

“20th Century American Drama: A Background for Albee and Others”

A Lecture by dr. Paul Gabriner,
Formerly of the Department of English
University of Amsterdam

Presented for the Studium Generale at Leiden University on 13 February 2007

Any background to 20th century drama must obviously begin with a sketch of what the 19th century was like, because every action is in fact a reaction to something else and effects are best understood in the light of their causes.

The development of the theater in 19th century America parallels the development of the nation itself. At first, there were only theaters on the Atlantic seacoast, and not too many of them. In 1800 there were just a few theaters with perhaps 150 actors in all, up and down the eastern seacoast, when the population of New York City itself was still not much more than 50,000 people, but as the country expanded dynamically, so did the theater.

By 1885 it is estimated that there were 5000 playhouses in at least 3500 cities great and small throughout the expanded country, and somewhere between 50,00 and 70,00 actors, many of whom before 1850 were in fact English-born rather than American (MacGowan & Melnitz, 371, 372 ff.).

Two favorite themes were the evils of drink and the evils of slavery. P.T. Barnum's production of The Drunkard ran for a 150 performances in 1850. Before the American Civil War broke out in 1861, a dramatized version of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin ran for more than 200 performances in New York, competing with two other versions of the same novel, and eventually found its way to London and Paris (M&M, 383).

It is widely believed that the North might never have gone to war had not this particular novel and its dramatized version so fiercely conditioned public opinion in the Northern states to look upon slavery in the South as an evil that had to be fought against and completely removed from public life.

Dramatized versions of other classic novels were also popular, such as those of Dumas's The Count of Monte Cristo, Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.

Ethnic plays were also popular. The American Negro was portrayed in The Octroon or Life in Louisiana, the Irish in The Colleen Bawn, and The Mulligan, the Chinese in A Trip to Chinatown, and the American Indian in The Indian Princess, or La Belle Sauvage as well as in Metamora.

There were plays on American historical themes such as Bronson Howard's Saratoga and Shenandoah, there were serious attempts at classical or European history, such as Robert Montgomery Bird's The Gladiator and George Henry Boker's blank verse drama, Francesca da Rimini; there was pure trash, such as The Black Crook, pretentious trash, such as Virginius and Richelieu, and there was social trash, such as The Poor of New York, The Poor of London and the Poor of Liverpool, all of which were imitations of Augustin Laperrière's, Les Pauvres de Paris.

There were also very many minstrel shows, where white actors whose faces were blacked by burnt cork, sang and danced to banjos, a type of production that sprang up in 1843 and lasted until the First World War.

Downright melodramas of the kind we can only laugh at now were extremely popular: Augustin Daly was famous for tear-jerkers such as Leah the Forsaken. In Under the Gaslight he tied his leading man to a railroad track, and in The Red Scarf he bound him to a moving log in a sawmill (M&M, 392).

Toward the end of the 19th century, a new trend became evident that had begun some twenty years earlier in Europe. This was realism, which was a revolt against the melodramatic excesses of the romantic style, which had gone from bad to worse as the century progressed. Some of these plays were of undoubted quality. Steele MacKaye's Hazel Kirke, a "domestic drama [that] had a quality of quiet naturalness," ran for 486 performances in New York, a record that stood for forty years after it was first produced in 1880.

Kenneth MacGowan and William Melnitz, in their book, The Living Stage, tell us that James A. Herne "went further than MacKaye in simplicity and naturalness. In 1890 and 1892 he wrote two plays that were ahead of their time," Margaret Fleming, which "dealt seriously and psychologically with a cultured American woman, and The Reverend Griffith Davenport, about a Southerner who opposed slavery. His comedies, Shore Acres and Sag Harbor were also better characterized than the run-of-the mill bucolic comedy-dramas of the times.

The problem was that realistic playwrights required a realistic stage, realistic direction, a style of realistic acting, and, not the least important, an audience ready to receive realistic plays. None of these were as yet present. The old joke, attributed to Heine, that when the world came to an end he wanted to be in Holland, because there everything happens fifty years later, could now be applied to the situation of realism in American drama. When Ibsen, Strindberg, Hauptmann, Wedekind, Tolstoy and Chekhov were busy reforming the European theater and preparing it for the 20th century, America was still enjoying minstrel shows while paddle-wheeled showboats, plying up and down the Mississippi River, were still performing such old standbys as Ten Nights in a Barroom and From Rags to Riches.

The spectacular growth of the American theater in the 19th century was largely quantitative only. For most of the 19th century, the quality of the plays performed was very poor, and even when a play was of the very first rank, as was always the always case with Shakespeare, the quality of the acting, direction, staging and production was often still laughably low by modern standards. It has been estimated that only three plays of any quality were written and produced before 1850, with possibly another four between 1850 and the turn of the century.

A major reason for this lamentable state of affairs was that the influence of Romanticism on American shores automatically turned anything dramatic into melodrama. The style of acting was more like "kabuki" than anything else. Actors and actresses learned set expressions and gestures by rote, each of which was thought necessary in order to express one or another emotion. Poetry of any kind was exaggerated upwards so that it seemed as little like natural speech as possible. Prose speeches tended equally toward the bombastic. Individuals were easily reduced to types, and the paraphernalia of theatre, the costumes, sets and all the rest, seemed to reflect some imaginary fairy-tale world rather than the one that the audience really inhabited.

The realistic play, when it finally came just before 1900, would be practically stillborn, surrounded as it was by such stifling conventions as these. A sea change would be necessary before realism could really catch on, and it not until about 1915 that the whole American theater began to play catch-up with the terrific advances that European drama had been making already since the 1870's and 80's.

Much of this change was owing to one theatrical group, the Provincetown Players, with their Playwright's Theater, which promoted the daring work of American-born writers like Eugene O'Neill, who is rightly considered to be the father of serious 20th century American drama. O'Neill was the main conduit through which the influences of Europe would be let loose upon the American stage, and his powerful, troubled dramas would act as the main training school for all of the major dramatists who would follow him, people like Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and, a generation later, Edward Albee as well.

At the same time, the revolution that was begun by Constantin Stanislavsky and Vladamir Nemirovich-Danchenko at the Moscow Art Theatre, in training actors to *become* their characters rather to merely memorize and play a role, the so-called "method" acting, had also made its way to American shores. Equally important advances that were making their imprint felt in America had to do with stagecraft, such as the construction of sets that could be used to serve a number of different scenes at the same time, and that added a quality of powerful suggestion to the drama of the play's text.

An example of what the new stagecraft could accomplish was seen in the multifunctional set that Jo Mielziner designed for the 1949 production of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, a set that served all the play's many scenes as well as its many shifts between reality and dream, past and present. Such a play would have been impossible to produce on the cumbersome Victorian stage, where huge sets complete with real, massive furniture had to be moved off between scenes while others were waiting to be moved onto the stage in their place, a process that was costly as well as very time-consuming, and one, moreover, which effectively hindered the building up of dramatic pressure from scene to scene.

A third fact to be considered lay on the academic side of things, where all of above came together in one place. Shortly after 1900, Prof. George Pierce Baker began to teach playwriting, first at Radcliff, later at Harvard University. By 1924 playwriting was taught at more than 100 colleges and universities all over the countries. Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and William Inge are among the many American dramatists who profited from such courses or who took part in the workshop productions they sponsored.

But this is running ahead of ourselves if we do not put down a few essential definitions before proceeding further! I have already spoken about the many artificial conventions of the 19th century stage and explained that realism, in the second half of the century, was a reaction against it. Ibsen was the great forerunner here. In the realistic play, things seem to happen to ordinary people on the stage as naturally, plausibly and inevitable as they might in real life. Such a play is written in colloquial prose, the characters are people of everyday life rather than kings, generals or highly-placed noblemen, they speak naturally, their psychological definition is such that we can easily identify with them and their problems and the story itself is set with a credible degree of verisimilitude in a particular place and milieu at a particular time.

But it was soon felt by many that the escape from romanticism into realism was an escape from one trap into another. Alvin Kernan, in his wonderful introduction to the

Classics of the Modern theater: Realism and After, explains the extraordinary lengths to which dramatists following Ibsen's example went in the meticulously realistic creation of "drawing-room sets . . . where the furniture, rugs and draperies on the stage were chosen to create the illusion of rooms as real as those the audience had just left in coming to the theater. The general concern for realism led ultimately to such extremes as getting every detail on the costumes, down to the last button, historically accurate for period pieces, and the introduction of water taps that really worked, real doors, genuine gravel for walks, and television sets that showed the same program you would have seen if you hadn't come to the theater" (5). Realism was thought to require "real forests planted in tubs to provide actors with living trees to climb, [and] entire houses complete with brick chimneys constructed by carpenters and masons."

The adoration of a new god required a stage that was just as cumbersome, costly and time-consuming to manipulate as the Victorian stage had been!

Kernan goes on to explain that "this drive to make the stage a photographic imitation of the actual world remains in many ways the main current of the modern theater, though it has been resisted from the beginning by those who have argued that the stage is by nature a symbolic place, not an illusion of reality, and that settings and costumes should be designed with their symbolic function in mind. This view, most properly termed expressionism, has led to the construction of improbable sets in which skeletal structures represent houses, where the world is reduced to a bare stage with a single tree, where a few folding chairs stand for an automobile and household furnishings. On the expressionistic stage the world may be symbolized by a few angular pieces of abstract statuary, by a color alone, or by a few boards made into platforms of different levels; tall buildings may lean over a house to express menace, stables may flower at their peak to express hope, men may walk through mirrors to express their insubstantiality. The laws of nature and probability are suspended on the expressionistic stage, and their place is taken by the laws of poetry, which state that a writer is free to reshape the natural world in order to make his point clear" (pp.5-6).

Clearly, both realism and expressionism could be taken to extremes: Ibsen was on one extreme and Brecht would later be on the other, but the fact was that great drama could be produced either way or by combining both modes, as Tennessee Williams was to do with brilliant success in A Streetcar Named Desire and Arthur Miller in The Death of a Salesman.

A third concept that we will need to deal with is that of the theater of the absurd, which naturally tended to make use of expressionism, but in America that was a much later development which did not make its impact felt until the early 1950's when the French philosophy of existentialism that was associated with Sartre, Camus was introduced into the Anglo-Saxon world largely through the work of Samuel Beckett and translations of Eugene Ionesco. This is not to say, however, that Albee was not influenced by it, because he was. It is no coincidence that Albee's first plays bear so much resemblance to plays by Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett which were making such a stir in the mid-fifties, plays such as Ionesco's The Chairs (1952) and Rhinoceros (1959), Beckett's Act without Words (1956), Waiting for Godot (1952), Endgame (1957), Krapp's Last Tape (1958) and Happy Days (1960).

To take a small example, the mysterious son who is the subject of such heated quarrels between the husband and wife in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, but who turns out to be an entirely imaginary character, is hardly less absurd than the mysterious Godot of the play by the same name by Samuel Beckett, a character who

is constantly spoken of but who never actually appears, and who may not really exist, either.

All of these plays follow Kernan's description of the minimalist expressionistic theater, where, as we have just seen, "skeletal structures represent houses, where the world is reduced to a bare stage with a single tree, where a few folding chairs stand for an automobile and household furnishings," etc. The stage directions for Ionesco's The Chairs, for instance, require only "a large, very sparsely furnished room" which initially contains only two stools, a blackboard and two chairs. The set for Beckett's Happy Days is merely an "expanse of scorched grass rising center to low mound. Gentle slopes down to front and either side of stage." The stage for his Krapp's Last Tape contains just a small table, two drawers of which are open to the audience. "Table and immediately adjacent area in strong white light. Rest of stage in darkness."

Compare this now to the stage directions for Albee's The Sandbox, written in 1959 and first performed in 1960: "A bare stage, with only the following: Near the footlights, far-stage-right, two simple chairs set side by side, facing the audience; near the footlights, far stage-left, a chair facing stage-right with a music stand before it; farther back, and stage-center, slightly elevated and raked, a large child's sandbox with a toy pail and shovel." That's it, just three chairs, a music stand and a child's sandbox.

This doesn't mean that Albee's early expressionistic plays are simply copies of the "theater of the absurd," because they are not. They may share the expressionistic mode in common with such playwrights as Ionesco and Beckett, as just explained, but they are also less absurdist in their philosophy and much more overtly political. Ionesco and Beckett never bother criticizing French or English culture as such; their plays are satires on the *universal* human condition of modern man. But all of Albee's plays in one way or another are overt criticisms of *American* history, culture and society. As he explained in an interview given to the New York Times on 18 April 1971, "When I write a play I am interested in changing the way people look at themselves and at their lives. I have never written a play which was not essentially political. But it is useless to attack details or the conscious level. What you must lay siege to is the unconscious."

As an example of this, Albee himself volunteered the information that the husband and wife of his best-known play, Who's Afraid Virginia Woolf (1962), who spend much of their time on stage viciously quarrelling about their non-existent child, were consciously named after the first president of the United States, George Washington and *his* wife, Martha, the first First Lady. In 1976 he wrote, "the play is an examination of whether or not we, as a society, have lived up to the principles of the American Revolution. There's no argument that George and Martha were named after George and Martha Washington" (quoted in N.Y. Times, 28 March 1976). In an interview given to M.E. Rutenberg seven years earlier, he had already suggested that the play could be read as a political allegory: "there might be an allegory to be drawn, and have the fantasy child the revolutionary principles of this country that we haven't lived up to yet." (M.E. Rutenberg, Edward Albee: Playwright in Protest, 1969).

Those of you who may have read the interview that the now 78 year old Albee gave to Kester Freriks in the NRC Cultureel Supplement of this past January 26 (2007) will also have noticed how Albee insisted on the American context of this play: "Ik ben altijd beducht," he told Freriks, "voor verregaande interpretaties van regisseurs die

denken dat zij belangrijker zijn dan de auteur. Als iemand Virginia Woolf in het zestiende-eeuwse Engeland will situeren, dan zou ik dat bijvoorbeeld niet goedkeuren. Het stuk hoort in de jaren vijftig thuis en speelt in een universiteitsstad in New England. Ik ben beschermd door copyright." New England, of course, is not only in the United States, but it is also the oldest part of the United States, the part where the country was originally settled as a colony of England and where its Revolutionary War against the mother country first began in 1776. New England is the place where the new nation was actually conceived of and born!

Those who are familiar with another of Albee's early plays, The American Dream, first performed a year earlier in 1961, will recognize in it this very same political theme, albeit in a different guise. In this play it turns out that Mommy and Daddy had adopted a son many years earlier. As they objected to the child's actions, they mutilated it as punishment, eventually killing it. Now a Young Man appears at the door looking for work. After hearing his life story, we are informed that this Young Man, who is dubbed "The American Dream," is the twin of Mommy and Daddy's first child. Because the first child was mutilated, the twin has experienced all of its pain and has been left physically beautiful, but also a psychological cripple, completely superficial and completely empty. As one Albee critic, Gerry McCarthy, pointed out, "if the boy in The American Dream is left as a shell, it is because Albee is dramatizing a soulless aspect of Americans society" (Edward Albee, pp., 24-25).

Similarly, another of Albee's early plays, The Death of Bessie Smith, written in 1959, but set in 1937, is an attack on racial discrimination in the United States. It is based around a series of conversations between the staff of a 'Whites-only' hospital in Mississippi in 1937, on the day that the famous blues singer, Bessie Smith, was supposed to have been brought in following a serious car crash. and denied admittance because of her race. The real Bessie Smith did die as a result of injuries suffered in the crash of a car, but for a long time it was never clear whether she was directly taken to the Afro-American hospital where she died, or was denied admittance first at a whites-only hospital that was much closer to the scene of the crash. Albee's play follows the commonly-held belief that she had indeed been brought to a whites-only hospital first, and that her death could have been prevented had she been given immediate medical treatment there.

Bessie Smith herself never appears in the play, but what is really important is the historical background to the play, which was first performed in April, 1960. Just five years earlier, the American Civil Rights movement, led by the Reverend Martin Luther King, had been sparked off when a tired Afro-American seamstress, Rosa Parks, had refused to give up her seat in the whites-only section of a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama. This led to the famous and successful Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56, which was followed by the forced desegregation of the Little Rock, Arkansas school system in 1957, and many other landmarks in the history of the American Civil Rights movement all through the 1960's, including the famous march to Washington in 1963, when Martin Luther King gave his famous "I have a dream" speech.

It is at this moment in American history that Albee first came to prominence, a moment when the difference between the American Dream and the American reality had become painfully clear to the whole nation. Just to give you an idea of The Death of Bessie Smith's political intentions, only three months before it was first performed in April of 1960, America had experienced a completely new kind of civil rights protest that was called a "sit in." On February 1, 1960, four African-American college students sat down at a segregated lunch counter in the Greensboro, North Carolina

Woolworth's store. Although they were refused service, they were allowed to stay at the counter, sparking off sit-ins all over the country.

In just two months the sit-in movement spread to 54 cities in 9 states. The newspapers everywhere were continually full of it. Six months after the sit-ins began, the original four protesters *were* served lunch at the same Woolworth's counter. In 1993, that lunch counter would be donated to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. in recognition of its historic importance, just as the actual bus on which Rosa Parks had been riding is now also a museum-piece. The Death of Bessie Smith was Albee's contribution to the advance of the civil rights movement, by making dramatically clear to American audiences just how unfair the treatment of Afro-Americans in the United States not only was at the moment when it was written, but in fact, always *had been*.

Albee's very first play, The Zoo Story (Het verhaal van de dierentuin), performed in 1959, was less expressionistic than some of his other early plays, but no less political in its criticism of the American way of life. Where Ionesco or Beckett would have had a bench in an indeterminate park, Albee's park bench, we are told, is situated in Central Park, New York. The specific American setting is important because the play's two characters, Jerry and Peter, represent the two halves of American society, the "have-nots" and the "haves."

The successful Peter, the inoffensive, modest "have" of the play, is a rather dull, well-adjusted, law-abiding upper middle-class man with a very good job, nice family and his own home. He likes coming to the park to read his book during lunch. He has been doing this for a long time and almost considers the bench, or his place on it, to belong to him by right of custom. In the course of the play, Peter's position on the bench is seen to become symbolic of his position in life, seemingly well-established by long custom, but in reality only held because it has remained unchallenged for so long.

The detail of the book that he always brings to the park with him makes Peter into an educated man of some culture – just like the playgoers who are watching the play. His antagonist is the unemployed, bitterly lonely loser, Jerry, who has been rejected by his own parents, has no job, lives by himself in a lodging house and is mentally unstable. Jerry proves to be not only extremely challenging to Peter's safe assumptions about himself and the world he lives in, but finally proves to be very aggressive as well, pushing Peter off the bench and challenging him to fight to get it back. In the scuffle that ensues, Peter winds up with Jerry's knife in his hand at which moment Jerry runs forward and impales himself on it, dying at the end. Who is responsible? Peter is innocent but somehow also guilty.

The play's genius is the way in which it manages to curry our sympathy for the aggressive Jerry and to deflect it from the mild-mannered Peter. We feel that Peter and those like him – that is to say, the playgoer - *do* have a responsibility for so complacently accepting a world in which they are comfortable while those like Jerry must live in utter misery. This feeling is crystallized at the play's end when Jerry's death is seen to fall somewhere in between suicide and murder, because although it is Jerry who runs forward toward the knife, it is Peter who remains holding it.

The Zoo Story is much too complex to be dismissed as mere political propaganda. Peter denies Jerry, just as the original Peter denied Jesus, whose name also began with a "J." Both Jesus and Jerry are crucified, in a way, by a world which cannot or will not understand them. Albee's Peter, like the educated playgoer, has been living in a fantasy world from which he must someday be rudely awoken, and is hardly

aware of the reality that surrounds him. Instead, he deliciously loses himself in his book, preferring art to the nitty-gritty of real life.

But even when the play progresses, and Jerry's reality is made more and more clear to him, Peter continues to remain uninvolved. Like the beautiful but empty boy of The American Dream, he seems wholly to lack the human equipment that could make him really sympathetic to or in any way involved in Jerry's predicament. And even if he were so equipped, why should he bother caring? Jerry, after all, is a total stranger to him! The easy way in which Peter accepts this comfortable logic also suggests that he bears a certain kind of responsibility for the problem. After all, an educated man who reads *should* know what reality is like, because art is not only supposed to mirror life, it is supposed to give us a heightened experience of it! And if Peter does know it, why hasn't he at least tried to do something about it?

The Zoo Story takes its title from the fact that just before Jerry comes across Peter in the park, he has also been to the zoo that is also located there, the Central Park Zoo. He seems to be particularly proud or happy about this fact, and in the very beginning of the play announces to Peter, whom he has just met, "MISTER, I HAVE BEEN TO THE ZOO!" This seemingly meaningless piece of information gains in resonance as the play moves inexorably toward its violent denouement, because the zoo is, of course, America, where half live like human beings and the other half live like animals. Jerry has been to the zoo in the sense that he knows from first-hand experience that this is true of America, but Peter, even though he frequents the park where the zoo is located, has never bothered to close his book and walk over to it. He finds it comfortable believing that everyone else is as comfortable as he is. The Zoo Story, therefore, is a story *about* America.

It is interesting in this context to note how angrily Albee has rejected the notion that his plays show the influence of the so-called "theater of the absurd." In the NRC interview I just referred to, he said, "Speel wat er staat, maak het niet te symbolisch en zeker niet te psychologisch. Er staan woorden in de tekst die iedereen kan begrijpen. Er wordt veel te veel onzin beweerd over mijn stukken. Ik werd eerst een 'absurdist' genoemd omdat The Zoo Story een keer in een avond werd gespeeld met Krapp's Last Tape van Samuel Beckett. Ik vond dat aanvankelijk een bedreiging. Mijn toneelwerk gaat over reële mensen met bestaande angsten. Daar is helemaal niets absurdistisch aan. Wie dat zegt, haalt de angel van de werkelijkheid uit mijn theater."

Expressionistic and absurdist, then, are not necessarily synonyms, and the fact that almost all absurd theater is staged in an expressionistic style should not mislead us into thinking that everything that written with an expressionistic touch is therefore representative of the "theater of the absurd." Albee's early expressionistic plays are *political* theater, as I have tried to show, and they are all driven by the underlying belief that far from being absurd, the human and civil rights expressed in the American Bill of Rights and Constitution *are* extremely meaningful and have been denied or grotesquely distorted by the way American history has developed in the 19th and 20th centuries. He is therefore not a nihilist or an absurdist, but an outraged idealist.

Albee's words, "mijn toneelwerk gaat over reële mensen met bestaande angsten" and his reference to the "werkelijkheid van mijn theater" provides us with an important clue for understanding him. By denying the element of the absurd in his work and insisting that he deals with real people who have real problems, Albee points us back toward the tradition of modern realism that I described earlier. In fact,

his two best plays, Virginia Woolf and Delicate Balance, are not expressionistic in style all, but are both examples of 20th century realistic drama at their best.

In his interview with Albee, Kester Freriks was also struck with the very non-European staging of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf when it was recently revived in the Kennedy Center in Washington, with Kathleen Turner and Bill Irwin in the lead roles. He writes, "De gordijnen schuiven open. Het décor is van een realisme dat ik in Nederland nooit heb gezien: overvolle boekenkasten, donkerbruin meubelair, een erker met kamerplanten, flessen vol toneelwhiskey in een serveerboy." This is hardly surprising, as Albee's own stage instructions at the beginning of the play inform us that when the curtain opens what we should see is "the living room of a large and well-appointed suburban house. Now."

This is a tradition that owes nothing whatever to Genet, Ionesco or Beckett, but everything to Albee's great American predecessor, Eugene O'Neill, and *his* older European forbears, Ibsen and Strindberg. For this reason I want to say a little more about O'Neill's work as a direct background for understanding Virginia Woolf and A Delicate Balance.

O'Neill's best known play, the autobiographical Long Day's Journey into Night, though originally written in 1941, was only first performed in 1956, and won the Pulitzer Prize the year after, only two years before Albee himself broke upon the scene. This harrowing full-length play is an intense family drama that follows the Tyrone family in their own home from early one morning to late the same night, and its influence on Albee is unmistakable. It contains at least six elements which those of you already familiar with Albee's A Delicate Balance, another Pulitzer Prize winner, will easily recognize.

First, A Delicate Balance is also a full-length play that follows an American family in their own home, in this case for a whole weekend. Second, as in O'Neill's play, the frequent mixing and drinking of alcoholic drinks of one kind or another is a central part of the family culture, and almost all of the characters on stage indulge in it from the first act to the last (something that also reminds us of Virginia Woolf). Third, both plays contain a truth-telling alcoholic family member who is a complete failure in love, work and life: in O'Neill's play it is the older son, Jamie, and in Albee's play it is Agnes's sister, Claire. Fourth, both plays also contain an adult child who never grew up and who returns to the parental home again after suffering a personal reversal, claiming protection and support: in the O'Neill play it is Edmund, the younger brother, and in Albee's play it is Tobias's and Agnes's daughter, Julia.

Fifth, both plays are full of bickering, backbiting, vicious remarks, accusations, heated quarrelling, the revelation of the most painful truths and personal failures, from beginning to end, something that also helped to make Albee's Virginia Woolf the memorable play that it is. But A Delicate Balance is no slouch in this department either! An example is the following bitchy speech which the exasperated Agnes addresses to her alcoholic sister, Claire, already in the first act:

"Why don't you go off on a vacation, Claire, now that Julia's coming home again? Why don't you go to Kentucky, or Tennessee, and visit the distilleries? Or why don't you lock yourself in your room, or find yourself a bar with an apartment in the back " To which Claire replies, "Or! Agnes: why don't you die?" The stage-direction now reads: "Agnes and Claire lock eyes, stay still."

(Tennessee and Kentucky are mentioned here because that is where the famous American bourbon whiskies are distilled, such as the famous “Jack Daniels,” just as Schiedam here in Holland has an old association with the distilling of Dutch jenever.)

Last but not least, both plays are in the tradition of modern realism that was chiefly inherited from Ibsen, the more extreme forms of their morbidity and destructiveness also showing the influence of Strindberg.

But these clear influences do not in the least mean that Albee’s achievement is merely derivative. Each of his plays bears his own special stamp, and at least part of that stamp reflects a private mythology in which the mysterious son I mentioned before is either dead, missing or even non-existent. As we have already seen in The American Dream, he was first mutilated and then died, in the case of A Delicate Balance the missing son, named Teddy, has just died without begin mutilated first, and in Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf it is a completely fictional being but just as important is if it were alive.

In A Delicate Balance the dead son is clearly responsible for much of the dysfunctionality that we see in the present. Tobias and Agnes have not been sharing the same bedroom for years because of it. Agnes is angry with Tobias because he would not give her another child, and is disappointed in Julia because her failed marriages have never given her a grandchild, either. Without a son or heir, the family name has no future.

Clearly, the theme of the missing son is an important symbol in Albee’s work, and one which is open to a number of interpretations. Gerry McCarthy, whom I referred to earlier, sees the theme as largely autobiographical and psychological. Albee was rejected by his natural mother and given up for adoption when still an infant. His adoptive father, Reed Albee, was passive and ineffective as a father, while his adoptive mother was dominating and challenging. These two types appear and re-appear in all of his plays, while the son over whose head they continually quarrel is Albee himself, whose existence is not legitimate and is never psychologically legitimated.

I myself prefer a political interpretation. Albee first dealt with the theme of the missing son in his political allegory, The American Dream, where the original son and his twin are the American Dream, both past and present. The original American Dream has been so badly mutilated that it died, and its twin in the present is beautiful but completely empty.

When George and Martha in Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf, are quarreling about their non-existent son, they are quarrelling about the same American Dream. We remember that both characters by Albee’s own admission are named after the first American president and his wife, and their non-existent son, the idea of which haunts them, is only non-existent in the sense that the American Dream has always remained a dream and has never become a reality. This fact, Albee suggests, explains the dysfunctionality of America today, which is symbolized on the stage by continual family quarrels and the lack of a son who can continue the family into the future.

The beautiful twin in The American Dream is a reminder that America’s beautiful picture of itself and its ideals is a sham that hides a completely empty and often very ugly interior. It is especially important to realize that Albee came to maturity during the Eisenhower years, the 1950’s, when the emphasis was one of glossing over the problems in American life and emphasizing its beautiful outward appearance. Few

public figures then drew attention to the structural poverty in America, to the homeless or to the shocking injustices of the system of racial segregation that prevailed throughout all of the South, to say nothing of the repeated lynching of black men that took place there every year. The Wikipedia informs us that “the murders of 4,743 people who were lynched in the United States between 1882 and 1968 were not often publicized. It is likely that many more unrecorded lynchings occurred in this period. Lynching statistics were kept only for the 86 years between 1882 and 1968, and were based primarily on newspaper accounts.”

Instead, American advertisements, government public relations and the best efforts of the great American dream factory, Hollywood, were directed toward convincing Americans that they lived in the greatest and most beautiful country on earth. Modern appliances and comforts were filling American homes. More and more Americans could afford to buy and own cars. New suburbs, such as the famous Levittown near New York, sold thousands of picture-postcard American frame homes in country-style settings to returning GI's, and the mass exodus from the teeming cities began. It was “huisje, boompje, beastie,” as the Dutch say, and the ubiquitous toothpaste advertisements always showed white middle-class people broadly smiling because they were apparently so deeply happy and fulfilled.

Albee's drama is an attempt to explode this pretty picture, and to show the hidden, very ugly reality underneath. The bitter loneliness of the rejected Jerry in The Zoo Story, the vicious quarrelling of Virginia Woolf, the existential fear that drives Edna and Harry, Agnes' and Tobias' best friends in A Delicate Balance, to seek shelter with them, thereby displacing the returned Julia from her bedroom, is a lot closer to the truth than the happy toothpaste commercials or the empty belief that America is the “land of the free and the home of the brave” where everyone is guaranteed “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

It is now almost time for me to conclude, but taking a step back I would like just for a moment to see Albee's work against the background of an even broader panorama, one which takes us back to the year 1902, when the Polish-English author Joseph Conrad published his novella The Heart of Darkness, which recounted the horrors he experienced as a steamboat captain in the Congo thirteen years earlier.

In the course of its powerful story, The Heart of Darkness presents its readers with a thought-provoking irony. Some of the story's black canoe-paddlers, though they are cannibals, do not eat the European passengers they have with them, even though they are badly underpaid and are also badly underfed – some inner discipline restrains them from doing so, sorely tempted though they may be - while the apparently civilized European, Mr. Kurtz, who is an ivory hunter, loses all restraint when in the savage environment and descends to utter savagery as both head-hunter and cannibal in order to extort even more ivory from the natives than what they have already given him. “The horror, the horror,” which are his famous dying words, would seem to refer to the depths of depravity to which even a civilized man is capable of sinking when the familiar, but very thin props of civilization have been taken away from him.

Similarly, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, with its perverted play on the nursery rhyme, “who's afraid of the big bad wolf,” shows us that average white middle-class America has never really progressed toward national maturity since the first George and Martha were on the scene, is still “playing games,” as it were, but now on a level of savagery almost equivalent to that of Conrad, because the failed American Dream, the non-existent son, has left a legacy that is full only of the most intense self-hatred and internal bitterness. The thin veneer of civilization in The Heart of Darkness is

somehow also echoed in the title of A Delicate Balance, where the dysfunctional family, a microcosm of the nation at large, is so easily upset by events in the personal sphere which prove too much for it to handle with any kind of civilized grace.

Albee is a political and social playwright, with America and its white Anglo-Saxon Protestant ruling class as his first target, but behind America he is also criticizing, as Conrad does, our naïve belief in civilization itself.

I hope this sketch has given you a better idea of where Albee can be placed in the context of American literary and political history, and if you have tickets to see the Dutch production of Wankel evenwicht at the LAKtheatre anytime between the 21st and 24th of this month, I wish you an unforgettable dramatic experience!

Works Consulted

Kernan, Alvin, ed. Classics of the Modern Theater: Realism and After. (New York, 1965).

McGowan, Kenneth and William Melnitz. The Living Stage: A History of the World Theater (Engelwood Cliffs, N.J, 1955)

McCarthy, Gerry. Edward Albee (Macmillan Modern Dramatists) (London, 1987)