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The founding: myth and history

THE FOUNDING OF THE PROVINCETOWN PLAYERS IS AN EVENT that has grown beyond legend to assume the status of myth in the annals of the American theatre. Its significance is paramount because, as theatre historians have recognized, the Provincetown, with its nurturance of self-consciously literary American playwrights like Susan Glaspell, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Eugene O'Neill, has come to represent a new conception of the theatre in the United States. The Provincetown is now seen as the major progenitor of experimental non-commercial theatre in America, the pioneering group that taught theatre practitioners how to develop, nurture, and practice theatre as an art in a country where theatre had always been almost exclusively a business. The growth of the Provincetown myth has been helped by the fact that, as Robert Sarlós has noted, "the group's first stirrings remain a mystery, about which many myths but few facts survive. Accounts, even by participants, are contradictory."¹ As early as 1931, the first published full-length history of the Provincetown, by Helen Deutsch and Stella Hanau, noted that the story of the founding in the summer of 1915 had been told so often that it was already assuming the form of legend:

Magazines, newspapers, personal biographies, and histories of the theater have carried accounts of the picturesque beginnings until even the phraseology of the tale has become traditional; one always tells of Robert Edmond Jones' improvised settings by saying that "Bobby Jones made scenery from sofa cushions," and of the very first performance by saying, always in the inverted form, "two plays they had." Eugene O'Neill, at his first appearance, is always a "shy, dark boy."²

The myth-making actually began with the group's first publicity efforts, as it was moving toward becoming an organized entity and opening its

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theatre in New York, at the end of the summer of 1916. George Cram Cook, not yet the group's elected president, claimed the centrality that he would later insist on. "It was George Cram Cook's idea," the article reported:

"Why shouldn't we have a little theatre and try out our new plays?" said [Cook] one day as they were all sunning on the beach after a swim. "Just the thing!" cried Jack Reed. "I've got two that I'd like to try next week." "Where shall we have the theatre?" said they. "Why not out there on the wharf?" suggested someone. An old sea captain was looked up and told they wanted to rent his old shed on the pier for a theatre. "That ain't no theatre," said he. "You wait and see!" said Freddie Burt.³

Even making allowances for the prevailing broad journalistic license to depart from the facts in the interest of a good story, it is evident from this account that Cook had ignored reality in order to create his own founding myth in speaking to the reporter. Jack Reed's plays were not submitted until the second summer. The first two plays staged by the group were *Suppressed Desires*, by Cook and his wife, the well-known novelist and short-story writer Susan Glaspell, and *Constancy*, by Neith Boyce, also a successful writer of fiction. They were put on at the home of Boyce and her husband, the journalist and philosophical anarchist Hutchins Hapgood. The idea of using the fish house at the end of a wharf, belonging not to an old sea captain, but to the writer and labor activist Mary Heaton Vorse and her husband Joe O'Brien, emerged only after the first performance at the Hapgoods' cottage. A letter from Boyce to her father-in-law, written two days after the performance on July 15, 1915, sheds a different light on the origin of the theatre group: "You will be amused to hear that I made my first appearance on the stage Thursday night!! I have been stirring up the people here to write and act some short plays – We began the season with one of mine. Bobby J[ones]. staged it on our verandah – The colors were orange and yellow against the sea . . . I have been highly complimented on my acting!!!"⁴

Probably because of Cook's later centrality to the group and the relatively early departure of Boyce and Hapgood, it is the Cook version that has become the master narrative. Robert Sarló's standard history, *Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players*, reinforced the centrality of Cook, treating the Provincetown Players as "the theatrical experiment engendered by Cook." Although his account acknowledges that the "first stirrings remain a mystery," it also suggests that "three factors in the

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group's birth are beyond dispute: the plays were first thought of as a profoundly therapeutic party-game for a small, close-knit group; the idea no sooner emerged than it materialized in the form of scripts; Jig Cook was *spiritus rector* before it all began."⁶ This narrative suggests that, in the spirit of George "Jig" Cook's "infectious enthusiasm and dedication to spontaneous group creativity," the Greenwich Village artists and thinkers vacationing in Provincetown that summer "yielded as a group to a spontaneous urge to dramatize issues directly affecting their own lives."⁷ This is an important part of the Cook founding myth because of his dedication to the Nietzschean idea of theatre as a Dionysian expression of the group spirit, brought into existence through the mediation of an artistic genius, Cook himself.

The emphasis on spontaneity and on the plays as a "profoundly therapeutic" party game for a group of friends may be slighting some other important factors. As Sarlós notes, there was a growing Little Theatre movement in the United States in 1915, and the people who so enthusiastically entered into the activity of the new theatre group in Provincetown were well aware of it, as well as the work of the European Art Theatres, several of which had brought productions to the US in the previous five years. To situate the contribution of the Provincetown in the context of the cultural moment, and to fully understand the cultural work its members intended to perform, it is important to take note of this performance history.

One of the most significant theatrical events in the second decade of the twentieth century was the American tour of Dublin's Abbey Players in 1911. The "Irish Players," which began their life as the Irish Literary Theatre, a company organized by William Butler Yeats, George Moore, and Edward Martyn to produce original plays by native playwrights, had grown into the Irish National Theatre, a company that not only served native playwrights, but was dedicated to some of the new impulses in the European Art Theatre, particularly those inspired by Edward Gordon Craig's call for a unifying synthesis of the theatrical elements in the production. Craig's desire to, as Sheldon Cheney described it in 1925, "substitute suggestion in place of imitation, simplicity in place of elaboration, expressiveness in place of showiness" and create "a definite spiritual or emotional relationship between the background and the action"⁸ supplied an aesthetic basis for the simplified staging methods and naturalistic acting style that had developed by necessity within a company of dedicated amateurs with little producing capital.

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Eugene O'Neill saw every one of the Irish Players' productions during their six weeks' residence at the Maxine Elliott Theatre in New York in 1911, and he later acknowledged that "it was seeing the Irish players for the first time that gave me a glimpse of my opportunity . . . I thought then and I still think that they demonstrated the possibilities of naturalistic acting better than any other company."⁹ John Reed, at that time a young editor for *American* magazine, also saw the Abbey Players in New York.¹⁰ The Midwesterners among the future Provincetown Players, including Cook and Floyd Dell, then his boss on the literary supplement of the *Chicago Evening News* and later to become assistant editor of *The Masses* under Max Eastman, saw the Irish Players in Chicago. Susan Glaspell wrote in her memoir of Cook that "quite possibly there would have been no Provincetown Players had there not been Irish Players. What [Cook] saw done for Irish life he wanted for American life – no stage conventions in the way of projecting with the humility of true feeling."¹¹ Dell wrote that it was "a wonderful experience" to "sit in the gallery night after night and see the rich world of [J. M.] Synge and Lady Gregory."¹² The Irish Players, with their amateur origins, their dedication to the drama as a literary art form, their cultural nationalism, their refusal to embrace theatrical convention, and their determination to break new ground in a broad spectrum of drama from the folk plays of Synge, Lady Gregory, and T. C. Murray to the modern, symbolic "Noh" theatre of Yeats, provided a strong precursor and direct model for the Provincetown Players. In their dedication to encouraging "the writing of American plays of real artistic, literary, and dramatic – as opposed to Broadway – merit,"¹³ the Provincetown Players were carrying out an American version of the Abbey Players' mission.

A second manifestation of the Art Theatre movement in the experience of many future Provincetown Players was the Chicago Little Theatre, founded in 1912 by Maurice Browne and his wife Ellen Van Volkenburg. Several of the future founders of the Provincetown Players were in Chicago at the time, including the artist Brör Nordfeldt, who designed and built the set for the Little Theatre's production of *The Trojan Women* and acted in some productions, as well as Cook, Dell, and the Provincetown Players' chief play-reader Edna Kenton. They were all caught up in the enthusiasm surrounding the Little Theatre's productions. Browne was deeply influenced by Craig, and Dell's vivid memory twenty years later of the productions of plays by Shaw, Strindberg, Schnitzler, and Euripides testifies to the imaginative power of the theatre

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Browne created in his tiny space in the Fine Arts Building across from Chicago's Art Institute. The awareness of the Chicago theatre's successful work and its impact on the city's cultural community was an important impetus in the direction that was taken very early in the career of the Provincetown Players, as were the Craig-influenced production ideas of Maurice Browne.

A more immediate influence on the Provincetown Players was the Paterson Pageant, which had been staged in 1913 in support of the silk workers' strike in Paterson, New Jersey. The moving force behind the pageant was John Reed, known to all of Greenwich Village as "Jack," who had been jailed along with a number of labor activists while he was in Paterson reporting on the strike for *The Masses* magazine. As Linda Nochlin has noted, Reed's Paterson Strike Pageant assumes its full importance only in the context of the more general pageant movement of its time in the US. Nineteen thirteen was something of a year of the pageant, when "the whole country was in the throes of a vigorous pageant renaissance, often referred to as the 'New Pageant Movement.'"¹⁴ It was spearheaded by George Pierce Baker – whose teaching of modern drama and theatre had influenced Reed, Hutchins Hapgood, Robert Edmond Jones, and Eugene O'Neill at Harvard – and Percy MacKaye, "Harvard '97, leader of the 'civic theater' movement and pageant-master extraordinary."¹⁵ The pageants of MacKaye and the civic theatre movement were largely patriotic and celebratory. Nochlin has noted that, in staging a pageant under the aegis of the International Workers of the World (IWW), whose actors were 1,200 striking workers, mainly immigrants, acting out the conditions that had prompted their strike, "Reed may be said to have turned the patriotic rhetoric, the well-meaning 'melting-pot' psychology of the do-gooder civic-theater leaders, back upon itself, revealing its idealistic vision of the immigrant workers' place in their new land for the sentimental cant that it was."¹⁶

The aesthetic principles of the pageant also foreshadow those of the Provincetown Players. As Martin Green has noted, "the historical ideal behind MacKaye's work was Greek theater, which exerted a guiding influence on both society and the state in ancient Greece. It reconciled the traditions of art with those of democracy."¹⁷ This idea meshed with George Cram Cook's "Greek" ideal for the Provincetown Players, as a theatre that did the sacred work of ritual within a democratic community, by bringing it together through shared creative experience. Reed's biographer notes that Cook had sat "enthralled at the Paterson Pageant" long

before he produced his “credo” for the Provincetown Players that “one man cannot produce drama. True drama is born only of one feeling animating all the members of a clan – a spirit shared by all and expressed by the few for the all.”¹⁸ Susan Glaspell wrote in her memoir that Reed infused the workers with “the energy of a great desire, and in their feeling of his oneness with them they forgot they were on a stage. That too was a night when we sat late and talked of what the theater might be.”¹⁹

Others who were central to the Paterson Pageant were Robert Edmond Jones and the artist John Sloan, who designed and supervised the painting of the scenery, and Hutchins Hapgood, who chaired the panel of citizen advisors. They relied on their slight theatrical experience, mainly in shows at Harvard, and Reed’s experience at working with crowds as a cheerleader, rather than seeking the help of professionals in putting on the pageant. The aim was the kind of authenticity, simplicity, and unity of effect that Gordon Craig and the practitioners of the New Stagecraft were calling for in Europe. A review in the *Survey Midmonthly* testifies to the fact that they were successful in these aims:

The pageant was without staginess or apparent striving for theatrical effect. In fact, the offer of theatrical producers to help in “putting it on” was declined by those who wanted the workers’ own simple action to impress the crowd. There was no complicated detail. The “episodes” – all with the same scenery, a great painted canvas mill building – showed: the workers dully going to work, entering the mill, and then rushing out a little later when the strike was called; picketing and police clubbing in front of the mill; the funeral of Modestino; the strikers giving their children for temporary keeping to “strike mothers” from other cities; and a typical strike meeting addressed by I. W. W. leaders.²⁰

Mabel Dodge, who fell in love with Reed while working on the pageant, wrote that Jones “insisted on making it a Gordon Craig affair,” noting that he staged the funeral procession and a street scene within the auditorium so that “for a few electric moments there was a terrible unity between all those people. They were one: the workers who had come to show their comrades what was happening across the river, and the workers who had come to see it. I have never felt such a high pulsing vibration in any gathering before or since.”²¹ The reviewer for the *New York Tribune* understood the connection between this pageant and the New Stagecraft, noting that “there was a startling touch of ultra-modernity – or rather of Futurism – in the Paterson strike pageant.”²²

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The most immediate organizational precursors of the Provincetown Players were located in Greenwich Village, and were characterized by the direct participation of key figures among the founders of the Provincetown Players. The Liberal Club, “A Meeting Place for Those Interested in New Ideas,” was an old New York institution which, shaken up by the new generation of Greenwich Village leftists in 1912, split apart over the issue of allowing “Negro” members and, under the leadership of Henrietta Rodman, located itself in a new headquarters at 137 Macdougall Street, off Washington Square. The new Club was “the center of much of the resurgence and renaissance associated with Greenwich Village during the flamboyant but fertile years between 1912 and 1918 . . . in the five years of its turbulent existence [it] attracted most of the movers and shakers of the pre-war Village to its plays, parties, poetry readings, debates, demonstrations, dances, and art exhibitions.”²³ The Liberal Club would come to function as the chief meeting place for the artists, writers, and leftist thinkers who were part of what has been characterized as the New York Little Renaissance, particularly those associated with *The Masses*, Alfred Stieglitz’s Photo-Secession Gallery, known as 291, and the Provincetown Players. Among its members were future Provincetown Players Cook, Glaspell, Reed, Dell, Hapgood, Boyce, Eastman, Vorse, Ida Rauh, Alfred Kreymborg, Charles Demuth, Harry Kemp, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Frank Shay, and E.J. (“Teddy”) and Stella Ballantine.

The dramatic wing of the Liberal Club was informally known as “The Dell Players” because it featured plays written by Dell and staged under his direction. Dell, who had been “enraptured” by the work of the Chicago Little Theatre, had begun a play with the poet Arthur Davidson Ficke in Chicago, just before he left for New York. This play, invented over lunch and “called ‘St. George of the Minute,’ a satire upon ‘modern’ ideas,” reemerged when Dell was asked “to write a play to produce at the housewarming of the Liberal Club” when it moved to Greenwich Village in 1913.²⁴ Renamed “St. George in Greenwich Village” and produced, as Dell said, “‘in the Chinese manner’, without scenery – also without a stage, curtains or footlights,” the play was produced at the Liberal Club in November. Dell wrote that “the Village enjoyed being satirized, and this was a satire upon everything in which the Village believed.”²⁵ Historian Steven Watson has suggested that the play “set the tone for the new Liberal Club. Presenting the Village through the eyes of a newcomer, Dell’s play satirized modern ideas and

was sprinkled with topical references to anarchism, Futurism, suffragism, and Montessori schools. It was produced on a shoestring, with no costumes, no curtain, no stage, no lights. Sherwood Anderson, Helen Westley, and other cast members improvised new lines when they forgot the ones Dell had written.”²⁶

The Club soon acquired a movable stage, curtains, and footlights, and produced a bill of three one-act plays written by Dell every few months. A group of amateur actors gradually emerged from the Club, including several who would later appear with the Provincetown Players – Kirah Markham, Justus Sheffield, and Ida Rauh. Dell’s plays were written for a self-enclosed amateur group. He noted that “some were romantic and poetic, but most of them were satirical little comedies making fun of ourselves – sometimes making fun of the ideas which I was earnestly propagating in *The Masses*.” He insisted “it was only in the privacy of our Liberal Club little theatre, amongst ourselves, that I made fun of the suffrage movement; I would not have thought of doing so in *Vanity Fair*; in public, I made fun of the anti-suffragists . . . the Village quite understood this attitude; it wanted its most serious beliefs mocked at; it enjoyed laughing at its own convictions.”²⁷ The Dell Players embodied the joyful amateurism, the group spirit, and the spontaneity that characterized the Provincetown Players at its beginning, as well as a coterie narrowness that was eventually to give way among the Provincetown Players to broader social concerns and a more serious aesthetic vision.

The most direct precursor of the Provincetown Players was a group of Liberal Club members who wanted to take their theatrical work more seriously than Dell was interested in doing. Lawrence Langner described it in his memoir as originating with Ida Rauh, the lawyer and feminist activist married to Max Eastman, whose real desire was to act. According to Langner, she thought that the dramatic wing of the Liberal Club was “absurd,” as did he, and he suggested starting their own theatre along the lines of the Chicago Little Theatre, which he had come to know while working in Chicago the previous year. They planned the new theatre during the winter of 1914, and, according to Langner, “as soon as word spread around among the younger generation that we were going to start a theatre, many of the young writers in the Village began to turn out plays. As none of us had the experience or patience to get further along than one act, we limited our efforts in the beginning to one-act plays, which was wise.”²⁸ After the second bill, “Ida Rauh resigned from the Washington Square Players, not caring for the parts that were offered to her.”²⁹ By the

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winter of 1916, she and Cook had become the central figures in the organization of the Provincetown Players.

The Washington Square Players' most immediate contribution to the formation of the Provincetown Players was the disappointed playwrights whose work it began to reject. The Washington Square Players was not, as the Provincetown Players was to call itself, a "playwright's theater." Although it did produce short works by American playwrights, such as Jack Reed's *Moondown* (1915), Alice Gerstenberg's *Overtones* (1915), Zoë Akins's *The Magical City* (1916), and later, plays by such writers as Alice Brown, Lewis Beach, Susan Glaspell, Eugene O'Neill, Ben Hecht, Elmer Rice, and Theodore Dreiser, the Washington Square Players said in its Aims and Objectives: "We have only one policy in regard to the plays which we will produce – they must have artistic merit. Preference will be given to American plays, but we shall also include in our repertory the works of well-known European authors which have been ignored by the commercial managers."³⁰ The Washington Square Players became the best New York showcase for European playwrights who worked in the new non-representational symbolist mode that would be associated with modernism, playwrights such as Maeterlinck, Andrejev, Schnitzler, Wedekind, Evreinov, and the later Strindberg. This meant that many plays were rejected, particularly those by neophytes that had an amateur quality. Various evidence suggests that a number of plays that were produced by the Provincetown Players during 1915 and 1916 had been rejected by the Washington Square Players. Glaspell and Cook's *Suppressed Desires* was rejected by the Washington Square Players as "too special" – much to the authors' chagrin, as Glaspell's biographer Barbara Ozieblo notes.³¹ Their disappointment must have been bitter, for, although Langner lists them among the members of the Washington Square Players in the first year, they soon dropped out. Jack Reed's play *Freedom* was also rejected, as, probably, were Neith Boyce's *Constancy*, Eugene O'Neill's *Bound East for Cardiff*, and several plays from O'Neill's early volume, *Thirst and Other Plays*.³² These rejected manuscripts were to form the basis of the Provincetown Players' first summer season in 1915, and, with *Bound East*, prove the inspiration for their new theatre.

Although the exact circumstances that prompted the first performance will never be known, it is clear that the group that became the Provincetown Players began with the performance on July 15, 1915, at the home of Neith Boyce and Hutchins Hapgood, of two plays, Boyce's

Constancy and Susan Glaspell and George Cram Cook's *Suppressed Desires*. Robert Edmond Jones created a simple set for the plays, staging *Constancy* on the verandah, and then having the audience turn their chairs around to view *Suppressed Desires*. Boyce and Joe O'Brien, the husband of Mary Heaton Vorse, played Moira and Rex in *Constancy*, a Shavian discussion play about the male–female dynamics within marriage. Cook and Glaspell played Stephen and Henrietta Brewser in *Suppressed Desires*, a satirical comedy about the new fad of Freudian psychoanalysis. The actors and the audience were so pleased with the experience that they decided to repeat the performance, adding two additional one-act plays to make a bill for which they could charge admission. O'Brien and Vorse owned a wharf with three buildings, one of which was emptied out, and its current tenant, the artist Margaret Steele, who was using it as a studio, was persuaded to vacate it in order to convert the building into a rude theatre, with a capacity of about 100.³³ The performance of *Constancy* and *Suppressed Desires* was repeated in August, and a second bill was produced on September 9. It included George Cram Cook's *Change Your Style*, a satirical comedy based on the running battle between the old-fashioned art schools in Provincetown and the young Post-Impressionist artists who had established their own summer colony there, and Wilbur Daniel Steele's *Contemporaries*, the dramatization of an incident in the previous winter when an IWW organizer, Frank Tannenbaum, had led a group of homeless men to take shelter in a Catholic church, only to be driven out by police at the request of the priests.

With Joe O'Brien's death in October, 1915, it was Cook who took over the plans to refurbish the theatre on the wharf. In the following summer, electricity was installed, an ingenious stage was built in sections that could be moved by hand, circus-style seating was installed, and the theatre was painted. A fire that charred two of the walls nearly delayed the opening, but artists Brör Nordfeldt and Charles Demuth quickly painted the other two walls a smoky shade of grey to match, and the theatre opened on July 13th. The bill included three one-act plays: a revival of *Suppressed Desires*; a new realistic play by Neith Boyce, *Winter's Night*, in which a woman refuses her brother-in-law's marriage proposal on the day of her husband's funeral, leading to his suicide; and John Reed's send-up of Tom Sawyeresque romanticism, *Freedom*. The second bill of the summer is a good indication of what the Provincetown Players was about to become. It included three one-act plays: Lousie Bryant's *The Game*, Wilbur Daniel Steele's "Not Smart", and Eugene O'Neill's *Bound East*