

Reflections on Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*

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When I cracked open my Eliot's Amazing Pineapple Orange Banana Juice Blend drink, I thought how nice it would be to have a quote waiting under the cap for me. For about the last two months or so, I have barely gotten any quotes on my caps. I had just seen the Revelers' production of Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*, directed by Eron Block, and enjoyed it. It's a good story and sent me on my way thinking. Actually, puzzling. The play challenged me, stimulated me, and it just seemed like the right time for a quote to be on the Eliot's cap—especially since it was Pineapple Orange Banana Juice Blend, and I had never tried it.

Well, there it was. This evening W. Somerset Maugham spoke to me from within the crinkled edges of the twist-top, saying: "Life is so largely controlled by chance that its conduct can be but a perpetual improvisation." A serendipitous and highly applicable quote considering the play I had just experienced. It thrilled me. But I would wager that I don't really want to believe it and that most people don't really want to believe it. At least we live like we don't, and I think Albee would agree.

Walking in early to get a decent seat, I found one of the two actors in the play already on stage. James Martin performed as Peter, a middle-aged fellow from the middle class who comes to a certain bench in Central Park, New York every Sunday to be alone and read. As theatre-goers filed in, the man sat on the bench, attentive only to his book, *Iron Man* by Robert Bly, and his pipe. He wore lace-up oxford shoes, dark socks, khaki slacks, a light blue shirt, a navy blue Polo tie, and a tweed coat. And glasses. He had hair slicked back nearly impeccably, parted just right. His sweet pipe smoke wafted out into the audience, mixed with the classical music that played in the moments before showtime. The Moon Room in Dana Auditorium, the location for the play, fostered, in conjunction with all of the above elements, a total impression of Yuppie elegance and quiescence. The entire setting was perfect to heighten the contrast of what was to come.

The lights went down to signal the beginning of the show. The man on the bench continued reading for a moment, the silence blatant now that the prattle of the audience had ceased. Enter Jerry, the second character, played by Joe Wallace. Jerry was big and black. He was not dressed so well, though not repugnantly. He definitely had not visited any Ralph Lauren stores lately. Jerry was foreign to the Yuppie, predominantly white, upper-middle class. He did not belong.

The whole play revolves around the bench Peter comes to every Sunday. Walking in, Jerry tries to strike up a conversation with Peter. He says out of the blue, "I've been to

the zoo, you know." The man on the bench keeps reading. Jerry repeats himself a couple of times, with no success in grabbing the man's attention. Disinterested, Peter just keeps on reading. Jerry finally gets right in Peter's face and bellows his proclamation. Peter jumps. "Were you talking to me?"

Yes. And from here the conversation begins between two complete strangers—strangers not only personally, but socio-economically. Peter is reluctant to talk and seems to listen only to be polite, and perhaps because he's a captive audience. He always comes to this bench to read. It's his bench. And Jerry is quite persistent in conversation (he has come specifically to talk and interact with a person like Peter, we find out later.)

Jerry asks questions. Peter tells some about himself—quite a bit to a stranger; he has a well-paying job, a wife, two daughters, two cats, and two parakeets, one for each daughter. A Yuppie in true form. Then Jerry starts telling about himself, tales tragic and weird and funny in a warped sort of way. His parents are dead. He lives in the slums with a big fat greasy alcoholic landlady who tries constantly to seduce him, belching sweet-nothings as she presses her huge, heaving frame against his. Then there's her dog, a gaunt and jet black mutt, black as black gets except for his blood-shot red eyes, his white teeth (which are constantly bared at Jerry), an open sore on his right foot which is red, and an obvious erection—which is red. Telling of one encounter with the dog, who seems to want to kill him, Jerry says, "There he was, malevolence with an erection, waiting."

The language of the play excited me, and much of it came alive in Jerry's tales to Peter. When Jerry told of his parents—his mother's alcoholism, his father having stepped out in front of a bus that happened to be moving—he dismissed it all, saying, "But that particular Vaudeville act is playing the cloud circuit now."

Decidedly one of the coolest phrases in the whole play came when Jerry discussed his sex life with Peter—rather when Jerry told Peter, who didn't really care to listen. Jerry has always had one-night stands with women. Never slept with the same woman more than once—ever. His only relationship came when he was fifteen. Jerry told of how this grand romance lasted all of a week and a half. Even then, Jerry did not sleep with the same woman more than once. He slept with the same boy more than once. But, Jerry mused, could he really say he had been in love? Or had he only been in love with sex? He didn't answer the questions, said only, "Aaah, but that was the jazz of a very special hotel, now wasn't it?"

Jerry's stories get weirder and decidedly more complex, and throughout them all, Peter maintains a relative disinterest. He would just rather keep reading, continue doing what he is used to doing, what he has been doing for so long. Routine is predict-

able and, for this reason, safe. He would be content carrying on as usual, having his time in the park and then returning to his middle-class home, his wife, his two daughters, two cats, and two parakeets. He doesn't want the intrusion Jerry poses. Only, Jerry is intent on shaking Peter up, on waking him up. Why, I don't know, but there it is. He wants, perhaps, to show Peter that his insular yuppie world is not so safe after all and that the regularity that we con ourselves into believing in life is an illusion. The whole interaction between the two explodes in the end. If you saw the play, you know what happened. (If you didn't, make an effort to see it elsewhere or read it, especially if you plan to be a yuppie.) To some extent, the two personalities clashed, but mostly it was their worlds that collided. The impact rocked Peter's world-view, body-slammed his notion of life like a two bit wrestler. With Peter's mind reeling, the play ended.

The mind-reeling did not end at that point, though, at least for me. The play overflowed with hints at greater significance, and I'm sure I didn't even catch half of them. But

I'm still messing with just one of them, the idea that something or someone could come along and shatter-bomb my whole notion of my life. The prospect is exciting in a way but scary. I wonder if that's why I don't want to listen to certain people and why, with some things, I'm just not interested. Probably. New factors mean danger for what's established in the mind, for what's comfortable and safe. And considering too much new input might mean we couldn't deceive ourselves that life is regular and predictable and is not "so largely controlled by chance."

Even though the play was complex, the significance came across well, primarily because I didn't feel like I was just watching a play. The Moon Room, though small, suited the purpose quite well, helping to establish a certain intimacy between audience and performers. Being in such relatively close quarters, smelling pipe smoke from time to time, made the play seem just a stimulating interaction between two people which I had the opportunity to be present for and witness.

This Week at a Glance

April 27 to April 30

DAY/DATE	TIME	EVENT	PLACE
Monday, 27	9-10:30 pm	General Union Meeting	Commons
Tuesday, 28	10:30-2:30 pm	Yoga Class	Gallery
	Noon-1 pm	Committee "W" Meeting	Dana Lounge
	3:30-5 pm	Career Development Resume Writing Workshop	Dana Lounge
	5:15-6 pm	Episcopal Holy Eucharist	Moon Room
	8:45-10 pm	FCA Meeting	Boren Lounge
	9-10 pm	Explorative Bible Study	Founders 203A
Wednesday, 29	2:30-4 pm	Faculty Colloquium/Forum	Gallery
	4-5:30 pm	SRC Meeting	Boren Lounge
	5:30-6:30 pm	Bonner Scholars Meeting	Boren Lounge
	6:45-7:15 pm	Athletic Dept Reception	Boren Lounge
	7:15-9:15 pm	Athletic Dept Banquet	Cafeteria
	7:15-9:30 pm	Fiction Workshop	Gallery
	7:15-9:15 pm	Student Fiction Reading Workshop	Gallery
	8:30-10 pm	IVCF Meeting	Boren Lounge
	9-10 pm	Amnesty International Meeting	Dana Lounge
Thursday, 30	4-7 pm	IVCF End-of-The-Year-Picnic	Miler/Bryan Lawn
	8 pm	Campus Alanon, Need a Ride? Call x. 2174 or 292-4905	UNCG Elliott Center
	9:15-10:30 pm	IVCF Campus Prayer Meeting	Founders 203A