

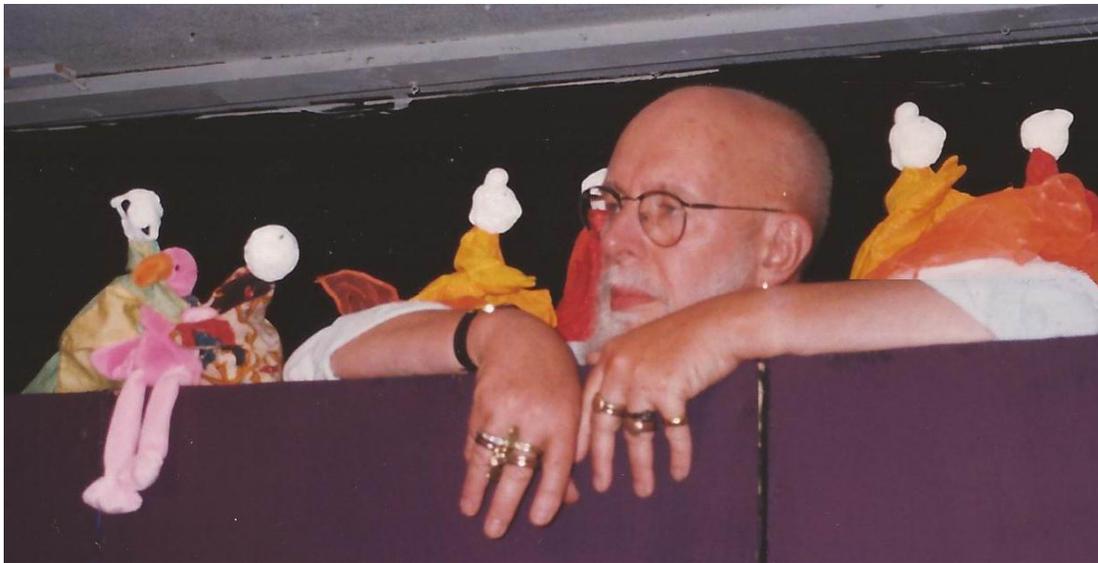
Prologue

How to categorize Edward Gorey? A writer with a flair for drawing? An artist who also told stories? A distinctive book designer and illustrator? A maker of odd ephemera, from beady-eyed beanbag animals to esoteric playing cards? A godfather of Goth? A sine qua non for Tim Burton, Lemony Snicket, and other macabre-minded line-straddlers? Twelve years after his death, booksellers still debate whether to shelve Gorey's elusively plotted, obsessively penned little books under Art, Humor, or Children's.

One label that's rarely proposed is *dramatist*. Yet ever since he arrived at Harvard University after World War II, Gorey's stories have popped up persistently onstage. Starting in the late 1980s, when he moved full-time to Cape Cod, theater encroached on his creative life to the point of engulfing it.

In person—over lunch at Jack's Outback, for instance—Edward Gorey was as hard to pin down as his work. He had a staggering ability to shift focus from a film he saw thirty years ago to today's menu to last night's episode of "Third Rock from the Sun" to Schubert's repetitions to Roman coins under Trebonianus Gallus. Every subject seemed to fascinate him, although you couldn't be sure, since he talked about each of them with the same acuity of perception and utter nonchalance of tone.

Being hard to pin down extended to new projects. Edward hated to say no. Rather than refuse a job, he'd either ignore it or claim some other obligation he couldn't get out of. You formed the impression that, like his hapless characters, Edward Gorey was perpetually being stalked by unseen threats. Even when it was clear he'd lavished enormous care on a drawing or story, he acted as though it had ambushed him—leapt on him from an overhanging branch and dragged him into the shrubbery. Ask him why he'd written this or that book, or what projects were on his drawing board, or even which had come first, the elephant on wheels or the woman standing under it, he was likely to mutter "Oh, I don't know," and wave a heavily be-ringed hand in vague embarrassment.



Edward and Le Théâtre Stoiïque: "Oh, the of it all!"

As Edward Gorey's neighbor, friend, producer, stage manager, instigator, and comrade-in-arts, I was involved in almost all of his theater work on Cape Cod. Our tastes were different, but we shared a passion for art as a way to investigate the world, particularly human peculiarities. In the hundreds of hours we spent talking about what we were doing, or wanted to do, I don't recall a single conversation about artistic influences, trends, formative experiences, or the like. As you'll see in this book, one thing did very often lead to another; but our focus was active, not reflective. The idea was to DO IT, not record or analyze it.

I only started writing about Edward's thespian adventures after he died, when his executors asked me to help them publish a book of his scripts. Given that he'd written, designed, and directed more than a dozen full-length plays and "entertainments" for Cape Cod theaters, plus half a dozen shorter pieces, that promised to be a challenge.

I started with a descriptive summary of our theater work—also a challenge. For one thing, there was Edward's reluctance to explain anything he did, or even to admit that he'd done it on purpose. For another, reliving that extraordinary creative collaboration without my much-missed collaborator felt—as he would say—"iddy ottic."

More than a decade later, with the scripts still inching toward print, I published my summary as a sort of exhibition catalog for the Edward Gorey House's 2011 show,

“Edward Gorey and the Performing Arts.” A combination of niche biography and memoir, it’s called *Edward Gorey Plays Cape Cod: Puppets, People, Places, & Plots*.



Edward hand-sewed a QRV rabbit for everyone in *Useful Urns*.

The obvious next step was this e-book: a four-dimensional 21st-century homage to Edward’s marvelous pop-up books. His scripts, after all, were only the starting point for his entertainments. Minimal though his staging was, his productions all had music as well as live actors and puppets. The way everything looked, moved, and sounded mattered as much to him as the words. And he was curious about other forms as well as plays (and his beloved films and ballet): opera, video, animation . . .

Edward Gorey On Stage, then, is my personal e-chronicle of an extraordinary artist’s lifelong involvement with theater. It opens with his Chicago childhood and closes after the posthumous premiere of his dazzling swan song, *The White Canoe: an Opera Seria for*

Hand Puppets. Here you'll find reminiscences, photographs, drawings, quotations from scripts and reviews, and (if you're connected to the Net) links to video clips, websites, and other useful sources of illumination. (The visual record of Edward's productions is spotty: until Chris Seufert started following him with a camera in the late 1990s, documentation was catch-as-catch-can.) Along the way this book touches on the diverse work of his that others produced, but its central focus is the theater projects Edward himself wrote, directed, designed, and occasionally performed in.

Aside from a few in the text, most live links are in the Credits and Links section at the end of the book. Those related to images are flagged by **bold red type** in the captions. Links are provided with no guarantee that the destination website will still contain the same content, or even still exist, beyond the publication date of this book.



Stage I: Chicago to Utah to Cambridge

Although he shuddered to think of it, Edward Gorey's theatrical career really did span half a century. And that's not counting his youthful involvement as a spectator at plays and the ballet. His ticket stubs (apparently he never threw one out) date back to a

Saturday matinee of *Brother Rat* at Chicago's Harris Theatre on Sept. 19, 1937 ("Had a swell day," he remarked in his diary) and a Tuesday evening show of *You Can't Take it With You* on Sept. 28 ("Swell play and swell time"). His active public participation didn't begin, though, until after World War II, with the Poets' Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

As a child, Edward—called Ted—had no siblings, and his parents' marriage was, well, theatrical. They divorced when he was eleven, the same year he graduated from eighth grade, and then reunited sixteen years later. In between, his father married nightclub singer and actress Corinna Mura, best known for singing "La Marseillaise" in the film *Casablanca*.

Edward depicted himself as a perfectly normal child, on the quiet and intellectual side but by no means solitary or introverted. His flair got a boost when he entered the Francis W. Parker School—known, according to his fellow student, artist, and close friend Consuelo Joerns, for "encouraging innovation and individuality and of course the arts." Although not big on performing, he had some backstage involvement with theater. He took a course or two at the Art Institute of Chicago, and spent a semester there after graduation—his only brush, he said, with studying art. Connie Joerns notes that the Art Institute opened other doors as well: "We went to outrageous parties being given by his fellow art students, which shocked and delighted us. Bohemianism in the spirit of *La Boheme*, but wildly exaggerated. Decades later Ted said never had he run into anything again in his life quite so bizarre!"

Harvard University was ready to welcome him, but he was intercepted by the U.S. Army. Ted Gorey spent the war typing, as a clerk at Dugway Proving Grounds in Utah. As hard as it is to picture him in military uniform at a government-issue desk, there's a weird aptness in the Army's posting him to exactly the kind of remote desert spot where he would later enjoy watching *The X-Files* send Agents Mulder and Scully. Any rumor of thousands of dead sheep discovered among the tumbleweeds, he said, always turned out to be Dugway. When I asked him what he did there, he answered that his main chore was to fill out a set of forms each day which went straight into the files, never to be seen again. It was here he started writing—nothing worth saving, just "closet dramas," he told *Boston Magazine* interviewer Lisa Solod (1980).

Like many of his freshman class, Ted Gorey entered Harvard on the G.I. Bill. What happened next has been described by the novelist [Alison Lurie](#), also a close friend, in a memoir that accompanies their mutual friend Violet "Bunny" Lang's collected poems and plays: