

Six Modern American Plays

The Emperor Jones

Winterset

The Man Who Came to Dinner

The Little Foxes

The Glass Menagerie

Mister Roberts

Introduction by Allan G. Halline



Modern Library College Edition

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SIX MODERN AMERICAN PLAYS

INTRODUCTION BY
ALLAN G. HALLINE



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INTRODUCTION

By

ALLAN G. HALLINE

Though the history of American drama dates from pre-Revolutionary days, our playwriting has achieved major significance only in the last three decades. The striking emergence of American drama into world recognition after World War I is explained in various ways: the victory America helped effect not only stimulated but also spotlighted our writers; the waxing and maturing nation inevitably produced an important theatre; the lashing by our own and foreign critics prodded us to greater effort; technical stage advances, growing audiences, and a flourishing English and continental drama posed a challenge to our native writers. These were undoubtedly factors in the upthrust of our drama, but one must not overlook the inexplicable insights and powers which dwell in the creative mind—these are often the real determining forces. Eugene O'Neill possessed these insights and powers in a superlative degree, and when they functioned under the stimulus of an exciting world, a new drama was born. The burgeoning of O'Neill's genius through succeeding decades produced the greatest single contribution to that new drama; it also charged the native theatre with such energy that other creative minds were impelled to significant activity. This does not mean that O'Neill became the leader of a school, for he had no actual imitators; but his daring and informed craft and his imaginative power stirred the American theatre as nothing else had. From this deep provocation came other

playwrights in the twenties who expanded O'Neill's challenge to a national achievement: (Maxwell Anderson) initiated his brilliant career with *What Price Glory?* in 1924; (Philip Barry) inaugurated his long line of expert social comedies with *You and I* in 1925; (Elmer Rice) experimented boldly in *The Adding Machine* (1923); (Sidney Howard) first gained recognition for his dramas of character with *They Knew What They Wanted* (1924); and (George S. Kaufman) vaulted into prominence as a comic satirist with *Dulcy* (1921).

Although the greatest excitement and expectancy, as well as a measure of fulfillment, came during the twenties, it was during the thirties that the most extensive and representative contribution to American drama was made. In that decade, characterized by range and maturity, the dramatists just named, together with S. N. Behrman, Robert E. Sherwood, Paul Green, and Lillian Hellman, fashioned new concepts in characterization, poetic drama, philosophic approach, expressionism, and comedy. These dramatists not only worked within traditional forms, but they also responded perceptively to European experiments in technique, often with variations that amounted to originality.

During the forties a notable and natural phenomenon occurred: World War II took immediate possession of our serious dramatists and relinquished them only gradually after the end of the war. This was in striking contrast to the situation during World War I, when our drama failed almost completely to respond to the crisis either during the conflict or in the years immediately following. The spirit of American drama had changed by the time of Munich: our playwrights were more alert to see significant dramatic material in the burning issues of the day. One phase of this phenomenon was that, though the

serious drama was dominated by the war, the comic drama largely avoided the topic until the end of hostilities: the war was too close and too terrible for light treatment. The latter part of the forties saw a ¹⁸spate of war comedies and the emergence of new writers of ¹⁸tragedy, notably Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. The theatre at the beginning of the fifties appears to be dominated by the success of the expert musical comedy; but a few of the older playwrights have held the attention of the public, and the younger writers of tragedy are fulfilling their early promise.

O'NEILL

Though O'Neill has had only ¹⁸one play on Broadway in the last fifteen years, he has not been ¹⁸superseded as America's foremost playwright. Even if he produces nothing ¹⁸more, he will not be dislodged from this position in the ¹⁸foreseeable future. The phenomenon of O'Neill cannot easily be ¹⁸explained. Several factors have already been ¹⁸cited which were ¹⁸conducive to the sudden upswing in American drama; other more specific factors which helped to shape O'Neill in particular are apparent when one considers his career. Spending his boyhood touring with his famous ¹⁸actor-father, James O'Neill, the youth early imbibed the magic of the theatre, though he did not at once go into the "profession." Following a Catholic schooling and a curtailed career at Princeton, O'Neill, under the spell of Conrad and Jack London, spent two years as a seaman ¹⁸on the far reaches of the Atlantic, an adventure which ¹⁸undermined his health and stocked his imagination. A brief stay in a ¹⁸sanitarium precipitated the decision to write plays; a year in Professor Baker's Workshop 47 at Harvard, followed by residence in Greenwich Village and in Provincetown, provided the training and outlets

which launched him on his career. Science and realism, European tradition and American pressures were ubiquitous and insistent. These were the external influences which played upon O'Neill, but more impressive in his work was the transfiguring operation of genius.

In the forecastles of freighters and in the back rooms of "Jimmy the Priest's," suffering and brutality, dissipation and despair flowed before the eyes of the sensitive writer, and much of what he saw entered into his soul. Whether this initial experience with sorrow and anguish was deepened by subsequent biographical events is not here inquired into; but it is clear that the large majority of O'Neill's plays, from apprentice one-acters to mature trilogy, are marked by brooding concern with the griefs and tortures of life.

It may be said that the most notable characteristics of O'Neill's work are: (1) an absorption in character, implemented by skill in subtle psychological analysis and a perception of a wide range of emotions; (2) a creative capacity for incorporating these analyses and perceptions into expressive human beings; (3) a constructive talent for leading these characters through intense conflicts; (4) a bold imaginativeness not only in using conventional dramatic devices in new ways but also in inventing devices to convey the values intended, with the result that most of his dramas are in part experimental; (5) a tendency to dwell upon the extremes of unhappiness; (6) an effort to interpret life in consonance with the findings of science, especially Freudian psychology, and at the same time a longing to find cosmic release in a mystical universe. These characteristics will be seen in a brief review of O'Neill's plays.

O'Neill's first full-length drama, *Beyond the Horizon* (1920), though mainly realistic, is experimental in its alternation of

indoor and outdoor scenes to suggest a rhythm in the lives of the characters. In this play, suggested by the life story of a sailor O'Neill had known, the frustrations which beset the characters are ravaging and final; the victims have no chance of overcoming their own natures and the environmental forces which press them down.

The inclusion of *The Emperor Jones* in this volume reflects the high favor in which the public has held this play since its first production in 1920. This success may be attributed to the combination of suspenseful plot and startling dramatic device: add to the basic story of flight and pursuit the pulse-compelling throb of the drum, the weird pantomimic imagery, the unfolding of personal and race memory through symbolistic monologue, and it is easily seen why *The Emperor Jones* has had many productions and has been widely acclaimed as a reading play.

In *Anna Christie* (1921) the realistic technique is chiefly employed, but the experimental approach appears in the personification of the sea as a means of vivifying an irony in the story: blame is placed on the sea whereas it is the land that has wrought the harm. Anna's improvement in character is brought about, to be sure, not simply by the influence of the sea, but by the devoted love of a man who is a product of the sea.

In considering *The Hairy Ape* (1922) it is pertinent to define the term *expressionism*, for this play is the purest example of the type that O'Neill wrote. Expressionism is a dramatic form which articulates ideas and emotions not normally expressed in the given situation; it employs such devices as soliloquies, heightened language, asides, masks, pantomime, choruses, suggestive scenery, lighting, costume, sound effects—all for the purpose of giving outward expression to thoughts and emotions

(of characters or author) which are normally unexpressed. In *The Hairy Ape* the feelings and attitudes of the characters, as well as the intent of the author, are brought out by heightened language, choral treatment of characters, distorted and symbolic sets, stylized acting. A majority of O'Neill's plays, it may be noted, are expressionistic in one degree or another.

O'Neill's interest in character is stressed in most of his plays. Character in relation to environment is treated in *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) in which the ¹¹³earthiness of the farm seems to permeate the characters. Expressionism is present in the cross-sectional set and in the embracing elms. One of O'Neill's two most searching studies of character is *The Great God Brown* (1926). In this play the approach is the idea that most persons change their characters according to the company they are in; the employment of masks in this play to mark the shift in basic character makes possible an unusually subtle analysis of both static and changing characters. The major theme of the play is the conflict between the ¹¹⁷introvert artist and the ¹¹⁸extrovert business man as they struggle for ¹¹⁹supremacy in love and occupation. The other play which is outstanding as a study of character is *Strange Interlude* (1928); this drama is noteworthy for three reasons: its probing analysis of emotion and thought; its tracing of character change through three decades; and its dramatization, by the use of asides, of the ¹²¹divergence between what we think and what we say. This ¹²²portrayal of character ¹²³duality gives the play its particular power. Less impressive with respect to character in ¹²⁴dissection but more suspenseful with respect to character in action, *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) tells the Agamemnon-Clytemnestra-Electra-Orestes story in terms of a Civil War homecoming, with character rather than fate as the shaping force. For sheer excitement of narra-

tive *Mourning Becomes Electra* is unsurpassed in O'Neill and seldom equaled by other playwrights. Character is subordinate to philosophy in O'Neill's last play, *The Iceman Cometh* (1947), for the main stress is on the necessity of illusion in the lives of disintegrated characters. The differentiation of character in the habits of Harry Hope's place is arbitrary and serves merely to demonstrate the universal utility of illusion. Though described as one of O'Neill's greatest plays by some critics, *The Iceman Cometh* is inferior in character analysis, emotional power, and dramatic effectiveness to *The Great God Brown*, *Strange Interlude*, or *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

Other plays of O'Neill's which illustrate his general qualities are the poetic, buoyant *The Fountain* (1926), the satiric *Marco Millions* (1927), the symbolic *Lazarus Laughed* (1927) and *Dynamo* (1929), the religious *Days Without End* (1934), and the entertaining *Ah, Wilderness!* (1933). These plays are not of equal importance, but they all reveal new facets of O'Neill's wide understanding and versatile art. His combination of character analysis, emotional power, masterly technique, and imaginative experimentation has made O'Neill not only America's greatest playwright but one of the two or three most important in the modern world.

ANDERSON

Maxwell Anderson, the playwright next in stature to O'Neill, has already produced a long sequence of significant plays and is still adding to his achievement. His dramas may be viewed as falling into five groups: (1) comedy and satiric drama; (2) historical tragedy; (3) contemporary drama and tragedy; (4) fantasy; and (5) musical drama. Though Anderson has achieved sufficient success in each of these fields to establish his versatil-

ity, his accomplishment is not equal in each group; to date his contributions to either the second or the third group are more important than his work in the other three combined.

Although his first produced drama, *White Desert* (1923), was a tragedy of pioneer life, Anderson came into prominence as the coauthor with Laurence Stallings of *What Price Glory?* (1924), a play which came to have a reputation of debunking war but which actually is more of a lustily realistic account of a curse-flinging friendship. It is true that the soldiers represented in the play are disillusioned about "fighting for democracy" and that the ugly aspects of war are exposed, but the dramatic interest centers in the personal feud between a captain and a sergeant, both professional soldiers, who revile each other off duty but who hold fast to each other under fire. Another satiric play was *Outside Looking In* (1925), based on Jim Tully's account of the tramp world, *Beggars of Life*. Anderson's domestic comedy, *Saturday's Children* (1927), is partly a conventional account of the bickering during the "first year" of married life and partly a toying with the idea that love succeeds best when the couple is unmarried. Although this was a popular play, Anderson did not write in the same vein again. Anderson's best satire, *Both Your Houses* (1933), is a somewhat pedestrian but nevertheless effective account of how the Washington lawmakers promote special interests and their own reelection by a variety of dishonest practices; the central action concerns a young and idealistic Congressman who hopes to defeat a pork-barrel bill by so loading it with preposterous appropriations that it will fall of its own weight—but the bill passes. The simplicity of the play's construction secures focus, and the plausibility of the speeches and action assures cogency.

In the field of historical tragedy, Anderson has made a notable

contribution. The distinctive qualities of these plays are: their presentation of historical personages in psychological terms that give the sense of present reality without destroying the illusion of the past; their skillful stagecraft which effectively makes use of conventional forms and introduces a few innovations; their frequent employment of blank verse; and their embodiment of Anderson's theory of tragedy which includes (a) the portrayal of an inner conflict between good and evil, (b) a protagonist of exceptional qualities who represents the forces of good and who wins, and (c) a protagonist who is not perfect at the beginning and who is ennobled in the course of the action. Anderson's first play in this group, *Elizabeth the Queen* (1930), is an account of the love-ambition contest between Elizabeth and Essex, done with the rapierlike precision of a courtier's duel; add to this the swift etching of the minor characters, and the result is a tense, polished drama. *Mary of Scotland* (1933) is the fullest expression of Anderson's theory of tragedy in its sympathetic portrayal of forbearing, sweet-tempered Mary who is ennobled in the face of death by her faith that she will in time's estimate be esteemed above the triumphant but treacherous Elizabeth. Though *The Wingless Victory* (1936) is historical in its treatment of the New England Puritan period, it falls short of true tragedy, for its central figure is neither an exceptional nor a sympathetic character. Included in the category of historical tragedy are also *The Masque of Kings* (1936), *Joan of Lorraine* (1946), and *Anne of the Thousand Days* (1948). *Joan of Lorraine* embodies an Anderson innovation in its use of a rehearsal to dramatize two divergent interpretations of Joan's essential nature; alternation of rehearsal scenes with playing scenes gives rise to a stirring analysis of the religious problem

involved. *Anne of the Thousand Days* adds to the conventional picture of the lustful Henry a brief account of his childish compositions in poetry and music, but its most memorable portrait is of Anne, who excitingly rebukes the royal pursuer while her own lover lives and who unflinchingly insists upon her rights until her influence with the king has expired. The drama fits Anderson's concept of tragedy in representing ennoblement of character: just before her execution Anne tells Henry that *he* is going to his death, and she to her expiation: "It involves dying to live." Henry is left in life to lug his bag of horrors behind him.

In the field of contemporary drama and tragedy Anderson's *Winterset* (1935) has remained the best known. This story of an American youth's effort to avenge his father's death, ending in the irony of his own death at the hands of the antagonists, invites comparison to *Hamlet*: although in Anderson's play the tragic hero is redeemed through love from the necessity of revenge, and is thus closer to modern psychology, yet he has neither the emotional nor intellectual stature of his prototype. The remainder of Anderson's plays in this category have to do with war themes. *Key Largo* (1939) depicts the effort of an American youth, who has failed his cause and his comrades in the Spanish Civil War, to redeem himself by risking his life for others purely from principle and not from passion. *Key Largo* is one of Anderson's significant plays in its dramatization of moral values and cosmic concepts in terms of melodramatic action. *Candle in the Wind* (1941) tells a story of the Nazi occupation of Paris; the more successful *The Eve of St. Mark* (1942) conducts an American boy from his home, through training camp, to a moral crisis in battle similar to the first scene in *Key Largo*.

Storm Operation (1944) is a technically correct but dramatically ineffective account of a military landing during World War II.

Though Anderson's plays in the fields of fantasy and music are less important than the foregoing, they reveal the scope of his talent. Fantasy is the dominant characteristic of *High Tor* (1937), a story of Dutch settlers and legends on the Hudson River, and it is also predominant in *The Star Wagon* (1937), a picture of what we might do had we our lives to live over again. The former play combines history and broad humor with its imaginative elements, but the latter is pure fantasy in form. *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938) is a musical comedy freely recreating Irving's pictures of early New York. Anderson's latest production, *Lost in the Stars* (1949), is a music drama of serious import, Kurt Weill contributing the music; it is based on Alan Paton's novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*. The drama is a compassionate account of white-Negro relations in South Africa and celebrates a white man's forgiveness, through understanding, of the Negro who murdered his son.

The solid, comprehensive, and often imaginative achievement of Anderson, whose work is shaped by high ideals, places this craftsman and poet near the top of American dramatists.

KAUFMAN and HART

For nearly thirty years George S. Kaufman has been the leading writer of satiric comedy in America. With the exception of the last decade he has produced at least one show a year, sometimes more, and on one occasion he had four shows playing simultaneously on Broadway, a feat equaled only by Clyde Fitch three decades earlier. Most of Kaufman's shows have been successes and an unusually high percentage of them have been

hits; he has also had widespread production on the semi-professional and amateur stage. The explanation of this phenomenal record seems to be that Kaufman gives fuller expression to the American comic spirit than anyone else; this spirit, as embodied in his plays, is a derisive but not bitter caricature, amplified by the ludicrous and spiced by sex. One is always aware in Kaufman's comedies that the objects of satire are deficient or aberrant in mental powers; yet there is a sympathy with them as human beings. Kaufman's caricature is grounded upon a detailed knowledge of human behavior, and by skillfully varying the degree of character distortion, the playwright secures the specific effect he wishes. Another of Kaufman's talents is an unflagging inventiveness in thinking up language, costumes, properties, sounds, pantomime, and situations that provoke humor.

Paradoxically, Kaufman is the most dependent and yet one of the most original of American playwrights. With one or two exceptions, all of his plays have been written in collaboration—a long-lasting reliance resorted to by no other American playwright. But in spite of the fact that he has had at least ten different collaborators, there is a recognizable dramatic quality common to every play. Only Kaufman could have supplied it. Although each of the collaborators must have brought markedly different talents and materials to the joint enterprise, yet it appears from Moss Hart's testimony^{J. D. A. 261} that every word of their final creation passed through the alembic of Kaufman's original and disciplined mind.

Kaufman's work falls chiefly into two groups: satiric comedies and satiric musical comedies. He has written a few plays which do not fit these categories, viz., *The American Way* (1939) with Moss Hart, a patriotic panoramic play; *Merrily We Roll Along* (1934) with Moss Hart, a study of character disintegration,

arranged in an inverted time sequence; *The Lana Is Bright* (1941) with Edna Ferber, a survey of three successive family generations; *The Small Hours* (1951), with Leueen McGrath, an account of a distraught wife who comes to realize that the problems of the other members of her family are greater than her own. The satiric comedies stress either character, situation, or general idea. The first of Kaufman's character satires, written with Marc Connelly, was *Dulcy* (1921), so far the best stage portrayal of the "bromidic" mind; *The Royal Family* (1928) with Edna Ferber extends the character satire to a whole stage family, the Barrymores. *Dinner at Eight* (1932) with Edna Ferber applies the scalpel treatment to a pair of social climbers and an assortment of others; *First Lady* (1935) with Katharine Dayton ridicules scheming politicians; *Stage Door* (1936) with Edna Ferber is an unimpressive picture of actress life in a boarding house; *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1939) with Moss Hart is the most brilliant of all the character satires and a masterpiece of invective. The flexibility of Kaufman's satiric skill may be seen particularly in *The Late George Apley* (1944) in which the author's characteristic boisterous manner is groomed down, no doubt by collaborator John Marquand, upon whose novel the play is based.

Kaufman's satiric comedies which stress situation include: *To the Ladies* (1922) with Marc Connelly, an American version of Barrie's *What Every Woman Knows*; *Merton of the Movies* (1922) with Marc Connelly, in which an actor who thinks he is a tragedian succeeds only in being a comedian; and *You Can't Take It With You* (1936) with Moss Hart, a potpourri of antic episodes. Several of the satiric comedies center about general ideas or conditions. The earliest of these plays, *Beggar on Horseback* (1925) with Marc Connelly, remains one of the

best; ingenious and provocative, it employs a clever dream sequence in which a sensitive, aspiring composer finds himself in the clutches of materialism and mass production. Kaufman and Hart's first collaboration, *Once In a Lifetime* (1930), mocks the superficialities of Hollywood; *George Washington Slept Here* (1940), with Moss Hart, mildly satirizes pride in place and tradition.

The second major category of Kaufman's plays is satirical musical comedies; in some of these the satiric element is subordinated to the musical, but in one or two the biting sting of satire is as strong as in the straight plays. Included in this major category are: *Animal Crackers* (1928) with Morrie Ryskind; *Of Thee I Sing* (1931) with Morrie Ryskind, a brilliant political satire; *The Band Wagon* (1931), a revue written with Howard Dietz; *Let 'Em Eat Cake* (1933) with Morrie Ryskind, another political satire; *I'd Rather Be Right* (1937) with Moss Hart, a caricature of Roosevelt; and *Park Avenue* (1946).

Though stress has here been placed upon the career of Kaufman, the achievement of Moss Hart must not be underestimated. Of all Kaufman's collaborators he has been the most frequent and one of the most successful; it must be remembered that *Once In A Lifetime* was originally Hart's play and that the collaboration was in fact a rewriting. In their subsequent work Hart has been a full-fledged partner; Kaufman speaks of the prodigality of Hart's mind and calls him "forked lightning." As a writer independent of Kaufman, Hart has had a creditable career of his own. His *Lady in the Dark* (1941) is an ingenious dramatization of psychiatry in which deftly told story scenes alternate with flamboyant dream sequences set to music by Kurt Weill with lyrics by Ira Gershwin. The music drama had an unusually successful run. Hart's next play, *Winged Victory*