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978-0-521-65179-0 - The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Volume Two: 1870-1945

Edited by Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby

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The Cambridge History of American Theatre *Volume Two*

The Cambridge History of American Theatre is an authoritative and wide-ranging history of American theatre in all its dimensions, from theatre building to play-writing, directors, performers, and designers. Engaging the theatre as a performance art, a cultural institution, and a fact of American social and political life, the History recognizes changing styles of presentation and performance, and addresses the economic context that conditions the drama presented. The History approaches its subject with a full awareness of relevant developments in literary criticism, cultural analysis, and performance theory. At the same time, it is designed to be an accessible, challenging narrative. All volumes include an extensive overview and timeline, followed by chapters on specific aspects of theatre.

Volume Two begins in the post-Civil War period and traces the development of American theatre up to 1945. It discusses the role of vaudeville, European influences, the rise of the Little Theatre movement, changing audiences, modernism, the Federal Theatre movement, major actors and the rise of the star system, and the achievements of notable playwrights.

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The Cambridge History of American Theatre

*Volume Two:
1870–1945*

Edited by

Don B. Wilmeth

Brown University

Christopher Bigsby

University of East Anglia



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*To the memory of Warren Kliewer (1931–1998),
artist, scholar, and friend*

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tainments, *The Drama Review: Thirty Years of Commentary on the Avant-Garde*, *Plays from the Contemporary American Theatre*, and *Inside the Minstrel Mask*. In 1990 he was elected to the College of Fellows of the American Theatre and in 1997 was honored by the American Society for Theatre Research for lifetime achievement.

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THOMAS RIIS, Professor of Musicology and Director of the American Music Research Center at the University of Colorado–Boulder, has taught music history and directed the early-music performing ensembles at the National Music Camp (Interlochen, Michigan) and at the University of Georgia. Senior Fellow at Brooklyn College’s Institute for Studies in American Music in 1987, he has published three monographs on the history of African American musical theatre, including the prize-winning *Just Before Jazz: Black Musical Theater in New York, 1890–1915* (1989).

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books, including *The American Stage* and the *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*.

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The study of American theatre and drama has never established itself securely in academe. Histories of American literature have regularly assigned the most marginal of roles to its accomplishments, as Susan Harris Smith has recently illustrated (see Bibliography). Too few universities teach its development over the centuries or consider its role in a developing social, political, and cultural world.

It is as though American theatre came into existence as a sudden grace with Eugene O'Neill and his suitcase of plays its only begetter. As was demonstrated in Volume One of this study, it has a history going back to the first encounter of Europeans with what, to them, was a new continent and, in the form of Native American rituals and ceremonies, a prehistory.

The theatre, the most public of the arts, has always been a sensitive gauge of social pressures and public issues; the actor has been a central icon of a society that, from its inception, has seen itself as performing, on a national stage, a destiny of international significance. For students of drama, of theatre, of literature, of cultural experience, and of political development, the theatre should be a central subject of study.

For the purposes of this History we have chosen to use the word "theatre" to include all aspects of the dramatic experience, including major popular and paratheatrical forms. Contributors were asked to address particular aspects of that experience – whether it be theatre architecture, stage design, acting, playwriting, directing, and so forth – but they were also invited to stress the wider context of those subjects. Indeed, they were encouraged to engage the context within which theatre itself operates. Hence, we have set out to produce a history that is authoritative and wide-ranging, that offers a critical insight into plays and playwrights, but that also engages the theatre as a performance art, a cultural institution, and a fact of American social and political life. We have sought to recognize changing styles of presentation and performance and to address the economic context that conditions the drama presented. This may lead, on occasion, to a certain recrossing of tracks as, for example, a chapter on playwrights invokes the career of particular actors, and a chapter on actors

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describes the plays in which they appeared, but this is both inevitable and desirable, stressing, as it does, the interdependence of all aspects of the craft of theatre making.

The theatre has reflected the diversity of America and the special circumstances in which it has operated in an expanding country moving toward a sense of national identity. The history of the American stage and the making of America have been co-terminous, often self-consciously so, and to that end each volume of this history begins with a timeline followed by a wide-ranging essay that attempts to locate the theatre in the context of a developing society. Both timeline and overview also allow individual authors to avoid any urge to offer inclusiveness and to provide, when appropriate, more detailed coverage of important individuals or events, enabling, for example, Tom Postlewait to offer a unique perspective in his introductory chapter and Brenda Murphy in Chapter 3 to provide a lengthy section on Eugene O'Neill.

The History could have run to many more volumes, but the economics of publication finally determined its length (and the number of illustrations allowed, which in this volume led to much frustration because of necessary iconographic omissions). The precise division between the three volumes and the strategies involved in structuring this History, however (especially because from the outset it was agreed that this would be a collective history), was a matter of serious debate, a debate in which the editors were assisted by others in meetings that took place at Brown University, in the United States, and at York University in Canada. It is proper, in fact, to pause here and, as we did in Volume One, gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance for the Brown meeting of Brown University, its special collections, and Cambridge University Press. For the York meeting we are indebted to Christopher Innes, who served as an adviser to the editors, and to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, who helped fund the expenses. In Providence we were able to gather a notable group of experts: Arnold Aronson, the late Frances Bzowski, T. Susan Chang, Rosemary Cullen, Spencer Golub, James V. Hatch, the late Warren Kliewer, Brooks McNamara, Brenda Murphy, Tom Postlewait, Vera Mowry Roberts, Matthew Roudané, David Savran, Ronn Smith, Susan Harris Smith, and Sarah Stanton. In Canada the editors were joined by Innes and the authors of overview essays (Aronson, Postlewait, and Bruce McConachie). We are indebted to these experts for their thoughtful and challenging ideas and recommendations.

Ultimately, of course, the editors accept responsibility for the present format, but without the preliminary discussions we would have doubtlessly floundered. In the final analysis, the fact that we have chosen roughly 1870 and 1945 as defining chronological parameters is, in part, an expression of our desire to relate the theatre to a wider public history but in part also a recognition of certain developments internal to theatre itself. Any such divisions have an ele-

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ment of the arbitrary, however, chronological periods doing damage to the continuity of individual careers and stylistic modes. Nevertheless, division there must be, and those we have chosen seem more cogent than any of the others we considered, despite our strong suspicion that any periodization can be misleading. In truth, Volume One extends to the post-Civil War period, and this volume, in order to establish some sense of continuity, dovetails the time frame of that volume (as Postlewait explains in his overview).

The organization of the three volumes does, however, still reveal a bias in favor of the modern, a bias this preface began by deploring. Yet it does not presume that theatrical history began with O'Neill but simply recognizes that the story of the American theatre is one of a momentum that has gathered pace with time, while acknowledging the rich heritage and accomplishments of American theatre during its earlier periods.

As implied above, the History does not offer itself as encyclopedic. Given restrictions of space, this could never have been an objective, nor was such a strategy deemed appropriate. Those wishing to research details not found in these pages should consult the *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre* (1993, 1996), edited by Wilmeth and Miller, and *Theatre in the United States: A Documentary History* (Vol. I, 1750–1915), edited by Witham (Vol. II is well under way). Both volumes were published by Cambridge, and this History was planned with those texts in mind as complementary to this effort. The reader will, however, find detailed bibliographies of further reading at the end of each chapter.

What the History does aim to do is tell the story of the birth and growth, on the American continent, of a form that, the Puritans notwithstanding, in river-front towns, in mining settlements, in the growing cities of a colony that in time became a country, proved as necessary to life as anything else originally imported from Europe but then turned to serve the purposes of a new society reaching toward a definition of itself.

A nation is constructed of more than a set of principles enforced by a common will. It builds itself out of more than contradictions denied by rhetoric or shared experience. The theatre played its part in shaping the society it served, as later it would reflect the diversity that was always at odds with a supposed homogeneity. Inevitably derivative, in time it accommodated itself to the New World, and, in creating new forms, in identifying and staging new concerns, was itself a part of the process it observed and dramatized.

Theatre is international. Today, an American play is as likely to open in London as in New York and to find its primary audience outside the country of its birth. Despite the restrictions imposed by Actors' Equity, actors move between countries, as do directors and designers. Film and television carry drama across national frontiers. Yet, the American playwright still addresses realities, myths, and concerns born out of national experiences; the American theatre still stages the private and public anxieties of a people who are what

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they are because of history. The accomplishments of the American theatre are clear. This is an account of those accomplishments as it is, in part, of that history.

Finally, we are extremely grateful for financial support from our institutions – Brown University and the University of East Anglia – and we are pleased to acknowledge the editorial assistance of Diana Beck, funded by the Brown Graduate School, who made many of our chores less arduous in the preparation of this volume. The initial idea for this history came from Cambridge editors Sarah Stanton and Victoria Cooper, who not only brought the editors together but have also been a constant source of support and encouragement; Anne Sanow in the New York office of Cambridge University Press helped to shepherd this volume through its various stages; and Françoise Bartlett and her colleagues have served us well in the production process. The eleven authors of chapters in this volume are clearly indebted to the scholarship of those who have gone before, as well as to colleagues still active in the field. The specific debts of each author are suggested in notes and, most significantly, in the bibliographic essays that conclude each chapter. Credits for illustrations are indicated with each photograph, though we are equally grateful to individual authors who furnished or suggested illustrations and to the staffs of the collections identified who helped to locate or furnish illustrations.