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THE FACTS ON FILE COMPANION TO

AMERICAN DRAMA

Second Edition

JACKSON R. BRYER AND MARY C. HARTIG

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EDITED BY JACKSON R. BRYER AND MARY C. HARTIG

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Since the publication of the first edition of the *Companion to American Drama,* we have seen the passing of, among other playwrights, three major American dramatists, Arthur Miller, Wendy Wasserstein, and August Wilson, as well as the emergence of new voices in American theater. We have seen American dramatic movements continue to evolve, in some cases, away from movement-specific themes. We have seen established playwrights add to their output and younger playwrights become established. We have seen thematic trends emerge as many playwrights responded to 9/11 and to the consequent political and military realities. These changes in American dramatic literature are reflected in this new edition.

Among the entries new to this edition are three plays that complete August Wilson's "Century Cycle"; *Gem of the Ocean* (2003) and *Radio Golf* (2005) were Wilson's last two plays, the latter premiering at Yale Rep just five months before his death at 60 from cancer. We have also added an entry on his earlier play *Jitney* (1982; revised 1996), which becomes more significant now that the 20th-century cycle is complete. Other new play entries include recent Pulitzer winners *Anna in the Tropics* (2003), *I Am My Own Wife* (2003), *Doubt* (2004), *Rabbit Hole* (2006), *August: Osage County* (2007), and *Ruined* (2008). We have also added, for the sake of completeness, three Pulitzer winners that we omitted last time, *Both Your Houses* (1933), *The Old Maid* (1935), and *Look Homeward, Angel* (1957). In addition, we have included recent New York Drama Critics' Circle Award winners *Take Me Out* (2002) and *Intimate Apparel* (2003), as well as Obie winners *Small Tragedy* (2003) and *The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow* (2003). New plays by established playwrights, apart from Wilson, include a farce by David Mamet (*Romance* [2005]) and Wasserstein's final play (*Third* [2005]). Other new play entries are Christopher Shinn's *Dying City* (2006) and Dael Orlandersmith's *Yellowman* (2002), both of which were selected for the *Best Plays* volumes of their years (as is true of many of the aforementioned prizewinners as well).

In this revision are entries on 12 additional playwrights, the significance of whose contribution to American theater has become clearer in the years since the first edition of the *Companion*. These include young playwrights, such as Sarah Ruhl, Christopher Shinn, and Julia Cho, as well as those who have been at work longer but whose more recent plays have brought them greater recognition, such as David Lindsay-Abaire, Stephen Adly Guirgis, Lynn Nottage, Theresa Rebeck, and Craig Wright, among others.

We have, then, supplemented the comprehensive history laid out in the first edition by bringing the reader up to date. Furthermore, we have corrected inadvertent errors and have edited some existing entries for greater clarity or conciseness. The result is a portrait of our country's ever-evolving drama, from the Revolutionary period through 2010.

Kensington, Maryland

INTRODUCTION

American drama has often been regarded as the poor stepchild in the family of American literature, with fiction and poetry receiving more attention and kinder treatment. In her important study, *American Drama: The Bastard Art,* Susan Harris Smith cites a truly remarkable series of critical pronouncements, ranging from playwright Dion Boucicault's 1890 declaration that "there is not, and there never has been, a literary institution, which could be called the American drama" (641), critic and anthologist John Gassner's 1952 assertion that "the literary element was never the strong point of American playwriting" (84), and critic and playwright Eric Bentley's 1954 statement, "[T]here is no American drama" (413), down to director and critic Robert Brustein's provocatively titled 1959 essay, "Why American Plays Are Not Literature," and scholar Morris Freedman's 1971 dismissal of American drama as simply a form of "public entertainment" (1).

Virtually from its inception, American drama has been embattled. What is equally true, however, is that as we write this, there are more than 200 professional theater companies producing plays, many of which are American, in New York City, while the number in Chicago and Washington, D.C., is more than 70 in each city. In fact, pretty much any city of any size in the United States has at least one and often more than one thriving regional theater presenting a full season of plays, many of them American. Similarly, college, university, and community theaters across the country frequently choose their repertories from the American canon. Our drama is also a major export around the world; the works of Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Eugene O'Neill, and Thornton Wilder are extremely popular overseas—with Miller's reputation in England and Wilder's in Germany and Austria being particularly high. More recent American dramatists like August Wilson, Sam Shepard, David Mamet, Wendy Wasserstein, Neil Simon, and John Guare also are well known and frequently produced overseas. English critic C. W. E. Bigsby speaks for many readers and theatergoers around the world when he maintains that "America has produced some of the very finest drama of the 20th century" ("Why American Drama Is Literature" [11]).

Another way of measuring the popularity and impact of American drama is to look at the number of copies of American plays sold annually. According to publishers' estimates, 200,000 copies of *Death of a Salesman* are sold in a year; 150,000 of *The Crucible;* 75,000 of *The Glass Menagerie;* and 20,000 of *Long Day's Journey into Night*—and these figures do not even include sales of the acting editions of these plays. Clearly, American drama is flourishing; no country in the world has more established and emerging playwrights writing and having their plays produced.

Despite all this activity and the popularity of American plays, students and audiences remain largely unaware of American drama "before O'Neill"; many college courses that purport to be surveys of the subject begin with O'Neill and thus effectively obliterate almost

150 years of American dramatic history. This *Companion* attempts to redress that imbalance and to provide a perspective and sense of history by presenting entries on many playwrights and plays before 1920. While some of these earlier plays may be of uncertain literary and theatrical value, all are part of the story of American drama and are stepping stones to the undeniably greater works that come after them. Our criterion for inclusion has not been an evaluation of America's "best" plays and playwrights; outside of a few obvious choices, that would be a controversial process (this fact is yet further testimony to the richness and diversity of our native drama). Rather, we have included the figures and works that we felt were important, interpreting "important" in as broad a way as possible.

Looking back over the history of American drama, one finds that a number of the reasons for its precarious position in literary studies can be seen right at the beginning. Because some of the first colonizers of this country were members of religious sects fleeing persecution in Europe, there was considerable initial opposition to drama and theater on religious grounds. In 1709, the Governor's Council of New York passed a law forbidding "play-acting and prize-fighting"; in 1750, the Legislature and Council of Boston outlawed stage plays, which, it felt, tended "to increase immorality, impiety and a contempt for religion"; and a 1779 Pennsylvania act forbade all theater performances. During the American Revolution, the Continental Congress prohibited the "exhibition of shews, plays, and other expensive diversions and entertainments" (Meserve 6–7).

Thus, it was established early in the history of drama in America that there was something potentially harmful, dangerous, and possibly even subversive about stage plays; paradoxically, there was also the implication that theater was an inappropriately frivolous art form during times of national crises. Over the years, American drama has been caught between these seemingly contradictory attitudes—that theater is either threatening and immoral or too lightweight—absorbing blows from both sides. Examples of drama being censored or running afoul of the law abound. To cite just three from recent times: In 1993, a production of Terrence McNally's *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* was halted by civic officials in Cobb County, Georgia, because it was thought to promote a homosexual lifestyle (they apparently hadn't read the play). McNally's later play, *Corpus Christi*, was picketed by Catholic organizations at its 1999 New York opening because of its depiction of a group of gay men rehearsing a play about the life of Jesus Christ. In 1963, the advisory board of journalists who had the final say on the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize for drama overruled their own drama jury and withheld the honor from Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* because, as one journalist explained, it was "a filthy play" (quoted in Gussow 189). Of course, it is a badge of honor that drama has been regarded for so long as powerful enough to be worthy of this kind of attention.

A second factor in the difficulties faced by American drama was also apparent in its beginnings. Partially because of the lack of a copyright law protecting playwrights and partially because the primarily middle-class individuals who came to the colonies were not particularly interested in theater, there were very few original American plays written. Aside from occasional and ephemeral plays written to commemorate specific occasions or to make political statements, most of what was performed through the 17th and 18th centuries in the New World were English plays—with Shakespeare especially popular. It is therefore not surprising that the first two notable American plays were highly derivative. Thomas Godfrey's *The Prince of Parthia* (published in 1765 and presented in 1767), the first professionally produced play written by an American, is a pastiche of plot ideas and characters lifted from Shakespeare. Royall Tyler's much more successful and influential *The Contrast* (1787), the first professionally produced American comedy and the first American play on an American subject, was similarly quite dependent on the English Restoration comedies Tyler saw in New York in the weeks before he wrote it. This reliance on English and European models—Smith calls it "slavish Anglophilia" (3)—has been yet another handicap American dramatic literature has had to overcome. It took many years, perhaps into the 20th century, for our playwrights to develop a distinctive national voice, uninflected by the culture of Great Britain.

In the 19th century, not very many American plays or playwrights achieved literary distinction, but American drama advanced well beyond its beginnings. Before one dismisses this period as not worthy of scrutiny, as is often the case, it is worth remembering that, in Great Britain, between Richard Brinsley Sheridan in the 18th century and George Bernard Shaw in the early 20th century, there is little of note in dramatic literature. It is not legitimate to compare American drama of this period to 20th-century American drama. What is far more appropriate is to look at the dramatic literature produced in this country during the 19th century and compare it to that written in Great Britain during the same span of years. By this standard, American drama fares quite well.

What we discover is that *The Prince of Parthia* and *The Contrast,* whatever their merits and degree of originality, stand as quite useful points of origin for two distinct strands of American drama. The first of these is romantic tragedy. Some of the best plays of the pre–Civil War period were done in this mode, often in verse and with Shakespeare again the model in genre but decreasingly so with respect to subject matter. While the poets and fiction writers of the period—Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, James Fenimore Cooper, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Walt Whitman, to name just the most prominent—tended to write about their own country, albeit often in very romantic and heroic terms, poetic dramatists frequently relied on European settings. John Howard Payne (*Brutus; or, the Fall of Tarquin* [1818]), Robert Montgomery Bird (*The Broker of Bogota* [1834]), and George Henry Boker (*Francesca da Rimini* [1855]) set their plays in exotic locales, while James Nelson Barker (*Superstition* [1824]) and John Augustus Stone (*Metamora* [1829]) used American settings. *Superstition* and *Francesca da Rimini,* especially, present complex and sympathetic characters and situations and deserve recognition as substantial achievements.

If *The Prince of Parthia* led to more sophisticated plays in the romantic, poetic tragedy mode, *The Contrast* prefigured a developing tradition of social comedy. While Tyler's work was essentially an imitation of English Restoration drama, his one innovation was the comically naive Yankee character of Jonathan, the simple man from the "sticks" totally baffled by the sophistication of city life but also a "natural" man among poseurs. This prototypical American comic figure, present in such 20th-century American personalities as Will Rogers and Andy Griffith, not only spawned many subsequent plays with "Jonathan characters" but also inspired the creation of two other native types in drama, the Negro and the Indian. One or more of these types appeared in many social comedies and social dramas before 1865. All three are present in *The Octoroon* (1859), a melodrama by transplanted Irish dramatist Dion Boucicault, which deals with the love of a southern aristocrat for an octoroon slave. Two, the Yankee and the Negro, appear in Anna Cora Mowatt Ritchie's *Fashion* (1845), which is the best of the pre–Civil War American social comedies because, as Arthur Hobson Quinn observes, it is "that rare thing, a social satire based on real knowledge of the life it depicts, . . . without bitterness, without nastiness, and without affectation" (*American Drama from the Beginning* 312).

The post–Civil War period in American drama is closely related to the same period in American fiction in that both are characterized by an emphasis on local color and realism. Alongside such local-color fiction writers as Sarah Orne Jewett (New England), George Washington Cable (the South), Edward Eggleston (the Midwest), and Bret Harte (the West) are playwrights Denman Thompson (New England; *The Old Homestead* [1886]), Bronson Howard (the South; *Shenandoah* [1888]), and Augustin Daly (the West; *Horizon* [1871]).

Concurrent with these geographically specific works were a series of plays that gradually moved American drama in the direction of greater stage realism. Although many of these were melodramas, almost all of them made efforts toward authenticity in settings, characters, and situations. Among the first was Augustin Daly's classic melodrama *Under the Gaslight* (1867); with its sympathetic portrait of a one-armed Civil War veteran and accurate New York settings, it was, despite its preposterous plot, a significant early attempt at realism. So too were Steele MacKaye's *Hazel Kirke* (1880), William Gillette's *Secret*