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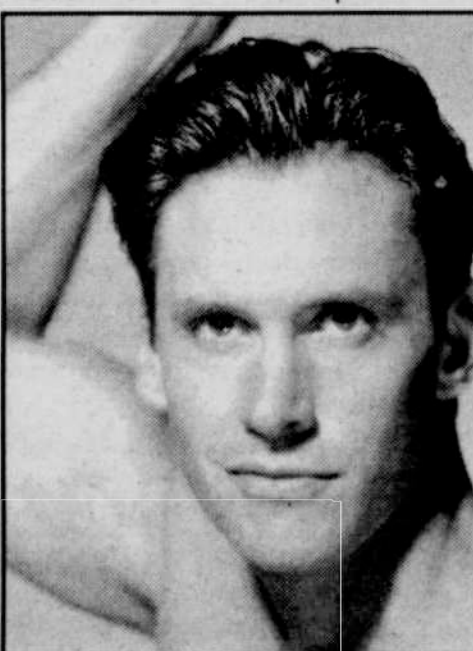
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THEATER**His best profile**

A whole season of Edward Albee
thanks to the novel Profile Theatre Project

BY SARAH LEIMERT

In a city crowded with small (yet largely successful) theater companies, Profile Theatre Project has carved out a niche all its own.

Established in 1998 by artistic director Jane Unger, Profile dedicates each season to a single playwright, giving audiences a well-rounded concept of the artist's work. Three productions a year allow ample staging time in its intimate 95-seat performance space at Southeast Portland's Theater! Theatre!

This season's profile is of renowned gay playwright Edward Albee: the two one-acts *The Zoo Story* and *The American Dream* from Oct. 11 to Nov. 17; *Seascape* from Jan. 17 to Feb. 16; and *Three Tall Women* from April 25 to May 25. In February, Profile will also include a special staged reading of Albee's *Fragments*.

Unger chooses playwrights based on "some extremely pragmatic considerations," such as venue size, cost and author name recognition. But she also tends to feature writers whose work has strong political resonance for our culture. "It's no accident that the last three playwrights we've featured—Arthur Miller, Harold Pinter and now Edward Albee—have all at one time been presidents of International PEN, one of the most socially responsible and politically active organizations for human rights of writers and poets around the world," she notes.

A strong Educational Enrichment Program also makes Profile unique. Using the rationale that schools are where audiences are born, the program gives students at area high schools detailed study guides for each play and then invites them to special matinees, including pre- and post-show discussions with the actors.

Unger regularly communicates with the playwright before and during productions, often bringing them here for lectures or workshops. "With nonliving writers or writers who won't travel to Portland, I contact an authority on their [work] and bring that person...to speak with our audiences," she explains. Whether Albee will visit Portland this season is still undecided.

Who is this Albee chap?

Born in 1928 Washington, D.C., Albee is one of the most prolific and influential playwrights of our time. Adopted as an infant by a millionaire couple, he was named after his adoptive paternal grandfather, Edward Franklin Albee, a powerful vaudeville producer. The junior Albee was raised in Larchmont, N.Y., amid great wealth and constant exposure

to well-known stage personalities.

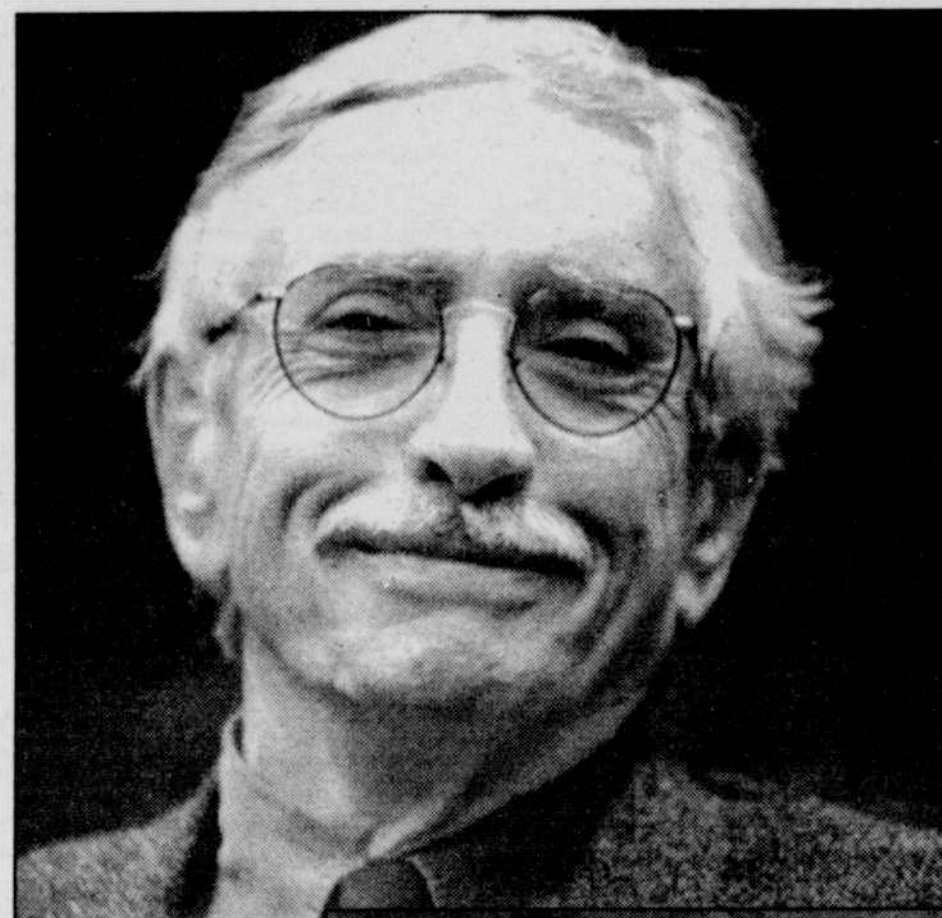
In 1958 Albee wrote his first play, *The Zoo Story*, as a present to himself on his 30th birthday. When no producer in New York would touch it, he sent it to an old friend, who started it on a long and winding route through European producers until it finally landed in Berlin. German audiences responded overwhelmingly, and it was soon being produced off-Broadway, double-billed with Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*.

After Albee's dizzying rise to success as an off-Broadway playwright, his first Broadway production—*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, a psychodrama about dysfunctional marriage—caused a stir when its nomination for the 1963 Pulitzer was not accepted unanimously by the prize committee. One judge called it "a filthy play" and refused to vote for it, prompting two members to resign from the committee in protest. As a result, no Pulitzer was awarded to a drama that year, but that didn't stop the film version from winning five Academy Awards in 1969.

Albee's impressive 40-year canon also includes adaptations of novels, including Carson McCullers' *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* and James Purdy's *Malcolm*. He has been the recipient of numerous awards for his contribution to the arts and continues to produce quality work to this day, preferring off-Broadway productions in smaller venues with aspiring artists.

Like many gay playwrights of his generation (and born from necessity), Albee's work is not known to address homosexuality specifically. His obsession, though, does lie with honesty: truth about relationships, this country and the human need for fantasy.

"Albee...has always been truthful about his homosexuality at a time when public pressure kept [it] in the closet, and telling that truth about himself was the disproportionately more difficult road to travel," Unger says. "Homosexuality has played a part in the minds of some of



PHOTOS BY JERRY SPREER

The writer and
the director:
Jane Unger
stages Albee's
work to explore
"the consequences
of forcing the
truth"



the critics who have negatively reviewed [his work], using his homosexuality as an excuse for something they didn't like or understand."

One critic's suggestion that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is actually a cloaked study of a gay couple was dismissed by Albee as "absolutely preposterous."

The playwright is considered a successor to American icons such as Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill. His work has contributed immensely to the face of dramatic theater and has had incredible staying power through the decades. As the world changes at light speed, the premise of Albee's work does not: Telling the truth about ourselves and our society—no matter how grim—is imperative to understanding who we are.

What are these plays about, anyway?

The Zoo Story, Albee's first play, is a one-act addressing themes of social class structure and alienation. It set the stage not only for Albee's own career but for the careers of many playwrights to follow.

Zoo illustrates one man's compulsion to live a truthful life and the fatal consequences that follow communication breakdown. Although written 40 years ago—in a much different political and socioeconomic climate—its thesis remains hauntingly relevant and particularly familiar to Americans right now.

The American Dream premiered in 1961, just after *Zoo* opened to great acclaim. This play systematically deconstructs the American family—stereotype by stereotype—giving us an

The Zoo Story studies
death and alienation

