

Poets & Writers

The Edward F. Albee Foundation: The Barn at the End of the World

by Thomas Hopkins

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“My time at Albee’s barn was extremely important, even life-changing,” says novelist Joanna Hershon. “I realized that, when left to my own devices—and with the most beautiful beach right nearby—I actually did write. And I loved it.” Hershon was an Edward F. Albee fellow at the William Flanagan Memorial Creative Persons Center in Montauk, New York, in the summer of 1994, right after she graduated from college. Hershon worked on two stories while she was in Montauk, neither of which was ever published—although one became the starting point for her first novel, *Swimming*, which was released by Ballantine Books in 2001. But, more important than either of the stories she wrote, Hershon says, “was the evolving sense that I might just be able to work hard enough, and consistently enough, to actually be a writer.”



Edward Albee's foundation was established in order to nurture exactly that kind of thinking. As a young playwright in the late 1950s and early '60s, Albee had visited friends while they were in residence at artists colonies such as MacDowell and Yaddo. "I'd seen how they worked, and how I thought they didn't work," he says. "In those days, they were not concentrating anywhere near enough on young artists at the cusp; they were concerning themselves with people who had more of a reputation." This has changed since then, he believes, but at the time, "I thought that those places really needed to give space to the young artists," the ones "who were broke and not established yet." What was lacking, then, was an artists colony that could lend support and encouragement, in the form of time and space to work, to writers and visual artists before they'd made it—when they needed it the most.

The opportunity for Albee to create such a place is a story familiar to many aficionados of the American theater. In the fall of 1962, the thirty-four-year-old playwright, who had enjoyed some success with one-acts such as *The Zoo Story* and *The Sandbox*, had a runaway hit with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* at the Billy Rose Theater in New York City. Albee was fortunate at the time to have a smart accountant, who advised him that, given the play's financial success, he had two choices: Let the government take a sizable portion of it, or start a nonprofit foundation and do something more useful and productive with the money. The Edward F. Albee Foundation was born. Around that time, the playwright, having bought a beach house on the eastern end of Long Island, in Montauk, discovered an old barn in town, about four miles away. This latter structure, which had fallen into disrepair, had once been the stables of Montauk Manor, a grand Jazz Age resort hotel perched atop Signal Hill. The place cost twenty thousand dollars to purchase, and perhaps another twenty thousand dollars to fix up. The old barn began life in its new incarnation in the summer of 1966. Three years later, in 1969, when Albee's old friend and mentor, the composer William Flanagan, passed away, it acquired the name by which it's still known: the William Flanagan Memorial Creative Persons Center. However, most Albee fellows—two visual artists and three writers in residence each month from June through September—affectionately refer to the place as "the Barn."

The colony's setting is rustic, and the barn itself, surrounded by trees at the end of a pebble driveway, is spartan. The inside of the structure is divided in half. To the left of the front door is the kitchen (a small, penciled message scrawled on the kitchen's makeshift door handle is a reminder: *This Is Not a Vacation*). To the right is the dining room, its walls lined to the ceiling with books, their pages swollen by the ocean air. Farther down a cement-floor hallway, which is filled with the work of previous visual arts fellows, there is a bedroom and studio for one of the writers on the right; a bathroom and the laundry room are on the left.

Up a creaky wooden staircase is the common room, with a fusty beige couch, a scruffy red-velvet chaise lounge, a record player, and an extensive collection of vinyl records. Bookshelves hold the rest of the barn's miscellany of plays, art monographs, gallery catalogues, back issues of literary journals—and the novels, short story collections, and poetry collections of former writing residents. Also on this floor are a second bathroom, two bedrooms for the visual artists, and two slightly larger rooms for the other two writers. The back half of the barn—viewable through sliding windows in the back wall of the common room—is one large, open space that soars forty feet from the cracked tile floor to

the wood beams of the roof. A low dividing wall separates it into two studio spaces for the artists.

For more than twenty-five years, two artists, painter Rex Lau and ceramic artist Diane Mayo, have been the caretakers of the place. They spend their summers working in their studios in a cottage on the property, while also making sure the barn's bathrooms are working, the outdoor shower is functioning, and the kitchen is stocked with paper towels and Chock full o'Nuts coffee. Beyond such basic amenities, though, the five fellows that reside in the barn each month are on their own.

"The Barn is unique not just because it's rustic," says Jakob Holder, secretary of the Albee Foundation. "It's totally *laissez-faire*." The colony "doesn't have any formalized program," he says. No reading series, no chef preparing the evening meal, no staff quietly leaving lunch boxes on cabin doorsteps. "It's just as simple as giving time. I think that people sometimes find it a bit unusual, to be so unstructured. But it gives them that sense that, really, this is totally up to you if you're going to do any work. It would be very easy to just mess around and not do any work when you're in Montauk—it's a lovely place." There is water, and there are beaches, in every direction: Fort Pond Bay to the west, Block Island Sound to the north, Lake Montauk to the east, and the Atlantic coastline to the south. But at the Barn, it's up to the fellows alone to determine how to best make use of their month's stay. The colony's mission is as bare-bones as the barn itself. "It's themselves, and their work," Holder says, "or nothing."

This *laissez-faire* approach indicates a confidence in the artists and writers to govern themselves, but the results can be somewhat chaotic. Barn fellows discover, upon their arrival, a long list of rules by the telephone in the front hall, specific enough to make them assume that each of its forbidden, detailed activities was once perpetrated there. Indeed, the history of the place is colorful, to say the least. "We've had botched suicide attempts," Albee says, "a couple of marriages, a couple of breakups, a lot of affairs, all sexual combinations, some people being so scared of the country that they slept in their car and left, people getting along, people not getting along—just about what you'd imagine." There was once a fistfight in the driveway, having something to do with a resident driving to Montauk in a car she'd stolen from her girlfriend. "There was also a parrot involved in that," recalls Lau. There was a fellow who simply refused to leave when her month was done (she tried to take up residence on the common-room couch). "She'd just decided she was happy here," Lau says. "She wasn't going to go." But most of the time, Holder says, the atmosphere this confidence cultivates is not just collegial, but convivial as well. "It's people at the picnic table, at midnight, with a couple bottles of wine and the barbecue going, talking and having a great time."

Writers and artists leave their regular lives behind when they come to Montauk, but they do have more responsibilities than they would at other residencies. They prepare all their own meals during their stay, and they share in various chores and housekeeping tasks. But unlike many colonies in the United States, they are not charged a residency fee. And the Albee Foundation hopes, in the near future, to make a month at the Barn even more financially feasible for the artists and writers who stay there. The modest annual budget

for the Barn is never more than sixty thousand dollars, but the foundation is currently in the middle of a capital campaign to raise money, both to renovate and insulate the barn, and to launch the Jonathan Thomas Fund, named in honor of the artist—and Albee’s partner of thirty-five years—who passed away in May 2005 after a two-year battle with cancer. Albee says he would like to keep the Barn open, if not year-round, then certainly longer than its current four months of summer operation. The foundation also hopes eventually to be able to provide a stipend for residents to offset, at least in part, the expense of taking a month off from their regular, working lives.

The Barn is only one of the dozens of artists colonies in the United States, of course, but it is unique in that its three-time Pulitzer Prize–winning founder is alive and well and actively involved in choosing his eponymous fellows every spring. (Albee, who hand-picks the visual artists, leaves the vetting of the writers to others, but he makes sure to read all the selected writers’ submitted work.) It’s unique for the founder’s presence each summer, too. “The first day I arrived,” says Hershon, “I went up to my room and, while I was unpacking, looked out the window and saw Edward Albee delivering our mail.” Albee does so nearly every day of the summer, after stopping by the foundation’s post office box in town. In part, this is the playwright’s way of making sure everyone is working (“I get to snoop,” he says). But author Aaron Hamburger, who spent a month at the Barn in 2002 working on the novel *Faith for Beginners*, which was published by Random House in 2005, believes that it’s much more than that. “I hadn’t had a lot of outward validation so far in my career,” he says, so his month in Montauk “was a real psychological boost.” Since the place is so small and personal rather than big and institutional, stopping by every day is Albee’s way of engaging each summer’s writers and artists at that level—not hawkishly watching over their shoulders, but supportively checking in. “He was really generous,” Hamburger says. But also, he adds, “It’s just cool to have Edward Albee be your mailman.”

“The interesting thing about taking a lot of young people,” Albee says, “is that so many people start out brilliantly, and then their careers just sort of fade away. So we’ve ended up with a lot of people who were wonderful at the very beginning, and then didn’t go on and prove themselves. That happens. But it’s worth taking the young people, hoping that they will progress properly.” And many writers and visual artists, in the Barn’s four decades, have gone on to successful careers. Sculptor Mia Westerlund Roosen was an Albee fellow in 1976; librettist James Lapine, in 1979; painter Sean Scully, in 1982. Novelist Carole Maso was there in 1985, a year before the first of her six novels, *Ghost Dance*, was published by North Point Press. Playwright Christopher Durang was an Albee fellow in 1972, when he was still a graduate student at Yale Drama School.

The late Spalding Gray stayed at the Barn twice, first in 1982, then again in 1986. He worked on his novel, *Impossible Vacation* (Knopf, 1992), during his second stay in Montauk. Fiction writer A.M. Homes was also an Albee fellow twice, the first time in 1988, a year before her first book, the novel *Jack* (Macmillan), came out; her second residency was in 1994. Carolyn Ferrell was at the Barn three years before her first book, *Don’t Erase Me* (Houghton Mifflin, 1997), was published; Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, nine years before *Random Family* (Scribner, 2003); Suki Kim, four years before *The Interpreter* (Farrar,

Straus and Giroux, 2003). Short story writer and monologist Barry Yourgrau was at the Barn in 1985. “I worked terrifically,” he says of his stay. Yourgrau wrote most of his short story collection *Wearing Dad’s Head* (Peregrine Smith Books, 1987) while he was there. “It’s a very emotional book, and I spent a lot of sessions with tears running down my face,” he says. “Fits of laughter, too. I guess when you’re ready to write, you’re just ready to write.”

The Barn might not be the right setting for every creative person to get work done, but for those for whom it is right, it inspires not just the creative work itself, but enthusiasm and fond memories as well. “It was that kind of relaxed, slightly surreal, time-out-of-time experience,” recalls Hershon. “We were all cheek to jowl, but no high-schoolish hassles and preoccupations,” says Yourgrau. “I loved the beach nearby. I loved the evening bike rides back through the leafy, spooky shadows.” Hamburger appreciated the freedom to cover the walls of his study and bedroom with “maps, posters, bits of advertising, all manner of stuff from Jerusalem,” which he used for research on his novel. He says the place felt “like a summer camp for artists, out at the end of the world.”

Maxine Swann, author of the novel *Serious Girls* (Picador, 2003), was an Albee fellow in 2003; she was beginning work on a new novel, and found much inspiration in various books she discovered in the barn, which she remembers gratefully. “I think those places are like little utopias,” she says of artists colonies. The Barn wasn’t her first residency experience—she’d been at Yaddo previously—but she appreciates the respective virtues of both places. “The Barn was different,” she says, “in the sense that I think we felt that, having been granted the setting, we were creating our own utopia.” She adds, “The tattered, beach-house setting of the Barn is inspiring, in that you really feel that this is a place where the work being done matters first and foremost.”

And ultimately, of course, that is what’s paramount—more important than rubbing shoulders with a famous mailman. “Well, someone’s got to bring the mail, and that’s fun,” Albee says. “But for the most part, I think they should be there to do their work, and interact with each other.” Hamburger tells a story from his month in Montauk of a day when he and the other fellows were all piled into one of their cars, driving somewhere in town. They were swapping anecdotes about their conversations with their famous host. “We were all telling stories—Edward Albee this, Edward Albee that. Finally, one of the artists who was there that month, this young sculptor from Japan, asked the rest of us, ‘Who’s Edward Albee?’ He’d been there two weeks,” Hamburger says. “He had no idea.”

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