

Albee Blames Commerce for the Decline of the Arts

Written by Johanna Welzenbach-Hilliard
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The Allaert Auditorium at the Galvin Fine Arts Center was almost filled to capacity last Friday evening when admirers of Edward Albee, author of such legendary American works as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

,
Seascape

, and

The Zoo Story

, flocked from near and far to see their favorite avant-garde playwright give a public lecture about "The State of the Theatre & the Arts in America."

Quad City Arts, through its Cary Grant Residency program, managed quite a coup in bringing the great Albee, three-time Pulitzer Prize winner and the reigning emperor of contemporary theatre, to our quiet corner of the universe. And Albee certainly knows how to please an audience. After walking out on stage to thunderous applause, he asked, "Am I the only person in Iowa wearing a necktie?" He surveyed the audience then said, "Off it goes." More thunderous applause.

Albee was charming, precise, humorous, and self-deprecating. He cracked jokes and made wry comments about himself and his escapades, but I had the feeling that he's done this many times before and always gets the desired results: sycophantic laughter from a rapt audience. However, in between his one-liners and his numerous anecdotes about what it's like to be Edward Albee, he gave an organized lecture on how, in his opinion, education, commerce, and censorship have affected the quality and integrity of theatre and the arts in today's society.

First, Albee fondly reminisced about his own childhood educational experiences. Despite the fact that he and his adopted parents really didn't like or understand each other, he was extremely grateful to have received an "extraordinary education" (via a variety of private schools) due to the Albees' great wealth and elevated social status.

Albee feels that our educational system has disintegrated terribly over the past few decades, and that it no longer serves its original purpose. In his words, "We need an education to learn how to participate in our lives fully, consciously, and responsibly." It is his opinion that our

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society no longer educates people to be “civilized”; we simply train them to get jobs and disappear into society.

Because the emphasis in education today is on specific training, the arts and culture have been cut more and more from the curriculum, leaving us with a two-dimensional, rather than a three-dimensional, young generation. By three-dimensional, I believe Albee means having a well-rounded education that provides children not only with practical skills, but also with theoretical skills and an appreciation for art, literature, and music.

Regarding commerce, it is Albee’s firm belief that big business has corrupted the theatre and film market by dictating what audiences want to see. He’s convinced that people would like to learn from their theatrical experiences, to feel uncomfortable, to be confronted with some life-changing epiphany. He posits that if sponsors would understand that, then plays and movies would be of higher intellectual quality.

He wondered aloud why it’s so difficult to get \$3 million to produce a serious film and so easy to get \$250 million to produce a “piece of crap.” Albee was not specific as to what he considers good, serious film and what is crap. However, where theatre is concerned, he was very specific about which playwrights are worthy of being produced – namely all of his contemporaries who began writing at the same time he did (Samuel Beckett, Andre Breton, Jean Genet, etc.) and, of course, Shakespeare. Productions, in his opinion, that are not as entertaining as the aforementioned “serious” plays are works by Rodgers & Hammerstein.

At that point, I have to admit that my regard for him lessened quite a bit. I realize that musicals are not for everyone, but they are a distinct American creation, a unique form of American performing-arts culture. How could he knock Rodgers & Hammerstein?! Who’s next, Gilbert & Sullivan?

Upon reviewing my notes I realized that I had read this same argument before (commerce dictating what the American public wants to see) in a mid-1960s volume of interviews with famous “young” playwrights of the time. In *The Playwrights Speak* Albee was asked his opinion of the quality of theatre “today.” (Keep in mind this is around 1966.) Young Albee said the same thing old Albee said at his lecture on Friday, but this time it was theatre critics who dictated what the American public wanted.

Because he did not grant interviews, I had no opportunity to challenge Albee on this point. But I wanted to ask him if he had ever entertained the idea that perhaps the American public dictates what the American public wants to see, or that there exists a greater outside force, a self-creating Culture itself that determines what is popular.

On the subject of censorship, Albee told us he traveled to totalitarian states and visited with dissident writers, when they weren’t in prison. He said that, as of yet, we do not suffer from that form of censorship. There is no one person in this country that can tell us what we may or may not write, perform, or compose.

He did say, however, that there exists “economic censorship.” He gave the example of regional

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or community theatres that are usually supported by generous, wealthy benefactors. In time, he said, these same benefactors will put the screws on these theatre groups, demanding that they perform plays the benefactors' families will enjoy, especially if they want to see another penny of support.

During a brief question-and-answer session, Albee was asked how we could reverse the trend of commerce (you remember, the trend that causes us to choose "crap" instead of "serious" work). He reminded us that commerce makes its money by selling us what we want, and that all we have to do is shout from the rooftops that we no longer want to watch crap. "We have absolute control over the arts," he said.

If we have such control, then it would appear that the American public *does* choose what it wants to see both on film and in theatres. One advantage of our society is that we have the opportunity to appreciate Albee's finely written plays, or to kick back and enjoy a good sci-fi thriller or a light-hearted romantic comedy.