

THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

SHINES FOR ALL
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At the Barn With Albee's Colonists

BY CARISSA KATZ

There is no sign directing you to the Edward F. Albee Foundation's William Flanagan Memorial Creative Persons Center. Only a street number painted on a bit of wood marks the center's driveway, off a winding Montauk road. At the driveway's end, a few hundred feet in, surrounded by a thicket of brambles and trees, a white gambrel-roofed barn stands. It serves as a home and work space for an ever-changing cast of artists and writers in the foundation's residency program.

Each month for four months of the year, three artists and two writers selected from a pool of several hundred applicants set up house at the center to indulge their creative passions or whimsies, work on long-simmering projects or start new ones, and generally take advantage of a rare opportunity to focus solely on their work.

"Just the concentrated time is great. It really propels you to develop ideas a lot faster," said Susanna Starr, a sculptor from Manhattan who is one

of five residents at the center this month.

In her studio, tables were crammed with squeeze bottles filled with every imaginable color of acrylic paint. Other tables held a tall stack of cylindrical makeup sponges and large, lacy slices of industrial sponge. On the floor, there were big squares of vibrantly colored sponge. "I wanted to find a material I could contain color and space with," Ms. Starr said. "This is a period of time to try things." She will show her work at Southampton College in August.

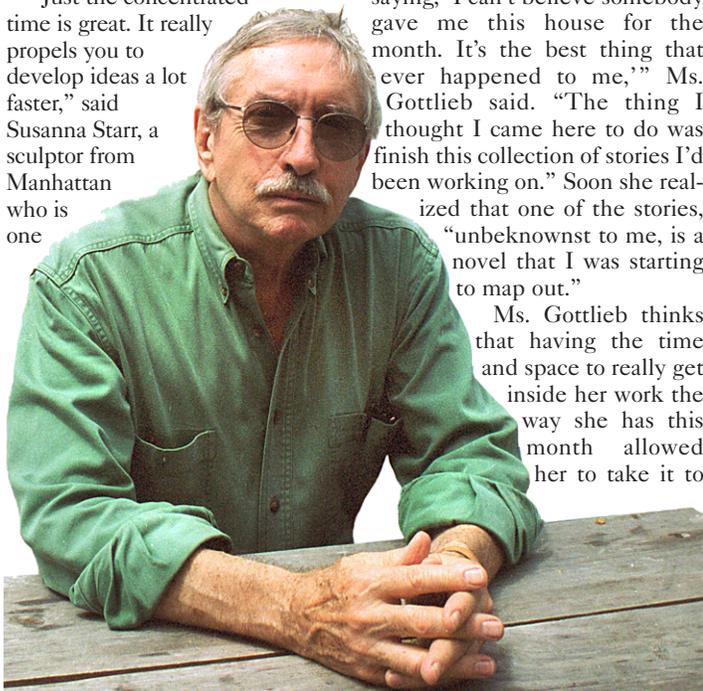
At the other end of the barn, Stacey Gottlieb, a fiction writer from Manhattan, had taken over the barn's tiny dining room. Working in a kind of frenzy, she taped bits of scribbled notes to a door, making a collage of words that she later described as a story map.

"I'm walking around every day saying, 'I can't believe somebody gave me this house for the month. It's the best thing that ever happened to me,'" Ms. Gottlieb said. "The thing I thought I came here to do was finish this collection of stories I'd been working on." Soon she realized that one of the stories, "unbeknownst to me, is a novel that I was starting to map out."

Ms. Gottlieb thinks that having the time and space to really get inside her work the way she has this month allowed her to take it to



Making use of ample floor space in her studio at the Albee Foundation's William Flanagan Memorial Creative Persons Center, the sculptor Susanna Starr saturates a large sheet of sponge with vibrant acrylic paint. *Carissa Katz Photos*



"We wanted to keep it a low-key, low-expense private foundation that people would come to to do serious work," Edward Albee said, explaining the foundation's residency program in Montauk.

the next level. "I guess that's Mr. Albee's idea," she said.

"You can't help but sort of wonder, hypothesize what the hand behind the curtain has envisioned," Ms. Gottlieb said. "I think some nights we feel like maybe we're really in an Albee play, that someone somewhere is taking notes."

Mr. Albee, who visits daily to deliver the mail, enjoys peeking in on the "colonists," as he calls them. "I snoop," he admitted. "I'm a snooper, but I try not to intrude. I make sure people are working, not spending the entire month at the beach."

Mr. Albee, the three-time Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright whose works include "Three Tall Women" and "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," chooses the visual artists himself.

"I think we tend to prefer the adventuresome rather than the people out here who just paint the sunsets," he said of his choices. "I don't have to like them, but I think I have to find something admirable that's going on in their work."

He has someone else review the several hundred plays, novels, and volumes of poetry that come in with writers' applications for residencies.

"We don't discourage anybody who's talented and," he said, pausing, "not realistic." Once the list has been narrowed down Mr. Albee and the foundation board "see if people can fit their lives into the months that are available," he said. "We tell them that we're only open four or five months a year, that it's a very impromptu place, that they're



Arnold Fanning, at work in his room, below, was among the writers in residence this month.

going to have to take care of themselves.”

Rex Lau, a painter, and Diane Mayo, a ceramic artist, who live and work in a small red cottage next to the barn in the summer, oversee it to some extent. But they do not coddle the residents.

Unlike other artist colonies such as the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, N.H., and Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., Mr. Albee's center leaves the colonists largely to their own devices.

They prepare their own meals and make their own schedules. Their rooms are simple and mostly unadorned, save for the paintings or sculptures previous residents have left behind. They sleep on thin mattresses set on no-frills metal frames.

The writers get the bigger rooms, which include a desk. There is a common room with an old television set, couches, and bookshelves stocked with art books and literary journals.

The surroundings are intentionally spartan. “We wanted to keep it a low-key, low-expense private foundation that people would come to to do serious work,” Mr. Albee explained.

“It's not Yaddo, where people live in mansions and are served huge dinners every night on special china. Nor is it the MacDowell Colony, where people's lunches arrive at their studio doors at 12 and they're not allowed to talk to anybody until 6 o'clock in the evening.”

Some of the other colonies also

have budgets of several million dollars a year. “I don't see how our budget ever gets above \$50,000,” Mr. Albee said.

This year, the foundation is mounting a capital fund-raising campaign for the first time in its 37-year history “because the place was falling apart,” the playwright said.

“We have trouble getting money from other foundations and charitable foundations because we don't do things according to their rules,” Mr. Albee said.

The capital campaign will allow the foundation to fix the roof, add a fresh coat of paint, and insulate the barn so that residencies might be offered for a longer portion of the year.

When he set up the foundation in 1966, Mr. Albee wanted to provide an alternative to the other colonies, which tended to serve people who were more established or successful in their fields.

“We thought that maybe we should do two things here — get people at the cusp, young people, before they necessarily had made it, or occasionally people who were older who had been forgotten and whose careers hadn't gone so well, but were still doing interesting work, because they could teach the younger people.”

The residents are generally in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, and a few have been in their 50s and late 60s. Although the foundation does not formally track the careers of former residents and neither publishes a newsletter nor solicits contri-

butions from alumni, board members and Mr. Albee do manage to keep up with many who have spent time at the barn. Some, like the writers Spalding Gray, A.M. Homes, Amy Bloom, and Adrian LeBlanc have since gained considerable recognition. Ms. LeBlanc spent part of her month at the center visiting people in prison while researching her recently published book “Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble, and Coming of Age in the Bronx.”

Others have drifted away from art or writing to pursue different careers. Young people often “run out of steam,” Mr. Albee said. “Some of them have a talent that goes on for three or four years and then something happens to the talent. Or, if they're playwrights, they decide to go to Hollywood and write scripts instead and you never hear from them again.”

Some colonists have been invited back to the barn in Montauk two or three times. One refused to leave when her month was up. “She was greeting people when they came in and showing them around like it was her house,” Mr. Lau said.

“Every once in a while somebody gets hysterical,” Mr. Albee said. “We had one many years ago who was so scared of the country he slept in his car.”

“For the first two weeks,” Mr. Lau added.

There was an artist who thought she was Janis Joplin and behaved that way. Marriages have resulted from a meeting at the barn. Once, there was a fistfight in the driveway.

“For the most part, people come and work seriously,” Mr. Lau said.

“I think most of the people that are here are pretty motivated and pretty focused,” Ms. Starr, the sculptor, said. Given the opportunity to focus so intently on a project, she said, “you want to work, you don't want to stop.”

“The best thing about this place, I think, is that people of different disciplines get to interact and they don't usually get to,” Mr. Albee said.

The colonists agreed. “I think it's wonderful that you can be with people of another genre,” Ms. Gottlieb said.

Ms. Starr has found that “there are a lot of crossover ideas. We talk about books, about movies, about art, about writing. I have a whole book list now,” she said. After realizing that they were both interested in “the same quirky things,” Ms. Starr and Ms. Gottlieb might even collaborate

on a project.

“Sometimes we share the cooking of meals together or go out together,” said Arnold Fanning, an Irish playwright who lives in New York. He has been at other residency programs, but likes the openness of the Albee Foundation. “It's basically like a commune, your own little writing home with other artists.”

“Inevitably there are things that, wherever you are, have a way of cutting into the workday,” Ms. Gottlieb said. “That I'm totally inaccessible here is so nice. I don't have e-mail on my laptop and there's no cell phone reception and the house phone's usually busy if someone's on the phone or on line.”

For her, the place functions just as she believes Mr. Albee intended it to. “It's sort of like bungee jumping coming here. You leave everything in your life,” she said.

“I feel like it is part of his sense that something good, creatively, if not emotionally and psychically, will come from shaking up the routine a little,” she said. “I don't know if it's the time or the place, but I really haven't gotten this much done for a long time.”

Rick Lewis, a painter working in the studio next to Ms. Starr's, said it is not just Mr. Albee's center, but the South Fork in general that speaks to him. Originally from Texas, he now lives in Brooklyn. He first came to the barn three years ago and returned in July. His primitive paintings have an earthy palette that could have been mixed from the sand and soil of Montauk.

“There's something about being in this area. There's some type of vibration in this place that I'm drawn to,” he said. “By coming back here, I wanted to see what would happen if I came full circle, to see how the work was reinforced.” He has also rented a house in Springs for the summer.

“I feel like maybe this place has something special,” Ms. Gottlieb said. “It's like camp, how kids come back from the summer seemingly years older than when they left.”

Ms. Gottlieb, Mr. Fanning, Mr. Lewis, Ms. Starr, and Susan Parker, a writer from Oakland, Calif., who was also in residence in July, will pack up their bags and manuscripts, paintings and sculptures, canvases and sponges, and leave Mr. Albee's barn today. Tomorrow, a new group will arrive to fill their shoes. ■