

# Edward Albee's **THREE TALL WOMEN**

Directed by Anthony Powell  
January 30 - March 29, 1997

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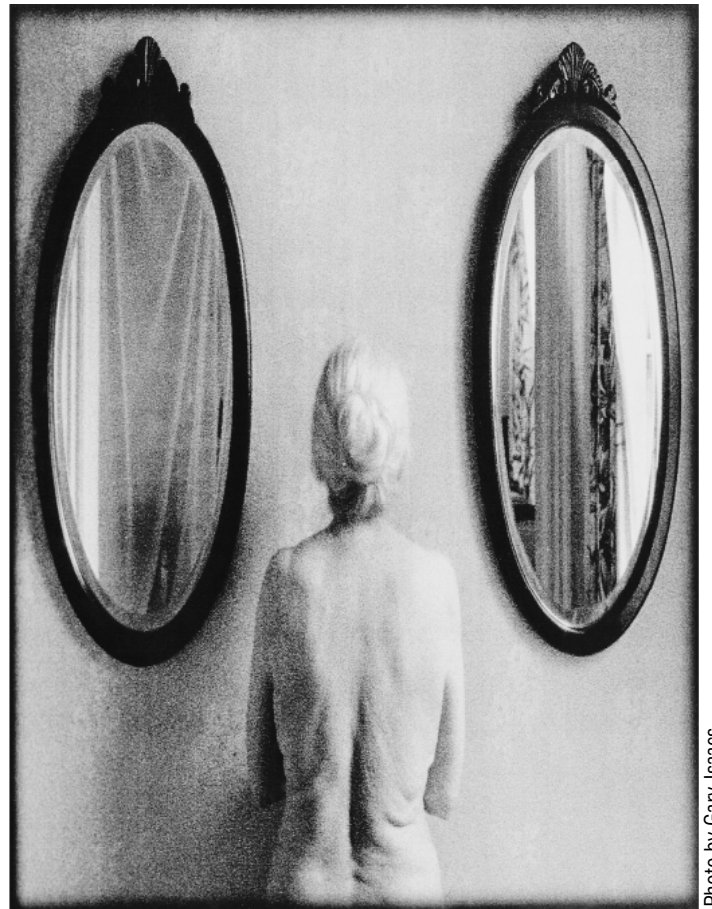


Photo by Gary Isaacs

## Play Guide

prepared by the Education Department of the Denver Center Theatre Company  
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# THREE TALL WOMEN

## SYNOPSIS

**“For the aging person, it is a duty and a necessity to give serious attention to himself.”**  
**Carl Gustave Jung. *Modern Man In Search of a Soul*, 1933, p. 57.**

**A**t opening, three women are discovered in a sumptuously appointed bedroom decorated with expensive furniture, a rare carpet, and a parquet floor. The oldest of the women (known as A) is an imperious, rich invalid, who hobbles on a cane, her left arm in a sling. She is attended by a middle-aged companion (known as B), an angular woman with a caustic tongue and a humped back, and a young, politically correct lawyer (known as C) who has come to discuss A's business affairs.

**T**he first of the two acts examines the exchanges among this symbiotic trio, consisting predominantly of A's recollections and the shocked reactions they evoke. A has turned sour and abrupt in old age, and she rails against life. Her spine has collapsed; she has broken her arm in a fall, and now the bone has disintegrated around the pins. In addition, she is prone to incontinence. She is a cantankerous old wretch, with a volatile tongue and a narrow mind, who still possesses vitality and directness, especially when compared to the humorless B and the prissy C. A recalls a past of elegant emptiness, horse shows, dances, and loveless affairs. She recalls her arid marriage and the son who brings her chocolates but doesn't love her. Memories carry A to the end of the act, where in mid-sentence, she is silenced by a stroke.

**T**he second act begins with A lying in bed under an oxygen mask. B has been transformed from a sardonic, hunched-over hag into a stately matron with pearls, while C has become an elegant debutante in a dating dress. The play shifts gears.

**I**n their conversations, each woman examines “her” life, and her path to this place. The inevitability of change is exposed as responsible for sickness, pain, but also joy. A, B, and C understand that we will all die, but they want to know the meaning of this journey we call life.

**“No falsehood lingers on into old age.”**  
**Sophocles.**  
***Acrisius*, fragment 58.**

# EDWARD ALBEE

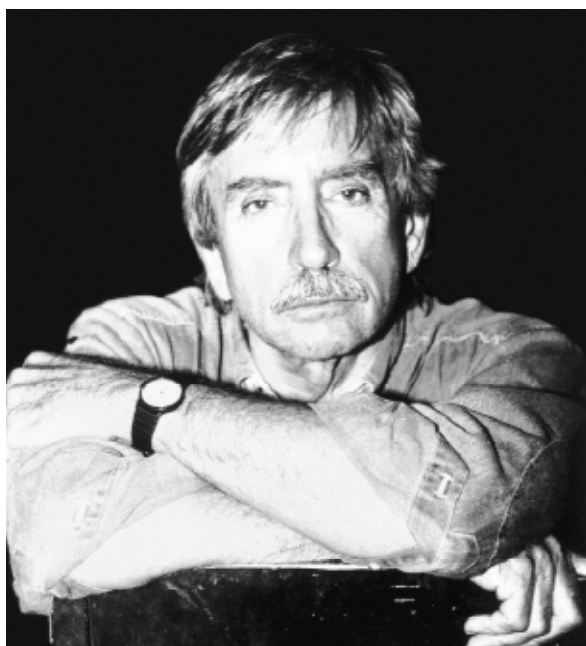
**"If I wrote plays about everyone getting along terribly well,  
I don't think anyone would want to see them."**

**Edward Albee**

**B**orn in 1928 in Washington, D. C., Edward Albee was adopted as an infant by the American theater executive, Reed A. Albee, of the Keith-Albee chain of vaudeville and motion picture theaters. The same year, Reed Albee retired from the theater business to breed and show saddle horses, an occupation which he continued until his death in 1961. Despite the wealth of his adoptive parents, who sent him to exclusive schools like Choate, Valley Forge, and Trinity College, Albee didn't have an easy start. He dropped out or was expelled from most of the schools he attended. At the age of 18, he left his parents' home and spent a decade drifting in and out of casual jobs. It was while working as a messenger for Western Union at age 29 that he wrote the angry and deeply disturbing one-act play *The Zoo Story*, in which a businessman on a park bench is coerced into stabbing a vagrant. The play was a sensation. Critics hailed it as the first work of a hugely original talent.

**A**lbee, then went on to write a series of chilling attacks on American domestic realities, most notably *The American Dream* (1961), *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), and *A Delicate Balance* (1966)—for which he won his first Pulitzer prize. These early plays are marked by themes typical of the theater of the absurd; characters suffer from an inability or unwillingness to communicate meaningfully or to sympathize/empathize with one another. Later plays include *Tiny Alice*, *Everything in the Garden*, *All Over*, *The Lady from Dubuque*, *The Man Who Had Three Arms*, and *Marriage Play*—all characterized by Albee's sardonic wit and stark irony.

**S**ince the beginning of his career Albee shunned commercial Broadway values and helped to found the off-Broadway movement. While he produced original drama at the rate of roughly one play per year, critics responded by dismissing nearly all of it as willfully experimental and obscure. Albee's answer was to dismiss the most powerful New York critics, by name, as



**"—It's better to live without false illusions,  
but if you must have them,  
know that they are false. It's part of  
the responsibility of the playwright  
to help us see when they're false."**

**Edward Albee**

know-nothings. His play *Seascape*, however, won Albee a second Pulitzer prize (1975) despite its limited commercial success and the author's stand-off with the press.

**A**lbee has always been an experimentalist with little visible concern for how his work is received, which makes ironic the critics' applause for his 1994 Pulitzer prize winning play *Three Tall Women*. In the play, Albee finds a reconciliation with and forgiveness for his adoptive mother; elements not present in his previous works. In a recent *New York Times* interview, he says of his mother:

**"She was destructive, but she  
had reasons to be. I couldn't have  
written the play while she was alive.  
I don't think I learned anything new  
about her by writing it. I pretty much  
made up my mind about everything I  
knew, felt and cared about her..."** 1

**I**f the difficult and domineering parent inspired Albee's strongest play in years, she may also have given him the resilience to withstand the years of critical disapproval. He says:

**"Well, she was a tough old bird and you learn at your  
parents' knees. One thing I don't do is go around feeling sorry  
for myself. Maybe because I was an orphan and didn't fit in,  
I had to create my own identity. As an orphan, you don't have  
forebears. You're the first person who ever lived, in a way."** 2

**A**lbee travels constantly, teaching and lecturing. When he is not doing that, he can be found in New York in a cavernous TriBeCa loft, which was an abandoned cheese warehouse when he bought it 18 years ago or at his home in Montauk, Long Island. He is currently working on two new plays, tentatively titled *The Play about the Baby* and *The Goat*. He received the Kennedy Center Honors Award in December of 1996 and the National Medal of Arts in January 1997.

# AGING IN AMERICA: PART I

**“10 years—a child; 20 years—a youth; 30 years—a man;  
40 years—standing still; 50 years—settled and prosperous;  
60 years—departing; 70 years—protect your soul;  
80 years—the world’s fool; 90 years—scorn of children;  
100 years—God have mercy!”**

**Popular German rhyme of 15th century. 3**

**A**ging in America is not a thought many of us wish to contemplate. Most of us fear and deny aging, because we fear and deny death. We pretend that old age can be turned into a kind of endless middle age, thereby giving younger people a false concept of their future. This deception does nothing to help younger people plan for an entire life through personal or spiritual growth.

**T**he signs of denial and anxiety over aging permeate every aspect of our lives because we have no role models for growing old, only postponing it. For example:

1. The dependence upon plastic surgery to hide our visual signs of aging has risen from 60,000 people in 1960 to more than 2 million in 1980.
2. The negative view of aging is disastrously reinforced by the media. Few fashion advertisements show a mature model, even when displaying frocks for the over 50. A *Newsweek* cover of a sweating, gray-haired young man bears the cover line, “Oh God—I’m really turning 50.”<sup>4</sup> Nursing home ads ask: “What shall we do about Mother?” It is not surprising that we accept these false images and embrace them as truths.
3. We develop negative stereotypes of the aged by the time we are six years old. The “wicked *old* witch” in fairy tales, the terms “*old* fuddy-duddy”, “little *old* lady”, “dirty *old* man”, “*old* bag”, “*old* biddy”, “*old* geezer”, “*old* goat”, “*old* codger”—all perpetuate the myth that old people are fit for little else but to sit in a rocking chair.

**I**n today’s American culture, our core attitude about older people is that they are useless individuals whose lives are over. This fact was dramatically illustrated in the book *Disguised* by Pat Moore. In 1979, the author began a 3-year journey into the world of the elderly in America. With the help of a make-up artist, tattered, ill-fitting clothes, orthopedic shoes, and a cane, she transformed herself into an aging person. As she wandered the streets, she was routinely ignored, treated rudely, shouted at, shoved, and intentionally short-changed in transactions. Moore’s social experiment dramatically illustrates the “ageism” that exists in our society. Ageism is defined as “a deep and profound prejudice against the elderly and a systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old.”<sup>5</sup> All this raises the question of how are we to deal with the fact that we are all getting older if we have no positive images of aging?

**I**t is a credit to Edward Albee that in his “exorcism” of his mother, he deals with this dilemma of aging by making her character witty and vital while she struggles to maintain the wreckage of her body. The mother’s story, as the three women relate it to each other, is the story of a tall beauty in a society and at a time in which women were ancillary. She was brought down by her need to succeed. She needed to emphasize the contrast between her modest upbringing and her married wealth; to win the rivalry with her prettier but alcoholic sister; to overthrow the frustration of a philandering husband and indifferent son, to accept her failure to overcome youthful inhibitions and, finally, to endure old age and illness. In the end she accepts death as the happiest moment in her life. It is a portrait etched in pain and joy for both old and not-so-young.

**“I consider the old who have gone before us along a road  
which we must all travel in our turn and it is  
good we should ask them of the nature of the road.”  
Socrates, *The Republic*.**

# AGING IN AMERICA: PART II

**“Why is it good to be old?  
Because I am more myself than I have ever been.”  
May Sarton. *At 70: A Journal*.**

**I**f we can all hold out, we will be spared what amounts to the psychological torture of uselessness and burdensomeness that the “chronologically challenged” of the 20th century have faced. There is an attitude shift in the wind. A small but growing group of experts (mostly over 65) comprised of gerontologists, physicians, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and spiritual leaders are the vanguard of a movement to change the way society looks at and deals with growing old. This cultural elite is exploring ways to move us and our social institutions toward a new concept of aging, one they call “conscious aging”. They want us to be aware of and accept what aging actually is, an appreciation that life has a beginning, a middle, *and an end*. They do this in order that we may eliminate the pervasive denial that prevents us from using and appreciating the last third of our lives.

“ ‘Conscious aging’ is a new way of looking at and experiencing aging that moves beyond our cultural obsession with youth toward a respect and need for the wisdom of age,” explains Stephen Rechtschaffen, MD, a holistic physician who directs the Omega Institute, a kind of New Age think tank that works with the elderly. <sup>6</sup> He would have us:

1. Recognize and accept the aging process and all that goes with it as a reality, a natural part of the life cycle; it happens to us all.
2. Reverse our societal attitude of aging as an affliction and instead of spending billions on walling off the aging, spend more to improve their quality of life.

**T**he myth that most older people are in poor health is untrue, according to the Louis Harris polls. In his book *Age Wave*, Dr. Ken Dychtwald, a gerontologist, deals with some of the myths of aging. They found that far fewer older Americans report problems with their health than the public assumes, even those over 80. Only about 20% of the older respondents said they were debilitated by health problems; while older people may have chronic controlled health problems as they age, they are not necessarily bothered or limited by them.

**T**he myth that old minds are not as bright as young minds is also disproved. Of the 30 million Americans over the age of 65, only 10% show any significant loss of memory, and fewer than half of those show any serious mental impairment. Most of the losses in mental capacity happen to the very old, and are due, not to age itself, but to depression, drug interactions, lack of exercise, and other reversible conditions. This so-called loss of intelligence is being recognized as the result of the way old people are often treated; if left in isolation with no social interaction, people begin to act anti-social, irrational and unintelligent. Conversely, people who stay active and intellectually challenged not only maintain their mental alertness but also live longer.

**O**lder people are just as productive as their younger counterparts. Studies conducted by the Department of Labor, the Senate Committee on Human Resources and independent sociologists reveal that, except for a decline of productivity in jobs requiring substantial physical effort, older workers performed either as well as or better than younger workers. History has given us countless examples of powerful, creative, and productive elders. Goethe completed *Faust* when he was 81; the scientist Alexander von Humboldt wrote the *Kosmos* from ages 76 to 90. At 71, Michelangelo was appointed chief architect of St. Peter's in Rome; at 89, Mary Baker Eddy was still running the Christian Science Church. At 90, Pablo Picasso was still painting, Artur Rubenstein was still giving concerts; Pablo Casals was still touring at 88. At 91, Adolph Zukor was chairman of Paramount Pictures, and George Abbott, at the age of 100, produced a revival of his first hit *Broadway*. “In the future older workers will be considered not worn out but seasoned, not out of date but able to learn, not ready to retire but open to a more flexible and productive work life.” <sup>7</sup>

**“You’re not getting older. You’re Getting Better.”  
Clairol Commercial.**

# WORDS OF WISDOM FROM THE WISE, AGING, AGED AND DEAD

**“The young man said to the very old man, ‘What is your greatest burden as you grow old?’  
The ancient one replied, ‘That I have nothing to carry.’ ”  
Ancient Chinese Story.**

*The Courage to Grow Old* edited by Phillip L. Berman contains essays by some prominent octogenarians (and beyond) on growing old, with the wisdom and experience that comes from a rich and varied life. We’d like to share some which give us hope and humor.

“People grow old only by deserting their ideals. Years may wrinkle the skin but to give up interest wrinkles the soul.” General Douglas MacArthur, p205.

“Middle Age is when you go to bed at night and think you’re going to feel better in the morning. Old age is when you go to bed at night and hope you wake up in the morning.” Groucho Marx, comedian, p25.

One factor in finding the courage to grow old is to realize that death may come as a friend, not an enemy... . One wonders, in this damned and doomed and polluted world, why anyone would even want to live into the 21st century?” Margaret Coit Elwell, historian, p57.

“Let’s use some literal, fundamental Fundamentalism: Genesis 1:1. God—or that Intelligence—created the universe (with the willing help of the creative evolutionary process). But please note that He—or She—didn’t rest on the second day or the fourth day. He kept going, and then rested (Genesis 1:2) on the seventh day. And any Creator who could turn out a hunk of work like the universe ... is damn well going to get up the morning of the eighth day—and Keep Right On Creating!” Jerome Lawrence, playwright-director, p95.

“Clinging to predictable beliefs and habits is the way in which we ward off chaos that surrounds us, and none of us are immune to it—the aged being the most susceptible. And yet, accepting change, or having the courage to make a change, is really what growing up—and growing old—is all about.” Alfred Painter, philosopher, p125.

“Especially look for—a ‘vital absorbing interest.’ This means something big, ongoing, and personally important to you. A cause, for example worth fighting for—or against.” Dr. Albert Ellis, psychoanalyst, p132.

“Indeed, sanely regarded, death may be seen as an important factor in making life tolerable; it’s very much the answer given by an octogenarian when asked how he accounted for his longevity: ‘Oh, just bad luck.’ ” Malcolm Muggeridge, journalist and social critic, p257.

“Many people are unaware of the numerous examples of intellectual achievements on the part of persons of advanced age and may be encouraged if told about them.—It is a fair assumption that many persons fail to keep alert and productive because of lack of expectancy. What is potential may be lost, not because of some physical ailment, but because of lack of use.” D. Elton Trueblood, minister and philosopher, p298.

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If pertinence are the pithy comments of Betty Friedan in her book, *The Fountain of Youth* and those of Letty Cottin Pogrebin in hers, *Getting Over Getting Older*.

"Age is perceived only as decline or deterioration from youth. An observer from another planet might deduce from these images that Americans who can no longer 'pass' as young have been removed from places of work, study, entertainment, sports, and segregated in senior citizens' 'retirement villages' or nursing homes from which, like concentration camps, they will never return." Friedan, p41.

"We must seek the empowerment of age, new roles for people over 60, 70, 80 in work and business, public and private sectors, church, synagogue, and the volunteer cutting edge of the community, which use their wisdom to help solve the problems of our whole aging society." Friedan, p630.

"... The unexpectedness of this new quest has been my adventure into age. I realized that all the experiences I have had—all of it, mistakes, triumphs, battles lost and won, moments of despair and exaltation, is part of me now: I am myself at this age. ... I have never felt so free." Friedan, p638.

"I don't want to be one of those sour old women, and I don't think it's ageist to say so. ... As I get on in years, I know I won't always feel as good as I do today, and when I'm sick or miserable, I plan to be honest about what ails me, and I expect to be treated with kindness and understanding. But when it comes to normal situations, I hope to be held to normal standards of social demeanor and congeniality rather than to be merely tolerated. I don't ever want to be an obligatory visit on my loved ones' calendar." Pogrebin, p304.

There is also the woman I do not wish to become to myself: depressed, aimless, spiritless, self-pitying ... I hope I have sufficient inner resources to do more with my days than wait for death. I do not want to be like the irascible old matriarch in Albee's 'Three Tall Women' who, when asked what was the happiest time of her life, replies: 'Coming to the end of it. ... When it's all done. When we stop.' I don't ever want to want it to stop. ... Pogrebin, p310.

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## Notes:

1. Markowitz, p7.
2. Richards, p1.
3. Cole, p11.
4. Daniel, p168.
5. Osgood, p176.
6. Daniel, p166.
7. Dychtwald, p43.