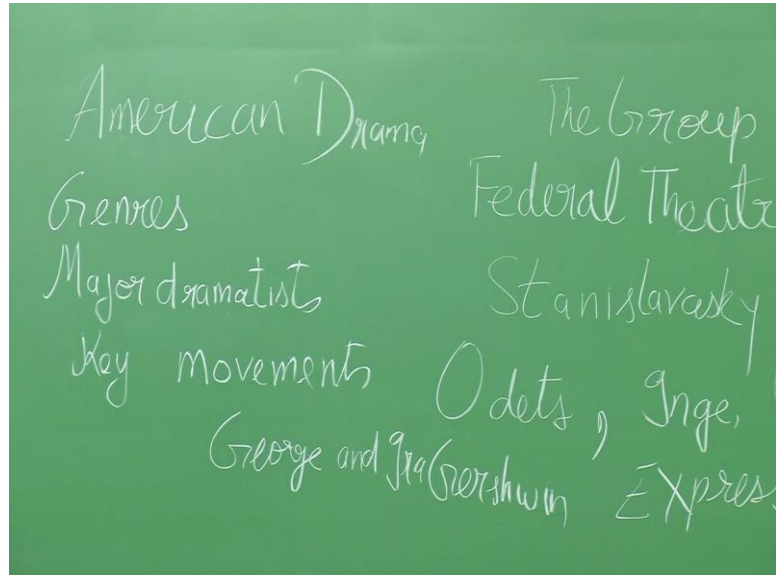
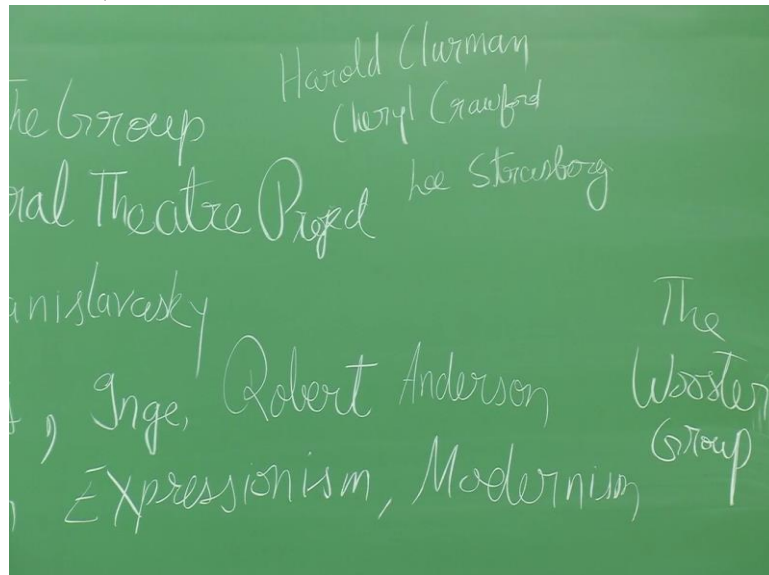


**American Literature & Culture**  
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**Mod 05 Lecture Number 29**  
**American Drama (Lecture 23)**

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Hello friends, we will be talking about American Drama, its growth, its origin, how it all began. I am going to talk about the historical origin of drama in America, the major genres, the major playwrights and dramatists and the key movements down the ages. Now American drama began with farces and comedies. As a dramatic form as you would know, farce originated in France. It soon spread throughout Europe and remained popular through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In America, the first play were to be written and published was Robert Hunter's play called *Androboros*, biographical farce in 3 acts which was 1714, a political satire and also a well-known farce, so the first known play, at least in the most popular and most well-known of that period. I am sure there were other plays as well. But this is one of the foremost; that has come to be documented.

Thomas Godfrey's Neo-Classical tragedy, *The Prince of Parthia* was published in or written in 1767 and is often considered the first play by an American produced professionally, and America was still a British Colony at that time. Godfrey combines the elements of romance and politics and the play's themes rests on the balance of the conflicting, conflicting demands of love and honor. Another important playwright was Royall Tyler who wrote *The Contrast* in 1787 which is a comedy written by an American author with a setting in the United States. The author was clearly inspired by Sheridan and Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* and Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer*. *The Contrast* is also noted for its depiction of the first native character of American theater, Jonathan the servant.

In the first few years of the twentieth century, Americans started taking an interest in writing plays. Prominent names of this period were Clyde Fitch, Augustus Thomas, Edward Sheldon or Edward Sheldon, Stephen Phillips and many more, though they are almost forgotten today. Drama came into its own with the works of Maxwell Anderson and Laurence Stallings, *What Price Glory?*, one of the most well-known plays of its time performed in 1924, a comedy drama, and it also enjoyed great success on the Broadway.

Now America or American Theater scene was also known for its great musicals, and the origin was Vaudeville, do you know what is Vaudeville? The term refers to comic musical and acrobatic acts in the theater. The Vaudeville could not compete with cinema. It is still practiced even now in some forms in, our modern times. The Theater Guild, this is another important concept that you should know, the Theater Guild, it brought together artists like Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein together and they collaborated on masterpieces and we are talking about the great musicals of the age, *Oklahoma!* , *The King and I* and *South Pacific*. I will repeat *Oklahoma!* , *The King and I* and *South Pacific*, all Rodgers and Hammerstein collaboration.

The Broadway is known for several musical extravaganzas as *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Cabaret*, *Cats*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Nine*, *The Lion King*, *Heir*, *Les Misérables* and *Mamma Mia!* So does the ages and they are still performed as you are well aware, I mean, the popularity of these musicals has always been on the rise. An important organization of this period, I am talking about the early 30s and the late 20s, was the formation of something called the group theater. The group theater was formed in 1931 by 3 important personalities, theater personalities Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford and Lee Strasberg. The aim was to present American plays of social relevance. A typical group production was a social protest play with often leftist viewpoint. The attempt of the group was the production Group as in capital G, Group Theater with capital G and a capital T.

The first attempt of the group was the production of Sergei Tretyakov's *Roar China!* followed by Paul Green's *House of Connelly* and next came two anti-capitalist plays, 1931 by Claire and Paul Sifton, and *Success Story* by John Howard Lawson. The group's first major success came with Sidney Kingsley's *Men in white* which is a hospital drama and it was the Pulitzer Prize. The play was performed first in 1933. The play was considered very bold for its time,

Men in White, especially for its depiction of a gruesome operation to try to save life of a young woman who is victimized by an illegal operation, illegal abortion.

She gets pregnant by one of the doctors and what happens to her, so this was the first time that the word abortion was used on stage and threw the spotlight on very important social issue. We have already seen Theodore Dreiser and the impact of pregnancies out of wedlock. So this was a, this play can be seen, in, you know, to a companion to a very socially relevant issues. So the play dramatized the significance of their struggle for legalized abortion. It makes a case for that and reminding us of the stigma out of wedlock pregnancies.

Now another important organization was Federal Theater Project. So the Group Theater soon paved way for the work's progress administration and there was, this was, Federal Theater Project was an offshoot of WPA. It was a project that was to have a major cultural impact in America through its various Arts projects for writers, artists, musicians and performers. An initiative of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the purpose of FTP or the Federal Theater Project was to create jobs for the unemployed theatrical people during The Great Depression years of 1935 and 39, during that period. Several of the productions included Classical as well as Modern drama, children's plays, puppet shows, musicals and documentary theater known as Living Newspaper.

FTP also staged plays by young unknown American playwrights and also, reflected support for Black American Theater or the growth of American, Black American Theater. The FTP was terminated in 1939 by congressional action due to investigations by the H U A C or the House Committee on Un-American activities. Theatre Guild was the next major organization. Essentially it evolved out of the Washington Square players. It was founded in New York by Lawrence Langner in 1918 and was committed to produce high quality non-commercial plays from America and also from other parts of the world. The Guild famously produced 15 plays by Bernard Shaw including Back to Methuselah, Saint Joan. American playwrights whose works were produced included Pulitzer Prize winner Sidney Howard, William Saroyan, Maxwell Anderson and Robert Sherwood.

The Theater Guild contributed to American Musical Theater, by producing, Porgy and Bess by George Gershwin, Ira Gershwin and DuBose Heyward. A major player of this period was

the playwright Clifford Odets who lived between 1906 and 1963. Odets, *Waiting for Lefty*, his 1937 play has now acquired a status of a legend in the annals of American Theater. The play was a winner of one act social play contest sponsored by the New Theater League and New Theater Magazine. It takes place at a taxi driver union's meeting and dramatizes the events leading towards the worker's strike.

The play used flashback techniques and plants in the audience to create the impression that strikers meeting was occurring simultaneously. This device anticipated the plays of more experimental playwrights such as (()) and Augusto Boal. The Group went to stage *Awake and Sing! Till the Day I Die*, *Paradise Lost* and *Golden Boy*. Odets wrote the play to give vent to the discontent of the workers in the Depression and comes out as a truly American Agitprop Theater which is theater of drama of agitation and propaganda. As you would know Agitprop is a dramatic form that had been popular with revolutionary groups in Germany and Russia during the 1920s and the 30s. Odets popularized the term and this kind of stage in America.

The leftist ideology is clearly visible in *Waiting for Lefty*; the choice between buying down to a corrupt capitalist system and a socialist alternative, so that's the key theme of *Waiting for Lefty*. Odets' ideas were to have a far-reaching impact on the new left and liberal writers of the 1970s and 80s also. The triumvirate or the most important writers of the twentieth century American Theater were of course, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, we are going to discuss these playwrights also during, the next couple of lectures, so you, I won't be doing them in detail today but you have to know these names. Now this was also a period where there were two major, there were two other major playwrights and those were Robert Anderson and William Inge.

Now Robert Anderson is best remembered for his play called *Tea and Sympathy*, a 1948 work which is an indictment at the way gender roles have been prescribed and constructed in America. The play is remarkable for its treatment of homophobia. So the hero is Tom Lee, a sensitive 18 year old school boy who is bullied by his school mates and his house master Bill Reynolds. The only person who understands him is Reynolds' neglected wife Laura who offers Tom tea and sympathy. That's the title of the play. Robert Anderson's works like William Inge offer themes that contain some of the taboo elements of sexuality that were more aggressively highlighted in the works of Tennessee Williams.

William Inge is an important dramatist of the 1950s. He was one of the first American dramatists to focus on Quality of Life in small American towns. His best works include *Come Back, Little Sheba*, *Picnic*, *Bus Stop* and he also wrote the original screenplay for *Splendor in the Grass*, film, it is also a film directed by great stage and film director Elia Kazan. I would like to talk about realism and the American stage. So it was in the 1880s when critics like William Dean Howells and Hamlin Garland began to note the elements of realism in the works of playwrights such as James Herne, James A.

Herne, Edward Harrigan and William Gillette, Ok so these were the realists of the American stage. So the great American playwrights, you know, the most well-known among them would be Henrik Ibsen or Bernard Shaw, and also Hermann Sudermann, so all of whom are known for their realistic playwrights. These are the Europeans, Ibsen, Shaw and Sudermann. So they are known for the realistic depiction life and people and themes on stage. The budding American playwrights looked towards the European masters for realistic aesthetics. The plays of James Herne for example, Margaret Fleming was particularly close to the everyday lives of the common people. Clyde Fitch was another popular and prolific playwright whose *Climbers* and *The City* reflected how attuned he was to the sounds and patterns of actual speech of his characters. An extremely successful Broadway production was David Belasco's *Madame Butterfly* which was written in 1900 and written with John Luther Long.

Expressionism, now realism was followed by expressionism which was a literary technique actually, not a genre but a technique and we should know that the first modernist movement in the theater after symbolism to have a major international impact was expressionism. As an artistic movement, it is started in European countries such as Germany in the 1920s. American theater experimented with expressionism with Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*, a play that ridiculed the depersonalization, dehumanization dredges of capitalism. John Howard Lawson used expressionism for agitational purposes in *Roger Bloomer* and *The Processional*.

These are the plays which were written in 1920s. Another example of expressionism was Irwin Shaw's anti-militarist *Bury the Dead*. The most notable American exponent of

expressionism was Eugene O'Neill. In *The Emperor Jones* he put subjective visions on the stage. In *The Hairy Ape* which was performed in 1922, he turned both oppressors and oppressed in a class society into puppets and in *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, he portrayed racial conflict in boldly two-dimensional imagery. We will be doing Eugene O'Neill soon, so we will talk about O'Neill's expressionism, his use of expressionistic devices in greater detail.

Now from there we move on to avant-garde and surrealist kind of theater and also modernism. You know what is modernism, this is a term applied to various developments in all art forms in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth century, many of these developments having a distinctly anti-realistic stance. Some of the elements in modernism suggest revival of the romantic spirit of the early nineteenth century, especially the concerns with internal reality.

Modernist art was iconoclastic, often with a specific conception of making way for a new art form for the future. Indeed, the first major modernist movement of the New Century was called futurism, a movement that celebrated speed, change, technology and revolutionary upheavals in art and politics. Introversion, technical display, self skepticism, they remained the key features of modernists and modernist literature and modernist characters. Landmark event of this period was the establishment of Moscow Art Theater founded in 1898 which has most closely been associated with realism and particularly with the director and leading actor Konstantin Stanislavski. Stanislavski method was grounded. He is known for his theory of method acting. So the theory was grounded in psychological realism, and led this theater to establish a number of experimental studios to explore alternative approaches of acting and direction. Stanislavski's techniques were later refined by Lee Strasberg who used his theory of method acting to hone the skills of several great American stage and film actors.

Another important movement, theater movement of this period was the growth, the rise of the Theatre of the Absurd. It's basically a European import; construct from Europe in the 1890, the French dramatist or rather French dramatists, several of whom had intellectual connections with the modernists. Spearheaded this new wave in the world of theater Samuel Beckett had served as secretary for James Joyce, Fernando Arabel and he was a member of André Breton's Surrealists circle and also Eugène Ionesco, he was fascinated by the works of someone called Alfred Jarry. Now Jarry's *King Ubu*, u b u, *King Ubu* is one of the most

revolutionary works presented at the symbolist Théâtre de l'Oeuvre which is now hailed as the precursor of the new modernist theater movement represented by writers like Ionesco, Beckett and Arabel and came to be known as the Theater of the Absurd.

The non-realistic characters and settings of these plays by these people, naturally posed, Ok, a challenge to traditional approaches to acting and scenic designs. So, this was the origin of the Theater of the Absurd and what happened in America, now Edward Albee was the keen practitioner of the Theater of the Absurd in America. He uses or used absurdism to explore American values and human interaction. Edward Albee wrote this, most of his plays at a time when American culture, I am talking basically of his foremost of seminal grand play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

So he wrote this play at a time when American culture was willing to take a more objectively intensive view of its personal institutions, specifically here in this play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* looking at or deconstructing the institution of marriage. So, his one act play *The Zoo Story* published in 1959 or performed in 1959 rather, revolves its setting around the or story around the man who sits on a public park bench and is joined by another man who has a profound difficulty in communicating and bearing under the weight of numerous personal problems, and these characters are mentally disconnected and live in an agitated state. This is the action of the play. And of course his most important play, much-performed play remains *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* where he examined modern married life and its illusions.

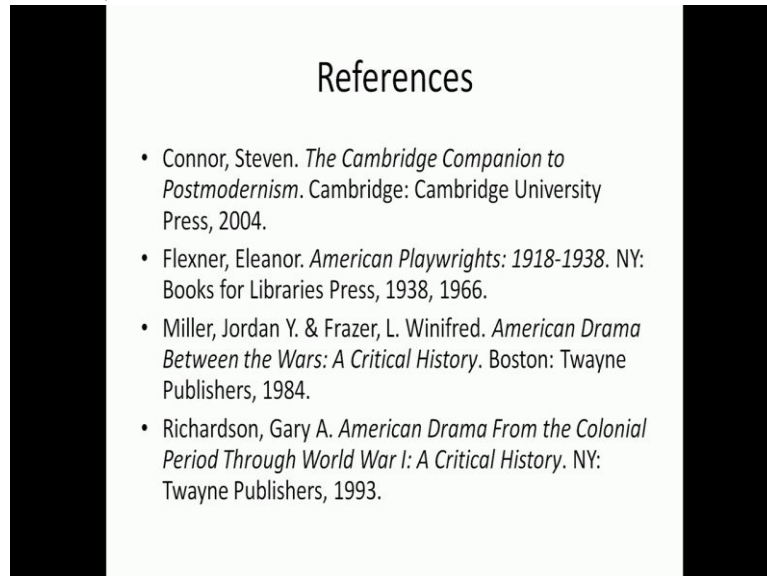
Another important movement was the experimental theater, the rise and growth of experimental theater in the United States which, roughly about started from 1959 after being tried out at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Some of the key figures in their works include Allan Kaprow's multi-art form adventure *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts*. So *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts* is a very experimental kind of a play which combines multi-art forms. So you can look it up on the net and understand more about this. The work anticipated many features of today's performance and experimentation, for example the use of simultaneously but seemingly unrelated action and movement.



The audience often becomes the participant and performer and a fragmented non-narrative structure using a mix of dance, live recorded sound and multimedia technology. Soon after other artists experimented with art environments; sometimes even using their bodies as canvas for painting and sketching on them. Then there is another important group, again under the broad area of experimental theater, The Wooster Group. It's a most experimental working group, theater group in the United States and it is led by the director Elizabeth LeCompte.

Now productions deconstructed classic works by Arthur Miller, Thornton Wilder, Eugene O'Neill by splicing these texts with varied material including a technological inclusion of video images and amplified voice. By the 1990s most performance arts, performance art expressed concerns with the self and its identity in relation to society and in America, this has, theater has always retained its significance, exploring subjects of special interests to those communities traditionally on the margins of powers, particularly women, gays or ethnic groups. And these are the references.

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Please take a look at this reading list for more understanding, better understanding of American Drama and Theater.

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So thank you very much.