

Profile: Edward Albee

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At age six, Edward Franklin Albee III determined he would become a writer; so he wrote his first poem. Twenty years later, Albee (pronounced All-Bee) turned from the writing of verse to the writing of drama. His success with that medium qualifies him in the minds of many as the Playwright of the contemporary theater.

Sitting in Gardner House, Albee readily answered questions put to him by enthusiastic undergraduates. He looked every bit The Playwright: three-piece, British-cut charcoal pinstripe; black and red print tie; and intense, dark eyes.

Why does he write for the theater?

“I like the immediacy about the theater. I find its present tense quality exciting.”

Does he consider himself a writer of the absurd or a writer of social criticism?

“Absurd really means out of the way. The term is a result of the U.S. being label happy. What is absurd is the plays themselves, not the human condition. The absurd plays should have been written in 1905.” Albee asserted that what is now called the avant garde or absurd is really true contemporary theater.

As for social criticism, Albee believes that all plays are concerned with this matter: “For anyone bothering to create, a social criticism is almost a necessity.”

But is it enough merely to criticize? What about solutions?

“To give answers is what the status quo demands. But you limit the questions when you limit yourself to answers . . . it is irresponsibility to ask those questions to which the answers are known.”

Albee does relent, thank goodness, from austerity. He can be entertaining also. What does he think of the Lincoln Center?

“An interesting collection of buildings.”

And when asked if there were any playwrights whom he admired, he responded quickly: “I think Beckett is the best alive. Then, with only a hint of a smile: “I also like late O’Neill, one half Anouilh and one-eighth Brecht.”

Though Albee conceded that perhaps school wasn’t for him, his intellectual approach to writing is worth noting.

He distinguished fact from truth. Fact, he is sure, is a single event. Truth is a single event that has some resonance, some host of implications that relate to other things and other people. The task for the writer is to “take off from fact and turn to truth,” Albee declared.

At his philosophical best, he said, “The writer must pretend that the play is writing itself. It is dangerous to examine our thought process too thoroughly.”

Later, almost poetically, he suggested, “Writing is the thing one is and does.”

If that be the case, the Edward Albee is an iconoclast, an annihilator of securely existing conditions. Hence the answer to that favorite question, “Who’s Afraid of Edward Albee?” is strikingly clear: the status quo.