

CONTEMPORARY
DRAMATISTS

CONTEMPORARY DRAMATISTS

SECOND EDITION

WITH A PREFACE BY
RUBY COHN

EDITOR
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PREFACE

This volume contains over three hundred entries for contemporary dramatists writing in English, thousands of miles apart. It might seem then that English drama is alive and well, but for that to be true, audiences should embrace drama. Do they? I have seen estimates ranging from one per cent of the population (of America) to five per cent (of England) who *ever* attend the theatre, but *regular* attendance thins down to decimals of decimals. Will three hundred dramatists continue to write for a diminishing audience?

How different from the burgeoning drama of the Elizabethans. And yet Burbage and Henslowe may also have worried about theatre attendance. No language seems to sport more than one great age of drama, and other periods of English language drama have looked pale by contrast with the Elizabethan. In later times English theatre came to be a fabulous invalid, enjoying its several prognoses, diagnoses, and forecasts of doom. Nevertheless I venture into these medical metaphors, not because our contemporary drama is less skillful than that of any age since the Elizabethan, nor even less plentiful. But because our drama, like that of no other period, has to survive in the noxious atmosphere of the mass media. Playwrights can defy the media, sidestep them, try to ignore them, or, as more often happens, use dramatic form as an entree into the media, notably films and television.

In English-speaking countries, with their meagre theatre subsidies and their major technical resources, drama abounds on film and television. (Dublin's Abbey Theatre in 1922 became the first nationally subsidized theatre in the English language, whereas the subsidized Comédie Française dates from 1680.) If today's writer is inadequately nurtured by theatre or publisher, he can turn to the media. But few media graduates have contributed significant dramas to live theatre. Mass media drama tends to appeal to the most facile reactions of an audience, and yet the techniques of the media can broaden the palette of the stage playwright. Since writing the Preface to the first edition of *Contemporary Dramatists*, I have become aware of media writers who return sporadically but significantly to the stage and of Heathcote Williams' *AC/DC* which grounds a frenzied strength in the weaknesses of a media civilization. The theatre has always drawn upon other arts, crafts, and technologies, and it may arrive at a *modus vivendi* with the media.

Perhaps the *drama* is dying in the form we have known for some four hundred years — a fairly inflexible prompt copy which is eventually printed. However, the *theatre* today — with or without promptbook — must recognize its uniqueness in that live actors play before live audiences. Each actor has a single instrument, the body that includes the voice. And for all the experimentation with non-verbal sounds, the voice has recourse to words, which are the province of the dramatist.

English drama is coeval with the printing press, and response to drama has for centuries been cumulative, as a reader-spectator travels from stage to page and, all the more receptive, to stage again. This itinerary may be less frequent for today's spectators. Contemporary stage dialogue may include primitive non-verbal sounds and electronic post-verbal devices, but new dramas of verbal distinction are nevertheless being written and played. As long as that continues, in the full awareness of live theatre as a minority art, drama will endure.

Prognosis pronounced, whom do we actually have in a volume on contemporary dramatists writing in English? Since "contemporary" has been defined (for this volume) as biologically alive, we find curious neighbors. Some dramatists have spent successful years appealing to middle-class entertainment-seekers; others have tried to entertain while supporting worthy causes or baring social problems. As has been true for four hundred years, certain plays were written to provide scope for the special talents of a particular actor. None of this sounds contemporary in an age when we take it for granted that we will fly faster than sound.

I have seen many, many plays, and many kinds of plays in nearly forty years of theatre-

going. It seems only yesterday that I saw *The Iceman Cometh* in a production advised by Eugene O'Neill. (It was actually 1946). Or *The Apple Cart*, crackling wittily, only shortly after Bernard Shaw's witticisms had ceased to crackle. (It was actually 1953.) But yesterday is far away in contemporary theatre, so that Shaw and O'Neill belong to another age and another theatre language. And since this is true of master-playwrights, it is all the truer for their lesser colleagues. Even living playwrights are dead in today's theatre: a windy would-be Elizabethan, a once angry young man turned surly, a once fragile young lyricist turned coy, a reacher for tragedy resigned to routine comedy, or various squatters in the Abbey Theatre which nearly exploded under the impact of three different meteors. Such dramatists are less contemporary than Euripides or Shakespeare, not to mention John Whiting and Joe Orton, who died in mid-career. For there is no necessary convergence between biological and artistic life. I hope all playwrights live to be a hundred, but I cannot help exclaiming at some of the entries in this volume: "Is he still alive?"!

Since mid-century, we have seen specimens of English language theatre labelled epic, angry, kitchen sink, absurd, ridiculous, radical, third world, puppet, guerilla, fact, nude, improvisational, perspectivist, alternative—all soon exploited by the mass media. It is small wonder that many of the contemporary dramatists in this volume seem either uncontemporary or undramatic, regardless of chronology or biology.

To shift abruptly to a positive note, we have among contemporary dramatists one giant, Samuel Beckett, who writes sometimes in English, sometimes in French, always in his own distinctive dramatic idiom. Samuel Beckett's plays are enduring masterpieces. They are also a terminus to the Western dramatic tradition, dissecting the parts of a play so that they can never again articulate innocently. Through the tension of play, Beckett probes the bases of Western culture — faith, reason, friendship, family. Through the skills of play, Beckett summarizes human action — word and pause, gesture and stillness, motion rising from emotion. Beckett's most celebrated play, *Waiting for Godot*, is striking in its stage presence. As Brecht called attention to the theatre as theatre, Beckett calls attention to the play as play. Often pitched as polar opposites, Brecht and Beckett both reacted against the dominant illusionist drama of their time and ours, so that it is no longer so dominant. In spite of their differences, Beckett resembles Brecht in precision of language at the textural level, and in integration of verbal rhythms into an original scenic whole.

Relentlessly digging his own way, Beckett has inspired two English language playwrights, one on each side of the Atlantic, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee. From Beckett both younger dramatists have learned to convey the presence of stage action, without before or after, exposition or resolution. Pinter capitalizes on the unverifiability of a past, and Albee fits the past obliquely into the stage present. Both playwrights create the stage present through carefully crafted dialogue. Their characters speak in stylized patterns that draw upon colloquial phrases of contemporary speech. Unlike the realists with whom they are sometimes confused, they use repetition and cross-talk to probe beneath or beyond surface reality.

In their rejection of realism, other contemporary dramatists resemble Pinter and Albee. Since no stage designer can compete with the camera in photographic fidelity to surface appearance, many contemporary dramatists don't ask them to try. Departures from realism can be as diversified as John Arden's Brechtian songs in *The Ballygombeen Bequest*, Edward Bond's Ghost in *Lear*, the penitential geometry of Kenneth Brown's *Brig*, the seasonal symbolism of Ed Bullins' *In the Wine Time*, the eternal sparring in Irene Fornés' *Tango Palace*, the opportunity for improvisation in Paul Foster's *Tom Paine*, the drug metaphor in Jack Gelber's *Connection*, the mythic dimension in LeRoi Jones' *Dutchman*, the repetitive patterns of American history in Robert Lowell's *Old Glory*, the fadeout and spotlight of David Mercer's *After Haggerty*, the documentary absurdism of James Saunders' *Next Time I'll Sing to You*, the stretch toward Artaud in Peter Shaffer's *Royal Hunt of the Sun*, the manic rock monologues of Sam Shepard's *Tooth of Crime*, the tribal magic of Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, the play organically within the play in Patrick White's *Ham Funeral*. I am not saying that these plays are of equal quality, but I am saying that forays into non-realistic modes provide richer possibilities of theatricalizing the profundities of contemporary

experience.

Provided that audiences come to see the plays.

* * *

This volume on *Contemporary Dramatists* is a companion to volumes on *Contemporary Poets* and *Contemporary Novelists*. My alarm about the state of the drama is matched by various alarms about the state of the novel or of lyric poetry. All literary genres are endangered by the mass media because, as any literate teacher knows, students read less today and less perceptively than they did a decade ago. People rarely acquire a reading habit after their student days, and one needn't swallow McLuhan whole to realize that films and television have displaced reading as a pastime. The medium may not be the message, but it has been pounding away at contemporary culture. The drama is particularly vulnerable because it suffers from the general erosion of reading habits *and* from direct competition of media drama.

Thus, *Contemporary Dramatists*, in contrast to *Poets* and *Novelists*, requires elucidation through Appendices. Three of this volume's six appendices document forms of drama on the media — film, radio and television. The other three appendices discuss live theatre, but musical libretto is a form in which the power of language is diluted into the pleasure of melody. Groups and Happenings both treat theatre as a medium in which the living actor blends body and voice to confront an audience. The appendices on Groups and Happenings highlight contemporary bifurcation of theatre and drama.

Though Happenings and counter-culture Groups are relatively new forms of theatre, they quite rightly belong in different rubrics. However, they share a few attitudes: both react against traditional theatre architecture and choose different spaces for performance. To different degrees and in different ways, they react against polished professionalism in the arts. They desire more intimate relationships between actor and audience, valuing spontaneity. Both seek to arouse new kinds of perception, and both de-emphasize language. Though Happenings and Group members see considerable overlap between art and life, they differ in their views of art and life. Group members tend to reject the various power packs of modern industrial society, favoring smaller ententes. Happenings tend to believe that all life is theatrical but that one has to see its stageability, which is enhanced by such techniques as slides, films, light shows, laser beams, Moog synthesizers, telephone switchboards, electrical control panels, and the mass media.

The word "happening" suggests chance — "It just happened" — but most happenings and events are prepared before chance is allowed to play its role. Developed mainly by visual craftsmen (Jim Dine, Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg), Happenings were also influenced by John Cage's experiments with chance and silence. Coordinating people as part of plastic content, Happenings seek to elicit kinesthetic participation and response. As practitioners of music and the visual arts move increasingly into sophisticated technology, so Happenings have acquired skill in "mixed means," and the mixture is itself a form of non-utilitarian technical invention. Only occasionally are words one of the means to be mixed.

Ted Shank has traced Theatre Collective (or Group) ancestry to Artaud by way of the Living Theatre, which differs from Happenings in its pride in makeshift means. Many Groups have accepted Artaud's dictum, "No more masterpieces!" and they sometimes imply that they want no more masters either. As Artaud was inspired by the Balinese dances, New Theatre Groups attempt pre-theatre forms of tribal ritual, with accompanying incantation. For them as for Artaud and Stanislavski, the essence of theatre resides in the actor's body. Like these innovators, many new Groups embrace theatre in a missionary spirit, but their conversions tend to be more direct and sometimes violent.

Ted Shank suggest that New Theatre Groups are part of a counter-culture, but he does not suggest (as I do) that the media are greedily absorbing the counter-culture into mass culture; I believe the word is co-optation. Most Groups, aware of co-optation as a danger, resist a mass production society with its mass-produced attitudes. Certain Groups woo a specially designated audience — Blacks, women, Chicanos, homosexuals, emergent nationalities. But

other Groups of this almost worldwide trend are unspecialized, and their work is often unpolished. Their productions may take the form of open rehearsals or of works in progress. Their performances may incorporate aspects of the actors' lives, or of audience biographies. Each Group member may try his hand at several of the theatre arts, sometimes mastering none. Performances always reflect the *raison d'être* of the Group.

In few cases is the *raison d'être* the exploration of a dramatic text as written, but Group attitudes towards texts vary. The Open Space, Freehold, and Performance Groups have worked variations upon well-known dramas. Playwrights – Jean-Claude van Itallie, Megan Terry, Susan Yankowitz – have participated in Open Theatre exercises, and produced scripts based on group dynamics. Several Groups evolve scripts collectively. The Performance Group has experimented with non-verbal sound, Peter Brook's International Company has invented a language, the Open Theatre has experimented with sign language. In most Group Performances, words are subordinated to movement. I have yet to see an English-speaking Group that approaches the skill of the Polish Laboratory Theatre or Danish Odin Teatret, though my lack of Polish and Danish may have compelled by closer focus on movement.

Jerzy Grotowski, Director of the Polish Laboratory Theatre, and one of the tutelary forces of the counter-culture Groups, has gathered his several essays under the title *Towards a Poor Theatre*. I respect what he means — rejection of all decorative accoutrements that distract from the actor. But audiences have wondered whether poor theatres need to be poor in craft.

The Living Theatre has made a mystique of the rough and spontaneous. Yet three of its widely toured productions did not improvise words, and the fourth did so only minimally. (Several spectators protested in Berkeley at the inflexibility of the *Paradise Now* chant: "I'm not allowed to smoke marijuana" when members of the audience had been tear-gassed that afternoon.) The Living Theatre uses words, and the words are commonplace. In general, undistinguished language proliferates in the New Theatre Groups. Perhaps it is paradoxical to ask for linguistic distinction, for colloquial elegance, from Groups committed to erode distinction and elegance.

But I ask it — in part because I admire the dedication of these Groups, in part because I think they herald the theatre of the problematic future, in which stars will be dissolved into sustained ensembles. Such solution (rather than dissolution) is evident in high quality performances of several subsidized Groups within the English establishment culture — Royal Shakespeare, Royal Court, Old Vic, Young Vic — which are hospitable to contemporary drama. In the United States, counter-culture drama has been blended with a verbal-gestural harmony in the now defunct Open Theatre, while the San Francisco Mime Troupe has achieved its own idiom of social caricature. I can only hope in ignorance about theatre groups in Canada, Australia, Africa.

The separation of popular theatre from a drama of distinctive language is not new. In the nineteenth century the mass media were popular theatre pieces of Boucicault, Kotzebue, Pixérécourt, and a host of others whose plays are fortunately lost, while Büchner went unperformed, and *Lorenzaccio* languished in mere print. At that time, too, there were spectacular mixed means — dogs, horses, floods, fires on stage. And there was body-worship, too, of the star. But serious exploration of human experience was channelled into fiction and poetry.

In our time, it is conceivable — if barely so — that such exploration will take place in the mass media. But only direct confrontation of actor and spectator can provide a totally personal interaction, and it is the personal that some of us need in theatre art. The Happeners have taught us to hone our perceptions, but what are we going to perceive with these sensitized instruments? The New Groups have emphasized the expressive potential of actors, but how can such potential be meaningfully actualized? English-speaking peoples have been highly verbal, and their dramas — on stage and page — have reflected human experience deeply and precisely. Now that the Poor Theatre has been enriched by painters, musicians, and even media technicians can we hope to hail the playwright?

RUBY COHN

EDITOR'S NOTE

The selection of dramatists included in this book is based upon the recommendations of the advisers listed on page xiii.

The entry for each dramatist consists of a biography, a full bibliography, a comment by the dramatist on his plays if he chose to make one, and a signed critical essay on his work.

Only those critical studies recommended by the entrant have been listed. British and United States editions of all books have been listed; other editions are listed only if they are the first editions. Data for plays first published in a magazine or anthology is not given if they have been later published as a separate book or in a collection of the author; acting editions of the plays are not listed unless there is no trade edition. Librettos are listed among the plays. The first production, first productions in both Great Britain and the United States, as well as subsequent productions in London and New York, if different, are listed. Reprints and revivals are not. Theatrical activities – acting and directing – have been summarized when the entrant requested it.

An appendix of entries has been included for some seven dramatists who have died since the 1950's but whose reputations are essentially contemporary. There is a Title Index of all plays (including screen, radio, and television plays) by the entrants, including those in the Supplement.

We would like to thank the entrants and contributors for their patience and cooperation in helping us compile this book.

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