

Edward Albee, who returns to the English stage next week, explains why he needs a little Bach with his coffee in the mornings

Tall stories

THEY say there are no second acts in American life: there aren't many second acts in American plays either. That's true. But one exception to the rule is 86-year-old Edward Albee. After the initial stunner success of *The Zoo Story*, *The American Dream*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *A Delicate Balance*, his career seemed to go into freefall. He continued to write, teach and direct but it is only with *Three Tall Women*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning New York hit which opens at Wyndham's next Tuesday, that he has made one of the most acclaimed comebacks since *Lawrence*.

Engaging in public chat with Albee recently at the Theatre Museum in London, I half expected to meet someone slightly chippy and defensive about the fickleness of public fortune. In fact, he turned out to be an amiable, well-preserved man — as sleek and lean as one of the Irish wellhounds that are his constant New York companions.

How much, I wondered, was Albee's return to favour with *Three Tall Women* due to the fact that he had delved into his own past? He was an adopted child brought up by Reed Albee, who owned a chain of vaudeville theatres, and his domineering wife Frances, who was both a foot taller and 43 years younger than her husband. And in the play itself there is a 40-year-old autocrat, called simply A, who harps on constantly about the difference in height and age between herself and her late husband.

"An odd coincidence, that," says Albee with a chuckle. "It is true that I was adopted by this tall and powerful woman that I was unhappy, ran away from home a number of times and finally left when I was 18. I wanted to write a play about Frances who was a complex and dominant character but I ended up inventing this woman while basing her entirely on a real person. I did the same thing in *The American Dream* where I had a character called Grandma based on my own bright, fancy maternal grandmother but yet dramatically much more interesting. So much dramatic writing is about translating memories and experiences from the unconscious to the conscious mind; and in *Three Tall Women* I found I was inventing lines which, to my surprise, happened to coincide with the real facts."

The difficulty with Albee lies in pinning him down. *The Zoo Story* and *The American Dream* were quickly claimed as part of the Absurdist tradition. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is both O'Neill-type

Written by
Michael Billington

Photograph by
Henrietta Butler

family drama and national allegory. And *A Delicate Balance* mixes domestic realism with social parable. But running through all Albee's work I see a sustained critique of America: its dependence on illusions, its naked materialism, its loss of human contact.

"I find all definitions limiting," says Albee. "Since we live in a post-existentialist age, anyone who writes interestingly almost by definition belongs to the Absurd. But plays also have to be useful, not merely decorative. I like to go to the theatre and have the world changed for me and my values questioned. I like to have a mirror held up that says 'this is how you live your life and if you don't like it, why don't you change something?'. Do we have to make a distinction between the social critic and the Absurdist?"

But surely, I persist, he constantly analyses America's loss of community? "Yes. The loss of community if people are isolated within themselves. One of my concerns is that we do isolate ourselves and end up not participating in our own lives. *A Delicate Balance* — while it deals with the invasion of a family by a couple who have experienced a nameless terror — is about the realisation that if we deny our social responsibilities long enough, we find we're no longer capable of doing anything when the time comes. What could be worse than coming to the end of your life and realising that you haven't fully participated? That's one of my worries about America: that we're not participating. Only 47 per cent of the American electorate actually vote, which means that whoever is elected is determined by about 26 per cent of the people. This isn't even participatory democracy. This is non-participatory omnidominance."

In *Virginia Woolf* in 1962 Albee wrote about a couple — symbolically named George and Martha — who sleep in illusion and fantasy. Looking at America today, has anything changed? "I was hopeful for a while that we were beginning to wake up. But now that I see the combination of the Republicans and an irresponsible press trying to destroy President Clinton I'm not so sure. I



don't believe the extraordinary social adventure he planned for the United States — as powerful as anything FDR ever proposed — can succeed. Maybe we're so hooked on passivity that we don't want to continue being a peacefully evolving, revolutionary society any more.

Albee insists, however, that he has many more questions than answers. "A playwright," he says, "is three things. He's a writer who, unlike a novelist, has to create totally believable dialogue. He's a composer in that he has to orchestrate sound and silence so I think he should listen to music to tune his ear: listening to Bach in the morning clarifies the mind as coffee does. You can be a good playwright and have a tin ear — Eugene O'Neill for instance — but he'd have been even more important if he'd heard better. But a play-

Billington Albee Part One

Clipped By:



ianharris

Mon, Jan 6, 2020