



John Fredo and Maggie Zindle in
"The Goat; or Who Is Sylvia?"

'The Goat' vs. the status quo

BY COLIN DABKOWSKI / NEWS ARTS WRITER

Edward Albee gets right to the point. Ask him, for instance, if his 2002 play "The Goat; or Who is Sylvia?" – in which the middle-aged protagonist's love affair with a goat threatens to destroy his family – is an absurdist metaphor for problems that could arise in any relationship. The reply will come back curt and unadorned, with a minimum of poetry and a maximum of insight.

"The goat is not metaphorical," Albee said, adding a pointed and unprintable catch-phrase about the impossibility of having intimate relations with a metaphor. "It's that simple. It is a real man and a real goat and a real love affair. And so what?"

There you have America's pre-eminent playwright, who at 82 years old – after penning such iconic plays as "The Zoo Story," "A Delicate Balance" and "Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolff?" and racking up a towering collection of accolades in the process – remains the uncompromising, convention-crushing provocateur he was at 30.

The first local staging of the play, which won Albee critical acclaim and raised its share of hack-

THEATER PREVIEW

The Goat; or Who Is Sylvia?

Where:
Road Less Traveled Theatre, 639 Main St.

When: Opens Friday and runs through May 22

Tickets: \$30, \$25 for seniors and \$15 for students.

Info: 629-3069 or visit www.roadlesstraveledproductions.com.

les when it opened in New York City, opens Wednesday in the Road Less Traveled Theatre. The production is directed by Derek Campbell and stars John Fredo and Maggie Zindle. The pre-eminent playwright will visit Buffalo for several days beginning May 9 as part of the local company's annual American Theater Masters series. While in Buffalo, he will attend a performance of "The Goat," participate in the company's annual fundraiser and work with members of its New Play Workshop.

Albee spoke to The News from Houston – "the only city in Texas I can tolerate," he said – where he is teaching a play-writing class at the University of Houston. Albee is no stranger to Buffalo, having visited frequently in the mid-'60s

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for premiere productions of his plays “Box” and “Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung” at Studio Arena Theatre. He recalled his time here fondly and praised former Studio Arena artistic director Neal DuBrook, a champion of his early plays.

Albee’s association with Road Less Traveled came about through the Buffalo-based playwright Neil Wechsler, whose play “Grenadine” Albee selected as the winner of the inaugural and highly competitive Yale Drama Award in 2008. Albee attended Road Less Traveled’s world premiere production of Wechsler’s play last September, and was tapped by company co-founder and artistic director Scott Behrend to return for a production of “The Goat” and to participate in its annual series, which in past years has drawn the likes of theater luminaries Alec Baldwin and Eric Bogosian.

As a voracious reader of contemporary plays, Albee makes a point to seek out and promote gifted new playwrights like Wechsler.

“You have to encourage real talent where you see it,” Albee said of Wechsler and his first effort, a comedy with echoes of Samuel Beckett that follows four characters on a quixotic journey through an unfamiliar landscape. “It is so infrequent, and theater should be made up of more of it. And I’m so tired of the middle-class, middlebrowism of most theater.”

The theater, Albee said with typical brevity, “shouldn’t leave you where you came in. It should do something to you.” He noted the skyrocketing prices for tickets, which can run well upwards of \$100 for a de-



Derek Gee/Buffalo News

Maggie Zindle and John Fredo play a husband and wife with an unusual problem at the Road Less Traveled Theater.

cent seat for a Broadway production.

“Shouldn’t something happen to you for that money?” he continued. “God, why spend your time and your money going somewhere to have a theatrical experience if you don’t learn something about yourself and about the art of theater?”

“The Goat,” with its boundary-pushing premise and concern with bestiality — a topic not alien to the minds of Western New Yorkers, given the recent controversy over sexually explicit e-mails sent by gubernatorial hopeful Carl Paladino — is nothing if not an affront to what Albee sees as a pervading lack of adventurousness in the contemporary theater. It could be his middlebrow-beating masterpiece.

For Campbell, who directs “The Goat,” the opportunity to work with a script so tightly constructed, meticulously written and endowed with so many levels of meaning is both an honor and a particularly daunting challenge.

“On the surface it’s tense, muscular,” Campbell said of Albee’s language. “Within that tough form there’s a very, very precise musical orchestration that assembles the language. When you begin to work on that, you start to break through the surface and realize how richly endowed it is with inner life and meaning.”

Campbell stressed that the play was not explicitly “about” bestiality, but rather deals with the tragedy of a man and a family suddenly confronted with it.

He urged audiences not to be put off by what most will consider the play’s taboo subject matter:

“There is a very profound and serious artist at work here, and if we get hung up on the sensational aspect of it and can’t get beyond that, then we’re going to lose what is an enormously provocative and moving and challenging text.”

As for Albee, he said one of his goals with the play is to get audiences to think beyond their traditional moral hang-ups and consider society’s more pressing issues.

“There are so many other values that we should be examining, and I don’t think falling in love with whomever or whatever you fall in love with is one of the corruptions of our society. I think greed and stupidity and laziness and totalitarianism are far more dangerous,” he said. “Most people have values that they haven’t examined for a very long time. And so I like to shake things up now and again.”

Or, as Albee put it in a 2004 speech to a group of students in Boston: “Each play is an act of aggression against the status quo.”

“I just adore that,” Campbell said of Albee’s conviction. “That’s understandable coming from the mouth of an aspiring 25-year-old playwright who is determined to make his mark, but to keep that as a governing philosophy for nearly 50 years is truly an astonishing tribute to the kind of internal quest that he’s on. And, of course, ‘The Goat’ is a perfect example of that maxim in work.”

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