

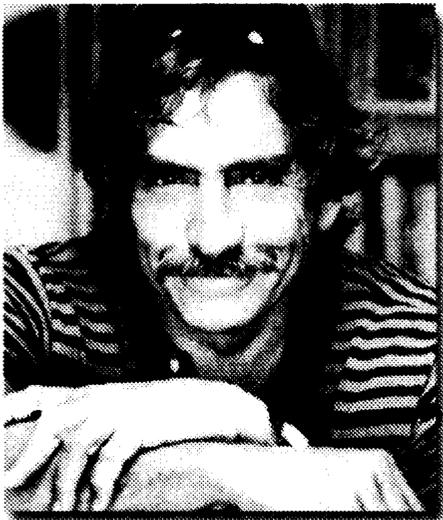


*Guilford College Department of Theatre,
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**Edward Albee. *Seascape : A Play*. New York : Atheneum 1975.
pp. 137. (first publication)**

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IF you look up Edward Albee's name in *The Columbia Encyclopedia* you will find that he is characterized as "American playwright, one of the leading dramatists of his generation b. Washington, D.C. Much of his most characteristic work constitutes an absurdist commentary on American life". If you look at the Pulitzer Prize list, you will find that he has won three Pulitzers, second only to Eugene O'Neill's four, but more than any other living American playwright. His plays are staged regularly both in the U.S. and in England, especially in metropolitan areas like New York, Chicago, L.A. and London, together with university towns. However, he is little known in Thailand. Not only is Albee prolific but he is also versatile. He can write realistic plays, absurdist plays, serious plays, light



Edward Albee (1928-)



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hearted plays and others that defy definition. *Seascape*, the drama that won his second Pulitzer, probably serves as an example of the last : readers or spectators must judge for themselves how they would like to categorize this play. I personally prefer a non-traditional coinage by *The Nation's* Harold Clurman : a “philosophical whimsy”.¹

Seascape had its debut on Broadway on January 26, 1975 at the Sam S. Shubert Theatre, directed by Albee himself. Putting the play in its historical context might help promote understanding of it :

In the 1970s, American society was in transition, undergoing radical changes in a number of areas including family life. The 1970s were known as the ‘me’ decade; people were passive and self-absorbed, concerned primarily with their own personal happiness and self-fulfillment. During this era, the divorce rate rose, and there were more nontraditional families because of divorce and remarriage. Another

¹ Kauffmann, Stanley, Review in *The New Republic*, February 22, 1975, pp. 22, 33.

prominent aspect of this time period was the ‘empty nest syndrome.’ Children who left home at the age of eighteen to attend college did not return after graduation. Because there were no children in the home, many mothers felt loss. Women’s lives changed. Some entered the workforce or continued their own education.²

Albee had already written on the theme of marital clashes and mid-life relationships, for example in *Who’s Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* and *A Delicate Balance* (which won his first Pulitzer). Both dramas were primarily ‘realistic’; the combination of the real and the surreal in *Seascape* may be Albee’s attempt to offer a different perspective on familiar problems. The play begins in a familiar world of a just-retired middle aged couple lounging on the beach in a setting that should serve as the backdrop to a carefree vacation. Psychologically, though, they are encountering a major change in life : they no longer have routine work to go back to and they are experiencing the empty nest syndrome; what will be their next step? For the women, the roles of wife and mother no longer hold priority. Nancy wants to broaden her horizons by becoming “a seaside nomad” -- to travel, be close to nature and learn more about other people, other languages, and other cultures -- while Charlie just wants to do nothing. Charlie represents the stereotyped trap of aging and retirement, while Nancy sees it as a possible threshold to new and interesting experiences. We later learn, however, that beneath this apparent contrast there is a similar drive to return to the sea : when Charlie was

² <<http://www.enotes.com/seascape/18422>>

young, he longed to be a fish and to live in the water. A Wordsworthian theme is unmistakable here : the child wants to live in harmony with nature, and his or her life is full of the desire to explore, but once that very child grows up he or she will tend to lose that special gift. Very soon Nancy's wish is granted when two lizards crawl up from the ocean. Both of them have English names (Leslie and Sarah); moreover, they speak perfect English. Now, Nancy and her husband have been given an opportunity to learn about a new culture of a reptilian species. Both couples long to escape from their 'natural' environments; the human couple want to immerse themselves in nature while the reptiles feel they do not belong to the ocean any more and desire to go ashore. Nancy and Charlie begin to explain their world to the lizards, telling them about the jet planes that they have never seen before, the breast which Sarah does not possess, the meaning of the word "bigot," the different ranges of emotions that make a person human, and the concept of evolution.

The responses of the articulate lizards call Darwinian theory into question : Are we more developed than these lowly animals? If we are already at the zenith of the evolutionary scale, is there anything we can learn from them? Parallels are drawn between the human and the lizard couples. The lizards are also going through a period of crisis, coming to the major evolutionary crossroad of their life; they have decided to leave the ocean and live on land. The symbolic significance of the *mise en scene* is obvious. The beach is where the sea meets the land : the site where the great evolutionary leap took place which led to air-breathing life, and thus ultimately to ourselves. Here, Albee's lizards seem to be in the process of taking such a leap, but Albee's humans are unsettled and uncertain.

Is there room for human beings to evolve? In the course of this drama, both humans and lizards will evolve psychologically, learning about themselves and others. The females of both species prove more inquisitive than the males, more willing to learn new things. In explaining their world to Leslie and Sarah, the couple discover something about themselves, their relationship and their emotions. They learn from each other. At the end, Charlie and Nancy make a pact to help the reptiles. The process of learning does not end at the retirement age. The play ends with the word "Begin" which signifies a new beginning for both couples. An optimistic ending is rather unusual for Albee.

Albee definitely gets the attention of his reader/spectator with this pair of talking lizards. Through their eyes, readers and spectators revisit the world of innocence once more. They provide consistent comical touches, making us laugh because of their naiveté, but we also are made to stop and think about the questions asked by these four legged friends and their reactions to the explanations given to them. The perspective of an alien intelligence is offered -- not only that of a different race and culture but entirely from a different species -- to ask us questions to wake us up from our complacency, so that we can see familiar practices in a fresh light. The fantastic setting illuminates very real issues, and laughter is used to draw us into an examination of very serious topics (such as the crisis of aging, and marital problems in the U.S. during the 70's).

Albee never ceases to amaze with his constant innovations, and his ability to involve our intellect and emotions in the most seemingly absurd situations. In his most recent play, *The Goat or Who is Sylvia?*, the protagonist has taken a goat as his mistress, and

his angry and humiliated wife leaves the house to execute her rival. Spectators again have to decide for themselves whether the actions of the play represent a movement up or down the evolutionary scale.

Some of the awards bestowed on Albee

- 1960 The Vernon Rice Award for *“THE ZOO STORY”*
- 1961 Foreign Press Association Award for *THE AMERICAN DREAM*
- 1962 Tony Award for *WHO’S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?*
- 1963 Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Plays for *WHO’S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?*
- 1966 The Pulitzer Prize for *A DELICATE BALANCE*
- 1975 The Pulitzer Prize for *SEASCAPE*
- 1980 Gold Medal in Drama from Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters
- 1994 The Pulitzer Prize for *THREE TALL WOMEN*
- 1994 Obie Award for Sustained Achievement in Playwriting
- 1996 The Tony Award (revival) for *A DELICATE BALANCE*
- 1996 Kennedy Center Honoree
- 1996 Recipient, National Medal of Art
- 2000 Tony Award for *THE GOAT OR WHO IS SYLVIA?*
- 2004 The Elliot Norton Award