

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Remembering Edward the Terrible

John Iacovelli · Thursday, September 22nd, 2016

I first met Edward Albee when he was visiting my undergrad school with a production of *The Zoo Story* that he had directed. There was great anticipation as he was coming to the University of Nevada, Las Vegas to present the one act in the Concert Hall, which is a large barn of a space with neither a proscenium or the feeling of a true stage.

I had been tasked with finding a NYC-style trash can and a park bench. We didn't have anything like that in Las Vegas, so we crudely welded and built them in our school scenic shop. I remember Mr. Albee was not impressed with either object. He was intimidating, and quiet. He looked at me like "Is this really the best you can do?" He briefly ran through his play with the actors. After the performance, he spoke in an interviewer-type setting and I remember him talking about how theatre should be "engaging, not merely entertaining."

That stuck with me perhaps more than anything I learned in undergraduate school. My first encounter with his writing was years earlier when I read, at Reno High School, and then directed for a local community theatre his *The American Dream* a one-act that was one of the first times I had encountered homosexuality in a play. One of the reasons I was involved in the theatre was that that it was a safe place for someone who was gay, everyone was welcome and we all a sort of equal. There was no concept of being "out" when I was in school. No one was "out."

That play stirred something in me in that here was a play that openly expressed male desire. The desire of both men and women for the male physique. The husband in the play has this line where he says, once he see the young man, "I'm getting sticky wet." This play has a raw and sexual energy that was shocking, even in the sexually liberated pre-AIDS days of the mid-seventies... Of course I would see many of Albee's plays over the next 30 years – and design some of them.

Then over several years I was privileged to be on a panel with him at SDSU, the "Juries" as it is called. He was always gruff, rough, and uncompromising. The way the Juries worked was that it was an all-day event, originally organized by Beeb Saltzer and now done by Ralph Funicello. A distinguished panel of theatre professionals would come and see three student teams of a director and designers prepare a chosen script for a presentation to us.

The first part was a design presentation that often featured the student director getting tongue-tied in explaining his "concept" or "approach." I remember Edward often saying, "Please, just answer the question I asked." Then student actors would perform a scene from the play in a minimal black box setting. One of the last years that Edward was on the panel, his play *The Zoo Story* (the original one-act, not the expanded full-length version.) had been chosen. Of course we were all nervous about saying anything in front of Edward, and then as the day came on we all noticed a curious thing. All three groups had set the show in the 1970s. It seemed odd as most of us think of the play either as set "now" or timeless or at least we would set it in the 1960s. So Edward asked the second group about this and they said, "Because it says so in the script." He said, "No, it

doesn't, and I should know, as the author." So a visibly shaking director pulled out a script and read him the descriptive opening remarks: "Place, New York City, The Upper West Side, the seventies" (referring to West 72nd street and the like). Of course we all laughed and Edward just looked exasperated. Later after lunch, I asked him to sign copy of an anthology of his plays that I had— and he wrote a very personal and very sweet note to me, one that I will always cherish. No one like him.

Top image of Edward Albee from this video interview of Tony Award-winning playwright Edward Albee, Obie Award winner and founder of the Living Theatre Judith Malina, and director of the archives of La Mama Experimental Theater Ozzie Rodriguez, in discussion with Village Voice theatre critic Michael Feingold at the Provincetown Playhouse, Sun., Dec. 19, 2010.

[alert type=alert-white]Please consider making a tax-deductible donation now so we can keep publishing strong creative voices.[/alert]

Edward Albee on the Heritage of Off-Broadway at the Provincetown Playhouse from NYU Steinhardt on Vimeo.

This entry was posted on Thursday, September 22nd, 2016 at 12:23 am and is filed under [Theatre](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site.