Introduction

Christopher Bigsby

The previous volume of this History told the story of the growth of Broadway theatre, the emergence of major playwrights, the shift from melodrama to a new realism and from that realism to a self-conscious experimentalism. It identified the extent to which the theatre reflected social change, as America moved from a rural to an urban economy, engaged a modernity which both delighted and appalled, and found in social inequity the source of dramatic energy. It charted the continuing influence, on actor training and design no less than dramaturgy, of the European theatre but also identified the extent to which America now exercised a powerful role. Through boom and Depression, the theatre in all its guises – from the Little Theatre movement, to the Federal Theatre, Broadway comedies and musicals, to powerful dramas of social and psychological experience – proved a public art with public appeal.

Yet already that role was threatened by the emergence of Hollywood. Ahead lay television. By the turn of the twenty-first century hundreds of channels would be available while cyberspace would exert its own seductive allure. Meanwhile, the economics of an art which required the collaborative efforts of a large number of people, used its plant inefficiently, and was often inconveniently situated, made it potentially less attractive than other arts or forms of entertainment.

This volume, though, is not an account of decline. Indeed, in some respects it covers a period in which the achievements of the American theatre were acknowledged worldwide as never before. For much of the second half of the century its playwrights were dominant, its musicals defined the genre, its actors, directors, and designers proved uniquely talented and internationally influential. But it did change in radical ways, which, unsurprisingly, mirrored transformations in society.

After a decade or so Broadway declined, a decline balanced by the emergence, in New York, of Off- and Off-Off Broadway. A similar development was to occur in Chicago and elsewhere. Indeed, the dominance of New York itself

came to an end as regional theatres spread throughout the country, generating plays that then fed back to Broadway, reversing the flow of the prewar world. And if audiences diversified on a regional basis, so they did on that of race, gender, national origin, and sexual preference. In other words, as the ruling metaphor of American society changed, from melting pot to rainbow, the theatre acknowledged this. The presumed homogeneity of the audience no longer prevailed. Just as television and publishing began to adopt a strategy of niche marketing, the theatre sought out a variety of different audiences, though often the concerns of such groups proved paradigmatic.

There were parallels with previous periods. The annual accounts of New York theatre offered by Otis L. Guernsey, Jr. itemized the continuing impact of British theatre, a thread which runs through all three of these volumes. It was responsible for just under half the Tony Awards for Best Play between 1964 and 1989 and rather more than half of the New York Drama Critics' Circle Best Play awards for the same period. By the 1970s, indeed, the British, previously believed to be genetically incapable of writing musicals, began to displace the homegrown product, until that time rightly regarded as one of the major accomplishments of the American theatre. Indeed in June 1997, *Cats*, by the ubiquitous Andrew Lloyd Webber, became the longest running musical in American theatrical history, displacing *A Chorus Line* (1975). Meanwhile, the experimental theatre of the teens and twenties had its corollary in the fifties and sixties, modernism was revisited, and where the Depression had radicalized the theatre in the thirties, the war in Vietnam did the same in the sixties and early seventies.

For the first time, though, the Federal Theatre aside, public subsidy was granted and though it was modest – occasionally to the point of near invisibility (in the 1970–71 season the American government's support for the arts amounted to seven and a half cents per head; the figure for West Germany was two dollars and forty-two cents; that for England, one dollar and twenty-three cents) – it was a sign that theatre was at last acknowledged as an art which made legitimate demands on the public purse as well as on public attention. Nonetheless it was an embattled art, constantly struggling to survive. But it was an art which accurately registered the shifting mood and concerns of a nation which stepped from Depression into war and from war into the uncertainties of a post-nuclear age. And as such it told the story, in the words of Philip Roth's Nathan Zuckerman, of the "disruption of the anticipated American future that was simply to have unrolled out of the solid American past, out of each generation's getting smarter . . . out of each generation's breaking away from the parochialism a little further" (*American Pastoral*, 85). In part, as the decades passed, that involved acknowledging what Roth calls "the indigenous American beserk," and in part recognizing that the centripetal project implied in the motto *E Pluribus Unum* could be seen as a false rather

than simply a utopian model, as radically divergent experiences were presented on America's stages.

The war marked another kind of divide. Some of those who had helped define the 1920s and 1930s did not survive to do the same for the postwar world. In the novel, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nathanael West, and Gertrude Stein died between 1940 and 1946, while Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and John Steinbeck no longer seemed to have a purchase on their society, despite their international recognition in the form of the Nobel Prize. In the theatre, likewise, Susan Glaspell, Sidney Howard, Jerome Kern, Lorenz Hart, and, within a few years, Philip Barry and Robert Sherwood were dead, while Maxwell Anderson and Lillian Hellman produced little to rival their earlier work.

Eugene O'Neill, meanwhile, had succumbed to a Parkinson-like disease which frustrated his efforts to write. He had, however, stored up works of great accomplishment, which, for over a decade after the war, would light up a Broadway season, works which plundered his life for the raw materials of plays that confronted his characters with their failure to realize the hopes that had once energized and now ironized them, plays whose very bleakness he had judged too great for wartime audiences.

A further irony awaited, however, in that the two not so very young men who appeared on the scene in the mid-1940s – Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, both in their thirties at the time of their first Broadway successes – were in fact shaped by the previous decade in which they had written, and indeed staged, radical dramas. They certainly reflected the mood of their own time – Miller, in particular, taking pride in his sensitivity to the contemporary – but both were marked by a decade in which the solitary individual was obliged to acknowledge a social obligation or be excluded alike from history and the moral world. Miller, as was signaled by the title of his first success, *All My Sons*, opted for a drama which staged the individual's struggle to negotiate personal meaning in a social context. Williams, as is indicated by the title of one of his plays, *Fugitive Kind*, explored the plight of the self in recoil from the public world.

Stylistically, O'Neill moved from a lyric celebration of the outsider, to an exuberant expressionism, to a strained realism, a naturalism which mocked its own assumptions. Williams and Miller both sought a more fluid, or, to use Williams's own word, plastic staging in which dramatic metaphor found a correlative in visual symbol. O'Neill's appeal lay in a relentless quality, as characters were driven beyond the point at which they could negotiate the terms of their existence. Miller's lay in the strenuous demands made of those required suddenly to confront the nature and extent of their own moral failings. Williams took his audience in a wholly different direction. His plays often threatened and, indeed, delivered, violence or displayed sexual need. Their

southern settings and lyrically expressive language offered a seductive exoticism not wholly unrelated to that being explored by Jack Kerouac, for whom the improvisatory free spirit lay, if not at the heart of meaning, then at the heart of the search for such.

Writing of the 1950s, Daniel Bell observed that: "America in mid-century is in many respects a turbulent country. Oddly enough, it is a turbulence born, not of depression, but of prosperity. Contrary to the somewhat simple notion that prosperity dissolves all social problems, the American experience demonstrates that prosperity brings in its wake new anxieties, new strains, new urgencies" (*The End of Ideology*, 103). Prosperity, indeed, was in part the problem. As Kenneth Keniston and Paul Goodman, psychologist and philosopher respectively, were to observe, materialism was not an ideal in itself; on the contrary, it provoked a desire for transcendence, for a personal economy independent of that generated by a mechanistic civilization. The very success of America gave economic power to a generation that in time found the ritual of earning and spending inadequate to their needs. They, or at least a number of them, became rebels without knowing the faith in whose name they rebelled. America, immediately after the war, may have celebrated its renewed status as a city on the hill and many of its citizens begun to dream a familiar dream, but there were others, and many writers among them, for whom the logic of history had other lessons to teach than America's steady rise toward the empyrean.

Looking back from the distance of the mid-seventies, Bell, or, rather, the writers whose views he summarized, and who had themselves emerged as commentators and primary movers (Norman O. Brown, Michel Foucault, R. D. Laing, and, in another sense, Charles Reich and Theodore Roszak), saw a generation which, in the late fifties and through the sixties, had chosen as their field of revolt "consciousness: a new polymorphous sensuality, the lifting of repression, the permeability of madness and normality, a new psychedelic awareness, the exploration of pleasure" (Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, 476). But this is not how the world seemed in 1945 when the war ended and Americans celebrated the return of what they took to be normalcy.

As ever, wars both mark a social and psychological divide and provoke a desire for continuities. Philip Roth, or his fictional alter ego Nathan Zuckerman, in *American Pastoral*, speaks of "the clock of history" being "reset" as Americans celebrated the end of the Second World War. "Everything was in motion," he insists. Men were back from Europe and Japan. America was the sole possessor of the Bomb. What could resist the newly unleashed energy of a nation politically secure and economically booming? Admittedly, the Depression was only a few years in the past and a tremor of anxiety could still pass through those who had lived through that time, but the rallying cry,

as he recalls it, was "*Make something of yourselves*." His generation, he insists, "were steered relentlessly in the direction of success" (41).

But Roth's novel is a story not just of paradise remembered (the title of its first section) but of paradise lost. For if ahead lay a materialism to be celebrated and deplored, ahead also lay assassinations, racial conflict, riots, corruptions, and another war which scarred a generation, and his novel is an account of the loss of innocence, the crumbling of assurance, a deepening anxiety about personal and public meaning, the "disruption of the anticipated American future. . . the ritual postimmigrant struggle for success turning pathological" (85–86).

But that lay far ahead. For the moment, the response was euphoria, followed by a desire to reach back not to Depression but the world which that disruption of the dream had seemed to invalidate, a world of material well-being and a confident faith in American principles. Consumerism was the new god while Manifest Destiny seemed reinstalled and legitimated. People picked up their lives and elected first a haberdasher from Missouri and then a general from Denison, Texas (who described his policy as one of "dynamic conservatism") as President, content to view the past only as processed through the calculated nostalgia of *Saturday Evening Post* covers. Meanwhile, a pediatrician, Dr. Benjamin Spock, was on hand to tell mothers that a new day had dawned, that they should trust themselves. He reassured them that the rigors of discipline need no longer prevail; desires could be satisfied without guilt.

The one-car family became the two-car family. Television plugged Americans into a common cerebral cortex. The consumer society consumed. As John Updike's narrator observed, in a short story called "When Everyone Was Pregnant," "Guiltlessness. Our fat Fifties cars, how we loved them, revved them: no thought of pollution. . . Romance of consumption at its height. Shopping for baby food in the gaudy trash of the supermarkets. Purchasing power: young, newly powerful, born to consume." And yet, as he pointed out, this coexisted with a "smug conviction that the world was doomed. Beyond the sparkling horizon, an absolute enemy. Above us, bombs whose flash would fill the scene like a cup to overflowing" (in *Museums and Women*, 92–93). And, indeed, the world had changed profoundly. The sky had been lit up by the twin suns of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and when the Soviet Union broke the American monopoly on nuclear destruction and China was "lost," for the first time a country previously invulnerable to attack felt deeply vulnerable. And since its military and scientific preeminence had been an article of faith, such catastrophes could only be a result of treachery and subversion. When had that subversion begun? Was it, perhaps, in the days of the New Deal or the brief period of U.S.–Soviet cooperation? If so, then it was necessary to rewrite history in such a way as to show that the thirties had been an aberration.

But the war itself had already sent a shock wave through those who could

not regard the allied victory as a vindication of the human spirit, and that tremor, as ever, was registered by the writer. Thus, in Europe, the bleakly comic ironies of the absurd had their roots in a very precisely definable political and social reality, while the *nouveau roman*, which marginalized the human figure, was, Alain Robbe-Grillet explained, no more than an expression of what he had observed in a war which relegated the individual human being quite literally to the ash heap. The Jewish writer in particular was unlikely to regard the Holocaust as no more than a brief interruption in the ascent of man.

The Jewish American writer, indeed, took from the war either a sense that the individual was a victim, trying to understand the ironies in which he was apparently trapped, or a desperate desire to reconstitute values apparently so profoundly denied as to negate the very idea of social or metaphysical purpose. Either way there was a sense of deep dismay, often rendered comically. The irony, however, was that by degrees such writers found themselves speaking for those for whom an old world – essentially rural, untroubled – no longer seemed accessible. Nor were Jewish writers the only ones to flirt with black humor (James Purdy, John Hawkes, Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller), or the deracinated or alienated individual (J.D. Salinger, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote). The new world was urban or, at best, suburban and, beyond the glitter of consumer products, was increasingly perceived as charged with tensions, infected with deep insecurities – sexual, financial, racial. What was at stake was a sense of identity and purpose, and unsurprisingly this was felt most acutely by those whose grip on national myths and realities was most tenuous: the Jewish and African American writer. No wonder Sartrean Existentialism hovered in the wings. They might acknowledge their victim status but they also resisted it in the name of an existential drive which was sometimes acknowledged and sometimes not. The irony is that the protagonists of such books as Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man* (1944) and *The Victim* (1947), Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* (1957), Philip Roth's *Goodbye Columbus* (1959), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and James Baldwin's essays *Nobody Knows My Name* (1957) came to seem expressions of a more general sense of alienation and anxiety. They might be marginalized by WASP society but such marginalization came increasingly to seem a common, and even celebrated, experience (see Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso). In the words of the protagonist of *Invisible Man*, "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"

For Professor of Psychology Kenneth Keniston at Yale University, drawing on his own work and that of others in the fifties and sixties,

> The prevailing images of our culture are images of disintegration, decay, and despair; our highest art involves the fragmentation and distortion of traditional realities; our best drama depicts suffering, misunderstanding, and

> breakdown; our worthiest novels are narratives of loneliness, searching, and unfulfillment . . . Judged by the values of past generations, our culture seems obsessed with breakdown, splintering, disintegration, and destruction. Ours is not an age of synthesis but of analysis, not of constructive hopes but of awful destructive potentials, not of commitment but alienation. (*The Uncommitted*, 2)

The argument may have been overstated and the comparison with the past suspect, but this language did, indeed, have currency, not least in literature.

And what was true in the novel and poetry was true also in drama. Neil Simon presented comically what Arthur Miller presented tragically, namely the dilemma of the individual who no longer feels he has a connection with his own life or with the community in which he finds himself. Miller in particular set himself very consciously to reconstitute the moral world denied equally by the Holocaust, which made its way into more than one of his plays, and by a particularly American penchant for denying the past. Those Americans who wanted to believe in business as usual, selling America back to itself as the best product on the market, were, in his plays, made to face the fact of their own fallibility as well as the falseness of the promises which elevated the future over the present and which denied the moral logic which linked that present to the past. He wrote plays which were as centrally concerned with moral identity as the novels of Bellow and Ellison. Indeed, in 1945 he himself wrote a very successful novel, *Focus*, which explored both the nature of American anti-Semitism and the existential dilemma of a man who struggles toward a sense of his own identity and of his responsibility toward others. In his plays his characters cry out their names precisely because identity has been placed under such pressure. The American dream, meanwhile, becomes an evasion, merely the expression of a need for coherence and meaning, a project whose indefinite deferral is a judgment equally of the individual and his society. When Willy Loman, in *Death of a Salesman*, tries to offer his false dreams as an inheritance to his sons he acknowledges a failure which touches very directly on his sense of himself. As Erich Fromm observed:

> When a person feels that he has not been able to make sense of his own life, he tries to make sense of it in terms of the life of his children. But one is bound to fail within oneself *and* for the children. The former because the problem of existence can only be solved by each one only for himself, and not by proxy; the latter because one lacks in the very qualities which one needs to guide the children in their own search for an answer. (*The Art of Loving*, 86)

By the same token Tennessee Williams's characters spoke of their sense of paranoia as power and money assumed an implacable authority, and the natural processes of mortality denied the very promises that life seemed to offer. His fragile characters, menaced in their sexuality and their social roles,

desperate for a love which simultaneously terrified them, registered something more than his intensely personal sense of oppression as homosexual and artist. Throughout his life he insisted on his radicalism, a radicalism literal enough in the works which he wrote in the thirties, but evident, too, in the subversive drive of plays which constantly celebrated the marginal, the dispossessed, the disregarded. In interviews and public statements he denounced a society which literally and legally proscribed his sexuality but that also, from time to time, menaced the freedom which his plays celebrated even in the moment that that freedom was being withdrawn. What some took for his southern gothicism, his melodramatic imagination, he regarded as a staging of the conflict between an implacable materialism and a redeeming, though ultimately defeated, human spirit.

Despite the fact that decades are little more than convenient means of organizing experience, rarely beginning and ending with any precision, they do, on occasion, have a persuasive shape. It was true of the twenties, heralded by Prohibition, as it was of the thirties, bracketed by the Crash and World War II. The sixties, likewise, obligingly began with what seemed like a clear shift in values, style, and priorities, though the election of John F. Kennedy was perhaps of greater symbolic than actual significance, not least because the drama of his assassination brought an abrupt end to his administration (and it is hard not to think of the events of those days, played out as they were on television, as a kind of theatre). Certainly little was accomplished in his brief presidency either domestically or in terms of foreign policy, beyond a somewhat grudging moral commitment to racial justice at home and a near lethal engagement with the Soviet Union over Cuba and a growing involvement in Vietnam. But everything about him signaled change. He was young, Catholic, sexually active (just how much so only becoming apparent later). He valued the arts, invited writers to the White House, and went to the theatre. His successor, too, invited writers to the White House. The difference was that some of them refused to go because by then, and despite his genuine commitment to social justice, Lyndon Johnson had committed America more completely to the war in Vietnam and this had distorted national politics and radicalized a generation. Robert Lowell and Arthur Miller both declined invitations, Miller, ironically, to Johnson's signing of a bill setting up the National Endowment for the Arts, itself a significant change in attitudes toward support for the arts in America. The impact both of social change and of that war was clear on all aspects of American life.

Not the least important aspect of that change was the emergence, essentially from the mid-fifties onward, of teenagers. With money in their pockets they provoked and responded to a new market in popular music, while finding images of their youthful disaffection in the movies – James Dean's drive to

oblivion merely reinforcing his role as social rebel. A decade later they were tuning in, turning on, and dropping out at the behest of Timothy Leary or marching against the war. The contraceptive pill had released them from biological discipline and hence, to a large degree, from moral constraint. Dr. Spock, who had been responsible for their nurturing, now found himself attacked for creating a permissive generation and himself followed what seemed to him to be the logic of his profession, as pediatrician, by protesting the war and even running for the presidency as a way of protecting future generations of babies. In short, within the course of a decade old authorities had lost their power: economic, social, moral.

Kenneth Keniston spoke of an "unprogrammatic alienation," a "rebellion without a cause" (*The Uncommitted*, 67). In his book on alienated youth in America he observed the degree to which the vocabulary of social commentary increasingly stressed the distance between people and between people and the objects of their concern.

> Alienation, estrangement, disaffection, anomie, withdrawal, disengagement, separation, non-involvement, apathy, indifference, and neutralism – all of these terms point to a sense of loss, a growing gap between men and their social world. The drift of our time is away from connection, relation, communion and dialogue, and our intellectual concerns reflect this conviction. Alienation, once seen as imposed *on* men by an unjust economic system, is increasingly chosen *by* men as their basic stance toward society. (*The Uncommitted,* 1)

It is hard not to see this as a description of the mood of Edward Albee's first success, *The Zoo Story* (1959), produced on the cusp of the sixties, in which the protagonist, withdrawn, disaffected, acutely aware of the gap between himself and others, has, indeed, chosen alienation; nor hard either to see in it a reflection of those concerns voiced by another psychologist, Erich Fromm, who, in his fifties book *The Art of Loving*, reflected both Keniston's views and those to be found in Albee's *The American Dream* when he oberved that: "Modern man has transformed himself into a commodity. . . He is alienated from himself, from his fellow men and from nature" (88), consoled by the "strict routine of bureaucratised, mechanical work" (74). The paramount need, Fromm insisted, was "to leave the prison of his aloneness." The mechanism whereby this was to be attained was love: "a power which breaks through the walls which separate man from his fellow men, which unites him with others" (24). The imagery was specifically that taken up by Albee, the potentially religious overtones being preserved in the symbolism of his early plays, as it was by Tennessee Williams, for whom love was indeed an active principle capable of neutralizing the alienation felt by so many of his characters. As the fifties slid into the sixties, love, counterpoised to the mechanistic drive of materialism or, more specifically, of the military, was celebrated as a

secular virtue or a spiritual principle, by a counterculture celebrating the body and frequently exhibiting a fascination with Zen Buddhism, a direction taken by Paul Goodman (an admirer, more accurately, of Taoism), whose interests spanned those of academic analysis and theatre.

By the sixties the novel seemed to be flying in all directions. Gore Vidal wrote a patrician version of history, John Updike and John Cheever a middle-class and suburban one respectively. John Barth, meanwhile, blended history with fiction, as E. L. Doctorow, William Styron, and Robert Coover were to do. There were parallels in the theatre as Miller revisited the Holocaust in *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy*, O'Neill plunged further back in the posthumous *More Stately Mansions* (1962), and Howard Sackler explored a version of the African American past in *The Great White Hope* (1968).

There were parallels, too, to the non-fiction novel of Truman Capote, the new journalism of Tom Wolfe, and the explorations of contemporary reality by Norman Mailer, though several of these came from abroad, most notably Rolf Hochuth's *The Investigation* (1965) and Heinar Kipphardt's *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (1964). Martin Duberman's *In White America* (1963) deployed documentary material, as did Daniel Berrigan's and Saul Levitt's *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (1969), which began Off-Off Broadway and transferred to Broadway, but the documentary play proved of limited appeal.

Perhaps a closer parallel is that between a new spirit of experimentalism in the novel, which included such diverse talents as William Burroughs, Ken Kesey, Thomas Pynchon, William Gass, Richard Brautigan, Donald Barthelme, and Kurt Vonnegut, and the neo-Surrealist and Dadaist concerns of the creators of Happenings, the Artaud-influenced performances of the Living Theatre, the Grotowski-inspired work of the Performance Group, the early plays of Sam Shepard, and the work of Jean-Claude Van Itallie, Rochelle Owens, Megan Terry, and Ronald Tavel. The fact is that increasingly there seemed to be no orthodoxy either to enforce or rebel against. Certainly, in 1961 Philip Roth spoke of the difficulty for the writer of making American reality credible. However, what seemed difficult in 1961 must have appeared all but impossible as assassination piled on assassination, Americans were invited to join the drug culture, cities burned, and young men were returned from a foreign war in body bags. Revolt, pressing toward revolution, spread around the globe. Authority was challenged, no less in the arts than in any other area of life.

The counterculture gave primacy to the Pleasure Principle over the Reality Principle; resisted the idea of distinctions, divisions, categories, hierarchies. It distrusted rationality as self-limiting and located an essentially Romantic exploration of the self in the context of a new communalism. Much the same had been true of the early decades of the century when Modernism was born