

*The theatre of the world from Ibsen,
Strindberg and Shaw to T. S. Eliot,
Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams
...from the Abbey Theatre to the
Arena Theatre...from naturalism
to existentialism...*

THE THEATRE IN OUR TIMES

by John Gassner

*A Survey of the Men, Materials and
Movements in the Modern Theatre*

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MOVEMENTS IN THE MODERN THEATRE*

John Gassner

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THE THEATRE IN OUR TIMES

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TO MOLLIE

My constant companion at the theatre
for more than a quarter of a century—
Who made good plays better and poor ones tolerable



Set designed by MORDECAI GORELIK
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PREFACE

In a collection of essays, *The Forlorn Demon*, Allen Tate declares that like other literary men he has been an eccentric conducting an unfinished education in public. Whether I, too, am a literary man is less certain than that I, too, have been conducting an unfinished education publicly. And eccentricity has been in my case reinforced by the extremely public nature of the theatre to which I have devoted more than half my life. That my education is far from completed will be sufficiently apparent to the reader from the tentative, sometimes even contradictory, nature of the contents of the book. If I sometimes write as if I were entitled to have my say, the reason is not that I claim more authority than most people in a field full of uncertainties, but that I have spent more time than is usual in floundering in it and therefore can speak from experience. I can chart the course of error, and I can lecture others with considerable authority as a pilot who never reached port.

My reason for publishing this book is my realization that theatre in our times has been in a precarious state, has been alternately buffeted by storms and becalmed, has sprung leaks and collected barnacles, and has carried a cargo on which fortunes have been spent and love has been lavished without any certainty that much of it can be delivered to the muse of history without profuse apologies. The theatre, too, suffers from an unfinished education. Perhaps all that can be said, then, in its behalf, and all I can say in my own, is that much of the zest of existence is associated with the course of an education rather than with its completion. The question that can be raised most legitimately concerning both the author and the stage is whether the process has not been miseducation rather than education; and in the case of the theatre, its survival as an institution is greatly involved with the possibility that its energies have been misdirected.

Although many discoveries have been made in the modern theatre, a living enterprise must make them again if they are to have any effect. Therefore, this book reviews and tries to evaluate many efforts now already categorized in histories of the drama. Discoveries must also be distinguished from a thorough exploration of the terrain. I claim no thoroughness in this book, but I believe I do look closely at some of the territory opened up here and abroad by our playwrights and producers. And since we have completed half a century identified with twentieth-century

modernism, I investigate some of the results. The perspective I have adopted for this purpose is the only one available to me. It is an American perspective, although, I hope, not a provincial one. It may not be the most comprehensive, but it is the only one most generally relevant to us in America.

To claim the strict unity of argument that pertains to a single-minded exposition is far from my intention. The book is essentially a collection of essays new and old, although much revised; and the latter originally appeared in publications as diverse as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Theatre Arts*, *The Forum*, *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *The Educational Theatre Journal*, and *Theatre Time*. I preferred the method of covering the subject of contemporary theatre with a procession of essays not because it is a less taxing procedure than consecutive composition, but because it enables a writer to advance a point without irretrievably committing him to it alone. The ambivalences induced by what the critic observes should not be resolved into dogmas for the critic and blueprints for a theatre invariably created by a variety of temperaments and responses. It is usually the business of the artist to make a single commitment in a single work. It is the business of the critical observer to make discriminations, but it is also his obligation to relate them to the diversity of his field of observation. As for myself, I have found my responses too divided to formulate doctrine, even if I cannot subscribe to mere impressionism in criticism.

Thus, I believe that the American stage is most vital when closest to American sensibility and interest, whatever their shortcomings, but that the European enterprise in theatre provides a necessary perspective and corrective. I also believe that realism and contemporary interest alone can give us a living theatre, but that realism should not limit us to realistic technique or style while contemporary interest should not limit us to commonplace or topical matter and attitudes. I grant the importance of *re-theatricalizing* the modern drama that realism *de-theatricalized*, but do not believe that theatricalism can be the sole end of an art that attained cultural stature in modern times with Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, and Shaw. We must develop or refine dramatic and theatrical forms, but these should not be regarded as absolutes rather than as a means for making drama a more intense or revealing experience. I believe in stylization, but suspect a tendency among stylizing modernists to "style" humanity right out of the theatre in the name of art. I do not expect all good drama to be "literature," but am gratified when it is that, too; I favor literary drama, but require it to be theatre as well. I like to be entertained as much as anybody else, but prefer to be stimulated. I favor excitement, but prefer to be excited into some recognition or to some purpose. My quarrel with many of our effective plays is that they are excitative without being forma-

tive. I also favor a critical spirit in the drama, but like the theatre to be intelligent rather than intellectual.

I cannot, therefore, avoid dividing my allegiance or shifting my emphasis whenever the theatre moves too far in one direction, and such fluctuations are better recorded in individual essays than in a tightly knit book-length argument. Nevertheless, the essays follow some pattern indicated in the divisions of the book. They are all intended to pursue the same inquiry, which may be summarized as an investigation of the nature of the theatre in our times, the positions it has held, the direction it has followed in so far as it has had any direction, and the gyres into which it has been driven by a world in which contrary winds have blown most prodigiously.

Some of the chapters belong to history, others to dramatic criticism, still others to dramatic theory. But the book as a whole, as has already been said, expresses one man's search for a relationship to a multiple enterprise that cannot be wholly expressed in intellectual terms but cannot be meaningfully discussed without them. And since this search has occurred in the course of a career that has taken the author almost equally into the fields of dramatic criticism, professional stage production, experimental ventures, and education, the endeavor to make some sense out of the contemporary theatre is probably representative. In any case, I am sure that the book is not so inviolably an "above-the-scene" commentary as to be purely theoretical or historical and is, at the same time, not so thoroughly embroiled in the immediate practicalities of "show-business" and the daily practice of play reviewing as to preclude generalization. A certain degree of conviction, too, has influenced the writing in this volume. It is the conviction that the theatre, for all the waywardness that has characterized its efforts in our century, is a proper subject for analysis, argument, and evaluations. It started out in Ibsen's time as a venture of the modern intellect and spirit, and it is still that, despite the bane of humdrum "commercialism" and equally humdrum "amateurism." Only the conditions under which it has functioned, the methods now available to it, and the lessons accumulated, if not necessarily assimilated, since *A Doll's House* are different.

In closing I should like to express my obligation to those with whom I have been professionally associated in my small part of this venture, although they are too many to be listed individually; to the editors of the publications in which a number of the essays were first published; to the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation which granted me a Fellowship that encouraged me to form some midcentury perspectives; to my publishers and their editors Bertha Krantz and Herbert Michelman. Brooks Atkinson, John Mason Brown, Harold Clurman, George Jean Nathan, Richard Watts, Jr., and Stark Young, who first welcomed me into the

cockpit of dramatic criticism two decades ago, also must share in my gratitude whether or not they agree with the opinions expressed in this book. And here I must add the names of my friends E. J. West, whose enthusiasm for some of my pieces implanted thoughts of incorporating them in a volume, and Arthur Colby Sprague, with whom I have had many delightful conversations about the theatre for a dozen years or more.

Finally, a major indebtedness must be acknowledged to the author's wife, Mollie Gassner, a lady of many talents not the least of which is perseverance. The idea of publishing this book originated with her, and I could not have actually undertaken the project in the midst of an over-committed schedule but for her editorial assistance. I may say that the publishers and the reader, too, are under some obligation to her, since without her vigilance the book would have been more than twice its present length.

JOHN GASSNER

February, 1954

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PERSPECTIVES OF THEATRE

INTRODUCTION:

THEATRE IN OUR TIMES

When the theatre moved toward the midcentury mark at the close of the 1948-49 season, the temptation to make a retrospective evaluation led us into many channels of inquiry. Usually, we emerged from these with loud laments and with scanty appraisals that could not be used for more than journalistic purposes. Nevertheless, retrospective study is the first step toward a perspective. My own review, first hastily drawn up in the issues of a periodical and then amplified, may serve to introduce the present volume. The review is offered as a casual journey of one person thinking aloud about the travail and somewhat less than unshakable faith he shared with many individuals in the American theatre. The perspectives are largely, if not entirely, those available to an observer situated in New York rather than in London, Paris, or Berlin. And if this introduction raises more questions than it can answer, it may serve as a wedge into the subjects explored in other chapters of the book.

I

As we make a rapid inventory of the period from 1900 to 1950, we may be rather amazed at all that has transpired.

We have witnessed the extension of the theatre into related media based on the development of scientific invention. Up to the present century, there existed in the Western world only one dramatic medium, that of the stage for the actor seen in the round on a platform. Our half century saw three new media spring up before its eyes—the motion pictures, radio theatre, and television theatre. The first and the third were given over to the two-dimensional performer who operated on our senses from a flat screen rather than a platform, and the living actor who gave his image to the screen was many miles—in the case of film, often several thousand miles—away from the spectator. This, in short, was a theatre radically different from any hitherto known, in the sense that the actor and the audience had no immediate actual relationship. The living performer of films was a canned image and a voice who did not perform directly to an audience and catch contagion from it. Until the advent of the “talkies,” moreover, he was also consistently deprived of the physiological function of speech, with consequences we need not examine here. In radio drama, moreover, he was even deprived of his face and figure and transformed