

study guide

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the play

A Delicate Balance takes place one weekend in the home of **Tobias** and **Agnes**, a seemingly normal, middle-aged married couple. Living with them is Agnes' sister, **Claire**, an outspoken woman who never turns down a cocktail or a chance to irritate her sister.

Tension is already high in the house when the couple's friends **Edna** and **Harry** show up, asking to stay after being frightened from their own home by an unnamed terror. The weekend is further interrupted by Tobias and Agnes' daughter, **Julia**, returning home after the failure of her fourth marriage. As the group attempts to coexist peacefully, conflict arises, shocking discoveries are made, and each character is forced to deal with issues of friendship, family, loyalty and regret.

*"Do we dislike happiness?
We manufacture such
a portion of our own
despair ...such busy folk."*

– Agnes

a delicate balance

Now playing at Arena Stage at Crystal City

Feb. 6 – Mar. 15, 2009

Written by Edward Albee

Directed by Pam MacKinnon



meet the playwright



"Every honest work is a personal, private yowl, a statement of one individual's pleasure or pain."

— Edward Albee

Edward Albee was born in Washington, D.C., but moved to New York two weeks later when he was adopted by the wealthy Albee family. His adoptive parents' partnership in a national theater chain, the Keith-Albee organization, exposed Albee to the arts at a young age, and he soon developed a passionate love for dramatic arts. At age 20, he dropped out of college and moved to **Greenwich Village** to pursue a career as a writer.

After unsuccessful attempts at poetry and fiction, Albee discovered his talent for writing plays. His first major work, *The Zoo Story*, won Albee a reputation as a fearless playwright willing to examine the uglier aspects of human nature. Four years later, he took Broadway by storm with the controversial and critically acclaimed play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which received a **Tony Award** and is still Albee's most popular work.

In 1967, he received a Pulitzer Prize (see related article) for his play *A Delicate Balance*, which explores, among other things, the upper-class world of his adoptive family. He recently received a Special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement, recognizing him as America's greatest living playwright. He continues to write.

Greenwich Village: neighborhood in New York City where many young artists live

Tony Award: highest professional theater award for excellence in Broadway theater

characters at a glance

Agnes, Tobias' wife, believes that she is the only thing holding her family together. Like Tobias, she attempts to keep the peace by avoiding anything that might upset it.

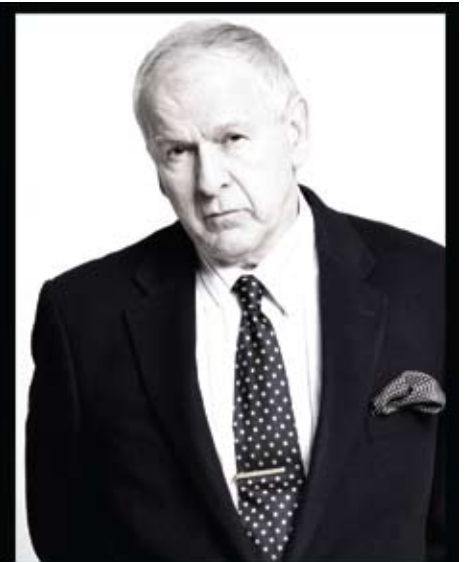
"It's one of those days when everything's underneath. But, we are all together ... which is something."

Kathleen Chalfant as Agnes

Tobias, a well-to-do, retired businessman, is tolerant but tends to avoid confrontation and emotional topics. He constantly asks the people in his home to be kinder to one another.

"There are some times when it's all... too much."

Terry Beaver as Tobias



Carla Harting as Julia

Julia, daughter of Agnes and Tobias, is stuck in a pattern of divorcing men and returning home. Unlike her parents, Julia brings conflict out into the open and demands to be heard.

"I want...what is mine!"

Ellen McLaughlin as Claire

Claire, Agnes' sister and polar opposite, claims not to be an alcoholic but a "willful drinker." She speaks her mind and is least affected by social politeness.

"That will give me everything I need. A smoke, a sip, and a good hard surface."

Theater as Agitation

“Writing should be useful. If it can’t instruct people a little bit more about the responsibilities of consciousness, there’s no point in doing it. But, we all write because we don’t like what we see, and we want people to be better and different. Sure, that’s why we do it.” – Edward Albee

Theater is more than entertainment. It can make people examine their own beliefs and the beliefs of their society. It can be a tool to teach and a catalyst for change. Edward Albee’s work challenges audiences to think for themselves, rather than accepting the world as it is. Albee’s characters show human behavior in absurd, unusual and often upsetting ways. This can make audiences uncomfortable and agitate them, forcing them to consider what may be wrong with their own behavior and society.

In Albee’s first play, *The Zoo Story*, an average businessman on a park bench murders a complete stranger who provokes him. Through this shocking story, Albee hoped to make viewers recognize how easily humans can be

driven to violence, and change such tendencies within themselves.

His following plays, such as *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and *A Delicate Balance*, also depict unusual situations and behavior. By putting strange dialogue and actions in these plays (such as, in *A Delicate Balance*, Harry and Edna running away from an unknown “terror”) Albee put a dark spin on the American family that people were used to seeing idealized on television. He also plagued the families in both plays with serious troubles, like alcoholism and the loss of children. These problems were only made worse by the families’ desires to ignore them and carry on as normal.

When these plays were written in the 1950s, American families tended to

hide serious issues in the attempt to be perceived as normal and accepted. Albee’s plays criticize this idea by showing the horrors to which it could lead. By forcing the audience to witness such uncomfortable and upsetting material through the lens of their own lives, Albee hoped they would be moved to change themselves and the world around them. ●

a! Activity: Albee’s plays criticized society by showing all that can go wrong even when all the rules are followed. Choose a rule or popular belief you think could have negative results and write a short fictional piece in which they occur.

The Ideal American Family



The ideal American family was a happy, perfect one.

In the 1950s America was coming to terms with the aftermath of World War II. The postwar era was a time of mixed messages in American culture. After the horrors of the war, many Americans longed to return to a more normal way of life, but the fear of attack was still there. The older generation was caught up in following proper etiquette, while the younger generation was practicing drills at school on how to protect themselves from atomic bombs.



Children during an air-raid drill, showing not all was perfect in postwar America.

From this period emerged the idealized picture of the American family. It was a time when women were influenced by Emily Post, a socialite writer and icon for social grace. Her books, such as *101 Common Mistakes in Etiquette and How to Avoid Them*, defined success in terms of charm, proper behavior and elegant speech.

Television, which was a new force in American society, aired shows like *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*, which presented idealized families living in properly kept homes and whose members neither raised their voices nor stepped outside of their assigned social roles. With these role models before them, parents taught their children to hide their emotions, to control their tongues and to avoid confrontation. The socially correct behavior was to agree rather than to make a scene.

Plays like *A Delicate Balance*, rather than upholding this image of perfection, scrutinize the American family, trying to see it plainly – flaws and all. They also highlight the consequences of maintaining the appearance of perfection. ●

a! Activity: Talk to your grandparents or other adults who lived in the 1950s about what American values were at the time. Then create a chart comparing and contrasting those to the values of today’s society.

Alcoholics Anonymous



In *A Delicate Balance*, Claire claims she is not an alcoholic but “just a drunk.” As she discusses her time in Alcoholics Anonymous, however, it becomes clear that she is unable to control her drinking. Alcoholism is a serious disease identified by a strong need to drink alcohol and an inability to stop drinking once it has begun. Excessive drinking can cause damage to the liver and brain and increases the risk of certain cancers. Alcoholism is a progressive illness, meaning that it cannot be cured in the ordinary sense, but can only be stopped by giving up drinking entirely.

Alcoholics Anonymous, commonly called AA, is a **fellowship** of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope. They work to solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership in AA is a desire to stop drinking.

Since its founding in 1935, more than 2 million people have called themselves members. AA has groups all over world. Groups hold regular meetings during which recovered alcoholics can share their stories, while recovering members can discuss the challenges they are facing. All members are permitted to remain anonymous, meaning that they are not required to share their names or any personal information about themselves. ●

fellowship: a close association of equals sharing similar experiences and interests



Activity: Seeking help for a problem as serious as alcoholism can be difficult and embarrassing. Think of a time you were in trouble and had difficulty asking for help. How did you eventually gain the courage to do it? How did you feel afterward?

“We submerge our truths and have our sunsets on untroubled waters.” – Claire

The Prize Withheld

In 1962, Edward Albee’s Broadway hit *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was selected by the **Pulitzer Prize** drama panel to win that year’s award for drama. However, the Pulitzer committee overrode the panel, claiming that the play did not represent a “wholesome” view of American life. No drama prize was awarded that year, and half the drama jurors resigned in protest. History has long since justified their original judgment. In the four decades since its debut, the play has been produced around the world and is now regarded as a classic of modern drama. ●

Pulitzer Prize: a prestigious award given for excellence in American literature, drama or journalism

Additional Resources

Books/Plays:

Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? by Edward Albee
The Zoo Story by Edward Albee
Understanding Edward Albee by Matthew C. Roudane

On the Web:

American Theatre Magazine: www.tcg.org/publications/at/jan08/albee.cfm
Alcoholics Anonymous: www.alcoholics-anonymous.org

Video:

A Delicate Balance – Kino Video
Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? - Warner Home Video

Sub/Text

For links and research related to Arena Stage productions, compiled by Arena Stage **dramaturgs**, please visit **Sub/Text: Your Virtual Dramaturg** at www.arenastage.org/season/08-09/sub-text/.

dramaturg– a theater specialist who does research for productions and represents the intentions of the playwright

Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

Arrive at least 30 minutes early.

Visit the restroom before the show starts.

Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers, and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.

Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.

Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!

Do not talk, whisper, sing, or hum.

Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.

Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.

Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.

Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.

Enjoy the show!



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Visit www.arenastage.org for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.