

THE ZOO STORY

The Death of Bessie Smith

THE SANDBOX

THREE PLAYS, INTRODUCED BY THE AUTHOR

Edward Albee

COWARD-McCANN CONTEMPORARY DRAMA

\$2.25

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of Bessie Smith*

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EDWARD ALBEE

Coward-McCann, Inc., New York

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION

With the exception of a three-act sex farce I composed when I was twelve—the action of which occurred aboard an ocean liner, the characters of which were, for the most part, English gentry, and the title of which was, for some reason that escapes me now, *Aliqueen*—with the exception of that, the three plays printed here, *The Zoo Story* (1958), and *The Death of Bessie Smith* and *The Sandbox* (both 1959), are my first three plays.

The Zoo Story, written first, received production first—but not in the United States, where one might reasonably expect an American writer to get his first attention. *The Zoo Story* had its première in Berlin, Germany, on September 28, 1959. How it got to production so shortly after it was written, and how, especially, it got to Berlin, might be of interest—perhaps to point up the Unusual, the Unlikely, the Unexpected, which, with the exception of the fare the commercial theatre setup spills out on its dogged audience each season, is the nature of the theatre.

Shortly after *The Zoo Story* was completed, and while it was being read and politely refused by a number of New York producers (which was not to be unexpected, for no one at all had ever heard of its author, and it *was* a short

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play, and short plays *are*, unfortunately, anathema to producers and—supposedly—to audiences), a young composer friend of mine, William Flanagan by name, looked at the play, liked it, and sent it to several friends of his, among them David Diamond, another American composer, resident in Italy; Diamond liked the play and sent it on to a friend of *his*, a Swiss actor, Pinkas Braun; Braun liked the play, made a tape recording of it, playing both its roles, which he sent on to Mrs. Stefani Hunzinger, who heads the drama department of the S. Fischer Verlag, a large publishing house in Frankfurt; she, in turn . . . well, through her it got to Berlin, and to production. From New York to Florence to Zurich to Frankfurt to Berlin. And finally back to New York where, on January 14, 1960, it received American production, off Broadway, at the Provincetown Playhouse, on a double bill with Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*.

I went to Berlin for the opening of *The Zoo Story*. I had not planned to—it seemed like such a distance, such an expense—but enough friends said to me that, of course, I would be present at the first performance of my first play, that I found myself, quickly enough, replying, yes, yes, of course; I wouldn't miss it for the world. And so, I went; and I *wouldn't* have missed it for the world. I wouldn't have missed it for the world, despite the fact—as I have learned since—that, for this author, at least, opening nights do not really exist. They happen, but they take place as if in a dream: One concentrates, but one cannot see the stage action clearly; one can hear but barely; one tries to follow the play, but one can make no sense of it. And, if one is called to the stage afterwards to take a bow, one wonders

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why, for one can make no connection between the work just presented and one's self. Naturally, this feeling was complicated in the case of *The Zoo Story*, as the play was being presented in German, a language of which I knew not a word, and in Berlin, too, an awesome city. But, it has held true since. The high points of a person's life can be appreciated so often only in retrospect.

The Death of Bessie Smith also had its première in Berlin, while *The Sandbox* was done first in New York.

The Sandbox, which is fourteen minutes long, was written to satisfy a commission from the Festival of Two Worlds for a short dramatic piece for the Festival's summer program in Spoleto, Italy—where it was not performed. I was, at the time of the commission, at work on a rather longer play, *The American Dream*, which I subsequently put aside and have, at this writing, just taken up again. For *The Sandbox*, I extracted several of the characters from *The American Dream* and placed them in a situation different than, but related to, their predicament in the longer play. They seem happy out of doors, in *The Sandbox*, and I hope they will not be distressed back in a stuffy apartment, in *The American Dream*.

Along with *The American Dream*, I am at various stages of writing, or thinking about, three other plays: two other less-than-full-evening ones—*Bedlam* and *The Substitute Speaker* (this a working title)—and a full-evening play, *The Exorcism*, or: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

Careers are funny things. They begin mysteriously and, just as mysteriously, they can end; and I am at just the very beginning of what I hope will be a long and satisfying

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life in the theatre. But, whatever happens, I am grateful to have had my novice work received so well, and so soon. And I am very happy to have these first three plays collected here.

EDWARD ALBEE

New York City
July 1, 1960

The Zoo Story

A PLAY IN ONE SCENE (1958)

For William Flanagan

FIRST PERFORMANCE: September 28, 1959. Berlin, Germany

Schiller Theater Werkstatt.

FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCE: January 14, 1960.

New York City.

The Provincetown Playhouse.

The Zoo Story

The Players:

PETER: A man in his early forties, neither fat nor gaunt, neither handsome nor homely. He wears tweeds, smokes a pipe, carries horn-rimmed glasses. Although he is moving into middle age, his dress and his manner would suggest a man younger.

JERRY: A man in his late thirties, not poorly dressed, but carelessly. What was once a trim and lightly muscled body has begun to go to fat; and while he is no longer handsome, it is evident that he once was. His fall from physical grace should not suggest debauchery; he has, to come closest to it, a great weariness.

The Scene:

It is Central Park; a Sunday afternoon in summer; the present. There are two park benches, one toward either side of the stage; they both face the audience. Behind them: foliage, trees, sky. At the beginning, Peter is seated on one of the benches.

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Stage Directions:

As the curtain rises, PETER is seated on the bench stage-right. He is reading a book. He stops reading, cleans his glasses, goes back to reading. JERRY enters.

JERRY

I've been to the zoo. (PETER *doesn't notice*) I said, I've been to the zoo. MISTER, I'VE BEEN TO THE ZOO!

PETER

Hm? . . . What? . . . I'm sorry, were you talking to me?

JERRY

I went to the zoo, and then I walked until I came here. Have I been walking north?

PETER (*Puzzled*)

North? Why . . . I . . . I think so. Let me see.

JERRY

(*Pointing past the audience*) Is that Fifth Avenue?

PETER

Why yes; yes, it is.

JERRY

And what is that cross street there; that one, to the right?

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PETER

That? Oh, that's Seventy-fourth Street.

JERRY

And the zoo is around Sixty-fifth Street; so, I've been walking north.

PETER

(Anxious to get back to his reading) Yes; it would seem so.

JERRY

Good old north.

PETER

(Lightly, by reflex) Ha, ha.

JERRY

(After a slight pause) But not due north.

PETER

I . . . well, no, not due north; but, we . . . call it north. It's northerly.

JERRY

(Watches as PETER, anxious to dismiss him, prepares his pipe) Well, boy; *you're* not going to get lung cancer, are you?

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PETER

(*Looks up, a little annoyed, then smiles*) No, sir. Not from this.

JERRY

No, sir. What you'll probably get is cancer of the mouth, and then you'll have to wear one of those things Freud wore after they took one whole side of his jaw away. What do they call those things?

PETER (*Uncomfortable*)

A prosthesis?

JERRY

The very thing! A prosthesis. You're an educated man, aren't you? Are you a doctor?

PETER

Oh, no; no. I read about it somewhere; *Time* magazine, I think. (*He turns to his book*)

JERRY

Well, *Time* magazine isn't for blockheads.

PETER

No, I suppose not.

JERRY

(*After a pause*) Boy, I'm glad that's Fifth Avenue there.