

# A Double Bill of Plays, Both Heavy on the Bile

The American Dream/The Sandbox  
Cherry Lane Theater

New York may be a world capital of self-satisfaction. But I'll bet there's not a more blindingly complacent creature in town these days than the woman

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known only as Mommy, who can be found strutting her smugness at the venerable Cherry Lane Theater in the West Village. Pricelessly portrayed by Judith Ivey with the purring contentment of a cat who has eaten an entire aviary of canaries, Mommy easily dominates the welcome revival of two early one-act plays by Edward Albee, "The American Dream" and "The Sandbox," which opened on Tuesday under Mr. Albee's direction.

First seen wearing red and white while seated on a blue chair, the proudly middle-aged, upper-middle-class and fiercely status-quo-conscious Mommy is the American nightmare in "The American Dream" — at least to the type of sensitive, alienated young man of whom she would automatically disapprove. Which would seem to be a fair description of Mr. Albee at the time he brought Mommy into existence.

Writers, or the kind who make it onto "Oprah" anyway, are fond of saying that they create their characters out of love. I think it's safe to say that Mommy was born of ice-cold hatred. It's no secret that she was inspired by Frances Cotter Albee, the playwright's adoptive mother.

Increasingly sophisticated variations on her type would continue to show up in Mr. Albee's work, culminating with the complex portraiture of his Pulitzer Prize-winning "Three Tall Women," staged in New York in 1994. But in "The Sandbox" (written in 1959) and "The American Dream" (1960), Mommy is the raw product of a very angry

young man, who sees in her pretty much everything that's wrong about the United States he grew up in.

Mr. Albee turned 80 last month, and this double bill is part of a slew of milestone-honoring productions of Albee plays of different vintages. Unlike "The Zoo Story," the first play he completed, which was revived in November by the Second Stage Theater, "The American Dream" now feels like a period piece, palpably of its time without transcending it. It wears the influence of European Absurdism, and especially the work of Ionesco, like a badge of honor.

The original genius that is Albee is also in evidence here, though: the mesmerizing musicality of the dialogue, the vituperative wit, the giddy fascination with the limits and possibilities of language and the idea of death as an unavoidable (if unacknowledged) household presence. And in the self-deluding ménage of Mommy, Daddy (George Bartenieff) and Grandma (Lois Markle), you perceive prototypes for the more complex domestic studies of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" and "A Delicate Balance."

Set within a box of a room papered in the colors of the American flag (Neil Patel is the set designer), "The American Dream" is both Mr. Albee's baldest satire and, along with "Three Tall Women" and "The Man Who Had Three Arms," his most stinging personal work.

A figure much as Mr. Albee appears to have seen himself — an adopted son who wasn't at all what his parents wanted — is discussed in grim detail here. And what might be taken as another semi-self-portrait, as the observing outsider, arrives in the form of a young man (Harmon

Walsh, who plays beautiful blankness well) who can feel nothing but "a cool disinterest" in the world.

The entrance of this young man, and the revelation of his relationship to the absent adopted son, is built with teasing confidence. "Dream" has a more purposeful plot-driven structure than, say, Ionesco's "Bald Soprano," which makes it easier to follow than most Absurdist works, but also more laboriously symbolic.

All the same, it's a pleasure to listen to Mr. Albee's precisely warped rendering of empty social chitchat. I especially enjoyed the early exchanges among the domineering Mommy, the ineffectual Daddy (entertainingly embodied by Mr. Bartenieff as a sort of stuffed souvenir of a husband) and Mrs. Barker (Kathleen Butler), the president of the local women's club. ("Won't you take off your dress?" Mommy famously asks Mrs. Barker, who politely does just that.)

Grandma, whom Mommy keeps threatening to have carted away by a scary imaginary being called the Van Man, is the character for whom Mr. Albee obviously feels the most compassion.

She also comes across as an atypically sentimental figure, an uncensored truth-speaker frilled in old-lady cuteness. Still, it's hard to resist the wry, self-flattening poetry of a line like, "Old people are very good at listening; old people don't like to talk; old people have colitis and lavender perfume."

**ONLINE: EDWARD ALBEE**

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# THE Arts

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Ms. Markle seemed more assured in "The Sandbox," a much shorter play and also a better one. Mr. Albee has said it's the work he's written that comes closest to being perfect, and "The Sandbox" remains a harrowingly effective chamber piece. It, too, includes Mommy, Daddy and Grandma, who has been taken to the seashore to die.

Set to elegiac music by William Flanagan (nicely played by Daniel Shevlin), which is self-consciously interrupted from time to time by the onstage characters, "The Sandbox," like "The American Dream," features a handsome young man of mysterious provenance (this time played by Jesse Williams), which is self-consciously interrupted from time to time by the suffocating world of Mommies and Daddies.

That's because he's death incarnate. Fortunately for us, Mr. Albee discovered another route of escape from his American hell — by writing about it.

## Edward Albee's *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox*

Written and directed by Edward Albee; sets by Neil Patel; costumes by Carrie Robbins; lighting by Nicole Pearce; music by William Flanagan; sound by Arlette Edwards. Presented by the Cherry Lane Theater, Angelina Fiordellisi, artistic director. At the Cherry Lane Theater, 38 Commerce Street, between Barrow and Bedford Streets, West Village; (212) 239-6200. Through April 19. Running time: 1 hour 10 minutes.

### THE AMERICAN DREAM

WITH: Judith Ivey (Mommy), Lois Markle (Grandma), George Bartenieff (Daddy), Kathleen Butler (Mrs. Barker) and Harmon Walsh (Young Man).

### THE SANDBOX

WITH: Judith Ivey (Mommy), Lois Markle (Grandma), George Bartenieff (Daddy), Jesse Williams (Young Man) and Daniel Shevlin (Musician).



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Jesse Williams, top, and Lois Markle in "The Sandbox."



SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Judith Ivey in Edward Albee's "American Dream."