Introduction

R. Barton Palmer and William Robert Bray

Robert Knopf is of course correct in observing that the cinema is the "youthful offspring" of an "ancient mother," the theatre; so it is hardly surprising that the two institutions, and the performance arts which are at their center, have enjoyed in the US and elsewhere a close and mutually supportive relationship since the birth of the new medium (and soon business) at the end of the nineteenth century.[1] In the early 1900s, the venues for programs of one- and two-reeler films were converted storefronts popularly known as nickelodeons. But in about fifteen years, the American film business started decamping to purpose-built auditoria that looked and functioned much like theatres, which was the name they were given. Inside, except for the presence of a screen and projection booth hidden from view, these elaborate "picture palaces" perfectly resembled the playhouses densely clustered in entertainment districts such as New York's Times Square. These city-center first-run theatres came to feature spacious lobbies, stadium seating, curtained proscenium stages, encircling balconies, theatrical lighting, spacious rest rooms, and orchestra pits. The fully developed "photoplay" of the era, with its formal structure based on time-tested dramaturgical principles, closely resembled the stage productions that often served filmmakers more directly as source material.

Both theatre and film are performance media invested in the design and production (in the largest sense of that term) of live action, even if this action is transformed by photography into a different form of artistic material. Because of the elemental homology of the two arts, actors and other creative workers (such as directors and art designers) could easily work in both. Moreover, techniques and traditions, such as acting styles, could be readily shared. And the two institutions were not true competitors in the marketplace, though both were angling for their share of the entertainment dollar. Addressing distinct, but overlapping clienteles, the American theatre and cinema were disposed toward a symbiosis that made for constant, mutually profitable exchange, in part because film, utilizing

photography and thus "capturing" performance (which could then be infinitely duplicated), could overcome the necessary existential and logistical difficulties of readily nationalizing theatre offerings and reaching the proverbial mass public. A filmed drama could be everywhere at once, with its "performances" not limited in time, but always capable of being revived. Screen versioning provided a stage production with a reach and influence unthinkable for the theatre, whose clientele was geographically limited and whose patrons, because of the continuing costs of live production, were customarily relatively well-off urbanites who could afford ticket prices that were much higher than the commercial cinema.

Plays, of course, present fewer of the problems involved in adapting literary fiction for the screen, and, already produced, come with a vision for their effective mounting that is readily available should the filmmakers desire to make use of it, as often happens. Of proven popularity, hit shows from Broadway have thus been routinely adapted for the screen in something resembling (and often derived from) their stage form. In fact, it has been unusual since the 1930s for a successful Broadway play to not be adapted as a film. With television providing yet another exhibition outlet for full-length features since the postwar era, the screen versioning of plays has only become even more common.

It is this tradition of adaptation that the present volume addresses. The essays collected here, however, focus neither on the Victorian stage, so influential on film production from 1900 through 1920 but today no longer much esteemed, nor on the well-established tradition of what we might call entertainment productions – the musicals, revues, and light comedy or dramas that have constituted an important sector of Broadway offerings since the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Instead, the concern here is with the self-consciously "modern" theatre that emerges, at first rather defiantly, as the artistic and institutional "other" of the Victorian commercial stage. For literary critics the term "modern" usually reflects some scheme of periodization (modern as opposed to medieval, for example). In this instance, however, modern refers to a specific development within American theatrical writing and production, and it carries with it strong associations of value, marking off an area of highbrow cultural production from more middlebrow or popular forms.

1915: the beginnings of a national theatre

Literary traditions do not customarily begin with a single event, but modern American drama assumed its characteristic theatricality, themes, and tendentiousness in 1915 with the foundation of the Provincetown

Players, which was, in the words of historian Brenda Murphy, "the most significant and most influential American theatre group of the early twentieth century . . . the first with a serious artistic agenda."[2] With the formation and subsequent flourishing of this playwriting producing collective, the international modernism introduced to the American public two years earlier in the famed Armory Exposition assumed a public, even at times provocative form. By 1915, it became possible, so suggest critics Adele Heller and Lois Rudnick, to speak unhesitatingly of "the New Politics, the New Woman, the New Psychology, the New Art, and the New Theatre."[3] With chapters devoted to each of these aspects of radical change, their edited volume *1915: The Cultural Moment* makes a strong argument that during this year the previously inchoate movement to "build a vital national culture" took on an increasingly concrete form.[4]

The era's politically active and culturally progressive Bohemians were strongly attracted to the theatre, which was hardly surprising. For this was the literary form, with its potentially forceful performative presence in the public sphere, that had demonstrated, in the shape it assumed under the influence of European naturalism, an ability to anatomize and deconstruct traditional values, as well as the institutions, especially the family, in which they were expressed. The aim of the naturalists was to transform the traditions of the Victorian theatre, rejecting its promotion of the spectacular in all its forms as well as the complex, melodramatic plotting of the well-made play (with its dependence on suspense, surprises, recognition scenes, and reversals). During 1915, the leading lights of the New York anti-establishment founded a playwriting and producing collective to be located in the Massachusetts coastal town where they regularly vacationed. What emerged with their early productions was a distinctly American dramatic culture – if by that we mean both the writing of provocative drama based on the model of European dramatic naturalism – as well as their subsequent successful commercial mounting in an alternative venue not under the control of the established theatre business.

The Provincetown Players moved production to Greenwich Village in 1916 (converting a building at 139 MacDougal Street into a theatre), but then more or less disbanded in 1922. Soon afterward, key members were instrumental in founding the Experimental Theater, Inc., staging a number of productions at the Greenwich Village Theater, where they drew an ever-widening audience. A number of O'Neill plays saw their first production there, including *Desire under the Elms*, which, debuting in 1924, proved popular enough as the decade wore on to merit transference to a succession of uptown venues, where it ran for over 400 performances, testimony to the growing taste among theatregoers for something beyond

the spectacular revues, light comedy, and insubstantial dramas that constituted the bulk of the theatrical fare then available in New York.

The Provincetown movement broadly conceived revolutionized the national stage, bringing the radically new into a dramatic culture still firmly rooted in the quite different aims of the entertainment industry and, even more importantly, in the melodramatic forms and values of the previous century, whose theatrical dominance was challenged, if not eliminated, by the naturalism pioneered by both Ibsen and Strindberg As C. W. E. Bigsby appropriately puts it, "To compare Ibsen with any product of the nineteenth-century American theatre is to compare . . . two wholly disproportionate worlds."[5] By the middle of the twentieth century that gap had closed, Bigsby suggests, with the evolution of a "style placing the individual in a more direct relationship to a material world which was increasingly seen as a generator of action and character."[6] The modern American dramatic tradition is dominated by both realism and *engagement*, and this is the broader subject that the various essays in this volume all take up and trace in the work of that tradition's most notable playwrights. However, the contributors would certainly agree with William W. Demastes that this tendentious realism has never become "a structurally unambitious, homogeneous, tunnel-visioned form . . . denying creation of a more open, pluralistic theatre."[7] A central aspect of the modern national theatre is that, as Demastes goes on to say, "a nation of many faces, perspectives, and beliefs . . . has adopted a theatrical form likewise of many faces, perspectives, and beliefs."[8] That said, however, it would be distorting to deny the pervasive influence on the Provincetown group and their successors of continental naturalism, particularly as represented by what were often at the time scandalous, even outlaw productions. The emergence of modern American drama was thus dependent on the fortunate fact that this European theatrical experimentalism, though slow in crossing the Atlantic, did find there, as Bigsby says, "a group of people who combined a studied aesthetic eclecticism with a conviction that the drama could have a central role in cultural and social life."[9] Naturalism was the other to the *fin de siècle* aestheticism that also influenced the complex mix then emerging as cultural modernism.

A transformed stage

In the decades before it was successfully taken up by intellectuals and artists as an object of cultural transformation, the American stage had a rich history of theatrical production, perhaps best typified by the Horatio

Alger career of David Belasco, who, starting as a script boy in San Francisco, eventually moved to New York, where he became one of Broadway's most successful stage managers, producers, and – to use an appropriate show business term then in vogue – impresarios. He was very nearly an industry in himself, mounting more than 400 productions during a long career, including many based on his own play scripts or adapted for the stage by him from other sources. More than forty American films all together derive from Belasco sources, perhaps making him the most adapted American dramatist. Belasco, however, can claim to have exerted no effect as a playwright on the development of a distinctly national and, above all else, authentically modern American drama.[10]

And yet Belasco cannot be dismissed entirely, for in his own way he participated in the general movement away from nineteenth-century theatricality, with its unconcern for realism. As a production designer, if not a playwright, Belasco made a substantial contribution (if unintentionally) to the drive toward modernism given such irresistible impetus by the Provincetown movement. The American theatre that since the late 1940s has achieved considerable world renown depends absolutely on a form of realism that situates individuals in a "material world" that, in the expressionist fashion, both reflects and inspires who they are and what they do; the carefully dressed set achieves a "defining power" in Bigsby's appropriate formulation.[11] If for Aristotle the least important aspect of dramatic presentation is *opsis* or spectacle (literally what the eye can see), the modern American theatre is crucially dependent on stagecraft, on the careful mutual adjustment of mise en scène broadly considered (including costuming, music, and so forth) to character. For Belasco, painted canvas sets and flimsy backdrops were an abomination; he proclaimed that "everything must be real."[12] His reflex in the postwar theatre is the art designer whose talents are crucial to the production as an aesthetic experience. It is hardly an accident that the two most acclaimed and influential plays of the postwar Broadway stage, Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), were especially effective drama because of their distinct "look," designed in both instances by Jo Mielziner, who in an extraordinary career provided the stage settings of over 200 Broadway productions and established as an institutional norm the "selective realism" that involves the carefully evocative or symbolic use of realistic structures or objects. The kind of stagecraft that Mielziner developed (heavily influenced by European developments) and furthered has been crucial now for more than half a century in determining the total effect of modern American theatre, dependent on a complex marriage of script, acting technique, and spectacle.

Spectacle, in fact, is one area in which the cinema, not tied to a play-space, disposes of advantages and resources unknown to the stage. The chariot race in both film versions of *Ben-Hur* (1925, Fred Niblo; 1959, William Wyler) is a defining moment of engaging dramatic action in which pure physicality dominates. What is little appreciated, however, is that this part of the drama was also emphasized in the first adaptation of Lew Wallace's bestseller (1880), the 1889 Klaw and Erlanger stage production, in which elaborate stage machinery (including giant treadmills and a moving cyclorama backdrop) made possible the use of real chariots, drawn by real horses, which raced outward toward amazed, and perhaps initially frightened, theatregoers. While the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the theatrical producers must be applauded, the chariot race as "staged" displays its inadequacy to the chariot race as "enacted" and made available for viewing through the medium of film. The stage version of Thomas Dixon's popular novel *The Clansman* (both 1905) was a substantial popular hit in tours throughout the South and the Midwest and even enjoyed a brief run on Broadway. But it could no more than point at the larger events with which it was concerned – the Civil War and Reconstruction. It took D. W. Griffith's film version, released eventually as *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915, to provide the dramatic action spectacle on the scale necessary for Dixon's fiction to be brought to full performance life, with seemingly vast armies competing on a field of battle substituting for a few soldiers crowding the stage; and, as we must remember, it was the national distribution of the film as well as its well-designed spectacle that made it possible for Dixon's regrettable racial politics to reach the widest possible audience in a form that directly aroused emotions and incited passions. It is this highly profitable, widely popular, and much discussed film that demonstrated the incredible cultural power of the emerging medium to bring dramatic art to a mass public, in a deep sense fulfilling the mission that the theatre, from its beginnings in ancient Greece, in some sense has always set for itself. The adaptations discussed in this book all represent (mostly for better, if occasionally for worse) the cinema's commitment to a performance art that transcends geographical, temporal, and cultural boundaries even as it embodies the more narrowly theatrical, subsuming in part the aim of the Provincetown group to establish a national drama that mattered.

Many years ago, film theorist André Bazin observed that the fully developed modern cinema will "give back to the theater unstintingly what it took from her," a generosity dependent on the principle that "there are no plays that cannot be brought to the screen, whatever their style,

provided one can visualize a reconversion of stage space in accordance with the data."[13] It is this reconversion of stage space that is always at the center of the cinematic adaptation of theatrical properties, and it makes possible a truly artistic approach that avoids the numerous pitfalls of "canned theatre." If the film business can extend the reach of Broadway, offering playwrights a mass audience for their work that is theoretically unlimited in time and space, then the film medium possesses the ability to deepen the sense in which dramatic presentation depends on the interaction of characters with a world we can recognize fully as our own. Conceived for a different audience, making use of resources both available and unavailable to the playwright or stage producer, and limited by institutions or traditions that have no purchase on the theatre, screen adaptations of plays make a very strong case for consideration on their own merits and not as necessarily inferior versions of the honored properties on which they are based.

Modern American drama has developed as a literary and performance tradition of great authors (and of these there are not many) rather than genres or cycles, and that is hardly surprising given its origins and the dominating presence of Eugene O'Neill. The fifteen essays that constitute this volume address the work of all the major figures who have attained a significant presence on film since the beginning of the sound era, but some of these (e.g. Williams, Miller, and O'Neill) are better known than others (Hellman, Kingsley, Edson). Absent here are chapters on playwrights who are important figures of modern American drama (such as Susan Glaspell and Elmer Rice) but whose work has not generated cinematically important or artistically interesting adaptations. Each chapter centers on what editors and authors decided was the most representative or otherwise significant play/film, with a view toward making it possible for this book to serve as the basis for a semester's examination of the subject.

Endnotes

1 Robert Knopf, ed., *Theater and Film: A Comparative Anthology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 1.
2 Brenda Murphy, *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), xiii.
3 Adele Heller and Lois Rudnick, eds., *1915: The Cultural Moment* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 1.
4 Ibid., 2.
5 C. W. E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama: Volume One 1900–1940* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), 3.

6 Ibid., 3.
7 William W. Demastes, *Realism and the American Dramatic Tradition* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), ix.
8 Ibid., xiv.
9 Bigsby, *Critical Introduction*, vii.
10 André Bazin, "Theater and Cinema," in Knopf, 126, 131 (110–133).
11 Bigsby, *Critical Introduction*, 4.
12 Quoted in ibid., 3.
13 Bazin, "Theater and Cinema," 131.

CHAPTER 1

Realism, censorship, and the social promise of Dead End

Amanda Ann Klein

When Sidney Kingsley's play *Dead End* premiered at the Belasco Theater on October 28, 1935, reviewers praised its realistic rendering of the disparity between rich and poor in 1930s New York City. A 1935 Brooks Atkinson review of the play in the *New York Times* proclaims, "What you have seen and heard in New York, wondering and apprehensive as you trudge along our begrimed seacoast, has found lodgment in this flaring anecdote of an average day,"[1] while a 1937 *Washington Post* review praised the play because it "conveyed no false note, struck no minor chord and left no remembrance in the consciousness of the spectator but one of complete fidelity to life."[2] Both reviews are representative of *Dead End*'s overall critical reception: the play was viewed as realistic, timely, and socially important. Critics and audiences were also impressed with *Dead End*'s detailed set, meticulously constructed by famed designer Norman Bel Geddes. Audiences were said to gasp audibly when the curtain first opened, revealing his elaborate rendering of a New York City block, flanked on one side by crumbling tenements and on the other by a new high-rise apartment building.[3] Although a mix of gritty realism and salty dialogue was the play's primary draw and the reason for its success, this realism created numerous problems for film producer Samuel Goldywn as he attempted to adapt the play into a social problem picture for MGM studios. Because Hollywood films were subject to far stricter censorship codes than stage productions, the 1937 adaptation of *Dead End* had to omit some of the more scandalous scenes and lines of dialogue from Kingsley's original play. Furthermore, most films of the era – even social problem films – were constrained by the basic conventions of classical Hollywood cinema, which required strong, morally unambiguous heroes and conclusive endings. Despite the resulting changes to the original script, however, director William Wyler's 1937 adaptation of *Dead End* stands as one of the most politically radical social problem films of the 1930s, effectively translating Kingsley's unflinching stage realism into cinematic terms.

Figure 1.1 The same cast of young boys was used in both the play and the film versions of *Dead End*. (frame enlargement)

Social problem films and the 1930s climate of concern

Social problem films are defined as any film "which combines social analysis and dramatic conflict within a coherent narrative structure."[4] Charles Mayland adds that the social problem film is "generally animated by a humane concern for the victim(s) of or crusader(s) against the social problem."[5] The social problem film's content must also be timely so that the contemporary viewer recognizes it as something that is happening "now," as opposed to the historical past. These issues must affect a significant segment of the population so that audiences recognize this issue *as* a problem; film studios, always motivated by profit, want to make films that appeal to the belief systems of their audiences in order to fill more theatre seats.[6] In fact, Peter Stead argues that one of the primary motivations behind Warner Brothers' much-lauded output of "socially conscious" films in the 1930s (*I Was a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* [1932, Mervyn LeRoy], *Wild Boys of the Road* [1933, William A. Wellman], *Heroes*