



american
avant-garde theatre
: a history

arnold aronson

American Avant-garde Theatre

A history

Arnold Aronson



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American Avant-garde Theatre

This stunning contribution to the field of theatre history is the first in-depth look at avant-garde theatre in the United States from the early 1950s to the 1990s. *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History* offers a definition of the avant-garde, and looks at its origins and theoretical foundations by examining:

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- John Cage
- the Beat writers
- avant-garde cinema
- abstract expressionism
- minimalism

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Arnold Aronson is Professor of Theatre at Columbia University. He is author of *American Set Design* and *The History and Theory of Environmental Scenography*, and he served as editor of *Theatre Design and Technology* from 1978 to 1988.

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American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History

Arnold Aronson

For Isaac

Preface

In his famous 1939 essay on avant-garde and kitsch, an essay that some have suggested signaled the start of the American avant-garde,¹ art critic Clement Greenberg marveled at a contemporary Western culture that could produce simultaneously T.S. Eliot and Tin Pan Alley lyricist Eddie Guest, or the art of Georges Braque and *Saturday Evening Post* covers. "What perspective of culture," he wondered, "is large enough to enable us to situate them in an enlightening relation to each other?"² We might marvel similarly at the theatrical culture of the 1950s. If Greenberg was amazed at the seeming contradictions and disparities within the broad scope of Western society – even though high and low art have dwelt in an almost nurturing symbiosis throughout history – what are we to make of the relatively narrow discipline of American theatre, which, within a single decade, could give birth to *My Fair Lady* and *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, *Gypsy* and *The Marrying Maiden*, or *Picnic* and the John Cage performance piece at Black Mountain College? Having acknowledged that they are all species of theatre in that they involve performers, discrete performance spaces, temporal structures, scenic design, props, costumes, and scripts of some sort, it is nonetheless hard to comprehend them as part of the same art form, let alone to envision them emerging from the same culture.

In those societies that have spawned organized forms of theatre, performance can generally be divided into three broad categories:

- All societies have had a theatre of popular entertainment – the theatre of the marketplace and music halls, which combined physical virtuosity, individual talent, and comic invention.
- Most societies have had some version of bourgeois entertainment, such as boulevard theatre or the West End – the mainstream

narrative theatre that reflected, reinforced, and sometimes shaped societal attitudes and popular tastes.

- And some cultures have developed elitist theatres such as masques and other court entertainments – rarefied forms of performance available to limited segments of the populace and whose understanding and appreciation required some degree of training or special knowledge.

In some periods, such as Elizabethan England, the forms have intertwined and overlapped. The late twentieth-century United States contained all three forms: the popular theatre was subsumed by television; bourgeois theatre existed on Broadway, Off Broadway, and to an extent in the movies; and the elitist theatre was represented by the avant-garde.

Because the avant-garde often contains within itself the intentionally shocking and provocative, and because – by definition – it constitutes an attack upon the established practices of mainstream culture and society, it has been regarded with suspicion and has often been poorly understood. Somewhat like the term “modern art,” “avant-garde” has been applied indiscriminately, almost as an epithet, to a wide range of performance that falls outside the boundaries of naturalism or realism – that is, narrative, psychological, melodramatic theatre. It is applied to almost any form of performance that is in some way confusing, difficult, or aesthetically displeasing by some received standard of Western culture. The absurdity of such an approach can be seen in the extreme in critic Louis Kronenberger’s description of the 1952 musical *Wish You Were Here* as “a wistful comedy of manners ... in the bold *avant-garde* manner of David Belasco.” This “manner,” according to Kronenberger, consisted of “a real swimming pool, real hot dogs, and what appeared to be real rain.”³ If the André Antoine–David Belasco school of naturalism – a more than sixty-year-old tradition by the time of Kronenberger’s review – could be labeled as “avant-garde,” then any useful definition of the term will be problematic.

I have proposed a narrower definition in the following pages and have attempted to show the origins, development, and ultimate decline of the very vital American avant-garde theatre in the decades following World War II. Although the avant-garde theatre – both broadly and narrowly defined – has received a great deal of critical attention, there have been surprisingly few books devoted to a larger overview of the phenomenon. This book is an attempt to provide that overview and place the avant-garde within a critical context. Even so, this book is

not a comprehensive study of American avant-garde theatre. I have had to make some difficult choices. Some groups and individuals who are mentioned here only in passing or not at all – Bread and Puppet Theatre, Mabou Mines, Playhouse of the Ridiculous and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, Martha Clarke, and Meredith Monk; a whole host of Happening and Fluxus artists, including Red Grooms, Robert Whitman, Dick Higgins, Claes Oldenburg, George Maciunas, and Yoko Ono; California groups including Soon 3, Snake Theatre, San Francisco Mime Troupe, El Teatro Campesino; postmodern dancers Ann Halprin, Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, David Gordon, and others; and performance artists Eleanor Antin, Suzanne Lacy, and others too numerous to list – were significant contributors to the ongoing development of the avant-garde and deserve greater attention. I have chosen to focus on those who I felt broke new ground or had the greatest impact on the evolution of the avant-garde. For that reason, I have often concentrated on the early work of these artists rather than later developments. Someone constructing a different narrative might make other choices.

I have also tried to strike a balance between description and explication. All theatre is a performative medium, a visual medium; but in much of the avant-garde theatre performative and visual elements are foregrounded. Photos or fragments of a script alone cannot convey the impact or meaning of a production. Therefore, I have tried to describe what an audience saw on the stage. In many cases I have turned to contemporary observers or the participants themselves to capture a sense of the sometimes electrifying, sometimes shocking, almost always revelatory impact of these works in their initial presentations. I hope that it will provide at least a hint of the excitement for those who were not there.

Acknowledgments

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avant-garde theatre were done under his guidance in the pages of *The Drama Review*. Michael read an early outline of this book, and his comments and criticisms helped to shape the current results. I regret that I did not complete this work before his death.

Finally, I must thank my wife, Ruth Bayard Smith, who was my tireless editor and sounding board and who patiently read each draft while providing unstinting encouragement, and whose love and support made this book possible.

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Chapter I

Origins of the avant-garde

Actually America has an intellectual climate suitable for radical experimentation. We are, as Gertrude Stein said, the oldest country of the twentieth century.

John Cage¹

To some observers, the postwar era in American theatre was a period of steady and ineluctable decline. If the American theatre is equated with Broadway – and it was and still is for many commentators and audiences – then statistically at least, it could be argued that the theatre *was* in fact deteriorating at a fairly precipitous pace. The number of new productions decreased with each season, the range of theatre produced narrowed alarmingly, the financial burdens grew more overwhelming, and audiences stayed home to watch television. But if one shifted one's focus away from Broadway (and its low-budget clone, Off Broadway), it became clear that the theatre was not dying at all. What was in decline was an institution – a particular means of creating and producing theatre – and the style of theatre it generated. In fact, American theatre was heading into one of the most vibrant, creative, and productive periods in its history. An evolutionary process was occurring, and the American theatre was transforming into something different from what it had ever been, something that reflected the changing needs of artists and audiences alike and that could adapt more readily to a new world.

In the roughly thirty-year period from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s, there was an eruption of theatrical activity in the United States that would ultimately reshape every aspect of performance and have significant influences both at home and abroad. The alternatives to Broadway were bursting with energy, talent, and new ideas. The myth of declining theatrical activity was easily belied by looking at the weekly

theatre listings of the time, especially in a newspaper such as the then counterculture *Village Voice*. By the late 1960s, on any given weekend in New York, it was possible to choose from over 250 events covering the whole range and gamut of theatre. The most significant of these performances were forging new paths in acting, directing, staging, and design, and were redefining the very notion of theatre. In the words of critic Stanley Kauffmann, "there was a sense of bursting creativity, of things rushing into life. Some cheery souls even called it a new Elizabethan age."² Never before in American theatre history had the foundations of the art been examined so minutely, been so challenged, and been so radically altered. The driving force at the center of this activity was the *avant-garde*.

The concept of an avant-garde was something new in American theatre. The European theatre (and art, music, and literature) had experienced waves of avant-garde activity since the emergence of symbolism in the 1880s, but there was no equivalent in the United States. Granted, the American theatre had experienced its own rebellions since the early years of the twentieth century, notably in the Little or Art Theatre movement, which flourished in the teens and twenties, introduced new European works to American audiences and gave birth to Eugene O'Neill and the New Stagecraft, and again in the alternative theatre of the 1930s, which included agitprop performance and the Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspapers as well as the political dramas of the Theatre Union, which was among the first to produce Bertolt Brecht in America. And it is true that by the second decade of the twentieth century American playwrights were beginning to incorporate avant-garde elements from European models: aspects of symbolism, expressionism, and surrealism found their way into the plays of Zona Gale, Susan Glaspell, Alfred Kreymborg, John Howard Lawson, Elmer Rice, and, of course, O'Neill, and would emerge in more sophisticated forms later in the century in the works of William Saroyan, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and others who employed Strindberg-like inner landscapes, dream sequences, flashbacks, poetic language, lyric realism, symbolic settings, and archetypal characters. But all these writers continued to work within a basically realistic framework and psychological character structure. Themes that would have been easily recognizable to Ibsen – questions of morality, social responsibility, the individual versus society at large, and familial relationships – remained clear and dominant; the exploration and pursuit of the elusive American dream informed most of these plays or lurked just below the surface. Avant-garde elements could be found *within*

the new plays, not as a *basis* for creating the plays. The fundamental building blocks of a radical European avant-garde became mere stylistic conceits in the hands of most American playwrights. As a result, the works by these playwrights remained within the establishment; Broadway welcomed every new generation and easily absorbed what changes or permutations each had to offer.

The general thrust and tenor of pre-World War II experimental theatre was summed up by Lee Strasberg, one of the founders of the Group Theatre and later head of the Actors Studio. Writing in 1962, Strasberg declared that

the theatre generation after the First World War felt itself to be part of a new dream which it hoped would lead to a new theatre. It was not to be words, scenery, and acting as separate elements uniting into a somewhat mechanical entity. It was to be the word transfigured from its purely logical and literary meaning on a page by the living presence of the actor whose creation of the moment the event, the situation, brought out or added dramatic meaning to the word.³

Although he went on to cite Edward Gordon Craig and “the art of the theatre,” Strasberg saw the problem not with the existing drama *per se* but with contemporary production practices. “This dream was shattered ...,” he continued, “by the fact that the central element for the creation of the art of the theatre – a coherent unified company of actors with artistic leadership to express its vision of the dramatist’s intention – was missing.”⁴ Strasberg was advocating neither a new form of theatre nor a radically new dramatic content; he was simply advocating the need for art to take precedence over commerce.

What began to emerge in the 1950s, however, was something quite different. There was a bold spirit of experimentation – a rebellion against the mainstream commercial system and the utter rejection of the *status quo*. What happened in the postwar era was the evolution of a theatre diametrically opposed to the conventions of dramatic practice common in the West since the Renaissance; it was an approach that rejected the beliefs and expectations of traditional audiences and radically altered both the aesthetic and organizational basis upon which performance was created. And because the traditional theatre provided little in the way of precedent, this new theatre drew heavily upon iconoclastic movements within the plastic arts, with the result that traditional barriers between theatre, dance, music, and art began to crumble.