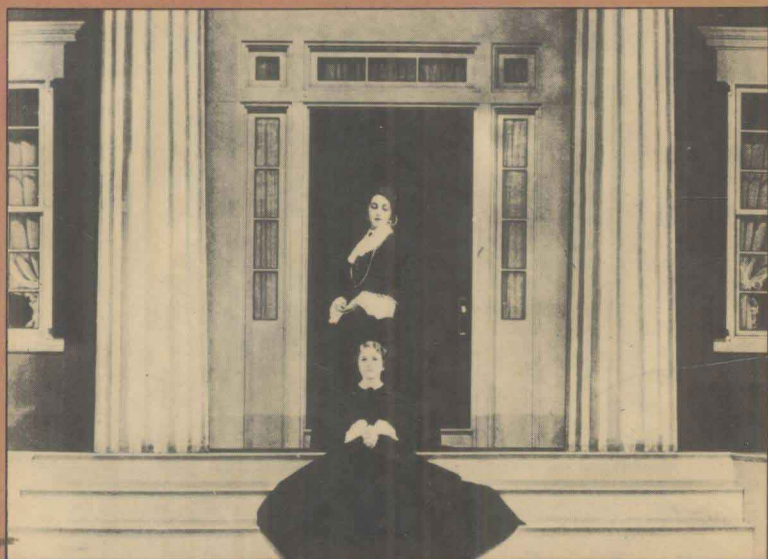


C.W.E. BIGSBY

A CRITICAL  
INTRODUCTION TO  
**TWENTIETH-  
CENTURY  
AMERICAN  
DRAMA**



VOLUME ONE  
1900-1940

A critical introduction  
to twentieth-century  
American drama

1

1900—1940

C. W. E. BIGSBY

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## PREFACE

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American drama, as a serious form, is a product of the twentieth century. But, as Walter Meserve has established in his multi-volume study (the first instalment of which appeared in 1977), it has a long and fascinating pre-history. A public form, it has self-consciously engaged the public issues and private tensions of a nation and a culture in search of itself. Few countries have lived their history so self-consciously, dramatising, with political rhetoric and fast-congealing myths, the opening of a continent and the creation of a national identity. The theatre played its part in this process. Particularly in the nineteenth century it attempted to devise a spectacle commensurate with national expansionism, the revealed splendours of the American topography and a new technological mastery. And from time to time it also expressed a concern for the erosion of American idealism and the pressures on national and personal values which were a product of rapid social process.

But it was in the twentieth century that American drama began to attend to its own processes, to test its own boundaries and possibilities. For all their amateurism the Provincetown Players were concerned with fostering American writers who wished to test the potential of the stage. The explosion of experimental theatre, which had marked European theatre at the turn of the century, was long in reaching America but when it did so it found a group of people who combined a studied aesthetic eclecticism with a conviction that drama could have a central role in cultural and social life, as paradigm no less than as subtle instrument of analysis or as sculptor of language and movement.

Where once the actor and, to some extent, the ingenious machinery of stage effects, had dominated, now it was the writer and even the director who did so. And the central theme of this new drama became alienation. Reborn in its modern guise in a largely urban and industrial environment which seemed, in many ways, to be a denial of animating myths that drew their strength and credibility from a predominantly rural world in which the individual's responsibility for his own fate and identity was an article of national no less than individual faith, it tended to take as its primary subject the loss of an organic relationship with the natural world, with one's fellow man and with oneself.

The dominant image was of the loss of space: physical, emotional and moral. In so far as American idealism had been consciously rooted in the fact of American space, romantic notions of the moralising impact of nature, political convictions about the democratising effect of the frontier and the

availability of land, in the simple absence of economic and social determinants, the loss of those convictions threatened the very basis of that idealism. And twentieth-century American drama has engaged that conviction directly, presenting dramatic correlatives of that process, on the whole taking the expansive and confident stage of the nineteenth century and compressing it until the sensibility of the individual is made to bear the weight of this social process.

For some writers this diminution of personal space, this collapse of a liberal dream, becomes an image of metaphysical process. For if the connections between the individual and a redeeming idealism, a liberating imagination, have been threatened by simple fact and by an implacable materialism, so the connection between the self and its own sense of available transcendence is seen as having been threatened. And so social alienation deepens into metaphysical *Angst*.

This book attempts to describe this process by concentrating on the major figures and theatre groups of the period. It does not attempt to be exhaustive. It is offered as a *critical introduction*. Many playwrights are mentioned but not discussed, others are not even mentioned: this does involve an act of critical judgement. The American theatre at this time could boast a large number of competent playwrights, but little, I think, in the context of this book, would be gained by offering an extensive critical reading of writers such as Sidney Kingsley, Sidney Howard, Marc Connelly, Paul Green or many others. Admittedly, one or two of those I do choose to discuss are not markedly superior to these but are offered as being in a sense representative.

For the most part this is a book about the central figures and principal groups of the period – those, that is, who shaped the nature of the American dramatic imagination. It is offered as an account of a theatre excitedly discovering its own power and potential. The American theatre moved with incredible rapidity from adolescence to maturity. It bears the stress marks of that fact. This is part of its fascination. It was a drama in the making as, in a sense, was America. This is the source of its energy as, perhaps, of its imperfections. On occasion those imperfections proved disabling but more often they were indicative of sensibilities struggling to make sense of a swiftly changing environment in a language and with a form that were themselves aspects of those changes.

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# 1 Provincetown: the birth of twentieth-century American drama

The decline of the theatre in the nineteenth century was not an especially American phenomenon. It was a century of mass art. It was, above all, a century in which the novel predominated. This was the social art of the new bourgeoisie celebrating its own literacy and leisure. For Shelley, the decline of drama was especially alarming because he assumed a direct correspondence between that and a kind of social entropy, suggesting that 'the corruption or extinction of drama in a nation where it had once flourished, is a mark of a corruption of manners, and an extinction of the energies which sustain the soul of social life'. As George Steiner has suggested, there was a kind of historical justification for such an assumption in that the corollary notion, which Shelley equally urged, that the 'highest perfection of human society has ever corresponded with the highest dramatic excellence',<sup>1</sup> could be plausibly argued with respect to England, France and Spain. It was not that theatre was unpopular but rather that it lacked subtlety, that it offered a literal platform for a posturing which was not unconnected with the celebration of bourgeois individualism and the display of a new technological sophistication. Romanticism, with its emphasis on the individual, with its admiration for the dominating, self-dramatising figure, had exacerbated the situation by placing the self as actor at the centre of attention; the revolutionary as actor striding the world stage. And in nineteenth-century America, with its public myths of upward mobility, of the self as a plastic form easily mouldable into the contours of successful businessman, rising politician and hero, the actor was in a sense a model of the age. He was everything the public could aspire to be: a Protean figure. No longer locked into a European fixity, for the American, acting out a self-created destiny, all things were possible. And so the theatre provided both distraction and a displaced sense of potential. And it was perhaps a certain logical hubris as well as a twist of insanity which sent John Wilkes Booth leaping onto the stage of Ford's Theatre after killing a president of the United States. The theatre had established itself not merely as a mirror of events but as a correlative to the national spectacle.

The American theatre was not quite the total wasteland it was taken to be, though serious drama was almost invariably touched with melodrama. Indeed, even James O'Neill's version of *The Count of Monte Cristo* was not without a certain wit and verve. But its real claim to seriousness lay in its concern with locating the individual in a social context, with examining moral and social problems against a background which in part explained those

problems and in part lent authenticity to their treatment. In 1873, Emile Zola had announced that 'there should no longer be any school, no more formulas, no standards of any sort; there is only life itself, an immense field where each may study and create as he likes'. The need, he insisted, was to 'look to the future'. And the future would 'have to do with human problems studied in the framework of reality'.<sup>2</sup>

A consideration of social problems was not new to the American stage. Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* had tackled the question of miscegenation in 1859, receiving its première just four days after the execution of John Brown. But, despite some intelligent dialogue, it was essentially a melodrama with a host of stock characters and contrived events. Much the same might be said of the work of Bronson Howard, who was more concerned with morals than morality. His observation that America needed plays which lauded virtue and attacked vice, his belief that 'the wife who has once taken the step from purity to impurity can never reinstate herself in the world of art on this side of the grave',<sup>3</sup> suggests the limitations that he willingly embraced.

James A. Hearne was rather more willing to challenge such presumptions. Indeed, in *Margaret Fleming* (1890) he created an Ibsenesque heroine who was not merely capable of challenging convention but who deftly asserted her autonomy within marriage. The play is concerned with the infidelity of a successful businessman. A young woman dies bearing his illegitimate son and when his wife discovers the truth she insists on taking the child into her own home, though the shock exacerbates an eye condition and makes her blind. Her husband is suitably cowed and the play ends on a note of somewhat smug contentment all round.

The distinction of the play clearly did not lie in its freedom from melodramatic elements; the usual farrago of revealing letters, concealed identities, sudden affliction, abound. It resided rather in the frankness with which the intimate details were confronted and in the figure of Margaret Fleming herself who, if capable of a sickening piety, was also capable of confronting her husband with the double standard of social morality that gave him a freedom it denied her. As William Coyle and Harvey Damaser have pointed out, the play was regarded as sufficiently shocking for the *New York Times* reviewer to comment that

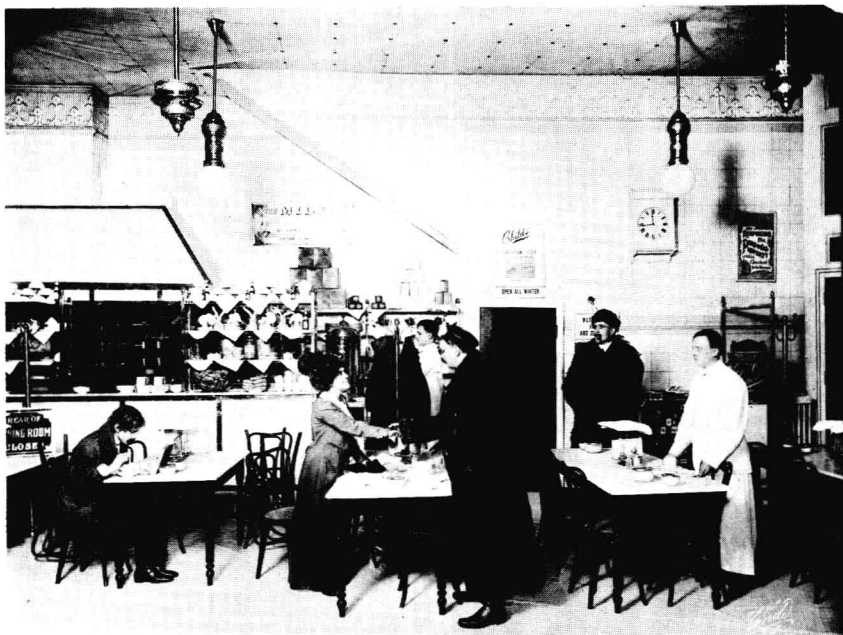
*Margaret Fleming* is, indeed, the quintessence of the commonplace. Its language is the colloquial English of the shops and the streets and the kitchen fire place. Its personages are the everyday nonentities that some folks like to forget when they go to the theatre. The life it portrays is sordid and mean, and its effect on the sensitive mind is depressing. . . the stage would be a stupid and useless thing if such plays as *Margaret Fleming* were to prevail.<sup>4</sup>

James A. Hearne was, however, finally upholding the bourgeois system. He assaulted immorality not because it was a consequence of social conven-

tion but because it inhibited the felicitous functioning of a fundamental institution of bourgeois life – the family. Ibsen may have been a source but he was perceived only at the most superficial level. Far from breathing life into the family, Ibsen dissected it, exposing the hypocrisies, the moral evasions, the self-betrays and the casual inhumanity which were the price paid for a stability that only seemed to imply private and public control over the flux of experience, instinct and emotion. To compare Ibsen with any product of the nineteenth-century American theatre is to compare two different levels of perception, two wholly disproportionate worlds. The self-doubt of *The Master Builder* simply has no parallel in the American theatre until after the middle of the twentieth century; the subtle enquiry into the ambiguous nature of the ideal contained in *The Wild Duck* no like until O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*.

But the impulse was clear. It was to define a notion of reality, which consisted of locating human action in a social context which partly explained and partly justified that action. And that required a particular style of production – a style placing the individual in a more direct relationship to a material world which was increasingly seen as a generator of action and character. The naturalistic convictions of the novelist applied equally to the stage, where the *mise-en-scène* becomes the equivalent of the detailed description offered by the novel. As André Antoine had explained of his own innovations at the Théâtre Libre, 'it is the environment that determines the movement of the characters, not the movements of the characters that determine the environment. This simple sentence,' he suggested, 'does not seem to express anything new; yet that is the whole secret of the impression of newness which came from the initial efforts of the Théâtre Libre.'<sup>5</sup>

In America the chief exponent of naturalistic stage setting was David Belasco, who arrived in New York City in 1882 and quickly made himself the dominant influence. Stanislavsky actually made him an honorary member of the Moscow Art Theatre many years later, following that theatre's visit to America in 1923. He declared his faith in realism, took advantage of the new system of electric stage lighting to produce naturalistic effects and insisted on realistic stage sets. 'I will allow nothing to be built out of canvas stretched on frames. Everything must be real. I have seen plays in which thrones creaked on which monarchs sat, and palace walls flapped when persons touched them. Nothing so destructive to illusion or so ludicrous can happen on my stage,'<sup>6</sup> he wrote in *The Theatre Through Its Stage Door*, which appeared in 1919. Indeed when he produced *The Easiest Way*, which contained a scene set in the hall bedroom of a cheap theatrical boarding-house in New York, he 'went to the meanest theatrical lodging-house I could find in the Tenderloin district and bought the entire interior of one of its dilapidated rooms – patched furniture, threadbare carpet, tarnished and broken gas fixtures, tumble-down



1. Belasco's production of *The Governor's Lady*, 1912. A stage replica of the well-known Broadway restaurant, Child's.

cupboards, dingy doors and window-casings, and even the faded paper on the walls'.<sup>7</sup>

Like all innovations, however, stage naturalism had a constricting as well as a liberating effect. Where stage sets had originally been either simple backdrops for bravura acting or spectacular enterprises offered as marvels of technical accomplishments and substitutes for subtlety of dramatic construction and character, they now assumed a defining power, a conventionalised significance, which became a shorthand for character and moral enquiry. Yet it did result in serious attention being given to the need to create a homogeneous effect with lighting, setting and acting which made possible the naturalistic acting of the twentieth-century theatre. It introduced an artistic unity which had not formerly been required. In common with those directors who transformed the European theatre Belasco announced his concern for truth.

But if the stage was acquiring techniques to serve a more forthright realism, the playwrights lagged somewhat behind. And as Adolphe Appia rightly pointed out:

the theatre has always been bound strictly by the special conditions imposed by the age, and consequently, the dramatist has always been the least independent

of artists, because he employs so many distinct elements, all of which must be properly united in his work. If one of these elements remains subject to the conventions of the age, while the others free themselves to obey the will of the creative artist, the result will be a lack of balance which alters the essential nature of the dramatic work.<sup>8</sup>

The effect is a disabling dislocation. But things were changing.

In his autobiography, Floyd Dell, editor of *The Masses* and *The Liberator*, describes the sense which he and his generation had that they were part of a fundamental revolution in values, aesthetics and lifestyles:

The year 1912 was really an extraordinary year, in America as well as in Europe. It was the year of the election of Wilson, a symptom of immense political discontent. It was a year of intense woman-suffragist activity. In the arts it marked a new era. Color was everywhere – even in neckties. The Lyric Year, published in New York, contained Edna St. Vincent Millay's 'Renascence.' In Chicago, Harriet Monroe founded Poetry. Vachel Lindsay suddenly came into his own with 'General William Booth Enters Into Heaven,' and commenced to give back to his land in magnificent chant poetry its own barbaric music. 'Hindle Wakes' startled New York, as it was later to startle Chicago. The Irish Players came to America. It was then that plans were made for the Post-Impressionist Show, which revolutionized American ideas of art. In Chicago, Maurice Brown started the Little Theatre. One could go on with the evidence of a New Spirit come suddenly to birth in America.<sup>9</sup>

There was, indeed, a sense, even before the First World War opened a gap of experience and perception between the generations, that the world was on the move. Partly it was the natural hubris of a new century, the feeling that forms and conventions adequate to the nineteenth century could hardly be adequate to the twentieth, but partly it was a genuine reflection of signs of change. Nor was Dell the only one to detect it. Indeed the air was thick with manifestos and prophecies. The previous year the London *Athenaeum* had remarked that 'few observant people will deny that there are signs of an awakening in Europe. The times are great with the birth of some new thing. A spiritual renaissance.' The prophecy was approvingly quoted in the *Chicago Review* which Dell edited, while his friend and fellow Iowan, George Cram Cook, expressed the hope that America would be 'moved by the same perception of the beauty and wonder of the world, and not be voiceless'.<sup>10</sup> Dell, Cook and a third citizen of Davenport, Iowa, Susan Glaspell, felt themselves to be a part of this movement.

George Cram Cook, born in Iowa in 1873, was repelled by the bourgeois values which he saw as suffocating the individual. He eagerly embraced the modern but wished to employ it to breathe life into American idealism. The problem, as he saw it, was to re-establish lost values and in particular to generate a literature with the power not only to embody but to promote

these values. Moving to Chicago he found himself on the fringe of the Chicago renaissance, reviewing the work of his contemporaries for the *Evening Post*. The writer did indeed seem a key to unlocking the imagination which would regain the past while embracing the language and the forms of the present. 'Suppose,' he wrote, that the renaissance 'depends not on blind evolutionary forces, involving the whole nation, but on whether or not the hundred artists who have in them potential power arrange or do not arrange to place themselves in vital stimulating relationship with each other, in order to bring out, co-ordinate and direct their power'.<sup>11</sup>

In 1911 he published *The Chasm*, a socialist novel, but his real model of an organic society in which culture and life were fused was Ancient Greece, not a notably socialist society. But Cook was never a man to subordinate vision to tiresome realities.

In 1913 he married Susan Glaspell, leaving his wife and three children to do so, itself something of a challenge to mid-western moralism. Glaspell had published a first novel, a sentimental book with pretensions to artistic accomplishment. But in 1907 she had met Cook and was pulled into the world of socialism, a concern with women's suffrage, and a more realistic apprehension of the world around her – a new vision – which was expressed in her second novel, *The Visioning* (1911).

As Dell describes it, Davenport was an 1848 European revolutionary foundation which had a liberal and socialist superstructure. There was also, he suggests, a certain native mysticism, deriving from romantic libertarian ideas. And certainly the renaissance which he, Cook and Glaspell jointly urged, created and celebrated, was a curious blend of anarchism (by which they seem to have meant individuals living intensely and acknowledging no authority), visionary socialism, and a mystical assertion of life against death. The significance of sex, the role of women, the liberating nature of art were discussed in small groups of enthusiasts and in the journals and newspapers to which they contributed, and which on occasion they edited. For all the naive political thrust there was an equally powerful lyrical pull. Certainly this was as true of Glaspell's novels as it was of George Cook's writing which subsumed his anarchist interests in a fascination with Greek theatre.

And for the first time in America it seemed possible that the theatre might actually play a role in a literary renaissance. Maurice Brown established the Chicago Little Theatre, which opened with Yeats's *On Baile's Strand*. Admittedly, it turned to a European rather than an American writer for its inauguration but the choice of play was not without significance to those wishing to see the emergence of a renewed national theatre. The arrival of the Irish Players the following year compounded this. When they reached Chicago, Cook and Glaspell were enthusiastic supporters, while a young man in New York, suffering from the effects of alcohol and tuberculosis and

depressed to the point of attempted suicide, paid repeated visits to the theatre when the Players arrived there. He, of course, was Eugene O'Neill.

The main thrust of the renaissance was clearly poetic, with the appearance of Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay and Edna St Vincent Millay, but the theatre began to exert a fascination which it had hardly commanded before – a concern reflected by the publication, also in 1912, of Gordon Craig's book on the theatre. Cook's enthusiasm for the Greek theatre was strengthened by Maurice Brown's production of Euripides' *The Trojan Women* and it was by no means an eccentric concern. Craig was also fascinated by the achievement of classical tragedy, while Isadora Duncan's idiosyncratic version of Greek dance had a surprisingly direct influence on Russian ballet, helping to liberate it from its heavy classical formality.

But for all the strength of the Chicago art scene, New York still exerted a powerful lure; and Dell, Cook and Glaspell all moved there, joining the new colony of artists and writers then establishing themselves in Greenwich Village. Although their experiments took different forms, there was a sense of community in their endeavours, a sense which chimed with Cooke's desire for an organic society led by its artists. The world of the arts became a paradigm for social action. As Susan Glaspell herself explained:

We were supposed to be a sort of 'special' group – radical, wild. Bohemians, we have even been called. But it seems to me we were particularly simple people, who sought to arrange life for the things we wanted to do, needing each other as protection against complexities, yet living as we did because of an instinct for the old, old things, to have a garden, and neighbors, to keep up the fire and let the cat in at night. . . . Most of us were from families who had other ideas – who wanted to make money, played bridge, voted the republican ticket, went to church, thinking one should be like everyone else. And so, drawn together by the things we really were, we were as a new family.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps, as Nick Carraway says at the end of *The Great Gatsby*, theirs had been a story of the West after all. For the revolt against contemporary American values was waged in the name of older American values, and when Cook and Glaspell formed the Provincetown Players in 1915 it was with a determination that they would stage American plays. And, as Arthur Waterman has pointed out, though they regarded themselves as socialists they never espoused pacifism or a fashionable anarchism during the First World War – though they did stage Edna St Vincent Millay's anti-war play, *Aria da Capo*.

Relations were not as cosy as Susan Glaspell's account would suggest; indeed Greenwich Village was composed of a number of overlapping groups who believed rather different things. Arnold Goldman has identified the elements which went to make up what he calls the culture of the Provincetown Players in a fascinating article in the *Journal of American Studies*. As he



reminds us, there were those like Hutchins Hapgood who shared Cook and Glaspell's impatience with current convention and combined this with a visionary outlook. From the year 1911 Hapgood began to spend the summer at Provincetown, and was soon the nucleus for a group of summer expatriates in retreat from the heat of New York. But in the summer of 1914 they were joined by what Hapgood called 'the extreme left wing of the Socialists, the females militantly revolutionary about sex-freedom'.<sup>13</sup> And to these – people like John Reed and Louise Bryant to whom Reed was pointedly not married – were added the aesthetes of Mabel Dodge's salon. But one thing did unite them – a more or less profound sense that a particular model of aesthetic and moral development had been disrupted, that just as classic liberal principles were inadequate to describe their sense of a world no longer susceptible to Jeffersonian idealism, and of a human sensibility more anarchically various than such a paradigm suggested, so a simple art of surfaces could not hope to describe a human or environmental reality which operated behind conscious and unconscious concealments. The outbreak of war in Europe certainly strengthened these convictions but it did not create them.

The experimental theatre movement, which had produced the Théâtre Libre in Paris in 1887, the Freie Bühne in Berlin in 1889, the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898 and the Abbey Theatre in 1904, was a considerable time in reaching America. The cultural lag in theatre was greater than in the novel, perhaps because the theatre is a collaborative exercise that requires a concerted decision as to the acceptability of the new. But Maurice Brown had founded his theatre in Chicago, and in 1912 the New York Stage Company was founded. A little later the Liberal Club on Macdougall Street, run by Henrietta Rudman, a meeting-place for writers, socialists and university people, formed its own drama group which specialised in skits satirising the beliefs and commitments of its own members. Floyd Dell himself wrote a number of them (including *The Perfect Husband*, *What Eight Million Women Want* and *The Idealist*) acting as his own stage designer and scene painter. In 1914 what were to become the Washington Square Players performed their first play. Lawrence Langner and Max Eastman's wife, Ida Rauh, were dissuaded from renting a theatre by Albert and Charles Boni who offered their own bookshop, which adjoined the Liberal Club, for their first performance. With the aid of Robert Edmond Jones, who had studied in Europe under Max Reinhardt, a makeshift acting space was devised and Lord Dunsany's *The Glittering Gate* became the somewhat curious inaugural production. In February 1915 they acquired the Bandbox Theatre and staged their first season, consisting of plays by Langner, Edward Goodman, Maurice Maeterlinck, John Reed and Philip Moeller, and Leonid Andreyev. The ideological stance was not consistent but they were clear as to the identity of the enemy which was the



commercially oriented, artificial and vapid world of Broadway, and beyond that, rather less clearly, the social system that created it.

One other experiment in theatre should perhaps be mentioned. The Neighborhood Playhouse, established in 1912, grew out of the activities of the Henry Street Settlement. This had been established in 1890 to deal with the influx of immigrants and the social problems of the area. Urged to form a drama group, Alice Lewisohn Crowley decided to launch it with a production of *The Shepherd*, a play by Olive Tilform Dorgon, about the revolutionary movement in Russia. Assisted by Agnes Morgan, a former member of George Pierce Baker's Workshop 47, she immediately began planning a purpose-built theatre. But for all their interest in recent developments in European production theory and stage design, they were not interested in a revived American theatre. Indeed, their second production was Galsworthy's *The Silver Box*. They were concerned with serving a community. The audience they sought was not that which attracted Floyd Dell or Lawrence Langner. But it was an eclectic theatre, drawing on Noh drama and Hindu plays as well as work by Leonid Andreyev, Arnold Bennett, Harley Granville-Barker, George Bernard Shaw and Scholem Asch. Indeed it also produced Susan Glaspell's *The People* and Eugene O'Neill's *The First Man*. But its real significance lay in the presumption that theatre could play a role in uniting the heterogeneous elements of an immigrant community, that the theatre spoke a language which was relevant to people trying to read the code of American society and looking for a reflection of their own uncertain apprehension of the real.

Though George 'Jig' Cook was himself involved in the first performance of what were to become the Washington Square Players, they were not experimental enough for him nor were they sufficiently interested in fostering native talent. And as evidence of that they turned down *Suppressed Desires*, a satire on the current vogue for Freud among the sophisticated, which Cook and Glaspell had written together. For Cook that was provocation enough. Accordingly, in the summer of 1915, in the Hapgood's house, they staged the play themselves, along with *Constancy*, a brief play by Neith Boyce (Hapgood's wife) which was based on the love affair between John Reed and Mabel Dodge. Once again Robert Edmond Jones designed the simple set. This was the beginning of the Provincetown Players and, in effect, the beginning of modern American drama. Pleased with their success, they repeated the plays together with two more, *Change Your Style* by Cook and *Contemporaries* by Wilbur Steele, in an old wharf at Provincetown owned by Mary Vorse.

For George Cook naturalism was no answer to the deficiencies of theatre