

Death onto Life—A Guide to Edward Albee

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Roudané, Matthew. *Edward Albee: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017. 200 pages. ISBN 978-0-521-72695-5. Pbk. £14.99.

Edward Albee left behind an impressive oeuvre of twenty-six original (published) plays as well as further adaptations, essays, and interviews. This is imposing in itself but also challenging to anyone attempting to familiarize him/herself with the work of this titan of the American theater. From the very early ones to the last, Albee's works—individual plays and the oeuvre as a whole—have generated much attention from critics as well as academics and theoreticians of the theater. From Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), which presents Albee as the new voice in American theater in line with European trends, whose “work attacks the very foundation of American optimism” with “forcefulness and bitter irony” (225), to the many book-length studies, special issues of scholarly journals, critical and analytic works, among them several written or edited by Matthew Roundané himself, the Albee literature can fill an entire bookcase.

Into this multitude of texts comes Roudané's *Edward Albee: A Critical Introduction*, which does exactly what the title promises: it is a concise and lively guide to all those who are just getting acquainted with Albee's works, and it also serves as a highly useful tool to those who wish to have an overview of the scholarship on Albee's plays. It is a thorough account, witty and intelligent, made even more enjoyable by the quotations from the many interviews the author conducted with the playwright.

Roudané's book is divided into three parts and concludes with an “Epilogue,” “Notes,” and a “Further Reading” section, which offers a comprehensive selection of the published works by and about Albee, as well as an “Index,” which helps readers to easily maneuver through the 200 pages of the volume. Part 1, “Albee's Life and Work,” divided into three chapters (“Life,” “Overview,” and “Contexts”), functions as the foundation for the oncoming discussion of the plays. It places them in the context of Albee's biography, and—more importantly—it also widens the reader's perspective as it provides a brief but reliable and pertinent account of the political, social, and theatrical context within which Albee became the major American playwright of the second half of the twentieth century.

The second and bulkiest part of the book consists of the analyses of all published Albee plays. It only makes reference to Albee's adaptations for

the stage of short stories, novels, or plays by other authors (*Bartleby* [1961]; *The Ballad of the Sad Café* [1963]; *Malcolm* [1966]; *Breakfast at Tiffany's* [1966]; *Everything in the Garden* [1967]; *Lolita* [1981]), as well as to the plays performed but never published such as *The Lorca-play* (1992), which Albee views as his “long-aborning examination of the reasons the fascist government of Spain found it prudent to murder their greatest twentieth-century writer” (Albee, *Collected* 7). If there is anything that I miss from Roudané’s book, it is the analysis of this play as it would have been highly informative, especially given that *The Lorca Play* may be Albee’s most directly political work.

The analytical part of the volume is divided into five chapters, each focusing on four or five plays, arranged in chronological order. Upon reading the entire work a common thread tying together the chapters becomes discernible: the sustained emphasis on Albee’s preoccupation with the themes of loss, death, and dying, and the awareness or sense of mortality that awakens, occasionally, his characters but, most importantly, his audiences.

“Ritualized Forms of Expiation” looks at the early plays preceding *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* focusing on their themes and topics that by now have proven to be the playwright’s recurring concerns: “[t]he necessity of ritualized confrontation, the primacy of communication, the paradoxical mixture of love and hate, the cleverly abrasive dialogue, the religious and political textures, the tragic force of abandonment and death, the felt awareness of a gulf between the way things are and the way things could be, and the penalty of consciousness” (29). “Challenging Broadway” consists of the analyses of four plays in which Albee wittily subverts the conventions of the American theatrical tradition of domestic realism. Roudané reads *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as a hopeful play that made Broadway matter again and that had the potential to awaken an entire nation “sailing on illusions” (65). He also highlights the metatheatrical aspects of the play: “Albee experiments with the illusion of dramatic mimesis, challenging traditional responses to the theater. This is a play that suggests that, with his first foray into Broadway, Albee was eager to take aesthetic risks, to bedevil more conservative audiences with a bold language and experimentalism whose textures and models were more European than American” (65). The analysis also highlights how *Who’s Afraid* demands an active and involved audience, a feature that is characteristic of Albee’s entire oeuvre and for which Albee has always strived. As he stated in *Stretching My Mind*, “We [authors] desire to engage, to upset, to trouble [audiences]” (262). *Tiny Alice* and *A Delicate Balance*—in Roudané’s interpretation—stand as theatrical representations of illusions, reality, and faith, and as proof of Albee’s unwillingness to compromise for the sake of success with critics and on Broadway. With

reference to *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* Roudané highlights their connection to music, calling them “pieces of verbal music, a partita . . . [which] invite audiences visually and aurally to enjoy [the experience]” (87). He quotes the playwright to sustain his argument, who had stated about *Box* and *Quotations* that they have a “musical structure—form and counterpoint” that require a hardworking audience “without a preconception of what the nature of the dramatic experience should be” (87).

The title of the next chapter of part 2, “The greatest sin in living is doing it badly—stupidly, or as if you weren’t really alive,” may also function as a topic sentence of the analyses of *All Over, Seascape, Listening* and *Counting the Ways: A Vaudeville*. Being alive means being really present in your life. Living one’s life in a half-anesthetized state, seeing and experiencing the world and oneself through the filter of dreams or illusions, have always been unacceptable for Albee and from *The Zoo Story* to *Who’s Afraid to Me, Myself & I* he has created characters who are forced to discard their illusions or to stand as representations of wasted lives. In this respect, Roudané places Albee’s plays in the context of Thoreau, Camus, and Bellow.

“A Quest for Consciousness” continues the train of thought of the previous chapter in the analyses, but widening the scope: the discussion focuses on how the plays affect (or should affect) audiences. “If there is hope for a redemptive force, perhaps it lies with the audience, whose perception may be altered by the spectacle” (122), Roudané concludes the interpretation of *The Lady from Dubuque*. He also discusses the experimental *The Man Who Had Three Arms*, the open-ended *Finding the Sun*, and *Marriage Play* as works demanding an active audience. Through their engagement with and experience of the plays, spectators may change their attitude to existence, which often recurs as an idiosyncratic feature of Albee’s characters. This analytic focus resonates with Albee’s statement about catharsis and its transformation in twentieth-century theater: “I get criticized for not having the catharsis in the body of the play. I don’t think that’s where the catharsis should be. I think it should take place in the mind of the spectator sometimes afterwards—maybe a year after experiencing the play. . . . [O]ne of the interesting things that happened with twentieth century drama [is]—that it moved the catharsis out of the body of the play” (*Stretching* 180).

The chapter that borrows its title from Faulkner, “As I Lay Dying,” discusses the plays of the nineties and the early 2000s highlighting how, as the Faulknerian title also suggests, a confrontation with death, loss, and the fragility of human relations necessarily creates states of crisis where characters recognize the nature and misleading power of their own illusions. *Three Tall Women*, though its autobiographical aspects are acknowledged, is seen as a play of reflections on past, present, and future of the dying character A, with B and C (A, B and C being

the three female characters of the play) functioning as A's younger versions. *Fragments* also returns to recurring subject matters of Albee but in a highly experimental form, in what Roudané calls "arias"; *The Play about the Baby* is seen as Albee's most Absurdist work, while *The Goat or, Who is Sylvia?* (*Notes Toward a Definition of Tragedy*) as the most provocative one. "The Theater of Loss" concluding part 2 of the volume is a discussion of Albee's last plays (*Occupant*; *Knock! Knock! Who's There!?*; *At Home at the Zoo*; *Me, Myself & I*), all experimental and metatheatrical, in which Albee questions existence, identity, and theatrical conventions. The characters—Louise Nevelson, Peter and Ann, Otto and otto—all desperately try to assert their identities, in search of an anchor for their shifting and ever-changing subjectivities, and so is Albee—still—in search of the appropriate form of theatrical expression to voice his concerns about twenty-first-century existence and humanity at large.

Part 3 consists of the chapter "Critical Reception," which highlights Albee's controversial relationship with critics and reviewers. It also offers a highly informative overview of major academic works on Albee, which, together with the "Further Reading" section, constitute a starting point for anyone interested in Albee scholarship. In the "Epilogue," Roudané, in his precise and persuasive style, masterfully sums up the focus of the entire book and of the entire Albee oeuvre: "To understand the role of death in Albee's theater, paradoxically enough, is to understand the compassion, the affirmation, the optimism of his world view. The plays are death-saturated because the presence of death, once internalized, shapes the quality of human existence" (178).

Matthew Roudané's *Edward Albee: A Critical Introduction* offers a relatively brief but thorough and thought-provoking discussion of Albee's works. It certainly engages the reader and stirs our interest in the analyzed plays, American drama, and theater in general. At the same time, it also functions as a trustworthy guide to anyone embarking on a more extensive study of Albee and/or the theater of the absurd. It should not be missing from any undergraduate library, from any theater documentation center or the obligatory reading list of any Albee scholar at the beginning of their research.

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Works Cited

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