

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

Lecture - 47
American Theatre in Context 1945 – Present Part 2

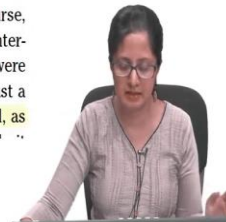
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representing the number of shows playing each week times weeks in the season – with 2,852.¹ By contrast, the 1945–46 season recorded 1,420 theatre weeks while by 1960–61 it had diminished to 1,210. Measured another way, 1927–28 was the peak season 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



This is to look at this essay which reads the American Theatre and the play is set in the historical context.

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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 impact on perceptions of entertainment. Radio was able to bring vaudeville performers, film stars, music, soap operas, and news directly into homes



We notice that despite the changing circumstances and the changing market conditions, there is a way in which the theatre, the Twentieth Century American Drama remains as a focal point of American intellectual life. This status continues to exist despite the status that movies have, despite the popularity that movies and other newer forms of entertainment begin to capture.

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reported his gossip. Audiences began to have different expectations of its performers and to develop a different relationship with celebrities.

But if the changing mood of the country was a factor in the shifting fortunes of the theatre after World War II, the more critical shift in American theatre resulted from a seismic demographic transformation that began after the war and continued for the next quarter-century. Beneath the seeming calm of the 1950s lay radical changes in the American population that would have profound effects on all aspects of society. Between 1945 and 1960 the general population increased by 40.1 million to 180 million or by nearly 29 percent. The overwhelming majority of this increase was in the suburbs, where 11 million new houses were built between 1948-58 (out of 13 million overall). The large middle class that had lived in New York and other urban centers, the societal segment that had anchored the residential neighborhoods and fueled urban mercantilism, began moving out to the suburbs as the postwar economic boom bestowed its benefits upon them. During the sixties, some 900,000 whites moved out of New York. By 1960, one of three Americans lived in a suburb. Historian Todd Gitlin expressed this transformation eloquently:



There is a significant change of mode in American history. There is a shifting of fortune after the Second World War and what we also find is a seismic demographic transformation that began after the war and it continues for the next twenty-five years or so, next quarter century. There is a lot of other things also happening simultaneously and this becomes important for us to be able to appreciate the context the extra literary context which produce these plays.

There is a drastic increase in the population between 1945 and 1960s apparently the general population increased by 40.1 million to 180 million which would be like close to 90 or close to 29 percent and there is also a rising middle class and with this large segment of the middle class which had lived in New York and other urban centres, and we find that there is a they their presence, their growing presence it fuels and urban mercantilism in this process.

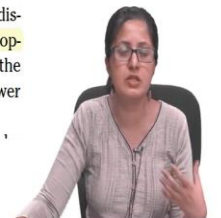
We find that by one by 1960 there is a very visible transformation from the early educates what we notice over here is about 900,000 white population 900,000 whites they move out of New York and by 1960; one at the three Americans lived in a suburb.

So, this is a different kind of a shift altogether with people moving to the suburbs and moving towards the rural economy is to perhaps make more profit and perhaps try out the ways to make a different kind of a fortune just the way we find Willy Loman's character in *Death of a Salesman* lamenting that there was a missed opportunity when his uncle Bob offered him something in the suburbs, and this move is very significant and this transformation is very eloquently expressed in Todd Gitlin's work *The Sixties*. (Refer Slide Time: 02:50)



The Puritan utopia of a "city on a hill" found its strange completion in the flatlands of the American suburb. For growing numbers, daily life was delivered from the cramp of the city, lifted out to the half-wide, half-open spaces, where the long-sought and long-feared American wilderness could be trimmed back and made habitable. The prairie became the lawn; the ranch, the ranch house; the saloon, the Formica bar. (*The Sixties*, 14)

Also by 1960 75 percent of families owned a car and 87 percent a television; and it was the first society in history to have more college graduates than farmers. The automobile culture replaced the urban culture, and roads and highways received funding while urban mass transit deteriorated and was dismantled. Suburban communities and highways served as magnets for shopping centers and later malls that replaced the downtown centers and the village greens. For those who had left the cities, there were fewer and fewer reasons to return.



The Puritan utopia of a city on a hill found its strange completion in the flatland of the American suburb. For growing numbers, daily life was delivered from the cramp of the city, lifted out to the half-wide, half-open spaces, with a long-sought and long-feared American wilderness could be trimmed back and made habitable. The prairie became the lawn; the ranch, the ranch house; the saloon, the Formica bar.

So, this transformation is happening in alignment with the changing economic conditions. So, by 1960 it is I noticed that as per the statistics 75 percent of families owned a car 87 percent a television and it becomes America very soon becomes the first society in history to have more college graduates than farmers.

It certainly is a very different kind of change which is why Daniel will also pointed out in end of ideology that this is a crisis, a dilemma, an anxiety which comes out of prosperity. It is not something that emerges out of poverty, not something that emerges out of any lack, it is out of plenty, out of abundance and out of prosperity.

We very soon find that there is a different kind of a culture which replaces his urban culture, it is the automobile culture. So, earlier in the sociological sense what was easier to understand was the shift of population from the rural economies to the urban centres.

We find that the urban centres the urban culture is getting replaced by what they begin to refer to as the automobile culture and this also paves the way to the other structures and institutions which emerged such as shopping centres, malls, .

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African Americans moving north from the rural south and Latino groups moving from the Caribbean and Latin America, all hoping to benefit from the perceived prosperity. From 1940 to 1960, 375,000 African Americans moved to New York and the Latino population quadrupled, although the total population of the city declined. Thus, the economic base of the theatre of the previous decades was being lost, and the intellectual and cultural face of the city was being altered. The new urban dwellers might have formed the basis of a new audience, but a variety of factors worked against this development. There was no voice representing the new populations and the potential new audiences within the theatre world. And because the recent arrivals, in many cases, lacked a theatregoing tradition, there was no compelling need to meet their demands nor was there much impetus from within the communities to create theatre. The production of theatre remained in the hands of the older generation or at least the same segment of society that was deserting the cities. The theatre had become so institutionalized that rather than attempting to change, it metaphorically dug in its heels.

The response by producers to the erosion of the audience was to try to lure



So, we find that for those who had left the cities there were fewer and fewer reasons to return as it is mentioned over here because things become more and more accessible irrespective of the location and there is in that sense a more distributed kind of growth and attempt that leads towards a more democratic kind of dissemination of wealth as was also pointed out by many other historians.

But, nevertheless we find that there are other there is a flips, there are other dilemmas to deal with too which would emerge as is pointed out in this following passage. As the white middle class left the cities they were replaced in large by African Americans

moving north from the rural south and Latino groups moving from the Caribbean and Latin America, all hoping to benefit from the perceived prosperity.

So, here we begin to see a shift in demographics it is also affecting the sociological background over here. So, we find that the African Americans they also find they also want to have their share of this prosperity, this perceived prosperity and there is a massive move towards these urban centres which have been vacated by which have been vacated by the white population because they also move to the rural centres.

So, and this in fact, is asking for a different representation, a different articulation in the theatre space as well in the artistic space as well. So, the economic base of the theatre of the previous decades is being lost, the intellectual and cultural face of the city is getting altered this begs for newer kinds of representation, but what also needs to be noticed is that even in these decades in the 1940s to the 1960s there is very little representation from the new population and the potential new audiences within the theatre world.

So, the last play that we looked at Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* it is an attempt though very perhaps very subdued it is an attempt to address this gap to fill this increase in case. So, certain things continue to remain the change because the production of theatre it remains in the hands of the older generation or the same segment of society which is deserting the city for the rural for the suburbs it remains in under their control.

But it is also a difficult market to dig into for the new audiences, for the underrepresented and new emergent population from the African-American population the Latino groups for moving from Latin America and Caribbean.

It is possible to say that at this point it has already become very institutionalized as pointed out in the beginning of this essay this is emerging the theatre was soon emerging as the national as an extension of the national consciousness because there was nothing else to take that place until then. So, the theatre had become so institutionalized that rather than attempting to change, it metaphorically dug in its heels. So, this is the situation by late 1960s.

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United States jumped from a mere 12,000 in 1946 to 9 million in 1955 to over 79 million in 1960, by which time 90 percent of American families were regular viewers and the average viewer was watching an astounding forty-four hours a week of programming – more time watching than working. So much time in front of the small screen meant little or no time for theatre, reading, hobbies, and a host of leisure-time activities. Even movie attendance dropped from 90 million a week in 1946 to 46 million a week in 1955.

Overshadowed by television, the theatre, once prestigious, ubiquitous, and a mirror of national identity had, by the sixties, become an elitist entertainment aimed at a narrow segment of the population. Movies had taken over the melodrama, the thesis drama, the well-made play, and the romantic comedy; television had taken over vaudeville and all forms of popular entertainment, including the domestic comedy that had held the stage since the time of Menander.

In previous generations, in fact for virtually the entire history of theatre, those aspects of performance that are lumped under the category of popular entertainment had always constituted the foundation of theatre and provided an ongoing thread. Whatever happened in the mainstream or elitist theatres,



So, as these changes continue to happen and there be another sort of a challenge that the theatre goes and the theatre producers and the playwrights have to face it's about being overshadowed by television. So, overshadowed by television, the theatre, once prestigious, ubiquitous, and a mirror of national identity had, by the sixties become an elitist entertainment aimed at a narrow segment of the population.

So, it continues to be an extension of the national consciousness it continues to mirror the national identity, but it also has carved out a niche kind of audience and a niche kind of space in the artistic world it has become more elitist and rather than the mass entertainment culture which is getting produced to televisions and through the newer audio visual modes like radio like the newer visual modes like cinema which is massively taking over the world.

So, it needs to be stated over here that it there is a very ironical shift over here with theatre which was seen as a mass entertainment, now that has become an elitist form of entertainment. Thus, the space occupied by these mass entertainers that has been taken over entirely by television and movies. So, movies had taken over the melodrama, the thesis drama the well made play and the romantic comedy television had taken over vaudeville and all forms of popular entertainment including the domestic comedy that had held the stage since the time of Menander.

So, they have to subscribe to a niche audience an elitist audience in order to make their mark, but the important point is it continues to be seen as very as a marker of national identity in a literary sense, in a in the sense of a performance in the sense of the category of art.

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bill of fare that either homogenized or obliterated individual voices, depending on one's point of view.

By the early fifties, most people involved with the Broadway theatre began to sound a note of panic as they recognized the situation. The pessimism was plaintively expressed by critic John Chapman dispiritedly summing up the season for *The Best Plays of 1950-1951*: "We must not look toward the future with any great amount of confidence, for the American theatre . . . has been in a decline during all the recent years. This decline has been both economic and artistic. Inflation has caused the economic decline, and few people can afford to be regular theatre goers any more" (v). In a history of Broadway twenty years later, *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson noted that theatre "as an industry . . . was obsolete . . . After World War II, theater owners became acutely conscious of a pitiless fact of life: a theatre could earn an income for only twenty-two hours a week, making only meager use of the expensive land it occupied" (*Broadway*, 417). Theatre was recognized as a business – an industry – and it was measured accordingly.



We also need to understand what happens to the Broadway theatre then.

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This decline has been both economic and artistic. Inflation has caused economic decline, and few people can afford to be regular theatre goers any more. Because theatre is seen as a more expensive form of entertainment, hence elitist and television it was invading the living rooms of every American home and that was that had that was meeting all kinds of entertainment needs as well.

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conscious of a pitiless fact of life; theatre could earn an income for only twenty-two hours a week, making only meagre use of the expensive land it occupied.”

So, theatre was by then it was not an art form it was not seen as a form of art anymore it was recognised as a business and it was important to make these decisions based on the kind of economic sense that it made. So, the theatre and is recognized as a business and as an industry and it was measured accordingly in terms of the land it occupied and the revenue that it generated and this is precisely the result of the capitalist conditions that America was beginning to occupy during these decades.

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to be regular theatre goes any more (v). in a history of Broadway twenty years later, *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson noted that theatre “as an industry . . . was obsolete . . . After World War II, theater owners became acutely conscious of a pitiless fact of life: a theatre could earn an income for only twenty-two hours a week, making only meager use of the expensive land it occupied” (*Broadway*, 417). Theatre was recognized as a business – an industry – and it was measured accordingly.



The 1950s

The decade of the fifties was long perceived as a period of conformity and stasis, although recent re-evaluations are challenging that view. Poet Robert



And, one cannot get judgmental about these decisions, but because that was also a means through which America as a whole ensured that there is a there are alternate pathways towards prosperity one had to make sense of these financial decisions without it affecting the component of art and entertainment and vice versa.

So, the 1950s in if we recall all the plays that we have done so far the 1950s it is still a very conservative society it has still being perceived as a period of conformity and stasis, but though there are minor changes happening in terms of the attitudes in terms of accommodating and accepting the marginal marginalized population in terms of accepting the alternate modes of thinking, in terms of sexuality, in terms of gender.

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Lowell, for instance, could write of "the tranquilized fifties" where "even the man / scavenging filth in the back alley trash cans, / has two children, a beach wagon, a helpmate, / and is 'a young Republican'" ("Memories of West Street," 85). Eisenhower was depicted by comics as a president who spent more time playing golf than running the country. It was the period of the "organization man," the corporate conformist described by social observer William Whyte. The organization man had become so totally accepted as part of society by the early sixties that even the humorless IBM Corporation could manage a smile at itself by dressing the guides at its 1964 New York World's Fair pavilion in gray flannel suits. Social philosopher C. Wright Mills wrote *White Collar* in 1951 attacking the sales mentality that had overtaken the nation and supplanted middle-class independence. He followed this up in 1956 with the more radical *The Power Elite*, which warned of the dangers of the corporate mentality and its power over all aspects of society as well as the dangers of the mil-



But, though it is largely seen as a period of conformity we do think, we do find that there are a lot of newer challenges which these plays and the other forms of art works are able to raise as well.

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them" mentality that pervaded the counterculture movements of the sixties. "Us" was the everyday, everyman, individual; "them" was the "establishment" of the government, military, and corporations or, in some contexts, the Communists, who were depicted as melodramatically evil. Cartoonist Walt Kelly, whose comic strip *Pogo* often skewered politicians, played upon this perception of the world at the start of the environmental movement in the early seventies. "We have met the enemy," declared a character, "and he is us."

The paranoid view of the world was captured in science fiction films and comic books that became filled with menacing blobs, things, body-snatchers, aliens, resurrected prehistoric monsters, and mutated - by atomic radiation or science experiments gone wrong - creatures including rabbits, plants, and housewives. The messages were plain and simple: Communists will steal your soul as soon as you let down your guard; and whenever science tries to play God it leads to tragic results.

Theatre has often been a stimulus for change or a challenge to a complacent culture, but the anti-Communist hysteria of the early fifties led by Senator



And there is an increasing paranoia also which is developing alongside. We saw this very clearly in *Glass Menagerie* we saw this in a zoo story, there is a sense of paranoia developing in every individual due to their location or their missed location. We find that

in Lorraine Hansberry's play too in the very evidently because of their very visible different kind of identity.

So, this paranoid view of the world and it is not just limited to the identity politics like we have been seeing in the plays of the 1950s and early 60s. So, for instance cartoonist Walt Kelly and he played upon this perception of the world at the start of the environmental movement and said, we have met the enemy and he is us. So, there is a growing sense of paranoia which also becomes a part of the national consciousness in some form if we may if we may see it so.

So, the paranoid view of the world was captured in science fiction films and comic books that said menacing blobs, things, body-snatchers, aliens, resurrected prehistoric monsters and mutated creatures, . So, there was also this paranoia that the alternate kinds of politics might completely snatch away the benefits of a capitalist society like communists will steal one's soul.

As we let one's guard down whenever science tries to play god it leads to tragic results and such sort of paranoia which took all kinds of forms not just in the theatrical productions, but in the other TV series, in the movies of the times, in the comic strips and the other all kinds of entertainment and popular mass media.

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Joseph McCarthy squelched a great deal of free expression – more through intimidation than by direct action. Anti-Communist sentiment had existed in the U.S. since the Russian revolution of 1917 and had led to the creation of the House Un-American Activities Committee. In the postwar years the belief that Communists were infiltrating every aspect of American society and government reached epidemic proportions. “Better Dead than Red” was the battle cry of the political right. A wide range of individuals was investigated by Congress for possible Communist activities or connections, but the McCarthy hearings were virulent and used smear, innuendo, and intimidation. His investigations spread well beyond political figures and focused on high-profile and sensational figures in theatre, film, and television. Mere accusation or association led to blacklisting, ruining the careers of many writers, directors, and actors in all media. And with few exceptions, it led to the end of a theatre of ideas. It was as if the war years were a kind of purgative for the theatre and McCarthyism the death blow to a generation of playwrights. Of all the play-



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tigations spread well beyond political figures and focused on high-profile and sensational figures in theatre, film, and television. Mere accusation or association led to blacklisting, ruining the careers of many writers, directors, and actors in all media. And with few exceptions, it led to the end of a theatre of ideas. It was as if the war years were a kind of purgative for the theatre and McCarthyism the death blow to a generation of playwrights. Of all the playwrights who had been successful before the war and who continued to produce afterward, including Clifford Odets, Maxwell Anderson, Robert Sherwood, Lillian Hellman, Elmer Rice, S.N. Behrman, William Saroyan – almost all of whom were noted as intellectual and politically provocative writers – not one met with anywhere near his or her previous success; none produced a hit play or lasting contribution to dramatic literature in the postwar years. Only Eugene O'Neill among the prewar playwrights achieved postwar success and this came in posthumous premieres and revivals such as *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *A Touch of the Poet*, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, after years of artistic eclipse. In the musical theatre, only Cole Porter equaled his prewar success with the 1948 *Kiss Me, Kate*. The public seemed to demand fresh voices for what was intuitively understood as a new



So, theatre has often been a stimulus for change or a challenge to a complacent culture, but the anti communist hysteria did not let it grow much because there was always there is a need for change, but there is also a belief that such sort of a change should not go overboard and become something which would affect the everyday life of people.

So, we find this fine balance operating in these plays in different ways.

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seemed to demand fresh voices for what was intuitively understood as a new era.

Arthur Miller was the only new playwright to attempt a theatre of ideas – somewhat in the tradition of Ibsen – and to confront contemporary politics. *The Crucible* (1953), about the Salem witch trials, was a thinly veiled attack upon McCarthyism, and *A View from the Bridge* (1955), which dealt with the struggle between self-interest and self-sacrifice as well as codes of honor, could be seen as a reflection of the moral dilemma of the times. But the majority of serious theatre moved toward psychological explorations. So prevalent was Freudianism and to a lesser degree Jungian psychology, that a book entitled *Freud on Broadway* was published which provided Freudian underpinnings for much of the modern American theatre.² The fascination with Freudian psychology and psychotherapy in the postwar years might have pushed the theatre toward psychological explorations of the individual in any case, but the proscription against political theatre hastened the shift in emphasis.



So, maybe which is why from the 1940s onwards in the post war period we find a lot of these playwrights experimenting whether the theatre of ideas. So, Arthur Miller in that

sense is seen as the only new playwright who attempted the theatre of ideas and he was also following the tradition of Ibsen, who was seen as very radical and who was seen as source for a lot of revolutionary potentially revolutionary ideas, .

And, in Arthur Miller's play we find him trying to confront the contemporary politics we find it growing more and more in his 1950s plays it is the crucible and a view from the bridge, it was a milder and subtle and more subdued in his earlier plays like *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*.

But we find him dealing with very pressing issues such as the struggle between self interest and self sacrifice and codes of honor and the in all of these he is also trying to reflect the moral dilemma of the times which was obviously, there in all my sons too where wartime prosperity is pitched against the moral dilemma within the within a single family itself.

So, there is a move towards the psychological explorations thanks to the massive influence of Freud we find that the American theatre experiments abet with the Freud because even a book which is titled Freud on a Broadway it provide it talks about how the Freudian theory is provided an underpin for much of modern American drama because it also explores at length the relationship between individuals within families the struggle and the stress which emerges out of that.

So, maybe one of the things that this author also pointing out is that the fascination with Freudian psychology and psychotherapy in the post-war years might have pushed the theatre towards psychological explorations of the individual in any case, but the proscription against political theatre hastened the shift in emphasis, .

So, instead of going political with the critique, the theatre of ideas also found it very convenient to focus on the psychological element. So, that the political element will not overshadow anything or will not hijack the discussion because it was also not a quote unquote safe territory to enter because the capitalist ideals could always be threatened by an invasion of these multiple political multiple political ideologies such as communism.

So, this psychological theatre, the psychological exploration of the individual it gains a lot of momentum also to avoid the move towards political theatre.

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Disaffection and Loss



In the years after World War II, American drama seemed to become totally pre-occupied with the individual's struggle against society, often played out in the microcosm of some domestic or familial setting. Through the fifties, the most remarkable playwright of personal angst continued to be Tennessee Williams. His characters were the outcasts of society, possessed by some internal demons, and searching for human contact and understanding. And while the locale and provenance of these characters were often exotic (frequently the gothic South), the inner spirituality of the characters nonetheless appealed to Broadway audiences of the time. But the playwright who best succeeded in melding poetic realism with gritty American naturalism was William Inge, whose four major works, *Come Back, Little Sheba, Picnic, Bus Stop*, and *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, virtually spanned the fifties. As *New York Times* theatre critic Brooks Atkinson described Inge's plays, they were "dramas about the private dilemmas of obscure people" (*Broadway*, 434).
Significantly, Inge set his plays in the small towns and waysides of middle



So, if we again recall the discussions that we have had in the context of the plays that we have already covered, American drama seems to be preoccupied with the individuals struggle. It is always the protagonist who is a; who is an individual he is in this ongoing struggle like in society finding it difficult to fit in for some reason or the other and it is also played out in the microcosm of a domestic or a familial setting.

This is something we noticed throughout in almost all the plays , it also opens the play most of the times it the opening scene is in a in the living room indicating drawing attention to the kind of family that the protagonist is part of and then the struggle which is played out within this micro setting, within this domestic familial setting it could be a dysfunctional family, it could be an incomplete family sometimes, it could be a family which looks very happy together, but quite odd and weird to comprehend, .

This individual who is placed within particular familial settings they have an ongoing struggle against the society as well. There will be these movements back and forth because we also find that various individuals have sometimes different kinds of struggles in either trying to fit in or trying to break away which we have seen in *The Glass Menagerie* in different ways and *You Can Not Take It With You*.

So, regardless of the components of tragedy or comedy which are part of these plays we find that this struggle is very real. This struggle becomes the centre around which most of the discussions happen in these American in these plays. So, through the fifties, the

most remarkable playwright of personal angst continued to be Tennessee Williams we saw it in his earliest play *Emperor Jones*. His characters were the outcasts of society possessed by some internal demons, searching for human contact and understanding.

The expression is the techniques used in *The Emperor Jones* had a very beautifully captured that as well and while the locale and provenance of these characters were often exotic, frequently the gothic south again think about the images, the internal struggles that *Emperor Jones* made to undergo in that play, the inner spirituality of the characters nonetheless appealed to the Broadway audiences of the time.

But the playwright who best succeeded in melding poetic realism and gritty American naturalism was William Inge, and then these are the plays that we may not be able to cover in the context of this course, but we will certainly be alluding to we will certainly be referring to some of the works which were dramas about the private dilemmas of obscure people.

So, even in the plays that we have already done with not just in William Inge's *Come Back, Little Sheba*, *Picnic*, *Bus Stop*, and *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* which were very prominent in the fifties. If we look at the other plays that we have covered as part of this course two we would agree with Brooks Atkinson that this was about private dilemmas of obscure people.

It is not modelled along the lines of the Shakespearean kind of plays, where it is a life of a well known person; it is a fall of a hero. Here these are people who always led lives in obscurity who were never known by even the closest people with whom they were working with they were nameless bodies they were their identities were never important and these are the stories these are the stories which try to capture the dilemma and struggles and the psychological dilemmas that these characters go through.

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The St. Louis of *The Glass Menagerie* was a decaying industrial city seen through the fire escapes of an alley. New Orleans, the site of Williams's next play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, is the least American of all US cities, made even more ethereal in Williams's vision. His subsequent plays through the fifties were set in the rural South or in fantastic, theatrical landscapes. Even though Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, the most classic play of this genre, was set in Brooklyn, there is a literal dialectic between the pastoral environs of the house as seen in Willy Loman's memories and the intrusion of high-rise apartments symbolizing the faceless urban milieu. Willy Loman became a symbol of the forgotten little man who is a victim of the materialism of the society as well as a victim of his own personal mistakes and agonies. A barely suppressed sexuality seethed just beneath the surface in these plays – it was significant that Marilyn Monroe played in the movie version of *Bus Stop* – that was both a harbinger of and a catalyst for the sexual revolution of the next



So, if we look at *The Glass Menagerie* it is set in a decaying industrial city Saint Louis and it is the city often in the play a scene through the fire escapes of an alley and we will find that is where most of the time most of the action of the play happens.

And in the fire site in the fire escape we find that most of these characters they also use that as a space for venting out their emotions and it is a very symbolic presence right from the beginning of the play whether fire escape also symbolises this site of the industrial city decaying industrial city and this need for the characters to get away from it.

So, if we look at play like Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* which is very which is a classic play in this genre and it is also set in Brooklyn and we find that there is a real setting sometimes it is very timeless the only the broad years a year or time would be referred, but the specific city the location where it is set is well be very graphically described.

So, here in *Death of a Salesman* which is set in Brooklyn there is a literal dialectic between the pastoral environs of the house as seen in Willy Loman's memories and the intrusion of high-rise apartment symbolizing the faceless urban milieu, which is why Willy Loman also in the play we find that very appropriately he becomes a symbol of the forgotten little man who is a victim of the materialism of the society as well as a victim of his own personal mistakes and agonies.

So, everything come together come everything come down together very heavily on characters like Willy Loman and this there also be find that when the houses, the apartments, the streets are described the human beings who occupy those are seen as very miniscule creators over them, and they lose their identity. They also end up losing their identity in this faceless urban milieu.

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ing and sometimes, as with Brando, theatrical experience, the theatre was neither the source nor the locus for this sullen exploration of disaffection, although the attitude pervaded much of the serious drama of the fifties.

Along with the slouched stance, the hooded eyes, and the upper lip curled into a sneer, the youthful image of disaffection was also identified with a slurred and mumbling style of speech. First popularized by Brando, it became associated with The Actors Studio approach. It was in stark opposition to proper stage diction but it was also in opposition to the proscriptions of proper societal behavior. To speak badly was to defy authority – parents, teachers, etiquette arbiters. It also suggested a distrust of eloquence; leaders on both sides of World War II after all had been compelling, even mesmerizing orators. But monosyllabic inarticulateness was merely a surface manifestation of a decades-long dramatic development. Characters were losing control of language; language as a means of communication evaporated and characters were increasingly unable to express ideas effectively or to talk to each other in meaningful ways. Characters in these plays became trapped in



Now, let us briefly look at the way language was changing in these decades particularly in the 40s, 50s and 60s. If we could pay attention to this passage which talks about the bad speech which finds its reflection in American drama and what it symbolises; it is very interesting to notes over here.

The youthful image of disaffection was identified with a slurred and mumbling style of speech. It is not eloquent speech, there are no solid low keys of which of stellar eloquence. We find that most of the characters they mumble their way through the play there are staccato sentences, half formed sentences and sometimes they miscommunicate most of the times they miscommunicate as well.

We see it very spectacularly clear in *A Zoo Story* and this approach that said that it was first popularised by Marlon Brando. It became associated with the actors studio approach we did see briefly about the emergence of the actor studio approach in the previous class.

So, to speak badly was also defy authority because there was a distrust of authority, there was a distrust of all those markers which were seen as being respectful towards authority. So, this and these plays we will find that language becomes a marker of subservience as well as defiance.

So, to speak badly was to defy authority, parents, teachers, etiquette, arbiters it also suggested distrust of eloquence, and maybe again go back to some of the instances in *A Zoo Story* it will become all the more evident, .

It also suggested distrust of eloquence; leaders on both sides of the World War II after all had been compelling, even mesmerizing orators. But monosyllabic inarticulateness was merely a surface manifestation of a decades-long dramatic development. Characters were losing control of language.

So, the plays exhibited this in a very powerful way the characters the playwrights no longer have control over communication and language, but they are losing control over language. So, language is as a means of communication evaporated and characters were increasingly unable to express ideas effectively or to talk to each other in meaningful ways. Language becomes a barrier than a means of communication.

Here we find the some of the tenets of the absurd theatre getting resonated over here as well.

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semantics, in situations in which the language itself seemed more important than the ideas it conveyed, or the words took on a life independent of the objects they represented. The erosion of language as a means of communication can be traced to the avant-garde movements in Europe at the turn of the century and most notably to the Dadaists, who divorced words from their referents and objects from meaning. This sense of language as a game reached a peak in the Absurdist movement in the fifties, particularly in the plays of Eugène Ionesco and Samuel Beckett. Whereas Absurdism in Europe seemed a logical, almost inevitable response to the irrationality of war, the analogous elements that surfaced in American drama seemed more a response to a materialist society run amok. The American-style Absurdism seemed to spring full-blown out of television advertisements and situation comedies, which had become new myth-making machines.

This breakdown of language was already implicit in *Death of a Salesman*



So, characters and these plays become trapped in semantics, in situations in which the language itself seemed more important than the ideas it conveyed or the words took on a life independent of the objects they represented, .

We may revisit *A Zoo Story* to see the implications of this and if we again recall this instance from Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* there what Binita sees as new fashion to make her hair look more like the others hair that scene that scene is an act of mutilation by her Nigerian friend.

The erosion of language as a means of communication that could be traced back to the avant-garde movements in Europe and we find it is also in extension of the of the movement of the Dadaism and we find the American society in the 1950s and 60s responding to some of these European movements and artistic movements in their own ways in their own distinct ways.

The sense of language has again reached a peak in the absurdist movement in the fifties particularly in the plays of Ionesco and Samuel Beckett whereas, absurdism in Europe seemed a logical, almost inevitable response to the irrationality of war, the analogous elements that surfaced in American drama seemed more seemed more response to a materialist society run amok.

So, we find the difference again over here just like the crisis caused out of prosperity, just like the difficulties and dilemmas emerging out of abundance, here we find that the absurdism in Europe and the irrational absurdist engagement with language in American drama they are very different, .

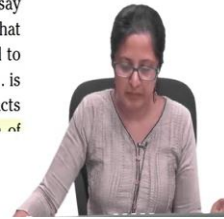
On the one hand in Europe where they were also may be perhaps the worst hit in terms of their involvement in both the wars we find that absurdism is a response to the irrationality of war, but on the other hand in emerging American drama in their drama of the 1950s and 60s the absurdism is a response to a materialist society which has gone out of control.

It is the anarchy which emerges out of over to materialist ambitions and in some sense in the American dream itself.

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rialist society run amok. The American-style Absurdism seemed to spring full-blown out of television advertisements and situation comedies, which had become new myth-making machines.

This breakdown of language was already implicit in *Death of a Salesman* and some of Williams's plays; it became explicit in the plays of Edward Albee. Albee burst onto the scene in 1960 with Off-Broadway productions of four one-act plays, *The Zoo Story*, *The Death of Bessie Smith*, *The Sandbox*, and *An American Dream*. The latter two in particular seemed to be directly influenced by the French Absurdist with their archetypal characters, symbolic plots, and eerily simplistic language. While Albee denied any knowledge of, let alone influence from the movement at the time of writing them, and attacked those who attempted to pigeonhole his style of writing, he clearly had an appreciation for the work of Genet, Beckett, and Ionesco, as evidenced in a 1962 essay in the *New York Times Magazine*. In a wry stab at his critics he remarked that he had always assumed that the appellation "absurdist theatre" referred to Broadway where "a 'good' play is one that makes money; a 'bad' play . . . is one which does not" ("Which Theatre is the Absurd One?," 146). His one-acts were followed two years later with the landmark Broadway production of



The American style absurdism seemed to spring full blown out of television, advertisement and situation comedies which had become new myth making machines. So, it is a different kind of industrialism and market condition which is getting played out in America in the 50s and 60s and that is what is getting fed into the theatrical productions as well.

So, as we mentioned that this breakdown of language was already implicit in *Death of a Salesman* and some of Williams plays; it became explicit in the plays of Edward Albee. Albee burst onto the scene in 1960 with an Off-Broadway production of four one-act plays, *The Zoo Story*, *The Death of Bessie Smith*, *The Sandbox* and *An American dream* and the final two were more in alignment with the French absurdist and their archetypal characters and the first one we have definitely taken a look at in detail *The Zoo Story*.

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He had always assumed that the appellation 'absurdist theatre' referred to Broadway where "a 'good' play is one that makes money; a 'bad' play . . . is one which does not" ("Which Theatre is the Absurd One?," 146). His one-acts were followed two years later with the landmark Broadway production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, a devastating critique of the American family and, by implication, American society. In a long, emotionally brutal night the protagonists George and Martha verbally attack and destroy each other and their two guests while shattering the illusions that have allowed them to function for two decades. In the best of Albee's plays there is a sense of anger and alienation as he meticulously dissects and skewers societal institutions, especially marriage and the family. The dominant, though not always triumphant, characters are ones who possess the greatest command of language, not unlike characters in a Restoration comedy of manners. In *Zoo Story*, the character Jerry literally commandeers the stage with an assault of language. Martha, in *Virginia Woolf*, bursts upon the stage with a Bette Davis quote which leads to a long night's journey of etymological gamesmanship and the revelation of a child who exists only as a verbal construct. The losers in such



Albee's other play which again we have discussed in as part of this course the landmark Broadway production of *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* It is a devastating critique as we have noticed of the American family and, by implication, the American society.

So, here in most of the plays again we find that when the American individual or the American society is getting critiqued by extension it is also a critique of the nation, critique of the society. In a long, emotionally brutal night the protagonists George and Martha verbally attack and destroy each other and their two guests while shattering the illusions that have allowed them to function for two decades.

Also we find language becoming something which can destroy, language is not something which can only connect and communicate, it also has the power to completely destroy and annihilate what has been built over two decades.

So, in *A Zoo Story*, we find the character of Jerry. He literally commandeers the stage with an assault of language, it is a language and approach which makes a pete as well as the audience uncomfortable at various points. Martha in *Virginia Woolf* we find it she bursts upon the stage with a Bette Davis quote which leads to a long night's journey of etymological gamesmanship and the revelation of a child who exists only as a verbal construct.

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Arnold Aronson

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tions. Choreographed by Jerome Robbins, Bernstein's first musical, *On the Town* (1944), was propelled not by the book or even the songs, but by a thorough musical score and sophisticated and athletic ballet and modern dance which supplanted lyrics and dialogue as a means of story-telling and emotional conveyance. Bernstein's revolutionary *West Side Story* (1957) transformed the emotional energy of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* into complex rhythms and counterpoint in one of the most musically sophisticated scores ever to grace Broadway, while the tensions and energies of the show were brought to life in Robbins's stunningly balletic choreography. *West Side Story* marked the end of an era on Broadway – the book musical as a vital form was virtually dead within a decade.

With the exception of composer-lyricist Stephen Sondheim, the next generation of musical theatre stars were not the composers or singers, but the choreographers and directors – Rob Fosse (who like Robbins had been



So, the power of language over here as something to deconstruct, as something which can unpack the existing situation is its possibilities are explored and experimented with in the drama of the 1950s and 60s.

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West Side Story, and *Grease*, the emphasis was increasingly on staging and choreography over music and lyrics. These productions, especially those of Harold Prince, also revitalized American design. From the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies Prince worked with the Russian-born Boris Aronson. Though always highly regarded among his colleagues as one of the finest designers of the time, he had only moderate successes until he teamed up with Prince and Robbins on *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964) with its Marc Chagall-inspired sets. Thereafter, his designs for Prince's productions blended Constructivist elements with contemporary technology and the occasional touch of American sentiment to create some of the most stunning designs of the era. After Aronson's death in 1980, Prince found another soulmate in Eugene Lee. (See Chapters 2 [Maslon, "Broadway"] and 4 for more detailed analysis of musical theatre.)

As Broadway declined there was a significant growth of theatre outside New York City. Although there had long been local professional theatres, stock companies, and touring shows, New York's position as the originator and focal point of theatre and entertainment was clear and dominant. Ultimately, a play or actor that did not perform in New York lacked credibility. As if the relation-



So, with this we will bring this session to an end and in the final segment of this discussion, we will take a look at how the theatre continues to grow outside of the New York city even after the visible decline which was beginning to affect the Broadway theatre.