

# Non-Retirement Package

Those ever-new kids Off-Broadway: Edward Albee and Judith Malina

BY MICHAEL FEINGOLD

“Don’t retire,” Edward Albee told me. That was my best holiday present this year: When the playwright tells the critic to keep writing—and Mr. Albee is not a famous encourager of critics—a bridge, however shaky, has been built over one of the theater’s seemingly unbridgeable chasms.

I’d been needing such a bridge. Mr. Albee and I were sitting onstage at the Provincetown Playhouse on MacDougal Street, newly renovated (no comment) by NYU. Mr. Albee was on my right; on my left—and politically on most Americans’ left—was Judith Malina, co-founder and artistic director of the Living Theatre.

We’d been conducting a December 19 panel on Off-Broadway’s glorious heritage, in honor of the Provincetown’s reopening. Mr. Albee’s first play, *The Zoo Story*, debuted there in 1960. When he fondly recalled seeing a late-’50s Provincetown production of Auden and Isherwood’s *Dog Beneath the Skin*, Ms. Malina floored us both by piping up, “I was in that.” She remembered which role she’d played, too.

Ms. Malina, now 92, has just directed the Living Theatre’s latest collaborative creation, *Korach*, about the rebellious Israelite who questioned Moses’s leadership. She glowed with a novice’s excitement as she described the light, joy, and singing with which her troupe fills this naysayer’s story. When I remarked that Mr. Albee’s plays aren’t known for being filled with light, joy, and singing, the 85-year-old author replied crisply, “Wait till you see the two I’m working on now.”

I think that’s when I realized I was the oldest person onstage. I turned 65 this year—not ancient by today’s standards. But, come February, I’ll have been at the same post, reviewing plays for *The Village Voice*, for 40 years. I’ve had some slight (extremely slight) salary increments; the space allotted to me has crept up from a single column to a full page, but there’s been no upward mobility: It isn’t in the job description. A theater critic is, and stays, a theater critic, period. These kids of 85 and 92 flanking me were full of hope. What, I asked myself, did I have to hope for?

Ergo, why shouldn’t I think about retiring? Four decades of slotting a set number of words on the same topic into a set space should be enough. And over those decades, the New York theater’s spirit has manifestly shrunk. I don’t mean that the theater’s gotten worse: Our art form is a resourceful beast genetically, spawning in every generation both imperishable masterpieces and ineradicable disasters. But the context in which these



exceptions thrive has steadily narrowed.

The amount of junk on Broadway should be no news. Our commercial theater has always supplied cultural junk: glorified nightclub acts, exploitable non-theater celebrities, glossy imports or safe revivals of works unrelated to our lives, forgettable musicals based on flimsy sources. (Those sources used to be old plays or novels; now they’re movies. So what?) Even *Spider-Man* comes naturally to the street that’s been musicalizing comics since *The Katzenjammer Kids*, 110 years ago. Broadway’s great achievements (I don’t deny their existence) have invariably slipped in between waves of trash and triviality. Today’s economics merely mean they do so less often.

But even Broadway’s high points never sufficed for the great spirits who molded Off-Broadway, including the Provincetown’s founders. When I asked Ms. Malina whether, starting out in the 1950s, she had been conscious of her great predecessors, I expected to hear about rebellion

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William Carlos Williams shared its stage with Pirandello and Brecht before outrageously innovative new works, like Kenneth H. Brown’s *The Brig*, won the company notoriety and headed it toward its traumatic confrontation with the FBI and IRS.

Off-Broadway had long battled the law, I reminded our audience. The Provincetown itself, when O’Neill’s *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* opened in 1924, had been ringed with NYPD troops, certain that the audience would riot when they saw a black man kiss a white woman’s hand. (Instead the audience braved the hand-kissing actor, one Paul Robeson.)

My mentioning this triggered a passionate response from our third panelist, Ozzie Rodriguez, director of La MaMa’s archive, there to speak, fervently, for Ellen Stewart’s astonishing decades of work. Talk of race rings bells with Ozzie, who grew up when the thought of young Latinos on Broadway was laughable. La MaMa, too, knew the reality of the police, who spent years suspecting that Ms. Stewart ran a house of ill fame. In reality she ran, and still runs, an aesthetic U.N., based on a faith in the idea of art for everybody, and of artistic talent unconstrained by nationality, race, or religion. Like Ms. Malina’s and Mr. Albee’s, her theater has been an innovator in form, an alterer of the transaction between performer and audience, an extender of the theater’s reach into realms where tidy commercial productions don’t go.

These three extraordinary figures bowled me over with their optimistic energy. I’ve been reviewing the actualities: those convenient, low-ceilinged plays that, too often today, constitute institutional Off-Broadway’s only response to Broadway’s stream of junk. My fellow panelists, meanwhile, have been contemplating what theater could still be, could still become, in this

new century. Theatergoing continues to give me pleasure. I don’t insist that innovation automatically equals good; I know what limitations we face. But I fret, often, over our theater’s lack of reach. The desires

to risk, to connect, to be worthy of the great past, have been stunted by the need to survive in this hectic electrified world.

Thought and feeling, which are of the theater’s essence, find little place in that world’s increasing quest for instant gratification. If I stay on, I want the kids under 30 to match the kids over 80 in ambition and hope. Retirement seems a tempting prospect. But then I think, if I stick with my job, in a quarter-century or so, I might become as crisply cogent as Edward Albee, or rediscover a youthful zest like Judith Malina’s. Anyway, I will take Mr. Albee’s advice, and keep at it.

Mark Richman and William Daniels in *The Zoo Story*; Rodriguez, Albee, and Feingold



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against their largely naturalistic approach. Instead she gazed upward, as if the spirits of O’Neill and Susan Glaspell still hovered in the Playhouse’s atmosphere, and said, “We hoped we would be worthy of them.”

*Worthy of them.* Today we don’t often measure our worth against the past. Nor do we much link our theater to its great contemporaries in other artistic fields. Mr. Albee spoke feelingly of the postwar cultural ferment in which Off-Broadway had burgeoned, of the vanished Village cafés where poets and painters mingled with actors. *The Zoo Story*, though pure prose, sprang from that awareness of poetry. The Living Theatre’s repertoire began with poets: Gertrude Stein and Wil-

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