

# *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*

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## *Volume Three: Post-World War II to the 1990s*

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## *American Theatre in Context: 1945–Present*

***Arnold Aronson***

### ***Introduction***

The history of the United States, more than that of most nations, has been depicted as a grand and heroic narrative – a great epic of the triumph of the human spirit over adversity, the victory of good over evil, and the success of the individual in the face of enormous odds. From colonial times well into the twentieth century, the theatre was not only a reflection of this mythology, it was a crucial instrument for the molding of public perceptions. Prior to the birth of the movies – which did not really become a mass medium until the 1910s – theatre, especially in its popular incarnations, such as circus, vaudeville, and minstrel shows, was the closest thing to a national forum that the country had. Ideas were debated, public opinion was formulated, and national consciousness was achieved on the stages of American playhouses. In this context, the melodrama – the dominant form of the nineteenth century – was something close to American classicism. It created such quintessential figures as Mose the Bowery B'hoy, Nimrod Wildfire, Jonathan, and their kin – all symbols of the young, energetic, and fundamentally good American society, and all players in the grand story. As long as the American narrative was unfolding, the popular drama was a critical tool for the dissemination of ideas and the creation of a national sense of unity and purpose. But World War I began to reshape American consciousness as the country was no longer one player among many on the world stage but a protagonist; World War II continued the transformation of global politics and economics while permanently altering America's international position and fundamentally transforming American life and sensibility. The “story of America” was seen as entering a new phase, possibly a final chapter in which Manifest Destiny was to be achieved. In such a situation theatre, indeed all the arts, would play a new role.

The aftermath of World War II complicated the narrative. The designation of that conflagration as the “last good war” was a reflection of the war as melodrama. The U.S. and the Allies were the “good guys” beset by the evil Axis

powers. Hitler and Hirohito were, on some levels, Simon Legree-type characters – villains to be vanquished – and their defeat was the inevitable end of a real cliffhanger. (Stalin, it should be remembered, was transformed into “Uncle Joe” for the war years to make him into the friend of the “good guy.”) In the immediate afterglow of victory, many Americans saw the war in those simple terms (and many continue to do so). Yet upon closer examination, not all aspects of the conduct of the war fit the dramatic archetype. The use of atomic weapons on Japan and the failure to take action against the concentration camps, for instance, called into question the moral purity and motives of the United States – the putative protagonist in this melodrama. In the twenty-five years or so following the war the emergence of the Cold War, the rising tensions of race relations, the growing awareness of poverty, the wars in Korea and Vietnam, and even a discomfort with the materialism of the “affluent society” all contributed to a re-evaluation of American society and erosion of the archetype. In the postwar era, the melodrama lost its validity as a paradigm for society. Melodramatic heroes were replaced by so-called anti-heroes, action was replaced by introspection, clear-cut morality was replaced by ambiguity, and the traditional dramatic model was replaced by free-form structures or structures devoid of meaningful content. With theatre no longer providing the superstructure for the understanding of the society at large, it lost its role as a primary outlet for cultural expression and exploration.

It is difficult at the end of the twentieth century to imagine how central the theatre once was to the social and cultural life of the United States. The years between the two world wars are now seen as a golden age in American theatre and drama. In the first half of the century, the musical achieved its mature form, a large number of significant playwrights emerged for the first time in American history, comedy became both exuberant and sophisticated, a comparatively strong African American theatre began to develop, popular entertainments thrived, and an American avant-garde began to emerge. This was also the period in which the Art Theatre or Little Theatre movement swept over the country, introducing American audiences to the dramas, ideas, and techniques of the European avant-garde in the teens and twenties and to the politically engaged agit props and social dramas of the thirties.

Despite the diversity and variety of this theatre it was contained under one roof, as it were; all the component pieces were perceived and experienced as different aspects of a single entity known simply as theatre or entertainment. Because of this unity a sense of nationhood was visible and an identifiably American voice began to emerge from this lively conglomeration of theatrical expression. Out of the theatrical cauldron came a distinctly American style in acting, language, and design. The Group Theatre in the 1930s began to explore the psychological realism of Stanislavsky and other offshoots of the Moscow



Art Theatre, while, at the same time, the ongoing love affair with British theatre and actors actually paved the way for the ideas of French innovators in a line of influence from Jacques Copeau through Michel Saint-Denis by way of London's Old Vic. Poetic diction could be found in the plays of Eugene O'Neill, Elmer Rice, Clifford Odets, and most especially William Saroyan, while Maxwell Anderson plunged into neo-Elizabethan verse drama. The New Stagecraft of Robert Edmond Jones, Norman Bel Geddes, and Lee Simonson supplanted the naturalism of David Belasco with symbolism and simplification, creating a scenographic equivalent to the abstraction of contemporary art. The dominant American style on the eve of World War II was characterized by psychological realism in acting, poetic diction in playwriting (applied to dark, gritty explorations of society that derived from the melodrama and the well-made play), and a semi-abstract, emblematic stage design. All in all, it was a seemingly incongruous pastiche of nineteenth-century American traditions dominated by melodrama, and early twentieth-century European avant-gardism that somehow coalesced into a fertile theatre.

The end of World War II brought unprecedented wealth and power to the United States and historical precedents suggest that such hegemony might have presaged a vigorous and energetic theatre as in Elizabethan England, the France of Louis XIV, or fifth-century Athens. But this was not to be. A certain confidence, sense of well-being, and exuberance, of course, did manifest itself in American culture, but more often in consumer goods than in art. Cars, for example, began to sprout tailfins – futuristic icons of useless excess – with the 1948 Cadillac; homes began to fill with gleaming white appliances; sleek “entertainment centers” disguised as furniture became the centerpieces of living rooms, and movies increasingly abandoned the “noir” tones of black and white for the saturated colors of Technicolor. Economist John Kenneth Galbraith popularized the term “affluent society” in a 1958 book to describe the sated, consumerist culture. Because the term implied a general material prosperity, it suggested a more democratic form of wealth than that of earlier generations. This was a whole society that shared in the riches, not a small sect of robber barons. The truth was, of course, that while the general standards of living were raised significantly for most people, and the middle class had a heretofore unheard-of purchasing power, there were still significant disparities within the society and disturbingly large segments of poverty. Galbraith also made the point that private affluence was being acquired at the expense of public service and civic needs. Nonetheless, this affluence, too, seemed the logical denouement for the American melodrama. A muscular and ebullient sense of triumph and joy was tangible in some movies – *Singin' in the Rain* is an excellent example – though a darker, more troubled genre also began to emerge, particularly in the filmed versions of several of the plays of Tennessee Williams and William Inge. To be sure, the American theatre in the

second half of the twentieth century witnessed its share of significant dramas and playwrights – many of which now constitute the American canon – the birth (and ultimate mainstreaming) of an American avant-garde, a period of spirited and innovative musical theatre, the transformation of design into an art, and the spread of resident professional theatres across the country. But the combined forces of economics, politics, technology, and demographic upheavals conspired to remove the theatre from its position of centrality in American culture and transform it into peripheral entertainment divorced from the community at large. As American society became increasingly fragmented in the postwar years it was mirrored in a fragmented theatre by an increasingly introspective and highly ambiguous drama. Film, television, popular music, and new technologies combined to eviscerate the traditional theatregoing audience. Insofar as the theatre retained any relevance to a national discourse it was as a tool for localized political and social debate. Insofar as it retained a role in popular culture it was primarily as leisure-time spectacle typified by the extravaganzas of Las Vegas, the circus, and theme parks.

### ***The Emerging Postwar Consciousness***

Less than a year before the United States joined the combatants of World War II, Henry Luce, head of the Time-Life Corporation, famously declared this the “American Century” in a *Life* magazine essay. Primarily an appeal to join the Allies in the escalating war in Europe, Luce’s essay argued that the unique position, history, and wealth of the United States created a moral obligation for it to be the guarantor of freedom around the globe and to establish international free trade, feed the world’s population, and send forth its distinctly twentieth-century technology and culture. “We know how lucky we are compared to all the rest of mankind,” he wrote. “At least two-thirds of us are just plain rich compared to all the rest of the human family – rich in food, rich in clothes, rich in entertainment and amusement, rich in leisure, rich” (quoted in Luce, *Ideas*, 107). At the end of the war, as if following Luce’s exhortations, the United States was indeed the wealthiest, most powerful, most technologically advanced nation on earth. It imprinted itself indelibly upon the twentieth century, essentially shaping the world for years to come. Paradoxically for a nation historically in the cultural shadow of Europe, the most long-lasting and pervasive export has been American culture spread primarily through the machinery of movies, television, and popular music. But this new-found power was accompanied from the start by underlying American discomfort with such dominance and a constant questioning of our moral obligations in the world. This uneasiness has informed postwar art in both form and content.

The American century also meant that the visual and performing arts were transforming from absorbing international influences to a position of generating influence. A growing class of wealthy art patrons and the presence of a sizable body of European émigré artists between the wars fostered a creative ferment, invigorated the American art scene, and inspired a generation of young American artists. When World War II effectively ended European dominance of the art world, American culture was able to rush in and fill the vacuum. New York City in particular emerged not only as the cultural capital of the United States but of the world; all strands of the grand narrative seemed headed for triumphant conclusion. Sounding a bit like Luce, writer Clifton Fadiman could state in a 1940 radio discussion, “We have reached a critical point in the life of our nation. We are through as a pioneer nation; we are now ready to develop as a civilization” (quoted in Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 57). But it was critic Clement Greenberg, the primary articulator of the new formalist American aesthetic, who astutely perceived the inextricable connections between the development of a new art and international supremacy. “The main premises of Western art,” he wrote, “have at last migrated to the United States along with the center of gravity of production and political power” (quoted in Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 172).

Freed of its subservience to European art and ideas and supported by a growing network of galleries, a unique American voice emerged, embodied in artists such as Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman. Similarly, what was for all intents and purposes the first generation of American composers and conductors appeared, including Leonard Bernstein, Milton Babbitt, and Lukas Foss. And the center of the dance world followed the other arts to New York – modern dance had European origins but found its mature expression in American choreographers and companies while postmodern dance was an almost purely American phenomenon. Theatre, too, began to explore new avenues of expression and by the sixties and seventies the American avant-garde was in the forefront of international theatre. Yet, unlike the situation in art or dance, this avant-garde movement did not supplant the established or traditional theatre that preceded it.

There are many possible explanations for the failure of theatre to evolve as the other arts did, the most immediate and compelling being the profound demographic changes that radically altered the constituency and attendance habits of theatre audiences. Another factor is the nature of the arts themselves. The primarily non-objective, emblematic, and symbolic vocabularies of music, visual art, and even dance allowed those forms to change more rapidly than theatre in response to shifting aesthetics and sensibilities, whereas the nature of Western theatre, with its narrative explorations of

human interactions and emotions, has historically kept it in an essentially realistic framework. But in the aftermath of the atrocities of World War II, and faced with the overwhelming fear of nuclear Armageddon that pervaded consciousness during the Cold War, a realistic drama seemed feeble and impotent. "Naturalism is no longer adequate, either aesthetically or morally, to cope with the modern horror," declared critic Dwight MacDonald (quoted by Guilbaut, "The New Adventures of the Avant-garde in America," in Frascina, *Pollock and After*, 160). Certainly a theatre in which characters could do little more than talk about "the bomb" seemed painfully useless. At the same time Clement Greenberg warned painters against a polemic art. "In the face of current events," he cautioned, in order for modern art to be successful it must emulate "the greatest painter of our time, Matisse" who "wanted his art to be an armchair for the tired businessman" (quoted in Guilbaut, "The New Adventures," 159).

The elements that comprised the underlying vocabulary of naturalism remained visible in the new forms of art and theatre; however they now functioned not as building blocks of a narrative but as independent aesthetic objects. "The vernacular repertoire," explained art historian William C. Seitz in a 1961 essay,

includes beat Zen and hot rods, mescaline experiences and faded flowers, photo-graphic bumps and grinds, the *poubelle* (i.e., trash can), juke boxes, and hydrogen explosions. Such objects are often approached in a mystical, aesthetic, or "arty" way, but just as often they are fearfully dark, evoking horror or nausea: the anguish of the scrap heap; the images of charred bodies that keep Hiroshima and Nagasaki before our eyes; the confrontation of democratic platitudes with the Negro's disenfranchisement . . . (*The Art of Assemblage*, 88–89)

His catalogue of elements, of course, is a prosaic echo of Allen Ginsberg's classic Beat poem *Howl*, which chronicled the "best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, / dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix, / . . . listening to the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox" (*Howl*, 9–10). The theatre and art that emerged in the forties and fifties drew inspiration from the raw energy, form, and content of American pop culture and iconography, the wonder and fear of new technologies and media, and from the conflicting chaos of urban society.

If the artists of the postwar era expressed a degree of fear of nuclear annihilation and distrust of the establishment it was at least in part because the American government tended to situate everything in the context of national security – preparation for war against the Soviets. The interstate highway system, for instance, was initially the National Defense Highway system, designed to move military equipment and personnel efficiently around the

country; the National Science Foundation was a response to the perceived advantage the Soviets had in military technology; support for schools came under the heading of the National Defense Education Act. It was, of course, harder to justify support for the arts as a factor in national security, but the emergence of a plethora of federal agencies which had a direct impact on daily life created an atmosphere in which support for the arts seemed plausible, and at the height of the Cold War, culture was a significant tool in international diplomacy. And it was, strangely enough, the identification of American Abstract Expressionism with democratic ideals that allowed modern art to move out of avant-garde fringes and into the mainstream, thereby making the funding of such art somehow patriotic.

The modern art movement in America captured the mantle of democratic righteousness after the war through a sort of “buy American” campaign, suggesting that supporting modern artists was virtually a patriotic duty. American artists were elevated to a level and prestige previously conferred only on European painters and sculptors. Not only serious critics, but the popular press such as *Life* magazine, began to pay attention to the new wave of artists and saw in them the new American spirit; they saw an art appropriate for the new postwar order. The process of acceptance was aided by the essentially apolitical nature of the new art, particularly Abstract Expressionism. This was in marked contrast to much art and especially theatre of the interwar years, which had been predominantly left-wing in its sympathies. At a symposium at the Museum of Modern Art in 1948 art critic Paul Burlin announced, “Modern painting is the bulwark of the individual creative expression, aloof from the political left and its blood brother, the right. Their common dictators, if effective, would destroy the artist” (quoted in Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 181). The practitioners of this new art became new American folk heroes in the tradition of the pioneers and so-called “modern art” became a *de facto* official art in the United States.

The theatre in 1945, weighted down with tradition, a formidable infrastructure, and an audience with no overt desire to overthrow the *status quo*, was ponderous and slow to change. But the changing aspects of American culture and society would serve to undermine theatre’s function and audience. Mainstream theatre had served two primary roles in the prewar years: it was “entertainment for the tired business man” or it was a source of ideas and a forum for discussion. By the fifties, however, much of the entertainment function had been ceded to television, and the political atmosphere stifled the more open and visible forms of public debate.

America’s entrance into the war had an immediate effect upon the content and style of drama. The whole genre of political drama as well as the social investigation that typified so much drama in the years following World War I

seemed to evaporate overnight. Politics were now determined by military alliances, moral ambiguity gave way to fervent patriotism, and entertainment functioned in service to the war effort. It was important to see the nation as a unified whole; to focus on individual groups within society, to emphasize difference, or to question the fabric of American life was seen as counterproductive, even anti-patriotic. Thus, the rising tide of black theatre artists and companies dissipated, and the socially and politically oriented groups – from the Federal Theatre Project and Group Theatre, through the small workers' theatres, already on shaky economic and artistic legs – simply disappeared. But without the social, political, and intellectual ferment, the drama suffered. The American theatre during the war years produced an unusually mediocre crop of plays and musicals, perhaps the most uninteresting four or five Broadway seasons of the century. There were, to be sure, a few notable exceptions, and in these exceptions could be seen the seeds of what was to come.

The rising fascination with Freudianism, psychotherapy, and the mysterious workings of the mind was evident in Richard Rodgers's and Lorenz Hart's *Pal Joey* (1940). Just as the European Naturalistic movement of the 1870s was grounded in the belief that objective examination of the underside of society could lead to the healing of social ills, the contemporary popular understanding of Freudianism assumed that exploring the darker recesses of the psyche was the best way to understand human behavior. This musical put morally complex, even repugnant characters at the center of the story and created a dark and cynical atmosphere that repelled many critics and baffled some of the audience, though it demonstrated that the musical could be a vehicle for dark and disturbing themes. Freudianism on a somewhat lighter note was the basis of *Lady in the Dark* (1941) by Kurt Weill and Moss Hart. Weill also brought American jazz, via the filter of a European sensibility, to the American stage. Musical innovation of another kind arrived two years later, when the new team of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II created *Oklahoma!* While thematically this musical reverted to the sentimentality and lyricism of earlier American drama and musical comedy (it was based on Lynn Riggs's play of 1931, *Green Grow the Lilacs*) and possessed a certain earnestness of spirit associated with Americana plays of the twenties, structurally it would alter musical theatre for almost two decades (see discussion of *Oklahoma!* in Volume 2). Taking the integration of music, lyrics, and plot that had been bubbling beneath the surface at least since the Jerome Kern–Guy Bolton *Show Boat* (1927), *Oklahoma!* created a contemporary, American folk-pop-operetta style. And while George Balanchine had choreographed ballet sequences in the 1936 *On Your Toes*, Agnes de Mille's choreography for *Oklahoma!* used ballet as a motif for advancing the plot and created a genre of theatrical dance.

The one significant play of the war years was Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942). Its self-referential dialogue, breaking of the fourth wall,

comic yet sometimes obscure symbolism, epic structure, and proto-Absurdist content served as a harbinger of a range of experimental theatre to come that vigorously and almost gleefully rejected the predominant American penchant for naturalism and sentimentality.

Of less quantifiable impact was the presence of refugee artists escaping the Nazis. Two who had significant influence on the development of the theatre were Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator. While Brecht's residence in the US from 1941 to 1947 had few tangible manifestations – he worked on one film and several of his plays were translated and performed, but for very short runs that made almost no critical impression – it would have long-range effects by laying the groundwork for a new politically engaged theatre and the use of alienation or estrangement as a dramatic tool. Most of the translations of Brecht's work were done by scholar and playwright Eric Bentley, who almost single-handedly introduced Brecht's plays and theories to the U.S. after the war. Piscator, meanwhile, ran the Dramatic Workshop at the New School for Social Research in New York from 1939 to 1951, where he staged some 100 experimental works. These productions introduced a generation to the principles of epic theatre, and in his classes he influenced many of the practitioners of the postwar generation, including Judith Malina, a co-founder of the Living Theatre.

It was the arrival of Tennessee Williams on the theatrical scene, however, that signaled a genuine shift in American drama with *The Glass Menagerie*, which premiered a few months before the war's end in the spring of 1945. Williams stood at the nexus of melodrama and psychotherapy. His plays took the by-now classic American themes of home and family and, using an essentially melodramatic vocabulary of a lost past, unrequited love, and yearnings for a better future, explored the inner workings of societally marginal characters. Although Amanda and Laura are the focus of the play, it is in the characters of Jim, the gentleman caller who failed to fulfill his potential yet who sells himself as the epitome of the American striver (he is planning to take advantage of the newest technology, television), and especially Tom, the son straining against the stifling atmosphere of the home but with no plans other than unarticulated yearnings for excitement, that Williams has created the postwar American characters. Tom is the prototype of the anti-hero, the rebel without a cause. (Though recent criticism sees Tom as autobiographical and therefore gay, so his rebellion actually does have a cause – just one that could not be articulated in 1945.)

In terms of dramatic technique, Williams's significant contribution was to find a theatrical framework by which the audience was allowed into the inner workings of the minds and souls of the characters without reverting to the often contrived and self-conscious theatrical devices earlier employed by Eugene O'Neill. Though not a political or morality play, *The Glass Menagerie*

worked as metaphor for the country on the verge of something new, yet filled with doubts and insecurities and unwilling to let go of a romanticized past. Stylistically, it drew upon the poetic atmosphere of the Symbolists, the associative world of the Surrealists, and the use of projections first exploited by Piscator, to create what Williams called a memory play. Following in the footsteps of William Saroyan, Williams created the genre of poetic realism or American symbolism, which is the closest thing the US had to a national style for the next fifteen years.

A contributing factor to the success of the play, and a significant element in establishing poetic realism as the dominant style, was the design by Jo Mielziner. Never before in American theatre had design and text been so fully integrated and so interdependent. Using scrims and painterly decor, Mielziner created an ethereal look, while facilitating the cinematic flow from scene to scene called for by Williams, and providing the ideal means for the depiction of memory. In fact, much of the postwar theatre was dependent for its success on a strong visual realization and an emotionally energetic acting style. The creative team of Mielziner and director Elia Kazan, formerly of the Group Theatre, together with Williams and later Arthur Miller, most notably in his play *Death of a Salesman*, would create a series of productions that typified the postwar style and that some would see as the pinnacle of American theatre. To a large degree, this was the result of the development of the art of lighting design. The effectiveness of the scrim, the creation of memory and dream, and the cinematic flow were dependent on the precise and fluid use of light. Jean Rosenthal, who worked with Orson Welles, and Abe Feder, both beginning in the thirties, virtually created the profession of lighting designer and went on to significant theatrical careers, while Mielziner, working with Ed Kook and building upon the aesthetics of Rosenthal, transformed lighting into an art.

As crucial to the success of the plays of Miller and Williams as the visual environment were the acting and directing. Once again, the American fascination with psychology informed the development of acting style and led to a major shift in the forties from a technical virtuosity to a more energetic emotionalism. Here, the influence of the Group Theatre of the thirties cannot be overstated. Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler had championed the ideas of Stanislavsky, though each drew upon a slightly different understanding of the Russian director's work. At root, they were interested in an emotionally truthful form of acting that emanated more from an internal and psychological understanding of character than from external techniques. As Group Theatre alumnus Elia Kazan emerged as the leading director of the late forties this Americanized naturalistic style was melded with the poetic realism of the new playwrights. Characterized by brooding portrayals, relaxed body language, and a verbal style that, in contrast to the contemporary stage diction, seemed to consist of mumbling and stuttering, the Kazan productions seethed with



emotional turbulence and sexual tension that were revolutionary for the time. Marlon Brando, who played Stanley Kowalski in Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1949), was the quintessence of this new style that was a direct challenge to the artificiality of stage decorum. He embodied the anti-hero – the protagonist of the emotionally ambiguous postwar era. Kazan, with other Group alumni Robert Lewis and Cheryl Crawford, created the Actors Studio in 1947 as a workshop for Stanislavsky-inspired acting training. Lee Strasberg joined in 1949 and soon became the sole director of the Studio. Under his autocratic leadership until his death in 1982, Strasberg trained several generations of actors in what became known simply as “The Method.” Ironically, the Strasberg approach became increasingly ineffective on the stage as Absurdism, the neo-Expressionistic ensemble theatre movement, and various avant-gardes transformed the American theatre from the late fifties onward, but the Studio became the training ground for virtually the entire postwar cadre of film actors. This group includes, aside from Brando, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Montgomery Clift, Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, Anne Bancroft, Shelley Winters, Geraldine Page, Dustin Hoffman, Robert De Niro, and Al Pacino. In opposition to the rugged good looks or perfect beauty of prewar movie stars and their unambiguous identification as either “good guys” or villains, the postwar generation was idiosyncratic and flawed in their physicality, and possessed of a moral ambiguity. The Method, which thrived on personal quirks and emphasized the emotionality beneath the surface, was ideal for a post-Holocaust, atomic society that was no longer certain of truth, morality, or even beauty. (See Chapter 6 for additional commentary on “The Method.”)

One might have expected the war itself to preoccupy playwrights in the late 1940s, but while it provided raw material for dozens of movies over several decades and much fiction, including Norman Mailer's debut novel *The Naked and the Dead*, it was surprisingly absent from the postwar theatre. The war as melodrama was fit for the entertainment needs of Hollywood, but playwrights seemed more interested in the postwar American society and its discontents. Arthur Miller's first hit play *All My Sons* (1947) used the war as a background for his moral exploration of individual responsibility, but it was set – as so many American plays were – in a home in a small midwestern community. The play was not about the war *per se*, but about the individual's responsibility to the larger society. The protagonist, Joe Keller, manufactured airplane parts during the war. Putting profit ahead of morality, he sold defective parts to the army, leading to the deaths of several fliers and ultimately the suicide of his son. With this play Miller established himself as the keeper of America's conscience, but it was not an investigation of war.

One of the only other theatre pieces to represent the war was Rodgers's and Hammerstein's *South Pacific*, which opened in the spring of 1949. The plot ostensibly dealt with fairly serious material. Set on an island in the South

Pacific during World War II, it involved a mission by the American servicemen to establish a secret base on a nearby enemy-held island. It also dealt with issues of interracial romance and marriage. Although the latter issue had been addressed in varying degrees in the twenties and thirties, it was starkly absent from the mainstream drama of the immediate postwar years and was something that only black playwrights seemed to confront until well into the sixties. Yet the issue was ultimately side-stepped in *South Pacific*. By placing it in an exotic location, the issue became not white and black, but white and Polynesian. The potential moral dilemma raised by the romance between the American serviceman Cable and the native woman Liat was avoided by having Cable killed during the mission, a ploy that provided a melodramatically moving emotional peak, but seemed narratively too contrived or convenient.

Despite the potentially profound themes of *South Pacific*, it is best remembered as a comic romance that produced such memorable songs as “Some Enchanted Evening,” “I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair,” and “There Is Nothing Like a Dame.” The popularity of the songs is, of course, a tribute to Rodgers’s and Hammerstein’s appealing score and lyrics, but it was also a factor of a happy coincidence – the development of the long-playing record. Although cast recordings, especially in England, date back to the beginning of the century, it was the ability to record a Broadway show’s score on a single, lightweight record that created a recording goldmine. For some fifteen years, from *South Pacific* until 1964’s *Hello, Dolly!*, Broadway cast recordings regularly topped the *Billboard* popular music charts. Since musicals were more widely known through cast recordings than the actual production, for many people the musical was tantamount to its score or, more precisely, its cast album; the book became secondary at best and a show’s themes and ideas could become divorced from its music if the songs did not directly address them. So while most serious postwar drama virtually ignored World War II, the most devastating conflagration in human history, and virtually no drama dealt with the deep-seated American dilemma of racial conflict, *South Pacific*, a musical, at least, confronted them. Yet for those who knew only the cast album, the issues were hidden at best. The operetta form of the American musical comedy, in which romance, song and dance, and lavish scenography were the paramount issues, undermined the ability of musicals to be a locus for serious social debate. (See Maslon, Chapter 2, “Broadway,” on cast recordings.)

### ***Economics and Demographics***

At the start of the nineteenth century New York City emerged as the commercial and theatrical capital of the nation and, by the late nineteenth century,

American theatre was essentially divided into New York and “the Road” – touring theatre that originated in or emanated from New York. The New York theatre had, from its earliest days, been physically centered around Broadway, but like a demographic barometer it followed the movement of New York’s population center up Broadway as the wealthy citizenry moved uptown. A theatrical building boom during the first three decades of the twentieth century anchored the theatre district firmly around the Times Square area and “Broadway” became a catchall term for mainstream theatre.

The economic structure of Broadway prior to World War I was based on relatively inexpensive labor, materials, and real estate, and sizable income from “the Road.” Low ticket prices meant that audiences from nearly all strata of society could afford to go to the theatre, creating a situation akin in some respects to that of Elizabethan London. There were seven or more widely read newspaper critics of more or less equal weight, thereby guaranteeing that no single critic or paper could determine the fate of a production. Accessible and affordable theatre meant that audiences would not wait for “blockbusters” but might venture to see a show simply because it had a popular actor, enchanting scenery, or an element of novelty. With live performance as the primary form of entertainment, theatregoing was a regular practice for much of the population. The Broadway of the interwar years was in some ways a monolithic theatre engine that spewed forth a multifaceted product consisting of a vast array of dramas, comedies, musicals, revues, variety shows, revivals, and even ice shows and operettas. (The *New York Times*, in its annual end-of-season wrap up, classified shows according to these categories, but tellingly included them under the single heading of the “New York theatre season”; it was all theatrical entertainment.) The idea of niche-productions, cult, or elitist theatre that would come to comprise a significant proportion of the productions by the nineties, was a barely visible component, apparent only in the labor theatres and ethnic and racial theatre companies of the thirties; and even these latter theatres were seen as a crucial part of the larger entertainment structure. Given the wide variety of theatre that was produced and the ability to take risks, Broadway contained, in a sense, its own research and development arm that could continuously revitalize the theatre.

The combined effects of the Depression and World War II, however, altered the economic and aesthetic structure, leading to the artistic fragmentation and geographic decentralization of the American theatre. Although theatre had withstood the early onslaught of film, the addition of television to the mix beginning about 1948, in combination with a significant shift in audience demographics, signaled an end to theatre as the epicenter of cultural and intellectual life.

There had been a steady decline in the number of productions since the mid-1920s. The season of 1925–26 was the peak for theatre weeks – a figure

representing the number of shows playing each week times weeks in the season – with 2,852.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, the 1945–46 season recorded 1,420 theatre weeks while by 1960–61 it had diminished to 1,210. Measured another way, 1927–28 was the peak season for new productions with 264 openings, whereas the 1945–46 season witnessed only 76 and the 1960–61 season a then record low of 48. By 1989–90 the season total for new productions was a mere 40, but of that number only 10 were new American plays, 3 of which had been originated either Off-Broadway or in a regional theatre, and only 8 were new musicals; the remainder consisted of one-person shows, revivals, and Radio City Music Hall revues. The decline after the twenties was exacerbated, of course, by talkies and the Great Depression and, to some extent, radio, but live entertainment remained a staple of American culture. Furthermore, movies were perceived almost exclusively as entertainment, whereas theatre – at least a portion of it – remained the focal point of American intellectual life and, as such, was seen to fill a role that movies could not. In the thirties, especially, it seemed as if many of the great social, political, and moral debates of the time were rehearsed upon the stage and continued in late-night discussions in restaurants and bistros afterward.

Radio, whatever its immediate effects on attendance, had a more long-term impact on perceptions of entertainment. Radio was able to bring vaudeville performers, film stars, music, soap operas, and news directly into homes. Though it was a mass medium, it seemed to function on an intimate level: listeners felt as if broadcasts were directed only to them and developed personal relationships with, say, Rudy Vallee as he sang or Walter Winchell as he reported his gossip. Audiences began to have different expectations of its performers and to develop a different relationship with celebrities.

But if the changing mood of the country was a factor in the shifting fortunes of the theatre after World War II, the more critical shift in American theatre resulted from a seismic demographic transformation that began after the war and continued for the next quarter-century. Beneath the seeming calm of the 1950s lay radical changes in the American population that would have profound effects on all aspects of society. Between 1945 and 1960 the general population increased by 40.1 million to 180 million or by nearly 29 percent. The overwhelming majority of this increase was in the suburbs, where 11 million new houses were built between 1948–58 (out of 13 million overall). The large middle class that had lived in New York and other urban centers, the societal segment that had anchored the residential neighborhoods and fueled urban mercantilism, began moving out to the suburbs as the postwar economic boom bestowed its benefits upon them. During the sixties, some 900,000 whites moved out of New York. By 1960, one of three Americans lived in a suburb. Historian Todd Gitlin expressed this transformation eloquently:

The Puritan utopia of a “city on a hill” found its strange completion in the flatlands of the American suburb. For growing numbers, daily life was delivered from the cramp of the city, lifted out to the half-wide, half-open spaces, where the long-sought and long-feared American wilderness could be trimmed back and made habitable. The prairie became the lawn; the ranch, the ranch house; the saloon, the Formica bar. (*The Sixties*, 14)

Also by 1960 75 percent of families owned a car and 87 percent a television; and it was the first society in history to have more college graduates than farmers. The automobile culture replaced the urban culture, and roads and highways received funding while urban mass transit deteriorated and was dismantled. Suburban communities and highways served as magnets for shopping centers and later malls that replaced the downtown centers and the village greens. For those who had left the cities, there were fewer and fewer reasons to return.

As the white middle class left the cities they were replaced in large part by African Americans moving north from the rural south and Latino groups moving from the Caribbean and Latin America, all hoping to benefit from the perceived prosperity. From 1940 to 1960, 375,000 African Americans moved to New York and the Latino population quadrupled, although the total population of the city declined. Thus, the economic base of the theatre of the previous decades was being lost, and the intellectual and cultural face of the city was being altered. The new urban dwellers might have formed the basis of a new audience, but a variety of factors worked against this development. There was no voice representing the new populations and the potential new audiences within the theatre world. And because the recent arrivals, in many cases, lacked a theatregoing tradition, there was no compelling need to meet their demands nor was there much impetus from within the communities to create theatre. The production of theatre remained in the hands of the older generation or at least the same segment of society that was deserting the cities. The theatre had become so institutionalized that rather than attempting to change, it metaphorically dug in its heels.

The response by producers to the erosion of the audience was to try to lure back the same audience. The single greatest cost increase for producers in the fifties was advertising, which rose some 300 percent. Curtain time was adjusted to meet the needs of suburban commuters – from 8:40 to 7:30 in 1971 and then back to 8:00, where it remains. The new suburbanites continued to return to the city to attend the theatre for a while but such a journey was more complex and certainly more costly than a mere subway or taxi ride. The cost of a trip into the city, the demands of family, and the rise of suburban movie theatres combined with the effects of television to alter theatregoing habits.

Although there was a continuous and significant drop in the number of

productions in the decades after the war, the total audience remained more or less constant. Attendance figures fluctuated from year to year by as much as 20 percent, but on average the Broadway audience from the end of the war through the 1960–61 season remained at about 7 million. And despite the continuing decline in new productions the overall attendance figures actually rose through the seventies, peaking at 11 million in 1981 and then leveling off at about 9 million ever since. But with theatre tickets three to ten times more expensive than movies (through the sixties, the cheapest seats were competitive with movies, but prices began to skyrocket thereafter, reaching a \$75 top in 1996 against \$9.00 for a movie, and, even so, the rise in ticket prices did not keep pace with the rise in production costs), the greater effort to get to the theatre, and the diminishing product, producers had to work harder to get the audience into the seats. Audiences were becoming increasingly selective in what they saw, willing to commit their time and dollars only to certified hits.

The unorthodox and iconoclastic shows that had once survived and even thrived on the periphery of the great theatre machine were now banished to increasingly obscure venues. The phenomenal salaries and fees that Hollywood offered, especially with the birth of the television industry, lured actors and, more significantly, writers away from the legitimate stage. The result was a steady erosion of the number of new productions and an increasing conservatism on the part of producers fearful of losing ever larger sums of money. Finally, the new technology of television had a staggering effect on the theatre to a degree that the movies never had.

The statistics alone are sobering. The number of televisions sold in the United States jumped from a mere 172,000 in 1948 to 5 million in 1950 to over 79 million in 1960, by which time 90 percent of American families were regular viewers and the average viewer was watching an astounding forty-four hours a week of programming – more time watching than working. So much time in front of the small screen meant little or no time for theatre, reading, hobbies, and a host of leisure-time activities. Even movie attendance dropped from 90 million a week in 1946 to 46 million a week in 1955.

Overshadowed by television, the theatre, once prestigious, ubiquitous, and a mirror of national identity had, by the sixties, become an elitist entertainment aimed at a narrow segment of the population. Movies had taken over the melodrama, the thesis drama, the well-made play, and the romantic comedy; television had taken over vaudeville and all forms of popular entertainment, including the domestic comedy that had held the stage since the time of Menander.

In previous generations, in fact for virtually the entire history of theatre, those aspects of performance that are lumped under the category of popular entertainment had always constituted the foundation of theatre and provided an ongoing thread. Whatever happened in the mainstream or elitist theatres,

including the virtual elimination of such theatres periodically throughout history, popular entertainment – singing, dancing, circus skills, comedy, and domestic skits – remained almost unaltered. In any other time in history, such entertainments would have sprung up in response to the needs of a changing audience – they would have weathered the storms of debilitating economics in the commercial theatre – and thus created a foundation for a revitalized theatre. But television supplanted live popular performance. Everything that might have been found in vaudeville houses, and much of the drama and comedy that had been a staple of the popular Broadway stage for decades, could now be found on television – and viewers did not even have to venture out of the house. Even the circus was put on TV. In one sense, the transference of popular entertainment to television meant that almost everyone could now attend the “theatre”; mass entertainment had never been so “mass.” But on the other hand, the possibility for local and ethnically focused entertainments was being crushed beneath the weight of universal acceptance. The television had become the primary tool for achieving the conformist society. The weekly *Ed Sullivan Show* entered homes with a wider variety of entertainment than most people had ever seen before, but now audiences from the industrial northeast or rural south or western ranch lands, the Jew, the African American, the Hispanic, the Asian, and the Anglican were all presented with a bill of fare that either homogenized or obliterated individual voices, depending on one’s point of view.

By the early fifties, most people involved with the Broadway theatre began to sound a note of panic as they recognized the situation. The pessimism was plaintively expressed by critic John Chapman dispiritedly summing up the season for *The Best Plays of 1950–1951*: “We must not look toward the future with any great amount of confidence, for the American theatre . . . has been in a decline during all the recent years. This decline has been both economic and artistic. Inflation has caused the economic decline, and few people can afford to be regular theatre goers any more” (v). In a history of Broadway twenty years later, *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson noted that theatre “as an industry . . . was obsolete . . . After World War II, theater owners became acutely conscious of a pitiless fact of life: a theatre could earn an income for only twenty-two hours a week, making only meager use of the expensive land it occupied” (*Broadway*, 417). Theatre was recognized as a business – an industry – and it was measured accordingly.

### ***The 1950s***

The decade of the fifties was long perceived as a period of conformity and stasis, although recent re-evaluations are challenging that view. Poet Robert

Lowell, for instance, could write of “the tranquillized fifties” where “even the man / scavenging filth in the back alley trash cans, / has two children, a beach wagon, a helpmate, / and is ‘a young Republican’” (“Memories of West Street,” 85). Eisenhower was depicted by comics as a president who spent more time playing golf than running the country. It was the period of the “organization man,” the corporate conformist described by social observer William Whyte. The organization man had become so totally accepted as part of society by the early sixties that even the humorless IBM Corporation could manage a smile at itself by dressing the guides at its 1964 New York World’s Fair pavilion in gray flannel suits. Social philosopher C. Wright Mills wrote *White Collar* in 1951 attacking the sales mentality that had overtaken the nation and supplanted middle-class independence. He followed this up in 1956 with the more radical *The Power Elite*, which warned of the dangers of the corporate mentality and its power over all aspects of society as well as the dangers of the military-industrial complex. Vance Packard and David Riesman also warned of the dangers of the increasingly consumerist society. These were not the muck-raking books of the Upton Sinclair variety, exposing harmful and exploitative business practices; these books warned of something more sinister – a kind of brainwashing and a loss of individual freedoms and national spirit. The dark side of Freudianism in the popular understanding was that if the mind were ultimately quantifiable it must therefore be controllable as well. Those with the right knowledge – and the wrong motives – be they corporations selling you their product or Communist operatives taking over your soul, had the ability to brainwash you, render you into a zombie-like agent of their desires. (This was the message behind the chilling 1962 movie *The Manchurian Candidate*.) These writings laid the groundwork for an “us vs. them” mentality that pervaded the counterculture movements of the sixties. “Us” was the everyday, everyman, individual; “them” was the “establishment” of the government, military, and corporations or, in some contexts, the Communists, who were depicted as melodramatically evil. Cartoonist Walt Kelly, whose comic strip *Pogo* often skewered politicians, played upon this perception of the world at the start of the environmental movement in the early seventies. “We have met the enemy,” declared a character, “and he is us.”

The paranoid view of the world was captured in science fiction films and comic books that became filled with menacing blobs, things, body-snatchers, aliens, resurrected prehistoric monsters, and mutated – by atomic radiation or science experiments gone wrong – creatures including rabbits, plants, and housewives. The messages were plain and simple: Communists will steal your soul as soon as you let down your guard; and whenever science tries to play God it leads to tragic results.

Theatre has often been a stimulus for change or a challenge to a complacent culture, but the anti-Communist hysteria of the early fifties led by Senator



Joseph McCarthy squelched a great deal of free expression – more through intimidation than by direct action. Anti-Communist sentiment had existed in the U.S. since the Russian revolution of 1917 and had led to the creation of the House Un-American Activities Committee. In the postwar years the belief that Communists were infiltrating every aspect of American society and government reached epidemic proportions. “Better Dead than Red” was the battle cry of the political right. A wide range of individuals was investigated by Congress for possible Communist activities or connections, but the McCarthy hearings were virulent and used smear, innuendo, and intimidation. His investigations spread well beyond political figures and focused on high-profile and sensational figures in theatre, film, and television. Mere accusation or association led to blacklisting, ruining the careers of many writers, directors, and actors in all media. And with few exceptions, it led to the end of a theatre of ideas. It was as if the war years were a kind of purgative for the theatre and McCarthyism the death blow to a generation of playwrights. Of all the playwrights who had been successful before the war and who continued to produce afterward, including Clifford Odets, Maxwell Anderson, Robert Sherwood, Lillian Hellman, Elmer Rice, S.N. Behrman, William Saroyan – almost all of whom were noted as intellectual and politically provocative writers – not one met with anywhere near his or her previous success; none produced a hit play or lasting contribution to dramatic literature in the postwar years. Only Eugene O’Neill among the prewar playwrights achieved postwar success and this came in posthumous premieres and revivals such as *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, *A Touch of the Poet*, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, after years of artistic eclipse. In the musical theatre, only Cole Porter equaled his prewar success with the 1948 *Kiss Me, Kate*. The public seemed to demand fresh voices for what was intuitively understood as a new era.

Arthur Miller was the only new playwright to attempt a theatre of ideas – somewhat in the tradition of Ibsen – and to confront contemporary politics. *The Crucible* (1953), about the Salem witch trials, was a thinly veiled attack upon McCarthyism, and *A View from the Bridge* (1955), which dealt with the struggle between self-interest and self-sacrifice as well as codes of honor, could be seen as a reflection of the moral dilemma of the times. But the majority of serious theatre moved toward psychological explorations. So prevalent was Freudianism and to a lesser degree Jungian psychology, that a book entitled *Freud on Broadway* was published which provided Freudian underpinnings for much of the modern American theatre.<sup>2</sup> The fascination with Freudian psychology and psychotherapy in the postwar years might have pushed the theatre toward psychological explorations of the individual in any case, but the proscription against political theatre hastened the shift in emphasis.

### ***Off-Broadway***

One response to the decline of the theatre was the emergence of Off-Broadway. In *The Best Plays of 1934–1935*, critic–editor Burns Mantle inaugurated a new category for revivals, classics, new plays, and even puppet and children’s theatre performed in New York but outside the mainstream theatres of the Broadway district. He termed this “Off Broadway.” But the popular conception of Off-Broadway as an artistic alternative to the commercial theatre predates the thirties. In a sense its roots can be traced to the late-nineteenth-century art theatres of Europe such as Théâtre Libre, the Freie Bühne, and even the Moscow Art Theatre, and to the so-called “little theatres” in the United States from the teens and twenties, such as the Washington Square Players, Provincetown Players, the Neighborhood Playhouse, and Civic Repertory Theatre, to the Group Theatre and the Federal Theatre Project in the thirties. In most cases the founders of these companies were discontented with the aesthetics of the mainstream and wished to explore and develop foreign plays, new approaches to American playwriting, and even new styles of acting in the less restrictive contexts of experimental theatres, which invariably had more intimate physical surroundings, fewer formal demands on production, and far less economic risk. Still, while the participants in these ventures saw themselves as challenging accepted practices and mainstream preconceptions, they rarely saw themselves as oppositional outsiders. In most cases the alternative became absorbed into the mainstream. The Washington Square Players, for example, became the Theatre Guild, which became a major producing organization on Broadway; Eugene O’Neill, first produced by the Provincetown Players, did not remain on the fringes for long; and the Group Theatre of the thirties produced the actors and directors of both Hollywood and New York for the forties and fifties. (See Volume 2, Chapter 4 for more discussion of the groups mentioned above.)

In the late forties it seemed as if history would repeat itself as an alternative theatre emerged once again. This time, however, most of the members of this new Off-Broadway movement were not rebelling so much against the aesthetics of Broadway as against the restrictive nature of its economically driven production structure. In a world of diminished opportunities and economic high risk, serious drama, experimental theatre, and unknown and untried playwrights found little welcome in the mainstream. Off-Broadway arose to take up the slack. But instead of being absorbed into the mainstream after a decade or so as its predecessor movements had been, Off-Broadway became a shadow Broadway, as it were – a movement that ultimately replaced Broadway’s function as a producer of serious drama. The result therefore was not so much an alteration of Broadway aesthetics as a permanent shift in the