

SUSAN GLASPELL IN CONTEXT

Susan Glaspell in Context provides new, accessible, and informative essays by leading international scholars and artists on Pulitzer Prize winner Susan Glaspell's life, career development, writing, and ongoing global creative impact. The collection features wide-ranging discussions of Glaspell's fiction, plays, and nonfiction in both historical and contemporary critical contexts and demonstrates the significance of Glaspell's writing and other professional activities to a range of academic disciplines and artistic engagements. The volume also includes the first analyses of six previously unknown Glaspell short stories as well as discussions with contemporary stage and film artists who have produced Glaspell's works or adapted them for audiences worldwide. Organized around key locations, influences, and phases in Glaspell's career, as well as core methodological and pedagogical approaches to her work, the collection's thirty-one essays place Glaspell in historical, geographical, political, cultural, and creative contexts of value to students, scholars, teachers, and artists alike.

J. ELLEN GAINOR is Professor of Performing and Media Arts at Cornell University. She wrote the award-winning book *Susan Glaspell in Context: American Theater, Culture, and Politics 1915–1948* (2001) and co-edited, with Linda Ben-Zvi, *Susan Glaspell: The Complete Plays* (2010). Gainor has published multiple articles, reviews, and reference works on Glaspell and serves as a consultant to professional theatres staging Glaspell's plays.

SUSAN GLASPELL
IN CONTEXT

EDITED BY
J. ELLEN GAINOR
Cornell University



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Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
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Contributors

LINDA BEN-ZVI, Professor Emerita, Colorado State and Tel Aviv Universities, was Lady Davis Professor, Hebrew University; Visiting Professor at Waseda and Aoyama Gakuin Universities, Japan; Trento and Venice International University, Italy; and Distinguished Doctoral Professor, Autonomous University of Madrid Spain. Of her thirteen authored and edited books are four on Samuel Beckett and four on Susan Glaspell, including *Susan Glaspell: Essays on Her Theater and Fiction*; *The Complete Plays of Susan Glaspell*, co-edited with J. Ellen Gainor; *The Road to the Temple* by Susan Glaspell, re-edited and with a new Introduction and Bibliography; and *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times*, winner of the 2005 Jury Prize of the American Theatre Library Association.

CHERYL BLACK is Curators Distinguished Professor Emerita from the University of Missouri, a former president of the American Theatre and Drama Society, and currently serves on the executive boards of the College of Fellows of the American Theatre, the Eugene O'Neill Society, and History Matters: Celebrating Women's Plays of the Past. She is the author, editor, or co-editor of four books on American theatre and drama and has published numerous essays in edited collections and journals. She has directed more than twenty productions at the University of Missouri, including Glaspell's *Trifles* and *The Verge*, and has staged and performed in readings of Glaspell's works at twelve national and international conferences.

PATRICIA L. BRYAN is Professor of Law at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and teaches a seminar on law and literature. With Thomas Wolf, she is the author of *Midnight Assassin: A Murder in America's Heartland* and *The Plea: The True Story of Young Wesley Elkins and His Struggle for Redemption*. With Martha C. Carpentier, she edited *Her America: "A Jury of Her Peers" and Other Stories*. She is also the author of articles on Susan Glaspell in the *Stanford Law Review* and elsewhere.

List of Contributors

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MILBRE BURCH has published Glaspell scholarship in *On Susan Glaspell's Trifles and "A Jury of Her Peers": Centennial Essays, Interviews and Adaptations*; *Miranda*, a multidisciplinary journal; the *Literary Encyclopedia*; and the International Susan Glaspell Society website. Her research is also found in *Edward Albee as Theatrical and Dramatic Innovator*; *The Routledge Companion to Media and Fairy-Tale Cultures*; the *International Journal of Conflict and Reconciliation*; and *Storytelling, Self, Society*. She is a playwright, storyteller, and storytelling studies scholar.

MARTHA C. CARPENTIER is Professor of English at Seton Hall University. She is a co-founder of the International Susan Glaspell Society and has been Vice-President and President of the Society. She is the author of *The Major Novels of Susan Glaspell* and co-editor of *Disclosing Intertextualities: The Stories, Plays, and Novels of Susan Glaspell*; *Her America: "A Jury of Her Peers" and Other Stories* by Susan Glaspell; and *On Susan Glaspell's Trifles and "A Jury of Her Peers": Centennial Essays, Interviews and Adaptations*, and has published numerous essays on Glaspell's fiction.

DOROTHY CHANSKY is Emerita Professor of Theatre at Texas Tech University and the author of *Composing Ourselves: The Little Theatre Movement and the American Audience*, *Kitchen Sink Realisms: Domestic Labor, Dining, and Drama in American Theatre*, and the forthcoming *Losing It: Staging the Cultural Conundrum of Dementia and Decline in American Theatre*. She is a past president of the American Theatre and Drama Society and immediate past Vice President for Publications of the American Society for Theatre Research. Her work has appeared in *Theatre Journal*, *TDR*, *Theatre Survey*, *Theatre History Studies*, and the *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Theatre*, among others.

KATHARINE COCKIN is Professor of English Literature at the University of Essex in the Department of Literature, Film, and Theatre Studies. She is Principal Investigator of the Arts and Humanities Research Council Ellen Terry and Edith Craig Database and Searching for Theatrical Ancestors resources at <http://ellenterryarchive.essex.ac.uk>. She has published fifteen books, including the *Collected Letters of Ellen Terry* and a volume of women's suffrage drama, and is the author of books and articles on nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, especially on the work of Edith Craig, director for the Pioneer Players theatre society productions of Glaspell's *Trifles* and *The Verge*.

JERRY DICKEY is Professor Emeritus in the School of Theatre and Dance at the University of Florida. He is the author of *Sophie Treadwell: A*

Research and Production Sourcebook, co-author (with Barbara Ozieblo) of *Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell*, and co-editor (with Miriam López-Rodríguez) of *Broadway's Bravest Woman: Selected Writings of Sophie Treadwell*. His essays on Treadwell have appeared in *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama* and *Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights*. He previously served as Associate Dean of the College of Fine Arts and Professor of Theatre at the University of Arizona.

DREW EISENHAUER co-edited, with Brenda Murphy, the collection *Intertextuality in American Drama: Critical Essays on Eugene O'Neill, Susan Glaspell, Thornton Wilder, Arthur Miller and Other Playwrights*. His research focuses on overlooked archival sources by and about American modernists, particularly those associated with the Provincetown Players. He has published on Susan Glaspell, Djuna Barnes, Eugene O'Neill, Alfred Kreymborg, and the Fitzgeralds and regularly presents at international conferences. He received a Research in Paris Fellowship (2011) and an American Theatre and Drama Contingent Faculty Award (2022). He is now permanent instructor in English and Théâtre at the University of Le Havre, Normandy, and teaches at Paris College of Art.

SHARON FRIEDMAN is Founding Gallatin Professor Emerita in the Gallatin School of New York University. Specializing in modern literature and drama, feminist criticism, and adaptation, she is editor of the volume *Feminist Theatrical Revisions of Classic Works* and co-author, with Cheryl Black, of *Modern American Drama: Playwriting in the 1990s*. Her essays have appeared in such journals and collections as *Theatre Journal*, *New Theatre Quarterly*, *Text and Presentation*, *Susan Glaspell: Essays on Her Theater and Fiction*, *Codifying the National Self*, *Intertextuality in American Drama*, and *Visions of Tragedy in Modern American Drama*.

J. ELLEN GAINOR is Professor of Performing and Media Arts at Cornell University. She is the author of the award-winning book *Susan Glaspell in Context: American Theater, Culture, and Politics 1915–48* as well as numerous scholarly essays, performance reviews, and reference articles on Glaspell. With Linda Ben-Zvi, she co-edited *Susan Glaspell: The Complete Plays*. A specialist in British and American modernist drama and women's playwriting, she co-edited *The Norton Anthology of Drama*, edited *Githa Sowerby: Three Plays*, and is co-editing the forthcoming *Routledge Anthology of Women's Theatre Theory & Dramatic Criticism*.

List of Contributors

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STUART J. HECHT is Associate Professor of Theatre at Boston College and also Editor of *New England Theatre Journal*. In addition to publishing many scholarly articles and chapters, Hecht authored *Transposing Broadway: Jews, Assimilation and the American Musical*, a basis for the Peabody Award-winning documentary “Broadway Musicals: a Jewish Legacy.” He also co-edited *Makeshift Chicago Stages: A Century of Theatre and Performance*. A member of the College of Fellows of the American Theatre, Hecht served on the artistic staffs of both the Goodman and Wisdom Bridge theatres in Chicago and was founding Chair of the Boston College Theatre Department. He is currently writing a book on Jane Addams’ Hull-House and its theatre.

SALLY HECKEL is an award-winning independent filmmaker who produces, directs, writes, adapts, edits, and often shoots her own films. Notably, these include her feature-length *Unspeakable*, a nonfiction narrative exploring her father’s suicide, *The Bent Tree*, a sand animation of a Yiddish folk song, and *A Jury of Her Peers*, an adaptation of Susan Glaspell’s story that was nominated for an Academy Award and has been shown worldwide at festivals, at museums, and on television. Heckel received an MFA in film from New York University Graduate Institute of Film/TV. She has received production grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the American Film Institute, and private foundations.

NOELIA HERNANDO-REAL is Associate Professor of English and American Literature at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (University Autónoma of Madrid). She has authored *Self and Space in the Theater of Susan Glaspell*, *Voces contra la mediocridad: la vanguardia teatral de los Provincetown Players, 1915–1922*, and *Rosas en la arena. Los relatos de Susan Glaspell*. She has coedited several volumes, including *Performing Gender Violence*, with Barbara Ozieblo, and *Negotiating Gendered Spaces and Gender Studies: Transatlantic Visions*, with Isabel Durán et al. Her journal articles have appeared in *New England Theatre Journal*, *Eugene O’Neill Review*, *REN*, and *Critical Stages*, among others. She served as President of the International Susan Glaspell Society from 2015 to 2021.

CHRISTOPH IRMSCHER is Distinguished Professor of English and director of the Wells Scholars Program at Indiana University Bloomington. He is the author of, among many other books, *Max Eastman: A Life*. His *Love and Loss in Hollywood: Florence Deshon, Max Eastman, and Charlie Chaplin*, co-written with Cooper Graham, was published in 2020. He regularly writes for the *Wall Street Journal*.

EMELINE JOUVE is Professor of American Literature and Culture at Toulouse Jean-Jaurès University. She co-edited *On Susan Glaspell's Trifles and "A Jury of Her Peers": Centennial Essays, Interviews, and Adaptations* with Martha C. Carpentier; *Unspeakable Acts: Murder by Women* with Aurélie Guillain and Laurence Talairach; and *Chronique judiciaire et fictionnalisation du procès* with Lionel Miniato. She published *Susan Glaspell's Poetics and Politics of Rebellion; Avignon 68 & le Living Theatre*; and *Paradise Now en paradis. Une histoire du Living Theatre à Avignon et après (1968/2018)*. Emeline is President of the International Susan Glaspell Society.

JEFFERY KENNEDY is Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Arts and Performance at Arizona State University in the School of Humanities, Arts, and Cultural Studies. Dr. Kennedy is a published scholar and frequent conference speaker on the Provincetown Players and Eugene O'Neill, with a new book titled *Staging America: The Artistic Legacy of the Provincetown Players*. He has served as President of the Eugene O'Neill International Society and on the board of the International Susan Glaspell Society, and is the creator of www.provincetownplayhouse.com, an award-winning research site. He is a working professional in theatre as a director, music director, and member of Actors' Equity, and was a production assistant for Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine.

VERONICA MAKOWSKY is Professor Emeritus at the University of Connecticut. Her books include *Caroline Gordon: A Biography*, *Susan Glaspell's Century of American Women: A Critical Interpretation of Her Work*, and *The Fiction of Valerie Martin: An Introduction*. She is the author of numerous articles on F. Scott Fitzgerald, American women writers, and southern writers. She served as Editor of *MELUS (Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States)* for six years.

BRENDA MURPHY is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of Connecticut. She is the author of more than twenty books about American drama and theatre, including *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity*, *The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights*, *American Realism and American Drama 1880–1940*, and *Eugene O'Neill Remembered*. Her most recent book is *Becoming Carlotta: A Biographical Novel*, about the actress and controversial third wife of Eugene O'Neill.

MARCIA NOE is Professor of English and Director of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

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She is the author of *Susan Glaspell: Voice from the Heartland* and *Three Midwestern Playwrights: How Floyd Dell, George Cram Cook, and Susan Glaspell Transformed American Theatre*.

ELIZABETH A. OSBORNE is Associate Professor in Theatre Studies at Florida State University. Her work has appeared in *Theatre Survey*, *Theatre Topics*, and *Theatre History Studies*. She wrote *Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project*; co-authored *Explore Theatre* (2nd ed.), with Michael O'Hara and Judith Sebesta; and co-edited *Working in the Wings: New Perspectives on Theatre History and Labor*, with Chris Woodworth. Her current research examines performances of history and their influence over cultural memory. She is an editorial board member for the *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* and co-editor of Palgrave's Studies in Theatre and Performance series with Shannon Walsh. She is the former President of the Mid-America Theatre Conference.

BARBARA OZIEBLO retired in 2017 from her Professorship in American Literature at the University of Málaga, Spain, where she specialized in Women's Studies and Theater Studies. She is co-founder of the International Susan Glaspell Society and was its first President, later serving as Vice-President. She is the author of *Susan Glaspell: A Critical Biography*, co-author, with Jerry Dicky, of the Routledge volume in the Modern and Contemporary Dramatists Series *Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell*, and co-editor, with Noelia Hernando-Real, of *Performing Gender Violence*. She has edited multiple collections of essays and organized a number of conferences both on American drama.

MARY E. PAPKE, Professor of English at the University of Tennessee, is the author of *Verging on the Abyss: The Social Fiction of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton* and *Susan Glaspell: A Research and Production Sourcebook*. She edited and provided the introduction to *Twisted from the Ordinary: Essays on American Literary Naturalism*; she also provided the critical introduction to a scholarly edition of Evelyn Scott's *The Narrow House*. All of her projects and essays have focused significantly on issues of gender and class ideologies as well as the processes of ethical and aesthetic evaluation.

SARA SCHOTLAND teaches Law and Literature and Protest and Dissent in American Literature at Georgetown University. She earned her BA from Harvard University, her JD at Georgetown Law, and her PhD in English Literature from the University of Maryland. She has authored

more than twenty publications, many of them on law and literature topics, including cross-examination of the rape victim in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, ethical issues in Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers," and representation of women in court in Elizabethan drama.

KIRSTEN E. SHEPHERD-BARR is Professor of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of St. Catherine's College, Oxford. Her work on theatre's relationship to science includes the books *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre and Science*, *Theatre and Evolution from Ibsen to Beckett*, *Science on Stage: From Doctor Faustus to Copenhagen*, and numerous articles and book chapters. She has also published *Modern Drama: A Very Short Introduction* and various books and articles on the plays of Henrik Ibsen. She is currently working on how theatre engages with and represents climate change.

JENNIFER J. SMITH is Associate Professor and Chair of the English Department at North Central College. Her book, *The American Short Story Cycle*, spans two centuries to tell the history of a genre that includes both major and marginal authors. Her work on story cycles has been published in *Pedagogy*, *The Journal of the Short Story in English*, *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice*, and a number of essay collections. Her essay for this collection was inspired by a National Endowment for the Humanities seminar, Making Modernism: Literature and Culture in 20th Century Chicago, led by Liesl Olson at the Newberry Library.

MIKE SOLOMONSON is a native Iowan who appreciates Glaspell's artistic roots and welcomed the opportunity to contribute to this collection of essays. At Northland Pioneer College, he serves as the Vice President for Learning and Student Services. He also is a playwright whose plays have been produced and published. A full-length play, *The Goodbye Levee*, was a finalist for the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's National Playwrights Conference in 2019, and two other scripts were published in *The Best 10-Minute Plays* (2021 & 2022).

AOISE STRATFORD is a dramaturg, playwright, and lecturer in Performing and Media Arts at Cornell University, where she teaches playwriting, theatre history, dramaturgy, and feminist crime narratives. Her own plays have been produced around the world, at London's National Theatre, The Hangar Theatre, InspiraTO Festival, Solo Chicago, Centenary Stage, and elsewhere. Her play *The Unfortunates* won the 2012 Susan Glaspell Award and was a Time Out NY Critics Pick. Her

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research focuses on Gothic narratives and feminist drama, and her scholarly work has been published in *Modern Drama* and *Frontiers*.

MICHAEL WINETSKY is an independent scholar with a doctorate in English from the Graduate Center, City University of New York. He has published many articles on Susan Glaspell, including “A Playwright of Pragmatism” in *Ecumenica* and “Historical and Performative Liberalism” in the *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*. He studies gender and popular culture, and in 2017 presented a paper on the series *Transparent* at the Popular Culture/American Culture Association Far West regional conference. He teaches at New Roads School in Santa Monica, California.

Preface

In 1920, as Susan Glaspell was drafting her play *Inheritors*, the world was suffering from the devastating Spanish flu pandemic that had begun in 1918 and ultimately infected 500 million people, about 50 million of whom, historians estimate, died from the virus. It cannot be a coincidence that Glaspell built into *Inheritors* the background story of a woman who rushed to the aid of a neighboring immigrant family in the throes of a diphtheria outbreak – another highly contagious disease at the time – and then succumbed to the infection. For Glaspell’s 1921 audiences, this narrative of illness and sacrifice would have resonated profoundly. In 2021, as I write this preface, the story resonates anew.¹ This detail from *Inheritors* provides just one example, however, of the ongoing relevance of so much of Glaspell’s writing. Her short fiction, novels, dramas, and nonfiction were all interlaced with her cultural moment, capturing the social milieus, the shifting political tides, and the interpersonal dynamics she observed in the Midwest, on Cape Cod, and in Greenwich Village – her three homes as a writer – as well as on her international travels. For readers and audiences today, her work not only reflects the tenor of her time, it also simultaneously reveals significant connections and parallels to our own, demonstrating unequivocally why her writing remains so salient.

When feminist historians and literary critics began rediscovering Susan Glaspell in the 1970s and 1980s, they responded to her truthful representations of women’s lives and the innovative compositional strategies she used to depict the challenges women faced in a male-dominated society that imposed a “separate spheres” ideology of strict gender roles for men and women. These scholars’ foundational works reverberated in a number of directions: toward renewed theatrical interest in Glaspell’s plays; the republication of select drama and fiction; and further research that engaged an ever-widening array of approaches that consider Glaspell and

¹ I am grateful to director Andrew Cassel for noting this historical parallel.

her writing in an expanding set of historical, theoretical, and critical contexts. That work continues in this volume.

We use six organizing frames through which to explore Glaspell's life, career, and legacy. The first, "Susan Glaspell's Early Writing and Her Midwestern Contexts," situates Glaspell geographically and culturally as a native of Davenport, Iowa. This region proved formative for her development as a writer, through the social and political perspectives she encountered that continued to shape her work. Essays in this group engage key facets of Glaspell's early career; they include a biographical overview complemented by an analysis of the Midwestern region as it informed foundational notions of American culture and American identity. Glaspell's initial career in journalism paralleled that of other women writers who rose to prominence in the early twentieth century; her emergence as a short fiction writer then put her in the company of male and female authors defining this form within an American context. Our discussion of six newly discovered Glaspell stories from early in her career, recently made available digitally, further connects these early professional experiences with her development as a fictionist and dramatist, particularly as evidenced through her two best-known works, the one-act play *Trifles* (1916) and its short story counterpart "A Jury of Her Peers" (1917). Glaspell's hometown friendships with George Cram ("Jig") Cook (whom she married in 1913) and Floyd Dell expanded her philosophical, spiritual, and intellectual horizons further, through their shared membership in the Monist Society and interest in left-leaning politics. The three friends' relocation to Chicago connected them to the artistically vibrant and politically active bohemian community there. Later in her career, during the Great Depression, Glaspell returned to Chicago to work for the Federal Theatre Project, a part of the Works Progress Administration, renewing her dedication to the Midwestern region, but also experiencing governmental strictures that grated against her political and artistic values.

The Greenwich Village, New York, bohemian community proved to be a magnet for many from the Chicago circle in the early twentieth century. The second cluster of essays, "The Bohemian Context: Greenwich Village, Provincetown, and the Rise of American Modernism," explores key Village institutions such as the Provincetown Players, founded by Cook, Glaspell, and others in 1916, for which Glaspell wrote most of her plays. As part of the Little Theatre movement in the United States, the Players fostered original dramaturgy and explored their vision of the American experience. *The Masses*, a Village periodical that championed leftist politics and vanguard social movements, published contributions from writers affiliated with the

Players who were exploring related themes on stage. These Villagers, many of whom summered in Provincetown, Massachusetts, were at the forefront of American modernism as it was developing through the visual, literary, and performing arts and intersecting with other cultural and political advances of the 1910s and 1920s. The friendship of Glaspell and Eugene O'Neill, whose dramas were first presented by the Players, exemplifies the synergistic creativity between modernists. Glaspell's dramas, stories, and novels reflect profound engagement with the literary and theatrical techniques, as well as the narrative concerns, of modernism. These engagements also prompted Glaspell to explore, across her career, the place of art and artists in the modern world—questions that would most notably shape the narratives in *The Comic Artist* (1927) and *Alison's House* (1930).

The third set of essays, "Susan Glaspell and American Culture and Politics," looks at specific dimensions of her writing emerging from this transformative period and its potent avant-garde sensibilities. At a time of polarized political views on race and ethnicity, immigration, and the status of indigenous peoples, Glaspell confronted reactionary and conservative ideologies that ran counter to fundamental concepts of democracy. In the lead-up to and aftermath of the Great War, she examined the political rhetoric and personal views that shaped the United States' responses to the conflict, at home and abroad. Deeply interested in scientific, medical, and psychological discoveries of her moment, as well as their popularization in the media, Glaspell produced timely fictional and dramatic works reflecting these trends. She explored the relationship between higher education in the United States and the political, scientific, and sociological perspectives taught therein. And she considered, with both humor and pathos, how all these various forces coalesced through the intimate lives of her characters.

The fourth section, "Susan Glaspell, Women Artists, and Feminist History and Criticism" connects current considerations of Glaspell's career with the feminist scholarly legacy that is largely responsible for Glaspell's importance to American literary studies; American theatre studies; women's, gender, and sexuality studies; and legal studies. Glaspell and other women stage artists developed structures of feminist dramaturgy, feminist directing, feminist performance, and feminist leadership that remain pivotal to theatre today. Yet Glaspell's feminism must be understood in its time; the tensions and contradictions we perceive in her writing in all genres around gender roles; sexual relationships; and attitudes to home, family, and career reflect evolving notions of feminism. Glaspell was acutely aware of how ideas about women's lives and work were shifting;

she brings an historical sensibility to her depiction of a famous woman poet, possibly modeled on Emily Dickinson, to illustrate the various social and familial pressures shaping women's lives from the late nineteenth century through the postwar period. This play, *Alison's House*, earned Glaspell the Pulitzer Prize in 1931 – a confirmation of both Glaspell's skill as a writer and her astute grasp of issues central to American culture. Glaspell's clear-eyed understanding of how American patriarchy impacts women's lives is one of the through-lines of her oeuvre and is integral to the value feminist legal scholars have perceived in her twinned works, *Trifles* and "A Jury of Her Peers," canonical texts for this field.

Glaspell's standing within these disciplines cannot, however, confine our sense of her reach. The fifth set of essays considers "Susan Glaspell in Broader Geographical Contexts." During her lifetime, she wrote important works set in – or related to – other locations, especially Greece, where she and Cook lived from 1922 to 1924. Her reflections on Greek life and culture, and their significance for Cook, strongly shaped the latter half of her career. Moreover, as the West emerged from World War I, Glaspell's work was enthusiastically received by theatre patrons and readers, and thoughtfully discussed by critics in England. From that time to the present, we can trace the continued expansion of interest in Glaspell's writing worldwide, through translation and production in locations across the globe.

The final group of essays explores "Susan Glaspell on Stage and Screen." Her writing continues to influence other artists who have adapted her works for Hollywood films and experimental opera, written a prequel to *Trifles*/"Jury," and transformed her fictional narratives for the stage and screen. Her work provides a model of excellence in creative writing classes, suggesting still more impact to come. The artistic merit of such undertakings is represented well by the Academy Award-nominated film adaptation of "Jury," directed by Sally Heckel. The insights directors bring to Glaspell's work, and understandings we gain through their renderings of her dramaturgy in live or – most recently – virtual productions, remind us of the vital importance of her creative process and of our participation in the communities that embrace and revere the artistry of Susan Glaspell.

Acknowledgments

The global community of Glaspell scholars is comparatively small, but enormously dedicated. Many members of that community contributed to this volume, and on their behalf, I thank all those who have aided this project, which has been a labor of love for an artist whose work we revere. The mutual support, expertise, generosity, and collaborative spirit of these colleagues, especially those who comprise the past and present leadership of the International Susan Glaspell Society, made this collection possible. I am indebted to them for their commitment, patience, and faith and trust in my editorship.

We are particularly grateful to the Estate of George Cram Cook, currently represented by his descendants Benjamin and Samuel Lourie, for its support of scholarly and creative undertakings that further the legacy of Susan Glaspell.

The International Susan Glaspell Society is fortunate to have close and cordial ties to the Eugene O'Neill International Society, and we thank EONS for its partnership and many years of fostering work of mutual interest.

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Lastly, we thank our families, friends, and institutions for their steadfast support.

A Chronology of Glaspell's Life and Works

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| 1876 | Born July 1 in Davenport, Iowa |
| 1894–96 | Writes for the Davenport <i>Weekly Republican</i> |
| 1895 | Graduates from Scott County Normal Davenport Training School |
| 1896–97 | Society Editor of the Davenport <i>Weekly Outlook</i> |
| 1896 | First short story, “Tom and Towser,” published in Davenport <i>Weekly Outlook</i> |
| 1897 | Enrolls in Drake University |
| 1898–1903 | Writes for the university literary magazine <i>The Delphic</i> |
| 1899 | On graduation, hired full time as reporter for <i>Des Moines Daily News</i> |
| 1900–01 | Assigned by the paper to cover Margaret Hossack murder trial, the source for <i>Trifles</i> and “A Jury of Her Peers” |
| 1901 | Glaspell resigns from <i>Daily News</i> and returns to Davenport to focus on creative writing |
| 1902 | Short story “By the Might of the Pigskin” published, initiating regular short fiction publication that continues through 1927. ¹ Summer graduate study at the University of Chicago |
| 1902–04 | Earns early prizes and cash awards for short fiction |
| 1908–09 | Travels in Europe |
| 1909 | Novel <i>The Glory of the Conquered: The Story of a Great Love</i> |
| 1911 | Novel <i>The Visioning</i> |
| 1912 | Short story collection <i>Lifted Masks</i> |
| 1913 | Marries George Cram (“Jig”) Cook in Weehawken, New Jersey; they make their home in Greenwich Village, New York |

¹ See Papke, *Susan Glaspell: A Research and Production Sourcebook* and the International Susan Glaspell Society website: <http://blogs.shu.edu/glaspellsociety/> for more information.

A Chronology of Glaspell's Life and Works

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- 1915 Novel *Fidelity*; one-act *Suppressed Desires*, co-written with Cook, premieres in Provincetown, Massachusetts
- 1916 *Trifles* premieres in Provincetown; Glaspell, Cook, and colleagues form theatre group that in September officially becomes the Provincetown Players, subsequently based in Greenwich Village²
- 1917 Provincetown Players stage one-acts *The People*, *Close the Book*, and *The Outside*; short story “A Jury of Her Peers”
- 1918 “A Jury of Her Peers” republished in *The Best Short Stories of 1917*; Provincetown Players stage one-acts *Woman's Honor* and *Tickless Time*, co-written with Cook
- 1919 Provincetown Players stage *Bernice*; one-act *Free Laughter* written, remaining unproduced and unpublished during Glaspell's lifetime
- 1920 *Plays*, a collection of Glaspell's one-acts and her first three-act play, *Bernice*
- 1921 Provincetown Players stage *Inheritors* and *The Verge*
- 1922 Cook and Glaspell leave New York for Greece; Provincetown Players stage *Chains of Dew* without Glaspell's direct involvement
- 1924 Cook dies in Greece; Glaspell returns to Provincetown and begins eight-year relationship with Norman Matson
- 1926 Memoir/biography of Cook, *The Road to the Temple*
- 1928 Novel *Brook Evans*; play *The Comic Artist*, co-written with Matson, premieres in London
- 1929 Novel *Fugitive's Return*
- 1930 Play *Alison's House* premieres in Liverpool, England in November, followed by New York premiere in December
- 1931 *Alison's House* wins Pulitzer Prize for Drama; novel *Ambrose Holt and Family*
- 1933 New York premiere of *The Comic Artist*
- 1936 Glaspell appointed Director of the Midwest Play Bureau of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP)
- 1938 Glaspell resigns from the FTP and returns to Provincetown
- 1940 Novel *The Morning Is Near Us*. Long-format story for children, *Cherished and Shared of Old*

² See Sarlós, *Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players* for more details of Cook's leadership and Glaspell's productions by the Players.

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1943	Novel <i>Norma Ashe</i>
c. 1944	Play <i>Springs Eternal</i> , which remained unproduced and unpublished during Glaspell's lifetime
1945	Novel <i>Judd Rankin's Daughter</i> , published as <i>Prodigal Giver</i> in UK, 1946
1948	Glaspell dies July 27 in Provincetown