

THE PLAY ABOUT  
**THE BABY**  
BY EDWARD ALBEE



## The world of the play

### Specific learning outcomes

Students will:

- research and understand the purpose and conventions of theatre of the absurd;
- identify and respond the absurd elements in the play.

[These learning outcomes relate to the strands Understanding Drama in Context (UC) and Communication and Interpreting in Drama in *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum*.]

### Theatre of the absurd

*Theatre of the absurd* is a term that describes a theatre movement of the twentieth century that was at its height in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In some ways, it was a reaction to the conservative society that emerged after World War Two.

Absurdist theatre presents a distorted, almost surrealistic, view of the world and human behaviour. It is non-realistic, which means that the settings, characters and action do not resemble normal, everyday life.

### Influence of existentialism

Absurdist writers were influenced by a philosophy known as *existentialism*. Existentialist philosophy holds that our existence as human beings has no purpose. All that we can know in life is that we will die. When people realise this, they suffer terrible anguish.

According to existentialist philosophy, people behave in a variety of ways in order to shield themselves from this knowledge. We create busy lives that we fill up with important jobs. We devise complex systems of laws, rules and regulations to help us feel that we have control of our destinies. We do things in repetitive ways, for example we always sit in the same seats in class. We also develop illusions of family, love and society, and create myths and stories to explain the world.

Existentialists believe that none of these behaviours are valid ways of living life. They think that only way that we can find truth in our existence is by facing our own mortality, determining what we believe in, and acting on our own convictions.

If there is no order or meaning in the universe, it follows that human beings have complete freedom of choice about the way in which we act.

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We could therefore take what we want when we want it, and do what we want all of the time. This is the view of *anarchists*, a political activist movement that began in the early twentieth century.

But unlike anarchists, existentialists believe that we need to act in a way that does not restrict the freedom of others. We should behave toward others the way we would like them to behave toward us. Existentialist philosophy holds that with freedom comes total responsibility for our own actions and, because we bear responsibility for our actions, we must carry guilt if we harm others.

### **Features of absurdist theatre**

So what does theatre of the absurd look like? If you went to an absurdist play, you might see...

- characters who do not have names, jobs or backgrounds
- characters who behave in illogical, disjointed ways
- characters who can't control the things that happen to them
- characters who enter and exit with no purpose
- characters whose behaviour changes and is inconsistent, (for example, by the end of the play they may behave the opposite of how they behaved at the beginning)
- bad things happening at random to good characters – justice is not always done, and happy endings do not always come to those who deserve them
- settings that could be anywhere, rather than a recognisable place
- settings that are non-realistic, (for example, oversized furniture)
- minimal and illogical action
- confusing and circular dialogue
- words and actions that are repeated over and over
- words that are spoken in a monotone or rhythmically
- clichéd language
- sound effects used in a way that does not match the action
- unexplained pauses in the action
- ceremonial, ritualistic movement
- elements of slapstick or circus clowning that highlight the silliness of a situation.

The playwright uses these conventions in order to get a message across to the audience about what human life means and how we should behave. By pointing out how foolish our everyday actions and words can be, the writer asks us to stand back and think about what we do and why.

### **Famous absurdist plays**

You may have heard of these two famous absurdist playwrights and plays.

**Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*:** In this play, two characters (Estragon and Vladimir) are filling in time waiting on a country road for a man called Godot... who never arrives. The language the characters use is often ludicrous. The play follows a cyclical pattern, so that it seems to end in the same state as it began, with nothing really changed. Like all of Beckett's plays, the underlying themes of *Waiting for Godot* are the

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uselessness of human action and the failure of the human race to communicate with each other.

**Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*:** In this play, the characters behave in foolish ways while slowly turning into rhinoceroses that blunder about the stage. Ionesco's main focus is on the futility of human communication. The language of *Rhinoceros* and his other plays reflect this by often being completely nonsensical. His response to the absurdity of life is to make his characters comical and unable to control their own existence.

## About the writer: Edward Albee

*"If you intellectualise and examine  
the creative process too carefully  
it can evaporate and vanish."*

Edward Albee

Edward Albee first started publicly discussing the development of *The Play about the Baby* in November 1995. From the outset, he was very decided on what the play would be called, and had a clear vision of its basic idea.

One colleague remembers these early discussions: "He was pleased with the title. When people would ask him about his new play, he could say "The Play about the Baby?" and they would answer "But what's the title?" He said he had written about forty minutes of the first act and there were four characters, a middle-aged couple, who is or is not [sic] related, and a young couple. The themes were identity, people as possessions, and surrogate parents..."<sup>1</sup>

### Family background

These themes are typical in Edward Albee's plays, and could be traced to Albee's personal background. Born in 1928, Albee was adopted at the age of 18 days by American millionaire parents, Reed and Frances Albee.

Biographer Mel Gussow believes that "His feeling about adoption was to become one of the most important factors in his life. Repeatedly he would ask himself questions. Where did he come from? Where did his talents come from? Who were his natural parents? What effect did they have on his character? Did it really matter who they were? What does it mean to be a parent? What are the responsibilities of parents to children, children to parents, siblings to siblings?"<sup>2</sup>

### Origins of the play

*The Play about the Baby* is a detailed examination of these kinds of issues. In his biography *Edward Albee – A Singular Journey*, Gussow concludes that Albee's need to write the play stems from his adoptive upbringing, although the playwright himself is less forthcoming about its origins.

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<sup>1</sup> Gussow, Mel. *Edward Albee – A Singular Journey*. Simon and Schuster. p. 388/9.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 23.

"Where did the play come from?" asks the biographer. "Then, and later, Albee would not – or could not – say, but it seemed apparent that it derived from his lifelong obsession with the meaning of parenting. Such questions have appeared in his apprentice plays and as early as *The American Dream*, and have reappeared in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and subsequent works. One impetus for writing the play may have been his own curiosity about his birth and adoption."<sup>3</sup>

However, Albee offers an alternate explanation for why his plays deal so often with the intricacies of family life (in Phillip Kolin's book *Conversations with Edward Albee*). When asked by students why he shows so much disappointment in the family, the playwright pointed out that most playwrights – famous names like Shakespeare, Chekhov and Ibsen – write about dysfunctional families. "Most plays are about people in conflict and not getting along" Albee points out, "and most plays are about people who know each other, and most people know each other in some sort of relationship..."<sup>4</sup>.

### **Attitudes to family**

Albee offers some insight on his personal views on family when he goes on to explain that "there are several ways for families to hang together. One is to ask no questions, another is to ask all questions. When you ask no questions, you hang together until you just disintegrate and aren't aware of why the disintegration is taking place. And if you ask all questions, you may possibly recreate a family structure but with firmer bonding."<sup>5</sup>

Whatever its origins, *The Play about the Baby* does contain elements of Albee's own life. The Man's recollection of an embarrassing lapse of memory (he forgets who his own mother is, making it impossible to introduce her to his friends) is taken "directly from Albee's life. It happened at one of his loft parties."<sup>6</sup> This time, Albee is prepared to offer an explanation for the incident from his own perspective. With a laugh, he explains "'I had been trying for years not to recognize her, so I think it was probably a wish come true.' If, as Albee says, reality is created by our need for it, then it might be said that he no longer had a need for his mother."<sup>7</sup>

### **Attitude to creative process**

Albee's attitude to the creative process is also embedded in the content of the play. In an interview, he once expressed frustration at being constantly hounded to explain how he came up with ideas and how writers worked. "Naturally, no writer who's any good at all would sit down and put a sheet of paper in the typewriter and start typing a play unless he knew

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 390.

<sup>4</sup> Kolin, Philip C (Ed). *Conversations with Edward Albee*. University Press of Mississippi. p. 153

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 153

<sup>6</sup> Gussow, Mel. *Edward Albee – A Singular Journey*. Simon and Schuster. p. 398.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 398.

what he was writing about. But at the same time, writing has got to be an act of discovery. Finding out things about what one is writing about.

“To a certain extent I imagine a play is completely finished in my mind – in my case, at any rate – without my knowing it, before I sit down to write. So in that sense, I suppose, writing a play is finding out what the play is. I always find that is a better answer to give. It’s a question I despise, and it always seems to me better to slough off the answer to a question which [sic] I consider to be a terrible invasion of privacy – the kind of privacy that a writer must keep for himself.

“If you intellectualise and examine the creative process too carefully it can evaporate and vanish. It’s not only terribly difficult to talk about, it’s also dangerous.”<sup>8</sup> The same attitude is clearly expressed by the writer that Woman tries to contact and watch working in *The Play about the Baby*.

### **Changes during development of *Baby***

Despite his attitudes to interference in the writer’s art, Albee does offer a few insights into the development of *The Play about the Baby*, which underwent fairly major changes during the course of its gestation.

In the middle of 1996, Albee “had a ‘wonderful visual idea for the end of the play,’ which meant adding another character. Now there were five people in the play. The new character was, he said, ‘the baby,’ to be played, he thought, ‘by a smallish female inside a large rubber baby’, or perhaps the puppet-like costume would be constructed out of some other material.”<sup>9</sup>

However, by 1997, after continued work on the play, Albee revised the script, and “indicated that the baby’s puppet-like appearance should be considered an alternate ending. Later he excised the scene completely.”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the problematic logistics of a baby suit helped to prompt this artistic decision!

The final version of *The Play about the Baby* satisfied Albee, though he didn’t see eye-to-eye with some critics on the play’s merits. “‘The play is where it should be,’ he said firmly. ‘If they don’t like it, \*\*\*\* ‘em. You don’t go and rewrite to make the critics happy.’

“He offered a few points of clarification. The baby is real even though we don’t actually see it. ‘We see its blanket. She’s not nursing a blanket. She’s not crazy. And she has mother’s milk, so obviously she’s had a baby.’ What happens to the baby? He reiterated that ‘it’s made evident that reality is determined by our need’ and added that the younger characters in the play ‘realize they cannot take the pain and loss of having a baby, so it ceases to be real.’ This theme, self-determination of what is

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<sup>8</sup> Kolin, Philip C (Ed). *Conversations with Edward Albee*. University Press of Mississippi. p. 61.

<sup>9</sup> Gussow, Mel. *Edward Albee – A Singular Journey*. Simon and Schuster. p. 389.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 390.

reality, has always been of primary concern to Albee.<sup>11</sup> It is a concern that has affected his life, as well as his art.

### **Finding his own way**

In another interview, the playwright described the process of coming of age and trying to find out about life on his own less-than-conventional terms.

He told the interviewer: "I decided when I was very young that I wouldn't settle down to a nine-to-five job. I never wanted to have a boss. I never wanted to be an employee. I moved to New York City. I spent this 10-year period absorbing everything I possibly could, taking odd jobs, never taking a job that could become a career. I lived almost on the periphery of society. I saw every gallery, every play and every concert I could sneak into for free, trying to learn what living was about, what consciousness was about, what I was about and not settling in too quickly on a life goal."<sup>12</sup>

These days, Albee would probably not be unhappy to be described as a career playwright. However, within this broad job description, he still dislikes being pigeonholed. "I dismiss all labels" he declared once. "Theatre of the Absurd. Angry Young Man. Playwright of Protest. Labels are so facile..."<sup>13</sup>

### **Making people react differently**

When asked what effect he hoped his plays would have on people, Albee replied "I hope, put them in contact with areas of their feelings they may have gotten out of contact with, or maybe make them see things from a different point of view. To think about things they haven't thought about, think about them differently. Affect them in some way that they'll have to react differently in the future to things."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 398.

<sup>12</sup> Kolin, Philip C (Ed). *Conversations with Edward Albee*. University Press of Mississippi p. 191

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 132

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 133

## Classroom activities: the world of the play

Classroom activities have been developed specifically for:



Working on with a class prior to viewing the play



Working with a class after viewing the play



Associated activities using resource material generated by the play.



### Prepare yourself

Read the notes in this resource about theatre of the absurd. Make notes in your journal under the following headings:

- Edward Albee
- existentialism
- conventions of theatre of the absurd.



### Identify the absurd

As a class, discuss the performance that you have seen. Identify the absurdist elements and conventions that you recognised and write them up on the board under the following headings:

- roles
- action
- dialogue
- set/costume
- themes.



### Be absurd!

Devise your own theatre of the absurd scene:

1. Choose a key idea or theme that you would like to explore.
2. Decide on roles and the action that could take place.
3. Consider the space, sound effects, use of costumes and/or props to develop your ideas.
4. Improvise around your roles to develop the action.  
Share your work with your teacher for feedback.