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CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHTS

Beginning in the cafés, lofts and small spaces of Off-Off-Broadway, and continuing in the Off-Broadway and regional theatres of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, new American playwrights emerged committed to exploring the potential of their craft, the nature of American experience and the politics of gender and sexuality. In this study Christopher Bigsby explores the works and influences of ten contemporary American playwrights: John Guare, Tina Howe, Tony Kushner, Emily Mann, Richard Nelson, Marsha Norman, David Rabe, Paula Vogel, Wendy Wasserstein and Lanford Wilson. Bigsby examines, in some detail, the developing careers of some of America's most fascinating and original dramatic talents. In addition to well-known works, Bigsby discusses some of the latest plays to reach the stage. This lively and accessible book, by one of the leading writers on American theatre, will be of interest to students and scholars of American drama, literature and culture, as well as to general theatre-goers.

CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY is Professor of American Studies at the University of East Anglia and has published more than twenty-five books covering American theatre, popular culture and British drama, including *Modern American Drama* (Cambridge, 1992). He is also an award-winning novelist and regular radio and television broadcaster.

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Contents

	<i>page</i>
<i>Preface</i>	vii
1 John Guare	i
2 Tina Howe	47
3 Tony Kushner	86
4 Emily Mann	132
5 Richard Nelson	165
6 Marsha Norman	210
7 David Rabe	252
8 Paula Vogel	289
9 Wendy Wasserstein	330
10 Lanford Wilson	369
<i>Index</i>	431

Preface

There has been a tendency, perhaps now beginning to change, for American drama to find itself marginalised in academe. The novel, a form virtually coterminous with America's development and a principal mechanism for investigating its amorphous nature, has been seen as central. The Great American Novel shared a national hubris. It was large, all-encompassing, because the nation itself was expanding and expansive, itself an imaginative enterprise that seemed to require a form commensurate with its ambition. Its achievements, meanwhile, have been acknowledged by a cluster of Nobel prizes, some more explicable than others.

Theatre, however, seemed not quite at the centre of the culture. Its history lay outside the country while for several centuries the principal lament was its failure to engage American talents, the American mind or American reality. To many, indeed, it seemed principally a twentieth-century invention and hence curiously unrooted. In fact, America's hunger for theatre, at the popular no less than the elite level, was strikingly apparent from the earliest days. For much of its history, indeed, it was precisely to the theatre, in its many forms, that Americans turned for an understanding of a society whose changing nature was both its central promise and the cause of anxiety (see Richard Nelson's *The General from America*). If that is less true today, when the popular dimension of theatre has been ceded to Hollywood and television, drama remains not only a sensitive barometer of social change, reponding to shifting moral and intellectual pressures, but also an internationally respected aspect of American cultural life.

Nonetheless, even in the present century the canon has proved remarkably restricted. Given drama's marginal role in the syllabus only a limited number of playwrights have an assured place in the intimidating piles of set texts to be found in campus book stores, along with the T-shirts and posters. In terms of the postwar theatre, Edward Albee,

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 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

viii

Preface

Arthur Miller, August Wilson and Tennessee Williams are predictable figures, but, despite long and impressive careers, not John Guare, David Rabe or Lanford Wilson. Sometimes individual plays find their way in by way of courses stressing ethnicity, gender or sexual preference but otherwise major talents, whose work has often been acknowledged by prizes and productions, remain if scarcely unknown then largely unstudied. This book is an attempt to look at the work of a number of such writers.

The immediate and legitimate question is why these and not others? Certainly, if there were no constraints of space (and Cambridge University Press frequently and gently reminds me that there are) I would have added many more, and did before such chapters had to be sacrificed to the twin necessities of length and price. There must, inevitably, therefore, be an element of the arbitrary. Where, you might ask, are Constance Congdon, Christopher Durang, Maria Irene Fornes, A. R. Gurney, Romulus Linney, Donald Margulies, Terrence McNally, Rochelle Owens, Wallace Shawn, Megan Terry? The list is, if not infinitely extensible, then at least a good deal longer than this, and it is that sheer length which explains such absences.

For the moment, then, and for the purposes of this study, I have chosen a heterogeneous group of ten writers who, for different reasons, seem to merit greater attention or whose public reputation has attached itself to certain plays at the expense of others. Thus, John Guare is best known for *The House of Blue Leaves* and *Six Degrees of Separation* while *Lyddie Breeze* and *Women and Water* seem to fall below the critical threshold. Tony Kushner is admired for *Angels in America* while *A Bright Room Called Day* seems to me to be undervalued. David Rabe still tends to be thought of as primarily a Vietnam writer, and Marsha Norman as the author of *'night Mother* and little else. Richard Nelson, meanwhile, seems to escape attention because, for the last decade, he has chosen to open his plays in England and to address an international theme. Others – such as Tina Howe and Paula Vogel – have had to battle for recognition, their idiosyncratic approaches initially proving unpopular with directors and critics or, like Wendy Wasserstein, have fallen foul of the suspicion that humour and inconsequence are organically related. There are, of course, those embraced by academe but largely ignored by the theatre. Susan Glaspell, from earlier in the century, would be one such, and Adrienne Kennedy another. But for the most part it is the other way around and it is that phenomenon which has led to this book.

These are, admittedly, scarcely unknown or unacknowledged writers.

Far from it. Between them they have won most of the available awards and experienced considerable success in the theatre. Several have been writing plays for more than thirty years but, to date, only one has been the subject of a critical monograph, and that is the point. Academe would benefit not only from allowing American drama a more prominent position in the syllabus but also from a more generous definition of the canon. Whatever else it may do, therefore, I hope that what follows may serve to underline the strength in depth of the American theatre and the sheer quality of American dramatic writing.

Without treating every play by every author I have, within the constraints of length, tried to give a sense of the trajectory of individual careers. I have also endeavoured to allow the writers to speak for themselves and in that context must acknowledge more than the usual gratitude to the editors and compilers of the various books of interviews on which I have drawn. Hence, my thanks go to Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, to Jackson R. Bryer, Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman, and to David Savran. I have been a beneficiary of their shrewd and sympathetic questioning. I am also grateful to Paula Vogel who submitted to an interview on the eve of the opening of the London production of *How I Learned to Drive*.

The American theatre, at the turn of a century and a millennium, remains one of the most vibrant in the world. I hope that this book gives at least a flavour of what makes that so.