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INTRODUCTION

In this book I discuss eight American playwrights, all of whose careers began in this century. They include five Pulitzer Prize winners (Ayad Akhtar, David Auburn, Stephen Adly Guirgis, Quiara Alegria Hudes, Bruce Norris), one shortlisted for that award (Christopher Shinn), as well as two writers who share a plethora of awards including, in the case of J. T. Rogers, a Tony and an Obie, while Young Jean Lee has two Obies. Among their number are a Pakistani-American, a Puerto Rican-American, and a Korean-American, writers who are Catholic, Jewish, Muslim. There is a gay writer, for whom details of his own life provide the motor force of his play, as there are those who reach out into a wider world or insist on the connection between the private and the public. The American theatre is changing, as is the society it reflects and with which it engages.

Where possible, I have included the playwrights' own comments on their lives and works, as I have contemporary reviews, though my primary concern is to enter into a dialogue with plays which are as various as the individuals and culture which generated them.

It is now just over a hundred years since, in July 1915, a group of people, none of them professional playwrights, gathered at the tip of Massachusetts Bay and formed the Provincetown Players, thus marking the beginnings of modern American drama. They performed, at first, to sparse audiences, in a rickety warehouse which stretched out over the water. Among their number, and a prime mover, was a woman from Iowa, Susan Glaspell, persuaded to turn aside from writing novels; while a young man who liked a drink, had suffered from tuberculosis, attempted suicide and abandoned his wife and child, became the foundation stone of a new American theatre. His name, of course, was Eugene O'Neill – like his fellow writers in revolt against the kind of nineteenth-century theatre represented by his own father, James O'Neill, whose performances in *The Count of Monte Cristo* kept the dollars rolling in but did little to address American realities. They quickly established a base in New York, where they were not the only ones to distrust Broadway's ability to foster change and open doors to new writers, happy, as they were, to experiment, lay claim to a freedom outside the mainstream.

A century later, there are still writers who gather together, create their own companies, stage their plays in small venues, develop their skills, and build their careers on the basis of productions outside of New York's theatre district – often, indeed, outside New York, and in some cases even outside the country. This book is a celebration of the American playwright in the twenty-first century, but the role of aspiring writer can be a difficult one – more difficult, according to David Hare, than that of his or her British counterpart. He has said that life is 'better for a British playwright than for an American playwright, self-evidently. It must be simply because in this country you feel that theatre can access society at large. That essential illusion, that people are listening, does buck you up and keep you writing. I think that if you are an American playwright the sense that you are working in a very disempowered and impoverished form . . . makes it tough.'¹

For the British director Richard Eyre, formerly of the Royal National Theatre, 'There's no continuity [in the American theatre] and no sense of a continuing tradition. Hence actors, directors, designers – and writers – don't get the chance to develop their work. Every show is a

new start . . . The NT provides continuity and a sense of being part of a continuum: a past, a present and a future.²

While it is worth noting Hare's confession that his conviction may be an 'essential illusion', several of the playwrights discussed in what follows would agree with him, sensing a different cultural environment, different attitudes towards plays which engage with the public world, and to emerging talent, though in truth if new plays no longer get much of a look-in on Broadway (in 2018 the only new play scheduled was *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, itself a British import), they do elsewhere across the country. Without the British system of public subsidies, however, they are always under pressure, not that theatre anywhere is immune to that.

The plight of the playwright is as precarious as ever, even as the lure of a public art, able to address audiences directly, collaborative, visceral, the imagination made physical, words sounding in space, remains compelling. For the ancient Greeks, theatre was where a society celebrated its myths, engaged with its values, staged its history. Not only did they bring their gods down to earth but they saw in the tensions of private lives a connection with conflicts of a broader kind. This has been no less true of American playwrights, even as it is debatable how central theatre is to American society today. Several of the playwrights in this book have expressed their doubts. Nonetheless, they have surely played their role in the unending business of defining a society always in flux, ever provisional, while confidently asserting a supposedly self-evident national identity.

At the same time, it remains true that the theatre can represent a challenge for those who contemplate a career in which their fate is determined by the financial exigencies of embattled companies, the interest of artistic directors overseen by executive boards, the willingness of audiences to engage with what they have to say and the way in which they choose to present it. Novelists have to contend with editors and, these days, the influence of sales departments, but once their work is accepted it continues to exist in print or online, readers not being tied to a particular place or time, not required to brave sudden snowstorms, car park charges, the time of last buses, a battle for toilets. The theatre is a high wire act in which balance is not assured.

A character in *Tender*, a novel by the British writer Mark Illis, remarks, 'there's a fine line between artistic activity and a complete waste of time.' It is true that another character replies, 'There's a thin line . . . between almost anything and a complete waste of time,'³ but somehow time given to writing that comes to nothing seems more profoundly wasted, so many words on a page smartly dressed for a blind date only to discover they have nowhere to go and no one to speak to. Christopher Shinn (like fellow playwright Will Eno) made the decision to fly to England, a place which unaccountably proved more receptive to mendicant authors than his own country.

Shinn's *Four* was produced by the Royal Court, which also staged Bruce Norris's picaresque *The Low Road* (as well as David Adjmi's first play, *Elective Affinities*), while J.T. Rogers thought a play set in Rwanda, *The Overwhelming*, and one set in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Washington, *Blood and Gifts*, would fare better in England, at the National Theatre, than in his own country.

The list of contemporary American playwrights whose careers began or were consolidated in Britain is surprising, depressing, encouraging, depending on your perspective. Nearly half of Shinn's plays have opened there while for Richard Nelson and Naomi Wallace, Britain was for long their base. For Tracy Letts it was only when his first play, *Killer Joe*, arrived in England that he felt himself a playwright while his second, *Bug*, had its premiere in London.

Later in this book, Shinn offers his own explanations for this situation, though it undoubtedly, as he suggests, has something to do with the existence, in Britain, of lower costs of production and cheaper ticket prices, while in America subscription series may encourage a certain conservatism, a hesitancy to embrace new work or, if not that, then the fact that subscription seasons require a limited run for any particular production, necessarily making way for the next play. In *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play*, published in 2009 by the Theatre Development Fund, some blame is placed on non-profit boards of directors, one writer suggesting that, “They say, “I don’t get it; why are you always in the red . . . let me look at the chart. Ah – new play, new play, new play, new play. Why do them?”⁴ The same book quotes a Minneapolis-based playwright and literary manager as saying that ‘Every time we do a new play . . . the theatre loses money, and that’s just the way it is. Brand-new plays we play at fifty-percent capacity.’⁵

To be sure, with luck there are staged readings, offers of development, the odd grant, enough to keep hope alive and food on the table, while prizes can make plays suddenly shine brightly, but they are no guarantee of future productions. As David Hare, admittedly speaking in the context of the British theatre, remarked, ‘a playwright needs to live. Unfortunately, you may be extremely well known for your prestigious achievements in tiny studio theatres while also being stony broke.’⁶

The actor Matthew Paul Olmos has said of would-be playwrights in America,

If they only knew how many of them would stick with it for several years, but ultimately wind up someplace entirely different. If they only knew the likelihood of them affording a house and a family was simply not possible on what a playwright actually gets paid for productions, commissions, etc.

That there is no money in the American theater should perhaps be something that is not just mentioned, but actually taught and studied and planned for . . . While there are amazing programs out there that select a few theater artists here and there to give them a taste of what it would be like to be paid for their art, I wonder what can be done at the root of all this and what systems could be put in place for it to not completely fall on the shoulders of theater artists to both work tirelessly on their art, and build up an entirely different financial support system at the same time.⁷

There were, however, other difficulties. Richard Nelson, in what became a famous address for the Laura Pels Foundation in 2007, at the Alliance of Resident Theatres annual meeting, lamented the attitude to plays and playwrights in America in particular, ‘the culture of readings and workshops . . . A culture of “development.”’ What was being said, it seemed to him, was that playwrights needed help to write their plays. ‘They can’t do their work themselves . . . the given now in the American theatre is that what a playwright writes, no matter how much he or she works on it, rewrites it at his or her desk, the play will ALWAYS not be right. Will ALWAYS need “help.” . . . And this mindset is devastating.’ Plays, it seemed, were always assumed to be broken and in need of fixing.⁸

For James Gittings, the Literary Associate of the New York-based The New Group (which describes itself as an artist-driven company), who receives at least ten unsolicited new plays a week as well as others from agents, ‘What a play really needs is a production, not endless readings.’⁹ In response to this concern, in 2003 thirteen playwrights formed the group 13P (i.e.

thirteen playwrights), whose motto was 'We don't develop plays. We do them,' which meant that once plays were completed they were regarded as not needing intervention, each writer serving as his or her own artistic director. The group lasted for nine years. One of the thirteen was Young Jean Lee, and another Sarah Ruhl whose play *Eurydice* had at the time, coincidentally, had thirteen readings and workshops but no production.¹⁰ There would be other such ventures, playwrights collectives. *American Theatre* magazine¹¹ identified Minneapolis's Workhaus Collective (eight playwrights), Washington D.C.'s The Welders (five) and Boston Public Works (seven). Philadelphia's Orbiter 3 deliberately aimed at self-destructing within three years, the former opening in 2014 and duly closing in 2017, the latter opening in 2015 and closing in 2018. Writing, though, has to start *somewhere* and readings and development have their place so long as they are a path and not a destination though small theatres, as was evidenced by the Provincetown Players and others a century before, may have a disproportionate impact. Meanwhile, many of New York's non-profit theatres have responded to the necessity for more productions by new writers, including Lincoln Center Theater's LCT3 (whose slogan is New Artists, New Audiences), Second Stage Uptown (which produces plays exclusively by twenty-first-century American playwrights) and Roundabout Underground (dedicated to fostering new works by emerging playwrights).

If theatres are under pressure so, too, are those who spread the word. Writers and actors may have ambiguous feelings about reviewers who can impact on the success or otherwise of productions, especially when *The New York Times* still has a unique power not only to determine the fate of plays running on or Off Broadway but also the likelihood of regional theatre productions transferring to New York. It remains true, though, that they perform a vital function and that that function has been threatened.

Newspapers have closed, slimmed down, disappeared behind paywalls, column inches shrinking. In response to this, in 2018 five New York theatre critics (four men, one woman), putting in their own money, founded *New York Stage Review*. The number quickly expanded to eight, of which two are women. In the words of the publisher Steven Suskin, 'With the continual changes in the media world, the number of outlets for theater criticism has dwindled to the point that even major New York daily newspapers have been forced to cut back on coverage. As an unofficial band of professional drama critics—long-time members of the New York Drama Critics Circle, each with former newspaper affiliations—we bemoan the diminishing coverage of the so-called legitimate theater.'¹² Initially, coverage was to focus on Broadway and Off Broadway but the intention was to broaden out beyond New York.

Unsurprisingly, it was a development welcomed by fellow practitioners including Adam Feldman, the theatre and dance editor at *Time Out* (New York), president of the New York Drama Critics Circle, who noted that, 'It's been a remarkable, and a remarkably fast, shift . . . Arts coverage, and especially opinionated arts coverage, looks like an easy cut if you're a media outlet making budget adjustments under difficult circumstances. So unfortunately a lot of really valuable voices are being lost, and in some cases, decades of experience and perspective.' For the producer Scott Rudin, 'There's a profound need for it . . . I think the enormous reduction in the number of critics makes it incredibly hard to sell shows, especially plays, where you really need them.'¹³ For all the many challenges facing playwrights, companies and all those involved in contemporary theatre, however, American drama continues to thrive.

In a previous book¹⁴ I discussed the work of seven women and two men. This one reverses the emphasis with six men and two women, so, in sum, nine—eight in favour of women. This

should not, though, be seen as reflecting the state of the American theatre, at least historically, though things have changed and continue to do so. In its seventy-year history, the Tony Award has only been awarded to a woman once, one-and-a-half times counting Frances Goodrich's half share in the authorship of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and this despite the fact that the award is named for a woman – Antoinette Perry. The Obies, awarded for the best American play Off Broadway, are harder to calculate thanks to shifting categories and multiple awards in any one year, but since 1956 seventy-eight men have received awards and twenty women (María Irene Fornés twice, Lynn Nottage three times), though fourteen of those come from the period 1992 to 2017. When it comes to Pulitzer prizes, in the hundred years since 1917 women have won fifteen times, seven since 1990. Drama Desk Awards for outstanding play have gone to women six times since 1975. The New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play has gone to ten women (ten and a half with Frances Goodrich) since 1936, though, confusingly, there is a sub-category for Best American Play so that calculation is not straightforward.

An article by Rob Weinert-Kendt, in *American Theatre* magazine in September, 2018, noted that eight of the eleven most-produced plays in the then-forthcoming season (defined as work scheduled between 1 September 2018, and 31 August 2019), were written by women while eleven of the most-produced playwrights were women. Meanwhile, the overall percentage of plays written by women, based on 2,085 productions, had gone from 21 per cent in 2015 to 30 per cent in 2018–19.¹⁵ Also increasing was the percentage of new plays at US theatres (somewhat curiously defined as plays which had their premiere between 2008 and 2018), which now stood at sixty-six, 40 per cent of which were by women, a rate of increase which suggested the possibility of parity by 2021.

New plays may be thin on the ground on Broadway and commercial Off Broadway companies, fighting for space amongst a full orchestra of musicals and British imports, but they were flourishing elsewhere even as it could sometimes take a long time for established playwrights to see their work on stage on the Great White Way. Paula Vogel was sixty-five, with fourteen plays and a Pulitzer Prize to her name, before, finally, in 2017, she opened *Indecent* on Broadway, moving from productions at Yale Rep, California's La Jolla and New York's Vineyard Theatre. As Garrett Eisler has pointed out,¹⁶ Lynn Nottage's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Ruined* did not make it to Broadway, her *Sweat* finally making it, also in 2017, via the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Washington D.C.'s Arena Stage and the Public Theatre.

In trying to understand why, until recent years, women playwrights found it difficult to forge a career, perhaps it is worth looking at other aspects of the American theatre. Tony Awards for directing began in 1960. Of the fifty-eight awards just four have gone to American women directors, all in the current century. But barely a third of directors are women while over 70 per cent of stage managers and assistant stage managers are.¹⁷ Of thirty new productions on Broadway in 2016–17, only six were directed by women even as 68 per cent of Broadway audiences are female.¹⁸ In seventy-four Resident Theatres 80 per cent of artistic directors are white men, as are 74 per cent of executive directors.¹⁹ As for women reviewers, they can seem an endangered species. Of the twenty-seven current and emeritus members of the New York Drama Critics' Circle, only eight are women.

Incidentally, or perhaps not, women represented just 4 per cent of directors of major Hollywood films over the last eleven years (3.3 per cent in 2018), to date 84 per cent of them never directing a second film.²⁰ They represent 24 per cent of producers and 13 per cent of writers.

This may seem a pathology of the American theatre (and, perhaps not incidentally, of the movie industry), but it is not offered as such; it is merely meant to note the challenges that have to be met by playwrights as the second decade of the twenty-first century ends, as well as the sheer number of new plays on offer and the extent to which those who existed in the wings have now moved centre stage. In fact, despite the many challenges, American drama remains vital and challenging, as ever a gauge of a society always in flux, a culture in which personal and national identities are constantly being negotiated.

Are there any overarching themes, directions, shared assumptions in these plays? Unsurprisingly, in an age of identity politics there is a concern by some playwrights to explore what distinguishes them from an assumed norm (sometimes in an ironic form as in Young Jean Lee's *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*), even as that norm is contested in a society which proclaims its unique distinctiveness even while radically divided. 'One nation, indivisible' its children are required to recite, even as divisions along the lines of race, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, ideological conviction, are clear. Perhaps, in a sense, those divisions are themselves definitional in an immigrant society concerned to celebrate its openness to others while urging assimilation as goal and virtue. America has always been torn between a desire to see its citizens as embracing shared dreams of material advancement, along with an assumed moral and social primacy, and a sense of unease, that last a familiar concern of America's playwrights, from O'Neill onwards. Financial collapse (Ayad Akhtar's *Junk*), involvement in suspect foreign wars (Bruce Norris's *Purple Heart*), revelations of sexual anxieties (Christopher Shinn's *Teddy Ferrara*), racial and religious tensions (Bruce Norris's *Clybourne Park*, Akhtar's *Disgraced*, *The Invisible Hand*), have deepened that sense of unease and that surfaces in a number of twenty-first-century plays.

There is, though, a world elsewhere, a world of geopolitics (David Auburn's *The Journals of Mihail Sebastian*, J.T. Rogers' *Oslo*), of interest and concern not merely because America reaches out to it, as what happens overseas feeds back into the country's sense of itself, challenging notions of right action (Quiara Alegria Hudes' *Elliot: A Soldier's Fugue*, Bruce Norris's, *The Pain and the Itch*, *The Unmentionables*, J.T. Rogers' *The Overwhelming*, *Blood and Gifts*), but because fundamental human concerns, the very stuff of drama, are not bound by national concerns. So, the lights dim, the curtain parts, an actor walks on stage and as ever the lies of theatre prove a path to truth.