

Twentieth Century American Drama
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Lecture - 35
Albee's *The Zoo Story* Part 1

This session is on Edward Albee's play *The Zoo Story*.

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Introduction



- *The Zoo Story* was written in 1958.
- It was first premiered on September 28, 1959 in West Berlin along with the German premiere of Samuel Becket's *Krapp's Last Tape* in a double bill.

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This has a slightly different flavor from the other works that we had been looking at, it also follows a slightly different tradition which we will come to know shortly as and when we begin going through this. This is also realist, but with a very intense psychological drama which also get enacted as the play progresses.

This is a 1950s work was written in 1958 and it premiered in 1959 along with Samuel Becket's play *Krapp's Last Tape*. We see resonances of the Beckettian tradition over here you do find resonances it resonating very well with the *Waiting For Godot* tradition that Samuel Beckett inaugurated. We see that these sort of continuities also plays the American theatre very centrally with the rest of European theatre.

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- Edward Albee wrote a prequel titled *Homelife* in 2004. *Homelife* is written as the first act to *The Zoo Story*. Together they are produced as a two-act play titled *Edward Albee's At Home at the Zoo*.
- Accolades:
Berlin Festival Award (1960), Obie Award for Distinguished Play (1960)
Drama Desk Award (1960), Argentine Critics Circle Award (1961)

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This work is from the beginning. It had drawn a lot of attention in terms of the continuities in terms of the universal themes that it was addressing though it was in a specific sense rooted within the American dream though it was rooted within very specific realities.

It also had a larger theme which could be expanded across time in the space. So, which is why like in 2004 there was a prequel which was written Edward Albee himself wrote a prequel to *The Zoo Story* titled *Homelife* and it is often now together presented as a play as a play titled Edward Albee's at Home at the Zoo .

We find that this is a play which is very malleable in that sense there is a certain flexibility about it where there is a before and after that one can recreate imaginatively recreate at any point of time in very different context.

So, if we look at the kind of plays that we had been looking at we saw that even in the last play *The Glass Menagerie* where we see that the situations even while the realities are very rooted in specific situations in specific locales we can always take those emotions out of that and place it anywhere else.

These plays continue to speak to us in a very emotional sense in a very political sense in a very deeply psychological sense even after the passing of these many decades. So, this play *The Zoo Story* had gone, it had won a number of accolades

number of awards and it continues to be staged and recreated in different forms and in different languages too.

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Synopsis



The Zoo Story is a one-act play in which Jerry, a lonely man, meets another man named Peter at New York City's Central Park and compels him to listen to the story of his visit to Zoo.

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This is a one act play and there are only two major characters over here Jerry and Peter. Jerry is a very lonely man who could be seen as a product, a certain forgotten by product of the new economy the new political system which was had got established and he meets another man Peter who is a fairly successful product.

These two are products of the same society Jerry and Peter are products of the same economic system, but they had come out in two very different ways that they cannot be placed together at all in any other context which is why this play in a rather dramatic way places them together in a bench in a within a zoo and they are in it is in the Central Park and they are being in a way Jerry is the character who is forcing Peter to listen to him.

He is on his way back from the visit to the zoo and the bench in the New York Central Park that becomes a site which can accommodate both of them together, perhaps the only site which can accommodate them together. There is a lot of discomfort in that positioning in the way in which they are they are placed beside each other it. The results do a lot of violence, it leads to a lot of uncomfortable situations even leading eventually to the death of one of the characters.



This is how this play is staged and also draws attention to the kind of disparities in an economic sense in the world views and also at a very fundamental level; how it becomes very difficult for two people from the same location, but the two people who inhabit totally different realities how it becomes difficult for them to even have a conversation.

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Major Characters

- Peter
A successful publishing executive and a family man, with a wife, two daughters, and two parakeets.
- Jerry
A poverty stricken lonely man living in the Upper West Side of US. His loneliness compels him to seek companionship from strangers.



The two major characters are Peter and Jerry, Peter is a successful publishing executive he is a family man and we get to know these from the details of the dialogues are mostly in very staccato snippet form. We get these details from that. He is a family man with a wife two daughters and there are also two parakeets, two pets that they keep.

Jerry is a lonely man his poverty stricken, there is hardly anything successful or meaningful about his life, he lives in the upper west side of US it also exemplifies. It also symbolically shows the kind of differences between these characters and his loneliness is what compels him to walk up to strangers strike a conversation even if that makes them uncomfortable to the point of them trying to flee the scene.

We find that he has these conversations these random conversations and tries to seek companionship even from strangers that is a kind of situation into which a character like Jerry has been driven into. This is also like the other plays that we have been looking at.

This is also a very pungent critique of the economic system of the social system, how it has the power to produce very successful, very individualistic people who are visible who gain fame as well as fortune. But at the same time, there are these byproducts, the forgotten byproducts of this system like Jerry who have nowhere to go literally nowhere to go and literally nothing to look forward to.

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The Zoo Story
Edward Albee

for William Flanagan

CHARACTERS

PETER: A man in his early forties, neither fat nor gaunt, neither handsome nor homely. He wears tweeds, smokes a pipe, carries horn-rimmed glasses. Although he is moving into middle age, his dress and his manner would suggest a man younger.

JERRY: A man in his late thirties, not poorly dressed, but carelessly.

What was once a trim and lightly muscled body has begun to go to fat; and while he is no longer handsome, it is evident that he once was. His fall from physical grace should not suggest debauchery; he has, to come closest to it, a great weariness.

THE SCENE:

It is Central Park; a Sunday afternoon in summer; the present. There are two park benches, one towards either side of the stage; they both face, the audience. Behind them: foliage, trees, sky. [At the beginning PETER is seated on one of the benches. As the curtain rises, PETER is seated on the bench stage-right. He is reading a book. He stops reading, cleans his glasses, goes back to



We start looking through some of the aspects of this play *The Zoo Story* by Edward Albee. The two characters are introduced to us. Peter is a man in his early forties, Jerry is a man in his late thirties and their appearances are presented in stark contrast to one another.

Peter is a man in his early forties, neither fat nor gaunt, neither handsome nor homely. He wears tweeds, smokes a pipe, and carries horn rimmed glasses. Although he is moving into middle age, his dress and his manner would suggest a man younger. A clearly sophisticated man who belongs to one of the upper echelons of the society.

Jerry, a man in his late thirties not poorly dressed, but carelessly, what was once a trim and lightly muscled body has begun to go to fat. The way their bodies are being described and that description also tells us about the kind of backgrounds that they come from, while he is no longer handsome, it is evident that he once was the system takes a toll on how we look on our appearances and on the way the kind of

shape that our body acquires and what that reflects of the backgrounds where that one comes from. His fall from physical grace should not suggest debauchery; he has to come closest to it a great weariness.

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[At the beginning PETER is seated on one of the benches. As the curtain rises, PETER is seated on the bench stage-right. He is reading a book. He stops reading, cleans his glasses, goes back to reading. JERRY enters.]
JERRY: I've been to the zoo. [PETER doesn't notice.] I said, I've been to the zoo. MISTER, I'VE BEEN TO THE ZOO!
PETER: Hm? . . . What? . . . I'm sorry, were you talking to me?
JERRY: I went to the zoo, and then I walked until I came here. Have I been walking north?
PETER: [puzzled] North? Why . . . I think so. Let me see.
JERRY: [pointing past the audience] Is that Fifth avenue?
PETER: Why ya; yes, it is.
JERRY: And what is that cross street there; that one, to the right?
PETER: That? Oh, that's Seventy-fourth Street.
JERRY: And the zoo is around Sixty-fifth Street; so, I've been walking north.
PETER: [anxious to get back to his reading] Yes; it would seem so.
JERRY: Good old north.
PETER: [lightly, by reflex] Ha, ha.
JERRY: [after a slight pause] But not due north.
PETER: I . . . well, no, not due north; but, we . . . call it north. It's northerly.
JERRY: [watches as PETER, anxious to dismiss him, prepares his pipe] Well, boy, you're not going to get lung cancer, are you?
PETER: [looks up, a little annoyed, then smiles] No, sir. Not from this.
JERRY: No, sir. What you'll probably get is cancer of the mouth, and then you'll have to wear one of those things Freud wore after they took one whole side of his jaw away. What do they call those things?



This happening in Central Park. The scene is Central Park, a Sunday afternoon in summer the present. There are two park benches, one towards either side of the stage; they both face the audience, behind that foliage trees sky. At the beginning Peter is seated on one of the benches. As the curtain rises, Peter is seated on the bench stage. He is reading a book, stops reading, cleans his glasses, goes back to reading and Jerry enters.

It is an uncomplicated image of Peter, being presented very well-dressed, sophisticated, successful man who is taking a break on a Sunday. He is sitting in the park and trying to read a book and Jerry enters and starts this conversation very randomly.

We will take a look at the conversation to get a flavor of the kind of tone that this play is trying to set how the stage is being set for us to get prepared for the action or rather the known non action that lies ahead.

“Jerry: I have been to the zoo. Peter does not notice. I said I have been to the zoo. Mister, I have been to the zoo hm. What? I am sorry were you talking to me? I went to the zoo and then I walked until I came here, have I been walking north?”

North? Why I think. So, let me see.

Is it Fifth Avenue? Why? ; yes, it is”. We can notice the surprised and almost uncomfortable response from Peter’s side and Jerry starts his conversation without any conversation starters, it just plunges right into it with a very direct question which perhaps does not even make much sense to Peter like why are they even having this conversation.

It is also these markers the absence of these markers are also about the kind of societies that they come from, the kind of formalities that one expects and the other does not have and does not even know how to display. This is that cross street there; that one to the right.

That? That is seventy-fourth Street. The zoo is around Sixty-fifth street. So, I have been walking north.”

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JERRY: [after a slight pause] BUT FOR THE NORTH.
PETER: I ... well, no, not due north; but, we ... call it north. It's northerly.
JERRY: [watches as PETER, anxious to dismiss him, prepares his pipe] Well, boy, you're not going to get lung cancer, are you?
PETER: [looks up, a little annoyed, then smiles] No, sir. Not from this.
JERRY: No, sir. What you'll probably get is cancer of the mouth, and then you'll have to wear one of those things Freud wore after they took one whole side of his jaw away. What do they call those things?
PETER: [uncomfortable] A prosthesis?
JERRY: The very thing! A prosthesis. You're an educated man, aren't you? Are you a doctor?
PETER: Oh, no; no. I read about it somewhere: Time magazine, I think. [He turns to his book.]
JERRY: Well, Time magazine isn't for blockheads.
PETER: No, I suppose not.
JERRY: [after a pause] Boy, I'm glad that's Fifth Avenue there.
PETER: [vaguely] Yes.
JERRY: I don't like the west side of the park much.
PETER: Oh? [Then, slightly wary, but interested] Why?
JERRY: [offhand] I don't know.



Peter is anxious to get back to his reading, yes it would seem so. “Good old north. Ha, but not due north. I well, no, not due north, but we call it north. It is northerly.

Jerry watches as Peter anxiously to dismiss him, prepares his pipe. Well, boy you are not going to get lung cancer, are you?"

There is a very naive directness about Jerry there is also concern for a stranger which is very discomforting given the background that Peter comes from. "No, sir not from this."

"No, sir. What you will probably get is cancer of the mouth and then you will have to wear one of those things Freud wore after they took one whole side of his jaw anyway, what do they call those things?"

Peter is clearly uncomfortable with the discussion, a prosthesis? The very thing a prosthesis. You are an educated man aren't you? Are you a doctor? No. I read about it somewhere: Time magazine, I think. Well, Time magazine is not for blockheads. No, I suppose not. Boy, I am glad that is Fifth-Avenue there. Yes. I do not like the west side of the park much. Why? I do not know."

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PETER: Oh. [He returns to his book.]
JERRY: [stands for a few seconds, looking at PETER, who finally looks up again, puzzled] Do you mind if we talk?
PETER: [obviously minding] Why . . . no, no.
JERRY: Yes you do; you do.
PETER: [puts his book down, his pipe out and away, smiling] No, I really; I don't mind.
JERRY: Yes you do.
PETER: [finally decided] No; I don't mind at all, really.
JERRY: It's ... it's a nice day.
PETER: [stares unnecessarily at the sky] Yes, Yes, it is; lovely.
JERRY: I've been to the zoo.
PETER: Yes, I think you said so ... didn't you?
JERRY: You'll read about it in the papers tomorrow, if you don't see it on your TV tonight. You have TV, haven't you?
PETER: Why yes, we have two; one for the children.
JERRY: You're married!
PETER: [with pleased emphasis] Why, certainly.
JERRY: It isn't a law, for God's sake.
PETER: No ... no, of course not.
JERRY: And you have a wife.
PETER: [bewildered by the seeming lack of communication] Yes!
JERRY: And you have children.
PETER: Yes; two.
JERRY: Does?



Jerry stands for a few seconds looking at Peter who finally, looks up again, puzzled and look at the stubbornness of this man to a very naive stubbornness of Jerry which is almost helpless you will begin to feel sorry for this man when he is waiting there to continue the conversation.

“Do you mind if we talk? Why, no. Yes, you do you do. He puts his book down, his pipe out and away smiling. No, I really I do not mind. Yes, you do. No I do not mind at all, really. It is a nice day. Yes, it is lovely.”

These are the things perhaps in these very nuanced conversation we also get to know that perhaps these are the things that Peter had always been not noticing and these are the only things perhaps Jerry finds time to notice, these are the only times perhaps it makes any gives any comfort gives any meaning to Jerry’s otherwise very uneventful life.

“I have been to the zoo. Yes I think you said. So, did not you? You will read about in the papers tomorrow, if you do not see it on your TV tonight. You have TV, have not you? There is something very prophetic about it.”

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JERRY: [TO THE CAMERA]
PETER: Yes; two.
JERRY: Boys?
PETER: No, girls ... both girls.
JERRY: But you wanted boys.
PETER: Well ... naturally, every man wants a son, but ...
JERRY: [lightly mocking] But that's the way the cookie crumbles?
PETER: [annoyed] I wasn't going to say that.
JERRY: And you're not going to have any more kids, are you?
PETER: [a bit distantly] No. No more. [Then back, and irksome] Why did you say that? How would you know about that?
JERRY: The way you cross your legs, perhaps; something in the voice. Or maybe I'm just guessing. Is it your wife?
PETER: [furious] That's none of your business! [A silence.] Do you understand? [JERRY nods.
PETER is quiet now.] Well, you're right. We'll have no more children.
JERRY: [softly] That is the way the cookie crumbles.
PETER: [forgiving] Yes ... I guess so.
JERRY: Well, now; what else?
PETER: What were you saying about the zoo... that I'd read about it, or see ...?
JERRY: I'll tell you about it, soon. Do you mind if I ask you questions?
PETER: Oh, not really.
JERRY: I'll tell you why I do it; I don't talk to many people except to say like: give me a beer, or where's the john, or what time does the feature go on, or keep your hands to yourself, buddy. You know i⁹ things like that.



We do know that if you have now read through the entire play you do know that something very massive happens towards the end that it will we are fairly certain that the very next day it will feature in the news and about how Jerry went to the zoo and then started having a conversation with this man.

“Why? Yes, we have two, one for the children. You are married, and look at the the about the positioning the mentioning of the TV. There is one additional TV for the

children too it gives us a sense of the background from which he comes. You are married. Why, certainly. It is not law, for God's sake.

No, of course, not. And you have a wife."

Bewildered by the seeming lack of communication they clearly come from two very different worlds where the value systems are different, but the kind of questions that they think it is ok to ask in a public domain, in a public sphere, it is very different.

"You have children. Yes two. Boys? No, girls both girls. But you wanted boys. Well, naturally every man wants a son."

We also find that this the father son relationship which we had been seeing in the other place that is quite absent over here this play has a very different background that it does not let us explore the father sons relationship, but it does show us a different kind of a man to man relationship over here how two men are able to they are unable to have a conversation, but at some level they also understand each other.

Jerry and Peter though they come from very different backgrounds, they also know about the kind of expectations that a man of Peter stature would have for instance about the even in this very brief mentioning of how every man wants a son.

"Jerry, but that is the way the cookie crumbles? I was not going to say that. And you are not going to have any more kids, are you? No, no more. Why did you say that? How would about that? The way you cross your legs, perhaps: something in the voice or maybe I am just guessing. Is it your wife?"

Peter suddenly furious for obvious reasons because this is a conversation which is now about to cross all personal boundaries and this is another thing that we find very significant in this play that in these very small instances it tells us a lot about the expectations from different social systems from different social backgrounds how a very innocuous simple question could be seen as crossing the personal boundaries and it certainly does and where these sort of conversations take them.

"That is none of your business. Do you understand? Well, you are right. We will have no more children. That is the way the cookie crumbles. Yes I guess so."

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JERRY: The way you cross your legs, perhaps, something in the voice. Or maybe I'm just guessing.
Is it your wife?
PETER: [furious] That's none of your business! [A silence.] Do you understand? [JERRY nods.
PETER is quiet now.] Well, you're right. We'll have no more children.
JERRY: [softly] That is the way the cookie crumbles.
PETER: [forgiving] Yes ... I guess so.
JERRY: Well, now; what else?
PETER: What were you saying about the zoo... that I'd read about it, or see ...?
JERRY: I'll tell you about it, soon. Do you mind if I ask you questions?
PETER: Oh, not really.
JERRY: I'll tell you why I do it; I don't talk to many people except to say like: give me a beer, or
where's the john, or what time does the feature go on, or keep your hands to yourself, buddy. You
know i⁹ things like that.
PETER: I must say I don't ...
JERRY: But every once in a while I like to talk to somebody, really talk; like to get to know
somebody, know all about him.
PETER: [lightly laughing, still a little uncomfortable] And am I the guinea pig for today?
JERRY: On a sun-drenched Sunday afternoon like this? Who better than a nice married man with
two daughters and ... uh ... a
dog? [PETER shakes his head.] No? Two dogs. [PETER shakes his head again. Hm. No dogs?



They seem to be understanding each other too in a very in a very strange sense over here. “Well, now; what else? What were you saying about the zoo that I would read about or see? I will tell you about it, soon. Do you mind if I ask you questions? Not really. I will tell you why I do it; I do not talk to many people except to say like: give me a beer or where John is or what time does the feature go on or keep your hands to yourself, buddy. Things like that.

I must say I do not. He started giving a lot of information Peter does not even know how to stop him. But every once in a while I like to talk to somebody, really talk; like to get to know somebody, know all about him. Am I the guinea pig for today? And he is also evidently very uncomfortable. On a sun-drenched Sunday afternoon like this? Who better than a nice married man with two daughters and a dog? No? Two dogs, no dogs.”

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[PETER shakes his head, sadly.] Oh, that's a shame. But you look like an animal man. CATS?
[PETER nods his head, ruefully.] Cats! But, that can't be your idea. No, sir. Your wife and daughters? [PETER nods his head.] Is there anything else I should know?
PETER: [he has clear his throat] There are ... there are two parakeets. One ... uh ... one for each of my daughters.
JERRY: Birds.
PETER: My daughters keep them in a cage in their bedroom.
JERRY: Do they carry disease? The birds.
PETER: I don't believe so.
JERRY: That's too bad. If they did you could set them loose in the house and the cats could eat them and die, maybe. [PETER look blank for a moment, then laughs.] And what else? What do you do to support your enormous household?
PETER: I ... uh ... I have an executive position with a ... a small publishing house. We ... uh ... we publish text books.
JERRY: That sounds nice; very nice. What do you make?
PETER: [still cheerful] Now look here!
JERRY: Oh, come on.
PETER: Well, I make around eighteen thousand a year, but: don't carry more than forty dollars at any one time ... in case you're a ... a holdup man ... ha, ha, ha.
JERRY: [improving the show] Where do you live? [PETER is reluctant] Oh look: I'm not going to



“That is a shame, but you look like an animal man cats? Cat, but that cannot be your idea. No, sir your wife and daughters? Is there anything else I should know? There are there are two parakeets. One for each of my daughters. Birds. My daughters keep them in a cage in their bedroom. Do they carry disease? The birds. I do not believe so.”

“That is too bad. If they did you could set them loose in the house and the cats could eat them and die maybe, look and what else? What do you do to support your enormous household? It clearly does not make much sense to Peter seeing the way this conversation is growing I have an executive position with a small publishing house. We publish text books.

That sounds very nice, what do you make? And Peter is trying to distract.”

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PETER: [still cheerful] Now look here!
JERRY: Oh, come on.
PETER: Well, I make around eighteen thousand a year, but: don't carry more than forty dollars at any one time ... in case you're a ... a holdup man ... ha, ha, ha.
JERRY: [ignoring the above] Where do you live? [PETER is reluctant.] Oh, look; I'm not going to rob you, and I'm not going to kidnap your parakeets, your cats, or your daughters.
PETER: [too loud] I live between Lexington and Third Avenue, on Seventy-fourth Street.
JERRY: That wasn't so hard, was it?
PETER: I didn't mean to seem ... ah ... it's that you don't really carry on a conversation; you just ask questions. And I'm ... I'm normally ... uh ... reticent. Why do you just stand there?
JERRY: I'll start walking around in a little while, and eventually I'll sit down. [Recalling.] Wait until you see the expression on his face.
PETER: What? Whose face? Look here; is this Something about the zoo?
JERRY: [distantly] The what?
PETER: The zoo; the zoo. Something about the zoo.
JERRY: The zoo?
PETER: You've mentioned it several times.
JERRY: [still distant, but returning abruptly]: The zoo? Oh, yes; the zoo. I was there before I came here. I told you that. Say, what's the dividing line between upper-middle-middle-class and lower-upper-middle-class?
PETER: My dear fellow, I ...
JERRY: Don't my dear fellow me!
PETER: [unhappily] Was I patronizing? I believe I was; I'm sorry. But, you see, your question about the classess householders mo



“Come on. Well, I make 18000 a year, but do not carry more than 40 dollars at any one time in case you are a holdup man. They are the fears and the anxieties that he has he is also putting all of that out there and Jerry is also he is quite intelligent and he gets where that comes from.

Where do you live? Look I am not going to rob you and I am not going to kidnap your parakeets, your cats or your daughters. I live between Lexington and Third Avenue and on Seventy-fourth Street. That was not so hard, was it? I did not mean to seem, it is that you do not really carry on a conversation; you just ask questions. And I am normally reticent. Why do you just stand there?”

We find that the way this conversation is growing there is not much scope for a conversation and we also know that it is not really about the conversation it is about two people trying to make a connect with each other.

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Plot Summary



- The play begins with Jerry intruding the peaceful time of a total stranger named Peter, who is sitting on the park bench reading.
- Jerry begins the conversation with "I've been to a zoo, mister" and goes on to ask personal questions about Peter's life. He learns that Peter has a wife, two daughters, two cats, and two parakeets.



It is just about Jerry the character, almost a nobody who is intruding into this life of a total stranger who is just sitting on the park bench reading and very uneventful day turning into something else altogether.

He also begins this question with a very random statement, "I have been to a zoo and then asked about gets goes on about asking very personal intense questions."

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- Jerry then narrates anecdotes from his life. He says he doesn't have family, friends or any other meaningful relationships. He also states that when he was 16 he was in a short term relationship, which made him believe that he was a "h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l" for a week and a half.



He also narrates these anecdotes from his life which does not have much of a meaning. We will see that in this meaningless conversation, the contextless

conversation. It is perhaps the context that the play is trying to set, that is the critique that is the crux of this entire play in terms of the absence of a context, the absence of meaning and the need to create it out of nowhere.

It ends on a very sad note too about how what happens when we try to create this context. We try to create this meaning out of almost like no way. It would be very useful if we could go through the play in detail and be familiar with the minute details. We can have a larger discussion about the major themes covered and how the larger context makes sense in terms of situating the American 20th century American theatre.