

TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY DRAMA

by

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B. A., Culver-Stockton College,
Canton, Missouri, 1931

A THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of English

KANSAS STATE COLLEGE
OF AGRICULTURE AND APPLIED SCIENCE

1950

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to point out certain important trends in contemporary drama, using the work of leading American playwrights, and that of a few British dramatists, to illustrate each major characteristic cited. The author is primarily interested in the contemporary American theatre, but has included the study of several British plays realizing that there has been continuous interchange between the stages of the United States and England. This cross-traffic includes not only plays, writers, directors, and actors, but also an exchange and acceptance of ideas.

The social philosophy of the American dramatist is almost identical with that of the English dramatist. In both countries the dominant ideas are those of the cosmopolitan upper middle class....which in general have been adopted by large sections of the populations...due to the mass production of newspapers, magazines, radio, and screen entertainment.¹

The author also wishes to define the difference between modern and contemporary, using contemporary material to illustrate contemporary trends, but showing the vital relationship between the work of the great modern dramatists upon those writing for the contemporary stage.

Without exception all the critics who were studied accepted Ibsen as the "Founder of the Modern Drama". There is, however,

¹ John Howard Lawson, The Theory and Practice of Playwriting (G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1936), page 84.

a difference of opinion as to the starting point of contemporary drama. Professor Thomas Dickinson starts with Percy MacKaye, whose first dramatic work was done as early as 1896; Professor Fred Millet sees William Vaughn Moody's contributions of 1906-1909 as important contemporary work; John Gassner begins his study of contemporary drama around 1914. Others including Barrett Clark, John Howard Lawson, Susan Glaspell, Professor Joseph Wood Krutch, and Anita Block generally agree upon 1918, the end of World War I, as the beginning of the contemporary era, seeing in all dramatic work prior to that time either no real relationship in spirit to that which followed the Armistice, or regarding it as transitional, having as much in common with the drama of the nineteenth century as with the work of the twentieth.

The author accepts the date 1918 as her starting point in the study of contemporary drama not only because of the strong arguments advanced by the critics who do so, but also because in a paper of this length it is a convenient boundary line. Since it is too soon after World War II to view with any correct perspective the work written after 1940, the author chooses to stop her considerations at that date.

BACKGROUND TO THE CONTEMPORARY ERA

Modern versus Contemporary

The World War precipitated the end of the modern world and the beginning of the contemporary world. The guiding star of the modern pre-war period had been faith in an orderly, peaceful progress as man's forward way of life. As a result, all the engrossing vital psychological and sociological questions presented in the plays by the modern playwrights were offered by them for consideration and solution to their own world, assumedly ruled by scientific knowledge, reason, and civilized human behaviour. To this the Great War comes as a destroying shock, and when the first four years had passed, the modern world was no more. In its place, astride the ruins, was a violently and completely changed world, changed not only politically and economically, nationally and internationally, but in all its basic concepts of life and behaviour---sexual, psychological social. This new post-war world, then, with its Communism, Fascism, Nazism, Aryanism, New Dealism, civil wars, 'imperial' conquests, and depressions, constitutes our own contemporary world. Incredible even to ourselves who are living in it, this period seems to bear no real relation to the modern period which preceded it.¹

The difference between modern and contemporary, then, is not so much a matter of time as of world events of great importance, and the effect that such events had on the thinking of the leading dramatists. To Miss Block's list (which was compiled in 1939 before World War II) could be added the fear and confusion resulting from the recent war. Essentially, however, the above paragraph may be allowed to describe

¹ Anita Block, The Changing World in Plays and Theatre (New York, Little Brown and Company, 1939), pages 15-16.

both periods.

To say that the "essential time" of the great moderns is divided from the "ossential time" of the great contemporaries is not to minimize the important contributions of the former. The great modern dramatists were pioneers who left succeeding playwrights a rich heritage, freeing the theatre for them of many taboos, and establishing for them a firm foundation of thought and conduct which even a world war could not destroy. It is not the purpose of this thesis to discuss the individual contributions of the great moderns--Ibson, Hauptmann, Strinberg, Shaw, and others--but to state the debt owed them by contemporary dramatists. That debt can perhaps be summed up in the recognition of what made them great, as a group. The outstanding modern dramatists were conscious artists of the theatre concerned first, last, and always with life as they knew it--the life of their own times. Their greatest plays contributed vitally to the development of thought and conduct in their own age. In the face of great hostility, in a society characterized by hypocrisy and ignorance, those courageous pioneers wrote plays deliberately composed to shock their audiences into an awareness of the realities of life.

Background of Contemporary Drama in the United States

By the end of World War I the ideas which had seemed so revolutionary to the modern theatre audiences had lost much of its "shockingness". A good deal of "talk" still lingered, but it required no particular daring to question either the social or moral code.

"New thought was no longer new", says Professor Joseph Wood Krutch, "...New ideas may have had a certain novelty in the theatre but they were new nowhere else...of the important dramatists to emerge between 1916-1930 few were intellectually at outs with a potential public to the extent that Ibsen and Shaw had been."¹

The influences of Ibsen and his followers stimulated wide dramatic activity on the part of some of the best minds on the Continent and in Great Britain. The establishment of the "free" and national theatres in Paris and Berlin was the natural outgrowth of the serious hearing the drama was receiving. In America, however, the drama of the pre-war period failed to reach not only the level of importance gained by European and English theatres, but also to keep abreast of the thought of its own contemporary work in fiction.

¹ Joseph W. Krutch, *The American Drama Since 1918* (N. Y. Random House, 1939), page 17.

There are several factors which partially explain this gap between drama and literature in the United States before World War I. One of the obstacles was the vastness of the country and the fact that its people were not culturally homogenous. Another important impediment to the development of important art drama was the unconditional control of the theatre by commercial producers, dedicated to the star system and the presentation of proven successful European plays.

In the years before our entry into the first World War, smugly indifferent to artistic and social forces threatening its own complacency, Broadway went on its merry way, attempting to live up to its appellation of the Great White Way and dispensing entertainment to an eager public...While the Great White Way had not as yet become the dramatic center of the world, it was at least supreme in the United States...Whatever performance was chosen, the Broadway seeker after amusement would know there was little chance of his being disturbed unduly by contemporary problems or driven to painful thought.....He would be very sure of beholding a star. If he brought along a maiden aunt or adolescent daughter, he would have little fear that lines or situations would bring a blush to their tender cheeks or sully their female innocence. It was on the whole, a pleasant world of escape and make-believe that was presented on the stage, a conventional and Freudless universe, not much more adult than the movies of a later age, and just about as sentimental. As romantic and escapist drama, the plays were not without merit; as manufactured products in the "show business", they brought fortunes to the successful producers and playwrights. Many different genres were popular, the only common denominator being their box-office appeal. Not the least successful type was the tearful comedy descendent of the sentimental play of the eighteenth century, naive, tender, poignant, with its perennial Cinderella themes. Peg O' My Heart and Pollyanna are excellent examples...Closely allied to the sentimental piece was the romantic love play...but, love and tears were not the only passport to Broadway fame. The neatly tailored farce-comedy, in which a clever idea was fully

exploited with the aid of expert staging and popular juvenile leads, was a perennial favorite (Montgomery's Nothing But the Truth, Clare Kummer's Good Gracious, Annabelle, Frank Craven's Too Many Cooks). Except for the plays of Shaw and other European importations, neither social comedy nor comedy of manners made much headway...Broadway managers preferred sentiment to satire, and they shied away from controversial questions. More popular fare included...a protean variety of melodrama...usually with some twist or new wrinkle to clamor for special attention. In an age when American tragedy was practically nonexistent, the real dramatic piece de resistance became the play with a punch, closely allied to melodrama but some what heavier.¹

"This state of affairs", says Professor Millet, "either stimulated native playwrights like Clyde Fitch to imitate foreign models, or failed to supply a 'serious' dramatist like Augustus Thomas with an adequately critical audience for his dramas of ideas."²

There is no lack of evidence to show that there were plays written in the United States after the middle of the nineteenth century that attempted to portray native American character types. The first play presented in New York of which there is actual record was George Farquhar's The Recruiting Officer. This is the earliest known play to have been acted in North America by professional players. It was produced in 1732. The Prince of Parthia by Thomas Godfrey

¹ Edmond M. Gagey, Revolution in American Drama (New York, The Columbia University Press, 1947), pages 4-5.

² Fred Millet, Contemporary American Authors (New York, Harcourt Brace and Co., 1944), page 98.

was the first play written by an American and acted professionally. The Contrast by Royall Tyler was the first play by an American author on an American subject to be produced on the American stage. In this play Jonathan was the first typical American character to be presented on the stage. The play was a comedy which presented the leading character as a Yankee. Soon after the success of Tyler's play there appeared numerous imitations, until a distinct type was predominant known as "Yankee plays". No real dramatic masterpieces, however, appeared in America during the nineteenth century. Edwin Forrest was the first to offer prize money for scripts by Americans, which, if accepted, he undertook to produce. This offer created a stimulus which accounts in large part for the growing dramatic efforts in the middle of the century. Among the new playwrights which Forrest produced were: John Stone's Metamora; Dr. Robert Bird's The Broker of Bogota; George Baker's Francesca da Rimini; and Mrs. Cora Mowatt's Fashion, produced in 1845 as the first successful social satire. Dion Boucicault and John Brougham were perhaps the foremost playwrights of the century before the appearance of Augustin Daly and Augustus Thomas. Both men were adapters, but both produced a large number of successful original plays. Boucicault's The Octoroon was particularly well received and continued to be a standard in stock after the turn of the twentieth century. Daly's Under the Gaslight was one of the most famous of all American melodramas. Then

came Steele Mackaye's Hazel Kirke and Augustus Thomas' greatest plays The Witching Hour, Arizona, As A Man Thinks, and The Copperhead. Thomas, whose produced work extends to 1918, wrote reliable melodrama for the commercial theatre, but was unable to bring to his attempted role of thesis-dramatist clear or distinguished thought. Only in The Copperhead did he produce anything memorial.

"There was little until the '90's to show that any writer tried seriously to reproduce the spirit of his country or set forth more than the superficial details of its external aspects", comments Barrett Clark.¹

The outstanding American dramatist for a period of twenty years beginning with 1890 was the prolific Clyde Fitch. He presented American audiences the adaptations of thirty-six foreign plays and composed twenty-one original plays. While his work lacked depth and seriousness, it was characterized by keen observations in manners, language, and costume.

Dr. Arthur Hobson Quinn has argued that William Dean Howells, whom he calls "a master playwright", exercised considerable influence on the American drama; was, in fact, the forerunner of the later realistic drama of the contemporary era. Barrett Clark says of Howells, "It is true that his plays offered a pleasant contrast to the over-written and

¹ Barrett Clark, *History of the Modern Drama* (New York, D. Appleton-Century Co., 1947), page 647.

bombastic works of their time....but the influence of Howells as a novelist and critic was without doubt far greater than his example as a practicing playwright."¹

Mr. Clark speaks also of James A. Hearn:

There seems no doubt that he (Hearn) was one of the influential forerunners of the native drama of modern times in the United States not only because he was an honest, conscientious, and effective actor of the unemphatic, realistic type, but because he strove in his later plays to create true native types...yet his work belongs to the conventional theatre of the '80's in which he was trained.²

David Belasco's influence on the American theatre lasted from 1870-1928. In that period he wrote, rewrote, adapted, or arranged so many of the "successful" American plays that it would seem that his influence as a playwright was of first importance. However, Mr. Millet evaluates the services of Belasco to the modern stage as

not commensurate with the high standards he set himself and other producers in realism of setting, costumes, and stage-business. Aside from his innumerable shrewdly selected successful foreign plays, his own contribution to the drama took the form of romantic plays in settings that offered lavish opportunities for the expression of his own somewhat baroque taste.³

Mr. Clark, commenting on Belasco's influence, states:

The value of the contribution of Belasco as manager and director to the development of the American theatre, and to the importance of the man as a revolutionary of sorts in lighting and

¹ Ibid., pages 648-649.

² Clark, Ibid., page 649.

³ Millet, op. cit., page 99.

staging, I do not question, but it is doubtful whether the plays for which he was directly or indirectly responsible affected to any great extent the work of contemporary or later playwrights.¹

Professor Krutch sums up this period of dramatic activity just described by saying:

Plays were commonly written either to exploit the talents of popular performers or as entertainments quite frankly upon a level below that of artistic pretension...whatever merits any of them (Fitch, Thomas, Hearn, Belasco) had, those merits are purely relative. All are praised for sincerity and realism but these qualities are remarkable only if their work is compared with that of other playwrights, not if compared with the fiction written at about the same time. It is not merely that they seem conventional, unreal, timed, and old-fashioned by the 'smart' standards of today; they seem almost equally conventional, unreal, timid, and old-fashioned if they are read with the best novels of the time in mind...a generation which was ready to read Tolstoi and Dostoevsky and Zola in translation, could find on the stage no contemporary work better than that of Robertson or Clyde Fitch. That it tolerated them at all is proof merely that it expected little, that the theater had almost been given up as a medium for serious expression...with only a few exceptions, the American playwright of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended to think of himself, not as an artist, but as an artisan practicing an absurdly specialized trade.²

This does not indicate that there was no sincere, earnest effort made to unite drama and literature again. The years from 1900-1918 which Mr. Clark calls "The Transition Period" saw sporadic attempts for a revival of a serious American drama. Mr. Clark says:

¹ Clark, op. cit., page 652.

² Joseph Wood Krutch, op. cit., pages 12-13.

The figure of William Vaughn Moody, who began his plays before 1900 and saw them produced during the first decade of the new century, may be allowed to symbolize the emergence of a new spirit in American drama...in The Great Divide and The Faith Healer are seen two signs of transition---mileposts on the road between the make-believe and largely artificial drama of the nineteenth century and the infinitely more genuine, grown-up American drama that flourished...between 1920 and the present day.¹

Mr. Millet also credits Moody's efforts at dramatic revival with importance. "Both these plays," (The Great Divide and The Faith Healer) he says, "are notable for their attention to characterization, the fidelity with which scene and business are imagined, and the creditable language that is spoken."²

In this effort at dramatic revival none was more active than Percy MacKaye. His entire body of work is colored by his conscious determination to raise the standards of the American theatre. Mr. Clark describes MacKaye's long and varied campaign as an attempt "to arouse his fellowmen to a sense of their destiny as a modern nation, capable of using their history and folk-lore and the very processes of their democratic activities in dramatic form, to achieve what he called Community Drama."³

Any attempt to determine the extent of MacKaye's influence on the public, the playwright, the manager,

¹ Barrett Clark, op. cit., page 654.

² Millet, op. cit., page 99.

³ Clark, op. cit., page 660.

er the actor of the past forty years must fail unless it is constantly borne in mind that the post-playwright spread his gospel from a thousand pulpits, that the sum total of the influence exerted by him is important not because he wrote a few more or less 'successful' plays for the professional stage, or brought together hundreds of thousands of people as participants in his masques... or that he was to some extent responsible for the teaching of modern drama in our colleges and universities. The simple fact of his presence among us during what I call the formative period of our national dramatic development; the fact that he was not ashamed to compete on Broadway with the despised commercial managers without trying to achieve popular success, and at the same time to cry aloud for beauty and inspiration; that on the contrary he followed a consistent policy of following his star in a day when to do so in the theatre marked him as a despised highbrow---this, I claim, is MacKaye's most valuable contribution.¹

Edward Sheldon well represents the group of playwrights whose major work appears both before and after 1918. His work shows the characteristics of the uncertainty of the drama as it shuttled back and forth between the demands of the commercial theatre and the literary revival spearheaded by MacKaye and Moody. Sheldon was the first member of Professor George Pierce Baker's playwriting class to call attention to the now famous English 47 Workshop. Barrett Clark says

The precise effect of Baker's courses...on the men and women who studied under him cannot be accurately measured, but the fact that Baker, a scholar and an instructor at Harvard, and later at Yale, should look upon the theatre as a contemporary phenomenon deserving of consideration, was a

¹ Clark, op. cit., page 660

proclamation that the American theatre was beginning to grow up.¹

George Pierce Baker is the best known of all men of the academic theatre, and the man who has done most to give the drama its present extraordinary place in the universities....Though Baker's graduates turned in the main toward Broadway, his work did a great deal to stimulate and hearten the pioneers in the little theaters, and by the time the war had completed the breakdown of the touring system, the other universities were rushing forward to contribute directors, actors, and designers to the community theaters.²

While Baker concentrated in the main on graduate work, Thomas Wood Stevens at Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh provided a four-year undergraduate course, limited to seventy-five students each year who produced ten major productions and six studio productions each season together with 128 performances for an invited audience that crowded the 400-seat theatre.

To this pioneer work in the universities were soon added so many well-coordinated courses in acting, production, design, and playwriting in colleges spread across the country that it is possible to mention but a few---such as excellent work done at North Carolina, Cornell, Iowa, Stanford, North Dakota, Kansas, Wisconsin, and Northwestern University.

A discussion of the theatrical history which preceded the contemporary era would be incomplete without some mention

¹ Clark, ibid., page 671.

² Kenneth Macgowan, *Footlights Across America* (N. Y., Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929), page 113.

of the art or "Little Theatre" movement in America. Mention already has been made to the free theatres of Europe and England, and it has been noted that such a movement was slower in developing in the United States. In the first decade of the twentieth century stock companies toured "The Road" to carry the American drama from New York into the hinterland. Every good sized city had its playhouse and many small towns boasted an Opera House where stock companies played regularly throughout the year. However, the increased costs of railroad travel and the competition of the movies after 1910 began to make the Road less profitable. An attempt to economize affected the quality of production and acting to such an extent that business soon went from bad to worse. With the decline of the touring stock company throughout America there came an increased growth of the theatre in New York. Between 1900-1914 the number of plays produced in New York per year rose from 72 to 130, while in the same period, the average number of plays on tour fell from 308 to 198. From 1914-1927, the number of plays produced in New York rose from 139 to 208, while those on tour fell from 198 to 68. These figures indicate the tremendous change in the growth pattern of the commercial theatre with the resulting concentration of theatrical activity in New York City.¹

¹ Kenneth Macgowan, ibid., page 41.

Professor Millet says of this phenomena,

The sad state of the American provincial theatre and the inspiring example of the European "free" theatres encouraged the initiation of the art theatre movement in America...Whatever form this non-commercial theatre took, and its forms were various, the impulses behind it were the production of plays of distinction in competition with the commercial theatre and the furnishing of drama to the increasingly extensive area outside the major cities, which the commercial theatres had ceased to serve.¹

There can be no doubt that the collapse of the touring system opened the door to the forming of local theatres. An American provincial audience whose desire for spoken drama created a demand for summer Chautauqua and winter lyceum circuits and made profitable the ventures of over a hundred and fifty traveling tent companies would not be content long to have that appetite unsatisfied. The first impulse to re-create what had been lost through the breakdown of the touring system came in the form of amateur acting clubs. Later the community theatre and the Little Theatre idea mushroomed to cover the continent.

It is this desire to create and to exhibit in the special, poignant, magical, and prominent way of the theater which has thrust the housewife, the business man, the doctor, the lawyer, the college girl on to the stage. It has done this through many generations, but until the last fifteen years (That is, after World War I), the only outlet--short of becoming a professional actor--was through the amateur dramatic club. Then a few men and women in Europe and America showed the possibility of applying amateur talent to a betterment of the serious

¹ Millet, op. cit., page 102.

theatre. Under unusual conditions and with unusual talent the result might be a struggling, gasping, yet living little theater. In America before the war, we saw many births, many deaths, and a very few survivals. Then with the end of hostilities a new factor entered the situation. This was the breakdown of the touring system. This was the break. Hundreds of communities no longer could see plays at any price except a railroad journey. The way was opened for the community theater....which seized the opening and drove through to a success as surprising to its organizers as to the onlookers who came to scoff and remained to play.¹

Two early important ventures in the field of the art theatre are the Theatre Guild, an outgrowth of the earlier Washington Square Players (started in 1915 and discontinued after World War I), and the Provincetown Players of Cape Cod, later the Provincetown Theatre of New York. It was the Provincetown group, led by George Cram Cook, and later under various leaderships, who gave Eugene O'Neill his first opportunity to see his work staged. An allied venture, the Neighborhood Playhouse in Grand Street, continued to be effective until 1927.

"If the Provincetown Players gave O'Neill his opportunity, it is equally true that he gave them theirs," says Kenneth Macgowan, one of the early members of the group.

"He was one of the embryonic playwrights who started the venture, and it was his plays--most of them turned out to fill weak bills--that made the fame and fortune of the Province-

¹ Macgowan, op. cit., page 82.

town....There can be no question that O'Neill has been the 'one outstanding contribution of the Playors, but they have found their justification, outside of O'Neill, in the creative spirit which their playhouse breathed on all who came within it."¹

When the Washington Square Players reorganized after the war as the Theatre Guild, its members built up the only art theatre which has ever successfully competed with the commercial stage. The Guild is still an important institution, although many critics claim it to be less "art" than "business". Nevertheless the Theatre Guild has probably done more than any other organization to raise the standard of plays produced in the United States. Without the Guild's backing many promising native playwrights would have been denied a hearing. Its generous support has been acknowledged by O'Neill, Maxwell Anderson, Sidney Howard, S. N. Behrman, and other lesser playwrights of ability. Professor Millet says:

Probably the Theatre Guild has rendered its greatest service as an example of what intelligence combined with shrewd commercial sense can achieve; it has also served as a symbol of what the community theatre might aspire to become. The services of the Guild to the art of acting in America are overwhelming. One need only to mention such names as Alfred Lunt, Lynn Fontanne, Helen Westly, Earle Larimore, Eva La Gallienne, Paulino Lord, and Judith Anderson to make it clear that the roster of its players is the roll of the most distinguished actors of the period."²

¹ Macgowan, ibid., pages 213-214.

² Millet, op. cit., page 103.

Outside New York the Little Theatre movement took a variety of forms. Many of them were transitory ventures, some degenerated from their original high ideals, but the rest aspired to and achieved the status of community or civic theatres of a stable character. Important Little Theatres include the Cleveland Playhouse, the Pasadena Community Playhouse, the Dallas Little Theatre, the Berkeley Playhouse, and the Petit Theatre du Vieux Carre at New Orleans. The role played by the colleges and universities in this field has already been noted.

The background preceding the contemporary era beginning in 1918 can be divided conveniently, then, into three main periods: the first, which might well include most of the nineteenth century was marked by drama of a low level, controlled by commercial producers, separated from its contemporary literature by a wide gap; the second, which extended from 1900 to 1914, was characterized by an appreciation of the new European drama and the hope by a few of the emergence of a similarly genuine American drama; and the third, from 1914 to the end of the war in 1918, which shows the native drama motivated by a number of scattered forces which include various artistic "movements", experimental theatres, and conscious and directed activity on the part of a few playwrights.

THE CONTEMPORARY ERA

The catastrophe of a World War and its aftermath jolted America into a somewhat grim realization of a world which it had previously been able to ignore. What was this post-war America like? The years between 1918-1940 can be divided conveniently into three periods: The Period of Reconstruction (1918-1929); The Period of the Depression (1929-1936); and The Period of Financial Recovery (1936-).

During the time of the actual conflict, and for a few years afterward, there was a great surge of patriotism and nationalism, which among other things created a strong anti-racial feeling which allowed such disreputable organizations as the Ku Klux Klan to flourish. The end of the war also saw the passing of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Amendments to the Constitution, giving us both Women's Suffrage and National Prohibition.

Economically America was overexpanding. Except for the brief recession in 1921, the end of the war marked the beginning of a financial boom unsurpassed in the country's previous history. Land values soared, spending increased at nearly every level, and fortunes on paper were made seemingly overnight. Science produced new labor-saving devices for both factory and home which resulted in new freedom and more leisure for everyone. This was the fabulous time when anything seemed possible. Every family boasted a car or aspired to one in the

very near future. Radio was here, and the motion picture industry reigned as king in the entertainment field. Prohibition spawned a wave of gangsterism. The speak-easy and the pocket-flask were commonplace realities. The spirit of recklessness which the war years had created was joined by plenty of money to pursue its pleasant road, and America's "Jazz Age" was born.

There were some who viewed with alarm the unparalleled spending and speculation. The flapper and her escort, the play-boy, were held up as horrible examples of the post-war's "lost generation". The finger of scandal was pointed at the unhealthy alliance between politics and high finance. Yet the merry-go-round continued in full swing until the famous stock market crash in 1929. The paper fortunes disappeared as magically as they had been born; thousands found themselves without work; others worried through the days wondering how to meet the mortgage or keep up the installments on the car. The party was over--the Depression was a reality. The buoyant spirit of America seemed to undergo a sort of creeping paralysis. Fear and uncertainty replaced the aggressiveness which had been such a marked characteristic of the nation as a whole. The nation bowed hopeless and afraid under the tremendous burden of national relief. The psychological depths were reached when the banks closed in March, 1933.

The slow hard pull out of the financial crisis began in

Franklin D. Roosevelt's first administration. Recovery was not, however, wholly due to one man and his Brain Trust, but rather to a combination of forces, both national and international, of which The New Deal was but one. Tremendous credit nevertheless must be given to President Roosevelt for the great psychological effect which his spirit had on the country. His great personal charm, his unfailing courage, his sincere passion for social justice, and his dynamic will to attack the problem did more to help restore the shaken morale of the people than any one of the many projects which the New Deal devised.

Besides the economic stress which marked the Depression era certain other points must be noted. Roosevelt's first administration saw the repeal of national prohibition; the rise of numerous "messiahs" such as Father Coughlin, Townsend, and Huey Long; the rapid rise of various forms of gambling from horse-racing and drug-store slot-machines to "Bank Night" at the movies and Bingo sponsored by the Ladies Aid; the growth of literary as well as political radicalism which reached out into the great middle and working classes, creating a cleavage of the peoples into conservative and liberal, rather than into Republican and Democrat.

Socially the period from 1918-1936 saw vital changes in the domestic habits of the people. This change was largely due to the rapid absorption of labor-saving devices, the pressure of high-powered salesmanship, the unprecedented rural-

urban movement, the development of the great radio chains, the growing attraction of the cheap movies, and the great mobility afforded by the millions of automobiles.

Culturally there was a definite rise but also a leveling of taste. New fields of interest were opened to the masses, but the scope of these fields was controlled by a standardization of fare and pressures of literary publicity and salesmanship which set a sort of pseudo-social example and prestige.

In the field of drama this period was characterized by an early marked decline in the commercial theatre and a corresponding growth in the importance of the art theatre. Commercial producers faced not only the rivalry of the motion picture theatre and the radio, but higher rents coupled with higher salaries for casts and technicians. For a year or two following the war it seemed almost as if the commercial theatre would be unable to weather such a combination of blows. It is to the credit of that institution, however, that it was able to dig in, take stock of its troubles, and set itself to right them. The most important lesson it learned was from the art theatre which had accepted much of the mature European dramatic thought. Soon playwrights who were writing for such influential organizations as the Provincetown Players and the Theatre Guild were given a chance to try their plays on Broadway. As a result the twenty years between 1920-1940 saw both brilliant growth of dramatic material and the economic stabil-

ization of the commercial theatre. In the United States these years stand as the drama's "Golden Age".

It is this period, then, with which the author is concerned. From the work produced during this time of great dramatic activity and importance one outstanding characteristic must be noted before discussing the various other trends to be observed from the study of the drama of the period. The galaxy of playwrights which produced in this era had at least this one trait in common--Realism. Each was concerned with presenting life as it is, or as it seemed to be to the individual artist. That this realism expresses itself in many ways is evident--some are primarily concerned with the inner conflicts which harass the individual in the new post-war world. Others are completely absorbed in the great social and economic conflicts of the new age. But whatever form it followed, each important dramatist sought to interpret the facts realistically, to integrate the material with the time in which it was written. In this the contemporary drama follows courageously the example set by the great modern pioneers.

To realism as the major characteristic of contemporary drama must be added (1) the emphasis on revolt, for this quality is absent from the work of few playwrights of first importance; (2) the priority of ideas over action; (3) the persistent concern with sex and other social problems; and (4) the revival of the comedy of manners and, especially since 1938, the rediscov-

ery of America as a dramatic subject.

It is important to remember that contemporary American drama was formed by three great revolutionary drives----the revolution in manners and morals that broke down the restraints and inhibitions of the nineteenth century, the artistic revolution that invested a pedestrian theatre with color, poetry, and beauty, and the leftest revolution of the thirties that brought missionary fervor and social consciousness in a crusade against war, poverty, and injustice.¹

The spirit of change which had been mildly simmering before the war, now burst into revolution. Increasing freedom of speech and manners brought attacks on Puritanism, Main Street and Babbitry. The eager search for the new brought also a significant change in stagecraft and acting technique fostered by the work of Gordon Craig, Max Reinhardt, Granville Barker, Stanisloski, and others abroad. The theatre was to be shorn of its rococo decorations in favor of functional simplicity, and the revolving stage, Fortuny lighting system, and the cyclorama were considered the standard equipment of playhouses which saw fit to stage the new drama. Gone too was the overplaying, oratorical style of acting, for the realism in dramatic matter and setting was unfit for anything less than the proven successful style developed by Staniskoski and exhibited by the Moscow Art Theatre.

A crop of eager young actors and actresses emerged who proclaimed scorn of the star system and emphasized the ideals

¹ Gagey, op. cit., page 282.

of ensemble acting and stressing naturalness on the stage.

These included the Barrymores, Pauline Lord, Katharine

Cornoll, The Lunts, and a score of others.

Only one important element was lacking---the native playwright. When Eugene O'Neill emerged from Provincetown and rose to splendor on professional Broadway with Beyond the Horizon in 1920, the reformers had good cause to believe that The Great American Playwright had at last arrived. To their delight he was joined before long by Maxwell Anderson, Sidney Howard, Robert Sherwood, and a dozen others.¹

Eugene O'Neill and the New Psychological Drama

Of all man's conflicts none has more persistently appealed to the playwright as essentially dramatic than his struggle with himself. Even primitive man, free from the neurotic conflicts engendered by civilization, manifested inner disturbance, and resorted to exorcism as the means of freeing the individual from an evil spirit that was destroying him....From his earliest days the individual has been beset by forces battling within himself, and that inner harmony is a consummation which he must fight to attain....In each one of us there exist diametrically opposed qualities constantly warring with each other, causing difficulties in our behavior, in our relations with other human beings and in reaching decisions that may change our lives. There may be a respite for the individual in his conflict with the external world, but respite in the conflict with himself there is none.²

It is not then surprising that two of the world's greatest dramas, Shakespeare's Hamlet and Goethe's Faust, both deal with

¹ Gagey, op. cit., page 38.

² Anita Block, op. cit., page 133.

that struggle between man's "higher" and "lower" self. Coupled with this age old dramatic device of picturing man's basic inner struggle and the interest and knowledge of psychology which followed the interpretations of Freud, it is not surprising to find many of the contemporary playwrights concerned with this problem. In the plays of Eugene O'Neill one finds the most significant contemporary dramatic interpretations of this inner conflict. Because of the unique place which O'Neill holds in American drama, the author wishes to touch on his entire career rather than stopping at her generally prescribed limit of 1940.

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill. The one playwright of national and international importance in contemporary American drama is Eugene O'Neill. Some critics go so far as to say that he is the only important dramatist to emerge in America. Since the production in 1920 of his first full-length play, Beyond the Horizon, O'Neill's position as our foremost playwright has not been seriously challenged. He is a winner of the coveted Nobel prize; he has three times been awarded the Pulitzer prize; and his fame has spread abroad to include appreciative audiences in France, Germany, England, Russia, Czechoslovakia, China, Japan, and the Scandinavian countries.

O'Neill is not only America's leading dramatist, but one of her most prolific playwrights. Besides his numerous early one-act plays there are better than two dozen full-length plays of importance to his credit. Once launched into his career of

writing for the theatre he has devoted himself to this single purpose. His progress has, however, been peculiarly uneven. In the long list of his plays there are several notable failures besides the ones O'Neill himself has destroyed as unworthy.

A writer of tragedy, his themes have been extraordinarily varied with many experiments with forms and theatrical technics. O'Neill's range is so wide that his work cannot be specially classified in any of the conventional critical categories. He sometimes writes in the vein of pure realism or pure romance, but his best and most characteristic work is that in which both elements are skillfully blended.

In Eugene O'Neill, the elements of weakness and strength are curiously interwoven. His most striking weaknesses are a lack of self-criticism that does not warn him of the extravagances of either realism or romanticism, an absence of clarity in the line of his own philosophical development, and an almost too high scorn for the limitations of the drama as a form and of the theater as a medium. His very great powers are certainly his style, which is in turn rich and earthy, intuitive and illuminating, his deep probing into the motivation of dynamic character, his power in working psychic conflicts, and the glamour with which his reading and projection of life are invested.¹

O'Neill was born October 16, 1888 in New York. His father was James O'Neill, a popular and gifted actor whose name became an American byword as he toured the country from coast to coast in the leading role of Count of Monte Cristo. Both Eugene's

¹ Millet, op. cit., page 105.

father and mother, the former Ella Quinlan, were devout Catholics. When the boy was not on tour with his parents, he attended Catholic boarding schools. In 1906 he went to Princeton University but was suspended before the close of the year's term for "general hell-raising". He then worked for a mail-order jewelry firm for a short time. Late in 1909 he went on a gold prospecting tour to Honduras. When he returned a year later he joined his father's company as assistant manager and toured with it for three months. At the end of the season he made his first sea voyage, going to Buenos Aires on a Norwegian steamer. Here he worked for Westinghouse, Swift, and the Singer Sewing Machine Company.

"I landed in Buenos Aires", he says, "a gentleman so-called, and wound up a bum on the docks in fact".¹

His friends were sailors, stevedores, and down-and-outers found around the wharves. He drank heavily and worked only when he had to. Eventually he shipped to sea again, this time on a mule boat to Africa and back. In 1911 he returned to New York where he continued his bumming life at a water-front dive called "Jimmy the Priest's". One day upon regaining consciousness after a wild party he found himself on a train bound for New Orleans. Here he fortunately found

¹ Barrett Clark, Eugene O'Neill, the Man and his Plays (New York, Robert M. McBride Co., 1933), page 19.

his father's troupe. Eugene's name was added to the cast. He continued to play a minor role for the remainder of the tour.

In August, O'Neill became a cub reported on the New London Telegraph. His boss, Frederick P. Latimer, was one of the first to divine any talent in the young man who was generally considered not only a problem to his family but a genuine wastrel and failure.

In December of 1912 O'Neill's health broke down, his illness diagnosed as tuberculosis. He entered Gaylord Farm, a sanatorium at Wallingford, Connecticut. During that winter and spring he took stock of himself and his life to date. It was here the urge to write plays came to him. In the next year or so he wrote eleven one-act plays and two full-length ones.

When he began work as a dramatist he was a young man with an insatiable zest for living. He had come to grips with existence, and the moment he reached the saturation point and taken in all he could assimilate, he had to express it....his equipment was a clear mind, an innate sense of the theater, a sensitive and powerful imagination, and a fund of human experience----of a kind.¹

By the time he began his career as a dramatist he knew a great deal about show business and was a voracious reader of plays.

He says, "I read about everything I could lay my hands on;

¹ Clark, ibid., page 34.

the Greeks, the Elizabethans---practically all the classics---and of course all the moderns. Ibsen and Strindberg, especially Strindberg."¹

O'Neill is not a man who thinks incisively in abstract terms and, for all his introversion, not a man whose self-analysis are of a sort very clearly communicable. It seems plain, however, that the history of his development is the history of a persistent, sometimes fumbling attempt to objectify his emotions. Radical sociological theorizing, Freudian psychology, and Roman Catholicism have successively concerned him.²

Feeling the need for certain technical advice in play-writing, in the fall of 1914 O'Neill enrolled in Professor Baker's "47 Workshop" course at Harvard. He wrote two plays there, but although he respected Professor Baker's ability and judgment, much that was necessarily taught to beginners was old stuff to O'Neill.

After a winter spent in and around Greenwich Village, New York, O'Neill went to Provincetown to live with Terry Corlin. Mr. Krutch states, "Certainly the accident of his meeting with an enthusiastic group of amateurs at Provincetown was of crucial importance."³

O'Neill, himself, says, "I owe a tremendous lot to the Players, they encouraged me to write and produced all my early

¹ Clark, ibid., page 35.

² Krutch, op. cit., page 79.

³ Krutch, ibid., page 82.

and many of my later plays. But I can't honestly say I would not have gone on writing plays if it hadn't been for them. I had already gone too far to quit."¹

In George Cram Cook's Greek Coins, Miss Edna Kenton in the introduction gives her opinion of the Provincetown Players' influence on O'Neill and his work: ".....had he not had our Playwright's Theater and our experimental stage to use always as he wished to use them, he would have reached Broadway by quite another road and with quite other plays--No other American playwright has ever had such prolonged freedom with stage and audience alike."²

Among the plays O'Neill brought to Provincetown were five that had already been published in book form called Thirst and Other One-Act Plays by Eugene O'Neill. The first O'Neill play to be produced was Bound East for Cardiff done at the Wharf Theater in Provincetown. Before the end of 1918 he had written a number of one-act plays, the ones dealing with the sea being marked by compactness, clarity, and poetic imagination.

In 1920 Beyond the Horizon was produced in New York and won the Pulitzer Prize for that year. It is the realistically ironic story of two brothers whom fate so traps that the one who wanted to go to sea stays at home, while the one who wanted to stay at home is destined to roam to faraway places. Robert,

¹ Krutch, ibid., page 82.

² Clark, op. cit., pages 43-44.

the stay-at home, is the central character, and it is the physical and moral degeneration of this man whose dreams lie "beyond the horizon" that gives the play its strength.

Later in the same year the Players produced The Emperor Jones and Diff'rent. To many The Emperor Jones remains O'Neill's masterpiece. Against a background of constantly beating ton-toms we see a former Pullman portor who rose to be emperor of a small island in the West Indies fleeing from his rebellious subjects. We feel the irrational terror of the black man, effectively played by Charles Gilpin (whom O'Neill once said was the only actor who ever reenacted exactly what he had in mind). The Emperor Jones is really almost a dramatic monologue made up of a few simple elements--a hunted man whose increasing terror forces a series of sharply defined flash-back memories to be created against the monotonous drumbeats. These pictures unfold the whole tragic epic of the American Negro. It's success was overwhelming.

Anna Christie, produced in New York in 1921, was written from an idea in an earlier play Chris Christopherson. With The Emperor Jones it definitely established O'Neill as a producing playwright whose work merited attention. It is the story of the regeneration of a prostitute under the influence of the sea and the man of the sea whom she came to love. It is also the story of her father, old Chris, who had followed the sea all his life and who had come to distrust and hate it. Here, too, one sees the first picture of "Jimmy the Priest's"

which was to be used again and again in O'Neill's work.

O'Neill's later work shows definite influences of the German expressionism school and of the Swedish dramatist, Strindberg. He says he became less interested in man's relationship to man and sought to reveal and interpretate man's relationship to God. Beginning with the expressionistic The Hairy Ape there is a dominant reoccurring theme in O'Neill's work----the obsession of his characters to "belong" to something outside themselves, stronger than themselves. Again and again he drives home his point that men are moved by forces whose influence reason cannot justify. There is often a suggestion of Hardy's conception of a Capricious Destiny or of D. H. Lawrence's search for the "Dark Gods". O'Neill once wrote to George Jean Nathan,

The playwright of today must dig at the roots of the sickness of today as he feels it---the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfactory new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with.¹

Technical innovations abound in O'Neill's mature work. In The Great God Brown and the professionally unproduced Lazarus Laughed he makes use of elaborate masks to distinguish the real self from the assumed self. In Strange Interlude he revived and developed the aside. Several of the later plays are extended to nine or more acts. In an interview with

¹ Krutch, op. cit., page 89.

S. G. Woolf, O'Neill justifies this later innovation in answer to the question: How long should a play be?

"As long as necessary to tell the story. No play is too long that holds the interest of its audience. If a short play is tiresome it is too long, and if a long play is absorbing until the fall of the last curtain no one will pull out his watch to look at the time."¹

With the production of All God's Chillun Got Wings, O'Neill ran into censor trouble. In this play the author deals with a sensitive, intelligent Negro man who marries a white girl. The opening scenes show the casual and unself-conscious friendship that occurs between children regardless of the color of their skins. Although Jim, the ambitious Negro marries his white Ella they are unable to sustain their earlier happiness in a world created by generations of attitudes and problems created by both blacks and whites. All God's Chillun, however, is essentially a drama of love and passion, not a sociological problem as developed by the playwright. That O'Neill was able to treat such intermarriage dispassionately did not mean that the public in general could.

Desire Under the Elms also had censor trouble, although the play was finally given a clean bill of health everywhere the authorities questioned it. Written in 1924, Desire, marked

¹ New York Times Magazine, September 15, 1946.

the highest point yet achieved by O'Neill in the creation of tragic drama. Against the background of Puritan New England in the middle of the nineteenth century one sees the manners and morals of a definite time and locality, but most of all one sees revealed the eternal tragic struggle of man with his passions. In a three-way struggle for power O'Neill shows us Ephraim Cabot who believes that "God is hard", and who has himself worn out two wives before marrying Abbie Putnam, who wants a home of her own; and Eben, the son by the second marriage, who fights to escape the domination of his father and to retain his rights of inheritance. Eben and Abbie fall in love after the step-mother has seduced the young man in order to give Ephraim the son he desires. When the father gloats over Eben with the loss of his inheritance to Abbie's son, the younger man feels that he has "been used". To prove her love Abbie kills the child. Eben confesses to being a partner to the crime. As the sheriff is leading the two away, they exult in their love untarnished by regrets.

The success of Desire Under the Elms was in part a success of scandal. Many saw it either to giggle at the scene in which Eben is seduced or to raise righteous hands in indignation that such obscenity should be permitted. Still others, fashionably intellectual, took it as an attack upon puritanism, a bold muckraking expose of what really went on in the prim houses of our revered forebears. But what the prudish and the advanced, as well as the merely ribald, failed to perceive is the fact that the themes of Desire are the themes of the oldest and the most eternally interesting tragic legends here freshly embodied in a tale native to the American soil. The intense, almost religious possessiveness felt by Ephraim and Eben and Abbie for the soil of New England....the

struggle of the son against the father, the son's resentment of the intruding woman, canonical incest itself, are part of the story whose interest is deeper than any local creed or any temporary society. It is one of the great achievements of the play that it makes us feel them not merely as violent events but as mysteriously fundamental in the human story and hence raises the actors in them somehow above the level of mere characters in a single play, giving them something which suggests the kind of undefined meaning which we feel in an Oedipus or a Hamlet.¹

Strange Interlude was produced by the Theater Guild in 1928. That it was a sensation is to understate. In the first place the play ran for nine long acts, beginning at 5:30 in the afternoon and running until eleven o'clock at night with the audience trooping out for supper during an eighty minute intermission. In addition to that O'Neill had made use of elaborate asides and monologues to reveal the inner thoughts of his characters. The story of Strange Interlude carries four characters through their chief spiritual crises for about twenty-five years. Nina Leeds is O'Neill's conception of Woman---wife, mistress, mother. Around her life are woven the lives of five men---her puritanical father; Gordon, her early dead love; Charles Marsden, conditioned by his mother into a kind of human capon capable of thinking of love only as Platonic and Ideal; Sam, her boyish husband; her lover Edmund; and their son, Gordon. The selfish, insatiable, but wholly vital Nina dominates the play. Besides exhibiting a remarkable series of events covering most of the adult life of his

¹ Krutch, op. cit., page 9697.

characters, O'Neill, in Strange Interlude takes us inside these characters to show us what they think--what they essentially are. Here we have the ultimate in effort to portray the inner struggle of the individual. If there is a little too much of it for this author's taste, or if, like Studs Lonigan, the main character seems hardly worth the effort, critics and audiences alike hailed it as the drama of the century.

Mourning Becomes Electra is another of O'Neill's plays that has required superlatives to describe it. It is considered a modern world classic. Barrett Clark says of it, "It is a grandiose work---the most ambitious ever attempted by an American playwright---it is a tearless tragedy, remote, detached, august, artfully shaped, cunningly devised, skillfully related and magnificently conceived."¹ Mr. Millet claims that it is O'Neill's "most powerful reading of life and its meaning."² Mourning Becomes Electra is a trilogy based upon the Greek Orestes-Electra saga, with the scenes laid in Civil War New England. Here, however, no mortal has offended the Gods, a Puritan has transgressed the moral code of his time, and the son of his victim turns upon the family for his revenge. In a pre-Freudian world, the inner struggles

¹ Clark, op. cit., page 195.

² Millet, op. cit., page 106.

of these characters would not, perhaps been written. let alone understood by an audience. The Mannons are a complicated lot---internally. The mother loves her son, the daughter loves her father, and the brother loves his sister---incestuallly. The only peace that can be found for any of them is death---or the death-in-life that Lavinia, the daughter, chose.

After a silence of twelve years O'Neill's play The Iceman Cometh was produced on Broadway, October 9, 1946. Directed by Eddie Dowling with one of the most expensive casts in theatrical history, it enjoyed a long run, but produced violently opposed critical opinions. John Mason Brown, reviewing it in The Saturday Review of Literature says, "The Iceman runs for hours and isn't worth it!..... it is not only the kind of play that Mr. O'Neill alone could have written, but it is also the kind of play which only he could have got produced."¹

W. E. Balon in Weekly Book Review wrote "It is O'Neill remembering Hope's saloon and its denizens back in 1912, with a pitying respect for their last illusions before The Iceman (Death) came."²

George Jean Nathan in American Mercury said, "It is one of the most impressive plays ever written by an American

¹ The Saturday Review of Literature, October 19, 1946.

² Weekly Book Review, October 20, 1946.

dramatist....It demonstrates again the deepest appreciation of character known to any of his American playwriting contemporaries."¹

The appearance of an O'Neill play after twelve years also sounded the signal for scores of articles on O'Neill the Man, and critical revaluation of his entire dramatic output. Kyle Crichton writing for Collier's reports, "At fifty-eight, O'Neill is a thin, gray man with a wispy moustache, a palsied hand, and a sense of humor that will make a monkey out of you if you don't keep your guard up." Crichton found O'Neill interested in baseball and jazz as well as serious drama and concludes that "O'Neill may be an American legend, but he is not a myth."²

S. J. Woolf, an artist, says, "What one remembers best is his mournful eyes that look oddly like those of Poe. Like Poe, too, he looks as if he were surrounded by an aura of mysterious sorrow."³

He is still among us, and it is hard to judge him dispassionately. As he pursues his way, he begins to take on the proportions of a prodigy, no longer a playwright humbly observing his fellow-men and tying them up in knots for the delight of theatergoers. He has cast his glance high above the heads of men and women in a heroic if perhaps futile effort to encompass life in its outlines rather than in its episodes. He has become a passion incarnate, struggling to discover the best medium for the expression of his

¹ American Mercury, October, 1946.

² Collier's Magazine, October 12, 1946.

³ New York Times Magazine, September 15, 1946.

torments and exaltations. His achievements have never measured up to his aims, but then whose have? He has written a good deal that is just as well forgotten, he has given us plays that are inept, violent and verging on the pretentious; he has unmistakably set up his standards as a prophet; he has too often striven to write jewelled passages instead of stinging dialogue; he is, in short, a maker of plays that are good, bad, and indifferent. But so far he has never written a line that was deliberately insincere, nor has he once tried to capture the prizes of material success...But even if Eugene O'Neill were never to write another line, it must be recorded that he occasionally walked the heights.¹

Thus speaks Barrett Clark. Mr. John Howard Lawson also has a word to contribute about his fellow dramatist:

Eugene O'Neill's career is of special significance, both because of the abundant vigor and poetic richness of his earlier dramas, and because of the confusion which devitalizes his later work. In a sense, O'Neill's case is not typical, because his preoccupation with the subconscious and with the destiny of the soul seems to be of a special kind and intensity. But this also accounts for the special importance of his work: he reveals the ideas which affect the modern theatre in their most intense form... O'Neill's philosophy reflects the period which followed the world war. This has caused him to ignore, to a remarkable extent, the role of conscious will in dramatic conflict...His interest in character is metaphysical rather than psychological. He attempts a complete escape from reality; he tries to sever contact with the world by setting up an inner kingdom which is emotionally and spiritually independent...O'Neill's philosophy is a repetition of past ideas. In this, he follows the line suggested by Freud, the line of regression, a flight to the past...the conception of emotion as the ultimate force is repeatedly stressed... The deepest emotional drive in his plays is always based on the father-daughter, mother-son relationship... their passion is necessarily evil, because it is incestuous; yet it is unavoidable because it is the condition upon which they are born...The behaviour of

¹ Clark, *ibid.*, pages 199-200.

O'Neill's characters is irresponsible, because they have no conscious will; even emotion is negative, working in man's own heart to accomplish his destruction. O'Neill, and many of his contemporaries, conceive of fate in a manner which has no parallel in any previous period of world literature or drama. In all previous epochs, man has been depicted exerting his will against objective forces. The modern fate is both inside man and outside him; it paralyzes his mind; his conscious will and his emotions are his worst enemies.¹

George Jean Nathan, a former business associate and long-time friend of O'Neill wrote:

His eminence is predicated on the fact that no other has anywhere nearly his ability to delve into and appraise character, his depth of knowledge of his fellowmen, his sweep and pulse and high resolve, his command of a theater stage, and his mastery of the intricacies of dramaturgy. His plays at their best have in them a real universality---his characters are active symbols of mankind in general, with mankind's virtues and faults, gropings and findings, momentary triumphs and doomed defeats. His weakness lies in his excesses---the excesses of over-emphasis, over-embroidery, and over-melodramatization of the psychological aspects of his drama itself. He has written muddled and poor plays along with the valid, but the great body of his work has a size and significance not remotely approached by any other American. In a broader sense, he is plainly not the mind that Shaw is, not by a thousand leagues--his is an emotional rather than an intellectual; he is not the poet that O'Casey is, for in O'Casey there is the true music of great wonder and beauty. But he has plumbed depths deeper than either; he is greatly the superior of both in dramaturgy; and he remains his nation's one important contribution to the art of the drama.²

¹ John H. Lawson, op. cit., pages 129-130.

² The American Mercury, December, 1946.

The Drama of Social Criticism

The social dramatist is vitally concerned with the forces at work in life; his material is, in the main, derived directly from his milieu; war, strikes, evictions, sit-downs, oppression and persecution of individuals, and their strivings and hopes, their dreams of a better world and their efforts to attain it. The struggle between opposing ideologies and classes, between democracy and fascism, between labor and capital, provides the living seeds of the dramatists' material. Here, in these sources, his ideas strike roots; here he finds his characters; the victims and the victors in these conflicts. He is, in short, occupied only with the functions and roles of living men, only with the living conditions of these men.

Contemporary social drama is concerned more with human characterization and less with slogans and mass action (than is the agit-prop play)..... A significant line of demarcation between the conscious social dramatist and any other kind of writer is that, apart from showing us what happens, he uses his art to make a constructive social comment. With it he arrives at some resolution. And instead of the play ceasing with the actual presentation of "the now", it continues over into the future.¹

The first attempts in America to create genuine social drama were timid, indeed, when compared with the earlier movement on the Continent represented by Ibsen, Hauptman, and later, Shaw. The first part of the twentieth century saw some sporadic attempts at social drama, mainly so-called "problem-plays" such as Charles Klein's The Lion and the Mouse, Charles R. Kennedy's The Servant in the House, and Edward Sheldon's The Boss. The post-war social playwright, however, was both

¹ William Kozlenko, The Best Short Plays of the Social Theatre (N.Y. Random House, 1939), Introduction, pages vii-viii.

critical and cynical, mirroring the spirit of disillusionment which characterized the times. Like the novelist he looked upon the contemporary scene with a jaundiced eye, and his work consistently debunked the ideals and pretensions of the great middle-class. All kinds of problems aroused him to dramatic comment----religious, moral, social, and political---and comedy and melodrama alike lent themselves to the attack. By the time the depression struck, the new playwright was well into his stride, and social criticism had become a definite trend in American drama.

The series of social and economic disasters which now shook America affected all serious writers, and the younger playwrights were especially eager to express the more violent issues of the crisis. The new social drama was influenced greatly by German Expressionism, particularly by the work of Chekhov. It is with plays of this type that the new spirit of revolt shows most keenly both in subject matter and in dramatic technique. Here, too, the trend of ideas over action is emphasized.

During the depression the economic pressure on the theatre created an almost desperate situation, with the decline in box-office receipts affecting both the commercial and art theatres. The summer theatre, a relatively low-cost enterprise, continued to thrive, and much of the important dramatic output of the worst depression years found a hearing here.

Two non-commercial organizations, the Theatre Union and

the Group Theatre, were born during this era. Both were devoted primarily to plays of social criticism from the point of view of the Left. The first group specialized in violent social dramas, and played to a subscription audience made up largely of people already indoctrinated with the ideas it projected. The Group Theatre was formed by actors from the Theatre Guild and began its career under its auspices. The work produced by this organization was largely naturalistic or expressionistic, with Clifford Odets as its most important contributor. The original Group Theatre produced twenty-three new American plays in New York between 1931 and 1940 and clung to its vision of a permanent and vital theatre created collectively by its actors, directors, writers, and technicians. The charter members included Harold Clurman, a Guild playreader; Lee Strasberg, a stage manager; and Cheryl Crawford, the Guild casting director. Several Guild actors joined the organization to stage the first production, Green's The House of Connelly. These included Franchot Tone, Morris Carnovsky, Luther Adler, and an unknown actor named Clifford Odets. The Group's ambition was to make of the theatre an art rather than a business. Clurman was strongly influenced by Jacques Copeau's community concept of acting, and Strasberg was an ardent disciple of the Stanislowski method. The leaders wished to establish a permanent company of actors, to eliminate the star system, to develop a common method, style and vocabulary of rehearsing and playing, based upon the example

of the Moscow Art Theatre and the Theatre du Vieux Colombier. Their specific objectives also were to present new American plays that were a "timely and vital reflection of the economic, moral, and social life of the day", to develop new playwrights who shared the feelings of the Group, to raise the dignity of the acting profession, and to conduct a school for new actors, writers, and directors.¹

Given lofty ideals, given fanatic perseverance, given undeniable talent, why did the Group fail to become a permanent institution?....To them and to the American theatre as a whole, the causes for the failure of what promised to be the finest theatrical organization on Broadway should contain a lesson of significance. In his book, Harold Clurman places the blame squarely upon the New York theatre and its playgoers for failing to find an endowment of \$1,000,000 for an institutional subsidy. In all its twenty-four productions, the Group had no choice but to follow the economics of Broadway show business and to grub for its finances piecemeal. This prevented the leasing of a theatre on a yearly basis---the only practice that would make possible experimental productions, a school, and a repertory....If all the fault lay with the commercial environment of Broadway, however, it would present a gloomy prospect for our ever achieving a truly national theatre....It seems clear that certain weaknesses within the Group were the cause of its failure to raise its subsidy and achieve a measure of permanence. Throughout its published statements, the Group manifested a curiously naive conception of the nature of the audience-play relationship. Repeatedly Harold Clurman scolded the audience and critics alike for not supporting the plays of the Group, for not grasping its serious and important subject matter.....This naivete seems manifest also in the often reiterated plea for an endowment from some wealthy patron of the arts---on behalf

¹ Harold Clurman, *The Fervent Years* (N. Y. Random House, 1945), pages 78-80.

of a theatre which had consistently berated the evils of capitalist wealth. Other reasons for failure are Clurman's subjectivism, his disregard for form in art, his didactic concept of the theatre, his inability to restrain the undisciplined writing of Odets..... the fact that the Group tended to be a clannish cult, suspicious of outsiders, intolerant of criticism however well-meaning,....taking their acting method too seriously, lacking a sense of humor, and the glaring weakness of the list of twenty-three plays the Group produced in ten years. (The score indicates but two hits and three other moderate successes.) Eighteen failures out of twenty-three efforts is perhaps too high a price to pay even for what the Group conceived to be its integrity....Another reason for the failure of the Group that cannot be underestimated is the general confusion and breakdown of the liberal movement in America between 1939 and 1941. The Group was most effective during the depression when it could make bold partisan protests. With the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, the progressive movement began to disintegrate, and the Group members were not the only liberals left dazed and uncertain. The Group Theatre represents a clear example of art dedicated to an ideology rather than to the search for human truths wherever they are to be found. Broadway needs a Group Theatre in 1949 just as urgently as it did in 1929---but a Group that will seek astute and realistic leadership--a Group that will look with less scorn upon the theatre's ancient and honorable task of attracting audiences. If the American theatre can learn from its mistakes, these fervent years will not have been in vain.¹

Another important theatrical organization to grow out of the depression was the Federal Theatre Project launched in 1935 by the Works Progress Administration. Under the direction of Mrs. Hallie Flanagan, who had ably directed the Experimental Theater at Vassar for three years, the Federal Theatre's primary object was to provide relief for the

¹ W. David Sievers, Instructor in Theatre Art, University of California, The Quarterly Journal of Speech, December, 1949, pages 473-476.

thousands of unemployed actors which the depression's effect on the theatres had caused. It also sought to provide cheap and decent entertainment for those who could afford little along this line, but who found themselves with greater leisure. Despite all of the intricate problems which such an organization was bound to have, the Federal Theatre's results were amazing. Anita Block calls it the only "living theatre" of our time, adding, "Organized as a government relief measure, it soon evolved into something infinitely more important. It became a genuine National Theatre, delighting millions of men, women, and children who had been denied the cultural as well as the emotional and spiritual experience provided by a living theatre."¹

Besides offering the needed employment to thousands and providing wholesome entertainment for the masses, the Federal Theatre gave a much needed shot-in-the-arm for important living dramatists who were finding an increasingly scarce market for their plays. Among the important names of the contemporary theatre associated with the Federal Theatre are Orson Welles, T. S. Eliot, Elmer Rice, Gilmore Brown, Agnes Morgan, Philip Barber, Helen Arthur, and Tallulah Bankhead.

Mr. Millet says,

But the most considerable achievement of the Federal Theatre Project was the creation of a new dramatic form, the Living Newspaper, which combined elements of

¹ Anita Block, ibid., page 102.

the expressionistic drama, the moving picture, and the side-show to present as forcefully as possible problems of current national and international importance. The most successful examples of this form were Triple-A Plowed Under, Power, and One-Third of a Nation. Each of these editions of the Living Newspaper has presented some acute economic problem so tellingly that congressmen and other busybodies have been deeply concerned with the nature of the propaganda fostered...The Federal Theatre Project not only has done a great deal for established playwrights, but also has brought to the attention of theatrical producers and the theater-going public a considerable number of new names and talents. The Living Newspaper, moreover, will probably continue to be used for the visual and dramatic presentation of important social issues, since its technique is easily adaptable to the comment of any organized group on current issues of importance.¹

Despite the efforts of a theatre delegation led by Tallulah Bankhead, daughter of the (then) Speaker of the House, and mass demonstrations throughout the country, Congress abolished the Federal Theatre Project July 31, 1939.

Since the drama of social criticism covers an extremely broad and complex field it is obviously necessary, in a paper of this type, to touch briefly on some phases, ignore others, and to divide the rest into less general categories. The new or changing attitude toward sex, marriage, and family life, while a part of the total social scene, will be considered under a separate chapter emphasizing the prevalence of such subject matter in today's drama. The subdivision, Drama of Social Criticism, will consider the debunking drama, the interest in

¹ Millet, ibid, page 122.

regionalism, bourgeois portraits set against a background of social change, and the protest against the economic and political systems. Because it is a separate and distinct type of play, Drama of the Left will be discussed alone, as will Plays Against War.

The Social Conflict. Some of the more successful "De-bunking" plays include Bartlette Cormack's The Racket which was produced in 1927. This melodrama is a scathing revelation of the evils spawned by Prohibition, showing the sinister tie-up between gangster bootleggers and crooked Chicago politicians and policemen. One of the cops voices the play's thorough cynicism when he explains the double-cross of the climax, "so that gover'nment o' the professionals, by the professionals, and for the professionals shall not perish from the earth."¹

In 1928 The Front Page by Ben Hect and Charles McArthur revealed another picture of graft in city politics and journalism. This fast-moving comedy of hard-boiled reporters was hailed by newspapermen as a most realistic portrayal of the city press. Louis Weitzenborn's Five Star Final produced in 1930 was another attack on tabloid journalism which revealed the same cynical view.

Hollywood was a popular subject for the debunkers. As

¹ Burns Mantle, *Best Plays, 1927-1928* (N. Y. Dodd, Mead Co. 1928), page 348.

early as 1922 Kaufman and Connelly produced Merton of the Movies adapted from Leon Wilson's novel. The mild kidding of this play gave way in 1930 to Kaufman's and Moss Hart's bombast on the same subject in Once In A Lifetime in which nearly every phase of Hollywood life is satirized in line after impudent line. A hilarious farce lampooning the movie industry appeared in 1935 when Boy Meets Girl by Bella and Sam Spewack was presented. Clare Boothe turned her barbed cynicism loose on the colony in 1938 with Kiss the Boys Good-bye.

In 1922 Rain (dramatized from ones of Maugham's short stories) by John Colton and Clsmentence Randolph proved that even religion was not safe from the debunker's cynical pen. In this daring (for it's time) drama, hypocrisy and charlatanism in the church is exposed in a sordid episode involving a missionary and the harlot he tries to reform. One of the play's many satirical lines has become a classic. Speaking of the natives of the South Seas, the Reverend Davidson says, "We had to teach them what sin is. We had to make sins out of what they thought were only natural actions."¹

William Hurburt's The Bride of the Lamb in 1926 was a study of the subconscious relation between religion and sex, while the same debunking technique was used in Bless You, Sister and Salvation to satirize Aimee Semple McPherson and her type of

¹ Mantle, ibid., 1922-1923, page 47.

female evangelists.

The Women by Claire Boothe in 1936 pours acid on her sex in the debunking of the typical Victorian attitude toward "the ladies." Howard's The Silver Cord and Kelly's Craig's Wife were no more respectful to the weaker sex.

Practically no important item of contemporary life escaped the cynics, and it is significant that from comedy to melodrama these debunking plays touched sympathetic cords in their audiences. Perhaps the ultimate in expression of the period's complete disallusionment was Robert Sherwood's The Petrified Forest produced in 1935. The author likens the world to a petrified forest...."Platonism--patriotism---Christianity---Romance---the economics of Adam Smith---they're all so many dead stumps in the desert."¹

Unflattering social criticism also included many bourgeois portraits such as the early The Show-off by George Kelly in 1924, and Kaufman's and Edna Ferber's Dinner at Eight produced in 1932. While not all of the characters of this type of drama were presented in an unsympathetic light, most are viewed with cynicism and revealed with satirical or sardonic humor.

More serious social criticism, however, appeared in some of the regional plays, particularly those dealing with the South or those built around racial themes. Paul Green best

¹ Robert Sherwood, The Petrified Forest, Chas. Scribner's Sons, N. Y. (1935), pages 113-114.

represents this type of drama. Green was born and grew up on a farm in North Carolina, and later became a member of the faculty of the University of North Carolina. As a student at the same university he came under the influence of Frederick Koch who has been a pioneer in the teaching of the creation of folk-drama first in North Dakota and then in North Carolina. Koch's method is to provoke the creative spirit in his students and to center their attention on their own people on the theory that one can make art only of the things he knows and feels at first hand.

Green's first professionally produced long play is The House of Connelly put on by the Group Theatre in 1926. It received the Pulitzer Prize in 1927. The play tells the story of the aristocratic Connelly family, tracing their fortune from wealth and position to social decadence through the consequences of weakness and sin. The Field God and In Abraham's Bosom reveal the socially unjust position of the ambitious Negro in the South, while his short Hymn to the Rising Sun and the realistic melodrama Native Son written in collaboration with Richard Wright, the Negro novelist, are both passionate protests against racial injustice anywhere. Paul Green's own explanation of the regional settings of his plays may well speak for such dramatists as Hatcher Hughes, Lynn Riggs, and Lula Vollmer:

My first memories are of Negro ballads ringing out by moonlight and the rich laughter of the resting blacks, down by the river bottom.....There is no solution to life--except death. And the only mysterious thing about the South is that it is so full of both. I don't know why this is so....The only requirement for the writer is to write the best he can about what he knows and has made his own. The people of the South are what I know and love best, and I have written as well as I can. I....try to tell the story of my people, but not as types or individuals needing a bettering of their condition. Rather as human beings. And in the world of drama people are people no matter what their color is, or where they live, or what they should or should not be.¹

In 1930 Lillian Hellman's The Little Foxes dealt with the same theme of the South's decadence as The House of Connolly. The depth of this region's decay, however, is depicted in the long run Tobacco Road (1933), a dramatization by Jack Kirkland of Erskine Caldwell's novel. Tobacco Road shows us a group of former tenant farmers reduced to shiftless parasites, living in a vacuum of human emotions and degenerate squalor. Although the play abounds in profanity and earthy humor, its social message is strong.

Protests against American materialism and the myth of business success was a favorite topic in the social drama. John Howard Lawson's Success Story, 1932, is an ironic indictment of both attributes of American business. It is the story of an ambitious Jew who cannot keep his ideals nor develop his

¹ Paul Green, Out of the South (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1939), pages XI-XII.

great talents under the pressure of the prevailing social and business set-up. Lawson's earlier play, Processional, 1925, is the story of a West Virginia coal strike done as "A Jazz Symphony of American Life". Its satire falls on many phases of contemporary American life including capitalism and the Klu Klux Klan.

As early as 1923 the Theatre Guild produced Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine whose hero, Mr. Zero, stands as the symbol for millions of pitiful, ignorant slaves produced by the machine age. Even in Heaven, Mr. Zero's lot is to run a giant adding machine, and when he is sent back to earth for further soul-conditioning he evolves as the least important cog of modern civilization. In 1928 Rice's somber melodrama of the slums, Street Scene, won the Pulitzer Prize.

O'Neill took a crack at business and what its code does for the soul of western man in his Marco Millions. He concludes that there can be no culture or even any appreciation of culture in a people dominated by materialism.

Strong social protest is voiced in Sidney Kingsley's Dead End, 1935. As in Street Scene the thesis is that the poverty of the slums breeds its own particular brand of viciousness. The social inditement is further emphasized by the setting's contrast between the fashionable apartment house nearby and the dirty run-down tenements of the dead end street. Here the tough city kids learn theft, bribery, extortion and a variety of vices pointing toward a career of crime as their only chance

for financial success.

Maxwell Anderson is considered to be O'Neill's leading rival among our serious dramatists, and like O'Neill, cannot be catalogued as either realist or romantist. His best work combines both elements. Much of Anderson's best known work lies in the field of the poetic drama where his strong interest in history is predominant. Anderson has also had notable success with comedy. Not as philosophic as O'Neill, Anderson appears to have a stronger social sense. Two of his plays voice a strong social protest. The earlier Gods of Lighting, 1928, is a realistic melodrama based on the flagrantly unjust Sacco-Vanzetti case. Much of the actual testimony is worked into the script, showing how those who control the courts use their power against anything which threatens the existing order. Winterset, 1935, is a sort of sequel to Gods of Lighting but a much stronger play. Both Your Houses, 1935, attacks both political parties and their pork-barrel methods of government. In exceptionally clear dialogue, the author shows the hypocrisy, corruption, and extravagance of Congress in his story of the young idealistic member who attempts to beat the gang at its own game.

The Masque of Kings, 1937, High Tor, 1937, and the poetic dramas such as Elizabeth, the Queen are considered Anderson's best work. All blend harmoniously the various elements of his personality--social, realistic, and romantic--to produce strong integrated, and moving drama.

John Wexley's They Shall Not Die, 1934, does for the Scottsboro case what Gods of Lightning did for the earlier courtroom injustice. Here the "justice" dispensed is colored by the South's racial intolerance, and the play includes trumped-up charges, false witnesses, and intimidation of the scared and ignorant defendants.

Drama of the Left. Social criticism in drama gradually increased in sharpness from the early cynically debunking plays to the impassioned exposure of weak and rotten spots in the contemporary American scene. As the political situation in Europe became more acute and the shattering economic crisis of the depression hit, America became definitely involved in the general social upheaval. The important drama of social protest after 1929 had a more positive point of view and a strident call to action. Much of this new drama wore the plain tags of Marxian ideology, and so was soon designated "Drama of the Left".

Many of these now "revolutionary" plays were merely propagandist harangues hastily and poorly put together; still others were simple melodramas of little literary or dramatic merit. Gradually this "agit-prop" play gave way to drama of real importance, and proletarian plays became a recognized department of contemporary playwrighting.

Of most of the proletarian dramas of the depression years, the defects are more conspicuous than the virtues. The defects are in the main excessive violence and the tendency to represent the class struggle in the elementary terms of traditional melodrama. Their virtues

are those of vitality and impassioned conviction, of acute social consciousness, and the determination that the drama shall not continue to be merely an expensive form of diversion for the bourgeoisie and a profitable form of economic exploitation for the commercial producers. At their least, these plays picture for after times, the darker aspects of the worst years of the depression. But the possibility that they will aid in bringing about a revolution in America is negligible, since their appeal is primarily to the submerged radicals of a half-dozen American cities and to the small fragment of the bourgeois suffering from a stirring of the social conscience.¹

The proletarian drama movement did a great deal to revive the one-act play since it was more easily adapted to either amateur or professional performance in halls or before small groups than the longer drama. The best of these one-acters, which found a hearing on Broadway, are collected in a volume edited by William Kolenzo under the title Best Short Plays of the Social Theatre.

Usually Leftist Drama was not touched remotely by humor or the comic spirit, but occasional noteworthy exceptions were highly successful. Outstanding in this field is Marc Blitzstein's The Cradle Will Rock, 1937, a novelty satirical "opera" performed on a bare stage. Another popular musical was a labor revue produced by the International Ladies Garment Worker's Union called Pins and Needles (1937-1938) with music by Blitzstein and Howard Rome. This rare example of labor's ability to laugh at itself enjoyed a successful two-year run and

¹ Millet, op. cit., pages 125-126.

covered a variety of topics given a satirical burlesque treatment. In a series of fast moving sketches and songs Father Coughlin, Mussolini, Clifford Odets, and even the squabble between John L. Lewis and William Green are lampooned. In this same spirit, although they cannot accurately be classified as "leftist", are Kaufman's satirical musical comedies produced during the depression years---Strike Up the Band, 1930, Of Thee I Sing, 1931, and Let'm Eat Cake, 1933.

Early non-musical plays in this field are Claire and Paul Sifton's 1931 and Rice's We, the People, both depicting the effect of the depression on its helpless victims.

Of the numerous proletarian plays produced by the radical Theatre Union those of George Sklar and his collaborators Albert Maltz and Paul Peters are the most important. In 1932 Sklar and Maltz wrote The Merry-Go-Round attacking the corrupt alliance between the police and the underworld. The next year they produced the radical anti-war play Peace On Earth. With Paul Peters, Sklar wrote Stevedore, produced in 1934 and considered his most important work. Its theme is that race-prejudice is the white employer's weapon of exploitation against both the Negro and the white worker. The subject is a race riot on the Louisiana docks, and in paced-to-life melodrama the authors seem intent on inciting an equally heated riot in the audience--at least the play seemed to generate a fighting heat among its subscribers who were assumedly of the

same sympathy. Effective as propaganda, Stevedore is also a skillful drama, piling up effects to a smashing climax where the black hero, Lonnie, is killed, but solidarity is achieved between the Negro and white workers.

The foremost dramatist, however, to appear in Leftist drama is Clifford Odets who was an actor and later playwright for the Group Theatre. Critics acclaim Odets not only as a dramatist of importance because of his vital and exciting powers with dialogue, his poignant, truthful interpretation of characters he really knows, but also because he is the champion of the little man and the under-dog.

Odets was born in Philadelphia and brought up in the teeming lower-class Bronx of New York City. He was in his early twenties when the depression struck in 1929. He turned to acting after he finished high school, getting an assignment from the Theatre Guild just as it was sponsoring the organization of the Group Theatre. Although he had been dabbling in writing for some time the Group at first saw little merit in his plays. They turned down Awake and Sing until Odets won a dramatic award from the New Theatre magazine for his one-act Waiting For Lefty. The Group then produced Awake and Sing along with his short anti-Nazi drama, Till the Day I Die, in 1935. Later they produced his Paradise Lost, Golden Boy, and Rocket to the Moon. Golden Boy, which was later filmed, was the most financially successful of Odets plays, and helped pull the Group out of the red after a disastrous season.

Whether Odets made the Group or vice versa seems an academic question. The fact is that this was one of the fortunate partnerships in the history of the theatre. The pungent, theatrical dialogue of Odets may be partly attributed to the fact that he wrote for fellow actors with whom he had lived and studied for five years. It is equally true that his Golden Boy saved the Group when its fortunes were at lowest ebb.¹

Awake and Sing is less shrill and acrid in tone than his two early short plays. It is mainly a realistic study of a middle-class Jewish family caught under the milestone of capitalism. It has a Marxian slant, but is not strident in its propaganda. His later plays are leftist more by implication than by the inclusion of direct ideological material. Golden Boy, 1937, deals almost entirely with personal situation and stresses character as it is influenced by the contemporary social scene. It is the most integrated and satisfying of Odets plays.

To what extent Marxism as an inclusive philosophy will gain adherents among writers in the decade to come is, of course, impossible to say, but the evolution of Mr. Odets' talent leads one to wonder whether the "Marxian playwrights" of the immediate future may not tend to become less and less a class wholly apart as they come more and more to take their creed for granted. The greater the imagination of the writer, the less the validity of his work depends upon the validity of his formal creed, and a Marxian dramatist of real genius would probably write plays quite as acceptable to non-Marxians as the novels of Tolstoi are to those unable to follow the author through his successive changes of faith.²

¹ W. David Sievers, ibid., page 475.

² Millet, ibid., pages 273-274.

Plays Against War. The termination of World War I placed upon many serious writers the desire, even the feeling of responsibility, to interpret life to the world in the significance of the catastrophe which had overtaken it. Plays about war were not new, of course, but the post-war play of this contemporary period is anti-war. It attempts to present war as it is, striped of its rosy patriotic haze---debunked---deglamorized. The new play forsakes the hero-myth to picture the soldier as a helpless pawn in a destructive game, not fully aware of its causes nor having a voice in determining its issues. The new anti-war play attempts to probe into the underlying causes of war and to suggest the road toward peace.

The opening shot in this field was What Price Glory written by Maxwell Anderson and Laurence Stallings in 1924. It's avowed purpose is to de-bunk war. The authors' preface to the play states plainly:

What Price Glory is a play of war as it is, not as it has been presented theatrically for thousands of years. The soldiers talk and act much as soldiers the world over. The speech of men under arms is universally and consistently interlarded with profanity----. The authors....have attempted to reproduce this mannerism along with other general atmosphere they believe to be true. In a theatre where war has been lied about, romantically, effectively---and in a city where the war play has usually moant sugary dissimulation----What Price Glory may seem bold.¹

¹ John Gassner, *Treasury of the Theatre* (1940, Simon and Schuster, N. Y.), page 201.

John Cassner describes the play as:

One of the most successful productions of the American stage....It promoted the cause of realistic drama...banished the romanticization of fighting which had prevailed after every American conflict.... especially after the Civil War...and it also struck a blow for freedom of speech in the theatre by promoting the acceptance of robust colloquialisms in so far as they are appropriate or indispensable to purposeful veracity.¹

Alexander Woolcott's review of What Price Glory in the New York Evening Sun claims, "In the tremendous irony of the comedy and in the sardonic laughter which fills its every scene, there is more said about the war than in all the editorials on the subject."²

The authors do not dwell upon the cause of war, yet by implication, the play is a protest against war. Their soldiers are real; their war with its muck and blood is real. Listen to Captain Flagg:

Damn Headquarters! Its some more of that world-safe-for-democracy slush! Every time they come around here I've got to ask myself is this an army or is it a stinking theosophical society for ethical culture and the Biblebacking uplift! In ten minutes we're going to have another of these roundheaded gentlemen of the old school here giving us a prepared lecture on what we're fighting for and how we're to do it---one of those bill-poster chocolate soldiers with decorations running clear around to his backbone and a thrilling speech on army morale and the last drop of fighting blood that puts your drive over to glorious victory---the side-whiskered, butter-eaters. I'd like to rub their noses in a few of the latrines I've slept in, keeping up army morale and

¹ Ibid., page 199.

² Cassner, ibid., page 215.

losing men because some screaming fool back in the New Jersey sector thinks he's playing with paper dolls.

Or to youn , sensitive Lieutenant Moore, sobbing at the sight of a dying companion:

Since six o'clock there'e been a wounded sniper in the tree by the orchard crying 'Kamerad! Kamerad!' Just like a big crippled whippoorwill. What price glory now? Why in God's name can't we all go home? Who gives a damn for this louey, stinking little town but the poor French bastards who live here? God damn it, you talk about courage and all night long you hear a man who's bleeding to death on a tree calling you 'Kamerad' and asking you to save him. God damn every son of a bitch in the world who isn't here!¹

Although this play was a Broadway success it was not without its enemies. Clergymen demanded that the play with its horrible profanity and blasphemy be closed "in the name of public decency". Violent objections came also from the army itself, claiming that the play held the Service up to ridicule and brought it discredit.

In 1928 Wings Over Europe, an English play written by Robert Nichole and Maurice Brown made its debut under the auspices of the Theatre Guild. This was its first production anywhere. This anti-war play concerns itself with the discovery by a young scientist of how to control atomic energy. To the young physicist, Francis Lightfoot, his discovery means freedom for humanity from all the oppressing evils which are the cause of war. To the English Cabinet to whom he takes

¹ Gassner, ibid., page 229.

news of his great discovery, it means the end of the Empire. They order Lightfoot to destroy his secret. When he refuses, he is killed. They soon discover, however, that other scientists have arrived at the same knowledge and will present their findings at a called-conference at Geneva. The rulers of the world must take this discovery for evil or good as they will.

Another English play For Services Rendered by W. Somerset Maugham shows a typical English provincial family touched by the aftermath of war. Sidney Ardsly, the only son, has been blinded in the war. Eva, the eldest daughter, lost her fiance in the same conflict, and in the end her grief drives her mad.

Sidney says:

I know how dead keen we all were when the war started. Every sacrifice was worth it. We didn't say much about it because we were rather shy, but honor did mean something to us, and patriotism wasn't just a word. And then, when it was all over, we did think that those of us who'd died hadn't died in vain, and those of us who were broken and shattered and knew they wouldn't be any more good in the world were buoyed up by the thought that if they'd given everything they'd given it in a great cause.

His father says, warmly, "And they had."

Do you still think that? I don't. I know that we were the dupes of the incompetent fools who ruled the nations. I know that we were sacrificed to their vanity, their greed, and their stupidity. And the worst of it is that as far as I can tell they haven't learned a thing. They're just as vain, they're just as greedy, they're just as stupid as they ever were. They muddle on, muddle on, and one of these days they'll muddle us all into another war. When that happens I'll tell you that I'm going to do. I'm going out into the streets and cry: Look at me; don't be a lot of damned fools; it's all bunk what they're saying

to you, about honour and patriotism, and glory-----
bunk, bunk, bunk.¹

For Services Rendered was produced in New York in 1933.

In the same year came the American play Peace on Earth by George Sklar and Albert Maltz. In this anti-war play a young professor, Peter Owens, becomes deeply involved in a strike of stevedores who refuse to load munitions for export. In a wharf fight a man is killed and the professor is wrongly accused of his murder. While he is in prison awaiting execution he learns that war has been declared and that his struggle for peace has been in vain. Owens is portrayed as an intelligent, sensitive man with a deep, true patriotism. Against Owens is the university trustee, John Andrews, who has large munitions interests. Professor Owens' reply to the judge who sentences him is noteworthy:

If my crime was opposition to war, if my crime was association with workers fighting against war---- then I am guilty. You can sentence me for these crimes, you can hang me---but you can't stop that fight. For those crimes I am willing to be sentenced. For those crimes I am willing to die.²

If This Be Treason appeared in 1935. It was written by a clergyman, the Reverend John Haynes Holm, a progressive churchman of New York City. In the preface to the written text of his play Holmes states his thesis:

¹ Modern Plays, Everyman's Library (London, Dent, 1937), page 181.

² George Sklar-Albert Maltz (N. Y., Samuel French Co., 1934), page 117.

The subject of this play is the will of the peoples to peace. It's hero is not John Gordon, President of the United States, nor Koye Kagawa, Japanese pacifist leader, popular leader of the Japanese masses, but the common men and women whose hidden desires they express and whose latent energies they release. The thesis is the simple proposition that if the people of any two countries involved in a war crisis were only given by their governments the same opportunity to serve the interests of peace that they are invariable given to serve the interests of war, peace and not war would come.¹

Peace comes in the conflict between the United States and Japan when the President goes to Japan and lays the issue before the Japanese people. Armed with the support of the masses in both countries, President Gordon is successful in averting war.

In 1936 Irwin Shaw's long one-act anti-war play, Bury the Dead, was produced. It resembles closely the famous Austrian drama Miracle at Verdun produced by the Theatre Guild in New York in 1951. As in the earlier play, Shaw's soldiers refuse to be buried until they can be assured that there will be no more war. The problem of the dead soldiers affects not only their relatives and friends, but also the government, the church, and the high army officials. It is a passionate plea against war.

From these few examples given it is easy to see a definite

¹ John H. Holmes, *If This Be Treason*, 'N. Y., Macmillan Co., 1935), page V.

trend in the production of a different type of war play. There is no sugar-coating by these dramatists, regardless of the way in which they treat the subject. That these plays were written by dramatic artists of high caliber, and received by American audiences just recently removed from ardent flag-waving patriotism is important.

New Attitudes Toward Sex and Marriage

The author's contention that sex is a persistent and prevalent subject concerning contemporary dramatists is most clearly illustrated by the fact that her list of important plays falling under this heading is equaled only by the one under plays of social protest. Here one is not concerned with the simple "boy-meets-girl" formula or the domestic comedy of marriage and home life which has always formed the solid backbone of the theatre and later of the motion picture industry. The plays to be examined in this chapter relate to the contemporary attitude toward sex problems, conflicts, standards, and taboos, and to the changing attitudes expressed toward marriage and the home. These include the attack on the double standard of sexual morality, trial or companionate marriage, infidelity, homosexuality, and incest. It would, of course, be ridiculous to say that these subjects are new to the drama for any or all of them have been considered by playwrights from the time of the classical Greeks to the

present day. The author wishes only to point to the contemporary treatment of such subjects and to emphasize their prominence in today's theatre.

Two plays by the English dramatist, Somerset Maugham, reflect one aspect of this subject. The Breadwinner pictures an upper middle-class husband rebelling against perpetual slavery as wage-earner for the insatiable spending of his wife and children. It is a satirical comedy with dominant interest in character, yet is at the same time a revealing picture of a typical contemporary family problem which arises from social and economic forces of post-war society.

Maugham's second and more important drama, The Constant Wife, deals with the passing of the double standard. The brilliant wit of Maugham's lines almost hides their deeper intent.

The plot concerns John and Constance Middleton who have been married happily for fifteen years. Constance learns that John is having an affair with one of her best friends, Marie-Louise. She refuses to consider divorce or financial independence in the form of a business partnership with another friend, Barbara. The knowledge of her husband's philandering, however, does encourage her to see an old suitor, Bernard Kersal, back in England for the first time since her marriage. Bernard is still in love with Constance, but she tells him she could not be unfaithful to John as long as he is supporting her.

Mario-Louise's husband finds John's cigarette case under his pillow, and Constance comes to her husband's defense with a convincing lie. She admits to John then, that she has long known of the affair. John is more disturbed by her calmness than by her knowledge.

Constance now decides to reconsider Barbara's offer of a job, and at the end of the year has paid John for her keep. She now feels she can go off with Bernard for six weeks before his return to the Orient, after which she plans to return to John.

John naturally is confused. Constance repeats her previous views on the marriage contract, and adds:

Let us face it, I was only a parasite in your house. You had entered into legal obligations that prevented you from turning me adrift, but I owe you a debt of gratitude for never letting me see by word or gesture that I was no more than a costly and at times inconvenient ornament.

"But why this sudden change?"

Constance:

I am naturally a lazy woman. So long as appearances were saved I was prepared to take all I could get and give nothing in return. I was a parasite, but I knew it. But when we reached a situation where only your politeness or your lack of intelligence prevented you from throwing the fact in my teeth I changed my mind. I thought that I should very much like to be in a position where, if I felt inclined to, I could tell you, with calm, courtesy, but with determination, to to hell.¹

¹ Burns Mantle, Best Plays, 1926-27, page 145.

She admits that Bernard is a little dull, but she is determined to go away with him because,

....Once more before it's too late I want to feel about me the arms of a man who adores the ground I walk on. I want to see his face light up when I enter the room. I want to feel the pressure of his hand when we look at the moon together and the pleasantly tickling sensation when his arms tremulously steal around my waist....For ten years I've been very happy in your affections, John... but now just for a little while I hanker for something else. Do you grudge it me? I shall always care for you. I may be unfaithful, but I am constant.

John: "Do you think I'm going to take you back?"

Constance: "I don't see why not. When you've had time to reflect you'll realize that you have no reason to blame me. After all, I'm taking from you nothing you want...I know you could never bring yourself to divorce me for doing no more than you did yourself."¹

John is forced to admit the truth of her arguments. He speaks the author's thesis when he admits that economic independence for the wife puts a different light on the double standard. The play points out, too, that the wife who gives value received for the money she costs can also claim her independence from the outmoded standard, if she desires it.

Young Love by Samson Raphaelson caused a furor when it was first produced in 1928. It deals with the subject of trial marriage. The opening is at dawn, and we see David and Fay, starry-eyed over their first night of love. Fay had insisted

¹ Mantle, ibid., page 151.

upon this trial before consenting to marriage. She insists that it is the only way in an enlightened age. Both are now convinced that their love is the greatest in the world, even surpassing that of that ideal couple, their hosts, Peter and Nancy, who have been happily married for ten years.

The young hopefuls are soon disallusioned, however, when they learn that the perfect love of Peter and Nancy has been marred by extramarital adventures. Peter, in fact, is now bent on pursuit of Fay, and Nancy is leading on young David. Fay doggedly insists upon another trial, this time affairs with their host and hostess. If their love can survive this experiment their marriage can still be possible. Fay grimly carries out her part of the bargain, but Peter cannot go through with the affair with Nancy. The bitter quarrel that follows threatens to break up the match permanently. It is only the depth and sincerity of their love that finally heals the hurts and clears the air for their reconciliation. Although Young Love appeared at a time when the country was talking about Colorado's Judge Lindsey's speech on trial marriage, the play was received with mixed emotions. Many were shocked at this picture of modern youth's view of marriage; others proclaimed the play as a realistic portrayal of youth's changing attitude toward the approach to marriage.

The same code is revealed in Mark Reed's play Yes, My Darling Daughter which was produced in 1937. Ellen and her young jobless architect, Doug, are financially unable to

marry. Doug decides to take a job abroad for two years selling razor blades. Ellen knows that he cannot afford to take her along as his wife and suggests they go away together for the weekend---to test and seal their love, and to make plans for their future. Ellen's aunt suspects their secret and warns Ellen's mother. Although Ann Murray, the mother, had had her own fling in Greenwich Village, proclaiming her belief in the right of free love, she is horrified at the thought of her daughter's going off for a weekend with a man. When Ann seeks to dissuade her daughter, Ellen accuses her of hypocrisy, pointing to her mother's own record in the Village and of her well-known affair with an English poet. Ann is unable to refute the girl's arguments, and cannot bear to lose face with her daughter for not standing on her avowed convictions. Besides she likes Doug and is convinced that the two are really in love. She sends Ellen away with the promise that she will stand back of her.

Lewis Murray, the father, is agast at his wife's news. Ann refuses to tell him where Ellen and Doug have gone. Murray leaves in anger telling his wife that her moral sense is perverted. Ann, hurt and angry, cries, "Goddamn sex anyway."¹

Lewis returns the next morning with arrangements complete

¹ Burns Mantle, Best Plays - 1936-1937 (N. Y., Dodd, Mead Co., 1937), page 318.

for a marriage as soon as the young couple returns. Ann insists that his plan is an insult to their daughter. Murray cries, "You're shouting all over the place because she has made the free-love team."¹

Doug is somewhat taken aback at the parents' attitude when they are met on their return. It is hard to tell which upsets him the most--the father's indignation, or the knowledge that Ann has willingly let her daughter go away with him.

Arrangements have been made for Ellen to have a job abroad, so there is now no reason to stop the marriage. Doug proposes, but Ellen feels that they are being railroaded into something somehow. It is Ann who turns her to the path of reason as well as her desire by saying "...when a man makes such a fuss over being seduced, a nice girl ought to marry him."²

Gypsy by Maxwell Anderson which appeared in 1929 is another play reflecting the contemporary attitude concerning love and marriage. Ellen Hastings, "Gypsy", the daughter of a questionable mother, is not a sympathetic heroine, but the play is rather typical of the ruthless study of changing ideals which occupied many leading writers of the period. Ellen makes rather a futile and desperate attempt at complete sexual freedom, despite the love she feels for her husband,

¹ Mantlo, ibid., page 320.

² Mantle, ibid., page 326.

David. Her promiscuity ends in disillusionment and defeat.

Saturday's Children by the same author had a more successful run on Broadway. This play presents a touching picture of a young married couple struggling for adjustment in a marriage beset by economic insecurity and hampered by their own immaturity. It is important to this study for its realistic treatment of marriage on the middle-class level. It suggests a fairly typical attitude toward marriage responsibilities of the so-called "lost generation" of the post-war period. Marriage must be fun---young people won't be tied down either by work or lack of money--women have a right to work for money for pleasure if the husband cannot produce it--the word obey is obsolete.

Craig's Wife by George Kelly, produced in 1925, gives another picture of marriage of that period. Mrs. Craig's credo, and that of many of her friends, is that a woman should seek and demand from marriage security and independence rather than romantic love. She is a fanatical housekeeper who nags her husband into a state of complete subordination. She drives away his family and alienates him from his former friends. Eventually she succeeds in driving him away entirely, and she is left alone with her "perfect" home.

An English play The Green Bay Tree by Mordaunt Shairp was produced in London in 1932, and in New York in 1933. The English version dealt quite frankly with the theme of incest, but Jed Harris' showing in New York was toned down to mere

suggestion, placing more emphasis on the social decadence of luxurious living which leads to a weakening of moral fiber. The story is about the rich, clever, and utterly selfish Mr. Dulcimer and his adopted son, Julian. Mr. Dulcimer has created for his foster son a life of exquisite luxury and uselessness. When Julian falls in love with Leonora Yale, an intelligent, energetic veterinary doctor, Dulcie is jealous and enraged. He cuts off Julian's allowance. Julian goes to live with his father, a reformed drunkard turned preacher, and with Leo's aid and encouragement attempts to prepare himself for a useful career. He hates both the hard work and the commonplaceness of his new home. Julian returns to Dulcimer's in the hope of persuading him to give him his allowance. When it is clear that he is again under the corrupt influence of his guardian, Julian's father kills Dulcimer. Julian cannot be saved, however. Leo, realizing that except for Dulcimer's death Julian would have gone to the highest bidder for his affections, gives him up. The play ends with Julian slipping naturally into Dulcimer's role of living.

An American play The Earth Between by Virgil Geddes also deals with the theme of incest. It tells the tragic story of Floy, a young farm girl, and her father, Nat Jennings. Nat sees in his daughter the reincarnation of his beloved dead wife, and transfers to her all of the frustrated desires which his loss brings. He refuses to let her associate with young

men, and is outraged when he learns of a strong attraction between Floy and a young neighbor, Jake. Nat is morally responsible for Jake's death from pneumonia, but so strong is the father's spell over Floy that she is unable to save the boy she loves or to save herself from the tragic sacrifice.

The first play dealing with homosexuality to play in America was the French drama The Captive by Edouard Bourdet. This was in 1926. Although dealing with a delicate subject, Bourdet's treatment was sincere and tactful. Its American run was brief, however, as the authorities closed it on the grounds of "corrupting public morals." It was seven years later before the taboo was lifted sufficiently to permit the long and successful run of Lillian Hellman's The Children's Hour. Produced in November of 1934, this play ran 692 performances. Placing the emphasis upon the public's cruelly ignorant treatment of the homosexual rather than on homosexuality itself, Miss Hellman tells the tragic story of the havoc a young girl's lie brought to the lives of two American schoolteachers.

When Mary Tilford in revenge for a school punishment tells her grandmother that there is something unnatural and nasty about the relationship between her teachers, Karen Wright and Martha Dobie, Mrs. Tilford removes Mary from the school. She promptly calls the other mothers to tell them of the horrible and scandalous news. The teachers' previous admirably record is at once blotted out of her mind by her

granddaughter's tale of unpardonable moral depravity.

Karen and Martha foolishly sue Mrs. Tilford for libel, and unfortunately lose their suit when Karen's aunt, their key witness, fails to appear. Karen breaks with her fiance when she realizes the gnawing doubt in his mind. Martha, either unbalanced by the impact of the hideous situation or shocked into reality by Mary's lies, confesses to her friend that she does "feel that way" toward her. She then commits suicide. Too late Mrs. Tilford learns the truth and offers public retribution.

Sidney Howard's two outstanding original plays point to the changed attitude in the theatre regarding subjects which were previously considered out of place on the stage. Although Mr. Howard's main interest seems to lie in character, his portraits are usually set against a background of social change. Like O'Neill, Mr. Howard belongs to the school of realists who attempts to interpret the truth as he sees it by refusing to sacrifice integrity to theatrical effect. Unlike O'Neill, however, his dramas reflect an optimistic view of life. His characters are allowed to work out their destinies rather than be submerged by a relentless, malevolent fate.

Mr. Howard is not a thesis dramatist, but the success of his plays is an excellent example of the accepted attitude of the audience to certain advanced social and moral attitudes.

The fact that these attitudes are rightly assumed to be present allows Mr. Howard to devote himself to character and situation. They Knew What They Wanted, 1924, and The Silver Cord, 1926, two of his best known works illustrate this point. The heroine of the first play has an illegitimate child conceived on the night of her marriage to a kindly old man who later adopts the child, accepts his wife, and befriends the lover, because the child was what he really wanted anyway. There is no cry for tolerance of the wrong doers---Howard assumes that his audience will not be shocked by the situation and devotes his skill to painting his three main characters.

The Silver Cord paints the unflatteringly sharp picture of self-centered widow whose devotion to her two sons is marked by an unconscious incestuous feeling. Unmasked by the elder son's wife, Mrs. Phelps loses David, but keeps Robert tied by the slightly tarnished silver cord she has fashioned. Again Howard's emphasis is not so much on the unnaturalness of the mother's emotion as upon complete character development, but as in the earlier play he rightly assumes acceptance of this trait.

The work of Eugene O'Neill has been discussed under a previous chapter heading, but the author wishes to point out that four of his major works (Anna Christie, Desire Under the Elms, Strange Interlude, and Mourning Becomes Electra) deal

with the sex motive treated in what previously would have been unconventional if not unacceptable. This too is significant in illustrating a trend.

The New American Comedy

While realism and propaganda were delighting the social critics, comedy after 1917 as before, continued to draw the cash customers. The kind of laughter it provided, however, was not the same. Most of the earlier comic types survived, but sentimental comedy fell into a consumptive decline, as did the tailored farce-comedy dear to William Collier and George M. Cohan. These forms, along with the romantic and period pieces, were soon taken over by the movies, which could handle them better for a less sophisticated audience. We find Mary Pickford and William Collier, for example, starring in 1920 in a screen version of the sentimental Pollyanna---already passe on Broadway----and in its search for tear-jerkers Hollywood exhumed even the hoary Way Down East. Domestic comedy, whether tearful or humorous, held its popularity in the theatre but tended to rise into high comedy and manners, as a comparison of Abie's Irish Rose and Life With Father would indicate. The pre-war bedroom farces and the timid discussions of trial marriage or feminism became more closely wedded to domestic drama and developed into what may loosely be called "sex-plays" concerned with such topics as marriage, divorce, and the Younger Generation. They, too, tended to become elevated to a comedy of manners. As for high comedy, practically nonexistent before 1917, it found worthy practitioners at least in Phillip Barry and S. N. Behrman. Perhaps the greatest change in the twenties and thirties was to be found in the gaudy blossoming of low comedy, which turned first to realism, then to satire and the depiction of mores, discovering thereby the potentialities of a genuine comic spirit. To an earlier, more polite audience the Kaufmans, the Harts, the Abbotts might seem to have debauched the comic muse into a ribald trollop of horselaugh and Bronx cheer, but the impartial and less sensitive observer must recognize her vast improvement in the process. One of the older comic formulas was well expressed by George M. Cohan in 1920: 'In my own plays I

have assumed that audiences wouldn't mind if the plays I wrote made them laugh a bit, cry a bit, and go out whistling.' The 1930 or 1940 audience would have little cause to cry and it would be more apt to go out leering than whistling.

Considering the period as a whole, one is struck not only by the infinite variety of comic forms, but also by the efforts, largely successful, to develop a true native comedy with distinctly American characters and themes. Like the serious playwrights the comic dramatists surveyed the American scene and faithfully recorded their observations....In lieu of indignation and propaganda, however, they preferred the traditional correctives of laughter and satire, and who will say that they were not more successful in the long run than the Jeremiahs of social significance?....Broadway comedy was still mainly escapist, but it was gradually becoming topical, realistic, outspoken; and on occasion it was not without its social comment.¹

It has been pointed out earlier how after the war ridicule of provincialism, bourgeois morality, and the gospel of material success played a large part in the work of contemporary dramatists. This mood expressed itself best in the smart satirical comedies of manners by George Kaufman, whom Mr. Gagey feels is more typically American than either O'Neill or Anderson. Mr. Kaufman prefers to work with collaborators and often seems to take on something of the quality of his partner, but it is apparent that credit for the hard-hitting satire and the fast pace of the play belongs to him. He is a prolific and successful playwright with a decided flair for the casting and staging of his plays.

¹ Gagey, op. cit., pages 175-176.

Exploiting the topical and more adept at wisecracks than epigrams, Mr. Kaufman nevertheless is outstanding in his field. His abilities include an unerring sense of timing and an instinct for dramatic construction which make his comedies "click".

The long list of successes which bear his name include the early Dulcy, 1921, Beggar on Horseback, 1924, The Butter and Egg Man, 1925, The Royal Family, 1928, June Moon, 1929, Of Thee I Sing, 1931, Dinner at Eight, 1932, and You Can't Take It With You, 1936.

When judged as a whole Mr. Kaufman's work is seen to hesitate between pure farce on the one hand and, on the other, topical satire of the sort which made such early plays as Dulcy, To the Ladies, and Beggar on Horseback a part of the post-war revolt against current ideals and sentiments. Even at his most purposeful, however, his references are always exclusively to the local and temporary. He never pretends to go below the surface of manners, and on the whole his later tendency has been to turn either in the direction of sentimental melodrama or mere farce rather than in the direction of a more deep-cutting satire.¹

Among the outstanding writers with whom Kaufman has collaborated are Marc Connelly, Edna Ferber, Ring Lardner, and Moss Hart. Kaufman's one independent play is the amusing piece on show business The Butter and Egg Man. Mr. Kaufman has been interested also in musical comedy, the most important of these being a contemporary musical satire on the

¹ Krutch, op. cit., page 151.

New Deal, I'd Rather Be Right written in 1937 with Moss Hart, and Of Thee I Sing, produced in 1931 and written in collaboration with Morrie Ryskind.

A writer who resembles Kaufman is George Abbott who also likes to work in collaboration. Abbott's forte is the play which involves the telling of a highly improbable story at breakneck speed by bizarre or raffish characters. Where Mr. Kaufman's plays move rapidly in plot and repartee, Abbott's plays also bustle with physical action, while the author often keeps two or three plots going simultaneously. Their astounding success would seem to indicate that they are exactly what the paying public wants. His first important farce, written with Phillip Dunning was Broadway produced in 1926. Its long run resulted in a "school" of imitators attempting not only Mr. Abbott's style but devoting themselves to his back-stage subject matter. Other notable success of his are Three Men On A Horse, 1935, Room Service, 1937, and What A Life, 1938.

Clare Boothe continued this highly successful tradition of fast and extravagant farce comedy with two long-run plays The Women, 1936, which has already been mentioned, and Kiss the Boys Good-bye, 1938, which concerns itself with Hollywood's long search for some one to play Scarlett O'Hara.

Farce does not, of course, make any pretense to literary merit, and sooner or later a style or formula palls and must be succeeded by a more original script.

A more serious writer of comedy is George Kelly whose realistic domestic comedies of the '20's reach a new high in that vein of endeavor. His Torch Bearers, 1922, lampooning the "artiness" of the Little Theatre movement, and The Show-off, 1924, were popular pieces, but of less dramatic importance than Craig's Wife, 1925, and Daisy Mayme, 1926. Both plays excell in characterization. Mr. Dickinson observes, "Kaufman...possesses a perception of reality that is so clear as to amount to a comic judgment. Only one writer has this gift in greater measure and this is George Kelly. To his gift of observation Kelly adds a strenuous moral sense, a respect for the standards of his art, that are by no means concealed by the light and frivolous air that his work carries."¹

The change in moral attitudes and the emphasis upon the sex theme in both melodrama and comedy has already been pointed out. Plays about the seemingly uninhibited Younger Generation, the New Woman, divorce, infidelity, and kindred subjects abound throughout the twenty years under discussion. Family life treated with humor rather than as a serious social problem or the subject for satire also found a secure place in the contemporary era. At its best such domestic comedy came close to representing the real life of the times, or presented a nostalgic picture of the family life of an earlier and less hurried time such as O'Neill's Ah, Wilderness and Lindsay and Crouse's long-run Life With Father, 1939. Anderson's

¹ Dickinson, op. cit., page 245.

Saturday's Children, 1927, proved to be a highly successful production combining both realistic comedy and drama of social criticism.

Domestic comedy, the problem play, and the drama concerned largely with sex have shown a gradual tendency to sophistication and high comedy with both brilliance of style and satire. Phillip Barry, in his comedies of manners, reveals a gift for brilliant if slightly mad dialogue and a flair for comic contrast. A similar theme, the antithesis between the commercial and non-commercial philosophy of life, runs throughout most of his important work. His most characteristic plays picture the lives, manners, and attitudes of the well-bred, well-to-do sophisticates of modern American society. His most successful comedies have exhibited not only a sparkling wit but also a seriousness of thought and apprehension of life. The Philadelphia Story, 1929, Tomorrow and Tomorrow, 1931, Holiday, 1928, Hotel Universe, and Here Come the Clowns, 1938, are representative.

Similar to Barry's work are the plays of S. N. Behrman whose best drama reveals the same flair for witty dialogue and psychological insight. Less a master of plot than Barry, Behrman, nevertheless has mastered the art of self-revealing conversation and epigrammatic style to a greater degree. His comedies of ideas are remarkable in their comprehension of the trends and impression of the times. His important plays include The Second Man, 1927, The Meteor, 1929, Brief Moment,

1931, Biography, 1931, Rain From Heaven, 1934, and End of Summer, 1936.

Mr. Krutch says of Behrman, ".....from the beginning it was evident that he had accepted and assimilated the Comic Spirit so successfully that he could write with a consistent clarity of thought and feeling unrivaled on our stage."¹

Mr. Barrett Clark, commenting on Barry and Behrman concludes,

Both men have consistently...brought to their work a certain distinction in the writing and point of view that may be described as adult....They have looked upon the writing of plays as a means of expressing a mature and sophisticated attitude toward contemporary life, and have scrupulously tried to write dialogue that should be something more than a means of translating action into 'theatre'.²

Robert Sherwood won the Pulitzer prize for two of his comedies, Idiot's Delight, 1936, and Abe Lincoln In Illinois, 1938. His best work is marked by a discriminating satire and slightly whimsical humor. His first produced play was a high-spirited Shavian comedy The Road To Rome, 1927. Mr. Sherwood is a versatile writer who has had a great deal of popular success with his sophisticated comedies, character studies, and plays in which the "idea" is predominant. His best known work of the period is Reunion in Vienna, 1931, starring the Lunte; The Petrified Forest, 1935, a dramatic

¹ Krutch, op. cit., page 181.

² Clark, op. cit., page 703.

comedy of the frustration of the post-war "lost generation"; Idiot's Delight, 1936, and Abe Lincoln in Illinois, 1938, a chronicle historical play declaring an abiding faith in democracy.

Since most of the period's leading dramatists tried their hand at comedy, the range of style, subject matter, and intent is so wide and varied as to make generalizations as to trends particularly difficult. Perhaps only two characteristics can be said to mark the bulk of comic material produced between 1920-1940: a completely realistic, unromantic approach and a general lack of inhibition. The American sense of humor apparently is tickled by a great many different things ranging from hard-boiled low comedy to satirical or sophisticated drawing-room dramas.

CONCLUSION

The author has attempted to point to the main trends in American drama during the very interesting and active dramatic period 1920-1940. This thesis has explored the new realism which dominated the stage after World War I and pointed to the changes in attitude toward such phases of contemporary life as the interest in psychology, and the total social scene which includes morals, economics, politics, and war.

The new realistic approach brought many new subjects under discussion and encouraged much experimentation in both form and style. The period is marked by a large degree of pessimism. Particularly in the psychological drama does one find the note of frustration and the denial of man's conscious will, or his ability to escape his fate. Influenced greatly by the modern dramatic pioneers on the Continent, American drama, nevertheless, gradually came to stand on its own feet. The interest in native American themes and characters begun before the War developed rapidly during the twenty years under observation. Although much of the outstanding work of the period is socially critical, belief in and appreciation of American culture as distinct and different yet as noteworthy as that of Europe is evident everywhere. After the satirical and debunking attacks which were so prevalent in the early part of the period, particular interest developed in

our country as material worthy of dramatic consideration. The plays written on regional themes are especially noteworthy of this trend.

Since World War II the drama has continued to hold an important place in American life both in literary consideration and in the field of pure entertainment. It is said that much of the vigor and enthusiasm of the earlier revolutionists has burned itself out, and many articles are current on "What's Wrong With the American Theatre?"

Technically, certainly, continued strides are being made, and it is encouraging to note that a new crusade for a National Theatre is making some definite gains in the form of the ANTA (American National Theatre and Academy). This organization, chartered by Congress in 1935 to stimulate theatrical production in every state, has finally become active enough to bear watching. It now operates a bureau of service and advice for both professional and non-professional groups, and has corporate members in every state as well as in Hawaii, Alaska, and Japan. The ANTA has been given a seat on the National Committee for Unesco. Its directors include Brooks Atkinson, Robert Sherwood, Arthur Hopkins, Billy Rose, Gilbert Miller, and Robert Edmond Jones. Its concrete achievements to date include the Experimental Theatre, the State Theatre of Virginia, two talent showcases, and the first children's Theatre Directory. The organization, besides making grants and loans to worthy theatrical enterprises has published Blueprint for

the Summer Theatre and built an outstanding record library of important stars in their outstanding plays. Its highest ambition is to form a truly National Theatre modeled somewhat on the lines of the old Federal Theatre Project, but divorced from political or governmental control.

Another encouraging sign is the increased interest in the formation of touring repertoire companies, and the talk of the revival of the old Group Theatre along lines more in keeping with the times.

Those who try perennially to diagnose the ills of "The Fabulous Invalid" attack the role and power of the modern dramatic critic, the increasingly unhealthy financial situation which makes production such a gamble and which is especially hard on the young playwright or actor, the extreme centralization of the drama in New York City, and the rivalry in competition offered by the movies, radio, and television.

Despite all of these obvious ills, there are at least some bright and promising aspects of the situation as well. Our scenic artists are unequalled anywhere, and America possesses good directors and excellent actors. Most important, however, is the fact that nearly all of our great dramatists are still alive and reasonably can be expected to continue to produce work of merit. Moreover, younger men such as Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Robert Ardrey, and Irwin Shaw are already showing much promise as outstanding dramatists.

The present period is one of world confusion, stress, and restlessness. What form the drama will take is only one of the unanswerable questions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author wishes to express her gratitude to her major instructor, Professor Robert W. Conover, Professor H. W. Davis, Head, Department of English, and Mr. Thomas Trenkle, Department of Speech, for the criticism, guidance, and encouragement which made this thesis possible.

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- (30) Merton of the Movies, Kaufman and Connelly, Mantle '22.
- (31) Once In A Lifetime, Kaufman and Hart, Mantle '30.
- (32) Kiss The Boys Goodbye, Boothe, Mantle '38.

- (33) The Women, Boothe, Mantle '36.
- (34) Rain, Colton and Randolph, Mantle '22.
- (35) The Bride of the Lamb, Hurlburt, Mantle '25.
- (36) Bless You, Sister, Albaugh, Bone, New York, 1927.
- (37) The Petrified Forest, Sherwood, Charles Scribners, Sons.
N.Y.
- (38) The Show-Off, Kelly, Mantle '23.
- (39) Dinner At Eight, Kaufman and Ferber, Mantle '32.
- (40) House of Connelly, Green, Mantle, '31.
- (41) Native Son, Green and Wright, Mantle '40.
- (42) In Abraham's Bosom, Green, Robert McBride, New York.
- (43) The Children's Hour, Hellman, Mantle '34.
- (44) The Little Foxes, Hellman, Mantle '38.
- (45) Tobacco Road, Kirkland, Viking Press, N.Y.
- (46) Hymn To The Rising Sun, Odets, Best Short Plays of the
Social Theatre, Random House, N.Y.
- (47) Success Story, Lawson, Farrar, N.Y.
- (48) Processional, Lawson, Contemporary Drama (American Plays)
Charles Scribner's Sons, N.Y.
- (49) The Adding Machine, Rice, Doubleday, Dorsn, Garden City,
New York.
- (50) Street Scene, Rice, Mantle '28.
- (51) Winterset, Anderson, Anderson House, Washington, D. C.
- (52) Masque of Kings, Anderson, ibid.
- (53) Joan of Lorraine, Anderson, ibid.
- (54) High Tor, Mantle '36.
- (55) Both Your Houses, Anderson, Mantle '32.

- (56) Elizabeth, The Queen, Anderson, Treasury of the Theatre, Gassner, op. cit.
- (57) Gods of Lighting, Anderson, Longman's Green and Co., N.Y.
- (58) Dead End, Kingsley, Mantle '36.
- (59) They Shall Not Die, Wexley, Mantle '33.
- (60) The Cradle Shall Rock, Blitzstein, Best Short Plays of the Social Theatre, op. cit.
- (61) Strike Up the Band, Kaufman, Random House, N.Y.
- (62) Of Thee I Sing, Kaufman and Ryskind, Mantle '31.
- (63) We, The People, Rice, Mantle '32.
- (64) Peace On Earth, Sklar and Maltz, Samuel French Co., N.Y.
- (65) Stevedore, Sklar and Peters, Covici, Friede, Inc., N.Y.
- (66) Waiting For Lefty, Odets, Best Short Plays of the Social Theatre, op. cit.
- (67) Til The Day I Die, Odets, Famous Plays of 1936, Gollancz, London.
- (68) Awake and Sing, Odets, Treasury of the Theatre, op. cit.
- (69) Golden Boy, Odets, Random House, N.Y.
- (70) What Price Glory, Andersen and Stallings, Treasury of the Theatre, op. cit.
- (71) Wings Over Europe, Nicholas and Browne, Dramas of Modernism and Their Forerunners, Little Brown and Co., Boston.
- (72) For Services Rendered, Maugham, Doubleday-Doran Co., N.Y.
- (73) The Constant Wife, Maugham, Mantle '26.
- (74) The Breadwinners, Maugham, D. Dorsn, and Co., N.Y.
- (75) If This Be Treason, Holme, Macmillan Co., N.Y.
- (76) Bury the Dead, Shaw, Random House, N.Y.
- (77) Young Love, Raphaelson, Bonaventos, N.Y.
- (78) Yes, My Darling Daughter, Reed, Mantle '36.

- (79) They Knew What They Wanted, Howard, Mantle '24.
- (80) The Silver Cord, Howard, Mantle '26.
- (81) Gypsy, Anderson, Mantle '28.
- (82) Saturday's Childron, Anderson, Mantle '29.
- (83) The Green Bay Tree, Shairp, Mantle, '33-'34.
- (84) Craig's Wife, Kelly, Mantle '25.
- (85) The Earth Between, V. Geddes, French, op. cit.
- (86) Dulcy, Kaufman-Connelly, Mantle '21.
- (87) June Moon, Kaufman-Lardner, Mantle '29.
- (88) You Can't Take It With You, Kaufman-Hart, Mantle '36.
- (89) Broadway, Dunning-Abbott, Mantle '26.
- (90) Three Men On A Horse, Abbott, Twenty Best Plays of the Modern Theatre, Cassner, Macmillan Co., N.Y.
- (91) What A Life, Abbott, French, op. cit.
- (92) The Torch Bearers, Kelly, French, op. cit.
- (93) Life With Father, Lindsay and Crouse, Mantle '39.
- (94) Holiday, Barry, Mantle '28.
- (95) The Philadelphia Story, Barry, Mantle '38.
- (96) The Animal Kingdom, Barry, Mantle '31.
- (97) Here Come the Clowns, Barry, Mantle '30.
- (98) Tomorrow and Tomorrow, Barry, Mantle '30.
- (99) The Second Man, Behrman, Representative American Drama, Little, Brown Co., Boston.
- (100) Brief Moment, Behrman, Mantle '31.
- (101) Rain From Heaven, Behrman, Twentieth Century Plays, Chandler, Nelson, N.Y.
- (102) End of Summer, Behrman, Mantle '35.

- (103) No Time For Comedy, Behrman, Mantle '38.
- (104) Idiot's Delight, Sherwood, Mantle '35.
- (105) Abe Lincoln In Illinois, Sherwood, Mantle '38.
- (106) Reunion in Vienna, Sherwood, Mantle '31.
- (107) Let Freedom Ring, Bein, French, op. cit.
- (108) Our Town, Wilder, Mantle '37.
- (109) Susan and God, Crothers, Mantle '37.
- (110) Claudia, Franken, Mantle '40.
- (111) Design For Living, Coward, Mantle '32.
- (112) Allison's House, Glaspell, Mantle '21.
- (113) Hell Bent For Heaven, Hughes, Mantle '23.
- (114) Green Grow the Lilacs, Riggs, Mantle '30.
- (115) The Time of Your Life, Saroyan, Mantle '39.