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PREFACE

This special issue of the *Miscellany* on Midwestern drama comprises seven essays that evoke the surprising richness of the genre in our region. As David Radavich notes in his overview, "Center Stage: Midwestern Plays and Playwrights," the Midwest "is often conceived of in the American psyche as an undramatic place"; nevertheless, "the central conflicts of the Midwest—surviving on the land, staying or going, fitting in or not fitting in—mirror the fundamental American struggle to sustain a viable new culture."

Our review of Midwestern drama begins in the early twentieth century, which saw an abundance of Midwestern playwrights come to the fore, primarily through the little theatre movement. Dorothy Chansky's discussion of Alice Gerstenberg's pioneering efforts in Chicago's Little Theatre encourages us to set aside traditional notions of canonicity and periodicity to view Gerstenberg not merely as an experimental playwright of the little theatre movement but, more significantly, as a playwright with a lifelong concern for fellowship, self-expression, anti-commercialism, self-actualization, and community, often enacted in her novel and plays within a feminist framework.

Also focusing on this period, Marilyn Judith Atlas looks to the small-town Midwest as she compares the ending of Zona Gale's novel *Miss Lulu Bett* with the endings of Gale's two stage adaptations of this work, arguing that, despite the more conventional conclusion of the Pulitzer Prize-winning version, all three texts enact the movement of Lulu Bett from victim to empowered adult. Anne Beck looks at rural Midwestern drama in the twenties and thirties and documents the power of the stage to educate, build community, and change lives in her discussion of three one-act plays by Wisconsin farm women who were part of the Country Life Movement.

Michael Wentworth moves our project forward to the small Midwestern town at mid-century, as he examines William Inge's *Picnic* and locates the source of this Pulitzer Prize-winning play's power in its ability to both evoke and subvert mythic perceptions of the Midwestern small town and in the way that these perceptions connect with key elements in the American Dream. And bringing our review of Midwestern drama up to the present day is Jill Gidmark, who focuses on the contemporary urban scene as she shows how playwright Stephen Dietz's early theatre experience in Minneapolis provided a thematic matrix for his later work.

Overall, these essays invite us to view the Midwest and its theatres, plays, and playwrights from new perspectives as they demonstrate ways in which Midwestern plays and playwrights have continually challenged conventional notions, whether they be of drama, theatre, performance, femininity, or the Midwest itself.

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CENTER STAGE: MIDWESTERN PLAYS AND PLAYWRIGHTS

DAVID RADAVICH

The Midwest is often conceived of in the American psyche as an undramatic place: not the storied East, not the flamboyant South, and not the romantic West. 1950s television shows like *The Nelsons* and *Father Knows Best* seem situated there, whether they actually were or not. In fact, the Midwest has played a central role in American theatre since its rise as a region in the late nineteenth century. From its beginnings, the Midwest has shown a strong connection to realism and has proven particularly hospitable to women and African-American playwrights. Indeed, an astonishing number of major dramatists have enduring ties to the Midwest: Susan Glaspell, Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams, William Inge, Lorraine Hansberry, and a host of more recent playwrights. A survey of twentieth-century American drama, contrary to one's expectations, finds the Midwest front and center.

Defining the Midwest geographically has taken longer than other, historically established regions. John T. Flanagan, writing in 1961, called the Midwestern state "probably the most heterogeneous group in terms of population in the entire Union" (Quoted in Stryk vii.) Consensus in recent years has settled on the Great Lakes states of Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin, plus the states of the upper Mississippi River basin, Missouri, Iowa, and Minnesota. On the West, the border falls geographically along a hundred-mile strip that runs down the eastern portion of the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas, to the west of which begins the Great Plains and wide-open spaces. The Southern borders of Missouri and the Ohio River take on colorings of both Midwest and South. And the Midwest can be seen to shade into the East somewhere in western Pennsylvania, so that

Pittsburgh, for instance, seems Midwestern while Philadelphia clearly does not. West Virginia serves as a similar three-toned border area between the Midwest, South, and East.

It is important to delineate such borders for our purposes because a number of America's best plays and playwrights have arisen from an intersection of regions. William Inge, for instance, one of the leading Midwestern dramatists, hovers in *Picnic* (1953) and *Bus Stop* (1955) near the Kansas border of the West. Marsha Norman, born and raised in Louisville on the Ohio River, foregrounds a border sensibility in *Getting Out* (1977) and *'night Mother* (1983) that combines Midwestern and Southern features in a way that Beth Henley's plays, for instance, do not. Both George S. Kaufman and August Wilson arose out of Pittsburgh. Kaufman spent most of his later life in the New York orbit, but he continued to collaborate with Midwestern authors, among them Edna Ferber and Ring Lardner. Wilson has set a series of plays in Pittsburgh, and he lived and worked productively for years in Minneapolis-St. Paul while achieving his remarkable run of successes at the Yale Repertory theatre.

How do plays of the Midwest, or from Midwestern writers, differ from those written or set elsewhere? Generalizations are always treacherous, especially given the fluidity and restlessness of American culture; many Midwestern dramatists who grow up and prosper in the country's center, move later to the two coasts that particularly nourish theatre and film. Nonetheless, some regional markers are worth noting, if only as rough generalizations.

Fertility and rootedness in the soil. Living on what the community grows and sells (agriculture, weaving, etc.). This contrasts with areas like Silicon Valley or Hawaii, whose economies center on computers, tourism, or other industries less directly tied to the land.

Cycles of the seasons. Variety of weather. Midwestern life is marked by four seasons and much regular change, unlike, say, Seattle, Florida, or Southern California, whose seasons range within a narrower gradient.

Flatness of landscape, or gently rolling hills, contrasted by abrupt human perpendicularity (silos, skyscrapers, etc.).This angular duality differs from the blue, undulating mountains of Appalachia, lush swamps of Georgia and Florida, or breathtaking peaks of the West.

Connectedness by water. The Great Lakes and the greater Mississippi River watershed stretch from western New York to eastern Montana and lace through the entire heart of the country as a nervous system of flux and consciousness.

Emphasis on small towns, regularity, "normality," even in larger communities. An ethos of sobriety or sanity seems to distinguish Des Moines, for instance, from Las Vegas or Orlando.

Emphasis on family and connectedness or the lack thereof. Belonging or not belonging to a group of community.

Emphasis on realism. Distrust of non-realistic forms like absurdism or postmodernism. More experimental work by Rabe, Mamet, and others still seems rooted in realism.

Emphasis on natural rights: women, minorities, gays and lesbians, the poor, etc. The communitarian bias of Midwestern life struggles with and often supports the rights of the disadvantaged.

Emphasis on plain language and understatement. Distrust of adornment or rhetorical flourish, which is regarded as unstable or untrue.

Emphasis on common sense and practicality, not given to sudden fads or overblown romanticism. Skepticism about the new until proven.

A number of these qualities overlap with those noticeable in other regions, but the Midwest generally lacks the overt sophistication of the Northeast, the self-dramatizing passion of the South, or the frontier detachment of the West.

The first Midwestern playwright of note was also a leading figure in American realism, William Dean Howells (1837-1920). Born in Martins Ferry, Ohio, Howells went on to achieve success as a novelist and man of letters and mentor to many younger writers we now revere. Yet Howells also wrote a number of plays, many of them only now being reconsidered: "Their dialogue is infinitely superior to most stage dialogue of the time, and their scenes would appear to make for good theatre". (Bordman 358) Most of Howells's plays are one-acts and not outwardly Midwestern in theme or sensibility. Typical are society comedies or farces like *A Counterfeit Presentment* (1877) and *Yorick's Love* (1878). Howells worked collaboratively with a number of authors, including Mark Twain, with whom he wrote *Colonel Sellers as a Scientist* (1887). Although one of the most important writers of his time and a Midwesterner by birth and upbringing, Howells does not evoke the Midwest the way many later figures do.

Much more successful at the turn of the century were Augustus Thomas (1857-1934), born in Saint Louis, and George Ade (1866-

1944), the "Aesop of Indiana." Thomas strived to make his plays reflect American themes and is perhaps most remembered for his "state" plays—*Alabama* (1891), *In Mizzoura* (1893), and *Arizona* (1900)—as well as for popular comedies like *The Earl of Pawtucket* (1903) and *Mrs. Leffingwell's Boots* (1905). Ade first achieved theatrical fame with librettos for *The Sultan of Sulu* (1902) and *Peggy from Paris* (1903). His straight plays were also successful: *The Country Chairman* (1903); *The College Widow* (1904), set in the college town of Crawfordsville, Indiana; and, to a lesser degree, *Just Out of College* (1905) and *Father and the Boys* (1908). His later librettos added to his significant contribution in developing musical theatre in the U.S.

Booth Tarkington (1869-1946) of Indiana successfully adapted his novel *Monsieur Beaucaire* for theatrical performance (1901) and subsequently collaborated with fellow Midwesterners Harry Leon Wilson (*The Man from Home,* 1908; *Cameo Kirby,* 1909; and *Tweedles,* 1923.), Otis Skinner *(Mister Antonia,* 1916), and Julian Street *(The Country Cousin,* 1917). According to Arthur Hobson Quinn, Tarkington is "best in drama when he gives rein to [his]fancy, abandons [the] effort to deal with ordinary conditions, and frankly takes his characters and situations into another time and place where he is freed from the limitations of accuracy" (Quoted in Bordman 655). *The Trysting Place* (1923) was given a successful reading in May 2001 at the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature's annual conference at Michigan State University.

William Vaughn Moody (1869-1910), also born in Indiana, taught English at the University of Chicago, and showed great promise with two masterpieces, *The Great Divide* (1906) and *The Faith Healer* (1909), before he died at a tragically early age. *The Great Divide*, featuring a visit by Easterner Ruth Jordan and her fiancé and brother to the West, is clearly a western play, one of the best of its period, but *The Faith Healer* is set in the Midwest and can be regarded as the first important drama set in Middle America and embodying its ethos and values. Moody was a poet of considerable talent: "His early death is believed by many scholars to have deprived the theatre of a major voice to have left it for Eugene O'Neill to bring American drama to maturity a decade later" (Bordman 484).

The twentieth century, then, became the period when Midwestern drama came to prominence, ushered in by Thomas, Ade, and Moody. Eugene Walter of Cleveland (1874-1941) began establishing himself as a noteworthy figure by writing social melodrama. *Paid in Full* (1908) and *The Easiest Way* (1909) were followed by a number of other theatrical works. Perhaps the most striking development in Midwestern drama of the second decade was the emergence of prominent women playwrights, among them Alice Gerstenberg (1885-1972), Rachel Crothers (1878-1958), Susan Glaspell (1876-1948), Zona Gale (1874-1938), and Zoë Akins (1886-1958). Catherine Waugh McCulloch (1862-1945) of Illinois, who served as justice of the peace in Evanston, wrote a striking suffragist play, *Bridget's Sisters; or, The Legal Status of Illinois Women,* in 1868, published in 1911. The play was given a successful performance as recently as 1990 in Charleston, Illinois.

Crothers was important as a feminist and as a playwright, though her plays are not conspicuously Midwestern in either setting or theme. One of her successes, *The Three of Us* (1906) takes place in Nevada, and plays like *Nice People* (1921) and *Mary the Third* (1923) focus on flappers. Nonetheless, the strong feminist presence in Illinois culture at the time - Crothers was born and raised in Bloomington, Illinois - must be seen as a major factor in her later social activism. Zoë Akins, on the other hand, was born in Humansville, Missouri, and became famous for her "society plays" like *Déclassé* (1919), *The Greeks Had a Word for It* (1930), and her Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatization of Edith Wharton's *The Old Maid* (1935). Again, her work exhibits few overtly Midwestern elements.

Glaspell, another important feminist and thinker, grew up in Iowa, graduated from Drake University, and went on to become associated with Eugene O'Neill and the Provincetown Players. Author of a number of long and short plays, she became particularly successful with her one-acts, among them *Suppressed Desires* (1914), a spoof on psychoanalysis, and *Trifles*(1916). The latter play has endured as a strong statement of feminist solidarity against the cultural power of men, who control the apparatus of law and language but often miss the deeper moral questions and come up short. Set at a farmstead in Iowa, *Trifles* evokes both Midwestern rootedness in the land and outlaw violence of the West. The play is frequently performed and anthologized.

Maxwell Anderson (1888-1959), born in Pennsylvania and most known for his historic poetic dramas like *Mary of Scotland* (1933), *Valley Forge* (1934), and *High Tor* (1936), attended the University of North Dakota. His only play to come directly out of that experience, *White Desert* (1923), evokes the harsh realities of that trying landscape in winter. Donald Marquis (1879-1937), known primarily as a humorous columnist and born in Illinois, wrote several plays, including *The Old Soak,* (1921), probably his most successful stage work, and *Master of the Revels* (1934), a comedy set in Tudor times. Both these writers are better known for other achievements but bear the stamp of their connection to the Midwest.

Langston Hughes, (1902-67), first major African-American dramatist, was born in Joplin, Missouri, and lived in Lawrence, Kansas, before attending junior high in Illinois and high school in Ohio. He went on to become one of America's important poets and a leading figure of the sparkling Harlem Renaissance. He is also a playwright of some significance, particularly *Mulatto* (1935), which ran at the Vanderbilt Theatre for 373 performances. In the mid-1930s, he wrote a series of plays for Russell and Rowena Jellifee's Gilpin Players at Karamu House in Cleveland, Ohio. But he shifted focus in 1938 to New York, and thereafter most of his plays specifying particular locales were set in Harlem. Hughes did not evoke his Midwestern upbringing in a direct or profound way. Nevertheless, he paved the way for arguably the greatest group of African-American playwrights from any region: Charles Gordone, Lorraine Hansberry, Adrienne Kennedy, and August Wilson, among others.

American theatre of the 1920s and '30s featured a great deal of collaboration, much of it centered on George S. Kaufman (1889-1961), who grew up in Pittsburgh. Kaufman collaborated productively with Marc Connelly, whom he met in Pittsburgh, on a series of plays, including *Merton of the Movies* (1922), set in the "tiny Illinois town of Simsbury," and *Beggar on Horseback* (1924). He worked with novelist Edna Ferber (1887-1968) on a variety of plays, including *Dinner at Eight* (1932) and *Stage Door* (1936). With Ring Lardner (1885-1933), like Ferber, a humorist from Michigan, Kaufman created *June Moon* as a musical, in 1929. Lardner wrote a number of short dramatic pieces in his own right, including *The Tridget of Greva* (1922) and *Abend di Anni Nouveau* (1928-29), a four-page play in five acts (of which Acts 3, 4, and 5 are all one!). A little-known playwright, Lewis Beach (1891-1947), born in Saginaw, Michigan, achieved some success with *The Clod* (1916) and especially *The Goose Hangs High* (1924).

One of the most important Midwestern plays of the 1920s, *The Front Page* (1928), was written by Ben Hecht (1894-1964) and Charles MacArthur (1895-1956) and has subsequently been made into at least three films. Hecht was born in New York but raised in Wisconsin, and both he and MacArthur worked as newspapermen in Chicago. *The Front Page* takes place in the press room of Chicago's Criminal Court Building, providing the prototype for a number of subsequent plays. The two playwrights also collaborated on *Twentieth Century* (1932) and other dramatic works. Another significant Illinois play, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1938), was written by non-Midwesterner Robert Sherwood (1896-1955). This historical drama is still performed on a not infrequent basis at sites in Indiana and Illinois with particular relevance to the sixteenth president.

The 1930s also saw the rise of Thornton Wilder (1897-1975), one of America's premier novelists and playwrights, who was born in Madison, Wisconsin, and later had strong ties to Chicago. *Our Town* (1938), the most frequently performed American play, is set in the fictitious town of Grovers Corners, New Hampshire, but evokes a Midwestern feel in many respects, with echoes of Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* (1915). Several plays, including *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942) and a one-act entitled *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden* (1930), are set in New Jersey. *Pullman Car Hiawatha* (1930), one of his path-breaking one-acts, begins in New York and arrives by train in Chicago a half hour later. Another one-act, *The Long Christmas Dinner* (1930), telescopes time from ninety years down to thirty minutes of a traditional American family ritual. Wilder remains one of the most performed and best loved of American playwrights, in part because of his seemingly rooted "middle-Americanness."

Also active in the 1930s was Paul Osborn (1901-1988), born in Evanston. Illinois, whose play *The Vinegar Tree* opened in 1930. *Morning's at Seven* (1939), winner of a Tony Award, is still performed with some regularity. James Thurber (1894-1961) is known primarily as a humorist, with strong ties to his native Columbus, Ohio. His one successful venture into theatre, *The Male Animal* (1940), was co-written with Elliot Nugent and proved quite successful. Action centers on a Midwestern college town, where the characters must deal with assaults on academic freedom and all -too-familiar questions of shared governance. Along with George F. Kaufman's *Merton at the Movies* (1922), *The Male Animal* remains one of the most successful Midwestern comedies of this period.

In the 1940s, three major playwrights—Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and William Inge—began to establish themselves, all with significant Midwestern ties. Williams (1911-1983) has always been thought of as a Southern playwright, and most of his later plays are set in that region. However, he spent his formative years in St. Louis and studied playwriting at both the University of Missouri in Columbia and Washington University, where he won several drama prizes, as well as at the University of Iowa. Williams wrote a number of short plays set in the St. Louis area, including *The Long Goodbye* (1940), *The Strangest Kind of Romance* (1960), and *Creve Coeur* (1978), *Hot Milk at Three in the Morning* (1930) and *The Magic Tower* (1936), both one-acts, won prizes, the latter being performed by the Webster Groves Theatre Guild. Several full-length plays -- *Stairs to the Roof* (1941), *Candles to the Sun*, and *The Fugitive Kind* (both 1937) -- were performed by The Mummers, a theatre group based at Washington University with which Williams was heavily involved during his early years as a playwright. These performances by The Mummers were reportedly well received by audiences. The most famous of Williams's Midwestern plays, *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), based on a play he wrote the previous year, *Gentleman Caller,* evokes the gritty working-class feel of industrial St. Louis, along with the city's fascination with glamour and decay.

The Midwesternness of Williams's apprentice years has not been sufficiently studied, and neither has Arthur Miller's important stay in the Midwest as a student. Born in 1915 of Jewish parentage in New York, Miller spent a productive period at the University of Michigan, where he won the Avery Hopwood Award for Playwriting. *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944), successfully revived at the Williamstown Theatre Festival in 2001, is set in the Midwest, and *All My Sons* (1947) seems to exhibit a Midwestern sensibility, which wanes in *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and disappears later, once Miller became reintegrated into the Northeast. The small-town rootedness of *All My Sons*, with its scenes in the familiar backyard, gave way to the non-realistic elements of *After the Fall* (1964) and the openly Jewish concerns of *The Price* (1968).

William Inge (1913-1973) is considered by many the "Dean" of Midwestern playwrights, based on his four Broadway hits, *Come Back, Little Sheba* (1950), *Picnic* (1953), *Bus Stop* (1955), and *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* (1957), all of which were later successfully filmed. But Inge was more complicated than the moniker suggests. Both *Picnic* and *Bus Stop* are poised on the doorstep of the West, with the rootless traveler in search of escape to virgin territory and the collection of disparate souls in a state of transition, a theme which appears also in the roadhouse of *Glory in the Flower* (1959). *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, set in Oklahoma, is based largely on Inge's upbringing in nearby Independence, Kansas. After Inge became successful and moved to New York, his later plays were no longer set in the Midwest and, with the exception of the Oscar-winning screenplay *Splendor in the Grass* (1961), a popular film starring Natalie Wood, were not successful. Regional legend still attributes Inge's suicide in 1973 to being divorced from his Midwestern roots.

Another particularly successful play of the 1950s was *Inherit the Wind* (1955), written by Jerome Lawrence (b. 1915) and Robert E. Lee (b. 1918), two Ohioans. Based on the famous "Monkey" Trial of 1925 in Tennessee, the script is nonetheless set in "a small country town somewhere in the South or Middle West." This broadens the play's import beyond a specific time and place. More contemporary conflicts in Kansas and elsewhere, where creationists and proponents of the teaching of evolution have squared off as recently as 2000, have kept the issues of this play relevant.

The 1950s saw the emergence of a whole generation of talent, which began emerging in the following two decades. Particularly important among these, from a social as well as a cultural standpoint, were African-American artists such as Lorraine Hansberry, Charles Gordone, Mari Evans, Adrienne Kennedy, and August Wilson. Hansberry (1930-1965), who grew up on the South Side of Chicago, became the first black woman to have a play on Broadway with *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). This play, set in Chicago, has since become an American classic in its depiction of African-American family life. Hansberry's later plays, like *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* (1964) and *Les Blancs* (1970), were less successful but have been generating renewed interest. She died at a tragically early age.

Charles Gordone (1925-1995), born in Cleveland and raised in Elkhart, Indiana, became the first African-American to receive the Pulitzer Prize for drama for *No Place to Be Somebody* in 1969. Mari Evans (1923), also born in Ohio (Toledo) and long associated with Indiana, is better known as a poet of such works as *I Am a Black Woman* (1964). But she wrote several plays in the 1970s, including *Eyes* (1979), an adaptation of Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). A stronger and broader legacy has been created by Adrienne Kennedy, who was born in 1923 in Pittsburgh, grew up in Cleveland, and attended Ohio State University. From *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) through more recent works like *The Ohio State Murders* (1992) and beyond, Kennedy has established herself as a poet of the theatre, whose demanding, sometimes confusing works create their own aesthetic space.

August Wilson (1945), born and raised in Pittsburgh in the Midwestern fringe of western Pennsylvania, has become one of America's leading playwrights. Major works date from his association with the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota, where he wrote *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), set in Chicago, *Fences* (1987), and *Piano Lesson*(1990), both winners of the Pulitzer Prize, among other plays. His searing theatrical examination of African-American life in different historical decades often plays out *against* the backdrop of the Great Migration and cultural intersections of North and South.

Another group of Midwesterners of the same generation was energized by anti-establishment ethos of the Vietnam War era. Megan Terry, born in New York in 1932, has been called "the mother of American feminist drama" (quoted in Meserve 379). She created the first rock musical, *Viet Rock,* in 1966 at the Open Theatre but subsequently left New York in favor of Omaha, where she founded the Omaha Magic Theatre and has since gone on to write over sixty plays in her adopted home. Maryat Lee (1923-1989), born and raised in the Cincinnati area, worked for a while in New York, but became disillusioned with the elitist and commercial trends she saw dominating contemporary theatre and moved to West Virginia, where she established what she called "EcoTheater." This approach relies on amateur players and dramatizes oral histories, aiming at authenticity in the context of a specific local community. Jack Gelber, born in Chicago in 1932, attended the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. He is known chiefly for *The Connection* (1959), an aelatory, counter-culture play featuring streetwise drug-addicts that shocked and energized Broadway in the decade following. Later plays like *Square in the Eye* (1965) and *Rehearsal* (1976) continued in the experimental, improvisatory vein.

David Rabe (1940) emerged with explosive energy with his Vietnam trilogy in the early 1970s. Both *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* and *Sticks and Bones* opened to great acclaim in 1971. Born and raised in Dubuque, Iowa, with its Catholic ambience along the mighty Mississippi, Rabe has been marked by a confluence of guilt and flux, which dominated most of his work. Although he has written a number of noteworthy plays, particularly *Streamers* (1976) and *Hurlyburly* (1984), the only work which seems conspicuously Midwestern is *Sticks and Bones*, the second play of the Vietnam trilogy, which focuses on Ozzie and Harriet, "typical" American parents, and their failure to understand the trauma experienced in Viet Nam by their eldest son, David.

Sam Shephard (1943), another major playwright of the same generation, was born in Fort Sheridan, Illinois but spent his later youth in California. Because of such works as *Fool for Love* (1979) and *True West* (1980), he is largely thought of as a Western playwright. However, *Chicago* (1966) and other early plays are set in the Midwest, and *Buried Child* (1978) is quintessentially Midwestern. When the son returns from roaming in the desert regions of the Southwest, the family farm is still rooted in the seasons of harvest, in elements of sun and rain, which ultimately feed and sustain, leading to potential renewal. Even plays like *True West* carry on a covert dialogue between the two regions of his experience.

Another Vietnam veteran, Lanford Wilson (1937), has written an important series of plays set in the Midwest. Born in Lebanon, Missouri, Wilson achieved success with this trilogy of plays set in his native Missouri: *5th of July* (1978), *Tally's Folly* (1982), which won the Pulitzer Prize, and *Tally and Son* (1985). All three plays focus on family, landscape, and continuity, though *5th of July* also features an influx of guests from California and a settled gay couple at the center of the action . Among earlier plays, *The Rimers of Eldritch* (1965) ridicules small-town bigotries, and cultural tension between Nebraska and California motivates *Lemon Sky* (1969). *The Mound Builders* (1975) involves anthropology and the Native America legacy that undergirds contemporary life in the Mississippi Valley. Wilson's subsequent plays, like *Burn This* (1987) and *Redwood Curtain* (1992), have continued the earlier success, but in New York and California respectively.

One of the tragic losses in American theatre was the untimely death of Larry Shue. Born in New Orleans in 1946, he studied at Illinois Wesleyan University and worked very successfully at the Milwaukee Repertory theatre. His early one-act, *Grandma Duck Is Dead* (1968), is set in a central Illinois college town. *The Nerd* (1984), his first major hit, seems distinctly Midwestern, while his other great comedy, *The Foreigner* (1985), is set in Georgia. These two comedies rank among America's finest; the loss from his premature death is incalculable.

Another major figure from the center of the country is David Mamet, born in Flossmore, Illinois, in 1947 and nurtured in the exciting theatrical scene in Chicago in the 1960s and '70s. *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1976) established Mamet as a fresh new voice and was later televised. *Duck Variations* (1976) and other one-acts are set either in Chicago or in Midwestern resort areas (e.g., *Lake-Boat* [1981]). The most important work of this phase is *American Buffalo* (1977), one of Mamet's best plays and a classic of American theatre. In *Glen Garry Glen Ross* (1983), winner of the Pulitzer Prize, Mamet seems to have moved beyond the Midwest, and *Speed-the-Plow* (1989) is set in Hollywood. Like Rabe and Lanford Wilson, Mamet arose from the Midwest and has since broadened his perspective to other areas of the country.

The newer generation of playwrights includes a number of energetic artists whose future remains still in formation. Emily Mann (1952), from Chicago originally and now long associated with the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, has written on a variety of documentary topics, including the Southern *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years* (1995), based on the narratives of two daughters of a man born in slavery. *Still Life* (1980) based on interviews with three people in Minnesota in the summer of 1978, examines violence in America. Ntozake Shange (1948) was born in Trenton, New Jersey, and cannot be considered a Midwestern playwright. Nonetheless, from the age of eight to thirteen, she spent crucial years at an integrated school in St. Louis, an experience she credits with educating her about the painful realities of racism in America. Many younger playwrights flourish now in cities like Minneapolis/St. Paul, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Detroit. John Olive, Marisha Chamberlain, David Radavich, David Rusch, Cheryl West, and a host of others show promise from the region. The Midwest continues to generate genuine theatrical talent that feeds into mainstream American culture.

Sensibilities of the nation's heartland are less well known and understood than those prevailing elsewhere. But a strong case can be made for the centering presence of the Midwest in American culture, even in drama, a genre that might seem antithetical to the regional attachment to understatement and rootedness. To an important degree, the central conflicts of the Midwest—surviving on the land, staying or going, fitting in or not fitting in—mirror the fundamental American struggle to sustain a viable new culture. The wide range of significant playwrights the heartland has produced gives ample testimony to the vitality of its culture and its centrality to American habits of thinking and self-definition.

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ALICE GERSTENBERG AND THE "EXPERIMENTAL" TRAP

DOROTHY CHANSKY

> Then Jane, the artist, and Jane, the woman, came face to face in the mirror, and both were smiling.
>
> --Alice Gerstenberg
> *Unquenched Fire* [1]

Why resurrect Alice Gerstenberg (1885-1972)? Outside of her one-act play "Overtones" (1931), which is among the most anthologized plays of the American Little Theatre Movement, she is largely forgotten.[2] Even recent scholarship on her work deplores her inability or refusal to "grow" as a playwright, to leave Chicago, or to critique capitalism.[3] These assessments may reveal less about Alice Gerstenberg than they do about ways of seeing theatre and writing theatre history that privilege some kinds of activism and challenge to a status quo while scorning or ignoring others. My purpose is to reconsider not only Gerstenberg's work as playwright, feminist, novelist, and theatre worker, but, equally importantly, to note how received ideas about innovation, experimentation, and social critique in theatre can hamper an ability to read work outside the dis/enabling frameworks of canonicity and periodicity.

Gerstenberg remained active in theatre until she was sixty and wrote her last play at eighty-three. Her career challenges the familiar inherited taxonomies of Little Theatre, which is usually regarded as either an experimental movement that had run out of steam by the end of World War I, or as a movement that continued in a debased "community theatre" version in the 1920s. Elsewhere I argue that a full understanding of the Little Theatre Movement, like other

Modernist projects, needs to include both phases, as well as their later effects.[4] Here I also want to suggest that the values of the Little Theatre movement are the very values that undergird the work of nearly all present-day academic theatre, independent groups, community theatres, and K-12 drama programs; therefore a subject who worked and wrote in accordance with them for sixty years offers a valuable site for investigating theatrical longevity as well as for reevaluating what comprises intervention or experimentation.

Gerstenberg had her share of commercial and New York success, but her plays and her investment in community—specifically her Chicago—embody the concerns for fellowship, self-expression, and anti-commercialism that Little Theatre—a movement spearheaded by amateurs and educators—fought for.[5] Historians of "experimental" or "avant-garde" theatre have largely focused on New York work, frequently calling it simply "American"[6] and thereby relegating any other work to the realm of "regional" or simply to invisibility. As Shannon Jackson has recently noted, depending on disciplinary situatedness, notions differ regarding what comprises the hinterland (and the center).[7]

Alice Gerstenberg wrote more than three dozen plays[8] and two novels, acted in Maurice Browne's Chicago Little Theatre, started the Junior League Children's Theatre in Chicago in 1921 and in 1922 founded the Playwrights Theatre, which operated until 1945. She lent her support—and plays— to a third amateur company that was named for her and founded in 1955. She lived long enough to see the founding of the American Educational Theatre Association, the forerunner to today's Association for Theatre in Higher Education, and was an invited speaker at three AETA conferences. Gerstenberg recognized that people interested in other arts were good prospects to tap as theatre supporters. She also recognized that understanding of and respect for theatre lagged behind the other arts, necessitating both educating by critics and some nudging and encouragement by people who, like herself, were in a position to make theatre going fun and comfortable for some who might otherwise stay away. Perhaps most important, her feminism—present in virtually all her plays—is too easily lost in critiques of her work that see only the upper-class milieus or the characters' extreme, sometimes silly behavior. Gerstenberg regularly lampooned the social roles that constrain actual women as much as—and perhaps more than—she portrayed putatively realistic individuals. A failure to see this ongoing *cri de coeur* suggest, among other things, a disregard for the genuine ways in which women saw and wanted other possibilities in Little Theatre endeavors than "growing up" to write or support hard, tough plays about "serious" issues, the latter a virtual litany of Modernist and theatrical concerns vis-à-vis literature and women's failures both as writers and as consumers of plays.[9] These retrospectively prescriptive assessments and insistence upon received categories perpetuate familiar yardsticks of success, standards dependent on national visibility, canonicity, and careerism and overlook the possibility that some women's relation to family and community made these trajectories less pressing and less interesting than other approaches to supporting anti-commercial theatre.

Gerstenberg's two unpublished autobiographies reveal four ongoing passions: the theatre, her family, Chicago, and her social world.[10] There is no question that Gerstenberg, an only child whose grandfather was a founding member of the Chicago Board of Trade, enjoyed a life available only to the very wealthy. While her life differed in degree from the standards of the more ordinary middle class, differences in kind were not as radical as they might seem at first glance to a present-day reader. Servants were a staple of home life for all but the poorest of working-class Victorian women; those who came of age in the teens were the first generation of urban, middle-class women to do most of their own housework and raise their children largely without help.[11] The excursions and indulgence Gerstenberg enjoyed, including the opera and symphony subscriptions and summers at a lake house, would become ordinary for many upwardly mobile baby boomers. She attended Bryn Mawr ('07) because her mother, who chose the college possibly knowing about its president's feminism, wanted Alice to have the education she herself did not.[12]

Gerstenberg began writing professionally within a year of graduation. Her writing during the Little Theatre years and beyond cannot be divorced from her idea of a particular audience nor from a belief that the double standard had crippling consequences for women. Her dramatic métier was frequently farce or drawing room comedy with settings and language usually realist and women's entrapment pushed to extremes. She wrote several plays with all-female casts. Gerstenberg's' Little Theatre one-acts are her best-known works, with *Ten One-Act Plays* enjoying fifteen printings between 1921 and 1959.[13] These plays, however, are part of a nexus of writing and theatre work that mutually constitute an "ongoing reconstruction of experience" that is gendered and that takes seriously the value of amateur theatre.

Unquenched Fire (1912), the novel that was Gerstenberg's first published work to receive some national attention, tells the story of Jane Carrington, a Chicago society girl who goes to New York to be an actress. Here Gerstenberg was already exploring what would later be called the split subject. Jane is aware of her ability to be in an emotional situation while simultaneously being able to watch and chart her own reactions and those of others. Jane also embodies the split between "woman" and "artist"; in the end she must choose between them, as her husband, in what is clearly portrayed as a supportive, companionate marriage, proves unwilling to forgive her single transgression (described in the book as what might be called heavy petting). Jane, suffering under his scrutiny, berates herself for "add[ing] the curse of Adam to the curse of Eve."[14] She emerges as a star but is punished as a woman. Gerstenberg recognized what social historians would later see as the Progressive Era's "limitations of willed equality," in which freethinking career women were largely subject to a "pattern of men's privileges and women's subordination."[15]

A year later, Gerstenberg wrote "Overtones," the split subject device of which is the most common reason for the attention the play received. It portrays a meeting over tea between two young women, who have both loved the same man, John, a painter. Harriet gave him up because she feared he would never make enough money to keep her comfortable; Margaret married him and they are, indeed, very poor. Margaret hopes that her friend will commission a portrait and thereby provide both money and contacts; Harriet commissions the painting so she can be in John's presence again and try to win him back. These women, however, are the socially well-behaved "overtones" of their "primitive" selves, Hetty and Maggie, who speak in strident voices and state directly what the social selves repress: desperation, compromise, helplessness within proscribed roles, and hunger, both physical and emotional.

It is easy to read the play as presenting "two women solely in their relationships to a man."[16] Another frequent reading focuses on the "invention of a separate onstage character representing one's alter ego [that was] later used by Eugene O'Neill in ...*Strange Interlude.*"[17] Neither interpretation suggests the feminist reading that Mary Denise Maddock offers when she calls Gerstenberg's interest in the inner psyche a "critique of a society that represses women so severely that they break apart."[18] The emphasis on technique and the dismissal of this aspect of the subject matter foreclose a response that says "attention must be paid" to ordinary women. While each overtone is conversant with her own primitive self, and while the primitives address each other, neither social self ever speaks to the other's primitive self. Neither, in other words, acknowledges that, just like herself, the other suffers from unhappiness and repressed secrets. The women are split off from each other's honest company and comfort as much as they are from having integrated public selves.

Touting innovation as a reason for canonicity or praise ignores how a play credited with "original" devices was not always the first to use them. Innovation, like history itself, is attributed not necessarily to what happened (first) but to what was encoded (first). Gerstenberg preceded O'Neill with the doubled self. She preceded *Blithe Spirit* with her own 1920 comedy featuring former mates, now dead, as central characters.[19] Edna Ferber expressed admiration for Gerstenberg's play "Fourteen," and Gerstenberg noted a scene in *Dinner at Eight* reminiscent of her own play.[20] *Glee Plays the Game* (1933) preceded by several years Claire Booth Luce's use of an all-female cast whose discussions and obsessions with absent men make the men almost seem like characters. My point is not that Gerstenberg's' plays were "better" or more unusual, or even original themselves. It is only that canonical firsts' pride of place can be challenged, thereby challenging traditional historicizing of drama.

Little Theatre drama was created by and for bourgeois interpretive communities, some more "bohemian" than others. Stuart Hecht is correct in suggesting that the "popularity of Gerstenberg's plays suggests a general acceptance of her world-view by the nation's amateur theatres."[21] Many of the one-acts she wrote in the teens and twenties were widely produced. The world-view that appealed, because it was recognizable to many women, was one in which most well-off and many middle class women had no careers—certainly not after marriage.[22] It was a world-view that recognized that men controlled finances and enforced a double standard while women were socialized (in no small part by advertising) to eschew forming strong emotional bonds with each other. Plays that allowed women to embody roles challenging this setup must have satisfied, at least for some, more than an investment in reproducing upper class mores. And these embodiments surely qualify as performative experiments within their contexts.

Gerstenberg's 1915 novel *TheConscience of Sarah Platt* offers a matrix for reading her other work. The story of the forty-five year-old spinster whose Victorian "conscience" caused her to reject the same ideal mate once as a naïve teen and again as a repressed adult is virtually a feminist polemic. The text also offers a cross-class critique of women's options in American life. Sarah is a schoolteacher in New York who barely earns enough to make ends meet on her salary. She is one of five women in the book, representing five perspectives on the "woman question." The others are a wealthy, progressive mother, her athletic, self-assured daughter, a lower-middle-class housewife who wishes to work and calls her home a prison, and a successful editor who has "outgrown" and has no need to replace the (long dead) fiance of her youth. She has delightful memories and no regrets; Sarah has neither. Again, society "breaks women apart," both from being integrated selves and from each other. No woman character in the book is married and leading a rich intellectual life; those with the leisure to develop the latter are portrayed as intellectually shallow and snobby.

Familiar forms could allow audiences to focus on social critique. In "The Buffer," (1916), which uses realism that borders on lecture, an unhappy couple stays together for the sake of their daughter.[23] The play takes seriously the question of incompatibility as well as its somatic effects on children and it clearly advocates divorce.[24] The housemaid is, besides a doctor, the only character who sees clearly that the parents' bickering is making the child ill and old before her time. Gerstenberg portrayed servants and working women outside the educated professions sketchily, but, they, too, have rebellious, or at least independent, voices in the plays. Of interest as well is the refusal of the widow whom the unhappy husband loves to continue an unconsummated affair when the means for making all the adults happy has been discussed outright. The "other woman," far from being a villainess, is a voice of honesty and reason.

In "Hearts" (1917), Gerstenberg uses obvious metaphors of a card game—playing for hearts/love, trumping others, refusing to be the dummy—to create a scenario in which the real winner prizes cooperation, not competition.[25] Twelve years later, Gerstenberg again assembled a quartet of women in a home setting in "Mere Man."[26] Here, they are high-powered, unmarried professionals who try to dissuade their pianist friend from marrying because of all the ways in which her independence will be co-opted. The pianist's wish to "triumph over the bondage of marriage and make it serve my freedom," anticipated the myth of the 1980s

relaxing followed by a one-act play as a curtain raiser, thereby offering a take-it-or-leave-it opportunity for curious audiences to experiment with the new in the midst of more familiar offerings.[34]

Much of the theatre work that Gerstenberg did challenges ideas about theatrical significance because she crossed the lines between "art" and "community" theatre with seeming abandon and because the designation "experimental" is so often reserved for the former. Yet she enabled people who might otherwise not have chosen to do theatre to turn their expressive and teamwork energies precisely to theatre. She founded the Junior League children's theatre in 1921 because she realized that the League president's request to start a theatre group would pose a rehearsal problem for an adult-focused venture. The young, mostly married, women members were expected to be home at night and working men could not rehearse by day. Gerstenberg proposed plays for children, since many of the the-popular fairy tales and stories about children lent themselves to all-female casts. Her idea was to give opportunities to more young women; she was also aware of these participants' need for assurance that cross-gender casting would not make them look ridiculous, as it might have in a realist or classical endeavor. Also, plays for children were not being offered elsewhere in Chicago.[35]

As late as 1947 Gerstenberg was interviewed for *The Chicago Daily News,* where she objected to psychiatrist George W. Crane's assertion that "most bachelors and old maids are like turtles," since "persons who don't marry withdraw into a shell and lose interest in the world." Gerstenberg called Crane "fifty years behind the times" and noted that unmarried women often avoid being "chained to a stove," while sometimes showing more " maternal interest in humanity than a lot of married women,"[36] Compulsive heterosexuality (Christine Stansell's escalation of "compulsory") demands biological maternity. Gerstenberg's ideas about domesticity are complicated. She believed most people needed marriage and children and that this need was the bedrock of human society,[37] yet she herself prized her independence and realized that marriage might well have interfered with the work she valued. She noted that half her graduating class at Bryn Mawr did not marry and she referred to her books as her children (124). This tangle of values and terminology (spinsters as maternal; books as children; the unmarried as turtles; biology as the index of motherhood) suggests some of the common assumptions and forms of resistance with which Gerstenberg struggled in her own life. Yet she also believed in the social and artistic contribution that woman not employed outside the

the local; even the Manhattan practitioners were writing and producing to local standards. Moreover, Little Theatre depended on the financial support of the well-off; its most bohemian practitioners never pretended otherwise.[31] It would become axiomatic later in the century for regional theatres to provide perks and services for donors and volunteers, whatever artists might privately believe about the sensibilities of some of their sponsoring individuals.

In 1926 Gerstenberg was engaged by Vaudeville's Orpheum Circuit board of directors to provide personal attention and ticketbuying assistance to "the elite of the town" who might otherwise have stayed home. She also used her position and the Palace Theatre itself to support the work of the amateur writers and actors in the Playwrights Theatre, an organization she founded that produced the new work of Chicago playwrights. Between matinees and evening shows, she organized "Twilight Play readings," inviting audience members with tickets to the matinee to stay for the readings and those arriving for the Twilight play to return for the evening show. the Palace provided the room for the readings.

Gerstenberg used her position as a publicist for a commercial producer in the late 1920s to facilitate a professional reading of a play for a fledgling playwright student at Northwestern University. Anne Frierson had written *Quagmire* for an African American cast. Gerstenberg arranged for the visiting company of *In Abraham's Bosom,* Paul Green's Pulitzer Prize winner, to read the play, which was reviewed favorably in *The Daily News.* She used her membership in Chicago's Arts Club to arrange for Playwrights Theatre readings and productions that would have guaranteed audiences and interest. "The Little Theatre must grow roots deep in its own area because that is where it functions to benefit the inhabitants there" (548). She also believed that local critics had a responsibility to help educate audiences by providing the context for recognizing experiments either in dramaturgy or in organizational structure (14). [32]

Average playgoers were not irrelevant to Gerstenberg, regardless of the contours of her personal social world. The preface she wrote for a 1934 anthology of one-act plays is of interest for its ideas about audience development.[33] She recognized that the usual 8:45 curtain created a problem for working people who hardly wished to race home between work and theatre but who, otherwise, were left with time to kill, even after an affordable dinner. Gerstenberg suggested that theatres open at 7:30 and make their lounges available for a half hour of relaxing followed by a one-act play as a curtain raiser, thereby offering a take-it-or-leave-it opportunity for curious audiences to experiment with the new in the midst of more familiar offerings.[34]

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The combination of Little Theatre ideals and the concerns of senior citizenship may seem like the forced marriage of an odd couple. Little Theatre of the teens is stereotyped as youthful rebellion staged via iconoclasm and self-expression; women's involvement in the 1920s community expansion of Little Theatre can be ridiculed as arising from a need for glamour or for compensatory attention-getting. Soul-searching in the face of aging gets almost no mention in either theme.[39] Theatre by and about senior citizens would not gain public attention until late in the century, but Gerstenberg did not wait.[40] In the 1950s, dismayed by the death of a friend who had shut herself in and drunk herself to death after her husband's demise, Gerstenberg wrote a three-act play called *The Hourglass* (1955) as both a protest against the emptiness of the lives of older women and a bid to her cohort to attend to their inner resources. She also wrote *On the Beam* (1957), a play about using spiritualism to combat the loss of faith in oneself that forced retirement can induce. Gerstenberg would follow her own advice again by writing *Time for Living* in 1969. The septugenarian who uses drama to speak to and about her cohort risks a no-win entry in the annals of (traditional) theatre history: as a product of her time, no matter how much she has "developed," she is always already "out of date." It is worth considering who is creating the timeliness and perpetuating which (frequently youth-focused) taxonomies.

Alice Gerstenberg's career is unthinkable outside the parameters and influence of the Little Theatre Movement. She took seriously a belief in the local and in the value, for participants in all departments, of a supportive community of theatre workers. She lectured on, taught, or practiced playwriting for most of her life. She created opportunities for original plays to be heard. Many of her plays feature financially comfortable women in domestic environs, yet she used familiar settings to challenge received opinion and social strictures. As Janice Radway asserts in her study of romance novels and their readership, the fact that a genre fails to meet the formalist criteria of the theorists or scholars does not automatically mean that is is of no use in developing self-awareness and the ability to be assertive among members of its target audience.[41] The difference between value to scholars and value to the users of literature is particularly important in theatre, where meaningful growth may occur from the fact of participation in a production as much as from the originality of a script. Gerstenberg worked both sides of the art/community fence within Little Theatre, thereby inviting a consideration of the multiple uses of the word "experimental." At face value "experimental" is often used in discussion of art to refer to something untried or simply new. But another dictionary definition is "based on experience and practical evidence rather than on ideas," a definition most readers would recognize in relation to that familiar school experience, the science experiment—an exercise that is not about proving anything new, but rather about experiencing first-hand the already-known.[42] Much experimentation in amateur or educational theatre is about the first-hand, and what is new in that. Moreover, "experimental" can become a catchall adjective for theatre that is "downtown" or anticommercial but that can still, within those designations, be derivative or predictable.

Alice Gerstenberg greeted changes with a willingness to go on writing, producing, and speaking about and on behalf of women and theatre.If she was unwilling or unable to play the role of tough rebel or to give up her financial status (something that few theatre artists who achieve success rarely do anyway), she accomplished for decades the feat that was often short-lived for female playwrights of the Progressive Era. Alice the artist and Alice the woman continued to face each other in the mirror. One can imagine they were often smiling.

The College of William and Mary

NOTES

[1] Alice Gerstenberg, *Unquenched Fire* (Boston: Small, Maynard and Company, 1921), 184.

[2] "Overtones" and Susan Glaspell's "Trifles" do duty as representing women's plays of the Little Theatre Movement. "Overtones" first appeared in *Washington Square Plays* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1916). "Overtones" and "Trifles" both appear in a Greeks-to-the -present college anthology, Jay B. Hubbell and John O. Beaty, eds., *an Introduction to Drama* (New York: Macmillan, 1927); "Overtones" is in *Plays By and About Women*, eds. Victoria Sullivan and James Hatch. (New York: Vintage Books, (1973); "Trifles" is in *Plays by American Women 1900-1930*, ed. Judith Barlow (New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1981) and in three editions of *The Harcourt Brace Anthology of Drama*, ed. W.B. Worthen (Orlando: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993, 1996, 2000). Both plays are included in *The Oxford Book of Women's Writing in the United States*, eds. Linda Wagner-Martin and Cathy N. Davidson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) and are the only examples of drama from the first half of the twentieth century. In the new millennium, "Overtones" is in Keith Newlin, ed., *American Plays of the New Woman*. (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000). Glaspell is represented by "The Outside," The third woman playwright in this collection is Rachel Crothers; the other three plays have the New Woman as their subject.

[3] Stuart Hecht., "The Plays of Alice Gerstenberg: Cultural Hegemony in the American Little Theatre," *Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. 26 (Summer 1992): 1-16. Marilyn Atlas, "Innovation in Chicago: Alice Gerstenberg's Psychological Drama," *Midwestern Miscellany* Vol10 (1982): 59-68.

[4] Little Theatre, a revisionist aesthetic movement of its age, benefits from an analysis that takes into account Thomas Strychacz's assertion that one of modernism's most important projects was installing the reading and legitimizing strategies for its emerging discourses in the realm of professional university training. Little Theatre innovators of the teens were often the same people who created or taught in the new university theatre departments of the twenties. See Strychacz, *Modernism, Mass Culture, and Professionalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); also Dorothy Chansky, *Composing Ourselves: The American Little Theatre Movement and the Construction of a New Audience, 1912-1925* (Ph.D.diss., New York University, 1997)

[5] Jack Poggi's mapping of innovative movements and change in the twentieth-century American theatre points out that the 1930s advent of the Group Theatre (the result of resistance from within the Theatre Guild), the emergence of off-Broadway in the 1950s, and the growth of the Regional theatre movement in the 1960s and 70s were all rebellions from *within professional theatre*, and were focused on New York, either as actual locus of work or as epicenter against which to define one's identity. See *Theatre in America: The Impact of Economic Forces 1870-1967* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966).

[6] See, for example, Arnold Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

[7] Shannon Jackson, "Professing Performance: Disciplinary Genealogies," *TDR* 45 (T169), Spring 2001: 89-90.

[8] Some were re-written with new titles and "Overtones" was reworked as a three-act play in 1922.

[9] See, for instance, Joseph Aimone, "Millay's Big Book, or the Feminist Formalist as Modern" in *Unmanning Modernism: Gendered Re-Readings*, eds. Elizabeth Jane Harrison and Shirley Peterson (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 1-13; Suzanne Clark, *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Bonnie Kime Scott's introduction to *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Joseph Mersand, "The Woman in the Audience Grows Up: A Study of the Contribution of Female Audiences to American Drama," unpaginated manuscript, New York Public Library, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, 1937; Marie-Claire Pasquier, "Women in the Theatre of Men: What Price Freedom?" in *Women in Culture and Politics: A Century of Change*, eds. Judith Friedlander, Blanche Wiesen Cook, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 194-206; and Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff's "'Art Hysterical Notions' of Progress and Culture," *Heresies* Vol. 1 No. 4 (Winter 1978):38-42.

[10] Alice Gerstenberg to Nancy Cox-McCormack Cushman: "Come Back With Me," unpublished autobiography (1959-1962), the Alice Gerstenberg Papers, Chicago Historical Society.

[11] Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), 259.

[12] See Mabel Newcomer, *A Century of Higher Education for American Women* (Washington, D.C.: Zenger Publishing Co. Inc., 1959), 56, 118, 189, 225.

[13] Alice Gerstenberg,*Ten One-Act Plays* (New York: Brentano's, 1921). The plays are "He Said and She Said," "Overtones," "The Unseen," "The Buffer," "Attuned," "The Pot Boiler," "Hearts," "Beyond," "Fourteen," and "The Illuminatti in Drama Libre." References to these plays are from this edition.

[14] Gerstenberg, *Unquenched Fire*, 404.

[15] Stansell, *American Moderns, 262.*

[16] Sullivan and Hatch, Introduction to *Plays by and About Women*, viii.

[17] Hecht, "The Plays of Alice Gerstenberg," 4.

[18] Mary Denise Maddock, "Prive Scripts, Public Roles: American Women's Drama 1900-1037" (Ph.D. diss, Indiana University, 1987), 41, 42, Maddock adds that, while O'Neill's characters transcend or reconcile their warring selves, Gerstenberg's do not.

[19] *A Grain of Mustard Seed* was written in 1920, optioned for Broadway, and then turned down. Gerstenberg rewrote it with Maude Fealy under the title *The Promise* in 1929. It was revised by Gerstenberg and Fealy again and published by Samuel French in 1942 asd *Something in the Air.*

[20] Gerstenberg wrote in her autobiography, "I am sure she is unaware of that fact, her subconscious merely digging up for her own use what seemed to fit into her need," invoking her own lifelong interests in parapsychology and the unconscious (83)

[21] Hecht, 13.

[22] See Dorothy M. Brown, *Setting a Course: American Women in the 1920s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), especially chapter 4, "On the Job: Still Separate Spheres" and chapter 6, "Education and the Professions: Expansion and Limits.

[23] The set-up had already been used by Eleanor Gates in her 1913 fantasy, *Poor Little Rich Girl.* In Gates's play, the child falls ill, dreams of parental reconciliation, and awakens to find her dream come true.

[24] "The Buffer," 112.

[25] "Hearts," 206.

[26] Alice Gerstenberg, "Mere Man," in *Comedies All* (London: Longmans, 1930), 23-29.

[27] See Donna Eileen Lisker, "Realist Feminisms, Feminist Realisms: Six Twentieth-Century American Playwrights (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1996), 76.

[28] See Carole L. Cole's analysis of twenty-four plays by American women in the decades immediately before and after the passage of suffrage, which discusses "relational values" as a desideratum of women early in the century that was co-opted by a focus on individualism. "The Search for Power: Drama by American Women, 1909-1929" (Ph.D.diss., Purdue University, 1991).

[29] Alice Gerstenberg, *Got Your Number*, unpublished manuscript, New York Public Library, Lincoln Center Branch for the Performing Arts, 1942).

[30] Her own view was that Chicago's "climate itself stimulates the 'I will' spirit...We kept on striving to build for a richer soil for the arts." (Letter to Nancy Cox-McCormack Cushman, II 7, 9).

[31] Gerstenberg left the Chicago Little Theatre at the end of its first season because Maurice Browne scorned the financiers from whom he expected help and also because he refused the advice of company members who realized that his dismissive treatment of supporting members was hurting the venture. Gerstenberg applauded his effort to create an art theatre that would pay its own way; she understandably resented the "usual tone of the radical of the day to...think that goodness was only a quality special to the have-nots" ("Come Back With Me," 17). Browne wrote in his autobiography, *Too Late to Lament* (London: Gollanez, 1955), about his penchant for alienating people upon whose support he depended.

[32] Her talk at the 1926 joint meeting of the National Drama and National Theatre Conference reflected her concerns and addressed "Experimental productions of new scripts. Responsibility of the Community theatre for the experimental production of plays written by local playwrights. The organization of the audience for experimental productions" (524).

[33] Alice Gerstenberg, Preface, *One-Act Plays for Stage and Study* (New York: samuel French, 1934).

[34] Sheldon Cheney, *The Art Theater: Its Character as Differentiated from the Commercial Theater; Its Ideals and Organization; and a Record of Certain European and American Examples* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925), 87.

[35] Gerstenberg's experience with her adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*, which had run briefly on Broadway in 1915, made her aware of the problems of mounting a production whose audience was really only available for matinees. "Come Back With Me," 426.

[36] "Spinster Takes Issue with Dr. Crane, Says It is Wives Who are Turtles," *Chicago Daily News*, 14 January, 1947. The implications of her shorthand reply would be unpacked in some detail a half century later by Shannon Jackson in a study of Hull-House and Jane Addams, another unmarried woman who worked for social change in Chicago. Jackson proposes "asking why biological connection always serves as the index of motherhood and whether "childlessness" is experienced as an absolute condition." Shannon Jackson, *Lines of Activity: Performance, Historiography, Hull-House Domesticity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 164.

[37] "Come Back With Me," 77.

[38] Alice Gerstenberg, letter to the Editor, *Bryn Mawr Alumnae Bulletin* No. 3 (1966-67). The economic questions raised in the 1990s by Nannygate suggest that the cross-class gender-related challenges Gerstenberg posed were far from resolved by the end of the century, ranking her among progressive rather than regressive thinkers.

[39] The topic of Alice Browne's "Joint Owners in Spain" -- a pair of querulous old women in a public home for the aged, and a play in which Gerstenberg appeared in 1913 -- is an exception.

[40] Gerstenberg wrote her first play about aging in 1922. "Ever Young" portrays four socialites in their late fifties and early sixties who lament their invisibility within a world that prizes youth. The women achieve self-awareness, tentative autonomy, and community by renouncing their received roles and crutches, with the most glamorous choosing generosity rather than continue the lifelong practice of competing for men and placing that activity ahead of maintaining loyalty with other women.

[41] Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

[42] *Encarta World English Dictionary* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 627.

FROM NOVEL TO PLAYS: ZONA GALE AND THE MARRIAGE PLOT IN THREE VERSIONS OF *MISS LULU BETT*

MARILYN JUDITH ATLAS

Zona Gale (1874-1938), an educated woman from Portage, Wisconsin, received a Master's degree in 1899. Fourteen years younger than Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry*, she, like Monroe, was a New Woman who evolved into the role from a more romantic, conservative position. Gale was interested in both the politics and poetics of her time, and although her style was only subtly experimental, her attitude toward her subject matter radically changed. In 1908, her portrayal of small town life in Friendship Village was gentle and idealized; by 1920, she had penned an ironic, even bitter critique of small-town cruelty and destructiveness in her depiction of Warbleton in *Miss Lulu Bett*. Zona Gale's style remained conservative when compared to radical experimentalists of her time such as Gertrude Stein, but when she adapted *Miss Lulu Bett* as a play (1920), Gale, for a moment, embraced a very modern attitude toward closure, or the lack of closure. In the first version of the play, the main character, Miss Lulu Bett, may marry, or she may not, but she is determined to have choices in how she spends the remainder of her life and she plans on spending some of it outside of Warbleton and away from the Deacons. Living with her married younger sister, Ina Deacon, for fifteen years is enough, and she will not remain in a household that uses and humiliates her or in a town where she is unable to be honest and must protect others rather than protect herself.

A professional journalist, Zona Gale began her career as a single newspaper reporter in Milwaukee for the *Evening Wisconsin* and *Milwaukee Journal* and then left the Midwest to write for the *New*

York World. She published poetry, short stories, plays, and essays and became famous for her Friendship Village stories. Politically active, Zona Gale fought for progressive causes such as pacifism and women's suffrage. In 1910 she won first prize in *The Delineator* short fiction contest, a prize at the time worth $2000.00, a great sum of money, making her a single woman well on her way to fame as well as financial independence.

Only one decade later in 1921, Zona Gale, still single, won an even more prestigious prize, the Pulitzer, for her play, *Miss Lulu Bett*. A year earlier, Gale wrote a novel by the same name, a best seller that rivaled Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street. Miss Lulu Bett,* the play, won the Pulitzer over Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones.* Perhaps it was because Eugene O'Neill had won the prize the year before for *Beyond the Horizon* and the committee did not want to give him the award two years in a row (he won it again two years later for *Anna Christie);* or perhaps Gale won because her play was witty and ironic and because it critically dealt with contemporary issues concerning small town life (Hamlin Garland was on the committee), single women's status, and women's economics.

Lulu Bett, in all three versions of *Miss Lulu Bett*, is a woman approaching thirty-four who lives on the "charity" of her sister and brother-in-law, Ina and Dwight Deacon. Sometimes they ridicule her, sometimes they patronize her, but they never pay her for her services to them, which are excellent, essential and many. The house runs quite dismally without her. Lulu is "rescued" by her marriage to Dwight Deacon's brother, Ninian. They are tricked into marriage by a silly game they are playing when Dwight, a licensed Justice of the Peace as well as dentist, eggs them into performing the marriage ceremony and then lets them know that their words are legally binding. Lulu and Ninian decide to take their vows seriously and embrace their choice. In all three versions, Ninian Deacon is more taken with Lulu Bett's worth, becomes unwilling to do her further harm, and confesses before they continue on to Oregon that he was previously married to a woman named Cora Waters who may or may not be dead. Ninian Deacon risks losing Lulu Bett in order not to abuse her further, just in case he is still legally bound to another. Lulu Bett, having no place else to go, returns to her brother-in-law's cruel and oppressive home.

Dwight Deacon is afraid of the scandal and orders Lulu to either remain silent about his brother or leave his home. If she refuses to

pretend that the problem in her marriage to his brother is anything other than incompatibility and thus prevents his family from hiding from the fact that his brother is a bigamist, she will be evicted from the Dwight Deacon family home. In the novel's ending, and in the play's first ending, Ninian Deacon's first wife, Cora Waters, turns up alive. In the novel, Miss Lulu Bett, finding out that Ninian Deacon is bound to another, simply marries another suitor, Neil Cornish, but in the first version of the play, Gale leaves Lulu Bett to face an uncertain future alone.

Pamela Neal Warford suggests that Zona Gale, even in her most realistic writings, only criticized the small town, community, or family when they turned their back on an individual (211), but I think all three versions of *Miss Lulu Bett* demonstrate that by 1920, Gale was questioning family and small town values in a broader way. Fairness and democracy are illusions in the small, Midwestern town of Warbleton. Only the patriarch, Dwight Herbert Deacon, dares to ask for a vote, and does so only when he is guaranteed victory. The Deacon family is dysfunctional and overtly dissatisfying and oppressive to all of its members. Dwight Herbert Deacon, absolutely the most privileged and tyrannical, is no happier than his wife: his rules and demands don't even satisfy him. In all three versions of *Miss Lulu Bett*, even without Miss Lulu Betts' positioning at the bottom of the family, the selfishness, blindness, and self-righteousness of the Deacons (and by implication, the community), are portrayed in an ugly, if humorous light. Diana, Dwight Deacon's daughter from a first marriage (he is widowed), is a desperately unhappy version of her aunt, Miss Lulu Bett. That Diana insults her aunt and sees her as deserving her fate only adds to the irony of the situation: suitor Bobbie Larkin will not and cannot save Diana from her family or herself. Miss Lulu Bett may be kindest and most sentimental in the second version of the play; her mother in this same version may be the most supportive, the least selfish and senile, but the family, even in this romanticized version, is nevertheless a questionable institution - hurtful, hypocritical, and frightening.

The novel and the plays manage to critique the family and town without totally dismissing or dismantling their central institution, marriage; this is especially true of the play version that won the Pulitzer. Here we have only one husband, Ninian Deacon, for Miss Lulu Bett. He is reformed, contrite, and, at the end of the play, as serious about his second marriage to his worthy second wife, Miss Lulu

Bett, as any man can be.

At least two versions of *Miss Lulu Bett* were, therefore, modern without being overtly threatening to the institution of marriage. In the novel, Neil Cornish, the new piano salesman in town, single and available, will do as a willing lover and faithful husband for Lulu, even if he is a bit of a bungler -- since Ninian is married and Miss Lulu Bett needs a new husband. In the second version of the play, Ninian Deacon is a widower, not a bigamist, and he is contrite for jeopardizing Miss Lulu Bett's heart and reputation. Without a moment of hesitation, Miss Lulu Bett forgives him. Their marriage is legitimate and the play ends with it being as hopeful as any. Even the first version of the play allows one to hope that Neil Cornish eventually will be Miss Lulu Bett's husband. She may leave town alone, but the possibility of closure through marriage is definitely introduced.

In all three versions of *Miss Lulu Bett*, Zona Gale is radical in her careful, deliberate attention to the small, almost silly details of life. This interest foreshadows postmodern European dramas such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and *Endgame* (1957), where the dailyness of life, the minutia, is all humans are ever able to know of life's meaning. Zona Gale may be indecisive about the extent of her critique of the patriarchal family, but she never dismisses the problems she sees in marriage and in the power relationships that traditional, heterosexual families support.

For good or evil, marriage in 1920 was still a better choice for women that remaining single, or so the novel and Pulitzer -winning play posit. But the original version of the play takes a more critical stance; in the third act Zona Gale dares to show that even more important than marriage is freedom and the right of women to choose. This version was performed only once -- at Sing-Sing -- (Bonin 8), but it is important to remember that it existed, and that it ended, as does Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll House,* with issues of identity superseding issues of matrimony. Shortly after the performance, Gale was directed to change it, and she did, creating the new third act, but she preferred the original version.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar assert in the first volume of *No Man's Land,* their classic study of twentieth-century women writers, that many modern male writers and critics during this era were frightened by what they saw as "women's unprecedented invasion of the public sphere..." (Gilbert 4). Zona Gale was one of these women who was writing and getting recognition for her work, and being rewarded for it, and she probably did not want to be frightening or appear bitter toward the family if she could prevent it. There is no doubt that she may very well have changed the ending because the original one was less satisfying to a conservative audience that wanted Miss Lulu Bett safely married rather than trying to earn a living alone regardless of her improved view of her own worth. Perhaps Zona Gale was willing to change the ending because she herself was confused over whether marriage would not, after all, be a better solution than a single, independent life. Her changing the play's ending to a more family-friendly version in which Miss Lulu Bett's mother is clearly supportive and Lulu's husband not a bigamist after all at least allows for the possibility that Zona Gale's own ambivalence toward single life, for she was herself still single, as well as her discomfort with her anger and confusion about the proper way to cope with emotional betrayal or to control feelings of bitterness when one is being belittled and abused, influenced her willingness to go for a safe ending that offered closure and romance instead of risk, open-endedness, and embittered, unsolvable, irony.

Lella B. Kelsey, in her 1928 introduction to the Appleton-Century edition of the novel, is among those, including Zona Gale herself, who suggest that the novel's ending, marriage to Neil Cornish, wouldn't work on stage because two marriages in a few hours wouldn't feel realistic, so changing the ending for the play is mandatory if the drama is to work well. In revising the third act of the play, Zona Gale first leaves Cornish out, and then kills off Ninian Deacon's first wife (neither Ninian, the audience or Gale seem very attached to her, poor dear!), but I think there is more to this changed ending than a desire to please the public. It seems to me that Zona Gale's ambivalence toward marriage was causing her first to allow Lulu Bett to remain single, a state that interested her at least as much as marriage, and then, giving in to perhaps personal as well as critical pressure, to revert to the marriage plot with Ninian free, this time, to be legally her husband. Neil Cornish, kind but not very impressive, was someone Zona Gale could dismiss, possibly because he was not Lulu Bett's equal, not in any way as romantic a choice as the charming, well-traveled adventurer, Ninian Deacon. More probably, this is the reason Neil Cornish was eliminated in the dramatic adaptation rather than because two marriages in a few hours would not seem realistic.

Perhaps two marriages in a few hours is more than a theatre audience can handle, but perhaps Gale is interested in creating a feminist ending where there is no one to rescue Lulu Bett, allowing for a glimmer of possibility that a woman alone is okay, can be financially independent and even happy. Gale, in this original version of the play has Lulu say: "For the first time in my life...I'm going I don't know where -- to work at I don't know what. But I'm going...from choice!" (161). A woman alone was too sad for the audience and they, according to John Tooley, clamored for a happier ending (Tooley 21). Zona Gale, bowing to public taste, supplied a new act in which Ninian and Lulu learn of the first wife's death in time for a routine embrace at the final curtain. There is also the possibility that Lulu Bett's being rescued from the single life by marrying Neil Cornish was an ending Gale did not like well enough to keep when she was translating her novel into play form.

Women and marriage were subjects of much literature in the 1920s. In a 1923 review of George S. Kaufman's and Marc Connelly's play, *To the Ladies!* Arthur Hobson Quinn posited that the proper role of a woman was that of a wife and homemaker, and that a play such as *To the Ladies!* "correctly" demonstrated that only a woman who accepts her role as a subordinate of her husband can find happiness. (Tooley 21). Zona Gale is attempting a different vision of what made women happy: in her novel and in both versions of the play, a single woman finally, after much subordination, refuses to efface herself further and Gale at least posits the possibility that she might be able to be happy without a husband. Jane F. Bonin in *Major Themes in Prize-Winning American Drama* notes that Zona Gale's *Miss Lulu Bett* was the first prize-winning play to explore the plight of the single woman and the possibility (improbability?) of making a decent life outside of marriage. After all, Zona Gale was making a life for herself outside of marriage.

In 1920, Zona Gale had not yet been married. She had, however, been engaged to Ridgley Torrence, an up and coming poet, but according to August Derleth, her biographer, she had sabotaged that relationship in 1904 because she was afraid to commit. Her mother was pressuring her not to marry a man who might not be an adequate bread earner. Many years later, in 1924, still confused and saddened over her own rejection of Ridgley Torrence, Zona Gale wrote to him, although he was already married to someone else with whom he had a child. Torrence had remained her friend, but the letter she wrote and which August Derleth reprinted, acknowledged the terrible loss she felt at not having married him:

> This was to have reached you on Easter Day....it is twenty years ago Saturday...that we attained to tragedy...I do so hope in our next incarnation, we can fall in love all over again -- and, *that* time, have enough more star-dust, in me, to bring it off....My love to your Pauline. My love to Olivia, My love always and always to you" (Derleth 84-85).

This ambivalence, this regret, so poignant in her own life, could well have affected her need, her willingness, to write and rewrite the ending of the marriage plot.

According to Jane Bonin, the play opened at Sing Sing as a premiere performance in which David Belasco used his portable stage. The following night, December 27, 1920, the play opened on Broadway at the Belmont Theatre and ran for 176 performances (other sources say the run was even longer). Bonin notes that although the play was not an unqualified critical success, the controversy surrounding the rewriting of the ending gave it significant publicity and helped to increase its popularity (Bonin 8).

But the novel had also been a best seller. It ends with Lulu Bett walking away from Dwight Deacon and her family and about to leave town on her own when she is stopped by a proposal from Neil Cornish, poor, unsuccessful in business or as a law student, but kind and genuinely an admirer. They marry and the reader is left wishing more for Lulu Bett, but thankful that one way or the other, she has escaped her life with Dwight Deacon, her sister Ina, her nieces Diana and Manona, and her mother.

If Gale saw marriage as a prison, which can be argued given the existing unhappy marriage, Ina's and Dwight Deacon's, and the potential unhappy marriage, Diana's and Bobby Larkin's, in the play and novel, she saw single women's lives as lacking in power, economically tenuous, and lonely. Perhaps the change of endings wasn't so difficult for her because she saw women of her generation as not particularly fulfilled whichever way they played life. John Fowles (*The French Lieutenant's Woman* [1969]) and John Barth (*Lost in the Funhouse* [1968]) would be impressed with this social realist gone postmodern. Even if she waffled, Gale's first version of this play was radical and it was a risk, a risk she both took and was unwilling to take.

Perhaps whether women married or not was not Zona Gale's main issue. How women maintained dignity and integrity in a patriarchal world where they had few opportunities to earn a decent living and little support from women or men may well have been Zona Gale's more central point, making her more modernist, less loyal to closure than her critics have perceived. None of the endings makes the problem of women's economics or troubled self-esteem disappear.

By the time she wrote *Miss Lulu Bett*, Zona Gale had had an impressive career as a writer and was also a political presence in Wisconsin. Later she would serve on the Board of Regents for the University of Wisconsin and become Wisconsin's representative to the International Congress of Women in Chicago, maintaining the position and prestige she had earned by 1920. but the female characters she was examining in all three versions of *Miss Lulu Bett* were uneducated and financially and emotionally dependent. Zona Gale was a big proponent of education dedicated to promoting positive social change for women so they could maintain their pride and independence. She had been poor in college and had learned to be very careful with her money during the beginning of her career. Her fictional and dramatic exploration of dependent lives in all three versions of *Miss Lulu Bett* demonstrates that she was very conscious of the potential tragedy of being uneducated and dependent on others either economically, spiritually, or socially.

In the novel version of *Miss Lulu Bett*, Zona Gale helps Lulu evolve from a passive victim with no confidence to a woman who refuses to be forced into a lie, who takes responsibility for her silences and her choices. In the second and third versions, Lulu's situation and choices change, but her values remain firm. Lulu knows with whom she empathizes, and she knows no one will ever again dismantle her sense of worthiness and resourcefulness. The novel and plays end with a Lulu Bett who, whether remarried or single, is more free and confidant and in touch with beauty and power than she has ever been before. The direction and message is clear: Zona Gale disdains a culture that devalues women's work while stealing their labor. Lulu Bett number one, two, and three will never again be under the power of Dwight Deacon, Ina, or Mrs. Bett, who may be encouraging in the revised third act of the play, but in previous versions is about as helpful as the monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz* before the wicked Witch of the West melts. Miss Lulu Bett needs to rely on herself and in all three versions of her story, Zona Gale helps her achieve a psychological place where she will never again be without choice.

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RECONSTRUCTING THE IMAGE OF THE FARM WOMAN: SCENES FROM RURAL LIFE,

1919-1929

ANNE BECK

Farm crises have a long tradition in the United States; however, from the first decade of the twentieth century through the 20's and into the 30's , there was an extraordinary effort to improve conditions in rural America[1].The standard of living common to farm people had concerned sociologists and politicians before World War I. In 1908 President Theodore Roosevelt appointed the Country Life Commission to investigate and report on the standard of living in rural America. In response, the Smith-Lever Act was added to the federal budget in 1914 to provide an educational demonstration program to teach improved methods of farming and home management to farmers and their wives[2]. The program was carried out by county and home demonstration agents, who traveled to rural communities throughout the country.

Although introducing better farming methods was the primary objective of the Smith-Lever Act, the ideological transformation of farming into a Life rather than a mere livelihood became a campaign called the Country Life Movement. The scheme of Country Life advocates and rural sociologists was to eliminate the worst of rural ills by introducing new techniques of work that also taught people how to organize and to solve problems through cooperative action.

The federal money allocated by the Smith-Lever Act was to be divided between farm and home. Farm women had long been ignored, and their needs, it was hoped, would finally be met. Roosevelt said: "There is no more important person measured in influence upon the life of the nation, than the farmer's wife." Martha Foote Crow, in whose 1915 book *The American Country Girl* the quotation from

Roosevelt appears, also included a letter from Asbury Lever, co-sponsor of the 1914 Act[3].Crow had written to Lever, asking him if there was a special provision in his bill for women and children. She reprinted his response, which read in part: "I say unhesitatingly that the problem of the farm wife is one of the most vital of our rural problems and when this bill was drawn, I had in mind the use of a reasonable portion of the funds for the amelioration of her condition"[4].

In 1913 David Houston, the newly appointed Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, solicited letters from farm women to tell him of their problems and to suggest how the government could help them. Extracts of the letters were published in four pamphlets on farm women's domestic, social and labor, educational, and economic needs[5]. A woman writing from Virginia listed what she considered were the major grievances of farm women:

> Isolation, stagnation, ignorance, lack of ambition, the incessant grind of labor, and lack of time for improvement by reading, by social intercourse, or by recreation of some sort are all working against the farm woman's happiness and will ultimately spell disaster to our Nation[6].

Despite the individual unit of each farm family, and the necessary interdependence of all members, many women demonstrated a weariness of their husbands' investing all of the money made back into the land and into farm machinery. A woman from Michigan wrote:

> The woman would not mind the work so much if she were working for something she needed or wanted, but when the hard-earned chicken money saved little by little goes to buy farm seed, pay the hired man, or pay for fertilizer, it is what wears her out[7].

All four of the pamphlets from farm women included letters of contentment as well as of complaint. Yet, even these women asked the government for help in starting women's organizations. "Educate the farm woman to the cooperative spirit," a woman from Wisconsin requested[8].

In a 1916 article, "Drama for Rural Communities," Alfred Arvold, director of the Little Country Theater in Fargo, North Dakota, referred to the letters farm women sent into the USDA and wrote: "Hundreds of replies, which were received from practically every section, told of social starvation." And he added: "the impulse of building up a community spirit in a rural neighborhood may come from without, but the real work of socialization must come from within. The country people themselves must work out their own civilization"[9]. This was the theme of the Country Life Movement: to make rural life more attractive by involving people in the regeneration of their communities. Drama was often referred to as a vocational tool that promoted a community feeling, which was an essential foundation to other improvements. Attending a play, acting in a local production, or watching a home economics lesson in the form of a skit performed by farm club members were some of the most successful methods used in rural education.

This essay introduces three one-act plays written for Wisconsin rural audiences concerning farm life as it affected women. The plays illustrate what life was like for women living on farms and connect to some of the major problems that concerned them: loneliness, too much work, the primitive conditions of farm kitchens, and little or no control over the money they made. A happier farm life, as evinced by these plays, would only be achieved when rural people had access to what they believed city people took for granted: good schools, labor-saving devices in the home, and a life balanced between work and play. The one acts are Mary Katharine Reely's *A Window to the South* (1919); Marion Lucy Felton's *Goose Money* (1927); and Calista Clark's *Dreams* (1929)[10]. Mary Katharine Reely, born in Spring Green, Wisconsin, was a professor at the University of Wisconsin as well as a playwright and short story writer; Marion Lucy Felton lived and worked on a farm in Dane county, Wisconsin, just outside of Madison; and Calista Clark was a schoolteacher and artistic director of the Muscoda Little Theatre from late '20s into the mid-'30s[11].

Mary Katharine Reely, concerned with problems of rural and community development, prepared a study guide in 1918, *Country Life and Rural Problems,* to assist rural people in developing an interest in life beyond the business of farming and profession of housekeeping by referring them to articles that would help them improve their churches, schools, and community life[12]. A book in Reely's bibliography, which she marked as one of the most important, was Henry S. Curtis's 1914 *Play and Recreation for the Open Country.* Curtis's chapter, "Recreation for the Farm Wife," begins:

> The woman's work is indoors. With her long hours she might almost as well be in the city, so far as any contact with birds or sunsets or an outdoor life is concerned. If a woman's laundry and baking are done out...she can easily reduce her hours of labor to five or six, which is

> quite as much as any woman with children should be expected to give to her house[13].

Unfortunately, the main obstacle for many women was their husbands. Curtis explained the extreme parsimony demonstrated by land-hungry farmers by relating an incident that occurred at a farmers' institute, where a group was meeting to discuss the benefits of a communal laundry, which would cost each family ten cents per load. A well-to-do farmer asked, "What would my wife do if she didn't save that ten cents?" Curtis hoped that that farmer was the exception: "Any farmer ought to be ashamed to have a wife whose time is not worth more than ten or twenty cents a day to her family"[14]. Reely's play dramatizes the concerns Curtis raised in his book and that her study guide attempted to meet.

A Window to the South resembles Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1890 story "The Yellow Wallpaper," yet instead of an overprotective husband who will not let his wife stir from her darkened room, Mr. Stockman, a successful farmer, has never allowed his wife to rest[15]. The play, set in a farm kitchen in Wisconsin, is about the toll taken by a woman's twenty-eight years of unending work and her husband's neglect of her request for a window. The room in which the play takes place is described as dim, and the "back wall -- the south wall of the kitchen -- is conspicuously blank"[16]. The single window in the kitchen, small and set low, faces the barn, placed there so "Ma" knows when to set the table for dinner. The farm is a prosperous one, but only by denying Ma inexpensive luxuries. Even a small patch of land next to the house where she planted flowers her son Hank has dug out to put in cabbage.

What Ma misses most is a kitchen window with a southern exposure, which her husband promised her he would put in during the first months of their marriage, but never did. For the past year Ma no longer eats much and spends her days aimlessly wandering about the house. Because she can no longer work, Mr. Stockman has hired Lucy, from a neighboring farm, to help his daughter Hattie clean the house and cook meals. The play begins with Lucy and Hattie baking biscuits, though it is a very hot morning. Lucy wonders why, when Hank drove to town the night before for binder twine, he did not buy bread to eliminate their having to bake. Hattie explains that their father never eats bakers' bread because he thinks it is an unnecessary expense. The money saved by such economy has gone toward a new barn, farm machinery, and more land. Lucy responds to Pa's success as a farmer by declaiming the plays' message: "Yes you told me about your Pa's barn--and what he could do for the boys--but what's getting on ever done for you and your Ma?"[17].

The result of constant work is Ma's listlessness, lack of appetite, and hallucinations. The local doctor, having failed to find anything wrong with her, brings in Dr. Sedgwick, an "alienist." Ma tells Dr. Sedgwick that for years she has longed for flowers, sunlight, and a large window facing south. She tells the alienist that before her husband put in the -- "you know," she says, "we did get the window cut in of course"--she used to "think" that it was there[18]. When she finishes speaking, turns to the blank wall and realizes the window is really not there after all, she covers her face and begins to cry. The play ends with the alienist "step[ping] up to the broken woman" and taking her hands from her eyes, as Mr Stockman enters with tools to cut out a window in the kitchen wall[19]. *A Window to the South* addresses a rural audience who would hopefully, as Reely wrote in her *Country Life* study guide, "learn from what others have done and put the new ideas into practice"[20].

In an article for *Drama* magazine, "The Farmer Goes to the Theatre," Henry Bailey Stevens mentioned Reely -- along with Alice Brown, Zona Gale, and Paul Green -- as having done "pioneering work" in their plays that "expressed the familiar characters and dialogue of rural people"[21]. Reely's most often-produced play by rural theatre groups was the comedy *Early Ohios and Rhode Island Reds* (1921), which shows a city couple, newly turned farmers, becoming disgusted with their snooty friends from town who hate the dirt and criticize their farm house -- "so damp and drafty"[22]. The urban philistine was a favorite target in rural plays; pity from city folk was anathema.

However, among farm women themselves there was plenty to grumble about. A major issue was the farm income. A 1920 editorial in the *Farmer's Wife*, a magazine "devoted entirely to the interests of the farm home," asked its readers: "Are farm women of the United States getting simple justice from their husbands regards farm income derived from the labor contributed by these farm women?"[23]. A series of articles in the *Farmer's Wife* concerned women's contribution to farm income, their unequal share in the profits, and an examination of women's legal rights. The article titled "Who Gets Your Earnings?" began with the question:

> Who collects your butter and egg money, your husband or yourself? If

> he allows you to have it he is giving you something the law says belongs to him, for states do not grant a wife the right to wages which she earns *inside* the family home[24].

In 1927 Marion Lucy Felton took up the issue of a farm wife's earnings in *Goose Money*, albeit in a softer tone. The play is about how a Wisconsin farm wife, Mary Smith, who wears a patched gingham dress, worn shoes, and has about her a "self-sacrificing air," decides to spend on herself the summer goose money she has made[25]. She transforms herself from a tired, old-fashioned farm wife to a "spiffy" modern woman, and with the money leftover, buys her husband a new suit and takes him on a vacation to Madison for "Farmer's Week."

Mary's husband owns his own farm and allows her to manage the money she makes raising geese. The threat to Mary's buying spree is her many years of living for others and working throughout the year without a break. She is reminded that there is a world beyond her own farm when an automobile full of relatives come for a visit. The injection of an involved, extended family is another important element of Felton's farm comedy, and Felton's use of character types suggests she patterned her play on Zona Gale's 1912 Little Theatre classic, *The Neighbors*[26]. The relatives in *Goose Money* create a community background, making the Smith farm into a smaller version of Gale's Friendship Village, and assist Mary by showing her that she does not have to work so hard. The relatives are, after all, on a vacation visiting her.

Felton wrote *Goose Money* for her group, the Hillcrest Players, so they could compete in the Dane County Home Talent Tournament in 1928 and enter their production in the first Wisconsin Dramatic Guild contest. They wanted to do a play about farm life, but felt the available plays "burlesqued" their life or were too "overdrawn to be natural." In her "Author's Statement" Felton wrote: "We desired a play where the audience could laugh *with*, not *at*, the farmer"[27]. Felton's play countered rustic farces, such as Walter Ben Hare's *Aaron Slick from Punkin Crick* (1919), which featured the character of "Al Falfer, the hired man." Felton assured the readers of her play that she was not a college woman, but lived on a farm just like them, which she hoped would encourage other rural people to write plays:

> Unquestionably, the most faithful delineation of rural life should come from the people who have experienced it in all phases, and I shall be happy indeed if *Goose Money* tempts other farm men and women to try their hand at developing real rural folk drama[28].

Though "naturally" comic and not "overdrawn," Felton's *Goose Money* is predicated on the assumption that the life of a farm woman is one of unending work, yet it shows other farm people how to avoid such an unbalanced life. And as the over-worked and under-appreciated farm wife was at the center of many farm plays, a farm comedy necessarily featured a woman whose say in the family budget was evidenced by a cheerful kitchen appointed with a few modern gadgets.

Jonathon Kolb, chairman of the Department of Rural Sociology at the University of Wisconsin, published *Goose Money* at the Extension Service of the College of Agriculture and distributed it free to farmers throughout the state[29]. Prefacing the play were excerpts from an article, "Toward a People's Theater in Wisconsin," by the President of the University of Wisconsin, Glenn Frank, who wrote: "It would be gratifying to see the people of Wisconsin rise above the current standardization and commercialization of leisure by making possible the development of a folk-theater and a folk-drama....Art can help us to preserve the poetry of farming while we are battling the economics of farming"[30]. Felton's *Goose Money*, by and about a real Wisconsin farm woman, raised the play-consciousness of the state, giving confidence to many amateurs. According to Carroll Streeter, staff writer for the *Farmer's Wife*, by 1935 the Dane County Rural Federation listed forty-five rural clubs, and the Federation sponsored a county drama tournament "renting the largest theatre in Madison"[31].

Central to Wisconsin's active community theatre in the '20s and throughout the 30s was the work of Ethel Theodora Rockwell, Chief of the Bureau of Dramatic Activities at the University of Wisconsin's Extension Division. Rockwell had been a student of Thomas Dickinson's at the University of Wisconsin and an original member of the Wisconsin Dramatic Society. Rockwell continued Dickinson's investment in shaping both the social and artistic awareness of audiences, primarily through developing socially-conscious writers. To encourage amateur playwrights Rockwell coordinated annual tournaments sponsored by the Wisconsin Dramatic Guild. In 1931 she edited *Wisconsin Rural Plays,* containing five prize-winning plays entered in contests she juried; the collection included *Goose Money* and Calista Clark's *Dreams*. Rockwell wrote in her foreword that the plays were "offered to rural communities of other states with the hope that they will help push open the door to a better and happier farm life"[32].

Clark's play *Dreams,* first produced by the Blue Shield Country Life Club at the University of Wisconsin in 1929, addresses a new generation of farm women, those who had benefited from social organizations and home demonstration agents. *Dreams* contrasts the old farm wife, who still uses a wash tub and scrub board, with the new one, who wants what they have in the city. Clark describes the widowed mother of a young farmer as "bent and thin, with a face that has once been pretty, but which drudgery and a narrow and harsh outlook on life have given a hard, forbidding expression"[33]. Her new daughter-in-law from the city has moved with her husband, who has returned to take over the family farm after being an instructor in agriculture at the state college. The mother is taken aback when her daughter-in-law wants to put off doing the dishes to take a drive and to spend money on a grand piano rather than on an extra eighty acres for a larger herd of milk cows. Young Estelle says to her mother-in-law: "Please don't misunderstand me to say I don't believe in work. I do...but to make it the only ambition in life—it's repulsive...I want some beauty, some sweetness, some fragrance, mixed with the hard grind of work"[34]. The daughter-in-law is the character with whom the audience is to sympathize and whose side they are to choose, as her dream of farm life is one balanced between work and leisure, a philosophy advanced by rural sociologists since before World War I.

A 1935 editorial in the *Farmer's Wife* claimed that young women were not willing to marry farmers unless the men "believe[d] that farm homes should be equipped to take away burdens as water "toting", hand laundry, and the like"[35]. Since the passage of the Smith-Lever Act and the on-going agricultural extension work for farm and home, the treatment of the farm wife became a measure of a farm's modernity; a farmer who knew about sharing the farm income with his wife as a working partner was also aware of the most productive methods of farming.

In 1937 a remarkable study was published, which covered the post-World War I development of cultural activities in the rural areas of eight states, all made possible by the Smith-Lever Act and administered by the Agricultural Extension Service. Marjorie Patten's *The Arts Workshop of Rural America* has sections on puppetry, opera, folk dancing, and handicrafts, but most of the book is devoted to describing community theatre activity. Patten attested to the enduring success of *Goose Money*, having seen it staged in Wisconsin, Iowa, and North Dakota, and having heard about it being performed throughout the Midwest[36]. Patten described the popularity of Felton's play as helping farm people "to forget their dilemmas, to build up stronger foundations of understanding and friendliness, to enable them to continue the struggle with the elements and to work out better social and economic plans for the future"[37]. This was precisely the goal of the cultural branch of the Agricultural Extension Service and the reason state agents and rural leaders organized community theatricals, choral fests, and other leisure-time recreation. However, Patten wanted the rest of the nation to know about the tremendous poverty and devastation that she saw in each rural district she visited and from which farm people valiantly worked to escape, at least for a few comic or tuneful hours. Patten believed that someone who had lived in rural poverty should write the theatrical counterpart of the film documentary *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936) "to send home the idea that all is not well in our farm country." She continued:

> Pages and pages in our rural drama story are still empty. If filled, they would make permanent valuable records; and at the same time they could bring America up-to-date on the things that really matter far from the main highways in isolated areas[38].

Actually a dramatic record had been made about poverty and hardship not slighting rural America, but it was one that was addressed specifically to farm audiences in need of suggestions as well as a reminder of the conditions that needed to be changed.

Keeping in mind their actors and audience, the three playwrights considered here were intent on showing just how farm women could live happier lives. Deftly prescriptive, the writers adhered to the pragmatic approach of agricultural extension education by showing measures that most women could accept. Despite the depressed farm economy that began after World War I and persisted into the '30s, there was a distinct improvement in social and cultural life in rural America. Plays written for country people to read and to produce in their home talent tournaments and drama guilds assisted in the development of rural community theatre, the antidote to numbing isolation and social starvation.

The University of Toledo

NOTES

1. For more about the depressed farm economy following World War I, see Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks' *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900-1939* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951) and Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Knopf, 1955).
2. William L. Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America, 1900-1920* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1974), 24.

3. Martha Foote Crow, *The American Country Girl* (New York: Frederick Stokes, 1915), 22.
4. Ibid., 245.
5. *The Social and Labor Needs of Farm Women*, Report #103; *The Domestic Needs of Farm Women*, #104; *The Educational Needs of Farm Women*, #105; and *The Economic Needs of Farm Women*, #106, The United States Department of Agriculture (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1915). Each pamphlet was preceded by the Secretary's statement: "How Farm Women May Get Help Under the Smith-Lever Extension Act: The funds appropriated under the extension act of May 8, 1914, are given to the State Agricultural colleges to enable them to employ men and women as county agents and experts who will move about among the farming people, demonstrate good methods of agriculture and home economics, cooperate with them in studying their farm and home problems, and assist them in the adoption of better methods on their farms or in their homes."
6. *The Social and Labor Needs of Women*, 14.
7. *The Economic Needs of Farm Women*, 11.
8. *The Social and Labor Needs of Farm Women*, 29.
9. Alfred G. Arvold, "Drama for Rural Communities," *The American Review of Reviews* 54 (September 1916): 309. For the history and mission of Arvold's rural theatre founded in 1911 to benefit the farm people of North Dakota, see Arvold's *The Little Country Theater* (New York: Macmillan, 1923.)
10. Page numbers of the plays refer to the following editions Mary Katharine Reely's *A Window to the South* in *One-Act Plays* (New York: H.W. Wilson Company, 1919); Marion Lucy Felton's *Goose Money* (Madison: Agricultural Extension Division, University of Wisconsin, 1928); Calista Clarks' *Dreams* in *Wisconsin Rural Plays*, ed. Ethel Theodora Rockwell (Chicago: Dramatic Publishing Company, 1931).
11. For biographical information on Reely see Ethel Theodora Rockwell's *American Life as Represented in Native One-Act Plays* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, Extension Division, 1931), 49. Felton's "Author's Statement" and family picture follow the text of her play; Clark is introduced by Ethel Theodora Rockwell in "Foreword" to *Wisconsin Rural Plays*, 5.
12. Mary Katharine Reely, "Introduction," *Country Life and Rural Problems: A Study Outline* (New York: H.W. Wilson Company, 1918).
13. Henry S. Curtis,*Play and Recreation for the Open Country* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1914), 158.
14. *Ibid.*, 157.
15. See "The Yellow Wallpaper," in *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader*, ed. Ann J. Lane (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 4. Gilman describes the epidemic of madness among farm women "confined [as they are] to the strangling cradle of the race," in *Women and Economics*, edited by Carl N. Degler, (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 267.
16. Reely, *Window*, 21.
17. *Ibid.*, 24.
18. *Ibid.*, 20.
19. *Ibid.*, 44.
20. Reely, *Country Life*, 7.
21. Henry Baily Stevens, "The Farmer Goes to the Theatre," *Drama* 21 (May 1931): 8.
22. Mary Katharine Reely, *Early Ohio and Rhode Island Reds* (Minneapolis: Perine Book Company, 1921).
23. Editorial, *Farmer's Wife* 23 (July 1920): 37.
24. Marjorie Schuler, "Who Gets Your Earnings?" *Farmers Wife* 30 (May 1927): 308.
25. Felton, 1.
26. Zona Gale, *The Neighbors in Wisconsin Plays, Series One*, ed. Thomas Dickinson (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1914). Gale offered *The Neighbors* royalty-free to any country theatre who wanted to use it for fund raising.

27. Felton, 25.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Jonathon H. Kolb, *Rural Community Organizations: A Handbook* (Madison: Agricultural Experiment Station, University of Wisconsin, 1926); He wrote: "Drama quickens the imagination of those who take part in productions; it cultivates the emotions to respond naturally and properly; and it directs the will along constructive lines, " 32.
30. Glenn Frank, "Toward a People's Theatre in Wisconsin," see *Goose Money*, 11.
31. Carroll P. Streeter, "Getting What They Want," *Farmer's Wife* 38 (February 1935: 30, 33.
32. Ethel Theodora Rockwell, "Foreword," *Wisconsin Rural Plays*, 6. Robert Gard, founder and director of the Wisconsin Idea Theater, talks about Rockwell's pioneering work in Wisconsin community theatre between 1927 and 1940. See Gard's *Grassroots Theater: A Search for Regional Arts in America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999).
33. Calista Clark, 13.
34. *Ibid.*, 24-25.
35. Editorial,"An Old Question Bobs Up," *Farmer's Wife* 38 (July 1935); 3.
36. Marjorie Patten, *The Arts of Rural America: A Study of the Rural Arts Program of the Agricultural Extension Service* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937), 146.
37. *Ibid.*, 150.
38. *Ibid.*, 151.

AT HOME IN THE '50s: CULTURAL NOSTALGIA AND WILLIAM INGE'S *PICNIC*

MICHAEL WENTWORTH

Together with Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, William Inge held the Broadway stage during the 1950s. Inge's plays and those of his close friend Williams were distinctive for their regional settings, though unlike Williams, whose dramas were most often set in the American South, Inge set his plays in the American Midwest. Inge, in fact, is generally recognized as the first significant playwright of the American Midwest and, more specifically, small-town MidAmerica. Ralph Voss credits Inge, in this regard, with widening Broadway's subject matter:

> There had assuredly been previous dramas in which small-town settings had played key roles; but before Inge, Broadway had not seen such a consistent portrayal of small Midwestern—mostly Kansas—town settings (273).[1]

Of Inge's major dramas, *Picnic* (1953) is perhaps the most popular and also the most distinctly Midwestern in terms of setting, atmosphere, folkways, and socio-cultural values.[2]

The play, the action of which extends from a typical Labor Day morning to early the next day and is confined to the adjoining yards and porches of two households, opens with the arrival in a small Kansas town of a down-on-his-luck drifter, Hal Carter, who intends to look up a former college friend, Alan Seymour, with the prospect of finding a job in his father's oil business. Hal's presence, like that of the typical Dionysian intruder, disrupts the staid, prosaic equilibrium of the various female characters with whom he comes into contact, most notably Madge Owens, the elder daughter of Flo Owens, whose husband, not unlike the missing father in *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), had deserted his family many years before. Currently the reigning "Queen of Neewollah,"[3] Madge is the town beauty and is romantically involved with Alan Seymour, the community's wealthiest and most eligible bachelor, a relationship that Madge's mother strongly encourages, given the security, material advantages and enhanced social status that would presumably accompany her daughter's marriage to Alan. Madge's younger sister Millie, more intellectually and artistically inclined than her older sister, though less confident of her physical attractiveness, is a high school senior who determines by the end of the play to eventually leave the small Kansas town for New York where she intends to "write novels that'll shock people right out of their senses" (136).[4] Rosemary Sidney, an "old maid schoolteacher" and boarder in the Owens's household, is startled by Hal's youth, vigor, and strong masculine presence into an awareness of her own fading resources and dwindling romantic prospects, and, driven by fear and desperation, she eventually finagles Howard Bevins, a self-satisfied bachelor, to accept her frantic proposal of marriage. Helen Potts, the Owens's next-door neighbor, who is tyrannized by the constant demands of a nagging convalescent mother who had successfully managed, for reasons never specified, to annul her daughter's marriage years before, finds Hal's presence liberating and rejuvenating. By the end of the play, Hal and Madge have discovered a deep physical and emotional attraction. Unfortunately, Hal, as a result of circumstances provoked by Alan's jealousy, is forced to leave town the following morning on a freight train bound for Tulsa, though Madge leaves shortly afterward to join him.

However unpromising his background, Hal's aspiration—his longing for material success and a permanent sense of place that both physically and emotionally he has always lacked, as well as his romantic interest in Madge and, though unstated, the prospects of a family and home of their own—are resonant in many respects with the hopes and expectations of the majority of upwardly mobile Americans in the 1950s. At the same time, Hal's romantic assumptions about the quality of life in Inge's fictional small town are equally resonant with America's nostalgic, even mythic, perception, in spite of demographic evidence to the contrary at the time of *Picnic's* original production, of the small town as idyllic place, removed from the vicissitudes of time and history and unified by a set of shared community values and traditions. Though developments within the play itself, together with the quiet desperation of the women characters, would seem to qualify Hal's assumptions, the nostalgic appeal and idealism of Hal's dreams undoubtedly account for the drama's original and continuing popularity.

Four years after the Broadway premier of *Picnic* in 1953, Viking Press published a second novel by a then relatively unknown author, Jack Kerouac. *On the Road* (1957) is based largely on the real-life escapades of the author and Neal Cassady as they cross and recross the American continent in search of kicks, as well as the more philosophical and elusive "IT." Both at the time of its initial publication and since, Kerouac's novel has been generally regarded as the definitive chronicle of a diffuse confederation of disaffected poets and novelists labeled as the Beat Generation. Compared to *On the Road* and other representative texts such as William Burrough's *Junky* (1953) and *Naked Lunch* (1959) and the radical, experimental, and anti-conventional lifestyle documented in such books, Inge's *Picnic* seems decidedly conservative and even reactionary in setting and the traditional American values that underlie Hal's aspirations.

On the other hand, Hal himself, much like Dean Moriarty (Neal Cassady's fictional alias in *On the Road*, is a drifter whose life on the road has been essentially shiftless; in fact, Hal, like Cassady and Kerouac himself, is something of a social anachronism, one of the last of a vanishing breed of hoboes.[5] Inge himself explains that "in a past era he would have been called a vagabond, but Hal today is usually referred to as a bum"—a view shared by Flo Owens who alternately refers to Hal as a "bum," a "tramp," and "riff-raff," though other characters, including Madge, Millie, Mrs. Potts, Howard Bevins, and, at least initially, Alan Seymour view Hal in more generous terms. Like Dean Moriarty, Hal is also possessed of a natural, almost involuntary masculine vanity. Mrs. Potts is particularly aware of Hal's masculine presence and explains to Flo near the end of the play, that, following Hal's unexpected arrival, "suddenly everything was different: He clomped through tiny rooms like he was still in the great outdoors, he talked in a booming voice that shook the ceiling. Everything he did reminded me there was a man in the house, and it seemed good....And that reminded me there was a woman in the house and it seemed good." (145). Hal could have been an All-American football player if he hadn't flunked out of college; he reminds Rosemary of a bust of a naked Roman gladiator; he regales Alan with stories of his unsolicited sexual adventures on the road; he's an accomplished and natural-born dancer whose instinctive deftness is memorably demonstrated in the climactic dance scene with Madge in Act II; and his physicality either awakens each of the women in the play from a previous condition of paralysis or radically redirects her expectations. Beyond his masculinity, Hal's criminal past (he had served a reform school stint for stealing a motorcycle) likewise recalls Cassady's own exploits as a car thief - growing up in Denver, and Hal's unstable family background further parallels Cassady's own childhood and adolescence. Hal's uncanny affinities with the most legendary of Beat figures invites the possibility that Hal himself might qualify as a Beat, though unconsciously so. But Hal's beatness is hardly symptomatic of a cynical post-war sensibility or a deeply felt cultural malaise. It is the consequence, rather, of his erratic and troubled personal history. Moreover, Hal's dream of success incorporates a grandiose vision of occupational prestige and material prosperity, values stridently disavowed by Kerouac. Ginsberg, and their fellow Beats. Shortly after his arrival, Hal shares his "favorite fantasy" with Alan when describing the kind of job he's looking for: "Oh, something in a nice office where I can wear a tie and have a sweet little secretary and talk over the telephone about enterprises and things. I've always had the feeling, if I just had the chance, I could set the world on fire" (94-95). Then, "with some desperation," Hal continues "I gotta get some place in this world, Seymour, I *got* to. ... This is a free country, and I got just as much rights as the next fellow" (95). Clearly, Hal's dreams are far closer to those of an aspiring corporate executive than the anti-materialist, rucksack philosophy described in Kerouac's *Dharm Bums* (1958). Hal also lacks the capacity for thoughtful philosophical speculation, cultural analysis, or creative self-expression associated with the Beats. He's astonished by Millie's skill as a painter and by the fact that she's not only an avid reader who reads whole books over the course of a single afternoon but an aspiring writer herself. Though his aptitudes and interests clearly lie elsewhere, Hal still regrets that he doesn't have more time to read books and then proudly resolves,"that's what I'm gonna do when I settle down. I'm gonna read all the better books—and listen to all the better music. A man owes it to himself" (14). Hal's intention of settling down leads to one of his most poignant and reflective moments in the play, as he evokes an idyllic vision of small-town life that is far more suggestive of Currier and Ives and Norman Rockwell than the essentially urban and less settled lifestyle of the Beats: "You know, there comes a time in every man's life when he's gotta settle down. A little town like this, this is the place to settle down in, where people are easy goin' and sincere." (114). Enthusiastically preoccupied with his plans for the future and anxious to fit in and be a good mixer, Hal even intends to join clubs and go to church and then vaguely adds, "and all those things" (112). Clearly, whatever superficial affinities Hal shares with the disaffected underground authors of the 50s, his assumptions are informed by traditional values called into question by those writers.

In fact, Hal's aspirations, both prior to and following his arrival in the small Kansas town, are actually far closer to the stereotypical perception of the American dream in the 1950s shared by the majority of returning veterans from World War II and the Korean War and their families, which, far from the cynicism of the Beats, suggests a popular reaffirmation of such traditional American values as private ownership of property, romantic love, material success, endless abundance, and, perhaps most notably, the nuclear family and home as sacred place.[6] What separates Hal from the majority of Americans in the '50s is the chosen setting within the social and geographical parameters of which he hopes to achieve his dream—the rural, small-town Midwest—which runs counter to shifting population trends at the time. Drawing upon U.S. census reports, urban sociologist Donald J. Bogue notes a significant shift in the ratio of rural and urban populations between 1940 and 1950; whereas the 1940 census identified 56.5 percent of the population as urban, the percentage had risen to 64 percent by 1950, representing an increase in the urban population of 22 million persons, reflecting ever greater numbers of Americans relocating in major and mid-major cities as more promising sites of prosperity, economic stability, and more accessible social services and recreational activities.[7] However, the 1950s modified such a trend as many Americans moved into new affordable housing developments in the suburbs, a geographical middle ground between country and city that enabled ready access by automobile to the advantages of the city while appealing to the pastoral instincts and related values of innocence and rural simplicity (traditionally associated with small-town America) long cherished by Americans and assiduously promoted by opportunistic land and housing developers. According to Stephanie Coontz, of the many new homes built in the '50s,

> eighty-five percent ... were built in the suburbs, where the nuclear family found new possibilities for privacy and togetherness. While middle-class Americans were the prime beneficiaries of the building boom, substantial numbers of white, working-class Americans moved out of the cities into affordable developments, such as Levittown (24).

Speaking of the social and cultural ramifications of the Levittown phenomenon, David Halberstam has noted,

> Starting in 1950 and continuing for the next thirty years, eighteen of the nation's top twenty-five cities lost population. At the same time, the suburbs gained 60 million people. Some of the 83 percent of the nation's growth was to take place in the suburbs. By 1970, for the first time there were more people living in suburbs than in cities (142).

It is doubtful, of course, whether Hal, given his background and marginal qualifications, would have been any more successful in the city or suburbs. A college drop-out, he clearly lacks the credentials essential to the high-level management position he originally fancies for himself. What is significant and revealing is the fact that he chose small-town Midwest as the setting best suited to achieve a version of the good life imagined, if not always achieved, by the majority of Americans in the '50s. Inge, of course, is not a playwright of urban and suburban life; rather, his most popular and successful dramas consistently draw upon that social-cultural milieu he knew best: the rural, small-town Midwest. Thus, the setting for Hal's projected success and achievement is hardly surprising. Moreover, Hal may be seen as a foil and possibly as a test case for Inge's own occasional flirtation with the possibility of returning to the Midwest.[8]

There is, in fact, considerable evidence in the play that supports Hal's intended relocation in small-town MidAmerica. For example, Steven Gale explains, in commenting upon the setting of the play—"the yard shared by Flo Owens and Helen Potts,"

> The fact that the yard is "shared" implies a relationship between the two women that is, sterotypically, closer and friendlier than it would be expected to be in a city or in a different part of the country. The designation of sharing is important, moreover, for this is an element of life generally associated with the frontier and small rural communities—which in American thought are typically considered repositories of strength, honesty, and purity where neighbors willingly

> share their lives and work together, indeed depend upon one another for survival (91).

Gale finds Inge's description of the backdrop against which the action of the play takes place equally revealing: "The panorama of a typical small Midwestern town [is seen], including a grain elevator, a railway station, a great silo and a church steeple, all blessed from above by a high sky of innocent blue (quoted in Gale 91). According to Gale,

> There is no clutter or pollution; the lines are straight, and they reach heavenward, whether representing the rich, healthy fecundity implied by the grain elevator, the romantic ideal of pastoral life in the shape of the silo, or the spiritual life symbolized by the church steeple. All is crowned by an "innocent" sky. Even those lines that do not stretch upward, the railroad tracks, appear to be radiating out from the idyllic, bucolic hub of the universe (91).

In Inge's drama, Hal and Madge never attend the community picnic, but in Joshua Logan and David Taradash's film adaptation one of the most memorable scenes is the picnic and the depiction of such familiar activities as one-legged races, watermelon and pie-eating contests, and a group singalong. All of these activities suggest a sense of community based on shared values and simple, innocent pleasures that not only confirms Hal's romantic vision, but also plays true to what Ralph Voss describes as the mythic appeal during the 1950s of the Midwestern heartland which was seen as

> a bastion of good old-fashioned American values where industry and integrity joined to produce both food and dedicated, honest people. Dwight D. Eisenhower, an army general who had been raised in Kansas, had led Americans to victory in Europe during World War II and now was leading the government. There was something seemingly wholesome about the Midwest in our popular imagination then; Kansas was just the place for a Labor Day picnic, just the place for a great leader to come from. People—even New Yorkers—probably liked *Picnic* for the same kinds of reasons they liked Ike and Toto (151).[9]

Such a perception parallels Bill Bryson's impressions of small-town Kansas three decades later. During the course of his travels across the state, Bryson discovers that

> the towns I went through all looked trim and prosperous and quintessentially American. But then Kansas is the most quintessential of American States. It is, after all, where Superman and Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz* grew up, and all the towns I went through had a cozy, leafy, timeless air to them. They looked like the sort of places where you could still have your groceries delivered by a boy on a bike and people would still say things like "by golly" and "gee whillikers" (213).

On the other hand, the play does reveal various circumstances that would seem to qualify such a collective sense of nostalgia (as described by Voss) and, more particularly, Hal's optimistic expectations. For example, considering the fact that Americans in the '50s "consistently told pollsters that home and family were the wellsprings of their happiness and self-esteem (Coontz 25), the sexual and emotional frustration of Inge's community of women would seem to give the lie to Hal's romantic vision of small-town life. Flo Owens's husband had abandoned her ten years before, leaving her with the responsibility of raising her two daughters on a severely limited income, thus explaining her overly zealous hopes for Madge's future with Alan Seymour, a future that could just as easily have been set in the American suburbs of the '50s, as she explains to Madge: "It'd be awfully nice to be married to Alan. You'd live in comfort the rest of your life, with charge accounts at all the stores, automobiles and trips. You'd be invited by all his friends to parties in their homes and at the country club" (81).

Mrs. Potts's prospects for a husband, home, and family of her own were squelched when her mother successfully contrived to have her short-lived marriage annulled. And Rosemary Sidney, the spinster school teacher and a long-term boarder in the Owens household, lacks a home of her own and, at least until the morning following the picnic, likewise lacks a husband, though, given her age, she will never have children of her own and thus, as before her marriage, she will no doubt rely upon the extended family of friends and neighbors as a support system. But it would be mistaken to view the respective predicaments of Flo Owens, Helen Potts, and Rosemary Sidney as necessarily representative of the community as a whole or as a uniquely symptomatic feature of small-town life. Nor, regardless of setting, would marriage seem to ensure any guarantee of happiness and self-fulfillment, for the plight of Inge's women, married or otherwise, is not that dissimilar in kind, if not in place, from that of many suburban housewives in the '50s who found themselves separated from the workplace and "isolated in a world of other mothers, children, and station wagons" (Halberstam 143). Speaking more comprehensively of housewives in the '50s, irrespective of urban, suburban, or small town setting, Stephanie Coontz observes that

> a successful 1950s family ...was often achieved at enormous cost to the wife, who was expected to subordinate her own needs and aspirations to those of both her husband and her children. In consequence, no sooner was the ideal of the postwar family achieved than observers began to comment perplexedly on how discontented women seemed in the very roles they supposedly desired most. ... Under a "mask of placidity" and an outwardly feminine appearance, one physician wrote in 1953, there was often "an inwardly tense and emotionally unstable individual seething with hidden aggressiveness and resentment" (36).

Coontz further notes that by 1960, "almost every major news journal was using the word "trapped" to describe the feelings of the American housewife" (37). Of course, nearly all of the women in Inge's play feel trapped, including Madge, who dreams improbably of finding "an important job in the Espionage Department" in Washington, D.C. or participating in "some great medical experiment that'll save the whole human race" (80). But, once again, such a sense of entrapment applied no less to the cities and suburbs than to the small-town hinterland. Moreover, Madge's fantasies are clearly inspired by the Hollywood dream factory and originate as much in her dissatisfaction with Alan as a romantic partner as in her longing to escape the routine circumstances of small-town life. Once she meets Hal, she abandons such fanciful projections, and whatever complications the future might hold, she settles for far less but also, if only in her own estimation, far more.

Whatever the unprecedented level of prosperity and material success achieved during the '50s, men, no less than women, were often equally disaffected and discontented, which resulted in a prevalent sense that the American dream, far from being attained or recovered in suburban or urban America, had somehow been lost, to be retrieved, if at all, in a simpler, more romantic past, pre-dating, if only in the popular consciousness, the social and demographic forces that shifted the setting for the American dream from rural and small-town America to the cities and suburbs. Then as now, the most prevalent setting of such retrospective nostalgia was small-town America, a phenomenon that Richard V. Francaviglia attributes to

> a sense of collective innocence in that our youths are times of relative simplicity before we experience significant personal, economic, and sexual responsibility. Main Street and other idealized place images may be points of refuge for Americans who would just as soon turn back the clock if it meant recapturing lost innocence and simplifying their lives (154).

By way of illustration, Francaviglia recalls a particularly memorable episode of Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone,* "The Stop at Willoughby," which dramatizes a distraught executive's escape from the pressure of the corporate rat-race and his unexpected return, both in time and place, to the small town of his youth. Francaviglia quotes directly from Serling's description of the small town:

> Beyond the station was a small village square with a bandstand. A bed of flowers went halfway around the square and added reds and whites and blues to the deep green of the town. A summer afternoon and a small town with a village square and a bandstand and people in old fashioned dress. In his whole life... he had never felt such a stirring deep inside, such a hunger to see a place again... (131).

As it turns out, the executive has actually been riding a commuter train home to the suburbs after another typically frenetic work day in the city, and his imagined return to the hometown of his childhood is achieved only at the expense of his life as he steps off the moving train to his death, recalling Hal's arrival by freight train at the opening of *Picnic.* Unlike the executive in Serling's narrative, Hal's arrival is not so much a return to an idyllic small-town past, which, of course, he has never known, as it is an enactment of his hope of achieving a commensurate measure of happiness and fulfillment in the present. Thus, for Hal, no less than for Serling's executive, "the small town becomes heaven to those stuck in the modem hell of the present" (Francaviglia 131).

If the plight of Inge's women isn't that dissimilar from that of their counterparts in the cities and suburbs (though, as Serling suggests, such a dissatisfaction was hardly gender exclusive), it still might be argued that Hal is victimized by the privilege and hierarchal infrastructure of the American small town, typified by Alan Seymour and his father. Yet however inflated his original expectations as a prospective high-management executive, once he meets Madge, Hal, like Madge, is eventually willing to settle for far less but at the same time, far more, and chances are, he likely would have succeeded had he not incurred the jealousy and antagonism of his romantic rival. And to Hal's credit and that of Inge's small-town community, he is accepted by most of the characters with whom he comes into contact. Flo may perceive Hal as a threat to her self-fashioned scenario for Madge's happiness and Alan eventually turns against him, but Mrs. Potts is immediately attracted to Hal, referring to him as an understanding confidant; Millie shares her most intimate and private interests and aspirations with him; and even Rosemary, who viciously turns on Hal during the famous dance sequence, later regrets her humiliation of Hal—as much a manifestation of her own insecurity as Hal's own original brashness and bravura which are moderated as the play progresses. Most importantly, of course, Madge accepts Hal unconditionally as a romantic partner. Hal's disappointment, then, by no means impugns the integrity or idealism of his original expectations which are, to a large extent, vindicated during the course of the play, the fact of which makes his departure at the end all the more poignant.

Inge's concerns in *Picnic* were, of course, hardly those of the sociologist or cultural geographer; rather, they were those of a serious practicing playwright whose most popular and enduring dramas never strayed far from his continuing source of inspiration: the rural small-town Midwest.[10] In one sense, then, *Picnic* may be viewed as an elegiac lament for an essentially agrarian and small-town ethos that had been eclipsed by economics, technology, and population shifts. Still, it is questionable whether the small town of Hal's imagination anymore than the glorified home towns of Hollywood's Andy Hardy and Henry Aldrich or television's Anderson and Cleaver families ever existed or ever will. As recounted in *The Lost Continent: Travels in Small-Town America*, upon traveling through Great Bend, Kansas, Bill Bryson is struck in this regard by the very timelessness and otherworldliness of the setting:

> It was like passing through a time warp. The place appeared not to have changed since 1965....I half expected Rod Serling to step out from behind a tree and say "Bill Bryson doesn't know it, but he's just driven into a community that doesn't exist in time or space. He's just embarked on a one-way trip into ... The Twilight Zone (213).

If anything, the nostalgic appeal of small-town America is, at present, stronger than ever. According to cultural geographer John R. Stilgoe,

> The small town endures as the national attic of American social and spatial consciousness, a sort of frame through which further vistas are invariably viewed and twisted to fit it. Always the small town is *out there* ...and always the disenchanted city dweller or suburbanite can drive there, get out, not lock the car, somehow be home (138-39).

Beyond Americans' increasing dissatisfaction with the crime, pollution, congestion, inconvenience, and impersonal nature of urban and suburban life, Richard Lingeman attributes the persistence of the small town in the American imagination to a "growing distrust of big government, big institutions, big cities —bigness" (441-42). James Howard Kunstler observes, along similar lines,

> When Americans, depressed by the scary places where they work and dwell, contemplate some antidote, they often conjure up the image of the American small town. However muddled and generalized the image is, it exerts a powerful allure. For the idea of a small town represents a whole menu of human values that the gigantism of corporate enterprise has either obliterated or mocked: an agreeable scale of human enterprise, tranquility, public safety, proximity of neighbors and markets, nearness to authentic countryside, and permanence (185).

Finally, however, the tonic chord in most popular perceptions of the American small town is a sense of community or what Lingeman describes, in terms suggestive of Hal Carter's own romantic perception of small-town life, as "a link to place, a sense of belonging, a network of personal primary ties to others, homogeneity, shared values, a collective belief in each individual's worth" (475).

The regionally specific locus of Hal's dreams, the rural small-town Midwest, is likewise prophetic of a recent shift in the popular perception of the Midwest. Cultural geographer James Shortridge, in *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture,* observes that whereas the East has been traditionally perceived as "the embodiment of American technological might and the West as the land of eternal youth," the Middle West had been traditionally associated with pastoralism and such related values as innocence, simplicity, family, and community (Shortridge 135, 140, 142-43). Drawing upon the three stages of John B. Jackson's cyclical theory of regional identity—an original "golden age" followed by a period of neglect and then by a time of rediscovery and restoration"— Shortridge notes that the positive values originally assigned to the Midwest were eventually displaced by a shift in attitude promoted largely by social and cultural commentators and various literary artists such as Sinclair Lewis, Edgar Lee Masters, and Sherwood Anderson associated with the revolt from the village movement that emphasized the provincialism, stultifying conservatism, cultural barrenness, and anti-intellectualism of rural America and the small-town Midwest (Shortridge 138-43). Such a shift in attitude was mirrored in the defensiveness, insecurity, and failed confidence of many Midwesterners themselves. More recently, however, Shortridge, discerns a recovery of those positive values originally associated with the Midwest, most notably, pastoralism and rural simplicity. For example, Shortridge notes the appearance of *Midwest Living*, a popular magazine touting the quality and the simple pleasures of life in the Midwest. Shortridge further notes the reascendancy of Main Street as a cultural ideal, thus citing the phenomenal success of Walt Disney's five-eights scale version of Main Street in his two theme parks, both of which are "loosely modeled after Disney's hometown of Marceline, Missouri," though "all the harshness, inconsistencies, and filth of the original have been removed," in view of which Disney's "recreated Main Street apparently represents the past that America wants to believe existed" (140).[11] Likewise, Shortridge quotes syndicated columnist George Will who, confirming the Middle West's traditional role as a touchstone for old-fashioned American values, has maintained God was "at heart a Middle Westerner" (quoted in Shortridge 143). Even more tellingly, Shortridge quotes former President Ronald Reagan—himself a product of the small-town Midwest—who, during a visit to Kansas in 1982, rhapsodized,

> Sometimes living in that big White House in Washington can leave you feeling a little fenced-in and isolated. But there is a tonic: visit a state where tall wheat and prairie grasses reach through a wide open sky; be with people who are keeping our frontier spirit alive—people who work the soil have the time to dream beyond the farthest stars. Here in the heartland of America lives the hope of the world (quoted in Shortridge 141).

The site of Reagan's effusive testimonial is right on the mark geographically and consistent with the setting of Inge's play, for the resurgence of the pastoral ideal has led, according to Shortridge, to a commensurate adjustment of previous geographic versions of the Midwest that thus excludes such urban, industrial states as Michigan and Ohio and focuses instead on the still essentially agrarian states of American's heartland, most notably, Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas.

In assessing the popular appeal of Inge's most successful dramas—all of which appeared in the 1950s—Steven H. Gale explains,

> Inge consciously wrote for a specific audience, what is now called "Middle America," and his Midwest settings and characters were purposely designed to express the common perceptions that his audience held about that segment of the American population that comprised his audience and at the same time was, and still is, themselves (88).

While *Picnic* would certainly play true to Gale's assessment and while history has evidently vindicated Hal Carter's original intentions of settling down in the small-town Midwest, arguably, the basis for the original and continuing popularity of Inge's play transcends any specific regional affiliation or any specifically grounded historical moment. Awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critic's Award, *Picnic*, together with Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* 1953), also received Billboard's Donaldson Award for best play of the year. While Miller's play, given the thinly disguised parallels between the McCarthy witch hunt of the early 1950s and the Salem witch trials nearly three centuries before, may, in retrospect, seem to be the more significant of the two plays, at least in terms of its continuing political relevance, *Picnic* is no less relevant for much the same reason that Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* has retained its popular appeal sixty-five years after its original production in 1928.

For even as the timeliness of Miller's play speaks to succeeding generations of readers and spectators, the timeliness of *Picnic* appeals to the nostalgic longing in the American consciousness for an idyllic, ahistorical sense of place intimately associated with small-town America. It is finally a measure of Inge's achievement, then, that now no less than fifty years ago, he quietly, though nonetheless eloquently, allows his audience, if only in their dreams, to return to whence they came.

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NOTES

1. Patricia McIlrath describes Inge as "The Voice of the Heart of America" and explains that while Inge's plays "may not be all that our highly sophisticated or even pseudo-sophisticated world wants to see...they are true, they are honest, they are moving, and they reveal

a playwright with perception, sensitivity, and a great understanding and love for the Midwest and its people" (49).

2. Directed by Joshua Logan, *Picnic* first appeared on the Broadway stage in February 1953, three years after the Broadway production of Inge's first play *Come Back, Little Sheba* (1950). Logan would later direct the highly successful film adaptation of *Picnic* (1955).

3. As Voss explains, Inge's hometown of Independence, Kansas annually crowns a Queen of Neewollah (Halloween spelled backward) "as part of an autumn celebration that had once been abandoned but was revived after *Picnic*" (4).

4. All quotations from *Picnic* are taken from the Grove Press edition of *Four Plays by William Inge* (New York: Grove, 1979).

5. See, in this regard, Kerouac's "The Vanishing American Hobo" in *Lonesome Traveller* (New York: Grove, 1960): 172-83.

6. Jane W. Lange perceptively situates Inge's play in relation to other, and more topically specific, aspects of the '50s. See "'Forces Get Loose': Social Prophecy in William Inge's *Picnic*," *Kansas Quarterly* 18. 4 (1986):57-70.

7. See Bogue, "Urbanism in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 60 (1955):471-86. See also Richard Lingeman, *Small Town America* (New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1980):442-44.

8. Drawing upon "the impressions of many who knew him," Inge's biographer Ralph Voss notes that Inge

> spent a good part of his life looking for a home in the richest connotational sense: a place of familiar location that is also where loved ones dwell, and ideal place of ease and refuge and comfort, devoid of pretense. Such a place would be a blessing for anyone to have: for Inge it might have been salvation" (166).

9. Eisenhower himself fondly recalled his boyhood home in Abilene Kansas, observing that Abilene

> provided both a healthy outdoor existence and a need to work. These same conditions were responsible for the existence of a society which, more nearly than any other I have encountered, eliminated prejudices based upon wealth, race, or creed, and maintained a standard of values that placed a premium upon integrity, decency, and consideration of others. Any youngster who has the opportunity to spend his early youth in an enlightened rural area has been favored by fortune (quoted in Ambrose 18).

More recently, unsuccessful presidential contender Bob Dole has frequently acknowledged his nostalgic affiliation with yet another small Kansas town, his hometown of Russell, Kansas, and has likewise acknowledged the influence of small-town Midwestern values on his personal and political development.

10. Inge himself once noted, "The Midwest helped to form me as a person, giving me my background, my storehouse of subject matter, helping in the creation of my viewpoints and philosophy" (quoted in Voss 272).

11. See also Francaviglia's perceptive analysis of the "Disneyfication of Main Street," 145-76, as well as Karal Ann Marling's "Disneyland 1955" the Place That Was Also a TV Show," in *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994):86-126.

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ROCKET MAN TAKES OFF: STEVEN DIETZ'S MINNEAPOLIS LAUNCHING

JILL BARNUM GIDMARK

Rocket Man (1998), a play Steven Dietz wrote and produced after he moved away from Minneapolis, has an intriguing premise: imagine that people become younger with time instead of aging. Trisha, the daughter of main character Donny, turns sixteen in the last act. At her birthday party she says, "[N]ow I am ready to enter my childhood. I look forward to the mystery of my final years—when the world grows new and simple once again... and I am given the clarity of innocence" (95).

As Donny had explained to Trisha in Act One, we owe past, present, and future to a Greek myth about a man named Hamlet who dropped a giant salt grinder, known as Hamlet's Mill, to the bottom of the sea. The motion of the grinding, like a huge gyroscope, generation after generation, accounts for the wobble of the earth on it's axis. Very slight, the wobble is also very slow: it takes 26,000 years to complete one cycle. And the amazing thing is that, when the wobble is measured against the fixed stars, the point of equinox is actually, ever-so-slightly, *earlier* each year, meaning that time travels backwards (48). In a complicated way, this backward movement of time, this "precession of the equinoxes" as Dietz puts it, explains character Donny's preoccupation with astronomy and architecture and eschatology. This backward movement also explains the trajectory of playwright Dietz's art—and the fact that, time and again, Dietz returns psychologically to the birth- and forging-place of his art, Minneapolis.

With concepts such as "window of opportunity" and "illusion of involvement," *Rocket Man* is compelling intellectual drama akin to the seemingly random branching, in intricate turns and mazes of Tom Stoppard, specifically, to Stoppard's use of fractal geometry and chaos theory in *Arcadia* (1993). Dietz's dialogues also share something with the scintillating head games of Luigi Pirandello. And Dietz's romantic trysts and traitors evoke *140* (1998), the Shakespeare-inspired one-act by Marsha Norman about the self-propagating cycle of love betrayed. Such sophistication and facility, humor and profundity, didn't of course, coalesce overnight. *Rocket Man* is a late play.

Born in Denver, CO, in 1958 to a railroad man and a housewife who already had a daughter, Dietz in his youth preferred baseball and tennis to theater. Then in high school he saw his first play, fell in love with the theatre crowd, and became hooked. He earned his B.A. in theatre at the University of Northern Colorado 1980, the same year he settled in Minneapolis, the self-proclaimed site of the "launching" of his career. The next eleven formative years that he spent in my city have proven the most formative and productive period in his artistic development. From his home base, the Minneapolis Playwrights' Center, Dietz wrote and directed at many area little theatres. The Center is noted for also having groomed such illustrious playwrights as Lee Blessing, John Olive, and August Wilson. Dietz co-founded Quicksilver Stage (1983-86), was artistic director of Midwest PlayLabs (1987-1989), and even tried his hand at an opera, *Saint Erik's Crown*, in St. Peter, Minnesota (1989). Here Dietz directed world premieres of early plays by (then) up-and-coming writers: Kevin Klings's *21A* (1984) and *Lloyd's Prayer* (1989), John Olive's *The Voice of The Prairie* (1986), and Jon Klein's *T Bone N Weasel* (1986).

But, like August Wilson, who was launching his own playwrighting career in the Twin Cities area at roughly the same time, Dietz eventually discovered a more vibrant theatre scene in Seattle and in 1991 relocated there. He met his wife, actress/playwright Allison Gregory, when she had a bit part in one of his plays, and they now divide their time between Santa Monica and Seattle. Married in 1996, they have a young daughter, Ruby Clementine. Dietz had adapted novels of Shusaku Endo (*Silence*, pr. 1995) and Bram Stoker (*Dracula,* pr. 1995, pb. 1996) and served as artist-in-residence or faculty member at Arizona State University (1993), Whitman College (1997), Mercer University (2000), and Seattle University (2002). In 2002 he received commissions From A Contemporary Theatre (Seattle) to do a new play called *Fiction* and from Purple Rose

Theatre (Michigan) for *The Ride Inside*. He has also received commissions from Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Arizona Theatre Company, San Jose Repertory Theatre, and the Seattle Children's Theatre. He says he works at his craft all the time, a notebook perennially handy for jotting oddities such as snippets of overheard conversations and storefront signs.

Three of Dietz's major plays premiered in states other than Minnesota, years after Dietz had left the state: *Halcyon Days* (pr. 1991, pb. 1991), *Trust* (pr. 1991, pb. 1992), and *Lonely Planet* (pr. 1992, pb. 1994). The published editions of these plays , however, all acknowledged the Minneapolis Playwrights' Center as having contributed importantly to their development. Though produced within a year of each other, these plays are worlds apart in situation and character, but similar in theme, all mining the depths and illusions, trust and betrayal, and the presence or lack of human compassion.

Halcyon Days is a dark, political play based in fact, moving back and forth between Washington, D.C., and St. George, Grenada, in 1983. In October of that year, to deflect negative public opinion at home about terrorist attacks and retaliatory bombings that were occurring in Beirut, President Reagan mounted a gratuitous military invasion, dubbed Operation Urgent Fury, on the languid Caribbean island of Grenada, Nutmeg Capital of the World. The play's theme is expressed in a quotation by Karl Kraus, cited by Dietz in his "Author's Note:" "[H]ow do wars start? Diplomats tell lies to journalists and then believe what they read" (85). The action of *Halcyon Days* is complicated, playing out betrayal on multiple levels, between the government and its citizens, to be sure, but also between colleagues and associates, and between would-be-lovers and family members. It's about selling out for money and how insidious the illusion of personal safety can be amid global chaos, about moral choices and honor and what happens when these qualities don't matter. It's a riff on the theme that was so prominent in the recent film *The Emperor's Club*: latent abilities, rather than active choices, determine a person's character. *Halycon Days* is also about the menacing power of the spoken word to launch death and destruction. A manipulative U.S. presidential consultant advises: "There are many truths...and they are all true" (48). A sympathetic old, native Grenadian woman quips: "Genocide is out...but *Linguicide* is in" (32).

The less public, nonhistorical, and apolitical drama *Trust* is set in the "present" in "an American city." The play exposes deceptions

underlying both casual and deep romantic entanglements and the pain when such betrayals come to light, echoing what P.T. Barnum and Herman Melville's Confidence Man were wise to all along: it's human nature to trust others, and that's always a mistake. "Trust" in the play is ironically also used for the title of two musical albums: a new release by a famous, sexy, sought-after singer named Cody, and an older album by Leah, a singer ten years Cody's senior who never quite made it. Near the end of the play, her younger friend Holly asks Leah how it felt to make love with Cody. HOLLY: "How was it? Promise." LEAH: "What exactly are you promising me?" HOLLY: "That I won't tell anyone." LEAH: "Holly. At the very least, learn this: everything gets known. *Everything*" (57). It's that prediction playing itself out that undoes the major relationships in the play: Cody's wedding to Becca doesn't happen because Becca happens upon Cody and Leah making love; Holly blows her chance with really-nice-guy Roy when she makes a play for Cody; Gretchen, the seamstress making Becca's wedding dress, exposes her latent homosexual desires and becomes Becca's lover. But there is more to the play than musical beds and love gone bad, and it's encapsulated in the character Roy. Roy is a radio announcer who has Leah and Cody on his midnight show. He admits to himself that women make him nervous, but he still does his darndest to figure them, and himself, out. Why is it, he puzzles, that women can talk for an hour with their faces only four inches apart, but "[i]f two men tried to do that, everyone would assume they were plotting a murder and they would be arrested" (39). How to get a woman interested in him is an eternal conundrum to Roy:

> Okay, I thought. I will combat this. I understand some things. I will think about the things that I do understand and determine whether I can make a fulfilling personal life out of them. I understand these things: the game of Yahtzee, most comic strips, the appeal of Thai cuisine, Bukowski's poetry, Dylan's songs, and, of course, Spin Art. Looking at this list, I think I'll be spending a lot of Saturday nights at the laundromat with a crossword puzzle (38).

While the play leaves Roy desolate in the final scene and holds out little hope that the new romantic couplings will last, it also demonstrates the vitality of each character's inner secrets and outer rage, the necessity of expressing them, and, if not the reality, at least the potential for healing. Nice guys finish last, but they get to have their say.

Lonely Planet, another variation on the theme of truth and illusion, what lasts and what is important, departs from Dietz's other work in that it has a cast of only two characters. Jody is a man in his forties who owns a map store "on the oldest street in an American city" (6) where the play is set, and Carl is his younger friend and lover. The play begins with an epigram by absurdist playwright Eugene Ionesco, " We will leave some traces, for we are people and not cities" (7), a line repeated in the play's final scene (52). Broadly stated, the play is a compassionate comedy about friendship and loss in the age of AIDS, though the disease itself is not identified. The men reminisce, interrupted at intervals by the insistently ringing phone so characteristic of David Mamet, conjuring past dates with other men, remembering friends who have died. They discuss their own significance in a world where they continue to exist but friends are gone, and they honor the memories of the departed. As in Ionesco's play *The Chairs, Lonely Planet* gradually assembles on stage for symbolic purposes a room full of mismatched chairs; in Dietz's play each chair represents a particular friend who has died of AIDS.

The other important symbol in *Lonely Planet* is a huge photograph of the earth hanging on a wall in the map shop. The photo, taken by astronauts of *Apollo 17* and a defining image of our planet, suggests vulnerable humanity threatened by darkness and the void. The play is an extended discourse between Jody and Carl about their own friendship and friendship in general, about dreams and memories that may be true or false, and about the frustrations of today's world. Jody, who is agoraphobic, does leave his shop at one point to be tested for HIV. The play ends with Carl on stage amid lit candles, with "his" unique, 1950s turquoise-and-silver kitchen chair. Jody and Carl take their leave of each other; Carl has joined the ranks of those who have succumbed to AIDS. "History," says Dietz in his "Author's Note,"

> ...is not the story of grand acts and masterpieces. History, instead, is the inexorable accumulation of tiny events - footsteps and glances, hands in soil, broken promises, bursts of laughter, weapons and wounds, hands touching hair, the art of conversation, the rage of loss...[W]hat do we affect during our lifetime? What, ultimately is our legacy? I believe, in most cases, our legacy is our friends...They get the very best, and are stuck with the absolute worst, we have to offer. Our friends get our rough drafts. Over time, they both open our eyes and break our hearts (55-56).

That the themes of history and illusion, friendship and death—themes that flowered so powerfully after Dietz moved to Seattle—were seeds that took root during Dietz's Minneapolis tenure is well illustrated by two of his Minneapolis plays: *God's Country* (pr. 1989, pb. 1990) and *Ten November* (pr. 1987, pb. 1988). *God's Country*—produced over two hundred times, notably in Johannesburg and Pretoria, South Africa—focuses on the white-supremacist movement. Dietz quotes Voltaire in Act I: " Anyone who has the power to make you believe absurdities has the power to make you commit injustices" (12). Act II begins with a passage from Santayana: "Fanaticism consists in redoubling your efforts when you have forgotten the aim" (88). Both quotations suggest the confusion, volatility, mounting danger and aggression of the play.

Dietz dedicated *God's Country* to the memory of Alan Berg, a bright and outspoken Jewish radio talk-show host murdered in Denver in 1984 by neo-Nazis. The play is largely a courtroom docudrama, direct address to the audience. It summarizes the history and beliefs, the evolution and demise of a movement called The Order, based on such ultra right-wing organizations as the Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations, and the American Nazi Party. On a more universal level, the play demonstrates how bigotry in adults invariably begets bigotry in their children, and how mindless and destructive crowd mentality can turn a simple crime spree into widespread incendiary revolution. Labeled as a "bleeding heart with an acid tongue" (22), Berg appears as a character in a play that seemingly conveys the intolerance and anger that led to his Mafia-style execution and to the hate crimes surrounding his murder. Historically, Berg's penchant for questioning certain beliefs incensed the radical right, who viewed his murder as an act of salvation. The play pits Berg's cool rationality against the raging madness of neo-Nazis who stalked him. This complicated tour de force opens and closes simply: a young boy pledging allegiance, in the play's most frightening moment.

Dietz contends that writing *Ten November*, one of his earliest plays, "taught me my place in the world. My job, that I'm fortunate to do , is to tell these stories and give them back to the people they belong to " (TuM1). Midwesterners are very familiar with the Lake Superior tragedy of the ore-freighter that disappeared with all hands in a storm on November 11, 1975, an event Gordon Lightfoot memorialized in his ballad "The Wreck of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*." In the mid-1980s, when the Actors Theatre of St. Paul gave Dietz a carte blanche commission to create a theatre piece, Dietz heard Lightfoot's ballad and focused on this maritime tragedy, checking out a dozen library books on the Great Lakes and poring over the Coast Guard report on the *Fitz's* sinking. The play premiered in St. Paul in 1987 and was remounted by the Theatre in the Round Players in Minneapolis in 2001. Dietz dedicated *Ten November* to the men of the *Edmund Fitzgerald.*

In writing the play, Dietz sought not to "mini-series" the tragedy, not to present individual stories of the twenty-nine men who perished aboard the freighter. Nor did he seek to determine an ultimate cause for the accident or assign blame. Instead, the play presents his personal response, focusing on "the myth of invincibility in our culture, and our attempts to deal with loss" (5). He begins both acts with lines from Emily Dickinson about ruin and fear and stoicism, the universal loss of human love through parting.

Using nine male actors cast in multiple historical roles and three muse-like female singers functioning as Greek chorus, the play's compelling narrative blends several discourses: myths of other vessels lost on the Great Lakes, transcripts from radio communications between the *Fitzgerald* and the *Arthur M Anderson,* a steel ore carrier that was proceeding along a similar route; hypothetical shipboard banter among the *Fitzgerald's* crew; fictionalized recollections of last conversations between survivors and victims; testimony from the Coast Guard hearing; and excerpts from the final report of the Marine Board of Investigation. The play ends with a bell tolling twenty-nine times, as actors chant in turn the names and ranks of each of the men who perished aboard the *Fitzgerald,*

Brian Knetl, in his entry on *Ten November* for the *Encyclopedia of American Literature of the Sea and Great Lakes,* comments:

> The real interest of the drama...is the destructive and majestic power of not only Lake Superior, dubbed 'the graveyard of ships,' but of nature in the broader sense. The play examines the ways in which humans arrogantly attempt to control nature through technology and the futility that results. As one sailor in the play observes, '[W]hen the lake wants you, she takes you.' Lake Superior is presented as a living entity, relishing her infamous mythology, impossible to suppress, and capable of causing grief which must be dealt with by mourners left ashore (440).

Knetl is saying essentially that nature "refuses to be scenery," Dietz's

very words in his"Playwright's Note" to *Ten November*:

> We go cocky with nature. Technology has enabled us, we think, to reinvent it in our own image. Our machinery has made us, we think, invincible. Nature is what we do on Sunday. This belief christens our ships, launches our rockets, and bombards our atoms. Ultimately, however, nature refuses to be scenery. In the case of the *Fitzgerald* (and the space shuttle *Challenger* 11 years later), the fallibility of invention was made known to us. Nature is active. It still melts our wings when it needs to. In the case of the *Fitzgerald* sinking, to claim human error would be like trying to establish blame for the wind. Nature is both cause and effect. It is the force against which we play out our lives (5-6).

I read *Ten November*, and Dietz's extended Minneapolis launching, as the roots and flowering of this playwright's best themes, the sum and substance of his art. It's *Rocket Man* again, with the "precession of the equinoxes," time moving backwards to the place where it all began. I like to think that Dietz is speaking reflectively and prophetically to us through Trisha in *Rocket Man's* final act, glancing both backward and forward: "Remember me fondly. Speak of me often. And travel further, dig deeper, and risk more than I ever did....[T]he future's one reward is a memorable past'" (95).

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