

'Virtue Is Not Its Own Reward' and Other Lessons for a Life in Art

By KATHRYN SHATTUCK

Edward Albee likes to tell about the time when, at 18, having fled his adoptive parents' stiflingly conservative household to begin a more expansive self-education in Greenwich Village, he knocked on W. H. Auden's door. Mr. Albee, frequently referred to as America's greatest living playwright, thought himself a poet then.

"I thrust my poems in his hand and said, 'I'll be back in a week,' and then I ran," he recalled. "A week later I showed up, and he invited me in. He spent two hours talking about my poems."

Thus began the Gospel According to Albee, a two-hour master class on Sunday evening at the Museum of Modern Art's education building for four high school seniors in the writ-

High school students get a chance to learn from the pros.

ing division of YoungArts, a program of the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts.

Mr. Albee had joined a who's who roster including the artist Julian Schnabel, the musician Wynton Marsalis, the dancer Desmond Richardson and the filmmaker Martin Scorsese for this weekend's inaugural round of mentoring sessions offered to YoungArts participants in New York.

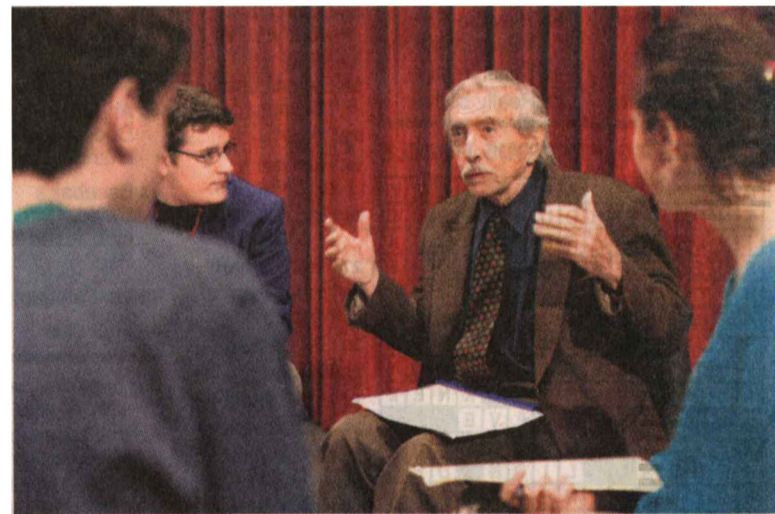
Founded in 1981 by Ted Arison

and his wife, Lin, YoungArts offers six-day intensive workshops in Miami each year to 140 or so creatively inclined high school seniors from around the country and has distributed more than \$84 million in prize money.

Beginning in 2006 the top students have been sent to New York for an additional four-day session, capped by a performance and an awards ceremony. Tonight at 6:30, the students are to present a variety show at the Ziegfeld Theater, after which Mr. Albee, Mr. Schnabel, Frank Gehry and Mikhail Baryshnikov, among others, will hand out achievement awards of \$5,000 and \$10,000.

"For the students, it's not so much the money as it is the master

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Michael Nagle for The New York Times

Edward Albee led a master class for students on Sunday night.

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classes in helping them to decide whether these are paths they want to pursue for the rest of their lives," Ms. Arison said. "This is what really impacts them."

Whether Mr. Albee's young listeners — Asher Frankfurt, Michael O'Brien, Phoebe Rusch and Kristofer Wellman — will be writers for life is anyone's guess, but he had plenty of advice for them.

"I think every writer has a different time when they decide they're a writer," he said. "George Bernard Shaw wrote his first play at 42. He was a music critic until then. For that matter, Mozart knew he was going to be a composer at 4, but he was special."

Mr. Albee was a sage 8 years old when he began writing poetry as an

escape from a household in which he said he never felt quite at home. By his teens he had completed what he called two very bad, very lengthy novels, now hidden among the theater stacks at the New York Public Library.

In his early 20s, he carted along a trunk full of his poems to the MacDowell Colony, where on a late night over a bottle of bourbon, Thornton Wilder asked him if he had ever considered writing plays.

"I'm not suggesting Wilder saw a playwright in me," he said. "I think maybe he was just trying to save poetry from me."

Mr. Albee said he stopped writing poetry at 28: "I was a better imitator than a poet. I never felt like a poet. And you can't do what you don't feel."

"I think all of us have a moment

when we figure out what kind of writer we are," he went on. "Should I have started writing plays sooner? No. Everyone has a different age when they are capable of writing what it is they're meant to write."

For Mr. Albee, that was his first play, "The Zoo Story," which he completed in just three weeks in 1958. Still, not even William Inge and Aaron Copland were able to help him get it produced in the United States. It wasn't until after the play's German premiere, when a critic from The New York Times happened to comment that it was a shame a young American playwright couldn't get attention back at home, that it made it to Off Broadway.

"Virtue is not its own reward," Mr. Albee went on. "There is a huge difference between popularity and excellence. As playwrights you are going to be encouraged not to hold the line, to simplify, to make things not the way you intended. You are going to be encouraged to make plays perfectly happy at three and a half hours into two hours."

How long should a play be?

"As long as it should be," Mr. Albee said, nearly roaring. "Everything has its duration, which has nothing to do with commerce. Do what you have to do to make a living, but figure out if you're going to be a hack or your own person."

"Can't writers be allowed a certain amount of creative fluidity?" asked Ms. Rusch, whose own efforts waver between poetry and prose.

"Yes, but people are generally better at one thing than another," Mr. Albee said, ticking off a list of offenders. "Henry James was a great novelist but a rotten playwright. Arthur Miller wrote a novel. Don't go near it. Sam Beckett was a great novelist and a great playwright. He reinvented both forms, which is why people

can't touch him."

Did he think that true art and true writing came with experience and life, Mr. Frankfurt asked?

"You're using terms I don't understand," Mr. Albee said.

Mr. Frankfurt began again. "I mean coming out the way we want to say it," he said.

"Then say it," Mr. Albee said. "That's your job, to change things and bring people around to your point of view. You're either right or wrong. Creativity begins in the unconscious. Don't write too soon. Get to know your characters. You should be writing absolutely real people in real situations. That's the only way actors can act your stuff."

There were practical matters, too: never lecture, don't be obscure, never become someone's opinion of you, and remember that every line has two purposes — one, to delineate character, and two, to advance the plot. Everything else is a waste.

There was also a reading list of the four essential 20th-century playwrights (Chekhov, Pirandello, Beckett and Brecht) and a warning.

"If you only read the great writers, you'll be in trouble," he said. "Read junk. It's enormously encouraging to tell yourself, 'I can do better than that.'"

And finally, a word of encouragement.

Mr. Albee recalled his dismay in 1962 at finding 75 people — actors, understudies, stage managers, costume designers — in the room on the first day of rehearsals for "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"

"There's only one reason that there are 75 people sitting here," Mr. Albee said the producer told him. "Never lose sight of the fact that the play begins with you and that it can never be done without you."

Class dismissed.