



Social Criticism in Edward Albee's Radical Plays The Zoo Story, The Death of Bessie Smith and The American Dream

By Dusica Marinkovic-Penney

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Seminar paper from the year 2004 in the subject American Studies - Culture and Applied Geography, grade: 1 (A), Justus-Liebig-University Giessen (Anglistics), course: Radical Theater: American Plays and American Culture of the 1960s, language: English, abstract: All three plays The Zoo Story, The Death of Bessie Smith and The American Dream are Edward Albee's early plays in which he points out the deplorable state of the American society. Albee's way of writing is provocative because his ultimate goal is to shock his audience. At the same time he wants to amuse the viewers with dialogues that are governed by sarcasm and irony. He writes in the preface of the play The American Dream: "Is the play offensive? I certainly hope so; it was my intention to offend- as well as amuse and entertain." (p.14) Thus his plays manages to confront the audience with the harsh reality of life and the problems of modern society.

In The Zoo Story a clash of two different representatives of the modern American society takes place and ends up in an accidental manslaughter. In The Death of Bessie Smith the audience faces a society ruled by hatred, racism and frustration. The third play which is going to be examined closely in this paper is The American Dream, a sad portrait of an American family craving for something to replace the emptiness they find themselves in.

This paper will examine the social criticism in these three plays which were written between 1958 and 1960 in order to find common topics and critical issues which were present at that particular time, and are still relevant today. The topics that are going to be analyzed are the outcasts of the society and their treatment by the members of the establishment, the lack of communication and growing violence as a result of it and finally the artificial values of the modern society and the constantly present hypocrisy and double standard.

As Edward Albee sums it up:

The play [The American Dream] is an examination of the American scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, it is a stand against the fiction that everything in

this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen. (p. 13-14)

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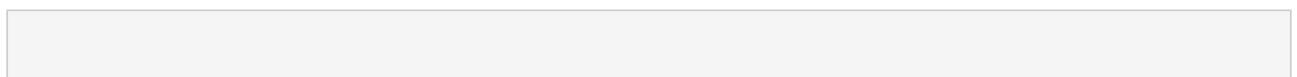
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- Sales Rank: #2565040 in eBooks
- Published on: 2004-07-30
- Released on: 2004-07-30
- Format: Kindle eBook



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