



Three Tall Women

BY EDWARD ALBEE

Directed by Charles Newell

January 13 – February 13, 2011

at Court Theatre

CHARACTERS

- **A:** A very old woman in her 90s. She appears to suffer from a mild form of dementia.
- **B:** B is the 52 year-old version of A, to whom she is also a hired caretaker. She is cynical about life.
- **C:** C is the 26 year-old version of B. She has the self-assurance associated with youth.
- **The Boy:** The son of the three women, he does not play a speaking role but is the subject of much discussion amongst the three characters. A falling-out between the son and his mother(s) is the cause of much of A and B's despair.

STORY

In Act One, a young lawyer, "C," has been sent to the home of a client, a ninety-two-year-old woman, "A," to sort out her finances. "A," frail, perhaps a bit senile, resists and is of no help to "C." Along with "B," the old woman's matronly paid companion/caretaker, "C" tries to convince "A" that she must concentrate on the matters at hand. In "A's" beautifully appointed bedroom, she prods, discusses and bickers with "B" and "C," her captives. "A's" long life is then laid out for display, and she cascades from regal and charming to vicious and wretched as she wonders about and remembers her life: her husband and their cold, passionless marriage; her son and their estrangement. Finally, when recounting her most painful memory, she suffers a stroke. In Act Two, "A's" comatose body lies in bed as "B" and "C" observe no changes in her condition. Suddenly, "A" enters, very much alive and quite lucid. The three women then represent the stages of "A's" life: the imperious old woman, the regal matron, and the young woman of twenty-six. Her life, memories and reminiscences—pondered in the first act—are now unceremoniously examined, questioned, and accepted (or not), but, at last, understood.



about the playwright: the life of edward albee

Edward Albee was born Edward Harvey on March 12, 1928 in Washington, D.C. At the age of two weeks, he was adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Reed Albee of Larchmont, New York, and renamed Edward Franklin Albee III. From an early age, Edward Albee knew that he was adopted, but he has never attempted to locate his birth parents.

The Albees enjoyed wealth and social position from the family's interest in a national chain of theatres. The Keith-Albee organization had played a dominant role in the American theatre since the 19th century, from the days of vaudeville and the great touring companies and into the era of motion pictures, when the chain merged with two other companies to become Radio-Keith-Orpheum, the parent company of the RKO motion picture studio.

Through his family's business, Edward Albee was exposed to the theatre at an early age and developed a passionate love for the arts, but his adoptive parents expected him to pursue a more conventional business or professional career. From the beginning, he found himself at odds with his adoptive family over their expectations for him and his own artistic ambitions.

He was expelled from two private schools before graduating from Choate, and dropped out of Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut midway through his sophomore year. At 20, he broke with his family and moved to Greenwich Village. He never saw his father again, and would not see his mother for 17 years.

For the next decade, Albee lived off of a small inheritance from his grandmother, supplemented by a succession of odd jobs, such as one delivering telegrams for Western Union. Enthralled with the artistic ferment of Manhattan in the 1950s, he absorbed every innovation in art, music, literature, and theatre. After unsuccessful experiments with poetry and fiction, he finally found his calling in writing for the stage.

At age 30, he completed his first major work, *The Zoo Story*. The play received its world premiere in Berlin, Germany in 1959, and opened Off-Broadway the following year. This startling one-act, in which a loquacious drifter meets a conventional family man on a park bench and provokes him to violence, won Albee an international reputation as a fearless observer of human alienation. Albee brought absurdism to the American stage with his one-act plays *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream*. In the same period, he dramatized America's simmering racial conflict in a more conventionally realistic short drama, *The Death of Bessie Smith*.



In only a few years, Albee emerged as the leading light of the burgeoning Off-Broadway movement. By 1962, he was ready to storm Broadway, the bastion of commercial theatre in America. His first Broadway production, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, was a runaway success and a critical sensation. The play received a Tony Award, and Albee was enshrined in the pantheon of American dramatists alongside Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams.

A searing evening in the company of two unhappy married couples, Albee's play also drew its share of criticism. When the Pulitzer Prize drama panel voted to award Albee the year's drama prize, the Pulitzer Committee overrode their choice on the grounds that the play did not represent a "wholesome" view of American life. No drama prize was awarded that year and half of the drama jurors resigned in protest. History has long since vindicated their original judgment. In the four decades since its debut, the play has been produced around the world, and is now regarded as an indispensable classic of modern drama.

"One must let the play happen to one; one must let the mind loose to respond as it will, to receive impressions, to sense rather than know, to gather rather than immediately understand."

-Edward Albee

Albee's adoptive father, Reed Albee, died before the success of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, but in 1965, Edward Albee attempted a reconciliation with his adoptive mother, Frances. Relations between the two were never easy, but Albee worked hard at the relationship until his mother's death in 1989. With the profits from *Virginia Woolf*, Albee created the Edward F. Albee Foundation in 1967. The foundation sponsors a summer artists' colony in Montauk, Long Island, where the playwright makes his summer home.

Albee's work in the 1960s ranged over a wide variety of forms and styles, from straightforward literary adaptations, such as a stage version of Carson McCullers's novel *Ballad of the Sad Café*, to frankly experimental works such as the one-acts *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*. The violently anti-clerical allegory *Tiny Alice* was met with responses ranging from frank bafflement to outright hostility when it opened in 1965. Albee even made one brief, unhappy foray into musical theatre with an adaptation of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, cancelled before it even opened.

The Pulitzer Committee finally honored Albee in 1967 for his metaphysical drawing room drama *A Delicate Balance*. Another play dealing with two troubled couples, *A Delicate Balance* tempered the apparent realism of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* with a faint touch of the absurdism of Albee's early one-acts. It foreshadowed the technique of many of his later works, in which improbable situations, expressionistic devices, or elements of fantasy mingle with utterly realistic characters and dialogue.

For many years, Albee was unable to repeat the success he had enjoyed with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, but he continued to engage difficult subject matter, as in *All Over* (1971), a stark look at death and the aging process. Albee won back the New York audience with *Seascape* in 1975, an expressionist fantasy in which two couples meet on the beach at Montauk. One couple is human; the other, a pair of anthropomorphic lizards who discuss love, relationships, and the evolutionary process. As bizarre as the idea sounded on first hearing, the result was both humorous and moving. The play charmed audiences and critics and won Albee his second Pulitzer Prize.



After *Seascape*, the New York theatre turned its back on Albee again. In the 1970s, he was drinking heavily and had fallen far behind in his taxes. Ready at last to curtail some of the excesses of his youth, he quit drinking and embraced a more sober and disciplined way of life. Critics and audiences remained lukewarm to his work for much of the next decade. Plays such as *The Lady From Dubuque* (1980) and *The Man Who Had Three Arms* (1983) had their admirers, but met with outright critical hostility and enjoyed only limited runs. Nearly 15 years passed without a new Albee play enjoying a successful run in New York, but Albee remained committed to the theatre, serving on the board of the Dramatists' Guild and directing revivals of some of his earlier plays.

In an era of Hollywood-style "play development" by committee, Albee has remained an uncompromising defender of the integrity of his own texts, and a champion of the work of younger authors. Over the years, he has scrupulously reserved part of his time for the training of younger writers. He has conducted regular writing workshops in New York, and from 1989 to 2003 taught playwriting at the University of Houston. He has persistently asked young writers to hold themselves to the highest artistic standards, and to resist what he sees as the encroachment of commercialism on the dramatic imagination.

Edward Albee made a triumphant comeback with *Three Tall Women* in 1994. Praised by many critics as his best play in 30 years, it struck many students of Albee's work as a final coming to terms with the memory of his vital but domineering adoptive mother. The play won every award in sight and earned Albee his third Pulitzer Prize. In 1996, Albee was one of the recipients of the Kennedy Center Honors and was awarded the National Medal of Arts.

Albee enjoyed a resurgence of creativity at century's end. *The Play About the Baby* (1998), was followed by a surprising success, *The Goat or Who Is Sylvia?* (2002). The same year, Albee, a passionate art-lover, unveiled *Occupant*, a dramatic study of the sculptor Louise Nevelson. Unexpectedly, he revisited the characters of his first play, *The Zoo Story*, in a new work, *Homelife*, to be performed with *The Zoo Story* under the collective title *Peter and Jerry*.

A revival of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was one of the hits of the 2004/2005 Broadway season. Although the play had enjoyed many successful revivals over the decades, its return to Broadway in the 21st century prompted critical re-evaluation of his long career. Days after his interview with the Academy of Achievement, the American Theatre Wing presented Edward Albee with a Special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement, recognizing him as America's greatest living playwright.

Peter and Jerry reappeared in yet another incarnation as *At Home in the Zoo* in 2009. In his latest work, *Me Myself and I*, a painfully narcissistic mother and her sons, identical twins both named Otto, struggle with troubling questions of kinship and identity. *Me Myself and I* opened at New York's Playwrights Horizon in 2010. Admiring reviews and enthusiastic audiences confirmed that in his ninth decade, Albee's work has lost none of its power.



'A play is fiction - and fiction is fact distilled into truth.'

Edward Albee

Chronology of Edward Albee's Plays

The Zoo Story (1958)
The Death of Bessie Smith (1959)
The Sandbox (1959)
Fam and Yam (1959)
The American Dream (1960)
Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1961-62, Tony Award)
Tiny Alice (1964)
A Delicate Balance (1966, Pulitzer Prize)
Box (1968)
Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse-Tung (1968)
All Over (1971)
Seascape (1974, Pulitzer Prize)
Listening (1975)
Counting the Ways (1976)
The Lady From Dubuque (1977-78)
Another Part of the Zoo (1981)
The Man Who Had Three Arms (1981-82)
Finding the Sun (1982-83)
Marriage Play (1987)
Three Tall Women (1991, Pulitzer Prize)
Fragments (1993)
The Lorca Plays (1995)
The Play About the Baby (2001)
The Goat - or - Who Is Sylvia? (2002)
Occupant (2002)
At Home at the Zoo (Act One: Homelife. ACT Two: The Zoo Story) (2004)
Me Myself and I (2010)

ALBEE'S STYLE

Albee can be classified with theatrical experimenters whose work jumped the boundaries of American drama. His style embraces existentialism, absurdism, as well as the metaphysical. His plays tend to puzzle. While not easy "night out" fare they are also full of satirically witty and sharp dialogue. The Albee audience consists of those who value being challenged and appreciate theatre that, if it existed, would fit into the School of Anti-Complacency. His failures at the box office are as well known as his critical successes. As described by the playwright himself, his plays are "an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, and emasculation and vacuity, a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen."

Awards for Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women*

- Pulitzer Prize (Drama, 1994)
- New York Drama Critics' Circle Award (Play, 1993-1994)
- Outer Critics Circle Award (Off-Broadway Play, 1993-1994)
- ALA Outstanding Books for the College Bound (1999.2|Drama, 1999)

Aging and mortality are two main themes of Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women*. For centuries, authors have grappled with these themes in pros and poetry; below is an example of such a work by William Wordsworth.

536. ODE : INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY FROM RECOLLECTIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD, William Wordsworth (1770–1850)

Arthur Quiller-Couch, ed. 1919. *The Oxford Book of English Verse: 1250–1900*.

<p>THERE was a time when meadow, grove, and stream, The earth, and every common sight, To me did seem Apparell'd in celestial light, The glory and the freshness of a dream. 5 It is not now as it hath been of yore;— Turn wheresoe'er I may, By night or day, The things which I have seen I now can see no more.</p>	<p>Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou happy Shepherd-boy! 35</p>	<p>Upon the growing Boy, But he beholds the light, and whence it flows, 70 He sees it in his joy; The Youth, who daily farther from the east Must travel, still is Nature's priest, And by the vision splendid Is on his way attended; 75 At length the Man perceives it die away, And fade into the light of common day.</p>
<p>The rainbow comes and goes, 10 And lovely is the rose; The moon doth with delight Look round her when the heavens are bare; Waters on a starry night Are beautiful and fair; 15 The sunshine is a glorious birth; But yet I know, where'er I go, That there hath pass'd away a glory from the earth.</p>	<p>Ye blessèd creatures, I have heard the call Ye to each other make; I see The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee; My heart is at your festival, 40 My head hath its coronal, The fulness of your bliss, I feel—I feel it all. O evil day! if I were sullen While Earth herself is adorning, This sweet May-morning, 45 And the children are culling On every side, In a thousand valleys far and wide, Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm, And the babe leaps up on his mother's arm:— 50 I hear, I hear, with joy I hear! —But there's a tree, of many, one, A single field which I have look'd upon, Both of them speak of something that is gone: 55 The pansy at my feet Doth the same tale repeat: Whither is fled the visionary gleam? Where is it now, the glory and the dream?</p>	<p>Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own; Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind, And, even with something of a mother's mind, 80 And no unworthy aim, The homely nurse doth all she can To make her foster-child, her Inmate Man, Forget the glories he hath known, And that imperial palace whence he came. 85</p>
<p>Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song, And while the young lambs bound 20 As to the tabor's sound, To me alone there came a thought of grief: A timely utterance gave that thought relief, And I again am strong: The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep; 25 No more shall grief of mine the season wrong; I hear the echoes through the mountains throng, The winds come to me from the fields of sleep, And all the earth is gay; 30 Land and sea Give themselves up to jollity, And with the heart of May Doth every beast keep holiday;— Thou Child of Joy,</p>	<p>Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting: The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star, 60 Hath had elsewhere its setting, And cometh from afar: Not in entire forgetfulness, And not in utter nakedness, But trailing clouds of glory do we come 65 From God, who is our home: Heaven lies about us in our infancy! Shades of the prison-house begin to close</p>	<p>Behold the Child among his new-born blisses, A six years' darling of a pigmy size! See, where 'mid work of his own hand he lies, Fretted by sallies of his mother's kisses, With light upon him from his father's eyes! 90 See, at his feet, some little plan or chart, Some fragment from his dream of human life, Shaped by himself with newly-learnèd art; A wedding or a festival, A mourning or a funeral; 95 And this hath now his heart, And unto this he frames his song: Then will he fit his tongue To dialogues of business, love, or strife; 100 But it will not be long Ere this be thrown aside, And with new joy and pride</p>

The little actor cons another part; Filling from time to time his 'humorous stage' With all the Persons, down to palsied Age, That Life brings with her in her equipage; As if his whole vocation Were endless imitation.	105	The thought of our past years in me doth breed Perpetual benediction: not indeed For that which is most worthy to be blest— Delight and liberty, the simple creed Of childhood, whether busy or at rest, With new-fledged hope still fluttering in his breast:— Not for these I raise The song of thanks and praise; But for those obstinate questionings Of sense and outward things, Fallings from us, vanishings; Blank misgivings of a Creature Moving about in worlds not realized, High instincts before which our mortal Nature Did tremble like a guilty thing surprised: But for those first affections, Those shadowy recollections, Which, be they what they may, Are yet the fountain-light of all our day, Are yet a master-light of all our seeing; Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make Our noisy years seem moments in the being Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake, To perish never: Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour, Nor Man nor Boy, Nor all that is at enmity with joy, Can utterly abolish or destroy! Hence in a season of calm weather Though inland far we be, Our souls have sight of that immortal sea Which brought us hither, Can in a moment travel thither, And see the children sport upon the shore, And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.	140	And let the young lambs bound As to the tabor's sound! We in thought will join your throng, Ye that pipe and ye that play, Ye that through your hearts to-day Feel the gladness of the May! What though the radiance which was once so bright Be now for ever taken from my sight, Though nothing can bring back the hour Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower; We will grieve not, rather find Strength in what remains behind; In the primal sympathy Which having been must ever be; In the soothing thoughts that spring Out of human suffering; In the faith that looks through death, In years that bring the philosophic mind.	175
Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie Thy soul's immensity; Thou best philosopher, who yet dost keep Thy heritage, thou eye among the blind, That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep, Haunted for ever by the eternal mind,— Mighty prophet! Seer blest! On whom those truths do rest, Which we are toiling all our lives to find, In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave; Thou, over whom thy Immortality Broods like the Day, a master o'er a slave, A presence which is not to be put by; To whom the grave Is but a lonely bed without the sense or sight Of day or the warm light, A place of thought where we in waiting lie; Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height, Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke The years to bring the inevitable yoke, Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife? Full soon thy soul shall have her earthly freight, And custom lie upon thee with a weight, Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!	110	Not for these I raise The song of thanks and praise; But for those obstinate questionings Of sense and outward things, Fallings from us, vanishings; Blank misgivings of a Creature Moving about in worlds not realized, High instincts before which our mortal Nature Did tremble like a guilty thing surprised: But for those first affections, Those shadowy recollections, Which, be they what they may, Are yet the fountain-light of all our day, Are yet a master-light of all our seeing; Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make Our noisy years seem moments in the being Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake, To perish never: Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour, Nor Man nor Boy, Nor all that is at enmity with joy, Can utterly abolish or destroy! Hence in a season of calm weather Though inland far we be, Our souls have sight of that immortal sea Which brought us hither, Can in a moment travel thither, And see the children sport upon the shore, And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.	145	What though the radiance which was once so bright Be now for ever taken from my sight, Though nothing can bring back the hour Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower; We will grieve not, rather find Strength in what remains behind; In the primal sympathy Which having been must ever be; In the soothing thoughts that spring Out of human suffering; In the faith that looks through death, In years that bring the philosophic mind.	180
O joy! that in our embers Is something that doth live, That nature yet remembers What was so fugitive!	135	Which, be they what they may, Are yet the fountain-light of all our day, Are yet a master-light of all our seeing; Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make Our noisy years seem moments in the being Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake, To perish never: Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour, Nor Man nor Boy, Nor all that is at enmity with joy, Can utterly abolish or destroy! Hence in a season of calm weather Though inland far we be, Our souls have sight of that immortal sea Which brought us hither, Can in a moment travel thither, And see the children sport upon the shore, And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.	155	And O ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves, Forebode not any severing of our loves! Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might; I only have relinquish'd one delight To live beneath your more habitual sway. I love the brooks which down their channels fret, Even more than when I tripp'd lightly as they; The innocent brightness of a new-born Day Is lovely yet; The clouds that gather round the setting sun Do take a sober colouring from an eye That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality; Another race hath been, and other palms are won. Thanks to the human heart by which we live, Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears, To me the meanest flower that blows can give Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.	190

NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE/POINT OF VIEW

www.wikipedia.org

The narrative mode (also known as the mode of narration) is the set of methods the author of a literary, theatrical, cinematic, or musical story uses to convey the plot to the audience. Narration, or the process of presenting a narrative, occurs because of the narrative mode. It encompasses several overlapping areas of concern, most importantly narrative point-of-view, which determines through whose perspective the story is viewed; narrative voice, which determines the manner through which the story is communicated to the audience; narrative structure, which determines in what order events are presented; and narrative tense, which determines with what sense of time the story is expressed, whether in the past, present, or future.

NARRATOR

The person who is used to tell the story is called the "narrator," a character developed by the author expressly for the purpose of relating events to the audience. The experiences and observations related by the narrator are not generally to be regarded as those of the author, though in some cases (especially in non-fiction), it is possible for the narrator and author to be the same person. However, the narrator may be a fictive person devised by the author as a stand-alone entity, or even a character. The narrator is considered participant if an actual character in the story, and nonparticipant if only an implied character, or a sort of omniscient or semi-omniscient being who does not take part in the story but only relates it to the audience. The narrative mode encompasses not only who tells the story, but also how the story is described or expressed (for example, by using stream of consciousness or unreliable narration).

FIRST-PERSON VIEW

In a first-person narrative the story is relayed by a narrator who is also a character within the story, so that the narrator reveals the plot by referring to this viewpoint character as "I" (or, when plural, "we"). Oftentimes, the first-person narrative is used as a way to directly convey the deeply internal, otherwise unspoken thoughts of the narrator. Frequently, the narrator's story revolves around him-/herself as the protagonist and allows this protagonist/narrator character's inner thoughts to be conveyed openly to the audience, even if not to any of the other characters. It also allows that character to be further developed through his/her own style in telling the story. First-person narrations may be told like third-person ones, with a person experiencing the story without being aware that they are actually conveying their experiences to an audience; on the other hand, the narrator may be conscious of telling the story to a given audience, perhaps at a given place and time, for a given reason. In extreme cases, the first-person narration may be told as a story within a story, with the narrator appearing as a character in the story. The first-person narrator also may or may not be the focal character.

SECOND-PERSON VIEW

Probably the rarest mode in literature (though quite common in song lyrics) is the second-person narrative mode, in which the narrator refers to one of the characters as "you", therefore making the audience member feel as if he or she is a character within the story. The second-person narrative mode is often paired with the first-person narrative mode in which the narrator makes emotional comparisons between the thoughts, actions, and feelings of "you" versus "I". Often the narrator is therefore also a character in his or her story, in which case it would technically still be employing the first-person narrative mode.

THIRD-PERSON VIEW

Third-person narration provides the greatest flexibility to the author and thus is the most commonly used narrative mode in literature. In the third-person narrative mode, each and every character is referred to by the narrator as "he", "she", "it", or "they", but never as "I" or "we" (first-person), or "you" (second-person). In third-person narrative, it is necessary that the narrator be merely an unspecified entity or uninvolved person that conveys the story, but not a character of any kind within the story being told. Third-person singular (he/she) is overwhelmingly the most common type of third-person narrative, although there have been successful uses of the third-person plural (they). It is even more common, however, to see singular and plural used together in one story, at different times, depending upon the number of people being referred to at a given moment in the plot. Sometimes in third-person narratives, a character would refer to himself in the third-person e.g., "(Character name) would like to come with you".

ALTERNATING-PERSON VIEW

While the general rule for narration is to adopt a single approach to point of view throughout, there are exceptions. Many stories, especially in literature, alternate between the first and third person. In this case, an author will move back and forth between a more omniscient third-person narrator to a more personal first-person narrator. (Omniscient means all-knowing, in which the reader knows more than one character's point of view.) Omniscient point of view is also referred to as alternating point of view, because the story sometimes alternates between characters. Often, a narrator using the first person will try to be more objective by also employing the third person for important action scenes, especially those in which he/she is not directly involved or in scenes where he/she is not present to have viewed the events in first person.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

www.wikipedia.org

The narrative structure describes the order in which events of the plot are presented throughout the narrative work.

LINEAR STRUCTURE

Linear structure (also known as causal structure) constructs the plot in a straight-moving, cause and effect, chronological order with the chronologically first event presented first and the last event presented last.

NONLINEAR STRUCTURE

Nonlinear structure constructs the plot in a non-causal order, with events presented: in a random series jumping to and from the main plot with flashbacks or flash-forwards; in a chronological order but with large intervals or gaps of time skipped between events; in reverse chronology; or, in any other manner that is either not chronological or not cause and effect.

DUAL NARRATIVE

A dual narrative is a form of narrative that tells a story from two different perspectives. Dual narrative is also an effective technique that can be used to tell a story in first-person narrative in past tense, as exemplified by *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens.

FRANCES ALBEE: FICTION IN THE FACT

By Production Dramaturg Megan Geigner

Three Tall Women earned Edward Albee his third Pulitzer Prize, and it is often credited with reviving his career; prior to its New York premiere in 1994, Albee had garnered little attention from the theatre community since the 1970s. *Three Tall Women* puts some autobiographical events from Edward's life onstage, as well as biographical events from the life of his adoptive mother, Frances Cotter Albee. Though it is tempting to read the play as a dramatization of Edward and Frances's lives, *Three Tall Women* is not fact. The play is Edward's rendering of his mother, a fiction that he created in the years following her death. Albee has said, "I wanted to ... write as objective a play as I could about a fictional character who resembled in every way, in every event, someone I had known very, very well. And it was only when I invented, when I translated fact intact into fiction, that I was aware I would be able to be accurate without prejudice."

ALBEE- Frances Cotter, March 24. Of Rye, N.Y. Beloved wife of the late Reed A. Albee. Proud mother of Edward. Funeral Services will be held at Christ Episcopal Church, Rye, N.Y. Monday, March 27, at 11am. In lieu of flowers, contributions to United Hospital, Port Chester, N.Y. or the New York Chapter of the Arthritis Foundation would be appreciated.

Thus read the March 25, 1989 *New York Times* obituary for Frances, a woman with "star radiance," "tremendous magnetism," and who was once "irresistibly beautiful." It reveals much about Frances's affluence and place in New York society but leaves much unsaid about her family relationships.

Frances lived what looked like a charmed life. Coming from a middle-class background, Frances married Reed Albee in 1925. Reed was heir to the Keith-Albee (and later Orpheum) vaudeville performers and theatre chain fortune. When his father, Edward, died in 1930, Reed received millions of dollars, two estates in Larchmont, NY, and a private railcar for travels to the family's home in Palm Beach, Florida. Reed lived in retired comfort with Frances, his third wife, and little Eddie, who had been adopted by the couple shortly after his birth in 1928.

Frances took advantage of the lifestyle her wealth afforded her. She showed horses, and the *New York Times* is filled with announcements of their winnings between the 1930s and 1950s. She was vice-chairwoman of the Westchester Country Club, a venue for Frances to wear her jewels and fine dresses to dinners, balls, galas, and other social engagements even after her show horse days. Frances also had the glory of a famous son: Edward, arguably one of the most famous American playwrights of the twentieth century, whom she regularly met with for holidays and events into her old age.

What this picture of Frances's life doesn't reveal is her bigotry, Reed's infidelity, or the fact that Edward left home in his early adulthood after countless arguments with his parents, one of which resulted in Frances hurling a crystal ashtray at him. As a boy, Edward was thrown out of several schools and ultimately fell in with a group of artistic misfits in the Village, behavior that utterly humiliated Edward's society parents. Edward and Frances did not speak for seventeen years and when Reed died in 1961, Edward did not attend the funeral. Frances had a heart attack in 1965 and a family friend suggested that Edward call her since she was alone and unhappy. For the next twenty-four years, Edward called Frances, went for visits, and brought her gifts. Frances attended his play openings, invited him to her country club, and visited him at his home. Edward even brought his friends to meet her, who were impressed by her height (she was over six feet) and the grandness of her home.

Upon her death, Frances left Edward only a small fraction of her estate, though earlier versions of her will listed him as heir to all she owned. The rest went to the charities (like the ones mentioned in the obituary) and institutions. Edward's close look at her assets revealed that she had sold many of her most valuable pieces of jewelry before her death and that her birth certificate showed her a year older than she claimed to be. Edward felt disinherited.

Like the obituary, *Three Tall Women* is only part of Frances Albee's story. What is fact versus fiction, however, is not what is at stake. *Three Tall Women* is a beautifully-crafted, darkly-comic, rich drama that questions the nature of family relationships, lifestyles, and ultimately human mortality. It is the investigation into the human condition that makes the fiction and fact of Frances Albee transcend her own life and makes the play something beyond a biography.

discussion & follow-up questions

1. In his play *Seascape*, Edward Albee writes, "Death is release, if you've lived all right". *Three Tall Women* deals with three women at three different stages in their lives, one of whom is approaching death. What do you think Albee means by the above quote? Does it hold true in *Three Tall Women*? Why or why not?
2. *Three Tall Women* is described by Albee as his most autobiographical work to date. What might be some pitfalls for an author writing about people he knew well and events that happened in his life? What are some benefits?
3. What narrative techniques does Albee employ in his telling of the story of *Three Tall Women*? What effect do you think these techniques have on how the audience perceives the play?
4. "The meaning or the lack of meaning that old age takes on in any given society puts that whole society to the test, since it is this that reveals the meaning or lack of meaning of the entirety of the life leading to that old age." – Simone de Beauvoir
What do you think this quote means? How does it relate to the themes and story of *Three Tall Women*?
5. Edward Albee is famously critical of theatre critics. In your opinion, what is the value (or lack thereof) of criticism in the arts (theatre, film, music, etc)?
6. Compare and contrast the themes and assumptions of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" (pp 6-7) with those in Albee's *Three Tall Women*. What statement does each author make about the nature of aging?