

The Cambridge History of American Theatre

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

Volume Three examines the development of the theatre after World War II, through the productions of Broadway and beyond and into regional theatre across the country. Contributors also analyze new directions in theatre design, directing, and acting, as well as key plays and playwrights through the 1990s.

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*The Cambridge History
of American Theatre*

Volume Three

The Cambridge History of American Theatre

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

Edited by

Don B. Wilmeth
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Preface and Acknowledgments

As was demonstrated in Volume One of this study, the American theatre has a history going back to the first encounter of Europeans with what, to them, was a new continent and, in the form of Native American rituals and ceremonies, a prehistory. In Volume Two the contributors explained that the theatre, the most public of the arts, has always been a sensitive gauge of social pressures and public issues; the actor has been a central icon of a society which, from its inception, has seen itself as performing, on a national stage, a destiny of international significance. As articulated in the introduction to this volume, the period since World War II has led to even greater variegated theatre with worldwide influence.

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

The theatre has reflected the diversity of America and the special circumstances in which it has operated in an expanding country moving toward a

sense of national identity. The history of the American stage and the making of America have been coterminous, often self-consciously so, and to that end each volume begins with a timeline followed by a wide-ranging essay which attempts to locate the theatre in the context of a developing society. Both timeline and overview also allow individual authors to avoid any urge to offer inclusiveness and to provide, when appropriate, more detailed coverage of important individuals or events, so that, for example, Arnold Aronson offers a unique perspective in his introductory overview chapter, while other authors, such as Marvin Carlson in chapter 2, focus attention on one particular aspect of this history, such as alternative theatre.

The History could have run to many more volumes but the economics of publication finally determined its length, together with the number of illustrations that were possible. In the case of this present volume, this has meant both that certain choices of emphasis have been necessary, with the result that more attention has been paid to some topics rather than others, and that we have not been able to include as many illustrations as we would have liked. The precise division between the three volumes and the strategies involved in structuring this History, however (especially since from the outset it was agreed that this would be a collective history), was a matter of serious debate, a debate in which the editors were assisted by others in meetings which took place in 1994 at Brown University, in the United States, and the following year at York University, in Canada. It is proper, in fact, to pause here and, as we did in Volumes One and Two, to gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance for the Brown meeting given by Brown University, the curators of its special collections, and Cambridge University Press. For the York meeting we are indebted to Christopher Innes, who served as an advisor to the editors, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, who helped fund the expenses. In Providence we were able to gather a notable group of experts: Arnold Aronson, the late Frances Bzowski, T. Susan Chang, Rosemary Cullen, Spencer Golub, James V. Hatch, Warren Kliewer, Brooks McNamara, Brenda Murphy, Tom Postlewait, Vera Mowry Roberts, Matthew Roudané, David Savran, Ronn Smith, Susan Harris Smith, and Sarah Stanton. In Canada the editors were joined by Christopher Innes and the authors of overview essays for each volume (Arnold Aronson, Tom Postlewait, and Bruce McConachie). We are indebted to these experts for their thoughtful and challenging ideas and recommendations.

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

have an element of the arbitrary, however, chronological periods doing damage to the continuity of individual careers and stylistic modes. But, division there must be and those we have chosen seem more cogent than any of the others we considered, despite our strong suspicion that any periodization can be misleading. In truth, Volume One extends to the post-Civil War period, and Volume Two, in order to establish some sense of continuity, dovetails the time frame of that volume, as this volume overlaps World War II, though its major emphasis is post-World War II.

The organization of the three volumes does, however, reveal a bias in favor of the modern, which previous prefaces in this series of volumes deplored. Yet it does not presume that theatrical history began with Eugene O'Neill, as often implied, but simply recognizes that the story of the American theatre is one of a momentum which gathers pace with time, while acknowledging the rich heritage and accomplishments of American theatre during its earlier periods.

As suggested above, the History does not offer itself as encyclopedic. Given restrictions of space this could never have been an objective, nor was such a strategy deemed appropriate. Those wishing to research details not found in these pages should consult the *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre* (1993, 1996), edited by Don B. Wilmeth and Tice L. Miller, and *Theatre in the United States: A Documentary History* (vol. I, 1750–1915), edited by Barry Witham (vol. II is well underway). Both works were published by Cambridge University Press, and this History was planned with those volumes in mind, as a complementary effort. The *Guide* is an especially important supplement to this volume. Rather than offer comprehensive detail, what this History does aim to do is to demonstrate that this nation is constructed of more than a set of principles enforced by a common will. It builds itself out of more than contradictions denied by rhetoric or shared experience. The theatre first played its part in shaping the society it served; later it reflected the diversity which was always at odds with a supposed homogeneity. Inevitably derivative, in time it accommodated itself to the new world, and, in creating new forms, in identifying and staging new concerns, was itself a part of the process which it observed and dramatized.

Theatre is international. Today, an American play or prominent production is as likely to open in London as in New York and to find its primary audience outside the country of its birth. The 1997–98 Broadway season was a good example of this, with a revival of *Cabaret* that began its life in England, a blockbuster hit musical *Ragtime* that developed in Canada, and major prizes going to a play which originated in France (*Art* by Yasmina Reza) and one that was Anglo-Irish in origin (*The Beauty Queen of Leenane*). Despite the restrictions imposed by Actors' Equity, actors move between countries, as do directors and designers. Film and television carry drama across national frontiers. Yet, the American playwright still addresses realities, myths, concerns born out of

national experiences; the American theatre still stages the private and public anxieties of a people who are what they are because of history. The accomplishments of the American theatre are clear. This is an account of those accomplishments as it is, in part, of that history.

We are extremely grateful for financial support from our institutions – Brown University and the University of East Anglia – and we are pleased to acknowledge the editorial assistance of Diana Beck, funded by the Brown Graduate School, who made many chores less arduous in the early preparation of this volume. The initial idea for this History came from Cambridge editors Sarah Stanton and Victoria Cooper, who not only brought the editors together but have also been a constant source of support and encouragement; Anne Sanow, formerly with Cambridge University Press, and Victoria Cooper, in the British Office of the Press, have helped to shepherd this volume through its various stages, and Audrey Cotterell has served us well in the copy-editing process. The thirteen authors of chapters in this volume are clearly indebted to the scholarship of those who have gone before, as well as to colleagues still active in the field. The specific debts of each author are suggested in notes and, most significantly, in the bibliographical essays that conclude each chapter. Credits for illustrations are indicated with each photograph. Though not successful in every instance, every possible effort has been made to obtain photographic permission. We have nonetheless given credit to all photographers when known and would be delighted to seek formal permission for subsequent editions should contact finally be made. We are grateful to individual authors who furnished or suggested illustrations and the staffs of the collections identified who helped to locate or provide illustrations. In particular, we are pleased to single out the assistance of Melissa Miller of the Humanities Research Center's Theatre Collection at the University of Texas; Ian Rand of the Publicity Department of Livent, Inc.; Christine Nicholson of Davis, California; Oskar Eustis of the Trinity Repertory Theatre; designers Eugene Lee, Harry Matheu, Tony Walton, and John Lee Beatty; Levi D. Phillips of Special Collections, University of California–Davis; John Degen, Martha LoMonaco, and Marvin Carlson; photographer Bill Rice; Peggy Shaw of Split Britches; Carol Bixler of En Garde Arts; Michael B. Dixon and Jennifer McMaster of Actors Theatre of Louisville; Ruth Maleczek of Mabou Mines; Richard Foreman of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre Company; Anne Reiss of The Wooster Group; Jennifer Garza of the Alley Theatre; and Anna Strasberg and Ivana Ruzak of the Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute. We are especially grateful to Laurence Maslon for the three wonderful caricature composites that he drew expressly for this History and which grace his section on Broadway.