# The Dramatist

The Journal of the Dramatists Guild of America, Inc.



## The Albee issue

www.dramatistsguild.com

SEP/OCT 2017

$7 USD
€10 EUR

VOL. 20 NO 1
SEP/OCT 2017

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The **Dramatist**
is the official journal of **Dramatists Guild of America,** the professional organization of playwrights, composers, lyricists and librettists.

**It is the only national magazine devoted to the business and craft of writing for theatre.**

# ALBEE ISSUES

## with Cheryl Davis, Anita Hollander, Timothy Huang, Michael R. Jackson, Penny Pun, and Ralph Sevush

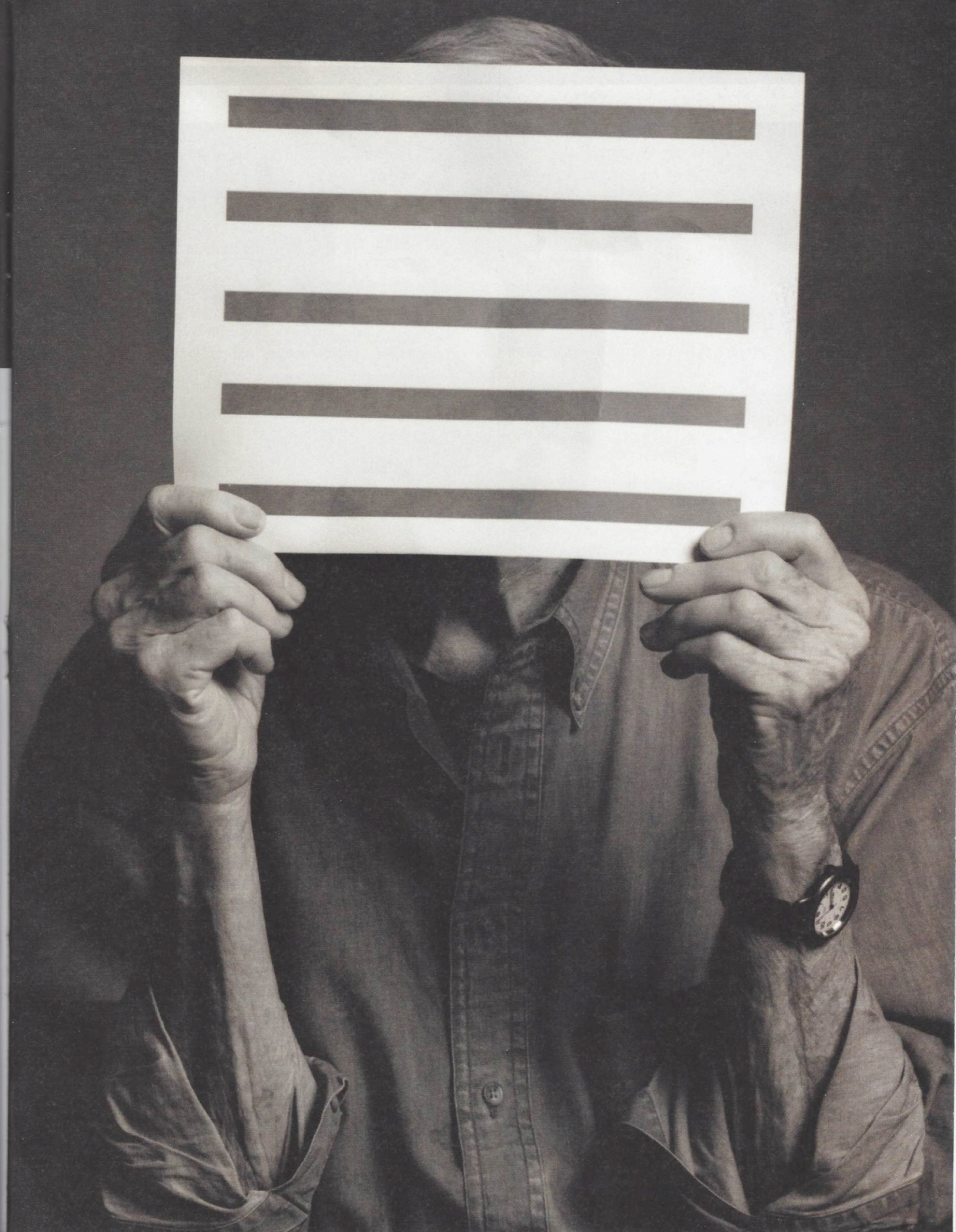
## moderated by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: I am someone who admired Albee so much when he was alive. In fact, I still admire him, and his loss felt both personal and professional to me. I used to refer to him as Our Elder Statesman, because he seemed to be the guy at the top of the mountain with this singular career and body of work behind him, who still seemed actively invested in those of us coming up in his wake, in protecting the sanctity of the craft. I loved the way he spoke about the empowerment of the writer in the room in the face of meddling collaborators. I feel like there was so much I learned from him, not only as an artist but also as an educator and advocate.

Then the controversy at the Shoebox Theatre in Oregon bubbled up regarding the color-conscious casting of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The way that the play and Albee's work was being positioned in the discourse made me nervous because I think I give Albee a little more credit for his own political self-awareness regarding these kinds of choices, though I can't speak for the estate.

I was interested in talking with a diverse range of playwrights about Albee's legacy professionally and artistically, but also about the question of a Playwright's Life beyond Life Itself. What is it about our work and our intentions in that work that is to be protected? What should—or simply, *do*—we give up when we give up our bodies?

So to start: are we all Albee fans? I am, obviously. I really love several of his plays. I think his body of work has immense value in-and-of itself, and I hope that it lasts in some way.



CHERYL DAVIS: I would consider myself an Albee fan as well. I'm an admirer, and I love *Virginia Woolf*. I think that one of his legacies is also his support of his other artists in this community. I think that's a phenomenal legacy to have.

ANITA HOLLANDER: I was going to say the same thing. What I found most impressive about Albee was all of the young writers that he nurtured – not always pleasantly, from what I've heard. Extremely blunt. I only got one small taste of that. But he undoubtedly was supportive of young, up-and-coming playwrights, and I've heard from so many that he was the most influential on them. That's the part of Albee that I most admire and am inspired by.

MICHAEL R. JACKSON: Yeah, he's a great writer. He's a great advocate for young writers. He's an elder statesman. He's all of those things. But I'm in a bit of a revival boycott right now. While I appreciate the individual greatness of Albee and others, I'm feeling a little ambivalent about worshipping the legacies of these people.

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: I think we should absolutely be interrogating this idea of "legacy." I certainly don't *worship* the legacy of Albee. I'm sure some people do. But it seems like something happens when the playwright as a human being in a human body is no longer in the picture. Albee is now Albee, Incorporated, or The Estate of Albee. You get subsumed into your body of work in some interesting way.

CHERYL DAVIS: I was going to say, while the playwright is still alive, they have the right to make changes and accept things like funky casting. And I've heard that about other estate issues, that the individual is more willing to make changes and take risks as opposed to the estate.

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: Are you an Albee fan, Penny?

PENNY PUN: I hadn't read any of his works, or any American plays, for that matter, until a few years ago when I started college. So "fan" is too big a word at this moment. However, because of an assignment I did when I was an intern, I got to listen to a lot of his interviews. I do understand that he was a great advocate for authorial rights and young playwrights, and I really admire that.

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: I'm sensing a hesitation to talk about the work itself, but it feels like an important piece here. Is everyone here familiar with what happened with this theatre in Oregon? I just want to make sure we all know what I'm talking about.

MICHAEL R. JACKSON: I think it would be useful to clarify because, at the beginning of [the controversy], I misunderstood it.

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: Essentially, the Shoebox Theatre was putting on a production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and the director had cast the part of Nick as an African American male.

[The theatre] hadn't actually cleared the rights before they went into rehearsals with it. They were about to open, when they finally applied for the rights. The Albee Estate asked them to submit a cast list—perhaps triggered by the director's asking for changes within the script to justify the use of a black body in this part. The estate said, "No."

This touched on a major sore spot in the theatre right now with regards to representation. It blew up very quickly into a demonizing of the estate as this sort of cabal of white supremacist thinking.

Something that was being constantly brought up in responses was this idea of, like, "You need to be in the 21st century and bring the work into the 21st century." Yet for me it was never a question of whether or not the estate was doing the right thing.

I remember, as far back as my college days, hearing people talk about how you couldn't do an Albee play with black people unless you were doing *The Death of Bessie Smith*. And the argument Albee was making—at least as I received it second or third or fourth hand—was that he was writing about a specific culture and specific people, e.g. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants in the mid-to-late twentieth century and their various existential whatevers, and that

The Wallis and Deaf West Theatre's co-production of *Edward Albee's At Home at the Zoo* directed by Coy Middlebrook. Left to right: Troy Kotsur (Peter) and Russell Harvard (Jerry).

KEVIN PARRY FOR THE WALLIS.

if you want to see other stories, you should find the playwrights who write those stories.

I felt he was slyly diverting attention and energy away from himself and towards "pluralizing the scene" in some way.

ANITA HOLLANDER: There's a part of what you just said that I somehow missed in all of the reports, this idea that they were trying to change the script.

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: Well, it wasn't reported very widely.

ANITA HOLLANDER: That's what turns a corner for me. As a writer, as a director, and as an actor with a disability, with one leg, I've come up against this all the time. The idea that if you're going to go onstage with one leg, people need to have an explanation of it somewhere in the script. I've been a three-legged Grizabella in *Cats*, and there was no explanation [given]. Something happened to this cat, and now she's standing on one leg singing "Memory." *[Laughter]*

But in *Brighton Beach Memoirs* or *Fiddler on the Roof*, a one-legged Blanche or Golde who walks differently or moves differently or is different has to be explained. This happens in casting when they say, "Well, you're so good, but we can't explain this. How are we gonna put you out there?" So that is a very interesting point. Having a black man in this character, they felt the need to explain it away.

That's when it's sticky for me. You shouldn't have to change it. You discover more about what is there in the play *because* somebody who you didn't expect to be playing that role is playing that role. The audience walks out with a deeper meaning.

But, I get that what you're saying is that Albee himself said, "I'm writing about these white people on the campus of a college." I get that.

TIMOTHY HUANG: I wonder if there's any benefit at this point to propose a notion that the conversation about nontraditional casting versus the conversation

about casting a performer of color in a play or a musical about race are, while similar, actually not the same. I've discovered that not everybody is aware of that. I'd like to throw that out to the table and maybe hear what our responses are.

CHERYL DAVIS: Are you talking colorblind versus color-conscious casting, or ...

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: What do you mean? "Nontraditional" versus "plays about race"?

TIMOTHY HUANG: I guess what I mean is if I were to just cast a play that was not necessarily about race or gender and cast it nontraditionally in a way that didn't require–

CHERYL DAVIS: Your standard white faces.

TIMOTHY HUANG: –where a performance of any color could, yeah. That's a different conversation. The need for that and the reason that has arisen in our world today is a little bit of a different conversation than, say, casting all Asian people in *Miss Saigon*, which is still necessary from a representational perspective.

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: Well, I guess I live in the camp of "all plays are 'about' race." By creating a division between "what is" and "what isn't" dealing with something, we sort of allow things like Albee's work to not have to account for the ways in which they traffic in whiteness. Those plays are definitely about whiteness. They're not about *all* whiteness. And they're certainly not *just* about whiteness. But Albee said he was writing about a very specific population—white, wealthy, highly-educated, et cetera, et cetera—dealing with feelings of repression and how they don't actually have any black friends. That was his milieu. That was his upbringing. The same way Eugene O'Neill was constantly writing about Irish immigrants trying to assimilate into a dominant culture, you know what I mean?

I think for me, I want to make sure that race doesn't become just "subject matter," like "grief" or "marriage." Race is a reality that permeates all those things and then some. It's a system we all live and participate in as American citizens and, I might even argue, as human beings, period. And it informs every single story we want to tell about ourselves. My challenge always to any media is, why is it that I am called a black writer, but lovely folks like Doug Wright and Marsha Norman and Sarah Ruhl and Annie Baker aren't ever called white playwrights? What is that double standard pointing at, exactly?

TIMOTHY HUANG: That's why I bring it up. There's a very proud tradition of yellow-facing a white person in the role of *The King and I* that I think bears addressing. Why is that so inappropriate if a guy who looks like me is allowed to play Mercutio or Biff Loman? I find that those two things are not necessarily incongruous, and the reason they aren't for me is because some plays are about history and culture and particularly address that whereas others are more just about where we are today.

MICHAEL R. JACKSON: When we use the term "nontraditional casting," the tradition is whiteness. I think that's something worth zeroing in on, since whiteness is at the center of so many of these conversations.

Even when you talk about the issue of "diversity," what they're usually talking about is a white person or persons at the center and then sprinkling in everyone else, which can in and of itself be a positive thing in terms of numbers of bodies on the stage. But the thing that's still happening is that whiteness is centered and ruling everything.

ANITA HOLLANDER: We have that in the disability community, too. The default is that everybody is able-bodied on the stage. We've always had that situation of actors who don't have disabilities playing the roles that are disabled, and then performers with disabilities don't get the roles that don't have disabilities. So it finally leaves them absolutely nowhere at all because, "Well, we'll have to explain it if you play it," or "No, we can't have 'real disabled people' doing this." Right now on Broadway this is being argued about [the current production of] *The Glass Menagerie*. "Oh my God, she's really disabled. Well, that's not what the playwright meant," and

blah, blah, blah.

We're facing this every day. I really do relate to the whole yellow-face, the blackface, and similar situations which still leave us out of the picture. There's so many ways to do that. I think that the more material that we're writing (I don't know, Penny, if you write material about disability culture), there's a lived experience of being who you are, whether it's race or gender or disability or whatever. You bring that to the table. You enrich the project. You bring something to it. Somehow this to me fit into this conversation.

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: Right! Again, the ethical move I think I felt Albee making publicly was to say, "I'm writing about whiteness. Someone else is writing about these other things. Give them a chance. Spread the wealth."

This is all triggering a funny memory for me. At the Signature Theatre last spring, there was a revival of three one-acts on a single bill: *Funnyhouse of a Negro* by Adrienne Kennedy, *Drowning* by María Irene Fornés, and *The Sandbox* by Albee. And I had this very profound experience because, first of all, I love all those plays, but also audiences were walking out in droves being like, "What the eff even is this?" I suspect it was because those works are from, like, the heyday of the avant-garde in American theatre, back when everyone was doing stuff in basements, basically. But we're also talking about plays that are literally over half a century old. And it was actually interesting to feel those plays fight those off-Broadway production values in some funny ways.

Anyway, I went with my friend Vella Lovell, who is a young black actress. Afterwards these very lovely ushers literally came up and actually asked her if she had written *Funnyhouse of a Negro*! And it was beyond awkward. She had to be like, "Uh, I'm not Adrienne Kennedy?" It was insane.

Anyway, the point is that they really wanted to engage her because they'd had an experience and didn't know how to talk about or process it and one woman goes, "The Albee we get. But I don't understand *Drowning* and *Funnyhouse*."

Then it became a really interesting conversation. I think that part of Jim Houghton's genius in programming this was to ask us to consider how we received different artistic legacies. So I told her, "Yes, you recognize Albee's voice, but Albee's work is just as weird and original as these other pieces. But for whatever reason, he was canonized in such a way that, culturally, you are now prepared to understand and seek meaning from his very difficult works whereas, in 2016, you struggle with the work by his literal contemporaries who happen to be Cuban American and African American, respectively, and both women. Why is that?"

Anita, you mentioned how we are all bringing specific cultures to the table. But I think a point we have to insist on is that we all *share* this culture. *We* are in a culture *together*. You are a part of my culture, but you're not visible within the way that that culture talks about itself, right? People of color are in this culture, and we are not visible within it in proportion to our presence.

I think you have to allow the theatre to be a space of equitable access to that visibility. That was what that piece really brought up to me: "Wait, everyone knows Albee's weirdness, but there are a lot of folks who were being just as weird and hardworking and innovative."

Can we play a little "Crystal Ball" right now? Do we feel like in fifteen years Albee's work will feel as relevant as it does now? That might be an unfair question to ask.

MICHAEL R. JACKSON: I feel like as long as it continues to be revived everywhere, it will be forced to be relevant. I saw the last revival of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Let me just preface this by saying, I literally applied to grad school musicalizing a scene from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* because I love the play so much.

I remember seeing it and being like, "I think all the juice has been squeezed out of this orange." It seemed to me that the only real reason to do it at this point was to give white actors an opportunity to squeeze this orange and give a white director an opportunity to squeeze this orange and to give a white stage manager an opportunity to squeeze this orange.

That's part of the reason why I am on a revival boycott. Because I think that white supremacy is de

Edward Albee's *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*
Left to right: Damian Lewis (Martin)
Sophie Okonedo (Stevie)

JOHAN PERSSON

facto. I don't think that white supremacy has to be this evil, malicious thing that's out to hurt people. It's just the air you breathe. "Oh, of course we will do this revival of this play that is about whiteness, and we'll just keep exploring it and keep peeling those onions and keep peeling that onion until there's no more onion. Then we'll just get another onion, and we'll peel it."

I had a realization recently that my experience of going to the theatre for the last seventeen years is essentially me having to turn into a white person in order to enjoy it. And there's something thrilling about turning into a white person. *[Laughter]*

Initially I was so pissed about this casting thing with *Virginia Woolf*, just because I had a fundamental misunderstanding about some of the issues on the table, and I just want to go on record saying as far as authorial rights, I stand with the Albee estate. But I do think that these other issues are something that we should really grapple with deeply and [we should] think about what are we willing to cede in order to create a more "inclusive" theatrical world?

TIMOTHY HUANG: I'm with Michael on this, actually. I think the question that's more challenging than 'what do we think about his legacy in fifteen years?' is 'what do we think of it in 50 or 100?', because I really feel strongly that everyone in this room is shaping the landscape of the theatre for the next generation to come. I think that given the fact that there's a little bit more of a level playing field now than there was fifteen years ago or twenty years ago, our tastes as a collective will change. At some point, I think there will be a curiosity in the audience for squeezing that orange again. We just haven't had a break from it, historically.

That's where I am at now. I want my perceptions of what it is to be an American to be challenged when I go to the theatre. More often than not, it isn't.

PENNY PUN: One of my approaches to thinking about this issue is the space that Albee's works occupies in the current canon. There are still a lot of theatres reviving Albee's works just because they attract a certain amount of audience. Also, an Albee title may carry

certain weight in a theatre's grant application.

So, in terms of the space that body of work occupies and how it actually may be taking away resources from other playwrights who are shaping the landscape of the theatre into a more diverse and inclusive space, that's one way to think about it.

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: That's a very profound point. What is being shared here? Who are we sharing the space with? I keep trying to rearticulate this thing I feel about Albee, which is that I think as a professional he was somewhat of an activist because he was individually trying to ensure the diversification of the theatre. But oddly his work becomes a touchstone for what it feels like, based on what you're saying, a kind of "whitewashing" of the theatre or something?

I think part of the Guild's mission and why the Guild is important is that it's about trying to humanize the profession and make room for us to have these ethical discussions about what we owe to each other, what we owe to the form, what we owe to the field.

I get the impulse there behind the Shoebox's *Virginia Woolf*: trying to make the work—and, by extension, the American theatre itself—feel inclusive. But at the same time, it's like, "Write your own play!" Or find the work by Michael R. Jackson or Anita Hollander or Cheryl Davis if [inclusion] is really the point here. But at the same time, if we live in that rhetoric of, "Okay, well, if it's boring and white, don't see it," are we burning down the house somewhat?

Maybe the estate has an obligation to do better work to contextualize Albee's work now that he's gone. Maybe it's the position of every estate to put forth what they believe is why this person's work should carry on. I don't know, I'm trying to figure out what could change about our practices.

ANITA HOLLANDER: Wasn't Sophie Okonedo in *The Goat*? That's already non-traditional casting. I presume that they were perfectly okay with that.

RALPH SEVUSH: Yes, the estate specifically approved it.

JOEY STOCKS: Coincidentally, Edward Albee was part of a 2005 roundtable for *The Dramatist* talking about casting. In it he says, "I thought about *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and it would be natural for the character of Honey to be played by a black actress. It would not demand rethinking anything about the nature of the play."

RALPH SEVUSH: That's been on the record. He's had it done. So, I found the calling for his head and the labeling of him as a racist because of his estate's position in respect to what he wanted to be unfair and ignores the facts on the ground, and that he was doing it for the purpose of artistic integrity of his work.

I think racism is an easy word to throw around, but it distorts the conversation, because if you want the conversation to be about opening up opportunities and seeing ourselves on the stages, finding reasons to hate Albee doesn't seem to be the best way to go about it.

We're also forgetting that our best artists are speaking in universal terms. The reason *Fiddler on the Roof* is so popular in Japan and China is because it talks about family, very specifically about Jewish families in a very specific time and place, but its specificity is what makes it universal. I think we can learn a lot from Albee's specificity and still find a universal idea in it and not just be caught in saying, "The only way to make it relevant is to impose different choices on it than he made."

It's like he made certain choices for very specific reasons, and because he made those choices, the plays work. They work on a universal basis because that dynamic that exists, even if it's among white people, it's a social dynamic that exists. As a Jew, I'm not particularly familiar with the kind of WASPy world he's portraying in that play, but I still can understand the dynamics involved. I just think we have to be careful about labeling if we really want to put forth an agenda that allows us to move forward rather than just looking backward.

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: I share a lot of those sentiments but, as a playwright, I get anxious about summing up anyone's body of work as consistently

## A STATEMENT FROM
# *The Dramatists Guild Of America*

The Dramatists Guild is aware of the recent casting controversy surrounding a production of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in Portland, Oregon.

The Guild asserts that it is a playwright's fundamental right to approve of casting choices to ensure they reflect his or her authorial intent. We assert this right for Edward Albee and his estate, just as we have asserted it on behalf of Lloyd Suh and his work *Jesus In India* and Katori Hall and her play *The Mountaintop*. We also assert the right of playwrights to specify diverse casting for work that is not demographically specific. Playwrights own their work, and therefore have the right to make decisions about all aspects of its presentation.

At the same time, the Guild is actively engaged in conversations and initiatives aimed at making the American theater a more inclusive place with greater opportunities for all playwrights and lifting the barriers that have for far too long severely limited opportunities for far too many. We remain firm in our belief that our art form can't achieve its full potential until it embraces our cultural and demographic diversity.

universal. I think Albee had a very long career with three waves of incredibly good work, but there were moments maybe in the '60s and '70s when he could have not written *The Death of Bessie Smith* the way he did it or *Seascape* with its weirdly muted race meta-allegories.

In spite of this, I think what I always feel in his work is a real humanistic spirit, and he may not quite "knock it out of the park" every time, but it's there for me. I get sad when, like you say, it flattens the dialogue about him, and flattens his intentions. Part of me wishes someone had pushed him to write more about his work and ideas, that we would had some better sense of how he might defend himself.

Maybe that's what I'm encouraging all writers to do, Albee-stature and otherwise: to really have a position on what you want the theatre to look like and defending the work that you do in some way. I was really hoping Katori Hall and Lloyd Suh could be here. They both had these very intense experiences involving "colorblind casting" in their plays *The Mountaintop* and *Jesus in India*, respectively. They stood up and said, "We don't want this." I wish that we could have drawn out the details behind their reasoning somehow.

ANITA HOLLANDER: Whereas, on the other hand, you have Chuck Mee, who wants to make sure that any role that he writes could be played by anybody of any different –

RALPH SEVUSH: But Chuck also gives his plays away for free.

ANITA HOLLANDER: That's true.

RALPH SEVUSH: And as a Guild, we defend his right to do that.

TIMOTHY HUANG: Personally, I can't even give my work away. *[Laughter]*

ANITA HOLLANDER: That's a big point, though. I often say with the disability community—they hate me for saying this—but once the playing field is leveled, anyone you want to play a disabled role [can] get in a wheelchair and play the role. But the whole idea of the leveled playing field–

RALPH SEVUSH: Is a fiction.

ANITA HOLLANDER: –as evidenced by what we're talking about here, [Albee] had decades of a great career. How many people get there?

There was another point I wanted to make which was that immigration and race are so huge on the horizon right now. I'm writing songs for immigrants, based on their experiences, for a project with Brave New World Rep Theatre turning their words into songs: Immigrants, Holocaust survivors, the experience of coming to this country, the experience of being the other, things like that.

But what I'm finding is that the songs are all ending up being these universal things that we all love. Going to Coney Island is not something that only one group of people likes to do. Many of their stories fit into that song because it's something so many people share and enjoy in life: the beach. It has nothing to do with where they come from or who they are.

I guess I'm looking for a day when the playing field is leveled. Albee's plays are part of the history like Chekhov's plays and Ibsen's plays are part of the history. But there's a whole, vast variety of artists that are part of the whole culture, that are not just *this* bunch of people: Shakespeare, Chekhov, Ibsen, whatever.

RALPH SEVUSH: All white men.

ANITA HOLLANDER: Yes, exactly. Able-bodied, white men! I think that is where we come into the picture. When you say, "What do you see 50 years from now," I'd like to see that that canon, that culture, is mixed with many different types of people and their work.

MICHAEL R. JACKSON: I feel like there's this contradiction that I can't totally reconcile, which is that I would like to see the work decentered from the artist itself in some way, that somehow as artists and writers we all can become these pure souls. That it's

not about labeling you a black writer or a disabled writer, and that we can just talk about the body of the work as the body of work.

To me, part of what happens is that we get so caught up in how great the person was that I think that their identity also becomes a part of that, whether it's because you're attacking them for being a white male writer or you're dismissing them because they're a Cuban American writer.

I don't know how it can truly become this meritocracy, but I wish that it didn't have to be. I wish that we didn't have to be sitting at this table premising everything on how great Edward Albee is while implicitly knowing how great Edward Albee is. I wish that could just be in parentheses, understood, and we could just talk about the work itself, this play that's saying this thing versus that play. Does it all add up? What's there? I don't know.

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: I believe you can't separate the citizen from the art. And I just think Albee has to be honored for that. At the same time, people forget he is often sending up the "culture" he's writing about. That is why that work was initially perceived as so upsetting. So when people get angry about it, I'm always like, "You're doing exactly what he had said you should do."

RALPH SEVUSH: It was a critique.

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: It was a critique of that world.

MICHAEL R. JACKSON: But who's getting angry about it? This is part of what I'm wondering about – who are these audiences who make these determinations, the critics who write the reviews that lead to more people seeing it or not seeing it?

My experience of seeing that last revival was that I felt neither here nor there about it. I don't know what the consensus was on that revival, but today, there are some people complaining about living room plays, and to some degree that play was at the forefront of living room plays, so how relevant is its critique anymore? What new lessons can we learn from this old living room play?

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: Correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm interpreting what you're sort of saying is, yes, in the context of its original premiere, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was very "upsetting" to many people on Broadway. It was denied the Pulitzer because there was cursing in it and blah, blah, blah. Albee was an enfant terrible, for all intents and purposes, who over the course of his career became the establishment.

And so when we encounter that work however many decades later, we are missing the context in which we can appreciate its politics, maybe. So what does it mean that we keep reviving it? Funnily enough, I think part of the estate's argument was that this is a play that is set in a specific historical period. Essentially, *Virginia Woolf* is a history drama.

So what are we watching now, really, when we watch it? Are we there to perform how much we can "get" the "importance" of this strange piece of writing?

RALPH SEVUSH: I think Penny put her finger on it earlier. The decisions being made here are largely economic, and the perception that artistic directors in regional theatres have of who their audience is and what they would buy. And yet they still want to make their own statement using these well-known titles as vehicles.

And that's where I have an issue. If there are issues you want to explore, either write your own play or find young playwrights who are writing about that. Stop producing the same five plays. Your job is to figure out how to sell that to your audience. Give them what they *need*, not what you think they *want*.

What an artistic director should be providing is leadership in the community, not just a sheep following what they think their audience may want in order to keep the doors open. If all you're doing is serving your own institution so it can perpetuate itself, who needs you?

PENNY PUN: I think another issue here is not just the audience, but the administrators and the directors and the designers. Doing an Albee play has be-

come a career milestone or professional aspiration for a lot of theatre artists across the field. It may be a goal they have set for themselves in the very early stages in their careers, when they received their professional theatre training and education, when they were taught to do canonical works such as Albee's. In that case, producing an Albee title, something a lot artists want to do and know how to do, seems like a better move than taking a chance on a new play. But as theatre artists, we should be bold and step out of our comfort zone.

At least, speaking from my experience, I don't think it's the audience who are consciously and actively rejecting plays with and/or by people of color. Part of this really intricate problem is that those plays are relatively new, and a lot of them require the administrative and creative teams to learn new ways to do theatre. Of course, these new ways to do theatre may make the audience uncomfortable. But that's the point.

ANITA HOLLANDER: Today, I was online reading where somebody was questioning the casting of Condola Rashad in *A Doll's House, Part 2* and saying, "I wondered why she was there. I wondered what they were trying to say."

RALPH SEVUSH: I read that, too.

ANITA HOLLANDER: Yes, there were certainly a lot of people that just thought, "Oh, cool." But there are still people out there who say, "Why is she black?"

TIMOTHY HUANG: I thought she was there to kick all sorts of ass. *[Laughter]*

ANITA HOLLANDER: Well, that's a given with Condola Rashad. But somebody in this feed was actually saying, "I wondered had Nora cheated on Torvald. Is that why she's black?"

RALPH SEVUSH: Right. It's just that in the case of that play, it's not naturalistic. It's anti-naturalistic. So you can have anybody playing anything. I think when you have an issue there, it's more your issue than it's the play's issue.

But there are productions of plays where it is supposed to be naturalistic. You have to wonder, if it's in a certain time period, if a person is not the person that's described as the character, how did that person get there? There's gonna be an audience that wants to know. There are times where it makes sense, and there are times when it doesn't.

We can blame the audience for being confused by that, but we also have to acknowledge that casting is often about trying to bring the audience in and to create as few barriers between the audience and the play as possible, not to create new barriers that confuse them. So it really depends on the play, and it depends on the playwright.

I think we are making generalizations about colorblind casting, color-conscious casting, naturalistic casting, all kinds of things. But it's so specific to the work and to the time it's being done and to the playwright's own view of the work that I think the default has to continue to be, and as far as the Guild's concerned it should always be, the intent of the playwright when the intent is clear.

Look, the playwright has been given nothing else except ownership and control of their play. The casting directors are all now up in arms because they're the only ones who aren't unionized and, like, "Hey, hello. We've been here the last hundred years not unionized." We know what that's like.

So what does the playwright get? Instead of a pension, instead of health and welfare benefits, instead of collective bargaining, they get ownership and control of the work for a limited period of time: life plus 70 years. You've got thousands of years of dramatic work to choose from. If you want to send a message or impose new meaning, go to it. But for the life of the playwright plus 70 years, you have to ask first. I don't think that's an unreasonable expectation.

Whatever other people's agenda is to impose on that, they have to accept the fact that the copyright law gives the author that and only that. We've sort of made a social compact with playwrights, like, "We're not going to pay you anything, but you're going to own and control your work, and we have to respect the decisions you've made about it."

We don't have to agree with them, and we can complain about them all we want. Maybe he's wrong, and maybe he's right. But ultimately, it's his decision and his estate's right to exercise that decision.

At the end of the day, we can talk about those issues, but as far as I'm concerned, it's an aspect of authorial rights that playwrights have earned. We can talk about new play production as a way of opening up the conversation. You can talk about the canon and classics and doing them in all different kinds of ways. But this little sliver of work right there in the middle since 1922 to the present that's still owned by somebody, that somebody has a right to say how the work is going to be done. That's all.

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins: It gives me pause when someone says, "I feel like I'm adding a layer of complexity," or, "I'm fixing the work," because I feel like you're losing sight of the fact that Edward Albee was a living person and a very good artist who made choices that were hard won and thoroughly justified. And it's your job to go honor those choices, or you can respond to those choices, but it can't be on the terms of that artist's work. That's how I feel.

Who knows if Edward cared if people run his plays in fifteen years or not? But I feel like in terms of honoring the model professional, he was, at least for me, this guy [who] worked so hard to protect our rights in this way. But it's up to us to carry the conversation forward and not demonize him for embodying something he had no truck with.

Cheryl Davis: I think the idea is to take the questions and the burbling emotions and say, "How do we use this to move forward as artists and as a theatre community? What do we do? How do we allow it to mobilize us?" There's a lot of political anger out there and increased activism in me and my friends.

The question is what do we do with it now? Do we use it in our art? Do I use my high-priced legal education to go help voting rights advocates? It's great that you're upset and you're angered and you've got a mission, but what do you do now?

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins: I'm curious about what the long-term artistic response to or result of Albee's legacy might look like, just thinking about canons. Canons, like histories, those are the stories we tell ourselves about where we've come from and how we've gotten where we've gotten. Canons are constantly being debated because new people show up being like, "Actually, that's not what my American family was doing in 1947." I'm thinking now about August Wilson and how his entire career was about rethinking history in that way. I'm curious about how we begin to think about Albee as a part of our history—or, at least American theatre history—and respond to that history in a productive way.

Cheryl Davis: Somebody write *Virginia Woolf* and set it in an HBCU. Maybe that's what somebody's take is. *[Laughter]*

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins: Right, or what's the sequel to *Seascape? Landscape?*

Joey Stocks: Since we're talking about Albee's legacy, part of his legacy also includes the Albee-Barr-Wilder Playwrights Unit that was funded from the royalties from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and produced the first production of *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, among others.

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins: He was literally part of the very beginnings of Downtown Theatre in New York. And he also managed to revive general interest in the commercial American theatre in a strange way. No one ever talks about that, that he gave it back.

Ralph Sevush: I've been at the Guild for twenty years now, and Edward was already a lifetime Council member when I came aboard. He was at almost every meeting of the council for the twenty years I was there.

He would come, and he wouldn't just sit and eat lunch. He was there to talk about stuff. Edward Albee did not need the Dramatists Guild to get a good contract or to defend his work. So why was he there? He was there because there were generations

of playwrights coming up who needed him, and he knew that.

So that's why I find this whole thing really hurtful in a lot of ways. I know it's important to distance the person from the art, but in this case, his art was him. He's being dismissed too easily for reasons that are inconsistent with his own life and his own choices.

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: And I hope that never happens to anyone in this room. *[Laughter]*

TIMOTHY HUANG: I kind of hope it happens to all of us. *[Laughter]*

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: I was like, "Maybe I do want to have three good artist streaks, a crap-ton of awards, die a legend, and have everyone else deal with it...have the Guild deal with it."

RALPH SEVUSH: I remember, from Katori Hall and from Lloyd Suh's end, and I seem to have some vague memory of having a discussion with you about this as well – do you delineate the way roles are to be cast in your own scripts? Is it specific or is it left open?

ANITA HOLLANDER: Some do. In the case of *Children of a Lesser God*, it is. There's a message at the beginning. Also in *Tribes* it is definitely delineated that this should be cast this way. But that debate comes up a lot. I think Martyna Majok wrote that *Cost of Living* had to be cast that way, which is great. She's from the new generation.

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: How is it cast?

ANITA HOLLANDER: Oh, with two disabled actors. I've made it sort of a quest to see who writes that stuff and who doesn't, and then there are arguments when they don't.

TIMOTHY HUANG: I happen to have a copy of Martyna's play on my computer, and she absolutely does. I would like to say for myself, though, what gets me nerded out workwise is writing for characters of color. I'll always specify where they're from, but I also feel like the question of casting is open to interpretation. If somebody says, "Well, okay, I know somebody who was born and raised in Japan. So he understands the Japanese culture but he reads white." That would be a really interesting conversation to have, and I would love to have that conversation.

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: I come upon this issue more as a teacher. One of my greatest pet peeves is students who bring in a character list that's like, "Sally: vivacious, funny, peppy. Robert: a hardcore jock, loves to have fun." And then it's like, "Don: black" and race becomes a stand-in for the whole personality type. *[Laughter]*

That drives me nuts. I feel like it has to be consistent, whatever you do. On the flip side of that, I spend almost too much attention to this page of my play texts because I think it's the one space in which I can try to guarantee a certain actor work. I know that if I don't write that down, some casting director in Chappaqua is gonna say, "Well, we really love this 60-year-old local favorite for this part of this fifteen year old biracial whoever."

I'm about advocating for playwrights to just be explicit about what they want the theatre to be, to look like, just to have a point of view on it, because this is a moment in which it's absolutely necessary. That's why I think young artists like Martyna are brilliant in that regard. She's openly asking us to rethink representation.

ANITA HOLLANDER: She is in many ways.

CHERYL DAVIS: Yeah. That's why I started delineating, because white is the default. If you don't state that somebody is of color in your cast list, the odds are they'll get cast white. So often in my plays, it does matter what race you are, and those roles where it doesn't, I write like, "Race unspecified." I just make a point of saying, "Okay, everybody else needs to be this, this, whoever."

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: I have a friend who "colorblind" cast a part in his lovely play that went to Broadway, and even though it's not specified [in the

script], every single regional production has honored that choice.

CHERYL DAVIS: I wonder in subsequent productions of *A Doll's House, Part 2*, is Condola Rashad's role gonna be consistently cast with an actor of color?

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: There's a production happening concurrently at South Coast Rep, and I don't think it is.

CHERYL DAVIS: Oh, it's gonna make it hard for the people who Google. *[Laughter]*

ANITA HOLLANDER: Well, I don't know if people have read the scathing review of *The Glass Menagerie* from Rex Reed –

MICHAEL R. JACKSON: Yeah, I was just talking about that yesterday.

ANITA HOLLANDER: –where he just completely rakes Madison Ferris across the coals for the gall of getting cast. She didn't walk in and go, "I'm playing this and nobody else is." This is a young actress right out of college, and they wanted to try this.

First, I've played Laura. Christine Bruno has played Laura. A lot of disabled actors have played Laura. But never in all of the dozens of Broadway revivals has it ever been even conceived, even when our community says, "Maybe you should think about this."

And they always go back to the line in the play that says, "It's not that a big a deal." But it's said by the mother of a person who's disabled, and anyone who is disabled knows that mothers of a person who's disabled have said, "It's not that big a deal. You can still get a job and take a walk." And the critic is saying, "She'd never be getting a job. She'd never be taking a walk." It goes totally against the playwright's words.

I think what we're talking a little bit about today is that this has never been tried in the most famous theatrical arena - to get her on stage and not be punished for it. The production has been punished wildly for looking at a classic this way. Whether you agree with it or not, it's a character in the canon that is supposed to be disabled, and this was someone's take on that. It's been a pretty shocking experience for a lot of us, too.

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: Yeah. And it's funny because cause Tennessee Williams is famously one of the great laureates of the "outsider" experience, notions of inclusiveness, and the interactions between people on the fringes.

ANITA HOLLANDER: It's in the script.

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: I feel like we've said a lot. I'm so glad that we all could take this time to think about Albee and his legacy—on and off the page. Thank you.

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*CHERYL L. DAVIS received the Kleban Prize as a librettist for her musical* Barnstormer, *about Bessie Coleman, the first Black woman flyer. Her play* Maid's Door *won seven Audelco Awards, was a finalist for the Francesca Primus Prize, and was presented at the National Black Theatre Festival in 2015 and 2017.*

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*Dramatists Guild & ASCAP member ANITA HOLLANDER has written work for theatres in NY, London, Copenhagen, Croatia & Japan. Her award-winning solo musical* Still Standing *has played Off-Broadway and throughout America. As National Chair of SAG-AFTRA Performers With Disabilities, she works with AEA, WGA and NEA for more diversity.*

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*TIMOTHY HUANG was a 2012 Dramatists Guild Fellow for musical theater and writes music, lyrics, and book in New York City. He currently serves on the Dramatists Guild Council as well as the DG Committee for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.*

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*MICHAEL R. JACKSON holds a BFA and MFA in playwriting and Musical Theatre Writing from the NYU Tisch School of the Arts. He is 2017 Jonathan Larson Grant Recipient, a 2017 Lincoln Center Emerging Artist Award Winner, 2017 Williamstown Theatre Festival Playwright-In-Residence, and has been commissioned by LCT3 and UARTS.*

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*PENNY PUN is a New York-based playwright, born and raised in Hong Kong. She graduated as valedictorian from Marymount Manhattan College with a B.A. in Theatre Arts and English and World Literatures. Her play* Blue *was recently produced as part of Pan Asian Repertory's Nuworks Festival at Theatre Row.*

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*RALPH SEVUSH is the Executive Director of Business Affairs and Advisor to Council for the Guild.*