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Edward Albee: 02-04-1981

Edward Albee

Stan Sanvel Rubin

Adam Lazarre

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Living on the Precipice:
A Conversation with Edward Albee
Edited by Mark Anderson and Earl Ingersoll

Speaking with Edward Albee were Stan Sanvel Rubin, the current director of the Forum; Adam Lazarre, the former Dean of Fine Arts; and Mark Anderson, who teaches Renaissance and contemporary drama.

Rubin: It has been said that the hallmarks of your drama are "cruel mocking wit, dramatic explosiveness, and poetic eloquence." Would you agree?

Albee: I like the sound of that. But I don't think about myself in those terms. I read these quotes about myself, and they're very nice for book jackets, but I don't think about myself in the third-person.

Anderson: In all of your works, though, you do seem to have a very great concern for words, for getting the words right, and for examining the process of human communication--people's attempts to make contact with each other and other people's failure to understand those attempts.

Albee: And other people's refusal to communicate with one another, which I sometimes think is probably much closer to the problem--not that people can't communicate with each other, but that they choose not to, because it's easier and safer not to. Not enough people are willing to live on the precipice. And if you're a writer, I guess you should concern yourself with precision of language.

Lazarre: You made a couple of points last night in your talk that struck me quite forcefully. You said that people's ability to govern themselves is connected quite closely with their aesthetic response to art, and you went on to draw some parallels between Eastern European societies, particularly the Soviet Union, and our own. You said also that man is the only animal that produces art.

Albee: . . . consciously produces art.

Lazarre: That's right. You finished by saying that ability to produce art was important to our evolution. Could you expand on that point?

Albee: I don't know if I can. It never occurred to me until all of a sudden I heard myself saying it one night. And I thought, yes, it must be part of the evolutionary process, or why else would this human animal be doing it? If we assume that we are not a lunatic mutant, that there is some kind of internal logic to what happens as we evolve, the fact that our tails have fallen off and we have developed metaphor strikes me as part of the evolutionary process. I haven't thought much about it beyond that, aside from the conclusion that participation in the art is

something natural to us, rather than something ephemeral or decorative, or, as many people feel, obscene.

Lazarre: What you've said suggests that in captive societies people have been known to go to the wall for their right to read or to express their ideas in art.

Albee: Unfortunately those people are in the minority. I don't know which conclusion I'm coming to: I used to think it was man's nature to live in a society where he can govern himself, but the more I think of it, the more pessimistic I become; it may well be man's nature to wish to live in a totalitarian society, to be governed. We may be at an evolutionary turning point.

The role of the writer is to be, axiomatically, against any society he happens to be living in, at least to be to one side of it, to be examining it, to question its too-easily-held values. That's why, especially in totalitarian societies, it is the writers who find themselves silenced more quickly than anybody else, because their governments realize the power of the creative mind. I worry in this country too whenever we have governments that feel the press has too much freedom of expression. It happened most recently, of course, under Nixon who was trying to get some laws passed to bridle the press, and who had a strong and often expressed anti-intellectualism and fear and loathing of the Northeastern intellectual establishment.

Lazarre: The anger and violence expressed by writers like Solzhenitsyn seem surprising to many Americans.

Albee: It's so interesting about Solzhenitsyn. While he was a dissenting writer in the Soviet Union, everyone in the United

States thought he was wonderful. As soon as he was thrown out of the Soviet Union and came here and started telling us that we had a couple of problems too, I noticed that a lot of people in this country lost some of their enthusiasm for him.

Anderson: Do you think it's the function of the artist to stir up controversy, to challenge people's assumptions?

Albee: Not merely to stir things up because you wake up in the morning and say, "Well, I'd better stir something up."

If we lived in utopia, there would be no point in having art because in utopia everything is perfect, and the function of art is to correct. Since, however, we do not live in a utopian society, there is enough to worry about, to complain about, to wish to change, and it is the writer's function to educate, to inform, to hold a mirror up to people.

Anderson: To disturb?

Albee: If you're going to hold a mirror up to people, you're going to disturb them.

Anderson: Should it be conscious?

Albee: No, it's part of a writer's function--it comes with the territory.

Anderson: Do you get the feeling that the artist is a kind of superman, or that he is at least better than other men?

Albee: No, different--that's all.

Anderson: But he has an extremely important function in society, to articulate what the society is. Going back to what we were talking about earlier, his words or communication is part of what it means to be human, part of the evolutionary development of

man.

Albee: It's a function he has that no one else can perform as effectively as he can, just as the writer cannot shoe a horse as well as someone whose job that is. Other than to write, about the only thing a writer can do as well as anyone else can--I tell you this from experience--is to deliver telegrams. I used to do that, and so did Henry Miller, long before I did, although I didn't know it at the time. The writer has a unique usefulness. If writing and the other creative arts hadn't a useful function, they'd have absolutely no worth whatever.

Anderson: You're saying the writer is almost a Western Union man delivering messages to his audience. What kind of messages does the contemporary audience need? What are your concerns as an artist?

Albee: My concerns are the facts that we are too short-sighted, that we will not live on the precipice, that too many people prefer to go through this brief thing called life only half-alive, that too many people are going to end up with regret and bitterness at not having participated fully in their lives, that it's easier not to have to deal honorably with one another, that communication is a vitally important and dangerous matter.

We are supposed to be a revolutionary society. Our reason for our existence, however, was an economic revolution, rather than a revolution for freedom as we all like to pretend. It was an upper-middle class trying to get richer--like most revolutions. We've had a continuing revolution from the first one on to the social revolution of 1932. If we've become static

and stagnant, then we may indeed have lost our value as a society.

Anderson: When we're talking about the "American dream" or the mythology we carry around with us, which you've dealt with directly in your play American Dream and indirectly in many of your other works, do you think there are fundamental American lies that need to be dispelled?

Albee: I don't know whether they're American lies or universal lies. Again, we're getting into an area that I'm not terribly good at articulating except in my work. What do my plays say? There lies the answer.

[Laughter]

We do live in a society where we are subject to different self-deceptions. Unlike other societies, we're permitted shortsighted and selfish decisions, cruel election jokes and things of that sort, that other societies which are controlled and whose people are not given the freedom of self-destruction don't have. These choices that we're permitted result in great danger and an extraordinary latitude for the right decision. Therefore, we have a responsibility, given the danger of freedom of expression and freedom of choice, to make informed decisions.

Anderson: You were talking yesterday about the artistic revival and the great spirit of optimism in the 60s. At the same time, in your works of that period, instead of the optimism of the period you seem to be puncturing the lies. In Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? and your later plays, that seems a central concern: there are life-lies that are dangerous to human

existence and prevent communication. In a sense we've come to see that perhaps much of our optimism in the Kennedy Era was naive.

Albee: That period gave a writer, faced with an enthusiastic, participating audience, the opportunity to examine continuing problems with some freedom. Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? was the result of my examination of the 50s, as much as anything. Many of us suspected that even though we were terribly enthusiastic about the Thousand Days of Kennedy before terribly long it would be business as usual and things would slide back to the way they were. And, indeed, quickly enough they did.

Lazarre: One of the interesting paradoxes of theater in this country is that although here, and elsewhere in the world, it does have a revolutionary quality it ends up being the province of the bourgeois, at least in capitalistic countries. How can writers reach the audience they want to reach?

Albee: But there are so many theaters in America. The commercial Broadway theater, indeed, is the possession of the middle class, which does not wish to be disturbed. But we also have experimental theater as well as university theater, which is living up to its responsibility by producing brave and venturesome drama. We have regional theaters, which at their very best are doing the best of the new plays. There are a number of theaters. Unfortunately what happens on Broadway affects to a too large extent the public consciousness of what theater is all about. What's why some of us keep banging our heads against the wall and insist on having our plays done on

Broadway, rather than in something safer and more comfortable like the regional theaters. Broadway should not be abandoned to the safe, the easy, the middle class, and the middle brow.

Lazarre: Even in the regional theater there are many who in an attempt to attract larger audiences continue to use the same material over and over again. I mean, how many times can you do Feydeau? Not that there's anything wrong with Feydeau.

Albee: There's nothing wrong with Feydeau. The problem is that there are so many people who think they should be doing Neil Simon, rather than Feydeau. Feydeau is funnier than Neil Simon. Feydeau is a step toward Moliere, and Neil Simon is not.

Lazarre: You were talking about plays that disturb, that strike to the heart of our present human condition.

Albee: That can be done with comedy, as well as with the stark humor in tragedy. In fact, most useful teaching plays, the very best plays, have some humor to them.

Anderson: From the very beginning, the comedy in your plays has had a biting edge. Jokes and aggression in many of your works seem to go hand in hand.

Albee: I find pain and laughter very close, and I've always been attracted to those writers who seem to comprehend that. Are there many more sadly funny writers than Borges or Nabokov or Beckett, for example? They are the three giants, I think, of the last half of the twentieth century.

Anderson: Is expression or communication an outlet for aggression, an alternative to physical violence?

Albee: On my own part?

[Laughter]

Anderson: No, in the works you envision. For example, in Seascape when the characters are having trouble communicating together, they both go into very aggressive or defensive postures, out of fear and lack of communication. There is a potential for violence there that is in a way mitigated by communication.

Albee: To paraphrase Auden, we must talk to one another or die. It used to be "We must love one another or die." Toward the end of his life, he changed it to "We must love one another and die."

Anderson: You've often dealt with death in your plays.

Albee: As somebody says in one of my plays, All Over, "It gets you where you live."

Anderson: You've said that All Over and Seascape were part of a life-death play.

Albee: They were supposed to be.

Anderson: Is there any significance in the order? Did you write one to be performed before the other?

Albee: I guess you do Seascape, the comedy, first; then All Over. I don't remember.

Anderson: Do you sense that your views about life or the way you perceive reality is changing? Are you getting more optimistic, for example?

Albee: Only to the extent, I suppose, that writing itself is an act of optimism. I don't seem to be stopping that, so obviously I've retained some optimism.

Rubin: I'd like to ask you about your adaptations, which, I

suppose, reflect another kind of optimism in literature. You must have a kind of love for a work or an optimism to wish to adapt it for the stage. You've done three adaptations of fine novels--McCuller's Ballad of the Sad Cafe, Purdy's Malcolm, and now Nabokov's Lolita. You're quoted somewhere as saying, "Adaptation is a difficult experience. I had to be both Nabokov and myself. I tried to write the play Nabokov would have written had he been a playwright." Would you comment on that statement?

Albee: I think that statement says it pretty succinctly.

Rubin: But why these three?

Albee: I don't really know why. I guess it struck me that they could be translated to the stage without any loss of power or effectiveness, and that I wanted to do it. I don't really know why.

Rubin: Did you know in first reading the novels that you wanted to turn them into plays?

Albee: I think so with both Malcolm and Ballad of the Sad Cafe. I first read Lolita so long before I was a playwright that it didn't occur to me to make a play of it.

Rubin: When did it occur to you?

Albee: When someone called me up and said, "I have the rights. Do you want to make a play of it?"

Rubin: Did you speak with Nabokov about what you were doing?

Albee: No, he was dead. It would have made it more difficult and costly anyway.

Anderson: Do you work on your adaptations in the same way you work on your other plays? In other words, do you carry them

around with you in your head?

Albee: Yes, I think about them for a while, and then I put them down very quickly. With Lolita I read the book again several times, thought about the whole project for about a year, and wrote it in ten days. I usually don't write quite that quickly, but I had a lot of the words.

Anderson: To broach an unpleasant subject, the New York critics have attacked you on your adaptations every time you've done them. Why is that true?

Albee: That's not quite true. Ballad of the Sad Cafe got away pretty well. Malcolm they attacked rather viciously--despite any merits or demerits the play might have--because it came out immediately after Tiny Alice and a rather annoyed press conference I gave in which I complained that the critics had seriously misunderstood Tiny Alice by telling audiences they would not be able to understand the play since it was so complex. I heard myself saying at this press conference that I was puzzled why critics would assume that anything that would puzzle them would necessarily puzzle an audience.

[Laughter]

As a result, when Malcolm opened, it got unanimously hideous reviews--far in excess of any faults the play may have had.

Anderson: It seems that even with Lolita people are waiting for your demise.

Albee: Oh, I dare say that there are a lot of critics who would be perfectly happy if they could accomplish that act. And I think as much as anything they're annoyed by the fact that I

don't just lie down and die.

Anderson: You seem have gotten more than your share of harsh or adverse criticism. There seem to be people out for your blood.

Albee: It's probably because I don't react the way they would like me to: I don't become sycophantic; I don't behave myself. I strike back.

Anderson: You think it's because of your position, because you appeared on the scene very much in a cloud of thunder and lightning?

Albee: If you get in any kind of exposed position, there are those people who feel they are the ones who should create celebrity or fame--there are some critics like that. And if you don't act as if you are their possession and their creation, they try to destroy you.

Anderson: Do you think they have a different conception of your career than you do?

Albee: I dare say. If I read them, I sometimes wonder who they are writing about.

Anderson: What do they want you to be and what do you want to be?

Albee: I don't know quite what they want me to be. Certainly not who I am. I don't know that I can get more specific about it than that. Some of them get very annoyed by the fact that I use language well. They complain about the fact that my plays are well written.

Anderson: They do focus a lot on language. And there is always the side issue of vulgarity or profanity involved in the plays,

but that seems to be a red herring. Somehow your language is very affecting to both your audiences and your critics.

Albee: Audiences seem to like it, but it turns the critics into mouth-foaming beasts. I don't quite know why that is.

Anderson: Do you think it's because it's language in the context of the family? A lot of your plays focus on family or domestic situations, and they get rough. They're not used to seeing that.

Albee: That possibly. Also I think there are some critics who feel the theater is not a literary experience but a terribly simplified experience, and that language gets in the way of the proper function of the theater. These are people who prefer plays that are coarsely written.

Rubin: You have directed some of your plays. Would you speak of the experience of directing and why you choose to direct some plays and not others?

Albee: Well, sometimes I'm busier than other times. I enjoy directing, and I don't believe this theory that playwrights shouldn't direct their own work, because if they can learn the craft, then indeed they should. I lead a fairly busy life, and I can't end up directing everything. Also there are some actors who still believe that a playwright knows far too much about his play to be permitted to direct it.

Rubin: That changes the chemistry with the actors, undoubtedly, when you're directing your own work.

Albee: There are frictions. But certainly the revival of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? that I directed in '76 was every bit as good as the original production in '62. And there was nothing

wrong with my production of Seascape.

Rubin: You've had some experience with turning your work into film. Or, at least Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? was made into quite a successful film.

Albee: It was a commercially successful film. I didn't think much of it as a picture. I thought the film of A Delicate Balance was far better, and that's the one where I exercised a certain amount of control. I had no control over Virginia Woolf--casting or anything.

Rubin: It's interesting that the film is often cited as a landmark in terms of obscenity in cinema.

Albee: Oh, this obsession!

Rubin: And this obsession follows you at a point in 1981 when in our daily life and in our artistic life language is very free. And yet this association with obscenity does stick to you, perhaps for some of the reasons you mentioned earlier.

Albee: Yes, and if we are to judge by some of the reviews in Boston, I have committed an obscenity on stage with Nabokov's highly moral novel Lolita. Very odd. I never understand that reaction from people to absolutely natural matters.

Rubin: You don't really think the audience shares that response, do you?

Albee: Well, there is one scene in Lolita, the initial seduction of Humbert Humbert by Lolita--that's one thing people forget about that extraordinary book: that it's not this dirty old man who seduces this innocent young girl--and right at the moment of Lolita's turning her back on us and opening her robe to show

Humbert Humbert the future, there is always a couple or two who huffily get up and leave the theater.

Anderson: But it seems so strange, because this has been going on for last ten or fifteen years on Broadway. We've been through Oh, Calcutta and the nude scene in Equus.

Albee: But there's a problem there. The nude scene in Equus is titillation--I don't think it was in the text originally but added by the director to keep the show running. And Oh, Calcutta is a piece of trash, so that's perfectly acceptable.

Anderson: It's acceptable as long as the audience doesn't consider the action real.

Do you think you can actually affect a change in the American audience? You're going for Broadway and mainline theater, instead of regional theaters and off-off-Broadway.

Albee: I don't see why I should be made a second-class citizen just because I write fairly serious plays.

Anderson: But have you noticed a change in Broadway over the past twenty years?

Albee: I don't think it's quite as healthy an environment to work in. I think it's worse. One or two plays of any serious pretension in a season are allowed to survive with the froth and the trash, but usually not more than that. And producers are becoming more cowardly with the economic chaos in the theater: the rising costs and therefore the rising ticket prices make cowards of producers. And audiences expect not to be disturbed but to be made happy when they spend all that money.

Rubin: Last night you said that audiences may no longer know the

very basic things artists assume they know. In what specific areas would you like to see the audience improve?

Albee: I just wish audiences would come without having predetermined the boundaries of the theatrical experience they're willing to have.

Rubin: You mean that they don't want to be affected by the experience?

Albee: No, I don't want them to come to the theater determined that only this and not that kind of experience is tolerable. I want them to come to the theater as if they had never been to a play before in their lives. They must come with a kind of awe and innocence, leaving their preconceptions--moral, intellectual, emotional--out in the checkroom.

Rubin: Do you see a new audience there? Did the participation and the breaking down of the boundaries between spectator and performance in the 60s have impact on today's audience?

Albee: I don't know that it's affected the Broadway audience all that much, but certainly there's a healthier audience going to the off-off-Broadway plays and the regional theater. But you must remember that theater is such a minority participation in this country: no more than 5% of the people ever go to the theater, and I dare say that only 5% of that 5% care about serious theater.

Rubin: I sense in your remarks a desire to educate the audience.

Albee: Oh, I think the world would be a far better place, or at least this country would be, if everybody went to the serious theater all the time. Television is so terrible that it's

driving people out of the house, and maybe some of them will end up in the theater, rather than the bowling alley or the movies.

Rubin: From your experience with having your work made into films, how do you feel about film as a medium?

Albee: The only way for a playwright to work in film properly is to be allowed to write and direct his own films.

Anderson: Is that possible here?

Albee: It's possible, but not very likely. I'm not holding my breath.

Anderson: Are you looking for that kind of experience, to reach a wide audience?

Albee: The commercial success of the film Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? means that it's probably been seen by more people than have ever seen all of my plays produced all around the world, or will for a hundred years. It's nice to reach a large audience, but that always reminds me of what kind of information is reaching an audience that large all the time. We are a film and television culture, not a theater culture. And film and television misinform.

Rubin: Do you have a sense of your audience as you write?

Albee: No, I'm always concerned with the reality of the piece that I'm doing.

Anderson: What about a sense of form or structure? Does it grow out of the content or characterization?

Albee: I am aware that I am creating structure as I write. Form and content co-determine each other.

Anderson: You have written very different kinds of plays. When

we get to something like Seascape, you take some real theatrical chances--for example, putting animals on the stage.

Albee: All of my plays have been filled with animals!

[Laughter]

Anderson: That's right. You started out with Zoo Story!

Albee: No, the people wandering around in most of my plays are animals. We are animals, are we not?

Why not take chances? What fun is there if you don't?

Anderson: Are you trying to emphasize the bestial in man, the aggression, the thrust and parry, in human relationships?

Albee: I'm interested in the fact that so much of what I think is wrong with the world has to do with the fact that man's nature is so close to the bestial. And we had better be a little more aware of it.

Anderson: What can we do to be human then? Is it to throw away the lies? Some writers, O'Neill for example, maybe Ibsen, would say that the lie is important; it enables human beings to go on.

Albee: I know. I think I probably became a playwright as much as anything to refute that whole argument of O'Neill, expressed most forcefully in The Iceman Cometh. I do think people probably need self-deception and lies. The only distinction I would make is that I think people should have them but be aware that they are deceiving themselves.

Albee: You've done a lot to encourage young American playwrights. What do you see as the state of play-writing right now?

Albee: We've probably got more interesting young playwrights than we had twenty years ago, but they find it harder to get their

work in front of a large public.

Rubin: All of the government subsidy of the arts hasn't helped?

Albee: The government subsidy in this country—and we won't have to worry about it too much longer if Reagan has his way--has never given enough money as direct support to the individual creative artist. It's been far more concerned to make the public happy by supporting the symphony hall or the ballet group. Very little of the money goes directly to the creative artist; it's going to the interpretative artist and the place that houses the interpretative artist.

Anderson: Do you see any improvement in this situation? Obviously you're a champion of playwrights, but the theater is in the hands of managers and directors and actors.

Albee: You'll always have some first-rate playwrights in this country. The only question is, Will anybody ever see their work? The theater is not going to stop. Serious play-writing is not going to go away. But the audience may vanish completely. The economic situation may make it impossible for this work to be seen. But it will still be done.

Rubin: I'm interested in the writing process itself. To what extent do you recognize that your characters draw upon people you know?

Albee: Characters are, I guess, a combination of people one has seen or known, oneself, and this odd animal called "creativity," and it's probably best not to examine where each facet of the character comes from, but just be grateful it's an individual.

Rubin: When you're working, do you seclude yourself and work

steadily until something has worked itself out, or how do you handle the problem of discipline?

Albee: I work in the mind for a long time before I work on the page. Work in the mind can take years before I write a play down. Writing it down is a very intense experience because I'm manipulating plot and structure and character. By the time I get to that point, I've made most of the decisions about what's going to happen, even though I may not be aware of the decisions I've made.

Rubin: Do you read your lines aloud, or do you try them out on someone you know?

Albee: No, I can hear the lines as I'm writing them down.

Anderson: Do you do much revision?

Albee: Not terribly much. Not as much as most people do. But I probably make a few more revisions than I admit to.

Anderson: Do you trust other people's judgments on your plays, or only your own judgment?

Albee: Ultimately my own. I don't look only for corroboration, of course; I'm willing to grumpily accept advice and criticism from time to time, and then I pretend it was my own idea anyway.

Rubin: How do you feel about seeing your work in book form?

Albee: I remember the first time I ever saw my play in book form; I was so excited. Or, even before that I remember seeing my poems in literary magazines at Choate: there was such a difference between the poem on the typed page and in print. I would touch the printed page and think it was really quite wonderful. But a play for me is complete, the experience is

complete, as I write it down.

Rubin: Some dramatists feel that their work has to be realized on the stage, as a theatrical product. Does the performance complete the play?

Albee: No. If the play is any good, the performance is merely a confirmation. If the performance is an improvement, then the play has not been well written.

Rubin: Are you conscious of your style changing over the years?

Albee: Not really. I think it's always had its particular concern with precision of expression. In The Zoo Story Jerry speaks with as much precision as Agnes in A Delicate Balance or any of the later characters.

Rubin: Do you feel that you are working against your audience's expectation that a play will have more action?

Albee: It's true that most of the action in my plays is interior rather than exterior action. But I take my model there from Chekhov. I mean, what really happens on stage in A Cherry Orchard? Absolutely nothing! An estate is sold, and the selling is offstage. There is absolutely no physical action of any import in that extraordinary play.

Anderson: You have a very effective visual imagination: your plays are not just literary texts put on stage but also visualized beforehand. Don't you think that if the dramatist worries about physical action

Albee: If you're not going to have any physical action on the stage, you've got to have the illusion at least of visual psychological or philosophical action to compensate for it.

Silence is as dramatic as sound. The answer a person does not give is as full as the answer a person does give. You just have to find the dramatic moment in evasion, in silence, as well as in engagement, in speech.

Anderson: Is there any easy answer for that? How do you make language active? How do you get involvement? Language can be just words that lie there.

Albee: I guess you do it, if you're a playwright. It comes with the territory.

Rubin: Did the kind of early success you had--Virginia Woolf was immediately canonized as a contemporary classic--change your relationship with your own work?

Albee: I suppose it's useful because it gives you a certain amount of liberty to make the kinds of experiments that you might have been too cowardly to make before. It has the disadvantage that everyone wants you to write it over again and again. You know, "The Son of Virginia Woolf" and "Virginia Woolf II." They're not going to get it because I'm done with those characters.

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