



SPECTERS

TRIFLES & THE AMERICAN DREAM

By Susan Glaspell and Edward Albee

Gender, power, and the dark side of the American Dream: Experience the social critiques and domestic horrors of *Trifles* and *The American Dream* in this riveting double bill of U.S. American theater masterpieces.

TRIFLES / Directed by Charlie Bierend and Lydia Preusch

In a quiet, isolated farmhouse, a man has been murdered in his sleep. As the women in the play uncover subtle clues that reveal what really happened, the male officers dismiss these as insignificant “trifles.” Keenly aware of the hidden horrors within the home, the women quietly take justice into their own hands. Glaspell’s gripping and atmospheric drama delves into the intricate power dynamics of justice and gender. This production breathes new life into the 1916 classic, drawing striking parallels between past and present gender roles. Taking Hannah Neeleman’s “Ballerina Farm” as a poignant foil, we illuminate the complexities of today’s #tradwife culture, enriching an evocative staging of this timeless play.

THE AMERICAN DREAM / Directed by Felix Krebs

Mommy, Daddy, Grandma, and a “professional woman” without profession inhabit a world stripped of meaningful relationships. There’s no child, no understanding of the “professional woman’s” purpose, and confusion about whose mother Grandma is. As the chilling truth about an adopted child’s fate unfolds, the moral and emotional bankruptcy at the core of this so-called family is revealed. Albee’s darkly comic satire portrays a grotesque reality where the obsession with material wealth has hollowed out the facade of the “perfect American family.” Our production of the 1961 play underscores the disintegration of human connection caused by the relentless pursuit of financial success.

Experience these two sharp, thought-provoking works back-to-back!

Premiere: Montag, 20. Januar 2025

Weitere Vorstellungen: 22.-26.01. / 29.-31.01. / 01.02.2025

Beginn jeweils um 19.30 Uhr im Audimax, Von-Melle-Park 4

Einführung mit den Regieteams

22. Januar, 18:00-18:45 Uhr

Audimax, Audi 2, im selben Gebäude

Nach Gespräch mit dem künstlerischen Team

29. Januar, im Anschluss an die Vorstellung

Schulklassen: 5 Euro pro Schüler*in (Begleitpersonal kostenlos)

Um Anmeldung wird gebeten: up@uni-hamburg.de



SCHOOL PACK

SPECTERS:

TRIFLES & THE AMERICAN DREAM

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Although written in different eras and employing distinct dramatic styles, both one-act plays reflect pivotal moments of transition in U.S. culture, exploring the often violent physical and psychological effects of traditional social norms on individuals forced to conform. Using different theatrical aesthetics, both plays deliver sharp critiques of social, political and ideological expectations, challenging audiences to reflect on issues of identity, power, and justice. As significant works in the U.S. dramatic canon, they continue to resonate powerfully with contemporary audiences today.

TRIFLES

By Susan Glaspell

Trifles is set in a rural farmhouse during a murder investigation. The story centers on the death of John Wright. His wife, Mrs. Wright, is the primary suspect, accused of killing him in his sleep. As the male characters—the sheriff and county attorney—search for evidence, they dismiss the women, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, as preoccupied with insignificant details. However, as the women examine the domestic space, they uncover subtle clues, including a broken birdcage and a strangled canary, which suggest that Mrs. Wright endured emotional abuse and profound isolation. These discoveries lead the women to believe that Mrs. Wright likely killed her husband after years of emotional violence. Empathizing with her plight and recognizing the inherent biases of a male-only legal system, they choose to destroy, conceal, and lie about the evidence, making it unlikely that Mrs. Wright will face trial.

POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY

First produced in 1916, the play emerged during a **pivotal moment in U.S. history, as the country moved toward women's suffrage**, which would culminate in the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920. As part of first-wave U.S. feminism, the play captures a time when women's political voices were just starting to be heard, even though cultural and legal recognition lagged behind. Set in this era of profound change, **the play showcases female solidarity and survival strategies**, while highlighting the urgent need for women's social and political agency that was beginning to dawn.

POWER AND LANGUAGE

The title serves as a powerful metaphor for how society has historically dismissed women's contributions, both in the domestic sphere and beyond. The play centers on the **gendered division between the domestic and public realms and its impact on voice, behavior, and communication**. While the men enforcing the law freely talk and move throughout the house



and its surroundings, the women in the play are confined to the kitchen and communicate through silent glances and fragmented, interrupted, ambiguous speech. Glaspell highlights this dynamic by using silence to underscore how women were silenced in the political sphere and how their concerns often lacked language: Terms like sexual harassment, domestic abuse, stalking, or coercive control did not exist. These experiences were conceptually unspeakable and could only be addressed implicitly. **Over time, as cultural and conceptual vocabularies evolved, these experiences became recognizable, describable, and actionable under the law.**

TRADITION AND CHANGE IN LAW

The women in the story engage in a silent rebellion against man-made law. Mrs. Hale states, “The law is the law – and a bad stove is a bad stove,” thus critiquing a legal system that fails to acknowledge domestic abuse, highlighting its ineffectiveness in addressing the emerging political identities of women. (Glaspell’s choice of metaphor is particularly notable, as she uses the gendered but concrete object of the stove – located in the female realm of domesticity – to critique abstract, man-made law.) In Glaspell’s time, for instance, women’s self-defense was often seen as aggression, since prior acts of violence against women were rarely recognized as actionable crimes. As a result, female “self-defense” was rendered conceptually impossible. In a **period of political and cultural transformation** the outdated and inappropriate nature of legal frameworks becomes evident. The play illustrates a disconnect between lived reality and the penal code of the era, **calling for legal and political reform and a break from male-dominated traditions.**

CONTINUITIES

Acknowledging a **contemporary resurgence of traditional gender roles**, as critiqued in the 1916 play *Trifles*, the directors of our production adapt this canonical but rarely produced one-act play for a contemporary audience. They highlight the **persistence and endurance of gendered roles, domains and power structures**, and explore how these dynamics still manifest today. The staging focuses on the **#tradwife** trend as a particularly notable example. Referencing Hannah Neeleman and her *Ballerina Farm*, the production engages a social media-native audience, questioning the complex notions of “tradition and change” in relation to socio-political “progress” and their implications of “betterment.” It emphasizes how seemingly outdated gender roles continue to persist in both overt and subtle ways, often poised to reemerge in habits, customs, and cultural narratives.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- To what extent is the domestic sphere, the private household, still a “woman’s space?”
- How do you interpret the metaphors of the dead canary and the forced-open birdcage?
- Are there still social issues, activities, or professions today that are considered “women’s matters” and dismissed as trivial or unimportant?
- The stage production draws parallels between the contemporary **#tradwife** movement and the legally enforced male oppression of more than 100 years ago. In what ways do you think they are similar, and how do they differ?
- In the play, the women interpret the evidence differently from the men, leading to their own moral and legal conclusions. From your experience, how can a person’s social position influence their perception and evaluation of the world?



THE AMERICAN DREAM

By Edward Albee

In Edward Albee's *The American Dream* (1961), a dysfunctional, stereotypical family—Mommy, Daddy, and Grandma—awaits the arrival of Mrs. Barker, a “professional woman.” When Mrs. Barker finally arrives, none of them can remember the exact reason for her visit. It is revealed, however, that years ago, Mrs. Baker was instrumental in Mommy and Daddy's adoption of a child which they mutilated and killed because it failed to meet their expectations. Later, a Young Man arrives—a handsome but emotionally vacant figure. He is enthusiastically welcomed and offered a job as “son.” After Grandma leaves, the play concludes with Mommy and Daddy celebrating their new “perfect child,” fully embracing the emptiness at the heart of the American Dream.

Edward Albee has been considered the first and foremost US American absurdist playwright. He explores the existential despair and isolation of individuals detached from themselves and tied to others only through meaningless but highly stylized, confrontational and always already futile speech acts. However, Albee differs from his European counterparts—Ionesco, Beckett, Pinter, and several more—who tend to address a generalized human condition. His plays are decidedly U.S. American in reference, and *The American Dream* especially so.

CONSUMERISM AND MATERIALISM

Like *Trifles*, *The American Dream* critiques societal power, but serves as a critique primarily of how a free-wheeling, alienating U.S. capitalism affects human identities existentially, including their gendered-ness. The play's aesthetics of the grotesque and absurd (in contrast to *Trifles*' realism, which allows the assertion of agency) mirror a world where **traditional structures of power and identity are disintegrating because reality no longer aligns with the economic expectations, ideals, and promises of the American Dream.** First coined in 1931 by James Truslow Adams, when it referred to democracy, liberty, and equality, the concept of the American Dream had evolved into an ideal focused primarily on accumulating wealth through the belief in meritocracy and upward mobility by the 1960s, when Albee wrote *The American Dream*. He addressed this change in meaning observable in the post-WWII era. However, against the backdrop of this economic imperative, the American Dream has effectively **hollowed out emotional human relationships in general and family bonds in particular.** The archetypes of post-war American success, Mommy and Daddy, are depicted as devoid of true purpose or connection. In our production, we emphasize the economic aspects of the American Dream and their impact on those pursuing it to underscore the superficiality addressed in Albee's absurdist grotesque.

FAMILY FANTASIES

The economic and political meanings associated with the American Dream have always included certain ideals about the nuclear family especially regarding reproduction and child-rearing. Albee's absurd take on this family ideal is reflected in the characters Mommy and Daddy, who refer to each other as “Mommy” and “Daddy” even in the absence of a child. They see these social roles as aspirational defaults and project them onto each other. This dynamic also extends to their humorous confusion about “Grandma,” as they repeatedly question whose “Grandma” she might be—again, in the absence of a child—and even whose mother she might be. In the course of the play, we learn that Mommy and Daddy had adopted a “bumble of joy” to fulfill their desires for a perfect and complete family. However, their disappointment in what



turned out to be a “bum” led them to commit grotesque and immeasurably violent actions, i.e. the mutilation and ultimate murder of the child.

ROMANTICIZED PAST

Interestingly, Albee contrasts “Grandma” with the violent disintegration of meaning and values resulting from the pursuit of superficial perfection, questioning what the U.S. have sacrificed for their economic liberalism. The character of Grandma serves to critique the wrongness of Mommy and Daddy’s actions and calls out the absurdity of the “professional woman,” suggesting a form of common sense—and thereby a potential escape from this horror—rooted in the past. Traditional ways and knowledge are cast in Grandma as a vanishing point for hope, yet she is on her way to the nursing home. Particularly in light of its ending—Grandma gone and the Young Man present—the play seems to imply that the loss of significant traditional modes of being and belonging has marked a **change for the worst**, as materialism has ultimately taken over the American culture. It could thus be argued that the presence of Grandma points to an actual or subconscious belief in a better past. A different reading could further the idea of vanishing point and recognize that such hope is always already vanishing – which would align more closely with the existential nihilism of the absurdist theater tradition with which the playwright Albee is associated.

GENDER

It has been argued that Mommy and Daddy represent an inversion of traditional gender roles: Mommy asserts control and dominance, while Daddy is reduced to impotent passivity. However, it is the role of Mrs. Barker that offers a more ambiguous and complex critique of gender in the American Dream. At first, we don’t know what Mrs. Barker, a self-proclaimed “professional woman,” actually does beyond chairing the local women’s club. It is only through Grandma’s hints that the truth emerges: Mrs. Barker once volunteered at an adoption agency and played a role in Mommy and Daddy’s adoption of the baby they later murdered. Beyond these two unpaid activities, Mrs. Barker’s supposed professionalism is unsubstantiated. Throughout, she is portrayed as confused and uncertain, embodying the aimless transformation of American society. The contrived idea of a “professional woman” is presented as an absurdist oxymoron. Mrs. Barker symbolizes the superficiality of societal change, especially regarding gender roles: While the facade of modernity suggests progress—women entering the public or “professional” sphere—the underlying structures of control and expectation persist. In essence, the so-called change from the era of *Trifles* is nominal at best, with the roles remaining fundamentally the same.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The more than 60-year-old play suggests that the free-market economy has alienated people from themselves and each other. Do you agree with this? If so, do you think this changed in any way until today? How do we think about work-life today?
- In the play, the idea of a nuclear family is presented as hollow and meaningless. How do we think about family today? What defines a family and what kinds of families can exist?
- Edward Albee, who was adopted himself, presents adoption as a way to complete this family ideal. How are adoption practices viewed today? What might motivate couples to adopt a child?
- Mrs. Barker is a “professional women” without a paid job, busy with volunteering activities. How does this relate to our contemporary times, for example in view of gendered jobs and the gender gap in wages?



SPECTERS IN THE DOMESTIC GROTESQUE

THE DOMESTIC SPHERE

Both plays, though emerging from distinct periods and societal frameworks, pose crucial questions about the roles individuals are assigned in society, with a particular focus on **gender, power, and identity**. They intersect seamlessly by setting their stories in the **domestic sphere**—a space transformed into a **realm of horror**. Within these intimate confines, we engage with the characters' private lives, or what's left of them. The plays lay bare the impact of hegemonic ideologies and culturally dominant belief systems on individual psyches. Murder weaves through both narratives, revealing the domestic not as a sanctuary, but as a site where societal pressures can drive familiar figures to commit monstrous acts—or, in the case of Mommy and Daddy in *The American Dream*, to become monsters themselves.

TRADITION AND CHANGE

Taken together, the two one-acts spark a deeper exploration of the ambiguous terms “tradition” and “change”—or, more politically, “conservatism” and “progressivism.” In *Trifles*, it is the tradition of male dominance and absent female political agency that breeds emotional and physical horrors within the domestic sphere. Meanwhile, in *The American Dream*, Grandma embodies a nostalgic past that allegedly harbors genuine human connection and a meaningful concept of family in view of the “modern” alienation. Both plays critique the current state of affairs, but where *Trifles* calls for transformation, *The American Dream* rejects its effects—or, at the very least, has lost hope and faith in the possibility of positive change. In their juxtaposition, the two plays invite a rich discussion regarding the ambiguities of these terms while also representing concrete historical moments of transformation in politics, cultural practices and discourse that are always already tied up both in what happened before and what might come after.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE AESTHETIC TRADITION

From an aesthetic perspective, we can trace significant developments between the two plays. While Glaspell's *Trifles* is progressive in content, it remains firmly rooted in the tradition of American realism. In contrast, *The American Dream*—and Albee's work more broadly—embraces postmodern surrealism or absurdism. We can see a transition from the U.S. realism of the early 20th century, as exemplified by Glaspell and her contemporaries like Eugene O'Neill, to the absurdism and surrealism of the 1960s, with Albee at the forefront. The lack of „rounded“ characters in *The American Dream*, as opposed to the psychological depth and exploration of subjective agency in *Trifles*, not only reflects these aesthetic shifts but also aligns with the thematic concerns of each play: the negotiation or assertion of (female) identity as agency in *Trifles* and the entire disintegration of identities and a meaningful social life in *The American Dream*.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

As your students prepare to engage with these plays before or after their theater visit, we encourage them to think about the following questions:

- The double bill is titled “Specters.” What does this term evoke and how does that relate to your experience and interpretation of the two plays?
- In what ways do both *Trifles* and *The American Dream* critique the societal norms of their respective time periods? What theatrical devices do Glaspell and Albee use to articulate their social critiques?
- There are approximately 50 years between *Trifles* and *The American Dream*, and roughly 60 years between *The American Dream* and today. Regarding the social and functions of women—what has changed, and what has remained the same?
- A person who is a “Grandma” in 1961 (production of *The American Dream*) would likely have been between 20 and 35 years old in 1916, the year *Trifles* was first performed—a time frame that aligns with the potential age of Minnie Wright, the character who murders her husband in *Trifles*. What might this say about the romantic reference to a “more authentic past” recurrently implied in *The American Dream*?
- Our staging of *Trifles* draws on the current #tradwife phenomenon, in which young women present themselves as happy mothers and housewives in the form of a monetizable Instagram brand. How does this resonate with the “professional woman” in *The American Dream*?
- The two plays reflect different judgments, hopes, and fears regarding socio-political “tradition” and “change.” In what ways does each play view these concepts as positive, negative or ambiguous?