

the same stimuli, I have a mind that isn't content with that. There's this quirk in my mind that makes me need to turn my experiences into a play.

BACK STAGE: You're also known for being so clear about your plays. I've read great stories about you noticing an actor miss the fourth word in the 17th line and pointing it out.

ALBEE: We composers feel that's important, you know.

BACK STAGE: So given that, can I ask you about the companies and directors that you've refused permission to stage *Virginia Woolf* with four gay men instead of two straight couples? You've said if you'd wanted to write a play about four gay men, you'd have done so.

ALBEE: I would have done so.

BACK STAGE: I'm not asking you to justify the idea, but what is it about gay men of this generation who see four gay men in *Virginia Woolf*?

ALBEE: There are several ways of looking at this. One is: Since the author's gay, the play must be gay. Second, you must remember that awful moment with the critic Stanley Kauffmann, who said there were three famous American playwrights who happened to be gay and were disguising male characters as female: Tennessee Williams, William Inge, and me. That's nonsense. Why anybody would see [that] a gay *Virginia Woolf* would automatically work, I don't know. I've pointed out constantly that I've known lots of gay relationships and there has not been a hysterical pregnancy among them. *Virginia Woolf* was written to a specific time, when specific rules applied. I notice considerable differences, too, in the psychological responses to things between men and women. The fact that you're gay doesn't make you any closer to a woman or a man. It gives you objective access to both, like anyone else. And there's one more thing I should mention: When I started out, nobody in the theatre was trying to tell playwrights what to write and how to write it. That's happened more and more with our theatre.

BACK STAGE: At the university level?

ALBEE: No, at the level of young playwrights being exposed to workshops where plays are seen and read to see if they can be commercial.

BACK STAGE: The thing playwrights call "development hell."

ALBEE: That's the right word for it. Me, I was very lucky to meet a producer named Dick Barr, who felt theatre should be about something that matters, and fuck commerce.

BACK STAGE: He was the type of producer who understood dramaturgy and could discern if a play was ready.

ALBEE: Producers don't know how to do that now.

BACK STAGE: In addition to all your productions in New York this past season, your plays are always done in regional theatres. Do you think artistic directors at nonprofit institutional theatres have taken the place of commercial producers?

ALBEE: I don't know. I do think there's a recent affliction on the American theatre: the dramaturge. It seems to me the people who run theatres should be able to read. I don't mind dramaturges that do historicism, but making critical choices isn't the dramaturge's job.

BACK STAGE: You've often said you've never suffered from a lack of self-confidence as a writer.

ALBEE: Have I? I think I'm critical of myself. I try to write as well as I possibly can.

BACK STAGE: Are you your own harshest critic?

ALBEE: I think you never really know the answer to that. I'm given to self-indulgence at times. I know when I'm overwriting. Then I take the overwriting out when I get into rehearsal until I get to "Gee, that's good writing." That's nice.

Occupant runs through July 6 at Signature Theatre Company, 555 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tickets: (212) 224-PLAY or www.signaturetheatre.org.

For more features visit www.BACKSTAGE.com/features

Mercedes Ruehl and Larry Bryggman in *Occupant*



CAROL ROSEGG

CAROL ROSEGG

Albee Actors Speak Out

COMPILED BY GERARD RAYMOND

As any Albee aficionado will tell you, the playwright's work is always a challenging and bracing experience for the audience. But we asked a few actors to share their feelings about performing in Albee's plays.

Bill Irwin (*The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*): Edward told us during the rehearsals for *Virginia Woolf* that he'd wanted to be a composer as a young man and still thought of his texts as music. He said that he might be seen in the back of the theatre, not facing the stage but listening only. It was not an apology; it was a challenge. He's a man who likes being known for his crusty sense of challenge, but he is the most remarkably generous human being too.



CAROL ROSEGG

Peter Francis James (*The Lady From Dubuque*, *London*): The first thing people would say about Edward is that he is the American absurdist. Edward's gift is to show you what is actually going on and to allow you the mental breathing room to think that he's being absurd. That's the beauty—and the disturbing character—of his writing.... Edward visited rehearsals and he was unbelievably approachable and completely forthright. Maggie Smith and I had all these questions, and he immediately boiled it down to something completely useful for the actor. He said about our characters, "They are what Jo, the wife in the play, needs." With just that simple sentence, I knew where he was writing from.

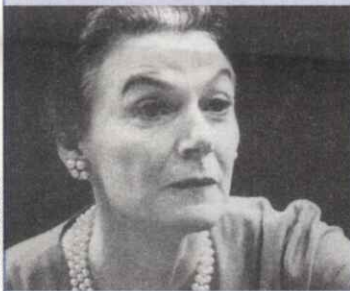


Brian Murray (*The Play About the Baby, Me, Myself & I*): He has such a precision about his words and his punctuation and his rhythms. It's essential more than anything to get the words absolutely right. Once you do that, and your mind can work as fast as his does, then you usually understand the character. You can't start from the inside out. You have got to start from the words. And then the character falls into place.... He's a trickster. It's a very elaborate kind of scamming that he does, in the best sense of the word: He leads the audience up the garden path and then surprises them in another way that they weren't expecting.



T. CHARLES ERICKSON

Marian Seldes (*A Delicate Balance*, *Three Tall Women*, *The Play About the Baby*): When Edward directs his actors, you can observe him observing them—his stillness, his gaze, his occasional smile or frown. An Albee man or woman is sui generis. Yet in rehearsal, many actors are surprised to find how much of their own selves they see in his characters. He dares you to find impulses that may be secrets in your real life and use them in the life he has created for you to play.... To have acted in Edward's plays means that he has become my teacher and my friend, and that I have become a part of his family. No one who works with Edward takes the privilege for granted. It is an honor to be a member of what he calls his "family," and an honor to play a part written by our illustrious and thrilling dramatist.



CAROL ROSEGG

Frances Sternhagen (*Seascape*): One of the reasons actors love Edward's plays is the rhythm of his words. He writes language which is fun to say. Also, in *Seascape*, where almost all the first act is between a married couple, George Grizzard and I were, as the couple, arguing about what to do with the rest of our lives and remembering the past. Edward came one day and merely said, "This is a happy marriage." And I was so relieved! I didn't have to dig for misery and recrimination; it was just the normal arguments of a happy marriage! Hurray!



JOAN MARCUS

Richard Thomas (*Everything in the Garden*, *Tiny Alice*): Edward is a language playwright in a very special way. So much of what he writes is about meaning and language—the inadequacies of language, language as action, language as a weapon. People behave sadistically towards each other using language. His plays are very scary; they mingle that dark, dark humor with an essence of humanity. Approaching a play by Edward, you know that you're going into a danger zone as an actor, because things are going to be required of you that are going to be painful. The bar is going to be high and the emotional life you're going to have to live is going to be very demanding on the stage and in your personal process. I really envy the actors who have done six or seven of his plays. I would like to be one of them.



CAROL ROSEGG

Kathleen Turner (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*): Quite simply, I was thrilled to work with Edward. At first, of course, intimidated a bit, but his observations during rehearsals and his notes after performances were insightful and helpful. Then when I really got to know him, I realized what a sweet softy he is. I love him.