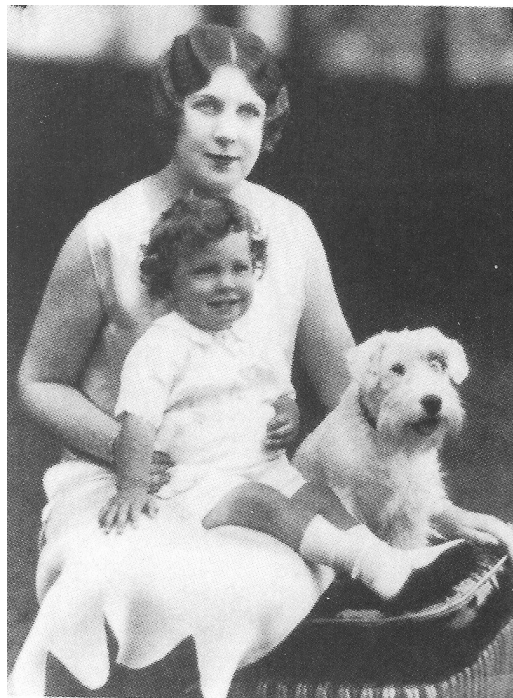




## Are You My Mother? The Long Quest of Edward Albee

*Truth or illusion, George; you don't know the difference.*

—Martha, in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*



*Frances and Edward Albee, 1929*

Edward Albee (March 12, 1928 – Sept. 16, 2016) was adopted. This was the central, immutable fact of his life. He often said that while his plays shared a kinship with those of Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams, there was one major difference: O'Neill and Williams created characters who believed in a comforting illusion in order to survive. Albee's characters chose illusion over truth while knowing the difference.

But when one fully commits to this, as Albee often did, it can be very difficult for an observer to find that difference. It is especially difficult in *Three Tall Women*, a play so personal Albee appears in it as a character. "A play is fiction," he wrote, "and fiction is fact distilled into truth." But what are the facts, let alone the truth?

### The Albees

In 1876, Edward Franklin Albee II, whose name would later grace his adoptive grandson, ran away to join the circus. There, he met up with B. F. Keith. In 1885, they formed the Keith-Albee Circuit, the cartel that would control vaudeville in the Eastern US during the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

E. F.'s son, Reed Albee, was a caricature. He supposedly worked for the Keith-Albee Circuit, but his true vocation was chasing women. When E. F.'s partner died in 1914, leaving E. F. with complete control, it was decided that his son should contract a dynastic marriage, in hopes of producing an heir. At 29, Reed wed the widow of the son of another theatre owner, but after ten years with no children, they amicably divorced. Four months later, on March 12, 1925, Reed married Frances "Frankie" Cotter, aged 26. Mel Gussow, Albee's biographer, writes, "The portrait of A and her unnamed husband in *Three Tall Women* is an almost exact replica of the Albees."

### Frankie

Native New Yorker Frankie Cotter stood six-foot-two in her stocking feet and had an eye for the main chance. She met Reed Albee at a party while working as a model at Jay Thorpe, a store that in the 1920s was an equal of Henri Bendel. The store featured private fashion showings in its fourth-floor bistro, "where customers could relax with refreshments while watching models stroll by in the latest fashions." (Vintage Fashion Guild)

Reed liked tall women. Frankie liked short men with deep pockets. They were married in Jersey City, doubtless to avoid publicity. Frankie

brought to the marriage an alcoholic sister and a mother, aged 61; her father had died in 1913. The sister was set up in an apartment, while Anna moved in with the Albees.

Frankie was suddenly rich, the chatelaine of a Larchmont mansion, a situation she dealt with by embracing the prejudices of the upper classes with the gusto of one who's sworn she'll never be hungry again. These prejudices included a genial anti-Semitism, a disdain for homosexuals and an aversion to African-Americans so extreme she hired only Irish or Scottish servants. For his part, Reed continued to chase women.

### **Eddie**

Frankie succeeded at everything except producing an heir. So it was that after precisely three years of marriage, Reed and Frances Albee adopted Edward Franklin Albee III, a boy whose birthday was also, conveniently, their wedding anniversary.

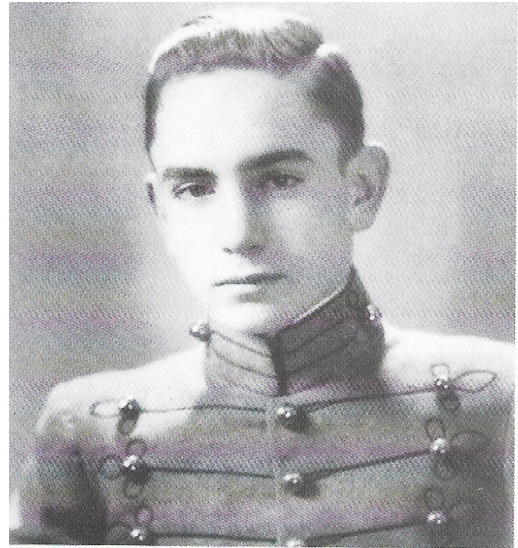
It was not until after Frankie's death in 1989 that Albee found out what little there was to know about his birth. (He also discovered Frankie had knocked a year off her age.) He was born in Washington, DC, to Louise Harvey and a man who, the adoption papers read, "had deserted both the mother and child..." The child, whom Louise had named Edward—truth, not illusion—was given up for adoption in New York; placed with the Albees when he was 18 days old; and formally adopted 10 months later. For the rest of his life, Albee would mutter, "They bought me for \$133.30," the cost of the "professional services" involved.

In 1928, E. F. Albee sold his entire operation to the rival Orpheum Circuit. Soon, talking pictures would kill vaudeville, but E. F. would die in 1930 leaving his family \$15.5 million—\$230 million in 2018 dollars. When Albee in later years talked of not being rich, despite owning a Tribeca loft and a house in Montauk, this was his point of reference.

Eddie was that living cliché, the poor little rich boy—the heir, bought and paid for. When he was six, he was told he was adopted. Having never felt any love from the Albees, Eddie pretended he had known all along. Still, his Grandma Cotter loved him. They would plot together in her room

upstairs, together with her Pekinese.

When he was 12, Eddie began to rebel, failing to be promoted at Rye Country Day. Frankie immediately packed him off to boarding school at Lawrenceville. She even paid a visit to the headmaster. It would be the last time either of his adoptive parents would visit any of his schools.



*Albee at Valley Forge Military Academy, 1944*

At Lawrenceville, Eddie had his first sexual experience, probably with an older boy. Failing there, he was sent to Valley Forge Military Academy for a year and a half. Booted from there, he ended up at Choate through the intercession of someone at Lawrenceville who had seen something in the boy. Choate would be the only school from which he would ever graduate.

At Choate, he wrote his first play at 17. Upon graduation in 1946, he went to Trinity College in Hartford but lasted only three semesters. Afterwards, he lived at home and commuted into New York, where he had a job as an office boy, doubtless arranged by the family. He also found his way into New York's gay underground.

The break came soon after. Frankie had already thrown a glass ashtray at him during a fight. Their final argument centered on Albee's leaving the car full of vomit (not his own, he said) after a night of drinking. From there, things escalated until he packed a bag, said goodbye to Grandma Cotter and her Pekinese and left. The argument, Albee always maintained, never touched on his sexuality.

But this story is illusion, in the form of an incomplete truth. Unmentioned is that on his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, Albee came into an inheritance from Grandma Albee, a weekly stipend of \$25. This was not a great deal of money even in 1949, but in New York, a cold-water flat could then be had for \$15 a month. It made the difference between his needing to work and his choosing to work.

To mark the boundary between his Larchmont life and his New York life, Eddie Albee decided he would now be known as Edward. He would not see Frankie again until 1965.

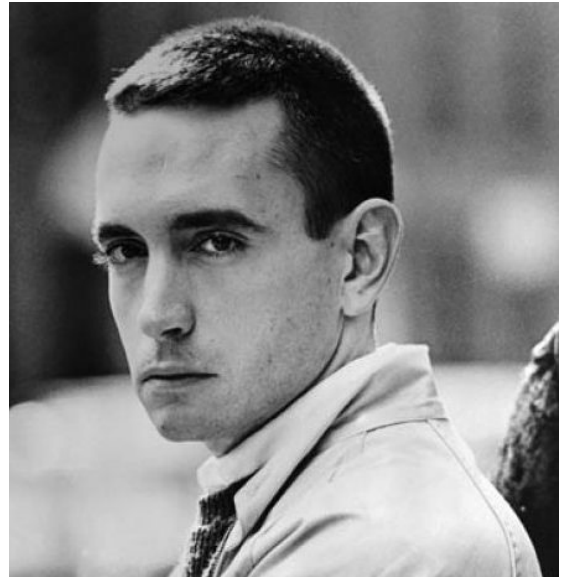
### Edward

In New York, Albee became involved with the composer William Flanagan, more than five years his senior. They both drank. A lot. Albee would be a mean drunk, off and on, until shortly before being diagnosed with diabetes in middle age. But he always wrote charming notes of apology afterward. The important thing was the people to whom he was able to send those notes, the people he met through Flanagan over the next decade.

The difference between truth and illusion also surrounds the writing of *The Zoo Story*. It's true that a month before he turned 30, Albee sat down at the kitchen table of his Greenwich Village apartment and wrote the play in two and a half weeks. Illusion, however, says Albee did this without ever having written a play before. (He would encourage this story as late as 1992.)

Actually, he had written nine plays, two of them full length, along with two novels, dozens of short stories and over a hundred poems. And there was another hidden economic truth: At 30, Albee would come into the bulk of his Grandma Albee's bequest, \$100,000—\$868,000 in 2018 dollars.

No matter. *The Zoo Story* had an authentic, theatrical voice. And because of the people he'd met, Albee was able to show the play to Thornton Wilder, Aaron Copland and William Inge. He could also send it to the American composer David Diamond, then resident in Florence. Albee had written one of his novels (and one of his notes of apology) there while he and Flanagan visited. Diamond showed it to a friend, and *The Zoo Story* received its world premiere in Berlin (in German) on September 28, 1959.



Edward Albee, c. 1960

On January 14, 1960, the play opened in New York. Edward Albee, playwright, was launched. Other plays quickly followed. If *The Zoo Story* posited a Central Park encounter between Larchmont Eddie and Village Edward (with deadly results), *The Sandbox* was a tribute to his Grandma Cotter, who had died in 1959. *The American Dream*, on the other hand, was a vicious attack on Frankie, Reed and their entire way of life. In the play, the couple has an absent son, absent because they've dismembered him.

Then came *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, with its demanding, domineering woman whose son is imaginary. Subsequent plays would feature a big woman being destroyed by a man and a dwarf; a young man being destroyed by an older woman (more than once); and *A Delicate Balance*, a play set right in Frankie and Reed's living room, alcoholic sister and all—but with a dead son.

Perhaps the impetus to write that play came from Frankie's re-entry into Albee's life.

### Edward and Frankie

Reed Albee died in 1961. His son did not attend the funeral. They had met only once, accidentally and briefly, since Edward had left Larchmont. Then, in May 1965, Albee received a call from a secretary. Frankie had had a heart attack. He thought about it for a few days, then called and asked if he might come to see her.

The meeting was “friendly but tentative.”

From there, they moved into civility, "...not really like mother and son, but more like distant relatives reunited after a long separation."

"From *Tiny Alice* onward, Frankie went to opening nights of his plays, but offered no opinions," Gussow writes. "Although his mother always remained removed from his work and from his life, she took pride in his accomplishments or, at least, in her position as the mother of Edward Albee the playwright." They never discussed his being gay.

"She had a kind of star radiance," said the actress Irene Worth. "She was irresistibly beautiful, with a tremendous magnetism..." Albee admitted to "...a grudging respect for her." Frankie told him stories of life in Larchmont, stories that found their way into *A Delicate Balance*, *All Over* and *Three Tall Women*. Which are truth and which illusion is impossible to determine.

In March 1989, as the comatose Frances Albee lay near death, Edward brought her a bouquet of freesia, which she seemed to sniff. When she died at 91, only the chauffeur and the maid were with her.

When her will was read, Albee found that instead of receiving \$1.5 million, he would receive only \$250,000. Perhaps Frankie did it because she felt he had enough money. Perhaps she did it because one of her friends had suggested things would be a lot easier if Frankie just accepted the fact that Edward was gay. Whatever her reason, Albee was devastated by what he saw as a final rejection, a rejection that coincided with a professional low. But curiously, it didn't end there.

"Soon he would write a play about her," Gussow mused, "and it would not be a story of revenge. Instead, it would be filled with understanding and compassion, along with dark humor. In a curious twist of fate, the play about his mother would revive and retrieve his career."

In his April 2017 eulogy, John Guare told a story that does not appear in the biography. "Mel Gussow located Edward's birth mother. Mel

dialled her number. He held out the phone to Edward. Before dialling the last number, Edward said no."



*Edward and Frankie Albee, late 1960s  
She has taken off her shoes to lessen the height difference*

Did he refuse because although he knew the difference between truth and illusion, he had finally accepted Frankie as his mother? Mad Frankie had hurt him into poetry, to paraphrase Auden. And that would have to be enough. When it came time to dedicate *Three Tall Women*, Edward Albee chose not to dedicate it to anyone.

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