

THE
Critics' Prize Plays

INTRODUCTION BY

GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

THE WORLD PUBLISHING COMPANY

CLEVELAND AND NEW YORK

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Introduction

ITS BIRTH INSPIRED by the increasing idiosyncrasies of the annual Pulitzer prize award, the New York Drama Critics' Circle began functioning in 1935. Composed of the critics for the established metropolitan newspapers and magazines, its politely unarticulated but nonetheless clearly discernible purpose was to take over from the anonymous and non-professional committee entrusted with the bestowal of the aforesaid prize the yearly stamp of active, professional, critical approval. Among the critics in these beginning days of the Circle were the following: Percy Hammond of the *Herald Tribune*, who was to be succeeded on his death by Richard Watts, Jr.; Brooks Atkinson of the *Times*; John Mason Brown of the *Post*; Burns Mantle of the *Daily News*; Robert Garland of the *World-Telegram*; Richard Lockridge of the *Sun*; Arthur Pollock of the *Brooklyn Eagle*; Joseph Wood Krutch of the *Nation*; Stark Young of the *New Republic*; Whitney Bolton of the *Morning Telegraph*; Robert Benchley of the *New Yorker*; John Gassner of *Current History*; Gilbert Gabriel of the *American*; John Anderson of the *Journal*; and your present recorder, of the *American Mercury*, *Vanity Fair*, *Esquire*, *Life*, *Scribner's*, et al.

What directly induced these critics to sponsor an award to that new American play which would seem to the majority of them to be the worthiest of its year was the Pulitzer award given ridiculously for the season of 1934-35 to the sentimental claptrap, *The Old Maid*, which was not only not an original play but a dramatization of another's novel, thus for the second time violating the Pulitzer board's own rules, and which was further and by almost general outside consent utterly worthless from any reputable critical standpoint. And all this in a season that had offered Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing* and Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, to say nothing of Robert Sherwood's *The Petrified Forest*, Maxwell Anderson's *Valley Forge* and the like, any of them at their weakest infinitely superior to the exhibit that the Pulitzer committee had seen fit to honor.

But rumblings had preceded the storm. The critics had first begun doubtfully to scratch their heads when, in the season of 1923-24, the Pulitzer prize had been snatched from George Kelly's *The*

Show-Off by Professor Brander Matthews out of the hands of the duly constituted committee of award and had been arbitrarily given by him to his co-member of the Columbia University faculty, Hatcher Hughes, for *Hell-Bent fer Heaven*. They had increased the scratching when, in the succeeding year, the Pulitzer masterminds airily waved aside such plays as *What Price Glory?* and *Desire Under The Elms* and knighted instead something like Sidney Howard's negligible *They Knew What They Wanted*. They had scratched deeper still when subsequently O'Neill's *The Great God Brown* was passed up in favor of the woefully inferior *Craig's Wife*, by George Kelly. They had scratched half their hair out when, in the very next year, the Pulitzer people closed their eyes to plays like *Chicago*, *Broadway* and *Saturday's Children* and pinned their prize on Paul Green's *In Abraham's Bosom*. And when Susan Glasspell's *Alison's House* later on received the award, what was left of the critics' hair was all too little to be finally torn out upon the before-noted award to the Akins-Wharton *The Old Maid*.

It was time to do something.

And the critics did it.

And this is how Eugene O'Neill, who previously had received three of the Pulitzer prizes, viewed their action. "It is a terrible, harrowing experience," O'Neill wrote to the Circle, "for a playwright to be forced to praise critics for anything. There is something morbid and abnormal about it, something destructive to the noble tradition of correct conduct for dramatists. Nevertheless, conscience drives me to reiterate that I think the Critics' Circle award a damned fine idea. Prizes in themselves are neither good nor bad. They have no meaning except that which derives from the recognized authority of the awarders of the prize as judges of true merit. The Critics' Circle possesses that recognized authority, and so I am sure that its awards will deservedly have a significant and growing effect in helping to shape public opinion and in directing the future course of our drama. It is my hope that these yearly awards will direct the attention of the public to the fact that our theatre is now adult and fully capable of standing adult comparison with that of any country in the world today; that it is no longer purely a showshop and an amusement racket, but has grown to be a place where Art may exist."

The Circle's initial award, for the season of 1935-36, was to Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset*, with but three dissenting votes going to Robert Sherwood's *Idiot's Delight*. Dedicating the award, the present recorder, on the ceremonial program over the radio, spoke in part as follows: "There are, as you know, certain other rewards to

each year's plays. But for some time now it has seemed to the Circle that they have lost all significance, and what is more important, all probity. They have been so hamstrung by rules and regulations, by by-laws and by-by-laws, that they have come to represent exactly nothing. Whatever anyone may think of the awards made by the Drama Critics' Circle, those awards will at least be forthright and unhedging. The *best* American play of the year: that is and will be the Circle's one and only question. There are and will be no further qualifications; there is and will be no ritualistic hocus-pocus. At least you will know a body of drama critics' undismayed and uncorrupted decision, whether it meets with your approval or whether it does not."

Maxwell Anderson, who previous to the Circle's inauguration had also been the recipient of a Pulitzer prize, accepted the Circle's award with these words:

"Except for the theatre critics of New York no body of men in the country is qualified by training, education and professional experience to render judgment on a season's plays. I am, I assure you seriously, much more interested in that aspect of the ceremony than the fact that the first award goes to *Winterset*. Anybody with the requisite cash can offer a prize for excellence in the theatre, but in order to encourage excellence it is necessary to know it when it appears, and a knowledge of what is excellent is more difficult to obtain than cash. I have never been greatly impressed with the Pulitzer prize for the best play of the year because the final authority for its presentation rests with a committee which is aware only dimly and at second-hand of most of what occurs in the theatres of Broadway. It follows that in so far as the Pulitzer prize has had any influence on our theatre it has been a confusing and misleading influence, an encouragement to mediocrity, a gift passed out to a lucky winner by authorities who possess in this field neither standards nor information. But neither ignorance nor lack of standards can be charged against the Critics' Circle. The critics know very definitely what they are for and why they are for it, and whatever their faults of judgment may be, they *earn* their knowledge of the plays offered during any year by an undeviating attention to what can be seen and heard from the aisle seats of Manhattan playhouses, an attention which amounts on some occasions to sheer martyrdom. I have, in my time, contributed to that martyrdom, and learned by stinging comments in the next day's papers that the boys knew what they were about. I have had both praise and blame in stimulating quantities, and have learned—perhaps unequally—from both."

The Circle's plaque for the season of 1936-37 was given to Mr. Anderson for his *High Tor*, with three dissenting votes going to Paul Green's *Johnny Johnson* and one, that of the present recorder, to Robert Turney's *Daughters of Atreus*. In the season of 1937-38, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* was honored, with Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* lagging behind in the voting. The following season, 1938-39, brought no award, since the Circle found it could come to no majority decision in the consideration of Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*, Clifford Odets' *Rocket To The Moon*, Robert Sherwood's *Abe Lincoln In Illinois* and William Saroyan's *My Heart's In the Highlands*, the last-named, incidentally, being the choice of the present recorder.

In the season of 1939-40, however, the award again emerged and was given to Saroyan's *The Time Of Your Life*, with Robert Sherwood's *There Shall Be No Night* and Maxwell Anderson's *Key Largo* trailing in the distance. (As if finally taking to heart the Circle's criticism of its awards, the Pulitzer committee followed the Circle's decision and also gave its prize to the Saroyan play. More, it has since followed the Circle in the Circle's decision on two different occasions to make no award.)

Lillian Hellman's *Watch On The Rhine* drew the Circle's prize for the 1940-41 season, with Saroyan's *The Beautiful People* the closest contender—the present recorder's choice, and with Richard Wright's *Native Son* drawing a single vote. The following year, 1941-42, again saw no award, the Circle being unable to attain a majority vote and announcing its withholding of an award with these words: "While the Circle was organized to encourage native playwrights and honor native dramatists, it has also the third obligation of maintaining the standards of the theatre and of dramatic criticism, and it feels it would cause a serious confusion of standards if it merely made a selection from a group of plays none of which seems up to the standards of the previous awards."

But again in the succeeding season, 1942-43, the award was bestowed on Sidney Kingsley's *The Patriots* "for its dignity of material, its thoughtful projection of a great American theme, its vigorous approach to the characters portrayed, and, in spite of certain limitations, its driving final effect on the stage." The losing candidate was Thornton Wilder's *The Skin Of Our Teeth*, which got the Pulitzer prize, just as such defeated candidates in previous years as *Idiot's Delight*, *Our Town*, *Abe Lincoln In Illinois* and *There Shall Be No Night* got it, almost in the nature of a consolation prize.

The war began to alter the composition of the Circle in the sea-

son of 1942-43. A number of the critics entered the armed services or took up duties in various governmental war branches, and their substitutes proceeded forthwith to occupy their chairs at the Circle's board. In the season of 1943-44, several of the older critics, among them Stark Young and the present recorder, resigned until a future day; and Joseph Wood Krutch privileged himself a sabbatical year in which to work on a life of Samuel Johnson. The reconstituted Circle, including in its membership Lewis Nichols as temporary successor to Brooks Atkinson serving as a war correspondent in China, John Chapman as successor to the retired Burns Mantle, Ward Morehouse in the shoes of Richard Lockridge who had joined the Navy, Howard Barnes as permanent successor to Richard Watts, Jr., who was with the Office of War Information, and Burton Rascoe quickly in and out as temporary occupant of the chair of John Mason Brown, also in the Navy, decided to make no award for the year after vainly arguing the merits of four or five plays, among them Lillian Hellman's *The Searching Wind*, John van Druten's *The Voice Of The Turtle*, James Gow's and Arnaud d'Usseau's *Tomorrow The World* and Edward Chodorov's *Decision*.

For the record, among the critics aside from those already named who have figured in the Circle's ballotings since its inception have been Rosamund Gilder, successor to Edith Isaacs of *Theatre Arts*, Wilella Waldorf who succeeded John Mason Brown on the *Post*, Louis Kronenberger of *PM* and *Time*, Wolcott Gibbs who succeeded Robert Benchley on the *New Yorker*, and George Freedley who followed Whitney Bolton on the *Morning Telegraph*.

II. THE PLAYS

Anderson's *Winterset* was produced by Guthrie McClintic in the Martin Beck Theatre on September 25, 1935, and ran for 179 performances, later returning for an additional 16. Its cast was headed by Richard Bennett, Burgess Meredith and the young Mexican actress, Margo. Serving as the playwright's inspiration was the celebrated case of the State of Massachusetts versus Sacco and Vanzetti. In poetic paraphrase, he tells the story of the son of one such alleged anarchist and his desperate search for evidence that will testify to his father's innocence. The play, its author stated, "is largely in verse and treats a contemporary tragic theme, which makes it more of an experiment than I could wish, for the great masters themselves never tried to make tragic poetry out of the stuff of their own times. To do so is to attempt to establish a new

convention, one that may prove impossible of acceptance but to which I was driven by the lively historical sense of our day—a knowledge of period, costume and manners which almost shuts off the writer on historical themes from contemporary comment. Whether or not I have solved the problem in *Winterset* is probably of little moment. But it must be solved if we are to have a great theatre in America. Our theatre has not yet produced anything worthy to endure—and endurance, though it may be a fallible test, is the only test of excellence.”

As to the last observation, Mr. Anderson's wholesale pessimism is open to some question. As to his earlier meditations, one may grant him a difficult task at least courageously ventured and, if not altogether satisfactorily achieved, one which at any rate amounts in considerable part to an eloquent and impressive document of hate and defiance, and to a play which in the aggregate was a credit to the Circle's critical judgment.

Mr. Anderson's *High Tor*, which gained him the Circle's accolade a second time, was produced by the same Mr. McClintic in the same Martin Beck Theatre on January 9, 1937, and ran for 171 performances. Its cast was headed, again, by Burgess Meredith and by the imported English actress, Peggy Ashcroft. On this occasion the playwright exercised himself in romantic fantasy and, unusual for him, in comedy both high and low. Contrasting the realistic present day with the legendary romantic past, he succeeded in confecting an exhibit of uneven quality, albeit one that at stray moments managed a lightly pleasant effect. Far beneath the merit of *Winterset* and given at times to a heavily postured colloquialism—and at still other times to a dubious philosophizing—the play nevertheless somehow maneuvered itself into the affections of its audiences, or at least that copious portion of them whose sentimental reaction was of a piece with that of those critics who had vouchsafed it the year's award.

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* was produced by Sam H. Harris in the Music Box on November 23, 1937, and ran for 207 performances. Its cast contained Wallace Ford, Broderick Crawford, Sam Byrd, John F. Hamilton, Claire Luce, Will Geer and Thomas Findlay, among others. It marked its author's first appearance as a playwright and presented him to a surprised and gratified audience as a dramatist of exceptional character penetration, vibrating dialogue, and general dramaturgical vitality. Few first plays by American authors had produced the impression that this play did; it became the talk of the town overnight. And it was unquestionably its uncommon merit that operated to make doubly

disappointing Steinbeck's subsequent effort, *The Moon Is Down*, which, as previously implied, was in its season abruptly dismissed by the Critics' Circle.

William Saroyan's *The Time Of Your Life* was produced by Eddie Dowling in association with the Theatre Guild in the Booth Theatre on October 25, 1939, and ran for 185 performances. Its cast was headed by Mr. Dowling, Julie Haydon, Edward Andrews, Celeste Holm and Gene Kelly. Originally called *The Light Fantastic*, the play proved to be a genuinely fascinating contribution to American drama and, after the delicately beautiful *My Heart's In The Highlands*, established its author as the freshest imagination that had come into our theatre in many years. The theme of the play, which Saroyan originally intended to have spoken before the rise of the curtain, a plan that was properly dismissed as redundant, he stated so: "In the time of your life, live—so that in that good time there shall be no ugliness or death for yourself or for any life your life touches. Seek goodness everywhere and where it is found bring it out of its hiding place and let it be free and unashamed. Place in matter and in flesh the least of the values, for these are the things that hold death and must pass away. . . . In the time of your life, live—so that in that wondrous time you shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world, but shall smile to the infinite delight and mystery of it."

Lillian Hellman's *Watch On The Rhine* was produced by Herman Shumlin in the Martin Beck Theatre on April 1, 1941, and ran for 378 performances. Its cast was headed by Paul Lukas, George Coulouris, Mady Christians and Lucile Watson. While greatly superior to the other anti-Nazi dramas that had preceded it and while here and there not without the melodramatic drive at which its author is an apt hand, the play seemed to the dissenting critics to be less the plumbing of ideological concepts that its author hoped and intended than a skilful exercise in pure blood and thunder, the latter concealed from the superficial eye in wily dramaturgical bandages and mufflers. But the time was theatrically ripe for its alarms and the majority read stern critical virtues into it where the minority saw only popular and contemporary prehensile qualities. The majority, however, ruled in the case of the public as it did in the case of the Critics' Circle, which gave the play its award by 12 votes to 6 for the next contender, the aforementioned Saroyan's *The Beautiful People*.

Sidney Kingsley's *The Patriots* was produced by the Playwrights' Company in association with Rowland Stebbins in the National Theatre on January 29, 1943, and ran for 157 performances. Its cast

was headed by Raymond Edward Johnson as Jefferson, Cecil Humphreys as Washington, and House Jameson as Hamilton. Originally titled *Thomas Jefferson* and for a time tempted to be called *Three Gentlemen Of America*, the drama contrasts the ideas and philosophies of Jefferson and Hamilton in the days of the Democracy's dawn, with the aging Washington hovering over Jefferson as a guardian angel. The Circle's citation accompanying its intelligent award was appropriately phrased, since the play's thoughtful projection of a noble American theme, its vigorous approach to the historical characters and, for all its occasional defects, its final driving stage effect are hardly debatable.

Upon the play's first presentation I observed, as I observe again, that with negligible rant, with gratifying humor, and with a passion brewed from cool intelligence it never descends to mere patriotic strychnine, seldom falters on its dignified course and always, except for its rather cinema-like prologue and some exaggeration in the instance of Hamilton, maintains its inner probity. More, although the play does not forego all the august pokerism which is so generally the portion of historical characters on the stage, it at least gestures very satisfactorily in that direction, which is a credit to its author's extensive research and sound reflective sense. In addition to the Critics' Circle award, the play received the season's prize of the Newspaper Guild and of the Theatre Club, Inc.

GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

Winterset

BY MAXWELL ANDERSON

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NOTE

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