

Stop the Balance, I Want to Get Off

GERALD WEALES

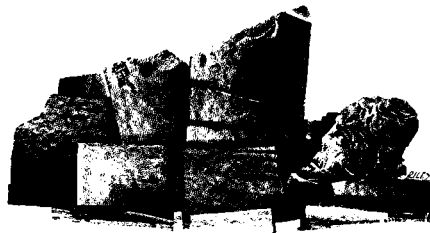
JERRY, in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*, tells of his adventures with his landlady's dog, an irascible creature that made a snarling attempt to grab Jerry's leg every time he tried to make it up the stairs. At first he tried to win the dog's affection with hamburger; when that failed, he tried unsuccessfully to poison the animal. Having made contact neither through love nor through hate, Jerry was forced to settle for an accommodation, one in which he and the dog ignored each other. His leg remained unbitten, but he felt a sense of loss in the working arrangement.

Albee's new play, *A Delicate Balance*, is about such accommodations that we know under the labels "marriage," "kinship," "friendship." The characters here, as in all the other Albee plays, are without occupation (the campus politics of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is little more than dramatic metaphor), not harried by the surface concerns of ordinary existence. They live in an obvious and unspecified affluence, a mansion in the suburbs of hell, that existential present so dear to contemporary writers in which life is measured in terms of loss, love by its failure, connection by its absence.

The mansion in this case belongs to Tobias and Agnes, a couple whose marriage, like Jerry's agreement with the dog, is a way of coping, an empty platform decorated with neither love (the last time they had sex, Tobias, fearing the loss implicit in birth, withdrew before ejaculation) nor hate (the triple murder Tobias jokingly considers would have to be committed in passion, a possibility that makes his sister-in-law laugh out loud), on which they act out their charade of human life. Their family group is expandable, able to take in Claire, the drunken sister-in-law, and Julia, the daughter, home again after the collapse of her fourth marriage. These two have a working arrange-

ment with Tobias and Agnes in which the pattern of aggression and withdrawal, of accusation and guilt, is kept in balance because each character knows that there are limits at which his specialty (Agnes's bitchiness, Tobias's acquiescence, Claire's mockery, Julia's brattishness) runs up against the others. The four find a home of sorts in the comfortable do-it-yourself torture chamber they live in, although, as Tobias and Agnes remind us in the third act, it is not a home in the sense that Tobias remembers and certainly not what John Howard Payne wrote about.

INTO this delicate balance step Harry and Edna, best friends of Tobias and Agnes, claiming the rights of friendship, demanding "succor," to use Claire's word, shelter



from the terror that assailed them as they sat, unprotected by needlework and French-vocabulary studies, in the desolation of their own home. The play, trying to answer Claire's first-act questions about the nature of friendship, asks Tobias to decide whether the frightened couple can stay at the risk of infecting a household insufficiently defended against that undifferentiated terror which waits—like the Emperor Jones's "little formless fears"—for a chance to come out into the open. Harry and Edna choose to go at the end of the play, over Tobias's protests, because they realize that they are loved only as much as they love and that in the world in which they live there are rites (but not rights) of friendship. The curtain descends on

a restored balance, but Agnes's words about the rising sun cannot comfort the four ropewalkers for another loss sustained, another possibility shut off.

The negation in which Albee's characters live is the stronger by virtue of Tobias's attempt to make something of that possibility, the chance that friendship put to the test may reinspirit life. His plea that Harry and Edna stay, despite the fact that he cannot love them and does not want them, is his prayer that something be done to upset the balance. Even chaos, disruption, pain seem preferable to accepted sterility. Tobias, like Jerry, has his animal story; and it is in the light of his first-act account of the cat who came not to love him that we can best view his actions in the third act. When he realized that his cat was indifferent, even hostile, he attempted—again like Jerry with the dog—to force himself on the cat through love (he made the cat sit on his lap) and violence (he slapped the cat so hard he affected its hearing). Failing, he had the cat killed. Not put to sleep, he insists, discarding Agnes's proffered euphemism, but killed; and then, like a medieval storyteller, he adds the moral: He should have kept trying, there must have been something—he has a serio-comic list of possibilities, including penance—that he could have done. Reluctantly, against every instinct of self-protection, he tries to do with Harry and Edna what he failed to do with the cat. But Edna, who is most insistent about their right to stay and who follows that insistence with the play's most specific statement about the separateness of each person, and Harry back away from a confrontation that may turn "friendship" from a euphemism into a fact. Tobias's attempt does not stand alone in the play. Agnes's dream of madness at the beginning of the play, Claire's drinking, Julia's new hope with each new husband and her regression to a child's hysteria—all these are attempts to escape (if not, as in Tobias's case, to change) the even, leaden, desperate balance on which they teeter out their empty and meaningless days. In *A Delicate Balance* there can be no escape, no change.

The play is, as one expects from Albee, neatly worked out and carefully argued (there is a pedagogical strain in Albee that his public statements tend to deny), with artfully planted lines hooking characters allusively one to another and giving the audience stepping-stones to pick its way through three acts of conversation. I found myself watching and listening with interest but indifference. There was none of the suffocating boredom that attacked me during *Tiny Alice*, but neither was there any of the excitement and delight that the first two acts of *Virginia Woolf* elicited. At no point in the play—and certainly not at the histrionic high spots (Julia's second-act appearance with the gun, Tobias's third-act accusation-plea)—did the characters evoke the empathy that would have made the play more than a well-dressed intellectual exercise. There are two reasons for this—one stylistic, one thematic.

LIKE T. S. Eliot in *The Cocktail Party* and Enid Bagnold in *The Chalk Garden*, Albee has chosen to be serious behind a façade that suggests the drawing-room comedy. The artificiality implicit in the setting is heightened by Albee's lines. He stuffs his sentences with nouns of address, with parenthetical expressions, with irrelevant relevant clauses that force the actor to stroll through his lines as though they were elegant gardens. Time after time, carefully avoiding the contraction, he ends a sentence with a "would we not?" or an "is it not?" that brings a lift at the end of the line, an inflection that stops the natural flow of speech. The most flamboyant example of his insistent artificiality comes in the first speech, in which Agnes begins a sentence, interrupts it with a parenthesis that becomes a digression lasting through several exchanges, then comes finally to the reopening of that first sentence. The direction, the costuming, the performances all intensify the elegance. Carmen Mathews as Edna wraps her magnificent voice around Albee's convoluted sentences as though she were packing exquisite crystal in cotton wool; Jessica Tandy as Agnes trips through her lines as though she were walking on a finely tuned xylophone,

her feet tapping out a baroque air.

The artificiality is intentional, of course, a dramatic metaphor in its own right—evidence that these people are only surface. It is here, however, that Albee's device and the play fail. In Miss Bagnold's case, the anguish of her characters smashed through the façade; in Eliot's, the instructive fable was of sufficient intellectual (for some, emotional) interest to make those in the audience who were listening care deeply how it would all work out. In *A Delicate Balance* there is never any doubt. Albee's view of contemporary American man as empty and sterile, hiding behind his material well-being and the conventional labels of kinship, was already commonplace when he

wrote *The American Dream* in 1960. Only in a play like *Virginia Woolf*, where the vitality of his characters in part contradicts the thematic assumptions, has he been able to grab his audiences and hold them. In *A Delicate Balance*, the characters are given a little biography, a few mannerisms, a whisper of depth, but they remain occasionally witty, always articulate stick figures moving through a sequence of non-events to a foregone conclusion. To use highly artificial means to display artificial people is probably a tactical error, for in the end the best the playwright can hope for is a delicate balance between audience and characters, polite distancing that expresses interest but never concern.

To a Young Woman, Entering a Formal Garden

Comes on with butterflies, whose stray
Parabolas become her presence, cool
As convoluted labyrinths of box
And borders where the passing compliment
She pays, by sleight of hand on flowers,
Here and there delays the royal progress.

The obliging fool, her gentleman, observing
In despair the mere accomplishment
Of that repose, and lacking heart to hint
At rank and foxy promptings of the will,
Takes no account of wantonness,
Like scent, attendant on her every pulse.

Oh, round archaic mouth no butter
Dares to melt in, you will come to terms,
On your terms only, with the earth.
The youth awaits you, edgily attentive
On an ironwork bench, as twisted
As the curious aisles between the box.

He twists in anguish, dreading to commit
The breath he greets her with; but she,
Whose spirits quicken on the trace
Of palpitating commonplace, may yet
Appear at path's turning, bare as Eve,
Only to feed upon his stricken face.

—JOHN ALEXANDER ALLEN