

# SEASCAPE

By Edward Albee

September 14 - October 14, 2007  
Stiemke Theater



The Rep

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## A study guide for students and educators

Researched and designed by the Education Department at Milwaukee Repertory Theater, this study guide is intended to prepare you for your visit. It contains biographical and scientific information that will deepen your understanding of and appreciation for the production. We've also included questions and activities for you to explore before and after our performance of

## SEASCAPE

If you would like to schedule a classroom workshop, or if we can help in some other way, please contact:

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# The Rep Milwaukee

THEATER ♦ TRAINING AT ITS BEST

## SYNOPSIS

### Act One

Nancy and Charlie, a retired couple, are lounging on a sandy beach after a picnic lunch. Their rest is periodically punctured by the sound of a jet plane flying overhead. As they look out over the ocean, Nancy expresses her love of the beach and her wish to remain there—or at any beach—forever. Charlie doesn't take Nancy's wish

*"We are **not** going to be around forever, Charlie, and you may **not** do nothing."*  
**Nancy**

seriously and discourages the idea. It is Charlie's desire to do absolutely nothing. Nancy suggests that they find something to do. The two begin to discuss their various ideas for their future. They are torn between Charlie's belief that they have "earned a little rest" and Nancy's plea that they have "earned a little life." She wants

to "See Everything Twice!"

Charlie recalls his youthful desire to live under the sea. As a child he would hold his breath and sit on the bottom of the shallow end of a pool. As a teenager visiting the sea, he would strip off his clothes, hold onto stones and sink to the bottom for a while, enjoying the feeling of being part of the objects under the water. Nancy encourages him to try it again, to feel young and alive once more, but he refuses.

The conversation ranges from Nancy's thoughts of divorcing Charlie when he was going through a period of depression, to the raising of their children, to the genuine love they share for one another and to all the things they still have left to try in life.

As they are talking, another couple approaches them on the beach. It is a humanoid pair of green sea creatures, referred to as "lizards" by Charlie. At first, Nancy and Charlie are alarmed by the unusual pair and look for a stick to defend themselves, but the sound of the jet plane frightens the intruders into racing back down the dune towards the water. Charlie considers that they might have eaten bad

food and died and that this might account for the strange things they are seeing. As the creatures re-appear, Nancy and Charlie adopt a submissive pose on the ground.

### Act Two

Nancy and Charlie are still in a submissive pose, and the two couples investigate one another. Leslie and Sarah, the sea creatures, poke and sniff Nancy and Charlie, concluding that the human couple does not look very formidable and so they might be safe. When both couples are assured that no one is in danger, they speak to one another, introduce themselves and start to get to know each other. They discuss the names for the different body parts, clothing, Nancy's breasts, whales, giving birth, raising children, emotions, courtship, fidelity, aerodynamics, existence and death.

Sarah reveals that they left the sea because they had a sense of not belonging down there anymore. The four characters discuss the forward momentum of all evolutionary processes. Sarah gets scared and wants to return to the sea. Her fear and tears provoke Leslie and Charlie into a physical fight, and Leslie starts to choke Charlie. Leslie releases Charlie and the humans try to convince Leslie and Sarah to stay up on land so that they can experience everything, including all of the emotions and disappointments that life may bring. After much resistance, Leslie and Sarah agree to stay and move forward with life on land, and the ending offers opportunities for new beginnings for all the characters.

*"All of a sudden, everything... down there... was terribly... interesting, I suppose; but what did it have to do with **us** any more?"*  
**Sarah**

Synopsis written by Kristin Crouch,  
 Literary Director

## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: EDWARD ALBEE

Edward Albee's involvement in the theater began at a very young age. At two weeks old, Edward was adopted into the Albee family of Larchmont, New York, half-owners of a national chain of theaters. As he says, "I was raised on live theater, which was about the only good thing about the adoption." As he grew, Albee's budding artistic interests brought him into conflict with his parents, who wanted him to choose a more stable career path. Edward left home permanently at age 20, severing all ties with his family. "I never felt comfortable with the adoptive parents," he says, "I don't think they knew how to be parents. I probably didn't know how to be a son, either."

Albee's first successful play was *The Zoo Story*, which opened in Berlin in 1959 and was produced in New York the following year. The play received international acclaim, and Albee followed up its success with the absurdist plays *The Sandbox* (1959) and *The American Dream* (1960). Absurdism, a movement that had been gaining popularity in Europe after World War II, centered on the idea that the universe had no meaning and therefore any attempt to find meaning was ultimately futile. Absurdist plays reflect this philosophy by ignoring theatrical conventions and using unrealistic, sometimes nonsensical characters and situations to explore themes of isolation, loneliness and futility. Albee's early plays brought Absurdism to the American stage for the first time.

In 1962 Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* opened on Broadway to tremendous acclaim, receiving both a Tony and a New York Drama Critics' Circle Award. The play was also selected to receive a Pulitzer Prize for drama, but the decision was overruled by the Pulitzer Council who regarded the play as overly profane. Albee went on to win three Pulitzer Prizes, for *A Delicate Balance* (1967), *Seascape* (1975) and *Three Tall Women* (1994). Despite his success, Albee has a relaxed attitude about awards. "Look, if they're giving out awards, it's nice to get them," he says,

"So every time I get one, I'm surprised. And every time I don't get one, I'm surprised. I live in a constant state of surprise!" Upon receiving his Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement in 2005, Albee commented, "You hang around long enough, people give you things. Although this one is a little premature. I hope my next four or five are better than my previous plays."

Over the years Albee's career has been eclectic - by the end of the 1970's, despite having written two Pulitzer Prize winning plays, he was living as a poverty-stricken alcoholic. However, he has always stood by the quality and integrity of his work and refuses to compromise his principles to please an audience or silence his critics. "Writing should be useful," he states, "If it can't instruct people a little bit more about the responsibilities of consciousness, there's no point in doing it. We all write because we don't like what we see, and we want people to be better and different. That's why we do it."



*"I am not a person who gets ideas for a play: 'Oh now, wouldn't it be good to write a play about this.' I write the plays to find out why I'm writing them."*

**Edward  
Albee**

## VOCABULARY TERMS FROM THE PLAY

**Nomad:** A wanderer. A member of a people or tribe that has no permanent home but moves about from place to place. Nancy's dream is for her and Charlie to become seaside *nomads*.

**Unfettering:** To set free from restrictions or bonds. Nancy sees her life as a long process of *unfettering*.

**Chattel:** A movable piece of personal property. Also used to describe a slave. Nancy claims that she and Charlie have nothing holding them down, just unnecessary *chattel*.

**Ambidextrous:** Able to use both hands equally well. Leslie and Sarah are *ambidextrous*.

**Inundated:** Overwhelmed. Sarah claims that many of the eggs she lays are eaten by passing fish. "...which is a blessing, really, or we'd be *inundated*," she says.

**Perpetuate:** To cause something to continue indefinitely. Leslie wonders how humans *perpetuate* if they have so few children.

**Imprecision:** Inexactness or vagueness. The lizards become frus-

trated with the humans' *imprecision* in describing certain concepts to them.

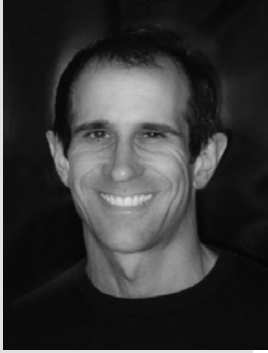
**Bigot:** A person who is partial to his or her own race or belief, and is intolerant of those who differ. Charlie claims that Leslie is a *bigot* for disliking fish.

**Agnostic:** One who is doubtful or noncommittal about something. Often used to describe one who is skeptical about the existence of God. Nancy claims that Charlie has switched from doubt to outright denial, "from *agnostic* to atheist."

**Leviathan:** A biblical sea monster. Also a term used to describe anything of immense size and power. Charlie describes how the dinosaurs, despite being *leviathans*, died out because they couldn't cope or adapt.



**The biblical Leviathan**



## A BRIEF MOMENT WITH BILL CLARKE, SET DESIGNER

### How did you become a set designer?

I'd always been interested in working on sets, even as far back as -- believe it or not -- elementary school. In college at the University of Virginia, I majored in drama and moved to NYC right afterwards. But it was impossible to get any jobs designing; the field was much more competitive than I'd imagined. So I painted scenery for a living, then gradually was able to get work assisting set designers in their studios. This became a kind of informal apprenticeship for me, and a few years later I went back to school -- this time to get an MFA at the Yale School of Drama, and I've been fortunate to be working ever since graduation.

### Tell us a bit about how you work on a play .

Someone once asked me if I had to read the plays I design! Well, that is the obvious first step.....followed by research, which can be further reading, or looking at artwork or photographs in museums or libraries -- or often nowadays on the Internet --, visiting historical sites or sometimes visiting the place where the play takes place if that's practical.

The first meeting with the director may happen quite early -- sometimes just a quick phone chat -- or it may happen after the designer has already done a great amount of research. Some directors like a designer to arrive with some ideas already in place -- others may have a strong notions about the play from the beginning.

The play's final designs are sometimes pretty close to my very first impulse -- and other times, completely different. I used to be more stubborn about holding onto my initial ideas, but I gradually have learned that directors with different visions have often saved me from some poor choices. My goal is to be as open as possible, as long as possible, to any influences.

### What is the most exciting thing about the set for *Seascape*? What would you say is the key of your design for this play?

Often the idiosyncrasies of a particular space, rather than being a limitation, can turn out to be the key to the more interesting aesthetic choices.

The Stiemke has a very low ceiling, and is not very deep. But its playing space is theoretically pretty flexible -- we can move the seats around to achieve different proportions and relationships between the actors and the audience. Laura Gordon (Director) talked early on about liking the feeling of an expansive space, and since the play is set at a beach, and characters are often gazing down the shoreline, we decided to stretch our stage as wide as absolutely possible. As I said, its height and depth are limited, but that just makes its extreme width that much more noticeable. Plus, rather than frame the set in traditional black masking legs, our stage just ends in a continuation of the sky--so we are hoping for a feeling of a limitless expanse.

### Tell us how sets help to tell a story.

I think people today are more highly visually literate than ever before, so the audience tends to be very attuned to the tone set by a stage picture. Since they usually form impressions before any actors even appear, I think a designer has a great responsibility to the production. On the most basic level, the set can, depending on the type of play, tell you a lot of specific detail about the lives of the characters. But in a larger sense, the set can establish a tone and indicate a point of view that the director and designer share about the play.

### What sort of interaction do you have with the other members of the creative team? How closely do you work with them?

A good question, and the answer will show how theory diverges from practice! In THEORY, we all meet frequently and ideas develop almost in a group setting, one person's inspiration feeding another. In PRACTICE, however, designers rarely live in the same city. Sometimes the director, set, lighting and costume designers might live in four different cities -- and the play performed in a fifth! Still, we try to meet, and of course it's now easier to share visual ideas thanks to web sites and scanned images. Luckily, Milwaukee Rep is one of the few theaters that provides for an initial face-to-face meeting with the director and ALL the designers, near the very beginning of the project, which is extremely helpful.

## INTERVIEWS WITH THE CAST

### Linda Stephens (Nancy)

**What have you been able to pull from your own life to help you play Nancy?**

Basically, I'm about the same age as she is, and the idea of "What are you going to do with the rest of your life?" is very close to me. I'm not married, but I have *been* married, so I have that. The idea of playing husband and wife with Jim is interesting to me because we're about the same age, we played together for the first time in 1985 and we've never played husband and wife before. So it's like playing husband and wife with a friend, and he is a friend who has been close in my life, so he is being drawn on.

**What's enjoyable about playing the role?**

It's really the ensemble of the play that's enjoyable: telling the story that we're telling, which is a very unusual story about either giving in to your fears or moving on. That's what's enjoyable: to work with this ensemble and tell a story that's very positive.

I love the play, and I think part of the reason I love the play is because you're not quite sure what's going on, but there's enough there to keep you moving forward. When you listen to it... then you think "Well, I'm not entirely sure what that was, but I kinda got it..."

**Do you think that there's a satisfying resolution to it?**

I do. If not a resolution, then another plateau, another place to move on from, and I think it's a positive place.

**What do you think that the message of the play is?**

You have two choices. No matter how old you are, or no matter what your position is in life, you can either stop and begin to atrophy and stay where you are, or you can move on and keep growing and keep experiencing... No matter how afraid you might be. I think it's about fear of the unknown and making the choice between facing that fear and just holding out and staying satisfied where you are.



### Cristina Panfilio (Sarah)

**How did you go about preparing to play this role?**

I read the play many times, made some preliminary choices, and started asking questions. As this will be my first appearance as a sea creature, the thing that I was least familiar with was the semi-evolved-lizard part. I did some lizard-research on my own, and then we did some of the same in rehearsal as well. We took a trip to the zoo to get a look at some of the reptiles there. We went rock climbing one evening for movement research. Sounds odd, I know, but it all helps. These characters are so extreme; we needed some basic and concrete starting points, particularly in terms of movement and behavior.

**How has your interpretation of Sarah changed throughout the rehearsal process, and what has caused it to change?**

I think that making theater demands constant adaptation. This production has an all-star team, and if I'm not responding to what

everyone else is doing, then I'm not doing my job right. Direction from Laura Gordon, choices that other actors make, costume and set design, revisiting the text, exploring movement with (Choreographer) Ed Burgess - those are the things that keep me in constant motion.

**What does the play mean to you?**

I think that this is a play about evolution - a great big general term, I know, but humor me. I think that it's about the evolution of our relationships; the ways in which we grow from courtship and passion, to complacency, to a truly deep need for our other. I think it's about growing out of our own skin and what we come to think of as home; it's about wonder and fear, hunger and growth, safety and risk, mortality and knowledge and love.



### James Pickering (Charlie)

**What have you been able to pull from your own life to help you play Charlie?**

Oh, a whole lot. I think Charlie has a lot in common with me, and he has a lot in common with people my age: closing in on sixty. I think there are parallels to my life and career. The conflict between the desire just to knock off and the desire to keep on contributing, for example. I think it's a really cool play - it's also difficult.

**How is it difficult?**

Edward Albee is not for beginners. A lot of work that's going on is going on under the surface. You have to really do your homework and

listen to the words. He writes complex characters.

**What has the rehearsal process been like?**

It's a very intense process. It's more *psychologically* arduous than physically. What Lee Ernst is going through playing Cyrano, with all those swordfights... is the same thing that I'm undergoing in *Seascape* but the exercise happens in the mind and heart, not in flying all over the stage.

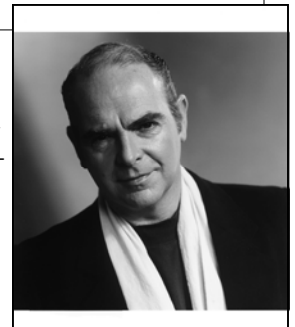
**Since you have been in so many plays... is there anything that you find out about yourself, playing a role like this, that still surprises you?**

Oh, every time. It happens every time. Every

time I do a play I find out something more about myself. Sometimes I find out really neat stuff, and sometimes... (laughs) it's awful.

**What do you think the message of this play is? What are people going to take away from it?**

I think it's about staying connected to what's real. About facing challenges - taking them on. Not turning away.





**The Horned Lizard can squirt blood from its eye sockets as a defensive measure**

*"Participate in your own life - fully. Don't sink back into that which is easy and safe. You're alive only once, as far as we know, and what could be worse than getting to the end of your life and realizing you haven't lived it?"*  
Edward Albee



**Frill-necked lizards run bipedally (on two legs instead of four) when frightened**

## SOME THINGS YOU MAY NOT HAVE KNOWN ABOUT EVOLUTIONARY THEORY

*"What do they call it... the primordial soup? The glop? The heartbreaking second when it all got together, the sugars and the acids and the ultraviolets, and the next thing you knew there were tangerines and string quartets... but somewhere in all that time, halfway, probably, halfway between the aminos and the treble clef - listen to this - there was a time when we **all** were down there, crawling around, and swimming and carrying on..."* - Charlie

The idea of evolution is explored both literally and figuratively in *Seascape*. Sarah explains that she and Leslie left the sea because they no longer felt at home there, and were forced to decide between "Making do down there and trying something else. But what?" - an explanation of their own evolution which mirrors Charlie and Nancy's dilemma of what to do with their later lives. Charlie and Nancy attempt to explain the theory in its literal sense to Leslie and Sarah, explaining that humans and lizards probably had a common ancestor.

In fact, a crucial missing link between humans and land animals was filled in very recently. In 2006 paleontologists announced the discovery of a fossil of the Tiktaalik, a crocodile-like animal that is estimated to have crawled out of the water 375 million years ago. The Tiktaalik find represents a midpoint in the evolution from fish to human: its fins contain bones similar to those of the upper arm, forearm and hands on land-living animals, and it has lost the bones that protect its gills in favor of a more flexible neck for breathing air above water.

There is also a theory (called the Aquatic Ape Hypothesis, or AAH) that at one point in human evolution we had adapted to become partially marine animals. The AAH was proposed in 1960 by a marine biologist named Alister Hardy, who pointed to man's exceptional ability to swim, his fondness for the water, and his hairless and "streamlined" form compared to other mammals. Unfortunately for Mr. Hardy, he had little scientific evidence to support his hypothesis, and since the 1960s an overwhelming amount of fossil evidence has been uncovered which contradicts it. The theory still has its supporters, however, and you can follow the debate in such works as *The Aquatic Ape* by Elaine Morgan and *The Aquatic Ape: Fact or Fiction*, edited by Machteld Roede.

For further background on evolutionary theory, the Rep education department recommends the following excellent websites:

**"Becoming Human"** (<http://www.becominghuman.org/>) - An interactive documentary about the origins of humanity, complete with fully rotating 3-dimensional skulls

**"Understanding Evolution"** (<http://evolution.berkeley.edu/>) - A collection of articles about every conceivable aspect of evolution, from its most basic concepts to its current impact on our lives.

## SOURCES AND SUGGESTED READING

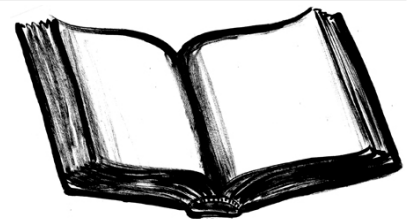
**The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee.** Edited by Stephen Bottoms. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

**Conversations with Edward Albee.** Edited by Philip C. Kohn. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988.

**Edward Albee: a collection of critical essays.** Edited by C.W.E. Bigsby. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1975.

**Living theater: an introduction to theater history.** By Edwin Wilson and Alvin Goldfarb. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983.

**Theatre History Explained.** By Neil Fraser. Ramsbury: Cromwood 2004.



## PRE-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Charlie and Nancy both have wildly different ideas about what they want to do with the rest of their lives. Nancy wants to travel the world and do everything, while Charlie feels that he has “earned a little rest.” If you were given the opportunity to do whatever you wanted with the rest of your life, starting today, what would you do? What is preventing you from living your life the way you want to?
- 2) Have you ever tried to communicate with someone who was significantly different than you? Think of a person you’ve met who came from a completely different background than your own. What difficulties did you encounter when trying to communicate with them? What did you find rewarding about the experience? What frustrated you?
- 3) One of Charlie’s favorite childhood activities was to sink to the bottom of a pool or a seabed and sit. He refuses to do so now that he is older. Think of an activity that you used to enjoy. What caused you to stop?

## POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Edward Albee has said, “The reason I wrote *Seascape* is because I’m not convinced evolution has completely taken place.” What does he mean by this? What aspects of the play reflect or support this viewpoint?
- 2) Think about the characters of Leslie and Sarah. What purpose is served by having Charlie and Nancy interact with two humanoid lizards instead of a young human couple? What do the lizards symbolize, if anything? When they first appear, Nancy finds them “beautiful” while Charlie describes them as “terrifying” - what does this tell us about their respective characters?
- 3) Nancy and Charlie are an elderly couple on the verge of retirement. Leslie and Sarah are young lizards who have lived their entire lives in the sea. Their lives and situations are probably very different than yours, but it is easy to relate to these characters nonetheless. What aspect of each character makes them likeable? What choices and questions are Charlie and Nancy facing that are similar to issues you’ve encountered in your own life? Why do we sympathize with the lizards instead of seeing them as monsters?

## POST-SHOW ACTIVITY

Edward Albee wrote another version of **Seascape** before coming up with the script which exists today. The original version, produced only in Russia, was three Acts long, and Act Two took place underwater instead of on the beach.

Write your own Act for **Seascape** that takes place before or after the action of the play. You could write a scene about Charlie or one of the other characters as a child, one of the couples meeting each other for the first time, a story about the offspring of Leslie and Sarah (or one of Nancy and Charlie’s children), and so on. Try to write something which stays true to the “feel” of the original play.

Present this scene to your classmates as a performance or an interpretive reading.

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## The Audience

*You can sit there and have a universal experience, of fear, of anger, of tears, of love, and I discovered that it's the audience, really, that is doing the acting.- Marlon Brando*

Theater is a collaborative art form. The success of a production relies upon every member of the ensemble performing their role expertly, from the cast and crew to the administrative staff to the audience themselves. Come prepared to make your contribution as a member of the audience. You have an active role to play, and the performers are relying on you to be respectful and attentive. Months of preparation, weeks of rehearsal and hours upon hours of effort have gone towards providing the best possible performance for you. Your participation is what makes this process worthwhile.

## Visiting The Rep ...

Milwaukee Repertory Theater is housed in the Milwaukee Center at the corner of Wells and Water Streets, downtown. Our building was formerly the home of Electric Railway & Light Company. This name is still carved on the wall outside.

You'll enter on the Wells Street side into a large, open space. Our box office will be visible on your left as you come through the front doors. The large space is the main hub for the businesses that share this building: a bank, an office tower, the Pabst Theater and the Intercontinental Hotel. If you walk into the center of this area, you'll see a staircase on your left. You will take this staircase to the Quadracci Powerhouse Theater lobby.

Inside the lobby are restrooms, water fountains and a coat check. If you decide to bring a snack, please know that food and drink are NOT permitted in the theater. However, you can leave things (at your own risk) in the coat check room, and enjoy them outside the theater during the intermission. Most plays have one intermission that is about 20 minutes long. You might also want to look for signs in the lobby which give the full "running time" of the play.

If you arrive forty-five minutes before the show, you can participate in a FREE pre-show talk called Rep In Depth. An actor from the show usually leads this discussion. This person will tell you a little about the play, the playwright, and the period in which the show is set. Often, they will also share stories about the design and rehearsal process. You can ask questions too!



For information on our education programs and our productions, visit our website at [www.milwaukeeerep.com](http://www.milwaukeeerep.com)