

A Market For Monologue?

Jean Luere

American drama's Edward Albee may disallow the advice Samuel Beckett offered a British writer in the 1960s. Beckett, recalling his own momentary elation over a freshly-minted manuscript, lifted one thin finger and exclaimed, "Ah, what you need is monologue—*monologue!* . . . that's the thing!!"¹ Albee, like Beckett, has been subject to turns of fortune with his one-speaker formats. Many of Albee's critical successes from *The Zoo Story* to *Seascape* encapsulate monologues-in-miniature on dogs, cats, or coves. Often critics extol the playwright for focusing in these reflective passages upon "the motivation behind action rather than action itself."²

Yet several of what critics consider Albee's actual or extended monodramas—*Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (1968) and *The Man Who Had Three Arms* (1983)—have fared less well than Samuel Beckett's with audiences. Some view these experiments in dramatic structure without enthusiasm, feeling that "the pulls of Beckett have brought Albee's talent dangerously near to disintegrating" though "there is hope that it will recover."³ Others laud the playwright for mastering speaker-listener formats like Beckett's rather than refining Eugene Scribe's "well-made-play formula" of the nineteenth century as Henrik Ibsen chose to do.⁴ Matthew C. Roudane commends Albee for his "estimable experiments with form . . . without regard to commercial pressure,"⁵ while Philip C. Kolin cautions that "Inevitably, the artist who places a value on innovation . . . may miss commercial success unless society's quest for satisfaction coincides with the artist's vision."⁶ Like abstract-expressionist painters who abandon the standard repertoire and augment their idiom to include arcane patterns, playwrights who discard the well-made-play formula can multiply their possibilities infinitely, but they may lose the security of familiar forms for their audience.⁷ Critics will object that their work is "less and less determinable"⁸ and dismiss it as unapproachably abstract.

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While Broadway's paying customers in 1968 were luke-warm toward an Albee monologue-collage, *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, a recent European audience at the Edinburgh Festival of 422 plays applauded his second monodrama, *The Man Who Had Three Arms*, for six years virtually shelved by the often-impenetrable playwright after Broadway had dismissed it in 1983. Both the New York and the Edinburgh productions played for two weeks: New York's failed; Edinburgh's won the *Scotsman's FIRST Award*. Scripts were identical except for one brief passage (twenty-to-thirty lines) at Edinburgh⁹ that Albee had deleted from the Broadway cast-books.

Neither Broadway's withholding of applause in 1983 at the Lyceum Theatre nor Edinburgh's awarding of the *Scotsman's First* at its International Venue in 1989 should have been unforeseen. Albee's *Zoo Story* (1959) had flown in Germany and on the continent long before American critics hailed it. Drama anthologist Oscar Brockett notes that critical acclaim for controversial playwright Edward Albee early and late has been steadier abroad than at home.¹⁰ In the present instance, the reception of *The Man Who Had Three Arms* may have been doubly precarious by reason of Albee's choice of the narrator-speaker-format for its structure.

Fortunately, media coverage of the two stagings of *The Man Who Had Three Arms* redounds with more data than that of the dramatist's earlier speaker-narrator play, *Box Mao Box*, and makes possible a full appraisal of the recent one's split reception on elements from genre and style to thematic focus and characterization. Today, theatre research must not attend so narrowly upon New York's early dismissal of Albee's uncommon structural choice for *The Man Who Had Three Arms* nor upon the apparent European vindication of it that we neglect to analyze meaningfully or theorize effectively *either* response. An elaboration upon the two productions' theatrical, social, and critical environments reveals previously-unassessed differences in the two productions' tone, thrust and action that partially explain the disparate audience-response to Albee's extended dramatic monologue. Moreover, beyond the immediate findings of this study, a corollary on critical reception in general may edify or unnerve prospective patrons, dramatists, or producers of tomorrow's American theatre.

Ironically, *The Man Who Had Three Arms* lampoons the press and public's failure to bestow or withhold applause judiciously, mocks them for clinging to what they already know—long-established forms—rather than opting to approach unfamiliar theatre. Albee's satire uses a bitter, faded star (called simply "Himself"), plus two cameo-actors who mime many of their bit-roles, to expose lugubrious ills of our celebrity system wherein star-hungry audience and applause-needy star co-exist: an indiscriminating public idolizes a willing though mediocre victim for a time to satisfy its own symbiotic need for the famous. The

star-appeal of Albee's hostile hero, now a resentful substitute speaker on a third rate dinner-club circuit, issues from a third arm that sprouted suddenly in the middle of his back, grew with vigor, then withered, along with his celebrity status. Still his audience leans forward, wide-eyed, straining for details of his deformation, and their chairwoman orders Himself to perform—"Talk about yourself."¹¹ The yes-man will comply—for a time. But if his talk strays from the same old format, the audience will walk and he will scream: "You owe me something, you people . . . you loved me in the good times, and you're fucking well going to love me now!!!"¹² Self-indulgence, resentment, and hostility are tonic accents of the hero's emotional nature.

In the two separate stagings of Albee's one-man show, certain critically-envisioned differences in the degree of Himself's indulgence in bitterness and recrimination may partially explain the audiences' antithetical attitudes toward *The Man Who Had Three Arms*. By nature of the script, Himself wallows in his plight, whines over the drawbacks of celebrity, indulges in recriminations against self and others, while concurrently bragging of the perks of fame. ". . . with celebrity—with great celebrity—the thighs of the world swing open, the universal clitoris and the great divide await . . . all one has to do is . . . show up."¹³ An inherent risk with one-man shows, particularly if the script demands vocal stridency, is that the acoustical pitch or tonic accent of the principal's voice, singly focused, may bludgeon the listeners by the denouement, whereas in multi-character plays, a speaker's tone, whether whiny or shrill, is perforce tempered by the timbre of other actors' voices. Since this play's two cameo-actors often mime their roles, their sporadic oneliners furnish scant relief for the principal's predominant vocal tone.

Happily, Albee's reinstatement before the Festival of a previously-deleted passage of twenty-to-thirty lines lessens Himself's preoccupation with self, and for a time stems his whiny laments. In discussions with actor Ed Fernandez and director Lynn Morrow, Albee stated that he has reinserted the passage from his conviction that its presence renders his hero less self-indulgent as he alternately hugs and champs at the chains of fame that bind him. The crucial passage falls at the play's end; but Fernandez's foreknowledge of the lines' timely boost in fortune for his character may lift his tone earlier in the play, letting us perceive Himself with some humour. New York's final curtain had fallen soon after Himself, sunk in self-disgust at failure to win his audience, smashed his podium, alternately raved at his turned-off viewers and piteously begged them to forgive his self-exploitation and accept his act and himself without demanding a sequel. At that point one of the play's two cameo actors, the literary club's chairwoman, ordered the other, the master of ceremonies, to squelch the speaker's strident words in order to end their evening with some grace. "Will you have them lower

the curtain?" she demanded. But Himself protested, "No!! No one leaves!! . . ." Self-obsessed, he began to remove his shirt to expose his now-armless back, saying "Look; believe me; I am *you*; I have always been *you*; there's no difference between us. . . ." He motioned wildly, started to weep, "Get out of here! Leave me alone! . . .," but as he noted the curtain closing, he begged, "No! Don't do that! Don't leave me alone! Stay with me. Don't . . . leave me alone! Don't leave me! Don't . . . leave me alone."¹⁴ New York's humourless hero indulged in grief and mourned Himself, a pawn of hype.

However, in Edinburgh's final moments incorporating Albee's originally-intended ending, the distraught former freak responds to an unanticipated and startling observation of his body by the chairwoman. Moved by his wail "Don't leave me alone," she crosses the stage and stands beside Himself:

Woman: (Comes over to him, to comfort) Yes, Yes; of course . . .

Himself: (To the audience). Stop looking at me like that!

Woman: (As he shudders, weeps). Shhhhhhhh! Shhhhhhhh! It'll all be alright. (She strokes his shoulders, his back) Shhhhhhhh! Shhhhhhhh! (She notices something on his back) Oh! Oh, how extraordinary!

Himself: I'm no different from . . . (becomes aware of her) What? What is it!?

Woman: (Moving behind him, looking at his back). Well, I . . . if I didn't know better—although I do know better, or should—if I didn't know better, I'd say; you . . . had something growing there—on your back. (To the *Man*) Come; come see.

Man: (Moving in). What? What is it?

Himself: (Disbelief and wonder suffusing his face). Something . . . ? Growing . . . ? There . . . ?

Woman: (pointing). See?

Man: (Peering). My goodness! Why, yes!

Himself: (Eyes more-or-less heavenward). It's coming back, you fuckers! (Fist upward and clenched) You'll get yours, you mothers! (To the two behind him; joy and pleading) It's coming back? You can see it?

Man: Yes! Look there!

Woman: Isn't that extraordinary!

Himself: (Eyes closed tight). Just wait, world!

Woman: Why, its . . . I think it's waving at me, or . . . yes, look there; it's . . . it's wiggling its little toes!

Himself: (A long beat). Toes!? (A longer beat) TOES!? (A beat. Blackout).

END¹⁵

Whether Albee's new appendage will forever stifle the hero's whines and stop him from surrounding himself with himself—or whether it will isolate and then destroy him with a perilous return to fame—is an open issue, for neither at New York nor at Edinburgh does the playwright, a steward of Chekhovian ambivalence, wrap up his endings. However, since the cameo-actress plays both the wife who has abandoned Himself and the chairwoman who has tried to discharge him, the actress's approach to Himself in the final moments at Edinburgh represents a turn toward compassion by one or both, lessening his total estrangement from his world. Secondly, the passage gives the piteously-faded star yet another freakish appendage, with a foot which he can flaunt before us to recoup his monsterdom and a heel which he can manipulate to retaliate against us. "You'll get yours, you mother f----s" . . . Just wait, world!!¹⁶ With the reinsertion, an audience is less repelled than captured, less estranged than touched by a fear that a return to the cycle of celebrity will trigger the bawdy hero's end. Unrepelled, Edinburgh can see humour as well as pathos in his situation, and finds the character "tragic" and "truthful" and "outrageously amusing" and the monologue "a major tour de force"¹⁷ where overpowered New York had shrunk from the hero's self-indulgence, calling both him and the play "sniveling" and "vicious . . . insulting . . . snarling."¹⁸

The tonal shift at the Festival derives not only from this reinserted passage but also from Albee's constant counsel to the actor to contain his delivery—to flounder quietly, occasionally,¹⁹ rather than rant and rave persistently. Though the actor portraying Himself—Robert Drivas in New York, Fernandez in Edinburgh—must repeatedly rail across the footlights at the hated public and at himself, Albee feels the actor should modulate his tonal attacks on those who flock to his shows for sequels not sense, for old thrills not fresh experiences. Crowds may balk when their whims are not catered to, but when Himself shows revulsion—"What do you want, photos of dead newborns?,"²⁰ Albee picks a rapier not a sword for the actor's emotional weapon. Broadway's Lyceum audience had protested the rancour of this one-speaker railing as Himself hawked mementos of his one-time third arm and jeered "This *is* what you came for, isn't it!?"²¹ According to *Newsweek*, Robert Drivas's Himself had raged from New York's stage in "a nasty and embarrassing display of bad manners,"²² one which *New York* magazine called "as abject as it is vile."²³ At the Festival, Fernandez meets Albee's intent and the critics describe his demeanor as more droll than ill-willed. Thus unbludgeoned, they seem more able to accept Albee's "ludicrous satire of

stardom"²⁴ and to face the public's unwholesome part in hype.²⁵ Albee, actor, and director deftly dodge an inherent risk with monologue—estrangement of an audience by reason of the single narrator's untempered intensity.

Perchance Edinburgh further regulates tone and heightens reception by a shift in presentation of the near-monologue's attendant cameo-roles. Heeding an additional Albee-prompt to burlesque the bit-parts, the production moves toward comedy. The result is that tottering M.C., ginned-up priest, sex-worn wife, cadavered parents, tittering nurse, inept doctor, hoaky agent are more modelled than before and the roles advance rather than recede, so that the play feels less a one-speaker show. At New York's Lyceum, 1983's theatre-goers had dismissed the one-liners as dull and extraneous, "unimaginative" and "part of a crude slideshow."²⁶ At Edinburgh the move toward burlesque, like the constraint of self-indulgence and hostility, eases the pathos of fame's fading and draws cheers for the more comic effect. The boisterous bits are "amusing . . . amazing . . . rambling . . . hyper-critical . . . bumbling"²⁷; the bizarre delivery not only lifts the strain on the audience but also "provides accomplished support for Himself."²⁸

Even with a plethora of mimed parts, a narrator-speaker show more than a Scribe or Ibsen "well-made play" depends for vitality upon its audience's emotional bonding to the play's on-stage principal. In the separate stagings of *The Man Who Had Three Arms*, the degree of audience-interaction with Himself might be aligned with the tenor of each theatrical housing—one impersonal, the other intimate. Albee craftily scripts the action for his substitute speaker and unseen listeners inside the monthly meeting-room of a low-brow, provincial Knife and Fork Club. Here coffee is always served throughout the meal rather than with the final course, and the quiche at a previous meeting proves to have been contaminated, sending vomiting members to a hospital. The playwright intends that we in our aesthetic distance quickly become that audience and suffer with it. In a play as in a painting, the quality of art inheres "not in a mosaic of parts but in the whole which results from their reciprocal effect on each other."²⁹ With a one-speaker work, particularly where fictive audience and actual audience are pseudo-mystically *one*, the play's mosaic of parts contributes to the artistic whole by the principal's effect upon the audience and also by its effect upon him. When a relatively small auditorium's house lights were left up at the play's trial-staging before Edinburgh, the shocked gasps and stares of the viewers beyond the footlights so disoriented the principal that by midpoint the decision was made to fade the auditorium to black during subsequent runs.

Artistically-admirable reciprocity among a play's parts can be obtained when housing suits a play's style needs. However, once inside the imposing and impersonal Lyceum in 1983, New York's critical circle, seats distanced from the

stage, understandably felt cold and detached from the speaker, blamed the monologue-form, considering it a lecture, not a play. *The New York Post's* critic seemed uninvolved in the stage and marked the drama's dearth of illusion: "We are not in a theatre. It is a lecture hall!"³⁰ Prospective patrons listened to WABC-TV's anchor chillingly report a lack of style and sparkle: "The play is . . . little more than a long speech" by a fifth-choice fill-in on a lecture circuit.³¹ One critic contended that "Albee can still pen those wonderful arias for which he's always been noted, yet even for an Albee aficionado, this isn't much of a play, even in any nontraditional sense of the term."³²

In contrast, reviewers inside the intimate aura of Edinburgh's more modest hall conceivably relax and relate to the stage, laugh, and promptly accept the play's one-speaker format. Absorbing the touchy hero's intellectual plea to a supposed huddle of homespuns, Festival critics identify the irony of Himself's trying his case before the pseudo-literary club's insensitive vacuum. They respond with "amusing" AND "abrasive."³³ *The Scotsman's* critic warms to the play though one flinches at his comment that ". . . it presents us with the phoneyess, the rampant egotism, the crassness and the mercenary nature of fame and riches, under the skin of the American Dream."³⁴ *The Manchester Guardian* relates to Himself's speech as "vibrant and compelling,"³⁵ and *The London Times* finds it "superb."³⁶ In retrospect, one hesitates to fault New York critics for failure to relax and let themselves be drawn onto the stage in their role as Himself's audience; producers must answer each vehicles' idiosyncratic calls for intimate or for impersonal theatrical housing.

Less easily sidestepped by shifts in production is another genetic peril of monologue, its viewers' unconscious tendency to construe the stage's lone speaker as *the* persona of the author. A cogent comment in the *Yale Review* cautions us, ". . . any artist's medium . . . is an untranslatable language in which the man may be encoded but which can never provide the key for that code."³⁷ The identification of speaker with author is as automatic as audience-response to theatre-ambiance and at times as far afield of a playwright's plan. With Albee's supposed satire and its diverse reception, what is problematic is that one set of critics abruptly identified Albee with his character, Himself. The degree of prior relatedness between this particular playwright and his media abetted such identification. Though of late "Albee's once-scathing attacks on critics he considered myopic appear less frequently,"³⁸ for decades reviewers for *The New York Post*, *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, or *Daily News* have interacted with the vocal playwright on his own turf. They have battled with Albee on the proper function and level of competence of theatre critics,³⁹ while more distant reviewers from *The London Times*, *The Scotsman*, *The Manchester Guardian*, and *The Edinburgh Theatre Review* have been less embroiled in Albee's prior generic

chiding of the media. When testy Albee's script castigates Himself's press for rigid mind-sets and for consequently ill-informed choices of fare, New York's critics may have felt an abrupt subjective sting. The *Post*'s Clive Barnes called Himself a mouthpiece for Edward Albee, "no more than a stooge."⁴⁰ The *Times*' Frank Rich said, "Albee makes almost no attempt to pretend that Himself is anything other than a maudlin stand-in."⁴¹ Rich added that, "Himself lashes out against drama critics . . . in a temper tantrum in two acts."⁴² Thus the soul of Edward Albee, New York critics assumed, stands naked in Himself.

Indeed, the playwright *is* the modern world's gadfly of Athens. From their separate milieu, the international theatre-buffs at the Festival perhaps more easily accept the play's stinging dramatic challenge. Hence the *London Times*' Billen grants that "While the audience is to be punished as well as entertained, the play rewards our patience."⁴³ "Uncomfortable, perhaps; compelling, certainly—the stuff of real theatre," writes the *Manchester Guardian*'s Thomas.⁴⁴ The Scots may see a thwarted, spiteful dramatist in the play's prickly hero; yet they countenance both play and hero *in spite of* Edward Albee. They ask *who* really knows whether Albee, contemporary gadfly, subtly wishes to sting, to pierce, alas, to draw blood, and they guess that the play portrays more than the life of one person.⁴⁵ *The London Times* cites the universality of the work as it shows us "what Himself has become as a result of his audience's collective voyeurism."⁴⁶ Critic Billen sees Albee treating the symbiotic processing of our famous whereby hungry audience and needy star feed off each other; she calls us culprits in the flare and fading of a nova.⁴⁷ With the Edinburgh press involving itself in what it called outrageous results of ill-conceived celebrity—estrangement, guilt, humiliation—the readers of reviews sought out the onespeaker show to investigate what New York had rejected as the sizzling of a chronic hothead.

An additional risk infixed in a one-speaker show is that, even with authorial care, it may lack dramatic movement, settling for speech in place of action. The form's dearth of dynamism is a more objective catalyst of diverse assessment than the aforementioned pitfall, author-critic involvement. In *The Man Who Had Three Arms*, no accord appears on whether admirable action materializes from Albee's scripting of a dozen simulated clashes between Himself and his intimates before and after stardom. Mimed through cameo bits, a typical taut encounter occurs when Himself's wife is initially aroused by the absurd sensuous arm, another when an insensitive priest shrinks from Himself since "in God's eyes freaks have no soul," then hisses, "How can you eat at the table with other people?"⁴⁸ Linking these scenes are the farcical freak's onstage antics as he badgers this fictive after-dinner audience seated before him. New York in 1983 wanted more conventional stage-action, having dismissed the capricious cameos as extraneous or stolid. Two senior critics agreed that the performance "has no

dramatic invention"⁴⁹ and that Himself " . . . stands . . . and spends nearly two hours alternately insulting the audience and announcing how bitter he is."⁵⁰ Furthermore, he stood "in a lecture hall, which should be warning enough."⁵¹

The Edinburgh reviewers arrive early and catch what may be heightened pre-curtain activity: "Two besuited actors [chairwoman and m.c.] urge us from the stage to find our seats quickly as we enter the theatre . . . firing questions at individuals in the audience to ensure our complete attention."⁵² Critic Billen shuffles to her seat at the Southside International Theatre hoping to relax, only to become "a spectator awaiting a titillating lecture" which "turns out to be one of those audience 'experiences' for which [the Festival] is renowned."⁵³ During the play, Himself on-stage is "hypnotical," the play "illuminating"⁵⁴ with "hilarious slides on Himself's portable silver-screen confronting us with sexually-explicit glimpses of the hero."⁵⁵

In point of fact, the shots that New York called substitutes for action⁵⁶ were the same in both productions, showing the hero-victim *before* his flash as a three-armed star, happy in his pond in mid-America in a comic flow of bi-sexual love and friendship. As for *after*, Fernandez's Himself in the flesh is more bloated than Drivas's svelte self in New York, but otherwise the same—alcoholic, compulsive, volatile afterbirth of a star. Edinburgh notes that the nova energetically "explores the situation of the celebrity"⁵⁷ and "plows the furrow of what was" for sluggish, tasteless patrons who applaud his trite routines. The Scots report action as Himself, sans talent or creative freedom, makes zeal replace real inspiration to reach out to the audience below the footlights to merit his pittance.⁵⁸

Edinburgh's discernment of action unnoted in the monologue's earlier staging might also evolve from Fernandez's compulsive cruising of orchestra and balcony for potshots at Himself's hypothetical press and club members. Mocking their sick stares at memorabilia—photos of his eerie appendage—and chafing at their purse-string rein over his act, Fernandez may work his offstage area more lewdly, crudely, and physically than had dignified Robert Drivas whom New York's Clive Barnes had called "unconvincing."⁵⁹ At Edinburgh, "Comic and impassioned in his speech, [Fernandez almost physically] takes us through the Has-been's personal experiences as 'a freak' who became 'the eighth wonder of the world.'"⁶⁰ When Himself rushes from stage to audience to chide symbolic objects of his ire with thrusts and sallies on disproportionate shapes and sizes of their vital parts, Albee scholar Anne Paolucci grants that his language and gestures, more sexually explicit than those in any previous Albee play, help us through hyperbole to grasp the freak's humiliation from the public's tittery stares at his first appendage.⁶¹ On the efficacy of his words and movements, Stephanie Billen of *The London Times* agrees: "Himself roams from row to row forcing us

to imagine ourselves in his position. . . .⁶² While the movement of an actor into orchestra or balcony is not new, to reviewers Fernandez's working of the audience seems fresh as he paces, pierces, and titillates.⁶³ His manner is that of a nightclub comic, his patter straight from ribald Albee.

Though authors opting for monologues face risks from overpowering tone, misconstrued persona, or insufficient action, intrinsically the form is a wise choice for dramatizing character. Exhibition of a hero's nature flows from the form's concentration upon language and thought. Otherwise-oft-impugned Albee is routinely acclaimed for character-development; but his drawing of Himself in *The Man Who Had Three Arms* arouses critical conflict. In the tradition of Jerry in *Zoo Story* (1959), Julian in *Tiny Alice* (1964), and Tobias in *A Delicate Balance* (1966), Himself dissolves on stage. His dissolution is an Albee ploy to dramatize the character's growth from attention-spoiled star to chastened nova, from egoism to awareness. But New York's Clive Barnes thought Himself static and shallow, flat rather than round. Barnes blamed the monologue-form for the shallowness. "Partly because of the unique, even cranky construction, Drivas [New York's Himself] has to convince us as much as a character as an actor."⁶⁴ Joel Siegel (WABC-TV) and Frank Rich blamed language; Siegel found the hero's words during his dissolution an "unmercifully padded" harangue,⁶⁵ and Rich found his lines "shrill and unmoving."⁶⁶ Perhaps with a mind-set for monologue, the *Manchester Guardian* watches character evolve at the Festival. From self-seeker to soul-searcher, Himself "probes into the essential struggle of living"⁶⁷ with growth as gripping as that of medieval drama's "Everyman"—though the freak's end is less felicitous. Thomas fathoms the hero's maturation in his multileveled final frenzy, perceives him "stirring a polemic about futility."⁶⁸ Colin Affleck writes that Himself's "exploration of the situation of the celebrity, of someone who is different," expands Albee's character.⁶⁹

With or without visible growth in the playwright's hero, New York and Edinburgh agree on one point. As Himself dissolves before his audience and rips his shirt to bare his golden spot, each set of critics senses the presence of Albee standing naked within Himself—New York, as cocky "mouthpiece, stooge, or stand-in," Edinburgh as time-wisened "pro" mourning Himself, a pawn of hype. With New York's vision of where Albee stands, its critics understandably flinched in 1983 and withheld their applause, judged play and star full of "narcissistic arrogance."⁷⁰ The faded star might cry ". . . the hog I had been living high off of was of my own devising, was . . . myself"⁷¹ to confess his portion of human greed, sexual excess, and self-exploitation, but firmly-opinioned critics sat on their hands: "It's hard to feel much sympathy."⁷² Often cited was Himself's "whining self-pity"⁷³ because "the adulation [had proved] 'idiotic,' the

power short-lived."⁷⁴ Albee's hero might shudder at his own guilt and innocence, but could not get off New York's ethical hook.

With a disparate vision of Albee's stance as his floundering hero reveals himself to us—and reveals *ourselves* to us, Edinburgh calls the labored revelation the brilliant core of the play, one that moves us to pity, terror, and awe.⁷⁵ Hence Edinburgh lets Himself off the hook, hinting that his plight may be less than self-induced, engineered as it is by an indiscriminating public's silly craving for the famous.⁷⁶ While the Festival gives no quarter to performers, playwrights, or ourselves in this specious celebrity system, Gillian Thomas sees "The courage of a quiet little man . . . in the predicament of [one] who has power thrust upon him."⁷⁷ Though the freak is not without flaw, having sucked up the game of hype, Edinburgh poses Albee's wry question, "What would *you* have done?"

Depending upon the answer and its implicit point-of-view, the playwright's experiment with a risky, non-standard form of art has created either an offensive non-theatrical lecture or a rousing dramatic experience. New York decided at the Lyceum that Edward Albee had "concocted a monologue in lecture format"⁷⁸ which was "not a play [but] a temper tantrum in two acts" whose "craftsmanship is rudimentary."⁷⁹ Albee might be "the author of two good plays," but had "written nothing of merit since Virginia Woolf."⁸⁰ Albee's experiment with structure was "merely a prospectus of a play . . . filled with evasions, trivialities and circumlocution,⁸¹ and "not so much a play as a literary exercise that happens to take place in the theater."⁸² At Edinburgh's production, whether from strategic shifts in thrust and action or from the public's orientation by its press, Albee's venture into monologue moves its audience to bestow the Scotsman's *First Award* with the critical summation, "This is a powerful critique of American Society and essential viewing for fans of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*"⁸³ Critics judged it a piece of art whose quality will take it beyond the Festival.⁸⁴

In the interim between the 1983 and the 1989 productions, Matthew C. Roudane summed up the play's New York trial: ". . . while Albee certainly succeeds in fulfilling one of his central goals—to involve the audience as active participants—he may lose the real audience he needs in the first place."⁸⁵ Situating the play's audience-response may suggest only that the particular structure Edward Albee has chosen for *The Man Who Had Three Arms* is not a staple in the market-place of America and that the expansion of his *modus operandi* beyond standard theatrical forms defeated his hope for audience-support on Broadway. Or, situating audience-response may suggest that Albee's initial experience with his New York staging led to seemingly-minute though calculated shifts in the next production's tone and text, circumventing his chosen form's generic risks.

A pertinent and interesting issue for future resolution is whether Albee's one-speaker formats have been less-immediate successes with popular audiences than Samuel Beckett's classic monologues; or whether Beckett's were well-received only after a time, and then only by theatre-elite at off-Broadway, regional or repertory theaters.⁸⁶ Letters from Beckett to friends *after* his turn to monologue hint that he expected "misunderstanding and misinterpretation from American critics and audiences," and that he was never surprised by "perplexed to disapproving" reviews of his work.⁸⁷ When Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (on a double-bill with Albee's two-character *The Zoo Story*) picked up a measure of support after opening to initially bad notices at the Provincetown Playhouse on January 14, 1960, Beckett wrote to director Alan Schneider that the reviews seemed to him "better than usual for my work" even though ". . . the Atkinsons and Kerrs are furious. . . ."⁸⁸ Yet Beckett at the time was "the new darling of the universities" and was deemed "quite possibly one of the most important writers of the twentieth century."⁸⁹

With reference to a somewhat similar dichotomy in the attitudes of popular versus art-film audiences, a current column in *The Washington Post* claims that our artistically critical "art-house audiences" may accept "obscure or risky productions," but that the mainstream of America is "marked by a real lack of curiosity" about unfamiliar forms.⁹⁰ The columnist cites therapists' maxims that Americans now engage in "a search for stability and sameness" since "repetition leads to familiarity, and familiarity to pleasure."⁹¹ No longer "rugged individualists," mainstream America "wants to feel comfortable" in its entertainment choices,⁹² does not want to be "whipped into mutual rage and revulsion."⁹³ The suspicion that *any* work's legitimacy hinges upon arbitrary audience expectation rather than on content, draftsmanship, or currency belittles American critics and theater-goers. A more encouraging thought on the failure of a given play could be that our audiences lack orientation as to what constitutes art. ". . . the beauty of art is order—not what is familiar, necessarily, but order . . . on its own terms."⁹⁴

It is absurd, said Paul Valery, to think that anyone "has discovered the laws that will make it possible to know with *absolute certainty* which [art forms or pieces of art] will be admired by posterity."⁹⁵ Still, ". . . which of us," countered Andre Malraux, "does not dream of catching posterity red-handed?"⁹⁶

Let future audiences with fresh critics decide whether the New York "Nay" or the Edinburgh "Yea" is appropriate for the thrust and spectacle of upcoming plays where critics see "no demarcation and no familiarity" and find artistry "less and less determinable."⁹⁷ But while critics will lead the approach to obscure dramatic structures, ultimately audiences themselves must use the critics' opinions only to expand their own role in assessing novel theatre as specious or legitimate.

By delving deeply into the personalities and realities of a writer's characters, the audience will be able to savor as connoisseurs the essence of theatre as art.

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Notes

1. Deirdre Bair, *A Biography of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) 351.
2. Liam O. Purdon, "The Limits of Reason: *Seascape* as Psychic Metaphor," in *Modern Critical Views: Edward Albee*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987) 119.
3. Ronald Hayman, "All Over," in *Modern Critical Views: Edward Albee*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987) 72.
4. Oscar G. Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 4th edition (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1982) 547.
5. Matthew C. Roudane, rev. of "The Man Who Had Three Arms," in *Modern Critical Views: Edward Albee*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987) 163.
6. Philip C. Kolin and J. Madison Davis. *Critical Essays on Edward Albee* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1986) 28.
7. William C. Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983) 28.
8. Seitz 8.
9. The passage that Albee had deleted on Broadway, then later restored, appears in *The Man Who Had Three Arms: Selected Plays of Edward Albee* (New York: Nelson Doubleday Inc., 1987) 470. I reprint it herewith on page 4.
10. Oscar Brockett notes: "During the 1960s Albee was almost universally considered the American dramatist of greatest stature" (699).
11. Edward Albee, *The Man Who Had Three Arms* (New York: ABKCO Theatre Productions, 1982) Act II, 4. (Albee's Broadway script).
12. Act II, 31.
13. Act II, 27.
14. Act II, 31.
15. Edward Albee, *The Man Who Had Three Arms*, published in *Selected Plays of Edward Albee* (New York: Nelson Doubleday Inc., 1987) 469-70. (contains the ending deleted on Broadway).
16. *Selected Plays* 470.
17. Floyd Kennedy, rev. of *The Man Who Had Three Arms*, in *Edinburgh: Stage and Television Today*, 7 September 1989: 4.
18. John Simon, "What Can I Say About Edward Albee's *The Man Who Had Three Arms*?", *New York* 25 April 1983: 92.
19. Both in the N.Y. and the Edinburgh versions, *Himself* stresses his self-disgust over letting himself be exploited:

Himself: (Out). So, I had been had, had I not. But I was to blame, as well, I suppose; the hog I had been living high off of was my own devising, was . . . myself . . . How do you like your blue-eyed boy now, Mr. Death?

(Pause . . . claps hands once).

20. Act I, 22.

21. Act II, 5.

22. Jack Kroll, "Edward Albee's Hymn of Self-Disgust," *Newsweek* 18 April 1983: 54.

23. Simon 92.

24. Rev. of *The Man Who Had Three Arms*, in *Edinburgh Theatre Review* 29 August 1989:

4.

25. Robert Alstead, "Mark Fisher Takes A Final Look: The Fringe Festival," *The List* 1-14 September 1989: 14.

26. Frank Rich's review on "Stage: Drama by Albee, *The Man Who Had Three Arms*," (*New York Times* 6 April 1983: C-15) overlaps that of John Simon's. On cameo roles, both critics views, sentence structure, and diction showed cunningly close correspondence: Simon wrote: "The *other two actors . . . might as well be part of the unimaginative slide projections* meant to juice up this lectern drama . . ." (92). With six or seven identical words, Rich repeated Simon's point: "Two *other actors...might as well be part of the crude slide show* Himself uses to illustrate his lecture" (C-15).

Note: Rich and Simon's additional overlaps (though not pertinent to the cameo roles) may also be of interest: (A) On Himself/or/the playwright's attitude toward women, Rich and Simon, in similar diction, overlap. Rich sees a "virulent misogyny" (C-15); Simon a "venomous misogyny" (92). (B) On the hero's nature, they note self-pity:—"unearned self-pity" (Rich C-15);—"whining self-pity" (Simon 92). (C) On the play's substance, the two critics phrased the same negative concept:—"a dodge to avoid introspection" (Rich C-15);—"no introspective honesty" (Simon 92). (D) In references by these two to a specific type of Albee-humour, Rich speaks of Albee's "wordplays . . . arm-in-arm-in-arm" (C-15); and Simon of Albee's "verbal games . . . every conceivable pun on arms" (92). (E) Finally, the two critics use what linguists list as a rarely used form of interpolation—the *embedded independent clause*—to couch parallel observations. Rich's interpolation runs thus: ". . . Himself—why is it always so hard for Mr. Albee to give people proper names?—stands at a lecture-hall podium . . . insulting the audience . . ." (C-15). Simon's interpolation relays the same information: ". . . Himself—Albee regularly eschews anything as unsymbolic as a name—is Albee himself, who . . . berates the world . . ." (92).

27. "Best of Festival: Day Planner," *The Scotsman* 24 August 1989: 20.

28. "Best of Festival" 20.

29. Seitz 39.

30. Clive Barnes, "Two Cheers for Albee's *Man With Three Arms*," *New York Post* 6 April 1983 [Reprinted in *New York Theater Critics' Review*] 322.

31. Joel Siegel, Review of *The Man Who Had Three Arms*, WABC-TV 5 April 1983 [Reprinted in *New York Theater Critics' Review*] 325.

32. Thomas P. Adler, "The Man Who Had Three Arms," review in *Theatre Journal*, 35 March 1983: 124.

33. *Edinburgh Theatre Review* 4.

34. Alstead 14.

35. Gillian Thomas, "Courage of a quiet little man." *Manchester Guardian*, 27 August 1989: 34.

36. Stephanie Billen, Review of *The Man Who Had Three Arms*, *The London Times*, 1 September 1989: 16.

37. J.D. McClatchy, "A Little More Night Music," *Yale Review* 73 (1983): 114-123.

38. Matthew C. Roudane, "Albee on Albee," *Critical Essays on Edward Albee*, eds. Philip C. Kolin and J. Madison Davis (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1986) 193.

39. Representative of three decades of Albee and press ill-will are these two columns: (A) David Richards, "Albee After the Plunge," *The Washington Post*, 24 January 1982, sec.K, 1, 5: ". . . if Albee depended on the kindness of critics, he would probably be lying in some dark alley, semicomatose and caked with dried blood."; (B) Teresa H. Anderson, "Students Learn Disdain from Albee," *New Orleans Time-Picayune*, 2 March 1983, sec.4, 6: "Albee voices ardent dislike of critics . . . and despair at the big business which critics have helped theater become."

40. Barnes 322.

41. Rich C-15.

42. C-15.

43. Billen 16.

44. Thomas 34.

45. Billen 16.

46. 16.

47. 16.

48. Albee, Act I, 15.

49. Simon 92.

50. Rich C-15.

51. Catherine Hughes, "The Pulitzer Puzzle," *America* 148, 7 May 1983: 361.

52. Alstead 14.

53. Billen 16.

54. Colin Affleck, Review of *The Man Who Had Three Arms*, *The Scotsman*, 24 August 1989:

14.

55. Affleck 14.

56. Simon 92.

57. Alstead 14.

58. 14.

59. Barnes 322.

60. Alstead 14.

61. Comments of Anne Paolucci, author of *From Tension to Tonic: The Plays of Edward Albee*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, in Spring 1989, at the "Albee in Excess" Workshop, Albright College, Reading, PA.

62. Billen 16.

63. 16.

64. Barnes 322.

65. Siegel 325.

66. Rich C-15.

67. Thomas 34.

68. 34.

69. Affleck 14.

70. Rich C-15.

71. Albee, Act II, 27.

72. Rich C-15.

73. Simon 92.

74. Rich C-15.

75. Affleck 13.

76. Alstead 14.

77. Thomas 34.

78. Simon 92.
79. Rich C-15.
80. Simon 92.
81. Michael Feingold, "Small Craft Warnings," *Village Voice*, 19 April 1983: 106.
82. Brendan Gill, "Bellyacher," *New Yorker*, 8 April 1983: 130-31.
83. Alstead 14.
84. "Best of the Festival" 20.
85. Roudane 164.
86. Beckett's biographer, Deirdre Bair, writes that Beckett's critics in 1960 New York revealed an "unreconcilable divergence of views," that "critical reception rankled," and that "The most public, accessible commentary came [not from publications with pretensions to seriousness] but from the newspapers and magazines which reviewed his novels and plays, and these brief statements all too often contained only superficial summation and opinion, tending to be highly negative because of it" (514).
87. Bair 513.
88. 514.
89. 514.
90. Rita Kempley, "Sequels Top Act in Hollywood," *The Washington Post*, 18 December 1990: Sec. D, 2.
91. Kempley 2.
92. 2.
93. Rich C-15.
94. Albee, *Select Plays* 262.
95. Seitz xi.
96. xi.
97. 28.