LAUREL

FAMOUS AMERICAN PLAYS OF THE 1980s

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AUGUST WILSON
MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

Selected and Introduced by Robert Marx
Foreword by Gordon Davidson

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ROBERT MARX

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A LAUREL BOOK

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Robert Marx is director of the Theater Program of the National Endowment for the Arts. A well-known essayist on theater and opera, his articles have appeared in *The New York Times, The New Republic, American Theatre, The American Scholar,* and many other publications. He has also been director of the New York State Council on the Arts Theater Program, artistic associate of the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, and served as a consultant for theater programming at the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival.

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FOREWORD

When I first scanned the Famous American Play series, I felt somewhat awed by the task of composing a foreword to all the volumes. The idiosyncratic nature of the series—an attribute I find quite appealing—dictates that each volume not only embody the temperament of a decade but also reflect the spirit of the editor selecting the plays. These editors, an assortment of distinguished critics and theater practitioners including Kenneth Macgowan, Harold Clurman, Henry Hewes, Lee Strasberg, Ted Hoffman, and Robert Marx, define "the best" differently with each decade, each volume, even from play to play.

Yet somehow, despite the bent of the individual editor and with all the regrettable omissions—many choices shaped by the limitation of plays available for publication at the time (where, for example, is arguably the most famous and continuously developing twentieth-century American playwright Neil Simon?)—I still believe that the series comprises a living document to a crucial aspect of this century's American theater: the evolution and shifting emphasis in theme, approach, and even location. American the-

ater has been on the move from Broadway to off-Broadway, from off-Broadway to off-off-Broadway, and finally from the singular concentration in and among the streets of New York to what has become the most exciting transformation of this century—the decentralization of American professional theater to include virtually every state in the union. The plays in these volumes reveal this journey and reflect the incredible changes not only in the theater but in our culture. The process of decentralization has affected and will continue to affect the very nature of the plays being written and the audiences attending them.

In the volumes covering the 1920s through the 1950s, all the plays—except for Eugene O'Neill's *The Moon of the Caribbees*—were Broadway plays. In the 1960s, only two plays included made it to Broadway from off-Broadway and from a regional theater. In the 1970s, only one did, although two others later moved to or reappeared briefly on Broadway. In the 1980s, *all* the plays started either off-Broadway, off-off-Broadway, or in regional theaters around the country, and three of them subsequently have appeared on Broadway.

The shifting emphasis in theme can be seen through the eyes of those who introduce each volume. In the 1920s the theater was considered a scene of "curious conflict" between realism and a freer form of theatricality. In the next decade, attention to the socioeconomic details of an individual's psychological condition became what Harold Clurman called "the most significant difference" between the theater of the twenties and that of the thirties. What informs many of the plays in that collection is a sense of political alertness married to an almost naive inexperience with

actual events. Many of these plays, from *Idiot's Delight* to *End of Summer,* show what Clurman described as *interest* in subject matter rather than any authentic familiarity with it.

In the forties, we find a drama that reveals a new sense of history and a new relationship to it. As the editor of that volume reflects, "History is no longer regarded as a clear and orderly process of cause and effect, but rather as a series of traffic snarls and collisions of many people and forces moving in different directions." Plays written prior to the tragedy at Pearl Harbor give none-too-buried warnings of the imminence of danger, yet all the while they continued to reassure audiences that all would be well as long as everyone maintained faith in American hope and glory. But the theater, like the country, was trying to learn some very hard lessons by sidestepping the mistakes of past generations, on- and offstage. *Home of the Brave* and *All My Sons* were both cautionary tales as much as they were realistic studies of the cost and consequences of war. The end of the conflict overseas brought renewed optimism on the boards, a response to victory that led to enthusiastic, if slightly ill-informed, ideas about theatrical innovation. But the audience for early experimental theater turned out to be far smaller than anticipated, although directors like Elia Kazan were making great and subtle strides in discerning authorial personality—what editor Henry Hewes calls "subconscious searchings"—in the work of newly discovered playwrights like Tennessee Williams.

Lee Strasberg found "numerous important playwrights [but] fewer important plays in the 1950s." Yet Strasberg, himself an innovator in modern acting tech-

nique, discerns a uniquely modern thematic perspective in these plays in the fusing of present, past, and future time and in the revelation of psychological insight. Strasberg anticipates the founding of a "new theater" that would "broaden the vision of man on the stage" by its "awareness and perception of drama in characters to which drama had never been previously attributed, a more subtle and more varied sense of relationship between people, and a deeper penetration of their motivation." It was an exciting time for the actor, the first generation to be influenced by Strasberg's ideas. Unfortunately, too few of the plays chosen for that volume proved of lasting importance. Even Strasberg seems to have suspected this—he ends his introduction, written in 1962, with a poignantly optimistic look to the impending creation of a repertory theater at Lincoln Center, under the guiding spirit of then-President and Mrs. Kennedy.

Thus, as illustrated by the impressive list of plays collected in these volumes, the plays of the twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties embody the evolution of the theater on many levels. In the sixties, however, was *revolution*. A remarkable transformation had its true beginning in the early 1960s. With the help of the Ford Foundation and the vision of W. MacNeill Lowry, Vice President for the Arts, the theater and theater professionals began to venture out from New York City—not, as they used to, tied to a rubber band that snapped them back at the end of a tour or summer stock engagement in time for the "new season on Broadway"—but as pioneers and adventurers to new lands, eager to set down roots and create some sense of permanence in cities all across the United States, and to explore and reflect those communities onstage.

In 1963 the Tyrone Guthrie Theater opened its doors in Minneapolis; in 1965 the Long Wharf in New Haven, Connecticut. In 1965 ACT traveled from Pittsburgh to Chicago and finally set up a permanent home in San Francisco. In 1964 the Actors Theatre of Louisville opened its doors. In 1963 the Seattle Repertory Theatre began, and in April 1967 the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles welcomed audiences for the first time. All in all, since that time 309 theaters have been established in 43 states and 150 cities. They were founded by individual artists, by partners, and by collectives. Some have inherited the structure of not-for-profit corporate entities with boards of directors, some have built buildings, some have established local, regional, and national profiles, and all have together produced an enormous body of work in less than thirty years. The Theatre Communications Group was formed in New York City as a service organization to bind this far-flung community together through meetings, publications, and advocacy.

I felt the excitement of this revolution firsthand; in fact, my career echoes the movement of the times. While when I first began looking for work in the theater in 1958 (I was still in the army), I thought about the possibility of finding work outside of New York, it was *in* New York that my life in theater had really begun: seeing Laurence Olivier in that famous double bill *Oedipus/The Critic* (that memorable offstage howl); seeing the Lunts, Laurette Taylor, Gertrude Lawrence, Lee J. Cobb, Ray Bolger, John Gielgud, Judith Anderson, Melvyn Douglas, Paul Muni, Ralph Richardson. What performers! But, at that time, my options outside New York were limited. There was summer stock; there was college theater (my dad

taught and directed at Brooklyn College). There was Nina Vance and the Alley Theatre in Houston; Margo Jones in Dallas; Zelda Fichandler at the Arena Stage in Washingotn, D.C.; the Cleveland Playhouse under K. Elmo Lowe; and a couple of theaters in San Francisco, including The Theatre of the Golden Hind and Herbert Blau and Jules Irving's Actors Workshop. And that was about it.

I felt compelled to start in New York. I chose a position as an apprentice stage manager at the American Shakespeare Festival. I worked with and under the mentorship of John Houseman, Jack Landau, Jean Rosenthal, Bernard Gersten, Marc Blitzstein, David Hays, Dorothy Jeakins. It was as an assistant to Houseman that, finally, in 1964, I made my way to Los Angeles, where John was directing a production of *King Lear* starring Morris Carnovsky for The Theatre Group, a professional theater on the campus of UCLA. Three years later I opened the Mark Taper Forum, a 750-seat thrust stage in the Los Angeles Music Center. In April 1987 we celebrated the twentieth anniversary of our continuous production of plays: world and American premieres, classic revivals, young people's theater, and a host of developmental programs. The Taper is one of a network of theaters, a *family* of theaters that, though situated differently, still have many similarities: in structure, in attempts at creating subscription audiences, in nurturing artists, in revealing the life of the community they serve.

The regional theater movement began as an alternative to the commercial pressures of Broadway and as an alternative to living in New York City. It therefore initially concerned itself with the presentation of classics, modern and ancient, that were done commer-

cially only sporadically. Dedicated to the development of companies of actors, designers, directors, these theaters preserved and reinterpreted the living library: Shakespeare, Shaw, Molière, Ibsen, Pirandello, the Greeks, as well as the American giants of the thirties, forties, and fifties. In fact, many of the plays reproduced in this series were and are the staples of regional theater programming. Audiences were willing to go to a theater with a recognizable, and to some extent familiar, list of plays performed and produced well. Actors and directors and designers searched for ways to make these plays come alive for contemporary audiences. These same audiences tended to shy away from new plays or unknown authors, unless they had the imprimatur, the stamp of approval, of a Broadway success (or at least a decent enough run on Broadway). Work on the "great plays" gave actors and directors a chance to stretch themselves and refine their skills (voice, movement, diction).

Then, to borrow from a phrase popular in the sixties, something happened. Concurrent with the social and cultural revolution with which we are all so familiar, Broadway really began to decline. (The "fabulous invalid," as it was known, began to look terminal.) Simultaneously, New York became a less hospitable or even challenging environment for artistic creativity. The reasons for this have been documented; they include soaring production costs, escalating ticket prices, urban blight, urban flight, expense account theater going and the loss of the regular audience; competition for attention and talent from TV and movies; and, to varying degrees, the usurpation by other media (including popular music) of the content,

subject matter, and even form that was previously the territory and province of the theater.

And in the sixties the artists took to the streets, lofts, basements, churches, and parks to write the plays that began to speak of their horror, outrage, and pain over war, assassination, and the gradual corruption of the spirit exemplified by Saran Wrap and defense budgets. As Edward Parone wrote in his introduction to a collection of plays entitled *Collision Course,* these plays were "written on impulse in short bursts that seem to want to impinge directly upon their audiences without the barrier of intellect or manners or preconceptions." And in turn the regional theater began to turn its attention to the presentation of new plays (note: some, like the Mark Taper Forum and the New York Public Theater, did this from the beginning), and with this came the creation of a system for developing new theater pieces through commissions, readings, laboratories, workshops, festivals, conferences, and the use of small venues (second spaces) as homes for venturesome work.

Like many revolutions, these changes grew of necessity; only in retrospect do we see their far-reaching effects. Not only did these developments allow audiences throughout the United States to participate in the adventure and excitement of creating and discovering new works of art, but they changed or reversed the flow of material and talent (plays, playwrights, actors, directors, and designers) both out of New York and back. Broadway is no longer the generator of material and the source of personnel for the theater. It is a grand and heady as well as pain-inducing receiver of the fruits of theater from elsewhere—traditionally

London and now more and more the rest of the United States.

The decentralization of the American theater is the most challenging and enduring transformation of the last three decades. It's both the best and worst thing that could have happened, because it also makes it that much more difficult to see, taste, judge, be influenced by, and know one another's work, and it puts an extra pressure on the need to share and find some ground upon which artists and audience have common experiences. The lack of a center or single pulse makes the gift of a collection like this one, a compilation of all our work, that much more valuable.

The decentralization also has brought to the surface a whole new set of problems, questions, esthetics, and challenges for the theater of the future. First and foremost is the need for a belief in the theater as an art form rather than as a business that produces a product which is either a success (a hit that makes money) or a failure (a flop and a financial disaster). The theater searches for survival as an institution, with all of the responsibilities an institution has to itself and its community. It serves a community and must be aware of the cultural, ethnic, and social diversity of its artists and its audience. It can speak to the specifics of a city, state, region, and to a nation. It can give voice to the needs of the community as well as reflect the hopes and aspirations of a wide cross-section of its population. It can be a place that nurtures, trains, and develops talent. It can nurture the soul.

Some challenges are immediate, even practical. These resident regional theaters are housed in buildings as diverse in size and shape as their location. We

have birthed in this same time period thrust stages, arena stages, small theaters, black boxes, *and very few* conventional proscenium theaters. Our writers are therefore exploring ways to create new forms of realism, naturalism, expressionism, and theatricality that let us know we are in a theater and not in front of a movie or television screen.

Other challenges are intellectual or spiritual. The "death of Freud" and the journey through the Jungian jungle may lead us to a more mythic search to satisfy our spiritual hunger and needs. The desire to better come to grips with our political and social realities can lead writers to explorations and insights unattainable on *Nightline,* but possible also because of the new access to information that even Johnny Carson's nightly monologue provides.

Language and metaphor, technology in the service of (revealing, not dehumanizing) the individual, and acting that examines both the truth of human behavior and the extraordinary capacity of humans to perform with style, skill, and bravery—these are the possibilities that challenge the leadership of this network of theaters today in the United States.

Finally, the theater has to face its relationship and responsibility to the changing multicultural essence of this country. The challenges of nontraditional casting, of cross-cultural writing, and nonhomogeneous audiences are the big questions for the future. These volumes of famous American plays, impressive and important as they are, still reflect a harsh reality: in over seven decades, the collection contains only two black playwrights, no Hispanic or Asian-American writers, and only three women. These plays therefore reflect a theater in desperate need to get in touch with

its own heart and the heartbeat of the society in which it dwells. One can only imagine what future volumes will contain and what extraordinary leaps of imagination, heart, and mind they will reveal. One hopes the series will continue long into the twenty-first century as a tribute to a theater that reflects a diversity of ideas, a wealth of voices, and a fervent belief in the centrality of the art to all our lives.

—GORDON DAVIDSON