CHAPTER 6

“You Should Terrify Them”: Absurd(?) Violence in Edward Albee and Adrienne Kennedy

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 1960s, Edward Albee was on a meteoric rise to dramatic stardom, and his landmark *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was yet to assault the American public’s sense of propriety and middle-class values. Although many scholars acknowledge his involvement in the Playwrights Unit and pivotal role in ushering in a wave of playwrights that would influence the next generation of American drama, his influence on black writers of the era remains underappreciated. Using interviews and comparisons of early work, this study establishes an aesthetic connection, particularly in regard to polemical Absurdist strategies, between Edward Albee and the then unknown black playwright Adrienne Kennedy. Acknowledging this connection, this study expands the importance of Albee, and—ironically, given the common view of Kennedy’s work as insular and racially self-loathing—calls for a reassessment of the exclusion of Kennedy as a forerunner of the Black Arts Movement.

Introduction

Resistant to labels and adapting a variety of writing styles, Edward Albee demonstrates a complex relationship with the absurd. But, his reverence for the genre’s potential to question and edify is beyond doubt. In a 1962 article, he claims, “For just as it is true that our response to color and form was forever altered once the impressionist painters put their minds to canvas, it is just as true that the playwrights of *The Theatre of the Absurd* have forever altered our response to the theatre.”¹ It is, I will argue, equally true that Albee’s influence has forever altered the course of African American theater. Adrienne Kennedy and Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) were participants in Albee’s Albarwild Theatre Arts workshop, and the *oeuvres* of both artists exhibit absurdist devices in their works. Here, Kennedy is my primary focus.

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Although scholars often readily acknowledged Kennedy's participation in the Playwrights' Unit at the Cherry Lane Theatre, created and run by Albee, Richard Barr, and Clinton Wilder, few scholars have acknowledged the aesthetic impact that Albee had on Kennedy. It is also readily acknowledged by many that Albee gave Kennedy her big break by selecting and producing *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, but such acknowledgment still does not quite evaluate the shared aesthetics of teacher and student. One exception is Philip C. Kolin, who, in addition to producing an impressive body of scholarship on Edward Albee and Adrienne Kennedy individually, documented in a 1989 article a compelling list of shared features between *The Zoo Story* and *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. In “From the Zoo to the Funnyhouse,” Kolin ponders, “As immensely popular as Albee’s work has been, it is startling to consider that not more has been written about Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse* in relationship to Albee’s early plays, most particularly *The Zoo Story* [sic].” The current essay is not an attempt to improve upon Kolin’s excellent close reading and comparison of setting, theme, and symbolism in the two works. Instead, the aim is to construct an aesthetic-intellectual history by reasserting this artistic relationship, examining the authors’ philosophy of dramatized violence and audience, and showing the significance of the Albee-Kennedy relationship to African American theatre. Furthermore, my interest here is in looking to Albee as a variable, a prominent one among several, that would explain the degree to which Kennedy, as Kolin observes, singularly “depart[s] from the realism of Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun* or the social protests plays of Ed Bullins or Amiri Baraka.”

From their individual interviews and comments on the process and purpose of theatre, it is possible to sketch a shared dramatic philosophy. For instance,

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2 Carol Allen acknowledges Albee’s influence, but, following a different agenda, argues for recognizing the West African cultural elements in *Funnyhouse*: “Kennedy enrolled in a workshop run by Edward Albee, and, as a result, she acquired the wherewithal and backing to go public with her art.” Carol Dawn Allen, *Peculiar Passages: Black Women Playwrights, 1875–2000*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 172. Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby come close to acknowledging the significance of Albee and Kennedy’s relationship (in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*), observing that “if Albee provided Shepard with an artistic boost through his Village Voice review of *Icarus’s Mother*, his support of Adrienne Kennedy was even more direct” (358). Wilmeth and Bigsby’s comment implies a personal and aesthetic bond between Albee and Kennedy.


4 Ibid., 8.