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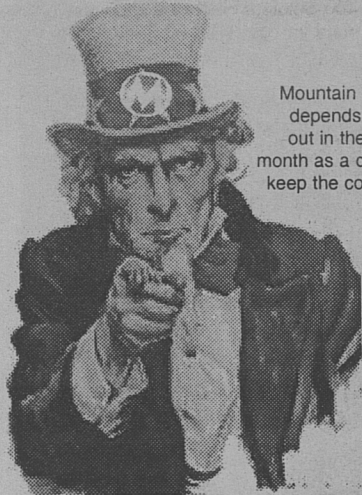
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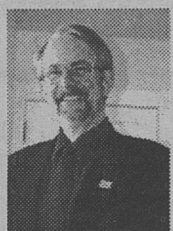
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queer classics: the plays of edward albee

By ERNIE MCLEOD

Edward Albee has said that it's not the responsibility of the writer to "give answers" but rather to "be a sort of demonic social critic." For over 40 years now, as an activist but mostly through his plays, Albee has been just that, offering, in his words: "an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, and emasculation and vacuity, a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen."

The state of the arts in America today is definitely not peachy-keen according to Albee, who happens to be gay (more on that later), and who was in Vermont recently to give the keynote address at a three-day Middlebury College symposium titled "Art Matters:

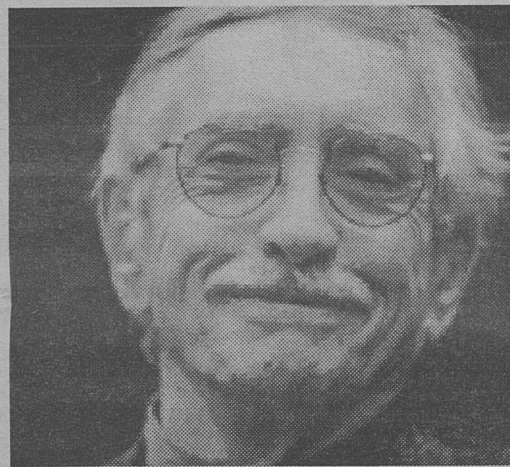
ize the two-tiered system, he thinks fundamental changes must occur so that students are educated from the earliest age "in wanting to participate in the life of the arts." In his view, the function of a formal education is to teach students how to educate themselves when their studies are done, a function that's likely overlooked when mastering standardized tests becomes the main educational priority.

Moving on to his early days in Greenwich Village in the late 50s, Albee fondly described it as an "enormously important" and "exciting time." The abstract expressionists were hanging out in the Village, and the avant-garde theater of Beckett, Genet, and Ionesco was thriving. Everyone, he said, worked for nothing. "Nobody was rich or famous or had an agent; no one was jealous." Today, he laments, that atmosphere is "mostly gone," replaced by an arts structure ruled by economics. As an

the 60s — when he was branded as the successor to Miller, Williams, and O'Neill and as a link between the realistic and absurdist movements — was followed by years of critical and commercial flops. By the 1980s, he was widely considered a has-been.

In a 1973 interview, Albee said he doubted that he'd ever write a "specifically political play," adding that "agit-prop plays dry up and disappear." What he does instead is write about the "states of mind" that give rise to certain political or cultural societal shifts. Perhaps consistent with this philosophy is Albee's attitude towards his sexuality. He doesn't consider himself a gay writer but rather a writer who happens to be gay, the distinction being that a writer who happens to be gay has no particular "responsibility to write about a gay theme."

Albee got in trouble at the 1991 OutWrite conference for saying that writers who happen to be gay



Albee got in trouble at the 1991 OutWrite conference for saying that writers who happen to be gay should aspire to the mainstream and avoid ghettoizing themselves.

Visions for the Arts in the 21st Century."

The capacity crowd at Middlebury's Mead Chapel offered evidence of Albee's continuing importance as an artist and provocateur. In his introduction of the playwright, drama critic and Albee biographer Mel Gussow spoke of how Albee has defied convention since the beginning of his career, remaining a "paradigm of persistence" through failure and success, equally a citizen and a playwright.

Albee, now in his seventies, spoke as both citizen and playwright in his symposium address, beginning by rephrasing his posted topic, "The Playwright vs. The Theater," as "Whither the Arts?" It's hard to see where the arts are going, he said, without talking about where they've been. To illustrate where the theatrical arts have been over the past half-century, Albee dipped at length into his personal history. In a humorously roundabout fashion, he emphasized the critical role education plays in keeping the arts alive by relating how he was thrown out of a number of prep schools, as well as a military academy, until he landed happily at Choate. The military academy, he joked, offered two courses — Sadism and Masochism, both compulsory. Jokes aside, he said that even during his unhappy military stint, at least he was exposed to an arts education, made aware its importance.

Albee believes that the U.S. currently has a disgraceful two-tiered educational system, one that's good for five to ten percent of the population, bad for the rest. To equal-

example, he notes that it only cost \$42,000 to put *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* on Broadway in the early 60s, something that — even accounting for inflation — would be all but impossible today.

Albee cites our "fragile" democratic system as another major determining factor in the health of the arts. In a democracy, he points out, you not only "get what you want" but "what you deserve." Beginning in the Nixon era, he believes, we began to question "as a society how much we want to know about ourselves. ... Do we want the arts to tell us the truth?" He went on to speak about censorship and its impact on the arts, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11, when writers like Susan Sontag have been called traitors for taking issue with the official governmental line.

At the end of the evening, Albee received a standing ovation, less for this particular address, I suspect, than for his place in American literature. His speech, while passionately delivered, contained too many loose ends and — I later learned in my research — was mostly a rehash of remarks he's been making for decades. Maybe the repetitive nature of his public remarks can be attributed to his belief that "the work should speak for itself."

Though Albee's probably best-known for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (later turned into a film starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton), he's written over 25 plays, some well-received, others — as he matter-of-factly stated — "sunk without a trace." His early success in

should aspire to the mainstream and avoid ghettoizing themselves.

Though Albee hasn't been ghettoized by his sexuality — which he's said he's never tried to keep secret — certain critics have accused him of putting heterosexual facades on what are really gay characters. To which assertions Albee always responds: "If I wanted to write a play about two gay couples, I would have done it. I'm fully capable of doing that."

In the past decade, Albee's capabilities have seemed stronger than ever. He's entered his most productive period, and his career has undergone a true renaissance. *Three Tall Women*, a play based on his difficult adoptive mother, earned him his third Pulitzer Prize. Most recently, he's generated considerable critical buzz with *The Goat or Who is Sylvia?* which chronicles — in Albee's highly stylized, darkly comic fashion — how a man's seemingly happy family life is upended by his unexpected love affair with a goat. A brief father-son (who happens to be gay) kiss apparently elicits gasps from the audience.

"Art is not pacification. It's disturbance," Edward Albee insists. It's a good bet he'll keep detractors and fans alike gaspingly disturbed until his final curtain. ▼

Vermont native Ernie McLeod is back on his home turf in Middlebury. Write him: mcleod@middlebury.edu.