

Twentieth Century American Drama
Prof. Merin Simi Raj
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Lecture - 46
American Theatre in Context: 1945- Present Part 1

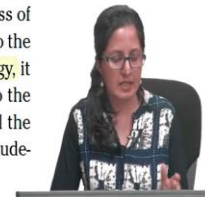
(Refer Slide Time: 00:14)

American Theatre in Context:
1945–Present

Arnold Aronson

Introduction

The history of the United States, more than that of most nations, has been depicted as a grand and heroic narrative – a great epic of the triumph of the human spirit over adversity, the victory of good over evil, and the success of the individual in the face of enormous odds. From colonial times well into the twentieth century, the theatre was not only a reflection of this mythology, it was a crucial instrument for the molding of public perceptions. Prior to the birth of the movies – which did not really become a mass medium until the 1910s – theatre, especially in its popular incarnations, such as circus, vaude-



This is to look at the American Theatre in Historical Context the socio political as well as the cultural context from which the theatre emerged from the Second World War onwards. So, in the last session we briefly took a look at how we can map the emergence of American theatre and the major events in the post war society against the major milestones which happened not just within America, but also in the under the elsewhere in the world.

So, in this essay that we are looking at today Arnold Aronson's American Theatre in Context 1945 to present this is also part of the Cambridge history of American theatre. So, here we would notice that it largely talks about the tradition of performance, but it is equally important for us given that most of the plays that we are reading as part of this our course, they were also performed mostly in Broadway and it is important to read this as a site which reflects the ethos of the nation.

So, as we have stated from the outset of this course it is very important to understand this genre the theatre these different performances as reflections of the nation's ideals, the

mythology that this nation began to perpetuate. Perhaps rather later compared to historically later compare to England and rest of Europe. So, it begins with this very categorical statement that.

(Refer Slide Time: 01:55)

1910s – theatre, especially in its popular incarnations, such as circus, vaudeville, and minstrel shows, was the closest thing to a national forum that the country had. Ideas were debated, public opinion was formulated, and national consciousness was achieved on the stages of American playhouses. In this context, the melodrama – the dominant form of the nineteenth century – was something close to American classicism. It created such quintessential figures as Mose the Bowery B'hoj, Nimrod Wildfire, Jonathan, and their kin – all symbols of the young, energetic, and fundamentally good American society, and all players in the grand story. As long as the American narrative was unfolding, the popular drama was a critical tool for the dissemination of ideas and the creation of a national sense of unity and purpose. But World War I began to reshape American consciousness as the country was no longer one player among many on the world stage but a protagonist; World War II continued the transformation of global politics and economics while permanently altering America's international position and fundamentally transforming American life and sensibility. The "story of America" was seen as entering a new phase, possibly a final chapter in which Manifest Destiny was to be achieved. In such a situation theatre, indeed all the arts, would play a new role.



The history of the United States more than that of most nations has been depicted as a grand and heroic narrative; a great epic of the triumph of the human spirit over adversity. If one is familiar with the history of for the political history of America and how it emerged from the 13 colonies and how it carved out a distinct identity for itself in the post war period.

It becomes how indomitable the human spirit was as against every adversity, every historical and political adversity that a nation had faced. The victory of good over evil and the success of the individual in the face of enormous odds and this in a nutshell also had paved way towards the formulation of the American dream.

From colonial times well into the Twentieth century, the theatre was not only a reflection of this mythology, it was a crucial instrument for the molding of public perceptions. It would not be wrong to say that the plays that we have looked at and many other plays which are part of the Twentieth century American literary tradition they all in some form or the other reflect mirror what the society is thinking about. It is not essentially always in tandem with the states ideas.

But, it of course, always almost always mirrors and more importantly the public perception about the certain abstract notions, such as success, material comfort and the many idealisms which are built in and around that. So, here in this essay Arnold Aronson like many others he begins by locating American theatre as a closest thing to a national forum that the country had.

So, if we compare this American literary history, American cultural history with that of England's or the rest of Europe's we find that it took there was nothing common as a national thing to begin with when the state was formed when the nation came into being. So, American theatre in that sense emerges as the perhaps the first formal tangible concrete site, where certain homogeneity in terms of national site could be identified.

Ideas were debated, public opinion was formulated and national consciousness was achieved on the stages of American playhouses, though at the beginning it was all very city centric like New York was the cultural capital of most of these plays and most of these activities. We find that the ethos that got reflected over there was part of the national consciousness could be identified with the national consciousness which was also emerging.

So, it in that sense the popular drama, but drama was before TV television and cinema entirely took over drama was major form of entertainment for the longest time and it continues to stay so though in certain in very elitist ways. So, as long as the American narrative was unfolding the popular drama was a critical tool for the dissemination of ideas and the creation of a national sense of unity and purpose.

So, we find that like most literary histories America is also going through this phase maybe a bit later, but in the 20th century using these plays, using these performances to forge a sense of national consciousness and national unity a sense of purpose that they all can relate with irrespective of their backgrounds and circumstances. But, the World War 1 as we also have noticed in the plays that we have dealt with it began to reshape the American consciousness.

Because it was until that point of time America was not a big player big international player on the world stage, it was just one among the many players and not even one of the major players. But, after the world war we find that America emerges as a central protagonist and with World War 2 we find that this notion is more or less cemented the

story of America is entirely rewritten from this stage onwards. It is a new face that America is entering after the Second World War with the transformation of global politics and economics.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:24)

something close to American classicism. It created such quintessential figures as Mose the Bowery B'hoj, Nimrod Wildfire, Jonathan, and their kin – all symbols of the young, energetic, and fundamentally good American society, and all players in the grand story. As long as the American narrative was unfolding, the popular drama was a critical tool for the dissemination of ideas and the creation of a national sense of unity and purpose. But World War I began to reshape American consciousness as the country was no longer one player among many on the world stage but a protagonist; World War II continued the transformation of global politics and economics while permanently altering America's international position and fundamentally transforming American life and sensibility. The "story of America" was seen as entering a new phase, possibly a final chapter in which Manifest Destiny was to be achieved. In such a situation theatre, indeed all the arts, would play a new role.

The aftermath of World War II complicated the narrative. The designation of that conflagration as the "last good war" was a reflection of the war as melodrama. The U.S. and the Allies were the "good guys" beset by the evil Axis



While permanently altering America's international position and fundamentally transforming life and sensibility in American society. And this was simultaneously a positive thing as well as something people began to dread after a point, because as we noticed in the previous session the crisis that emerged in the post war period in America was not something that came out of poverty it was not something that came out of a sense of lack.

It was a crisis which emerged out of prosperity and which is why the insecurities and anxieties were of very different kind than compared to England or the rest of Europe and it had to be addressed in a very different way altogether. So, we find that in this sense the American theatre becomes a site, where this new story of America the story of America begins to be rewritten during this new phase.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:22)

powers. Hitler and Hirohito were, on some levels, Simon Legree-type characters – villains to be vanquished – and their defeat was the inevitable end of a real cliffhanger. (Stalin, it should be remembered, was transformed into “Uncle Joe” for the war years to make him into the friend of the “good guy.”) In the immediate afterglow of victory, many Americans saw the war in those simple terms (and many continue to do so). Yet upon closer examination, not all aspects of the conduct of the war fit the dramatic archetype. The use of atomic weapons on Japan and the failure to take action against the concentration camps, for instance, called into question the moral purity and motives of the United States – the putative protagonist in this melodrama. In the twenty-five years or so following the war the emergence of the Cold War, the rising tensions of race relations, the growing awareness of poverty, the wars in Korea and Vietnam, and even a discomfort with the materialism of the “affluent society” all contributed to a re-evaluation of American society and erosion of the archetype. In the postwar era, the melodrama lost its validity as a paradigm for society. Melodramatic heroes were replaced by so-called anti-heroes, action was replaced by introspection, clear-cut morality was



So, some of the questions that these plays also deal with reflecting the consciousness of the nation is the question of moral purity and the motives of the United States we all know the part that the role that America played in both the World Wars. And it also had question the sense of morality on which the post enlightenment western civilization was built.

So, in that in about couple of decades 2 to 3 decades after the Second World War also during the time when the cold war phase was emerging. We find that America was not so not quite tension free, it was there was a rising tension of race relation about the growing awareness of the class differences leading to almost poverty in certain segments and the wars that America directly began to was involved in the wars the Vietnam War and the war with Korea.

(Refer Slide Time: 08:20)

as a paradigm for society. Melodramatic heroes were replaced by so-called anti-heroes, action was replaced by introspection, clear-cut morality was replaced by ambiguity, and the traditional dramatic model was replaced by free-form structures or structures devoid of meaningful content. With theatre no longer providing the superstructure for the understanding of the society at large, it lost its role as a primary outlet for cultural expression and exploration.

It is difficult at the end of the twentieth century to imagine how central the theatre once was to the social and cultural life of the United States. The years between the two world wars are now seen as a golden age in American theatre and drama. In the first half of the century, the musical achieved its mature form, a large number of significant playwrights emerged for the first time in American history, comedy became both exuberant and sophisticated, a comparatively strong African American theatre began to develop, popular entertainments thrived, and an American avant-garde began to emerge. This was also the period in which the Art Theatre or Little Theatre movement swept over the country, introducing American audiences to the dramas, ideas, and



And there was even a discomfort with the materialism like we pointed out in the previous session it was a crisis which emerged out of prosperity, American dream and the promise of material comfort, material wealth the newer roads which were being carved out in order to reap this success. They always beginning to be seen as problematic, so there was a growing discomfort with the materialism of the affluent society.

These were the terms just like consumerism and the purchasing power, these were the new terms that during those decades America was beginning to familiarize itself with. So, all of this contributed to a reevaluation of American society and it needed new archetypes to begin with and it needed new archetypes to begin with because the old world order was eroding in every possible way.

So, which is why it also makes sense for us to understand this transformation from melodrama towards realism, which was witnessed which we began to witness from the 19th century onwards and it became clearer in the 20th century.

So, there are of course, a lot of critical views which feel that the period between the two world wars where the golden age in American theatre. But, we find that in terms of capturing the essence of what America was going through the post war theatre the post Second World War theatre does immense justice as well.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:44)

American history, comedy became both exuberant and sophisticated, a comparatively strong African American theatre began to develop, popular entertainments thrived, and an American avant-garde began to emerge. This was also the period in which the Art Theatre or Little Theatre movement swept over the country, introducing American audiences to the dramas, ideas, and techniques of the European avant-garde in the teens and twenties and to the politically engaged agit props and social dramas of the thirties.

Despite the diversity and variety of this theatre it was contained under one roof, as it were; all the component pieces were perceived and experienced as different aspects of a single entity known simply as theatre or entertainment. Because of this unity a sense of nationhood was visible and an identifiably American voice began to emerge from this lively conglomeration of theatrical expression. Out of the theatrical cauldron came a distinctly American style in acting, language, and design. The Group Theatre in the 1930s began to explore the psychological realism of Stanislavsky and other offshoots of the Moscow



A lot of things from the past the in between decades of the war, where a lot of things which brought about positive changes in the American theatre scene had been happening like the emergence of the group theatre in the 1930 and the point is all of these contributed to the emergence of a sense of nationhood.

And an identifiably distinct American voice was beginning to emerge from the 1930s and 1940s onwards, the American theatre American literary tradition was no longer a shadow of what was happening in Europe and we also find that we did see the timeline we took a look at the timeline in the previous session.

Where we noticed that America is also coming to the forefront of world literature in terms of awards, in terms of international visibility, in terms of international reputation.

So, it is we find the post world war period becoming a game changer in every sense of the term, it is not just political superiority we find that there is a sense of cultural superiority to that America is beginning to claim.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:54)

The end of World War II brought unprecedented wealth and power to the United States and historical precedents suggest that such hegemony might have presaged a vigorous and energetic theatre as in Elizabethan England, the France of Louis XIV, or fifth-century Athens. But this was not to be. A certain confidence, sense of well-being, and exuberance, of course, did manifest itself in American culture, but more often in consumer goods than in art. Cars, for example, began to sprout tailfins – futuristic icons of useless excess – with the 1948 Cadillac; homes began to fill with gleaming white appliances; sleek “entertainment centers” disguised as furniture became the centerpieces of living rooms, and movies increasingly abandoned the “noir” tones of black and white for the saturated colors of Technicolor. Economist John Kenneth Galbraith popularized the term “affluent society” in a 1958 book to describe the sated, consumerist culture. Because the term implied a general material prosperity, it suggested a more democratic form of wealth than that of earlier generations. This was a whole society that shared in the riches, not a small sect of robber barons. The truth was, of course, that while the general standards of living were raised significantly for most people, and the middle class had a heretofore unheard-of purchasing power, there were still significant dis-



So, the end of Second World War brought about a lot of changes in the American society, first of all it brought unprecedented wealth and power to the United States and historical precedent suggests that such hegemony might have presaged a vigorous and energetic theatre as in Elizabethan England the France of Louis 14 or 5th century Athens.

But this was not to be. A certain confidence sense of well being and exuberance of course, did manifest itself in American culture. But, more often in consumer goods than in art because it is a different age all together. It is a capitalist society which is emerging.

So, though perhaps the energy of Elizabethan England or the 5th century Athens is not getting replicated. We find that a sense of superiority is beginning to grow not just in the American minds, but it begins to be perceived becomes to be very tangibly visible for the rest of the world as well. There are lot of objects which assume importance at this stage for instance cars and they were began to sprout tailfins and that was seen as futuristic icons of useless excess.

For instance the 1948 Cadillac and they the homes began to be filled in with gleaming white appliances, sleek entertainment centers disguised as furniture became the centerpieces of living rooms and movies increasingly abandoned the noir tones of black and white for the saturated colors of Technicolor. So, if we notice in most of these plays that we have already looked at it begins with the description of the living room.

The description of the living room tells us a lot about the objects which are part of the living room tells us a lot about the class and the ideals that the family embraces. So, there is John Kenneth Galbraith who popularized the term affluent society in 1958 and we find that these terms which are part as well as products of this new capitalist consumerist culture, it is becoming part of the national vocabulary too.

So, this term affluent society it implied a general material prosperity, but it also indicated it also and an ideal suggested a more democratic form of wealth than that of the earlier generations. We can compare this with the kind of wealth distribution or the lack thereof which was there in England as well as in the rest of Europe.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:34)

the sated, consumerist culture. Because the term implied a general material prosperity, it suggested a more democratic form of wealth than that of earlier generations. This was a whole society that shared in the riches, not a small sect of robber barons. The truth was, of course, that while the general standards of living were raised significantly for most people, and the middle class had a heretofore unheard-of purchasing power, there were still significant disparities within the society and disturbingly large segments of poverty. Galbraith also made the point that private affluence was being acquired at the expense of public service and civic needs. Nonetheless, this affluence, too, seemed the logical denouement for the American melodrama. A muscular and ebullient sense of triumph and joy was tangible in some movies – *Singin' in the Rain* is an excellent example – though a darker, more troubled genre also began to emerge, particularly in the filmed versions of several of the plays of Tennessee Williams and William Inge. To be sure, the American theatre in the



So, this was a whole society that there was a whole society that was sharing in the riches. At least there was a potential to share the riches share the wealth which was available for everyone and it was not just a small sect a sect of barons not just a small set of privileged classes.

And the truth was of course, that while the general standards of living were raised significantly for most people and the middle class had a heretofore unheard of purchasing power. There were still significant disparities within the society and disturbingly large segments of poverty.

So, there is in there is in an initiative and a lot of initiatives being taken towards democratizing wealth distributing wealth. But, it is not without any negative influence, because we find that there are certain pockets which continue to operate as being more privileged than the other.

And this affluence to this perceived affluence at least that also contributed to the logical ending of the American melodrama that was moving on towards more and more a realist tendency.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:48)

90

American Theatre in Context



second half of the twentieth century witnessed its share of significant dramas and playwrights – many of which now constitute the American canon – the birth (and ultimate mainstreaming) of an American avant-garde, a period of spirited and innovative musical theatre, the transformation of design into an art, and the spread of resident professional theatres across the country. But the combined forces of economics, politics, technology, and demographic upheavals conspired to remove the theatre from its position of centrality in American culture and transform it into peripheral entertainment divorced from the community at large. As American society became increasingly fragmented in the postwar years it was mirrored in a fragmented theatre by an increasingly introspective and highly ambiguous drama. Film, television, popular music, and new technologies combined to eviscerate the traditional theatregoing audience. Insofar as the theatre retained any relevance to a national discourse it was as a tool for localized political and social debate.



(Refer Slide Time: 14:51)

and playwrights – many of which now constitute the American canon – the birth (and ultimate mainstreaming) of an American avant-garde, a period of spirited and innovative musical theatre, the transformation of design into an art, and the spread of resident professional theatres across the country. But the combined forces of economics, politics, technology, and demographic upheavals conspired to remove the theatre from its position of centrality in American culture and transform it into peripheral entertainment divorced from the community at large. As American society became increasingly fragmented in the postwar years it was mirrored in a fragmented theatre by an increasingly introspective and highly ambiguous drama. Film, television, popular music, and new technologies combined to eviscerate the traditional theatregoing audience. Insofar as the theatre retained any relevance to a national discourse it was as a tool for localized political and social debate. Insofar as it retained a role in popular culture it was primarily as leisure-time spectacle typified by the extravaganzas of Las Vegas, the circus, and theme parks.



So, it is stated as as stated over here as American society became increasingly fragmented in the post war years it was mirrored in a fragmented theatre by an increasingly introspective and highly ambiguous drama. This is something that we saw in a Zoo Story in a Glass Menagerie, a lot of these inner conflicts which also become part of the realist depiction. Because theatre in some sense it continues to retain the relevance to a national discourse.

So, even when the new technologies the popular music, film, television, Hollywood all of these things are beginning to eat into the theatre going audience, we find that the theatre continues to remain at that site where a national discourse could be carried out.

So, which is why perhaps it was always seen for the longest time as a tool for localized political and social debate, we find a lot of things which are of pressing concern not just political and social things. But, which are of pressing moral concern, emotional concern are also discussed in these plays.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:58)

The Emerging Postwar Consciousness

Less than a year before the United States joined the combatants of World War II, Henry Luce, head of the Time-Life Corporation, famously declared this the "American Century" in a *Life* magazine essay. Primarily an appeal to join the Allies in the escalating war in Europe, Luce's essay argued that the unique position, history, and wealth of the United States created a moral obligation for it to be the guarantor of freedom around the globe and to establish international free trade, feed the world's population, and send forth its distinctly twentieth-century technology and culture. "We know how lucky we are compared to all the rest of mankind," he wrote. "At least two-thirds of us are just plain rich compared to all the rest of the human family – rich in food, rich in clothes, rich in entertainment and amusement, rich in leisure, rich" (quoted in Luce, *Ideas*, 107). At the end of the war, as if following Luce's exhortations, the United States was indeed the wealthiest, most powerful, most technologically advanced nation on earth. It imprinted itself indelibly upon the twentieth century, essentially shaping the world for years to come. Paradoxically for a



So, there is a post war consciousness that we find emerging. So in fact Henry Luce he wrote this in life magazine, we know how lucky we are compared to all the rest of mankind at least two-thirds of us are just plain rich compared to all the rest of the human family rich in food, rich in clothes, rich in entertainment and amusement, rich in leisure rich .

(Refer Slide Time: 16:30)

century technology and culture. "We know how lucky we are compared to all the rest of mankind," he wrote. "At least two-thirds of us are just plain rich compared to all the rest of the human family – rich in food, rich in clothes, rich in entertainment and amusement, rich in leisure, rich" (quoted in Luce, *Ideas*, 107). At the end of the war, as if following Luce's exhortations, the United States was indeed the wealthiest, most powerful, most technologically advanced nation on earth. It imprinted itself indelibly upon the twentieth century, essentially shaping the world for years to come. Paradoxically for a nation historically in the cultural shadow of Europe, the most long-lasting and pervasive export has been American culture spread primarily through the machinery of movies, television, and popular music. But this new-found power was accompanied from the start by underlying American discomfort with such dominance and a constant questioning of our moral obligations in the world. This uneasiness has informed postwar art in both form and content.



So, in this post war period America emerges very clearly as a formidable leader, emerges as the wealthiest, most powerful and most technologically advanced nation on earth this is something that we know how it came about and the rest is history. So, this also led to the emergence of a particular kind of consciousness.

So, there was also discomfort with this newfound power all was not well with it, there is a distinct identity; there is clearly a distinctive American voice emerging out of the cultural and political and social articulations, but there is clearly a discomfort as well.

So, this discomfort is a combination of this dominance this unquestionable dominance on the one hand and a constant questioning of the moral obligations that America has towards the rest of the world. And in some sense it is either the rest of the world or towards the lesser advantaged within the same society. And this uneasiness, this discomfort we find has informed the post war art in both its form as well as in its content.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:38)



The American century also meant that the visual and performing arts were transforming from absorbing international influences to a position of generating influence. A growing class of wealthy art patrons and the presence of a sizable body of European émigré artists between the wars fostered a creative ferment, invigorated the American art scene, and inspired a generation of young American artists. When World War II effectively ended European dominance of the art world, American culture was able to rush in and fill the vacuum. New York City in particular emerged not only as the cultural capital of the United States but of the world; all strands of the grand narrative seemed headed for triumphant conclusion. Sounding a bit like Luce, writer Clifton Fadiman could state in a 1940 radio discussion, "We have reached a critical point in the life of our nation. We are through as a pioneer nation; we are now ready to develop as a civilization" (quoted in Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 57). But it was critic Clement Greenberg, the primary articulator of the new formalist American aesthetic, who astutely perceived the



This is something we would continue to reiterate like this is like crisis, an anxiety, a dilemma born out of prosperity. So, this also meant that when the world war second world war ended and it also ended simultaneously along with the war. What also ended was the European domination the European dominance in the of the art world.

And we find that wherever this gap was found this the spaces vacated by the European masters, the European artists, the European art forms we find that those spaces were filled in with American culture.

There clearly is a vacuum in most parts of Europe right after the Second World War and the American culture just in some sense in with a increasing bigger it fills up all that gap. So, New York City we find the New York City emerging as the cultural capital of the United States as well as the rest of the world and this is again a grand narrative which continues to get celebrated, but there is also discomfort associated with it.

(Refer Slide Time: 18:50)



Idea of Modern Art, 57). But it was critic Clement Greenberg, the primary articulator of the new formalist American aesthetic, who astutely perceived the inextricable connections between the development of a new art and international supremacy. "The main premises of Western art," he wrote, "have at last migrated to the United States along with the center of gravity of production and political power" (quoted in Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 172).

Freed of its subservience to European art and ideas and supported by a growing network of galleries, a unique American voice emerged, embodied in artists such as Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman. Similarly, what was for all intents and purposes the first generation of American composers and conductors appeared, including Leonard Bernstein, Milton Babbitt, and Lukas Foss. And the center of the dance world followed the other arts to New York – modern dance had European origins but found its mature expression in American choreographers and companies while postmodern dance was an almost purely American phenomenon. Theatre, too, began to explore new avenues of



Clifton Fadiman in 1940 he mentioned this in a radio discussion here we find him echoing Luce we have reached a critical point in the life of our nation, we are through as a pioneer nation we are now ready to develop as a civilization. This is totally undercutting how the western civilization had been seeing itself for the last many centuries.

And he also says one could also add Clement Greenberg's observations to this, the main premises of western art have at last migrated to the United States along with the center of gravity of production and political power.

So, we find America emerging as the center of world politics, as a center of world economy and by extension the center of world art itself. So, it is at this juncture in the decades after the war after the second world war we find that America is able to free itself from the subservience to European art and a unique American voice is emerging over here and this finds it is perhaps the most critical and the purest reflection in the American theatre.

(Refer Slide Time: 20:06)

...dance forms followed the same path to New York. Modern dance had European origins but found its mature expression in American choreographers and companies while postmodern dance was an almost purely American phenomenon. Theatre, too, began to explore new avenues of expression and by the sixties and seventies the American avant-garde was in the forefront of international theatre. Yet, unlike the situation in art or dance, this avant-garde movement did not supplant the established or traditional theatre that preceded it.

There are many possible explanations for the failure of theatre to evolve as the other arts did, the most immediate and compelling being the profound demographic changes that radically altered the constituency and attendance habits of theatre audiences. Another factor is the nature of the arts themselves. The primarily non-objective, emblematic, and symbolic vocabularies of music, visual art, and even dance allowed those forms to change more rapidly than theatre in response to shifting aesthetics and sensibilities, whereas the nature of Western theatre, with its narrative explorations of



So, theatre also in that sense it begins to explore new avenues of expression and it because there is also this succinct need to move away from everything that was traditional so far. So, there is a by 60s and 70s there is a need to emerge with something very avant grade in American theatre which could also become international theatre by extension.

So, there is also a tendency to make sure that this avant garde did not supplant or supplant the established or the traditional theatre that preceded it and which clearly meant that it was moving away from everything that was making America subservient or an extension of England or the rest of Europe.

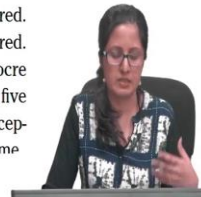
(Refer Slide Time: 20:54)



94

American Theatre in Context

seemed to evaporate overnight. Politics were now determined by military alliances, moral ambiguity gave way to fervent patriotism, and entertainment functioned in service to the war effort. It was important to see the nation as a unified whole; to focus on individual groups within society, to emphasize difference, or to question the fabric of American life was seen as counterproductive, even anti-patriotic. Thus, the rising tide of black theatre artists and companies dissipated, and the socially and politically oriented groups – from the Federal Theatre Project and Group Theatre, through the small workers' theatres, already on shaky economic and artistic legs – simply disappeared. But without the social, political, and intellectual ferment, the drama suffered. The American theatre during the war years produced an unusually mediocre crop of plays and musicals, perhaps the most uninteresting four or five Broadway seasons of the century. There were, to be sure, a few notable exceptions and in these exceptions could be seen the seeds of what was to come.



Of course theatre began to decline in some form as well, because the other forms of entertainment were also blooming almost in every part of the country. So, and in this process and its inevitable to see this sort of decline, but this decline did not mean that the space went away entirely, the space continued to remain as this site where a national consciousness could be enunciated.

So, we find that there is significant transformations in the way things are being looked at as well the world view is also changing. Politics were now determined by military alliances. Moral ambiguity gave way to fervent patriotism and entertainment functioned in service to the war effort. So, we find all of these changes also getting inbuilt into the way a theatre continues to perform.

(Refer Slide Time: 21:46)

Brecht's work were done by scholar and playwright Eric Bentley, who almost single-handedly introduced Brecht's plays and theories to the U.S. after the war. Piscator, meanwhile, ran the Dramatic Workshop at the New School for Social Research in New York from 1939 to 1951, where he staged some 100 experimental works. These productions introduced a generation to the principles of epic theatre, and in his classes he influenced many of the practitioners of the postwar generation, including Judith Malina, a co-founder of the Living Theatre.

It was the arrival of Tennessee Williams on the theatrical scene, however, that signaled a genuine shift in American drama with *The Glass Menagerie*, which premiered a few months before the war's end in the spring of 1945. Williams stood at the nexus of melodrama and psychotherapy. His plays took the by-now classic American themes of home and family and, using an essentially melodramatic vocabulary of a lost past, unrequited love, and yearnings for a better future, explored the inner workings of societally marginal characters. Although Amanda and Laura are the focus of the play, it is in the characters of Jim, the gentleman caller who failed to fulfill his potential yet who sells himself as the epitome of the American striver (he is planning to take advantage



So, 1945 is seen as a very significant year, this is when *The Glass Menagerie* was staged and the arrival of Tennessee Williams is seen as an event a milestone which signaled away genuine shift in American drama.

(Refer Slide Time: 22:03)

himself as the epitome of the American striver (he is planning to take advantage of the newest technology, television), and especially Tom, the son straining against the stifling atmosphere of the home but with no plans other than unarticulated yearnings for excitement, that Williams has created the postwar American characters. Tom is the prototype of the anti-hero, the rebel without a cause. (Though recent criticism sees Tom as autobiographical and therefore gay, so his rebellion actually does have a cause – just one that could not be articulated in 1945.)

In terms of dramatic technique, Williams's significant contribution was to find a theatrical framework by which the audience was allowed into the inner workings of the minds and souls of the characters without reverting to the often contrived and self-conscious theatrical devices earlier employed by Eugene O'Neill. Though not a political or morality play, *The Glass Menagerie*



So, *Glass Menagerie* premiered a few months before the war's end the spring of 1945 and we find melodrama and psychotherapy being experimented with being explored extensively in *Glass Menagerie* as we have already or we have already noticed.

So, if we read through this we could turn to see his plays took the by now classic American themes of home and family and using an essentially melodramatic vocabulary of a lost past, unrequited love and yearnings for a better future, explored the inner workings for societally marginal characters inner working being the most the operative term here the key term here.

So, Amanda and Laura they are the focus of the play, but it is not the character of Jim, the gentleman caller who failed to fulfill his potential yet who sells himself as the epitome of the American striver. Because we know that he is planning to take advantage of the newest technology television.

So, it is a very different way in which we begin to look at the play when we also are aware of the changing consumerist patterns in the economy and Tom the son straining against the stifling atmosphere of the home with no plans other than unarticulated yearnings for excitement that William's has created the post war American characters.

So, these characters are typically post war the women as well as their men, though they seem to be appearing though they seem to be inhabiting different locations emotionally. We find that they are all products of the same war they all came out through this crucible of war, but they do have distinct identities and that is also the essence of diversity which American theatre perhaps foregrounds over here. And Tom could be seen as a prototype of this anti hero the rebel without a cause.

So, here we also find that as foregrounded over here Tennessee William's is able to get into the inner workings of the minds and souls of these characters, without reverting to the contrived and self conscious theatrical devices employed by Eugene O'Neill that is also something that we witnessed that we saw in the play Emperor Jones .

(Refer Slide Time: 24:18)

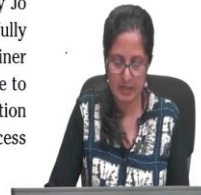
96

American Theatre in Context



worked as metaphor for the country on the verge of something new, yet filled with doubts and insecurities and unwilling to let go of a romanticized past. Stylistically, it drew upon the poetic atmosphere of the Symbolists, the associative world of the Surrealists, and the use of projections first exploited by Piscator, to create what Williams called a memory play. Following in the footsteps of William Saroyan, Williams created the genre of poetic realism or American symbolism, which is the closest thing the US had to a national style for the next fifteen years.

A contributing factor to the success of the play, and a significant element in establishing poetic realism as the dominant style, was the design by Jo Mielziner. Never before in American theatre had design and text been so fully integrated and so interdependent. Using scrims and painterly decor, Mielziner created an ethereal look, while facilitating the cinematic flow from scene to scene called for by Williams, and providing the ideal means for the depiction of memory. In fact, much of the postwar theatre was dependent for its success



So, *The Glass Menagerie* is not a political play it is not a morality play either William's himself as we noted before, he himself had referred to this as a memory play. And this worked as a metaphor for the country on the verge of something new yet filled with doubts and insecurities and unwilling to let go of a romanticized past.

We see this unwillingness to let go in the mother's character. In fact, we see this unwillingness to let go of the past in Lorraine Hansberry's characters as well though in a slightly different way altogether. So, in the stylistic sense Tennessee Williams drew much from the symbolists, but we find him that with the association with the associated world of the surrealist which he brings into play in this drama. He is able to create the perfect ambiance for what he calls as a memory play.

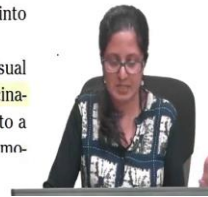
So, following the footsteps of William Saroyan, Williams created the genre of poetic realism or American symbolism which is the closest thing US had to a national style for the next 15 years. So, what we need to underscore over here is the possibility of producing something of a national scale.

There is a national discourse which American theatre is engaging with there is also national style which with *Glass Menagerie* and with Tennessee Williams's plays they seem to be getting closer to identifying a national style which could get replicated in a number of other successive plays.

(Refer Slide Time: 26:01)

of memory. In fact, much of the postwar theatre was dependent for its success on a strong visual realization and an emotionally energetic acting style. The creative team of Mielziner and director Elia Kazan, formerly of the Group Theatre, together with Williams and later Arthur Miller, most notably in his play *Death of a Salesman*, would create a series of productions that typified the postwar style and that some would see as the pinnacle of American theatre. To a large degree, this was the result of the development of the art of lighting design. The effectiveness of the scrim, the creation of memory and dream, and the cinematic flow were dependent on the precise and fluid use of light. Jean Rosenthal, who worked with Orson Welles, and Abe Feder, both beginning in the thirties, virtually created the profession of lighting designer and went on to significant theatrical careers, while Mielziner, working with Ed Kook and building upon the aesthetics of Rosenthal, transformed lighting into an art.

As crucial to the success of the plays of Miller and Williams as the visual environment were the acting and directing. Once again, the American fascination with psychology informed the development of acting style and led to a major shift in the forties from a technical virtuosity to a more energetic emo-



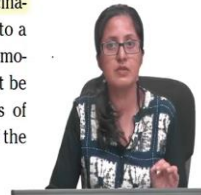
And here it this perfect a mix of being able to critique the society while also exploring the inner workings of the individual characters. And it is in this same way in that Arthur miller is also being talked about in his *Death of a Salesman*, in a series of productions that typified the postwar style and that some would see as a pinnacle of American theatre.

So, it is a stellar combination by mid 1940s which is happening in the post war period with Tennessee William's, Arthur miller on writing plays and experimenting with something which would eventually become the national style itself.

(Refer Slide Time: 26:45)

theatre, together with Robbins and Mielziner, most notably in his play *Death of a Salesman*, would create a series of productions that typified the postwar style and that some would see as the pinnacle of American theatre. To a large degree, this was the result of the development of the art of lighting design. The effectiveness of the scrim, the creation of memory and dream, and the cinematic flow were dependent on the precise and fluid use of light. Jean Rosenthal, who worked with Orson Welles, and Abe Feder, both beginning in the thirties, virtually created the profession of lighting designer and went on to significant theatrical careers, while Mielziner, working with Ed Kook and building upon the aesthetics of Rosenthal, transformed lighting into an art.

As crucial to the success of the plays of Miller and Williams as the visual environment were the acting and directing. Once again, the American fascination with psychology informed the development of acting style and led to a major shift in the forties from a technical virtuosity to a more energetic emotionalism. Here, the influence of the Group Theatre of the thirties cannot be overstated. Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler had championed the ideas of Stanislavsky, though each drew upon a slightly different understanding of the



So, this fascination with psychology continues to remain quite dominant.

(Refer Slide Time: 26:51)

Arnold Aronson

97



emotional turbulence and sexual tension that were revolutionary for the time. Marlon Brando, who played Stanley Kowalski in Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1949), was the quintessence of this new style that was a direct challenge to the artificiality of stage decorum. He embodied the anti-hero – the protagonist of the emotionally ambiguous postwar era. Kazan, with other Group alumni Robert Lewis and Cheryl Crawford, created the Actors Studio in 1947 as a workshop for Stanislavsky-inspired acting training. Lee Strasberg joined in 1949 and soon became the sole director of the Studio. Under his autocratic leadership until his death in 1982, Strasberg trained several generations of actors in what became known simply as “The Method.” Ironically, the Strasberg approach became increasingly ineffective on the stage as Absurdism, the neo-Expressionistic ensemble theatre movement, and various avant-gardes transformed the American theatre from the late fifties onward, but the Studio became the training ground for virtually the entire postwar



And we find that it also gets very well played out in a number of works, such as Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

(Refer Slide Time: 26:58)

avant-gardes transformed the American theatre from the late fifties onward, but the Studio became the training ground for virtually the entire postwar cadre of film actors. This group includes, aside from Brando, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Montgomery Clift, Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, Anne Bancroft, Shelley Winters, Geraldine Page, Dustin Hoffman, Robert De Niro, and Al Pacino. In opposition to the rugged good looks or perfect beauty of prewar movie stars and their unambiguous identification as either "good guys" or villains, the postwar generation was idiosyncratic and flawed in their physicality, and possessed of a moral ambiguity. The Method, which thrived on personal quirks and emphasized the emotionality beneath the surface, was ideal for a post-Holocaust, atomic society that was no longer certain of truth, morality, or even beauty. (See Chapter 6 for additional commentary on "The Method.")

One might have expected the war itself to preoccupy playwrights in the late 1940s, but while it provided raw material for dozens of movies over several decades and much fiction, including Norman Mailer's debut novel *The Naked and the Dead*, it was surprisingly absent from the postwar theatre. The war as melodrama was fit for the entertainment needs of Hollywood, but playwrights



Which was also a stellar success and went on to win a lot of awards as well.

(Refer Slide Time: 27:03)

One might have expected the war itself to preoccupy playwrights in the late 1940s, but while it provided raw material for dozens of movies over several decades and much fiction, including Norman Mailer's debut novel *The Naked and the Dead*, it was surprisingly absent from the postwar theatre. The war as melodrama was fit for the entertainment needs of Hollywood, but playwrights seemed more interested in the postwar American society and its discontents. Arthur Miller's first hit play *All My Sons* (1947) used the war as a background for his moral exploration of individual responsibility, but it was set – as so many American plays were – in a home in a small midwestern community. The play was not about the war *per se*, but about the individual's responsibility to the larger society. The protagonist, Joe Keller, manufactured airplane parts during the war. Putting profit ahead of morality, he sold defective parts to the army, leading to the deaths of several fliers and ultimately the suicide of his son. With this play Miller established himself as the keeper of America's conscience, but it was not an investigation of war.

One of the only other theatre pieces to represent the war was Rodgers's and Hammerstein's *South Pacific*, which opened in the spring of 1949. The plot ostensibly dealt with fairly serious material. Set on an island in the South



So, Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* too we find it use the war as a background for the moral exploration of individual responsibility. So, this is something we had discussed at length while we were looking at the play too, like most other plays it was also set in a home in a small Midwestern community. The play was not about the war *per se* it is a post war period where war has little to do except influence the way in which people are beginning

to think or the way in which people change their world views. So, the play was not about the War Per Se.

But, about the individuals responsibility towards a larger society and this is something which becomes a matter of conflict as we saw within these families too. So, protagonist Joe Keller he had manufactured faulty parts of an airplane which also led to the death of a number of young pilots.

So, putting profit ahead of morality he sold defective parts to the army leading to the deaths of several fliers and ultimately the suicide of his son. And though it ends with a very tragic note it is also a commentary on this the need to re look at revisit the contours of morality, do we look at the yardsticks of morality in this new changing economic scenario.

So, what Miller does through this is with this play Miller established himself as a keeper of America's conscience, but it was not an investigation of war. So, it is a thin line that they are treading over here to they are critiquing what is happening out there, but that does not become in any way they are not disowning what is happening over there. But, he also an establishment himself as this essay points out as a keeper of America's conscience.

(Refer Slide Time: 28:51)

season"; it was all theatrical entertainment.) The idea of niche-productions, cult, or elitist theatre that would come to comprise a significant proportion of the productions by the nineties, was a barely visible component, apparent only in the labor theatres and ethnic and racial theatre companies of the thirties; and even these latter theatres were seen as a crucial part of the larger entertainment structure. Given the wide variety of theatre that was produced and the ability to take risks, Broadway contained, in a sense, its own research and development arm that could continuously revitalize the theatre.

The combined effects of the Depression and World War II, however, altered the economic and aesthetic structure, leading to the artistic fragmentation and geographic decentralization of the American theatre. Although theatre had withstood the early onslaught of film, the addition of television to the mix beginning about 1948, in combination with a significant shift in audience demographics, signaled an end to theatre as the epicenter of cultural and intellectual life.

There had been a steady decline in the number of productions since the mid-1920s. The season of 1925-26 was the peak for theatre weeks - a figure



We notice the combined effects of the economic depression and the world war it completely altered the economic and aesthetic structure as seen in the post-world war period. So, there is an artistic fragmentation and a geographic decentralization which happens in American theatre which also means that there is a steady decline in the number of productions.

(Refer Slide Time: 29:13)

100

American Theatre in Context

representing the number of shows playing each week times weeks in the season – with 2,852.¹ By contrast, the 1945–46 season recorded 1,420 theatre weeks while by 1960–61 it had diminished to 1,210. Measured another way, 1927–28 was the peak season for new productions with 264 openings, whereas the 1945–46 season witnessed only 76 and the 1960–61 season a then record low of 48. By 1989–90 the season total for new productions was a mere 40, but of that number only 10 were new American plays, 3 of which had been originated either Off-Broadway or in a regional theatre, and only 8 were new musicals; the remainder consisted of one-person shows, revivals, and Radio City Music Hall revues. The decline after the twenties was exacerbated, of course, by talkies and the Great Depression and, to some extent, radio, but live entertainment remained a staple of American culture. Furthermore, movies were perceived almost exclusively as entertainment, whereas theatre – at least a portion of it – remained the focal point of American intellectual life and as



(Refer Slide Time: 29:15)

weeks while by 1960–61 it had diminished to 1,210. Measured another way, 1927–28 was the peak season for new productions with 264 openings, whereas the 1945–46 season witnessed only 76 and the 1960–61 season a then record low of 48. By 1989–90 the season total for new productions was a mere 40, but of that number only 10 were new American plays, 3 of which had been originated either Off-Broadway or in a regional theatre, and only 8 were new musicals; the remainder consisted of one-person shows, revivals, and Radio City Music Hall revues. The decline after the twenties was exacerbated, of course, by talkies and the Great Depression and, to some extent, radio, but live entertainment remained a staple of American culture. Furthermore, movies were perceived almost exclusively as entertainment, whereas theatre – at least a portion of it – remained the focal point of American intellectual life and, as such, was seen to fill a role that movies could not. In the thirties, especially, it seemed as if many of the great social, political, and moral debates of the time were rehearsed upon the stage and continued in late-night discussions in restaurants and bistros afterward.

Radio, whatever its immediate effects on attendance, had a more long-term



And there is a there are other forms of newer forms of entertainment which is taking over there or the movement across between the rural and the urban also contribute to it.

But, nevertheless as stated over here theatre American theatre remained as a focal point of American intellectual life and such was seen to fill a role that movies could not. So, this is very important there is a decline in numbers, the production costs go up.

And in some sense it also becomes something a form of entertainment for the elite. But, nevertheless we find that the role played by the American theatre is that of it continues to remain as the focal point of American intellectual life.

This is something which is very central while we are trying to locate the plays that we are looking at. So, we will bring this discussion to a close with this and we will continue to look at the various impacts that the post-world war scene had on the different theatrical enunciations, particularly the plays that we have already looked at.