

THIS IS NOT A VACATION

The number of people who enjoy sending a large portion of their income to the IRS for safekeeping is roughly equivalent to the number of playwrights who succeed at making a living solely through their writing.

In 1964, Warner Brothers paid Edward Albee \$500,000 for the film rights to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (approximately \$4,000,000 in today-dollars). Facing a hefty income tax (the top rate at that time was somewhere between 70-90%), his then-accountant asked him if he'd like to be a little more in charge of how that money was spent than would be the case if the federal government was left to sort it all out. Anyone who knew Edward was familiar with his fondness for control and can imagine how receptive he would have been to the idea.

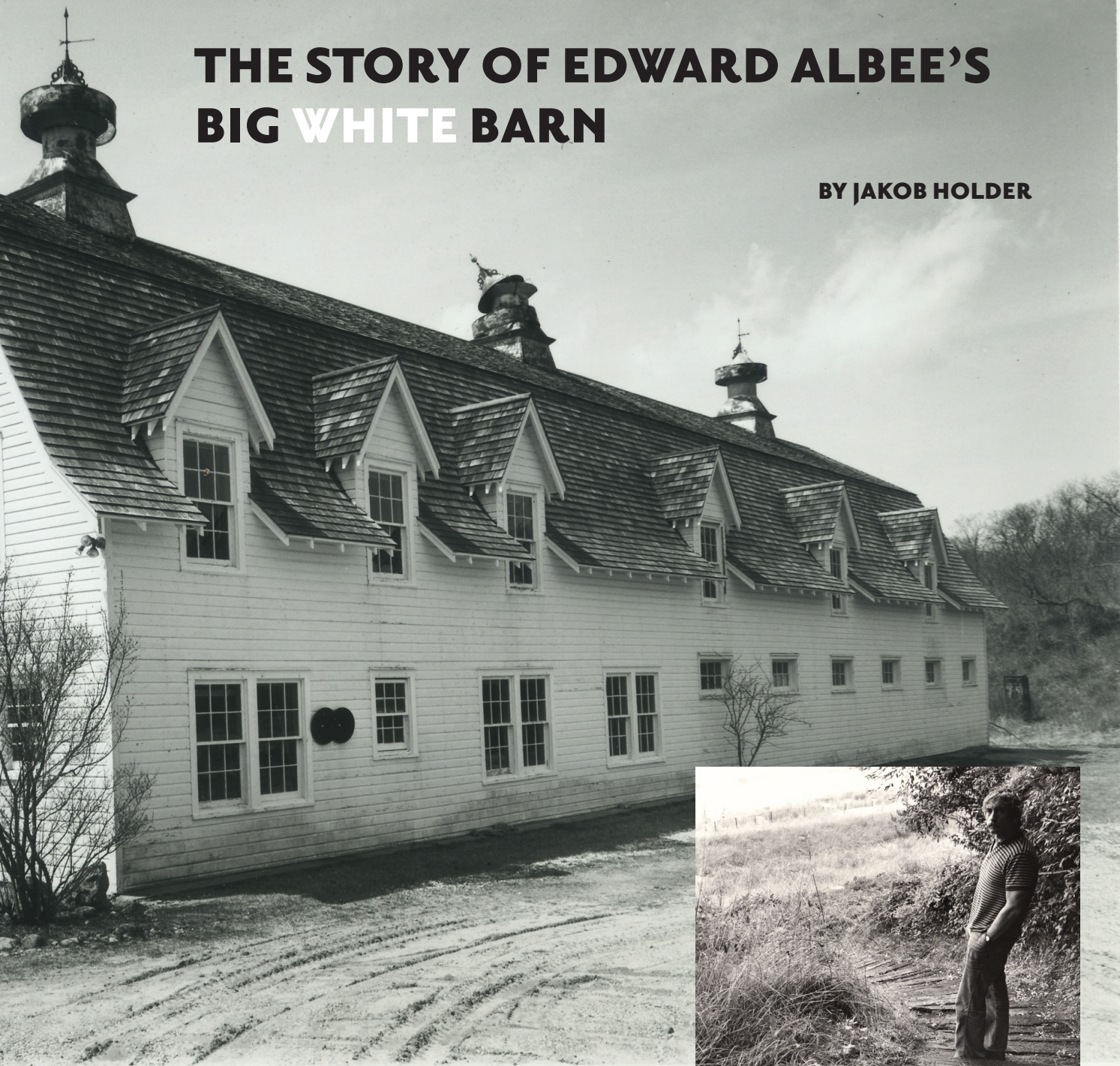
The solution was to start a foundation to support a cause that he cared about. Anyone who knew Edward was also familiar with his fondness for animals, primarily: dogs, cats and creative people. How he would order preference on that list is debatable but, at least in this story, dogs and cats are left to fend mostly for themselves and creative people win out.



One spring in the mid-1960s, Uta Hagen, the German-American actress who created the role of Martha in *...Virginia Woolf?*, took Edward on a field trip out east on Long Island. The destination was Montauk – a working class fishing town nicknamed “The End”; the mission being to find him a suitable summer home. Hagen had a home there herself and thought Edward would find the remote simplicity attractive. They eventually landed at a cedar-shaked two-bedroom

THE STORY OF EDWARD ALBEE'S BIG WHITE BARN

BY JAKOB HOLDER



house perched on a southern bluff overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.

In a letter to his one-time partner and mentor, the composer William Flanagan, Edward reveals the moment of purchase some months later, when he returned with one of his producers and his stage manager to seal the deal:

“I have been in Montauk—which, I’m now informed is pronounced *Montauk*—with Clinton Wilder, and Mark Wright, visiting Uter, and buying the house I

looked at this spring. Clinton has already offered to buy it from me if I decide I hate it, and will pay me a ten thousand dollar profit. So, not too bad a day.”

Edward would never see monetary profit on the house in his lifetime. Rather, he spent the next 50+ summers there walking the beach, hosting guests the likes of Tennessee Williams and Mark Rothko (who sat silently staring at the ocean, fully suited, shirt buttoned to the top, bowler perched on head, regardless of weather, temperature or number of other guests

milling about) and writing the bulk of his oeuvre. He also opened his door to generations of feral cats, each one given a name and treated as a member of family.

While Edward's plays ranged wildly in terms of subject matter, mood and layers of stylization, they were unified by several key points: all were written originally in longhand, all were composed in his study in Montauk, and the title of each—once the final “blackout” was confidently set down on page—took its rightful place on a list scrawled on the inside of his bathroom door.

Indeed, Montauk was so important to Edward that it came as some relief to those close to him when he passed away last September that he did so peacefully in his oceanside bed, with the gentle crash of waves breaking below.

Some years after he took up residence in Montauk, Edward discovered another piece of property that would become inextricably linked to his life: a large white barn, unseen from the road, surrounded by shade trees and choke berry bushes. The price was attractive, the room ample, and with some careful and austere renovations Albee created a living and working space suitable for housing five creative people at a time. The William Flanagan Memorial Creative Persons Center, the flagship program of The Edward F. Albee Foundation, was established.

A no frills environment that has stood the tests of both time and environment, the Barn has space for three writers and two visual artists per period—each period lasting four to six weeks during the summer months—and has provided space and focus for somewhere close to 1000 creative people for around 50 years. Ranbir Singh Sidhu, playwright and novelist, remembers coming to the Barn in 2007 after submitting his gripping play *True East*:

“I'd been to a couple residencies before, and expected to find at the Barn what I'd met there: welcoming committees, anodyne speeches, scheduled meals, a sense of always being benignly watched, like some creature in a freak show for the crazily talented and suddenly lucky. But when I arrived at the Barn, all I found was a great, clattering empty wooden barn—not a soul in sight, and not a whiff of patronizing BS.

The message was clear: we were serious artists, all of us, and we could figure out for ourselves what we needed and didn't need.”

There are those who might find the spartan nature of the offering to be a touch too spare; Fellows who have stayed at other, more needs-catering residency programs and have become used to luxurious amenities have occasionally found the experiencing comparatively wanting. But for those like Ranbir who want nothing more than to ensconce themselves in work it can prove a unique and useful experience. Anne Phelan, who has stayed at The Barn twice, calls it a “magical place where you can work, surrounded by other artists, cut off from the distractions of the every day. I've never been anywhere that felt so conducive to writing, and I always write twice as much as I plan to at the Barn.”

The environment itself plays a large part in how the residency plays out. For James O'Connor, whose haunting play *Timor Mortis* earned him a spot in 2005, the Barn was “a rare combination of the pastoral and the coastal. For me, the pastoral was for reading and writing, and the coastal was for walking. That's why I loved the Barn. It had the best of both worlds.”

The Foundation primarily seeks to assist creative people at the beginnings of their careers, when they need both the time and validation most. Many are still students, as Celine Song was when she joined the ranks of Albee Fellows in 2012 with her disturbing play *The Feast*. “I had nothing but a play when I arrived at the Barn in Montauk. The residency was the first thing I did as a real writer. I wrote my second play there. It's like a first love to me.”

Many Fellows have stories of the days when Edward used to come by to visit. Or, as he would put it himself, “to snoop.” He enjoyed walking unannounced into a painter's studio and watch as he or she scrambled to conceal some of the works while emphasizing others, perhaps hoping for a sort of carefully cultivated A-grade. Mia Westerlund-Roosen, a sculptor who stayed at the Barn several times in the 1970s and now serves on the Foundation's Board, laughingly recalls how Edward would “point to whatever you had hidden under your chair and say: ‘But that's the best thing here!’”

Rex Lau, the Barn's long time Facilities Manager remembers how Edward's unannounced visits would sometimes allow for some fun to take place, occasionally at a Fellow's expense. "He used to bring the mail. Every day. We had someone stay with us once who had no idea who he was and figured he must be the postman. So, he handed Edward a letter and asked if he would mail it for him. He took it and he did. I'm sure Edward was a lot more amused by that than the poor Fellow was once he found out the truth."

Justin Kuritzkes, whose hilariously well observed play *The Intimacy Party* won him a 2012 spot, speaks to Albee's lasting presence at the residency, citing the playwright's frequent habit of stocking the Barn's library with books from his own overstuffed shelves: "Most of the books on the shelves are literally HIS books—one of them even had an old love letter in it. When you're at the Barn, you are Edward's guest, and there's a remarkable amount of trust that's placed in you: it's as if Edward had given you the keys and said 'Do whatever you want, just don't get on each other's nerves and don't burn the place down.' To do a residency at the Barn is to be part of a little family that Edward willed into existence."

Sometimes quite literally so. Justin and Celine, who shared the month of August in 2012, now share a home, having married last summer, four years after meeting at the Barn. Justin recalls their first day: "We sat across from one another at the table outside, and once we were done reading each other's plays, we both looked up at each other like "who the hell are YOU?"

And while marriages don't result from every grouping (the Foundation has been apprised of three in its 50-year existence; the number of divorces it is responsible for is less well undocumented) a platonic group love affair often takes place and lasts years after the present-tense romanticism of living worry-free in a storied bucolic environment settles into the past. Chalk it up to what you might call the "Who the hell are YOU"-ness of the arrangement. Five creative people camping together for a month in a milieu of diligent work and mutual respect. A poet might become excited by the unrestrained brushstrokes of a painter working late into the night; a sculptor lying facedown in bed so as to avoid the pressures of the studio might finally be roused by the incessant typing of the novelist

next door. "Get to work!" the walls start to say, "That's what you came here for, that's what the rest of them are doing!" The wonderful and temporarily freeing fiction of having responsibilities to no one and nothing other than yourself and your work has a way of turning into a terrifying burden. Sharing that distinction with other creative people like yourself can provide the key to making the most of it and often leads to lasting friendships and professional collaborations.

The title of this piece is a reference to a line one of our Fellows scribbled on a makeshift doorknob in the Barn's kitchen years ago, now since painted over. It was a warning of sorts. Not only because, for all of its laissez faire attitude, the Foundation takes some note of who uses the space well and who uses it as a convenient parking space for a month at the beach, but also due to the self-awareness that can take hold once you've been given what you asked for by applying: the joint gifts of time and space in which to work freely. That gift can be simple and useful or it can serve as a terrible mirror. Are you a playwright who holds down a necessary day job or are you an office temp who likes the idea of being a dramatist? The decision is not always yours to make, and coming face to face with how you spend this gift may reveal something not every creative person is prepared to accept but would do well to confront.

Or it can be a dozen walks on the beach while sorting all that out. Or it can be picking up a book you know Edward Albee once held in his hands and wondering how *he* got over moments of self-doubt. Or it can be the picnic table at which you wrote your third play, the one that really began to show you who you are.

And it costs nothing to apply. And it costs nothing to stay.

Fifty years ago Edward Albee became a playwright who could make a living solely through his writing. He figured it might be nice to do something truly useful with some of that money. He bought a large white barn, fixed it up a bit and opened its doors.

We accept applications from January 1 to March 1 each year. We look forward to reading you. www.albeefoundation.org 