

From
CLASS to CASTE
in American Drama

Political and Social Themes
Since the 1930s

RICHARD G. SCHARINE

*Contributions in
Drama and Theatre Studies, Number 32*



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Introduction

Trent: Why a play . . .

Stone: Because the theater, sir, alone among the arts, engages in equal measure, the emotion and the intellect. And both must be touched here, if we are to survive.¹

—*The End of the World*, by Arthur Kopit

I am convinced that fine art is the subtlest, the most seductive, the most effective means of propaganda in the world . . . because it works by exhibiting examples of personal conduct made intelligible and moving to crowds of unobservant, unreflecting people to whom real life means nothing.²

—George Bernard Shaw

As its title implies, this book examines selected issues which shaped the development of the United States from the Depression to the AIDS crisis, as they were portrayed in selected American plays first produced between 1933 and 1985. It chronicles a dramatic concern with the mythos of American capital labor conflicts—conflicts which also affected and were affected by American problems of caste (social rank based on unalterable biological conditions, such as race, cultural ancestry, sex, and sexual orientation). In our contemporary United States, class and caste remain inextricably entwined.

From Class to Caste in American Drama, therefore, draws upon fifty years of American social and political history, as well as the history of the American theatre and American political theatre. Although the book begins by examining a number of American definitions of political theatre

and proposes a theory of how a political play is constructed, no attempt is made to chronicle the histories of political theatre or any politically oriented theatre companies, except as is required for the understanding of the dramas.

Political Theatre: Definition and Usage

All definitions of political theatre note its rhetorical nature, that is, its purpose is to persuade. As Eric Bentley put it in his keynote address to the Columbia/City University of New York "Political Theatre Today" conference in May 1985, "Clearly the bone of contention is propaganda."³ In *The Drama of Attack*, his analysis of American social drama of the 1930s, Sam Smiley describes didactic drama as emphasizing thought over plot and character.⁴ Discussing the same period in *Drama and Commitment*, Gerald Rabkin differentiates between ideological and aesthetic theatre.⁵

Yet, the purpose of all literature is rhetorical, in the attempt to convince us of the author's viewpoint. In *Feminist Drama: Definition and Critical Analysis*, Janet Brown cites Kenneth Burke as her authority for refusing to separate author message for artistry.⁶ Certainly, no author was more message-oriented than Mao Tse-tung, who said, "Works of art which lack artistic quality have no force, no matter how progressive they are politically."⁷ Similarly, works of art created without political intent can have political consequences. One of Jacques Ellul's three forms of propaganda is "integration propaganda . . . a self-producing propaganda that seeks to obtain stable behavior, to adapt the individual to his everyday life, reshape his thoughts and behavior in terms of the permanent social setting."⁸ Indeed, to be apolitical is a political act under certain circumstances. In the heyday of Soviet socialist realism, it was for "formalism" that Vsevolod Meyerhold spent his last days in Siberia.

To follow such reasoning to its logical end is to conclude that all art is political—a statement that is both true and a discussion closure. It might be more accurate to say any drama may be produced for a political purpose, but this requires an analysis of individual productions that is beyond the scope of this book. We will limit our analysis of political drama to written scripts whose political implications were inherent at the time of their composition.

This is by no means as narrow a limit as might be implied. Ellul's two other forms are agitation propaganda and dialectical propaganda. Agitation propaganda "is most often subversive . . . and has the stamp of opposition." It is led by a party seeking to destroy the government or the

established order."⁹ Its intention is to point out previously unrecognized or uncontested social problems. Dialectical propaganda is more subtle. "It is a theatre which attempts to demystify, by depicting separately, interactively, and always clearly, the basic elements which comprise a confused social or historical situation."¹⁰

It is agitation propaganda which is usually defined as political theatre. Caspar Nammes, whose 1948 *Politics in the American Drama* was a pioneer in American political theatre analysis, restricted his discussion to "plays directly dealing with such political subjects as candidates running for office, corruption in government, politics and specific political issues; plays based upon a political philosophy, such as Fascism, Nazism or Communism; [and] plays whose plots stem obviously from political situations."¹¹ Michael Kirby, in *A Formalist Theatre* (1987), is even more circumspect. His thesis is not in sympathy with political theatre which can only be described subjectively, that is, it has no unchangeable "formal" elements and depends entirely upon the intent of the playwright and/or the production and its effect upon the audience. "Theatre is political if it is concerned with the state or takes sides in politics. This allows us to define 'political theatre' in a way that distinguishes it from other kinds of theatre: it is a performance that is intentionally engaged in or consciously takes sides in politics."¹²

However, agitation propaganda theatre, as Professor Kirby admits, can also motivate and inspire. "It can give [believers] the feeling that they are not alone in their beliefs, that others are actually involved and pursuing the same goals."¹³ This is without doubt most true of the political theatre which involves caste. Indeed, it is at the point where "consciousness-raising" becomes cultural rather than issue-oriented that agitprop evolves into the demystification associated with dialectical propaganda.

The drama of all emergent social groups begins with group members describing their own experiences. Their discovery that the experiences are similar gives them validity both as individuals and as a social group. For example, playwright Megan Terry describes the empowering potential of women's consciousness-raising sessions: "One of the things feminist theatre can do is to explore the possibilities of what a woman could be like because we've had so many outlines and definitions forced on us." She defines feminist drama as any drama that gives women confidence by showing themselves to themselves free of imposed masculine standards.¹⁴ Substitute the words *black* and *Chicano* for *feminist*, and *white* for *masculine*, and the definition applies equally well to Ed Bullins's "black rituals" at Harlem's New Lafayette Theater and El Teatro

Campesino's *actos* performed on the picket lines during the Delano, California, grape strikes. Such actions lack political significance only if you regard the potential alteration of the nation's social, economic, and aesthetic life as apolitical.

In a caste theory of culture, one culture is the norm. All others deviate from it. The advantage of political theatre as a consciousness-raiser is its insistence that each group has its own norm—different from, but in no way inferior to, that of the dominant culture. In that way, the move of El Teatro Campesino from the agitprop *actos* of the Delano fields to its *corridos* and *mitos* of the seventies was a necessary political step if it was to provide an alternative rather than a reaction to gringo society. Similarly, the "Black Arts Movement" could see the necessity for "a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic . . . a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology."¹⁵

Finally, from the viewpoint of a personal cultural base, the unquestioned classics of dominant art may be examined as cultural artifacts whose close study may reveal the assumptions and tactics by which the dominant culture remains dominant. The feminist deconstruction of *The Oresteia* and of Shakespeare in Sue-Ellen Case's *Feminism and Theatre*¹⁶ is the critical counterpart to the dramatic demystification provided in the dialectical propaganda defined by Elull. Such a criticism is capable of taking up the questions asked by the French critic Hippolyte Taine in the nineteenth century: "Given a literature, a philosophy, a society, an art, a group of arts, what is the moral condition which produced it? What are the conditions of race, milieu, moment most fitted to produce this moral condition?"¹⁷

At its best, the purpose of political theatre is to answer Taine's questions, and with those answers to alter the moral condition described. The chance of achieving that alteration in a specific case is slim. As Carlos Fuentes says:

I do not believe that literature has an immediate, partisan role to play, but I do believe that literature is revolutionary and thus political in a deeper sense. Literature not only sustains a historical experience and continues a tradition. It also—through moral risk and formal experimentation and verbal humor—transforms the conservative horizon of the readers and helps liberate us all from the determinisms of prejudice, doctrinal rigidity, and barren repetition.¹⁸

Further, one could cite Tom Stoppard's comparison of the relative influences of South African playwright Athol Fugard and *Guardian* correspondent Adam Raphael, whose 1970s newspaper series prompted South African mine owners to raise wages:

The plain truth is that if you are angered or disgusted by a particular injustice of immorality, and you want to do something about it, *now, at once*, then you can hardly do worse than write a play about it. That's what art is bad at. But the less plain truth is that *without* that play and plays like it, without artists, the injustice will *never* be eradicated. In other words, because of Athol Fugard . . . *The Guardian* understood that the Raphael piece was worth leading the paper with, worth printing.¹⁹

Comparing Political Theatre with Traditional Theatre

For our purposes we will define political theatre as those plays showing public policy, laws, or unquestioned social codes unfairly and systematically threatening the existence or quality of human life. Classical tragedy, as Aristotle defined it, imitated the events of the real world in such a way as to show their inevitability. Its aim was to reconcile the spectator with his world by purging him of the tensions the world aroused in him. Worrying about what could not be changed was wasted effort. This philosophy, the German playwright/theorist Bertolt Brecht insisted 2,300 years later, served entirely to support the status quo. Augusto Boal, the Brazilian director and Brecht admirer, called the Aristotelian system "coercive."²⁰ Greek tragedy, for instance, shows the gods punishing those who violate the structure-supporting codes of religion (blasphemy toward the gods), society (betrayal of a host), and family (the harming of a blood relative). Such plays are integrationist propaganda.

Brecht, who spent the last thirty years of his life trying to perfect political drama, first called his theatre "epic," and later "dialectic." He suggested that the modern world could only be described to an audience in terms of its alterability. The actor's performance and the elements of staging do not aim to imitate real life, but attempt rather to show how real life works—an intellectual rather than an emotional experience. Fate (inevitably) is the product of social and economic realities, and thus is a historical (changeable) condition. Human behavior is created by historical conditions, and is a part of historical conditions. Dialectical theatre should so distance the audience that it may understand why something is happening, rather than share the feelings of those to whom it happens.²¹

In a political tragedy, the system is the antagonist. The trials faced by a good man because of the machinations of a bad man are melodramatic. The trials faced by any man (or Everyman) because of an unjust system, no matter how honestly administered, are political. In political tragedy, the social norm is basically antihuman (destructive to human beings instead of geared to their survival). In such plays, characters who are "good" are destroyed because the corruption in the system is too strong

for them to combat, or so accepted as to be invisible. At the same time, those who accept the values of the system are destroyed because the system shows no favorites and consumes its own.

Traditional comedy falls into two categories, romantic and judicious. Romantic comedy—from Shakespeare to Neil Simon to sitcom—is the more familiar form because it is less bound to a particular culture or time. It presumes the efficacy of the social norm, that is, society is basically good and the comic character (the one whom we laugh at or ridicule) is funny because he deviates from the norm of a society. The comic character pretends to be something other than what he is, or else fails to understand what the norm of society is, or why the norm is correct. Comedy reinforces the social norm by making the audience fear the laughter that accompanies deviation from it.

The basic premise of political theatre, on the other hand, is that the social norm or some part of it is in error. Therefore, in a political comedy, that erroneous norm will be laughed at in an attempt to convince the audience to bring it into line with real social needs. Called judicious comedy, this drama was evident in Aristophanes' attacks on the Peloponnesian War, corrupt Athenian officials, and the blasphemy he perceived in the rise of sophism. Its ancestors were the fertility rites that directed ridicule against those forces of nature and society which stood in the way of the human drive for pleasure and procreation.

If there is an inherent shortcoming in political comedy, it may lie in the nature of laughter itself, which traditionally has been a means of release in tense situations. The classic line with which Owen Wister's "Virginian" averted a gunfight, "Smile when you say that, pardner," is understood by any guerrilla theatre performer. Freud knew that every joke is a disguised attack, but the street performer knows that a joke may get his message across without risk of a broken head. The problem is that when tension is released, the need for taking action is often released with it. Playwright Peter Barnes notes that jokes are a way of accepting existing conditions: "If a man is doubled up with laughter, he can't very well change the injustices that are afflicting him. It seems to me that those received opinions about humour must be examined very coolly and intensely."²²

Structuring Political Theatre

Dramatic action in political theatre is naturally organized around an idea—the exposure of a societal flaw and the formulation of a plan of action to change it. Political theatre is not limited to a single type of plot.

Plays whose subjects are as diverse as the congressional pork-barreling in Maxwell Anderson's *Both Your Houses* and the AIDS crisis of William Hoffman's *As Is* still use the "well-made play" structure, itself older than Aristotle. In the opening scenes, the playwright sets up the situations and the desires and motivations of certain characters (who are in support of, in opposition to, or indifferent toward some aspect of the existing social system). Out of the conflicts between the characters' goals and their interrelationship with the existing situation, all later events develop. Attempts to surmount the obstacles make up the substance of the play, with each scene growing out of the last until a crisis is reached where either the supporter(s) of the system or the rebel(s) against it must triumph. That triumph is often measured by the movement of the indifferent, previously neutral, group of characters to a position of systemic opposition or support.

The "well-made play" is often politically effective because of its determinist structure—specific causes lead to specific results—and because of the audience's familiarity with the form. This familiarity, however, has inherent difficulties. The "well-made play" is synonymous with realism, which in television, film, and the theatre has concentrated on individual motivations rather than social causes. Playwright David Edgar sees this as the predicament in writing political plays for TV's large audience: "The countless other drama serials, series, and plays that are part of a television audience's experiential baggage will lead them to take an individual-psychological view of events if they are given any opportunity."²³

Still, the political message cannot become part of the "audience's experiential baggage" by refusing the openings available. Trevor Griffiths calls this procedure "strategic penetration," and Hal Foster has asserted that it is only sensible to practice "counterhegemonic and resistant" art wherever "the cultural is an arena in which active contestation is possible."²⁴

Nevertheless, a political message is often more likely to be perceived if the audience's expectations are altered. The most common method is to separate events into dramatically complete episodes. In the classic agitprop play, a symbolically representative character encounters the symbolic manifestation of a system in a single episode. Longer episodic dramas follow one of two forms. In the first, a central character undertakes a sort of picaresque pilgrimage in which he encounters various examples of a central flaw in society. Eventually, the character identifies the problem and acts against it—often unsuccessfully, leaving the audience disturbed and angry. Plays as different as Paul Green's *Johnny*

Johnson and Marsha Norman's *Getting Out* use this structure. Alternately, the protagonist does not recognize this problem, but thanks to his or her struggles, the audience does, and therefore is made responsible for doing something about it.

In the second type of episodic political theatre, different characters face different aspects of the same societal problem in a number of separate episodes. When they come to realize that their separate problems are part of the same problem, they unite together to fight, inviting the audience to join them. Examples in this book include the chronicle plays *In White America* by Martin Duberman and *Black Elk Speaks* by Christopher Sergel, and the granddaddy of them all, Clifford Odet's *Waiting for Lefty*.

The best of traditional theatre demands personal involvement in the form of emotional commitment. However, political theatre makes the assumption that if the audience knows what is really happening and what to do about it, they will extend their commitment to action. Erwin Piscator, certainly one of the most overtly political of theatre directors from the end of World War I to his death in 1966, attempted to physicalize this commitment by including his working-class audience in the historical scenes of mass revolution in plays like *Red Rumble* and *In Spite of Everything* in the mid-1920s. The Communist Party, to which he was devoted, was quick to point out his error to him:

In this formulation, the danger of "direct literature" and especially the theater comes clear: the stage and the experience communicated by it as a substitute for the collectivism lacking in reality, as a substitute for an experience of the masses which in the real world, in political life, does not happen to the revolutionary party. The stage becomes, as in the bourgeois theater, a place where the inadequacy felt in reality disappears, where the negative complexes can be swept out of sight. . . . It is the substitution for the real class struggle by the demonstration of a copy on the stage.²⁵

The purpose of a political play is not to reassure the audience, but to arouse it to complete *outside* of the theatre an action suggested in the play. In order to assure that fact, political theatre plays must tread the fine line of not ending happily (resulting in audience complacency), while seeing its goals as reachable (retarding audience despair).

The Political Theatre Character

The problem of the political dramatist has been to make systems and values theatrically moving. A drama's effectiveness depends upon the audience's identification with a character whose subsequent triumph or

defeat becomes the audience's own. Unfortunately, as we have already noted, the personalization of the viewer's reaction causes the character's circumstances to be perceived as individual and unique, fated in the view of Aristotle, neurotic in the view of Freud. It is difficult to see the character (and, by extension, ourselves) as the product of history, that is, politically changeable systems and values.

The political playwright frequently attempts to counter this difficulty by creating characters who are representative of large social groups. The dramatic ancestors of these "generic" characters are to be found in the symbolist plays of August Strindberg, in the expressionists, and, going back to the Middle Ages, in the "Mankind" and "Everyman" of the morality plays. Paul Green's Johnny Johnson carries the name most found among American World War I soldiers. Angus Buttonkooper, the Little Man in search of a home in *One-Third of a Nation*, was already familiar to Federal Theatre audiences from a previous "Living Newspaper," *Power*. The Vietnam-shattered family of David Rabe's *Sticks and Bones* bore the inferences of having the names associated with one of television's most beloved sitcoms: Ozzie, Harriet, David, and Ricky. The antagonists (those associated with the system's error) are no less generic than the protagonists. Harry Fatt is the aptly named "capitalist pig" in *Waiting for Lefty*, while those charged with brainwashing the minds and souls of blacks in *The Death of Malcolm X* are identifiable by Uncle Sam suits and other symbols of Western white culture.

Progress in political dramas can often be measured by the movement of neutral characters to a point of commitment. Fanny and David in Lillian Hellman's *Watch on the Rhine* learn that fascism cannot be appeased and join with Kurt Muller to oppose it. Bella, Honey, and Cousin Roy find that racism cannot be quietly ignored in *Deep Are the Roots*, and find themselves taking a reluctant stand. The white man who comforts a Little Rock black girl at the conclusion of *In White America* has discovered the link between her and his own fifteen-year-old daughter.

In the earlier plays, the result of this movement from neutrality to commitment is the creation of the collective hero, who has the power to oppose a system which would crush individuals, for example, the strike committee (and the audience) in *Waiting for Lefty*, the tenement dwellers in *One-Third of a Nation* who plan "to keep on hollering until they admit in Washington it's just as important to keep a man alive as it is to kill him," and so on.

In drama where caste is a factor, however, unity becomes the goal. Marianne Van Kerhoven of Brussels University has noted three distinct

stages in political theatre since the 1960s: (a) the attempt to change society, (b) the attempt to discover group identity, and (c) the attempt to maintain that identity.²⁶ It is an evolutionary pattern which tells much about the magnitude of the problem ahead. In *As Is*, the sense of self-acceptance that Rich achieves because of the support of his family and loved ones is as important as the victory he will probably never win over AIDS; and in *Getting Out* Arlene must come to accept all facets of her personality before she can even begin the task of self-determination. Sometimes the realization of the need for unity comes too late, and the process is never without its difficulties. In *Black Elk Speaks*, the Native American tribes are finally forced to give up their individual identities and accept the white man's designation of them as "Indians" so that they can effectively fight back. For Yellow Woman, the recognition that she must side with her people against all white men is made particularly bitter by the fact that she is married to one.

Political Theatre Imagery

As in all good theatre, the visual aspects of political drama carry a message. Most often the setting serves as a metaphor for the system under which the characters live, while at times scenic elements themselves comment directly on the play's action or theme.

By definition, political theatre puts aspects of public life on trial. All of Heinar Kipphardt's *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer* and Daniel Berrigan's *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine*, and parts of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, take place in courtrooms where the protagonists are being tried as much as anything for the judgments they have drawn about their own societies. All are convicted, but the evidence presented in the process reverses the verdict in the minds of the audience who are to be stirred to action by the law's unfairness. *The Crucible* is a larger metaphor, substituting the hysteria of the Salem witchcraft trials for the McCarthyist Red-baiting of the early 1950s. Sidney Kingsley's adaption of Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* is similar. However, the latter, set in the Russia of Stalin's Purge Trials, can also be seen as a straightforward condemnation of a revolution congealed into a reign of terror. It is only in retrospect that its ambivalence surfaces. *Darkness at Noon* is set in a prison of the protagonist's own making. *Getting Out* is more subtle. Its central setting—a motel room which is to be the first outside home for a paroled ex-prostitute—is a literal inset in a larger grouping of prisons and other institutions whose judgments keep her at the mercy of a male hierarchy.

Even more clearly, domestic settings are metaphors for America in sum. The spacious, tastefully simple living room of *Watch on the Rhine*, with its inviting classlessness, unlocked front door, and liberal patriarch's portrait on the wall, is America, even as Fanny Farrelly's acceptance of her German grandchildren marks America's recognition of itself as part of the World Family. In contrast, the similarly tastefully living room of *Sticks and Bones* is America as a television advertisement, its consumerist falsity as vulnerable to the realities of a racist war as a picture tube is to a combat boot. The living room of Ed Bullins's *The Gentleman Caller* is less realistic, but the message of its trophy wall decorated with black, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Native American heads is no less clear.

The Gentleman Caller shares with *The Death of Malcolm X* a use of visual stereotypes to comment on the plays' actions, among them the Uncle Sam suits worn by the officials of the Institute for Advanced Black (brainwashing) Studies in the latter and the white (and dead) Mr. Mann in the former. *The Death of Malcolm X* also provides a properly symbolic award for an integrationist Uncle Tom: a jewel-encrusted watermelon. *Johnny Johnson*, as befits a musical by Kurt Weill, has scenic elements which sing their message (including a Statue of Liberty trenody about the futility of symbols and cannons which mourn not being plowshares), as well as others which bear witness in eloquent silence (including a statue of Christ which conceals a sniper and a tombstone dedicated to peace). In *One-Third of a Nation*, the set is the protagonist, an "old-law" (pre-1901) tenement which comments on the society which allows it to continue to exist. The original setting of Luis Valdez's *Las Dos Caras del Patroncito* was a comment, but not a metaphor. The only agitprop play included for discussion, it was performed in the fields in order to explain the Delano grape strike to those who were participating in it.

The Conjunction of Historic and Dramatic Themes

The bulk of *From Class to Caste in American Drama* is divided into seven chapters. Each chapter has three aspects: (a) a history of the period of cultural phenomena studied in relation to an evolving principle, (b) a detailed analysis of particular American dramas which illustrate that evolution, and (c) a suggestion of other plays in which the evolution may be further studied.

The twenty-one dramas which receive detailed analysis include nineteen American plays, one German docudrama whose dialogue is totally drawn from American published sources, and one film. All were selected for the insight they provide into the cultural attitudes of the United States

and the political ramifications of those attitudes. The priority given to those insights is the criterion which justifies the inclusion of the German play and the film.

The seven historically labelled chapters of *From Class to Caste in American Drama* are as follows: (1) The Great Depression; (2) World War II; (3) The Cold War (4) Vietnam; (5) Civil Rights; (6) Civil Rights Theatre—Race; and (7) Civil Rights Theatre—Gender. The conditions and problems of each period should be seen as deriving to some extent from the solutions imposed in the era preceding it. For example, our involvement in Vietnam is clearly the result of our assumptions about ourselves and the world which were the product of the Cold War, while the rise of the women's movement in Chapter 6 was inspired by both the accomplishments and the shortcomings of the civil rights movement. The relationship of the major plays analyzed to the evolving cultural attitude is described below.

The Great Depression (1933–1938)

The dominating idea of this period is class analysis: the bankruptcy of the rugged individualism ideal, and the subsequent rise of the collective hero and the sense of government responsibility to its citizens. *Both Your Houses*, Maxwell Anderson's 1933 Pulitzer Prize winner, believes in as little government as possible. Government policy is the tool of a big business which built America in order to steal it. But Manifest Destiny has passed, and the people who once prospered riding on the coattails of these thieves are now starving. *Waiting for Lefty*, by Clifford Odets (1935), shows all "producing members of society" to be equally oppressed by capitalism, and unites them all together to "strike" for a Marxist society in which they will control the means of production. Based on FDR's second inaugural address, Arthur Arent's *One-Third of a Nation* (1938) became the best known of the Federal Theatre's "Living Newspapers." It could alter the specifics of its slum descriptions to fit the city in which it was being played, and argued (not for the last time) that federal money spent on armaments could be better used to relieve social inequities at home.

World War II (1936–1945)

The dominant idea of this period is the growth of America's responsibility toward the world's oppressed people. The trend toward a "family of man" viewpoint in which an ideal, classless, democratic world will

be a reflection of a classless democratic America reflects the rise of the United States as a world power and will lead to a belief in our ability to "Americanize" the world. Set to a Kurt Weill score, Paul Green's *Johnny Johnson* (1936) fights the "War to End All Wars" and is put in an asylum as a "peace monomaniac." A reflection of Oxford Pledge pacifism, the play accepts the "merchants of death" explanation of our entry into World War I and suggests (without much hope) the League of Nations as an alternative to nationalist inhumanity. Lillian Hellman's pro-interventionist *Watch on the Rhine* (1941) opened seven months before Pearl Harbor. By the simple expedient of making a family half-German and half-American, the play depicts a responsibility to the World Family of freedom fighters. Arnaud D'Usseau and James Gow's *Deep Are the Roots* (1945) showed America the irony of its self-image of world freedom fighter by showing us the racial caste system which institutionalized a second-class citizenry. What happens to a black college graduate, designated by act of Congress an officer and a gentleman, when he returns to a home in which front doors are forbidden to him and he must have a note from a white person to use the public library?

The Cold War (1950–1964)

In our attempt to "never again" allow tyranny to work its will in the world, we found ourselves confusing a national struggle with the Apocalypse, endangering the very liberties we were sworn to protect. *Darkness at Noon*, Sidney Kingsley's 1950 adaptation of Arthur Koestler's novel, describes an idealistic revolution gone wrong because of an unquestioning acceptance of historical determinism and "the end justifying the means." Although the setting is the Stalin Purge Trials of the late 1930s, it is equally applicable to America's "anti-Red" purges following World War II. In Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953), the Salem witch trials of 1692 provide a parallel to the McCarthy Communist hunts of the early 1950s. A comparison between the Puritan theocracy and America's sense of itself as God's chosen people shows the danger of equating dissenting viewpoints with heresy, turning accusations into convictions, and presuming all human differences to be the product of demonic conspiracy. Heinar Kipphardt's *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (1964) is culled from the transcripts of the physicist's Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) hearing in 1954. Oppenheimer is seen to have lost his AEC clearance because of his association with Communists in the 1930s and his reluctance to develop the hydrogen

bomb, and as a warning to other scientists to do their work without questioning its consequences.

Vietnam (1957–1971)

The concentration in this period is on our growing awareness of the gap between ideals and means—the principles which drew us into the war and the realities of our national institutions—and our reluctance to face this gap. *China Gate*, Samuel Fuller's 1957 pro-interventionist film about American soldiers of fortune fighting for the French in Indochina, sees racism as the barrier to Western success in Asia. The issues are made clear by having the native Communists be the puppets of an unscrupulous Russian major, and the prize be the hearts of a Eurasian girl and her Vietnamese son—last seen happily clutching a baseball glove and other assorted American paraphernalia. Derived from the trial transcripts by one of the defendants who burned Maryland draft records with napalm, Daniel Berrigan's *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (1969) is a litany of the breakdown of the ideals of the Catholic church, the American legal system, domestic racial practices, and imperialist business policies. David Rabe's *Sticks and Bones* (1971) shows the extent to which America will go to avoid seeing that the terrors of Vietnam are merely the reflection of racial/sexual/materialist attitudes at home. David, blinded perhaps by the war or perhaps by congenital disease, insists on bringing the realities of the war home to Ozzie, Harriet, and Ricky. When they can no longer bear the guilt of these realities, his family "assists" David's "suicide."

Civil Rights (1963–1976)

What appeared to be a problem of black and white in America dissolved on close examination into endless shades of gray as black American drama evolved from protest to Black Power to the postrevolutionary blues. In *White America*, Martin Duberman's 1963 docudrama, proceeds chronologically from the slave ships to Little Rock. The first act ends with Emancipation, but the more important second act concludes with an example of acceptance on a personal level. In Ed Bullins's *The Gentleman Caller* (1969), a seemingly stupid "Mammy-type" maid cuts the throat of her master (whose false beard symbolizes his potency) before shooting her mistress and the "sophisticated Negro" who appears ready to assume his place in white society. She then reveals herself as an apostle of black aesthetics and Black Power nationalism. In

The Death of Malcolm X (1969), LeRoi Jones sees Malcolm's assassination as part of an anti-Third World conspiracy by American government/business/military, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), and "Uncle Tom" Negroes. The members of Richard Wesley's *The Mighty Gents* (1976), a once powerful street gang now grown older, see only three ways out of their dead-end ghetto life: (1) early death as drunken panhandlers, (2) material success as pimps and thieves preying on their own kind, or (3) the creation of children to whom they can pass on their unfulfilled hopes. They make the wrong choice.

Civil Rights Theatre Sequel I—Race

The principle theme is the extension of the challenge to white male hegemony from black Americans to other "minority" groups (Chicanos, Native Americans, women, gays, etc.) whose rights and virtues have been denied. Until each has established its fundamental worth as a separate group, a truly unified society is seen as impossible. Luis Valdez's *Las Dos Caras del Patroncito*, "The Two Faces of the Boss," (1965) is one of a series of one-act plays produced by El Teatro Campesino for Cesar Chavez's striking United Farm Workers in California. Like most protest drama, it provides an alternative view of history which explains the worker's position in it and denigrates that of the boss. Christopher Sergel's *Black Elk Speaks* (1976), adapted from John Neihardt's 1930–1931 interviews with the Oglala Sioux medicine man, centers around the Plains Indian Wars, beginning with the Minnesota Santee Sioux in 1862 and ending with Wounded Knee in 1890. Christianity and gold justified the white man's slaughter of the red man, but these actions are seen in the light of Black Elk's vision, which calls for the unity of all living things and the earth which produced them.

Civil Rights Theatre Sequel II—Gender

Women, gay men, and lesbians are alike in that their political difficulties are associated with gender and gender roles. In specifics, however, they may be distinctly different. A lesbian, for example, knows that most of the demands of gay men could be met without dismantling the patriarchy that oppresses her as a woman. She also knows that many women's liberationists are capable of dismissing lesbian issues as "lavender herrings," as Betty Friedan did.

Sent to reform school by a sexually abusive father, and to prison by a sexually exploitive pimp, the heroine of Marsha Norman's *Getting Out*

(1978) is divided against herself, robbed of the spirit which might have permitted her to survive, and sent back into the environment which originally sent her to prison. Finally, the discovery by a young man that he has AIDS in William M. Hoffmann's *As Is* (1985) throws into sharp relief the homophobia which distorts the American psyche and the American legal system. Before these can be changed, his family and friends, and even the victim himself, must learn to accept him "As Is."

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From
Class to Caste
in American Drama

The Great Depression—Social Themes in the Theatrical Mainstream

As a national disaster, only the Civil War ranks with the Great Depression. Between 1929 and 1933, the gross national product shrank from \$87 billion to \$41 billion. Inversely, estimated unemployment went from 3.2 percent to between one-quarter and one-third of the working population.¹ Farmers, who had been encouraged to expand their acreage and their debt during World War I, were even worse off. In 1929, farmers' earnings were only 30 percent of the American average.² Two years later, they had dropped by three-quarters. By the winter of 1932–1933, a third of the value of all farms was pledged to banks and insurance companies.³

Try to visualize those statistics in human terms. In 1931, four New York hospitals reported ninety-five starvation deaths. In Washington, a congressman argued that eleven cents a day could feed an Indian child. A single parish in San Antonio buried thirty-nine persons in one month, "mostly children." In Carlisle, Pennsylvania, a starving man suffocated his three small daughters rather than see them starve to death. In 1933, the Children's Bureau reported that one child out of five was inadequately fed.⁴

Even the surviving unemployed lost their self-esteem and found their community status in danger. They felt a sense of personal guilt at having failed in what they had been told was the richest country in the world, wondering if the Depression, like the monster in *Frankenstein* (the most popular movie of 1930), was not God's retribution for their hubris. In some locales, families on relief lost the right to vote.⁵ College students, those perennial "hopes of the future," found that one-third of the class

of 1933 had been unable to find employment, and another one-third had gotten jobs for which they had no interest, talent, or training. As "An Ode to Higher Education," a popular ditty of the time, put it:

I sing in praise of college,
of M.A.'s and Ph.D.'s.

But in pursuit of knowledge
We are starving by degrees.⁶

What had caused this disaster? In theory, laissez-faire economics—the free market system—prevented economic crises because demand controlled supply, and competition (Adam Smith's "great regulator of industry") undercut potential abuse by the supplier.⁷ However, Adam Smith had built his theory on a relatively equal distribution of wealth. By 1929, 200 corporations held 22 percent of America's total wealth and 49 percent of its corporate wealth. In 1931, 65 percent of American industry was in the hands of 600 corporations.⁸ This imbalance was to prove a major factor in the economy's downward spiral.

From 1920 to 1929, disposable income rose 9 percent for all Americans, but 75 percent for the richest 1 percent. One-tenth of 1 percent of the population had annual incomes of \$100,000 or more, while 71 percent had incomes of under \$2,500. This unequal distribution was a problem for the rich as well as the poor. For how could the poor (demand) buy from the rich (supply) without money? The answer was credit. Aided by the developing new industry of advertising, outstanding installment credit increased from \$1.38 billion in 1925 to \$3 billion in 1929. Three out of every five cars and four out of every five radios during this period were purchased on "time."⁹

The rich were buying on credit too. After 1926, the Federal Reserve Board permitted 90 percent margins, selling stock at ten cents on the dollar. This encouraged speculation, or the buying of stock based not on the real value of the company, but on the hope that the price of the stock would go up. For example, the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), without ever paying a dividend, went from 94.5 in March 1929 to 505 in September. An investor with \$945 in March could have bought one hundred shares on margin, selling them in September at a profit of nearly \$42,000.¹⁰ The market reached its peak on September 3, 1929, and when it crashed on Black Thursday, October 24, the loss of values in the day's trading amounted to almost as much as America had spent to fight World War I.¹¹

The collapse of the market meant a collapse of credit. Business cut back on production to reduce inventory and on credit to increase real

assets. This meant laying off workers, who, lacking either cash or credit, reduced purchases. As unpurchased items clogged inventories, industry cut back again, further reducing worker purchasing power.

Internationally, America cut back on its loans to Germany, but continued to demand war debts owed by France and Great Britain. These debts, in turn, had been financed by German reparations. As Germany teetered toward bankruptcy, Hitler found the unemployed to be his strongest supporters. An early victim of the 1930 Smoot-Hawley Tariff (intended to protect American industry against foreign competition) was Japan. Its foreign trade fell by nearly 50 percent between 1929 and 1931, leading to a military takeover and the resumption of an aggressive expansionist policy that had been dormant for a decade.¹² By March 1932, revolutions had toppled governments in seven Latin American countries.¹³ When a 10 percent reduction was made in the salaries of federal employees that summer, President Hoover sent a secret message to Congress asking that the armed forces be exempted, as their services might be needed soon to assist in the suppression of civil dissent.¹⁴ War and revolution appeared to be in a deadly race.

Few doubted that the United States was on the brink of radical change. The obvious options were communism and fascism. According to John A. Simpson of the National Farmers Union: "The capitalistic system is doomed. It has as its foundation the principles of brutality, dishonesty, and avarice." When AFL (American Federation of Labor) president William Green threatened a Senate subcommittee with a "universal strike" if relief was not forthcoming, Senator Hugo Black of Alabama asked, "That would be class war, practically?" "It would be that," said Green. "That is the only language that a lot of employers ever understand—the language of force."¹⁵

On the other hand, when the Bonus Army (World War I veterans seeking immediate payment of \$1,000 due in 1945) marched on Washington in the summer of 1932, Army Deputy Chief of Staff General George Van Horn Moseley worked on a plan to send dissidents "to one of the sparsely inhabited islands of the Hawaiian group . . . to stew in their own filth until their cases were finally disposed of with the return of normal conditions."¹⁶ Governor Eugene Talmadge of Georgia had unwanted nonresidents put on chain gangs, and when textile workers went on strike, had pickets put into barbed-wire concentration camps. Frank Hague, the political boss of Jersey City, called for similar camps in Alaska for "Native Reds." Even so moderate a man as Kansas governor Alfred M. Landon, who was to be the 1936 Republican