The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity

The Provincetown Players was a major cultural institution in Greenwich Village from 1916 to 1922, when American Modernism was being conceived and developed. This study considers the group's vital role and its wider significance in twentieth-century American culture. Describing the varied and often contentious response to modernity among the Players, Murphy reveals the central contribution of the group of poets around Alfred Kreymborg's *Others* magazine, including William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Mina Loy, and Djuna Barnes, and such modernist artists as Marguerite and William Zorach, Charles Demuth, and Brör Nordfeldt, to the Players' developing modernist aesthetics. The impact of their modernist art and ideas on such central Provincetown figures as Eugene O'Neill, Susan Glaspell, and Edna St. Vincent Millay, and a second generation of artists, such as e. e. cummings and Edmund Wilson, who wrote plays for the Provincetown Playhouse, is evident in Murphy's close analysis of over thirty plays.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521838528

First published 2005

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-13 978-0-521-83852-8 hardback
ISBN-10 0-521-83852-5 hardback

For my favorite performers,
Aldo, Dante, Elaine, Katie, Kevin, Courtney, Andy, Janet, Jen,
and Mike

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The publisher would like to apologize for the poor quality of some of these early theatre photographs – every effort was made to make the reproduction as clear as possible.

Preface

ALONG WITH *THE MASSES* MAGAZINE, ALFRED STIEGLITZ'S Photo-Secession Gallery, known as 291, Mabel Dodge's famous salon, and the Armory Show of 1913, the Provincetown Players was one of the central cultural phenomena in New York's Greenwich Village during the period between 1912 and 1919 that is known as the Little Renaissance. To list the Provincetown's founding members is to chronicle the swiftly changing currents of American avant-garde thought during this period. Central among them were George Cram Cook, a professor of literature, sometime socialist, and philosophical monist who was devoted to the ideal of Dionysian primitivism and hoped to build a Utopian art collective in the Provincetown; John Reed, a Harvard graduate who was to be one of the founders of the Communist Party of the United States and to write a well-known eyewitness account of the Bolshevik Revolution in *Ten Days That Shook the World*; socialists Max Eastman and Floyd Dell, editors of *The Masses*; feminist journalist and labor activist, Mary Heaton Vorse; journalist and "philosophical anarchist" Hutchins Hapgood; fiction writers Susan Glaspell, Neith Boyce, and Wilbur Daniel Steele; feminist lawyer Ida Rauh; painters Charles Demuth, Brör Norfeldt, and Marguerite and William Zorach. Although the founding members shared an ideal of collective creation and a commitment to experimentation, originality, and the "New," they agreed about little else, and the spirit of freewheeling debate pervaded the Provincetown from its inception.

Despite its relatively short life, from 1916 to 1922, the Provincetown Players was the most significant and the most influential American theatre group of the early twentieth century. It was the first theatre group in the United States with a serious artistic agenda, which included the production of new plays by American playwrights and the employment of innovative and experimental production methods. The Provincetown's accomplishments in the theatre are

many and varied, and they have been well documented. Major studies include Helen Deutsch and Stella Hanau's descriptive overview of the theatre's history, *The Provincetown: A Story of the Theatre* (1931); Robert K. Sarlós's study of George Cram Cook's shaping influence on the theatre from 1915 to 1922, *Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players: Theatre in Ferment* (1982), Cheryl Black's study of the women participants and the influence of first-wave feminism on the Players, *The Women of Provincetown, 1915–1922* (2002), and Barbara Ozieblo's *Susan Glaspell: A Critical Biography* (2000), which deals extensively with the Provincetown Players. This book builds gratefully on their work, but differs from it in that its focus is not on the Provincetown's role in theatre history, but on its wider significance in twentieth-century American culture, specifically the links between the theatre practitioners and the artists, writers, and thinkers who are associated with the development of the self-consciously modern American culture during the Little Renaissance that preceded a full-blown American Modernism in the arts.

Among writers, the Little Renaissance was characterized by a number of little magazines, ephemeral in nature, but important for the opportunity they gave to poets who were experimenting with what they called the "new verse." Among them were *The Glebe* and *Others*, which were edited by Alfred Kreymborg, who was to become, along with the painters and poets William and Marguerite Zorach, a key figure connecting the Provincetown with the new work that was being done in poetry and the other arts. Although it existed for only four years, *Others* published some of the most important work by many of the most significant American poets who are associated with modernism. It was Kreymborg who contributed the first modernist play to the Provincetown in 1916, *Lima Beans*, which featured *Others* poets William Carlos Williams and Mina Loy as actors. Besides Kreymborg himself, a number of the poets in the *Others* group would participate in the Provincetown Players, including Wallace Stevens, Maxwell Bodenheim, Djuna Barnes, William and Marguerite Zorach, Kathleen ("Kitty") Cannell, and Evelyn Scott. Once the *Others* group began producing plays, Edna St. Vincent Millay, already famous as both poet and actor, became part of the group, writing the most significant play to emerge from it, the anti-war fantasy *Aria da Capo* (1919).

The Provincetown Players lived a short, explosive, and very productive life. By 1922, when the group disbanded, it had produced 93 plays by 47 different American playwrights, and had nurtured the careers of Eugene O'Neill and Susan Glaspell as well as opening up the American theatre to theatrical idioms beyond the limits of realism. The original group was

succeeded in Greenwich Village's Provincetown Playhouse by the Experimental Theatre, Inc., a group that included many of the Players and was run by what is known as the Triumvirate, Eugene O'Neill, designer Robert Edmond Jones, and producer Kenneth Macgowan. Under the new aegis, another wave of experimentation took place in what was now a fully formed and self-conscious modernist aesthetic. This included plays by O'Neill that he considered too experimental or too daring for Broadway, such as *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, *The Ancient Mariner*, *The Fountain*, and *Desire Under the Elms*, and plays by modernist writers such as Edmund Wilson and e. e. cummings. In the hands of its founders and subsequent members, the Provincetown Players became a cultural crucible in which the disparate and seemingly random ideas, aesthetics, and cultural values swirling around Greenwich Village in the teens and twenties were annealed into a practical aesthetics for the theatre. The effect of this process is evident not only in the group's own plays, but in the subsequent work of the many artists and thinkers who were members of the Provincetown, or who simply spent time at its theatre, its café, and its legendary parties, participating in the continuous discussion of political, social, and aesthetic ideas and values that was central to its identity. Young artists and intellectuals as disparate as Waldo and Florence Kiper Frank, Edmund Wilson, Sophie Treadwell, S. Foster Damon, Agnes De Mille, Mike Gold, Ann Sutherland, and John Huston gravitated to the Provincetown as naturally as they had gravitated to Greenwich Village, participating in a diverse, vociferous, contradictory, and productive community. This book records the process of creating an important element of cultural modernity that occurred at the Provincetown in the teens and twenties as these artists and intellectuals interacted and worked together, and suggests the impact that the aesthetic ideas formed within the Provincetown movement had on American culture, not only in drama and theatre, but in the fiction, poetry, criticism, and intellectual history of the twentieth century.

It should be emphasized that, while all of the members of the Provincetown Players were enthusiastic participants in the culture of modernity, or what they tended to refer to as the "New," whether in the arts, in philosophical, social, and political ideas, or in the living of their daily lives, they were not all committed to what was already being called "modernism" in 1915, particularly in the visual arts and poetry. Adele Heller and Lois Rudnick's *1915: The Cultural Moment* (1991) eloquently demonstrates the broad cultural context for modernity that existed when

the Provincetown Players was being formed. Building on this foundation, the first chapter of this book lays out specific cultural influences on the group's founding members, from the ideas of William James, John Dewey, Sigmund Freud, and Friedrich Nietzsche, to their contemporary versions of anarchism and socialism, to the first-wave feminism in which many of the Players participated, to the aesthetic ideas ranging from the Ashcan School social realism of Robert Henri, John Sloan, and George Bellows to the Fauve and Cubist aesthetics that several of the members had brought back with them from Paris. This account is meant to show the extraordinary range of the founding Players within the culture of modernity, from extreme libertarianism to socialism in politics, and from social realism to pure formalism in art.

In the drama of the Players, this range of aesthetics tended to come down to a split between realist or representational drama and non-representational, or what they preferred to call "presentational," drama, that is, drama that did not pretend to represent anything but itself. In addition to its resistance to the mimetic, this non-representational drama had a number of characteristics that have come to be associated with modernism in the US: the use of myth, literature, or history as setting; fragmentation of the narrative trajectory; the abstraction of some characters into types or symbolic figures; the representation of a character's subjectivity on the stage, the theatrical equivalent of "stream of consciousness" in fiction; abstract, often symbolic set designs and costumes in which color and design were paramount; dialogue that was intended to be poetic, symbolic, and suggestive, rather than to approximate normal speech. As in the visual arts, the most noticeable characteristics of this drama were its abstraction from "the real" and the playwrights' and theatre artists' intention to synthesize all of the elements of the theatre into the creation of an organic, fully authentic and autonomous work of art.

While this study is focused mainly on the self-consciously modernist non-representational plays produced at the Provincetown Playhouse, one of its basic working assumptions is the importance of considering these plays in the context of the broader sense of modernity that prevailed among the Provincetown Players. The second chapter of this book considers all of the plays the Players produced in the important founding year of 1916. Chapter 3 details the important interrelationship between the Players and the group of poets around *Others* magazine, who were responsible for most of the modernist plays that were produced by the Provincetown Players, plays that helped propel Eugene O'Neill and

Susan Glaspell, the subject of chapter 4, in the modernist direction they took after 1916. Finally, chapter 5 suggests some of the ways in which the work of the Players influenced the development of modernism, both in the theatre and beyond it.

Acknowledgments

AS ALWAYS, MY PRIMARY DEBT IS TO MY HUSBAND, GEORGE Monteiro, who not only read every word of this manuscript and gave me the benefit of his wisdom and support throughout the project, but traveled with me to many libraries and archives, and on occasion even took notes. Don Wilmeth and Rebecca Jones have been exemplary editors, and I am grateful for their help. I am pleasantly indebted to my colleague, Glen MacLeod, for his excellent advice and to my gifted research assistant, Laurie Cella, for her unfailing good work and good humor. For providing the funds that made her help possible and for the funds that allowed me to travel to the libraries whose archives were indispensable to this study, I am grateful to the University of Connecticut Foundation. For the fellowship year that gave me the time to write the book, I am equally grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities and to the University of Connecticut.

The research collections of a number of libraries have been indispensable to this project, in particular, the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and the Berg Collection, New York Public Library; the Harris Collection of the John Hay Library, Brown University; the Library of Congress; the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; the Harvard Theatre Collection; the Houghton Library, Harvard University; the Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University; the Charles E. Shain Library, Connecticut College; the University of Maryland Library; and most importantly, the libraries of my home institution, the University of Connecticut, particularly the Homer Babbidge Library and its Inter-Library Loan Division, and the Thomas R. Dodd Research Center. I am especially grateful to the many librarians and curators who have given me the benefit of their experience and expertise in the course of this project.

For permission to reprint photographs from their collections, I am grateful to the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations; the Smithsonian Institution; and the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.