

A stable atmosphere for artists

BY RACHEL LEIFER
STAFF WRITER

The Edward F. Albee Foundation's fellows, chosen to spend a month developing creative projects at the foundation's house in Montauk, look forward to their daily mail with unusual eagerness. Their benefactor delivers it.

When Albee arrives at the rustic William Flanagan Memorial Creative Persons Center — once a stable and now nicknamed “the Barn” — computer keyboards go temporarily silent. Acrylic sets on canvas.

“You really want to engage this icon of theater. He’s one of the reasons I’m a playwright,” said David Barth, who is working on a new piece about a Jewish family in Hollywood on the eve of World War II.

Albee keeps his Barn visits brief, and his common farewell is, “Keep working.” The foundation exists not to give what he calls “cusp artists” the chance to rub elbows with a living literary legend. Its goal is to grant them disturbance-free time and space near the ocean in Montauk to develop serious work.

When “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” netted him financial success — the play’s Broadway revival, starring Kathleen Turner and Bill Irwin, debuted in March — Albee decided in 1967 to use some of the proceeds to support other creative people awaiting their big break.

“If you have the ability to help other people in the arts, it’s your responsibility to do it,” Albee said in a telephone interview. “Though I know that’s not a terribly popular attitude.”

So between June and October, when it’s warm enough to inhabit the unheatable Barn, four groups of five emerging writers and visual artists, chosen on talent and need, spend four weeks there meditating, struggling and creating.

Many foundation alumni — including performance artist and actor Spalding Gray, playwright Christopher Durang and novelist A.M. Homes — went on to enjoy successful careers.

Will Eno, whose critically acclaimed play “The Flu Season” earned him the 2004 Oppenhe-

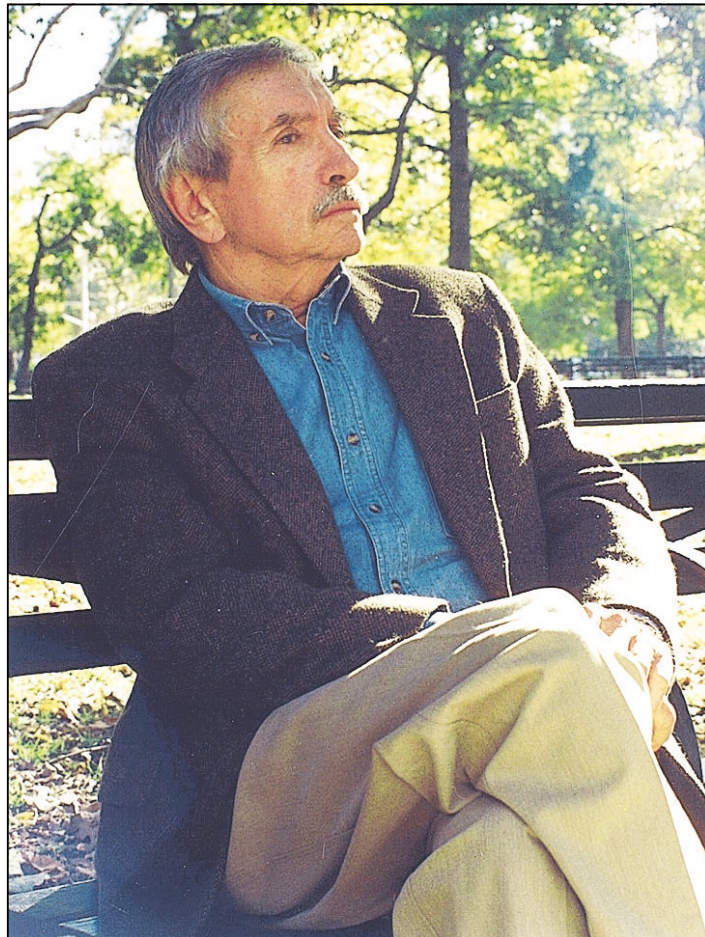


PHOTO COURTESY OF KAREN KRAMER

Edward Albee encourages fellows to “keep working.”

imer Award for the best new American playwright, spent June 1996 at the Barn.

“It’s taken on the characteristics of its founder,” Eno said in a telephone interview. “It’s rigorously unpretentious, but then also has a nice, serious monastic quality as well.”

For Eno, who said he had never been further east of the Home Depot in Valley Stream, it was “a thrill to get out there and breathe that air for a while.”

The Barn’s spectacular setting, a two-minute drive from Montauk’s famed beaches, has inspired a new path for artist Elizabeth Barrera’s drawings.

“I came here feeling like I

knew what kind of project I wanted to do, but now I’ve veered toward landscape,” said Barrera, who teaches art classes to children in Los Angeles. “Being here has allowed me to re-focus, to approach my work in a

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— Playwright Will Eno, who spent June 1996 at the Barn

Ethan Greenbaum is grateful for the space. He pieces together inches-thick Styrofoam slabs into massive surfaces with irregular borders for his sculptural paintings.

“I was hoping for a big space and uninterrupted work time,”



NEWSDAY PHOTOS / KEN SPENCER

Artist Elizabeth Barrera works in one of the studios in “the Barn” in Montauk. Below, playwright David Barth writes under a tree in front of the Barn.



said Greenbaum, who received a graduate degree in fine arts from Yale in May. “This has been a great way to continue on my project ideas without losing too much momentum.”

The writers huddle over their laptops. Brian Trzeciak is writing a semi-autobiographical novel about his experience designing toys after college. He came to the Barn with a first draft; on the second go-round, the manuscript doubled in size.

“At home, it’s the usual drill: Go out, try to get inspired. A lot of times I come back with nothing,” said Trzeciak, who’ll start teaching seventh-grade English in Newburgh this fall. “But here, I’ve been pumping stuff out. Maybe I’m getting used to the country, not locking doors and being able to see the stars.”

Barn residents navigate communal living carefully. John Rowell, also at work on a novel, calls

the Barn experience “The Real World: Montauk,” after the MTV reality show.

“It’s five egotistical people in one barn,” laughed Rex Lau, a painter who has been the Barn’s caretaker for 27 years. “At first, everyone is stepping around each other. . . . Edward sets the tone, by who he is, how he is.”

Frustrated by so many artists’ “disenfranchisement,” Albee is determined to support as many as he can. In honor of his late partner of 35 years, Jonathan Thomas, the foundation is establishing a memorial scholarship to help those at the Barn buy materials and cover rents they leave behind for the month.

For Barth, Albee’s endorsement has been like “a little gust of wind in the sails” of his career. “It’s validating, it’s supportive, it’s an honor,” Barth said. “That’s something you don’t normally get in the real world.”



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