

# The Making of Modern Drama

RICHARD GILMAN

With a new introduction by the author

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# THE MAKING OF **MODERN DRAMA**

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*A study of Büchner, Ibsen,  
Strindberg, Chekhov, Pirandello,  
Brecht, Beckett, Handke*

with a new introduction

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# INTRODUCTION

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**N**ineteen ninety-nine marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the original publication of *The Making of Modern Drama*. Naturally, I am greatly pleased that my book has stood the test of time to that extent, and I am grateful to Yale University Press for undertaking this new edition, which, apart from giving the book a chance at a still longer life, affords me the opportunity to include this new introduction.

During the quarter of a century since the book came out, the theater has undergone a good many changes, two of which seem to me particularly worthy of comment here. The first is the spread of theatrical groups or companies, or simply numbers of people with common interests (which may legitimately be called agendas) ideologically and politically inspired and committed—black theater, gay and lesbian theater, feminist, Hispanic, Asian-American—and a corresponding increase in the number of plays by individuals writing with such agendas, or simply out of the expression of, or search for, the kinds of identity that gave rise to, and continue to create, ideologically oriented theater.

This seems a good place to take up one of the questions that over these twenty-five years I've been most often asked about the book: Why doesn't it include any women or any minority writers? Before I reply, I need to let the reader know that a similar question has been even more frequently asked: Why doesn't it include an English-speaking playwright? Why not Bernard Shaw? Or Eugene O'Neill? My answer, when I've had a chance to offer one, has always been that although I admire a great many of Shaw's ideas and values, almost all of his iconoclasm, his energy, and a good number of his plays—some of which, like *Major Bar-*



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*bara*, *Heartbreak House*, and *Saint Joan*, I consider masterpieces—he doesn't in my opinion quite measure up in innovative technique and imaginative daring to the writers I did choose. As for O'Neill, my answer is that except for a few of his early sea plays and some late works such as *Long Day's Journey into Night*, I think O'Neill was a clumsy, often inept writer, a master *faut de mieux* (America needed, and thought it deserved, a theatrical giant on a level with the great Europeans; and so a playwright of ordinary talent—and extraordinary ambition—had his reputation inflated, not by any conspiracy but by a rather common process of cultural jingoism, to fill the vacuum). I might add that if I had been commanded on pain of death by some authoritarian regime or publisher to pick one American dramatist for the book, without hesitation I would have chosen Tennessee Williams.

As for women and minority (in this context, I have always understood this to mean black) playwrights, the answer is that, alas, I know of none who measures up to the standards I was using and continue to maintain. Gertrude Stein did write several extremely interesting and technically inventive plays, but of course she was, and is, far better known, where she is known at all, as a writer of fiction; and Susan Lori Parkes, a young black writer with strong gifts, seems to have the wherewithal to go much farther than she already has; her greatest fault, I think, is a tendency to overwrite. Wole Soyinka of Nigeria has been mentioned, but again I don't think he measures up to the artistic standards set by the dramatists I did choose. The sorrowful historical reasons behind this condition of scarcity are of course far beyond the scope of my *Making of Modern Drama*.

The second and probably most important or lasting change in theater during this quarter of a century is a movement away from the primacy, or rather the almost exclusive reign, of formal texts, “plays”—indeed away from dialogical language itself, and toward what we have come to call loosely performance art, or simply performance. Whichever label we use it's an extremely



elastic term, lending itself to a whole range of definitions and applications (and therefore subject to many misuses) the way such terms as “theater of the absurd” and “absurdist,” as well as, for that matter, “modern art” used to be, and in some unthinking quarters still are.

All we can say in a sentence or two about performance art with any hope of being accurate or useful is that it places at the center of attention the *self* or *selves* of what we confidently used to call actors. What we have now are human beings who, instead of impersonating or representing other beings as in traditional drama, are exhibiting or presenting *themselves*. For the most part this means their attitudes and opinions, but also in some deliberately outrageous instances it means their fully or partly nude bodies, sometimes smeared or coated with one or another substance—grease, blood, chocolate, and so on. Or we're given their entire or partial “stories,” or histories, which may turn out in some especially belligerent cases to be chronicles of just those attitudes and opinions or, more often, their likes and dislikes. With the decline or near disappearance of a consciously Marxist-oriented theater, left-wing views tend to find expression these days in performance, rather than in a traditional kind of play.

In the view and practice of performance, which I think it legitimate to say has at least some of its more remote origins in vaudeville and cabaret and its more recent ones in the blurring of the lines between traditional theater, dance, and the graphic arts (a phenomenon that not so long ago we called “the theater of mixed means”), the person or persons making an appearance, that is to say performing, are not in a play, as we have traditionally defined it, but are simply “out there” in a performance or performing area, a public space or, more accurately, a space open to the public (the audience). Beyond that, these performers are not necessarily doing their work on what we have always called a stage, but at least as often in a coffeehouse, a studio or art gallery, a nightclub, or some other sort of club. To a lesser extent the



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same thing is true of traditional kinds of plays, which in recent years have been produced or, in the older meaning of the word, performed, at such venues as empty warehouses or factories, unused schools, and, in one notorious and, I think, misguided choice—a much disputed production of Beckett's *Endgame*—an abandoned subway station.

In a great deal of performance art language remains dominant (some practitioners like Spalding Gray and Anna Deavere Smith may be described as monologuists), but in the wider practice of performance there is a greater emphasis on the physical or visual, the whole enterprise veering off toward dance, fashion as display, or even circus (a “theater of images” one critic, Bonny Maranca, has aptly called it). On the largest scale this kind of theater gives us the opera-like work of such artist-directors as Robert Wilson, Ariane Mnouchkine, and Richard Foreman, all of whom in their different ways have functioned as impresarios of what in the late nineteenth century was aspired to as “total theater.”

As in every era, in every field, there has been no shortage of critics and theoreticians (but perhaps not quite as many practitioners) eager to announce the death or the end of drama as we've known it, but, again as in every era and field, such apocalyptic pronouncements are continually belied by actuality. The dwindling number of devotees of a truly mad prophet like Antonin Artaud, whose ideas reigned over so large a region of “advanced” theater a generation ago, have repeatedly been conked on the bean—as we used to say—by experience and, thank the Lord, are (metaphorically) getting up more and more slowly.

There exists a certain type of mind that cannot tolerate the coexistence of the new (or what used to be called—quaintly, it now sometimes seems—the “experimental”) with the old, or traditional, the sanctified, or classical. For such rigid, absolutist, to say nothing of murderous, thinking (to call it revolutionary would



be to give it an undeserved dignity), for such a mind one central action of the new, as well as a precondition for its very existence, has always been not just shouldering aside the old to make room for newness, but wiping it out, causing its obliteration. In the *Present Age*, Kierkegaard wrote that “everything creative is latently polemical, since it has to make room for the new which it is bringing into the world.” Notice that he called for or saw the necessity of polemics, which presupposes coexistence, not a generational war between the new and the old.

The cast of mind that will not accept that new and older styles can, and most often do, exist side by side, that no style or way of doing things is ever eliminated from the universe of created objects is largely responsible for the mania we have for proclaiming various deaths—the death of the novel, the death of God, and so on. This mindset also lies behind our related craze to attach the prefix “post” to anything that had the misfortune to come along later than something else to which we previously gave a name or a label but which is no longer as influential or universal as it once was. Post-impressionist is the first such word I recall entering the vocabulary, and then the term proliferated: post-Christian, post-Freudian, post-Marxist, right up to post-modern. The impatience with which so much of our recent artistic and intellectual life is being hustled off to the grave is one of the most striking features of the cultural atmosphere during the past quarter of a century.

But as Mark Twain famously said of the reports of his death, the obituaries are premature. Novels—some of them good and even what a few unashamed holdouts, or escapees, from the terrifying onrush of post-modernism, with its deconstructionist hit men, would call artistic—are still being written and read; for millions of people God and Christianity continue to be very much alive; and although Freud's and Marx's ideas have been under continual attack by revisionists, many of their central visions seem by now to be indispensable to any reliable description of



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how both people and society work. To turn to another artistic enterprise, not so long ago cocksure avant-gardists were proclaiming that figure painting was gone, over, kaput. But the body, a wily survivor, managed to sneak back into studios and galleries and finally to immortality-giving institutions like museums. In the same way, the human voice, language, is a survivor, as immortal as the body from which it issues to play its part as the chief executive instrument of consciousness.

To come back to the theater, good new texts, recognizable as plays in any definition, made up of words (dialogue) to one major degree or another, go on being written and watched, even—dare I say it in this age of culture as nothing but a set of codes, this era of enthusiasm as a curse, at least in academia, dare I say enjoyed?—aligning themselves alongside the existing body of drama of the fundamentally language-based, narrative kind we've always known. Such newer plays are not necessarily realistic; most of the best ones are not. In any case, *The Making of Modern Drama* treats a body of plays in a wide range of styles, but at the time of their composition during the past two hundred or so years (the period covered by “modern” in the sense in which I have used the term) they had in common the quality, or power, of being innovative and share now, collectively as well as in their own right, an indestructibility that I am confident will survive all fashions and faddish movements. There will never, I venture to assert—risking the danger always inherent in saying never—be an end to, a death of, dramatic works, which, in a formulation I once fashioned and, immodestly perhaps, can't seem to improve on, I like to think of as formal instances of “enacted consciousness.” Consciousness will always be in need of, and always demand, enactment; and language, as someone (I think Coleridge) once said, is the armament of the mind, which I take to mean our chief protection against mortality.

The plays by the dramatists I have written about in this book have not been rendered obsolete and certainly haven't been



annihilated by the newest forms of theater. For one thing, more of them are being put on (to skip past the old-fashioned word produced) more often and in more places, geographically speaking, than ever before. More subtly, they continue to be central influences on theatrical practice. Indeed, the new forms owe their own lives to what preceded them—a statement so obviously true that I feel foolish in making it.

All new life owes itself to previous life, of course, but the point I want to make in this new introduction to a book about a “making,” a *process*, is that the making is still going on, renewing and extending itself. The dramatists I wrote about were at the beginning of their careers as revolutionaries, which is to say at the point when they became innovators (Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, and Pirandello all began writing in traditional, if not dully conventional, ways; Büchner, Brecht, Beckett, and Handke seem to have arrived as full-blown inventors), and so, because they offered new techniques, new ways of doing things, they were pioneers and liberators, helping to shape new dramatic consciousness. By now they have become models, inspirations, for several generations of playwrights and, what's more, are the standards by which, rightly or wrongly, most contemporary work is judged. “Chekhovian,” “Brechtian,” “Strindbergian,” and “Pirandellian” are almost always used as words of praise, although sometimes they are ignorantly bestowed, as in the case of a sentimental and imitative playwright like Wendy Wasserstein being hailed as Chekhovian, or any number of playwrights who can contrive an atmosphere of doubtfulness and menace being called “Pinteresque.” These descriptives are words whose coinage represents the highest honor to which a writer, or any artist, can aspire: to have one's name turned into an adjective. And the existence of these adjectives, and of a construction such as “Ibsen-like,” testifies to the continuing, indestructible, and maybe most important, irreversible influence of the playwrights I chose to write about.



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This is as good a point as any for me to reply to another question that frequently has been asked about *The Making of Modern Drama* since it was published: Why did I write on some plays and not others? My answer has always been that this book is not a history or a survey but, as I said before, the account of a process, a “making”; and so I wrote about the plays that seemed to me most central and influential in, as well as most representative of, that action.

I wrote earlier that this new edition gives me the chance to bring things up to date. To that end, I will first mention that of my original eight “makers,” only Peter Handke is still alive; he seems, however, to have given up writing plays in favor of fiction, poetry, and essays, which he had always written, along with screenplays, which are new for him; he has also directed movies, including a notable production of his wonderful short novel *The Left-Handed Woman*. Still, his plays, particularly his early *sprechstucke* (speech pieces), have had, and continue to exert, a large influence over the world of playwriting and theatergoing. If Handke did nothing else, he made large holes in the wall of quasi-mystical, hushed Respect-for-Theater-as-Cultural-Rite that had been built up over the centuries and against which Brecht, starting long before Handke was born, had always thrown himself. The irreverence and aggression of Handke's speech pieces, in particular *Insulting the Audience*, encouraged a number of other playwrights (and, not incidentally, performance artists, too) by their example.

I want now to call attention to some recent additions to our knowledge and understanding of the other plays and playwrights my book discusses: *To the Third Empire*, Brian Johnston's extremely thorough and intelligent study of Ibsen's neglected early plays, the so-called Viking ones; Anthony Caputi's *Pirandello and the Crisis of Modern Consciousness*, a book that falls only a little bit short of its ambitious title; Michael Meyer's *Strindberg*, a massive but highly readable biography, a sort of companion piece



to Meyer's earlier life of Ibsen. I might mention, too, in as neutral a manner as I can, my own new book *Chekhov's Plays: An Opening into Eternity*, which had its origin in the Chekhov chapter of *The Making of Modern Drama*.

Writing about Beckett, the man and the work, continues to pile up, having become a sort of cottage industry, but the only new or relatively new work (published in 1989, the same year as Beckett's death) I can recommend without reservation is Jonathan Kalb's *Beckett in Performance*, a study of how the plays have been staged through the years, on a few occasions by Beckett himself. One rather remarkable achievement of Kalb's is that he got Beckett to agree to talk to him, not in an interview—the most modest and taciturn of geniuses, Beckett never gave one—but in “conversations,” which shed a great deal of new light on various matters, including, centrally, Beckett's opinions on how his plays have been and should be directed and acted. The book also contains conversations (as well as some true interviews) with such gifted Beckett interpreters as director JoAnne Akalaitis and actors Ekkehard Schall, David Warrilow, and my own favorite, the quintessential Beckett performer, Billee Whitelaw. A rich selection of photographs accompanies the text.

Since 1974 there have also been two new and enormously long Beckett biographies, one of which, James Knowlson's *Damned to Fame*, is very much worth reading. The other, an earlier book by Dierdre Baer, regrettably is full of factual inaccuracies, speculations in place of insights, and an almost total lack of critical acumen.

One further Beckett note. Since I wrote about him, his first full-length play *Eleuthéria*, long known about but for various rather arcane reasons never before published or performed, finally appeared in 1995, in both French and a fine English translation by Michael Brodsky. Very much worth knowing in its own right, the play is additionally valuable for its foreshadowings of



the later masterpieces, in particular *Waiting for Godot*, which Beckett was to write a couple of years after *Eleuthéria*.

The only one of my authors about whom there has been any real controversy since *The Making of Modern Drama* first appeared is Brecht, but it should be said that the dispute has been notably excitable, and sometimes quite acrimonious. It all began with the publication in 1994 of a book by John Fuegi called *Brecht and Company: Sex, Politics, and the Making of the Modern Drama*. (Am I wrong in seeing something pilfered in the subtitle? That extra “the” saves it from a charge of outright plagiarism, but I’m not a lawyer and it could be that it’s still plagiarism. . . . On thinking it over, however, I’ve decided that maybe I should take the “borrowing” as a compliment.)

Anyway, this personal matter is certainly not the controversy I mentioned. That arose from the nature of Fuegi’s book, which, to put it as curtly as I can, is an immensely long (732 pages), nearly unrelieved diatribe against his subject. The attack is chiefly on Brecht’s morality but incorporates his plays and theories, too, by a natural kind of extension. So thoroughgoing and deep-seated (and, I might add, all but unaccountable) is Fuegi’s hatred of Brecht—at one point he compares him to Adolf Hitler—it was only to be expected that he would damn much of the work along with the man.

The heart of Fuegi’s case, briefly put, is that Brecht ruthlessly exploited a number of people, many or most of them women—among the most prominent were Ruth Berlau, Marieluise Fleisser, Elisabeth Hauptmann, and Marguerite Steffin—whom he called, or who called themselves along with him, “collaborators,” but who were in reality, according to Fuegi, victims of his rapacity, egoism, and dishonesty, which caused, or inspired, him to take without credit their ideas, their suggestions, their actual words, and even whole plays of theirs that he claimed as his own. Brecht, as many of those who knew him have attested, was a notable charmer with an almost charismatic presence, had erotic



relations with several of the women, and, says Fuegi, treated them as shamefully as lovers as he did as collaborators.

Before Fuegi's book appeared, nearly all his charges, both general and specific—such as the claim that Elisabeth Hauptmann, his longtime secretary, researcher, and collaborator, was almost wholly responsible for *The Threepenny Opera*—had been known (though far from proven, as they mostly remain) in the world of Brecht studies, and were at least rumors in the wider world of the theater. But Fuegi's book instigated further attacks on Brecht by many critics (not all of them women, and not all of them strongly, or even mildly, against Brecht's work) and led to an ongoing inquiry into and debate over an issue of primary importance to theatrical practice—the nature of collaboration—and a related issue, of special concern to feminists, the accusation that women had been used by Brecht in his role as the latest in a long historical line of male exploiters who, by refusing to acknowledge certain women's contributions to their writings or other artistic or intellectual work, had, in effect, made such women disappear.

The whole imbroglio is and continues to be far too complex for me to do more than slide over its surface. But I think it important to offer a few pertinent facts and a couple of observations. First, as the critic, editor, and educator Erika Munk has (among others) pointed out, it should be remembered that Brecht had many *male* collaborators or coworkers, too. (I single out Munk because I think she has been one of the sanest and most intelligent voices in the whole affair. Her reviews of the Fuegi book in the *Nation*, October 31, 1994, and in a special Brecht issue of *Theater*, the magazine she edits, are especially valuable.) Most of these men, she says, not only did receive credit for their contributions but, unlike the women, with the exception of Fleisser, the most gifted of all Brecht's cowriters, went on to have more or less notable careers of their own: Caspar Neher, the designer; the composers Kurt Weill and Hans Eisler; the writer Lion Feucht-



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wangler. Fleisser, it's true, underwent many years of near oblivion before her own extremely interesting plays were discovered and given theatrical life and her contributions to Brecht's work were acknowledged, although not directly by him. The point is that Brecht wasn't an indiscriminate exploiter (sex—and sexism—were clearly mixed up in the whole affair) but was truly interested in theater as a collective process and had greatly original ideas on the subject. Years after the time of the alleged exploitation, roughly from the early twenties to the late thirties, his *Berliner Ensemble* would be founded and would operate on continually evolving collective principles, becoming an inspiration and model for theater groups everywhere. Still, the word “collective” is a reminder of Brecht's less-than-noble political behavior during his time in what was then East Germany; and in fact his communism, or *Stalinism*, as his chief detractors—correctly, I think—have it, is the target of much of Fuegi's animus.

The most important and persistent question remains: To what extent should our knowledge of Brecht's sexist attitudes and behavior affect interpretations and performances of his plays? There are those who follow Fuegi in calling for a radical revision of our thinking about Brecht's plays and theories. But other theater people, including such eminent and gifted female directors as Liz Diamond and Carey Perloff, have said that Fuegi's indictment has not and will not change their ideas or lower their appreciation at all. To quote Diamond: “The Brecht plays are important not because of who wrote them, but because they are densely layered works of art, capable of supporting a multitude of readings by reader, director, actor, and audience.” To which I say “amen,” and I wish to second Diamond by recalling an incident that took place some years ago in one of my classes at the Yale School of Drama. A student asked me what I would do if it were incontestably proven that Bacon had indeed written Shakespeare's plays. “Well,” I said, “I would change the adjective from Shakespearean to Baconian.” Over the years of my intellectual



life I've learned that a number of writers I admire were nasty persons—Baudelaire, Dostoevsky, T. S. Eliot, and Evelyn Waugh come immediately to mind—without this knowledge diminishing my esteem for their work.

Besides, though Brecht may have been sexist, he wrote some of the most sympathetic and impressive roles for women in the modern theater: Shen Te–Shui Ta of *The Good Person of Set-zuan*; Grusha of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*; Joanna Dark of *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*; the protagonists of plays like *The Mother*, *Senora Carrar's Rifles*, and *The Jewish Wife*; and, of course, Anna Fierling, the title character of *Mother Courage*. Only Ibsen and Chekhov among Brecht's immediate predecessors and contemporaries wrote about women with as much understanding as he did. This is not an excuse along the lines of “some of my best friends are Jews,” and will not tamp down the controversy, I know, but I think the point shouldn't be ignored.

If I were to do a sequel to this book, I suppose I'd have to call it “The Making of Post-Modern Drama.” The trouble is that I have never liked the word “post-modern,” or “modernism” either for that matter. Eliot, Joyce, Proust, Picasso, Stravinsky, Pirandello, and Beckett didn't think of themselves as modernists; they were simply alive and working at a certain time that came to be called modern by other people—critics, cultural historians, journalists, academics. In a certain sense every period of time is modern to those who inhabit it. I might more accurately have called my book “The Making of Today's Drama,” except that such a title almost instantly would have become obsolete. Modern was out there to be used, and people knew what I was referring to. Anyway, when did modernism end and post-modernism begin? Universal agreement does exist, I think, that Beckett was the last of so-called modernism's literary and theatrical masters. Whatever the case, I would have a more-than-ample list of candidates for inclusion in a study of post-modernism in drama. Since 1974, a large number of gifted playwrights has appeared or their careers



have grown in stature. Without straining my mental resources, I think of Harold Pinter, Sam Shepard, Tennessee Williams, David Mamet, Maria Irene Fornes, John Arden, Edward Bond, Joe Orton, Howard Brenton, Caryl Churchill, Brendan Behan, Athol Fugard, David Hare, and the young Irishman Sebastian Barry—all English-speaking writers; and then there are the greatly talented German-speakers—Thomas Bernhard, Botho Straus, Peter Weiss, Wolfgang Bauer, and Franz Xavier Kroetz—and the comically subversive Italian, Dario Fo. I would also add a few plays of extraordinary technical interest by the brilliant Frenchwoman Marguerite Duras, best known of course as a novelist and for the screenplay of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*.

There could not have been many periods in history when so much talent was on display: The Periclean era in ancient Greece? The Racinian age in France? The Elizabethans? There may have been more giants in those times, but not nearly so many writers of at least moderate brilliance as during the past twenty-five years or so.

The best work of all these dramatists is unthinkable without the powerfully instructive examples of the innovative and yet ageless forms (as Ionesco said, all innovation is a return to something lost or forgotten) that their predecessors of the past two centuries, the makers of modern drama, have bequeathed to them and that go on influencing what they do and silently encouraging them to do it. As D. H. Lawrence once wrote, writers or other artists didn't so much derive technical lessons from their great predecessors as morale, the spirit of artistic enterprise. I hope that I have communicated something of both the technique and the morale that went into the making of modern drama, and that my book will find new readers, and—a real blessing if it happens—some who wish to return to it.

*Note:* Two changes I wanted to make in the original text would have been exorbitantly expensive in the new printing.