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0521818192 - Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century

John H. Houchin

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Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century

John Houchin explores the impact of censorship in twentieth-century American theatre. He argues that theatrical censorship coincided with significant challenges to religious, political, and cultural systems. Arranged in chronological order, this study provides a summary of theatre censorship in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and then analyzes key episodes from 1900 to 2000. These include attempts to censure Olga Nethersole for her production of *Sapho* in 1901 and the theatre riots of 1913 that greeted the Abbey Theatre's production of *Playboy of the Western World*. Houchin explores the efforts to suppress plays in the 1920s that dealt with transgressive sexual material and investigates Congress' politically motivated assaults on plays and actors during the 1930s and 1940s. He investigates the impact of racial violence, political assassinations, and the Vietnam War on the trajectory of theatre in the 1960s and concludes by examining the response to gay activist plays such as *Angels in America*.

John Houchin is Associate Professor of Theatre at Boston College, Massachusetts. He is the editor of *The Critical Response to Eugene O'Neill* (1993). His work has also been published in *The Drama Review*, *The New England Theatre Journal*, *The Journal of American Theatre and Drama*, *Theatre History Studies*, and the *Eugene O'Neill Review*.

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*To my wife
Pamela Spring Newton
For her love and support*

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Acknowledgments

I began researching this topic in 1994. Initially, I wrote articles on isolated examples of theatrical censorship that occurred in the early part of the twentieth century. I naively concluded that really there were not enough examples of this kind of activity to support a book-length study. Of course, there was the opposition that plays by Ibsen and Shaw encountered in the first decade of the century, but these were the results of slow-dying Victorian prudery. I knew about attempts to stop *Hair* and *Oh! Calcutta!* in the South, but I assumed that these campaigns represented conservative religious biases that had retarded the intellectual and cultural development of that region for over a century. Surely the protection afforded by the First Amendment would not have permitted very many egregious attempts to suppress stage plays. I quickly changed my mind. As I continued to research this topic, I was astonished at the staggering number of instances where senators, representatives, popes, legislators, teachers, district attorneys, judges, bishops, school boards, and private citizens had attempted to alter or suppress theatrical productions. Moreover, efforts to censor shows made headlines in major newspapers for weeks at a time, particularly if the offenders were arrested and tried. Thus, the sheer number of investigative articles, editorials, and letters to the editor that appeared in metropolitan dailies was immense. And then there were pro and con essays that appeared in news magazines, theatre journals, law reviews, and organizational newsletters. With the advent of the information age, National Public Radio and Cable News Network, not to mention numerous websites on the Internet, broadcast assessments, interviewed principals, and presented editorial opinion. By the time I began to write this book in 1997, I was no longer worried about a scarcity of data. I was, however, concerned about my ability to condense this mountain of information into a volume whose length would not cause publishers to laugh hysterically at my pretentiousness.

I am indebted to Cambridge University Press for making this project a reality. Don Wilmeth, editor of Cambridge's Studies in American Theatre and Drama, and Victoria Cooper, my editor at Cambridge, have been particularly patient and encouraging. I am also indebted to the administration of the College of Arts and Sciences at Boston College – former dean Father Robert J. Barth, S.J., Dean Joseph F. Quinn, and Dean of Graduate Studies Michael Smyer – for providing me with material and intellectual support that enabled me to complete this protracted investigation.

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