

# Edward Albee

and the theater

of arrogance

by Anne Attura Paolucci '47

It was Goethe who said that all new art was a gesture of arrogance. It has to be. It takes a good deal of nerve, of brazenness, of courage even, to break with established tradition and insist that what came before is now valueless and what will come tomorrow is better than what exists today. All new art is presumptuous when it does away with the past in one confident sweep, asserting its own unassailable inspiration.

But the danger in this defiant gesture is equally clear. Knocking down is all too easy; and what is announced as an inspired vision often proves, in the working out, a pitiful stammering. The arrogance of art lies in the confidence of its inspiration; but inspiration—as Dante observed—cannot be fittingly embodied or expressed arrestingly without the skill or fluency that comes with long practice in an art form, without the knowledge of the technique perfected by experience, and without the innate talent which gives unique and personal value to the result. These three—*usus, ars, ingenium*—are prerequisites without which the arrogance of inspiration collapses into something foolish and inarticulate. History bears this out. The avant-garde has always had and will continue to have a foolish and inarticulate fringe, whose arrogance serves, nevertheless, an immediate purpose in providing the self-confident atmosphere conducive to art. Such a fringe clears the way ahead, but the true artist pauses to look back before taking possession of the ground thus cleared.

Today's avant-garde theater has such a fringe in those who see the future of dramatic art as spontaneous expression with or without words, *happenings*, dramatizations which defy form and make no distinction between audience and spectator, meaning and non-meaning, words and sounds. If theater is to remain theater, such impulses must be harnessed and controlled. There is a place for happenings in the avant-garde theater; but they must

not be pushed at the expense of the rest.

The threat, let me hasten to add, is not really serious. Theater will not be destroyed, no matter how popular happenings become. The worst that can happen is that avant-garde critics will make a fetish of novelty for a time, mistaking arrogance (the initial thrust) for greatness, and condemning ordered genius for its adherence to the standard requirements of theater. The avant-garde can, for instance, blast the author of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *Tiny Alice*, and *A Delicate Balance* as old-fashioned for submitting to the traditional conventions of a proscenium stage and a printed text; but such criticism will not hurt Albee in the long run, any more than it has hurt Shakespeare. Albee will survive the craze for happenings even as he has survived criticism leveled at him from the opposite extreme, by steady playgoers who find his work difficult and abstract. Passing between Scylla and Carybdis, at once new and traditional, Albee has succeeded in giving repeatable theatrical expression on many levels to experiences that have for him as well as for his audience all the arrogance of inexplicable happenings. He has often been asked to 'explain' his plays and has consistently refused to do so; he has gained a kind of notorious popularity but has not given in to the conventions of big money theater. If anything, his plays get harder—not because he enjoys confusing his audience, but because he is constantly exploring new areas of human experience with totally new dramatic means. He is the only American playwright, after O'Neill, who shows real growth. And the only one who has made the effort to break away from the 'message plays' which have plagued our theater since O'Neill. Experimentation for Albee is a slow, internal transformation of the dramatic medium, not an arbitrary exercise in expressionism, or Freudian symbolism, or stream-of-consciousness. He is the only one of our playwrights who seems to have accepted and committed himself to serious articula-

tion of the existential challenge of our time, recognizing the incongruity of insisting on a pragmatic view in an age of relativity, when the old Ibsen-like realism of dramatic 'statement' can no longer be effective. Albee's work is a refreshing exception to John Gassner's judgment that our theatre—with its 'message' plays and its outgrown realism—is in a state of "protracted adolescence" which gives it a "provincial air."

Happenings are the extreme reaction to our fossilized theater. Edward Albee represents the first sober attempt to effect a transformation at the core.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *Tiny Alice*, and *A Delicate Balance*, Albee is avant-garde in the best and most serious sense of the word. He brings to our theater something of the poetic experience of Beckett and Ionesco—the same striving for a new dramatic language, the same concern with making use of the stage as an articulate medium, in the way—for example—that the Italian film makers (Fellini and Antonioni, especially) have revolutionized film techniques and raised their medium to a new art. Albee's arrogance as an innovator is all too clear, but his instincts as an artist are always at work reshaping dramatic conventions. His early work—four one-act plays—reflects simultaneously the fascination of social drama and the effort to overcome that fascination. The full-length plays struggle with the existential burden and the search for meaning. The search for content is matched on every level with a search for adequate and original form.

*The Zoo Story*—the first of the one-act plays (1958)—transforms a realistic situation into a Pirandellian question. This early play is, in effect, a series of paradoxes and traces (already fully developed in this limited context) what will prove to be Albee's mature dramatic method, a method well-suited for the questions Albee likes to raise and which suggests at once a break with the theater that preceded him. We have on the surface a vicious criticism of the American way of

life, an apology for the misfit and the homosexual, a satirical attack against the complacent male who allows his women to dominate and emasculate him; but Peter is as much an *active* protagonist in this seemingly passive environmental setting as Jerry is. Both struggle against the pessimism not of the social order but of the human condition; through that struggle, both come to see their illusions as cruel oversimplifications. Here, as in the later plays, Albee does not indulge in sentimental hopes by way of a conclusion. Jerry's Christ-like sacrifice shocks us into awareness, but it's no answer. *The Zoo Story* ends with a sense of terrible loss, suggesting—in its limited context—many of the large themes and recurring motifs of the later plays, particularly the 'inversion' of religious experience and the transparent symbolism which Albee perfects as he moves into the full-length plays. *The Zoo Story* transforms solid pragmatic realism into a constantly shifting scene that pulls the ground from under us without betraying the illusion of realism. A roominghouse is a world, is a zoo, is a trap, is Hell guarded by Cerberus, is a recognizable and prosaic setting raised to a poetic image by a restless imagination. Peter is a middle-class, young-middle-aged ordinary guy, a next-door neighbor, a reliable executive type, a lonely man on a park bench, a lost soul, an unwilling disciple, the betrayer of truth, helpless mankind shocked into humility. This kind of symbolism works itself out naturally, internally, effortlessly, and produces meaning which is not *statement* but a suggestive *mosaic*.

### Later technique

In the plays which follow *The Zoo Story*, this method is enlarged and adapted to a series of unique dramatic situations. In *The Death of Bessie Smith*, Albee strives for a nervous realism which will reveal the mystery behind personality, stripping motives down to a bare question. In *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream*, the method is reduced to trans-

parent allegory and *types*. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* type and allegory are deftly reworked into a realistic setting which—like that of *The Zoo Story*—turns out to be an incredible nightmare. Allegory takes on an almost Dantesque quality in *Tiny Alice* and animates familiar routine with the suggestion of madness in *A Delicate Balance*. Albee's procedure may be summed up as a kind of *dialectic*, an oscillation between prosaic and absurd, obvious and mysterious, commonplaces and revelation. What holds these extremes together as fluid, living reality is Albee's refusal to settle for 'facts' as we know them or experience as we have grown accustomed to defining it. A lesser artist might have been tempted to 'insert' novelty to suggest this strange restless movement of the soul—'innovations' like memory sequences, stream-of-consciousness, Freudian symbolism (all the gimmicks which have proved 'successful' on the Broadway stage ever since O'Neill first experimented with them)—but Albee, with the arrogance of genius, starts confidently from scratch each time, searching for the spontaneous *particular* idiom that will do justice to the *particular* idea in each case.

The most ambitious of these efforts to weld content and form into unique dramatic experience is *Tiny Alice*. At first—and coming to it from the pyrotechnic virtuosity of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*—this play may strike the reader as cut and dry, dull even, in its dialogue, while—at the same time—straining the limits of imagination with its ambiguous meanings. Albee's ambitious design begins to emerge as we realize that the giant replica of Miss Alice's mansion is one of a series of reproductions—one inside the other—somewhat like a series of chinese boxes, each getting smaller, down to an infinitesimal question. The mansion itself is part of the series, of course—part of the expanding (or contracting) universe which the play is about. This knowledge throws a weird light on the inhabitants of the strange house. We

sense the mystery long before we can grasp it effectively.

The three inhabitants of the mansion suggest, in fact, a curious parody of the holy trinity: Lawyer, the effective liaison man for the group, the contact between the mansion and the outside world, the wielder of power; Butler, a kind of unobtrusive but omniscient reminder of purpose; Miss Alice, the deceptive source of love. Into this unusual household comes Brother Julian, presumably to expedite the transfer of a large sum of money donated by Miss Alice to the Church; but as we watch with growing dismay, we come to realize that he is there to fulfill some kind of perverted destiny, that he has been chosen mysteriously to undergo a cruel conversion which he must acknowledge and accept in order to be initiated into the dark mysteries of the Replica.

The mansion itself has the awesome aspect of a deserted cathedral; in it, phrases and statements echo with hidden implications, suggesting reverberations in an empty church. The toast to the newlyweds has, in fact, the grand quality of a religious rite, especially since it is directed to the Replica as though it were the high altar in a gothic cathedral. The sense of awe grows as the Replica comes to life at Lawyer's words, as though some invisible hand were turning on the lights in each of the miniature rooms, which extend to . . . eternity. As correspondences suggest themselves and the symbolic tapestry begins to emerge, we begin to suspect a providential design in all this and grasp, finally, the bold paradox which is the emptying out of purpose via the rites and myths of faith.

The heart of the paradox is Brother Julian, who harbors in himself, hidden in the point of darkness at the root of consciousness, a doubt about his purpose and his faith. The task of the others, we learn gradually, is to bring that doubt to light, force him to acknowledge and confess it, and get him finally to accept the death inside him.

The last scene of the play is, in my

opinion, one of the most remarkable pieces of stage writing in the history of the modern theater. What Albee has done, in effect, is to make *Nothing* visible on stage as a *metaphor*, playing on the age-old symbol of darkness. But it is a *moving* darkness which is seen 'approaching' in the lights extinguished first in the Replica (the allegorical dimension) and then in the room where Julian lies dying. Darkness literally spills forth out of the model into the room where the dying man lies, moving like a swath of black as the great chandeliers go out one by one. Darkness literally comes down the stairs to engulf Julian and claim him. The symbolic meaning here is not arbitrarily set up; it is at once visual and immediate.

Stylistically, the play is a series of surrealistic images, a constant telescoping of real and metaphorical, clichés and extraordinary insights. There is a kaleidoscopic swiftness in the technique: familiar things take on a mysterious quality and what seems strange is turned into every-day perceptions. Dialogue is, at every moment, statement and revelation; phrases ring with a curious echoing effect, as if they mean more than they say. Past and present seem to converge again and again on a point which is Absolute, outside of time, and therefore inexpressible.

In depicting the destruction of faith and illusion in so many ways and from so varied and rich a psychological base, Albee is stripping the soul in true Pirandellian fashion, baring the many masks of personality in the tragic struggle for the experience as the destructive *movement* of consciousness, a constant alternating of extremes, a mirroring of faith in despair, truth in purposelessness. And, as in Pirandello's case, the seemingly impossible feat of converging on meaning by way of constantly shifting suggestion is accomplished within the grand illusion of realism—at once a condemnation and confirmation of the age-old commitment to standard theater procedures.

Jack Ryan (Jerry), Peter J. Migliaccio (Pete), Anne Paolucci (director-producer of the *Zoo Story*), and Sergio Lori (theater critic of Roma), celebrate the opening of the Italian production.



→ identity. Like Pirandello, Albee defines