

Edward Albee

Category : Who's Who: In American Theatre

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Edward Albee -Playwright

Edward Albee was born in Washington, DC on March 12, 1928. When he was two weeks old, baby Edward was adopted by millionaire couple Reed and Frances Albee. The Albees named their son after his paternal grandfather, Edward Franklin Albee, a powerful Vaudeville producer who had made the family fortune as a partner in the Keith-Albee Theater Circuit.

Young Edward was raised by his adoptive parents in Westchester, New York. Because of his father's and grandfather's involvement in the theatre business, Edward was exposed to theatre and well-known Vaudeville personalities throughout his childhood.

In 1940, twelve-year-old Edward entered the Lawrenceville School, a prestigious boys' preparatory school. During his high school days, he shocked school officials by writing a three-act sex farce entitled *Aliqueen*. At the age of fifteen, the Lawrenceville School dismissed Edward for cutting classes. Hoping to inspire some discipline in his wayward son, Reed Albee enrolled Edward at the Valley Forge Military Academy. Within a year, Valley Forge had dismissed Edward as well.

Ultimately, Edward attended Choate from 1944 to 1946. Even as a teenager, Edward was a prolific writer. In 1945, his poem "Eighteen" was published in the Texas literary magazine *Kaleidoscope*. His senior year at Choate, Edward's first published play *Schism* appeared in the school literary magazine.

After graduating from Choate, Edward enrolled at Trinity College, a small liberal arts school in Hartford, Connecticut. While there Edward irked his mother by associating with artists and intellectuals whom she found objectionable. During his days at Trinity College, Edward gained a modicum of theatre experience - although it was onstage, as an actor, rather than as a writer.

Albee left home when he was in his late teens, later saying in an interview, "They weren't very good at being parents, and I wasn't very good at being a son."

He would move to New York where he supported himself by writing music programming for WNYC radio. In 1953, young Albee met playwright Thornton Wilder. Later, he credited Wilder with inspiring him to become a playwright - advice he did not follow for a few more years. Over the next decade, Albee lived on the proceeds of his grandmother's trust fund and held jobs as an office boy, record salesman, and Western Union messenger.

In 1958, Albee wrote his first major play, a one-act entitled **The Zoo Story**. When no New York producer would agree to stage it, Albee sent the play to an old friend in New York. The play was first produced in Berlin. After its success abroad, American theatre producer Alan Schneider agreed to produce *The Zoo Story* off-Broadway in a double bill with **Samuel Beckett's Krapp's Last Tape**. This early association with Beckett served to cement Albee's connection to the **Theatre of the**

Absurd. In fact, *The Zoo Story* was at the time of its production hailed as the birth of *American* absurdist drama.

Immediately, Albee became perceived as a leader of a new theatrical movement in America. His success was in part predicated on his ability to straddle the two divergent traditions of American theatre - the traditional and the avant garde, combining the realistic with the surreal .

Thus, critics of Albee can rightfully see him as a successor to American playwrights Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Eugene O'Neill while at the same time unmistakably influenced by European playwrights like Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. Albee has also called Ring Lardner, James Thurber, and Jean Genet important influences on his writing.

Throughout the following years, Albee strengthened his reputation with a series of one-act plays, including **The Death of Bessie Smith** and **The Sandbox**, which he dedicated to his beloved grandmother, in 1960. In 1961, **The American Dream** dealt with themes that would be drawn upon in Albee's later career.

Much of Albee's come from his original and absurdist dramas. His first three-act drama and the play for which he is best known, **Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?**, was produced in New York in 1962. Immediately it became popular and controversial. When its nomination for a Pulitzer was not accepted unanimously by the prize committee, two members of the Pulitzer Prize committee resigned. Nonetheless, the play received the Tony Award and New York Drama Critics Circle Award.

After the failed McCullers adaptation in 1963, Albee's original drama, a dream play called **Tiny Alice**, opened in New York. That same year, Albee joined with two friends in creating an absurdist group called "**Theater 1964**," which produced, among other things, **Beckett's Play** and Pinter's *The Lover* at Cherry Lane Theatre. After *Malcolm* closed after only five days, Albee rebounded with the success of *A Delicate Balance* in 1966. For this play, he received the Pulitzer Prize.

Albee continued to write plays throughout the 1960's and 1970's. *Everything in the Garden*, adapted from a play by Giles Cooper, was produced in 1967, followed by the original plays *Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* in 1968, *All Over* in 1971, and *Seascape* in 1975. For *Seascape*, Albee was awarded a second Pulitzer Prize. *Counting the Ways and Listening* which initially debuted as a radio play in England was staged in New York in 1977.

Throughout the 1980's, Albee's playwriting career failed to produce a substantial commercial hit. Plays from this period include *The Lady from Dubuque* (1980), an adaptation of *Lolita* (1981), *The Man Who Had Three Arms* (1983), *Finding the Sun* (1985), and *Marriage Play* (1987). During this time, Albee also taught courses at various universities and maintained his residence in New York.

In 1994, Albee experienced a much-awaited success with the play *Three Tall Women*. That play earned Albee his third Pulitzer Prize and his first commercial hit in over a decade. *Three Tall Women* also won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and the Outer Critics Circle Award. Albee's most recent productions have been *Lorca Play* in 1993 and *Fragments: A Concerto Grosso* in 1995.

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A member of the Dramatists Guild Council, Albee has received three Pulitzer Prizes for drama — for **A Delicate Balance** (1966), **Seascape** (1974), **Three Tall Women** (1990-1991); a Special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement (2005); the Gold Medal in Drama from the American Academy and

Institute of Arts and Letters (1980); as well as the Kennedy Center Honors and the National Medal of Arts (both in 1996).

Albee is the President of the Edward F. Albee Foundation, Inc., which maintains the William Flanagan Creative Persons Center (a writers and artists colony in Montauk, NY).

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