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0521271169 - A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, 1 - 1900-1940

C. W. E. Bigsby

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A critical introduction to twentieth-century
American drama

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For Gareth, Kirsten, Bella and Ewan
with love

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PREFACE

American drama, as a serious form, is a product of the twentieth century. But, as Walter Meserve has established in his multi-volume study (the first instalment of which appeared in 1977), it has a long and fascinating pre-history. A public form, it has self-consciously engaged the public issues and private tensions of a nation and a culture in search of itself. Few countries have lived their history so self-consciously, 'dramatising, with political rhetoric and fast-congealing myths, the opening of a continent and the creation of a national identity. The theatre played its part in this process. Particularly in the nineteenth century it attempted to devise a spectacle commensurate with national expansionism, the revealed splendours of the American topography and a new technological mastery. And from time to time it also expressed a concern for the erosion of American idealism and the pressures on national and personal values which were a product of rapid social process.

But it was in the twentieth century that American drama began to attend to its own processes, to test its own boundaries and possibilities. For all their amateurism the Provincetown Players were concerned with fostering American writers who wished to test the potential of the stage. The explosion of experimental theatre, which had marked European theatre at the turn of the century, was long in reaching America but when it did so it found a group of people who combined a studied aesthetic eclecticism with a conviction that drama could have a central role in cultural and social life, as paradigm no less than as subtle instrument of analysis or as sculptor of language and movement.

Where once the actor and, to some extent, the ingenious machinery of stage effects, had dominated, now it was the writer and even the director who did so. And the central theme of this new drama became alienation. Reborn in its modern guise in a largely urban and industrial environment which seemed, in many ways, to be a denial of animating myths that drew their strength and credibility from a predominantly rural world in which the individual's responsibility for his own fate and identity was an article of national no less than individual faith, it tended to take as its primary subject the loss of an organic relationship with the natural world, with one's fellow man and with oneself.

The dominant image was of the loss of space: physical, emotional and moral. In so far as American idealism had been consciously rooted in the fact of American space, romantic notions of the moralising impact of nature, political convictions about the democratising effect of the frontier and the

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availability of land, in the simple absence of economic and social determinants, the loss of those convictions threatened the very basis of that idealism. And twentieth-century American drama has engaged that conviction directly, presenting dramatic correlatives of that process, on the whole taking the expansive and confident stage of the nineteenth century and compressing it until the sensibility of the individual is made to bear the weight of this social process.

For some writers this diminution of personal space, this collapse of a liberal dream, becomes an image of metaphysical process. For if the connections between the individual and a redeeming idealism, a liberating imagination, have been threatened by simple fact and by an implacable materialism, so the connection between the self and its own sense of available transcendence is seen as having been threatened. And so social alienation deepens into metaphysical *Angst*.

This book attempts to describe this process by concentrating on the major figures and theatre groups of the period. It does not attempt to be exhaustive. It is offered as a *critical introduction*. Many playwrights are mentioned but not discussed, others are not even mentioned: this does involve an act of critical judgement. The American theatre at this time could boast a large number of competent playwrights, but little, I think, in the context of this book, would be gained by offering an extensive critical reading of writers such as Sidney Kingsley, Sidney Howard, Marc Connelly, Paul Green or many others. Admittedly, one or two of those I do choose to discuss are not markedly superior to these but are offered as being in a sense representative.

For the most part this is a book about the central figures and principal groups of the period – those, that is, who shaped the nature of the American dramatic imagination. It is offered as an account of a theatre excitedly discovering its own power and potential. The American theatre moved with incredible rapidity from adolescence to maturity. It bears the stress marks of that fact. This is part of its fascination. It was a drama in the making as, in a sense, was America. This is the source of its energy as, perhaps, of its imperfections. On occasion those imperfections proved disabling but more often they were indicative of sensibilities struggling to make sense of a swiftly changing environment in a language and with a form that were themselves aspects of those changes.

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