

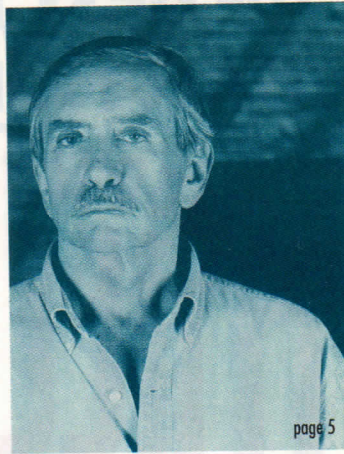
STAGEBILL

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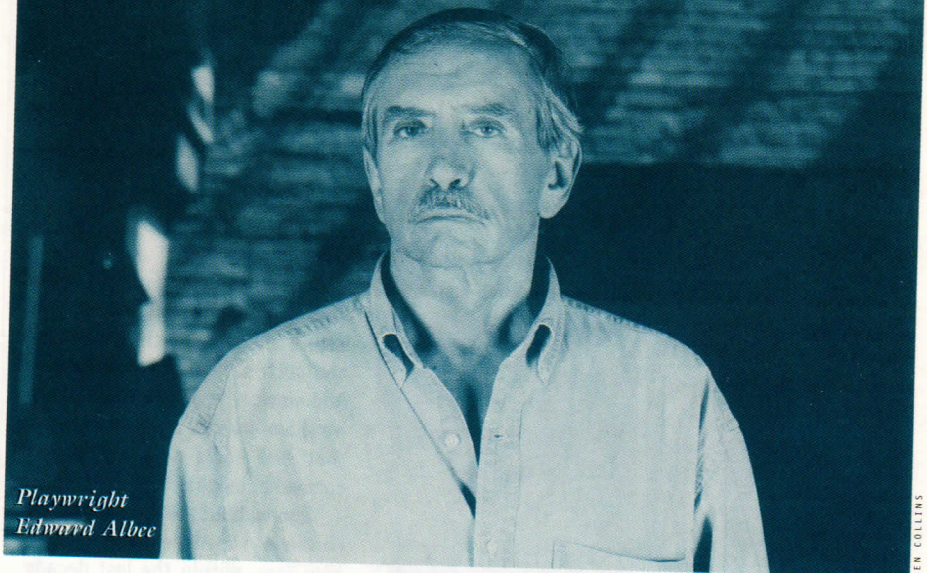
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MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH



Playwright
Edward Albee

KEN COLLINS

Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Edward Albee brings *All Over* to Roundabout's Gramercy Theatre this summer. BY GERARD RAYMOND

Life and death—those are the two things you have to write about basically; how people handle them,” says Edward Albee. Death is a key event in his 1971 drama *All Over*, which receives its first major revival in New York with Roundabout Theatre Company's production, June 7 through September 1. In the play, a famous man lies on his deathbed (unseen by the audience) while his family gathers around to wait out his final hours. Before it is all over, the characters, whose generic names are defined by their relationship to the dying man—The Wife, The Mistress, The Daughter, The Son, and so forth—will achieve an acute understanding about life and what they have made of it. “I think the only way we can probably live fully is to have the awareness of mortality,” says the playwright. In the play, The Nurse puts it

succinctly, “Death, yes; well, it gets us where we live, doesn't it?”

Emily Mann says she has waited more than two decades to direct *All Over*. “I have loved this play since I read it in graduate school in 1977. I remember saying to myself, ‘I look forward to the day when I am ready for it.’” Re-reading the play three years ago, Mann felt it was time. She envisaged Rosemary Harris and Michael Learned in the lead roles of Wife and Mistress, respectively, and she got her wish. Mann's production, which was mounted earlier this year at Princeton's McCarter Theatre where she is artistic director, opens this month at the Gramercy Theatre. “I am delighted for people to reexamine this play, and it is such a good production,” says Albee, speaking from Texas where he teaches a spring playwriting course

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at the University of Houston. He adds, "The things the play addresses are just as valid as they ever were."

Albee was 43 when he wrote *All Over*. His career had begun in a blaze with the one-act play *The Zoo Story*, followed by a spectacular 1962 Broadway debut with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Four years later his second Broadway success, *A Delicate Balance*, received the first of his three Pulitzer Prizes for drama. Recalling the genesis of *All Over*, Albee says he originally planned for two one-act plays—one titled *Life* and the other *Death*. "But I have no self-discipline whatever and I ended up writing two long plays instead," he deadpans. *Death* turned into *All Over*, while *Life* became

today's audiences may also be more attuned to Albee's heightened language and more at ease with the humor in the play. "Edward has a wicked sense of humor—I mean it's a very witty, very funny play."

"I think I was in my early teens when I became aware of what death meant," Albee reports, "at least, that I should start thinking about it. We should be aware of it as much as we possibly can as early as we can." Audiences at Mann's revival of *All Over* are invited to share in the liberating effect of this playwright's confrontation with mortality. "Well, you know, we're all in this together, aren't we? None of us is getting out of this alive," says Mann. "There's a kind of bond that happens in an audience when it is handled with such intelligence, such tenderness, and such savage wit all at once. And since it is all something that we share—we are all going to be in that bed some day—a trusting communal laughter takes place."

Roundabout's revival of *All Over* continues the Albee renaissance in New York. Within the last decade we have witnessed significant revivals of the playwright's early work along with the premieres of four new plays, including his third Pulitzer Prize winner, *Three Tall Women*. "He's had times when he's been lauded and revered and other times when he couldn't get his work done in this country, and yet he never ever stopped," says Mann. "He never stopped experimenting, never stopped pushing the boundaries." The playwright is pragmatic: "My plays come back. Maybe we just have to wait 15 or 20 years before people completely understand what I have done. It would be nicer if it happened quicker." At age 74, and with his latest work, *The Goat*, currently on Broadway, Albee certainly shows no signs of slowing down. "I feel quite alive, quite energetic, and quite enthusiastic about being a playwright," he says.

Gerard Raymond is a frequent contributor to Stagebill.



PHOTOS BY F. CHARLES ERIKSSON

Rosemary Harris (left) and Michael Learned star in *All Over* at Roundabout Theatre Company.

Seascape, which garnered Albee's second Pulitzer in 1975. The Broadway premiere of *All Over* (starring Jessica Tandy and Colleen Dewhurst under Sir John Gielgud's direction), however, was not a success. "It's a fairly serious play about death and that seemed to put a few people off," Albee remarks.

Mann believes several factors, aside from its subject matter, may have inhibited the play's first audiences. "So often with some of Edward's plays, they are ahead of their time. The idea of putting in the death room, where the great man is dying, both his wife and his mistress as part of the family constellation—you need to get past that in order to get the incredibly nuanced and subtle beauty of the relationship with those two women, which is the spine of the play." She suggests that

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