

Chicago, Greenwich Village and Provincetown: American theatre becomes little

Daniel Sampey

ABSTRACT

At the outset of the 20th century, dozens of small theatre companies sprang up across the United States. Towards the end of the 1910s, divisions began to emerge in many of these organizations. These splits may be categorized generally as between a politically radical or artistically experimental faction against a more traditional contingent seeking the larger audiences which would be attracted by higher production values. By the 1980s the Provincetown Players had become little more than a footnote in canonical American theatre history as the group that produced Eugene O'Neill's first plays. Since then, however, another account has come forth that suggests a larger significance for the group. This narrative centers on George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell's dissatisfaction with the commercial ambitions the Washington Square Players and their decision to split from them. This story of the Provincetown group also features the fundamental contributions of women, particularly that of established novelist Glaspell, in all aspects of production during the early years of the Provincetown Players. The formative roles of women in other early 20th century American companies will be touched upon in this paper as well.

KEYWORDS

American drama, little theatre movement, Provincetown Players, Susan Glaspell, George Cram Cook, Eugene O'Neill

Stephen Watt outlines two distinct yet intertwining narratives, both problematic, that have emerged over the years describing the “difficult birth of modern American drama.” The present paper will use and critique elements of each “familiar story” in an account of the development of certain regional amateur theatrical groups which formed across America throughout the first decades of the 20th century.

One of these narratives is centered on Broadway: the reason that theatrical production and literature resisted change for so long (as opposed to other forms such as American poetry and fiction) was because of “nineteenth-century audiences and the economics of theatrical practices designed to appeal to them.” Watt characterizes a need at the turn of the 20th century to break away from what English designer Gordon Craig referred to as a “perishable” theatre of empty, but “sumptuous and expensive productions.”¹ In *The Theatre – Advancing* (1919) Craig contrasts a “durable” theatre of “Truth (or Reality if you prefer [...]),” a stage of true challenges, feeling and even participation for audiences.²

A second account chronicles “the emergence at the end of the nineteenth century of a realistic drama to counteract melodrama’s excesses – and defects.”³ As Watt points

1 Stephen Watt, “Modern American Drama,” *The Cambridge Companion to American Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 102-126 Watt calls for the weaving “of a kind of revisionist narrative, [...] one less concerned with the evaluation or assessment of aesthetic value and more concerned with the cultural work that modernism and modern drama sought to accomplish. To be sure, this work enacts a revolt from both orthodox aesthetics and dominant ideology.” 104-105, 108.

2 Edward Gordon Craig, *The Theatre – Advancing* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1919), 11-12.

3 Watt, “Modern American Drama,” 111-113.

out, citing Thomas Postlewait, the difficulty with this narrative is that even today “we can find melodramatic elements in realistic drama and realistic elements in melodramatic plays.”⁴ This can be seen readily in, for example, huge permanently-running Broadway spectacles such as *The Lion King* and *Annie* with their easily definable heroes and villains. Despite what may seem like (in Raymond Williams’ terminology) emergent but what are essentially superficial (not to mention marketable) nods at multiculturalism, audiences at these extravaganzas undoubtedly seek the comforting repetitive reinforcement of the dominant ideology.⁵

Origins and influences

In the wake of other reformist settlement communities of the period, in 1899 Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr founded the Hull House complex in Chicago. Later that same year Addams and Starr established an amateur theater at Hull House “not only as an agent of recreation and education, but as a vehicle of self-expression for the teeming young life all about us.”⁶ Plays presented there included storylines featuring the overlooked contributions of women throughout history as well as “educat[ing] individuals on cultures other than their own.”⁷ The goals were traditional progressive ones connected to economic and social justice, but the productions themselves, including the realistic plays chosen, did not experiment formally with theatrical conventions of the day.

Following a long tradition throughout the United States during the late 19th century of “parlor theatricals,” in 1909 The Players formed in Providence, Rhode Island; two years later the Wisconsin Dramatic Society came together in Madison and Milwaukee.⁸ Some of these activities were “to compensate for a lack of rural folk games,”⁹ others later to attract patrons away from what were seen as morally-corrupting silent film houses.¹⁰ Dozens of companies, largely outside of New York, formed as a response against

“conventional formulas of conventional success” reproduced in grand theatres largely controlled by the Theatrical Syndicate of established owners and producers.¹¹

The 1911 American tour of Dublin’s Abbey Theatre seems to be a seminal event, one which inspired many organizations to form the following year in larger cities across the country like Chicago, Seattle and Detroit. The Toy Theatre in Boston was the first of a number of smaller companies in urban areas started by professional and semi-professional theatre practitioners and writers, including the Boston imagist poet Amy Lowell.¹²

Founded in 1912 by the English “literary rebel” Maurice Browne, the Chicago Little Theatre is one of the most famous of these groups. Chasing actress Ellen Von Volkenberg from Florence, Browne had arrived in Chicago in 1910, where he “gave a series of controversial lectures on such vanguard writers as Wilde, Shaw and H.G. Wells.”¹³ Co-founder of the Abbey Lady Augusta Gregory urged Browne to

avoid “spoiled” professionals, and to overcome lack of money with originality. Most importantly, she advised him not to confuse “theatric with literary values” and to remember “that poetry must serve the theatre before it can again rule there.”¹⁴

During its five years of operation the Chicago Little Theatre staged 130 productions, many of which “plays never before seen in America [...] often in ways seldom seen before,” including “puppet and dance theatre.” The eclectic range of performances in the 91-seat venue influenced what Charles Lock defines as a “politics of modernism” based on the “little” which would in turn affect literary production through a new generation of dozens of magazines.¹⁵ One notable Chicago literary magazine of the period that featured unconventional dramas was *Poetry*, founded by Harriet Monroe in 1912 and still published today. *The Little Review*, established by Margaret Anderson in 1914, moved to Greenwich Village, New York three years later. The same year Ezra Pound became the publication’s “foreign editor.”

Greenwich Village nuts

In 1914 members of the Liberal Club, an assemblage of radicals, artists, journalists and novelists in Greenwich Village began to consider ways of expressing “avant-garde ideas

4 Thomas Postlewait, cited in Watt, “Modern American Drama,” 114.

5 Such typically American good guy/ bad guy narratives (Puritan/ heathen, frontiersman/ Indian, capitalist/ communist, freedom-loving democrat/ tyrannical terrorist) are what Jeffery Mason calls “a means of affirming a belief in a reductive perception of reality.” (Cited in Watt, “Modern American Drama,” 113) These mythologies are obviously ever-evolving, as the intolerant Puritan becomes the villain in many contemporary stories and the Native American emerges as the hero in others. Theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco describe how these “hyperreal” simplifications and binaries are also propagated and marketed in the mass media, for example in mainstream television news as well as in Hollywood and Hollywood-style films.

6 “They present all sorts of plays from melodrama and comedy to those of Shaw, Ibsen, and Galsworthy. The latter are surprisingly popular, perhaps because of their sincere attempt to expose the shams and pretenses of contemporary life and to penetrate into some of its perplexing social and domestic situations.” Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: MacMillan, 1912).

7 Daniel Levine, *Jane Addams and the Liberal Tradition*, (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1971) Cited in Nichole Bettis, “Jane Addams” in Women’s Intellectual Contributions to the Study of Mind and Society (Webster University) <<http://www.webster.edu/~woolfm/janeaddams.html>>

8 Don B. Wilmeth, “Community theatre/ Little Theatre movement,” *The Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 105-106.

9 Travis Bogard, *Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O’Neill* (New York: Oxford University Press. 1972), 66.

10 Gerald Bordman and Thomas S. Hischak, “Little Theatre in America,” *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre* (New York: Oxford University Press. 2004), 435.

11 “At a secret meeting in 1895, the owners of the vast majority of American theatres covertly entered into an agreement to control competition and prices.” Stephen Watt and Gary Richardson, *American Drama: Colonial to Contemporary* (Cambridge MA: Heinle and Heinle, 2003), 152.

12 Travis Bogard, Introduction to Jackson Bryer, ed. *The Theatre We Worked For: The Letters of Eugene O’Neill to Kenneth Macgowan* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1982), 4-9.

13 Lesley Lee Francis, “The *New Numbers* Poets and the Chicago Little Theatre,” Dartmouth College Library Bulletin, (2011) Web 22 January 2011. <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~library/Library_Bulletin/Nov1999/Francis.html>

14 Watt, “Modern American Drama,” 110. Quotes by Lady Gregory originally cited in Charles Lock, “Maurice Browne and the Chicago Little Theatre,” *Modern Drama* 31 (March 1988): 106-112.

15 Lock, cited in Watt “Modern American Drama,” 110. Watt relates this attitude back to William Butler Yeats, quoting an 1897 letter from the Irishman to a friend: “We have a literature for the people but nothing yet for the few.” The sentiment expressed here is trenchant considering the challenges the Abbey would encounter when faced with public reactions to the staging of certain works by Synge and Shaw. This stereotypically modernist idea of so-called high art for the elite as an alternative to the products of mass markets has been criticized by theorists of the postmodern for its naïveté. This struggle between art, politics and commerce proved a defining one of the period.

in theatrical terms."¹⁶ A doorway had been just cut through the adjoining wall of the club and the Washington Square Book Shop, recently opened up by the Boni Brothers. Albert Boni, future publisher of works by Leon Trotsky,¹⁷ had attended Harvard with Liberal Club member Robert Edmond Jones, himself recently returned from Europe. There Jones had been denied a meeting with Gordon Craig, designed the set for a production on Shelley's *The Cenci* in Florence and spent a year observing the work of Max Reinhardt. Along with other patrons, Laurence Langner and free-lance journalist Edward Goodman proposed staging a production in the shop, which

consisted of two large rooms, each thirty feet square, with ceilings fourteen feet high. They were divided by sliding mahogany doors, whose frames, Jones decreed, would serve as the proscenium. *The Glittering Gate*, by Lord Dunsany [...] was selected as the vehicle because of its brevity and the presence of several copies of the play on the shop's shelves.¹⁸

Over the next few months, through two more evenings of theatrical programs in the book shop, a diverse gathering of artists and amateurs began to sell subscriptions, finally raising enough funding to rent the 299-seat Bandbox theatre three miles from Washington Square. The first program, designed by Jones and consisting of three one-acts written by members, along with *Interior* by Belgian symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck, played to a sold-out house and received glowing critical praise. On the same bill was *Another Interior*, set in a human stomach. The hero Gastric Juice bravely fends off the villainous dishes consumed at dinner until he is finally done in by a "vividly colored cordial."¹⁹

According to a contemporary commentator on the first season, while "the plays themselves were all vital, full of meaning, or full of racy fun, and the settings were unusual and arresting," not until the third bill was there "sustained practice in acting [...]" which could compare with professional work." After three more seasons with productions of native originals such as Eugene O'Neill's *In the Zone* and Elmer Rice's *The Home of the Free* as well as European works like Chekov's *The Seagull*, Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and Ibsen's *Ghosts*, the company was at a crossroads, with a major problem seen as the mixture of "both amateur and professional actors with unsatisfactory results."²⁰ Another source of conflict was the company's "predilection [...]" for foreign plays,"²¹ an especially sensitive area as debates fueled by nativist anti-German sentiment raged across the United States about the country's entry into World War II.²²

A 1917 piece for *Theater Magazine* fittingly entitled "Two Interviews" describes a split emerging within the Washington Square Players. Co-founder (and future director of several successful productions of O'Neill plays) Philip Moeller described the Washington

Square Players' need to "assert the rights of the human soul." He was a bit more concrete about the problems of American theatre

[which] has no place for the subtler nuances of drama. The whole system is wrong. The acting is mechanical, the production lifeless and the scenery [...] positively mid-Victorian. The trouble is that the whole system is commercial. The American theatre is aiming at nothing but the dollar.

From his suite of offices in downtown Manhattan, founding member Goodman was now distinguishing between his own organization and more recently established theater companies.

We view with alarm the growing tendency of half-baked amateurs to usurp the field properly belonging to the trained professional. [...] They suppose that what they call inspiration will take the place of years of practical experience behind the footlights. [...] I notice there is another company starting up in Greenwich Village, where most of the crackbrained schemes originate. Its directors complain that the American theater is becoming commercial. Commercial! They forget that every good theater is a commercial. There is just one test of excellence in dramatic art – the box office!

In the same article, Langner described "trying to think of a scheme for keeping our subscription list to the really nice people. It doesn't look right to have those Greenwich Village nuts overrunning the place. It makes us look as though we were just one of those amateur art theaters."²³

Those "Greenwich Village nuts" who had been Langner's colleagues just a few years earlier at the Liberal Club had become unwelcome not only on the basis of artistic differences. Within American liberal intellectual circles a divide had emerged between progressives who opposed the United States entry into the war in 1917, perhaps best represented by Randolph Bourne of *Seven Arts* magazine, against those like pragmatist John Dewey who saw the war as an opportunity to change the system from within.²⁴

By 1917 Constance D'Arcy Mackay's survey *The Little Theatre in the United States* was able to describe one of "the newest, freest, most potent and democratic forces in the

23 Gelb and Gelb, *O'Neill*, 489-491.

24 David M. Kennedy, *Over Here*. Dewey assumed President Woodrow Wilson would share his view that the war period was a "plastic juncture" (50) during which important causes of progressive agenda could be furthered, including "the settlement house movement, to the campaigns against civic corruption and corporate power, to the struggles for political reform and economic justice, for workers' rights and immigrant education, to all the schemes to civilize the cities and to tame capitalism." (49) According to Professor Kennedy, Bourne's cynical prediction that the war was not one to preserve democracy but to enrich Eastern industrialists was, as it turned out, closer to the truth. (51-52) Wilson soon allied himself with conservative interests and sought to use the twin weapons of the education system and public relations to "'nationalize' the consciousness" of a population that contained millions of newly-arrived immigrants toward "like-mindedness" in support of the war effort. (46-47) Jane Addams, like others who remained opposed to America's involvement, earned violent acrimony and even threats in the mainstream press. Addams commented on a production of a version of Euripides' *The Trojan Women* which Hull House had produced in 1915 with the Chicago Little Theatre in the midst of nationwide debates over "preparedness:" "An audience invariably fell into a solemn mood as the age-old plaint of war-weary women cheated even of death, issued from the darkened stage, reciting not the glory of War, but 'shame and blindness and a world swallowed up in night.'" *Peace and Bread in Time of War* (New York: Macmillan, 1922) Questia.com. Assessed December 25, 2010. <<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=101410685>>

16 "With the motto, 'A Meeting Place for Those Interested in New Ideas,' the club [...] was a home away from home for the likes of Edna St. Vincent Millay and Upton Sinclair." Arthur Gelb and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill: Life With Monte Cristo* (New York: Applause, 2000), 486-487.

17 Herbert Mitgang, "Albert Boni, Publisher, Dies," *New York Times*, 1 August 1981. Assessed January 4, 2010. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1981/08/01/obituaries/albert-boni-publisher-dies-founder-of-boni-liveright.html>>

18 Gelb and Gelb, *O'Neill*, 485, 488.

19 William Pritchard Eaton, "The Lesson of the Washington Square Players" (1916) *Theatre History Pages*, Wayne S. Turney. Assessed January 5, 2010. <<http://www.wayneturney.20m.com/washingtonsquare.htm>>

20 Bogard, *Contour*, 175.

21 Bogard, *Contour*, 68.

22 David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 18-25.

art of the American Stage” against the “arch foe of commercialism.”²⁵ In the same year Sheldon Cheney’s *The Art Theatre* criticized “the progressive theatre movement in this country” for its “failure to know and find inspiration in the outstanding art theatres of Europe.”²⁶

A division was reenacted over and over within numerous organizations across America between a more politically radical or artistically experimental faction against a generally larger, more conservative contingent wanting the bigger audiences which would be attracted by higher production values. Another goal of the traditional coalitions was undoubtedly avoiding political (and related commercial) problems of seeming to support “hyphenated Americanism.”²⁷

Many splinter groups left the bigger companies to form their own. The most successful of these new organizations, for example the Group Theatre, which eventually formed in 1931, were socially radical, however, not formally experimental. Observers have commented on the lack of truly avant-garde theatrical movements of the sort appearing in waves throughout Europe since the symbolists in the 1880s. In America, even in the most far-reaching formal experiments that were to come during the 1920s, theatre practitioners worked

within a basically realistic framework and psychological character structure. Themes that would have been easily recognizable to Ibsen – questions of morality, social responsibility, the individual versus the society at large, and familial relationships – remained clear and dominant. [...] Avant-garde elements could be found *within* the new plays, not as a *basis* of creating the plays. The fundamental building blocks of a European avant-garde became mere stylistic conceits in the hands of most American playwrights [, whose works] remained within the establishment; Broadway welcomed every new generation and easily absorbed whatever changes or permutations each had to offer.

Artists of the time, as Arnold Aronson contends, had no problem with the theatre as it existed “per se, but with contemporary production practices.” The struggle was seen as only incidentally political, a “need for art to take precedence over commerce.”²⁸ This reasoning of course maintains a strict division, similar in some respects to a separation of high and low art, a distinction to be examined during the next decades by critics associated with the Frankfurt School. Attitudes exhibited assume what Richard Murphy (citing Peter Bürger and Jürgen Habermas) refers to as aesthetic autonomy or “l’art pour l’art” associated with the decadent movement in Europe at the end of the 19th century. Murphy critiques “aestheticism’s blank rejection of any need to react to” the larger society

as well as the movement’s lack of “self-criticism” of art as an institution, which would only come with Dada a decade or so later.²⁹

A community of feeling and endeavor

By 1918, the Washington Square Players had declared themselves to be completely professional, changing their name to the Theatre Guild; they “kept a press book and invited critics to first nights.”³⁰ But long before this, member George Cram Cook, novelist, poet, playwright and enthusiast of Ancient Greece, had become disenchanted with the group’s “business motives.” The Players had rejected Cook and Susan Glaspell’s *Suppressed Desires* as being “too much of a departure.” The play was staged at the Liberal Club in March 1915, and, with a coterie of like-minded individuals, the newly married pair of writers decided to start Cook’s own “dream city,” a theatre “without the commercial thing imposed from without.”³¹

Unlike many of the Greenwich Village crowd, Cook was interested in neither American nor international politics. Nevertheless, he claimed to favor native dramas as opposed to the “predilection of the Washington Square Players for foreign plays,” although, as Travis Bogard contends, the “purposes of the theatre closest to his heart were less literary.”³² Cook spoke about establishing a theatre that was first and foremost a “community of feeling and endeavor.”

One man [...] cannot produce drama. True drama is born only of one feeling animating all the members of a clan – a spirit shared by all and expressed by the few for the all. If there is nothing to take the place of common religious purpose and passion of the primitive group out of which the Dionysian dance was born, no vital drama can arise in any people.³³

According to Doris Alexander, Cook had twice caught a glimpse of “what a modern theater might be,” once when communist journalist John Reed “brought two thousand embattled strikers from the Patterson Silk Mills over to Madison Square Garden and had them act out their struggle; second, when he went to the old Jewish theater on Henry Street.”³⁴ Witnessing the “restrained acting style and [unpretentious] production values” of the Abbey Theatre in its stop in Chicago during its 1911 tour of America also had a profound influence on Glaspell and Cook.³⁵ Glaspell would later recall how “[q]uite

25 Constance D’Arcy Mackay, *The Little Theatre in the United States* (New York: Henry Holt, 1917) Preface, 1. Questia.com. Assessed December 21, 2010. <<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=55376191>>

26 Not one of these local leaders but acknowledges his debt to Gordon Craig, takes off his hat to Stanislavsky, calls Copeau brother, or remembers with a thrill the visit of the Irish Players.” Sheldon Cheney, *The Art Theatre* (New York: Knoff, 1917), 37. Assessed December 21, 2010. <http://books.google.com/books?id=VONRh8434isC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false>

27 Robert A. Ferguson describes how since the times of the Revolution, for Americans “factionalism is and remains their clearest enemy. Indeed, the possibility of collapse through internal dissention continues to haunt both political considerations and the literary imagination.” “We Hold These Truths” in *Reconstructing American Literary History*, ed. Sacvan Bercovich (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press), 4. This would soon come to include anti-Bolshevist prejudices fueled by grotesque exaggerations in the mainstream press about the threat of violence posed by unionists, “sowing seeds of doubt even among working people themselves. [...] By the fall of 1919, [historian Robert K.] Murray notes, all strikes were regularly branded ‘plots to establish communism.’” (David M. Kennedy, *Over Here*, 291)

28 Arnold Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 2-3.

29 Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 6-8.

30 Bogard, *Contour*, 67, 457, 465-471. Long after rejecting several plays by Eugene O’Neill, the Guild in 1928 began a string of seven productions of what would become some of O’Neill’s most enduring works including *Strange Interlude* (1928), *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), as well as the first (relatively unsuccessful) production of *The Iceman Cometh* (1946). The Washington Square Players had debuted O’Neill’s “S.S. Glencairn” play *In the Zone* in 1917.

31 Gelb and Gelb, *O’Neill*, 493.

32 Bogard, *Contour*, 68. Bogard generally underestimates the contributions of by-then twice-published novelist Susan Glaspell during the early history of the Provincetown Players.

33 Cook quoted in *The Road to the Temple* (1926) by Susan Glaspell. Cited in Bogard, *Contour*, 68-69. Bogard goes further, maintaining that to Cook “the group came first, the theatre second.”

34 Doris Alexander, *The Tempering of Eugene O’Neill* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), 221

35 In addition, the influence of the Abbey Theatre’s 1911 engagement in New York on O’Neill has been well documented. O’Neill saw all of the productions presented by the Abbey during its six-week stay, including works by Lady Gregory, *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, Shaw’s *The Shewing Up of Blanco Posnet*, as well as two plays by Lennox Robinson and one work each by William Boyle and T.C. Murray. Ritschel summarizes the work

possibly there would have been no Provincetown Players had there not been [what in America were called] the Irish players. What [Cook] saw done for Irish life he wanted for American life – no stage conventions in the way of projecting with the humility of true feeling.”³⁶

Cook, called “Jig” by his friends, asked all of them to “express their avant-garde ideas in the form of one-act plays” for a group they would form in Provincetown, where Glaspell and Cook had been vacationing the past few years. The Massachusetts fishing village in 1899 had been declared an “artists’ colony” by painter Charles Webster Hawthorne. By 1915 “a sprinkling of artists and writers” along with expatriate Americans fleeing Europe at the start of the war were making the town their permanent home.³⁷

On July 15th in the cottage of Neith Boyce and her husband radical writer Hutchins Hapgood, a double bill of Boyce’s *Constancy* and *Suppressed Desires* was hosted. Robert Edmond Jones, who was staying in Provincetown that summer, created two playing spaces in the living room; when *Constancy* had ended, the patrons turned their chairs around “to face an alcoved room representing a studio in Washington Square,” where Glaspell and Cook performed their play, a third role played by Glaspell’s “dearest friend” at the time, Lucy Huffaker. Glaspell wrote how the neighbors who had not been invited to the show were “hurt.”³⁸ Later that summer “a five-dollar contribution from each of the thirty members” funded the transformation of a “two story shell perched on pilings” on Cape Cod Bay into what Cook called the Wharf Theater.

When both doors were open, a realistic sea-backdrop was exposed that no producer could have bettered: the vast bay, dotted with blinking lights of passing vessels, and swept by the lighthouse beacon across the harbor. [...] There was not enough lumber on hand in Provincetown to build seats [...] and patrons were obliged to carry their own chairs to and from the theater. They also had to carry umbrellas on opening night, against a heavy rainfall – which, at least, safeguarded them from fire, a constant threat.³⁹

The first night of what would the following year be named the Provincetown Players was held in August. Almost one hundred people squeezed into the 25 by 35 foot fish house. A brief description of the four short works presented that evening, none of which contain formal theatrical experiments, reflects how the community of artists and radicals on stage and off “liked to make fun of its own current interests.”⁴⁰ In *Suppressed Desires*

of several scholars on the effect of the “folk lyricism” of Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* on O’Neill, especially on his first notable work *Bound East for Cardiff*. Ritschel also comments on the American Catholic protests of *The Playboy of the Western World*, one of four of J.M. Synge’s works presented at the time. Demonstrations in 1924 against the debuts of both O’Neill’s *All God’s Chillun’ Got Wings* and *Desire Under the Elms* would guarantee the productions sell out houses in the same way that *Playboy* sold out in New York and Philadelphia in 1911. Nelson O’Ceallaigh Ritschel, “Synge and the Irish Influence of the Abbey Theatre on Eugene O’Neill.” In *Eugene O’Neill Review* 29 (2007): Assessed February 7, 2011. <<http://www.eoneill.com/library/review/29/29h.htm>>

36 Cited in John P. Harrington, “The Abbey in America: The Real Thing,” *Irish Theatre on Tour*, ed. Nicholas Grene and Chris Morash, Dublin: Carysfort, 2005. 35-50. Quote cited in Ritschel, “Synge and the Irish Influence of the Abbey Theatre on Eugene O’Neill.” <<http://www.eoneill.com/library/review/29/29h.htm>>

37 Gelb and Gelb, *O’Neill*, 495.

38 Cited in Jeff Kennedy, “Suppressed Desires,” ProvincetownPlayhouse.com. 2007. Assessed December 12, 2010 <<http://provincetownplayhouse.com/suppresseddesires.html>>

39 Gelb and Gelb, *O’Neill*, 495-497.

40 Thomas Tanselle, “George Cram Cook and the Poetry of Living, with a Checklist,” *Books at Iowa* 24 (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1976) Assessed October 25, 2010. <<http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/spec-coll/Bai/tanselle.htm>>

Henrietta proclaims her firm belief in psychoanalysis: “I rather have my hand in at hearing the unbelievable.”

Her architect husband Stephen is becoming tired of Henrietta’s constant invocation of “Freud, the new messiah” and “Jung, the new St. Paul.”⁴¹ In diagnoses the couple has heard about, one woman has a hidden wish to leave her husband and another has a “desire for her employer.” Henrietta’s sister Mabel has also been having dreams which Henrietta quickly deduces are a result of her suppressed longing to leave her own husband, a dentist. Stephen decides to be secretly analyzed. Even when the result is that Stephen’s dream of walls enclosing him symbolizes his wish fulfillment to escape marriage, Henrietta holds on to her faith.

HENRIETTA: If you are going, I wish you would go to-night!

STEVE: Oh, my dear! I – surely I couldn’t do that! Think of my feelings. And my laundry hasn’t come home.

HENRIETTA: I ask you to go to-night. Some women would falter at this, Steve, but I am not such a woman. I leave you free. I do not repudiate psychoanalysis; I say again that it has done great things. It has also made mistakes, of course. But since you accept this analysis – (She sits down and pretends to begin work) I have to finish this paper. I wish you would leave me.⁴²

It is not until Mabel is diagnosed with a “secret desire for Stephen” that Henrietta suddenly reverses, becoming agitated and finally announcing that she will “burn the Journal of Morbid Psychology.” Stephen’s curtain line when Mabel asks what she should do with her newly-uncovered desire is “You just keep right on suppressing it.”⁴³

It is enough here to emphasize the at-the-time traditional and non-traditional aspects of the characterizations. Stephen’s text is the skeptical voice of moderation in opposition to Henrietta’s obsession with a new science. But Henrietta seems the stronger or at least the more stubborn of the two, and her work, the paper she is writing for the Liberal Club, is taken seriously by her husband. Although the climax of the play relies on Henrietta’s reversion to a (rather stereotypical) jealous emotional state, it is she who controls the story throughout and at curtain.

Constancy is a work “spoofing the love affair” of a New Woman with a younger man who has other lovers but, as he says, “would always come back” to her. She ends the relationship with him, but he cannot understand her change of heart, calling her instead of himself “inconstant.”⁴⁴ One telling 1982 criticism of the play is that the woman’s firm resolve makes the drama’s conflict weak.⁴⁵ This view would have Boyce more interested in staging her protagonist’s decisiveness than in exploring the nuances of the situation.

41 George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell, *Suppressed Desires* in George Cram Cook and Frank Shay, ed. *The Provincetown Plays* (Cincinnati: Stewart Kidd, 1921) 17 Open Library. Assessed January 25, 2011. <http://openlibrary.org/books/OL7110581M/The_Provincetown_plays>

42 Cook and Glaspell, *Suppressed Desires*, 34-35.

43 Cook and Glaspell, *Suppressed Desires*, 44.

44 The male character was based on John Reed. Neith Boyce, *Constancy*. Cited in Jeff Kennedy, “Constancy,” ProvincetownPlayhouse.com. 2007. Assessed December 12, 2010. <<http://provincetownplayhouse.com/constancy.html>>

45 Robert K. Sarlós, *Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players: Theatre in Ferment* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 14. Cited in Jeff Kennedy, “Constancy,” ProvincetownPlayhouse.com. 2007. Assessed December 12, 2010. <<http://provincetownplayhouse.com/plays.html>>

The last two plays on opening night also show the range of interests of the Provincetown Players. Cook's satire *Change Your Style* "debated, with somewhat forced humor, the merits of Post-Impressionism as opposed to the scorned academic school of art" – hardly the stuff of popular entertainment. *Contemporaries*, a "parable" by Wilbur Daniel Steele comparing the persecution of Jesus Christ to the harassment of a labor organizer defending a group of homeless men taking shelter in New York churches in winter, was the final drama on the bill.⁴⁶

"We need not be held in forms moulded for us."

In the summer of 1916 the second season in the Wharf Theater, which included newcomer Eugene O'Neill's *Bound East for Cardiff*, was successful enough to encourage the Provincetown Players to move to a converted parlor apartment on the first floor in an 1840 brownstone in Greenwich Village. After two years and productions of four plays by Susan Glaspell, including the satires *Close the Book* and *The People*, plus two dramas by recent immigrant from the Russian empire Mike Gold, six more one-acts by Eugene O'Neill and several works by other members of the Players, the company was prosperous enough to move three doors down the block to a small theatre.

Of the nineteen plays produced during the second New York season, eight were written by women; during the first year after the move to the larger performance space, eight of fourteen works presented had female authors. Productions during the following three seasons of the Players included Edna St. Vincent Millay's pacifist verse play *Aria de Capo*,⁴⁷ three works by Djuna Barnes (who was with the group during the season of 1919-1920), a play by Theodore Dreiser as well as Wallace Stevens' Zen-influenced *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise*.⁴⁸ Throughout the first six seasons in Massachusetts and New York, the Provincetown Players produced nine dramas by Glaspell, two co-written by her, as well as fifteen O'Neill one acts.

Cheryl Black outlines the conflicts over the years between those moving toward "realist works to draw larger, more mainstream audiences" and those who favored greater experimentation. She describes the evolution of the Provincetown Players in the context of similar modernist movements, comparing the literary magazine *Others*, founded in 1915 by poet Alfred Kreymborg. Black highlights the struggle between those favoring representational naturalism and supporters of presentational verse drama, pointing out how twelve of the poets featured in *Others* also staged plays at the New York Provincetown. These writers formed their own group, The Other Players, to stage works at the Playhouse in 1918.⁴⁹

46 Gelb and Gelb, *O'Neill*, 497.

47 Algonquin Round Table member and critic for *The New Yorker* Alexander Woollcott called *Aria de Capo* "the most beautiful and interesting play in the English language now to be seen in New York." (*New York Times*, 14 December 1919) Cited in Jeff Kennedy, "History," ProvincetownPlayhouse.com. 2007. Provincetown Playhouse.com. 2007. Assessed December 12, 2010. <<http://provincetownplayhouse.com/history.html>>

48 "The characters are three Chinese, two negroes and a girl." Wallace Stevens, *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise* in Harriet Jacobs, ed. *Poetry* 8:4, Chicago, July 1916. Original text scanned on Brown University Library web page. Assessed January 19, 2011. <<http://dl.lib.brown.edu/pdfs/1212149523703125.pdf>>

49 Marcia Noe, Review of *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity* by Brenda Murphy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) in *Eugene O'Neill Review* 29 (2007): Assessed August 2, 2009. <<http://www.eoneill.com/library/review/29/29j.htm>> See also Kurt Eisen, Review of *The Women of Provincetown, 1915-1922* by Cheryl Black. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002) in *Eugene O'Neill Review* 26 (2004). eOneill.com. Assessed August 2, 2009. <<http://www.eoneill.com/library/review/26/26t.htm>>

Cook seems to have had different conflicts. The first translations of Nietzsche into English around 1910 had made the philosopher popular among American intellectuals, but Cook had been reading him in German at least ten years earlier. Choosing "those elements of Nietzschean doctrine that best combined with his romanticized view of ancient Greek ideals" in order to invoke a "spiritual resuscitation of himself and others,"⁵⁰ Cook's goal reads like a textbook definition of aspects of modernism. He considered the amateurism of the Players, "their unfamiliarity with the conventional dramatic form," as an advantage.⁵¹ Yet when the collective's plans did not concur with Cook's ideas, he had no qualms about "animating the group spirit" with unilateral action. He overruled the guiding committee about the need for a dome to be constructed over and around the stage. Cook felt that O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* should be staged against a "background of infinity," and simply purchased the materials and built it himself.⁵²

Even after their move to New York, Cook seems to have championed the amateur status of the Players against the more professional ambitions of the younger members of the company. Actress, writer and founding member Edna Kenton is reported to have remarked on how the success of the production of *Emperor* in 1920 "marked the end of Provincetown's amateur idealism in favor of the kind of theatrical professionalism that brought out old gender prejudices and inequities."⁵³ Recent scholarship examining documents of the group puts forth a less romantic narrative "by tracing the ways in which Cook and his allies – Glaspell, Kenton, and actress Ida Rauh – consolidated their authority over the protests of more democratically-oriented members."⁵⁴

Many sources confirm the infighting over the artistic and commercial future of the Players. Cook had been replaced as director by James Light for the second New York bill in 1919, when the "tensions between the young and the old guard of the company reached an all-time high." During the production of Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, Cook was again replaced by Light, who seems today to be little remembered except for his direction of the Experimental Theatre's productions of O'Neill's version of *The Ancient Mariner* and the controversial *All God's Chillun Got Wings* which featured Paul Robeson as a black law student married to a white woman. After six seasons in New York a one-year hiatus was agreed upon by the company for the 1923 season.⁵⁵ This became a permanent change when Cook died in Greece in January of 1924 after sending a letter intending to disband the organization, "to let this theatre die rather than let it become another voice of mediocrity."⁵⁶

50 Bogard, *Contour*, 69-70.

51 Gelb and Gelb, *O'Neill*, 498.

52 Robert Edmond Jones had described the *Kuppelhorizont* in use in Germany, and Cook was anxious to try his own version: "Against its concavity, light could be played in flexible, infinitely variable combinations, the texture of the plaster providing a reflecting surface for light that no flat cyclorama could equal in depth or subtlety. [...] Moreover, no American theatre possessed such a device." Bogard, *Contour*, 71.

53 Eisen, Review of *The Women of Provincetown*.

54 Noe, Review of *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity*. Rauh, a feminist with a law degree from New York University and married to editor of *The Masses* Max Eastman, had also been the "leading lady" of the Washington Square Players. (Gelb and Gelb, *O'Neill*, 489) *The Masses* (1911-1917), another little magazine despite its grand name, was a "genteel anti-establishment publication that mixed political radicalism with literary and artistic avant-gardism." (David M. Kennedy, *Over Here*, 76)

55 Cook had taken a year break from the company earlier after being replaced during the 1919 season. Jeff Kennedy, "History." Assessed August 2, 2009 <<http://provincetownplayhouse.com/history.html>>

56 Letter by Cook to Edna Kenton. Originally quoted in *The Road to the Temple* by Susan Glaspell. Cited in Ben-Zvi, Linda. "The Provincetown Players: The Success that Failed." *Eugene O'Neill Review* Volume 27, 2005.

Linda Ben-Zvi describes the eventual demise of Cook's "community of life givers" as inevitable, owing to the group's "seemingly incompatible goals" of

putting on plays both for the fun of it and for the higher love of beauty. At the same time the theater would become a serious laboratory in which playwrights could test their ideas, free of all restraints, even the need for popular success. If they remained committed amateurs, how would they develop the skills needed for playwrights to mature in their craft? If dedicated to communal enterprises, how would they serve the individual writer above all others? [...] More than most, Cook's character encapsulated the spirit of the time: contradictory, youthful, joyous, rebellious and visionary. If these were his failings, they were the failings of the period as a whole.⁵⁷

Susan Glaspell's role has also come to be emphasized in the formation of the Provincetown Players, especially the experienced novelist's importance to budding playwright Eugene O'Neill. In addition to Glaspell's "role of editorial adviser and confidant," it is "as a playwright that she may have had the most significant (albeit unacknowledged) influence on O'Neill." The cooperation between the playwrights continued even after Jig Cook had lost control of the Players. *The Hairy Ape* (1922) has many "similarities in staging, scenery manipulation, expressionistic devices, and even plot" to Glaspell's *The Verge* (1921).⁵⁸ Both plays show protagonists trying to define themselves and to escape established, hierarchal systems.

HARRY: (going on with his own entertainment) Explain that this is what came of the men who made the laws that made New England, that here is the flower of those gentlemen of culture who --
DICK: Moulded the American mind!
CLAIRE: Oh! (it is pain)
HARRY: Now what's the matter?
CLAIRE: I want to get away from them!
HARRY: Rest easy, little one – you do.
CLAIRE: I'm not so sure – that I do. But it can be done! We need not be held in forms moulded for us. There is outness – and otherness.⁵⁹

The botanist Claire seeks to create Breath of Life, a plant that will grow away from the forms that constrain it;⁶⁰ the stoker Yank wanders from environment to environment searching for a place to belong. Both plays end with death by asphyxiation – in Glaspell's play Claire finds herself strangling the man who has just promised to "keep" her by

eOneill.com. Assessed August 2, 2009. <<http://www.eoneill.com/library/review/27/27b.htm>>

57 Ben-Zvi, Linda, "The Provincetown Players: The Success that Failed."

58 Ben-Zvi, Linda, "Susan Glaspell and Eugene O'Neill: The Imagery of Gender." *Eugene O'Neill Review* Volume X No. 1. Spring 1986. eOneill.com. Assessed August 2, 2009 <<http://www.eoneill.com/library/newsletter/x-1/x-1e.htm>>

59 Claire describes a feeling of "otherness" on five occasions throughout *The Verge*, e.g. "Breath of Life is alive in its otherness." in Act I. Susan Glaspell, *The Verge* in The Project Gutenberg EBook of Plays. Assessed June 20, 2010. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/1/0/6/2/10623/10623.txt>>

60 "a plant like caught motion, and of a greater transparency than plants have had. Its leaves, like waves that curl, close around a heart that is not seen. This plant stands by itself in what, because of the arrangement of things about it, is a hidden place. But nothing is between it and the light." Act I.

inviting her to escape to India with him. In *The Hairy Ape* Yank is squeezed to death by a "brother" ape the stoker is trying to free from the zoo.⁶¹ (Scene VIII)

In *The Women of Provincetown* (2002), Cheryl Black describes how, as the Provincetown Players was shifting more and more toward professional production by 1922, the contributions of women in "management, writing, acting, directing, and designing" had substantially decreased. Black also contrasts the "public radicalism and private sexism" among the company's men, going on to contrast the first years of the Players with the unequivocally "male-dominated" Experimental Theatre formed by O'Neill, Robert Edmond Jones and critic-producer Kenneth Macgowan in 1923 out of the remnants of the group.⁶² The struggle in himself between tortured artist and profitable popular writer was one O'Neill would fight throughout his career.⁶³ By the early 1920s O'Neill was entering the period of his most extensive formal experimentation. For this funding was required, tickets had to be sold. It was time for the women and the amateurs to go home.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Addams, Jane. *Peace and Bread in Time of War*. New York: MacMillan, 1922. Accessed December 25, 2010. <<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=101410685>>
- Addams, Jane. *Twenty Years at Hull House*. New York: MacMillan, 1912. Accessed November 27, 2010. <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1325/pg1325.html><http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1325/pg1325.html>
- Alexander, Doris. *The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962. Aronson, Arnold. *American Avant-Garde Theatre*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994.
- Ben-Zvi, Linda. "The Provincetown Players: The Success that Failed." *Eugene O'Neill Review* 27 (2005). Accessed August 2, 2009. <<http://www.eoneill.com/library/review/27/27b.htm>>
- Ben-Zvi, Linda. "Susan Glaspell and Eugene O'Neill: The Imagery of Gender." *Eugene O'Neill Review* X.1 (1986). Accessed August 2, 2009. <<http://www.eoneill.com/library/newsletter/x-1/x-1e.htm>>
- Bettis, Nichole. "Jane Addams." *Women's Intellectual Contributions to the Study of Mind and Society*. Accessed November 27, 2010. <<http://www.webster.edu/~woolfm/janeaddams.html>>
- Bogard, Travis. *Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.

61 Eugene O'Neill, *The Hairy Ape* in *Complete Plays* Volume II, 1920-1931 (New York: Library of America, 1988), 163.

62 Eisen, Review of *The Women of Provincetown*.

63 O'Neill carefully controlled his image as brooding artist in portraits for newspapers and magazines. Travis Bogard contends that some of his shadowy "Art Theatre" photos contain "carefully arranged backgrounds [that] might have been designed by Robert Edmond Jones himself." (Bogard, *Contour*, 168) In a letter dated 1926 O'Neill complains how he is "seriously peeved" about not receiving enough royalties from three of his plays, and asks his business manager Macgowan "Do you want me to begin selling the investments I made before I left N.Y. in order to pay my bills down here [in Bermuda]?" (*The Theater We Worked For* 110) Two years later published copies of *Strange Interlude* would earn the author \$250,000. (Bogard, *Contour*, 296)

- Bordman, Gerald and Hischak, Thomas S. eds. "Little Theatre in America." In *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Bryer, Jackson, ed. *The Theatre We Worked For*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982.
- Cook, George Cram and Susan Glaspell. "Suppressed Desires." In *The Provincetown Plays*, edited by George Cram Cook and Frank Shay. Cincinnati: Stewart Kidd, 1921. Accessed January 18, 2011. <http://openlibrary.org/books/OL7110581M/The_Provincetown_plays>
- Eaton, William Pritchard. "The Lesson of the Washington Square Players." (1916) Accessed January 5, 2010. <<http://www.wayneturney.20m.com/washingtonsquare.htm>>
- Eco, Umberto. *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*. New York: Mariner, 1990.
- Eisen, Kurt. "Review of *The Women of Provincetown, 1915-1922*, by Cheryl Black." *Eugene O'Neill Review* 26 (2004). Accessed August 2, 2009. <<http://www.eoneill.com/library/review/26/26t.htm>>
- Francis, Lesley Lee. "The New Numbers Poets and the Chicago Little Theatre." *Dartmouth College Library Bulletin*, 2011. Accessed January 22, 2011. <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~library/Library_Bulletin/Nov1999/Francis.html>
- Gelb, Arthur and Gelb, Barbara. *O'Neill: Life With Monte Cristo*. New York: Applause, 2000.
- Glaspell, Susan. "The Verge." Accessed June 20, 2010. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/1/0/6/2/10623/10623.txt>>
- Kennedy, David M. *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980.
- Kennedy, Jeff. "Constancy." Accessed December 12, 2010. <<http://provincetownplayhouse.com/constancy.html>>
- Kennedy, Jeff. "History." Accessed December 12, 2010. <<http://provincetownplayhouse.com/history.html>>
- Kennedy, Jeff. "Suppressed Desires." Accessed December 12, 2010. <<http://provincetownplayhouse.com/suppresseddesires.html>>
- Mitgang, Herbert. "Albert Boni, Publisher, Dies." *New York Times*, August 1, 1981. Accessed January 4, 2010. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1981/08/01/obituaries/albert-boni-publisher-dies-founder-of-boni-liveright.html>>
- Murphy, Richard. *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Noe, Marcia. Review of *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity* by Brenda Murphy. *Eugene O'Neill Review* 29 (2007). Accessed August 2, 2009. <<http://www.eoneill.com/library/review/29/29j.htm>>
- O'Neill, Eugene. "The Hairy Ape." In *Complete Plays Volume II, 1920-1931*. New York: Library of America, 1988.
- Ritschel, Nelson O'Ceallaigh. "Synge and the Irish Influence of the Abbey Theatre on Eugene O'Neill." *Eugene O'Neill Review* 29 (2007): Accessed February 7, 2011. <<http://www.eoneill.com/library/review/29/29h.htm>>
- Stevens, Wallace. "Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise." Brown University Library web page. Web 19 January 2011. <<http://dl.lib.brown.edu/pdfs/1212149523703125.pdf>>
- Tanselle, Thomas. "George Cram Cook and the Poetry of Living, with a Checklist." University of Iowa webpage. Accessed October 25, 2010. <<http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/spec-coll/Bai/tanselle.htm>>
- Watt, Stephen and Richardson, Gary. *American Drama: Colonial to Contemporary*. Cambridge MA: Heinle and Heinle, 2003.

Watt, Stephen. "Modern American Drama." *The Cambridge Companion to American Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Daniel Sampey is an Assistant Professor specialising in academic writing and literary studies at the Department of English and American Studies, University of Pardubice. He received an MFA in Screenwriting from the University of New Orleans in 1995 and is currently a doctoral candidate in Anglo-American Literary Studies at the Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures, Charles University in Prague. His research interests include early 20th century American theatre, especially the influence of expressionism on works from the period. He is also the author of numerous plays for screen and stage, many of which have been produced by himself or others. His 15 years of experience in all aspects of theatrical production includes directing for the stage dramas by Molière, Tennessee Williams, and Sam Shepard.