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MACMILLAN MODERN DRAMATISTS

**AMERICAN
DRAMATISTS
1918-1945**

Excluding O'Neill

Bernard F. Dukore

Professor of Drama and Theatre

University of Hawaii

M
MACMILLAN

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1984

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*First published 1984 by
Higher and Further Education Division
MACMILLAN PUBLISHERS LTD
London and Basingstoke
Companies and representatives throughout the world*

*Typeset by
Wessex Typesetters Ltd
Frome, Somerset*

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Dukore, Bernard F.

American dramatists, 1918–1945.

1. American drama—20th century—History
and criticism

I. Title

812'.52'09

ISBN 978-0-333-35315-8 ISBN 978-1-349-17633-5 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-17633-5

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Acknowledgements

The author and publisher are grateful to the following for permission to reproduce photographs: The Theatre Collection, Museum of the City of New York for plates 5, 6, 7 and 9; The Billy Rose Theatre Collection of the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center for plates 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 10 and 11.

Editors' Preface

The *Macmillan Modern Dramatists* is an international series of introductions to major and significant nineteenth- and twentieth-century dramatists, movements and new forms of drama in Europe, Great Britain, America and new nations such as Nigeria and Trinidad. Besides new studies of great and influential dramatists of the past, the series includes volumes on contemporary authors, recent trends in the theatre and on many dramatists, such as writers of farce, who have created theatre 'classics' while being neglected by literary criticism. The volumes in the series devoted to individual dramatists include a biography, a survey of the plays, and detailed analysis of the most significant plays, along with discussion, where relevant, of the political, social, historical and theatrical context. The authors of the volumes, who are involved with theatre as playwrights, directors, actors, teachers and critics, are concerned with the plays as theatre and discuss such matters as performance, character interpretation and staging, along with themes and contexts.

BRUCE KING
ADELE KING

Preface

‘Excluding O’Neill’: this phrase on the title page raises a question that requires an answer at the outset, ‘Why?’ The explanation is practical: another book in this series, *Eugene O’Neill* by Normand Berlin, treats him. But because no book on American drama of the period can entirely ignore so influential a figure, this one will where appropriate refer to him. ‘Excluding O’Neill’ has a consequence unrelated to the real reason for his omission. Removal of his shadow from his playwriting colleagues affords a view of them that while not necessarily better is certainly different. They may stand or fall on the basis of their own merits or demerits. This book will discuss both.

1918–45, the dates of the conclusions of this century’s two world wars, a phrase I hope the rest of the century does not invalidate, conveniently circumscribes the period when America’s first wave of major dramatists came of age. True, Elmer Rice preceded O’Neill with a play on Broadway; but the modernity of Rice’s work post-dates the emergence of O’Neill, to whom he like so many stands

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indebted. True, Arthur Miller's *The Man Who Had All the Luck* opened on Broadway in 1944 and Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* did so in 1945; but few would quarrel with the assertions that Miller's important work began three years later with the production of *All My Sons* and that he and Williams represent a newer, post-Second World War wave different from the first. It is equally true that several members of the first wave continued to write plays after 1945. However, the works on which their reputations lie are without exception those written during the period 1918–45: even Thornton Wilder's *The Matchmaker* (1945) is essentially the same play produced in 1938 as *The Merchant of Yonkers*. For this reason, and also because of space limitations, I refer to their post-1945 plays only when such references help to illuminate aspects of their work in general (for instance, Clifford Odets' *The Country Girl*, 1950, dramatises Group Theatre acting techniques that inform his playwriting practices). Unless otherwise indicated, dates are of first productions.

In considering the dramatists of this period, space limitations suggest either a sketchy survey of many writers or a close examination of relatively few. I have chosen the second option. Although any list of important playwrights is debatable, most critics or readers would probably concur with or at least grant me the prerogative of all but one of my selections: Elmer Rice, E. E. Cummings, George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart, Maxwell Anderson, Clifford Odets, Thornton Wilder, Lillian Hellman and William Saroyan. The possible exception is Cummings, whose name and titles I write in conformity with conventional practice and in defiance of his idiosyncratic avoidance of capital letters. Cummings' *Him*, first performed over half a century ago, remains controversial. I include him and *Him*

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partly because it exemplifies a theatrical genre, surrealism; partly because I greatly admire the play; and partly because a work that creates such diverse critical responses deserves attention and exposure to readers, whom I urge to turn from my account to the play itself and form their own judgments.

Even limiting the subject to eight authors (with Kaufman and Hart as one), space restrictions impose a problem, since between them they wrote about two hundred plays, from a high of over fifty by Rice (his own count) to a low of three by Cummings. To treat all their plays, or all produced between 1918 and 1945 (about sixty less), would prevent scrutiny of works that are more important or representative. Therefore each chapter that examines these dramatists provides an overview of their dramatic and theatrical characteristics, but not always of every play they wrote, which could too easily become mere name-dropping. It will survey their original plays, not translations, and then with one exception concentrate on one play for more intensive study of dramatic and theatrical characteristics. The exception is Elmer Rice, whose two major works are in different dramatic and theatrical styles, expressionism and naturalism. Dramatic and theatrical: the chapters will try to analyse both, for these plays were written for performance on a stage and what is performed is dramatic literature. Analyses of these plays will include their first productions, in some cases revivals as well. Their selection derives from familiarity and interests of theatregoers and readers (on the bases of revivals, books in print and works anthologised), critical interest or consensus, and variety of genre. The plays to receive more attention than others are Rice's *The Adding Machine* and *Street Scene*, Cummings' *Him*, Kaufman and Hart's *You Can't Take It With You*, Anderson's

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Winterset, Odets' *Awake and Sing!*, Wilder's *Our Town*, Hellman's *The Little Foxes*, and Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life*.

As some may have noticed, all but *Him* and *Awake and Sing!* have been turned into films. For three reasons I will where possible refer to them. First, the reader may have seen them at cinema clubs, film societies, revival houses or on television. Second, he or she may be sufficiently familiar with the work of an actor to imagine the actor's rendering of a role. Third, substantive changes in a play's transition from stage to screen can by contrast reveal aspects of the play.

To avoid a proliferation of notes, references that a reader can find with little difficulty (a review of a production, for example) will be unnoted. Because so many dramatists employ three periods, the conventional mark of ellipses, to suggest a pause or a stammer, I place three periods in brackets to indicate ellipses.

For their friendly assistance in helping me to rummage through files of clippings and photographs, it is a pleasure to acknowledge the staff of the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center and of the Theatre Collection of the Museum of the City of New York, particularly Wendy Warnken, Associate Curator. For their help in research, I thank Yukihiro Goto, Nina Hettema and Therese Moore.