

“H-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l”

Edward Albee and Homophobic Theater Criticism

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Abstract

As Edward Albee has been regarded as one of the most provocative playwrights of the 20th century, his works have been the subject of heated discussions. Theater criticism has had a special focus on Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, a drama about the encounter of two married couples. This play has been given several labels: the work of a genius, pornographic, extremist, cynical, pessimistic, etc. – but after the premiere some critics came up with a special category for such works: homosexual theater. According to their point of view these works have a hidden agenda, namely, to attack the foundations of the “normal” (that is: heterosexual) society. My paper examines the sociological/political circumstances among which such criticism could have emerged.

Keywords: Edward Albee, McCarthyism, homosexuality, Lavender-scare, American drama

In 1962, Richard Schechner, the soon-to-be director and important theatrical theoretician, went to the Billy Rose Theater to see the latest work by a young American dramatist. After the performance he wrote a vitriolic piece of criticism of the play for *The Tulane Drama Review*:

The American theater, our theater, is so hungry, so voracious, so corrupt, so morally blind, so perverse that Virginia Woolf is a success. I am outraged at a theater and an audience that accepts as a masterpiece an insufferably long play with great pretensions that lacks intellectual size, emotional insight, and dramatic electricity. I’m tired of play-long “metaphors” – such as the illusory child of Virginia Woolf – which are neither philosophically, psychologically nor poetically valid. I’m tired of

plays that are badly plotted and turgidly written being excused by such palaver as “organic unity” or “inner form.” I’m tired of morbidity and sexual perversity which are there only to titillate an impotent and homosexual theater and audience. I’m tired of Albee. (qtd. in Paller 176)

Nearly every researcher of American drama would agree now with the statement that *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* transformed Albee overnight from an off-Broadway experimenter into an American classic (McCarthy 59). Besides, the play had a two-year run and won two prizes: therefore Schechner’s criticism seems to be unfounded. Almost each sentence of his opinion contains something controversial that is worth examining. Certain parts of Schechner’s argument may easily induce a sophisticated discussion (for example about the issue whether the son in *Who’s Afraid* is entirely fictional or not), while other parts we can easily dismiss (Schechner’s remarks that Albee’s works are without intellectual depth and dramatic suspense suggest a rather superficial interpretation). However, it is the last sentence of the quotation which contains the most important ideas, where the critic asserts no less than the view that the work of the dramatist is low in quality because it belongs to homosexual theater, and theater culture itself is corrupted and immoral if it tolerates such phenomena.

How can *Who’s Afraid* be characterized as a text that belongs to “homosexual theater”? It is important to remember that Schechner was not at all alone in his opinion; in fact it was not *Who’s Afraid*, but rather *Tiny Alice* that had become the target of a serious attack by Philip Roth, who called the play a homosexual day-dream and threatened the readers that the age when homosexual characters appear on the stage undisguised was near (Paller 178).¹ One year after Schechner’s criticism, the star psychologist of the 1960s, Donald Kaplan, published a paper of over thirty pages on the subject of “homosexual drama,” identifying *Who’s Afraid* as the prototype of this genre. Kaplan argues that such plays result from the rebellion of some spoiled children who could not bear the fact that they do not get what they want, and also cannot accept that they are sometimes made to subject themselves to the norms of the society. Therefore, Kaplan comes to the conclusion that this kind of theater is written by egocentric authors with an unstable identity, so the experience the audience may gain here is nothing but humiliating for a “normal” (that is: heterosexual) American (Paller 178).

Considerably more examples of such opinions might be cited, but these clearly support my argument that the critics were not so much interested in the text or the production as in the author himself, or to be more precise, in the playwright’s sexuality. The schema that the above-mentioned critics use is simple; the homosexual writer creates in the “homosexual genre,” whose frame he cannot abandon. The essence of the genre is camouflage, since “perversion” (that is, the homosexual relationship) wears the mask of innocence, and leaves traces only for those who have been initiated. The critics, however, just like the code-breakers of the Second World War, are familiar with this language; they cannot be tricked, so they are able to draw the society’s attention to the dangers these text contain.

Tennessee Williams reacted strongly to what might be called “code-breaking hermeneutics” in an interview, in which he argued:

I've read things that say that Blanche was a drag queen. Blanche DuBois, ya know... that George and Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* by Albee were a pair of homosexuals... these charges are ridiculous!... If I am writing a female character, goddamnit, I'm gonna write a female character, I'm not gonna write a drag queen! If I wanna write a drag queen, I'll write a drag queen... (Devlin 189)

We have two points of argument here contradicting each other. One point of argument assumes that the author's personal intentions just "slipped into" the text unwillingly, therefore every work can be decoded by means of information about the author. In contrast, the other point of argument claims that the author is the true master of his/her text, and nothing appears in the text against his/her intention. It would be easy to point out the weaknesses of both of these arguments, but since literary theory has already done so in several ways, it would be redundant to do so again. The real question behind such arguments is why homosexuality became such an important issue for theater criticism, and what the real reasons for Schechner's anger were.

Schechner's argument is very much connected to the process of the witch-hunting started by Joseph McCarthy and his Committee (HUAC). Surprisingly, the narrative provided by most historians about the actions of the HUAC lacks some important information. Although they examine the "Red Scare" in every detail, just a few scholars seem to know about another kind of menace, the "Lavender Scare." For example Gary A. Donaldson's *The Making of a Modern America* devotes a chapter to the history of Cold War America in which the author gives a seemingly detailed summary of the politics of Joseph McCarthy according to which the senator launched an investigation against (only) communists and leftist intellectuals (Donaldson 40–44). This view is shared by Arthur Miller, who in the instructions to *The Crucible* connects the plot of the play to the politics of the 1950s and shows that the word "communists" works in the same way as the term "witch" did in the 17th century: it conjures up a fear of the uncanny while launching a mindless, endless, irrational hunt and also serving certain political (and therefore very real) agendas.

Miller and Donaldson share the misconception that the HUAC investigations were "only" about communists. In an appearance on *Meet The Press*, where politicians had to answer journalists' questions, McCarthy said that in his view the State Government was full of people who are "communists or worse" (Doherty 88, emphasis added). The question what "worse" means should have been asked, but unfortunately it was not. Today, thanks to David K. Johnson's book, *The Lavender Scare. The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*, we have some idea of what McCarthy meant by that particular word. Johnson's research showed that besides fighting against the red demon, the senator and his associates launched another campaign behind the scenes – a campaign against gay citizens (Johnson).² Alongside the Red Scare, another threat appeared, termed the Lavender Scare, playing on the perceived danger of homosexuality. The 1950s and 1960s saw the emergence of a new terminology for gay people; they were "security risks" (Johnson 14). Besides being repulsive, the gay subject was now to be regarded as a dangerous, destructive agent who threatened the integrity of the nation from inside.

The Kinsey reports and the “secret box” of sexuality

It would be a serious mistake to say that homophobia appeared exclusively as a result of the senator’s activities. In the 1930s several attempts were made to exclude homosexuals from the public sphere (see Chauncey 331–355); in the army, physicians screened soldiers on the basis of their sexual orientation. According to official reports the procedure was extremely humiliating, and the recruits had to answer disturbing questions. However, one must note here, the aim of the procedure was not the stigmatization of gay people; rather, the “experts” thought that though gay people could manage in everyday life, in the army they would be exposed to such high levels of stress that their frail nerves would not be able to cope with it. At this stage, homosexuals were not dangerous psychopaths in the investigators’ eyes – as the fact that gay people were subsequently discharged with honor proves. However, by the 1940s the conditions for gay people went from bad to worse; policemen started to patrol in New York’s Central Park, harassing men who “looked suspicious”, and the owners of gay bars were threatened (see Bérubé). Under the Truman government workers were investigated several times, during which not just their political orientation was examined but their sexual orientation as well (Donaldson 41). Moreover, the Pervert Elimination Campaign (launched by the Truman administration) provided a wide range of interpretations for the term “pervert”.³ All this shows that McCarthy radicalized an existing discourse on the boundaries of “normal” sexuality – a discourse which after the 1940s became more and more aggressive. Anything that differed from the norm became suspicious and a problem for society – therefore it needed to be investigated and categorized. In 1948, Alfred Kinsey published his research under the title *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, a report that ignited an angry debate on the nature of the “legal” ways of love. This research shocked the public since it revealed not only that American men who had been interviewed had committed adultery and paid for sex, but also – even more importantly – that 37 percent of them admitted having sexual relations with a partner of the same sex.

The scandal that followed the Kinsey reports provides an excellent field of research for sociologists who share a Foucauldian perspective. The discourse on sexuality itself became dangerous; even mentioning it in public could constitute a threat to American morals. In his work on the American theater of the Cold War period, Bruce McConachie shows that the metaphor of containment is of great importance in this area. According to McConachie, the National Security Act which was introduced in 1947 creates a metaphor in which the Nation appears as a container. The United States appears as a “box” containing values and secrets to be protected at any cost. Therefore, according to the Act, it is of great importance to restrict the rights of civilians in the name of national security; every citizen is a member of the nation, and everyone must be accounted for (McConachie 11).

The nation/container contains other, smaller containers, the most important of which is the family – which contains the American Character. Following McConachie’s argument, sexuality could be also described as a container, or to be more precise, a closed, dark box which can be located somewhere inside the family but outside the American character. There is a reason why I call it a box: in the 1930s the psychiatrist William Reich created a device called the Orgone Box. This machine was approximately the size of a refrigerator,

and what it did was the “production” of orgasms. Reich’s work was banned ten years later. The problem with it was exactly the same as with Kinsey: both of them legitimized the discourse on sexuality. Naturally, for that very reason Kinsey had followers who, in the name of a sexual revolution, tried to save American men and women from moral corruption by describing certain positions and techniques in detail. At the end of the 1950s a journalist from *Time Magazine* described the whole country as one big Orgone Box, since nearly everyone was talking about sexuality (See Reumann 202). It seemed that criticism of Kinsey’s work would never stop; among the self-appointed “experts” we can find physicians, theologians, literary critics, and even a secretive Mrs. W. who described herself as an American wife and mother. As a result, citizens – in the guise of everyday arbiters of normality – started to notice certain phenomena that had previously been considered unimportant. Moreover, sexual perversion (including homosexuality) became the enemy that needed to be stopped, and it was considered very important to recognize deviants before it was too late. Robert Corben argues that in the 1950s, to determine one’s sexual orientation became as important as identifying one’s race (Corbert 9). The gay individual, who had been ridiculed in secret, was now to be rejected or/and saved (a task for women and psychologists), since the spread of the “disease” threatened the integrity and the future of the nation. Homosexuality was characterized as an illness similar to alcoholism; the so-called experts considered themselves capable of identifying gay people on the basis of certain symptoms (weakness, instability, traumatized behavior), and – because such an individual represented a threat for the whole society – forcing treatment on him/her. However, addiction was not frightening enough to be used as a parallel with homosexuality. In her book, the *American Sexual Character: Sex, Gender, and National Identity in the Kinsey Reports*, Miriam G. Reumann cites medical reports from the 1960s, according to which gay individuals were described as repulsive and pathetic abominations of nature; in 1963 the American Psychiatric Committee described homosexuality as a psychopathological self-disorder, which develops as the effect of emotional abuse (Reumann 174).

Even the parallel with alcoholism is more threatening than it initially appears. The addict is often described as a person who can be manipulated easily, and therefore the unknown enemy might exploit him in the war on capitalism. It is not surprising that McCarthy initiated a new kind of comparison in the 1950s; homosexuals are just like communists. Both the reds and the queers are hiding themselves. Both create unique subcultures that are hard to define, both communicate through symbols, and their main desire to create an international brotherhood which, in the case of the gay community, is called the *homintern* (Higgins 287). While investigations were launched against homosexuals, journalists tried to direct attention to McCarthy’s error; however, according to some commentators it was not the absurdity of the process that was problematic but the fact that the senator failed to realize that gay people were in fact much worse than communists. Senator Kenneth Wherry addressed the government with a rhetorical question: “Could you imagine a worst threat against the U.S. than the perverts?” (Johnson 21). Also, politicians defended the firing of 600 employees from public office as a result of the necessary “purging” of perverts (Johnson 21).

Stories from Europe about homosexual conspiracies just worsened the situation;

though these affairs had taken place in the distant past, the hysterical atmosphere of the 1950s was able to breathe new life into them. For instance there was the story of Philip Eulenburg, a member of Wilhelm II's court who was condemned for homosexuality and treason. Such stories helped link treason to homosexuality in the mind of the average American; for example, Westbrook Pegler, referring to the Eulenburg story, announced that homosexuality was "worse than communism. This is like cancer" (Johnson 35). The homosexual character underwent fundamental changes in the public mind during these years; initially the homosexual was viewed as suffering from psychological illness, then he became a traitor, and then he was identified as the embodiment of the illness itself, without any ideological background. Cancer is not the most appropriate metaphor here; the metaphor of a virus would be more apt, since there is no cure; homosexuality hides itself and spreads invisibly until it destroys the American character, the family, and the Nation itself. Eventually homosexuality was separated from communism, therefore even when the Red Scare seemed to fade, there was no change in the attitude towards gay people; at times it seemed that the situation worsened. In Boise, Idaho a panic in 1955 started when the Idaho *Daily Salesman* reported the arrest of three men who allegedly had sexual relationships with young boys. To unveil all the "homosexual cycles" the police interrogated hundreds of suspects. According to a columnist of *Time Magazine* the citizens of Boise were shocked by the thought that their town had become a home for the "homosexual mob". In his book titled *Is Homosexuality a Menace?* Guy Mathews writes about gay refugees who, after having been exiled from Washington, went to New York to take up jobs in offices and theaters (Mathews 138–39).

All the above does not justify Schechner's outburst, but it does provide a perspective on the political context which may help us today to understand the reasons for it. Being aware of the hysteria, the young theater critic thought that the fact that the author of *Who's Afraid* was gay had relevance for the play. The general discourse about perverts and deviants created an interpretive strategy which – just like positivism – puts the author in the center; with the obvious exception that in this case only one characteristic of the author is relevant. Sexual orientation hence becomes so important that if the audience lacked information about it, they could easily misunderstand the play. Moreover, the stakes are very high, as such texts hide dangerous, subversive meanings that can manipulate the reader. Gay characters, just like "real" gay people, disguise themselves, thus creating theater inside the theater – but authors leave traces, so the informed audience member can see the truth behind the mask. Knowing that the author is a homosexual in their eyes means knowing how to break the codes, find the real meaning, and eliminate the threat; and it would seem that this also becomes the main objective for some theater critics confronted by the plays of Edward Albee. For this reason, interpretations similar to Schechner's critique began to proliferate; according to C.W.E. Bigsby, one member of the Pulitzer Prize advisory board, W.D. Maxwell, agreed with the young critic's opinion (Bigsby 257). Stephen J. Bottoms cites the drama critic Howard Taubman, who wrote an article in *The New York Times* on the "homosexual influence" on Broadway, and pays much attention to *Who's Afraid* (Bottoms 102). In 1964, Tome Driver, in his review on *Who's Afraid*, argues that we can see homosexual couples on the stage (Driver 38). After the film version of the play appeared, the number of these speculations increased, and Albee admitted to William

Flanagan in an interview that he had once written a letter to a critic of *Newsweek*, asking him to check his information. The answer was: the critic always knows the play better than the writer ("Edward Albee: The Art")

It might be true that a critic has a more sophisticated opinion on a certain work than the author (since as a judge, the critic has a more objective position), but this time the credit must undoubtedly go to Albee. A professional close reading of the text does not provide any evidence of the character's (latent) homosexuality.⁴ It is strange, however, that if the critics had wanted to attack Albee because he was gay and wrote about homosexuality, they could have done it by focusing on *The Zoo Story*. As I am about to show in the following part of my paper, the playwright's first successful work offers a sophisticated, sarcastic and serious criticism of the sexual politics and norms of the 1960s.

"Is he?"

The Zoo Story – "which was written in 1958, passed from friend to friend, from country to country, from manuscript to tape to production (in Berlin in 1959) before it made its way back to the United States" (Weales 22) – made a most effective debut in the history of American drama, according to C.W.E. Bigsby (Bigsby 129), and "was one of the first American plays to sensitize audiences to the explosiveness of Off Broadway" (Roudané 44). Although it ignited many discussions, it was not labelled as illicit or inappropriate, despite Jerry's constant remarks about sexuality.⁵ Jerry speaks about his pornographic cards, and when he learns that Peter used to have the same kind of toys, he starts interrogating Peter about whether he threw them out after his wedding. Jerry is obviously interested in Peter's love life and he is very eager to know the reasons why Peter no longer needs the cards. He is making Peter uncomfortable, and Peter prefers to avoid the subject. Then Jerry moves on to another story: he starts to describe his "fat, ugly, mean, stupid, unwashed, misanthropic, cheap, drunken bag of garbage" (Albee 25) landlady, and her affections towards him ("and somewhere, somewhere in the back of that pea-sized brain of hers, an organ developed just enough to let her eat, drink and emit, she has some foul parody of sexual desire. And I, Peter, I am the object of her sweaty lust.") (Albee 25). After describing his landlady as an animal, Jerry focuses on her dog; the main characteristic of the red-haired dog is, that "it's certainly a misused one... almost always has an erection... of sorts. That's red, too" (27)

It is important to keep in mind that the play contains the above thoughts in a social context where sexual behavior has a political reference, and anything that is out of the ordinary becomes dangerous. (The sociologist Pitrim Sorokin declared in 1956 that the most dangerous enemy of the U.S. was not China or the Soviet Union but the sexual revolution, because the latter transforms the character, creating a threat to ethical norms.) (Reumann 13). Clearly Jerry goes against ethical norms when he starts to discuss the delicate subject of sexuality with a stranger. Mentioning the pornographic cards can be understood as an ironic reference – namely, Jerry referring to Peter's poor sexual life. Therefore, in an ironic interpretation, Jerry could be seen as a "sexual freedom-fighter", who sacrifices himself to create a "real" human being from the vegetable-like editor, Peter, who was exiled from his home to the park. But the text does not remain within the heterosexual frame, since suddenly Jerry makes a surprising confession about his own past:

JERRY: to have sex with, or, how is it put ? ... make love to anybody more than once. Once; that's it ... Oh, wait; for a week and a half, when I was fifteen ... and I hang my head in shame that puberty was late ... I was a h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l. I mean, I was queer ... [Very fast] ... queer, queer, queer ... with bells ringing, banners snapping in the wind. And for those eleven days, I met at least twice a day with the park superintendent's son ... a Greek boy, whose birthday was the same as mine, except he was a year older. I think I was very much in love ... maybe just with sex. (Albee 24)

According to Michael Paller, the appearance of a character who speaks about his homosexual past on stage breaches the norms in itself. Moreover, this character regrets nothing in his past but being a late bloomer, and he speaks hatefully about a woman (making it plausible to think that he has the same opinion about all females). Furthermore, in the end, this character could seem heroic since he sacrifices himself to save Peter.

Though I agree with Paller's argument, I think the real provocation is in Jerry's remark saying that he *was* a homosexual. According to this wording, now he is no longer a homosexual, since he has had relationships with women; but if this is so, the question arises where we can find the borderline between heterosexuality and homosexuality. By raising that question, the play touches the most sensitive nerve of the contemporary discourse on sexuality. As Miriam G. Reumann argues, after the Kinsey reports the border between homosexuality and heterosexuality seems to have become increasingly blurred. Even the differences between the sexes had become uncertain. While at the beginning of the 1950s scientists agreed that one act of homosexual intercourse did not make anyone homosexual, this perspective suddenly changed, and every unconventional relationship between two individuals of the same sex was regarded as a form of perversion. A special taxonomy arose to characterize gay people on the basis of the time they had spent in such relationships; a person can be an experimenting, an obsessive or compulsory homosexual. However, the main point is that any deviance from the norms places individuals into one of the three categories, declaring them deviant for life; only the seriousness of her/his condition can be evaluated differently. The same person who was harmless at the beginning of the 1940s became a dangerous pervert; this is precisely the reason why John Cheever characterizes the climate of the 1960s as a time when "everyone worried about homosexuality".

They were worried about other things, too, but their other anxieties were published, discussed, and ventilated, while their anxieties about homosexuality remained in the dark: remained unspoken. Is he? Was he? Did they? Am I? Could I? seemed to be at the back of everyone's mind. (Cheever 157)

The same questions arise regarding Jerry's character. If he is not homosexual, it is hard to define his earlier relationship with a young Greek man; though in the other case, as a gay person, how could he have had those one-night stands he is bragging about? The blind spots of the semiotic system responsible for recognizing the national threats become obvious: either, under a certain threshold, there is no need to asseverate the breaking of the norms (but where is that threshold precisely?), or the signs of heterosexuality are not objectively reliable. The war against perversion promised to restore order by fixing and defining the

correct categories, but the only result it was able to achieve was to make their use more chaotic. During the 1940s it was easy to characterize a gay individual; he was feminine, vulnerable, a little ridiculous, easy to recognize, yet in spite of his queerness he meant no harm. As soon as homosexuality became a security risk, there was no definite way to read the word “deviant”, just as there was no objective method to recognize communist agents. Everybody could be like “that”. This chaos caused serious problems during the war against the Lavender Scare; one woman reported several of her colleagues because she suspected that they were lesbians. She could support her suspicion with no facts but one: she felt uncomfortable in the company of those women. Marcelle Henry became suspicious because, just like Jerry, he had too many partners; hence she asked before the committee how a heterosexual could be as much of a threat as a homosexual.

In conclusion, the narrative that could serve as a foundation of the discourse that divides human beings on the basis of their sexuality is itself a kind of zoo story: it is constantly being referred to, though never being told openly. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to use the metaphor “witch-hunt” to describe the Lavender Scare, rather than the Red Scare. At the end of Miller’s play *The Crucible*, it becomes obvious that there is no ending of the hunt, since there is no proper definition of the term “Witch”. After a certain period of time, nearly everyone can be suspected of having the Devil as a Master. Jerry’s character is provocative in many respects – but most of all because he raises the most disturbing question pertaining to a paranoid subject area: “Is he (gay)”?

Notes

¹ According to Gerald Weales, the beginning of the play might support Roth’s opinion, since we can find homoerotic remarks in the dialog of the characters, but – Weales argues – these jokes and insults have little importance throughout the play. One respondent to Roth’s article pointed out that the writer-publicist is completely wrong about Albee’s play, since homosexuality is not at all disguised; namely “Tiny Alice” refers to the male anus in the gay community.

² At the beginning of his book, Johnson points out that though the witch-hunt against homosexuals sparked a hysteria that pervaded the whole society, yet only a few historians have recognized the seriousness of the Lavender Scare. It would seem that even the pioneering scholars of queer theory have very little information about this; Alan Sinfield addresses the problem of the campaign against homosexuals during the Cold War, but he thinks that this happened only in the army. See Alan Sinfield. *Cultural-Politics: Queer Reading* (New York: Routledge 2005, 40–59). There are just a few works that share Johnson’s agenda of investigating the sexual politics of this time thoroughly; without doubt, the books of John D’Emilio (with a special focus on *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of the Homosexual Minority, 1940–1970*) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) and David Savran belong among the pioneering works in the field.

³ David K. Johnson describes the case of a young man, Scott, who was harassed by policemen in the name of the Campaign. While walking in Central Park, Scott wanted to use the toilet, but going into one he noticed a suspicious-looking man, so he decided to wait outside. When he wanted to enter the men’s room again, a policeman stopped him and asked for his credentials. It turned out that

the suspicious-looking man was an undercover policeman, and the fact that Scott wanted to avoid him made him suspect Scott of being a pervert (Johnson 61).

⁴ Suppose we accept that because Martha and George are struggling, and torturing each other, they are homosexuals; following that logic, that would mean that *all* the fighting couples in dramatic and literary history are also gay... and if this is so, we should immediately start to reconstruct the Western canon.

⁵ However, politics did not entirely leave the play unmentioned; Prescott Bush called the work “filthy” and “infected by Communism.” Philip C. Kolin. “Albee’s early one-act plays: A new American playwright from whom much is to be expected.” In Stephen Bottoms (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 17.)

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