

Edward Albee

THE SANDBOX

A Brief Play, in Memory of My Grandmother (1876–1959)

PLAYERS

THE YOUNG MAN, 25, a good-looking, well-built boy in a bathing suit

MOMMY, 55, a well-dressed, imposing woman

DADDY, 60, a small man; gray, thin

GRANDMA, 86, a tiny, wizened woman with bright eyes

THE MUSICIAN, no particular age, but young would be nice

NOTE. When, in the course of the play, MOMMY and DADDY call each other by these names, there should be no suggestion of regionalism. These names are of empty affection and point up the pre-senility and vacuity of their characters.

THE SANDBOX Written in 1959. Edward Albee, abandoned by his natural parents, was adopted two weeks after birth in 1928 by a wealthy couple in Westchester County, New York, and named after his adoptive grandfather, part owner of the Keith-Albee string of movie-and-vaudeville theaters. His early schooling frequently interrupted by family vacations, Albee attended a variety of private schools. Dismissed from Trinity College (Connecticut) after three semesters, he went to Greenwich Village, against his foster parents' wishes, determined to write. For about ten years he tried poetry and fiction while working at various odd jobs to supplement a weekly allowance from a trust fund established by his grandmother. After the success of his first play, *Zoo Story* (1959), and the completion of a second, Albee interrupted work on *The American Dream* when commissioned to do a short play for an international theatrical festival. For this play (*The Sandbox*) he used characters from the work in progress placed in a different situation and setting. Despite its overlap of characters and themes with *The American Dream* (1961), it is a separate play, and Albee in 1966 declared it his favorite among his plays (which then numbered about ten including *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*).

THE SCENE. *A bare stage, with only the following: Near the footlights, far stage-right, two simple chairs set side by side, facing the audience; near the footlights, far stage-left, a chair facing stage-right with a music stand before it; farther back, and stage-center, slightly elevated and raked, a large child's sandbox with a toy pail and shovel; the background is the sky, which alters from brightest day to deepest night.*

At the beginning, it is brightest day; the YOUNG MAN is alone on stage to the rear of the sandbox, and to one side. He is doing calisthenics; he does calisthenics until quite at the very end of the play. These calisthenics, employing the arms only, should suggest the beating and fluttering of wings. The YOUNG MAN is, after all, the Angel of Death.

MOMMY and DADDY enter from stage-left, MOMMY first.

MOMMY (*motioning to DADDY*). Well, here we are; this is the beach.

DADDY (*whining*). I'm cold.

MOMMY (*dismissing him with a little laugh*). Don't be silly; it's as warm as toast. Look at that nice young man over there: *he doesn't think it's cold.* (*Waves to the YOUNG MAN*) Hello.

YOUNG MAN (*with an endearing smile*). Hi!

MOMMY (*looking about*). This will do perfectly . . . don't you think so, Daddy? There's sand there . . . and the water beyond. What do you think, Daddy?

DADDY (*vaguely*). Whatever you say, Mommy.

MOMMY (*with the same little laugh*). Well, of course . . . whatever I say. Then, it's settled, is it?

DADDY (*shrugs*). She's *your* mother, not mine.

MOMMY. *I know she's my mother. What do you take me for?* (*A pause*) All right, now; let's get on with it. (*She shouts into the wings, stage-left*) You! Out there! You can come in now. (*The MUSICIAN enters, seats himself in the chair, stage-left, places music on the music stand, is ready to play. MOMMY nods approvingly.*) Very nice; very nice. Are you ready, Daddy? Let's go get Grandma.

DADDY. Whatever you say, Mommy.

MOMMY (*leading the way out, stage-left*). Of course, whatever I say. (*To the MUSICIAN*) You can begin now. (*The MUSICIAN begins playing; MOMMY and DADDY exit; the MUSICIAN, all the while playing, nods to the YOUNG MAN.*)

YOUNG MAN (*with the same endearing smile*). Hi! (*After a moment, MOMMY and DADDY re-enter, carrying GRANDMA. She is borne in by their hands under her armpits; she is quite rigid; her legs are drawn up; her feet do not touch the ground; the expression on her ancient face is that of puzzlement and fear.*)

DADDY. Where do we put her?

MOMMY (*the same little laugh*). Wherever I say, of course. Let me see . . . well . . . all right, over there . . . in the sandbox. (*Pause*) Well,

what are you waiting for, Daddy? . . . The sandbox! (*Together they carry GRANDMA over to the sandbox and more or less dump her in.*)

GRANDMA (*righting herself to a sitting position; her voice a cross between a baby's laugh and cry*). Ahhhhhh! Graaaaa!

DADDY (*dusting himself*). What do we do now?

MOMMY (*to the MUSICIAN*). You can stop now. (*The MUSICIAN stops.*)
(*Back to DADDY*) What do you mean, what do we do now? We go over there and sit down, of course. (*To the YOUNG MAN*) Hello there.

YOUNG MAN (*again smiling*). Hi! (*MOMMY and DADDY move to the chairs, stage-right, and sit down. A pause.*)

GRANDMA (*same as before*). Ahhhhhh! Ah-haaaaaa! Graaaaaa!

DADDY. Do you think . . . do you think she's . . . comfortable?

MOMMY (*impatiently*). How would I know?

DADDY (*pause*). What do we do now?

MOMMY (*as if remembering*). We . . . wait. We . . . sit here . . . and we wait . . . that's what we do.

DADDY (*after a pause*). Shall we talk to each other?

MOMMY (*with that little laugh; picking something off her dress*). Well, you can talk, if you want to . . . if you can think of anything to say . . . if you can think of anything *new*.

DADDY (*thinks*). No . . . I suppose not.

MOMMY (*with a triumphant laugh*). Of course not!

GRANDMA (*banging the toy shovel against the pail*). Haaaaaa! Ah-haaaaaa!

MOMMY (*out over the audience*). Be quiet, Grandma . . . just be quiet, and wait. (*GRANDMA throws a shovelful of sand at MOMMY. Still out over the audience*) She's throwing sand at me! You stop that, Grandma; you stop throwing sand at Mommy! (*To DADDY*) She's throwing sand at me. (*DADDY looks around at GRANDMA, who screams at him.*)

GRANDMA. GRAAAAA!

MOMMY. Don't look at her. Just . . . sit here . . . be very still . . . and wait. (*To the MUSICIAN*) You . . . uh . . . you go ahead and do whatever it is you do. (*The MUSICIAN plays. MOMMY and DADDY are fixed, staring out beyond the audience. GRANDMA looks at them, looks at the MUSICIAN, looks at the sandbox, throws down the shovel.*)

GRANDMA. Ah-haaaaaa! Graaaaaa! (*Looks for reaction; gets none. Now . . . directly to the audience*) Honestly! What a way to treat an old woman! Drag her out of the house . . . stick her in a car . . . bring her out here from the city . . . dump her in a pile of sand . . . and leave her here to set. I'm eighty-six years old! I was married when I was seventeen. To a farmer. He died when I was thirty. (*To the MUSICIAN*) Will you stop that, please? (*The MUSICIAN stops playing.*) I'm a feeble old woman . . . how do you expect anybody to hear me over that peep! peep! peep! (*To herself*) There's no respect around here. (*To the YOUNG MAN*) There's no respect around here!

YOUNG MAN (*same smile*). Hi!

GRANDMA (*after a pause, a mild double-take, continues, to the audience*). My husband died when I was thirty (*indicates MOMMY*), and I had to raise that big cow over there all by my lonesome. You can imagine what *that was like*. Lordy! (*To the YOUNG MAN*) Where'd they get you?

YOUNG MAN. Oh . . . I've been around for a while.

GRANDMA. I'll bet you have! Heh, heh, heh. Will you look at you!

YOUNG MAN (*flexing his muscles*). Isn't that something? (*Continues his calisthenics.*)

GRANDMA. Boy, oh boy; I'll say. Pretty good.

YOUNG MAN (*sweetly*). I'll say.

GRANDMA. Where ya from?

YOUNG MAN. Southern California.

GRANDMA (*nodding*). Figgers; figgers. What's your name, honey?

YOUNG MAN. I don't know . . .

GRANDMA (*to the audience*). Bright, too!

YOUNG MAN. I mean . . . I mean, they haven't given me one yet . . . the studio . . .

GRANDMA (*giving him the once-over*). You don't say . . . you don't say. Well . . . uh, I've got to talk some more . . . don't you go 'way.

YOUNG MAN. Oh, no.

GRANDMA (*turning her attention back to the audience*). Fine; fine. (*Then, once more, back to the YOUNG MAN*) You're . . . you're an actor, hunh?

YOUNG MAN (*beaming*). Yes. I am.

GRANDMA (*to the audience again; shrugs*). I'm smart that way. *Anyhow*, I had to raise . . . *that* over there all by my lonesome; and what's next to her there . . . *that's* what she married. Rich? I tell you . . . money, money, money. They took me off the *farm* . . . which was real decent of them . . . and they moved me into the big town house with *them* . . . fixed a nice place for me under the stove . . . gave me an army blanket . . . and my own dish . . . my very own dish! So, what have I got to complain about? Nothing, of course. I'm not complaining. (*She looks up at the sky, shouts to someone off stage*) Shouldn't it be getting dark now, dear? (*The lights dim; night comes on. The MUSICIAN begins to play; it becomes deepest night. There are spots on all the players, including the YOUNG MAN, who is, of course, continuing his calisthenics.*)

DADDY (*stirring*). It's nighttime.

MOMMY. Shhhh. Be still . . . wait.

DADDY (*whining*). It's so hot.

MOMMY. Shhhhhh. Be still . . . wait.

GRANDMA (*to herself*). That's better. Night. (*To the MUSICIAN*) Honey, do you play all through this part? (*The MUSICIAN nods.*) Well, keep it nice and soft; that's a good boy. (*The MUSICIAN nods again; plays softly.*) That's nice. (*There is an off-stage rumble.*)

DADDY (*starting*). What was that?

MOMMY (*beginning to weep*). It was nothing.

DADDY. It was . . . it was . . . thunder . . . or a wave breaking . . . or something.

MOMMY (*whispering, through her tears*). It was an off-stage rumble . . . and you know what *that* means . . .

DADDY. I forget . . .

MOMMY (*barely able to talk*). It means the time has come for poor Grandma . . . and I can't bear it!

DADDY (*vacantly*). I . . . I suppose you've got to be brave.

GRANDMA (*mocking*). That's right, kid; be brave. You'll bear up; you'll get over it. (*Another off-stage rumble . . . louder.*)

MOMMY. Ohhhhhhhhhh . . . poor Grandma . . . poor Grandma . . .

GRANDMA (*to MOMMY*). I'm fine! I'm all right! It hasn't happened yet! (*A violent off-stage rumble. All the lights go out, save the spot on the YOUNG MAN; the MUSICIAN stops playing.*)

MOMMY. Ohhhhhhhhhh . . . Ohhhhhhhhhh . . . (*Silence.*)

GRANDMA. Don't put the lights up yet . . . I'm not ready; I'm not quite ready. (*Silence*) All right, dear . . . I'm about done. (*The lights come up again, to brightest day; the MUSICIAN begins to play. GRANDMA is discovered, still in the sandbox, lying on her side, propped up on an elbow, half covered, busily shoveling sand over herself.*)

GRANDMA (*muttering*). I don't know how I'm supposed to do anything with this goddam toy shovel . . .

DADDY. Mommy! It's daylight!

MOMMY (*brightly*). So it is! Well! Our long night is over. We must put away our tears, take off our mourning . . . and face the future. It's our duty.

GRANDMA (*still shoveling; mimicking*). . . . take off our mourning . . . face the future . . . Lordy! (*MOMMY and DADDY rise, stretch. MOMMY waves to the YOUNG MAN.*)

YOUNG MAN (*with that smile*). Hi! (*GRANDMA plays dead.[!] MOMMY and DADDY go over to look at her; she is a little more than half buried in the sand; the toy shovel is in her hands, which are crossed on her breast.*)

MOMMY (*before the sandbox; shaking her head*). Lovely! It's . . . it's hard to be sad . . . she looks . . . so happy. (*With pride and conviction*) It pays to do things well. (*To the MUSICIAN*) All right, you can stop now, if you want to. I mean, stay around for a swim, or something; it's all right with us. (*She sighs heavily*) Well, Daddy . . . off we go.

DADDY. Brave Mommy!

MOMMY. Brave Daddy! (*They exit, stage left.*)

GRANDMA (*after they leave; lying quite still*). It pays to do things well . . . Boy, oh boy! (*She tries to sit up*) . . . well, kids . . . (*but she finds she can't*) . . . I . . . I can't get up. I . . . I can't move . . . (*The YOUNG MAN stops his calisthenics, nods to the MUSICIAN, walks over to GRANDMA, kneels down by the sandbox.*)

GRANDMA. I . . . can't move . . .

YOUNG MAN. Shhhhh . . . be very still . . .

GRANDMA. I . . . I can't move . . .

YOUNG MAN. Uh . . . ma'am; I . . . I have a line here.

GRANDMA. Oh, I'm sorry, sweetie; you go right ahead.

YOUNG MAN. I am . . . uh . . .

GRANDMA. Take your time, dear.

YOUNG MAN (*prepares; delivers the line like a real amateur*). I am the Angel of Death. I am . . . uh . . . I am come for you.

GRANDMA. What . . . wha . . . (*then, with resignation*) . . . ohhhh . . . ohhhh, I see. (*The YOUNG MAN bends over, kisses GRANDMA gently on the forehead.*)

GRANDMA (*her eyes closed, her hands folded on her breast again, the shovel between her hands, a sweet smile on her face*). Well . . . that was very nice, dear . . .

YOUNG MAN (*still kneeling*). Shhhhh . . . be still . . .

GRANDMA. What I meant was . . . you did that very well, dear . . .

YOUNG MAN (*blushing*). . . . oh . . .

GRANDMA. No; I mean it. You've got that . . . you've got a quality.

YOUNG MAN (*with his endearing smile*). Oh . . . thank you; thank you very much . . . ma'am.

GRANDMA (*slowly; softly—as the YOUNG MAN puts his hands on top of GRANDMA'S*). You're . . . you're welcome . . . dear.

(*Tableau. The MUSICIAN continues to play as the curtain slowly comes down.*)

QUESTIONS

1. On the face of it, this little play is absurd—absurd both in the way it is presented and in what happens in it. Is it therefore simply horseplay, or does it have a serious subject? What is its subject?
2. The word *absurd*, used above, itself demands attention, since it has been much used with reference to contemporary theater. The word suggests two different meanings: (a) funny, (b) meaningless. Do both meanings function here? Does either meaning predominate?
3. Characterize Mommy and Daddy. In what ways are they alike? In what ways are they foils? Two of Daddy's speeches are repeated. What do they tell us about his relationship to Mommy?
4. Discuss the treatment by Mommy and Daddy, especially Mommy, of Grandma and her death and burial. What discrepancy exists between appearance and reality? Is their treatment of her in death similar to or different from their treatment of her in life? What metaphor is submerged in Grandma's account of their fixing her a place under the stove with an army blanket and her own dish? What is the function of the musician?
5. How does the treatment accorded the young man by most of the characters (Mommy, the musician, Grandma) contrast with their treatment of Grandma? What accounts for the difference? What kind of person is the young man?
6. What aspects of contemporary American life are presented in the play? In

answering this question, consider your answers to questions 3, 4, and 5. What judgment does the play make on contemporary American life?

7. Contrast Grandma with the young man and with Mommy and Daddy. What admirable qualities does she have? What disagreeable qualities does she have? Why? On the whole, is she presented as more, or less, worthy of respect than the other characters in the play? Why?
8. Both in the notes and in the dialogue, the young man is identified as the Angel of Death. How is he a very unusual Angel of Death? Is he a simple or a multiple symbol? What other meanings does he suggest?
9. What symbolic meanings are suggested by the following: (a) the bareness of the stage, (b) the sandbox, (c) the toy pail and shovel, (d) the dimming and extinguishing of the lights, (e) Grandma's burying herself with sand, (f) the fact that Grandma is buried before she is dead, (g) the young man's kissing Grandma. Which of them, like the young man, are multiple symbols?
10. At various points in the action the characters seem aware that they are performers in a play. What effect does this have on the audience's response?