

What Looks Like a Cage on an Ordinary Day: Edward Albee's At Home at the Zoo at Psych Drama Company

"You have everything in the world you want; you've told me about your home, and your family, and your own little zoo." - Edward Albee, Zoo Story



In 2004, Edward Albee added a prequel to his iconic 1959 play, "The Zoo Story." Rarely ever has a playwright been able to make such a large adjustment to a previous work so long after the original work premiered. Albee felt that the character of Peter in "The Zoo Story" needed to be expanded upon, and so he added a first act called "Homelife" and the two one-acts became "Edward Albee's At Home at the Zoo." The first act features Peter and his wife, Ann, trying to communicate with little success, resulting in Peter heading to Central Park with book in hand.

“Edward Albee’s *At Home at the Zoo*” is currently being performed at 95 Empire Street by the Psych Drama Company, who are going to be offering a three-play season from now until November, including Sarah Ruhl’s “*Stage Kiss*” and Yasmina Reza’s “*God of Carnage*.” The company’s mission is centered around giving audiences an “education on a wide range of topics in psychology by combining immersive, experiential performances with post-show discussions led by mental health professionals.” The marriage of mission and material here is a logical one, as Albee’s work is ripe for dissection, especially this one. For those who want to go for a deep dive, there are talkbacks after every single performance led by a different mental health professional.

“*Homelife*” is the play written more recently but placed first in the evening, and there are shades of other famous work by Albee, including “*Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*” and “*A Delicate Balance*.” By this point in his career, Albee had cemented himself as the foremost authority of how rich, wordy people exist in domestic stasis. In fact, the play begins with Ann, Peter’s wife, saying “We should talk,” and boy, do they talk.

If you’re heading into a play by a playwright you already know, it’s always nice to be given a few surprises, and director Larry Segal gives us a sensible one right at the start by setting both plays in an alleyway configuration, with audiences on both sides of the action. I admit to being partial to this set-up in most situations, but here it has the added effect of, yes, immersing us in the action, but also helping the conversations in both acts feel more like engagements and confrontations than just clever banter, which can be the downfall of many Albee productions.

The second pleasant surprise is in tandem with the first — both plays are highly activated. The performances seem designed to keep the audience either amused or agape, but never bored. As Ann, Wendy Lippe thankfully sidesteps having the character be a beleaguered wife, and instead, makes her a character who passionately wants to connect to her husband. Lippe pulls out every trick in Ann’s arsenal, and when it’s clear that the relationship she so desperately wants is not going to come to fruition, her hurt is palpable. It’s a wild performance that’s both exhausting and often exhilarating to watch.

As Jerry, the terrifying stranger who approaches Peter in “*Zoo Story*” as he sits on a bench in the park, David Lee Vincent comes across as almost feral. The entire one-act is difficult in a way that’s immediately evident — why wouldn’t Peter just get up and leave as soon as this man makes it clear how unhinged he is? The answer is frustrating, but simple — you just need a really compelling actor to make you believe that Peter wouldn’t be willing to turn away from Jerry any more than we would. Luckily for this production, Mr. Vincent *is* very compelling. He tears at the words and the air, but with smart direction, reveals himself slowly, at first coming across as irritating but harmless, and then more sinister as the play reaches its brutal climax.

The climax itself is a hard one to pull off. In a space as small as 95 Empire, the level of precision needed

to make it entirely convincing is high, and the production doesn't quite reach that level, with the ending feeling a little too off-the-rails and over-the-top. Granted, the script at that point doesn't lend itself to much subtlety, but somewhere in there is a balance that hopefully will develop over the course of the run. If the goal of the show was to give us an Albee with teeth bared rather than just suggested, mission accomplished, but especially in the second act, it feels as though Jerry should have a few more tricks up his sleeve.

As Peter, Brian Dion has the unenviable task of playing a mostly reactionary character, although thanks to Albee, he now has all of "Homelife" to help flesh out the dormant man on the bench we see in Act Two. Mr. Dion gives a very thoughtful performance in "Homelife," and he's adept at the lofty living room dialogue Albee writes so well. He's a generous actor, who serves his co-stars well, and Peter's discomfort in Act One as he stumbles in and out of one sexual confession after another was a highlight.

For this production, Segal has made the bold choice to have both Ann and Jerry be aware of the audience, and in such an intimate space, it's a risk to take a play that was never intended to acknowledge the audience so boldly and lean into it in such a way, but by having Peter be always in the world of the play while the other characters step in and out of it, it seems more like carefully crafted strategy than chaotic concept. That's just a fancy way of saying, I assumed I was going to hate the choice, and I was wrong — it works really well for this production in this space, and the actors pull it off without making anyone cringe more than a little, but if you're not cringing while watching Albee, I'm not sure you've really been to the Zoo.

The Psych Drama Company's Edward Albee's "At Home at the Zoo" runs until Feb 23 at 95 Empire St, PVD. For tickets and more information, contact The Psych Drama Company directly at psychdramacompany@gmail.com or by calling 774-259-4379 or visit www.thepsychdramacompany.com