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### **Modern American Drama, 1945–2000**

In this new edition of the widely acclaimed *Modern American Drama* Christopher Bigsby completes his survey of post-war and contemporary theatre and brings the reader up to 2000. While retaining the key elements of the first edition, including surveys of those major figures who have shaped post-war American drama, such as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, David Mamet and Sam Shepard, Bigsby also explores the most recent works and performances: these include plays by established dramatists such as Miller's *The Ride down Mount Morgan* and Albee's *Three Tall Women*, as well as works by relatively newer playwrights Paula Vogel, Tony Kushner and Terrence McNally among others. Bigsby also provides a new chapter, 'Beyond Broadway', and offers an analysis of how theatre has formed and influenced the millennial culture of America.

CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY is Professor of American Studies at the University of East Anglia and has published more than twenty-five books covering American theatre, popular culture and British drama, including *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama* and *Contemporary American Playwrights*. He is co-editor, with Don Wilmeth, of *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*. He is also an award-winning novelist and regular radio and television broadcaster.

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## *Preface to First Edition*

Ten years ago I wrote a study of twentieth-century American drama. It quickly outgrew its proposed length, expanding from one brief volume to three extensive ones. Eight years later I was asked to write a 30,000 word section of the Cambridge History of American Theatre. I had reached 170,000 words before I realised I had inadvertently written another book. Discipline has never been my strong suit. I did then complete the original commission but what follows is that accidental study. It covers territory I have charted before and there are bound to be a few echoes, but it is surprising how a familiar country can change over time. The book is offered as a series of reflections on American drama in the second half of the twentieth century. It does not aim to be comprehensive. What I hope it does is reflect my fascination with writers who in staging their plays have also staged the anxieties, the tensions and the myths of a nation en route from a world war to the end of a millennium.

## *Preface to Second Edition*

Eight years after the first edition, I return to bring the story up to the year 2000. In 45,000 additional words I have tried to expand on the careers of those in the original edition and add something on those who should have been given greater space the first time around or whose careers blossomed in the 1990s.

All organising principles are suspect. No taxonomy without misrepresentation. Nonetheless, necessity rules and I have chosen to gather a number of writers in a chapter called 'Beyond Broadway'. It is, heaven knows, a vague enough term, and indicates a structural change in the American theatre that goes back several decades. It is, however, probably as good as any, provided one remembers that those gathered together in this way are heterogeneous talents united by nothing, necessarily, beyond a belief that Broadway was to be neither natural home nor validating agency.

When Henry Luce declared that his was to be the 'American Century', he was hardly making a high-risk prophecy. Financial and military power were already accruing in the face of collapsing empires. I doubt, however, that he gave much thought to culture. That his prophecy should also have proved true, in large degree, of the novel, poetry, art, music and dance would no doubt have surprised him. That it should also have proved true of the theatre would surely have been more of a shock. After centuries of laments at the lack of native playwrights (a lament not entirely justified), America produced a series of dramatists who not only engaged with the realities, the illusions and values of their own society but proved to be powerful and defining presences on the international stage.

The process, of course, was already underway when this book begins, O'Neill receiving the Nobel Prize in 1936, still, astonishingly, the only American playwright to be so honoured. The second half of the century, however, saw the emergence of writers (and also actors, directors,

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designers) who helped shape the way we see the world and whose impress is clear on the work of their contemporaries around the world.

Again, I must underscore what I said in the preface to the first edition. This is not an encyclopedia. Even expanded space precludes addressing the work of all those writers whose achievement I would wish to acknowledge. Nonetheless, I trust that at the very least it provides evidence of the continuing power and significance of American playwrights as we passed through that artificial barrier which separates one disordered century from another.

Perhaps in the future we shall no longer speak of American drama but of an English language drama. Perhaps even that will begin to seem unnecessarily parochial and limiting. Is difference, after all, not being sandblasted away by a homogeneity claimed as evidence of the modern, or postmodern? National cultures, competing ideologies, it is argued, may be nothing more than quotations, so many stories within a master story which speaks of a planetary consciousness, to be welcomed as evidence of a new understanding and deplored as a consequence of transnational corporations imposing their own models of the desirable. I rather doubt it.

As we passed through the invisible barrier of the millennium, filling the sky with fireworks, from Beijing to Boston, as if to light our way and cast out demons, nationalism, religious fundamentalism, cultural and gender difference seemed to many to contain the essence of their being, to define, in effect, who they were.

On the other hand, writers, like all of us, inhabit a world not defined by national, or, indeed, other borders. *King Lear*, as Peter Brook has said, is the story of a family and that is the door through which we can all enter that annihilating play. There is a shared world of experience, of symbols, of knowledge. Then, again, writers reach out to other writers as their source and inspiration, and feel happier, often, in their own company than in that of their fellow citizens, who care less for striking through the pasteboard mask. Yet, even so, we are in part shaped, in our acquiescence and our rebellion, by the proximate world. We are contained (if not absolutely) not only within a language but a set of presumptions, values, myths which speak of the particular as well as the general. And though America remains a contested space, in which identity must, immigrant country that it is, constantly be making and remaking itself, the theatre remains a place where that identity continues to be explored.

By the same token, the triumphs and failures of a country born out of



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a utopian impulse are still, it seems, to be examined and tested, and where else but on a stage which brings together the private and the public, which presents us simultaneously with appearance and the real, the dream and the actuality. Perhaps, indeed, in some ways it is that tension between a utopian rhetoric and a diminished and flawed experience which not only connects the various writers in this book but defines the very nature of the American writer.