

## Emory University Creativity Conversations

Edward Albee and Rosemary Magee

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Introduction: The Creativity Conversation is a series of interactions with University guests, faculty, staff, and students about the creative processes and how creativity enters our daily lives and inquiry. Creativity Conversations take place live and many are presented on Emory iTunesU. The conversation today is being taped and will be available on the iTunes site within a few days. All Emory iTunesU content is free and available to the public, but you are here.

Today's moderator is Rosemary Magee, Emory University Vice President and Secretary. No one has done more to seize, focus, and enliven artistic and creative energies on the Emory Campus, changing the Emory landscape architecturally and in forums, conversations, and centers of collaborative effort. As witness of the kinds of forces Rosemary habitually gathers, let me announce that today's Creativity Conversation is cosponsored by the Mighty 13, the Office of the Provost, the Graduate School, the Hightower Fund, Manuscript Archives and Rare Book Library, the Office of the Provost Luminary Series, the Creativity & Arts Strategic Initiative, Emory College Center for Creativity & Arts, the Departments of Comparative Literature, Creativity Writing, English, French and Italian, Irish Studies, Film Studies, and Computer Studies. We wanted you here.

Albee: Why, why all those people?

Male: Because we like to work together.

Albee: Oh, all right.

Introduction: Since he burst onto the international stage with *The Zoo Story* in 1958, Edward Albee has continued to challenge himself and us by never ceasing to write, steeling himself against the vagaries of critical fashion, he followed *The Zoo Story* with *The Death of Bessie Smith*, the absurdist *Sandbox*, an *American Dream*, and with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in 1962, he stumped the establishment. The Pulitzer Committee selected the play and then refused to honor it for perceived vulgarity of content. Mr. Albee kept writing. *Tiny Alice*, a metaphysical bombshell, *Delicate Balance*, a play that the Pulitzer Committee felt it could honor. He kept writing. The formal experiment of *Box* and *Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*. *Seascape*, the only play yet to win a Pulitzer while assigning lines to sea lizards. Adaptations of Carson McCuller's, Truman Capote, Vladimir Nabokov, James Purdy, Gold Medal and Drama from the American

Academy and Institute of the Arts and Letters. He kept on. *Three Tall Women*, another Pulitzer. Kennedy Center honors and National Medal of the Arts in the same year. He kept writing. *The Play About the Baby*, *The Goat*. In 2005 a special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement and Edward Albee, I have his personal assurance on this, is still writing, still gifting us with a satirical eye for peculiarly American falsehoods, a heart strong enough to imagine the most savage confrontation of characters and to see hope there, and an ear for the delicate music language that is learned, funny, eccentric, violent, and sharper than a knife. In content and form, one of the most bracing of American writers ever, please help me to welcome Rosemary McGee and Edward Albee. [applause]

Magee: Thank you very much, Michael, for that extremely generous introduction and thoughtful, as well. Thanks to all of you for being here. Thanks to all of our many sponsors and special thanks to you, Edward Albee, for being our guest and really our companion here at Emory for the past 24 hours or so.

Albee: Very good. As long as we don't have to discuss creativity.

Magee: No, no. But since you mentioned it first...

Albee: It's a concept I don't comprehend and I'm not sure it can be discussed. Can we straighten one thing out about the Pulitzer Prize rejection of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* It's a little more complicated and interesting, even than you made it seem. The Pulitzer Prize jury was made up of qualified critics. They voted *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* the Pulitzer Prize. However, I think it may still be true, but I'm not certain, the awards made by the qualified jurors had to be approved by some trustees of Columbia University, 15 of them I believe, which voted no. Now, *The New York Times*, bless it, made some inquiries to find out how the voting went. It was 8 to 7 by the way, against giving the prize to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* They spoke to these eight people who voted against it and discovered something very interesting. Five of the seven who voted against it had neither read the play nor seen it. This gave them a kind of objectivity. So that's the way that went. But let me tell you, I got far more mileage and the production ran far longer being denied the Pulitzer Prize than it ever would have had they awarded it the prize. I just wanted to straighten that out.

Magee: Thank you, very interesting. We are here, you're here in large part, due to celebration of the correspondence of Samuel Beckett, which we had that celebration last night and it's continuing this week. And you have talked a bit about Samuel Beckett's impact on your--influence on your life and your work. One statement I've heard you make is, "We are all Beckett's children." And in that most of us have...

Albee: Well, those of us who are wise enough to be that.

Magee: Right, okay, the choice, we have that choice. And most of us have a complicated relationship with our parents and especially our fathers. And I'm wondering if you see that in that statement, "We're all Beckett's children," if you see that relationship as also being complicated for you?

Albee: Well, probably less complicated for me, since I was an orphan and I had no idea, nor do I still, who my natural parents were. Back in the days when I was adopted, you weren't allowed to find out. And the adopting parents weren't allowed to know who the natural parents were and the natural parents weren't allowed to know who the adopting parents were, so the kid wasn't allowed to know anything. So I never knew. And so perhaps I needed a father.

Magee: So you adopted Samuel Beckett.

Albee: So I adopted Sam Beckett, or let Sam adopt me. But it's really simpler than that. As I said last night, I will paraphrase what I said last night about Beckett. That when you come across a writer quite as extraordinary, amazing, and wonderful as Beckett, there is no emotion advisable except prostration, gratitude for somebody who is such a brilliant and wonderful writer. And hey, everybody wants a father like that. Now mind you, I've been influenced by other playwrights.

Magee: Yes, such as?

Albee: You know, Aristophanes...

Magee: Long tradition.

Albee: Shakespeare, Noel Coward, you know. Just about everybody. But I think Beckett was able to teach me things about playwriting that maybe nobody other than Chekhov has -- clarity, precision, simplicity, accuracy, and humanity.

Magee: And how did you learn that? Did you learn it by reading the plays? Did you learn it by attending the performances?

Albee: Well, I'd read some of Beckett's plays when in 1958 I went to Berlin in Germany for the world premiere of my play, *The Zoo Story*, which happened to be happening in German, a language which I had chosen not to learn. And it was being done on a double bill with a play by Sam Beckett, the evening in German -- The Zoo Story was called the *The Zoo-Geschichte*. And the Beckett play was called *Das Letzte Band*, which turns out to be *Krapp's Last Tape*, a play which I had not read. But I saw that play -- it came first -- it was done before *Zoo Story*. And it engaged me so completely that I was convinced, though I didn't speak a word of German, that I understood every single thing that was happening in the play. I went back to England and read it and discovered that I had. Now, a playwright that you can understand completely in a language you don't speak must have some virtues. And so I proceeded to study Beckett's work and learned

the things that I've just mentioned, that Chekhov also has -- the two most important 20<sup>th</sup> Century playwrights I think perhaps. And I've kept studying. I became a director as well as a playwright and I've directed a lot of his work and learned a great deal about both directing and playwriting and acting and just about everything else, and audience response and everything, from directing Beckett's work. An amazing playwright. But I still don't know anything about creativity.

Magee: No, we're not going to talk about that.

Albee: Thank you.

Magee: I think I've heard you say that *Krapp's Last Tape* remains one of your favorite plays by Beckett, is that correct?

Albee: I think the two that I -- well, I like so many of them, it's hard to make a choice. But the two that I think I have the most personal response to are *Happy Days* and *Krapp's Last Tape*. There's something wonderful in the letters last night and Beckett mentioned that he -- one of his books was finally published and had sold a couple of hundred copies, which in the play, *Krapp's Last Tape*, you will remember, Beckett translates as "19 copies sold in trade editions, getting known." I think it's 19 copies.

Magee: So what do you think he'd make of this fuss we're having, this celebration we're having in his honor and his work?

Albee: I've always felt that the theater would be a better place, if I could go to any city in the world and find a production of one of Sam Beckett's plays open. That's the way I feel about him. I think we -- there's all so much that -- to gain, to enjoy from being in his presence as a playwright, that he should be done everywhere all the time. You guys are getting it going, that's fine, but some people do pay attention to him, but you don't find him on Broadway much. Though, there is a production of *Waiting for Godot*, which is in rehearsal now, starring the extraordinary Bill Irwin and Nathan Lane directed by Anthony Page, who's a very good director. We'll see what happens. I don't expect it to run as long as *Jersey Boys*, but...

Magee: You have written a bit about the subject of love in Beckett's plays and some poets say, or it has been said about poetry that all poetry is love poetry. And I'm wondering about that in terms of drama, in terms of...

Albee: Love possessed, love lost?

Magee: Right, yeah. Either through its presence or its absence.

Albee: Well, what can you write about? There are only two things to write about, life and death, and what happens in between, and during. And love, yes, of course, love and loss...

- Magee: So let's talk a little bit about the subject of love and...
- Albee: I'm all in favor of it.
- Magee: You are in favor of it, absolutely, excellent. That makes two of us.
- Albee: I'm leery of it from time to time, but I'm in favor of it.
- Magee: And especially in Beckett's plays and then I'd like for us to talk a little bit...
- Albee: Of course, it's impossible to write honestly about somebody that you feel nothing but hatred for. You can't possibly be objective. And I'm thinking through Beckett's characters. Is there anybody that does not possess the possibility of love? No, I don't think so.
- Magee: Either the capacity of being loved or of demonstrating love?
- Albee: More people possess the capacity of loving than they do the capacity of being loved, of course.
- Magee: So let's talk about *Happy Days* or *Krapp's Last Tape*, the sense of love as a presence there, or as an absence.
- Albee: I don't want to limit a discussion of Beckett to the concept of love...
- Magee: Okay.
- Albee: ...necessarily, because well, that would be limiting. *Happy Days* is about survival, which I suppose is a form of love of being alive. Winnie is a survivor. You know why *Happy Days* is a two-act play, by the way, not a three-act play? Those of you who know it, this character Winnie, in the first act of the play is buried up to her waist in a mound of earth. In the second act, she is buried up to her neck in a mound of earth. That's why there's no third act.
- Magee: What do you do next?
- Albee: I mean she'd be totally buried. What were you saying?
- Magee: You were talking about survival, survival being the...
- Albee: Here is this woman who is surviving being alive, the loss of so much in her life, the fact that she may be just about the only person left on earth. But she begins every day when the sun comes up with opening her eyes say, another happy day, just for being alive, being conscious. That's such an important awareness.

Magee: Let's take that a step further. In terms of being both a playwright as well as a director, it seems to me that there's a quality of both – in your work and what you say about it, of the importance of that awareness of being alive, and that that is the thing that keeps us both present and makes our life have greater meaning. And...

Albee: Beckett once said when everybody asked him why he wrote such depressing plays, he said, "If I weren't an optimist, I wouldn't write." A, because he believes the communication is possible, not only advisable, but possible, yes. But what I've learned from Beckett – I mean I've learned so much from the guy – one of the things I learned by directing him, even more than reading him, I think, is the relationship between drama and music. He understood music absolutely. Probably, again, more than any other playwright, 20<sup>th</sup> Century playwright than Chekhov. He understood the fact that a play is sound and silence and a piece of music is sound and silence. And he was able -- I learned from him to punctuate the way the composer notates and I learned that Beckett did this also. In music, a composer writes a quarter note and then he writes next to it a quarter note with a dot. That's called a dotted quarter note. You know the difference between the two. A dotted quarter note has half again the value of the quarter note. How do you punctuate that in a play? Because you learn the difference in duration between a comma and a semicolon and a semicolon and a period. This may seem sort of uninteresting to you, but being able to punctuate the way a composer notates, allows you to write so precisely and so carefully, that nobody has to screw up your work. Because if they pay attention to what you've written, they won't screw up your work. Nobody goes around rehearsing a Beethoven string quartet and the violist suddenly says, "Excuse, me, I don't like that progression there, the D natural to the F sharp to the G, I don't like that. I think what I'll do..." and then tells some other notes that he wants to do. Nobody does that with Beethoven. People try to do it even with Beckett. They think that the play is an approximation rather than a very, very specific statement of how it looks and how it sounds. But Beckett was so precise and so correct in his notation – I'll give you an example. I was directing *Krapp's Last Tape* or *Happy Days* once – I've directed so many of Beckett's plays, I've learned so much from him. And at one point, the character – I think it's *Happy Days* – the character Winnie has a line and then there's a stage direction, two second silence, parenthesis. Then she has another line and there's another stage direction, three second silence, then another sentence. Well, that's very interesting. And we were doing that, I had my actors who've learned the difference between two and three seconds, and they were doing it in the proper order. And I said, "I want to make an experiment. I want you to do the three second silence first and then do the two second silence." They said, "Why?" I said, "Because I want to hear it." And you know, he did the three second silence first and then the two second silence and it didn't work. Beckett knew so precisely the difference between two seconds and three seconds. He heard so precisely because he heard and saw his plays as he was writing them, and he put down exactly what he saw and what he heard. And that may be the most important thing I learned from him, accuracy, clarity, and precision.

Magee: So when you're the director, your job is to...

Albee: Translate the play accurately and intact from the page to the stage. Interpretation, well, as long as you're interpreting exactly what the playwright intended, that's fine. But playwrights and composers do not put their sounds and silences and their value differences, fast, slow, loud, soft, in there for their own amusement. They put it because that's the way they want what they want to hear and what they want to see. And if anybody can be as precise and as accurate as Beckett in doing that, you damn well better pay attention to it or the play is not going to be as effective.

Magee: So when you've directed your own plays and do you feel like you have a greater opportunity for poetic license, shall we say, or artistic room to develop the play or take the play in a different way?

Albee: Well, I don't let a play go in rehearsal for the first time until I'm pretty convinced that's what I want. I'm not one of these playwrights who does four or five drafts of the play, changing it from – and changing its whole nature. I don't write anything down until I'm pretty convinced that somewhere in my head I've figured out the way it should go. And the first – the so-called draft that I put down, is the play I go in rehearsal with, and with the exception of a couple of cuts here and there, that's what I open with. So I don't do draft and so I don't run into the...

Magee: Except in your head...

Albee: I don't run into that problem. I'm sure I'm doing them in my head, as long as I don't know about it is fine.

Magee: So when you take your own play into production, you follow it exactly as the way it was written.

Albee: And I try to work with actors and directors, if I'm not directing myself, who respect the text. Yeah.

Magee: Ed, we want to talk a little bit about – we're not going to talk about creativity, but we might talk about...

Albee: Well, my problem with creativity is I...

Magee: Okay, yeah, let's talk about...

Albee: ...I don't know where it resides. Everybody is different, everybody's brain functions differently. So some people are playwrights, some people are axe murderers, even a few Republicans around. But and then there's some people who are not content with having the same experiences that everybody else has, but insist on writing them down as something, as poems, as string quartets, as plays. Is that creativity? I don't know. The need to translate experience into something

that can communicate to somebody else, I guess that's creativity. But I think like most black magic, it's best not too carefully examined.

Magee: When you're thinking about a play or when it's developing in your mind, even before you write it down, do you have any awareness of how it's come to you? Does it come to you as a sound or as an image or experience or all of the above? Can you trace one of your plays back?

Albee: I'm not a didactic playwright, consciously anyway. I don't sit around and suddenly decide, gee, now I've got to write a play about this or that. No, I don't do that. I will discover one day when I'm wandering about, theoretically minding my own business, that a play is forming in my head. How do I know that? Well, there's some characters talking, or a visual image occurs to me, which makes me realize that something is happening in my head.

Magee: Can you give an example of that?

Albee: No.

Magee: In one of your plays? What about...

Albee: No. It's usually fleeting or I'll be at a recital listening to a pianist or a string quartet and all of a sudden I will start hearing people talking or getting the sense of some other reality taking place.

Magee: And the characters that you have in your stories, are they characters that are – have come to you, are they a visitation to you or are they – and also, once the play is written, do they stay with you? Do they continue to live with you? And for example, you have written, you've taken, at least one play and given it a prequel. Over a period...

Albee: Though I don't like – I don't like the term. We'll talk about that...

Magee: But given it an addition, use the same characters...

Albee: Once I create a character, I never forget the character and could probably go on writing about the character, unless -- and I don't kill many of them in the plays, so I probably could, but I don't, for the most part. For example, what am I going to do with George and Martha at the end of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* I don't know personally whether or not they had the guts, the courage, really, to go on with their relationship. I don't know. I know they can. Are they able to? I don't know, and therefore, I'm not going to find out. I'm not going to write about it since I don't know. The characters I write, all of our characters, we playwrights, all of our characters come – we either use ourselves or people we know or we invent. Better to invent, because if you base a character on somebody you know or a real person, you're limited by how that real person would respond. And so if

you invent the character, you can do any damn thing you want. You can have them behave the way you want them to. So for the most part, I invent or think I do anyway. And I let them talk. I realize until I know my characters very well, I don't dare put them in a play. So what I do, sometimes I wait a year before I get to know the characters fairly well and I will do improvisations. I will go for a walk and think of some situation that can't be in the play, possibly – can't possibly be in the play -- and improvise dialog on that situation with two or three of the characters. And if they can behave 3-dimensionally and if they can handle themselves in an improvised situation, then I think I can trust them in my play. It's a sort of playwright's version of actor's improvisation. And it works very well.

Magee: You mentioned George and Martha earlier and in one of the statements in the play, one of the comments, Martha says to him, "Truth and allusion, George..."

Albee: "You don't know the difference."

Magee: "...you don't know the difference."

Albee: "You don't know the difference."

Magee: "You don't know the difference."

Albee: Most people don't.

Magee: That's the question I was going to ask you. How do we know the difference?

Albee: We guess and we make whatever decisions we need to make most. How much we're lying to ourselves, of course.

Magee: You said that you're not a didactic writer, but I've also heard you...

Albee: Well, my plays are about things, things happen in them and they may imply something, though I hate the term, what does a play mean? It means what it says, any good play. But sure, they're about something, things happen to people in the course of them. I mean can you write a play in which nothing happens to anybody? I mean somebody said about *Waiting for Godot*, "It was a play in which nothing happens twice." But stuff happens, stuff happens even in *Godot*, even with its excesses.

Magee: But I've also heard you say that your plays are political.

Albee: Well, they're political in the sense that I think what I'm trying to do sometimes is hold a mirror up to people when I write a play and say, "Hey, look at this, this is the way you behave, this is the way you're carrying on. If you don't like what you see, why don't you think about changing?" Because I think all of us, whether we

want to admit it to ourselves, are trying to make people behave the way we think they should. Sort of Messianic, but we pretend it isn't. So sure, I want people to change.

Magee: And that's a political, that's a political act...

Albee: That's political because I'm convinced that politics is determined by how we respond to consciousness.

Magee: And do you sense any change, speaking of politics, in the political landscape? I am aware that you had strong feelings about the former administration and do you sense any change in the air...

Albee: Besides the fact that it was a criminal act? And he wasn't even elected, it was a coup d'etat. Why didn't anybody realize or say anything about the fact that it was a fucking coup d'etat? Really, the death of democracy, really, appalling. What troubles me still a lot is the fact that there are a couple of things we don't educate kids in any more in our schools, basically. One of them is the arts and the other is something that used to be called civics, the way government is supposed to work, [applause] and the nature of democracy and how it's supposed to function at its best. We don't teach that any more. And so people come into the polling booth with an amazing illiteracy and I'm surprised elections ever result the way they should.

Magee: Illiteracy about government itself.

Albee: Yes, the way it's meant to function and our responsibilities as informed citizens. Back in the old days, Jefferson and all those people felt the vote should be limited to property owners and people who could read. They didn't get away with it, but that's what they wanted, of course. No. We don't teach people our responsibilities as citizens.

Magee: Well, let's talk about the other part of that that you mentioned and that is art, the ways that we teach or that we don't teach art. You're a teacher, as well as a writer and a director, how do you teach art? How do you go about...

Albee: Well, mind you, I only teach – I work with playwrights. I mean you can't teach playwriting, but I try. I work with the playwrights and I tell them what – work with other writers too sometimes. But if you're going to be a writer, you have to know a great deal about all of the other arts. You have to know about classical music because the shapes and the – the shapes of classical music so relate to the shapes of a play or a novel or a short story or a poem and you have to know about the visual arts, too, especially if you're a playwright, because a play is the physical act, as well as a heard act. And you have to learn how the other arts function and how they work effectively and when they don't work effectively and learn from that to help your own work. And so I have all my students, playwriting

students, I have them go around listening to Beethoven and the Shostakovich string quartets and I tell them to begin every day listening to Bach preludes and fugues. It clarifies and orders the mind beautifully. Then I have them go to museums.

Magee: Do you do that? Do you do that as well?

Albee: I pretty much do, yes. I listen to music a great deal, yes.

Magee: So keep going.

Albee: And I like beginning the day with a couple of preludes and fugues. It's a pretty good way to begin the day.

Magee: Yeah, it sounds good.

Albee: It's nice. Then coffee.

Magee: Other things that you instruct your students in, beyond the preludes and fugues.

Albee: Oh, I tell them good stuff like – let me tell you first though, when I do teach playwriting, I insist on choosing my own students and they let me get away with it, which is nice. Because there's some people that are very, very good at doing clever imitations of other people and you don't see terribly much creativity there. I would rather work with the work of a young playwright and the play is an absolute mess, but I know there's a huge amount of talent there, rather than somebody who is capable of doing a good imitation of somebody else's work. And I tell them several things.

Magee: So you read the student's work before they come to class.

Albee: Oh yeah, before I let them in the class, of course, yeah. Then I choose the ones that I think may some day turn into real interesting playwrights, because that's what we should be after. Not merely instructing people how to imitate other people, because everybody knows how to do that or can learn very quickly. You can't teach anybody how to be a playwright. I can teach somebody how to write like somebody else, but that's not the same thing. You can try to push people if – and first of all, you have to find out whether playwriting is what they should do, because a lot of people think they're playwrights when they're really novelists or poets. And so you have to figure out whether playwriting is really what you should be up to. And then I tell them, "There are no rules." First I tell them, "Every time you write a play, you should write the first play ever written by anybody. That's the most important thing to do. All of these rules that you've learned about how the art is meant to be structured, they don't necessarily work." I tell them, "How long should a play be? It should be exactly as long as it needs to be." This notion that a full-length play has to be something that goes on for two

hours – any play that is full to its length is a full-length play. I tell them, “People want two-hour plays for commerce, only for commercial reasons, because people got to get home to the babysitters after a certain hour and they don’t want to sit around for four hours at a play.” I tell them that “Write the first play ever written and play no attention to what you’re told.” If you’re writing a two-act play, does the first act have to be an hour and 10 and the second act 50 minutes, which is conventional? No. I can conceive of somebody writing a two-act play where the first act is an hour and 55 minutes and the second act is three minutes. If that works, or the reverse, if that works, wonderful, that’s fine. Whatever works. Whatever you can – whatever works and whatever is worth having work, that’s the second important rule. Your play better damn well be capable of changing something somewhere, or illuminating something that’s in the darkness somewhere. You have to be able to do that. But all of these rules as to how a play should be structured, how long it should be, what it should do, they’re ridiculous, you know. I mean nothing happens in Chekhov’s plays either, except everything happens, of course, yes.

Magee: So if you’re a new and young playwright, how do you know when you’ve reached that moment of something changing, of something being illuminated?

Albee: It depends first of all whether you are a playwright by nature. This is just the way a playwright’s brain functions, makes it different from a novelist’s brain. Isn’t it interesting how few playwrights are good novelists, with the exception of Sam Beckett, of course, and how many novelists are good playwrights? I mean Arthur Miller is a pretty good playwright. Do you ever read his novel? Don’t. Thomas Hardy was a pretty good novelist, don’t read his plays. Henry James was a good novelist. Don’t read his plays, stay away from them. T.S. Elliot, first-rate poet, though nobody seems to read him these days. A couple of his plays are okay, but if he’d had to make his reputation as a playwright, not as many people would know the name Elliot today as do because he’s such an important poet. People are certain kinds of writers by nature. I mean Chekhov wrote a lot of good short stories, but I still think that he’s better as a playwright, more important as a playwright.

Magee: So there’s something in the DNA of the person that leads them in a particular...

Albee: Seems to be and the synapses and the electrical connections. I don’t know what it is.

Magee: Well, you have also adapted the works of novels into plays.

Albee: Yes, I did three, the Truman Capote was trying to save a musical about Breakfast at Tiffany’s and they gave me three weeks and it didn’t work. I don’t even want to talk about that.

Magee: Well, how about Carson McCullers' in *Ballad of the Sad Café*? She's from Georgia, she's a local...

Albee: Well, the three – the three novels, one novella and two novels that I translated from the stage, from the page to the stage myself, were Carson McCullers' *Ballad of the Sad Café* and James Purdy's novel *Malcolm*.

Magee: And he just died, James Purdy died.

Albee: Yes, James just died, alas, he was 93, good writer, poor guy. Had a lot of problems in his life, health, and lack of acceptance and all. And the third was Nabokov's *Lolita*, which I adapted into a play which was never performed, a travesty of what I've written was put on stage somewhere, but don't even talk about that one. What I was trying to do with the adaptations was write as a play what the novelist author would have written had he been me and I been him. So, I was trying to do what McCullers would have done had she made it into a play. Here's the interesting thing about *Ballad of the Sad Café*, which suggests to me that maybe I succeeded. A number of critics in New York, theater critics, said of my adaptation of the *Ballad of the Sad Café*, Albee didn't have to do much here. All he did was take all the dialog from the *Ballad of the Sad Café* and put it on stage. This told me two very interesting things. Since there's not a word of dialog in Carson McCullers' *Ballad of the Sad Café*, first that they didn't know what they were talking about, they hadn't read the book, which same objectivity as those guys at Columbia had. And also, that they were giving me far more credit than they thought, because they thought that was all McCullers had written. Because I was trying to write a play that McCullers would have written had she made it a play. So I wasn't – which I don't try to put my own personality into my work. Again, I don't know what that is in my work, but people sometimes tell me, "Oh, this playwright's been influenced by you." I'll go look, I don't get it. But then again, maybe that's because I'm so dead. So I change my styles and my – so much, I don't know. Anyway, those were interesting experiments.

Magee: So how did you do that? How did you think the way Carson McCullers thought?

Albee: Because I took her characters and had them speak the way she suggested they would have spoken had they spoken.

Magee: So did you do this kind of improvisation that you referred to earlier with those characters?

Albee: I guess so, this was a while ago now, 40 years or 35 years, a little hard to remember. Two people very much liked my adaptation of James Purdy's *Malcolm* – James Purdy and me, and that was enough for me since I was...

Magee: That's unanimous.

- Albee: I was trying to make James happy. And my *Lolita* adaptation was never performed. I don't want to talk about it...
- Magee: No, we're not going to talk about it.
- Albee: ...some other thing got performed and I have to take the blame for it. Oh well. That's my last adaptation. Having said that, next week I'll probably do another one.
- Magee: Okay. So are you willing to talk about what you're working on now? You've, I...
- Albee: Well, I will tell you that I am working on two plays, one of which is set on Easter Island and the other isn't. I don't think I want to say much more. Because you know, what if you're wrong. I think I know what's going on. I don't know what they're about. I never understand this concept, what is a play about? It's about two hours. I don't get it. A play is about things, things happening to people. They're both there. I don't know which one I'll write first. Probably the one not set on Easter Island. But I don't know. They both – they're both serious, of course, because all my plays are serious. One is a lot funnier than the other. Maybe I'll write that one first. I don't know.
- Magee: How do you sustain this over time, this...
- Albee: How do I what?
- Magee: Sustain this creative energy, this creative output, this generation of material and ideas?
- Albee: Because I'm a playwright. That's what I do, that's what I am and what I do and I do what I am. I write plays. I get ideas for plays in my head and I've got to get them out of my head and so I put them down on paper.
- Magee: Have you ever gone through a struggle, a time when you weren't able to write plays?
- Albee: No. I mean there's some critics who think this has happened often, but...no, once I start something I commit myself to it. Now mind you, some of them have been extremely unpopular, but they're some of the better ones. So what do you do there?
- Magee: I've heard you say, make the statement, "Good writers define reality." And...
- Albee: I wonder what I meant by that.
- Magee: Yeah, that's what I was wondering, too. It actually goes back to something you said...

Albee: God, that's a pretentious remark. Sorry I said it.

Magee: Well, my question is, if it's possible it's true, maybe somebody else said it, too. "Good writers define reality." My question is, do they also change it.

Albee: Do what?

Magee: Do they also change it? As a writer, can you change reality?

Albee: Well, reality is all based on perception isn't it? I mean no two people have the same one. You can change people's perception of things, yes, and all perceptions are changed and become the same thing, then I guess you have an absolute reality. But until then it's all perception.

Magee: So to the extent that people's perceptions change through the act of reading or performing it or attending your plays, that's...

Albee: You see there's no value in going to a play or going to a museum to look at picture or listening to music unless something happens to you. There's no point in doing it. It's expensive and it takes up a lot of time. I mean I don't understand Broadway at all because almost everything that happens there you come out somewhat lessened rather than made better from what you've experienced, and it's cost a lot of money. But unless something happens, unless a work of art can do something to you, and make you perceive things differently or more interestingly, or learn something, then you've wasted your whole time. And I think the function of art is to make us more conscious of consciousness.

Magee: We're at a university and our job is obviously has to do with the education of ourselves and students. And is there a way...

Albee: You know what the most important part of a formal education is?

Magee: Yeah, that's what I'd like to know.

Albee: Well, I think everybody knows this. I figured it out eventually for myself. Is to teach you how to keep educating yourself once you're done with your formal education. That's the whole point of it

Magee: Yeah, that's – there's not much more to be said about that. I agree with that. I'd like to talk about the arch of your work over time. Do you see your work having shifted and in a direction or having a different focus or the interior landscape of your work?

Albee: I'll tell you, I have a problem answering that question, because one of the things I like least in the world is thinking about myself in the third person. I don't enjoy

that. So, I don't think about that much. I don't think about my work that way. I mean I've written 30 plays. They're all different in a way, but they're all some of the same concern. But how has it changed? I like to think maybe my craft is more under control. I'd like to think that. Maybe I've learned something about how to put a play together over the years. I know that my mind hasn't collapsed yet -- I know that -- and that the plays I write now are probably as useful as the plays I wrote a long time ago. They're different necessarily, because I'm different. I've learned a lot of things and forgotten a lot of things.

Magee: About Louise Nevelson, or I think in a conversation you had with her, there was a statement that she made, I think, "Every piece I've ever done is a part of a big piece."

Albee: Yes, Louise Nevelson, she was a good friend of mine, and I went to -- I was doing the catalog for her big show at the Whitney Museum a number of years ago, 20 years ago I guess, and I took a -- I didn't -- I'm a ludite, I don't understand mechanical things very well. But I took a tape recorder with me to record what she said. I wanted to ask her a lot of stuff about early influences like the influence of Torres-Garcia on her sculpture and stuff like that. And I tested the device at home and it worked perfectly well, and I got there and I put it down on the table in front of Louise and she looked at it -- well, balefully, but she didn't touch it. She looked at it and she said, "Oh, that's interesting." She touched it in the air. I recorded an hour, took it home and it was completely blank. She was a witch.

Magee: Well that statement that she made though, about every piece being part of a big piece.

Albee: She thought that everything she did -- thought, first of all, she thought everything that she did was making lace. She worked in wood for the most part. She thought she was making lace. And she thought that every piece that she made was a part of a somewhat larger piece that she was theoretically eventually making. And toward the end of her life, she did a piece called Mrs. N's Palace, which was a huge piece and you could enter it and walk into it and walk around in it. It was a structure made up of nothing but her work. And indeed, everything she did was part of a larger piece, very much like Mrs. N's Palace, yes. Where she got the lace thing, I don't know.

Magee: Do you see your work in that way, that all of the pieces are part of a larger piece?

Albee: Well, I suppose they are since they're all written by the same guy, who doesn't seem to change his mind about anything.

Magee: Is that true?

Albee: I can't dissuade anybody else to change their minds either.

Magee: Is that true, you don't change your mind about things?

Albee: I don't think so, no, not too much. No, not if you want to stay an optimist you don't.

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