

ME AND MY SHADOW

Edward Albee's alternate selves.

BY JOHN LAHR

For more than fifty years, Edward Albee has been telling us stories about his interior. A wary, sharp-eyed customer, Albee is expert at putting a bright smile on his bleak vision—a vision that began with his birth, in 1928. In a questionnaire, Albee tersely characterized his family as “adoptive—we never got along.” At eighteen days old, and at a cost of \$133.30, he was taken into the Larchmont, New York, home of Reed and Frances Albee. (His adoptive father was a scion of the Keith-Albee vaudeville-theatre chain.) “I was not what they bargained for, what they thought they had bought,” Albee said. In his arid family, there were “no touchies, no feelies.” At play on the grounds of his parents’ estate, Albee was soon a veteran of privilege and neglect. He repaid the indifference with insolence. A smart lad and a recalcitrant student, he ricocheted among a series of expensive boarding schools: Lawrenceville, Valley Forge Military Academy, Choate. “I was not happy being away at school. I was not happy being at home. Obviously, I wasn’t happy anywhere,” he told his biographer, Mel Gussow, in “Edward Albee: A Singular Journey.” Dr. Allan Heely, the headmaster of Lawrenceville, recognized the parental problem and tried to intervene on Albee’s behalf when he applied to Choate. “Very confidentially, he dislikes his mother with a cordial and eloquent dislike which I consider entirely justifiable,” Heely wrote, adding, “I can think of no other boy who, I believe, has been so fully the victim of an unsympathetic home background or who has exhibited so fully the psychological effect of feeling that he is not wanted.” In 1949, at the age of twenty-one, having been expelled from Trinity College after less than two years, Albee set out on his own.

Seventeen years later, after his fame had brought renewed glory to the Albee name, he reconnected with his imper-

ous mother, but when she died, in 1989, he discovered that she had revised her will, removing him as her primary heir and eliminating him as a trustee of her estate. Going through her papers, Albee came across his adoption certificate, which contained the startling news that his birth name, which he had never known, was Edward Harvey. Only then,



Zachary Booth and Preston Saddleir as identical twins in “Me, Myself & I.”

Albee said, did he start to wonder, “How did I get this way? Where did I develop this peculiar mind?” Given the similarity of the two names, it’s easy to see how Albee, with his playful and ironic bent, could be drawn into the notion of Edward Harvey as his doppelgänger, a kind of imagined twin. Albee’s 2008 play, “Me, Myself & I” (crisply directed by Emily Mann, at Playwrights Horizons), is, as its title suggests, about the landscape of the self and the drama of claiming an identity.

“Me, Myself & I” focusses on a pair of identical twins and on the role of the maternal embrace—or the frustrating lack of

it—in shaping a sturdy personality. It is at once a lament and a lampoon, its characters revolving around one another like planets in an alien galaxy. The set is a minimal white box, which suggests both the realm of the interior and a kind of cage. Perched center stage on a double bed, with her lump of a partner, the Dr. (the droll Brian Murray, in a pin-striped suit and a red tie), beside her, the Mother (Elizabeth Ashley) is literally and figuratively unable to tell her two sons, now in their twenties, apart. “Who *are* you? Which one *are* you?” she says in almost her first words to her son OTTO (Zachary Booth), adding, “Are you the one who loves me?” With her auburn hair teased up into a kind of Medusa do and her throaty Southern drawl simultane-

ously cooing and killing, Ashley makes a hilarious monster of nurture: her mind is as sharp as her tongue; she’s both seductive and speedy, which works perfectly in this role. Mother, as Ashley plays her, is an infuriating, tantalizing, and destructive object of desire, flouncing around on the bed in an orange-and-bronze negligée with a precipitous décolletage, pouting, kicking, and working herself up into an eye-rolling comic tizzy:

MOTHER: (to OTTO) . . . I’ve seen you every day of your life, over and over, twenty times a day for all the years, but I don’t know who you are.

DR.: (to Mother) You’re speaking metaphorically here.

MOTHER: No, you asshole! I don't know who he is. Maybe I did . . . *once*.

OTTO: All right; (*pressing*) When?!

MOTHER: . . . When I looked down and saw each of you on a nipple. *Raising* you, raising the two of you, all the years. . . .

In Albee's shrewdly pitched dialogue, the *idea* of motherhood—not actual mothering—is what captures Mother's imagination. She wants to be looked at but not looked into. The result is emotional chaos, which Mother, with her sensational shallowness, has compounded by giving her identical twins identical names. "I named the twin at my right breast OTTO, after his father's grandfather's whatever, and the other, at my other one, otto," she explains. "One loud; one soft. Perfect boys; perfect breasts; perfect names." She goes on: "They would nestle there and enfold and . . . become one—be one. They were . . . Otto. My Ottos were Otto." The name, with its palindromic symmetry, acknowledges the identical external reality of the twins but outrageously denies them their individual interiors. It's soul murder given an absurdist spin. "I don't think existence determines much of anything," Mother says, levelling her big almond eyes at the audience. "Do *you*?" Identity, as the play cleverly dramatizes, is a collaboration of the self with the other. *Are we making sense? Are we communicating? Are we loved?* If the eyes that we fix on at birth don't reflect us back, the effect is deracinating. We're lost to ourselves.

"Do you like my mother?" OTTO asks the audience at one point in Act II, after declaring that his brother no longer exists for him. "Otto and I . . . *used* to find her perplexing, exhausting, maddening, deeply loving, terribly destructive. . . . But now, of course, I can't say, since my twin and I . . . no matter." From the play's first beat, the rebellious OTTO tells us that he wants to stir things up and get clear of his family; he announces to his family that he's going to China to become Chinese. Only later in the play does he tell otto (Preston Sadleir) that he wants him to disappear, too. "My brother *did* exist, but now I need him *not* to. Clear?" OTTO confides to us.

The psychic terror of invisibility, the need to have your life somehow wit-

nessed, is played out primarily through the character of otto, who represents the biddable, vulnerable, insecure side of Albee's divided self, the son who wants to love his mother and his girlfriend, Maureen (Natalia Payne), but who is sent into an existential meltdown by OTTO's declaration of independence. "You *see* me. You see *me*," otto beseeches the bewildered Maureen. "You *feel* me! . . . You *see* me. You *feel* me." The lethal OTTO does his best to humiliate and debase his tender twin, to kill off the soft part of his heart—going so far as to impersonate otto and bed Maureen. "I'm not nice, am I! Never have been; good dissembler though," OTTO says. In the end, he negotiates a kind of truce with otto. "My twin, perhaps, but not my brother," he says.

Who, then, is OTTO's brother? The play's answer is OTTO's own reflection in the mirror. "This was the *real* me. This was me—identically," he says. The name of this interloper is *Otto*—in italics. "He's real. He *does* exist," OTTO insists to his twin. "I guess we'll just have to think of ourselves as triplets." The joke brings the warring selves into some kind of harmony. OTTO and otto embrace. "I think the play's over," OTTO says. "Let's go join the curtain call." The twins pivot away from us and stand with the other actors to take their bows—a moment that plays as both a termination and a liberation.

Albee once said of his double parental abandonment, "I used to care about it, but then I discovered that I was a writer. . . . I found out who I was through my plays." In "Me, Myself & I," he makes a spectacle of that discovery, of the strength to be found through self-expression. Along its jaunty way, the play nods to the Greeks (with a deus-ex-machina happy ending), to Samuel Beckett (Hamm's dark glasses, Vladimir and Estragon's bowler hats and exasperated banter), and, for me, anyway, to musical comedy. In Frank Loesser's "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying," the ambitious hero peps himself up by singing a love song to his reflection in the bathroom mirror: "And when my faith in my fellow man / All but falls apart, / I've but to feel your hand grasping mine / And I take heart, I take heart." ♦