, that all the film critics thought was the most stagy.

INTERVIEWER

Incidentally, when did the title *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* occur to you?

ALBEE

There was a saloon—it's changed its name now—on Tenth Street, between Greenwich Avenue and Waverly Place, that was called something at one time, now called something else, and they had a big mirror on the downstairs bar in this saloon where people used to scrawl graffiti. At one point back in about 1953 . . . 1954, I think it was—long before any of us started doing much of anything—I was in there having a beer one night, and I saw “Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” scrawled in soap, I suppose, on this mirror. When I started to write the play it cropped up in my mind again. And of course, who's afraid of Virginia Woolf means who's afraid of the big *bad* wolf . . . who's afraid of living life without false illusions. And it did strike me as being a rather typical university, intellectual joke.

INTERVIEWER

With the filming of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* the oft-repeated evaluation of it as a play about four homosexuals who are, for the sake of convention, disguised as heterosexuals recurs. I cannot recall any public statement or comment being made by you on this interpretation of the play.

ALBEE

Indeed it is true that a number of the movie critics of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* have repeated the speculation that the play was written about four homosexuals disguised as heterosexual men and women. This comment first appeared around the time the play was produced. I was fascinated by it. I suppose what disturbed me about it was twofold: first, nobody has ever bothered to ask *me* whether it was true; second, the critics and columnists made no attempt to document the assertion from the text of the play. The facts are simple: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was written about two heterosexual couples. If I had wanted to write a play about four homosexuals, I would have done so. Parenthetically, it is interesting that when the film critic of *Newsweek* stated that he understood the play to have been written about four homosexuals, I had a letter written to him suggesting he check his information before printing such speculations. He replied, saying, in effect, two things: first, that we all know that a critic is a far better judge of an author's intention than the author; second, that seeing the play as being about four homosexuals was the only way that he could live with the play, meaning that he could not accept it as a valid examination of heterosexual life. Well, I'm sure that all the actresses from Uta Hagen to Elizabeth Taylor who've played the role of Martha would be absolutely astonished to learn they've been playing men.

I think it is the responsibility of critics to rely less strenuously on, to use a Hollywood phrase, "what they can live with," and more on an examination of the works of art from an aesthetic and clinical point of view. I would be fascinated to read an intelligent paper documenting from the text that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a play written about four homosexuals. It might instruct me about the deep slag pits of my subconscious.

I believe it was Leslie Fiedler, in an article in *Partisan Review*, who commented that if indeed *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* did deal with four disguised homosexuals, the "shock of recognition" on the part of the public is an enormously interesting commentary

on the public. To put it most briefly, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was *not* written about four homosexuals. One might make one more point: had it been a play about four homosexuals disguised as heterosexuals, the only valid standard of criticism which could be employed would be whether such license of composite characterization was destructive to the validity of the work of art. Again we come to the question of the critics' responsibility to discuss the work of art not on arbitrary Freudian terms but on aesthetic ones. Only the most callow or insecure or downright stupid critic would fault Proust's work, for example, for the transposition that he made of characters' sexes. It would be rather like faulting Michelangelo's sculptures of the male figure because of that artist's reputed leanings. So, if a play should appear, next year, say, which the critics in their wisdom see as a disguised homosexual piece, let them remember that the ultimate judgment of a work of art, whether it be a masterpiece or a lesser event, must be solely in terms of its artistic success and not on Freudian guesswork.

INTERVIEWER

It's been said by certain critics that your plays generally contain no theme; others say that you've begun to wear the same theme thin; and still others say that with each play you bravely attack a new theme.

ALBEE

I go up to my room about three or four months out of the year and I write. I don't pay much attention to how the plays relate thematically to each other. I think that's very dangerous to do, because in the theater one is self-conscious enough without planning ahead or wondering about the thematic relation from one play to the next. One hopes that one is developing, and writing interestingly, and that's where it should end, I think.

INTERVIEWER

You've spoken frequently to the effect that your involvement with music has influenced your writing for the theater. Can you elaborate on that in any way?

ALBEE

I find it very difficult. I've been involved in one way or another with serious music ever since childhood. And I do think, or rather I *sense* that there is a relationship—at least in my own work—between a dramatic structure, the form and sound and shape of a play, and the equivalent structure in music. Both deal with sound, of course, and also with idea, theme. I find that when my plays are going well, they seem to resemble pieces of music. But if I had to go into specifics about it, I wouldn't be able to. It's merely something that I feel.

INTERVIEWER

Which contemporary playwrights do you particularly admire? Which do you think have influenced you especially, and in what ways?

ALBEE

The one living playwright I admire without any reservation whatsoever is Samuel Beckett. I have funny feelings about almost all the others. There are a number of contemporary playwrights whom I admire enormously, but that's not at all the same thing as being influenced. I admire Brecht's work very much. I admire a good deal of Tennessee Williams. I admire some of Genet's works. Harold Pinter's work. I admire Cordell's plays very much, even though I don't think they're very good. But on the matter of influence, that question is difficult. I've read and seen hundreds of plays, starting with Sophocles right up to the present day. As a playwright, I imagine that in one fashion or another I've been influenced by every single play I've ever experienced. Influence is a matter of selection—both acceptance and rejection.

INTERVIEWER

In a number of articles, mention is made of the influence on you—either directly or by osmosis—of the theater of cruelty. How do you feel about the theater of cruelty, or the theories of Artaud generally?

ALBEE

Let me answer it this way. About four years ago I made a list, for my own amusement, of the playwrights, the contemporary playwrights, by whom critics said I'd been influenced. I listed twenty-five. It included five playwrights whose work I didn't know, so I read these five playwrights and indeed *now* I suppose I can say I have been influenced by them. The problem is that the people who write these articles find the inevitable similarities of people writing in the same generation, in the same century, and on the same planet, and they put them together in a group.

INTERVIEWER

The point was that the influence may not have been directly through Artaud, but perhaps, as I said, by osmosis.

ALBEE

I've been influenced by Sophocles and Noel Coward.

INTERVIEWER

Do you aspire to being more than a playwright . . . to being a sort of complete man of the theater? You've involved yourself in the production of plays by other writers; you've toyed with the idea of doing a musical; you've written a libretto for opera; you've been an articulate interpreter of the American theater as an institution; and even a public critic of professional drama critics. In retrospect, do you feel that you may have overextended yourself in any of these areas?

ALBEE

I've certainly done myself considerable damage, though not as an artist, by attacking the critics, because they can't take it. As for involving myself with the production of other people's plays, I consider that to be a responsibility. The playwrights' unit we've been running, Playwrights 66, encourages thirty or thirty-five writers. The plays we've put on in the off-Broadway theater, the Cherry Lane, and other places, are primarily plays that I wanted to see: other people weren't putting them on, so we did. It seems to me that if one finds oneself with the cash it's one's responsibility to do a thing like that. There's certainly no self-aggrandizement. I have done adaptations because I wanted to. I don't like the climate in which writers have to work in this country and I think it's my responsibility to talk about it.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that in your own particular case, on the basis of a single big-time commercial hit, you have been raised to too high a position? For your own creative comfort.

ALBEE

I really can't answer that. I have no idea. As a fairly objective judgment, I do think that my plays as they come out are better than most other things that are put on the same year. But that doesn't make them very good necessarily. The act of creation, as you very well know, is a lonely and private matter and has nothing to do with the public area . . . the *performance* of the work one creates. Each time I sit down and write a play I try to dismiss from my mind as much as I possibly can the implications of what I've done before, what I'm going to do, what other people think about my work, the failure or success of the previous play. I'm stuck with a new reality that I've got to create. I'm working on a new play now. I don't believe that I'm being affected by the commercial success of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* to make this one more commercial; I don't think I'm being affected by the critical confusion

over *Tiny Alice* to make this one simpler. It's a play. I'm trying to make it as good a work of art as I possibly can.

INTERVIEWER

To talk a little about *Tiny Alice*, which I guess is your most controversial play—during your widely publicized press conference on the stage of the Billy Rose Theater, you said the critical publicity had misled the audiences into thinking of the play as a new game of symbol-hunting . . . which was at least to some degree responsible for the play's limited run. Still, you have also said that if audiences desert a play, it is either the fault of the playwright or the manner in which it was presented. With a year to reflect on the matter, how do you feel about all this now as it pertains to *Tiny Alice*?

ALBEE

I feel pretty much what I said on the stage. I keep remembering that the preview audiences, before the critics went to *Tiny Alice*, didn't have anywhere near the amount of trouble understanding what the play was about; that didn't happen until the critics *told* them that it was too difficult to understand. I also feel that *Tiny Alice* would have been a great deal clearer if I hadn't had to make the cuts I did in the third act.

INTERVIEWER

In view of the experience you had with *Tiny Alice*, the critical brouhaha and the different interpretations and the rest of it, if you were to sit down and write that play again, do you think it would emerge in any terribly different way?

ALBEE

It's impossible to tell. A curious thing happens. Within a year after I write a play I forget the experience of having written it. And I couldn't revise or rewrite it if I wanted to. Up until that point, I'm so involved with the experience of having written the play, and the nature of it, that I can't see what faults it might have. The only

moment of clear objectivity that I can find is at the moment of critical heat—of self-critical heat when I'm actually writing. Sometimes I think the experience of a play is finished for me when I finish writing it. If it weren't for the need to make a living, I don't know whether I'd have the plays produced. In the two or three or four months that it takes me to write a play, I find that the reality of the play is a great deal more alive for me than what passes for reality. I'm infinitely more involved in the reality of the characters and their situation than I am in everyday life. The involvement is terribly intense. I find that in the course of the day when I'm writing, after three or four hours of intense work, I have a splitting headache, and I have to stop. Because the involvement, which is both creative and self-critical, is so intense that I've got to stop doing it.

INTERVIEWER

If one can talk at all about a general reaction to your plays, it is that, as convincing and brilliant as their beginnings and middles might be, the plays tend to let down, change course, or simply puzzle at the end. To one degree or another this complaint has been registered against most of them.

ALBEE

Perhaps because my sense of reality and logic is different from most people's. The answer could be as simple as that. Some things that make sense to me don't make the same degree of sense to other people. Analytically, there might be other reasons—that the plays don't hold together intellectually; that's possible. But then it mustn't be forgotten that when people don't like the way a play ends, they're likely to blame the play. That's a possibility too. For example, I don't feel that catharsis in a play necessarily takes place during the course of a play. Often it should take place afterward. If I've been accused a number of times of writing plays where the endings are ambivalent, indeed, that's the way I find life.

INTERVIEWER

Do *The Zoo Story* and *Virginia Woolf* both begin and continue through the longest part of their length on an essentially naturalistic course, and then somewhere toward the end of the play veer away from the precisely naturalistic tone?

ALBEE

I think that if people were a little more aware of what actually is beneath the naturalistic overlay they would be surprised to find how early the unnaturalistic base had been set. When you're dealing with a symbol in a realistic play, it is also a realistic fact. You must expect the audience's mind to work on both levels, symbolically and realistically. But we're trained so much in pure, realistic theater that it's difficult for us to handle things on two levels at the same time.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you pick the names George and Martha? As in Washington? What did you make of Arthur Schlesinger's discovery that with those names you'd obviously written a parallel of the American sociopolitical dilemma?

ALBEE

There are little local and private jokes. Indeed, I did name the two lead characters of *Virginia Woolf* George and Martha because there is contained in the play—not its most important point, but certainly contained within the play—an attempt to examine the success or failure of American revolutionary principles. Some people who are historically and politically and sociologically inclined find them. Now in one play—*Virginia Woolf* again—I named a very old Western Union man “Little Billy”—“Crazy Billy” rather. And I did that because as *you* might recall, Mr. Flanagan, you used to deliver telegrams for Western Union, and you are very old and your name is Billy. Things like that—lots of them going on in the plays. In *Zoo Story*, I named two characters Peter and Jerry.

I know two people named Peter and Jerry. But then the learned papers started coming in, and of course Jerry is supposed to be Jesus . . . which is much more interesting, I suppose, to the public than the truth.

INTERVIEWER

Going back to those “levels of understanding,” in *Virginia Woolf* the audience questioned the credibility of George and Martha having invented for themselves an imaginary son.

ALBEE

Indeed. And it always struck me as very odd that an audience would be unwilling to believe that a highly educated, sensitive, and intelligent couple, who were terribly good at playing reality and fantasy games, *wouldn't* have the education, the sensitivity, and the intelligence to create a realistic symbol for themselves. To use as they saw fit.

INTERVIEWER

Recognizing the fact that it was a symbol?

ALBEE

Indeed recognizing the fact that it was a symbol. And only occasionally being confused, when the awful loss and lack that made the creation of the symbol essential becomes overwhelming—like when they're drunk, for example. Or when they're terribly tired.

INTERVIEWER

What you're saying is something which I guess is not really too commonly understood. You're suggesting that George and Martha have at no point deluded themselves about the fact that they're playing a game.

ALBEE

Oh, never. Except that it's the most serious game in the world. And the nonexistent son is a symbol and a weapon they use in every one of their arguments.

INTERVIEWER

A symbolic weapon rather than a real weapon. In the midst of the very real weapons that they do use.

ALBEE

Indeed, yes. Though they're much too intelligent to make that confusion. For me, that's why the loss is doubly poignant. Because they are not deluded people.

INTERVIEWER

I see. Then what you're trying to suggest now is that the last act of *Virginia Woolf* is in no way less naturalistic than the first two acts.

ALBEE

I don't find that the play veers off into a less naturalistic manner at all.

INTERVIEWER

Well, if not into a less naturalistic one, certainly into a more ritualistic, stylized one. With the requiem masses and all that.

ALBEE

Well, going into Latin, indeed. But that's a conscious choice of George's to read the requiem mass which has existed in Latin for quite a number of years. I like the sound of the two languages working together. I like the counterpoint of the Latin and the English working together.

There's one point that you've brought up that annoys me. It really annoys the hell out of me. Some critics accuse me of having

a failure of intellect in the third act of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, merely because *they* didn't have the ability to understand what was happening. And that annoys the hell out of me.

INTERVIEWER

I can see that it would. A critic recently wrote the following paragraph: "Mr. Albee complained with *Tiny Alice* that people asked questions and would not let the play merely occur to them. He complains of those critics who judge a play's matter and do not restrict themselves to its manner. Both of these statements tend to a view much in vogue—that art consists principally of style, an encounter between us and the figurative surface of a work. This view reduces ideas to decoration, character to pageant, symbol and feeling to a conveyor belt for effects. It is to shrink art to no more than a sensual response, one kind or another of happening. To some of us this modish view is nihilistic, not progressive." Now the critic in question has come fairly close to defining a theory that might be got out of, say, Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation* or her essay on style. I wonder how closely the critic's interpretations of your remarks—of the remarks, I guess, that you made most specifically at the *Tiny Alice* press conference—are true to your own understanding of them.

ALBEE

Well, this critic is a sophist. What he's done is to misinterpret my attitudes, Miss Sontag's attitudes, and the attitudes of most respectable creative people. What I said is that I thought it was not valid for a critic to criticize a play for its matter rather than its manner—that what was constituted then was a type of censorship. To give an extreme example, I was suggesting that if a man writes a brilliant enough play in praise of something that is universally loathed, that the play, if it is good and well enough written, should not be knocked down because of its approach to its subject. If the work of art is good enough, it must not be criticized for its theme. I don't think it can be argued. In the thirties a whole school of

criticism bogged down intellectually in those agitprop, social-realistic days. A play had to be progressive. A number of plays by playwrights who were thought very highly of then—they were very bad playwrights—were highly praised because their themes were intellectually and politically proper. This intellectual morass is very dangerous, it seems to me. A form of censorship. You may dislike the intention enormously but your judgment of the artistic merit of the work must not be based on your view of what it's about. The work of art must be judged by how well it succeeds in its intention.

INTERVIEWER

In other words, what you're saying is that a critic should separate what he takes to be the thematic substance of a play from the success or lack of success that the author brings to its presentation.

ALBEE

It's that simple. And critics who do otherwise are damn fools and dangerous, even destructive people. I don't think it can be argued.

INTERVIEWER

You have said that it is through the actual process of writing that you eventually come to know the theme of your play. Sometimes you've admitted that even when you have finished a play you don't have any specific idea about its theme. What about that?

ALBEE

Naturally, no writer who's any good at all would sit down and put a sheet of paper in a typewriter and start typing a play unless he knew what he was writing about. But at the same time, writing has got to be an act of discovery. Finding out things about what one is writing about. To a certain extent I imagine a play is completely finished in my mind—in my case, at any rate—without my knowing it, before I sit down to write. So in that sense, I suppose, writing a play is *finding out* what the play is. I always find that the

better answer to give. It's a question I despise, and it always seems to me better to slough off the answer to a question that I consider to be a terrible invasion of privacy—the kind of privacy that a writer must keep for himself. If you intellectualize and examine the creative process too carefully it can evaporate and vanish. It's not only terribly difficult to talk about, it's also dangerous. You know the old story about the—I think it's one of Aesop's fables, or perhaps not, or a Chinese story—about the very clever animal that saw a centipede that he didn't like. He said, "My god, it's amazing and marvelous how you walk with all those hundreds and hundreds of legs. How do you do it? How do you get them all moving that way?" The centipede stopped and thought and said, "Well, I take the left front leg and then I—" and he thought about it for a while, and he couldn't walk.

INTERVIEWER

How long does the process of reflection about a play go on?

ALBEE

I usually think about a play anywhere from six months to a year and a half before I sit down to write it out.

INTERVIEWER

Think it through, or—

ALBEE

Think *about* it. Though I'm often accused of never thinking anything *through*, I think about it. True, I don't begin with an *idea* for a play—a thesis, in other words, to construct the play around. But I know a good deal about the nature of the characters. I know a great deal about their environment. And I more or less know what is going to happen in the play. It's only when I sit down to write it that I find out exactly what the characters are going to say, how they are going to move from one situation to another. Exactly how they are going to behave within the situation to produce the

predetermined result . . . If I didn't do it that way, I wouldn't be able to allow the characters the freedom of expression to make them three-dimensional. Otherwise, I'd write a treatise, not a play. Usually, the way I write is to sit down at a typewriter after that year or so of what passes for thinking, and I write a first draft quite rapidly. Read it over. Make a few pencil corrections, where I think I've got the rhythms wrong in the speeches, for example, and then retype the whole thing. And in the retyping I discover that maybe one or two more speeches will come in. One or two more things will happen, but not much. Usually, what I put down first is what we go into rehearsal with; the majority of the selections and decisions have gone on before I sit down at the typewriter.

INTERVIEWER

Could you describe what sort of reflection goes on? Do whole scenes evolve in your mind, or is the process so deep in your subconscious that you're hardly aware of what's going on?

ALBEE

I discover that I am thinking about a play, which is the first awareness I have that a new play is forming. When I'm aware of the play forming in my head, it's already at a certain degree in development. Somebody will ask, Well, what do you plan to write after the next play? And I'll suddenly surprise myself by finding myself saying, Oh, a play about this, a play about that—I had never even thought about it before. So, obviously, a good deal of thinking has been going on; whether subconscious or unconscious is the proper term here I don't know. But whichever it is, the majority of the work gets done there. And that period can go on for six months or—in the case of "The Substitute Speaker," which is a play that I hope to be able to write this coming summer—it's a process that has been going on for three and a half years. Occasionally, I pop the play up to the surface—into the conscious mind to see how it's coming along, to see how it is developing. And if the characters seem to be becoming three-dimensional, all to the

good. After a certain point, I make experiments to see how well I *know* the characters. I'll improvise and try them out in a situation that I'm fairly sure *won't* be in the play. And if they behave quite naturally, in this improvisatory situation, and create their own dialogue, and behave according to what I consider to be their own natures, then I suppose I have the play far enough along to sit down and write it.

INTERVIEWER

Is that when you know that a play has gone through this “subconscious” process and is ready to come out?

ALBEE

Not necessarily. It's when I find myself typing.

INTERVIEWER

That's not an answer.

ALBEE

It really is. There's a time to go to the typewriter. It's like a dog: the way a dog before it craps wanders around in circles—a piece of earth, an area of grass, circles it for a long time before it squats. It's like that: figuratively circling the typewriter getting ready to write, and then finally one sits down. I think I sit down to the typewriter when it's time to sit down to the typewriter. That isn't to suggest that when I do finally sit down at the typewriter, and write out my plays with a speed that seems to horrify all my detractors and half of my well-wishers, that there's no work involved. It *is* hard work, and one *is* doing all the work oneself. Still, I know playwrights who like to kid themselves into saying that their characters are so well formed that *they* just take over. *They* determine the structure of the play. By which is meant, I suspect, only that the unconscious mind has done its work so thoroughly that the play just has to be filtered through the conscious mind. But there's work to be done—and discovery to be

made. Which is part of the pleasure of it. It's a form of pregnancy I suppose, and to carry that idea further, there are very few people who are pregnant who can recall specifically the moment of conception of the child—but they discover that they are pregnant, and it's rather that way with discovering that one is thinking about a play.

INTERVIEWER

When you start, do you move steadily from the opening curtain through to the end, or do you skip around, doing one scene, then another? What about curtain lines? Is there a conscious building toward the finale of each act?

ALBEE

For better or for worse, I write the play straight through—from what I consider the beginning to what I consider the end. As for curtain lines, well, I suppose there are playwrights who do build toward curtain lines. I don't think I do that. In a sense, it's the same choice that has to be made when you wonder when to start a play. And when to end it. The characters' lives have gone on before the moment you chose to have the action of the play begin. And their lives are going to go on after you have lowered the final curtain on the play, unless you've killed them off. A play is a parenthesis that contains all the material you think has to be contained for the action of the play. Where do you end that? Where the characters seem to come to a pause . . . where they seem to want to stop—rather like, I would think, the construction of a piece of music.

INTERVIEWER

You think of yourself then as an intuitive playwright. What you're saying in effect now is that superimposing any fixed theme on your work would somehow impose limitations on your subconscious imaginative faculties.

ALBEE

I suspect that the theme, the nature of the characters, and the method of getting from the beginning of the play to the end is already established in the unconscious.

INTERVIEWER

If one worked expressly by intuition, then, doesn't the form get out of control?

ALBEE

When one controls form, one doesn't do it with a stopwatch or a graph. One does it by sensing, again intuitively.

INTERVIEWER

After writing a play in this sort of intuitive way, do you end by accepting its overall structure (which must also be something of a revelation to you), or do you go back and rewrite and revise with the idea of giving it cogent shape?

ALBEE

I more or less trust it to come out with shape. Curiously enough, the only two plays that I've done very much revision on were the two adaptations—even though the shape of them was pretty much determined by the original work. With my own plays, the only changes, aside from taking a speech out here, putting one in there (if I thought I dwelled on a point a little too long or didn't make it explicit enough), are very minor; but even though they're very minor—having to do with the inability of actors or the unwillingness of the director to go along with me—I've always regretted them.

INTERVIEWER

Your earlier work, from *The Zoo Story* to *Virginia Woolf*, brought you very quick and major international celebrity, even though today at . . . thirty-eight—

ALBEE

—thirty-seven.

INTERVIEWER

When this is published it will be thirty-eight—you would otherwise be regarded as a relatively young growing writer. Do you feel this major renown, for all the doubtless pleasure and financial security it has given you, is any threat to the growth of the young playwright?

ALBEE

Well, there are two things that a playwright can have. Success or failure. I imagine there are dangers in both. Certainly the danger of being faced with indifference or hostility is discouraging, and it may be that success—acceptance if it's too quick, too lightning-quick—can turn the heads of some people.

INTERVIEWER

I was thinking less in terms of what the personal effect on you would be. In terms of what you said before, there seems to be a certain pattern that's acted out in the American theater, if not exclusively in the American theater, of elevating new playwrights to enormous prestige, and then after a certain time lapse, arrived at arbitrarily, the need comes to cut them down to size.

ALBEE

Well, the final determination is made anywhere from twenty-five to one hundred years after the fact anyway. And if the playwright is strong enough to hold on to reasonable objectivity in the face of either hostility or praise, he'll do his work the way he was going to anyway.

INTERVIEWER

Since I guess it's fairly imbecilic to ask a writer what he considers to be his best work or his most important work, perhaps

I could ask you this question: which of all of your plays do you feel closest to?

ALBEE

Well, naturally the one I'm writing right now.

INTERVIEWER

Well, excepting that.

ALBEE

I don't know.

INTERVIEWER

There's no one that you feel any special fondness for?

ALBEE

I'm terribly fond of *The Sandbox*. I think it's an absolutely beautiful, lovely, perfect play.

INTERVIEWER

And as for the play you're writing now . . .

ALBEE

A Delicate Balance, which I am writing now. "The Substitute Speaker," next, and then in some order or another, three short plays, plus a play about Attila the Hun.

INTERVIEWER

You say three short plays. Do you hold forth any prospect of going off Broadway with anything?

ALBEE

Well, considering the way the critical reaction to my plays has been going in the past few years, I may well be there shortly.

INTERVIEWER

I was thinking out of choice rather than necessity.

ALBEE

I'm talking about that too.

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